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Colette, Leduc, Despentes:
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by

Marion Elizabeth Phillips

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Committee in charge:

Professor Michael Lucey, Chair
Professor Debarati Sanyal
Professor Dora Zhang

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores how the concepts of the ordinary, of failure, and of abjection shape the works of three French women writers across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. I engage with theories of the quotidian, queer and affect theory, feminist literary criticism and work on life-writing, and sexuality studies. Each of the writers under investigation here demands a reorientation to their texts from readers, as styles and subject matter shift to challenge patriarchal discourse.

I focus on the last two original works of Colette (1873-1954), which experiment with her short forms and observational style. I connect her insistence on material objects to the everyday existence and corporeal realities of an aging writer. I then turn to Violette Leduc (1907-1972), a little-known protégée of Simone de Beauvoir whose writings on love and sex between women were censored by her publishers. Finally, I connect Colette's fashioning of feminine identity to that which is systematically dismantled by Virginie Despentes. Despentes (1965-), a punk rocker and lesbian activist, tests the limits between cinema and pornography in her films and between feminist theory, philosophy, autobiography, and noir fiction in her writing. She portrays a postcolonial, multiracial, and fractured contemporary French society in her sweeping literary frescoes.

This study prioritizes descriptions of embodied experience and challenges representations of female desires and sexualities. It also considers failure as a strategy for critiquing systems of power that invalidate, silence, and objectify women and women's writing. After discussing the difficulties in expressing written accounts of the ordinary and the abject, I explore potential ruptures and continuities for Cixous's *écriture féminine* as well as the category of women's writing.

In memory of Marion R. Glansberg
(1926 – 1980)

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Introduction

No dissertation on the work of Colette, Violette Leduc and Virginie Despentes can begin without first acknowledging how their personal and literary reputations shape readers' perceptions of their writings. Certainly, they have been thought of together before. Colette and Leduc have appeared together before in literary criticism and analysis about women's life-writing (with Leduc occupying much less space than Colette), and Despentes cites Leduc as an author she admires. Here I propose considering the three of them together in order to explore commonalities and variations on certain themes within and between their works. I delve into the unglamorous and at times ugly sentiments portrayed in the works of these authors and examine how my three central concepts – the ordinary, the failed, and the abject – appear in and shape their writing. I also investigate how these concepts resonate more widely in both literature and in works of feminist and queer theory. I see these three terms as situated on a spectrum of undesirable, unremarkable, and unpleasant elements. Can these categories be reclaimed? Do they need to be resituated? In any case, the ordinary, the failed, and the abject merit sustained inquiry and illustration. Colette wrote from the Belle Époque through the years immediately following World War II, overlapping with the beginning of Leduc's literary career, which continued until the posthumous publication of her last work in 1973, the same year as her death. Despentes began writing in a post-punk, post-porn, post-feminist context of the 1990s and 2000s, a moment in which Leduc was beginning to be rediscovered thanks to interest in queer studies and her relationship with Simone de Beauvoir.

Although these authors figure in bibliographies for "queer women writers," it is important to acknowledge that the term queer is a label applied to Colette and Leduc anachronistically and rather inaccurately. Neither writer explicitly claimed a lesbian or bisexual identity, nor did they engage in any political or social activism.[1] Leduc did perform some of the questioning of gender and sexual norms that the contemporary term queer implies, but only as they related to her personal experience. Relationships with other women were described poetically by both writers, with Colette's descriptions more euphemistic and Leduc's full of imagery. Relationships with men also take up significant space in their writing. Both Colette and Leduc were able to shift between desires for and relationships with women and men. In Colette's case, she had three marriages to men, giving her the social capital of state-sanctioned relationships and the ability to brush off any queerness when she so desired. Leduc was also married to a man, but had a harder time brushing off her queerness, as her poverty and grating personality intertwined to keep her an outsider for most of her life.

However, I believe that their works can certainly be explored within a queer studies framework and also categorized as queer in that their authors engaged in non-normative sexual relationships and pushed boundaries in terms of subject matter and form in literature. This could be construed as a co-opting of the word/category queer or a watering down of its revolutionary powers. But as I will demonstrate here, it is helpful to analyze these writers and their works as queer, in that it allows the reader to see instances of non-traditional subject formation in literary

[1] Colette eschewed giving political opinions, and even declared herself "not a feminist." For more on how Colette became a feminist hero, particularly in the U.S., see Kathleen Antonioli. "How Colette Became a Feminist: Selling Colette in the United States 1960–1985." *Journal of Modern Literature*, 41.4, (2018): 68–83.

form. I don't see these three authors as necessarily constituting a certain trajectory, but I do see each corpus as creating important literary spaces worthy of analysis in the context of one another, and as touchstones for women's writing. These writers could be said to announce one another (forward, back, and across time and genre) and their works serve as sites from which to delve into what writing about women, sexuality, and literature looks like in different moments and in different forms. What I have found most useful in my analyses is to look at how, where, and to what degree each of the three concepts mentioned exists in specific works and how they vary between my authors. By close examination of each author's works I hope to more fully elaborate theories of the ordinary, of failure, and of abjection in queer women's writing and also to put the authors in fruitful dialogue with each other. For instance, the ordinary in Colette will turn out not be a uniform concept throughout her work; I will be examining a range of tropes and various ways that different kinds of ordinariness inform her work. This will be understandably different from the ordinary as found in Despentes' writing, where we find portrayals of punk and street culture, marginalized populations and both physical and literary or verbal violence. And yet ultimately, I will illustrate and analyze where these authors who interrogate and challenge notions of femininity in very different contexts converge in their writing.

In elaborating my thinking about embodied experience and moving through literary and physical spaces, Sara Ahmed's work on phenomenology has proved invaluable. She asks in *Queer Phenomenology*, "Is a queer chair one that is not so comfortable, so we move around in it, trying to make the impression of our body reshape its form?"[2] This description of trying to fit into molds and of the comfort or discomfort of subjects inhabiting the world is one that I will be examining in terms of queer women's writing. We need to think of the works of these authors as objects to which we must reshape our bodies when reading them. Colette and Leduc speak to how our bodies are oriented by objects and their works also act to orient the bodies of their readers. For example, as Colette faced corporeal changes in her later life, her writing, too, changed in relation to this new, physical reality. She specifically narrates sensations of aging, physical decline, pain, reduced mobility and dependence on others. Her sufferings, which she describes good-naturedly, might bring an involuntary sense of repugnance to the reader, as deterioration and decay of the female body described in the first person and unaccompanied by poetic anguish is indeed something one might consider as too ordinary for great literature. Yet the optimistic, slightly coquettish portrayals of her body in pain bring the physicality of the enterprise of writing to the forefront, and add another element to Colette's depictions of her writing process, which she usually characterized as arduous and slow.

The chapters will be somewhat chronological, given that each chapter will have a significant focus on one particular author while still analyzing the other two authors' works. I may also be imposing a sort of hierarchy of transgression, with Colette's writing of the ordinary serving as a jumping-off point for later discussions of failure and abjection that have an element of the extreme about them. And yet, while the chapters focused mainly on Leduc (chapter two) and Despentes (chapter three) are the ones where failure and abjection are explored most fully, those same topics do also lead me back to Colette, to grueling pressure to produce writing, to unrequited love, to knowing submission by female protagonists to romantic partners, to not living up to or refusing to meet certain standards of femininity and to the grittiness of her

[2] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke UP, 2006, 168.

descriptions of music-hall performers' lives. Each of these authors also reflects on her coming to writing in ways that call attention to their particular gendered socio-historical situations. Colette describes in *Mes Apprentissages* her forced coming to writing, and then haphazard coming to publication, through the venality of her husband Willy. Post-Willy, Colette constantly struggled to retain literary and financial independence. Her struggle to maintain emotional independence also connects her to Leduc and Despentes. Leduc, in her autobiographical writings, describes her motivations and desperate desire to write, and also her difficult journey towards a writerly identity. And in *King Kong Théorie*, Despentes names her own motivations and recounts the experiences that have contributed to her literary career. She tried (and failed, or failed to try) at various jobs and she recounts this, without shame, as it is her failure to believe in fulfilling upward mobility that allowed her to write, to put into literary form, if not literary language the daily lives of minorities, of the poor, and of the disillusioned.

My three central concepts are not completely isolated. I explore the porosity and interrelation of my three central concepts across all three chapters, even as each concept predominates in one of the chapters (Colette and the ordinary in chapter one, Leduc and failure in chapter two, Despentes and the abject in chapter three). The different themes, plot elements, and literary strategies that I describe as contributing to the ordinary, the failed, or the abject run and bleed into each other. An old woman can be seen as a failure of femininity, or as an abject creature stricken with illness and ugliness, or as a fixture of ordinary life. Reveling in corporeal abjection could be interpreted as failing to abide by a certain system of gender, or normative codes of sexual behavior. And Despentes's works of striking violence and sexual explicitness in some ways embody what has become ordinary in contemporary literature. This is my focus here – the literariness of these concepts, their mobility and evolution, an effort to express in print how certain rejections of the societal status quo in writing resulted in literary enshrinement for these particular authors. Since failure and abjection are already established concepts in literary criticism and queer theory (and to a lesser extent the ordinary, or its cousin, the quotidian), I hope that my multi-faceted analysis of these concepts through different works and authors can also build on and amplify current ideas about failure and abjection. Finally, I will consider how various processes of abjection play into failure or allow for its *détournement*.

These three authors all engage in some type of life-writing and have in common their status as noted women writers. However, they diverge in numerous ways (perhaps Despentes and Colette especially). Colette was neither a feminist nor political; Leduc could be called a feminist but was not political; Despentes is a queer feminist who is most certainly political. Yet each writer succeeds in expressing anger, frustration, and suffocation that is intricately bound up with the experience of being female. Despentes has achieved literary renown with her *Vernon Subutex* trilogy, adapted as a television series for Canal+ in 2019,[3] and her nomination to the *Académie Goncourt* in 2016. She remains a fixture in the French literary and cultural scene, regularly penning articles in newspapers and magazines, organizing and participating in punk concerts and collaborating with Béatrice Dalle. In spite of their common experience of serving on the *Académie Goncourt*, and being (eventually) consecrated by the literary establishment, little in the

[3] Despentes has criticized the adaption, removing herself from its production, and qualifying it as "une vision du proletariat par la bourgeoisie." Pauline Thurier, "Virginie Despentes dézingue la série 'Vernon Subutex' dans 'Society.'" 17 May 2019.

way of literary similarities connects Despentes to Colette. This lacuna exists for good reason; their opposing aesthetics and embodiments of femininity seem to preclude scholars of one author from appreciating the other. Nonetheless, I believe that readers of Despentes would do well to explore Colette's œuvre, and vice versa. Leduc, however, is uniquely relatable to both Colette and Despentes. And indeed, these authors all connect with readers of less literary and more popular genres, making them popular choices for those who feel excluded. The intimate or painful is not shrouded in secrecy in their writing, and there is less reverence for and even animosity towards what has been considered by some as sacred in literature. And so, by considering the concepts of the ordinary, of failure, and of abjection we can gain a greater understanding of each author in terms of subject and thematics, but also in terms of style, technique, and manner of production.

Engaging with the ordinary can in and of itself cause women writers in particular to be seen as practicing a certain feminine type of writing. In this way, the ordinary is used simultaneously to praise and critique Colette. According to her contemporaries, her writing is a poetry of the everyday and of the details, but she writes with her instincts, not her intellect.[4] And so her focus on details, on observation and description, are associated with instinct and sentiment, and by extension with the feminine. In this way, Colette's *éloge* of the quotidian is perceived as putting her at odds with serious, masculine, macro-level writing. Like Colette, Leduc writes lyrical passages describing scenes of nature. She also has significant dialogues with everyday objects like a razor blade (*La Chasse à l'amour)* and the sparkles in the metro steps (*La Bâtarde)*. The focus on objects and detail by both writers, along with their at times overpowering literary personas (it's often difficult to discern myth from reality and writer from reputation) motivates me to examine how and why works of literature that have been derided as instinctual, feminine, and ephemeral could be considered as steady world-making and a choosing of objects that please, comfort, and create.

Post-World War II literature and literary criticism in France began to engage with theories of the everyday, the ordinary, and the quotidian with the work of Henri Lefebvre (*Critique de la vie quotidienne* would be published in 1947). Important work by Georges Perec on the topic would appear in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by a significant amount of academic inquiry into the everyday beginning in the 1980s.[5] The everyday has sustained the interest of readers and scholars ever since. A recent conference on the everyday, for instance, titled "Les écritures contemporaines du quotidien: une cartographie"[6] links the quotidian to its spatial and temporal elements, bringing an intangible concept into contact with the practicality of cartography. The conference description addresses some of the challenges in working with the quotidian. It is "ce qu'il y a de plus difficile à découvrir" according to Blanchot.[7] Perec ponders how to narrate the everyday : "Ce qui se passe chaque jour et qui revient chaque jour […],

[4] See Marie-Christine Bellosta's notice to *Aventures Quotidiens* in Colette, *oeuvres complètes, La Pléiade, vol. 3*, p. 1298-1304, edited Claude Pichois.
[5] See especially Maurice Blanchot, "La parole quotidienne," *L'Entretien infini*, Gallimard, 1969, Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, Gallimard, 1980, Georges Perec, *L'Infra-ordinaire*, Seuil, coll. La Librairie du XXe siècle, 1989, Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, Oxford UP, 2006.
[6] https://centerinparis.uchicago.edu/news/les-ecritures-contemporaines-du-quotidien-une-cartographie. A two-part conference held at the Université de Strasbourg and the University of Chicago Paris Center in June 2019.
[7] Blanchot 355.

comment en rendre compte, comment l'interroger, comment le décrire ?"[8] We will see in chapter one how Colette conceives of the project of writing the ordinary.

In developing my thinking on the ordinary as it relates to space and place, I draw on *Loiterature* by Ross Chambers in order to better define both the ordinary and the extraordinary in Colette's writing and to elucidate how the ordinary opens up the experiences of the periphery. I conceive of writing from the periphery as a kind of marginality, and as being on the sidelines. While in many ways later in life Colette occupied positions of centrality (we can think of her geographically central location in Paris and her unanimous election to the *Académie Goncourt* in 1945), we can also think of Colette as physically sidelined in her apartment with arthritis, often confined to a wheelchair, excluded from romantic affairs and seduction by age and loss of conventional beauty (although her third husband, Maurice Goudeket, who was 17 years her junior, continued to care for her until her death). Early in her career, she also wrote from the periphery of bourgeois life and the literary elite while performing in music halls. Chambers sees a kind of "formlessness" as corresponding to an "uncertainty of identity."[9] By being at home everywhere and nowhere, Colette is a "critical reader of social dominance and an empathetic reader of the marginal."[10] Her formal (or formless) choices reflect the instability of her own position (with a foot in multiple worlds) as well as those of her characters (performers, *ouvrières*, those involved in same-sex relationships, aging women, and women in love).

Colette's close friend and Palais-Royal neighbor Jean Cocteau insisted on her reverence for the small and the ordinary in his speech after being elected to the *Académie Royale de langue & de littérature Françaises de Belgique* in 1955. Cocteau would occupy the place left vacant in the Academy after Colette's death. He tells the audience, "Le vif n'a jamais quitté cette âme, et sa curiosité pour toutes choses, grandes ou petites, ne connaissait aucun repos … Et je ne sais pas si Goethe ou Shakespeare, brusquement réapparus, eussent distrait Madame Colette d'une araignée en train de tisser sa toile, ou d'une chatte attaquée par les hirondelles."[11] Cocteau pronounces a description with which Colette would wholeheartedly agree. This type of approachability and lack of pretension would help Colette to be accepted by the French general reader, and perhaps by her literary peers who found her non-threatening because of it. Some of her scandalous past falls away in her love for the diminutive and the ordinary. This does not diminish her place in the canon or the importance of the quotidian as an object of study; however, it does explain how Colette, despite being refused funeral rites by the Catholic Church, became the first woman to receive a state funeral in France in 1954. The beauty and genius of Colette's work exists in the tension between and coexistence of an exultation of the ordinary and an appreciation for those on the margins.

In the same vein as writing from a place of feminine ugliness that Despentes and Leduc explore, in later works like *L'Étoile Vesper* and *Le Fanal Bleu* Colette describes her aging body and her battles with arthritis pain. She also reflects on herself as a writer. Is Colette's nearly monolithic silence about war and its aftermath a strategic homage to the everyday, or a refusal to

[8] Perec 11.
[9] Chambers 58.
[10] Chambers 82.
[11] Jean Cocteau. *Colette: Discours de réception à l'académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises*, Grasset, 1955, 39-40.

enter into a certain kind of writing? Does the intimate, personal nature of the boudoir and its place in Colette's writing fix her characters in static subjectivities? The acquisition of goods, especially luxury goods, is a topic taken up by both Colette and Leduc. I look at how the use of objects relates to exploration of a writerly ordinary in Leduc and Colette. Both writes explore a problematic, troublesome pleasure that they find in the longing for, acquisition, and possession of clothing, jewelry, and furniture. In the case of Leduc, we can think of her Schiaparelli suit or the lacquered table in *La Bâtarde* and in Colette in her last two works the meditations on her "boules féeriques" (glass paperweights) and pieces of jewelry. In chapter one we will trace the impact of things and on things, in Colette and Leduc.[12]

If the topics of abjection and failure seems unquestionably central to the writings of Leduc and Despentes, it may not be immediately obvious to readers of Colette how abjection comes up in her work. I will explore the idea that, especially in the works of Colette, feminine aging constitutes a fall into abjection. While aging does not represent the same types of abjection as that experienced by marginalized characters in Despentes, there is an analytical trajectory that I will pursue, moving from Colette's explorations of the consequences of aging to the descriptions of aging as abject and as a particular part of femininity in the works of Leduc. Leduc's constant comparisons and lamentations about her body as ugly, skinny, and old contribute to the constant scrutiny to which the female body is subjected, even by female authors. The relevance of this scrutiny to Despentes's treatment of abjection will be clear. To analyze how age affected Colette's writing and how female aging was represented in her works, I will compare the approaches of Anne Freadman and Bethany Ladimer to *L'Étoile Vesper* and *Le Fanal Bleu*. Freadman's *The Livres-Souvenirs of Colette: Genre and the Telling of Time* demonstrates how Colette's last works form not just collections of impressions but also become objects curated for display. Ladimer's *Colette, Beauvoir, and Duras: Age and Women Writers* specifically analyses the portrayal of Léa's aging body in *La Fin de Chéri*. There is also a moving away from fiction for Colette as she ages, and Ladimer equates writing with sensuality for Colette in her later works – the sensual is in her writing and not in physical relationships. This shifting of sensuality to writing marks a permeability in membranes between genres and subjects. What was once merely contained within the confines of the physical body now also infiltrates words and books. In this way, boundaries become blurred and abjection of writing about sex or sexuality to the margins becomes a more challenging process.

2013 marked a resurgence in critical and popular interest in Leduc. The film *Violette*, directed by Martin Provost, told a cinematized version of Leduc's story, marshalling significant star power to do so. Emmanuelle Devos played the title role, and Sandrine Kiberlain played the role of Simone de Beauvoir. Accompanying the film's release, Gallimard published new editions of Leduc's works. Reviews of the film will furnish additional insight into the treatment of failure

[12] In thinking about affect and the ordinary, and things, a review of Lauren Berlant's new book (*The Hundreds*, by Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart, Duke UP 2019) connects affect theory and cruel optimism with anecdotes of the everyday: "It is an inventory of what Berlant and Stewart call 'ordinaries,' which arise from encounters with the world that are 'not events of knowing, units of anything, or revelations of realness, or facts.'" Indeed, "each entry is an experiment in 'following out the impact of things' in a hundred words, or a multiple of a hundred words." *The New Yorker* "Affect Theory and the New Age of Anxiety" Hua Hsu, 18 March 2019. The "impact of things" will be significant to Colette as she composes her final works.

by Leduc. One such review, entitled, "Violette Leduc, l'amie scandaleuse de Simone de Beauvoir," re-inscribles Leduc in a literary landscape from which she had often been omitted. The title itself imparts a certain social cachet by both connecting Leduc to Beauvoir and implying a life even more scandalous than that of the author of *Le Deuxième Sexe*. While readers of Leduc may rightly critique the version of her life Provost created for the screen, the reception of the film permitted those unfamiliar with Leduc to be introduced to her unique style of writing. For instance, readers of *Le Figaro* were privy to this description : "Pour la fille de Berthe, qui a des tendances paranoïaques, la littérature tient lieu de défouloir. Violette écrit pour ne pas mourir. Faute de vivre ses passions, elle couche ses désillusions sur des pages blanches."[13]

Located a few hundred meters from Leduc's lodgings in Paris at 20 rue Paul Bert in the 11th arrondissement is the bookstore Violette and Co. Opened in 2004 as a queer feminist bookstore and meeting space, the store's website describes itself as "la librairie des filles et des garçons manqués ... et de leurs ami-e-s!"[14] In 2013-2014 Violette and Co. hosted a number of events in honor of Leduc to accompany the film and the 10th anniversary of the bookstore. A "club de lecture" was organized that year to read or re-read Leduc's *œuvre*, and continues to this day. The club now reads work by a variety of feminist and queer authors. Included among the talks and conferences about Leduc was a presentation by the research team that was working on her manuscripts, preserved at the Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine in Caen. In addition, 2014 marked the 50th anniversary of the publication of *La Bâtarde*, engendering its own conference at the École normale supérieure in Paris.[15] All this to say that Leduc is in the process of being discovered by a new generation of readers and re-examined by a new generation of scholars, thanks in part to the convergence of all of these events in the past several years. The study of her manuscripts has allowed more insight into her writing process and her writing failures. *La Bâtarde* represented Leduc's first literary success in 1964, and indeed, fifty years later her seminal work continues to both shock and touch its readers. In thinking about reorienting bodies to books, we can also look at how the literary establishment and the reading public have reoriented themselves to these authors over time.

As Simone de Beauvoir states in her preface to Leduc's *La Bâtarde*, "De nos jours, les confessions sexuelles abondent. Il est beaucoup plus rare qu'un écrivain parle avec franchise de l'argent. Violette Leduc ne cache pas l'importance qu'il a pour elle: il materialise, lui aussi, ses rapports avec autrui."[16] In Leduc's work we see a conflation of writing, money and sex in *La Bâtarde,* and *La Folie en tête*. Adding another level to the discussion of the circulation of goods, literary works and women Leduc narrates her experiences as a black-marketeer during the Second World War. She describes in detail the moment when she is finally stopped by the police – a moment of abject failure. Colette oversaw product tie-ins with the *Claudine* novels, launched a make-up line, and described her need to write for money in many of her works. Leduc wrote advertising copy before writing novels, and Colette wrote descriptions for decorative volumes about perfumes and other luxury goods. I wish to connect the material concerns of these women writers with their penchant for objects which help them to construct a tangible, interpretable world. Ordinary financial concerns and ordinary objects become at certain moments almost

[13] Nathalie Simon, "Violette Leduc, l'amie scandaleuse de Simone de Beauvoir," *Le Figaro*, 5 November 2013.
[14] http://www.violetteandco.com/librairie/
[15] http://www.item.ens.fr/colloque-international-sur-violette-leduc-la-batarde-a-cinquante-ans/
[16] Simone de Beauvoir, preface to *La Bâtarde*, 16.

characters in these works, and the weight of their significance provides at once a touchstone to daily life and a path to literary creativity. Objects for the writers in question take on status as memories, and form collections that help to construct queer universes made up of objects and selected by writers.

For these three authors, failure can be alternately described as a motivator, as an inhibitor, and as a shaper of writing. Different ways of coming to writing embody different forms of failure and are important in how these writers view themselves and their relationship to their craft. They help explain why Colette loved the accolades she accumulated later on in life which often make us forget her transgressive past. Colette also makes explicit the "work" involved in writing, describing writing as a job and herself as an artisan (and this is highlighted by the way the tools of her craft are displayed at Musée Colette). Ladimer reflects on ". . . Colette's uneasy relationship to the masculine profession of writing as sacralized by the intellectual establishment and the scholarly canon, and her lifelong refusal to see writing as anything but a form of work like the music hall, the cosmetics business in which she was briefly involved, or the everyday tasks ordinarily accomplished by women."[17] Leduc and Despentes makes explicit similarities between sex work and writing work. This explicitness helps to counter the masculine myth of the inspired intellectual artist and underscores the work, setbacks and failure that accompany literary success for these writers.

In considering ways to read and write failure, I turn to Halberstam's thinking in *The Queer Art of Failure* and couple this with Sara Ahmed's work on both failure and objects. Moving from physical objects to objects of affection, I like to think of Leduc, in particular, as an "affect alien" as described by Sara Ahmed in the conclusion to her essay "Happy Objects": "If anything, the experience of being alienated from the affective promise of happy objects gets us somewhere. Affect aliens can do things, for sure, by refusing to put bad feelings to one side in the hope that we can 'just get along.' A concern with histories that hurt is not then a backward orientation: to move on, you must make this return. If anything we might want to reread melancholic subjects, the ones who refuse to let go of suffering, who are even prepared to kill some forms of joy, as an alternative model of the social good."[18] All three of the authors I am considering here refuse to put some bad feelings to the side, albeit in ways that correspond to their own lives and writing styles. For Colette, this means more direct communication with the reader in her final works as she describes physical pains and frustrations. Leduc and Despentes insist on not easing up on suffering, or on "bad feels," which I discuss in chapter three. And the idea of failure is ever-present in Despentes's writing – she is constantly reiterating the hypocritical standards put in place by capitalist systems of power and presenting characters who fail to meet those standards. Yet by failing to "succeed" or to achieve in any conventional way that should lead to happiness, Despentes's characters demonstrate alternative ways of being, of questioning and of resisting imposed narratives and behaviors.[19]

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[17] Ladimer 85.
[18] Ahmed 50.
[19] A 2019 conference, "Autopsie de l'échec littéraire" sought to explore some of these very questions. Authors interrogated both the notions of "success" and "failure" in literature, and discussed changing perceptions of works and authors over time. Thus, failure is not a stable category, and critical judgments merit revision. Consequently, Leduc's many failures can be read in different ways today.

Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* reframes the question of literary and artistic failure in terms of gender and sexuality: "Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures."[20] In chapter two I explore both failure as experienced by protagonists and as written by authors. What is "the art" of failure – i.e. through what literary and rhetorical devices is it described and related to the reader? Halberstam expands upon the idea of failure to include unbecoming, passivity, masochism, and other ways of challenging a patriarchal "becoming" of woman and inhabiting of femininity.

Despentes directly explores the question of failing at femininity in *Les Jolies Choses* in which one twin sister has bought in to the marketing of femininity and the other, who had resisted, comes to follow in her footsteps. I will be exploring the dual possibility on the one had that certain works by Colette, Leduc, and Despentes "fail" at being feminist, and on the other hand that those same works support Halberstam's claim that failure can be a productive and successful undoing of patriarchal forms of power: "This shadow feminism speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, an antisocial femininity, and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so reproduces her relationship to patriarchal forms of power."[21] Despentes's protagonist in *Apocalypse Bébé*, for example, is a woman who has both failed at heterosexuality and according to her lesbian mentor in the novel continues to fail at being a lesbian. Leduc's unrequited love for gay men and Colette's protagonists who don't accept the marriage plot represent both sentimental and social failures. In addition, failure in Despentes is enacted in the rejection of capitalist systems of production, of being a good, obedient worker, and of desiring that role. When writing characters who are marginalized in terms of race and class, Despentes also explores failure in terms of measuring up to bourgeois white French standards of behavior, of education, and of language.

I also consider censorship as a form of failure. Censorship has been intertwined with the publication of writing by all three women. In her exploration of the censorship of now classic works of French literature, Elisabeth Ladenson questions subversion and transgression as absolute values.[22] Her analysis of the reclaiming and canonization of works by writers like Flaubert, Sade and Baudelaire will inform my discussion of the censorship faced by Colette, Leduc and Despentes. Colette faced pressure to change and re-write texts to suit editors' moral and financial purposes, especially earlier in her career when she wrote in installments for newspapers and journals. Leduc's *Ravages* was cut so as not to include the lesbian sex scenes of what would become *Thérèse and Isabelle*. Leduc recounts her subsequent failure of mental health and resilience in *La Chasse à l'amour.* Also, this censorship significantly alters the structure of the novel. It fails to be a coming-of-age story that begins with a lesbian relationship, and in its entirety described two heterosexual and two homosexual relationships, and instead portrays a lesbian relationship placed in the middle (and therefore de-emphasized) between heterosexual relationships that begin and end the work. And Despentes's *Baise-moi* shocked the

[20] Halberstam 4
[21] Halberstam 124.
[22] See Elisabeth Ladenson, *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita*, Cornell University Press, 2007.

literary public and challenged the limits of cinematic censorship with its film version, co-directed by Despentes and the famous pornographer Coralie Trinh Thi. I will be exploring not only the censorship of these specific works but also the interplay between censorship and the enshrinement of these authors in the literary field.

While we can discuss the masochistic or submissive roles embodied by characters in Colette and Leduc, the reveling in the abject of both the female body and the feminine position in society seen in Despentes presents an entirely different treatment of the body as it relates to sexuality. How does Despentes (and to some extent, Leduc) challenge the conventions of representing the female body in narrative? In order to explore this, I will continue to draw on recent work in affect theory, including Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* and "Happy Objects", which will permit me to think about both physical objects and objects of happiness like the nuclear family from which the "unhappy queer" is excluded.[23] Sianne Ngai's treatment of negative feelings in *Ugly Feelings* will help my thinking about Leduc's experiences with minor affects like anxiety, paranoia and envy. In examining shame and abjection, I will look to Sanyal's treatment of Despentes in *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form*, as well as Eribon's *De La Subversion: Droit, Norme et Politique*. Sanyal's work on *Baise-moi* will help me look at the creative and aesthetic potential in violence, abjection and negativity in more recent works of Despentes, along with discussions of "matter's revenge on form."[24] Eribon discusses Leduc's illegitimacy, along with shame and abjection in *Principes d'une pensee critique*. That discussion, along with the passages in *De La Subversion*, where he explores how shame and abjection can serve as tools for creating identities for which negativity is only a stepping-stone will be instrumental to my analysis.

Exploring and reveling in the abject is not a phenomenon that is limited to the works of Despentes, which portray abjection as both imposed and embraced. All three writers capture a certain delectation in specific kinds of submission. I will interrogate these different languages of submission, which occur, for example, in representations of the awareness of unrequited love and desire, and the knowing perseverance in its pursuit. Both Colette and Leduc explore the abject position in their works in stories of unrequited love and in other ways. For example, in addition to Leduc's description of her abortion in *Ravages*, other depictions of corporeal suffering and emotional anguish and mental illness are woven throughout her writing. The vocabulary introduced by Colette when writing about romantic relationships - *prison, cage, laisse, chaîne, maître, violence, liberté, soumission* – is also employed by Leduc and Despentes in their discussions of desire and knowing submission. Despite the different time periods from which they write and their radically different life experiences, all three writers can be brought into conversation on this topic. In chapter three I connect Colette and Despentes through discussions of abjection and the body and the work of Leduc. In different yet related ways these writers are describing ground-breaking ways of being vulnerable – sexually, textually, and literarily.

As we will see in chapter three, investigation of the abject allows us to consider the limits of both the human body and the social body. Despentes's writing does an excellent job of communicating the corporeal realities of characters on a micro level. In addition, her kaleidoscopic narrative techniques (many moving parts that are constantly being re-shaped) form

[23] Ahmed "Happy Objects."
[24] Sanyal 139.

macro level portraits of the social body, with a specific focus on those living on the margins. In addition to Halberstam's work, Darieck Scott's thinking on abjection shapes my interpretations of the role of the abject in Despentes. In *Baise-moi* and her other works, Despentes challenges aesthetic codes and presents new discursive depictions of the female body. Scott's work will help structure my discussion of the permeability of bodies represented in Despentes. In this way corporeal instability and vulnerability need not always signify weakness, and may engender excesses in representation. Permeability calls into question delineations between self and other, and between self and world.

"… la plupart du temps, c'est l'ordinaire qui me pique et me vivifie." ~ Colette, *Le Fanal Bleu*

"Mon travail ne vaut rien, je le sais, inutile de m'injurier." ~ Leduc, *La Folie en tête*

"J'écris de chez les moches, pour les moches, les vieilles, les camionneuses, les frigides, les mal baisées, les imbaisables, les hystériques, les tarées, toutes les exclues du grand marché à la bonne meuf."

~ Despentes, *King Kong Théorie*

My journey through these authors and concepts begins with Colette's ordinariness, moves on through Leduc's extravagant displays of failure, and ends with Despentes's insistent dwelling on that which social norms exclude. Taken all together, they offer a compelling vision of a darker side of women's writing, and the making of the self.

Chapter 1: Colette's Ordinary: the Quotidian, the Material, the Corporeal

I take my inspiration for understanding the term "ordinary" from something Colette writes at the beginning of *Le Fanal Bleu*:

> ... Je ne sais pas écrire un vrai journal, c'est-à-dire former grain à grain, jour après jour, un de ces chapelets auxquels la précision de l'écrivain, la considération qu'il a de soi et de son époque, suffisent à donner du prix, une couleur de joyau. Choisir, noter ce qui fut marquant, garder l'insolite, éliminer le banal, ce n'est pas mon affaire, puisque, la plupart du temps, c'est l'ordinaire qui me pique et me vivifie.[25]

> [... I do not possess the knack of writing a proper journal, that is to say of stringing together, bead by bead, day after day, a rosary whose value and intrinsic lustre are relative to the writer's power of exact observation, and of assessing his own importance and that of his time. The art of selection, of noting things of mark retaining the unusual while discarding the commonplace, has never been mine, since most of the time I am stimulated and quickened by the ordinary.][26]

In *Le Fanal Bleu,* Colette's final original work, she calls attention to those elements of her writing that focus on the ordinary. She also uses this term to distinguish her style and subject matter from those of her literary peers. Colette's delight in writing about the ordinary aspects of human existence (or what she considers to be the ordinary aspects) is confirmed and expanded upon in her writing towards the end of her career. It is important to situate Colette in a literary context where the feminine and the ordinary (read: the unimportant) had long been conflated. Colette, along with other women writers, has been considered less interesting to some scholars because her writing is seen as coming from the interior, or the boudoir, as opposed to dealing with larger questions in the social world. Women wrote what they knew, and for many of them this was indeed home life and the quotidian. Dianna Fuss aptly connects social, familial, and physical structures to changed notions of writing and of the writer. Indeed, the industrial revolution and the rise of bourgeois dwelling-spaces shifted conceptions of domestic spaces with regards to writing:

> The new ideology of the house as a place of solitary retreat perfectly suited the contemplative work of writing, but it also left the profession open to the charge of feminization. Writing became feminized not only because more women were entering its ranks, but also because the labor of writing itself remained within the home, the very heart of domesticity.[27]

The charge of feminization is one that I welcome wholeheartedly concerning the writing of Colette and the fashioning of her domestic space. For throughout her works, but most unequivocally in the last two, Colette's domestic and writing spaces are overlapping and intertwined. Over Colette's career she wrote prolifically of female protagonists acting in the

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[25] *FB* 728.
[26] *FB* Trans. Roger Senhouse 6-7.
[27] Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them*, 10.

larger world, often writing very much from the exterior (including during her career as a journalist). However, in this last chapter of her life when she is, in fact, writing physically from her boudoir/bureau, she chooses to embrace the ordinary. For me the ordinary as a concept, especially as one sees it in Colette's work, has three distinct valences: the quotidian, the material, and the corporeal.

Colette's long and varied career as a novel writer, journalist, music-hall performer, and magazine columnist, among other roles, lent itself to reinvention. As scholars and readers of her work, we must also re-interpret and revise our perceptions of her texts. We must reorient ourselves as readers just as Colette reoriented her body and writing to a less mobile existence in the final years of her life. It is difficult to make generalizations about Colette's writing, given her prolific career. But, one can break her writing up into periods or thematic groupings.[28] A great deal of attention has been paid to the *Claudine* novels, first published beginning in 1900. Attention to these works also included Colette's relationship (both marital and literary) with her first husband, Willy. This period of her life is also the subject of a 2018 feature film starring Keira Knightley as Colette. There has been much written about her music-hall career and *La Vagabonde*, as well as autobiographical explorations of her native Burgundy and her relationship with her mother in *La Naissance du Jour* and *Sido*. Colette came into literary renown with *Chéri* in 1920, and participated in flurries of literary, artistic and commercial endeavors throughout much of her long career.

In this chapter, I would like to attempt for us, as readers of Colette, to re-orient ourselves towards *un univers restraint et rétreci* (a restricted and shrunken universe), at least in terms of physical space, and to bring into focus the apartment at the Palais-Royal in Paris where Colette spent the vast majority of the last decade of her life. I begin with the last works of a confirmed literary talent, writing in the aftermath of World War II; an aging writer crippled by pain who accumulates and intertwines objects and memories in her final texts: *L'Étoile Vesper* (*The Evening Star)* and *Le Fanal Bleu (The Blue Lantern),* published respectively in 1946 and 1949.

To grasp the significance of Colette's final works, we must contextualize and re-inscribe her in her corporeal reality and in her physical surroundings. Colette wrote *L'Étoile Vesper* and *Le Fanal Bleu* while confined to her apartment at the Palais-Royal because of severe arthritis. Consequently, the material surroundings of her apartment play an important role in her writing. The objects around her anchor her last two original works as she curates and shares them with her reader, intertwining them with memories. Colette's collections of contemplative objects (paperweights, glass sculptures, and butterflies, among others) will serve as touchstones in my analysis of the embodied experience so fundamental to her writing.

Colette spends an inordinate amount of time describing material goods in her last two works, eschewing narrative trajectory or deep character development. Her collections of short impressionistic pieces, display Colette's always evident keen sense of observation and description. As the world is brought to her, tangible objects become gateways to memories,

[28] For instance, in *Colette and the Fantom Subject of Autobiography*, Jerry Aline Flieger divides many of Colette's works into three categories: autobiographical fiction (including the *Claudines*), fictional autobiography, and impressionist memoir. *L'Étoile Vesper* and *Le Fanal Bleu* are placed, appropriately, in this last category.

adventures, and feelings. The two volumes are made up of short written episodes, and the way she collects these short pieces in these last works mirrors the collections of objects she describes in the works themselves. They form a constitution of self, through objects that are not the self but rather that define and shape it. In this way, we can think of objects as having a related function to that of the abject (the subject of a later chapter of this dissertation) – although objects in Colette's collection do not engender disgust and are not expelled from the body. Instead, they serve as ways to delimit and describe herself and her work. Through inclusion rather than exclusion, these objects form a delineated space of self and other. Although Colette, through her reflections on these objects, delineates a boundary between interior and exterior, she makes her interior space permeable to the outside world. This permeability resembles Colette's own abilities to permeate multiple worlds and take on a series of identities. At this point in her life, Colette's writing circulates through multiple audiences with ease, whereas Leduc and Despentes, at earlier career moments, have work to do to obtain a public. One way this circulation and permeation of Colette's work is accomplished literarily is through the extended elegies of the objects with which she forms herself and her world.[29] Through inclusion and cushioning as opposed to exclusion and excision, Colette cultivates written and physical comforts.[30] By cushioning, I mean both physical comforts that have been modified and adapted for her body (the rolling desk fitted over her bed, chairs with embroidered cushions), and sentimental objects and décor that soften the harsh critiques and judgment of an earlier world where Colette did not always fit so well. It can be said that Colette created worlds and also made space for herself in worlds that made no room for her. Seen this way, Colette can be taken as a precursor to writers like Leduc and Despentes. All three can be taken as examples of Lauren Berlant's idea of "making worlds for what doesn't work."[31] However, Colette's writing is a less extreme example of this than Leduc and Despentes. Her work mostly created worlds for what did work, or what did come to work eventually thanks to her persistence, cultural capital and savvy. While Colette's path to famous writerhood was not an entirely smooth one, her ability to connect to the world around her, its objects, animals, and people, greatly facilitated this process. Leduc and Despentes, in contrast, had more obstacles (imposed by both self and society) to navigate in forming their writerly identities. I will use Leduc's work as a point of contrast to Colette's, particularly as regards the affective relation to ordinary objects in the world, later in this chapter.

The valences of the ordinary that I explore here (the quotidian, the material, the corporeal) overlap with each other and with the materiality of existence. As a writer of the quotidian, we see the moments of daily life, which Colette was so skilled at grasping and relating

[29] We will look at Bill Brown's work on thing theory later in this chapter. For more on the ways that objects can mediate bodies and selves, see Brown's *A Sense of Things*.

[30] In thinking of how curating one's physical space can create comfortable worlds, we can recall Octavia Butler's words connecting writing and world-making as an African-American woman writing science fiction: "You got to make your own worlds. You got to write yourself in," to Charlie Rose, 1 June 2000.

[31] Lauren Berlant, Afterword: After It's Over, in *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, Duke UP, 2014. 25. In addition, Heidegger's concept of worlding is helpful in thinking about making and creating worlds. See "The Origin of the Work of Art" 1960 (1950), trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, Ed. David Farrell Krell, 2008. Heidegger reminds us of the "thingness" of works of art – actual wood, marble, etc. and that "To be a work means to set up a world" (170). "The *world worlds*..." The world is neither only tangible nor only our representations of it, but an interplay between both and relationships between all. Worlding describes an ongoing process of "thinging" the world, a matter of responsiveness to particular things, and how we experience the world as familiar.

to her readers, in ways that are alternately humorous, touching, or poignant. It is her attention to detail in describing daily life that supports the idea that one can make deep, profound statements while talking about such things. Her final works validate existence and writing that takes humble subjects for its studies. And in these last two works more than in any others Colette relates the experiences of inhabiting an aging and painful body. Whereas Leduc and Despentes excel at relating experiences of social pain and shame, Colette here imparts corporeal distress. Having already related the experience of losing one's youthful feminine beauty earlier in her career, particularly in *Chéri* and *La Fin de Chéri*, we come to understand, in great detail, the loss of function that accompanies her struggle with arthritis and the constant pain that accompanies her in her writing in *L'Étoile Vesper* and *Le Fanal Bleu*

I. The Quotidian

In her last two works, Colette moves away from fiction and autobiography and towards discrete moments of observation. The short form and discontinuity of her texts correspond to unsorted, unfiltered existence and thought. These formal choices can be thought of as leading the reader to be "productively dislocated"[32], in that they oblige the reader pay closer attention to what the writer is doing, and attempt to offer alternative forms of narration, and by extension, alternative ways of looking at the world. Both the form and the content of Colette's final works represent an investment in the quotidian. Indeed, the form and the subject matter mirror each other: "Aucune partie de ce recueil n'est en marche vers une péroraison ou une apothéose."[33] Colette's writing in these last works is anti-rosary in structure; she is not stringing together— either logically or chronologically — her memories to form the perfect circular structure of the rosary.[34] Yet, this collection of writings does take on the valence of reverence associated with religious devotion. Colette's devotion is, however, to the commonplace and to the ephemeral.

In place of the uniform structure and order of the beads of the rosary, Colette's vignettes here represent a grab bag of oddly shaped stones of all colors and sizes. In a typical passage of Colette's celebrating the ordinary (both ordinary people and ordinary moments), she discusses the art of the butcher. And in typical disorderly fashion, this passage occurs just after descriptions of encounters with Jean Cocteau and memories of festive meals, separated with simple line breaks. Following the butcher, Colette passes on to black market boutiques for a few paragraphs. Then, following another line break, she begins a dated narration of her birth, as though beginning a classic autobiography. The date of writing is that of her seventy-fifth birthday, and descriptions of the festivities will immediately follow. We've gone from birth to the seventy-fifth birthday in the space of a few paragraphs, and this rapprochement of

[32] To borrow a phrase from Judith Butler, used in an address given at Berkeley during a foreign language commencement ceremony in 2017.
[33] *EV* 681.
[34] While Colette's remark about her writing not being akin to the structure of a rosary does not in and of itself belie anti-Church sentiment, it is worth noting that while she was the first woman to receive a state funeral in France in 1954, she was refused funeral rites by the Catholic church. Given her two divorces from men and past relationships with women, this is no surprise, but could be viewed as a commentary on the complex relationship between the French state and the French Catholic church, especially with regards to the women chosen for honors.

experiences and events goes counter to traditional narrative structure and expectations of Memoirs with a capital M.

The continued digressions persist, so that digressions in fact become primary subjects. Take the example of Colette's veneration of Parisian butchers:

> Je retrouve, j'apprécie encore le chic que ces messieurs de la boucherie mettent à parer la viande. Un boucher coupant, tranchant, élaguant, façonnant, ficelant, vaut un danseur, un mime. Boucher de Paris, s'entend. La huppe d'or sur le front, la joue pareille à l'aurore et l'oreille comme une rose, les cordons du tablier noués à l'ordonnance, juste ce qu'il faut de taches de sang çà et là, ah ! madame, le boucher de Paris vaut le coup d'œil, sinon mieux.[35]

Here we see description that functions *as* narration. Colette pauses and zooms in on actions that one wouldn't normally focus on at the butcher, such as his appearance or movements. More typical would be images of the butcher's shop and the array of meats displayed. In this passage, Colette appears almost as a *metteur-en-scène* in the most literal sense of the expression. She has put the butcher onto and into the scene, and in this scene he is both artist and artisan: "[Il] vaut un danseur, un mime." High praise coming from the former music-hall performer, who held her performer colleagues and their work in great esteem. In her lovely poetic fashion, Colette also exalts the butcher's work with flesh and blood with comparisons to the dawn and to roses. The pleasure she takes in the way the apron strings are tied, in the pattern of bloodstains, show her finding beauty and joy in what could be called the overlooked ordinary. Colette specifies (twice!) in this short paragraph that she is speaking of the Parisian butcher: "Boucher de Paris, s'entend." Colette typically does not snub La Province in admiring descriptions, so why the insistence on the Parisian butcher? Parisians more than any other *commerçants* understand themselves as part of the urban theater that forms part of the Parisian cultural, aesthetic, and social fabrics. Paris itself, and its inhabitants, theatricalize the ordinary in a way that Colette recognizes and to which she calls attention. At the end of the sections in which she touches on the butcher, pastries, and luxury foodstuffs of the black market, she describes those present as "tous les acteurs de cette scène,"[36] further emphasizing the theatricality of these interactions, and her cognizance and appreciation of it. The quotidian is not always simple – here Colette lauds and literally winks at the butcher and the reader. She knows the butcher's actions are part of a performance, and thanks to her descriptions we know this as well, and can appreciate the performative gestures that constitute and elevate the Parisian quotidian.

Colette grounds herself from her perch at the window of her apartment above the gardens of the Palais-Royal. Although restricted for the most part to her bed and to her wheelchair, Colette voyages across time and space in recounting observations and experiences. We follow her across France but then are quickly recalled to her bedside, to the persistent pain and immobility that anchor her last works. The interior and the exterior reinforce each other. And Colette's lingering on Parisian butchers, and, as we shall see next, Parisian children, cements her as a master of a type of quotidian particular to the Parisian cityscape. She describes how a crying child is always soothed on the playground "chaque fois que le démoulage d'un 'pâté'

[35] *FB* 756.
[36] *FB* 757.

(proportions : terre humide 50 %, crottes diverses 50 %) requiert son doigté. Après quoi il repleure un peu, mais sans conviction."[37] The recipe here for children's playground creations is given as though it were an actual cake, even though Colette insists on proportions of damp earth to muck and droppings. In this way she manages to both mock the child benevolently and communicate a respect for children's priorities and protocols. In fact, she delights in them. Unlike the Parisian butcher, Parisian children have no explicit role to fill or performance to give, and they figure as more uninhibited representations of the simple and the ordinary. This vein of literary creation extends to Colette's abundant writing on animals, chiefly her pet dogs and cats.[38] There is a guilelessness and humor that she is able to illuminate for the reader in her writing about both children and animals, which connects to her concern for the quotidian.

Her writing celebrates both the humble actions and the humble things around her. And Colette's quotidian does not stop at the *periphérique.* She cultivates a reverence both for Paris's urban theater and for the beauty of France's smaller towns. Although more narrative in structure, Colette's observations echo Francis Ponge's 1942 homage to everyday objects in *Le parti pris des choses*. Visiting the region of Grasse, through her lens of childlike wonder, she lauds humble village life, and the rich varieties of French regions:

> Les fontaines libres abondent, le moindre mas a sa cascatelle; l'urne ventrue des 'placettes' abreuve sans repos les villages de ses trois jets presque glacés, parfois finement pailletés de bulles ; je ne peux me tenir d'emprunter un gobelet, ou de téter la cruche ombiliquée, de boire aux fontaines comme je faisais, autrefois, en passant par Aix-en-Provence. Une source, c'est toujours un miracle.[39]

Here Colette reaffirms her appreciation for La Province, for life outside of Paris. We can also see how descriptions like this and the lauding of French village life and regional identities help Colette to become very "Française" at the end of her life. Indeed, her texts were given as dictations to French children in Fourth Republic schools. Her former scandalous affairs seem to fall away as her legacy is solidified by the French state and venerated by the French public.[40] Colette's appellation, "Une source, c'est toujours un miracle", takes on religious valences with regards to her dismissal of her writing as rosary. Indeed, this utterance signifies a secular, and very French, interpretation of "miracles." Like everyday people, Nature also inspires reverence in Colette. She treats the water from the fountain as a connoisseur might speak of a fine wine: "trois jets presque glacés, parfois finement pailletés de bulles."[41] But in this case Colette is not talking about a rare vintage (although she certainly appreciated them). She exalts the village fountain and its water, elevating it to an object of reverence and even sacredness. But her reverence for the quotidian does not, in this sacralization, overtake or erase the simple or quotidian qualities of objects.

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[37] *FB* 797.
[38] *Douze dialogues de bêtes* (1930) being one of the chief examples.
[39] *FB* 775.
[40] Kathleen Antonioli, "Colette's Erasure from Literary History", 20th & 21st centuries French and Francophone Studies Colloquium, 28 February 2015.
[41] Antonioli, "Colette's Erasure from Literary History."

Along with her focus on descriptions of objects in her last two works, Colette treats subjects that for her are decidedly ordinary. Ordinary subject matter for Colette includes memories of her years as a performer in the music-hall, motherhood, descriptions of old photos, her experiences with insomnia, letters from readers, perfume-making in Grasse, dialogues between mothers and children, dog breeds and animal behavior, and excursions to the theater. She also sketches brief portraits of visiting friends and her colleagues at the *Académie Goncourt*. In both works, Colette discusses her own previously published texts, and thereby makes them ordinary objects of contemplation in acts of "auto-intertextuality." Some of this is not ordinary daily life for everyone, but it is her ordinary. Here we hit upon one of the thornier aspects of the ordinary, which seems to lay claim to a certain universality. The ordinary as daily life, or the corporeal realities of inhabiting a human body and the physical world, seem to have universalizing properties readily accessible. But of course one person's ordinary is not exactly another's – the ordinary is also relative. Colette inhabits a human body, but her body is cared for, treated and transported by those in her employ. Material objects shape the orientations of our bodies and potentially our lives, but the objects that Colette surrounds herself with range from flea market trinkets to invaluable gifts from celebrities and well-wishers. Colette's ordinary towards the end of her life has little in common with that of many of her readers or with that of Leduc or Despentes. However, her insistence on the importance of the small daily moments and objects that make up her ordinary demands inquiry into her lived and written ordinaries.

Besides the broad variety of topics addressed in these two texts, Colette's formal choices are striking. Although collections of her newspaper columns and magazine pieces were often published together, each piece had its own title and represented a complete narrative arc or observation. Her two final works do not follow this typical structure. In these two works she jumps from one section to the next, with only a few line breaks and no titles to orient the reader. Again, as Colette tells us in *L'Étoile Vesper*, "Aucune partie de ce recueil n'est en marche vers une péroraison ou une apothéose."[42] Just as description is non-teleological, so Colette's writing is a thematic and formal grab bag seemingly without a unifying force or direction. Like descriptions of the goods stumbled upon during her flea market trips, we see a panoply of short, impressionistic texts that function simultaneously as books *of* and as books *as* memories.[43] The term "livre de souvenirs" was used by Colette herself, to differentiate her writing from traditional Memoirs. Accordingly, these works first become books of memories, a written version of an album or a curio cabinet. Second, the act of writing and then of reading these memories enables the texts to function as memories in and of themselves. The term *livre-souvenirs* describes a grouping of Colette's works by Anne Freadman, consisting of semi-autobiographical texts.[44] They include those from the 1920s that have been studied for their interrogation of the mother-daughter relationship (*La Maison de Claudine, La Naissance du jour, Sido*), to which Freadman adds three later works – *Mes Apprentissages*, *L'Étoile Vesper* and *Le Fanal Bleu*. Colette's writings themselves also become objects and her objects become writing. In this way Colette not only fashions her snippets of text as she wishes, but reforms the literary landscape through generic innovation and the blending of genres.

[42] *EV* 681.
[43] Anne Freadman, *The Livres-Souvenirs of Colette: Genre and the Telling of Time*.
[44] Anne Freadman, *The Livres-Souvenirs of Colette: Genre and the Telling of Time*.

In *L'Étoile Vesper*, Colette's memories of the Occupation involve vignettes of daily things, not sweeping conclusions or generalizations about the war itself or politics or history. Some of the topics and portraits include: pain, writing, age, men in drag, rich men, appreciation of everyday objects, musings on insomnia, grieving her friend Hélène Picard, pets, love letters, her speaking tour, photographs from her music-hall days, and memories of her pregnancy. The last pages of the book discuss her experiences with writing versus embroidery, and at that point she asks how and if it is possible to stop writing. In *Le Fanal Bleu*, topics discussed include children, dogs, milk, homage to another friend, Marguerite Moreno, bird visitors, quests for sewing implements, memories of Jean Cocteau, descriptions of her birth and of her parents' bedroom, lists of gifts and letters she received for her 75th birthday (she would die at 81), ripening patterns of figs, making of perfumes, plane rides, dogs, and children at play. In this book there is more generic variety than in the previous one. We still have Colette's written musings on writing, time, and nostalgia, but also letters to her from readers, a letter from a cat (!) and letters from fans and from writers, making demands and asking for favors. There is a dialogue between children written in script form, ready to be performed on stage. In her last works we discover lexicons for furniture, crafts, jewelry, plants and animals. Colette is not afraid to go into the particular, deviate off course into tangents, and delve into jargon.

Surprisingly, the lack of transitions between these discrete pieces is not jarring. It is even, perhaps, productively dislocating.[45] As Ross Chambers posits in *Loiterature*, "The trick of loiterly narrative is so to question the conventionality of beginnings and endings that the alleged story becomes all middle."[46] In this way, the seeming lack of trajectory, most remarkable in *Le Fanal Bleu*, permits more emphasis on the middle. Colette's loiterly writing also neatly hinders the act of ending, just as she so openly described her difficulties in putting a *point final* on her writing career. She writes in *Le Fanal Bleu*: "*L'Étoile Vesper*, je l'appelais honnêtement mon dernier livre. Je me suis aperçue qu'il est aussi difficile de finir que malaisé de continuer."[47] Writing "all middle" gives us more of the stuff of everyday life, and, as with description, is an exercise in sustained attention and care.[48] The reader cannot skip over the middle to the conclusion or concentrate on the introduction to take away the main ideas. The main ideas are embedded in the intimate and ordinary details.

The idea of *Loiterature* also encompasses literary digression, which is one way to think about the various fragments of observation and contemplation that make up Colette's last two works. Chambers reminds us that to digress, is, etymologically speaking, always to digress *from something*; the act is ablative. In these works, Colette digresses from both narrative conventions and from her own disciplined writing work for deadlines and pay (even though she disputes this idea of discipline when she compares herself to other writers). The before and after of these digressions remain linked and dialogue with each other just as Colette's writings link various interpretations of the ordinary as she meanders among objects, people, animals, and art. And as we will see later, changes in Colette's aging body prompted changes in her space and the way

[45] Butler, commencement address 2017.
[46] Chambers 21.
[47] *EV* 727.
[48] Dora Zhang, "A Weak Theory of Modernist Description." Consortium on the Novel presentation, UC Berkeley, 7 March 2016. Dora Zhang points out that "Descriptive passages can be an education in sustained attention, as solicitations of care."

she spent her time. Her carefully curated writing table and instruments complement the carefully crafted yet meandering prose of her final works. For instance, Colette goes from relating tragic memories of World War II to the practice of journalism to her humorous portrait of "l'homme riche." Towards the end of her recounting of several journalistic experiences, Colette opens a new paragraph with, "Il est difficile, à présent, de rendre vraisemblable l'atmosphère politique du *Matin*, à l'apogée de ses tirages et de son influence." Two paragraphs later, Colette writes her tongue-in-cheek depiction of the stereotypical "rich man."[49] This hopping from subject to subject is not some kind of writerly negligence; Colette makes clear that it is strategic. In this way she offers a model of writing that corresponds to the particular notion of self that she is endeavoring to present to us, which is a self that is decidedly not all-knowing or unified. The specific space of her writing adds particularity, in addition to Colette's narrative digressions: "A writer's domestic interior opens a window onto both author and text, reminding us that what we may at first perceive to be the timeless and universal truth of writing cannot be so neatly extricated from the complex particularities of its spatial and material origins."[50] Thus, through contact with the ordinary, both the particularities of the space of literary creation and a meandering narrative practice help to deconstruct writing as the enlightenment production of self. There is not a single authoritative authorial self or voice, but a collection of moments each rooted in specific conditions of production and thought:

> Je réfléchis. C'est beaucoup dire, mais c'est dit avec assez d'emphase comique pour que se rassure celui qui s'inquiète. Faut-il vraiment donner le nom de pensées à une promenade, à une contemplation sans buts ni desseins, à une sorte de virtuosité du souvenir que je suis seule à ne pas juger vaine ? Je pars, je m'élance sur un chemin autrefois familier, à la vitesse de mon ancien pas ; je vise le gros chêne difforme, la ferme pauvre où le cidre et le beurre en tartines m'étaient généreusement mesurés. Voici la bifurcation du chemin jaune, les sureaux d'un blanc crémeux, environnés d'abeilles en nombre tel qu'on entend, à vingt pas, leur son de batteuse à blé... J'entends sangloter les pintades, grommeler la truie... C'est cela, ma méthode de travail... Puis soudain, un trou mental, le vide, l'abolition, une ressemblance parfaite, je pense, avec ce que doit être le début d'une mort, la route perdue, barrée, effacée... N'importe, je me serai bien amusée en chemin.[51]

Colette indulges her "virtuosité du souvenir" and her vanity to label it as such. She voyages in her past, and in her former body ("à la vitesse de mon ancien pas"). This digressive mental and literary promenade allows her to re-embody herself and to resurrect her dear surroundings of nature. It is also an exploration of the way her own self is constructed, discontinuously, and with inexplicable gaps as well as surprising associations.

In fact, *Le Fanal Bleu* is not only a work of digression and discontinuity, but a text that ought not to exist. Colette said her writerly *adieux* both in the text of *L'Étoile Vesper* and in the title itself. The precarious existence of this final text, which was not intended to be written, also challenges not only notions of finality but also the way we think about an author's responsibility

[49] *EV* 613.
[50] Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them*, 2.
[51] *EV* 593.

for her utterances. Even in *L'Étoile Vesper*, Colette describes the novel sensation of writing without deadlines, and without an assignment: "Il se peut que je ne publie pas ces pages. C'est la première fois que j'écris sans compter. Grande nouveauté, dans la vie et le geste d'un écrivain, que de couvrir les feuillets dont le sort n'est pas fixé."[52] The fate of the words and pages she writes is not yet fixed. She is not writing for a particular audience or publication, which she did for most of her career. In addition, the above phrases were not recorded in a journal about writing her last work, but are included as part of the work itself. This type of self-reflection and candid commentary reappears throughout her final volumes. Colette had conditioned herself to certain types of writing, and certain commercial realities. She is not counting on a paycheck for this project, which changes her relationship to her work and to her text. These material conditions encourage the creation of a literary text that is "all middle," with the author's freedom to structure pieces any way she likes and to treat any subjects she wants. This gesture of writing and knowing that the pages may not be published adds an ephemeral quality to her observations and meandering prose. She also extrapolates this meandering into a schema for her writing career:

> Il m'a fallu beaucoup de temps pour noircir une quarantaine de volumes. Que d'heures dérobées au voyage, à la flânerie, à la lecture, voire à une féminine et saine coquetterie. Comment diable s'arrangeait George Sand ? Cette robuste ouvrière de lettres trouvait moyen de finir un roman, d'en commencer un autre dans la même heure. Elle n'en perdait ni un amant, ni une bouffée de narghilé, sans préjudice d'une *Histoire de ma vie* en vingt volumes, et j'en tombe d'étonnement. Puissamment, elle agença pêle-mêle son travail, ses chagrins guérissables et ses félicités limitées. Je n'aurais pas su en faire autant, et là où elle pensait à la grange pleine je me suis attardée à regarder la verte fleur du blé.[53]

Colette sets up an opposition between herself and Sand that is not entirely accurate. Even if she enjoyed her creature comforts and delighted in small pleasures, Colette also churned out dozens of books and hundreds of articles and worked doggedly to support herself and those she loved. We also see in this comparison a continued self-mythologizing of her outsider status.[54] While she praises Sand's discipline and productivity, she suggests that the hallmark of her own writing is a willingness to stop and concentrate on the description of a beautiful flower. This self-characterization agrees with that of Cocteau in his speech to the Belgian Academy quoted in the introduction. And this act of stopping and concentrating on a little thing can be read with Dora Zhang's suggestion that descriptive passages can be an education in sustained attention, and can also be solicitations of care. Ignoring conventional literary structures, Colette is a generic innovator, even if her stylistic and formal choices, along with her subject matter, kept her from being considered alongside other Modernists. Her writing challenges the easy dichotomy between description and narration, and her attention to detail moves her writing beyond the opposition of surface and depth. Descriptions can serve as sites for potential surprise and

[52] *EV* 666.
[53] *EV* 682.
[54] Antonioli, "Colette's Erasure from Literary History."

discovery, and can also introduce heterogeneous notions of temporality or registers.[55] Colette's lingering over material objects in her writing, like the knick knacks and flea-market finds that we will discuss momentarily, encourages slowness and dilation.

If we take the figure of the rosary as the style of writing that Colette eschews (or in perhaps false modesty, claims to be incapable of), we could imagine that her portraits and slices of life are the literary kin to Walter Benjamin's intellectual work. As Benjamin's philosophical intuition "developed" similarly to photographic images (over time, even though the original imprint has been there from the start), so do Colette's descriptions present images and observations that are not being instrumentalized or deployed in the service of a greater structure or apotheosis. Like Colette, he eschews the metaphor of the rosary and "one thing leading to another" for intuition and experiences that are not necessarily teleological. [56] We could say that Colette's experiences (cognitive and otherwise) spark musings, if not philosophical intuitions, that develop over time. Colette's references to her childhood and native Burgundy, even in her last works, reinforce this idea. Returning to Colette's recounting of her 75th birthday in *Le Fanal Bleu*, the piece begins dated as with a journal entry "28 janvier 1948", despite her repeated claims of not keeping journals. She describes her birth in the first person, then continues with reflections on birthdays past and present, anchored by the physical space of the room in which she was born:

> À force de cris et de peine, ma mère me chassa de ses flancs, mais, comme je surgis bleue et muette, personne ne crut utile de s'occuper de moi ...
>
> Il y avait bien peu de douceur et de confort dans cette chambre. Des rideaux de perse fleurie, montés sur flèche à l'ancienne mode, arbitraient les deux lits, largement séparés, de mes parents. Un singulier petit bahut à chaussures, trapu, occupait l'embrasure de la fenêtre qui donnait sur la rue, et servait de siège. L'armoire à glace à trois corps inégaux, en palissandre doublé de thuya satiné, me parut toujours trop belle, et dépaysée ...
>
> Une quinzaine d'autres 28 janvier passèrent, sans y rien changer, sur cette chambre où je naquis à demi étouffée, manifestant une volonté personnelle de vivre et même de vivre longtemps,

[55] Dora Zhang, "A Weak Theory of Modernist Description," Consortium on the Novel presentation, UC Berkeley, 3 July 2016.

[56] "To the mind that would comprehend intellectual phenomena in terms of logical or chronological development wherein one thing leads to another, to use Benjamin's metaphor, 'like the beads of a rosary', his work offers little satisfaction. It is grounded, rather, on philosophical intuitions sparked by cognitive experiences reaching as far back as childhood. These 'develop' only in the sense that a photographic plate develops: time deepens definition and contrast, but the imprint of the image has been there from the start. In spite of the metamorphoses that his writing undergoes in style and form of expression, he held onto his philosophical intuitions tenaciously because, quite simply, he believed them to be true." From *Ursprung des deutschen Traverspiels*, I, p. 226 (The Origin of German Tragic Drama, Intro. George Steiner. Trans. John Osborne. London: NLB, 1977). In Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing : Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, 1989 (1999 edition). Introduction p. 7

> puisque je viens d'accomplir le soixante-quinzième anniversaire que mes amis autour de moi s'obstinent à appeler "un beau jour."[57]

The description of this room echoes the care and detail with which Colette describes her finds at flea markets and the furniture and décor that surround her at the Palais-Royal.[58] Colette's original birth-day becomes the image that develops over time. This short passage introduces a longer one to describe the praises, gifts, and kindnesses that Colette's friends have bestowed upon her for the occasion. In this way, the re-telling of the story of her birth and subsequent birthdays does not lead to summaries of her accomplishments to date, but rather to a more diffuse portrait of her as a cherished friend. She is both slightly embarrassed and also delighted at the birthday cards and gifts sent by friends and fans alike.

Anne Freadman expands upon Colette's discussion of her life and work in comparison to George Sand's. Sand wrote grand frescoes and carefully structured long and often philosophical novels, as well as an imposing autobiography. Colette invites comparison to Sand when she describes her writerly identity in contrast to Sand's. She both humbles herself next to Sand's prolific-ness and weighty subjects and tomes, and also puts her name next to hers – even though she explains their differences, she still places herself close enough to Sand to be compared. In addition, her characterization of Sand as a "robuste ouvrière de lettres" aligns perfectly with Colette's own descriptions of her writing as physical and mental labor, with her pens and papers as her tools of the trade. Contrasting Colette's formal and thematic choices with those of Sand, Freadman notes: "To tell the story of one's life is somehow to collect and assemble the whole and put it into storage. By contrast with Sand, Colette's focus is on the small and the singular..."[59] Instead of taking "the life" as a whole finished product, then working backwards and meticulously crafting anecdotes to support its representation, Colette instead plucks anecdotes before they are "ripe for the harvest: not 'the life', but moments of living."[60] Colette writes in these last works at a micro level, instead of the macro level analyses ascribed to the more "masculine" writing of Sand. Even though Colette writes observations of the exterior when describing the butcher shop, fountains, and her native region of Burgundy, she continually returns to her current physical existence, now limited to the interior of her apartment. In this way, while discussing travels and past events, Colette, in her last works, upholds her reputation as a writer from and for the boudoir, that gendered (and always as feminine) interior space.[61] But the micro and the ordinary and the detailed descriptions don't equate to a less important literary work; they serve to encourage contemplation and the opening up and creating of space. For Colette, the ordinary and the feminine are entangled in a way that for Sand they are not. By lauding the little things, Colette valorizes femininities and *soi-disant* minor players.

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[57] FB 758.

[58] "In Proust's life as in his fiction, pieces of furniture operated as personal vehicles of memory rather than as social harbingers of taste," Fuss 164. Furniture functions similarly for Colette in this passage as vehicles of memory, but it also serves elsewhere as harbingers of taste (although the taste is often for the singular or the well-loved, instead of the most fashionable or expensive).

[59] Freadman 22.

[60] Freadman 22.

[61] See Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* and Sue Best "Sexualizing Space."

II. Material Objects

The minutiae of the material objects described by Colette in her final works forces us to pause and consider the importance of description itself. While in realist literature, narration was considered the privileged category, as opposed to description, there is much reason to challenge this "critical devaluing of description."[62] In trying to move beyond the opposition of narration and description, of "depth" and "surface", Dora Zhang reminds us of Willa Cather's 1922 essay "The Novel Démeublé." While *L'Étoile Vesper* and *Le Fanal Bleu* are not considered novels, and indeed resist easy generic classification, our concern here the description of material objects in Colette benefits from Cather's critique of its use in novels. Cather contends that an excess of description of material objects and physical sensations detracts from the art of the novel, and makes of novelists "mere" observers, journalists, cataloguers, and interior decorators.[63] Cather values instead "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there ..." as the work of a true artist, as opposed to a chronicler of places, things, and people. She holds up Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* as an example of a successful unadorned writing style where minimal physical description allows mood and feeling to be communicated artfully. I don't take issue with Cather's praise for Hawthorne; I remain unconvinced, however, that more description of objects and surroundings would be a detriment to the book's artistry. In contrast to Cather's call to rid novels of descriptive "furniture", Colette's writing is certainly "surmeublé". Her formal innovations and inconsistencies perhaps allow her to indulge in description that Cather would not find distasteful. But novel or not, description in literature is not devoid of profundity.

The opposition between narration and description or the general and the particular is especially pertinent when thinking about women writers.[64] The favoring of narration over description, or the idea that description is only ancillary to the narrative, dismisses the importance of detail and material objects to the text itself. This attention to detail on the part of the writer evokes similar feelings and habits in the reader. Colette's lingering on descriptions of objects in her last works helps to convey feelings of nostalgia and of a warm empathy toward this writer who herself has always displayed great curiosity and care towards her subjects. In her finals works, Colette's writing becomes sparse in narration (in writerly artistry according to Cather's take): "Every writer who is an artist knows that his 'power of observation,' and his 'power of description,' form but a low part of his equipment."[65] In fact, *L'Étoile Vesper* and *Le Fanal Bleu* could be read as a counterexample to Cather's claim that "If the novel is a form of imaginative art, it cannot be at the same time a vivid and brilliant form of journalism."[66] It is in fact the specificity of Colette's descriptions, with her insistence on detailing material objects and physical sensations, which is both artful and imaginative.

Objects are important in the lives and literary production of other writers besides Colette, including her contemporaries. Diana Fuss analyses Proust's interior surroundings as a way of exploring the writer's interiority: "... a reading of the actual space of writing, infused as it

[62] Dora Zhang, "A Weak Theory of Modernist Description."
[63] Willa Cather, "The Novel Démeublé," *The New Republic,* 12 April 1922: 5-6.
[64] See Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*.
[65] Willa Cather, "The Novel Démeublé", *New Republic* Vol. 30, April 12, 1922, 5-6.
[66] Cather 6.

is with the lived experiences of sensation, memory, illness, and intellect, provides a revealing and sometimes surprising context in which to understand the literary work that is so painstakingly produced there."[67] Indeed, "For every sign of literary eccentricity found in these interiors (a favorite pen, a beloved portrait), one encounters many more testaments to quotidian living (a tarnished comb, a linen handkerchief). Profound objects collide with banal objects ... in a modern world filled with totemic objects, the banal *is* profound."[68]

Marbles and other glass creations remain objects of fascination for Colette throughout her life. She recounts in her last two works numerous quests and trips to various knick knack shops and the power these have over her imagination: "A La Rochelle, c'est pour un amusement que j'ai manqué le train, parce que je ne pouvais pas m'arracher d'un petit magasin, sous les arcades, qui vendait – déjà introuvables – des billes de verre magnifiques, des 'calots' farcis de spirales multicolores, aussi beaux que des 'sulfures' (je les ai encore)."[69] It is most certainly both the object itself and the seeking out of the object that motivates these passages. While treating descriptive lists as "textual cysts"[70] can be productive, Colette's lists and descriptions of objects are growths that are integral to her writing. In some ways, her last two works are all (benign) cysts. They *are* the story. Her recounting of trips to the flea market lists objects she finds and explains how these objects affect her perception of time:

> Presque chaque dimanche, je battais les fortifs de Saint-Ouen, leurs terre-pleins, leurs culs-de-sac, leurs berges d'herbe râpée... L'objet d'art et l'ustensile de ménage s'y succédaient d'une manière étrange et saisonnière. Pendant tel mois abondaient les ouvre gants et les pinces à sucre, qui cédaient la place aux cannes, pommes d'ivoire et d'argent, joncs précieux à glands de cuir tressé. Un luxe funèbre de chapeaux haut de forme usagés, le mois suivant, sévissait. Puis c'étaient des draps fins, de la toile de frise ajourée, des nappes d'autel, des rideaux de damas, restés jeunes dans l'ombre froide d'un salon du second Empire ... [71]

For Colette, objects are devices deployed for narrative and linguistic effect. In the following description, her words linger over each section of "useless" objects, as though scanning the aisles. Things that have outlived their usefulness attract her gaze. They may remind her of her own weakened physical state as she reflects on her moments of living. But they also represent the small and the singular. These objects can be appreciated aesthetically and intellectually - when objects no longer serve their function their inherent thingness becomes more apparent. Bill Brown uses the example of windows to differentiate between objects and things. A window is an object in and of itself and also something that we look through, just as we look through objects to gain meaning: "As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things."[72] A window's "thing-ness" is highlighted when it gets dirty

[67] Fuss 153.
[68] Fuss 214.
[69] EV 671.
[70] Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*, 12. Hamon describes descriptions containing lists as forming a "kyste textuel" that signifies a rupture with the rest of the text.
[71] EV 630.
[72] Brown, "Thing Theory" 4.

and becomes opaque, whereas when typically transparent it functions as an object through which we see and project meaning.[73] Colette holds a special appreciation for things as such, for the not-so-beautiful, or the damaged: "... le rayon des meubles boiteux, celui des couteaux sans manches, celui des manches sans couteaux et des phonos aphones." The thingness of objects is illustrated in this list. Here, as Brown suggests, the objects do once again become things as they have lost their function and so our attention is focused on their actual physicality, on the thing before us, instead of putting it to use as an extension of ourselves. The knife without a handle or the handle without a knife is now an entirely separate entity from its human operator, and is a thing in and of itself. They retain the value of objects that have been crafted by someone or something, and Colette delights in the skill of artisans. In spite of the renewed thingness of these objects, Colette simultaneously uses language to personify them ("boiteux," "aphones," les chapeaux qui "sévissent"). This personification activates a kind of tension between description and narration. While things can be appreciated wholly in their thingness, for Colette, they are never far removed from their connections to human beings.

Contemplation of objects also leads to memories for Colette, and to getting lost in time. Her friend tries to get her attention at the flea market, so that they may depart, but Colette doesn't hear her at first: "Je venais de choir mentalement dans un de ces pièges qui confondent, enchevêtrés, le présent et l'oublié, le mensonger et le réel, et où nous attendons, passifs, de redevenir maîtres d'eux-mêmes et de nous..."[74] The objects she contemplates both focus and distract her attention, and in this way Colette is able to communicate in her writing the simultaneous experiences of looking at objects and the thoughts and feelings that they inspire. The passage of time is physically represented by the damaged or non-functional things. The author's *felt* or experienced passage of time radiates out from the descriptions of these objects, and perhaps Colette reflects here on her own legacy and that of her *œuvre*. The slowness, dilation, and often non-teleological nature of the description encourage the reverence for the commonplace that Colette espouses. This reverence also has a temporal dimension, as Colette remarks on objects that have become obsolete with the passage of time. As seen in Colette getting lost in thought at the flea market, description can introduce heterogeneous notions of temporality. Linear narrative patterns can be complicated, slowed, or expanded to encompass other forms of being. And this experience of dilation with description strikes me as a very apt term for Colette, one of the few writers Cixous named as a practitioner of *écriture feminine*. Dilating narrations and textual cysts move the text from a two-dimensional operation to a three-dimensional one – words and meanings move up and out from points on the page in addition to across and down. Later in this chapter, questions of time, including notions of "queer" and "crip" time, will help us to better understand Colette's descriptions and expanding notions of time.

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[73] Brown describes the modern theorization of things beginning with Heidegger's lecture "The Thing" in 1950, continuing with the work of Lacan, the poetry of Frank O'Hara, "and the *chosisme* of the decade's *nouveau roman*, the postwar era looks like an era both overwhelmed by a proliferation of things and singularly attentive to them. Only belatedly, in the 1980s, did Baudrillard declare that just as modernity was the historical scene of the subject's emergence, so postmodernity is the scene of the object's preponderance" (14). I see Colette as a literary precursor to some of this theorization. EV and FB were published in 1946 and 1949 respectively, and so are just barely post-war and pre-Heidegger's "The Thing." What is missing from these theorizations of things with respect to the works of Colette and Leduc is, for Colette, wonder and delight, and for Leduc, anguish and despair. They don't just "think with things", they feel with them.

[74] EV 630.

In her treatment of everyday objects, Colette upholds a reputation that she herself helped to craft. Her musings on colors of marbles, types of linens, and all kinds of *bibelots* showcase a writer who carefully embraces her whimsy. She writes of missing trains to seek out marbles and doodling animals on her manuscripts. Regarding her accumulation of various objects, Colette tells us in *Le Fanal Bleu*, "Si je m'écoutais, je ne jetterais rien. Je tâche de m'écouter le moins possible ..."[75] Adorable, self-deprecating, relatable – these qualities of Colette's writing both endear her to readers, and, according to Kathleen Antonioli, represent a strategic choice. [76] This choice has to do with Colette's management of her reputation as literary outsider. Antonioli holds that Colette made a "professional choice" in her reputation management and chose a conscious strategy to give the public what they wanted. Readers searched her final works for clues to her life story and to glean pearls of wisdom, as letters included in *Le Fanal Bleu* from her readers attest. As a woman writer with some scandal to her past, I would argue that this type of writing and this type of persona reassured readers and the literary establishment alike. Colette's self-deprecation represents both a savvy marketing strategy and a pleasurable choice in that she seems to revel in her simultaneous insider and outsider status. Colette's creation story, retold in *Mes Apprentissages*, is carefully curated, just like her choice of objects to describe vices (péchés mignons)[77] for which she chides herself. Antonioli reminds us that Colette's penchant for describing animals, plants, and bodies forms a reassuring part of her identity as a woman writer "naturally" producing literature. We can see this equivalency at work in a scene describing a delivery of tomatoes that find themselves placed among her objects: "Parmi mes presse-papiers tout farcis de serpentins, de berlingots, de fleurs et de bactéries, Marcelle dispose les tomates rondes, d'un rouge irréprochable, sans plis ni côtes, les dernières tomates de son jardin de Saint-Cloud ..."[78] In this passage, the objects she mentions solidly retain their object status, but they also aid us to see through them to other things, namely Colette's deployment of certain tropes that help to cement her reputation as a whimsical, natural, and at times capricious writer. Self-deprecation and appreciation for "the little things" are hallmarks of Colette's relationship to objects. The presence of tomatoes among writing implements presents an image of intentional incongruity that is meant to offer some reflection upon what is going on in Colette's writing life. At the end of her career, Colette has achieved great writer status and literary renown. Yet she calls her space "mon musée d'ignorante" where she collects interesting objects like a plant that is currently expelling seeds into the air and whose name she doesn't know: "J'ignore le nom de la plante qui disperse ainsi ses volantes âmes, mais elle n'a pas besoin d'un état civil pour prendre sa place dans mon musée d'ignorante."[79] We can almost imagine Colette echoing the words of Francis Ponge: "'Ideas give me a queasy feeling,

[75] *FB* 768.
[76] Antonioli, "Colette's Erasure from Literary History." Colette's adorable self-deprecating relatability also echoes Sianne Ngai's discussion of "cute" as an aesthetic category in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, 2012. This "cuteness" as it pertains to Colette also explains in part the commercial success of goods with her likeness or name.
[77] In terms of whimsical objects but also commercial success, one could think of the high-end concept store *Colette* on the rue Saint-Honoré in Paris. Opened in 1997, it was closed in December of 2017. While Colette's name is used to denote all things sexy, in the case of the store I think that her name was a fitting choice because of the curation of trendy and eclectic clothing and *objets*.
[78] *FB* 772.
[79] *FB* 729.

nausea,' whereas 'objects in the external world, on the other hand, delight me.'"[80] Colette, like Ponge, sides with things. In presenting and venerating things, Colette lets them "speak" for themselves, and listens to what they have to say. In comparing Colette to Ponge, there is some unavoidable slippage between objects and things, as Ponge neglected to distinguish between the two.

Colette is curious about things that constitute both the outside and inside world. Flora and fauna have been insisted upon in her writing since the *Claudine* novels. The natural things Colette often describes coexist with the manmade objects she discovers. Not all of these things are gifts; Colette lists items she notices in a shop or on a trip, and items she would like to procure. She also lingers lovingly in her last works on the objects that she has obtained and that make up her surroundings. The designing and furnishing of the space in which she lived is crucial to Colette's writerly identity. Peter McNeil proposes that these practices contribute to the creation of queer spaces and explains the importance of designing one's own space:

> To other textual and literary reading of the traces of lives, we might also add the aspect of the built environment and collecting practices that have been increasingly personalized over time. Even more so than fashionable clothing, the arrangement and management of houses is one of the most transient and least documented cultural gestures. How people moved through and animated spaces, how they modulated spaces and propelled change through their bodies, clothing and gestures...[81]

While not using this particular framework or the anachronistic concept of queerness to compose her texts, Colette certainly engages in creating her own space to support her positionality. The idea of queerness and queer spaces helps to think about the different ways that Colette and Violette Leduc move through spaces and interact with objects and people. Both writers engaged in romantic relationships with women and men, yet wrote about them very differently. Writers like Violette Leduc must bump into physical and social barriers like closed windows, intimidating doorways, demeaning steps, and smug shopgirls. But Colette can pad her interiors with physically and psychologically comforting objects that smooth edges and produce space for contemplation. Reputation, wealth, material comforts and social capital are all aids in navigating the non-traditional parts of Colette's story.

We now return to what Anne Freadman calls Colette's last two works, her "livres souvenirs." These books made up of memories and that function as memories are in a sense literary scrapbooks. We see Colette in her last works both showing off her collections of decorative objects and of written memories. Anchoring these last works are the objects surrounding Colette in her apartment as she writes and her collection of objects and memories that she curates and relates to the reader. We can consider Colette's surroundings while she composed the bulk of these last two works. In Colette's native village of Saint-Sauveur-en-

[80] Cited in Brown, 2.
[81] Peter McNeil "Crafting queer spaces: privacy and posturing" *Fashion, Interior Design and the Contours of Modern Identity*, Ashgate Publishing, Surrey, England, 37. For more on queer collecting, specifically art collecting, see also Whitney Davis "Queer Family Romance in Collecting Visual Culture."

Puisaye, in Burgundy, one can visit the Colette museum and archives, housed in a small chateau, much grander than her childhood home. The *pièce de résistance* of the museum is a reconstructed version of Colette's last apartment at the Palais-Royal. Everything is just as it was, with the original furniture and décor. The moveable desk that can be adjusted so that she could write without having to leave her bed, the chairs she embroidered, the *fanal bleu* – an architect's lamp covered with blue paper to provide a soothing light. And, displayed for the visitor, glass cases of Colette's collections of hundreds of *objets.* Dozens of beautiful preserved butterflies, various *bibelots* (knick knacks), and glass and crystal paperweights – her *boules féeriques*. Those known as '*sulfures*' contained cameos or portraits, like the one for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. Others display dried flowers, glass designs, colorful mosaics, and animals. They are described by Colette's daughter, Colette de Jouvenel, as "... les exquises réductions de jardins fleuris et de fonds sous-marins que sont les presse-papiers." Colette's writing can be analogized to the paper weights – beautiful artistic renderings and reductions of the world: "Colette n'a pas jugé bon d'assigner aux 'boules' d'autre rôle que de tenir compagnie ... Goût de la sphère, de la transparence, amour de la fraîcheur et des secrets cachés dans les chefs-d'œuvre dits anodins."[82] The fact that these objects and furnishings exist highlights the importance of Colette's cultivation and creation of space, both to herself personally and to her literary legacy. The adornment of herself and her surroundings allows us to know so much about the material environment essential to the creation of these books.

De Certeau's distinction between *espace* (space) and *lieu* (place), is particularly relevant in Colette's decorating and collecting. Both Colette's physical apartment and her narration are highly cultivated spaces (written text = place, written text + reader = space = act of reading), and "stories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places." De Certeau conceives of space as "a practiced place," in a way that recall's Merleau-Ponty's distinction between geometrical space and anthropological space.[83] One of the ways in which Colette cultivates her space is through collecting, although she disavowed the collector and the collection:

> Ma mère ... ne tenait pas le collectionneur puriste en très haute estime, et cependant elle savait apprécier certaines collections. Mais, hors de son travail, elle manquait de l'entêtement et de l'application nécessaires à la poursuite d'une collection. D'ailleurs, quel danger qu'une collection parachevée ! Danger d'ennui d'abord, danger de devoir la condamner à la chambre forte, danger de mort... Le plus élaboré des bibelots n'est qu'objet éteint sans le regard poétique que nous portons sur lui ; il ne reprend couleur, forme, âme qu'à travers la compréhension que nous avons de lui. Qu'entre nous et l'objet se noue un lien, même passager, et le voilà qui resplendit.[84]

[82] Colette de Jouvenel, "Colette et les presse-papiers," *Cahiers Colette N. 16*, "Éclats et Reflets," 1994, 94-96.
[83] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 117-118. For more on the significance of material objects and collecting in terms of literary production, see the special volume of *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Literatures* published in 2014, entitled "Self and Stuff: Accumulation in Francophone Literature and Art", which explores the ways in which material items are collected, cherished, and sometimes hoarded for the value they hold in self-expression.
[84] Colette de Jouvenel, "Colette et les presse-papiers."

We can better understand Colette's difficulty in stopping to write with *L'Étoile Vesper* if we think of that text as a potential "collection parachevée." For Colette, collecting and collections are meaningless without human interaction and appreciation. A collection under lock and key has no value to her. It needs circulation, contemplation, and touch. [85] Colette, the master of self-fashioning, through make-up, costume, performance, and art, was also a master of fashioning her living and writing space. As she aged, these two spaces converged. How Colette furnished and decorated her physical place, and the writing she practiced within it, established a space for creating and communicating meaning: "Qu'entre nous et l'objet se noue un lien, même passager, et le voilà qui resplendit."[86]

The passing connections between Colette and objects, memories, people and places make up the bulk of her final works. She instills them with meaning just as readers will form passing connections with her words. Could one collect Colette texts like the author collects paperweights? Colette moves into what she calls another type of "writing" in her final years – needlepoint. In *L'Étoile Vesper*, Colette recounts her forays into tiny shops and flea markets throughout France, where she searches out marbles, paperweights, and odds and ends of all kinds. In *Le Fanal Bleu*, Colette relates a six-week stay at a clinic in Geneva, hoping for some relief from her arthritis. She requests various obscure sewing tools and materials from a friend, and tells us: "Dans un sens magique de contemplation et d'évocation, je m'enrubanne de mercerie."[87]

While Colette had severe arthritis in her hip and leg, she did not have it in her hands, and towards the end of her life took up embroidery, finding great solace in this activity.[88] Even though she embroiders, she doesn't do the delicate sewing for which these requested implements are used. And so, her desire for these implements can be read as seeking tools for nostalgia. She also enjoys the quest, and learning about eccentric tools and their histories and practices. As *L'Étoile Vesper* comes to a close, Colette the groundbreaking woman writer embraces the traditionally feminine art of embroidery.

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[85] See Walter Benjamin: "Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Book Collecting," in *Illuminations*, Engl. trans. (London: Fontana, 1982), 59-60, 63, and 66-67. Colette insists that she is not a collector. For her, the acquisition of objects is secondary to the possessing, and her joy in possession comes from the ability to contemplate and dialogue with her objects, not in the possession itself. While traveling, Colette seeks out specific objects, but this seeking is not in the realm of the tactical that Benjamin describes: "Collectors are people with a tactical instinct; their experience teaches them that when they capture a strange city, the smallest antique shop can be fortress, the most remote stationary store a key position" (63). Colette does indeed seek out goods from the smallest and most remote of shops, but there is not an acquiring of territory behind her actions. The objects she seeks help her to furnish an existence, to adorn and celebrate. Not to prevent someone else from acquiring those same joys. She delights as much in the sensual caressing of her neighbor the jeweler's creations as if she owned them (and perhaps more). The fleeting, the novel, the ephemeral delight her, as opposed to the permanence and transmissibility of the collection as conceived by Benjamin. Colette doesn't collect like Benjamin, but the relationship between objects and memories, order and chaos, is similar. "... for a collector – and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be – ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them" (67). For Colette, the objects come alive in her and in her writing; she doesn't live in them.

[86] Colette de Jouvenel, 95.

[87] *FB* 734.

[88] *FB* 734.

III. The Writing Body

In her later works, Colette's attention to the ordinary includes describing her aging body and her battles with arthritis pain. She is writing from a place of feminine ugliness in perhaps the same vein as Despentes and Leduc will explore. In this section I tease out the idea that the ordinary experience of feminine aging constitutes both a failure of femininity and a falling into abjection. Writing about aging women by aging women shapes societal perceptions: "All ... bodies are themselves reflected through the prisms of personal phantasms and cultural representations. The aging body as imagined and experienced and the aging body as represented structure each other in endless and reciprocal reverberation,"[89] and I hope that through analysis of Colette's final works I can illustrate this complicated relationship between the aging body as imagined, experienced, represented, and written.[90] I take issue with Freadman's claim that in Colette "the trope of the collection comes to counter the conventional view of ageing as loss"[91] and Ladimer's assertion that aging women writers channel formerly erotic energies into their writing.[92] Writing and collecting are, of course, essential activities for Colette, but I do not read her aging as being channeled or countered in her writing. Her aging body, especially her aging writing body, occupies a central role in the production and substance of her final works. Her body becomes something to be interrogated, managed, and explored in the act of writing.

I will also remind the reader that despite Colette's now impressive literary status and reputation, she struggled with her "uneasy relationship to the masculine profession of writing as sacralized by the intellectual establishment and the scholarly canon" and maintained "her lifelong refusal to see writing as anything but a form of work like the music hall, the cosmetics business in which she was briefly involved, or the everyday tasks ordinarily accomplished by women."[93] In this way we can distinguish and legitimize both the author's body of work and the author's writing body. In 1945, Colette became the second woman to be elected to the *Académie Goncourt*, the ten-person committee that awards the prestigious literary Goncourt prize each year. She served as its president from 1949 until her death in 1954. Merely her participation in this sacred literary institution reinforced corporality in the cerebral body of the Goncourt committee. First, she writes of taking coquettish pleasure in being the only woman surrounded by male members of the committee. Next, her aging (female) body imposes restrictions on the logistics of committee meetings: "Les réunions se tiendront la plupart du temps chez elle; elle sera amenée chez Drouant avec son fauteuil roulant chaque année, pour la remise du prix."[94] Colette's physical limitations impose her physical body on the literary body. Indeed, the Goncourt committee members would come to Colette's apartment to deliberate literary works and prizes in Colette's highly curated space. By accommodating her body, they enter her space and make accommodations to receive her in theirs.

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[89] Kathleen Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, 5.
[90] A third work by Colette, *La Fin de Chéri*, treats the fictionalized aging female body. It is a poignant portrayal of an aging courtesan's decline, related essentially through the eyes of her young former lover.
[91] Freadman, *The Livres-Souvenirs of Colette: Genre and the Telling of Time*, 112.
[92] Bethany Ladimer, *Colette, Beauvoir, and Duras: Age and Women Writers*, 1999, and "*L'Étoile Vesper* et *Le Fanal Bleu,* œuvres de la vieillesse féminine" *Cahiers Colette N. 19*, 1997, 123-132.
[93] Freadman 85.
[94] Françoise Burgaud, notice to *L'Étoile Vesper*, Éditions Bouquins, vol. 3, 583.

By opening up discussions of her corporeal existence and limitations as she grew older, Colette facilitates the discussion of all embodied experience.[95] In addition to the pain and lack of mobility that shapes her writerly existence, Colette also makes us aware of the physical impressions that writing makes on the writer's body. Colette's frequent use of the word *outil* (tool) for her writing implement is crucial to her understanding of writing as an embodied task, as work, and as craft. What does writing do to the body? And what does the body do to writing? Although as readers we tend to imagine a writer's thoughts and words in the creation of a literary work, we may forget the physical body attached to those words and thoughts —the ordinary human being who held pens, sat at desks, and wrote and re-wrote manuscripts. Colette reminds us of the corporeal existence of the writer and of the writer's work, when she remarks in *L'Étoile Vesper* : "J'ai l'auriculaire droit un peu arqué, parce que la main droite, en écrivant, prenait appui sur lui, comme fait le kangourou sur sa queue."[96] Colette has shaped her body to her work and to her tools. Her finger has molded to the writing position of her hand. This same phenomenon is described differently in Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology.* She explores orientation and disorientation between bodies, objects, and the world. Following Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed discusses phenomenology and the writer's relation to furniture, specifically the writing table. She also demonstrates how repetitive motions of work and relations between bodies and objects lead to physical changes:

> For instance, my right ring finger has acquired the shape of its own work: the constant use of a pen, in writing, has created a lump, which is the shape that is shaped by the work of this repetition; my finger almost looks 'as if' it has the shape of a pen as an impression on it ... The work of repetition is not neutral work; *it orients the body in some ways rather than others*. The lump on my finger is a sure sign of an orientation I have taken, not just toward the pen-object, or the keyboard, but also toward the world, as someone who does a certain kind of work for a living ... Bodies hence acquire orientation through the repetitions of some actions over others, as actions that have certain 'objects' in view ... . Bodies tend toward some objects more than others given their tendencies.[97]

The objects towards which Ahmed's body tends are both material – writing tools – and behavioral – the "writing stance" or posture. Colette's final works present the occasion to explore this process of orientating and of tending towards objects as her physical constraints and surroundings play a larger role in the composition of her texts. But Colette always saw writing as both mental and physical work; like her music-hall performances it is a craft that requires training, practice, and tools.

By the time she composed her last works, Colette's was a fairly immobile existence punctuated by bouts of pain from severe arthritis in her hip and leg. Indeed, in the book that "ought not to have been written," *Le Fanal Bleu*, Colette spends significant time and space

[95] Except those of men dressed and performing as women, which she decries as "sad." See chapter two.
[96] *EV* 684.
[97] Ahmed 57-58.

detailing her physical ailments and their effects on her life. After a few pages to open the book, she details a six-week stay at a clinic in Geneva in 1945 for arthritis treatments. A few months later, she would attempt another cure at Uriage in the French Alps. Not only does she discuss her physical pain but also the flurry of people and activities that form the background to her life with disability and chronic pain. Doctors, nurses, assistants, schedules, arrangements, and medications are all now parts of her daily life. The difference in tone between her last two works seems to be that *L'Étoile Vesper* was crafted to put a period on her writing career. Without being a traditional autobiography or book of memoirs, there was a sense of finality. In *Le Fanal Bleu*, it seems that Colette, in taking up her pen again after having completed what she had thought was her final work, *se lâche un peu*. Even more than in *EV*, she writes about what she wants to write about and does speak about the trials and tribulations of growing older and living with increasing pain and immobility. We could say that she gives herself permission to treat a subject that might seem too ordinary and too abject to receive literary notice: the aging of a body as it moves towards the end of life. While Colette often lingers over her reduced mobility and pain in her last works, she doesn't insist on the singularity of her aging body. The memories and literary digressions that occur because of it, yes, but her actual physical decline is related rather matter-of-factly. This distinguishes Colette's work here from that of Leduc and Despentes, who are interested in more marked themes of ugliness and abjection.

While the representation of a character like Léa in a work like *La Fin de Chéri* would seem to suggest a direct relationship between age and self-satisfaction or agency, it is difficult for me to agree with some scholars that the romance typical of Colette's novels is replaced by "writerly sensuality" in her later works. Bethany Ladimer sees a "style de la vieillesse"[98] in Colette's last two works, where romantic eroticism is replaced with textual and writerly sensuality.[99] I disagree, and see her style in these works as influenced by age, immobility and pain. She arrives at a style that for me could be described as active contemplation. But the physical constraints imposed by her body do seem to affect and change formal structures: "Voici que l'empêchement de marcher, et les années me mettent dans le cas de ne plus pécher par mensonge, et bannissent de moi toutes chances d'événements romanesques."[100] Ladimer describes this passage as communicating that Colette is "soulagée" at this point : "Elle explicite ainsi que les structures narratives traditionnelles et les conventions romanesques ne fonctionnent plus pour elle, puisqu'elle écrit du point de vue de la vieillesse."[101] New narrative conventions are necessary – more "middle" as it were, because the "évènements romanesques" are no longer a possibility, neither is the romanesque telling of such stories. I find it doubtful that contentment with one's changing body can be described as being "soulagée", as Ladimer characterizes Colette's words. Perhaps, one might say there is less relief and more resignation (maybe with some contentment mixed in). Balancing both sadness and satisfaction, along with present and past, exemplify for Colette a representation of successful aging. And as Colette's age and arthritis remind us, we are all just temporarily abled, for age, injury or illness will necessitate changes at some point in how we move through the world. Ladimer discusses Colette's positive spin on her immobility: "Parce que son immobilité a rendu possible – même nécessaire – cette

[98] Ladimer 126.
[99] Ladimer, "*L'Étoile Vesper* et *Le Fanal Bleu*, œuvres de la vieillesse féminine."
[100] *EV* 666.
[101] Ladimer 125.

contemplation tranquille du monde, Colette va jusqu'à dire que cette immobilité a bien servi son besoin de contemplation, donc de possession."[102] With twenty-first century eyes we could say that the next step would be to not call her arthritis or confinement "mal" but part of life, a thing that happens. The nexus of both age and corporeality here is the question of abledness in Colette. Beyond looking at her last works as examples of representing female old age, I'd like to examine these works with the help of recent work in disability studies, which can then lead to interpretations of Colette's narrative structures and conceptions of time.

Right after the opening lines of *L'Étoile Vesper*, Colette situates us in her physical body and physical space:

> Mon compagnon soucieux va penser encore une fois que je m'ennuie. Les personnes valides croient toujours que de l'immobilité forcée naît l'ennui. C'est une grande erreur, dans laquelle sans doute je tomberais moi-même, si au lieu de pécher par une jambe je manquais de bras. Une infirmité se fait affligeante pendant sa première année, alors que chaque saison, presque chaque jour, nous instruit d'une contrainte nouvelle, nous demande un renoncement nouveau ... [103]

While the reader might think of pain as an abnormal state, for many and certainly for many of a certain age, it is an ordinary and consistent part of life. Colette insists on this, as she frames her narrative, and her point of view, with her body and physical reality. But, just as with her displayed ambivalence to the aging female body, she displays ambivalence towards her new disabled existence. She speaks of constraints and frustrations, but also of new knowledge and experiences that she would otherwise not have gained. Her moderated and modulated accounts of life with chronic pain and reduced physical mobility produce a nuanced portrait, a type of "disability narrative" before that genre had been named as such. Her relationship to time, to writing, and to people surrounding her changes, and she is able to relate much of this in descriptive and insightful moments. Just as the formal structure of these works is not linear, Colette's descriptions of pain and immobility do not form a teleological narrative of pain and triumph, illness and healing. Instead, certain moments and stories dilate and take precedence over others. Both her body and her writing are re-shaped to her new reality. And re-shaped doesn't necessarily mean shifts under constraints, although that is certainly part of her experience. It also means new apertures for observing the world and new points of departure for her own thoughts.

Colette's relationship to time and to writing is shaped by her corporeal reality. To better understand these relationships and the connections between Colette's physical existence and her writing, the concept of "crip time", or cripping time, to accommodate disabled bodies is illuminating: "Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds."[104] Colette, in her physical surroundings and in her writing, reorients her body to space, objects and time. The concept of crip time takes inspiration

[102] Ladimer 131.
[103] *EV* 589.
[104] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* 27.

from and engages with the concept of queer time, and indeed, the epigraph to chapter 1 of Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip* is taken from José Esteban Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*: "Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough."[105] The concept of queer time creates space for non-linear narratives, born of desires and lives that don't fit normalizing chronologies surrounding heterosexual sex and reproduction. Queer time also brings to light discrete moments of narration, in desires and stories that must remain brief and furtive, and that may only surface when there is less risk, and less fear of violence or repression. This is in opposition to traditional notions of time that easily envelop narratives of heterosexual courtship. Queer time, then, allows one to consider non-linear conceptions of time as equally valid and real. The notion and value of time thereby takes on different valences through the lenses of queer time. Crip time continues theorizing in this vein, as time also changes valence, expands and contracts, when it is lived or experienced in a differently-abled body. It is no longer easily linear, but involves unexpected delays and potential disruptions to schedules as the realities of navigating the world collide with the needs of bodies. In *L'Étoile Vesper*, Colette is living in multiple temporal dimensions, past, present, and future. Through short dialogues in the beginning of the book, she communicates the tension between what those around her expect of her as an invalid, and what is truly going through her mind. These inquiries from her *proches* illustrate attempted *rappels à l'ordre* to a normalized state and narrative, where the scripted reassuring responses from an invalid to her friends are received.[106] And when she does give the expected response, she lets the reader know that she is purposefully doing this, so as not to surprise or ruffle her caretakers:

> Qu'est-ce que tu regardes ?
>
> Les avions américains qui passent. Un vol de poissons dans la nuit tombante... Ils traversent les nuages de pluie comme l'épinoche son nid floconneux...
>
> Car il est toujours prudent de dissimuler. Avouer que l'on n'est occupé qu'à se souvenir, c'est de quoi blesser un innocent.[107]

In a few short lines (formatting Colette's), the space and time between Colette and her interlocutors becomes apparent. This structure of a few lines of dialogue in italics reoccurs six times in the first seven pages of the book. Like Colette's reveries, the reader's following of the text is interrupted by her well-meaning friends. The reader supports Colette in her placating reassurances, so that the rhythm of reading can resume.

In this moment for Colette, the future becomes less important; the past and the present are what occupies her. Exploring disability and one's relation to time involves not just more

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[105] For more on queer time see the special issue of *GLQ* : "Queer Temporalities" ed. Elizabeth Freeman, 13, nos. 2-3 (2007) and Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*.

[106] Bethany Ladimer specifically describes Colette's relationship with Maurice Goudeket : "... elle éprouve un besoin constant de le tromper en le rassurant par exemple sur sa souffrance, ou en lui cachant le fait qu'elle se perd souvent dans ses rêveries et qu'elle considère que ces dernières se justifient chez les personnes âgées," "*L'Étoile Vesper* et *Le Fanal Bleu*, œuvres de la vieillesse féminine," *Cahiers Colette* n. 19, 1997, 126.

[107] *EV* 592.

time, but also a reorientation to time. This echoes the reorientation to the material and the corporeal necessary to follow Colette's literary digressions. At the beginning of *Le Fanal Bleu*, she writes about her *séjour* in Geneva for treatment for her arthritic leg:

> J'apprenais, premièrement, le comportement du patient en traitement, auquel mes médecins amis ne m'avaient pas dressée. J'apprenais la ponctualité, l'accoutumance, et quelles heures amenaient l'entrée d'un étranger puissant, bien intentionné et inexorable ... L'heure de craindre, tout en l'appelant, un certain homme, un homme nouveau.[108]

Her use of the imperfect here, "j'apprenais", impresses upon the reader the ongoing and repeated process of learning how to act in this environment, of adjusting her mind and her body to these surroundings. She also learns the role she is to play as a patient, although the word she uses, "dressée" suggests the breaking of a horse as opposed to an aging invalid. But Colette has to be trained, and perhaps broken, for this process. As a broken bone is often re-broken to set properly and heal, so something in Colette's way of being must be re-set so that she can be oriented to the role of patient and invalid.

Colette's orientation changes not only to time and to her surroundings, but also to objects. Reorientation to time and material objects converge in the following passage about her watch, in what I see as Colette's reinvention of herself as a *flâneuse mentale*, or *flâneuse d'esprit*:

> Il se fait tard, sans que je m'en sois aperçue. Il est l'heure de laquelle on dit couramment qu'elle est longue, et triste singulièrement aux personnes âgées et seules. Pourtant deux heures, trois heures, ce sont pour moi des instants, pour peu qu'une relative oisiveté m'y aide. Au travail, le temps se traîne, les quarts d'heure se mâchent durs comme des chanteaux de gros pain qu'on mange sans boire ni saliver. Cet après-midi me fut une douce journée, passée à flâner et à souffrir. Près de moi brille encore, dans le bleu du soir, la montre à cadran d'or que j'appelle la montre cardiaque, parce que suspendue par son anneau à un clou mince comme une épingle, les battements de son cœur l'obligent à osciller légèrement. Elle me mesure ma vie, mais c'est moi qui la secours. Si j'oublie un seul jour de la remonter, la voilà muette et entrée dans la mort. Qui la réparerait ? Elle est ancienne, les ouvriers délicats qui eussent pu la soigner sont morts aussi. Il faut bien que j'accepte de la voir passer, un de ces jours, à l'état mélancolique d'objet d'art ...[109]

Colette's "crip time" means that standard measures of time and durations no longer accurately express her experience "deux heures, trois heures, ce sont pour moi des instants." And a watch with no one to wind it will become a melancholic *objet d'art*. These last phrases are darker than most that she writes speaking of age and death. The watch will both be an object of melancholy because it will have lost its function, and also provides the image of a stopped watch left unwound after Colette's death. Here time affects material objects, as the worn-down clock will eventually be condemned to become an *objet d'art*, much like Colette's legacy. In this case time

[108] *FB* 731.
[109] *EV* 644.

and its passing don't represent minutes and hours, but the fact that each day Colette is still alive and winding her watch. Mortality can be found in this melancholy object. Even the "ouvriers délicats", the artisans for whom Colette has such a fondness and respect, will also be dead and so the watch, should it malfunction, will have no one to repair it. It's perhaps the closest Colette can come to imagining her own death. She can put these thoughts into words and images only through her affection for this material object.

In this passage Colette is free to let her mind rest on these morbid thoughts – she doesn't have to remain optimistic, or witty, or even wise while contemplating the future. She imagines a different future, and imagining other futures is an important element of crip time, as traditionally, "'the future' has been deployed in the service of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness."[110] Colette's existence is now often dictated by others and by exterior forces. Returning to the answers that invalids are expected to give to questions, which Colette understands and complicates, Kafer breaks down the compulsory narrative of healing and progress. Those with acquired impairments, are usually described, and often describe themselves, as having multiple selves — the "before" and "after" disability selves. There is a "cultural expectation that the relation between these two selves is always one of loss, and of loss that moves in only one direction."[111] Like the before-and-after of weight loss, one is not supposed to long for the fat or disabled days:

> Fat bodies and disabled bodies appear in different temporal frames here, but neither is permitted to exist as part of a desired present or desirable future. This assumption that disability cannot be a desirable location, and that it must always be accompanied by a nostalgia for the lost able mind/body, is what animates 'the cure question' so familiar to disabled people: Wouldn't you rather be cured? Wouldn't you like to be as you were before? Wouldn't you prefer to be nondisabled? The repetition of the question, the fact that disabled people are consistently expected to address it, is part of what gives the question its strength, its compulsory and coercive power.[112]

We can see this assumption at work in the questions posed by well-meaning friends in *L'Étoile Vesper*. They all seem to want to ask, in dismay, "But how can you be happy as you are?" As though to experience contentedness in this supposedly undesirable body was an admission of failure. Age, immobility, and pain all represent typical biological decline, yet it seems that one must always be fighting against them to prove one's humanity. Colette, however, maintains and in some ways expands her *esprit* in her now differently-abled body, and relates sometimes contradictory feelings about it. These contradicting visions of her body aptly capture the complex, competing, and changing relationships to one's body as one ages. Additionally, there is no longer (if there ever was), a stably embodied writerly subject. Sometimes the suffering gets the better of her jovial spirit: "Et j'en ai assez à la fin! Et je veux ma jambe ! Vous avez tous l'air de trouver naturel que je sois dans cet état... J'en ai assez ! Un miracle, un miracle, tonnerre de

[110] Kafer 27.
[111] Kafer 42-43.
[112] Kafer 43.

tonnerre ! Il n'est que temps!"[113] But after this outburst (to herself), Colette whispers to the reader how she presents herself to her companion and her friends: "Je tais mes cris. Je n'ose pas la trahir, cette confiance, je vais encore une fois 'très bien', je ne souffre 'pas du tout'." Not only is there her "before" and "after" disability selves, there is also the self that only the reader has access to, the self who is frustrated and not suffering sweetly and silently but furiously, and then the self that she presents to those around her, who is in good spirits and causes no trouble. It is only because Colette is so skillful at relating dialogue in written form, and transmitting silences and detailed observations, that we can be privy to multiple temporalities, attitudes, and selves of the body and the writer in pain.

While the reader has greater access to the vacillations in Colette's temperament than the friends she describes in her prose, Colette protests a little too much. Although here they have access to different registers and levels of her pain, Colette still tries to prove her *bonne volonté* and positive disposition to those around her physically, and to her readers. She doesn't need to find the positive in her condition to demonstrate her resilience, but she does: "Que le mal nous façonne, il faut bien l'accepter. Mieux est de façonner le mal à notre usage, et même à notre commodité. C'est une manière d'exploitation à laquelle les jeunes, les robustes sont malhabiles, et je conçois bien qu'on leur fasse difficilement comprendre, par exemple, que la quasi-immobilité est un cadeau."[114] This reads like it could be from an over-compensating redemption narrative. Could the loss of mobility be something that just is? Not a tragedy to be overcome, but instead a part of life that does not necessitate acceptance; it simply is. We do have moments that pierce through her suffering, without relief or silver lining: "Sous mon fanal bleu, mon amarre est de plus en plus courte, mon tourment physique de plus en plus fidèle."[115] Or this : "Surtout j'ai de la douleur, cette douleur toujours jeune, active, inspiratrice d'étonnement, de colère, de rythme, de défi, la douleur qui espère la trêve."[116] Colette describes her "quasi-immobilité" as a "cadeau" at the beginning of *L'Étoile Vesper*, but by the writing of *Le Fanal Bleu* more moments of pain and frustration break through. In the first book, she does at times address her pain, employing the second person (We will see this use of the second person again later when Leduc addresses and is addressed by objects that taunt her):

> Les nuits que choisit l'arthrite pour travailler hanche et jambe, j'hésite à les nommer mauvaises nuits. Il y a, dans la douleur manifestée par élancements ou par ondes, une contribution de rythme que je ne puis tout entière maudire, un flux, un reflux dont l'indépendance occupe mon attention. Ce que j'appelle souffrir honorablement, c'est mon dialogue avec cette présence d'un mal. Debout, elle m'empêche de marcher, mais couchée je lui tiens tête. La preuve, c'est l'absence, à mon chevet, d'analgésique ou de somnifère. De ce membre que tu tourmentes, douleur, j'ai – sauf quelques rares défaillances de ma volonté - attendu que tu te retires, et tu t'es retirée.[117]

[113] *EV* 659.
[114] *EV* 589.
[115] *FB* 727.
[116] *FB* 729.
[117] *EV* 655.

Colette's externalizing and anthropomorphizing of pain provides a space for both speaking of and speaking to the body – in this case, a markedly feminine and aging body (a further incarnation of Cixous's *écriture féminine*). Colette subscribes to a narrative of willpower when it comes to pain, in her refusal to take sleeping or pain medication. She prides herself on this refusal, and on her hardy constitution. This echoes her insistence on doing gymnastics while pregnant, and the pride she took in her "grossesse d'homme."[118] Rather than channel erotic energies elsewhere or counter aging with numerous collections, Colette's writing forges new literary territory. Innovations in substance and style encompass narratives of pain, aging and disability.

Another aspect of crip time illustrated in Colette's late works is the advance planning necessary for even the most mundane of activities. Improvisation is difficult, while ordinary outings become complicated, and lose their spontaneous pleasure. Disability demands "a foregrounding of physical needs,"[119] and the most basic bodily functions must be planned for. In her writing, Colette makes the planning for moving her from place to place concrete. This planning, of course, represents ordinary considerations for a woman with extraordinary means. Crip time also implies a constant physical stance of anticipation - what will the disabled person's body have to do, and how will she do it? What vehicles, materials, and people will be necessary to complete this activity? And is it worth all of the planning? Colette expresses this constraint, albeit in the context of her well-off Parisian existence – usually talking about losing spontaneity. Crip time doesn't typically involve eating oysters at chic Parisian brasseries, but for Colette it does:

> 'Tu voulais qu'on te conduise à la galerie Charpentier? Mais tu n'avais qu'à le dire ! Comment, tu as eu envie de t'asseoir à la terrasse du petit bistrot pour manger des huîtres ? Pourquoi n'en as-tu pas parlé ? On aurait téléphoné à un véhicule quelconque...'
>
> Improvisé, le plaisir eût eu justement le goût de l'huître des terrasses, son sel, son eau fraîche, le goût de son verre de vin blanc un peu vert ... Il eût eu l'odeur poussiéreuse d'une boutique d'antiquailles. Le plaisir improvisé ne s'accommode pas d'un taxi.[120]

Her writing also expresses the feeling of how people talk over her and make decisions about her life, like how to travel back to Paris from the south of France:

> C'est en ma présence que s'engage un débat affectueux, que se discute mon incommode retour à Paris: 'Non, pas le train. Tout plutôt que le train pour elle. La chaleur... Et cette longue crise qu'elle subit... L'auto, n'y pensons pas. – Pourquoi ? – Trop long. Pas assez confortable.
>
> – Bon. L'avion alors. – Ah ! je n'aime pas beaucoup l'avion pour elle...
>
> – Mais elle, qu'est-ce qu'elle préfère ? – Elle ne l'a pas dit ...'

[118] *EV* 679.
[119] Kafer 39.
[120] *EV* 664.

> Elle ne dit rien. Elle n'a pas entendu, elle lit. Elle se retient de rire. Mon meilleur ami me regarde – que dis-je ? il me jauge. Où calera-t-on au mieux l'objet qui tantôt se prête à tout, et tantôt réagit avec intolérance ? Dans quel panier enfermer ce gros chat, le long de mille kilomètres ? Mais le chat en a décidé à part lui, l'objet s'est donné le plaisir de trancher le débat, et de choisir l'avion.[121]

She uses the third person to show how the others talk about her – she is the third person in her own story, the one who is talked about, even though she is writing the story. She also becomes a cat, and an object to be passed between others. The repetition of the words "chat" and "objet" helps to demonstrate Colette's thingness in her disabled body. She is a thing to be talked about, moved around, and planned for. People talk about her in her presence, and she becomes a spectator to her own existence and to the decisions being made for her. This shifts her position from that of writerly subjectivity to one of writerly object-ness.

On the last page of *Le Fanal Bleu*, the last page of her last original work, Colette addresses her confinement and her chronic pain before tackling the task of stopping to write. Her writing continues to be "all middle" in that, unlike with *L'Étoile Vesper* when she seemed to try to put a *point final* on her writing, she doesn't give any ending at all. She ends with the words "A suivre ..." followed by an ellipses. The seeming finality that she was able to give at the end of *L'Étoile Vesper* is nowhere to be found. Ambiguity, ambivalence, and no fixed ending now make up her writing world:

> Or, si je suis immobile ce soir, je ne suis pas sans dessein, puisqu'en moi bouge, – outre cette douleur torse, en grosse vis de pressoir, – un sévice bien moins familier que la douleur, une insurrection qu'au cours de ma longue vie j'ai plusieurs fois niée, puis déjouée, finalement acceptée, car écrire ne conduit qu'à écrire. Avec humilité, je vais écrire encore. Il n'y a pas d'autre sort pour moi. Mais quand s'arrête-t-on d'écrire ? Quel est l'avertissement ? Un trébuchement de la main? J'ai cru autrefois qu'il en était de la tâche écrite comme des autres besognes; déposé l'outil, on s'écrie avec joie : 'Fini !' et on tape dans ses mains, d'où pleuvent les grains d'un sable qu'on a cru précieux... C'est alors que dans les figures qu'écrivent les grains de sable on lits les mots : 'A suivre...' [122]

Illness and immobility give the author additional perspective on her life and actually facilitate memory writing. While writing from the physical interior, she is able to exteriorize herself as her body and existence become objects for her writing. Colette has found ways to travel while immobile, thanks to writing. Hers is a self-conscious writing process at this point, in which she writes as she remembers, and remembers as she writes. Ordinary objects serve as touchstones for her reflections, and furnish a space to create and recreate connections between body and mind.

[121] *FB* 779.
[122] *FB* 805.

IV. Colette and Leduc and the Ordinary

"Je suis âgée. Je dois rentrer dans l'ombre et l'oubli de plus en plus souvent."

Leduc, *La Chasse à l'amour*[123]

"Pendant une bouffée de silence, épaisse comme une brume, je viens d'entendre choir sur la table voisine les pétales d'une rose qui n'attendait, elle aussi, que d'être seule pour défleurir."

Colette, *L'Étoile Vesper* [124]

Colette and Leduc give the reader insight into their corporeal existences, first as women, and then as women of a certain age. While they sometimes describe similar phenomena, each author deploys her individual style to relate the experience of inhabiting an aging female body. Both Colette and Leduc valorize and explore forms of the ordinary and of material objects. But they create different object worlds and maintain different relationships to and with objects. On the surface, we could describe their different approaches as relating the beautiful and successful (for Colette) versus the ugly and the failing (for Leduc). In Leduc's rapport with objects, there is more room for doubt, uncertainty, and instability. It is the objects that interpellate and interrogate her, while Colette does the interpellating of objects and imbues them with meaning. Objects call Violette into question and serve as another vantage point from which the protagonist is judged and found wanting by the world around her.

Colette describes objects in minute and sensuous detail. While her meditations on objects can lead to flights of fancy or recollections of memories and feelings, the objects remain objects. They serve as conduits for lyrical musings, aesthetic anchors in a sea of imagination and memory. Colette's choice of material objects and literary anecdotes is carefully curated. Even though she insists that she cannot organize life experience "grain à grain" like some other writers, she certainly selects the most poignant examples and images for her contemplation. Leduc, on the other hand, tends to select objects that are even more truly quotidian for contemplation. As opposed to Colette, who uses objects as springboards for observation, Leduc gives voice to the objects themselves. *They speak back to her*. We "see" objects through Colette's lens and are always aware of her mediating our perception of the object under scrutiny. Leduc, in making objects speak (sparkles in the metro steps, razor blades, roses in the pattern of a carpet), removes that mitigating relationship and through her writing makes the objects speak directly to us (and to her protagonist, Violette). Their soliloquies give voice to a materiality of the quotidian, of the utilitarian, and of the overlooked, much like the work of Leduc overall. Colette has the means late in her life to construct a friendly material world for herself and her body. Leduc, for most of her life, does not, and the world and its things are hostile to her. Leduc's world is not welcoming, and she doesn't fit comfortably in it. She would, eventually,

[123] *La Chasse* 281.
[124] *EV* 603.

find a more welcoming world and fulfilling life once her success allowed her to buy a house in the country in Faucon, in the south of France.

While Colette and Violette Leduc never met, a missed connection surrounding the delivery of a hat box brings the two authors into physical proximity. This event (or non-event) takes place in 1938, and is recounted in *La Bâtarde*. It happened when Leduc was working for Synops, and the year Colette moved permanently into the Palais-Royal. Leduc was running errands for her boss, Denise Batcheff, a neighbor of Colette's, and delivers a hatbox to an unknown apartment. Éliane Lecarme-Tabone characterizes this episode as "non [pas] une fréquentation suivie mais... une absence de rencontre."[125] Leduc describes the unexpected encounter in *La Bâtarde* :

> Elle prit le carton, elle dit: "Je le porte dans la chambre de Mme Colette en attendant. – Colette ? dis-je. – L'écrivain", répondit la bonne. Elle me laissa. J'étais entre les casseroles de Colette, près du fourneau de Colette, à côté du buffet de cuisine de Colette. Je dis au revoir à la bonne de Mme Colette, je descendai à pas de loup et, revenue dans les jardins du Palais-Royal, je marchai sous les fenêtres de Colette comme si elle écrivait ses livres sur les vitres.[126]

Violette (the protagonist of *La Bâtarde*) didn't know that she was sent to Colette's apartment until she arrived. After leaving, she observes objects in the gardens of the Palais-Royal: "J'observais un cycliste assis sur un banc, se reposant près de son vélo, j'observais la forme d'un bonbon dans une main d'enfant, la forme d'une fleur dans un pot ..."[127] This mode of observation and writing echoes that of Colette, and I see this moment of as one of many connections between these two writers. In Leduc's writing, objects and others are more utilitarian and serve to highlight her dis-ease in the world. Colette and Leduc are writers whose works and writerly worlds are constituted by objects and the ordinary, although they experience the world very differently. Colette is surrounding herself with beautiful and often luxurious collectibles while Leduc is bumping into table corners and doorways. This "absence de rencontre"[128] provokes lyric musings by Leduc on Colette's surroundings:

> Normale de la part d'une employée encore tout à fait obscure, la réaction de Violette Leduc est en même temps significative de son rapport permanent au monde: toujours en position d'exclue, elle se tient dans les marges ou sur les seuils, et reporte souvent sur les objets ou les lieux la ferveur que lui inspirent les êtres que ceux-ci symbolisent.[129]
>
> [Typical for a still obscure employee, the reaction of Violette Leduc signifies at the same time her permanent relation to the world: always in the position of the excluded, she keeps herself in the

[125] *Cahiers Colette* N. 21 (1999) in the Rubric "Témoignages," presented by Éliane Lecarme-Tabone, 30.
[126] *La Bâtarde* 267.
[127] *La Bâtarde* 267.
[128] Éliane Lecarme-Tabone, "Témoignages." *Cahiers Colette* 21, 130.
[129] Éliane Lecarme-Tabone, "Témoignages." *Cahiers Colette* 21, 131.

> margins or on thresholds, and turns often to the objects or the sites of fervor which inspired the beings that they symbolize (my translation)].

In the passage about Violette's non-meeting with Colette, Leduc figures herself in the position of the "always excluded." Objects and material surroundings signal not fitting or not belonging for Leduc, while for Colette they are comforts and signs of inclusion. This "not fitting" will be discussed as social failure, or failure to fit into society, in chapter two.

The windows of Colette's apartment form one of these barriers for Leduc. She can look in them but not cannot see or participate in what's going on. In *La Bâtarde*, she describes walking beneath Colette's windows "as though she [Colette] wrote her books on them." [130] In the following volume of her trilogy, *La Folie en tête*, she revisits Colette's windows while going to a bookseller near the Palais-Royal with Jean Genet: "J'aurais voulu voir ce que devenaient les fenêtres de l'écrivain Colette."[131] These things, these windows, serve as touchstones in Leduc's literary life. They both physically separate her from others, like Colette, but let her attempt to gaze through them at the worlds in which she does not play a part. Brown's theorization of objects as opposed to things and the example of the window comes into play again here. Leduc is always bumping into things, hitting up against dirty windows and trying to see through them. When she descends from Colette's apartment, she stares at the windows, not just on the outside looking in but also looking up from below. These things, the windows, situate her socially, physically, literarily, and psychically.

In Brown's terms, objects are vehicles to meaning and things have meaning. Windows, part thing, part object, allow us to refine our sense of the differences between Colette and Leduc. Colette, especially in her last works, is looking out through her windows and observing the world. As she becomes less and less mobile, the world comes to her. Colette even published a book with the title *Paris de ma fenêtre* in 1942. While often pausing on overlooked things and their uses in that volume, Colette maintains the object/objective status of the window as she observes and recounts stories of Paris in wartime. But if Colette is typically looking out, Leduc is forever writing as someone looking in. Windows (and thresholds, and doorways) take on more of their "thingness" in her writing – we see these objects and spaces as just that – physical things blocking her way in. She goes to them, she observes the objects surrounding people she admires, and she covets those objects and the affections of their owners. Colette has the luxury, at this point in her career, of confirmed social and literary status and the ability to delight in objects. For Leduc, they are representations of what she doesn't have, and who she doesn't know. Ultimately, Leduc would find a measure of contentment after the success of *La Bâtarde*, when she purchased her house in Faucon. Whatever peace she found there would continue to be interrupted by painful memories of her earlier exclusions.

Leduc's relationships with objects signal more conflict, often bumping into or up against things, ideas, and people. Her existence contrasts sharply with Colette's smooth contemplation and rounded edges. As one reviewer describes the recent biopic devoted to Leduc:

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[130] *La Bâtarde* 267.
[131] *La Folie* 270.

> 'Violette' est le récit d'un très bel apaisement. D'une longue purge par l'écriture. Et donc d'une vraie nécessité, celle d'une bâtarde au physique ingrat, qui se cogne partout, aux objets, au monde, aux gens, à sa mère, à sa douleur, avant de se réconcilier, parce qu'elle a beaucoup écrit, parce qu'elle a été enfin lue et reconnue. [132]

Unlike Colette's fluid, seemingly symbiotic relationship with people and objects, Violette moves through the world like a wind-up toy constantly running into walls. While in her final works Colette writes outward from the interior of her apartment and the objects that she has curated within it, Leduc muses about objects in the urban space of pre-World War II Paris in *La Bâtarde*. Writing for Colette is artisanal craft, while for Leduc, it's exploitation of herself and others ("tu commences à nous exploiter,"[133] say the sparkles in the metro steps). Things and objects counter these lacks, and help to fill and connect ephemeral and tenuous existences.

Objects that Leduc writes about take on different valences than they do for Colette. When she writes about a comb, a razor blade, sparkles in the metro steps, carpet roses, church chairs, and spinach leaves, these passages can be lyrical and poetic; but, they almost always involve harsh self-critique on the part of the protagonist. As when she leaves her new job for the day, only to be reprimanded by the sparkles in the metro steps for her ambition to write, and the gall to think that she could:

> Toi écrire oh là là parlons-en chuchotèrent dans mes yeux les paillettes d'un escalier de métro. Tu passais, nous existions. C'était cela te mettre à écrire avec tes petits yeux. Maintenant que tu nous vois, tu te prends au sérieux. Je vous décrirai. Tu n'en seras pas capable. C'est vrai, je ne vous voyais pas. Tu commences à nous exploiter. Tu ne nous cherchais pas, chercheuse de trouvailles. Tu nous aperçois parce que tu vises l'originalité.[134]

Leduc is not necessarily bringing out the hidden beauty in an object or the dedicated work of an artisan to bring it into being. The object is pointing out her flaws and her delusions of grandeur. In comparison with her predecessors, Leduc's treatment of things is dark. Simone de Beauvoir observes this tendency of Leduc's to take the sides of those who are, like her, on the outside looking in : "Mise en présence de l'injustice, elle prend aussitôt parti pour l'opprimé, pour l'exploité ... Et puis, les gens situés en marge de la société lui semblent plus vrais que les citoyens bien rangés qui se plient à des rôles." Like Despentes, as we shall see, Leduc takes the side of the oppressed and the exploited. But all three of these writers interrogate the position of the periphery – as authors and in the lives of their characters. As Beauvoir's preface to *La Bâtarde* explains, "Ses décors, ses personnages appartiennent à ce monde des petites gens que la littérature d'aujourd'hui passe d'ordinaire sous silence."[135]

Writerly objects furnish another physical link between the works of Colette and Violette Leduc. While both highlight the materiality of the writing process, Leduc's process, as we would

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[132] François Guillaume-Lorrain, " 'Violette': l'amoureuse de Simone de Beauvoir," *Le Point*, 30 October 2013.
[133] *La Bâtarde* 311.
[134] *La Bâtarde* 311.
[135] Simone de Beauvoir, preface to *La Bâtarde*, 18.

expect from what we have already seen, is streaked with anguish and self-doubt. Although Colette dabbles in self-deprecation, her descriptions of writing portray it as more akin to the steady and skilled work of the craftsmen she admires. Colette's daughter describes her mother's appreciation for the *marché aux puces*, where Colette finds "beaucoup d'autres objets dits absurdes, touchants, tous marqués par l'habileté manuelle et la fraîcheur d'âme des artisans qui les avaient conçus ..."[136] The artisan and their creations are inseparable. For Colette and Leduc, their texts are their creations, the objects that they have fashioned. This is strengthened by these authors' auto-intertextuality, referencing their other texts in their own writing. Previous works become objects to be discussed by the authors in subsequent texts. And this self-referencing leads to a reification of both texts and experiences. For example, Leduc talks at length about the process of writing her novel *Ravages* in her book *La Chasse à l'amour*, and her disappointment at the book's publication. Frank discussions of the conditions surrounding writing and their previous works leads to a demystification of the writing process in the work of both writers. This challenges the Enlightenment construction of the writerly self and the figure of the writer as divinely inspired genius. Like Colette, Leduc makes the material conditions and tools of writing apparent. Indeed, writing tools become points of focus. Writing is shown as a process that is anchored in bodies and things. Writing materials of a blue color are specifically mentioned by each writer, but in very distinctive ways. Colette has her blue lamp and blue paper : "Je me berce sur mon ancre, sous le fanal bleu, qui n'est rien d'autre qu'une forte lampe commerciale au bout de son long X extensible, bleue et juponnée de papier bleu."[137] Leduc has her blue ink in *La Folie en tête*: "J'ouvrirai le sexe d'Isabelle, j'écrirai dedans avec mon encre bleue."[138] Colette's *ancre* (anchor) and Leduc's *encre* (ink) are being held tight to and also instrumentalized for writing. We go from the dainty feminine "juponée" and the maternal "je me berce" to the forceful disclosure of sexual experience: " j'ouvrirai le sexe d'Isabelle, j'écrirai dedans avec mon encre bleue."[139] The choice of title for *Le Fanal Bleu* leaves no doubt as to the importance of the writer's workshop and tools for Colette and the importance of the objects surrounding her. While less lauded by Leduc, writer's ink remains an important tool for her as well, and permits her to communicate embodied experience in written form.

The physical work of writing leaves material traces behind and the study of Leduc's manuscripts attest to the labor that produced her writing.[140] Her manuscripts exist in multiple palimpsest copies, with pages corrected or added by Leduc gluing additional pages into her notebook, over the previous pages. In her manuscripts, there is much evidence of "gommage, educulturation, et auto-censure."[141] And while manuscript research can lead into a black hole of

[136] Colette de Jouvenel 95-96.
[137] *FB* 752.
[138] *La Folie* 422.
[139] See Linda Williams's analysis of Diderot's *Les bijoux indiscrets* in chapter one of *Hardcore*. The idea that the sexual knowledge and secrets of a woman's sex need to be discovered or forcefully disclosed resonates with some of Leduc's impulses to uncover knowledge through "seeing."
[140] The research group on Violette Leduc housed in the Institut des Textes et des Manuscrits Modernes (ITEM) at the École Normale Supérieure Rue d'Ulm has produced groundbreaking work analyzing Leduc's manuscripts and papers housed at the IMEC (Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine) in Normandy. http://www.item.ens.fr/groupe-violette-leduc/
[141] Catherine Viollet, "Violette Leduc: Une pionnière?", lecture, 17 May 2014.

"what if's," it is enlightening to see what, in fact, *was not written*.[142] Just as an *ébéniste* leaves wood shavings on the workshop floor while producing a cabinet, a writer leaves discarded or rejected pieces of writing out of the final manuscript. Colette describes this process in *L'Étoile Vesper*: "Je n'ai pas travaillé aujourd'hui. Écrire, c'est souvent gaspiller. A compter les pages que j'ai déchirées, de combien de volumes suis-je l'auteur ?"[143] Are the torn-up and discarded pages failures, or part of the writing process? As we will see in the following chapter, in the case of Leduc, this process can be incredibly painful. And the physical manifestation of commercial literary failure can be even more painful. In *La Chasse à l'amour*, Leduc writes about her publisher, Gallimard, pulping the unsold copies of her first novel, *L'Asphyxie*.[144] The materiality of both the creation and destruction of texts is emphasized, when we remember that books purchased or unsold are made up of paper, ink, and adhesive. Writing for both authors is work - physical and mental labor that requires certain materials and stamina. But Leduc's experience of writing lacks some of the joy and most of the ease of Colette's. As her writing attests, Leduc would remain uneasy both in the world at large and in the literary world.

The material objects sought out and cherished by Colette can serve as cushions or safeguards in a world where one "fails to fit." To return to Sarah Ahmed's question, "Is a queer chair one that is not so comfortable, so we move around in it, trying to make the impression of our body reshape its form?"[145] Colette's writing is a queer chair! So is Leduc's. This description of trying to fit molds and the comfort or discomfort of subjects inhabiting the physical world is one that reoccurs in the writing of Colette and Leduc. While Colette observes the physical discomforts and constraints of aging, Leduc speaks more to a metaphysical discomfort of not fitting in with the social world (looks, social class, education, etc.). Colette speaks both to how our bodies are oriented by these objects and also to how our bodies orient them. And as readers, we can think of the last works of Colette as objects to which we must reshape our reading bodies. Certainly, the form of these texts is unusual, requiring more effort on the part of the reader. The content stretches our knowledge of *bric-à-brac* vocabulary and compels us to take second and third looks at everyday objects. Just as writers' bodies are oriented by objects and practice, so readers' bodies and practices have to be reshaped to queer texts – texts that treat unusual subject matter or that deploy unusual formal structures. Instead of the easy comfort and fit found in a traditional narrative, readers may bump up against unfamiliar elements or experience discomfort when faced with novel forms of writing.

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[142] An example of this is described by Viollet in her talk. The episode Viollet entitles "La main dans le sac," from Leduc's manuscripts, was the intended *incipit* of *Ravages*. While a tiny part of this episode does appear in *La Bâtarde*, it does not at all appear in *Ravages.* There exist at least five versions, maybe more, in Leduc's manuscripts. Viollet characterizes this episode as a "trou noir dans l'œuvre de Violette Leduc."

[143] *EV* 643.

[144] Lucey 325.

[145] Ahmed, *QP* "So, if furniture is conventional and indeed directs the bodies that use it, then furniture often disappears from view; indeed, what makes furniture 'furniture' is this tendency to disappear from view. A queer furnishing might be about making what is in the background, what is behind us, more available as 'things' to 'do' things with. Is the queer table simply one we notice, rather than simply the table that we do things 'on'? is a queer chair one that is not so comfortable, so we move around in it, trying to make the impression of our body reshape to its form? The chair moves as I fidget. As soon as we notice the background, then objects come to life, which already makes things rather queer," 168. Colette does not let furniture disappear from view, signifying perhaps a queer writerly posture. Colette and Leduc bring what is in the background to the foreground.

Not only are the writer's tools crucial to the process, but the furniture that cradles or resists the writer's body shapes the process as well. Colette does just this work of transformation when she tells the origin story of her writing desk that has followed her from Paris to St. Tropez and back again, allowing her to write in a more comfortable position. It was a gift from the Princesse Edmond de Polignac, adjusted by a *maître bricoleur*:

> Épaissi, consolidé, haussé, ayant perdu la plupart de ses grâces du XVIII[e] anglais, il enjambe mon lit-divan et contente en effet depuis un quart de siècle mon repos et mon métier. Un pupitre à crémaillère s'encastre dans sa solide table d'acajou et supporte le poids de téléphone, de fruits, de coffret-radio et de gros tomes illustrés qui me délassent de ma propre écriture ... L'édifice circule aisément de mon chevet à mes pieds. En y comptant le couteau à tout faire et sa queue de scorpion, le bouquet de stylos, et des bibelots sans utilité précises, je groupe sur son dos quelques bons et agréables serviteurs.[146]

The detail with which Colette depicts her desk and writing materials underline their importance in constructing her physical world. As she is forced to retreat more and more often to her apartment, and then to her bed, we see her attempting to furnish and to soften a world that has become ill-fitting. In discussing Heidegger's work on the writing table and the way that individuals interact differently with this same object, Ahmed posits that orientation to the work of writing is gendered:

> So, for instance, if the action of writing is associated with the masculine body, then it is this body that tends to inhabit the space for writing. The space for writing – say, the study – then tends to extend such bodies and may even take their shape. Gender becomes naturalized as a property of bodies, objects, and spaces partly through the loop of this repetition, which leads bodies in some directions more than others as if that direction came from within the body and explains which way it turns.[147]

This echoes the assertion of Diana Fuss cited at the beginning of this chapter, that "writing became feminized not only because more women were entering its ranks, but also because the labor of writing itself remained within the home, the very heart of domesticity."[148] Here we can see one factor (among many others) in women socialized to confessional writing, with the boudoir being oriented as the feminine space and the study the masculine one.[149]

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[146] *FB* 728.
[147] Ahmed, 58.
[148] Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them*, 10.
[149] In "Gestures, Intercorporeity, and the Fate of Phenomenology in Folklore," Katharine Young makes a useful point for approaching the relationship between bodies and objects in Colette's work. Extending the work of Merleau-Ponty, Young calls for an investment in the phenomenology of intercorporeity and focuses on the intentionality of gesture: "My senses reach for things and hold them in a certain way; the idea of the thing precedes the thing itself" (79). She gives the example of a hand already taking the shape of knife when reaching for the knife to cut a slice of cake – our bodies form to objects, extend to them, and there is a dynamic relationship between bodies and objects in the presence and reaching for them. The concept of intentionality dovetails with Ahmed's

In thinking about re-shaping bodies towards certain gestures and actions, we can think about physically not fitting in a chair. How can one "have a seat at the table" if the chairs don't fit? In *Hunger,* Roxane Gay addresses this precise question, and acknowledges the role that physically fitting and being comfortable (or not) plays in the work of writing and also in moving through the world. Often, her body simply doesn't fit. As a queer writer of color, there are many metaphorical spaces where Gay's ideas and identities don't fit either. Embodied experience is essential to understanding Gay's positionality. It is not until Colette is faced with aging and immobility that her physical world becomes very limited and uncomfortable. Leduc spends the vast majority of her life socially ill at ease, and sometimes physically so. Although the dis-ease of these writers differs greatly, the crucial common thread is their decision to include writing about material and corporeal realities. The writer can no longer be construed as an unmarked (and thus male, body). It is marked and used and suffers. Gay specifically addresses the role that chairs play in her experience of the world:

> There are very few spaces where bodies like mine fit.
>
> Chairs with arms are generally unbearable. So many chairs have arms. The bruises tend to linger. They remain tender to the touch hours and days after. My thighs have been bruised, more often than not, for the past twenty-four years. I cram my body into seats that are not meant to accommodate me, and an hour or two or more later, when I stand up and the blood rushes, the pain is intense... I see how physical spaces punish me for my unruly body... Anytime I enter a room where I might be expected to sit, I am overcome by anxiety. What kind of chairs will I find? Will they have arms? Will they be sturdy? How long will I have to sit in them? If I do manage to wedge myself between a chair's narrow arms, will I be able to pull myself out? If the chair is too low, will I be able to stand up on my own? This recitation of questions is constant, as are the recriminations I offer myself for putting myself in the position of having to deal with such anxieties by virtue of my fat body.[150]

Gay then goes on to describe feelings of humiliation when others watch her struggle into or out of a seat, and having to decline social invitations because theaters and restaurants often cannot fit her comfortably. Trying to mold or fold or squish oneself into chairs that don't fit, or spaces that are rigid and uncomfortable, leads to different relationships with the physical and social world than for those who move through the world more seamlessly. There's more to think about, more to fear, and more to avoid. While Leduc's size is not of issue in questions of fitting in the world, her severe self-deprecation, her ugliness, and her bumping up against barriers constitute a world where she fails to fit. Doorways grab her too. In light of this, queering one's space can become a revolutionary act (albeit with the potential for consumerist bourgeois co-opting). By queering space I mean constructing spaces, surroundings and tools to complement bodies that "don't fit"

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move from gesture to gender: "Gender is an effect of how bodies take up objects, which involves how they occupy space by being occupied in one way or another," (59).

[150] Gay, *Hunger*, 202-203.

in any sense of the word. It means re-thinking design, reshaping narratives, and re-examining existences. In Leduc's writing, this means narrating stories of love and sex between women without the intended titillation of a straight male readership. It also means recounting failure after failure without trying to be palatable or pleasing (most of the time).

Gay's first bestseller, *Bad Feminist*, signals another failure to fit, this time ideologically. Holding contradictions and re-shaping feminist spaces are major themes in Gay's work, and the appellation of "bad feminist" would be one perfectly suited to each of the three authors discussed here. Without delving into the specificities and definitions of feminisms in different contexts, Colette, Leduc and Despentes are all women authors beloved by groups of feminist scholars (sometimes these groups overlap, but not always). Each writer maintains problematic and productive relationships to women and feminist ideals. It is the badness, the messiness, and the ordinariness of these relationships that interests me. It is important to connect all of these voices without erasing their vast distinctions, and I find it productive to think of Colette and Leduc as complicated and challenging subjects for feminist readers and critics.

In the last pages of *L'Étoile Vesper*, Colette describes a different kind of writing[151] which she has taken up in her later years – embroidery: "Et ayant, un demi-siècle, écrit noir sur blanc, j'écris en couleurs sur canevas depuis tantôt dix années."[152] While Colette finds it difficult to put an end to her writing with pen and paper, her new writing activity seems to offer respite from the uncertainty of the blank page and of her own mortality. The chair cushions that Colette embroidered can still be viewed in Saint-Sauveur-en Puisaye. While she left behind a great many objects of literary study, she also took pleasure in creating colorful needlepoints during her final years:

> Il ne m'appartient pas de dire si je dépense, à broder au point croisé, une surérogation quelconque. Je perce, et je reperce. L'équille – l'aiguille – brille entre deux fils, remorque sa queue de laine. Mes Mémoires s'écrivent en verdure bleue, en lilas rose, en anthémis multicolores. Je commencerai d'après nature le portrait de mon étoile Vesper.[153]

As she ends what she thought to be her last work, Colette is decorating – literally and figuratively. She is making her space more comfortable and beautiful, and is over-furnishing not only her prose but her apartment as well. The term "surérogation" points to another moment of reverence – for the scenes of nature she is writing with her thread and for the craft itself. And perhaps it is excessive to be writing in embroidery when she already writes with pens. Colette in a final gesture again destabilizes the writerly production of an all-knowing self. She uses "Mémoires" with a capital M, but the work she describes is her colorful and faithful embroidery of flora and fauna. The ordinary for Colette affirms that different forms of stories are valid, and that there can be no final authoritative summing up for her – only more writing, more instants, more moments of living. Just as the ordinary plays an outsize if complicated role in the final

[151] "Weaving" is a metaphor that has long been used in feminist literary criticism, but what's great about Colette's last work is that she's not really weaving or braiding narrative strands together – they stand on their own as discrete moments and thoughts. However, she does find comfort in the repetitive act and colorful product produced through literal weaving.
[152] *EV* 682.
[153] *EV* 683.

works of Colette, failure acts as a unifying experience in the works of Leduc. In the next chapter we will look more closely at the ways in which Leduc and her writing fail to fit.

Chapter 2: Violette Leduc and the Art of Failure, or, Failure IS an option

Failure for Colette appears as more of physical breaking down of the body and an inability to continue to adhere to certain gendered and physical norms which she had previously embraced, such as mobility and a conventionally attractive youthful feminine appearance. Failure for Leduc, however, is foundational. It colors her upbringing, her view of the world, and her literary travails. Failure in Colette is figured as more of a loss of something once possessed, and there is something to be mourned. In Leduc, it never existed in the first place. In the previous chapter, we saw how writing about the ordinary allows for a different kind of relationship with the world, on at times a micro level that goes unnoticed. Writing about failure also expands views of the world, although instead of awe or appreciation for the ordinary, there is empathy and exasperation as failure becomes sustaining and generative. Failure generates new forms of being in writing, without necessarily leading to success. In this chapter I explore how Leduc's commercial failure as a writer until the publication of *La Bâtarde* influenced her writing. I also discuss her social, romantic, and sexual failures. The works of Leduc on which I focus here are her three autobiographical volumes (*La Bâtarde*, *La Folie en tête, La Chasse à l'amour)* and her first three books: *L'Asphyxie, L'Affamée*, and *Ravages*.

I look here at how failure shapes Leduc's work and allows for the creation of new identities and awareness of the potential benefits of failing. I propose thinking about failure in terms of "not fitting" into three broad categories: femininity, class, and writing. Femininity comprises both prescribed sexual and romantic roles and adherence to physical requirements of feminine beauty. In addition, I examine how Leduc treats the failure of characters to meet heterosexual standards and how same-sex relationships between women are written. I explore different portrayals of inhabiting, adopting, rejecting and undoing femininity. Leduc and Despentes both write from and for a place of ugliness, in the most superficial sense, which is related to failure in that ugliness for a woman in a society that values beauty and beauty work[154] suggests a failure to meet gendered physical and aesthetic standards. Indeed, what does it mean to avow one's ugliness in writing or to write for "les moches"?[155]

Beyond exclusion (both experienced and self-imposed) based on nonadherence to feminine ideals, marginalization based on class and social situation represent a failure to fit into a society that sees poverty and a nontraditional family structure as moral failings. Finally, in addition to her gender and social failures, Leduc's meta commentary on writing and publishing gives insight into what forms literary failure can take. This is not a tale of failure that eventually leads to success ("If at first you don't succeed, try, try again"), or failure as a necessary and even valorized stepping stone to eventual fame and fortune. These types of narratives which engage in the "toxic positivity" theorized by Halberstam now permeate the self-help and business management publishing sectors, as well as motivational speaking.[156] Even after Leduc achieves a

[154] In *Force of Beauty*, the concept of "beauty work" signifies the time, effort, and expense that goes into maintaining socially acceptable standards of feminine beauty.
[155] As Despentes claims to do in the beginning of *King Kong Théorie*.
[156] One incarnation of the rhetoric of failure as co-opted for capitalist means is the Museum of Failure, which puts on popular and highly publicized exhibits, mostly featuring inventions that never took off. While embracing failure, the rhetoric of the exhibit descriptions and museum publicity glorifies failure inasmuch as it highlights other eventual successes. Failure, without the pairing of eventual success, would seem to be less spectacular and less

modest form of literary and financial success, she continues to choose descriptions of failure as defining. For her, the failure is an end in and of itself.

Failure is an incredibly powerful concept in queer theory, which helps us to see it as a possible opting-out or passive resistance to systems of power that don't allow for open confrontation or with which confrontation would cost too high a price. Violette Leduc's writing expresses many forms of failure and she pours her anguished existence into her work. The poor sales of her first books and the significant censorship of her novel *Ravages* destroy her, just as her unrequited and all-encompassing loves do. And she shows us this – her dependent, pathetic ranting and sadness. In my analysis I draw specifically upon ideas of failure theorized by Halberstam, who suggests that certain artistic works and authorial failings can be re-thought or re-imagined as alternative ways of being and of resistance. I see failure, like ordinary objects or abjection, as a form of identity-formation. Failure is an essential piece, if not the essential piece, of Leduc's subjectivity. She both thrives on and is crushed by her perceived abnormality and failure to fit.[157]

In *The Queer Art of Failure,* Halberstam expands upon the idea of failure to include unbecoming, passivity, masochism, and other ways of challenging a patriarchal "becoming" of woman and inhabiting of femininity. Failing out of normative gender roles also means failing into a new space:

> Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failure is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon 'trying and trying again.' In fact, if success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards.
>
> What kinds of rewards can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers. And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the

narratable. https://failuremuseum.com/. Samuel Beckett's quote "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" ("Worstword Ho!"), has been taken out of context to support a trend, especially in Silicon Valley, of talking about failure as a way of shoring up success. On taking the Beckett quotation out of context and Beckett's much darker and broader interpretation of failure, see Mark O'Connell, "The Stunning Success of 'Fail Better': How Samuel Becket became Silicon Valley's life coach", January 29 2014 : "The entrepreneurial fashion for failure with which this polished shard fits so snugly is not really concerned, as Beckett was, with failure per se—with the necessary defeat of every human endeavor, of all efforts at communication, and of language itself—but with failure as an essential stage in the individual's progress toward lucrative self-fulfillment." https://slate.com/culture/2014/01/samuel-becketts-quote-fail-better-becomes-the-mantra-of-silicon-valley.html

[157] Ahmed, "Failure to fit" in a queer chair, *Queer Phenomenology*.

> opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life.[158]

As we will see in this chapter, Leduc certainly persists in the petulance of childhood. What Halberstam terms "rewards", Lauren Berlant defines as "new potentials" in *Sex, or the Unbearable*: "... making a world for what doesn't work changes the consequences of those failures in a way that produces new potentials for relation within the structural space of the nonsovereign."[159] Leduc's writing performs this act of "making a world for what doesn't work." She collects failures and humiliations like Girl Scout badges. Yet this accumulation is more constructive in that failure is both freeing and generative. New spaces and new badges are created. Like Colette's collecting of material objects, Leduc's accumulating of failures makes space for a different type of world.

While it would seem important to distinguish between the failings of the author, Violette Leduc, and the failings of her narrators, usually named Violette, in this analysis the distinction does not need to be nailed down precisely. Indeed, part of what captivates in Leduc is her precise failure to draw clean classic lines between author and narrator. All three of the authors discussed here have been given at some point, perhaps erroneously, the étiquettes of autofiction, although life-writing seems more appropriate. But Leduc's failures as writer and Violette's failures as narrator are so entwined that teasing them apart is not only incredibly difficult but also unproductive for our purposes. What interests me is the idea of failure, its communication and what we can learn from it.

The negative affects that Halberstam references make up another important area of inquiry in queer and literary theory. And Leduc's sense of not fitting, and of never fitting, is a "durable one"[160]:

> Often the formation of that misfit community seems to happen around the shared affective experience of misfitedness itself, of living on a sociological fault line, of being, in one of Bourdieu's favorite terms, *en porte-à-faux*, misaligned, out of kilter, off balance, caught in an experience of a state of precarious social (un)intelligibility. For Leduc, that state is a durable one.[161]

Halberstam, Edelman and Berlant discuss failure or negativity in conjunction with modes of undoing, unbeing, or unbecoming. Rather than regressing, these verbs signify to me a loosening of laces or straps, like those on a strait jacket, and letting more uncertainty — Ngai's "disconcertedness"[162] — and failure out into the world. This mirrors Leduc's narrations of all of her relationships, romantic and not.

Can a refusal to be redeemed lead to redemption? Or does it suggest that there is no need to be redeemed, or perhaps, no real redemption possible? Such a refusal proposes that the

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[158] Halberstam 2-3.
[159] Lauren Berlant, Afterword: After It's Over, in *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, 25.
[160] Lucey 365.
[161] Lucey 365.
[162] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*.

idea of redemption or its corollaries (success, achievement, winning) is itself "misaligned, out of kilter, [and] off balance."[163] In the following chapter, I discuss how the failures Leduc relates in her writing, and what those failures point out about literature and the larger world. These different forays into failure help to illustrate in both broad and specific ways how Leduc fails and is failed, and what these failures can tell us.

I. Writing Literary Failures

Because the second and third volumes of Leduc's literary autobiography were written towards the end of her life, we have the unusual chance of reading a successful author's descriptions of her first writing and publication attempts, and the struggle and disappointment that these involved. Instead of a traditional autobiography, in which the author would look back on her life and recount formative experiences while giving them some sort of narrative arc and explaining how they affected her, Leduc's writings represent a recursive type of narration. [164] She writes in circles, plunging down rabbit holes of self-deprecation. The three volumes of Leduc's literary autobiography recount the events of her life in literary fashion, separating to some degree the protagonist Violette from the author Violette Leduc. In this way, Leduc recounts her struggles with writing and coming to inhabit the words "écrivain" and "auteur" as the barely fictionalized Violette.

In *La Folie en tête* and *La Chasse à l'amour*, Leduc writes about the composition and publications of her first two full-length works. *L'Asphyxie*, published in 1946, was the product of her writing in Normandy during World War II. Leduc describes at the end of *La Bâtarde* the moment where Maurice Sachs, ostensibly to give him some peace and quiet, suggests that Leduc write down her childhood memories. This scene is portrayed quite compellingly in Martin Prévost's film *Violette* (2013), in which Emmannuelle Devos, playing Leduc, takes her notebook, sits under a tree, and reads aloud in a voice-over the now oft-repeated first sentence of *L'Asphyxie*: "Ma mère ne m'a jamais donné la main."[165] The film and its cinematographic choices help to bring into focus scenes of interest and contention, and let us consider formative moments in Leduc's life from additional angles. It's difficult to be completely objective when critiquing this film, as the pleasure in seeing moments in the life of a famous writer and her peers come to life on screen outweighs the frustration at factual inaccuracies or liberties taken with the script. However, by choosing to prioritize this scene over others, Prévost helps to enshrine the origin story of Leduc as a writer. Unfortunately, it helps to further the sentiment that Leduc only wrote at the behest of Sachs, and only then because she had too much to say, and he found it annoying. It seems to refer back to women's writing as diary writing or memoirs, as repositories for their overactive imaginations and emotions.[166] Although Colette never knew the poverty that Leduc suffered, writing for both women was bound up with earning a living and financial

[163] Lucey 365.
[164] See Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Seuil, 1975.
[165] *L'Asphyxie* 7.
[166] See the concept of "Unruly Women" in Anne Petersen, *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud: The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman.* "Unruliness" or being "too much" makes women who are public figures reviled. However, this "too-muchness" is much better tolerated from white women than women of color or trans women. It's not incidental that the three women authors discussed here were able to write about romantic relationships with other women and be tolerated and even celebrated for their unruliness, as their whiteness makes them more palatable.

worries were never far afield from their work. At least, until late in their careers when their literary reputations and commercial success were established. Financial security bought Leduc property and some semblance of peace.

The concern with the material continues as a striking and important quality of both Leduc's and Colette's writing. Contrary to Colette's scene of writerly genesis, Leduc is not sitting inside writing at a desk. Most women writers when portrayed onscreen and in photographs are seen toiling at desks surrounded by papers and books, and usually looking extremely solitary. In this scene Leduc is seated outside, with only a schoolchild's notebook to write in. Her literary outsiderness seems paramount here, as does the importance of nature as a source of inspiration that will continue throughout her life. In addition, the choice of the opening line of *L'Asphyxie* for the voice-over knits together visually and aurally the putting of pen to paper for Leduc with her experience of being a bastard. Writing and illegitimacy will be forever bound together for her, and this scene helps to cement that relationship for the viewer.

Both Colette and Leduc wrote literary versions of their origin stories as writers, and both involve a man they were deeply devoted to telling them to write. But neither Willy nor Maurice Sachs encouraged these women to write because they were convinced of their talent or ideas; telling them to write was a self-serving act. Colette unveils her account of the genesis of the Claudine novels in *Mes Apprentissages* (written and published after Willy's death). In her retelling, Willy says to her after a year or two of marriage, "Vous devriez jeter sur le papier des souvenirs de l'école primaire. N'ayez pas peur des détails piquants, je pourrais peut-être en tirer quelque chose... Les fonds sont bas."[167] After completing the task assigned to her by Willy, Colette reveals what she's written to her husband and he responds, "Je m'étais trompé, ça ne peut servir à rien."[168] First exploitive, then rejecting and cruel, Colette's *venue à l'écriture*[169] is in fact a non-arrival, just as Leduc's meeting with Colette is a non-event. Only much later will Willy rediscover the schoolgirl notebooks Colette filled with the beginning of the Claudine novels and work to have them published. Maurice Sachs is even less kind when he instructs Leduc to write: "Vos malheurs d'enfance commencent de m'emmerder. Cet après-midi vous prendrez votre cabas, un porte-plume, un cahier, vous vous assoirez sous un pommier, vous écrirez ce que vous me racontez."[170] However, when Leduc turns in her work at the end of the day to Sachs "j'attendais la bonne ou la mauvaise note," she is met with encouragement: "Ma chère Violette, vous n'avez plus qu'à continuer."[171] This anecdote comes toward the end of *La Bâtarde*, in a rare uplifting moment that leaves the reader hopeful for Violette. Both authors compare their first writing assignments to schoolwork, Leduc waiting for her grade from Sachs and Colette enjoying selecting her writing supplies and describing them in detail, as well as a "passivité d'accomplir un travail commandé."[172] "Travaux commandés" or writing assignments would be the bane of Colette's writerly existence. While Colette recounts this experience with Willy in matter-of-fact fashion, Leduc indulges in the potential of her writing:

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[167] *Mes Apprentissages* 1210.
[168] *Mes Apprentissages* 1210.
[169] Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l'écriture*, 1977.
[170] *La Bâtarde* 399.
[171] *La Bâtarde* 400.
[172] *Mes Apprentissages* 1210.

> Les oiseaux soudain se taisaient alors je suçais mon porte-plume: le Plaisir de prévoir que ma grand-mère allait renaître, que je la mettrais au monde, le plaisir de prévoir que je serais la créateur de celle que j'adorais, de celle qui m'adorait.[173] Écrire ... Cela me semblait superflu pendant que je me souvenais de ma douceur pour elle, de sa douceur pour moi. J'écrivais pour obéir à Maurice.[174]

Leduc expresses a vulnerability and a pleasure in her writing that feels rawer and less studied than that of Colette, whose narration portrays a more measured, consummate professional.

Colette and Leduc both comment on the act of writing memoirs or writing about their life experiences. Both wrote forms of literary autobiography and life-writing, and both seem to question the motivations and accuracy of such writing. However, their styles in doing so differ. Leduc's self-critique of her deployment of her childhood memories in her writing maps onto Willy's exploitation of Colette's memories for his own financial gain. At the beginning of *La Folie en tête*, she writes: "Ah! que les adultes deviennent putains pour exploiter les petits enfants qu'ils ont été."[175] Whereas Colette, in *Belles Saisons*, published in 1945 immediately before *L'Étoile Vesper*, describes a similar sentiment towards memories of childhood that an adult imagines intact, but in a very different manner from Leduc:

> Je me méfie même des miens. Nous devenons imaginatifs sur le tard, en même temps qu'optimistes, pour déformer en les dépeignant, ces violents chagrins, ces mélancolies, ces jalousies brûlantes – toutes passions dont l'amour, après, ne fait que remâcher la saveur. Il manque, à l'authenticité de ces sortes de Mémoires, les rayures d'ombre et de lumière, les sursauts de douleur emportée et de folle allégresse, les heures interminables et les années galopantes, bref le rythme perdu.[176]

Both authors, while writing extensively about their pasts in their work, question pointedly the validity of *Memoires* with a capital "M." They also question the accuracy or authenticity of trying to string together moments into a coherent narrative, favoring short sections of impressionist-style writing to communicate past experiences.

Leduc's second work, *L'Affamée*, would be published in 1948. While short pieces that she had written prior were published in the journal *Les temps modernes* and appreciated by the likes of Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, Cocteau and Genet, her first two full-length works were commercial flops. In *La Folie en tête*, Leduc even reports that Cocteau read and liked *L'Asphyxie*, and encouraged others to read it. However, due in part to her commercial literary failures, the failure of Leduc to see herself as a writer and as capable of writing meaningful texts follows. While Leduc's self-doubt is infused into all of her written works, the one that contains the most references to her difficulties with writing and disappointment at her books not selling is

[173] Compare to Annie Ernaux's *Une Femme*, in which she gave writerly "birth" to her mother in a sociological and literary portrait.
[174] *La Bâtarde* 399-400.
[175] *La Folie* 15.
[176] Colette, vol 3, 539.

La Folie. This second volume of her literary autobiography is the one that was written directly following her first commercial success with *La Bâtarde* in 1964 (*La Folie* would be published in 1970). Did this newfound success and renown allow her to delve back more deeply into her self-doubt and despair pre-*Bâtarde*? Reading about crushing self-doubt and disappointment written by a now successful writer actually helps us to understand her version of the genre of literary autobiography as opposed to autobiography. She is writing in the moment without regard to connecting her struggle to her future success. She also does not use her future success to bolster her darker moments, as in "I felt horrible but I knew it would get better" or some kind of optimistic encouraging mantra. She continues to steep herself in despair and doubt, without reaching towards a future promise of commercial and public success to attenuate her (and the reader's) suffering.

In this way, we can think of Leduc's literary project as a queer one, in that it embraces failure without looking towards a future moment of socially enshrined success.[177] While not necessarily looking forward, it is unavoidable that Leduc's subject position does shift over her writing career, and that she is now writing retrospectively from a position of modest literary success. However, instead of optimism or utopian thinking, Leduc takes the opposite tack and goes further than just not looking towards success; her writing marinates in failure. It is both the impetus for and the result of her writing. Sheringham captures this idea when he says that "*La Folie en tête* is purgatorial rather than redemptive, and lacks a clear end point."[178] There is not a teleological trajectory to her literary project, in that even after she achieves success, she continues to write about failure. And this persistence can take on a different valence after success. This idea of not giving the reader a happy ending, or any ending at all, resonates with Love's theorization of "the 'dark side' of modern queer representation"[179] and Halberstam's "dark heart of the negativity that failure conjures."[180]

Heather Love explores associations with failure and queerness in theorizing "feeling backward", which comprises "feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment*, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness. These feelings are tied to the experience of social exclusion and to the historical 'impossibility' of same-sex desire." These feelings represent part of what she terms the "'dark side' of modern queer representation."[181] Refusal to be redeemed, negativity, noncathartic, ugly: these *etiquettes* from different contemporary theorists help us think about Leduc's work in new ways: "Texts or figures that refuse to be redeemed disrupt not only the progress narrative of queer history but also our sense of queer identity in the present."[182] In a section entitled "The Art of Losing", which pairs nicely with Halberstam's *The Art of Failure*, Love interrogates both love and loss for queer subjects: "Same-sex desire is marked by a long history of association with failure, impossibility, and loss. I do not mean by this that homosexual love is in its essence failed or impossible, any more than regular love is. The association between love's failures and homosexuality is, however, a historical reality, one that has profound effects for contemporary

[177] See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.
[178] Sheringham 129.
[179] Love 4.
[180] Halberstam 23.
[181] Love, *Feeling Backward*, 4.
[182] Love 8.

queer subjects."[183] Love explores these ideas through, among others, the lives and works of authors like Willa Cather and Radclyffe Hall. She also takes up Elizabeth Freeman's concerns with the concentration in contemporary queer theory on pain and negative affects, proposing that exploring the failed and the melancholy neither negates nor undermines pleasure. As in the works of Leduc, pleasure is a part of the pain of loss. In Leduc's writing, pleasure is not only re-discovered after loss or enjoyed in spite of it, but also experienced (at least for Leduc and for her readers) along with and thanks to her suffering. As a reader, there is aesthetic pleasure to be found in Leduc's painfully beautiful prose and there is also a form of *schadenfreude* at her simultaneous self-deprecation and self-absorption. In addition, there may also be some discomfort on Leduc's part with her change in social status. Although anguish, rejection and self-doubt are what she is used to and where she is most comfortable, Leduc's aestheticization of failure does succeed in creating beauty.[184] This beauty would seem to signal some sort of success. This success, however, is consolatory rather than redemptive. Leduc is not creating triumph of out her failures, but poetically relating them.

We first witness Leduc's struggles with writing in her mystical, lyrical love letter to Simone de Beauvoir, *L'Affamée*. Like Colette, Leduc describes the conditions and materials with which she writes – table, pen, etc. But unlike Colette, who likens fashioning her prose to that of an artisan, Leduc's writing process is wrenching:

> Assise à ma table, j'essaie d'écrire. Pendant que j'essaie, je me délivre laborieusement et innocemment de mon incapacité d'écrire bien. Ma plume grince. Je gémis avec elle. Nous gémissons pour rien. Nous formons ensemble des mots inutiles. J'ai honte d'infliger ce travail à ce petit objet capable.[185]

Leduc mentions often the "nuts and bolts" of her writing – parts of speech, words, etc. — like an artisan crafting something. But while Colette uses the artisan metaphor to elevate her writing and infuse it with some of the terroir of her native Burgundy, Leduc seems to do it to degrade it, as though she is merely a manual laborer among a sea of writers: "Mon travail ne vaut rien, je le sais, inutile de m'injurier. Des vagues à peine formées, dessinées, à la craie rose ... ce sont mes verbes et mes adjectifs filandreux."[186] Being "honteuse" of her work and fearing that her embarrassing state would contaminate those around her continues even as Leduc later moves into fashionable literary circles. Instead of a feeling of pride that Genet and Cocteau would discuss her book *L'Asphyxie*, she writes in *La Folie,* "Je ne voulais pas que Genet parle de mon petit livre à Cocteau. C'était rabaisser Genet et son génie."[187]

Paradoxes abound in Leduc's feelings towards her writing. Even though Violette expresses shame at her work, she still waits impatiently for reviews or any mention of her book. She is both mortified and hungry for praise. She is constantly searching in vain for her book

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[183] Love 21.
[184] Michael Sheringham explores this disconnect (between current success and writing about past failure): "Ironically, Leduc wrote *La Folie en tête* in the years 1965-1970 when she was enjoying the success and notoriety *La Bâtarde* had brought her, and was living it up in fashionable places and circles. No reference is made to this in the text: the only 'present' we are made aware of is that of the act and process of writing," 129.
[185] *L'Affamée* 66-67.
[186] *La Folie* 526.
[187] *La Folie* 273.

displayed in bookstore windows: "J'avais une méthode: celle des détrousseurs de nids. Je ralentissais, vingt mètres avant la librairie, j'arrivais en douceur pour surprendre mon livre en vitrine et recevoir de lui un choc. Je ne le dénichais jamais. Sauf une fois. Où ? Dans l'étalage débilitant de la librairie polonaise, boulevard Saint-Germain. Qu'il était vieux et usé au dernier rang !"[188] And the few reviews that she does find in the press are short and not favorable. She finds her work characterized as "sécot", "maigre", and "charabia."[189] Even though her self-pity can often seem melodramatic, in the case of the reviews for *L'Asphyxie*, her writing was indeed not well-received: "Je pleure la nuit: on n'achète pas mon livre. On ne le voit pas aux vitrines des libraires. On n'en parle pas. Aussitôt imprimé, aussitôt disparu. C'est un naufrage qui passe inaperçu."[190] We must pause here to appreciate the poetic quality of Leduc's description of her shipwreck of a book. The final rhyming syllables of the last two sentences only further emphasize loss and failure: "disparu" and "inaperçu." While clearly talking about her book, the reader understands that Violette herself also feels this way, and perhaps feels shipwrecked along with her work. Leduc makes these statements even though she did just describe seeing her book in one bookshop window, and Cocteau told Genet that he liked her work. It even is being spoken about a bit in the literary press, although not very favorably. All in all, the reception of *L'Asphyxie* as described in *La Folie* illustrates that indeed Leduc's first book was not a success. But it also raises the question: what would it take for Leduc to admit success to herself? Is it even possible for her to be satisfied? She deplores her failures yet persists in their excavation. But this persistence does not lead to catharsis; success or even relief are both anathema to her project. We get some attempts at answers to these questions when she writes about receiving letters from readers.

Leduc writes about two separate instances of receiving letters from readers. The first, in *La Folie*, is from Patrice, a young man who read and admired *L'Asphyxie*.[191] The second, related in *La Chasse,* is from a young woman who writes to her after having read *L'Affamée*.[192] In both of these instances, Leduc relates her disbelief while simultaneously feeling flattered, even though she makes clear that she doesn't believe she merits admiration. But Leduc can't help herself and she gets more involved with both of these admirers than a typical author might. The attention they pay to her is too seductive, as is the pleasure she takes in self-flagellation as she counters their compliments in her mind. In *La Chasse*, the young woman, Hortense, invites Violette to have lunch with her. While waiting to meet this admiring reader, Violette imagines that she will not, in fact, show up: "Non, elle n'arrive pas. Elle n'a pas la moindre considération pour l'auteur qu'elle a lu. L'auteur ? Les autres sont des auteurs, pas moi."[193] Even when faced with admirers of her work, Leduc remains painfully self-deprecating and succeeds in bringing in other seemingly critical voices whenever she slips into considering herself as a writer, as evidenced in her initial use of the word "auteur" and then her interrogation of her usage of that word to describe herself. She is indeed the author of these works (even if they didn't sell) and yet the idea

[188] *La Folie* 154.
[189] *La Folie* 154.
[190] *La Folie* 189-190.
[191] *La Folie* 301.
[192] *La Chasse* 319.
[193] *La Chasse* 319

of belonging to a community of writers, of taking on that identity of "auteur," even if she craves it, is anathema to her sense of self.

Leduc initiates and responds to contact with others, and forms relationships, yet they are not reciprocal: "... Leduc creates an intersubjective network where she is at once central and peripheral ... Leduc has no real place in the network of her own past relationships, all of which involve her exclusion, rejection, or marginalization."[194] In her interactions with her readers, we can observe this network in which "she is at once central and peripheral." She is both the admired writer and the unworthy outsider, awkward, unsure, and intensely self-critical. She is not self-effacing, because even in her most cruel passages, she is still always obsessed with how others see her and in describing how unworthy she is. One can think of a self-obsessed teenager, who perceives every event and action only in the ways that it will affect them. Impartial decisions become personal attacks, slight deficiencies are woeful inadequacies, and mild slights are unpardonable offenses. Leduc's protagonists' acute lack of self-awareness encourage this comparison, although she differs from the teenager in her willingness to blame both others and herself. As Sheringham maintains, "[Key scenes in *La Folie*] establish links between desire, exclusion and solitude which will be central to the subject position Leduc sees herself occupying as a writer."[195] Her perceived and lamented exclusion, rejection, and general not fitting are key to her writerly identity. There is no phrase of Leduc's declaring herself a writer, or a success, without immediate self-criticism following. The image of Leduc on the outside looking in, whether in a doorway or through a window (like the window of the Chanel boutique near the Ritz or the shop on Boulevard Malesherbes where she falls in love with a lacquered table), illustrates her perceived relationship to others and to the world. Leduc's description of her hesitation to cross the threshold into Colette's apartment to deliver a package (discussed in the previous chapter) echoes these sentiments. And before her initial meeting with Simone de Beauvoir, Leduc recalls in *La Folie* going to the Café de Flore and watching Beauvoir and Sartre write, admiring them from afar. She says, "Qui suis-je lorsque je m'en souviens? Une sentinelle aux portes de la littérature."[196] Even when remembering this moment, even after achieving many kinds of success, she sees herself as always remaining on the threshold, looking in. Failure is both an experience and a style for Leduc, content and form, the events of her life and then her persistence in presenting them under this mantle of failure and rejection.

Leduc fails to leave one failure behind to embrace another. While lamenting the refusal of Gallimard to publish her text of *Ravages* without some significant cuts, Leduc also returns to one of her favorite lamentations about her previous publications that did not sell well. At a bookshop she notices a book of Beauvoir's on display and asks how it's selling. The saleswoman responds: "Nous le vendons beaucoup."[197] Violette repeats this phrase to herself, seemingly chewing it over and savoring both the success of her mentor and her bitter jealousy.

[194] Sheringham 131.
[195] Sheringham 131.
[196] *La Folie* 45.
[197] *La Chasse* 31.

II. Social Failures: Class and Illegitimacy

Failure for Leduc predates her literary aspirations. Her class and social standing inform her earliest memories. Social failure would color Leduc's existence and her writing. Her social failures include growing up in poverty and being an illegitimate child. Her first successful literary work, the first volume of her autobiography, is entitled *La Bâtarde*. While the title can be thought to normalize the condition of being an illegitimate child, it is also announces her identity on the cover. As though branded, both in life and in literature. There are no other words in the title to take attention away, nothing to attenuate the suffering. And this is one of the most distinctive characteristics of Leduc's writing – there is nothing to attenuate the suffering. Even when what she describes is painful, humiliating, shameful, or bizarre, she insists on relating it all. Leduc accepts the label of bastard but does not reclaim it in the way that derogatory slurs have been reclaimed by some groups. It remains a wound that does not heal. It can be analyzed, explored, poeticized, sometimes made beautiful, but it remains. Leduc relates in her writing the feelings of illegitimacy – as a child who is not spoken for, as a woman seen as ugly, as a writer who can't seem to succeed or measure up. And like that child who desperately wants to be recognized, to be seen, Leduc the writer desires that. Like artists and scholars before and after her, Leduc interrogates the situation of *enfants naturels*. From Olympe de Gouges to Stromae, the question of *bâtardise* as stigmatized social category continues across centuries.[198]

Leduc begins by describing her impoverished childhood and troubled adolescence in rural France. Her father, the son in a bourgeois household where her mother worked as a servant, never acknowledged Violette as his daughter. Being a bastard without her father's name informed much of Leduc's identity as a child, and she suffered greatly. This experience, among others, leads to her always desiring more affection and attention from her lovers than they can or want to give to her. Leduc then continues by relating her domestic life in pre-World War II Paris with her lover Hermine. Using the poignant second person voice, which Leduc deploys to communicate some of her harshest criticisms and most distressing observations, the narrator Violette addresses her mother in the opening pages of *La Bâtarde*: "Je suis née porteuse de ton malheur."[199] And so from birth Violette is marked, and carries unhappiness with her as part of her very existence: "Elle porte le fardeau d'une 'faute' qu'elle n'a pas commise."[200] Violette suffers the indignities, insults, and insecurities that accompany being an illegitimate child, but she is also the reminder to her mother of her "faute" and the emblem of it to the world at large. Violette is the living, breathing, scarlet A on her mother's chest. And Berthe, her mother, will repeat to Violette innumerous times to never get pregnant and to never trust men. Leduc agonizes at what Berthe suffered as an unwed mother, and this agony seeps into her skin : "Mais ceux qui

[198] Olympe de Gouges, *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, Article XI : "La libre communication des pensées et des opinions est un des droits les plus précieux de la femme, puisque cette liberté assure la légitimité des pères envers les enfants. Toute citoyenne peut donc dire librement*, je suis mère d'un enfant qui vous appartient*, sans qu'un préjugé barbare la force à dissimuler la vérité ; sauf à répondre de l'abus de cette liberté dans les cas déterminés par la loi." Stromae's song "Bâtard" from his chart-topping album *Racine Carrée* contains the bridge "Ni l'un, ni l'autre/ Bâtard, tu es, tu l'étais, et tu le restes !"
[199] *La Bâtarde* 20.
[200] Eribon, *Principe*, 20.

te montraient du doigt, ceux qui te refusaient le coucher avant ma naissance étaient collés à ma peau."[201] The shame is a part of her and constitutes her identity at the deepest levels.

In *Principes d'une pensée critique* (2016), Didier Eribon devotes a chapter to the social condition of being a bastard, and deals largely with Leduc while drawing on Genet, Sartre and Beauvoir. He designates Althusser's formulation of interpellation as having broader applications for human beings in the general social world. While Leduc's writing remains focused on her personal experiences and thoughts, Eribon's analysis of her work allows us to see the broader implications of the condition she lived and describes. The first time Violette is called a bastard, she doesn't know what the word means: "Une famille, qui voulait tenir le haut du pavé, qui ne me répondait pas quand je lui disais bonjour, m'appela bâtarde. 'Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire ?' ai-je demandé à ma mère en arrivant en trombe dans notre cuisine. Ma mère blêmit. 'Ça ne veut rien dire.'"[202] Sadly, being a bastard is indeed a social category that exists, and without knowing it exists or meaning to occupy that category, Violette is placed in it. Eribon explains this categorization: "La société comme verdict. Dans le cas de Violette Leduc, la notion de 'bâtardise', c'est-à-dire celle d'enfant 'naturel', renvoie aux structures sociales, morales, religieuses et juridiques de l'alliance et de la parenté dans une société comme la nôtre. Une 'bâtarde' n'existe qu'au regard de ces structures"[203] In this way the social wins out over the natural, the categories of comprehension are imposed, and Leduc is placed into them by others. In spite of the appellation *enfants naturels*, this categorization is anything but natural – it exists purely as a social construction. Eribon re-works the now classic formulation of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* that "On ne naît pas femme, on le devient" to explain the existence of bastard children: "on naît bâtarde, on ne le devient pas."[204] Bastards are named as such by others, in instances of interpellation. Like Berthe, Violette's identity is confirmed by those who point their fingers at her and name her.

To be born already at fault, to be a bastard without even understanding the word, shapes Leduc's childhood and sense of self. And so in a rare moment of thinking about the collective, instead of the individual, Leduc writes of others in the same condition: "Les bâtards sont maudits : un ami me l'a dit. Les bâtards sont maudits ... Pourquoi les bâtards ne s'entraident-ils pas ? ... Pourquoi ne forment-ils pas une confrérie ? Ils devraient tout se pardonner puisqu'ils ont en commun ce qu'il y a de plus précieux, de plus fragile, de plus fort, de plus sombre en eux : une enfance tordue comme un vieux pommier."[205] This "enfance tordue" is what Leduc relates in *La Bâtarde*. Even though Leduc talks about a movement for bastards, she is not a political militant: "Mais son combat, elle l'a mené dans ses livres, qui contiennent de magnifiques descriptions des mécanismes de l'assujettissement et de l'infériorisation. Elle explore et fait ressortir et ressentir précisément comment les forces sociales opèrent, à travers l'insulte, le mépris et la honte qu'elles produisent, la peur aussi, et finalement la souffrance, la douleur, la folie. Sa littérature si personnelle, si intime, est au plus haut point sociologique et politique."[206]

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[201] *La Bâtarde* 25.
[202] *La Bâtarde* 45.
[203] Eribon, *Principe*, 103-104.
[204] Eribon, *Principe*, 104.
[205] *La Bâtarde* 51.
[206] Eribon, *Principe*, 122. Eribon asserts that Leduc is not writing autofiction, as some have said, because in addition to writing about her life she is showing how social forces acted on that life. There's a larger dimension to the work.

Leduc's writing is certainly personal and can be read as sociological, but it is a bit of a stretch to include the political. While Leduc rarely discusses broader social contexts, her theorization of illegitimacy from her personal experience can be read as supporting a critique of state categorization and labeling.

In thinking about Leduc's renditions and experiences of illegitimacy, we can turn to the film *Violette*. This recent work offers new perspectives on Leduc's life and writing, and inspired updated analysis for those who reviewed the film. In his review entitled, "Violette Leduc: la bâtarde est de retour", Jean-Louis Ezine explores the entwinement of Leduc's bastard and literary identities: "La bâtardise, expliquait le penseur [Sartre in 'les Mots' in 1964], consistait à se sentir *'de trop'*. Bien entendu, ce 'trop', pour les illégitimes de naissance, était fondé sur un manque abyssal ... On peut se sentir de trop très jeune."[207] This sentiment of being *de trop* is a constant one for Violette and for the reader. Her often cringe-inducing tirades or heart-breaking self-deprecation let the reader viscerally understand her feeling of being too much or of never fitting in. At the beginning of *La Chasse*, describing her descent into a psychological breakdown at the manuscript of *Ravages* being censored, she announces, "J'existe trop."[208] This "too much-ness" can also be thought of as the not being good enough that often accompanies class interactions. Leduc cannot shrink or smooth her physical appearance or her dramatic personality. She is too poor, too illegitimate, too queer, too crazy, too ugly, too much, and not enough. This feeling of being *de trop* also manifests when she is with her mother and her stepfather (*Ravages*), and contributes to her dis-ease and never feeling entirely comfortable or a sense of belonging.

We have some psychological justification for her behavior: her desire for "la reconnaissance. C'est le mot-clé, et c'est tout le problème. La bâtardise fabrique de la honte, de la laideur, et du mensonge. Elle est à l'image du bâtard : invivable. Violette se pâmait devant quiconque lui témoignait ce dont l'état civil l'avait privée : la reconnaissance."[209] While it is too simple to attribute all of Leduc's behavior in relation to others to her bastard status, there is certainly room to claim that the absence of state-enshrined legitimacy and of a father, along with the presence of a miserable mother, shaped her constant desire for validation and reassurance. This helps explain why she falls in love and becomes obsessed with everyone who encourages her writing : Sachs, Beauvoir, Genet. "Mais Genet ne l'appela bientôt que 'l'emmerdeuse' et Simone de Beauvoir, dans ses lettres à Nelson Algren, 'la femme laide.'"[210] She is neither pretty nor nice, failing at both behavioral and physical aspects of femininity. Even with her fellow bastard, Genet, and even with her mentor, Beauvoir, she continues to be *de trop*.

Violette's mother Berthe constantly reminds her of her illegitimacy and the offending father who refused to recognize her: "Elle m'offrait chaque matin un terrible cadeau : celui de la méfiance et de la suspicion. Tous les hommes étaient des salauds, tous les hommes étaient des sans-cœur. Elle me fixait avec tant d'intensité pendant sa déclaration que je me demandais si

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Eribon sees Leduc (and authors like Beauvoir, Foucault, Fanon) as doing auto-analysis in their writing (à la Bourdieu) "... ce sont des auto-analyses ... c'est-à-dire des explorations des structures sociales de la domination dont on est ou a été soi-même victime, et que l'on veut penser pour s'en libérer au maximum, pour aider les autres à s'en libérer, ou du moins à en desserrer l'étau asphyxiant. Il s'agit vraiment de mieux respirer."

[207] Jean-Louis Ezine, "Violette Leduc, la bâtarde est de retour," 5 November 2013.

[208] *La Chasse* 18.

[209] Jean-Louis Ezine, "Violette Leduc, la bâtarde est de retour."

[210] Jean-Louis Ezine, "Violette Leduc, la bâtarde est de retour."

j'étais un homme ou non."[211] It comes out like a logic problem: If "man" for Berthe = something terrible, and Violette knows that she is terrible because of what her mother has suffered as a result of her giving birth to Violette, then for her childlike purposes, "Violette" = "man." She takes on both the failure of the illegitimate child and the failure of men to legally recognize and support their children when she wonders if she, too, was "un homme." Social failure for Leduc is tightly wrapped up with gender failure, as Leduc's bâtardise is both the cause and constant reminder of her mother's suffering and social failure. This leads to her mother's tirades against men in which Violette confounds the fault of men with her own fault for being born, and for existing. Her mother does not explicitly blame Violette in these tirades, but the young Violette intimates that she too is at fault. She feels it with the intensity of her mother's stares, and, hearing constantly from her mother that men are heartless, wonders if perhaps she is a man. Leduc fails to distinguish between her mother's anger towards men and her anger at their situation, of which Violette is the physical reminder. This leads to her failure to distinguish between her gendered identity as a girl and that of "un homme." Violette takes on parts of an identity that aren't really being ascribed to her, but that contribute to her sense of self.

Leduc's feelings towards her father vacillate wildly. In *Trésors à prendre*, she characterizes him contemptuously : "Mon père – dont je me désintéresse, qui n'a été pour moi qu'un jet de sperme ..."[212] René de Ceccatty counters this description with a completely opposing one, also penned by Leduc: "Je n'ai pas connu mon père ... mon père est un inconnu qui coule dans mes veines. Mais je sais que nous aurions écouté les mêmes musiques, lu les mêmes livres. Nous aurions chanté faux ensemble. Il était parasseux, luxeux. Je rêve que nous aurions mangé ensemble ses fraises dans la même assiette en hiver. Nous 'aurions' est conjugué au désespoir." [213] Although not published, this passage represents one of the "magnifiques descriptions" mentioned by Eribon. We go from the political to the personal – Leduc's father is nothing to her, and yet she suffers so greatly because of his absence. The "Nous 'aurions' est conjugué au desespoir" is a heart wrenching instrumentalization of the conditional passé.

In spite of her coexisting contempt and longing for her father, there is a material effect of his presence/absence on Leduc. Both Ceccatty and Eribon discuss Leduc's desire for luxury as an attempt to connect or make sense of or depart from her identity. There is also an echo of nineteenth-century naturalism and decadence in the idea that Leduc inherited some of her father's aristocratically decadent traits. Weak, lazy, penchants for luxury – these could all describe Leduc at various instants. But her desire for luxury leads to her always feeling out of place. According to Ceccatty, Leduc "avait gardé une sorte de nostalgie inconsciente (à travers les reveries de sa mère) pour un luxe qu'elle-même n'avait guère connu."[214] Eribon sees Leduc's desire as two-pronged. She longs for luxury goods and experiences and also wishes to be culturally sophisticated. He notes how she failed initially to obtain both of these in her educational failures at lycée Racine and in her trying on clothes during a sale at the famed Schiaparelli boutique. Although her lover (Hermine in *La Bâtarde*) offers her a Schiaparelli suit,

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[211] *La Bâtarde* 39.
[212] Cited in de Ceccatty 64 n. 3
[213] This passsage was unpublished, as explained in de Ceccatty 64 n.3 : "Ghyslaine Charles-Merrien, dans sa thèse (*Violette Leduc ou le corps morcelé*, Université de Haute Bretagne II, 1988), propose un passage inédit de *L'Asphyxie*, que lui a communiqué Carlo Jansiti, le biographe de Violette Leduc."
[214] de Ceccatty 64-65.

Violette still fails to fit in. She doesn't fit in with the rich women at the boutique, and she fails to really wear her suit well.[215] It is intimated that there are other kinds of knowledge and practice that she will never have access to. She never "fits", even when she gains access. Or she certainly never feels like she does. When Hermine announces that they will go to the sale at Schiaparelli, Leduc says, "Tu oserais? Tu oserais entrer chez Schiaparelli?" and later, "Ils nous jetteront dehors."[216] This precedes the scene of lèche-vitrine to come in the Rue Cambon, at the Chanel boutique by the bar du Ritz: "Rue de la Paix, 4 heures de l'après-midi. Léchons, Hermine, léchons."[217]

Leduc's description of Schiaparelli is not unlike a Colette description of an upscale Parisian boutique – the reader, along with Violette, revels in the beauty and is transported to another era and world. In Trout's *Force of Beauty,* we learn exactly how beauty institutes came into being in Third Republic France, along with women's magazines, beauty guides, and the concept of "fashioning oneself" through clothing, hairstyles, and makeup. Following this shopping trip, Leduc recounts visiting the famous Salon Antoine, and even tells the reader that she has learned to revere this institution because of the women's magazines *Vogue* and *Fémina*. This ethos of French female beauty and self-fashioning infuses Leduc's prose: "Un parfum vous possédait en possédant murs, tapis, mannequins de treillis. On arrivait, il vous entraînait avec la sensualité d'une valse dans une salle où le bal est commencé. Nous respirions le luxe de Paris."[218] In fact, Leduc's "reporting" as a working-class bastard child from the luxurious shop is reminiscent of Colette and her "reportages" from various worlds (political, literary, theatrical). While Colette is no stranger to these different worlds, in reporting back to the reader she seems like an initiated member with an excellent sense of observation and storytelling. But Violette quickly comes back to Earth in Schiaprelli when she insists on plucking a white hair from Hermine's head: "Deux élégantes sortirent écœurées. Nous gâchions leurs habitudes."[219]

Herein lies a unique aspect of Leduc's voice. She can both appreciate and describe the beauty and pleasure of luxury, and also communicate the experience of utter exclusion and disdain these places and pleasures hold for her. Leduc opens a section near the beginning of *La Folie* with her suffering the disdain of the saleswoman at Guerlain: "La vendeuse me parfume le dessus de la main, elle m'asperge de son dédain, je n'achète rien. La manche de mon manteau de lapin balaie le comptoir, mes chaussures à tiges sont des intruses sur leur moquette."[220] And yet, Leduc seems to seek out these kind of interactions, searching for a scent that doesn't exist. Her invented desire is thwarted, and the saleswoman "sprays her with disdain" when she tests a perfume for her. Her shabby clothes and exasperating manner are intertwined and difficult to separate. In a similar moment of feeling out of place and looked down upon, Leduc recounts going to the police station to report cash she lost in a crowd (earned by trafficking black market goods). She's flustered and the police officer clearly annoyed, skeptical as he tells her to be more precise in her description: "Il me regarda encore de la tête aux pieds. Cataloguée."[221] The police

[215] *La Bâtarde* 108.
[216] *La Bâtarde* 191-192.
[217] *La Bâtarde* 192.
[218] *La Bâtarde* 193.
[219] *La Bâtarde* 194.
[220] *La Folie* 33.
[221] *La Folie* 56.

officer literally looks her up and down and, we can infer, is not impressed by her appearance or her mannerisms. The single-word utterance "Cataloguée" is impactful, and hits the reader abruptly. Leduc captures succinctly this moment of perception of being judged ("catalogued") by someone else.

And this type of moment, a perception of being labeled, also occurs earlier in the autobiographical trilogy. In *La Bâtarde*, Violette takes her girlfriend Hermine (Cécile in *Ravages*) to meet an older gentleman who accosted her while she gazed longingly at a store window on the Boulevard Malesherbes. Upon hearing that she lived with "une amie", the man invited them to have drinks with him at the Ritz. Violette insists on dragging the reluctant Hermine to the rendez-vous. It is the first stage of Hermine and Violette's interaction with the *voyeur* that effectively classes them and clearly demonstrates that they are out of their element. Leduc writes "le bar du *Ritz*" six times on the page where Violette convinces Hermine to accompany her. Clearly excited at the prospect of visiting this elegant institution, Violette further marks her own social distance from it when she says, "Nous connaissions l'entrée du bar du *Ritz*, rue Cambon, parce que nous léchions aussi les vitrines de Chanel."[222] ["We knew the entrance to the Ritz bar in the Rue Cambon because Chanel's display windows were another of the attractions we used to stand and devour."][223] Consequently, window-shopping happens for Violette in both of the first two locations where she interacts with the *voyeur*. In this way, his wealth is contrasted with the sites of Violette's unfulfilled desires for luxury goods.

The meeting with the *voyeur* who will pay for Violette's desired *table laquée* is an episode of sexual deviance that reveals issues of social exclusion and class and illustrates the fear of social contagion. If we translate word-for-word the French idiomatic expression for window-shopping, *la lèche-vitrine*, literally, we are left with "window-licking." Absurd, yes, but also perhaps an opening into the idea of a fear of contagion. Inside the bar du *Ritz*, Violette and Hermine are classed and contained. There is also an attempted consumption of them as goods to be paid for by the voyeur. Out in public, in the street, their queerness is unregulated, and therefore dangerous. The idea of queerness as threatening and potentially contagious is illustrated by Mel Chen in "Toxic Animacies, Intimate Affections." [224] Chen discusses here the fear surrounding ingestion of lead from Chinese-made children's toys. Multiplying this fear is the fact that the "frightening originary scene of intoxication is one of a *queer licking*."[225] Violette and Hermine could be thought of as ingesting luxury goods but also contaminating the wealthy shopping avenues where they "lick windows" and contaminate the shops and goods with their queerness and relative poverty. In the English edition of *La Bâtarde*, *lèche-vitrine* is not translated as window-shopping, but instead as the act of standing and devouring the goods in the Chanel window. In another form of contagion, these queer women can contaminate public space through their metaphorical ingestion of luxury.

Once inside, all eyes are on the women until the approach of their suitor. After he joins them, Leduc tell us: "Des élégantes souriaient, nous étions cataloguées."[226] ["Well-dressed

[222] *La Bâtarde* 225.
[223] Leduc, *La Bâtarde*. Trans. Derek Coltman. 226-227.
[224] Mel Chen, "Toxic Animacies, Intimate Affections" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. 265-286.
[225] Chen 271, italics are the author's.
[226] *La Bâtarde* 226.

women were smiling nearby: we had been labeled."][227] In this setting the two women are goods to be ordered, purchased, viewed, consumed, or even devoured. Just as in her interaction with the policeman in *La Folie* ("Il me regarda encore de la tête aux pieds. Cataloguée"[228]), Leduc relates her experience of being catalogued by another. From the singular "cataloguée" by the policeman to the plural "cataloguées" with Hermine by the patrons of the Ritz, Leduc spreads her low-class label across the upscale institutions of Paris. It is interesting not only that the women are catalogued as soon as the man approaches them, but that Violette perceives this moment of comprehension of the other patrons. This observation on the part of Violette reinforces the idea that lesbian acts made up part of the constellation of known sexual indulgences of the day, available for consumption by paying customers: "Invisible and visible at once: Such was the paradoxical subsumed existence of lesbian sex workers. While the day-to-day lives of these early lesbians seldom reach us, 'lesbian acts' fantasized or even invented by the broader culture were made quite visible and even enjoyed widespread popularity."[229] Violette and Hermine are both queered and classed – classed by queerness and queered by class. They are not necessarily sex workers, and yet because they are two women of a certain class they are labeled as such and their sexuality is contained, and therefore legible and acceptable to the other bar patrons, and to society at large.

In the final two pages of *La Bâtarde*, Leduc interrogates her failures and her outsiderness: "Je voulais m'en sortir. Me sortir de quoi ? Du mépris des autres que j'imaginais. La société ..."[230] In a rare moment of self-awareness, she categorizes the "mépris des autres" as imagined. So much of her searching and yearning could be thought of as trying to make herself legitimate and loved. She goes on to discuss her love for the countryside: "Voilà pourquoi je serai toujours un exilée" and her perceived lack of achievements: "Je n'ai rien eu. J'ai raté l'essentiel : mes amours, mes études."[231] She is exiled, failed at love and school, and despised by society (at least in her imagination). But as we have seen in this section, what Leduc feels and the structures that society imposes form her reality, justified or not. Her social failures, both being poor and being illegitimate, follow her throughout her life and throughout her writings. They also enable us to question the structures and accepted beliefs that set her up to fail. And they encourage us to accept unquestioningly her narrative of her failure, with no respite to appreciate any successes. She makes no room for ambiguity in her self-flagellation, and this lack of nuance leads the reader to accept her version of events and to both sympathize and be exhausted by her descriptions.

III. Failures of Femininity: Beauty and Appearance

Like her literary heir Virginie Despentes, Leduc talks at length about beauty and ugliness. Despentes explores this subject on a broad, systemic scale while Leduc, as usual, keeps the discussion centered on herself. Leduc's stark descriptions of her perceived physical

[227] *La Bâtarde* 227.
[228] *La Folie* 56.
[229] Francesca Canadé Sautman, "Invisible Women: Lesbian Working-class Culture in France, 1880-1930" in *Homosexuality in Modern France*, 187.
[230] *La Bâtarde* 461.
[231] *La Bâtarde* 462.

unattractiveness let us understand how crucial embodied experience is to self-perception and artistic creation. Dominique Rolin, in *Le Point,* 19 novembre 1973, talks about what *La Chasse à l'amour* has in common with her other books : "Violence sous-tendue, du début à la fin, par la honte et l'horreur de ce que Violette Leduc estime être sa laideur physique. Le complexe de cette femme supérieurement intelligente la situe dès lors obsessionnellement au tranchant d'une douleur dont elle fait son matériau fondamental. La misère vient l'aiguiser ainsi que la faim, le froid, le manque et la demande d'amour, l'humiliation. Bref, la solitude."[232] Her feeling as though she was always already in the wrong, for not being conventionally attractive, and then articulating those feelings of unease and anger and shame, allows us a window into the same structure that Despentes is writing from in *King Kong Théorie* when she says :"J'écris de chez les moches ..."[233] However, Leduc's narrative is deeply personal and descriptive, and her self-absorption is part of the reader's fascination with her. Despentes extrapolates from her personal experience to address a collective of women (and men) who don't fit the assigned mold and don't perform gender as instructed. While writing to very different ends, at different historical moments and in different styles, both of these authors explore the idea of what it means to fail and to succeed at femininity. Despentes's is a collective declaration and struggle, while for Leduc, her ugliness is her own personal label and story. The only moment when Leduc addresses an imagined collective, as previously noted, is when discussing her *bâtardise*.

Despentes equates "les moches" to "les exclues du grand marché à la bonne meuf." Ugly women don't get brought to market in the same way that conventionally attractive women do. [234] Through her prose Leduc illustrates the enacting of this concept in *L'Affamée*: "J'ai vu des abat-jour invendables. On les avait alignés sur le rayon d'une arrière-boutique. On ne les avait pas serrés les uns contre les autres. Leur laideur ne se froissait pas. Mon visage est un abat-jour invendable, mais je n'ai pas d'arrière-boutique pour le dissimuler ..."[235] This passage is an entire paragraph unto itself. The paragraph comes after a line break, and the ellipsis ends both the sentence and the paragraph. Thus, this passage stands on its own spatially. The detached manner in which Leduc describes herself as an ugly, unsellable lampshade is further underlined by the passage's organization on the page. The idea of a person being "vendable" is horrifying, and yet the definitions of successful femininity dictate that one must indeed be sellable to be worthwhile, to count as a woman. In this way we can think of Halberstam's conception of failure as an opting-out, or even an escape from being brought to market.

Women as goods to be consumed and purchased in the marketplace is a cornerstone of the thought expressed by Despentes in *King Kong Théorie*. Like Violette, she writes from the place of someone who is not found to be pleasing. Unlike Violette, she doesn't look to keep attempting to please: "J'écris de chez les moches, pour les moches, les vieilles, les camionneuses, les frigides, les mal baisées, les imbaisables, les hystériques, les tarées, toutes les exclues du grand marché à la bonne meuf."[236] Her use of marché à la bonne meuf prefaces her critique of capitalism and extension of materialist feminist thought. Despentes's class-conscious

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[232] Rolin 75.
[233] *KKT* 9.
[234] The concept of women as goods in a marketplace has been theorized by many scholars, including, Levi-Strauss, Gayle Rubin, Irigaray
[235] *L'Affamée* 20.
[236] *KKT* 9.

critique continues, “Bien sûr que je n’écrirais pas ce que j’écris si j’étais belle, belle à changer l’attitude de tous les hommes que je croise. C’est en tant que prolotte de la féminité que je parle ...”[237] Like Leduc, social class and gender are intertwined, and Despentes sees herself as belonging to a specific class of woman because of her physical appearance. The terminology to talk about class works in terms of gender conformity and compliance: “La figure de la looseuese de la fémininité m’est plus sympathique, elle m’est essentielle. Exactement comme la figure du looser social, économique ou politique. Je préfère ceux qui n’y arrivent pas pour la bonne et simple raison que je n’y arrive pas très bien, moi-même.”[238] Despentes figures herself as a “looseuse de la fémininité” and I think we could safely put Leduc in that category as well. Leduc could cross into several other loser categories (social/class, sexual, literary, academic). Like Leduc, Despentes’s corporality shapes her writing, as does her not fitting into the mold of femininity that is available to her. Like Leduc, Despentes writes about and from a place of (perceived and felt physical ugliness), but Despentes takes it further and writes for all “moches” and makes it political.

Throughout her writing, Leduc discusses her appearance harshly. A phrase that is repeated from the mouths of others is, “Tu ne t’es pas regardée,” either as a question or an exclamation. As though it was indeed sinful to be ugly, but the cardinal sin was being ugly and expecting to be treated like any other woman. The cardinal sin was not retreating to private space and living out her ugly days far from the gaze of others. It’s a question of knowledge – a woman has to both acknowledge her non-adherence to certain beauty standards and then live her life accordingly. In *La Folie*, Violette seeks to get a ride with a truck driver picking up women:

> Un autre camion s’arrêtait:
>
> -- Vous me prendrez ?
>
> -- Toi ? Tu ne t’es pas regardée!
>
> Je tâtais le bout de mon nez mal rectifié. Des hommes riaient, ma réaction leur plaisait.[239]

Like the term bâtarde, an identity that was bestowed upon her by others and society at large, the label of “moche” is also applied to her. The exchange is also linguistically classed, in Violette’s address to the driver with the formal “vous” and his response to her with the informal “tu.” As an ugly woman, she is a true “prolotte de la feminité”, to quote Despentes, unworthy of common linguistic courtesy. In addition, the double entendre of “Vous me prendrez?” expressly coveys that Violette is being rejected both sexually and as a passenger. Ugliness, like queerness, effectively intertwines with social class to position her as the excluded and the undesirable. But, as a gesture towards self-defense or internalizing of the insults, the harshest words on Violette’s appearance come from Leduc herself. She often takes the second person voice for these exchanges, as if to better humiliate herself for forgetting that she was ugly or acting as if she was not. When she looks to see if she could get a ride with a truck driver, she tells herself, “Tu es

[237] *KKT* 10.
[238] *KKT* 10.
[239] *La Folie* 52.

moche, tu as quarante ans, les camionneurs ne voudront pas de toi."[240] When she stays at Paul Morihen's, he shows her to her room: "-- Vous coucherez dans la chambre de Jean Marais, me dit Paul Morihen. Laideron, tu vas ronfler dans le lit d'une idole."[241] Any and every occasion is an opportunity for Violette to berate herself. One of the ways in which Leduc so impeccably expresses failure is in the dialogues she has with herself, speaking to herself in the second person. She is so cruel, so unrelenting. It makes the reader recoil, but also offers a glimmer of recognition for those who sometimes speak to themselves in the same tone, "les exclues du grand marché à la bonne meuf." We can see how Leduc has very different attitudes to her identity as "moche" and her identity as a "bâtarde." While ugliness remains for Leduc a private, personal pain, which she shares with readers as being one of her individual crosses to bear, she interestingly makes a rare gesture toward the political and the collective when speaking of her "bâtardise." In this instance, Leduc addresses her fellow bastards and ponders collective action and shared experiences. But the experience of ugliness does not inspire this same pattern of thought. Despentes, however, does take her personal label of "moche" to address others and reveal imposed standards of beauty, which many cannot meet. She justifies this failure and exalts in it, making what for Leduc is a personal experience a public and political one.

Leduc's sense of ugliness structures her interactions with the world, especially with men. If we accept Wittig's premise that "lesbians are not women," given that the generally accepted definition of "woman" implies a certain receptivity toward the male gaze and even desire for it, then Leduc floats in and out of this category, flirting with and agonizing over the importance of enticing the male and female, heterosexual and homosexual gaze:

> From the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures. In many ways this has been the message of many renegade feminists in the past. Monique Wittig (1992) argued in the 1970s that if womanhood depends upon a heterosexual framework, then lesbians are not 'women,' and if lesbians are not 'women,' then they fall outside of patriarchal norms and can re-create some of the meaning of their genders.[242]

If the accepted notion of women comprises the idea that women should look pleasing, does ugliness then discount certain women from this category? And if it does, if being ugly (according to whatever standards happen to be in place) does discount one from womanhood, then what category or gender is left to her? Leduc and Despentes could then be considered "not women" because of their class, appearance, and sexuality.[243] Who actually makes it into the category of "woman"? Very few, according to Despentes, when she lists out all of the required characteristics of being "une bonne meuf." As in Wittig's formulation, the definition of "woman" can be considered as having the valence of a certain availability to (heterosexual) men. The willingness to play the game of femininity, to package and adorn one's body according to

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[240] *La Folie* 51.
[241] *La Folie* 308
[242] Halberstam 4.
[243] Wittig, *La Pensée straight*, 1992.

the dictates of the day, serves to attract the gaze of others and to reassure men of one's availability and inclination (single or not, heterosexual or not, sex worker or not). Both Despentes and Leduc write about the almost magical powers of donning ultra-feminine apparel. The tailleur episode in *La Bâtarde* helps connect failing at femininity in terms of appearance to failing at femininity in terms of romantic relationships. It is Hermine who insists on offering Violette the extravagant *tailleur* (woman's suit) during a sale at the couture house of Schiaparelli. Hermine takes particular pleasure in dressing, accessorizing, and feminizing the androgynous Violette. Sexuality complicates this makeover – Violette's girlfriend takes pleasure in in an act that makes Violette more attractive to straight men. What could have been a sweet moment of sartorial pleasure and shared transgression between two women who didn't belong at Schiaparelli, given their class and their queerness, becomes another instance of Violette being *de trop*. Hermine does not get to play much of the appreciative, authoritative role of the partner enjoying her lover on display, attracting admiration and thereby reflecting desirability back onto Hermine. Instead, Violette turns her gaze to men and their responses to her.

At first resisting the expense and the feminization of the *tailleur*, Violette subsequently finds her own pleasure in strolling the boulevards of Paris in her new outfit, attracting the attentions and advances of male passers-by. Alex Hughes invites the comparison between a super-hero putting on his magic suit and Violette's donning of her new *tailleur*. She writes: "The outfit transforms Violette into a kind of 'super-putain', as her subsequent, highly comic man-hunting antics on the boulevards of Paris reveal."[244] Making and breaking rendez-vous with aplomb, she walks the streets emboldened and protected by her new outfit. However, Violette does suffer insults about her physical appearance when she rejects some advances: "Vous ne voulez pas? Va te faire foutre mocheté. Tu le croyais ? Tu ne t'es pas regardée."[245] This comment reappears – tu ne t'es pas regardée - and is sort of always hovering over Leduc. If she allows herself to feel any sort of pride or ease this phrase could come and slap her back to reality.

Despentes, after recounting her initial work as a prostitute in the days of the Minitel, explains how she was able to play this hyperfeminine role:

> Finalement, aucun besoin d'être une mégabombasse, ni de connaître des secrets techniques insensés pour devenir une femme fatale ... il suffisait de jouer le jeu. De la féminité. Et personne ne pouvait débarquer 'attention c'est une imposture', puisque je n'en étais pas une, pas plus qu'une autre. Ce processus m'a fascinée, au début. Moi qui m'étais toujours contrefoutue des trucs de filles, je me suis passionnée pour les talons aiguilles, la lingerie fine et les tailleurs. [246]

The idea of being or feeling like an imposter while adhering to gendered scripts and wardrobes reinforces gender as performative and presenting as masculine or feminine as playing a role.[247] However, adhering to these norms or even enjoying inhabiting them is not always a submission

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[244] Alex Hughes, "Desire and its Discontents: Violette Leduc/*La Bâtarde*/The Failure of Love." *French Erotic Fiction: Women's Desiring Writing, 1880-1990*. 77-78.
[245] *La Bâtarde* 206.
[246] *KKT* 64.
[247] For more on gender and queer performativity, see Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* 223-242.

or a success. It can be a source of play, creativity, and experimentation, as we see in both authors' descriptions.

Playing the game of femininity, by acquiescing to contemporary styles and dressing to evoke desire in others, has some appeal for both Leduc and Despentes. The first day that Violette puts on her new outfit, the descriptions run for pages and pages of the process of preparation, others' reactions to her, and her reactions to others' reactions or lack thereof. It's exhausting, a veritable *jeu des regards*, and in Leduc's rendering, one's success at femininity seems to hinge on attracting the most attention. Indeed, both Leduc and Despentes recount "dressing up" as a woman in conjunction with narratives of prostitution (or at least clumsily trying to be a prostitute, in Leduc's case). Immediately upon costuming themselves for the role of "woman", Leduc and Despentes are newly categorized as purchasable goods. They are expected to give of their bodies and time to men who accost them. It is this symbol of availability that gets expressed in succeeding at femininity.[248] In chapter three, I will examine how we can differentiate between women being objectified by men, objectifying other women, and objectifying themselves, and we will parse the helpful versus the harmful effects of these actions.

Returning then to physical ugliness, and to the visual representation of Leduc's embodied experience, how does one make a commercially viable film about a writer whose identity was in no small part based on being and feeling ugly? Martin Prévost's film *Violette* presented a challenge in terms of casting – how to attract audiences to a movie where the lead female character is known for being incredibly unattractive? Prévost seemed to compromise by casting a very beautiful, popular actress and then making a gesture towards making her ugly. Some criticized the choice of the actress Emmanuelle Devos to play the role of Violette Leduc in Provost's film. Although she wore a prosthetic nose, she was still considered too beautiful by many to play the role of Leduc, for whom physical unattractiveness was a defining and generative characteristic. What does it say that in order to make a successful film the female lead must be conventionally attractive? How does one tell stories of not fitting in if one seems (at least physically) to fit in well? Devos gave an inspired and nuanced performance, though at times it was difficult to reconcile Leduc's self-deprecating remarks and self-hating attitude with Devos's looks and grace (despite capturing some of Leduc's anguish in her mannerisms). The question of not fitting returns, as a woman with a generally pleasing appearance will move through the world differently than one who is displeasing (of course, it is difficult to tease out who is doing the deciding of whether or not a woman looks pleasing – Leduc internalized external critics and condemned herself in advance). Leduc's writing brings the question of physical attractiveness front and center, demonstrating how tangled up it is with her sense of self in all aspects – as a writer, and as a lover. It is also deeply enmeshed with questions of class, cultural and educational capital, and sexuality.

In her writing Leduc opens up the possibility of other categories, or at least of other spaces, where existence (including joy and love) can take place. Granted there is much suffering as well – not fitting is never a painless or enjoyable process. But it is this very not fitting, this

[248] This echoes of Ariel Levy's 2005 *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, in which women trying to be feminine or sexy imitate porn stars or strippers (or in Leduc's case, prostitutes), and these women are, in turn, imitating a caricature made for consumption of the idea of femininity. It's an imitation of an imitation, or a copy of a copy of a copy, a *mise en abîme* with no true essence of femininity to be discerned.

failure of femininity in terms of physical beauty (perceived and/or imagined) on Leduc's part that suggests alternate forms of existence and ways of being. It suggests also that this delineation between fitting and not, between inside and outside, is tenuous at best. The division is there but is it meaningful or even real? It may feel real, and Leduc's anguish at her appearance certainly communicates that. But there is an outside to this structure, which serves to dismantle the (harmful and arbitrary) divisions put in place.

Women are always already failing at gender, at what's considered part of being a woman : too fat, too flat-chested, too much this, not enough that. Leduc is too ugly, Devos is too pretty. This begs the question – could a female actress who is not conventionally attractive even obtain a starring role? Would our affective and aesthetic responses as viewers of the film (and consumers of the spectacle of the female body) differ? Reviews of the film *Violette* in 2013 bring questions of Leduc's looks to the forefront. The reviewer in *La Croix* found that Devos' effort at incarnating Leduc physically had succeeded : "Mais Devos, qui s'est enlaidie, lui prête toute son humanité et sa complexité, en effet 'attachiante.'"[249] And the actress did give us the amazing neologism of "attachiante", a combination of "chiante" and "attachante." Seemingly opposing and mutually exclusive qualities, this term to me actually captures Leduc quite well. She is both endearing and annoying. Her writing is captivating, and the verb "attacher" definitely describes how she binds herself to others she admires. She is also "chiante", an exhausting pain in the ass. "Devos et Kiberlain" is an interview with the actresses who played Leduc (Emmannuelle Devos) and Simone de Beauvoir (Sandrine Kiberlain). In this exchange, the actresses discuss Devos's "uglification" for the role:[250]

> S.K. : Il y avait aussi tes quatre heures de maquillage par jour. C'était dingue, il fallait te voir avec la prothèse nasale. Cet appendice qui te faisait saigner, qui t'écorchait. C'était courageux.
>
> E.D. : C'est une aide, au final. Le nez du clown qu'on met pour rentrer dans le personnage. Cela aide à se quitter soi-même. L'enlaidissement permet d'appréhender les choses différemment.
>
> S.K. : On dit souvent que ces choses sont un détail, mais je pense au contraire que cela permet de modifier radicalement notre perception de la manière dont on nous regarde, dont on nous filme.

As brave as it might seem for Devos to wear an unsightly and painful nasal prosthetic, it still seems to pale in comparison to actually being in Leduc's body and experiencing the rejection that she felt based on her physical unattractiveness. Also, how brave is it for a pretty woman to play an ugly one? It's a prosthetic that she removes at the end of the day, and only serves to underscore her physical attractiveness by comparison. Even if the prosthesis changed how Devos

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[249] " 'Au début, j'ai cru que c'était un film sur Viollet-le-Duc. Je n'avais quasi jamais entendu parler d'elle. J'ai lu d'abord une biographie. Puis ses livres. Je n'ai pas tout aimé. Le côté amour fou pour Beauvoir, l'avortement, hum hum. Elle est parfois précieuse, chiante. Et puis il y a des moments de grâce, dans 'Trésors à prendre', par exemple, ses randonnées dans les Cévennes. Mais le personnage, une solitaire entourée, est étonnant ... Une caractérielle, un monstre, qui se jetait à la tête des gens pour tout obtenir.' Mais un monstre 'attachiant', selon sa jolie expression forgée pendant le tournage." Devos, cited in François Guillaume-Lorrain, " 'Violette': l'amoureuse de Simone de Beauvoir," *Le Point*, 30 October 2013.

[250] "Devos et Kiberlain", propos recueillis par Étienne Rouillon, *TroisCouleurs*, 5 November 2013.

moved while on set and how she was perceived and filmed, she still can't communicate the malaise and self-deprecation of the author. For Leduc, failure in beauty is an enduring one.

IV. Failures of Femininity: Sexuality and Romance

The idea of failing at beauty and therefore at femininity can be expanded to include relationship and sexual identity failures. Leduc fails at gender in both failing to perform femininity in certain respects and failing romantically in nearly all respects. Contrary to what Leduc's comments about her looks would lead readers to assume about her romantic life, her appearance does not prevent her from engaging in multiple sexual and romantic relationships with men and women. Leduc's sexual desires and romantic relationships defy easy categorization or analysis. I speak of her queerness when Violette/Thérèse appears in public with her female love interest Cécile/Hermine, to denote their outsider status. Alone, either woman can blend in to the heterosexual fabric should they so choose and make the necessary (albeit not always easy) gestures. But together, this is less simple.

Leduc's case is a complicated one. Looking at the relationships she describes, we are struck by her divergence from the heterosexual nuclear family narrative. Leduc's first formative sexual experiences were explored in *Thérèse et Isabelle,* which represents the first section of *Ravages* that would be cut before publication, thereby doubly illegitimating this same-sex relationship. Leduc's adherence to the heterosexual love script is spotty at best. Her heterosexual relationships involve unequal power dynamics and emotional destruction, and they fail in the sense that they don't last or provide lasting happiness. What does persist is her desire and obsession – with Simone de Beauvoir and her "scapulaire d'homosexuels" as Leduc referred to the gay men whom she admired and desired.

Leduc is in love with Simone de Beauvoir (although "in love" does not seem accurate to describe her sentiments and their relationship – "obsessed" feels more accurate but denotes perhaps a more aggressive, more clinical, more single-minded sentiment). She is also obsessed with Jacques Guérin, Maurice Sachs, and Jean Genet. To further complicate things, in her obsessive monologues, Leduc describes herself sometimes as a woman, sometimes as a man, and often as a lower-life form (rat, dog, fish, slug, larva, monster, excrement, fly). There is no way to categorize either her sexual orientation or gender identity that seems accurate and accounts for the variation and instability in her sexuality. This failure to fit, to defy sexual categorization, allows for more complex and varied conceptions of desire. And Leduc's romantic feelings were certainly oriented towards multiple love objects simultaneously. I use the term "objects" purposefully. Not only does Leduc express romantic desire for people of different genders and sexual orientations, but she also romanticizes and sexualizes things and concepts.[251] Lee Edelman's formulation provides a theoretical grounding for Leduc's literary engagement with negativity in her depictions of desire and romance:

[251] Lucey, *Someone* : "It is a regular part of Leduc's artistry to pause to insist on inappropriate (often inappropriately sexualized) relations to aesthetic objects or figures (or to their surrogates) but to use sophisticated aesthetic resources in doing so (We will see in what follows that hers is, off and on throughout her life, a literary sexuality--that is, that literature features in her sexuality, that it is an element of, or a central component of sexual experience for her)" 334-335.

> ... our images of sex without optimism don't leave optimism behind any more than they ever escape the disturbance of negativity. Instead they depict an interminable oscillation as each comes into focus and then retreats from view. In this back-and-forth movement they describe a constant engagement with negativity, with what opens us to an otherness that undoes our image of the self. If that negativity entails destruction, such destruction enables change. Not, however, by redeeming negativity but precisely by *enacting* it, by imposing it as the condition of being open to (ex)changes that promise us nothing more than being bound to them, forever.[252]

Leduc's loves are like this – coming into focus and then retreating. Actively courting and holding onto negativity, and certainly not redeeming it, are hallmarks of Leduc's prose and relationships. Her varied sexual and romantic objects of desire highlight the limitations of categorizing sexual preference. This seeming ambiguity or failure to fit in any one category means that we have to rethink what defines a successful relationship, and what is important in "unsuccessful" ones. Catherine Viollet describes Leduc's "amours impossibles" as a "moteur d'écriture." Failures serve as motivation.[253] Something about the tension of failing to possess her desired love object serves as inspiration or driving force in her work and life. She is always striving for something or someone and despairing that she doesn't have it, then wallowing in that despair. When writing of Gabriel and Maurice, she says, "Je m'attachais à des hommes qui m'échappaient."[254] Given the simultaneity of the two verbs in the imperfect tense here, there is no implied causation or chronology. Does Leduc become attached to men who are distant or unattainable (depending on what attaining them would mean), or do they distance themselves from her once their relationship begins and her obsessional nature and difficult personality have manifested themselves?

In addition to her varied love objects, Leduc's conception of herself and her gender also varies. One thing we see repeatedly is her disappointment that it is impossible for her to love/make love to her straight male partners or straight women as a man would, and to love/make love to her gay friends as a gay man would. When Leduc describes meeting Simone de Beauvoir for the first time at the famous *Deux Magots*, she brings her a bouquet of flowers, and asks herself, "... pourquoi suis-je un jeune homme qui apporte des bouquets?"[255] Not only is she someone who brings flowers, or a woman who brings flowers, but she *is*, "je suis", a young man. A metaphor, in that she feels like a nervous young male suitor bringing flowers to a woman he's courting? Or is this "je suis" more powerful – does it describe a facet of her existence in which part of her, Violette, is a young man who brings flowers? Or does this refer to her role as always that of supplicant?

Leduc does have a relationship with, marries, and is impregnated by a man, whose name is Marc in *Ravages* and Gabriel in *La Bâtarde*. In *Ravages*, throughout their relationship, Marc often refers affectionately to Violette as "bonhomme." This term of endearment doesn't necessarily on its own connote a differing conception of gender, more just an expression of

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[252] Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 33-34.
[253] Catherine Viollet, "Violette Leduc: Une pionnière?", lecture, 17 May 2014.
[254] *La Bâtarde* 376.
[255] *La Folie en tête* 96.

comradery. But, when taken in the greater context of their relationship, it seems very telling. During their first encounter Thérèse declares matter-of-factly to Marc: "-- Je ne suis pas une femme" and he responds, " – C'est vrai. Vous n'en êtes pas tout à fait une."[256] Her self-definition of not being a woman stems potentially from the fact that Marc is the first man she has sex with, or that she has sexual interest in women, or that she doesn't seem put off by Marc's pointed questions and advances without sticking to the cultural script for heterosexual women of flattery and seduction. Thérèse fails to respond as a "woman" would, perhaps with real or mock indignation and insistence on adherence to certain norms and courting rituals. Leduc often frames her (Thérèse's) sexual desire for Marc as masculine. She describes her wedding night thus: "Cette nuit-là et les nuits qui suivirent je pensais à suivre Marc, à entrer en lui comme il entrait en moi, à demeurer en lui comme il demeurait en moi."[257] And later, "Je veux prendre Marc comme il me prend quand il s'allonge sur le dos."[258] Whether this expresses desire to be able to have sex as a man, or to experience a more active or aggressive sexuality, or simply a desire to know other experiences of sex, Leduc disrupts heterosexual sex and re-writes scripts of desire. Despite her nontraditional objects of desire, Leduc as a young woman in the mid-twentieth century is still faced with the frightening and potentially lethal consequences of getting pregnant. Just as middle-class women's identities in France came to include beauty products and beauty work during the Third Republic,[259] they also included being dutiful wives and mothers. Leduc describes in *Ravages* being terrified of getting pregnant, which her mother warned her against repeatedly. She actively defies law and cultural script to seek an illegal abortion when she is impregnated by her husband.

In *Ravages*, we see Thérèse, a woman who is not exactly a woman, and a marriage, between Thérèse and Marc, which is not exactly a marriage. In *La Bâtarde*, the same story is re-written for Violette and Gabriel. Violette's portfolio of objects of desire is further diversified as she relates her rotating obsessions with men who are not sexually attracted to women. Leduc sets up the idea of "un homosexuel" as a representational ideal or key to meaning, more for herself than anything else. When Violette meets the writer Maurice Sachs, she tries to impress him with her knowledge of homosexual practices and cultures. She speaks to him in a more and more familiar way, trying to get a reaction, and says about her efforts "... je voulais violer l'intimité d'un homosexuel."[260] Her use of "un homosexuel" is nearly as uncomfortable and disconcerting as the overt violence in the verb "violer." The indefinite article "un" makes us question the specificity of this desire to Sachs. It also has an uncomfortable generalizing quality, as though the intimacy of a (or any, or all) homosexuals would be similar and could be exchanged, one for another. The figure of the male homosexual is, for Leduc, a placeholder and a foreclosed possibility: "Un homosexuel. Un homme qui n'est pas un moine ni un castré, ni un vieillard. Un homme qui est plus que cela, moins que cela. Un homosexuel : un passeport pour l'impossible."[261] Here she has found an object of desire that will never return her feelings but with whom she cannot logically be angry for not returning them. These desires, for Sachs, for

[256] *Ravages* 37.
[257] *Ravages* 195.
[258] *Ravages* 199.
[259] Trout, *The Force of Beauty.*
[260] *La Bâtarde* 262.
[261] *La Bâtarde* 266.

Guérin, for Genet, and for others, will never be met and this will always leave her in a space of wanting and never having resolution. Although, no matter her choice of love object, one can suppose that even if Leduc's feelings were ever returned, she would find new ways to feel dissatisfied and unworthy. But her whining and pining for gay men allows space for a certain kind of desire that, in never being fulfilled, matches her recursive structure of failure. She is in turn intrigued, admiring, frustrated, and devastated by her "scapulaire d'homosexuels."[262] This appellation contains both delightful blasphemy and the image of the men she desires as a sort of protective amulet. She takes comfort in their lack of desire for her even though it makes her ill with longing. It also points back to the self-centeredness that is at the heart of all of Leduc's relationships. In thinking about this, we can refer back to Sheringham's comment about scenes in *La Folie* that "establish links between desire, exclusion and solitude which will be central to the subject position Leduc sees herself occupying as a writer."[263] In her great solitude, Leduc makes anguished imaginary offerings to others. She proposes one such offering to her "scapulaire", which is both servile and self-serving: "Si je hachais mon sexe, si je le servais farci dans une aubergine ? Ils le boufferaient, ils en seraient débarrassés."[264] Tortuous and gratuitous, this musing written as a hypothetical serves to shock the reader and indulge Leduc's fantasy of self-mutilation and even self-annihilation. The harshness with which she speaks to herself is unnerving, but also captivating in its taking of outrageous thoughts to the extreme.

In contrast to when Violette figures herself as a young man who brings a bouquet of flowers to Simone de Beauvoir, Violette, upon meeting Sachs, is painfully too feminine: "Je tendais mes muscles afin qu'il oubliât mes fesses féminines."[265] Commentary on her now too-feminine body (which was so androgynous at the Schiaparelli boutique) both begins and ends their meeting. Violette's bodily discomfort and dysphoria closes their interaction with, "J'avais honte de mes hanches de femme quand je lui dis au revoir."[266] Violette's body is always too much or too little of something, like women's bodies in contemporary consumer culture.[267] As we have seen, Despentes broadens a different valence of failure in terms of femininity in *King Kong Théorie*. Failure for her means failing to attract or failing to try to attract the male gaze. It's related to capitalistic mechanisms of gender production :

> Il faut, de toute façon, que les femmes se sentent en échec. Quoi qu'elles entreprennent, on doit pouvoir démontrer qu'elles s'y sont mal prises. Il n'y a pas d'attitude correcte, on a forcément commis une erreur dans nos choix, on est tenues pour responsables d'une faillite qui est en réalité collective, et mixte. Les armes contre notre genre sont spécifiques, mais la méthode s'applique aux hommes. Un bon consommateur est un consommateur insecure.[268]

While wanting to fuck her husband like a man fucks another man, Leduc at the same time subscribes to many of the products touted as necessary to womanhood in the 20th century,

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[262] *La Bâtarde* 297.
[263] Sheringham 131.
[264] *La Chasse* 66, see René de Ceccatty, *Violette Leduc : Éloge de la Bâtarde* for an explication of this citation, 222.
[265] *La Bâtarde* 260
[266] *La Bâtarde* 265.
[267] Petersen, *Too Fat, Too Loud, Too Slutty.*
[268] *KKT* 123-124.

including designer boutiques and celebrity hairdressers.[269] Leduc certainly always feels in a state of failure. What Despentes reveals here, that the failure is in fact collective, echoes the proposition that failure highlights the incorrectness or impropriety of certain standards, and that the system is broken, not the individual. We will discuss more on this in chapter three. Intriguingly, the section of *King Kong Théorie* in which this excerpt appears is entitled "Je t'encule ou tu m'encules ?" This title echoes a questions of Leduc's. She writes an ode to Jacques Guérin, but then follows up with a too familiar questioning of a young man about his sex life: "Tu l'encules ou il t'encule?"[270] Moving from Leduc to Despentes, we move from the question of who's fucking who to who's getting fucked over.

Maurice Sach's exasperation with Violette's feelings for him leads her to reaffirm boundaries of gender: "Les femmes ne sont pas des hommes, me disais-je avec désolation."[271] As if trying to remind herself. Or as if having to remind herself, because she perhaps had hope that there was some wiggle room. Leduc brings a corporeal vulgarity to her description of certain experiences: "La présence d'un homme qu'on aime et qui vous intimide, la présence d'un homme intelligent qu'on écoute aussi avec ses ovaires est un gala et un enfer. Il parle, mon bas-ventre est glouton."[272] Here, she listens "with her ovaries" to the object of her affection. But the female body takes on a different valence when she is upset and recounts: " ... j'ai hurlé avec mes ovaires."[273] Is this an essentialist description of women's emotions, or even a nod to hysteria as legitimate, if strong emotions and desires come from the female reproductive organs? Or is it a daring statement of corporeal realities for a woman in love with men who love men? Even her desire and her rage mark her further as feminine and therefore further excluded from reciprocity in her relationships with these men. Writing from and of the female body in this way appears as a mise-en-pratique of Cixous's conception of *l'écriture feminine*, albeit an anachronistic one. What is unique about Leduc's writing here is that while there is indeed this description of the female body there is also shame of her too-female body and desires to make love or be loved "like a man." Leduc attempts to put these emotional, physical, and sexual complexities into words serve to expand categories of sex, gender, and desire.

The ideas of multiple identities, of failure, and of mixed desires, are echoed in the description of the drag cabaret in *La Chasse*. Although Violette seems at ease expressing desires to act like a man while still being a woman, she doesn't seem to be able to hold the possibility of the performers both being men and performing as women. A lack of understanding or even openness to ambiguity with drag performers is similarly voiced in Colette. Both writers speak of a "tristesse" that must weigh on the men dressed as women. For Leduc, instead of drag performance representing an undoing of femininity, or a look behind the curtain at gender performance, the performers are "afflicted" and "sad": "La nature est cruelle quand elle hésite. Je suis convaincue de ceci : quand un homme s'habille en femme son sexe pèse lourd en tristesse sous sa robe ... Ces dames, affligées de ne pas l'être ... Une verge, entre les cuisses de Diane... Le sexe s'est trompé de porte."[274] Surprisingly, Leduc cannot make a world here for what doesn't

[269] Trout, *Force of Beauty.*
[270] *La Chasse* 66.
[271] *La Bâtarde* 307.
[272] *La Bâtarde* 382.
[273] *La Bâtarde* 398.
[274] *La Chasse* 132.

work but instead maintains a rigid gender and sexual binary, which seems to ignore her own desires for both feminine and masculine experiences. The term "affligé" suggests an illness or condition with which one is afflicted, not the possibility of temporary shifts or exploration in one's gender presentation and performance. This difference between her portrayal of her own first-person mix of desires and narration in the third person is revealing. Her desire to act in a masculine way is straightforward, without explanation or qualification or even interrogation. But for these performers nature is cruel. Colette introduces her discussion of cross-dressing men with a study on the handwriting of those suffering from "sexual abnormalities":

> André Lecerf, le graphologue, étudie actuellement les écritures d'anormaux sexuels...
>
> Mais nul n'échappe à son physique, auquel participe adroitement l'écriture**.** La scandaleuse boucle de lettre, l'arabesque révélatrice comme un cri, une insane coquetterie des barres de *t*, une spirale, un crochet, - que d'imprudences... Laquelle correspond à la manie, à la délectation de porter, sous un pantalon de terrassier en velours à côtes, des jarretelles roses ? Laquelle révèle une mortification honteuse, une géométrie de plaies volontairement incisées, quotidiennement entretenues ? Un abîme de tristesse s'ouvre, à contempler les photographies d'hommes demi-nus, affligés – en vue de quelles joies ? – de soutien-gorge féminins, vides. Vides. S'il s'agissait de simuler par rembourrage les avantages de l'autre sexe, s'il s'agissait de la jalousie singulière, mais admissible, qu'inspirent à l'homme le torse orné de la femme ... l'ombre serait moins épaisse. Mais non, elles sont vides, désaffectées, ces poches jumelles de satin ou de tulle, aplaties comme des fleurs d'herbier, flasques, inexplicables...
>
> Je ne recueille, à contempler ces petits crimes contre la nature, que de la tristesse. Comme c'est triste, ces chiffons à dentelles sur des cuisses noires de poils, ces buissons pileux autour d'un sexe informe, ces jarretières de roses rococo sur une rotule caillouteuse... Et ces pauvres figures de faux hommes, ces anatomies de femmes à mettre au rebut, ces essais avortés de front, de menton, de crâne...
>
> Leur roman est encore plus triste. Car ils ont leur roman, leur espoir, leur désastre. Certains ne disposent, pour insinuer dans leur vie la volupté ou le sentiment, que d'une heure de nuit, d'une marge d'ombre... ils n'ont pas fait de place à la sécurité dans leur existence.[275]

In almost a reversal of the Freudian female lack, here the "uncastrated male" represents disappointment and deception for these two authors.[276] Both women had personal lives and bodies of work that were in many ways groundbreaking and atypical of their time. Indeed, even

[275] *EV* 623-624.
[276] For more on the early twentieth century discourse of inversion, see Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a masquerade," *Influential Papers from the 1920s*: "Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it ..." (131).

Colette's female lover Missy often dressed in men's clothing. However, their perceptions of men dressed as women only suggested to them one possibility, that of sadness and failure.

Leduc's persistence in self-deprecation and annoying qualities lend themselves to discussion along with Sianne Ngai's theorizations of "low" negative feelings. Instead of talking about shame, melancholy, and other "high" negative feelings, Ngai proposes in *Ugly Feelings* that the "low" or minor negative feelings have important value as well: "... the feelings I examine here are explicitly *a*moral and *non*cathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release."[277] Michael Sheringham's description of *La Folie en tête* as "purgatorial rather than redemptive"[278] complements Ngai's theorizations, and encompasses Leduc's entire oeuvre and existence. Ngai proposes minor negative emotions as expressing a politics of noncatharsis in art: "... art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release..."[279] Ngai takes Melville's Bartelby as her opening case, representing a more muted version of noncatharsis, or failure of release. Leduc's works are more charged, and more energetically noncathartic. Protagonists run headlong into drama and difficulty, but redemption remains impossible for them. The obsessional nature of Leduc's relationships with Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Sachs, Jaques Guérin, et. al. sets up avenues for noncathartic writing – there is no apex or conclusion, no consummation of the relationship or total rejection. The act of Sachs's instructing Leduc to write about her memories and leave him alone is about as close to a rejection as she comes, and it is indeed an incitement to write. The only emotional release that seems to happen is in Leduc's lyric passages describing nature. In the scenes of her adopted home in the south of France, we do perceive catharsis and even joy. This politics of noncatharsis, with nothing to attenuate the suffering, creates a world where living with ugly feelings and not looking toward their end, where embracing the ugly even while suffering from it, is shown to be of value. Here we can see Leduc as carrying out Berlant's concept of "... making a world for what doesn't work.[280]" We could interpret the word "work" in multiple ways, but a helpful way here would be constructing a world where one is not successful. This "not working" is the "moteur d'écriture" for Leduc, and the producer of new potentials, which can be found in not achieving, in not ending, and in not releasing. Sheringham sums it up: "Beauvoir and Genet, Berthe and Jacques, Isabelle and Hermine, Sachs and Gabriel all come to embody, in different but endlessly comparable ways, a fairly limited series of emotional dead-ends, sexual cul-de-sacs, existential impasses."[281]

Of course, one could describe Leduc's writing as one giant emotional release. But I would argue that her consistent lamentations don't offer any finite ends or catharsis. Nothing is resolved: "In their tendency to promote what Susan Feagin calls 'meta-responses' (since it is hard to feel envy without feeling that one should *not* be feeling envy, reinforcing the negativity of the original emotion), there is a sense in which ugly feelings can be described as conducive to producing *ironic distance* in a way that the grander and more prestigious passions, or even the moral emotions associated with sentimental literature, do not."[282] Leduc's interrogations in the

[277] Ngai 6.
[278] Sheringham 129.
[279] Ngai 9.
[280] Lauren Berlant, Afterword: After It's Over, in *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, 25.
[281] Sheringham 131.
[282] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 10, emphasis mine.

second person, from the mocking sparkles in the metro steps to her own self-deprecating questions to herself as she navigates the literary world and her place in it, illustrate this idea of ironic distance produced by ugly feelings. Much of Leduc's ranting or wallowing in despair involves then questioning or second-guessing herself for what she is feeling or how she is describing it. By describing both affect and the meta-response to affect, Leduc inhabits a space of constant questioning and checking of herself. These noncathartic, ugly feelings produce an element of "disconcertedness"[283] and confusion "about how one is feeling or supposed to feel."[284] We feel sorry for Leduc and also incredibly annoyed by her. The way that she tells her stories and fashions her prose allows for the nuances of being "attachiante." It also builds in distance between writer and reader, permitting us to feel disconcerted and ill-at-ease.

This disconcertedness, then, is expressed both in Leduc's writing and also experienced by her readers. Leduc's affection or admiration for someone negates the possibility of their enduring affection for her: "À vrai dire, toute relation avec Violette Leduc semblait relever d'un sévère tangage émotionnel, son puissant besoin d'amour – auprès d'amis, souvent homosexuels, d'amies et d'amantes – ayant la fâcheuse tendance à la rendre insupportable."[285] In *Ravages*, Thérèse persists in obsessively visiting Marc in the hospital, although it puts her relationship with Cécile in jeopardy. Cécile remarks to Thérèse : "- Tu fais tout ce que tu peux pour me dégoûter de toi".[286] Thérèse also exasperates her male love-interest, as Marc says to Thérèse in the hospital, "Toi, mon vieux, tu as la manie de détruire."[287]

The neologism coined by Emmannuelle Devos during the filming of *Violette* is quite apt to describe this quality of Leduc's of being "attachiante." While at first glance these qualities of being "attachante" and "chiante" seem mutually exclusive, what this term lets us see in Leduc's work is the "both/and" quality of these sentiments. She is both of these things, simultaneously and separately. And this can help to think of Leduc in terms of her romantic attachments. She is both queer and hetero, desiring the impossible affections of gay men, sensually attracted to writers, literature, and objects. She both seeks pleasure in humiliation and suffers from it. And this is incredibly disconcerting. Leduc cannot be claimed as "only" anything. She fails to fit in traditional categories and in new ones. She attracts and repulses the reader, just as she seems to do with those around her and those writers she admires.

V. Literary Failures and Censure

While failing to be recognized for her work outside of a small circle of literary insiders was painful, it also confirms Leduc's opinion of herself as an outsider. The censoring of her work *Ravages* was to be a defining moment in in her life and in her writing. Before continuing, it is necessary to pin down the meanings of censor and censure, in English, as well as *la censure* in French. While censoring and censorship describe limiting what can be said, written, or published, censure involves a critique or rebuke that is usually of some official origin. While Leduc and her writing were not officially censured, they were censored, in part to avoid the

[283] *Ugly Feelings* 17.
[284] *Ugly Feelings* 14.
[285] Arnaud Schwartz, " 'Violette' : Écriture et haine de soi."
[286] *Ravages* 134.
[287] *Ravages* 140.

potential of government censure for her publisher, Gallimard. The term *censure* in French covers both of these meanings, and so must be interpreted according to context. Additionally, there are specific legal definitions that go along with the state deciding to censor a book or censure its author or publisher. I chose to include "censure" in the title of this section, even though Leduc's work did not receive government censure, because the censoring of her writing did amount to a larger rebuke of her subject matter and language. Interesting Leduc scholarship has been done recently on various manuscript editions of *Ravages* and the three volumes of her autobiographical project. The censoring of *Ravages* was lived by Leduc and described in *La Chasse à l'amour* as a veritable maiming/wounding/amputation/murder/stillbirth/abortion. This failure, both to get *Ravages* published intact, as the author intended it to be read, and the failure of Gallimard to accept the text as written, led to a failure of Leduc's mental and psychological health. The censure, and Leduc's reaction, however troubling, led to the beautiful, shocking and disturbing prose that recounts her breakdown and recovery. Exploring the valences of what it means to be censored, and to have one's work censored, allows us to think about the instability of texts and how they are changed in reaction to and/or in fear of censorship. In this section we will look closely at the beginning of *La Chasse à l'amour,* which recounts Leduc's reactions to the news that *Ravages* would need to be altered for publication.

La Chasse à l'amour, the third and final volume of Leduc's literary autobiography, opens with her suffering the censoring of *Ravages.* This volume was published posthumously in 1973 (Leduc died in 1972) and Simone de Beauvoir prepared the manuscript from Leduc's papers. The author writing the manuscript of *La Chasse* in the early 1970s is in a very different social and literary position than the author she is describing in the text, who is crushed by the censoring of *Ravages* in 1955. *La Chasse* is also a work describing failure (censorship) in a work edited and published by a third party (Simone de Beauvoir). When *La Bâtarde* was published in 1964, it was a rousing literary and commercial success, a first for Leduc. In 1966, a version of the section cut from *Ravages* was published as an independent volume, as *Thérèse et Isabelle*. Does the vindication of seeing her work, originally considered obscene, finally in print allow her to delve more deeply into her original rage and despair at the censorship?

It is curious to find the *incipit* of this work dealing with the experience of censoring earlier on, particularly when the text of *La Chasse* was established for publication by Beauvoir's organization and editing. Catherine Viollet distinguishes between the acts of censoring and editing in her research on Leduc's mansucripts: "Simone de Beauvoir n'a pas censuré mais sélectionné, [elle] a enlevé beaucoup d'envois poétiques."[288] And while she insists that Beauvoir's work did not constitute censoring, she maintains that the published version of *La Chasse* represents "une édition pas du tout définitive" and "un appauvrissement de l'édition finale." Viollet relates that in her survey of the manuscripts of *La Chasse*, there were many words crossed out, and that it was impossible to tell which had been crossed out by Leduc and which by Beauvoir. Two examples of specific changes that she was able to determine as having been made by Beauvoir include the following: Leduc's "visage virile de sa mère" became "visage de sa mère" and the figurative "flatteuse" became "langue."[289] Obviously there is a great

[288] Viollet, Talk at Violette & Co., Paris, 28 March 2014.

[289] The research group led by the late Catherine Viollet and including Mireille Brioude, Anaïs Frantz, and Alison Péron, is part of the research group "Genèse & Autobiographie" at the ITEM (Institut des Textes et Manuscrits

difference between a mentor editing the posthumous manuscripts of a protégé for publication and a publishing house refusing to publish a work unless the entire first section is cut. But it seems pertinent that Leduc's description of her experience of the censoring takes place in a literary work that was ultimately prepared by someone else for publication. The difference between censoring and editing cannot be clearly defined when it comes to Simone de Beauvoir's aid to Leduc. Undoubtedly, without Beauvoir's assistance, support and editing of her works, Leduc's writing would never have been published. Leduc's biographer, Carlo Jansiti, describes Beauvoir's interventions as a *nettoyage*, or cleaning, of Leduc's manuscripts: "Ses corrections allègent parfois les phrases, proposent des termes peut-être plus appropriés, mais son intervention dans le domaine des images et des comparaisons n'est pas toujours heureuse."[290] While the reader misses out on moments of Leduc's more colorful or poetic language, without the large majority of the changes made by Beauvoir it is certain that Leduc's work as is would not have been published.

One could go endlessly in circles trying to decipher a true version of the text, without necessarily coming to a satisfactory conclusion. And indeed, that endeavor might not be terribly helpful in interpreting Leduc's work. But the process of creation, and especially the palimpsestic nature of Leduc's manuscripts, gives insight into the interior and exterior manners of creation of the finished, published work. For Leduc, censorship was a significant part of that process. After the censorship of *Ravages* in 1955, she was able to include a re-worked part of the *Thérèse et Isabelle* section in *La Bâtarde* (1964), and then a stand-alone volume of *Thérèse et Isabelle* was published (1966). These different versions help to round out the understanding of this formative relationship for Leduc. The intended version, with its intended structure, as originally submitted to Gallimard, was never published.[291]

The censoring of *Ravages* could be described as formative failure – this experience shapes her life and writing in the coming years, and it is only after this tumultuous experience that she writes her first wildly successful work, *La Bâtarde*. When Beauvoir edits the manuscript of the third volume, she is editing the prose of a successful, well-known literary figure. Questions of posterity and reputation surely come into play, as do questions of Beauvoir's feminist and literary legacy, with the death of her protégée. Anaïs Frantz contextualizes the censoring of *Ravages*, and compares reactions to this manuscript with those to scandalous works by authors of the French canon. She reminds us that "Flaubert et son œuvre sortent grandis du procès de *Madame Bovary*; Violette Leduc mutilée de la censure de *Ravages* … Pour l'écrivaine,

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Modernes) housed within the CNRS/ENS. Viollet was a scholar of genetic criticism, and her discussion of Leduc's manuscripts can be seen in Esther Hoffenberg's 2013 documentary on Leduc, entitled *La Chasse à l'amour*. https://violetteleduc.net/lequipe-de-litem-et-les-manuscrits/

[290] Carlo Jansiti, *Violette Leduc*, 1999. On this subject Jansiti references the work of Adelaide Iula Perilli in her thèse de doctorat, *L'Imaginaire baroque dans l'oeuvre de Violette Leduc*, Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1993.

[291] The most recent publication of the research group "Genèse & Autobiographie", a volume entitled "Genres, sexes, sexualités: que disent les manuscrits autobiographiques?" was directed by Viollet and Danielle Constantin and published in 2016. The final section of this collection is made up of essays by each of the four members of the Leduc research group, about a particular aspect of the manuscripts of *La Chasse à l'amour*. These findings come from their study of Leduc's manuscripts and papers held at the IMEC (Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine) and contain manuscripts, correspondence, biographical and press documents. As *La Chasse à l'amour* was published posthumously by Simone de Beauvoir in 1973, the opportunities for different versions and questions about authorial intent abound.

il s'agira toujours d'un roman mort-né."[292] While the publication of *Ravages* is often discussed in terms of censoring, Gallimard insisted that the first section be cut precisely to avoid government censure once published. First, Simone de Beauvoir delivered the manuscript to Raymond Queneau, a member of Gallimard's *comité de lecture*. Queneau suggested the removal of the entire first part. Then, Beauvoir asked Queneau to have another reader review the manuscript, and it was passed to Jacques Lemarchand. Lemarchand had other critiques, which he recorded in his *rapport de lecture* for Gallimard. In addition to removing the first section on the love affair between Thérèse and Isabelle, Leduc was also instructed (via Simone de Beauvoir) to remove much of the description of her abortion, which at the time was illegal in France, and her frank description of a penis. Lemarchand writes,

> C'est un livre dont un bon tiers est d'une obscénité énorme et précise – et qui attirerait les foudres de la justice. Et les cent cinquante pages de l'avortement sont du mauvais Sartre. C'est aussi un livre qui contient des réussites ponctuelles. L'histoire des collégiennes pourrait, à elle seule, constituer un récit assez envoûtant – si l'auteur consentait à entourer d'un peu d'ombre ses techniques opératoires. (…) Publié tel quel, ce serait un livre à scandale et les qualités du livre - qui en seraient, en outre, étouffées – ne justifient pas ce scandale.[293]

Along with sexism typical of the time period, we also see in this report a certain amount of fear and unwillingness to risk obscenity charges and a censorship scandal. Whether Leduc's writing had literary merit was not the issue – her manuscript was not worth taking the risk of judicial censure and scandal. It was the amputating of the love and sex between Thérèse and Isabelle that would take by far the greatest toll on Leduc.

While the accuracy of the analogy between *Madame Bovary* and *Ravages* could be debated, the fact remains that Leduc would not see commercial success, or renown, or acceptance of her depiction of sex between adolescent girls for another decade. Frantz also signals that "l'année où Gallimard refuse la première partie de *Ravages*, Jean-Jacques Pauvert publie *Histoire d'O*, roman érotique signé Pauline Réage."[294] Critics have remarked that male authors could publish works with obscene sex scenes much more easily than female authors; that, from the pen of a woman writer, the erotic became obscene. And yet, *Histoire d'O* was published that same year and under a feminine pseudonym. Obscenity charges were brought by the government against the publisher, but these charges were later rejected by the courts. Without delving into the politics of literary publication, the stark contrast between the two works and the acceptance of one while the other had to be cleaned up for publication is surprising.[295]

Leduc would suffer greatly from the censoring, as if part of her physical body had been amputated in conjunction with the body of her text. In the section entitled "Violette Leduc,

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[292] Anaïs Frantz de Spot, "Pourquoi lire *Thérèse et Isabelle* aujourd'hui," *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine*, 224.
[293] Cited in Jansiti, *Violette Leduc*, 265.
[294] Anaïs Frantz de Spot, "Pourquoi lire *Thérèse et Isabelle* aujourd'hui," *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine*, 225.
[295] For further reading on the publication history of *Ravages* and *Histoire d'O,* see Elizabeth Locey, *The Pleasures of the Text: Violette Leduc and Reader Seduction*, 78-81.

Catherine Breillat et Virginie Despentes montrent leurs bites" of the first volume of *Queer Zones*, Sam Bourcier situates Leduc as a precursor to the work of Despentes and the filmmaker Catherine Breillat. Bourcier sees patriarchal power structures as needing to differentiate between "littérature" and "pornographie" and that the necessity of this distinction is what makes the work of these three women troubling: "Éloigner les femmes de leurs corps, les couper de leur désir d'écrire le Plaisir, exciser leur textes; oppose sexualité active et corps en puissance de procréer, érotisme et tendresse, homosexualité et hétérosexualité. Tout cela était en jeu dans la censure de *Ravages*."[296] The verb "exciser" is not chosen haphazardly here. Just as excision of the clitoris in female genital mutilation is thought by some to keep women pure or make them better future wives by removing some or all of their capacity for physical sexual pleasure, Bourcier likens censoring of writing about women's sexual pleasure to excision. Of course, these two cannot ever actually be equated. But figuratively, Bourcier compares the excised flesh to the excised text, removed for the comfort of others and depriving women of pleasure, corporeal integrity, and sexual agency. In light of this comparison, Leduc's subsequent mental breakdown following the censure of *Ravages* appears to be a reasonable response to the violation she feels as an author and on behalf of her creation.

Not only do Leduc and Despentes "montrent leurs bites" in terms of writing style and audacity, but Leduc's writing is compared favorably to that of a man's. When *Ravages* is finally published, in its edited form, the review by Claude Lanzmann in *France Dimanche*[297] is entitled "Violette Leduc parle de l'amour comme un homme." Would that headline have been different if *Ravages* had been published in its entirety? Describing in poetic language the early sexual experiences between two teenage girls, as Leduc did in the censored section that would become *Thérèse et Isabelle*, would certainly not have earned her the appellation of writing about love like man. In this case, "parler de l'amour comme un homme" is meant to signify an achievement. A woman doing something "like a man" is at this point still meant to convey praise and perhaps slight unease. And so Leduc writes as a woman, but like a man, about love and sex. But in fact, she didn't just write about love like a man. She wrote about sex like a woman, which led her writing to be censored. In addition to cutting the entire first section of *Ravages*, Gallimard also insisted that Leduc adjust language pertaining to her description of Marc's penis in a scene in a taxi and the language dealing with her abortion. These two instances requiring reworking are found at the beginning of the work and at the end. The first describes Leduc's encounter with Marc in a taxi, where after their evening together Marc guides/forces Thérèse's hand towards his *sexe*: "Je touchais la peau fripée, fragile comme une paupière." Right before the two lines of ellipses that replaced the offending description, Thérèse offers a virginal "C'est la première fois."[298] In interpreting this scene, Bourcier brings the work of Leduc and Despentes together in discussing censorship and the mixing of registers:

> Avec ces descriptions osées, Violette Leduc s'arrogeait l'un des privilèges de la représentation pornographique masculine: objectiver le sexe masculin. Elle menaçait en cela la répartition genrée des pouvoirs dans la représentation. L'objectivation du pénis par les femmes : tel est le

[296] Bourcier 228.
[297] *France Dimanche*, 22 May 1954.
[298] *Ravages* 34.

> retournement de situation pourtant prévisible mais indésirable dans une économie masculine de la représentation. C'est aussi le geste qui relie Leduc, Breillat et Despentes et les expose à de si violentes critiques : elles montrent leurs bites. La leur et celle de l'homme dans le taxi, du violeur de Manu, de Paul et de Rocco. Dans le cas de Violette Leduc, il ne fallait surtout pas que le reste du texte puisse subir la contamination de 'la partie pornographique' et ce pour maintenir la distinction entre littérature et littérature pornographique. Entre littérature et sexe. Entre homme et femme.[299]

While Bourcier's analysis could be considered extreme, it helps us to understand the censoring of *Ravages* as serving two distinct purposes. Firstly, for a woman author, writing this frank description of the male sex organ was unacceptable. Secondly, while sex scenes occur throughout the book, the longest and most explicit erotic section, which happens to deal with same-sex female sexuality, would have "contaminated" the rest of the novel. That section needed to be excised, cordoned off, and placed in the margins. Bourcier likens the censoring of *Ravages* to the scandal and interdiction surrounding Despentes's film *Baise-moi*. The idea that Bourcier puts forward is that it matters who is doing the showing (a male or female author) and if there is a generic blending between the pornographic and the literary. In this way the imposed censoring of *Ravages* and the film *Baise-moi* demonstrate an inability of the censors and the public to accept sex written and performed by women and interwoven with literature and cinema. The literary establishment didn't know what to do with sex written by women that was not pornography. The censoring can be seen as a failure to challenge generic and gender conventions, especially when dealing with portraying female sexuality.

While Leduc describes her mental anguish and emotional furor at the refusal of *Ravages*, her description of this failure stays at the level of the personal. When Despentes, in *King Kong Théorie*, discusses women writers of the past, she extends her personal experiences and opinions to encompass those of her entire gender. Twice, she writes "Moi, je suis de ce sexe-là ..." :

> Dans la littérature féminine, les exemples d'effronterie ou d'hostilité contre les hommes sont rarissimes. Censurés. Moi, je suis de ce sexe-là, qui n'a même pas le droit de mal le prendre. Colette, Duras, Beauvoir, Yourcenar, Sagan, toute une histoire de femmes auteurs qui toutes prennent soin de montrer patte blanche, de rassurer les hommes, de s'excuser d'écrire en répétant combien elles les aiment, les respectent, les chérissent, et ne veulent surtout pas – quoi qu'elles écrivent – trop foutre le bordel. On sait toutes que sinon : la meute s'occupera soigneusement de ton cas.[300]

Despentes also reminds us that because of censorship (whether at the level of publisher, government, or the author's self-censorship), the texts that exist from women writers are what was deemed "dicible" at the time. This seems to temper her indictment of Colette, among others, for playing nice with the male literary establishment (in her estimation) in order to write and be

[299] Bourcier 27.
[300] *KKT* 136-137.

accepted as writers. This could be considered an anachronistic way of reading the successes of earlier women writers, but also makes us pause to consider which texts of those writers exist and how they came to achieve success. Despentes describes briefly the censorship of *Thérèse and Isabelle* and aligns herself with Leduc's experiences and project:

> Moi, je suis de ce sexe-là, celui qui doit se taire, qu'on fait taire. Et qui doit le prendre avec courtoisie, encore montrer patte blanche. Sinon, c'est l'effacement. Les hommes savent pour nous ce que nous pouvons dire pour nous. Et les femmes, si elles veulent survivre, doivent apprendre à comprendre l'ordre. Qu'on ne vienne pas me raconter que les choses ont tant évolué qu'on est passé à autre chose. Pas à moi. Ce que je supporte en tant qu'écrivain femme, c'est deux fois ce qu'un homme supporte.[301]

What are the literary consequences of the removal of the first section of *Ravages*? Viollet discusses the implications of the censorship of the novel on its structure and, in consequence, on its meaning.[302] Leduc set out to write a "roman de formation", an "education sentimentale" of the 20th century. The censoring altered the entire structure of the novel as Leduc had originally conceived it. The censored version contains three parts instead of four. The first describes Thérèse's meeting and affair/courtship with Marc. The second describes her relationship with Cécile, the home they shared together, and the end of their relationship. In the third part Thérèse and Marc come together again, and are even married. The novel closes with Thérèse's botched illegal abortion and recovery from sepsis. If we look at the three parts of the novel in terms of Violette's love objects we have Marc-Cécile-Marc, or homme-femme-homme. Were the original novel published in its entirety, the structure would have been Isabelle-Marc-Cécile-Marc, or femme-homme-femme-homme. One could argue that Marc being represented twice doesn't quite make the pattern work, but he is a placeholder for a masculine object of desire. The original structure both begins with Violette's sexual initiation with another girl and creates an even and alternating pattern between feminine and masculine objects of desire. The censured version creates a triptych that is both opened and closed by a heterosexual relationship, with the homosexual relationship between Thérèse and Cécile sandwiched between the two and therefore seemingly of less consequence. It would indeed seem to give weight to the cliché of straight women passing through a "phase" of same-sex desire before resettling on male love objects. In this way the censoring imposed on *Ravages* completely shifts the entire work. As Leduc herself states in *La Chasse* : "Le début supprimé, la suite n'aura pas de poids. Thérèse manquera de pesanteur."[303] The idea of weightiness is repeated here, first with regards to the work as a whole, and then to the character of Thérèse. Having weight could be equated with having literary merit, and with being of a certain literary quality. Having her "roman de formation" lessened or reduced by the cuts makes it seem less solid and more unbalanced. Leduc herself feels this censoring to be a literary amputation of sorts, irreparably changing the work and also mutilating it.

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[301] *KKT* 137-138.
[302] Catherine Viollet, "Violette Leduc: Une pionnière?" 17 May 2014.
[303] *La Chasse* 24.

This perceived mutilation of her work initiates a mental breakdown and Violette becomes paranoid and violent. She describes her turbulent thoughts at the beginning of *La Chasse*, before being sent by Beauvoir to a psychiatric hospital. The failure of her mental health, her failure to keep it together in the face of rejection, is prompted by the failure of her *Ravages* manuscript to be accepted in its entirety. One failure begets another. And her breakdown seems more understandable and justified if we think about the fact that the Thérèse and Isabelle section was censored for obscenity. Her first formative sexual experience was considered too obscene to be published: "Ils ont refusé le début de *Ravages*. C'est un assassinat. Ils n'ont pas voulu de la sincérité de Thérèse et Isabelle. Ils craignent la censure."[304]

In *La Chasse*, Leduc sets up a conflict between the supposed dirtyness and debasement of the first section of *Ravages* and its veracity. For her, truth makes a story tellable. For the publishers, this is not the case. She can't seem to accept that the story could be both true and unacceptable to publishers: "Je lui dirais que le début de *Ravages* n'est pas sale. Il est vrai,"[305] and later, "Ce ne sont pas de vilaines gamines. Ce sont mes héroïnes. Mes cent cinquante premières pages ne sont pas malpropres. Elles ne peuvent pas l'être. C'est ce qui a été."[306] In Leduc's reactions, we see one of the dangers of life-writing – that criticism or censoring of the text can feel like a rejection of one's life. This attack feels personal, and the rejection is experienced mentally, emotionally, and physically. Unlike Despentes, Leduc cannot exteriorize her feelings or experiences (at least until much later), nor see the failure of her manuscript to be accepted as evidence of prevailing views and publishing structures, rather than her fault or as a criticism of her lived experiences and identity: "J'ai donné ma vie en écrivant *Thérèse et Isabelle*. Est-ce pour être humiliée? J'ai honte de moi en ayant honte d'eux. Ils ont cisaillé mes élans, broyé mes trouvailles. Ils ont tiré sur moi à bout portant. Mon porte-plume surnage dans l'eau de la cuvette des w.-c."[307] Leduc's description of her porte-plume here is a far cry from that of Colette, who describes her beautifully crafted array of her delightful writing tools in *Le Fanal Bleu*.[308] This divergence could represent in part the different relationships that Colette and Leduc (at least for most of her career) had with the literary establishment and with the world. Although Colette faced her own concerns with censorship (*Le blé en herbe, Le pur et l'impur)*, Leduc's reaction to the censoring of *Ravages* is in a different league. Both Despentes and Leduc retrospectively judged Colette's work. Leduc judged Colette's Claudine characters as "timides" in their romantic and sexual relationships, according to Viollet. René de Ceccatty also reports Leduc's take on Colette[309] : "Colette manquait de courage, [...] elle était timorée." And then he cites Leduc in *Candide* (19 novembre 1964) : "Quand j'ai lu Colette j'ai aimé sa langue très savante, sa puissance d'évocation, mais je la trouvais bien timide du point de vue érotique. Je me disais, bien avant de commencer à écrire : 'Si je réussissais à écrire, j'aimerais en dire plus qu'elle.'" It's important to keep in mind that these interviews are coming on the heels of Leduc's first commercial literary success, with the publication of *La Bâtarde* in 1964.

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[304] *La Chasse* 22.
[305] *La Chasse* 22.
[306] *La Chasse* 23.
[307] *La Chasse* 23-24.
[308] *FB* 728.
[309] *Lettres françaises*, 15 October 1964.

The censoring breaks Leduc's spirit, and her will to write. She laments the work and effort she put into her writing of the first section, and then announces "Continuer d'écrire après un pareil refus? Je ne peux pas"[310] and "Je n'écrirai plus."[311] The terms that Leduc uses to describe herself in the beginning of the book will be discussed further in the following chapter on abjection. But just a few of the ways she describes herself in the first forty pages of the book when faced with the rejection of *Thérèse et Isabelle* include "un rat", "une mollusque", "un chien" et "une crotte." Failure, in terms of censorship, represents a turning point for Leduc in her authorial identity and an example of what was considered "dicible" and "non-dicible" in mid-twentieth century French publishing houses. Jacques Guérin paid for an edition of *Thérèse et Isabelle* to be published "sous le manteau," which was a common practice for erotic texts that couldn't receive mainstream publication. But even this printing, which allowed for the story of Thérèse and Isabelle to be shared with a small specific audience, still severed the first section of the novel from the other three, retaining the generic division of "littérature" and "littérature pornographique."[312] The maintenance of this division also kept certain narratives of female sexuality (same-sex relationships in particular) in the genre of pornography for male consumers, as opposed to part of an author's experience that could be read along with other, less scandalous accounts and relationships. The excision of Thérèse and Isabelle from *Ravages* helped to maintain a separation between a woman describing, and by extension, determining, her own pleasure, no matter the veracity of the recounted experience. Reading *Ravages* and *La Chasse à l'amour* permits a greater understanding of the social mores at play during the different times of publication of these two works. In the 1950s, when *Ravages* was written and published, topics such as abortion, physical love affairs between teenage girls, and the candid description of her lover's penis by a female author, were too risky to publish and too much to stomach for much of the literary establishment and the public. By the 1960s and 1970s, social codes and practices had shifted. *La Chasse à l'amour* was published in 1973, five years after the protests and social upheaval of 1968 in France. In her last autobiographical volume, Leduc could comment (fairly) freely on the censoring of *Ravages*. In this way she could censure the censors for their lack of courage and of foresight, and for silencing part of her story. Leduc was finally, through her writing and her failures, able to "make a world for what doesn't work."[313]

This making of a world though is not tantamount to success, at least by any existing metrics. It merely opens up space for existence and failure, not happiness and success. And that is enough. But, one can go darker. Sometimes new spaces can't be created or one can't opt-out of systems already in place. Then, finding some semblance of power or subjectivity in abjection becomes a potential option for the formation of the self.

[310] *La Chasse* 23.
[311] *La Chasse* 39.
[312] Bourcier 27.
[313] Lauren Berlant, Afterword: After It's Over, in *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, 25.

Chapter 3: Fetishizing the Abject and Abjecting the Feminine in Despentes

Virginie Despentes appeared on the French literary scene in 1993 with her first book, *Baise-moi*, unfortunately often translated in English as *Rape Me*. The novel has been described as a rape-revenge plot, a pornographic re-writing of *Thelma and Louise*, and as a quintessential example of trash literature. It became internationally known and sparked further controversy when a film version was released in the year 2000. Despentes co-directed the film with Coralie Trinh Thi, a well-known porn star of the 1990s, and the main roles of Nadine and Manu were played by pornographic actresses Rafaëlla Anderson and Karen Lancaume. In response to the film's graphic violence and explicit sex, it became the first film to be banned in France in twenty-eight years. After various protests, the film was eventually re-released. Since *Baise-moi*, Despentes has authored numerous literary works and directed multiple films. She also contributes to contemporary political debates, writing opinion pieces about the *mariage pour tous* campaign and the *théorie du genre* controversy that flared up in France in 2013.

Despentes's protagonists form a contemporary pendant to Eugene Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris,* in that they produce a representation of the marginalized underworld in literary form. Her portraits of psychiatric patients, drug users, rape victims, rapists, spree killers, prostitutes, strippers, criminals, street kids and punks make her a logical heir to the naturalist writers of the nineteenth century. Her work has also been categorized as "hyper-naturalist."[314] Thematically, in her writing one finds echoes of Sade and Baudelaire. Stylistically, her use of language, including slang and obscenity, makes her an heir of Céline.

Despentes affirms that she draws upon her own experiences repeatedly in her works, but not for the purpose of creating an *autoportrait*. She instead uses her specific knowledge to better create and depict her characters and their surroundings. In the post-1990s literary world, infused with sexual confessions à la Catherine Millet and sexualized autofictions à la Christine Angot, writing fiction about cultures and worlds that one knows well seems almost quaint. But as readers of Despentes know, her writing is anything but.[315] While Despentes's work stands out in contemporary French literature, it can also be situated in the context of late twentieth/early twenty-first century women's writing:

> In the 1970s and 1980s, authors such as Cixous, Chantal Chawaf, Annie Leclerc and Marie Redonnet sought to celebrate the rhythms and plentitude of the female body in writing. Yet, since the 1990s, illness, death and trauma have surfaced as corporeal themes that expose the darker side to a female bodily experience (see Robson 2004), and reflect a wider trend of witnessing texts and 'wound culture' (Seltzer 1997). These elements are still very much present in the twenty-first

[314] Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity*, "This darkly comic self-reflexivity, along with Despentes's unbeautiful brand of hypernaturalism, rejects the hypocrisy of aesthetic conventions that soar above or sterilize the messiness of the real," 167.

[315] "Despentes has become a kind of cult hero, a patron saint to invisible women: the monstrous and marginalized, the sodden, weary and wildly unemployable, the kind of woman who can scarcely be propped up let alone persuaded to lean in," (Parul Sehgal, "French Feminist Pulp That Spares No Pain," June 30 2016).

> century, in Ernaux's literature that revisits death and illness, in Ananda Devi's writing that considers abuse and suffering, in Despentes's work that exposes violence and rape. [316]

While I see certain moments of celebration of the female body in Despentes, those moments stem from what Damlé and Rye term the "darker side" of female embodied experience. This is one of the most interesting things about Despentes's work – while describing rape, violence, and misogyny, she reformulates interpretations and expressions of female desire. There is still space for joy in her works, both in spite of and because of the vulnerable situation of women, and particularly of poor women: "Though women's writing in the twenty-first century continues to highlight female desire, it appears to enable a spectrum of desiring positions, rather than focalize around one explicit pole."[317] This "spectrum of desiring positions," which encourages exploration of the "darker side" of female experience, is one feature of the writing of Despentes and her contemporaries that leads me to explore the connections between her work and abjection.

In this chapter, I connect Colette and Despentes through discussions of abjection and the body and also through a discussion of the work of Leduc. To situate these works in relation to each other, it is helpful to consider instances of translation, intertextuality, and censorship. English translations of Despentes's *Bye Bye Blondie, King Kong Theory,* and *Apocalypse Baby* are now available in a box set, published by the Feminist Press, the same press that published the most recent English translation of Leduc's *Thérèse and Isabelle* in 2015. Leduc's text is one that inspired Despentes, given the courage Leduc showed in writing about female sexuality in a way that did not seek to appease male readers and that, indeed, precipitated the original censorship of *Thérèse et Isabelle*. While Despentes's novel *Baise-moi* was not censored, the film version was, creating a form of kinship between these writers in my eyes. This shared experience allows me to juxtapose these women, who proposed new ways of being vulnerable (sexually, textually, and literarily). Writing from and about the abject position circles back to writing from the periphery, from outside the "beau monde." Thinking of the abject inherently brings to the forefront aesthetic codes of representing sex and the body, especially in the works of these three writers who all challenged societal norms in various ways, including by representing same-sex relationships between women in their writing. Colette and Leduc focused on fictionalized life-writing that leads readers into deep identification with individual characters, demonstrating what certain individual women feel and suffer. Despentes's literary and cinematographic frescoes, meanwhile, bring systemic issues to the forefront. The reader sees how structural inequalities marginalize certain groups in a society. Given those positions, Despentes creates characters who claim agency in spite/because of their positions within marginalizing systems. Her characters don't necessarily escape or overcome these inequalities; they experience small triumphs of selfhood in hostile environments, often through taking pleasure in an abject status.

Abjection is multi-faceted in the work of Despentes. We meet not only characters who are economically, racially, and sexually marginalized and are therefore abjected from models of mainstream society, but also characters who can revel in the abject – a porn star and prostitute

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[316] Damlé and Rye 10-11.

[317] Damlé and Rye 11. They continue: "From excessive desire in Alina Reyes, violence and viscerality in Despentes, Christine Angot's ongoing narratives of incest, Sophie Calle's invasion of privacy, to the catalogic enumeration of sexual acts in Catherine Millet or Catherine Cusset, the explicit exposure of female sexuality has been at the forefront of French culture (see Best and Crowley 2007)."

turned spree killers, peep show performers, a pop star, a private eye – all kinds of theories of performance and subjectivity come into play here as Despentes gives voice to experiences of and pleasures in the abject. This reveling in abjection echoes images of Leduc on her knees or completely prostrate begging lovers not to leave her and knowing that they would. It also makes Leduc's description of her pleasure in the abject, supplicant role seem quaint next to Despentes's explicit narration. I see a certain "quaint abjectness" in the literary romantic relationships described by Colette, wherein female protagonists take pleasrure in submitting to their lovers, almost a century prior to Despentes. Although Despentes disavows any literary lineage linking her to Colette or to other women writers she sees as not resisting patriarchal systems of power,[318] in my view, both Colette and Despentes (along with Leduc) belong to a tradition of women writers who manage to communicate a sense of pleasure-in-abjection by female protagonists. Where Colette might have seen this potential as stemming from women's individual natures, Despentes's stresses the systemic forces that place women in a position to experience this kind of pleasure. Despentes demonstrates potential pleasure-in-abjection while also critiquing the forces that set up that pleasure potential. The three writers in consideration all share a lexicon introduced by Colette herself in regards to desire and submission: *prison, cage, laisse, chaîne, maître, violence, liberté, soumission*. All three writers develop particular languages of submission and of unrequited love or desire, and also an awareness of these knowledges and their *mise-en-écriture*.

In the following section, we will look closely at definitions of abjection, broadly theorized by Kristeva in her 1980 *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection*. Then we will turn to Darrieck Scott's modifications of the concept of abjection, and my reading of Despentes in light of interpretations of this concept. Abjection came to my attention as a concept and experience that both marked and made conceptions of self by way of Scott's *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. Scott, analyzing writing from the American literary landscape, theorizes the coming to a certain kind of power, through racialization-in-abjection, specifically the rape of Black men. Although Scott theorizes from very different experiences and contexts, his work helped me appreciate the power of abjection as identity-making and also potentially pleasurable. Scott posits that from humiliation, vulnerability, and wounds, specific forms of power and selfhood could arise. Abjection's clear relationship to failure also resonated with the works I was thinking about, as did the idea that both concepts had redemptive, resistant qualities to them. Abjection as linked to feminine corporeality in the works of Despentes was an obvious place to start, and this in turn reconnected back to Colette and to the very present corporeal existence at the end of her life that is described in her two final works. One area that Despentes has explored less than others, in terms of her character portrayals, is that of the elderly (at least until the later volumes of her most recent trilogy, *Vernon Subutex*). She has certainly plumbed the depths of middle-aged women all-too-conscious of their plummeting stock on the heterosexual market, and her latest

[318] *KKT* 137. Also, Despentes perhaps unintentionally further communicates her feelings towards Colette by giving a French bulldog in the first volume of *Vernon Subutex* the name Colette. The protagonist Vernon is charged with dog-sitting for her, and finds that even though she is a spoiled and primped French bulldog, she is actually a quite enjoyable and affectionate companion. I'd like to think that Despentes might in this way find some things to appreciate about Colette's writing, as Vernon comes to appreciate his canine charge. French bulldogs were a favorite breed of Colette's, including her cherished companion Toby Chien, and Despentes herself had a French bulldog. Beginning in the 19th century, they were considered the dog breed preferred by courtesans.

protagonist, the title character of *Vernon Subutex,* relays many of the experiences of masculine aging and failure.

I. Theorizing Abjection

Traditionally in psychoanalysis, the abject is conceived as that which is cast away to define the subject that remains, the expelled part that serves to shore up the identity of the whole. In *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, Kristeva draws on Freud and Lacan to situate the abject as part of a primal order, which exists outside of or prior to the symbolic order. She defines abjection as the area between self and not-self, neither subject nor object. Examples such as bodily fluids, excrement, and dead bodies inspire disgust and create distance from the living bodily subject: "De l'objet, l'abjet n'a qu'une qualité – celle de s'opposer à *je*." [319] Corpses are prime examples of the abject, in that they are human, but not living. In this way, they trouble the boundaries of the subject: "Ce n'est donc pas l'absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend abjet, mais ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L'entre-deux, l'ambigu, le mixte."[320] Kristeva discusses disgust and repulsion as responses to the abject, which help the subject identify itself as such. In spite of some arguments that are essentialist and exclusionary, Kristeva does advance the idea that literature is an important space for exploration of the abject. She cites many modern writers, including Céline, as examples of literary explorations of abjection : "D'occuper sa place, de se parer donc du pouvoir du sacré de l'horreur, la littérature est peut-être aussi non pas une résistance ultime mais un dévoiement de l'abjet."[321]

Abjection, then, is thought to play a key role in individual subject formation, in defining the subject against the abject, against that which is expelled or excreted and categorized as disgusting. Hanjo Berressem explains Kristeva's work on abjection in topological terms:

> *Topo*logically, then, the dreadfulness of abjects lies in that they fundamentally disturb the subject's psychic space. Designating simultaneously a 'border' (3), a space of 'in-between' (4), and something that turns the subject 'inside out' (3), they introduce a fundamental ambiguity and ambivalence into the subject's world that threatens it in its very constitution as a coherent psychic aggregate (23).[322]

But abjection does not just affect individual identity and subject formation. It plays a role in forming and defining the social body as well:

> Encounters with the abject thus jeopardize personal and collective identity because they threaten the border of the subject and are accompanied by feelings of loss and loneliness... Referring to the

[319] Kristeva 9.
[320] Kristeva 12.
[321] Kristeva 246.
[322] Berressem, "On the Matter of Abjection," *The Abject of Desire: The Aestheticization of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture*.

> abject and abjection as 'safeguards' and 'primers of my culture' (Kristeva 2), Kristeva's concept suggests that this mechanism works for entire cultures as well as for individuals.[323]

Concepts such as "safeguards" and "my culture" demand further attention and critique, and Scott looks closely at some of Kristeva's assumptions in theorizing abjection. Here I wish to highlight that abjection can be deployed to explore subject formation on an individual and on a collective level, which is meaningful for literary works that explore individual lives and interrogate social structures, like those of Despentes. Didier Eribon includes Genet and Jouhandeau as French writers of the abject (understood in a sociological, rather than in a psychoanalytic way) in a context of queer sexualities. I see Despentes as one of their literary successors:

> Dans *Une morale du minoritaire*, j'ai analysé comment des écrivains français (c'est le cas tout particulièrement de Jouhandeau et de Genet) avaient pensé la 'honte' et l' 'abjection' comme les vecteurs sociaux et politiques cruciaux de l'assujettissement des individus infériorisés par l'ordre sexuel... La honte et l'abjection constituaient pour eux le point d'ancrage et d'appui d'une reformulation de soi, d'une esthétique de soi. Ce ne sont pas des penseurs de la négativité, mais des penseurs d'un futur qui naît à partir du travail sur la négativité à laquelle les minoritaires sont assignés par l'ordre social... . La honte, l'abjection deviennent donc des leviers pour des pratiques transformatrices. Ce sont des chemins qui mènent vers autre chose. Vers l''orgueil' dit Genet. Ou la 'fierté' dirait-on aujourd'hui. En tout cas vers un avenir.[324]

Despentes's societal frescoes of the urban landscape depict the social body, constituted and made whole and comprehensible by those it ejects, excretes, and views as disgusting – the homeless, the poor, prostitutes, addicts, criminals, immigrants, people of color, and queer people – who in turn keep the rest of society's identity "intact." Thus, the abjected members of a society contribute to its function and are necessary for identity formation. In this system, arguably strengthened under imperialist projects and regimes,[325] the abject is not just a by-product of that formation but a crucial piece of its development. Abject objects, states, zones, agents, groups, psychic and political processes all reconstitute the boundaries between bodies. France's colonial legacy and contemporary questions of immigration and economic insecurity, as well as continued classist and racist structures of power, are accounted for in the lived experiences of

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[323] Kutzbach and Mueller, introduction, 9.
[324] Didier Eribon, *De la subversion: Droit, norme et politique*, 46-47.
[325] Anne McClintock, in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), conceives of "abjection as a formative aspect of modern industrial imperialism. Under imperialism, I argue, certain groups are expelled and obliged to inhabit the impossible edges of modernity: the slum, the ghetto, the garret, the brothel, the convent, the colonial Bantustan and so on. Abject peoples are those whom industrial imperialism rejects but cannot do without: slaves, prostitutes, the colonized, domestic workers, the insane, the unemployed, and so on. Certain threshold zones become abject zones and are policed with vigor: the Arab Casbah, the Jewish ghetto, the Irish slum, the Victorian garret and kitchen, the squatter camp, the mental asylum, the red light district, and the bedroom. Inhabiting the cusp of domesticity and market, industry and empire, the abject returns to haunt modernity as its constitutive, inner repudiation: the rejected from which one does not part. Abjection is richly suggestive for my purposes for it is that liminal state that hovers on the threshold of body and body politic – and thus on the boundary between psychoanalysis and material history," 72.

Despentes's characters. She portrays in her writing the inevitable outcomes of these systems of exclusion, and the continued abjection of undesirable groups, people, and places.

If abjection assists in subject formation in patriarchal and racist structures of power and language, then occupying even temporarily the position of the abjected instead of the abjecting subject could be viewed as an act of (passive) resistance. Scott proposes the ideas of both blackness-in-abjection, that is, bodies that are racialized through the experience of domination, and blackness-as-abjection, where blackness comes to stand in for the position of the abject. This dynamic paradigm points to the workings behind the static category of "abject" and suggests both fluctuation and potential in racialized and racist societies. Scott expands "on Fanon's essential point in *Black Skin, White Masks* that blackness functions in Western cultures as a repository for fears about sexuality," and theorizes the relation between "blackness, abjection, sexuality, and power ..."[326] Fears about sexuality and power are intricately bound up with questions of race, gender, and class.[327] Talking about fears of sexuality and blackness recalls Cixous's problematic assimilation of the female sex as the "dark continent" in her seminal piece "Le Rire de la Méduse," a call to (writing) arms for *l'écriture feminine*: "Ils disent qu'il y a deux irreprésentables: la mort et le sexe féminin. Car ils ont besoin que la féminité soit associée à la mort ; ils bandent par trouille !"[328] Cixous assimilates the struggles of Black men and women under Apartheid, slavery, and colonial regimes to the struggles of women writers, in discussing the darkness that surrounds women's writing and creative work: "Ton continent est noir. Le noir est dangereux."[329] We can certainly see the too easy comparisons and the wordplay between "noir" as darkness or secrecy and Africa's appellation by Westerners as "le continent noir." Cixous's undeveloped comparison of women to Africans and her facile assertion that black is dangerous is harmful and complicit in the subjugation of Black bodies in White feminist thought. I keep this in mind as I explore Darieck Scott's work on abjection and Black male bodies in American literature. His theorizations of abjection, through rape and powerlessness to forms of potential embodied power, present how "blackness becomes a mode of or figure for abjection."[330] I do not wish to suggest that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the abjection of Black men through rape as Scott describes it and what I see as the abjection depicted through violence against women and other marginalized groups in Despentes's works. But I am intrigued by the way Scott takes up thought on abjection and molds it to serve his particular analytical focus. The way that he does this is helpful to me in arriving at a fuller understanding of Despentes's project within a different framework.

I therefore discuss Scott's work to demonstrate the ways that it has informed my thinking about abjection, specifically abjection in Despentes's writing. Scott's analysis of Kristeva's work on abjection helps to make some of her ideas relevant to contemporary

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[326] Scott 10.

[327] Here I am thinking about the prostitute in nineteenth-century French literature (especially *Nana*) as a repository for the fears of contamination, both from the spread of venereal disease and moral vice, which stemmed from the mixing of social classes in modern cities and the changing financial power structures with the rise of the bourgeois class. Abjected bodies, specifically for Scott the bodies of Black men in African-American literature, represent ambiguity in identities by their very existence, and while it is important to explore "liberatory" identities and terms like queer, it is also imperative to retain the specificities of Black corporeal experiences as unique.

[328] Cixous, "Le Rire de la Méduse," 47.

[329] Cixous, "Le Rire de la Méduse," 41.

[330] Scott 11.

discussion, and to critique them where necessary (it also makes them more intelligible). Thinking about different kinds of oppression together, as Scott does, allows for commonalities and differences in the experiences of black, queer, and female bodies with regards to power structures to be understood in new and productive ways. In questioning interpretations of rape and abjection, Scott holds space for other manners of thinking and for sitting with the ambiguity that is anathema to clearly defined boundaries. These boundaries are both tangible and intangible – the fleshy physical boundaries of the individual human body constitute one type of boundary. Collective boundaries of the social body can be both intangible – social mores and practices – and tangible – the roping off of ghettos, slums, prisons, and brothels from the rest of the city. Scott's investigation of these boundaries allows for a description of potential power and pleasure for what he terms "the black abject":

> ... what my reading suggests is that within the black abject – within human abjection as represented and lived in the experience of being-black, of blackness – we may find that the zone of self or personhood extends into realms where we would not ordinarily perceive its presence; and that suffering seems, at some level or at some far-flung contact point, to merge into something like ability, like power (and certainly, like pleasure) without losing or denying what it is to suffer.[331]

The questions of power-in-suffering, or power-with-suffering, or pleasure-with-suffering, are incredibly important for our discussion of abjection. Scott describes power-with-suffering in the context of the rape of Black men, and the extension of the self he describes would seem to be a formulation of selfhood that contains room for abjection, or that makes room for it. Indeed, Scott's formulation of experiences of abjection is based on the racialization of bodies through abjection and so examines different kinds of violence and suffering in a specifically African-American literary and historical context. The idea of suffering and the extension of self, whether in spite of, because of, or regardless of suffering, expands the spectrum of response to trauma and how we interpret or read it. Despentes expresses a related theorization of rape in *King Kong Théorie*: "[Le viol] est fondateur... C'est en même temps ce qui me défigure, et ce qui me constitue."[332] Not only sex, or sex work, or sexual violence, but rape in particular is the central element in her constitution of self. Scott also explores the constitution of self in terms of queer usages of abjection:

> There the use of *abjection* follows another of Kristeva's accounts of it, this one emphasizing the process of exclusion and boundary setting that are components of subject formation: as in Kristeva's mapping of the development of subjectivity, this use of the term *abjection* describes how the (always incomplete and at-risk) achievement of an identity depends on certain objects-to-be (such as phobogenic elements or the feminine body or excrement) becoming reviled and cast off in order to consolidate the subject, which thereby becomes not only itself or *a* self according to its idealized definition but 'clean' and defended – while retaining an attraction and repulsion relationship to what is abjected. This process reflects and is reflected by social boundaries between

[331] Scott 15.
[332] *KKT* 53.

> races, genders, and sexualities. In queer usages of *abjection*, generally we begin with the inescapable slippage across necessarily porous but desperately defended boundaries: the boundary between the ego and what it excludes in order to constitute itself (the female excluded – ab-jected – to make the male, the homosexual to make the heterosexual).[333]

In light of Scott's depiction of Kristeva and the abject as serving the development of subjectivity, I turn to to several specific examples from Despentes's novel *Les Jolies Choses*, which will be further discussed in a later section. We see here illustrations of "the female excluded – ab-jected – to make the male, the homosexual to make the hetersosexual." The book describes several male/female relationships (both romantic and familial ones) that capture poetically the abjection that takes place for female characters in relation to males. Pauline's boyfriend Sébastien makes homophobic jokes about her friend Nicolas, after which Pauline observes that this cutting down or exclusion of others attracts her to him: "Cette cruauté qu'elle aime en lui, qui donne envie d'être sa femme."[334] In this exchange, first Sébastien defines his heterosexuality against abjected homosexuality, and then Pauline defines her abjected role as a woman in response to Sébastien's male cruelty. Pauline also recounts her memories of her father's abusive behavior towards her mother: "Et la mère laissait faire, et se rendait malade, comme une femme, en silence."[335] The comparative clause "comme une femme" inserted into the middle of this description specifically of Pauline's mother, demonstrates one of the simple techniques that Despentes employs to extrapolate the experiences of her individual characters to a more universal female experience. The reader sympathizes with Pauline's mother and then potentially interrogates the claim that her experiences and reactions are representative of a general feminine position with regards to heterosexual males. "Comme une femme" also has a tinge of mockery to it, and we recognize the familiar refrain of misogynist jokes about women's qualities ("You know women ..."). This valence communicates both the ever-prevalent misogynist mocking and calls it into question. Why is her behavior "comme une femme"? Why does this behavior exist as a category, and how do we manage to both criticize individual women and mock them as a group? In one sentence Despentes shows the reader both the close-up anguish of one woman and her place within a system that locates women in that place.

The development of subjectivity across generations is depicted in the relationships between the girls' parents. Pauline's mother's silent suffering helps define her as a woman, while cruelty and anger help define both her boyfriend and her father as men: "... car colère d'homme est légitime, on doit s'arranger pour ne pas la provoquer. Bien sûr, c'est d'avoir peur de lui, aussi, qui l'attache à lui si clairement. Si elle a peur, c'est que c'est un homme."[336] The reductive model is also applied to male protagonists – "elle a peur de lui" parce que "c'est un homme." We move from the specific to the general with regards to the place of the male in this model as well. In this passage, Despentes creates confusion between Pauline's relationship and that of her parents, as though to illustrate the pattern of violence that continues between the generations. Pauline is eventually able to see that the role that she takes on, at times forcibly and at times willingly, when she is with Sébastien, is that of submissive female. And this is one of

[333] Scott 16-17.
[334] *LJC* 170.
[335] *LJC* 38.
[336] *LJC* 171.

Despentes's greatest strengths as an author, that she can show the reader that women can knowingly acquiesce to these power dynamics, but that these dynamics go beyond the individual and shape all relationships. She critiques the system without harshly critiquing women's choices. Pauline realizes at the end of the novel what it means for her to go back to Sébastien: "Tant qu'elle est seule, c'est pouvoir devenir le père, être égoïste, ambitieuse, agressive et ne faire que ce qu'elle veut. Si elle redevenait sa femme, elle se retransformerait en épouse, c'est elle qui doit aider, pardonner, s'oublier."[337] Elle "s'oublie," she forgets herself. The system of power is dynamic, in that women, through their socialization, their desire for acceptance and security, their lack of awareness of other options, and real material concerns, play a role in their own self-abnegation. They sometimes abject themselves to make room for masculinity and men's sense of self, and also to survive.

But the idea of women as finding some power through their experience of the position of the abject has, for Scott, significant problems. Scott posits that the feminine and the abject are already too close for there to be significant transformative powers available: "... the abject and the feminine as the penetrated or violable are cotravelers and overlap... Women or female characters ... may be too easily shown to have a relation to the abject – this risks simply underlining the structure resulting from the production of normative gender – and thus may be harder to affirm as evincing some form of power in abjection."[338] Normative gender structures being what they are, Scott makes the case that the feminine and the abject are already so ideologically related that some of the potential power to be found in the experience of other forms of abjection is unavailable here. But I'd like to make the case for that power potential also being available here under certain circumstances, specifically in Despentes's portrayals of sexual and societal violence. Scott's discussion of corporeal vulnerability is, I think, translatable to the feminine abject as well as the male:

> ... vulnerability to penetration is portrayed in their texts as a willed enactment of powerlessness that encodes a power of its own – a kind of skill set that includes pleasure in introjecting and assimilating the alien (perhaps, alienation itself), a sense of intimacy acquired even in situations of coerced pain, a transformation, through harm, of the foreign into one's own.[339]

While Scott here is discussing the engagement of Black male writers (the examples are Eldridge Cleaver and LeRoi Jones) with Fanon's work, and attitudes toward the image of the penetrated Black male, the idea of vulnerability to penetration and of transformation through pain resonates deeply with Despentes's portrayal of sexualized violence towards women. It is the examination of sexual violence against certain kinds of women in certain circumstances in Despentes's writing that makes Scott's analytic framework so useful to understanding it. Indeed, in her discussion of the works of both Rachilde and Despentes, Sanyal suggests that "their [Rachilde and Despentes] rehearsal of symbolic violence opens up spaces for the representation of affects such as shame and abjection, affects that characterize a subjectivity's emergence through its vulnerability to bodily violence."[340] Scott doesn't talk about conquering pain, or emerging

[337] *LJC* 232.
[338] Scott 20.
[339] Scott 30.
[340] Sanyal 154.

stronger after trauma, or any of the positive self-help rhetoric that often accompanies contemporary trauma narratives. Assimilating the alien, transformation of the foreign ... these turns of phrase could be applied to immigrant populations perceived as threatening, to infectious cells invading the body, and to harm inflicted on vulnerable bodies by others. In this way, reading vulnerability in Despentes with Scott permits an understanding of the fractured, heterogeneous nature of the self that emerges from physical vulnerability. As Parul Sehgal writes,

> Despentes's understanding of rape shapes the feminism in her work... Her true subject is women's physical vulnerability, the way the threat of rape is central in how the sexes are oriented toward each other and how women collude with men in shrinking themselves, bargaining away their power in order to be desired.[341]

Often, as in the passage just cited, critics write as if Despentes is addressing "women" and "men" generally. But we could say that her focus on sexual violence directed against certain women (say, coming from certain subcultures or class locations) in certain kinds of social contexts is what defines her work. How then, does rape both act as an experience that constitutes the self and as an instance in which the self is experienced as something that can be de-valued? In *Baise-moi*, two women are gang-raped and have very different emotional responses. Both are bruised and bloodied, but Karla is horrified while Manu is calm and matter-of-fact. Karla is indeed just as horrified by Manu's reaction, or lack thereof, as by what has just happened to them. When Karla questions how Manu can be so nonchalant about it, Manu responds,

> Je peux dire ça parce que j'en ai rien à foutre de leurs pauvres bites de branleurs et que j'en ai pris d'autres dans le ventre et que je les emmerde. C'est comme une voiture que tu gares dans une cité, tu laisses pas des trucs de valeur à l'intérieur parce que tu peux pas empêcher qu'elle soit forcée. Ma chatte, je peux pas empêcher les connards d'y rentrer et j'y ai rien laissé de précieux... .[342]

Despentes makes space for a wider spectrum of reactions to rape and sexual violence, and in doing so tugs at some potential for power in the face of abjection. In *King Kong Théorie*, Despentes sketches a theorization of rape and rape culture that is based on both personal experience and the work of feminist thinkers. Despentes writes that Camille Paglia's idea of rape being a risk that women have to take in order to enjoy the same liberties that men do was incredibly influential in changing how she thought about her own rape: "Dévalorisation du viol, de sa portée, de sa résonance. Ça n'annulait rien à ce qui s'était passé, ça n'effaçait rien de ce qu'on avait appris cette-nuit là."[343] Without denying what she suffered, Paglia's incitement to "dust yourself" after a rape allows Despentes to think about sexual assault as the potential price of entry into a life lived without fear, out-of-doors, as a man would. We can think back to Scott, to vulnerability to penetration as "a kind of skill set that includes pleasure in introjecting and

[341] Sehgal, "French Feminist Pulp That Spares No Pain."
[342] *Baise-moi* 57.
[343] *KKT* 42.

assimilating the alien (perhaps, alienation itself), a sense of intimacy acquired even in situations of coerced pain, a transformation, through harm, of the foreign into one's own."[344]

Despentes suggests that the experience of rape can be more nuanced, without discounting the trauma suffered. In fact, instead of finding power or pleasure in suffering, Despentes (and Manu) suggest the possibility that for her, and for many female rape victims, perhaps the suffering does not have to be so great. While not seeking to devalue the victim, Despentes seeks to devalue rape itself. Although it is a defining, traumatic experience for many survivors (including Despentes), perhaps it need not always be.[345] Despentes reminds us of the dominant rape discourse : "Post-viol, la seule attitude tolérée consiste à retourner la violence contre soi."[346] Instead, the experience of abject violence could also lead to a potential extension of the self. This is not to suggest in any way that rape should not be considered a horrific experience and an insidious part of misogynist culture. But, given the pervasive sexual violence inflicted on women, perhaps there could be less of a stock narrative placed on their experiences, with less guilt and need for justification imposed upon victims. Perhaps there are more ways to look at rape and to complicate the position of the forcibly penetrated abject body.

Questions of abjection, corporeal vulnerability, permeability, penetration, and assimilation, allow us to rethink the female subject and the female body. When clear lines are no longer so clear between the expeller and the expelled, ambiguity enters into congress with the abject. When substances and bodies co-mingle in physical and aesthetic spaces, there is potential for productive or pleasurable fluidities. Literarily, there can be both a re-inscription of the self in context (rape as fundamental to one's constitution of self), and a de-inscription (rape as formative for many women, but not necessarily a prescriptively debilitating trauma). This line of thinking dovetails with work on writing the self in contemporary women's writing:

> Yet, there is an increasing feeling in women's writing in French that this flux and displacement might open out more enticing, enabling glimpses into female embodied experience. Indeed alongside notions of deterritorialisation, there is also a sense that subjectivity might be *re*territorialised, within particular environments, that the very tissue of the self might be interwoven with place and space (see Barnet and Jordan 2010), as an embodied relation to and in the world.[347]

The concept of reterritorialization, or re-inscription in one's body, one's environment, and one's stories, suggests a gesture of relaxing into identities and experiences that are considered as abjecting and degrading. Scott's "pleasure in introjecting or assimilating the alien"[348] nods to these actions of taking in, ingesting, and transforming foreign materials or experiences into part of one's own story. We could even think back to Chen's theorization of a "queer licking," and

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[344] Scott 30.
[345] For other contrary views to dominant feminist discourses on rape, see the works of Laura Kipnis, *Men: Notes from an Ongoing Investigation*, 2014, and *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus,* 2017, and Camille Paglia, *Free Women, Free Men: Sex, Gender, and Feminism*, 2017.
[346] *KKT* 48.
[347] Damlé and Rye, introduction, 10.
[348] Scott 30.

the devouring of luxury goods by Leduc and her lover. These actions are in many ways compatible with Halberstam's "shadow feminisms" in that they embrace what may be considered negative or passive stances. However, as we shall see in the next section, Halberstam embraces a total lack of agency, while Scott sees agency and power as potentially created by the process of abjection.

II. Shadow Feminism and the Bad Feels

In thinking about the ideas of queer negativity and radical passivity, Halberstam develops a definition of "shadow feminism":

> This feminism, a feminism grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence, offers spaces and modes of unknowing, failing, and unforgetting as part of an alternative feminist project, a shadow feminism which has nestled in more positivist accounts and unraveled their logics from within. This shadow feminism speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, an antisocial femininity, and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so reproduces her relationship to patriarchal forms of power.[349]

The characters of Leduc and Despentes embody this shadow feminism. In this section we will look closely at how each of these authors portrays versions of shadow feminisms in their writing. Leduc is an author much admired by Virginie Despentes and cited by her as one of the few female authors in France who refused to "montrer patte blanche," i.e. to make thematic, personal, and stylistic concessions to the male literary establishment and patriarchal structures in general in order to be accepted. By making themselves non-threatening, these "patte blanche" writers could simultaneously achieve personal success and be of use to the establishment as examples of their progressiveness and magnanimity with regard to women writers. These writers serve as counter-examples to shadow feminism, in their (general) acceptance of social mores and patriarchal power:

> Colette, Duras, Beauvoir, Yourcenar, Sagan, toute une histoire de femmes auteurs qui toutes prennent soin de montrer patte blanche, de rassurer les hommes, de s'excuser d'écrire en répétant combien elles les aiment, les respectent, les chérissent, et ne veulent surtout pas – quoi qu'elles écrivent – trop foutre le bordel.[350]

All of the authors cited are from generations previous to Despentes. They are well-known and even revered names in the pantheon of French writers. On the same page, Despentes critiques Colette and then praises Leduc. Immediately following the above passage, Despentes delves into the censorship of Leduc's *Thérèse et Isabelle*. This furthers her argument that resistance is not tolerated. If a woman writer writes stories that are not reassuring to men, if she doesn't "montrer patte blanche" like the others, her work may well be censored so that those stories cannot be told

[349] Halberstam 124.
[350] *KKT* 137.

in that way. The choice Leduc made was to be published, with concessions to the censors, instead of not being published at all. Only later would more complete versions be brought into print. The ruptures that Leduc painfully tore into the fabric of mid-century French literature were then looked through and ripped wide open by other authors, notably Despentes. Leduc's descriptions of her perceived failures (literary, sexual, social) set us up to talk about purposeful or at least pleasurable failures for some of Despentes's characters and for the author herself.

While Leduc has explored and related failure and its descriptions in many ways, we rarely see failure and its affective trappings as leading to any kind of pleasure. Failure is something to overcome, to crawl out from under, and from which to be saved by a lover. While failure appears to open doors for different kinds of consideration and success, Leduc does not walk through them. We have only glances of what that terrain looks like, glimpses afforded to us by the pinpricks she's made in the fabric of concepts like beauty and success. This is not to say that Despentes's characters who find themselves in situations of failure and abjection feel that there is anything they should be happy about in these situations. But there are some potentially redeeming possibilities given the position society has put them in. We can see Despentes as helping us to read and understand Leduc, as taking up Leduc's flag, and as offering possible answers to some of the questions she posed. Despentes writes about Leduc as one of the authors with whom she feels a kinship, and as a literary predecessor. So not only can Leduc's work help us to understand Despentes, Despentes's writing for me also sheds light on Leduc.[351] The idea of queer time not being linear[352] is helpful when acknowledging that in order to better understand women writers, sometimes drawing on the present can illuminate the past (and vice versa). This allows for new comprehension of the potential of failure and of abjection, especially in regards to queer women's writing.

In addition to queering time, the works of Despentes and Leduc challenge traditional literary representations of sexual practices with regards to women. As a liminal space, the abject is a site of convergence for seemingly opposing affects and experiences. Pain and pleasure can serve not only to delineate each other, but can also converge in the abject: "As in states of jouissance, for instance, in states of abjection pleasure and pain are disturbingly, even dreadfully, undifferentiated."[353] Discussing Leduc's novels in relation to Despentes with an eye toward BDSM (Bondage/Discipline, Domination/Submission, and Sadomasochism) frameworks for constructing and instructing desire demonstrate the scripted-ness of many sexual interactions. These frameworks also highlight possibilities for willful subversion of or acquiescence to norms and scripts. Delorme "demonstrates that BDSM games rely on a contractual relationship based on ever-shifting positions. This explains why the latter games are perceived as essentially contesting conventional heterosexist and patriarchal sexuality."[354] I would say perhaps not "contesting" (because sexual practices don't always have to have political ends or intentions or awareness) but "acknowledging" sexual norms as constructed and therefore things that can be

[351] So backwards, à la Heather Love's *Feeling Backward*.
[352] See Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Duke UP 2010.
[353] Berressem 26.
[354] Michèle Schaal, "Bridging Feminist Waves: Wendy Delorme's *Insurrections! En territoire sexuel*," *Rocky Mountain Review*, 186.

played with and from which pleasure, even joy, can be derived. Or in which unpleasant pleasure can be found:

> She (Delorme) also believes that making peace with one's fantasies, including patriarchal ones, represents a form of feminist empowerment and reclaiming of one's sexual agency... Similarly, Delorme acknowledges how women's use of dirty language is still stigmatized, including within the lesbian, queer, or feminist subcultures. For feminists, explicit language is considered a form of collaboration with the patriarchal system; mainstream society women still encounter the interdiction of explicit language as 'unfeminine.'[355]

I am not suggesting that in *Ravages* Leduc's protagonist Thérèse is knowingly engaging in contemporary BDSM practices in her relationships. However, looking at how similar experiences can be written by authors such as Despentes does expand our understanding of Leduc's desire for total submission to a partner, and desire for something like annihilation of the self in her romantic relationships. And when she cannot obtain this, then annihilation of the relationship ensues.

One might say that characters in Depentes and Leduc are *willfully* abject, and the question of willfulness has a complex relationship to the passivity that Halberstam takes as a hallmark of shadow feminism. Other characters in Despentes, for instance, also engage in masochistic behavior or relationships in a way that has been read as deeply intentional:

> Despentes's heroines are entrenched in physiology, in the organic experience of the body and its appetites. As women who have come to an experience of their body – its pleasure and pain – through shame, violence, and humiliation, her protagonists celebrate the abjection of their experience *as* beauty. Nadine's back is scarred with whiplashes sought out in masochistic encounters over the *Minitel*.[356]

The works of both Despentes and Leduc dialogue with ideas contained within shadow feminism, which allows for a little more breathing room for its practitioners while continuing to question unequal power dynamics. In *La Folie en tête*, Leduc notes in detail the words of literary critics in reviews of her work : "André Rousseaux, dans son feuilleton du *Figaro Littéraire*, se moquait de mon 'charabia'... son sadisme me consolait mais je pleurais quand même."[357] Not only is she sad and crying, but she also finds consolation in his sadism. Indeed, occupying the abject or submissive position is a source of comfort for Leduc. It confirms her view of herself and certainly feels more familiar to her than any other treatment. Leduc's behavior (or the behavior of her character Thérèse) towards her loves in *Ravages* can feel like long efforts at abjection of herself – as though in submitting herself to them she could perhaps make herself disappear, and meld into the other, much as one thinks of dissolving oneself or one's worries into alcohol or other substances.

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[355] Schaal 187-188.
[356] Sanyal 166.
[357] *La Folie* 154.

In *Ravages*, Thérèse often places herself in the abject, submissive position vis-à-vis her lovers and their relationships. Even though she at times treats Cécile poorly, and certainly attempts to drive her away, Thérèse is always entirely ready to devote herself to the idolatry of another: "Elle jettera une épingle dans l'herbe, je me mettrai à quatre pattes dans le sentier pour une épingle que Cécile aura jetée."[358] And objects play an important role in her idolization of her lovers – her relationship to objects is not quite fetishistic in the sense that they do not stand in for the entire person of her lover, but they do represent an intense emotional connection and illustrate the French definition of *fétiche* – that of an amulet or object of reverence.

Leduc does not always place her protagonist in the subservient role. Occasionally the reader catches a glimpse of her appreciation for witnessing or even inflicting cruelty. After her wedding to Marc, Thérèse remarks that : "Lorsque Marc allait être brisé, mon corps s'illumina comme s'illumine étrangement la journée avant que la neige commence à tomber."[359] Occupying a "male" position of power is exciting to her. It is also calming - this image of peaceful stillness related to snow appears in other works by Leduc, including *Thérèse et Isabelle*. Something about the cruelty or suffering of others is calming to her. But nothing is quite as central and exciting as her own suffering. Descriptions of Marc and Thérèse's married life read like a passage out of *Histoire d'O*:

> - Ne pense qu'à toi. Je t'en supplie : ne pense qu'à toi, Marc. »
>
> Son plaisir est ma raison d'être. Je façonne mon sourire avant de le lui offrir.[360]

When Thérèse tries to convince Marc not to go to work and leave her at home alone, she searches in vain for ways to obliterate herself and make him happy:

> ... Je vais te faire un beau lit, je tendrai le drap comme tu l'aimes tendu. Je te regarderai ou bien je tournerai la tête si mon regard te dérange. Je ne respirerai presque pas si m'entendre respirer t'agace.
>
> ...
>
> « Tu n'as pas honte, dit Marc, tu n'as pas honte pour toi et pour moi ? Ce que ça peut être femelle une femme . »[361]

This last line echoes Despentes's description of Pauline's abused mother: "Comme une femme..." Thérèse thinks that abasing herself will bring Marc back and make him stay. She tries to convince Marc to return to their apartment and leave his mother's house: "J'attendais à genoux. 'Plus bas, encore plus bas, toujours plus bas' chuchotaient les roses étiolées de leur tapisserie."[362] Inanimate objects like the roses in the carpet often speak to Leduc in a second person address, usually in a moment of derision. In *La Folie en tête*, when Violette is offered the

[358] *Ravages* 146.
[359] *Ravages* 195.
[360] *Ravages* 201.
[361] *Ravages* 230.
[362] *Ravages* 243.

opportunity to write a short piece for a news magazine, she describes her conflicted feelings through a dialogue with the sparkles found in the metro steps. The sparkles address her in the second person, mocking her for her pretensions of writerly ability: "Tu te gonfles, parasite des grandeurs."[363] Her inner critic is exteriorized in the most humble of objects and surroundings, and the chastisement continues in her relationships with others.

After the roses in the carpet tell Thérèse to lower herself even further, she follows behind Marc on the floor, kissing his feet and hanging on to his legs like a child refusing to let go of a parent. Even when Marc chastises her with "Les esclaves, ça m'a toujours répugné," she continues her professions of devotion :

> Je me traînai derrière lui, je serrai son mollet dans mes bras.
>
> ...
>
> J'abaissai sa chaussette de fil, je caressai son mollet, j'idolâtrai sa cheville.
>
> ...
>
> Il me donna un coup de talon sans le vouloir. Il m'écrasa la main ; je poussai un rugissement de plaisir.
>
> ...
>
> Sois moins gentil ... [364]

"Sois moins gentil" sums up a significant number Leduc's entreaties to her lovers. She interprets their attention and anger with her as affection and interest. Like a child for whom any attention is pleasing, or a young couple who sees angst and discord as signs of the strength of their sentiments, Leduc seeks affirmation of her power to make others pay attention. Leduc's characters are then both petulant lovers but also women who reject certain ways of being, instead choosing ways of unbecoming.

Unbecoming, unthinking, and unlearning can be brought into focus visually as well as in writing. Nikolaj Lübecker's theorization of the "feel-bad film" highlights characteristics in common with the writing under discussion here. Indeed, the works of Leduc and Despentes could be described as "feel-bad novels." For Lübecker, the feel-bad film is characterized by getting on the spectator's nerves, making them uncomfortable, frustrating their desires, and being generally unpleasant: "the film produces a spectatorial desire, but then blocks its satisfaction; *it creates, and then deadlocks*, *our desire for catharsis*."[365] Feel-bad films aim for the body of the spectator, but not in the same way as other genres that aim for the body (horror, porn and melodrama). Because feel-bad films don't offer catharsis, they offer generic subversion. Creators of feel-bad films "... maximize the possibility of bodily displeasure (and the potential for

[363] *La Bâtarde* 312.
[364] *Ravages* 246.
[365] Lübecker 2, italics are the author's.

annoying spectators who prefer a clear distinction between high and low status genres)."[366] We can think back here to Bourcier's observation that issues of censorship often arise when there is a mixing of genres, as defined by those who maintain the cultural status quo. For this reason, the perceived mixing of literature with pornography in *Ravages* would lead to censorship, and to *Thérèse et Isabelle* serving as the abjected portion of the text which shores up the integrity of the rest of the book, allowing it to be published. Despentes plays with these distinctions often; the chapters of her "trash literature" are peppered with literary allusions, quotations, and epigraphs. She cites Baudelaire and Virginia Woolf while narrating stories of sexual violence. The discomfort, while not cathartic, is productive. Lübecker sees feel-bad films as sharing with the avant-garde "... an interest in confronting the body of the spectator, and they also explore whether transgression and unpleasure can lead to emancipation."[367] We can add a new "un" substantive to our list – the productive potential in the "unpleasurable." While we can certainly relate this concept to Despentes, especially in her work as a filmmaker, it strikes me as even more applicable to the work of Leduc. She takes a form of pleasure in unpleasure, and unpleasure is essential to her existence and to her writing.

Halberstam explores the films of Michael Haneke as a way of illustrating one tenet of shadow feminism, the power of passivity: "The antisocial dictates an unbecoming, a cleaving to that which seems to shame or annihilate, and a radical passivity allows for the inhabiting of femininity with a difference."[368] This idea of inhabiting femininity *autrement* broadens the possibilities of both what it means to be a woman and what it means to resist those definitions and identities. Halberstam notes that "masochism is an underused way of considering the relationship between self and other, self and technology, and self and power in queer feminism."[369] Halberstam's discussion of Yoko Ono's 1964 performance of "Cut Piece" illustrates some of her points about undoing accepted practices and embracing passive or unbecoming gestures. In "Cut Piece," Ono sits on a stage for nine minutes while members of the audience cut off pieces of her clothing. The cuts become more aggressive over time and the piece finished with her nearly naked. Halberstam sees this performance and permission for cutting as

[366] Lübecker 3.
[367] Lübecker 13.
[368] Halberstam 144. Works of art that enact the ideas of shadow feminism could be grouped aesthetically into the category of "sadomodernism," a term created by Moira Weigel in discussing violent sex in the films of Michael Haneke (also discussed by Lübecker) and inscribes Despentes in the same aesthetic category: "Extreme violence to women is a defining feature of a French sadomodernism that critic James Quandt has called the 'New French Extremity.' These sadomodernists, among them several notable female directors, combine shocking content with experiments in narrative structure and visual style that distinguish their work from straight pornography. Virginie Despentes and the former pornographic actress Coralie Trinh Thi made *Rape Me*, about a sex-and-shooting junket that two young women, who meet by chance, go on after one is gang-raped (Trinh Thi told an interviewer at the *Sunday Times* that her film 'was not for masturbation, is not porn.' Despentes agreed that it was 'not erotic'). Shot on digital video in two months with no artificial lighting, its low-budget look seems to resist conventional tricks for glamorizing the female body on-screen, while also offering a snuff-ish authenticity," Moira Weigel, "Sadomodernism: Haneke in Furs", *N + 1*, Issue 16: Double Bind, Spring 2013, 142. If Leduc's version of the bad feels is that of unpleasure, Despentes's is that of sadomodernism. Indeed, Haneke's films function as a juncture of analysis for Lübecker, Weigel, and Halberstam. By writing in modes of unpleasure and sadomodernism, Leduc and Despentes give literary weight to Halberstam's theorizations of shadow feminism.
[369] Halberstam 145.

representing the fragmentation of the female self and masochism as a vehicle for feminist commentary:

> Her stillness, punctuated only by an involuntary flinch seven minutes into the event, like the masochistic cuts in *The Piano Teacher* and the refusals of love in *Autobiography of my Mother*, offers quiet masochistic gestures that invite us to unthink sex as that alluring narrative of connection and liberation and think it anew as the site of failure and unbecoming conduct.[370]

We can think of unbecoming both as an adjective – unattractive or inappropriate (e.g., unbecoming behavior), and also as a verb – i.e., to unbecome what we have become in response to the world:[371] This unbecoming, or radical passivity, is not a notion to which Leduc always subscribes. When she suffers the literal and figurative cuts to her manuscript, she rants, rages, and turns in on herself. She does not have the framework which Despentes will develop to turn her rage outward and theorize the slicing of her manuscript as evidence of the failures of others to be comfortable when faced with her text, or even the failure of the idea that a reader must be comfortable when facing a text. Leduc's texts, like Despentes's, don't work to make us comfortable. And that is one of the ways in which their work represents queer texts, meaning that one does not sink into their words in a frictionless way, as one sinks into a comfortable chair (or as one mostly sinks into Colette's writing— her writing frequently, though certainly not entirely, describes moving through the world without much friction).[372] Queer texts and feel-bad films, though not the same, cause us to cringe, to question, to feel shame, and to be disturbed.

In works like the queer texts described above, the potential for power exists in the negativity (Halberstam) or the abjecting (Scott) of the reader, of the author, and of the characters in the texts. For this reason, we move between what is represented by characters in the texts and how reactions of the reader play a part in this representation. Texts like these can't be analyzed in a vacuum. The body and experiences of the reader are implicated, as are the motivations of the author and the conditions of the production of their literary works. Literary, social, and cultural context matters in how we interpret them. In the *New York Times* book review of Despentes's most recently translated books, the author places Despentes squarely in a genealogy of writing about violence and sex in French literature:

> Despentes's work is frequently situated within a tradition of French extremist art that examines sex — particularly violent sex — with a kind of Flaubertian detachment. Think of the Marquis de Sade; "Story of O"; Georges Bataille's novels; Catherine Millet's memoir, "The Sexual Life of Catherine M."; the films of Catherine Breillat and Claire Denis. The sex in the film version of "Baise-Moi" is unsimulated and, to most people's tastes, not very pretty (gun, anus). Yet "the

[370] Halberstam 145.
[371] There is a facile but essential link between "unbecoming" as verb, as action where the subject unbecomes what society has made them, shedding established roles and aesthetic codes, and "unbecoming" the adjective, often used to describe unfeminine or impolite behavior in women. The action of unbecoming is an unbecoming one by design, in that to unbecome one must risk being unbecoming.
[372] For more on comfort between bodies and objects, see Sara Ahmed, "Queer Feelings", *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 148.

> point is not to be shocking," Despentes has insisted in interviews, "but to change the shape of things."[373]

This categorization of Despentes is not inaccurate – thematically her work is certainly in conversation with those authors cited. But, there is a satirical element too that mocks pseudointellectual bourgeois values that appreciate the writings of Sade but condemn contemporary pornography (*Baise-moi*). Also, sex in Despentes's books is not just all libertinage. Violence and rape play central roles. The comment about the unsimulated sex in *Baise-moi* being, "to most people's tastes, not very pretty (gun, anus)" fails to notice that unsimulated sex needs to be specified here because in almost all cinematographic representations, sex is indeed simulated. Like we will see later when looking at *Les Jolies Choses*, where women try to imitate a certain image of feminine beauty that is already an imitation of an imitation, sex on screen is also a mise-en-abime of represented sexual coupling that follows smooth, aesthetic lines. *Baise-moi*'s unsimulated sex interrupts the easy watching of typical cinematic sex, giving us "unsimulated" or "real" sex. This realness has been considered to be the purview of pornography and not cinema, and here again we have a contrast between "pretty" and "real." Esthetic codes must be changed, as Breillat has said, so that these two terms don't have to seal off representations of sexuality from one another. Certainly, Despentes is not primarily concerned with making sex pretty. But, perhaps, sex isn't supposed to be pretty. It's not supposed to seem "simulated." And in this way, her writing about sex and violence does "change the shape of things." Shadow feminisms offer new conceptual frameworks, changing how we read and think about violence and sex.

III. Corporeality and Counter-Fetishization

Reading Despentes and Leduc side by side has allowed us to foreground issues of displeasure which have a clear relation to the abject subject position that is at the heart of my analyses in this chapter. Now I turn to consider matters of the body which take center stage in Despentes's work, particularly the female body. The corporeal realities of women's existences are described by Despentes in excruciating detail. And this begs the question – how to represent the traditionally unrepresentable? Berressem recalls Kristeva in describing the aesthetic challenges that representing the abject presents: "Too close to the subject to be experienced as either sublime, beautiful or ugly *o*bjects, *a*bjects cannot be 'assimilated' (14) and thus they cannot be contained by aesthetic (or also anti-aesthetic) parameters."[374] The aesthetic and formal codes must be challenged in addition to the thematic ones. It is not insignificant that both Leduc and Despentes write in strong and unique voices and both have very distinctive writing styles. They are fighting an uphill aesthetic battle, given "the close connection between concepts of (gendered) identity and categories of the (un)aesthetic ... In cultural production, what is perceived as 'disgusting' or unaesthetic is often correlated with insights into the instability and the fragmentary nature of the self ..."[375] In an aesthetic system that is not set up to appreciate the female body outside of its consumption by the male gaze, works of cultural production that

[373] Sehgal, "French Feminist Pulp That Spares No Pain."
[374] Berressem 21.
[375] Kutzbach and Mueller 7.

describe "ugly" bodies will be thought of as "ugly" themselves. In an interview with Virginie Despentes, Catherine Breillat explains why writers and directors such as herself and Despentes focus on what is deemed abject and disgusting: "Il faut changer les codes esthétiques. On peut se mettre à aimer et trouver beau le coulant, le suintant. Le dégoût moral est d'ordre esthétique. Il faut affronter le fait que l'organique effraie ... " [376] This is exactly what Despentes does in *Baise-moi* and in her other works, challenging aesthetic codes and presenting new discursive depictions of the female body.

In *Baise-moi*, discourses about women's menstrual cycles, their contamination, and their uncleanliness, are distilled into the corporal excess reclaimed by Manu who makes designs on the carpet and on her body with her menstrual blood: "Ça sent bon dedans, enfin faut aimer."[377] The hyper-naturalism of Despentes's writing is apparent here, as the female body is both opened up for examination and also reclaims a pleasurable corporality in spite of the prevailing discourses condemning all that flows from the female body as contaminating. Manu's childlike pleasure in making her designs denotes a performance by and for herself: "C'est spectacle, merde, ça fait plaisir à voir."[378] Embodied experience can't exist outside of the discursive regimes in which it exists and which helped to create it. To this end, *Baise-moi* parodies classic and canonical texts in order to question the possibility of writing from both inside and outside of the female body. Manu "[leaves] behind a blood-spattered scene reminiscent of an entire tradition of aesthetic tableaux depicting the beauty of the dead female body. In these passages, the shameful or disgusting materiality of the female body is redeemed as art."[379] This tradition is upheld in contemporary entertainment (think of many scenes from *Game of Thrones* or *True Detective*). While dead, bloodied and naked female corpses allow for the "disgusting" material reality of the female body to be redeemed as an aesthetic trope, living breathing female bodies that excrete and bleed challenge those tropes. Just as Manu finds pleasure and spectacle in her menstrual blood, Leduc sees blood as powerful: "Je vendrai après leur avoir expliqué leurs rêves : l'eau sale mène aux ennuis, les fleurs seront des pleurs, les enfants sont des présages de tourment, mais le sang, femmes, le sang c'est notre victoire."[380] There is an appreciation for and revalorization of abject female bodies and bodily fluids, while still talking about corporeal "excess" without euphemism. While Leduc and Despentes are both

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[376] "Trois femmes s'emparent du sexe, " *Libération*, 13 June 2010.
[377] *Baise-moi* 152.
[378] *Baise-moi* 153. Here I'd like to draw upon Celine Parreñas Shimizu's notion of "productive perversity," that the embrace of hypersexuality enables a critique of the power of normalcy (See Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, Durham: Duke UP, 2007. Chapter 1 "The Hypersexuality of Asian/American Women: Toward a Politically Productive Perversity on Screen and Scene," 1-29). While Shimizu explores this notion in terms of race, gender and sexuality with regards to Asian American women in film and pornography, I believe that it also provokes interesting questions about the "hyper" violence (perhaps akin to "hypernaturalism" that Sanyal describes about Despentes) and abjection in *Baise-moi* and other works. Like Foucault, Shimizu reminds us that one's truth is not necessarily located in sex and that we need to look at sex with appreciation for its "quality of unknowability." Linda Williams in her extensive study of hard core pornography posited that for much of hard core, the object is to "see" and therefore to "know" pleasure (See Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* UC Press, 1999, and *Screening Sex*, Duke UP 2008). Unlike many of the now classic hard core films that she studied, seeing does not equal knowing in the works in my discussion. Pleasure, knowledge, and the gaze are all troubled by these works.
[379] Sanyal 166.
[380] *Ravages* 160.

talking about blood and the female body, they do it in very different ways. Leduc's writing in imagistic in a way that Despentes's is not. Her lyrical, metaphorical prose about seemingly base subject matter begins to turn around the abject and make it a vehicle for poetic description. It allows the abject matter to take on literary qualities. What Leduc makes beautiful and literary, Despentes drops bluntly on her readers and viewers. She also comments on the spectacular nature of the abject, in this case women's bodily fluids. Instead of abjecting them to maintain a whole, pure self, these "excesses" are tools of pleasure and performance.

Corporeal excess, bodily fluids, and hypersexuality lead to writing about sex work by Leduc and Despentes, and also to the troublesome relationship between writing and prostitution. Where does exploitation end and reconstruction of the self begin? Writing and other forms of artistic expression are often taken as tools for reclaiming agency, as Halberstam explains when interpreting works of art that express radical passivity or productive failure. This seems to hold true for Leduc and Despentes as well, however, it is also complicated by the way that writing is metaphorically attached to sex work in their writing. From these authors, we encounter both writing about prostitution and the postulate that writing is a form of prostitution.[381] In *Ravages,* Thérèse thinks about buying and selling while waiting for Cécile to write back to her : "L'argent m'entrera dans le sexe comme il entre dans la fente d'une machine à sous."[382] Despentes also speaks of her "sexe" in monetary terms : "La prostitution a été une étape cruciale, dans mon cas, de reconstruction après le viol. Une entreprise de dédommagement, billet après billet, de ce qui m'avait été pris par la brutalité. Ce que je pouvais vendre, à chaque client, je l'avais donc gardé intact."[383] Both writers assimilate their bodies to their pay, their genitals serving as product and financial repository. Both authors also discuss explicitly the ties between prostitution and writing. Leduc talks about writers exploiting their younger selves for their stories, and Despentes likens putting her words in circulation to the act of prostituting oneself. Exploitation and reconstruction of the self, both as a writer and a prostitute, may then be co-constitutive. In an exploitive system of sexuality, in which women are told that their bodies are disgusting but yet that these very bodies are the only thing that constitutes their real value, how does sex work allow for empowering experience? Taking an active role in one's own sexualization/fetishization by others can provide some possibilities.

Mireille Miller-Young suggests an important difference between women in hip hop being exploited and fetishized and exploiting or fetishizing themselves for power and material gain, with a consciousness of the system in which they are acting. "Counter-fetishization", as Miller-Young describes it, is self-authored fetishization that takes place at the nexus of self-exploitation and reclaiming power.[384] Counter-fetishization implies a willfulness, like the willfully abject characters in Leduc and Despentes. There is an agency that is acquired through

[381] The seminal works of Claude Levi-Strauss, Luce Irigaray, and Gayle Rubin permit us to compare the circulation of women among men to the circulation of goods among consumers. Leah Hewitt, in analyzing women's life-writing, discusses how the author puts herself in circulation, much as her text circulates. Rita Felski brings this train of thought into dialogue with the concept of the "modern" in *The Gender of Modernity*. She posits women as both objects of consumption and consuming subjects with the advent of the department store and the rise of the bourgeois class.
[382] *Ravages* 160.
[383] *KKT* 72.
[384] Mireille Miller-Young, "Hip Hop Honeys + Da Hustlaz: The Black Sexual Subject in the New Hip-Hop Pornography," *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*.

abjection and one's responses to it. Miller-Young discusses the fetishization of hypersexualized Black bodies in the genres of hip-hop and pornography. Her awareness of the capitalist system in which the production of sexual desires and products take place and of the material realities of performers and sex workers echoes observations made by Despentes on behalf of her marginalized characters, particularly female sex workers. Although Despentes's strip club and Colette's music-hall conjure very different images and very different groups of readers, I see these sites as interrelated. The idea of counter- or self-fetishization can be considered a descendant of Colette's "self-fashioning." Shaping and/or displaying oneself to at once earn a living and enjoy a degree of self-determination is a process constantly visible in the works of Colette, Leduc, and Despentes.

An oft-overlooked novel of Despentes's explores some of these questions. *Les Chiennes Savantes* was Despentes's second novel, published in 1996. Riffing on Molière's *Les Femmes Savantes*, the novel explores issues of gender and bienséance but in a very different time and setting. The bulk of the novel takes place at a strip club, where in typical Despentes style the reader is introduced to a rotating cast of characters who form a literary mosaic of Lyon's underclass. I see the title as being related (if not purposefully, certainly in a happy accident) with one of the nouvelles in Colette's *L'Envers du music-hall*, entitled "Chiens Savants." Like in Despentes's work, Colette is exploring "l'envers", the underside or backstage of mostly female performers in the often exploitative music-hall profession. In "Chiens Savants," dogs who perform as part of the musical act fight out of jealousy because only one of them can sleep with the trainer at night. This suggests a paradigm for why women in exploitive working conditions (like Lucie or the other strippers in *Les Chiennes Savantes*) don't help each other more. The structure is set up to encourage competition and prevent collective action by creating the false premise that only one or a few can succeed.[385] Despentes's title makes the connection explicit between female performers and the animalistic and derogatory views of them held by their customers and pimps.

In *Les Chiennes Savantes*, Lucie, a stripper who works in a peep-show, falls for Victor, a criminal and bad boy, who rapes/deflowers her.[386] Lucie's observations and sensations during sex with Victor contain a multitude of messy, counterintuitive corporeal understandings:

> Je me découvrais le bas-ventre capable de grandes émotions, lui dedans moi, j'avais été conçue pour ça, balbutier, me cambrer et me faire défoncer.
>
> Ça n'avait rien d'érotique ni d'évanescent, aucun tripotage raffiné là-dedans, pas d'attente éreintante, pas de choses du bout des doigts. Que du poids lourd, du qui-s'enfonce-jusqu'à-la-garde et les couilles viennent cogner l'entrejambe, foutre giclant pleine face, seins malmenés pour

[385] For more analysis of labor practices as represented in Colette, see Margaret E. Gray, "Cross-undressing in Colette: Performance, gender and music-hall labour practice."
[386] This invites comparisons to the canonical rape/deflowering scene in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles.*

> qu'il se branle entre, se faire coller au mur. De la chevauchée rude, je me désensevelissais les sens au Kärcher, j'étais très loin de ce qui est doux.
>
> La gestuelle avait un caractère sacré, l'ardeur barbare des histoires de viande crue, il y avait dans ces choses une notion d'urgence, de soulagement final, qui en faisait un emportement mystique et radical : l'essence même de moi, il l'extirpait. L'essentiel de moi lui revenait.[387]

While essential and essence might be words that Despentes would no longer use to describe a woman's sexual experience, as nothing about her theorization of sexuality or of feminism for that matter is essentialist, this passage manages to combine descriptions of pleasure and pain, and of sex as extremely physical and even violent. It also extends Lucie's sense of self and her sexual knowledge. Lucie's phrase "j'étais très loin de ce qui est doux" acknowledges both a cultural script in terms of what she should desire and the fact that she has gone off-script. She is inhabiting female sexuality with a difference.[388] From inhabiting femininity with a difference we can trace a path to bringing new subjectivities into being. Despentes's writing style when it comes to sex differs greatly from Colette's and Leduc's. Colette is often lyrical and euphemistic, and Leduc is imagistic and depressing. While Leduc's sex scenes can be violent and disturbing, they don't contain the same potential for discovery and creation that Despentes's do. Scenes of violent or abject penetration in Despentes like the one cited above leave open a bit of space for pleasure in negating the self, or in "assimilating the foreign" as Scott says. Thinking about different kinds of oppression together, as Scott does in his theorization of the abject, helps to structure the potential for power in part due to an experience of violent abjection. In this passage, Despentes writes a sex scene that is both "cru" but also "mystique et radical." For Lucie, an economically marginalized sex-worker who gets taken advantage of physically and financially, this sexual experience can be revelatory. It also reveals an additional overlap between writing and sex work, a connection that is explored by both Despentes and Leduc. From their embodied experiences as sex workers, the comparison of that work to the work of writing explores another abjected position which creates new possibilities for expression. By exploring new types of writing and experiences, especially when it comes to sex, Despentes presents new options for writing and thinking women and sex and work.

In order to change the aesthetic codes where the representation of women is concerned, both form and content need to be challenged:

> *Baise-Moi*'s trashy scenarios of revenge expose the underlying logics of systemic oppression – by race, class, and sex – through what can be called a process of corporealization. Like Rachilde, albeit in a completely different literary and historical register, Despentes challenges an aesthetic tradition that derealizes matter and fixes it into form by probing into the layers of aggression, shame, and abjection that condition a woman's emergence into being.[389]

The process of corporealization leads to embodied writing that does not avoid the abject or the ambivalent. In this way, subjectivity is broadened and subjects do not have to expel parts of

[387] *Les Chiennes Savantes* 182.
[388] See Halberstam 144.
[389] Sanyal 157.

themselves or their identities in order to feel or to be considered whole. And while having a strong boundary of selfhood might seem like the ideal experience of subjectivity, Despentes's characters can be whole while at the same time being broken: "*Baise-Moi* depicts the female body as an abject, vulnerable thing that harbors the scar of social violence at its very core. Manu's sense of osmosis translates a fractured, permeable subjectivity that emerges through violation."[390] One could indeed argue that the normal state of vulnerable bodies is porous and fractured. Instead then of holding up an impermeable sense of self and an impenetrable body as the goal, a greater understanding of corporeal realities and embodied experiences could be sought out. Despentes has certainly put this seeking into writing.[391] Like turning a globe, Despentes initiates a change of perspective. Instead of viewing rape as a solitary act involving a single suffering victim, Despentes turns the focus to rape as a tool, as an epidemic, and as an experience of the perpetrator as well. Here, the social body is not constituted through the abjecting of rape. Rape is not simply an abject act - the disgusting exception that constitutes the "wholesome" whole – it is at the center of how society is organized.

The experience of sexual violence by women in positions of socioeconomic vulnerability thus has the potential to unlock space in literature for representing permeable subjectivities. Berlant suggests that sex can be a catalyst for "making a world for what doesn't work,"[392] and we could add to this formulation that sexual violence is a particularly acute experience of "what doesn't work." Halberstam makes space for the not-working and the sexually violent, and without praising this violence mines it for meaning (and unmeaning). Moving from sexual violence to sexuality in general, Halbertsam encourages us to "unthink" sex, and perhaps there are ways in which sexuality can be a vehicle for unbecoming, or temporary ways of becoming. In *King Kong Théorie*, Despentes systematically recounts her experiences with rape, prostitution and pornography, and then dismantles preconceived notions about each. Despentes calls into question the stories that we as a society tell ourselves, and especially calls into question our knowledge of sexuality and of the existences of the marginalized. While writing with the autobiographical "I" of her personal experiences of rape and prostitution, she also cites the work of mostly pro-sex American feminists whose works explores the intersectional effects of race, class and gender. In this way, Despentes finds theoretical support to help frame the telling of her story and lends both her story and firsthand knowledge to support theory.

She describes rape as a widespread, constant epidemic, as opposed to the conception of rape as an isolated incident which one might expect from an autobiographical narrative. Despentes also flips the discussion on rape from female victims to male perpetrators, describing the discursive techniques sanctioned by society that are used to describe a rape using anything but that word. Despentes further recounts her own experiences working as an occasional prostitute during the days of the Minitel. She is adamantly pro-legalization of prostitution and denounces what she sees as the hypocrisy of anti-legalization feminists. In *Apocalypse Bébé*, she is the able to de-mystify prostitution by comparing it to other forms of work: drug dealing, detective work, writing, and being an academic. With these comparisons, she removes the shock

[390] Sanyal 160.
[391] Natalie Edwards, in "Rape and Repetition: Virginie Despentes and the Rewriting of Trauma," points out how Despentes confront myths and established narratives about rape.
[392] Berlant afterword to Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 125.

value and moral baggage that accompany discussions of prostitution. She also forces a rethinking of writing, academic life, and prostitution by bringing them into contact with each other and showing how they overlap. The different strands of shadow feminism that we have looked at, including masochism, sexual violence and rape, passivity, unpleasure, failure, and abjection all meet in Despentes's 2010 novel *Apocalypse Bébé.*

Apocalypse Bébé is a post-modern *policier* in which the importance of knowledge - who knows what, and when - is exemplified by Despentes's kaleidoscopic narrative technique, which layers characters' experiences on top of but also intertwined with one another (the narrative structure is akin to that of nachos, with different yet complementary parts forming a heterogeneous whole). Information is shared or dissimulated by private eyes, state and religious authorities, and bourgeois *chefs de famille*. The search for knowledge and the confirmation of its veracity in tracking down a teenage runaway is mirrored by the protagonist's slow and at times clumsy discovery of sexual knowledge and lesbian relationships. And as our detectives struggle to piece together the facts of the case, their "enquête" parallels a questioning of how we go about acquiring and interpreting knowledge. In *Apocalypse Bébé*, we read fictional illustrations of theory and fictional supports to Despentes's autobiographical narrative. For example, a remark between detectives about the possibility of a teenage girl running away because she was gang-raped, "... si toutes les gamines qui se font violer se sauvaient, il n'y en aurait plus beaucoup dans les maisons ..."[393] echoes Despentes's arguments about the prevalence of rape across all social classes in *King Kong Théorie.*

Chapters narrated in the first person by the protagonist Lucie alternate with individual chapters dedicated to other characters, each with a third person omniscient narrator. This technique creates a sort of narrative layering, in which facts are revealed, covered up or have their meaning completely changed depending on the narrator. The protagonist, Lucie, is a physically unattractive private detective who is unsuccessful in her relationships and in her profession. She tells the reader that the only thing she is successful at is being invisible to those around her. She doesn't question generally accepted stereotypes or received knowledge, until later in the novel when her partner, La Hyène, calls into questions her unexamined beliefs. La Hyène is an out and assertive lesbian, and initially, Lucie doesn't hesitate to repeat derogatory remarks about lesbians that litter popular culture. For example, after an interview, Lucie's partner says to her:

> - La petite très jolie là, j'ai pas compris si c'était un bébé gouine ou si je la trouvais tellement ravissante que j'ai pris mes désirs pour des réalités.
>
> - Mais il n'y a que ça qui t'intéresse, toi ? Atterris : elle est beaucoup trop jolie pour être gouine.
>
> Je regrette ce que j'ai dit au moment où je le dis, parce que ça me semble particulièrement blessant, mais elle me regarde fixement deux secondes, puis éclate de rire :
>
> - Toi, ton cerveau, c'est Jurassic Park en live.

[393] *AB* 142.

Through witty dialogue and empathy for Lucie's pitiful received knowledge, Despentes both mocks and de-stabilizes her position. And this is something that often gets overlooked in Despentes: critics talk about her obscene language and the violence and sex in her writing, and forget about her humor. Evidently, Despentes's work shocks and unsettles, but it also makes us laugh in intelligent ways. Here, the supposedly knowledgeable private detective whose job it is to unravel the mystery and explain it to the reader, is revealed to be both ignorant and inexperienced. She clearly suffers from some kind of internalized homophobia (not questioning received knowledge) and has bought into derogatory stereotypes about lesbians. But over the course of the novel, Lucie receives edification on lesbian identity and sexuality. This is thanks to her unlikely partner, nicknamed La Hyène, who is an amalgam of stereotypes: she is a virile and slightly androgynous yet sexy lesbian detective who beats up male suspects and seduces women left and right. When Lucie remarks that the teenage girls who the Hyena was catcalling might find her comments hurtful, she retorts:

> Blessant? Mais non, c'est des hétéros, elles ont l'habitude d'être traitées comme des chiennes, elles trouvent ça normal. Ce qui les change, c'est que ça vienne d'une superbe créature, comme moi. Même si elles ne s'en rendent pas compte, ça allume une faible lueur d'utopie dans leurs pauvres petites têtes asphyxiées par la beauferie hétérocentrée.

Although it is Lucie who seeks the Hyena's help to track down 15 year-old Valentine who has run away from home in Paris to Barcelona, it will be the Hyena who provides intelligible models and information to Lucie on ways of being, of loving, of investigating, and of knowing. Indeed, just as *Baise-moi* has been called an updated version of the film *Thelma and Louise*, Lucie and La Hyène's relationship mimics that of a buddy cop film.

As mentioned previously when discussing *Apocalypse Bébé*, Lucie's acquisition of sexual knowledge parallels her investigation into Valentine's disappearance. While staying with a friend of the Hyena's in Barcelona, she awakes in the middle of the night and literally stumbles upon a lesbian orgy taking place in the living room. Images of fisting, slapping, spanking, cutting, and squirting, in various configurations, shock and trouble her. These images echo Schaal's analysis of BDSM games in Delorme as potential sites of resistance. But Lucie is not yet capable of seeing this : "La vision est si inhabituelle que j'ai du mal à en décoder les éléments."[394] This decoding, which takes place both immediately as Lucie rushes back to the ideological safety of her room, and also over the rest of the novel as Lucie falls in love with a woman, is possible thanks to the tools furnished by the Hyena. And in order to truly define what she is experiencing, Lucie has to re-write the cultural script. On the back of her new lover's motorcycle, she says,

> Je me dis que c'est bon comme d'avoir quatorze ans. Mais c'est faux. Jamais ça n'a été doux comme ça, avoir quatorze ans. Au contraire, c'était dur et aride, c'était le pire moment de la vie. Je n'ai jamais été princesse. La vie était remplie d'humiliations, interdictions brutales, échecs et incapacité.[395]

[394] *AB* 174.
[395] *AB* 294-295.

The last sentence could be a quote from a novel of Leduc's, as it captures succinctly both her and Lucie's relationships to the larger world and their place in it. Lucie's new experience of love only truly makes sense when she sees her instinctive remarks, or narrative tendencies, for what they are: false, and a far cry from her own experiences. These false memories constitute the only template she has for this kind of feeling. Here again Despentes interrogates ways of narrating and of knowing, and contradicts typical ways of telling stories about love and sex. Later when Lucie discovers sex with a woman she remarks on the different tempo and rhythm of their physical relationship. With her newly acquired bodily knowledge, even time is subject to revision.

These discoveries point Lucie in the direction of unbecoming, in order to make room for becoming something and someone else. She also moves from an abjected position on the exterior of society and its narratives about love and success, and instead opts for a less fixed position in a less sure narrative. This opting out recalls Halberstam's theorization of passivity, and failing out of systems that don't serve one's selfhood. Despentes points to this process of unbecoming, by calling out the stories and knowledge Lucie has received about love and sex. There has to be some undoing, some serious shifting in both the exterior and interior planes of existence to make space for something other.

Natalie Edwards describes Lucie's narrative arc, which differs from that of male protagonists from nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels:

> ... the road trip in pursuit of the elusive teenager has become a Bildungsroman for Lucie, but not one that works according to the motif of a young, male protagonist moving from the provinces to the urban centre and undergoing experiences that solidify his growing character. Instead, middle-aged Lucie is brought into circumstances that force her to unlearn what she has previously learned about intimacy, desire and sentiment, and lead her to reject modes of identity upon which she has previously rested.[396]

This observation is where I draw the term unlearning from, and from there link it to failure. Lucie's failure to fit, to comprehend, and to succeed, all lead to unlearning and to a different kind of success.

I'd like to return to the question of what it means to narrate the self through literary text. For Despentes, the sensations of not fitting, whether as a woman or as a writer, are translated into the language of her texts. Rejecting academic discourse or hacking it up to suit her purposes enables her to challenge aesthetic codes and dismantle discursive regimes that limit the ability to recount embodied experience. The various genres and narrative techniques on which Despentes draws allow her to depict the instability of the lives of her protagonists and demonstrate the lack of a single form or condition of feminine subjectivity. The embodied experiences of her characters create new aesthetic codes, as Sanyal reminds us: "Despentes's heroines may be read as rebellious artists who stage the victory of organic content over aesthetic form, thereby rejecting the disembodied formalism associated with masculine models of creativity."[397] The genres in the final two works discussed in the next section, from autobiography to theory to

[396] Natalie Edwards, "Feminist Manifesto or Hardcore Porn? Virginie Despentes's Transgression."
[397] Sanyal 166.

fiction, form a sort of prism through which Despentes's sustained critique of the status quo is focused and strengthened by the variety of genres on which it draws.

IV. Self-Fashioning: Failures and Formations of Femininity

The exploration of the diversity of conditions for the formation of femininity and female identity is an area of rapprochement between Despentes and Colette. Two authors seemingly on opposite ends of the "women writers" spectrum, and at opposite ends of the 20th century, explore in what I see as complementary ways the formation and failure of/at femininity. We will be looking closely here at two of Despentes's lesser-known works, *Les Jolies Choses* and *Bye Bye Blondie*. *Les Jolies Choses* (1998) won the *Prix de Flore*, two years after Michel Houellebecq and the year before Guillaume Dustan. The film version came out in 2001, but was neither adapted nor directed by Despentes, as 2000's film version of *Baise-moi* was. The film stars Marion Cotillard, who plays the roles of both twin sisters, Lucie and Marie. For this performance she was nominated for the *César du meilleur espoir féminin*. Patrick Bruel plays a sleazy music company executive who seduces and exploits her. This book hasn't been much talked about – probably because it came out before the 2000 scandal with the film *Baise-moi* and because the film adaptation of it came out in 2001 when the scandal from *Baise-moi* hadn't yet died down.

Like Colette, Despentes explores questions of gender failure, conformity, and "travestissement." Colette writes in *Mes Apprentissages* of the sometimes playful, sometimes disturbing play on identity and stand-ins between herself, her first famous character Claudine, and the actress Polaire who played Claudine in the theatrical representations of the novels. Willy had the two women, Colette and Polaire, cut their hair in the same fashion and often accompany him out to social occasions dressed alike. And we thus have two women, replacing or standing in for a fictional character, which in a sense could represent how all women are encouraged to continually work on themselves to resemble what "la femme idéale" of the moment is. However, the excess in the display of multiple Claudines created an uneasy sense of the constructed nature of that ideal. This echoes the later mise-en-écriture of Despentes's theory of the ideal woman in *King Kong Théorie*:

> Parce que l'idéal de la femme blanche, séduisante mais pas pute, bien mariée mais pas effacée, travaillant mais sans trop réussir, pour ne pas écraser son homme, mince mais pas névrosée par la nourriture, restant indéfiniment jeune sans se faire défigurer par les chirurgiens de l'esthétique, maman épanouie mais pas accaparée par les couches et les devoirs d'école, bonne maîtresse de maison mais pas bonniche traditionnelle, cultivée mais moins qu'un homme, cette femme blanche heureuse qu'on nous brandit tout le temps sous le nez, celle à laquelle on devrait faire l'effort de ressembler, à part qu'elle a l'air de beaucoup s'emmerder pour pas grand-chose, de toute façon je ne l'ai jamais croisée, nulle part. Je crois bien qu'elle n'existe pas. [398]

Part of Colette's entry into the literary establishment involved gender performance and adherence to a certain appearance and persona. She has to "montrer patte blanche,"[399] first to

[398] *KKT* 13.
[399] *KKT* 137

Willy when he locked her in to write, and then to the world at large, to show that she would "jouer le jeu" of femininity, especially at the very beginning of her career.

Two of the nouvelles from Colette's *Les Vrilles de la vigne* could form pendants to *Les Jolies Choses*. In "Maquillages," Colette explores changing makeup through the generations, describes her makeup store, and her daughter's relationship to makeup. Colette romanticizes makeup, creating in her writing a mise-en-abime of the mise-en-beauté process, both physical and textual. There is also a deconstruction of the beauty of women that is meant to be "created" yet also "natural." In "Le Miroir" there is a dialogue between Colette and Claudine ("Bonjour, mon Sosie!"), Colette being the author and performer and Claudine the character she has both created and embodies. Much like women have a culturally prescribed double identity – the persona they create and show to the world, as well as the woman "underneath" when she removes her makeup, Colette is both of these women separately and simultaneously.[400] "Le Miroir" and "Maquillages" illustrate much of the beauty and creation work that comes into play in *Les Jolies Choses*. Unlike Colette's mostly positive and poetic descriptions of transformation and doubling, Despentes's narration interrogates the violence done to any semblance of selfhood through beauty industry dictates and the male gaze.

Indeed, all three of the authors in this study rigorously reveal the construction of femininity, and, in revealing its construction, show that it is a highly variable social form, experienced as coercion and experienced with pleasure to different degrees in different circumstances. Leduc in her Schiaparelli tailleur and Despentes in her lingerie, are both playing dress-up, both expecting to be called imposters, but realizing that femininity is just a posture, an attitude, a series of costumes and acts that one displays.[401] The opening scene of Colette's *La Vagabonde* underscores this creation of the feminine self through artifice and performance. The protagonist, Renée Néré, sits face to face with herself in the mirror, made up for the stage. She interrogates herself through her reflection. This version of herself is created for public consumption. She prepares to perform for wealthy acquaintances with whom she socialized before her divorce and her subsequent music-hall career which has afforded her independence. But this independence comes with a price. As in Leduc and Despentes, economically vulnerable or precarious women's bodies are put on display (as actors, dancers, strippers, prostitutes) for consumption by others and for their pleasure. The spectacle of their femininity is different from that of women from wealthier classes and socioeconomic categories. There is an exaggerated quality to their femininity and sexuality, and an exaggeration of their corporeal, specular, and sexual availability. Like the pressures on ordinary women to imitate strippers or porn stars who are playing "women," Colette's performance and Despentes's deconstruction of the ideal woman highlight the formation of femininity as an act of imitating an imitation or a fictional creation.[402] Nothing is natural. Colette makes some peace with this and finds some beauty in the process. For her, the liberty or sense of safety that comes with a mask, and the sense of agency or empowerment that comes from (socially scripted) identity formation were infused into her

[400] Cover Girl Cosmetics would seem to be pushing for the collapsing of these two identities, into one that is always made-up and presentable, as with their 2018 advertising slogan "I am what I make up."
[401] On gender performativity, see Butler *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*. Also RuPaul's iteration of gender performativity, "We're all born naked and the rest is drag."
[402] See Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2005).

writing, even if she observed, in texts like *L'Envers du music-hall*, what a high price certain kinds of women paid as a result of their participation in this cultural process.

Les Jolies Choses explores the double identity and twin dynamic with the performativity of womanhood that the Colette/Claudine/Polaire dynamic evokes. Despentes does a bit of self-mythologizing in *King Kong Théorie* when she relates how she came up with the title for *Les Jolies Choses.* She recounts reading the reviews of *Baise-moi*. A critic cites Jean Renoir in remarking that: "les films devraient être faits par de jolies femmes montrant de jolies choses." Despentes follows this critique with : "ça me fera au moins une idée de titre."[403] The title of the novel *Les Jolies Choses* thus works to undermine this critique and also to illuminate what really goes into being a "jolie femme" and what it means to do "jolies choses." Indeed, "les jolies femmes" are in fact "jolies choses" that have been fashioned, worked on, inspected, re-worked, and are under constant surveillance.

Les Jolies Choses presents twin sisters, Pauline and Claudine, who couldn't be more different. Claudine has always wanted to be a star, and always worked and succeeded at attracting the male gaze. She moves to Paris from Province to become a pop star, despite being a mediocre singer. When she finally gets a break and needs to record songs, she calls upon her sister, Pauline, who doesn't subscribe to traditional notions of femininity or beauty work but has a great voice. Claudine hopes to have Pauline pass for her at a demo concert, and then record her songs. Claudine will do the public appearances. It's almost as if the successful female performer cannot be only one woman – it's not enough. In order to incarnate this perfect female projection, the work of many people is involved. While Pauline performs this brief concert as Claudine, the real Claudine remains at home and commits suicide. When Pauline returns to find her sister dead, she (seemingly without hesitation) tells the police officer investigating that the dead women is her sister, Pauline, and that she is Claudine. From this moment forward she takes on the identity of her dead sister and we see humorous and shocking moments as she attempts to "pass" for a young woman who has bought in to every message about feminine beauty and behavior.

The twins are named Claudine and Pauline, although originally "La mère proposa qu'on appelle les jumelles Colette et Claudine, le père s'y oppose fermement ..."[404] We could say that both the author and her characters have Colette on their minds when it comes to thinking about the production of femininity. But it is an open question as to whether Despentes, the mother in the novel, and the father in the novel all react to Colette and her character Claudine in the same way or would see the signification of the names as being the same. Perhaps the father would not want his daughter to emulate the behavior of a somewhat scandalous woman writer. For Despentes, it would seem that what is important in this intertextual echo is Colette's way of underlining the fictionality of femininity and the labor inherent in its public performance. After Claudine's suicide, Pauline takes the place of her sister and only tells a few people her real identity. With those few in private, she is still called Pauline, but in public, and to the public, she is Claudine. However, towards the end of the novel, the lines become further blurred as Despentes now hyphenates the names of her protagonists as alternately Pauline-Claudine or Claudine-Pauline. She is simultaneously one or the other and both, just as Colette is at once both

[403] *KKT* 117.
[404] *LJC* 40.

Colette and Claudine. She cannot simply be herself – that is not enough. She must be an amalgam of all the desirable feminine qualities. Fractured or changing subjectivities are not supported. Indeed, one of the fictional aspects of this performance is the performance of its unity. The interchangeability and repetition also signals the way that social pressure and the work of being and looking properly female creates an entire gendered group that is exchangeable and replaceable if guidelines are not properly adhered to.[405]

And so we learn from Pauline and Claudine what gender failure and successful gender conformity look like and what they can do. In order to pass as Claudine in the music world, Pauline has to learn not only how to work on her appearance but also how to literally "embody" femininity. It is indeed a learned skill. Pauline tries on Claudine's (always short, always tight, always revealing) clothing, and struggles to walk in her high heels: "on dirait un travelo."[406] This brief remark calls up a host of theorizations of gender performativity, including drag performance. Comparing an "unfeminine" woman learning to walk in heels to a man dressed as a woman seems like an attempted insult to both. Neither measures up, but each reveals the theatrical nature and necessary study and practice to achieve a correctly feminine look.

The imagery presented as part of Pauline's transformation into a socially acceptable woman (also, young, hot, sexually available pop star) is powerful and dismantles myths about natural femininity and feminine beauty. At one point, Pauline goes through all of the beauty products in Claudine's bathroom, amazed at the number and variety. Claudine has not only bought in to societal notions of femininity but has also literally bought all of the products marketed to her to achieve that goal. Here we can see Despentes's materialist critique, which dismantles Colette and Leduc's praises of beauty products and the pleasures in their aesthetics and applications. Despentes names many of the products in a sort of Rabelaisian listing of the ridiculous. Then, while in the bath, Pauline throws all of the products in with her. In the film, the scene is visually striking. Marion Cotillard is submerged in the bath, except for her face, surrounded by bottles and jars of every imaginable beauty product. It's Colette's self-fashioning taken to its most extreme conclusion. Like a potion, or a recipe, this product-filled bathtub is the broth from which one emerges as "une femme." The image parodies Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, with woman being born/made from all of the purchased goods rigorously applied to the female body. At the end of the scene in the novel, Despentes sums up the procedure that Pauline is undergoing: "Lutte implacable contre soi-même, surtout ne pas être ce qu'on est."[407] This is a much darker interpretation of female beauty work than Colette's. Instead of self-affirming and self-fashioning in a playful and supposed liberating fashion, the regimen required for feminine beauty compliance is a fight against oneself. It is a constant reminder of always already being in the wrong, for female beauty work is never complete but requires constant vigilance and will become more difficult as women age. In typical Despentes fashion, she doesn't criticize the

[405] The plot echoes nature versus nurture debates and experiments that can't really be carried out. It makes me think of Marivaux's *La Dispute*. But, instead of genetics being equal between twin sisters, in the play the environment is equal between two boys and two girls brought up isolated in a forest to see which sex was the first to be "inconstant" in love. Literature is the laboratory, which we will see again with the work of Preciado.
[406] *LJC* 80.
[407] *LJC* 82.

female protagonist but does condemn the patriarchal capitalist structures that create and impose this system:

> Après des siècles d'interdiction de montrer, femmes sommées d'exhiber qu'elles ont bien tout aux normes, qu'elles se sont calibrées : voilà mes jambes interminables, glabres et hâlées, mon derrière correctement musclé, mon ventre plat nombril percé, mes seins énormes fermes et moulés, ma belle peau saine et pas vieillie, mes cils sont longs, mes cheveux brillants.
>
> Contrairement à ce qu'elle croyait auparavant, il ne s'agit pas d'une soumission aux désirs des hommes. C'est une obéissance aux annonceurs, il faudra que tout le monde y passe. Ils régissent le truc, fil des pages : voilà ce qu'on vend, alors voilà ce qu'il faut être.[408]

In style representative of Despentes, we have here a paratactic first paragraph of specifics. She adds discrete moments and concrete examples on top of each other, each corporeal stipulation and utterance that is assented to or protested against joining the one before without argumentative rhetoric. The second paragraph reflects on the data provided in the first and moves from understanding the demands placed on women as coming from men to understanding them as coming from some well-structured capitalist consumer culture ("voilà ce qu'on vend, alors voilà ce qu'il faut être."). In this way Despentes can rhetorically connect specific examples to larger forces and systems at work in the world. Despentes notably does not blame men for imposing all of these physical requirements on women. She suggests that this system goes beyond either gender and at its base is a question of commercial manipulation. In this way, *Les Jolies Choses* intersperses materialist feminist analysis and critique with the dialogue and action of the novel. The third person omniscient narration allows for this. The creation myth exposed with the bathtub scene could be compared to Pygmalion, but the catch is, there's no sculptor or Professor Higgins directing the transformation – Pauline does it to herself (along with society's help).

The purification/rebirth of Pauline into a "woman," according to codes and norms, is concurrent with her transformation into Claudine, as she convinces those around her that she is indeed her sister. Pauline's transformation into Claudine echoes Colette's willful conversion into the delightful and sprightly Claudine of her books. After this rebirth comes the molding and fashioning, as Pauline enters the world of makeup. Despentes's descriptions of makeup, the makeup table, and applying makeup[409] are reminiscent of Colette and her descriptions of stage make-up, except that in *Les Jolies Choses* there is not a liberating quality to taking on a different identity. This makeup makes Pauline smaller: "Tout l'art du traficage."[410] Trafficking can be thought of not just as applying to women selling their bodies (prostitution), or their words (writing), but also their very identity, appearance, and sense of self.

[408] *LJC* 83.
[409] *LJC* 87-88.
[410] *LJC* 88.

One particular scene in *Les Jolies Choses* echoes the scene in *King Kong Théorie* where Despentes talks about working as a prostitute and transforming herself by putting on the sartorial trappings of "sexy femininity." It's not magic that the other girls have :

> Jamais auparavant elle n'avait cru que c'était possible, sortir comme ça et que personne ne s'exclame : 'Mais qu'est-ce que c'est que cette imposture?' Cette allure qu'elle a, jambes sublimées, silhouette transformée. Et personne ne se rend compte qu'elle n'est pas du tout comme ça. C'est la première fois qu'elle comprend, qu'en fait aucune fille n'est comme ça.[411]

Compare this to a scene that was part of the trailer for the film *Les Jolies Choses*, as though it captured the whole process of transformation and highlighted how bizarre Pauline was before her transformation. Pauline puts on a dress of Claudine's to wear out, and Nicolas is shocked and dismayed at her hairy legs. He insists that the she cannot go out like this, that she has to wax or shave them, and at first, Pauline refuses:

> Mais ton lascar t'a jamais demandé de t'épiler?
>
> Non. C'est pas un lascar, ça doit être pour ça.
>
> Pourquoi il croit que fatalement, juste parce qu'elle est une fille, elle devrait toujours tricher sinon personne ne voudrait d'elle ?[412]

The words "traficage" and "tricher"[413] imply a falseness and a deviousness in Despentes's formulation of beauty work that is not associated with Colette's creating of female beauty. This exchange between Nicolas and Pauline implies that having someone (a man) want her is the most important thing and without this she is nothing, certainly not a woman. Although Despentes's writing insists on the systemic and economic forces at work in the pressures and standards applied to women's physical appearance, she also distills these forces at work at the personal level of her characters. While men don't necessarily dictate correct femininity, women look to them to confirm their adherence to the system and resulting worthiness.

The appellation "lascar" is used throughout the novel, and in many of Despentes's works, as a synonym for "mec" or "guy." It is most often used in dialogue between characters. But, the utilization of this particular word is significant, as unlike "mec" or "type", "lascar" is both raced and classed. Originally the equivalent of something like "bonhomme", in more contemporary usage it implies a young man from the cité. And in French, location is everything. Geography effectively racializes and classes a person. A young man from the cité (cité typically referencing the low-income housing projects located on the periphery of large French cities, in the suburbs) is both read as lower-class and often of North or West African descent. "Lascar" is not pejorative when used by young men from the cité with one another, but does stand out in this passage in how this identity would or should affect the boyfriend's taste in women: "C'est pas un lascar, ça doit être pour ça." Therefore, a man's preferences or demands when it comes to women's appearance also speak to his own style of masculinity and adherence to various norms.

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[411] *LJC* 91.
[412] *LJC* 85.
[413] *LJC* 88 and 85.

In the film, "lascar" became "mec", and in an easy stereotypical joke, Nicolas, upon discovering that Pauline's boyfriend never asked her to remove her body hair, continues by asking her "Il est allemand?" He thereby acknowledges that both masculinity and femininity function differently in different contexts, while implying that the present context is more normative. And, thus, adherence to beauty regimes becomes a marker of normalcy, even a marker of cultural fitness. Despentes astutely comments on both female and male gender identity formation when she muses towards the end of *Les Jolies Choses*, "C'est drôle, comme les hommes ne pensent pas à être complexes…Ne pense qu'à son regard qui se pose et pas penser la réciproque."[414] In addition to her explicit investigation of gender performativity and identity, Despentes distinguishes herself from many of her contemporaries and from the other two authors discussed here by exploring male and non-white experiences. Indeed, she has written male characters and protagonists from both the third and first-person perspectives.

Questions of shadow feminism, of revolt, of violence, and of gendered and sexualized formations of selves and bodies are further on display against the backdrop of mental institutions and psychological treatment in Despentes's 2004 novel *Bye Bye Blondie.* This work pushes the technique of *dédoublement* omnipresent in *Les Jolies Choses* in a different direction. Despentes as usual continues to incorporate class markers and mockeries of those who worship them, but she also gets to portray her most punk female protagonist in her struggles with selfhood, desire, and the crushing structures of the heteronormative nuclear family and the medical/psychological apparatus of the state and health systems.

The film version of the novel would follow in 2011. This film, like *Baise-moi*, was adapted and directed by Despentes. Despentes is a writer whose works benefit from being retold onscreen, especially when the author herself creates the film. This one stars Béatrice Dalle and Emmanuelle Béart playing teenagers from different social classes who fall in love in a psychiatric hospital and come together again as adults, only to be driven apart by their differences. It is interesting to note that in the book and film, Gloria remains a female character, but in the move from book to film, her love interest changes gender. In the book, it is male, Eric, and in the film, female, Frances. But in both cases, Gloria remains working-class and her love interest bourgeois. In fact, transforming her love interest into a woman serves to highlight the class differences more starkly between Gloria and Frances. It's as if to say, they have the same gender, but look at what their upbringing and class has wrought on each of them. And also, while they both are considered "women," look at how class shapes definitions of womanhood. It also gave Despentes and audiences the pleasure of seeing two incredibly talented and powerful actresses play off of one another.

Gloria, a punk teenager in Nancy, has been sent to a psychiatric hospital by her parents, who are at the end of their proverbial rope. In her interview with the psychiatrist, he asks her why she thinks she has been brought there by her parents:

> "Je suis là parce que mon père a commencé à me hurler dessus et qu'au lieu de la fermer j'ai répondu pareil..."

[414] *LJC* 186.

> Mauvais réponse bis, ça se lisait aussi sec sur la tête du vieux.
>
> "Et à votre avis, pourquoi refusez-vous d'être une femme ?
>
> Gloria pensa à garder tout commentaire pour elle-même. Alors comme ça, accepter d'être une femme, c'était prendre des coups sans vouloir les rendre. OK, connard, bien entendu.[415]

Gloria doesn't entirely reject feminine fashioning. She wears makeup, but lots of dark eyeliner and dark lipstick, and she wears skirts, but with torn tights and combat boots, and "... elle était la seule fille de sa connaissance à savoir faire le mur en talons aiguilles..."[416] She's not rejecting all of femininity's trappings, and in fact she's trodding a well-worn path that seems original to her as she traverses her adolescent angst. But we come face-to-face with the idea that there is only one normative way to be feminine, and that if one doesn't subscribe to it then one is pathologized. This question the psychiatrist asks her, "Pourquoi refusez-vous d'être une femme?" ends a section of text, followed by a page break before the next section, thus leaving the question unanswered by the protagonist, although she has already answered it in her narration. The reader fills in her own response as well. But the voice of authority, of medical science, and of patriarchal discipline gets the last word. The doctor gets to question non-adherence to norms and by being questioned alone Gloria is interpellated as an abnormal, defiant subject working against her own interests, which would be to conform to approved notions of feminine beauty and behavior. Gloria has appropriated the tools available to her as a teenage girl (makeup, hairstyle, clothing) to express herself and her non-conforming femininity:

> Le vieux avait noirci quelques pages de commentaires avant de revenir aux sujets qu'il jugeait cruciaux:
>
> Pourquoi vous enlaidir ? Pourquoi cette coupe de cheveux ? Et cette couleur ?

It all comes back to a woman's appearance and the fact that her physical appearance is always open to questioning and interpretation by others. One can never just be. Always "why this and not that?" implying that a wrong choice has been made and that one is in a state of wrongness. After the line break, Gloria resumes her narration, and both Despentes's humor and recourse to punk references help drive home the next point: "Si elle avait été chanteuse dans un groupe, ça lui aurait fait un texte de chanson : " 'SOS, enfermée chez les dingues, le docteur veut que j'aille chez le coiffeur.' Mais là, ça ne lui servait à rien du tout."[417] If she had had this creative outlet, she both could have expressed her pain, and she could have had a public of listeners or bandmates who would have appreciated it. The importance of like-minded peers, of a counter culture to ward off or balance the imposed system is made paramount here. Reading Despentes in concert with Colette and Leduc lets us see the gamut of forces at work in feminine beauty, both interior and exterior. *Bye Bye Blondie* in particular highlights the surveillance of women's adherence to beauty standards by those in power, in this case that of the medical community. Gloria and her love interest are physically abjected from the rest of society, removed and

[415] *Bye Bye Blondie* 53.
[416] *Bye Bye Blondie* 54.
[417] *Bye Bye Blondie* 54.

enclosed in a psychiatric institution until they can successfully adhere to norms. But as Scott suggest, there is potential for power in abjection. Gloria and Frances find romance in their situation and together resist some of the damaging treatments inflicted upon them. With the help of this and other Despentes's novels and films, we can question what success and failure at femininity means in different contexts.

V. Conclusion: Connecting the Ordinary to the Abject

Réné de Ceccatty summarizes the seeming contradictions in Leduc's work : "Elle reviendra très souvent à travers toute son œuvre sur le lien de l'abjection et de la parade, de la misère et de la merveille."[418] These contradictions are prevalent in the works of all three authors under investigation here. But if we think of these authors for a moment in terms of generalities, stereotypes, and literary reputations, they can be neatly categorized. If Colette is *merveille* and Despentes is *misère*, Leduc is both. Colette is "Mes apprentisages," Despentes, through Lucie in *Apocalypse Bébé*, le "désapprentissage." Leduc shares Colette's éloge of the quotidien, and Despentes's depictions of the unspeakable. And the unspeakable/abject and the everyday/ordinary are connected through challenges of representation. Not only can they be linked by content, but also by form. Berressem tackles questions of abjection in literary form and style in analyzing Samuel Delany's short story "On the Unspeakable": "The questions posed by 'On the Unspeakable' are precisely: which subjects, groups or practices does a violently heteronormative culture mark as unspeakable|abject?"[419]

> How can one give a voice|space to the *a*bject and how can one (re)inject it into a culture that has always already excluded it other than by destroying|disrupting the text? When the narrator notes that the unspeakable is 'an area, a topic, a trope impossible to speak of *outside* [...] 'The Everyday'' (141:1; my italics), he points to the fact that both the *a*bject and the quotidian have a problematic relation to representation. While the unspeakable is 'representationally difficult' (141:1) because it is invisible and *outside* of the discursive realm, the 'everyday' is representationally difficult because it is all too visible and fully *inside* the discursive realm. While the unspeakable cannot be easily represented because it is taboo, the everyday cannot be easily represented because of its very 'banal[ity]'(141:1). To represent them, the former has to be stylistically downgraded, its rhetorical figure being the 'euphemism' (142:2), while the latter has to be stylistically upgraded, its corresponding rhetorical figure being the 'hyperbole' (see 142:2).[420]

Despentes also poses and answers these questions – she tackles not only a "violently heteronormative" culture, or as she puts it in *Apocalypse Bébé*, "la beauferie hétérocentrée,"[421] but a violently racist and classist one. If the question is "how to write the unspeakable" Despentes's different works propose several different answers. Novels, films, feminist manifesto

[418] de Ceccatty 69.
[419] Berressem 30.
[420] Berressem 31.
[421] Despentes, *AB* 65.

and autobiography all provide arenas in which she explores just what is unspeakable and how to say it. The everyday figures in Colette are also present in relation to the abject. The aging female body, the music-hall performer excluded from polite society, and the disabled writer who must conform her travels and her work to her physical needs all chronicle everyday struggles that brush up against abjection. Berressem's comments speak to the difficulty of a literary figure like Colette, at some moments too focused on the everyday and at others too scandalous to print or to accept. Leduc also fits into this mold, navigating the literary landscape between euphemism and hyperbole.

We could include aging among the features of the everyday, as something that happens slowly over time as a universal part of human existence (of course, according to current beauty standards, cultural norms, and socioeconomic status one may choose to combat the effects of again or to age differently). But in Colette's work, I see an insistence that feminine aging often constitutes a fall into abjection. While aging does not represent the same types of abjection experienced by marginalized characters in Despentes, Colette shows that there is a kind of aging that is specifically feminine and that has different kinds of impact on different kinds of women. Leduc's work very clearly brings out these gendered and classed aspects of aging as well. Colette specifically narrates sensations of aging, physical decline, pain, reduced mobility and dependence on others. Her sufferings, which she describes good-naturedly, might bring an involuntary sense of repugnance to the reader, as deterioration and decay of one particular female body described in the first person and unaccompanied by poetic anguish is indeed something one might consider as too "ordinary" for great literature. Yet the optimistic, slightly coquettish portrayals of her body in pain bring the physicality of the enterprise of writing to the forefront while adding another element to Colette's depictions of her writing process, which she usually characterized as arduous and slow. This brings us full circle – the ordinary as abject, the abject as ordinary. Life as failing.

Bethany Ladimer's *Colette, Beauvoir, and Duras: Age and Women Writers*, analyzes the portrayal of Léa's aging body in *La Fin de Chéri*. Ladimer sees a moving away from fiction for Colette as she ages, and she equates writing with sensuality for Colette in her later works – the sensual is in her writing and not in physical relationships:

> Throughout Colette's works, one finds in more or less explicit form the notion that as a woman's body ages, it is appropriate and necessary for her to renounce a certain youthful feminine sexuality and, by extension, love relationships with men. Léa's body is repeatedly described in *The End of Chéri* as grotesque, betraying the narrator's fundamental *ambivalence* towards the aging woman's body ... Although Léa has proved to be a survivor and illustrates the inestimable virtue in Colette's universe of adapting to changed reality, I think we must read descriptions like this one as revealing obsessive fears and fantasies rather than as evidence of resolution.[422]

I wouldn't necessarily use the word "ambivalence," as the narrator seems pretty disgusted and dismayed at Léa's changed body. However, as we have seen, ambivalence or ambiguity can serve as a variant of abjection. Confusion, and not fitting into categories, make it difficult to

[422] Ladimer, *Colette, Beauvoir, and Duras*, 61-62, emphasis mine.

differentiate the abject from the whole self. When Chéri sees Léa for the first time since their separation, he doesn't recognize her. Léa "n'était pas monstrueuse, mais vaste", "sans sexe" and "comme un vieil homme."[423] In addition to her corpulent body, Léa is no longer considered feminine. Age has actually stripped her of her gender, as only sexually attractive women can be considered "women." And this confusion and permeating of boundaries lends itself to a constituting of aging as abjection.

In Leduc's works we find repeated lamentations about her body as ugly, skinny, and old. This litany of self-critiques contributes to the sensation of constant scrutiny to which the female body is subjected. Leduc's prose creates a constant whirlwind of insults, hurled by others and also by herself at herself. Between all of the critical voices, there is rarely a moment of peace. However, in Leduc's last book there is some semblance of her having made peace with herself and her body as she settles in to a quiet life in the country. But the earlier self-deprecation and being literally cast aside by others shows abjection as a social process based on the physical.

Berressem cites Kristeva on the possibilities and the limits of abject writing: "Abject writing, then, 'perverts language – style and content' (16). It expresses 'the sudden irruption of *affect*' (53). This affect, however, is invariably a 'written affect' (203), because 'in abjection, revolt is completely within [...] the being of language' (45)."[424] Writing that perverts language and allows for the "irruption of affect" is an incredibly accurate description of Despentes's writing. Indeed, her work was often categorized as "trash literature" i.e. the waste that is thrown out/expelled to maintain the rest of literature intact and uncontaminated, especially before her nomination to the *Académie Goncourt*. Her writing "perverts" matter and form, content and style. In order to challenge the way that society marginalizes people, her work asserts, their portrayals also have to be challenged ("Il faut changer les codes esthétiques").[425]

In the same vein, Despentes's penchant for writing from the perspective of the "looseuse" is an enlightening glimpse into failure's literary potential. So many of her characters are those situated on the outside, looking in (like Leduc), in terms of class, race, gender, physical appearance, sexual desires and professional success. This connects to the idea of writing from the margins, or the periphery, which Ross Chambers explored in Colette. These concepts and actions represent a submission of the self to a larger sense of being, outside of defined boundaries, or not contained by them. And this submission to and blurring of boundaries is what connects abjection to the ordinary in literature, and allows us to see, to rethink, and to unlearn.

[423] *La Fin de Chéri* 586.
[424] Berressem 37.
[425] "Trois femmes s'emparent du sexe, " *Libération*.

Coda: Beyond "Women's Writing"?

Now that we have examined the works of these three authors in concert with conceptions of the ordinary, the failed, and the abject, we can broaden and re-interpret Cixous's definition of *écriture feminine* to include more complete, more contemporary, perhaps less celebratory but more uncompromising writing. In this section, I take up Hélène Cixous's groundbreaking essay "Le Rire de la Méduse" from 1973 in which she launched the concept of *écriture feminine*. While this concept is intertwined with the works of Colette and even identified with her, the concept itself in some ways impedes ways of thinking about women writers and the evolution of women's writing. The essay is often thought about in terms of feminine "style" and subject matter, and what I would like to do here is discuss and reclaim some of the violence inherent in Cixous's original proposal: "Il faut que la femme écrive par son corps, qu'elle invente la langue imprenable qui crève les cloisonnements, classes et rhétoriques, ordonnances et codes, qu'elle submerge, transperce, franchisse le discours-à-réserve ultime . . ."[426] This incitement seems to be exactly in line with Despentes's literary and theoretical projects, in that Despentes re-captures the original violence and rupture suggested by Cixous.

By returning to "Le Rire de la Méduse" in my reading of these three authors, I explore writing not just with the body, not just as feminine, but writing as outcast, as marginal, as periphery. We can look to women's writing not just as changing or multiplying sites of pleasure as has been explored in the works of Irigaray, but as talking about the inverse of pleasure. Colette, Leduc and Despentes productively write thwarted desire, failed desire, and a failure to conclude. We can think of both Colette's continuing to write after "signing off" in *L'Étoile Vesper* and the inconclusiveness of Leduc's last work *La Chasse à l'amour*, which ends abruptly as it was Simone de Beauvoir who published the manuscript posthumously and made significant cuts and edits. By exploring the "negative" aspects of these works (ordinary, failed and abject) and their relationships to one another, we can expand or productively rupture the definition of *écriture feminine* while exploring how recent writing in some ways enacts practices of *écriture feminine* as Cixous originally envisioned it.

If Colette writes our desires, and her words resonate with our experiences, Leduc and Despentes invent new words, phrases, and states of being that shape the comprehension of experience. Colette teaches us to observe and to read, Leduc and Despentes teach us to speak and to write. And Despentes goes beyond Leduc's focus and teaches us to speak about the world around us, to see both the micro and the macro of human experience. In Despentes's work, we see an exteriorization of thought and experience, not just from the female subject out onto the world, but in interconnected Foucauldian networks of power highlighted by her writing. Despentes draws connections between the everyday lives of her characters to political and cultural forces that impact their lived experiences. We see both how power flows between people in their intimate relationships, and also where people bump up against the manifestation of power emanating from state and economic actors and systems.

As Cixous wrote, and Despentes seems to echo, women are always guilty : "coupable de tout, à tous les coups : d'avoir des désirs, de ne pas en avoir ; d'être frigide, d'être trop 'chaude' ;

[426] Cixous 48.

de ne pas être les deux à la fois ; d'être trop mère et pas assez ; d'avoir des enfants et de ne pas en avoir ; de nourrir et de ne pas nourrir . . ."[427] Despentes writes,

> Parce que l'idéal de la femme blanche, séduisante mais pas pute, bien mariée mais pas effacée, travaillant mais sans trop réussir, pour ne pas écraser son homme, mince mais pas névrosée par la nourriture, restant indéfiniment jeune sans se faire défigurer par les chirurgiens de l'esthétique, maman épanouie mais pas accaparée par les couches et les devoirs d'école, bonne maîtresse de maison mais pas bonniche traditionnelle, cultivée mais moins qu'un homme …[428]

Even if neither Cixous nor Despentes would claim an affinity with the work of the other, the similarities in rhetorical strategies and language call for comparison. We see some violence in Cixous's writing, but clearly Despentes takes this to the next level.

It is important to contextualize Cixous's thinking amidst second-wave feminist theory and acknowledge gaps, errors and assumptions that leave Cixous's theorization incomplete and serve as an impediment to seeing women writers as having multiple, plural identities. As mentioned previously, Cixous assimilates all women as "la femme" and equates all women with colonized subjects. She continues Freud's appellation of the female sex as "le continent noir." Despentes explodes this unifying notion of "la femme" by exploring the doubly, triply, and infinitely marginalized female subject in contemporary France. Cixous designates only three writers whose writing can be classified, for her, as "féminine": Colette, Marguerite Duras and ("to a certain extent") Jean Genet. The inclusion of Genet in this list already opens and leaves a certain amount of space and fluidity in terms of gender and sexuality of the one doing the writing. And Leduc was a great admirer of Genet and tried to emulate his writing. How do we move from Colette, the representation par excellence of *écriture feminine* according to its chief theorizer, to Leduc and Despentes, women writers who, according to Sam Bourcier, don't write with or from their vaginas or uteruses, but instead, along with Catherine Breillat, "montrent leurs bites" in their work?[429] Does the idea of writing with/showing one's dick completely shatter and render useless any notion of *écriture féminine*? I see this analogy as contributing to broadening conceptions of gender and writerly identity.

There is a lot to question in both the content and the structure of this dissertation. Beyond the ways that I have chosen to relate certain themes and ideas, and the ways in which I have defined or deployed certain terms, there is the basic structure of the three women heading: Colette, Leduc, Despentes. I hope it is apparent why I chose to write about these three authors in particular, and how looking at their works in relation to each others' is enlightening for the study of them all. But in the course of my research and writing I have realized the extent to which the three women title pervades writing in feminist literary analysis. Here, I have referred to Bethany Ladimer's *Colette, Beauvoir, and Duras: Age and Women Writers,* and in the introduction made note of the 2015 conference from which Dider Eribon's chapter on Leduc in *Principes d'une*

[427] Cixous 43.
[428] *KKT* 13.
[429] Bourcier 228.

pensée critique is drawn, entitled "Beauvoir, Leduc, Wittig: Feminism's Abject Selves." Readers of feminist literary critique will be able to think of many other works with this same tripartite structure. Of course, discussing three authors together occurs across all fields of scholarship and isn't limited to women writers. But, it has become apparent to me how pervasive this type of organization is in the type of research and writing that I do. In creating my research questions, I unintentionally replicated a structure (and who says structure says hierarchy of organization) that I have consumed and internalized as a student and as a scholar. Does the weight of three women writers add an extra feeling of security in what remains an under-valued field? Perhaps the triple author structure furnishes a reassuring Hegelian dialectic of *these-antithèse-synthèse*, serving to shore up any scholarly doubts about the legitimacy of our intellectual endeavors. It also may appeal to our pedagogical impulses, formulating knowledge in the five paragraph essay structure we hope our students have mastered so that they may tackle more original writing configurations. Like many unconscious but not unbiased choices that scholars make about how to further knowledge, the choice to study three women who wrote in temporal succession might have impacted the conceptual work in which this project is interested. Appealing to a teleological notion of progress over time, instead of encouraging connections backwards, forwards, and across, can lead to a Russian doll-like narrative structure, with the most recent author holding the kernel of the best and the most developed literary techniques and feminist truths. And the structure of the trilogy, which Despentes deployed for her recent *chef d'œuvre* in three volumes, *Vernon Subutex,* imparts a sensation of gravitas and finality. What I would like to insist upon, however, is the idea that these three writers occupy only a small corner of the story. Focusing on their works allows for helpful investigation of several particularities, but does not preclude making many other connections.

Indeed, I have been investigating varied forms of identify formation and fractured subjectivities without interrogating the classifications imposed by the term "women's writing" and its study. Here I say "women's writing" in English, to mean writing by women, as opposed to Cixous's formulation of *écriture féminine* in French, signaling her conception of a certain type of writing practice, which in theory may be undertaken by a person of any gender. Do either of these categories continue to be helpful for writers and readers? This question in some ways dovetails with that of the contemporary publishing industry in how to market books as a function of their authors' identities. Many authors resist etiquettes that insist on their gender, race, and ethnicity as primary descriptors, and see this categorization as a "ghettoization" of women and minority writers that splits them off from mainstream publications. In spite of the drawbacks presented by discussing women writers as such, benefits of comparing the writing of embodied female experience remain. These include tapping into specificities of violence enacted against and by women, struggles that women writers have faced in gaining literary acceptance, especially when prioritizing narratives of female selfhood, and writing that describes women's corporeal realities and sexual desires as both ordinary *and* as worthy of literary exploration. But just as with the three-part title, perhaps this categorization feels comfortable and effective because it *is* comfortable and has been effective. New groupings and structures would not feel so comfortable, indeed like a queer chair. Writers, scholars and readers would need to reorient themselves to other types of writing and analysis. Perhaps scholarship that feels off-kilter, that demands different orientations from our minds and bodies, can push us forward. One such text

that feels off-kilter is that of Berlant and Edelman's *Sex, or the Unbearable*, which contains multiple generic structures, thereby making space for new connections to emerge. Another potential off-kilter project would be a comparison of Violette Leduc with Jean Genet. Both of these writers tend to be categorized as more minor than their contemporaries. As we have seen, Leduc is often written about in connection with other women writers and Genet with other male writers, often male writers of minority sexual narratives. Although seemingly balanced between two authors, putting these two together, without the added value or enshrinement of a more major (or more straight) author, would involve a reorientation of the reader to these authors as worthy objects of study and as providing insight into each other's work. Other possibilities include narratives of embodied experience across multiple gender and sexual identities.

And so I suggest that the topics, organization, and driving theories behind part of my work here could be usefully updated and renovated by considering issues raised, for instance, by trans writers. How can we reconcile what I see as revolutionary writing by women, such as those discussed here, with the inclusion of trans writers and scholarship and the needed breakdown of gender binaries? The writing of Paul B. Preciado, queer theorist, trans activist, and former partner of Despentes, suggests several avenues to explore. In addition to helping us re-evaluate *écriture feminine*, Preciado provides a supplement to the study of Virginie Despentes's literary identity. The author's identity is re-formed and enhanced by the appendage of Preciado's writing with Despentes as the subject of someone else's description, not its creator. The personal, the sexual, the affective and the literary combine to inform this inverted interpretation of the author as written. In addition to her roles as novelist, filmmaker and activist, Despentes's public relationship with Preciado added further dimensions to her public persona and to her activist as well as her sexual identity. Despentes the author became Despentes the lover and literary character in Preciado's 2008 work, *Testo Junkie: Sexe, drogue et biopolitique*, notably in the chapter entitled "Où le corps de V.D. devient un élément du contexte experimental." Preciado describes meeting Despentes for the first time, during the uproar caused by the censoring of the film *Baise-moi* in 2000. Bodies, literature, writing and sex intertwine as Preciado explores the effects of testosterone on Preciado's body and on Preciado's relationship with Despentes. *Testo Junkie* and *King Kong Théorie* are two works that combine autobiography and theory. They seem to exemplify a contemporary genre of women's writing, or perhaps of *écriture queer*. Preciado writes about Despentes as a person and as a lover in *Testo Junkie*. There is also an intertextuality present in the work, as Preciado references Despentes's writings in a queer citational loop.[430]

[430] Examples of this intertextuality present in *Testo Junkie* include : " L'hétérosexualité traditionnelle est un programme politico-sexuel qui se dévalue sans cesse sur le marché pharmacopornographique, déplacé par les représentations gay, lesbiennes, fétichistes et SM, afin d'obéir à l'impératif d'augmentation de l'indice de production spermatique et de capital. Le secret de la réception pornographique, tel que le dévoile la *King Kong Théorie*, réside dans l'identification entre le spectateur et l'actrice porno," 248, and "Ces féminismes dissidents accèdent à la visibilité à partir de la fin des années 80, quand les sujets exclus par le féminisme bien-pensant commencent à dénoncer les processus de purification et de répression de leurs projets révolutionnaires. Ces processus d'épuration conduisent à un féminisme gris, normatif et puritain qui appréhende les différences culturelles, sexuelles ou politiques comme autant de menaces contre son idéal féminin hétérosexuel et eurocentré. Reprenant la formule de Virginie Despentes, on pourrait parler du réveil critique du 'prolétariat de féminisme', dont les mauvais sujets sont les putes, les lesbiennes, les femmes violées, les biohommes dissidents, les séropositives, les

Instead of experimenting with writing about the body, or through the body, Preciado experiments on the body directly (self-administering testosterone patches in *Testo Junkie*) and relates these experiences along with explorations of how biology and technology have both shaped and controlled bodies and sexualities and also opened infinite possibilities for living or interpreting one's body and sexuality. Preciado calls into question our very definition of "the body" and in particular of "the female body" - what it is made of, what we can put into it, what we can do (or not do) to it. Preciado thereby opens up what "la femme" of Cixous's essay can or could be. In *King Kong Théorie* Despentes intersperses autobiographical moments with theoretical essay, and in *Testo Junkie* Preciado intersperses lyrical descriptions of exploring sex with Despentes with as analysis of "l'ère pharmacopornographique." The conclusion leaves us to wonder if Preciado's version of "writing from the body" already surpasses any comparison with *écriture feminine*. Preciado is no longer only describing in writing, but also creating realities through writing and science. Indeed, for Preciado, "l'art, la philosophie et la littérature peuvent fonctionner comme des contre-laboratoires virtuels de production de la réalité."[431] Language and speech perform and form realities, and it's important not to forget the radical potential in literature to imagine, and by imagining, to create the possibility of others worlds, identities, and existences.

Preciado's creation here is corporeal and literary. The administration of testosterone is described as "le projet de transiter d'une fiction du sexe à une autre,"[432] calling into question not only gender as socially constructed but biological sex itself as fiction that can be re-written. Preciado's discussions of sex and discourses surrounding sex don't take up sexual violence like Despentes and Scott do. However, we are presented with further potential for power in subject positions typically thought of as abject:

> Les représentations dominantes de l'ère pharmacopornographique (pilule, prothèse, fellation et double pénétration) ont en commun une même relation entre corps et pouvoir : désir d'infiltration, d'absorption, d'occupation totale. Nous pourrions céder à la tentation de représenter cette relation selon un modèle dialectique de domination/oppression, comme un mouvement unidirectionnel dans lequel le pouvoir, extérieur, miniaturisé et liquide, infiltre le corps docile des individus. Non. Ce n'est pas le pouvoir qui s'infiltre de l'extérieur, c'est le corps que désire le pouvoir, c'est lui qui cherche à l'avaler, à le manger, à se l'administrer, à se l'enfiler, plus, toujours plus, par tous les trous, par toutes les voies possibles d'application. Se faire le pouvoir. Le corps dit *Baise-Moi*, tout en cherchant des formes d'autocontrôle et d'auto-extermination.[433]

If power is desired and attainable through acts of submission, then these acts would appear to shift categories, or perhaps transcend categorization altogether. "Se faire le pouvoir" seems to me to be a more active and determined form of Halberstam's resistance through passivity and

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butch, les transsexuel(les), les femmes qui ne sont pas blanches, les musulmanes . . . la plupart d'entre nous, en définitive," 286.

[431] Preciado, 33, n. 1

[432] Preciado 130

[433] Preciado 162.

negativity. With Preciado we also return to a primacy of the body ("Le corps dit *Baise-Moi*. . .") and a willful desire to negate the self.

We can think here of Breillat's exhortation to change aesthetic codes in order to represent the female corporeal experience "Il faut changer les codes esthétiques. On peut se mettre à aimer et trouver beau le coulant …"[434] to appreciate Preciado's poetics of the liquid in describing life with Despentes and life with testosterone, offering a gender-bending aesthetics of "le coulant." Viscous bodily fluids, gender identities, and amorphous existences can circulate and change form: "Pendant ce temps, je vais faire une analyse de sang. Dans les profondeurs, quelque chose coule, circule dans un espace circonscrit, mais qui pourrait se répandre. Dans cette strate, les sentiments existent à l'état gélatineux, juste avant l'évaporation et la transformation des solutions de carbone en courant électrique."[435] The fluid can of course refer back to amniotic fluids and maternal experiences as in Cixous, or it can describe the experiences of new and different substances coursing through the body, leading to new discoveries. This gelatinous state, unformed but full of potential, permits writer and reader to explore what can be.

Preciado is an outpsoken critic of third-wave white bourgeois feminism, and this critique aligns with the critical fictional representations of a *féminisme bien-pensant* found in Despentes. But Preciado sees potential in a new feminist esthetic, which echoes the practices of pro-sex gender fucking, by performing "le sexe cru et le genre cuit." This feminism "se crée toute une esthétique féministe postporno, faite d'un trafic des signes et d'artefacts culturels, de resignification critique de codes normatifs considérés par le féminisme traditionnel comme impropres à la féminité."[436] The ideas here of trafficking and resignification strike me as integral to contemporary feminist queer literary projects. Trafficking, a *mise-en-circulation* and repackaging of goods for consumption, echoes the writing as/for/of prostitution model previously discussed in Leduc and Despentes. Resignification involves an engagement with normative culture, in order to consume and then excrete a re-signified cultural object, which can remain un-abjected.[437]

Preciado and Despentes have experimented with hybrid genres (fiction, autobiography, theory) in their works. Preciado can also add newspaper columns to the formal structures he has utilized to compose thoughts on the personal and the political. In August of 2014 Preciado published two separate columns in *Libération* alluding to the "rupture" with Despentes. These columns treat the performative aspects of identity formation involving gender and sexuality. In the first column Preciado finds comfort in the statistical probability of their break-up: "…je remarque, d'abord avec surprise, puis avec soulagement, que je suis dans la moyenne statistique – même si l'étude n'a pas encore recensé les couples formés d'un trans *in between* non opéré et d'une femme hors norme. La singularité de notre résistance de genre se plie aux lois statistiques. La statistique est plus forte que l'amour. Plus forte que la politique *queer*."[438] In the second

[434] "Trois femmes s'emparent du sexe, " *Libération*.
[435] Preciado 202.
[436] Preciado 290.
[437] See Annabel Kim's forthoming *Cacaphonies: Toward an Excremental Poetics* for a theorization of the literary and the excremental.
[438] Preciado, "La statistique, plus forte que l'amour," 1 August 2014, *Libération*. Since 2015, Preciado uses masculine pronouns and announced in his *Libération* column in 2016 the change in his "état civil" to "homme."

column Preciado explores the performative aspects of identity formation in terms of their break-up and the "marriage pour tous" debate. Here Preciado discusses the fall-out from the announcement of their break-up in the previous column, and presents an analysis of performative language when dealing with relationships, sexuality and gender: "La force performative est le résultat de l'imposition violente d'une norme que nous préférons appeler nature pour éviter de nous confronter à la réorganisation des rapports sociaux de pouvoir qu'entraînerait un changements de conventions." Preciado references Butler's work on gender, performance, and language, as well as identity formation with regards to the state. We need to consider "les énoncés sur l'identité … comme des performatifs qui se font passer pour des constatatifs … des mots qui produisent ce qu'ils sont supposés décrire …"

Finally, Preciado incites the reader to speak and employ new words as resistance, creating new performative forces : "Se dés-identifier pour reconstruire la subjectivité endommagée par le performative dominant."[439] This is what Despentes's work does, along with Preciado's. Disorientation and reorientation to structures and practices calls for world-breaking and world-remaking. This can include dislocating gender. To disidentify, or untangle oneself from the dominant discourses, and to reconstruct subjectivities that have been damaged or were never whole, or to create new ones, can be accomplished in part by paying attention to the ordinary, by seeing failure differently, and by re-defining the abject. Indeed, the concept of the ordinary can be reconfigured in light of this study. If Colette's ordinary includes objects and experiences that help to make her world more comfortable, Preciado's ordinary includes language and technology that re-shape the reader's orientation to text and re-makes the world through which our bodies move.

[439] Preciado, 29 August 2014, "Force d'attraction de la rupture," *Libération*. The term "dés-identifier" makes reference to *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* by the late José Esteban Muñoz (1999, University of Minnesota Press).

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