

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
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LANGUAGE AT THE LIMIT: RE-IMAGINING THE DISCOURSE OF SEXUAL
VIOLENCE THROUGH TRANSGRESSIVE LITERATURE

NATALIA MYERS
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:
Tracy Rutler
Professor of French and Women's Studies
Thesis Supervisor

Marc Authier
Professor of French and Linguistics
Honors Adviser

* Electronic approvals are on file.

ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to examine the various ways sexual violence has been placed into discourse within French literature through an examination of transgression fiction spanning from the 18th to 21st centuries, specifically through their constructions of a female subjectivity. Beginning with an analysis of two historical texts, the Marquis de Sade's *Juliette* and Georges Bataille's *L'histoire de l'œil*, I trace the history of transgressive literature in France, demonstrating how these authors contributed to the discourse on sexual violence, while also examining the limitations of these works as it pertains to the possibility of a feminist discourse on sexual violence. Departing from the historical, I then move to a contemporary work, Virginie Despentes's *Baise-moi*, to explore the significance of feminine writing on sexual violence, illustrating the need for this discourse to go beyond a consideration of the content of transgression towards an acknowledgement of the role of the female subject in constructing a truly feminist discourse on sexual violence.

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Introduction: The Imperative to Transgress

While this past century has seen a dramatic rise in the West of visibility and acceptance of radical sexual lifestyles that transgress the heteronormative, monogamous, and filial dynamic that has long structured sexual politics, violence against women remains an endemic problem worldwide. Furthermore, the availability of a discourse to confront this problem has long been lacking. While the #Balancetonporc movement in France and #MeToo movement in the United States that have occurred over the past several years have made achievements in creating a space for women to speak with agency and authority on sexual harassment, the more horrific violence of rape still lacks a space for authentic representation by those who have experienced it, a space which affords the victim of such violence the capacity to affirm the reality of what has happened and speak out about it from a place of agency. Instead, this discourse is often sanitized, with those having experienced such a violence treated as victims. As such, any capacity to truly confront this problem is rendered impossible seeing as there exists no common language with which to speak about it.

Foucault wrote about the connection between the language we give to sex and the power it has over our lives and societies. In order for the concept of “sex” to have material power within a given structure it must first be put into language. “Le sexe, raffiné ou rustique, doit être dit” (*La volonté de savoir* 45). However, it is not only the language the individual uses but the context in which that language is spoken which confers the power relations between the speaker and the receiver: the discourse and the society. It is this *incitation aux discours* which structures our attitude towards the object of the discourse, in our case, human sexuality. To highlight the

material consequences of this theory, Foucault uses the example of confession within the Catholic Church. By forcing the individual to give a language to sexual experience through the act of confession, which functions as a request for forgiveness, the Church inseminates the confessor with an attitude of shame towards sex. The confessor is *guilty* of the sexual act, and it is only through the Church that the individual can be forgiven, thus endowing the Church with power over the discourse surrounding sexuality. While Western society is no longer primarily mediated through the institution of the Catholic Church, other institutions and power structures have taken its place, whether they be the medical establishment (which is Foucault's hypothesis), or much less structured and deinstitutionalized developments, such as the internet.

Furthermore, it is through language that we construct stories, and we humans are natural storytellers. By telling stories, we assign meaning towards individual experiences by placing them within the collective. By listening to stories, we become capable of identifying with those whose lives are different from our own; those whose gender, race, class, and abilities we may have never experienced. Narratives force us to individually engage with the injustices of the world so that we may integrate such ideas into our own conceptions of ourselves, consequently changing the way we engage with the Other. It through the relation to the Other that we structure the hierarchies and power relations of society, meaning that the telling of stories is a crucial and powerful tool towards any attempt at reimagining these structures.

It is for this reason that we must find a new framework through a transgressive discourse that acknowledges the structural power inequality at play; a framework that once sexual violence has occurred, allows the violence to be affirmed in order to overcome it. I will suggest that this

discourse be one that transgresses the constraints of neoliberal discourse, which perpetuates a victim-blaming narrative. Rather, in order to confer onto those who speak out against sexual violence agency without responsibility for the violence, these experiences must be put into a language with a radical acceptance of its abject nature and an appeal to a less moralized conception of violence, a conception that views violence not as a question of good or bad, but instead as a means of enforcing power relations. Only then can the problem of sexual violence be treated by its discourse as a structural problem worthy of a collective response.

The formula for conceiving such a breakthrough in the treatment of discourse, albeit in a different context, was outlined by Roland Barthes in his work, *A lover's discourse*. The thesis driving Barthes' work is as follows,

the lover's discourse is today *of an extreme solitude*. This discourse is spoken, perhaps, by thousands of subjects (who knows?), but warranted by no one; it is completely forsaken by the surrounding languages: ignored, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority (sciences techniques, arts). Once a discourse is thus driven by its own momentum into the backwater of the "unreal," exiled from all gregariness, it has no recourse but to become the site, however exiguous, of an *affirmation* (1).

If we were to apply this framework not to the discourse on love but to that of sexual violence, it then becomes clear that in order for sexual violence to become "real", to escape its own solitude and reenter the collective, it must be affirmed within and for its transgressive nature. While it may appear odd and irrelevant to apply a framework aimed towards affirming the discourse of love to the subject of sexual violence, since these behaviors are often considered to be polar opposites, in reality the only true difference between them is the presence, or lack thereof, of consent. Therefore, in order to use this framework of affirmation conceived by Barthes as a par-

adigm for reimagining the discourse of sexual violence, the discourse must not only focus on an affirmation of its subject, sexual violence, but it must also affirm the potential, or lack thereof, for the subject to give consent, both individually and structurally. This discourse, instead of focusing on the moral credibility of the victim, is one which radically affirms the often-ambiguous intersection between superstructural power relations, the agency of an individual to give consent, and the reality of the subjective experience of violence.

Therefore, this study will begin by tracing the history of such a transgressive discourse through an analysis of two works from literary's greatest contributors towards transgressive literature: the Marquis de Sade's *Juliette* and Georges Bataille's *L'histoire de l'œil*. Using these texts as a starting point for a transgressive discourse, I will specifically focus on the way the utilization of the explicit and oftentimes pornographic language within these narratives either aid or hinder the agency and subjectivity of those subjected to sexual violence within the texts in order to demonstrate the difficulty of placing their connection within a dualistic morality. Furthermore, since this study seeks to not only analyze the discourse of sexual violence in and of itself, but also the way in which society relates to that discourse, these texts will also be analyzed within the contexts in which they were published (contexts which included censorship), to reinforce the argument that these authors were capable of shocking and changing mainstream discourse surrounding sex and violence in new directions.

Returning to Barthes's framework, it must be noted that Barthes rejected the idea of an obscene or "transgressive discourse" towards accomplishing his goal of rescuing the lovers' discourse from solitude. Within his chapter on the obscene, Barthes suggests that obscenity cannot

rescue the lover's discourse since, "it exposes itself without protection to the moralism of anti-morality" (176). Naming both Bataille and Sade as representatives of this obscenity, Barthes argues against the obscenity of their work since he sees it as a response to morality with an anti-morality in the name of a modernity which "acknowledges a subject, provided it be "generalized" (176). Barthes conceives of these generalized subjects within a Nietzschean framework where, "the distinctive mark of modern souls is not lying but *innocence*, incarnate in lying moralism" (176). However, as Barthes notes, to seek and reject this innocence isn't to rescue the discourse, rather it "is in fact only *another morality*" (177). Therefore, for Barthes, modernity imposes an anti-morality which, instead of affirming a discourse, only achieves a rejection of the previous model. While Barthes's aim for analyzing the obscene is to contrast it with the overly sentimental discourse of the lover, his critique of a transgressive discourse demonstrates that it is impossible to place the obscene within language since, "any utterable obscenity as such can no longer be the last degree of the obscene" (179). It is thus impossible for the obscene to "really coincide with affirmation," to achieve "the limit of language" (179).

While this critique of Bataille's and Sade's works on the basis of obscenity can and will be applied to the two historical texts I will analyze in the first two chapters, I will ultimately reject Barthes's hypothesis through the study of a third and final piece of work from the contemporary canon, Virginie Despentes's *Baise-Moi*. Published in 1993, the narrative of Despentes will be placed within its confrontation between the personal and political as it relates to sexual violence, demonstrating its capacity to endanger popular discourse on sexual violence in favor of more nuanced perspective. I will argue that Despentes's work liberates transgressive discourse

from its solitude, bypassing the limits of language through its radical affirmation of the reality of the dynamics between power, agency, and violence, in which Despentes crafts a work that reconciles the personal consequences of sexual violence with the political systems that render it endemic. It is through this radical confrontation between fiction and reality, violence and agency, power and gender, that a discourse can be forged which affirms the reality of sexual violence, and in doing so, gives us the tools to confront it.

Chapter 1: The politics of transgression: Sade's libertinage

In order to understand the history of transgressive literature within France, I begin with an analysis of one of French literature's first and most controversial *enfants terribles*, the Marquis de Sade. Born in 1740, Sade's work was written against the backdrop of a society entrenched in hope and disillusion, the change and terror that gripped the years during and shortly following the French revolution. However, the political change of the era was also accompanied by a larger shift in values produced by the discourse of the Enlightenment and modern philosophy, a reconfiguration of Western society that positioned the subject at the fore. It is a configuration we still hold today and is key to understanding the relevance of Sade's oeuvre to contemporary society. I therefore begin with a theoretical analysis of certain Enlightenment ideals produced by modern philosophy which provided the framework for Sade's work. After establishing the theoretical framework of Sade's fiction, I move to an analysis of Part 1 of Sade's *Juliette*. In this section, I demonstrate the novel's value as a discourse on the limits of the idealized reasonable subject as it pertains to sexuality through its dependence on the displacement of morality, the argument upon which Sade's notion of libertinage rests.¹ Upon arriving at this conclusion, I then abstract the text from its theoretical implications in order to place it within its historical context and reception. By placing the work within the realm of politics it helped to produce, I can then draw a conclusion as to the importance of Sade's discourse of transgression as it pertains to

¹ I used the definition libertinage as articulated by John Phillips, "The French word *libertin* meant 'free thinker on religion' by the end of the 16th century, but during the course of the 17th century, it gradually came to designate a person leading a dissolute lifestyle" (20).

our study of the necessary conditions to challenge the framework of the contemporary discourse on sexual violence.

In order to understand the work of Sade, it must be placed within the theoretical context in which it was written. Generally speaking, Sade's work is the product of modernity and the modern attitude towards the social milieu produced by the Enlightenment.² While the scope of the Enlightenment and its consequences are too large to be analyzed here, using the framework of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno as presented in *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment* we can arrive at a summary of its significance.³ The founding of Enlightenment ideals is placed by Horkheimer and Adorno within the work of Francis Bacon, whose *New Organon* provided modernity a template with which to eject itself from the Middle Ages through an emphasis of the capacity for the human subject to exert influence over Nature by use of reason. Bacon declares, "Man, as the minister and interpreter of nature, does and understands as much as his observations on the order of nature, either with regard to things or the mind, permit him, and neither knows nor is capable of more" (Bacon 11). As such, the notion of man as being a minister of nature is revolutionary for its time seeing as it completely reconfigures the way in which humanity understood itself in relation to Nature, endowing humanity with agency over this relation as opposed

² The terms "modernity" and "Enlightenment" are generally broad concepts. However for the purpose of this thesis I mean modernity to mean the historical era that began in the 16th century, and arguably, continues today, whereas by Enlightenment I refer more broadly to the shift in thought and values of the early modern historical period, a shift which Stephen Pinker notes was oriented around the themes of reason, science, humanism, and progress (8).

³ Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002. All future citations from this text will be included parenthetically in the main body with the abbreviation *DE*, followed by the page number.

to being subjected to its whims.⁴ As Horkheimer and Adorno note, during the Enlightenment, “Nature is no longer to be influenced by likeness but mastered” (*DE* 13). The concept of mastery and sovereignty leads to the positing of the human as a subject independent of a higher being. However, this subjectivity goes far beyond the scientific method or the quantitative understanding of the world it enabled – it confers to man the task of assigning qualitative meaning to the world as well. Horkheimer and Adorno explain that, “the manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object, between rational significance and its accidental bearer” (7).

The consequence of this reconfigured relationship between man and the material world is that it imposes a shift of sovereignty over nature, a sovereignty previously occupied by God and the mythology which surrounds the divine to the human, and in which the distinction between these two concepts becomes muddled: “In their mastery of nature, the creative God and the ordering mind are alike. Man’s likeness to God consists in sovereignty over existence, in the lordly gaze, in the command” (6). Thus, the confrontation between the subject and nature results in a system which “aims for the form of knowledge which most ably deals with the facts, most effectively assists the subject in mastering nature” (65). This framework of sovereignty, however, presents a conflict because contained within nature there exists other individuals, other human subjects who want to “effectively master nature”, creating a plurality of bids to conquer nature and each other. The subject is social and must deal with the “reconciliation with power” (68) inherent in the world in which subjects are confronted with one another, posing limits to the sover-

⁴ While the concept of “Nature” has had a broad definition throughout the history of thought, its meaning within the context of this project is all phenomena of the physical world independent of a cause.

eignty of the individual. This confrontation of the multiplicity of subjects within a given society has long been mediated by rules and codes for social behavior, constituting the concept of morality. However, prior to the Enlightenment, Western society mediated these rules through the mythology of God and divine power. With the displacement of sovereignty from God to the human and their capacity for reason, the foundation upon which this morality was built is pulled out from underneath it.

Nevertheless, early modern philosophers attempted to reconcile this pitfall with the notion of God and the morality produced by the existence of such a being. Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* undertakes this project. However, the third meditation in which he posits a proof of God's existence demonstrates only that humanity existence must have a cause, saying nothing of the ethical implications of such a being (Descartes 29).⁵ Kant also attempted to use the method established by modern philosophy to reconcile reason with the inevitable conflicts that accompany coexisting subjects. Kant saw the rational subject has being capable of using reasoning to see all things, all matter, objectively, "before it enters ego" (cited in *DE* 64). Kant posits that there is such a thing as "pure understanding" upon which all empirical judgements can be made on a factual basis, "If 'all empirical laws [are] only special determinations of the pure laws of understanding,' research must always ensure that the principles are properly linked to the factual judgments" (*DE* 64). This reasoning, however, is unsatisfactory and, as Horkheimer and Adorno note, "facts, however, form part of praxis; they everywhere characterize the contact of-

⁵ Sade acknowledges and discredits this argument in an argument found on pages 29-37 of *Juliette*, when he concludes that "those absurd partisans of man's deific bogey actually never say anything more than there can be no effect without a cause" (37).

the individual subject with nature as social object: experience is always real action and suffering” (64). While we may be able to make “factual judgements” about the world, resulting in material actions, this logic doesn’t consider the various power structures which also influence the conditions for agency. By extension, power corrupts our capacity for pure understanding. Yet, to continue to appeal to it as a natural and innate faculty is to reproduce social hierarchy as natural, a position which will be expanded upon by Sade, but also acknowledged by Horkheimer and Adorno, “It is on power, however legalistically veiled, that the social hierarchy ultimately rests. The mastery of nature is reproduced within humanity” (86).

It is within this framework of the positing of the modern subject that we must approach *Juliette*, for, as my reading will suggest, Sade’s work is centralized around the tension between morality and reason. While the transgressive and pornographic nature of the novel dominates the narrative of the story, the value of the erotic transgression in Sade’s tale functions only as transvaluation of the intermediary philosophical discourse, a discourse whose importance to Sade’s characters is seen as equivocal to the practice of libertinage they embody, or as one character puts it, “There is more to it than just experiencing sensations, they must also be analyzed. Sometimes it is as pleasant to discuss as to undergo them” (Sade 60). Part 1 of *Juliette* recounts the story of Juliette’s initiation into the practice of libertinage, an initiation occurring within the context of a Catholic boarding school, a setting already indicative of the text’s transgressive thematic material. While this initiation includes practical instruction in the form of ritualized orgies organized by Juliette’s mentor Madame Delbène with participants who are often forced to participate against their will, the critical insight from Juliette’s training lies within its philosophical discourse. Delbène picks up where the modern philosophers left off, that is to say with the question

of the existence of God and morality within a society founded on reason. Unlike the modern philosophers, however, Delbène sees these two concepts as being irreconcilable. The foundation of her argument derives from the subject's capacity for agency, and how, if there were a divine omnipotent being, that being would have to condone all our actions since its omnipotence would prevent the subject from praxis that it saw as unfavorable, "as our will always expresses itself in some movement, gesture, or impulse, God is consequently obliged to concur in what we will and sanction what at our will's behest we do" (41). Therefore, the reasoning goes, if there were to be an all-knowing and all-powerful God, by the very nature of these properties that being would concur with all human judgements, and therefore cannot be viewed as the impetus for that judgement.

In removing God as the impetus for judgement, Sade relocates the drive of the will to the concept of Nature, "the universe runs itself, and the eternal laws inherent in Nature suffice, without any first cause or prime mover, to produce all that is and all that we know" (43). The consequence of this displacement is that value is produced by the "natural faculties," which is to say sensory experience, whose satisfaction is found within the domain of the sexual. However, Nature, and the sensory pleasure it provides, destroys the validity of the moral systems on which we structure our societies since these systems come from human societies and are not found innately within the world, "nothing is more immoral than Nature; never has she burdened us with interdictions or restraints, manners and morals have never been promulgated by her" (51). It is through the assertion that Nature is inherently immoral in combination with the idea that it drives our judgement that we arrive at Sade's reasoned explication for the virtue of vice and the misfortune of virtue, "I am going to dismiss this equally absurd and childish obligation which enjoins

us *not to do unto others that which unto us we would not have done*. It is the precise contrary Nature recommends, since Nature's single precept is *to enjoy oneself, at the expense of no matter whom*" (52 emphasis my own). By destroying the sovereignty of God and reassigning it to Nature, upon which our will enables us to be Nature's master, all notions of good and evil become moot since all notions of moral sovereignty are established by the subject. It is within this reasoning that both Sade's approval of contemporary feminist political ideals, such as the right to access abortion (68) or the tyrannical nature of marriage when forced upon a woman (65), and his justification of misogynist acts of sexual violence (117), become reconcilable. Sade's only concern is the will of the subject, regardless of the destructive potential that the subject's will may pose to legal and ethical considerations. To destroy the potential for any appeal to good and bad, law and civilization, however, is the point according to Horkheimer and Adorno: "Juliette, however, draws the conclusion the bourgeoisie sought to avoid: she demonizes Catholicism as the latest mythology, and with it civilization as a whole" (DE 74).

It is upon this notion that the entirety of civilization is a sham that the public condemnation of Sade and his philosophy of libertinage becomes apparent. However, the political path it took France to condemn Sade is only representative of France's own reckoning with Enlightenment ideals, particularly as they pertain to political systems. Prior to the French Revolution, Sade was incarcerated for his libertine activities in 1777 under a *lettre de cachet*, a tool representative of the absolute power of the monarchy under which the arrest of any individual without cause or the ability to appeal was authorized (Phillips 24).⁶ However, the arrival of the French Revolution in 1789 provided the framework for Sade to reenter society. It was during the early period of

⁶ Like Madame Delbène, Sade participated in libertinage both in theory and in praxis.

Revolution, in which the National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, that the concept of the rational subject espoused by many Enlightenment thinkers began to be reconciled within the political system in which that subject lives. The Declaration can therefore be viewed as an attempt to reconcile the sovereignty of man over nature with the multiplicity of subjects present in a society by providing an ethical framework upon which society was to be organized. It was under the principles of the Declaration that the writings of Sade were liberated from censorship, “The free communication of thoughts and of opinions is one of the most precious rights of man” (Article XI). The institutionalization of these values even led to Sade’s election to the National Convention in 1790, in which he was given a platform to freely share his ideas with the public. However, Sade’s inconsideration of the social contract quickly extended to the politics which endowed him with his freedom, and the Reign of Terror brought a swift end to the tolerance which allowed for Sade’s ideas to be published. As the Revolutionaries, under the guidance of Robespierre, began to turn on anyone who participated in the intentionally ambiguous crime of “counter-revolutionary activities” (Phillips 25), any allegiance that fell outside of the dogma espoused by the Revolutionaries was cause for punishment. While Sade escaped the guillotine and reclaimed his freedom after the fall of Robespierre, the timeframe in which both *Juliette* and its counterpart *Justine* were published, his status as a free man did not endure. Upon the ascension of Napoleon to power, and the return to the unity of Church and state that ensued, Sade was arrested once again in 1801, however this time for his ideas and not his actions, specifically those presented in *Juliette* and the accompanying novel *Justine*. He was returned to prison and later moved to an asylum, where he resided until his death in 1814. His books remained censored in France until 1957 (Perrottet).

Sade's incarceration, his loss of agency at the hands of both the *ancien régime* and the French empire, demonstrates the long-term political untenability of his ideals. Radical ideas, when transformed into radical politics, will always face a backlash, and while Sade's ideas may be reasonably sound, they did not withstand a confrontation with the authoritarian power structures of the Revolutionaries, nor the traditional morality of the Church institutionalized by Napoleon. However, Sade's personal experience with his subject matter as a libertine endowed him with an intimate knowledge of the violence which he practiced in freedom and endured in prison. The idea of the world as being inherently violent, and that this violence derives from the Nature over which we are sovereign, endows the concept of violence with a knowability in which violence is a domain, not unlike math or science, upon which the subject builds a *connaissance*. This *connaissance*, this knowledge of violence which Sade gained through his experience of life, can therefore be seen as intricately interwoven not only with the content of his writing, but also with its form. As Gilles Deleuze notes in *Coldness and Cruelty*, "With Sade [and Masoch] the function of literature is not to describe the world, since this has already been done, but to define a counterpart of the world capable of containing its violence and excesses" (Deleuze 37). Returning to the goal of a collective discourse within the framework provided by Barthes, as analyzed in the introduction of this study (that a discourse must become a site of affirmation in order to overcome its solitude), we arrive at an understanding of how Sade's work produces this affirmation through not only the definition of the world as essentially amoral and violent, but also through a discourse of that world by its placement within language and narrative imagined here within the story of *Juliette*. Furthermore, by shining a light on the violent aspects of the world, especially as it pertains to sexuality, Sade forces the reader to recon-

cile that violence with the preconceived values upon which society is a built and upon which discourse is created.

Such values still remain located within the framework of the ideals of the Enlightenment, specifically within the Enlightenment notion of the rational subject who exerts their rationality as sovereignty over the world. *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, while no longer part of the French legal system, still provides the framework for an emphasis of the concepts of liberty, equality, and tolerance within social experience. Therefore, the reaction and subsequent censorship of Sade's work produces a challenge to Western society's appeal to tolerance in the realm of thought and opinion. As unlikely as it may seem, reading Sade, even within a consideration of the feminist issue of sexual violence, deserves merit. As Judith Butler notes, "if we burn Sade, then we will be burning books and, perhaps, by implication, associating ourselves with those who seek to achieve forms of social purity by violently expelling parts of the population and what they believe" (Butler 169). It is within this vein that Sade's work challenges the foundations of our current discourse on sexual violence and, when allowed to be read, analyzed, and commented on, can serve as a starting point for a critique of such a discourse seeing as Sade reveals the ethical limitations of rational thought, providing an impetus to search for a new basis for ethical judgement.

We can therefore read the work of Sade as being only an extension of the notion of sovereignty and reason established by the Enlightenment taken to its extreme in application to the domain of the sensory pleasures of sexual experience. The analysis offered here concludes that reason, when abstracted from the material conditions in which it is employed, is never capable of producing a rational foundation for a notion of ethics. Sade took this insight and applied it to the

domain of sexuality in which he argued for a complete vindication of all sexual transgression, a rationalization of sexual violence. Nevertheless, the notion of the libertine subject proposed by Sade is bold and forces the discourse on sexual violence to reconsider the relations between subject and victim, power and social experience, agency and Nature. Instead of outrage towards Sade's framing of the conditions for sexual violence as being a consequence of the human attitude of sovereignty over Nature, his insight should instead be celebrated. While Sade's project may appear contradictory to the aim of emancipating humanity from sexual violence, its value derives from its capacity to shine a light on civilization's inability to prove the rational subject as a solid foundation for ethical judgement. If reason is not only inadequate at producing an argument against immorality of sexual violence, but rather is shown to celebrate it when taken to its extreme as Sade suggests, then the entire framing of the question of sexual violence as being a problem capable of defeat at the hands of reason is put into question.

Chapter 2: The eroticization of the transgressive in Bataille's *L'histoire de l'œil*

Following the tradition of transgressive literature founded by Sade, we now turn to an emblematic figure of the 20th-century French intellectual scene, Georges Bataille, specifically his short novel, *L'Histoire de l'œil*. Published in 1928 under the pseudonym "Lord Auch", *L'histoire de l'œil* once again discursively examines the intersections between the subject and its capacity for sexual violence by placing this tension within a fictional narrative.⁷ However, much like Sade, the story of the novel is a catalyst for a larger discussion surrounding the nature of human agency, under which the human disposition for violence falls, as it confronts the nature of human sexual experience. While, in a certain sense, Bataille's work can be seen as a continuation of the Sadean project of the libertine subject, it also presents a departure from Sade's framework of domination through reason towards a more existential and interior authority. This chapter will therefore begin with an examination of Bataille's concept of the subject, specifically within two of his philosophical works *L'expérience intérieure* and *L'Érotisme*, as well as a comparison of his notion of subjectivity to that of the Marquis de Sade's. Upon establishing this framework, I then analyze the novel for its discursive and political value as it pertains to the problem of sexual violence using both prior analyses of the novel as well as my own. Upon completing an analysis of Bataille's novel, we can then examine the value of his work as a means for both overcoming

⁷ The pseudonym's meaning, which Bataille explains in a preface, is as follows, "The name Lord Auch [pronounced osh] refers to a habit of a friend of mine; when vexed, instead of saying "aux chiottes!" (to the shithouse), he would shorten it to "aux ch'." Lord is English for God (in the Scriptures): Lord Auch is God relieving himself. The story is too lively to dwell upon; every creature transfigured by such a place: God sinking into it rejuvenates the heavens" (*Story of the Eye* 45).

and further limiting the constraints of the current framework for a discourse of sexual violence as it pertains to this study.

In order to grasp the significance of the novel's break from the notion of the subject as being sovereign over nature, it will be helpful to place it within Bataille's theoretical work. Beginning with *L'expérience intérieure*, Bataille outlines his theory on experience and subjectivity by positing that all perception of ourselves and the world is mediated by what he calls "inner experience", in which the subject is liberated from all previous appeals to authority. "Inner experience not being able to have principles either in dogma (a moral attitude), or in science (knowledge can be neither its goal nor its origin), or in a search for enriching sites (an experimental, aesthetic attitude), it cannot have any other concern nor other goal than itself" (*Inner Experience* 7). By opposing the experience of the subject as being derivative from exterior relations, any notion of authority or sovereignty is reformulated as being created within the subject, such that within interior experience, "man's authority [is] defined as the challenging of himself" (8). Nevertheless, the search for authority is derived from an impetus, and within Bataille's framework that impetus is the prospect of death, the mortality of the subject and their descent into nothingness. This creates an imperative for the subject to "bear the weight of the future only on one condition: that others, always others, live in it-and that death washes us, then washes these others without end" (22). For Bataille, any understanding of the future, and of death, must involve the experience of another object or person, putting into question the boundary between ourselves and others. However, in order to arrive at this boundary between the subject and the other, existence and nothingness, life and death, the subject must seek to undergo this nothingness not only in its

subject that is experiencing, but also through the object that is experienced, to that point that, “experience attains in the end the fusion of the object and subject, being as subject non-knowledge, as object the unknown” (8). Paradoxically, it is only upon this fusion of the subject and the object contained within inner experience, that the subject is capable of establishing itself, “‘One-self’ is not the subject isolation itself from the world, but a place of communication, of fusion of the subject and the object” (9).

Perhaps the most exemplary inner experience is that of “erotism”, a concept developed in *L'Érotisme*, published 30 years after *L'histoire de l'œil* in 1957, in which Bataille explores the union between inner experience and sexuality. In erotism, individuals take the place of the “object” within inner experience, specifically through acts considered transgressive of societal taboos. Bataille frames this notion of transgression as being opposed to legal and cultural norms not in terms of content, but rather in form. The book thus begins by positing human society as a duality between two modes of existence, the first of which concerns the world of work founded upon reason, in which the subject is disgusted by “the general horror of violence” (*Erotism* 53). Therefore, reason creates an imperative to constrain violence for the sake of work and production, which causes society to impose constraints on human behavior through the creation of taboos, enforced both culturally and legally. However, despite this emphasis on reason which creates taboos, Bataille sees the nature of humanity as being two-sided, with an innate tendency towards violence existing simultaneously with our disgust for it: “man has built up the rational world by his own efforts, but there remains within him an undercurrent of violence” (40). Unable to constantly uphold the constraints of the taboo, the subject resorts to transgression, in which the

taboo is broken, and the violent behavior meant to be restrained is enacted. This enactment, however, cannot be seen as a negation of the taboo, but rather exposes the subject to the transcendental nature of inner experience: “the transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it” (63). It is in this sense, returning to the concept of the subject established through an effacement of its mortal condition through the fusion of subject and object, that eroticism is an inner experience in which the boundaries between life and death are once again blurred. Bataille writes that “eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death” (11). However, Bataille doesn’t distinguish life and death as a dualism between mortality and immortality, but rather between continuity and discontinuity, involving the other which we noted as being crucial to the establishment of the subject, “the concern is to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity” (15). However, in order to produce this feeling of continuity within eroticism, there must be a strong rupture, one which for Bataille is inherently violent, “in essence the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation” (16). Bataille’s project is thus one which once again naturalizes the enactment of violence as being a necessary step towards the subject’s liberation from itself, which in turn, is necessary for the subject to exist as such. Therefore violence, and its enactment within the realm of the sexual, can be seen as an essential component of Bataille’s notion of the subject.

Nevertheless, despite this naturalization of violence, this remains a dramatic departure from the subject as conceived by Sade, whose notion of sovereignty consisted of the subject’s relation to the constraints of the world and the other subjects which populate it, in which the inherent solution was to dominate through force all which stood in the way of the subject’s sover-

eignty, a relation which was mediated through the faculty of reason. Rather, Bataille wishes to expel reason and the taboos that derive from it, through his concept of transgression, which posits the subject as being in a battle not with others but with the self. As Susan Rubin Suleiman notes, “In Bataille, the Law is internalized; the drama of transgression occurs within the subject” (Suleiman 82). It is in this sense that violence, for the Bataillean subject, functions not as a means of overcoming the constraints of Nature, but rather the constraints of the subjects’ entrapment of being and of discontinuity, to the point where the subject is no longer in a stasis of *being* but is rather constituted within a continuity of *becoming*, constantly renewing itself through violence. Nevertheless, much like Sade, Bataille considers violence to be contained within the essence of the human being and its liberation, thus denying the subject agency over the acts of violence they commit, complicating the potential of Bataille’s work to succeed in theoretically reexamining the agency allotted to women when speaking of sexual violence. Despite this complication, Bataille’s fictive work still manages to propose a discursive challenge, however limited, to the current framework, a challenge which must be analyzed.

Having examined the theoretical notions of the subject conceived by Bataille, we can now examine the consequences of such a subject when placed into the praxis of a narrative by analyzing *L’histoire de l’œil*. The narrative of the novel details the exploits of a young unnamed hero and his accomplice Simone as they partake in a series of successively more extreme transgressions, in which various symbols of eyes (eggs, cow testicles, etc.) are utilized as tools.⁸ Upon their initial bond at the beginning of the novel, Simone and the narrator quickly seek to expand

⁸ See Barthes’ *The Metaphor of the Eye* for further elaboration of the significance of the symbolism of the eye.

the scope of their transgressions, fixating on a young woman and unwilling compatriot named Marcelle. The pair quickly begin to assert their authority on Marcelle through sexual violence, leading her to be committed to an asylum, only to be quickly rescued by her assailants. Upon Marcelle's break out however, her distress at her situation causes her to reassign the violence she experiences onto herself, ending with her suicide in Simone's bathroom. Avoiding the legal complications of their deeds, Simone and the narrator flee to Spain where they encounter a new accomplice Sir Edmund. At this point the story reaches its climax in a scene of ritualized rape and murder of a priest within a cathedral.

While the depictions of eroticized violence drive the narrative of the story, it is the relationship between the narrator and the female characters that endow the text with value as it pertains to a feminist reading. Beginning with Simone, it must be noted that she and the narrator are often placed upon equal standing, endowed with equivocal agency over their actions throughout the text. While this power relation is disturbed in one scene in which the narrator attempts to rape Simone, she is able to thwart his advances, "she brusquely sliced away" (*Story of the Eye* 10), and plays off the attempt with a declaration comical in tone which only further strengthens her sense of independence from traditional feminine roles. "You're totally insane, little man," she cried, "I'm not interested here, in a bed like this, like a housewife and mother!" (10). Furthermore, much like Juliette, Simone's role within the transgressions committed is often one of instigation, her appetites leading her to the scene in which she demands the testicles of the winning bull, leading to yet another eroticized murder. Finally, at the end of the novel, Simone emerges victorious, unscathed from the consequences of her transgressions, in which she and her com-

rades “set sail towards new adventures” (40), avoiding the stereotypical pitfalls of many canonical texts in which the woman always comes to bear the brunt of her transgressions in the end.⁹ She manages to simultaneously embody the violence necessary to be considered Bataillean subject while also rejecting the notions of feminine passivity which make women the usual victim of such transgressions.

While the character of Simone presents a feminist interpretation of a subject as conceived by Bataille, this is based on her appropriation of the violent sexual urges of Bataille’s imagination and not her gender, a remark which becomes apparent when her character is contrasted with both that of the Simone’s mother and Marcelle. Beginning with Simone’s mother, her role is absent from the dialogue. She is robbed of a voice and agency, yet remains a powerful specter looming over the transgressions of Simone and the narrator, briefly appearing throughout the story. In one scene, the mother catches Simone and the narrator in one of their frenzied sexual acts, however her role as a voyeur is, for the narrator, “reduced to a family portrait” (6). Furthermore, as the narrator begins to entwine his life with Simone’s, living in Simone’s mother’s house, this arrangement is one forced upon the mother, reducing her status within their lives to one of their victims. Regardless of the lack physical assault on her person, “her mother, having no authority over her... accepted the situation without even trying to fathom the mystery” (10). As the story progresses, the mother becomes more and more entangled within the activities of her daughter, while also remaining a specter of a person, an anonymous object whose role enables the two to continue their transgression.

⁹ For example, we can find this type of feminine punishment in Rousseau’s *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* or Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, to name a few.

While Simone's mother functions as a negation of the Bataillean subject at a passive level, the character of Marcelle could be seen similarly as a negation of the subject, however her role within the transgression is active, serving as a mirror to the Simone's subjectivity both in the Bataillean and feminist sense. To begin, Marcelle is often described as weak and lacking in agency, opposing Simone's brash agency and blasé attitude towards the grotesque nature of her transgressions. Marcelle is "timid and naively pious" and possess "an unusual lack of will power" (6). In another scene, occurring in between her breakout from the asylum and her suicide, she asks the narrator, "Now we can get married, can't we?" (21), explaining that, "it's very bad here, we suffer..." (21), demonstrating a naive recourse to the institution of marriage as a way out of the suffering she experiences from the violence. This can be seen as a stark contrast to Simone's disavowal of marriage, a disavowal which Bataille clearly favors. Finally, the negation of Marcelle's subject becomes literal within the context of her suicide, in which she violently ends her life, providing the narrator and Simone the continuity they need to establish themselves as subject. However, at the same time, Marcelle's suicide also complicates a feminist reading of the novel. While Simone may have avoided the common literary pitfall of the fallen woman doomed to die, this archetype has only been displaced onto the body of Marcelle, whose being ends up functioning as an object similar to the various eyes present throughout the story; enticing and enjoyable for sexual acts, but ultimately, disposable.¹⁰

¹⁰ While absent from the previous analysis, it is worth noting that a similar displacement of the fallen woman archetype also occurs within the framework of Sade, in his accompanying novel to *Juliette, Justine*.

It would therefore be a mistake to assign the transgressions of Bataille's characters as being as *de facto* a collective site for a discursive reconceptualization of the taboos surrounding the discourse on sexual violence, given that Bataille's narrative depends upon a naturalization of violence subjugated against women as objects, becoming subjects only when they appropriate the violence committed by men, such as with Simone. Much like Juliette in Sade's novel, one could interpret Simone as but a figure of the hero's imagination, a prop, an extension of the fantasy provided by the ideals of personal sovereignty in which Bataille constitutes his subjectivity, regardless of that sovereignty's epistemological origin within the genderless concept of inner experience. To even ask the question of whether or not Simone was acting consensually as an agent or coercively as a victim poses a problem because the novel, written in the first person, is ultimately a masculine fantasy, whose object could be said to take little consideration of a female construction of subjectivity. This point is bolstered by the appendix to the story added by Bataille as well, in which he identifies the story to be a fictionalized version of his own imaginations and fantasies, aligning his narrator as his imaginative self, declaring the story only "partly imaginary" (41). This is precisely a point of contention among many feminist critics, most notably Andrea Dworkin in her book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, who notes that the character of Simone "is a prototypical figure in the male imagination, the woman who is sexual because her sexuality is male in its values, in its violence. She is the male idea of a woman let loose" (Dworkin 176). For Dworkin, Simone doesn't present a new discourse for imagining the role of women in relation to sexual violence, but instead is an appropriation of typical notions of virility, the values which enable men to commit sexual violence, to a female subject. Within this

framework, Simone functions as a means to justify sexual violence, most often committed by men, by demonstrating that the impetus for such violence is genderless and universal, a justification that Dworkin adamantly rejects.

However, not all feminist scholars agree with Dworkin's analysis, prominent among them being Susan Sontag and Susan Rubin Suleiman, both of whom saw complications with Dworkin's reduction of the novel to misogyny plain and simple. In Sontag's essay *The pornographic imagination*, she argues that pornography has value outside of its sexually stimulating allure, especially as it pertains to pornography of the "literary genre" (Sontag 182). In her article Sontag writes positively about Bataille and *L'histoire de l'œil*, noting that Bataille's work is representative of a larger literary trend in Europe at the time, endowing it as being worthy of the title "art" which Sontag defines as follows: "art (and art-making) is a form of consciousness; the materials of art are the variety of forms of consciousness" (188). As such, Sontag sees in Bataille's work, not merely an expression of his "imagination", as Dworkin suggests, but also as consciousness of "the most extreme form" in which the writer makes their work, "repulsive, obscure, inaccessible. In short, to give what is, or seems to be, *not* wanted" (189). It is through this violation, to write what is *not* wanted, what is obscene and taboo thematically and artistically, that Bataille's work achieves a discursive signification, seeing as he displaces the value of pornography from the sexual towards a more existential inquiry. As Sontag notes, "Bataille understood more clearly than any other writer I know of that what pornography is really about, ultimately, isn't sex but death" (202).

Building on the work presented by Sontag, Suleiman further places the tension between a theoretical feminist critique of the novel and its significance as having discursive value as a text. However, in contrast to Sontag, Suleiman sees this tension playing out not in the theoretical implications of the text, but rather through its content, specifically its approach to the female body. As Suleiman notes “the female body, in its duplicate as asexual maternal and sexual feminine, is the very emblem of the contradictory coexistence of transgression and prohibition, purity and defilement, that characterizes both the “inner experience” of eroticism *and* the textual play of the pornographic narrative” (Suleiman 85). For Suleiman, it is within the body of the female characters that the tension between Bataille’s theoretical insights and his misogynistic tendencies play out, a conclusion that I also demonstrated through my analysis of Bataille’s female characters. Furthermore, Suleiman rightly acknowledges the difference between the value of the text’s content and the value of the text as discourse, in which a reading of the story, “will look at a text, or at a whole *œuvre* if time and space allow, patiently and carefully, according the work all due respect—but also critically, not letting respect inhibit it” (84). By distinguishing the text from its content as Suleiman does, she is then able to examine Bataille’s novel beyond its “scene and characters,” and through its language, which she sees as being equally transgressive to its content. It is here that Suleiman, through the work of Derrida, finds discursive value outside of the text’s pornographic content. Suleiman, referencing Derrida, notes that Bataille’s work can be viewed a potential site of discursive re-signification through the larger implications of its transgression, noting, “Derrida in an essay on Bataille, suggested that the transgression of the rules of

discourse implies the transgression of law in general, since discourse exists only by positing the norm and value of meaning, and meaning in turn is the founding element of legality” (75).

It is worth considering that the debate between these two frameworks, the anti-pornography stance of Dworkin, in which all pornography is inherently misogynist, and that of Sontag and Suleiman, in which pornography has value as it pertains to feminist epistemologies, is representative of one of the larger debates among contemporary feminist theorists — that between radical feminists (Dworkin) and pro-sex feminists (Sontag and Rubin Suleiman). The polemic between these two feminisms is summarized by Elisa Glick as follows, “while radical feminists see ‘female sexuality’ as repressed by ‘the patriarchy,’ the pro-sexuality movement sees repression as produced by heterosexism and ‘sex negativity’—cultural operations often seen as institutionalized in feminism itself” (21). In consequence, the differing framework between the two camps produces the radically different political stances towards pornography noted earlier. Nevertheless, as Glick notes, there are overlaps in the approaches of these dueling frameworks in the sense that, “both pro-sex and radical feminists reproduce the ideology of personal emancipation within contemporary capitalist society by making the liberation of sex a fundamental feminist goal” (22). For Glick, this focus on “personal emancipation” through the sex acts of the individual misguidedly places the onus of emancipation onto the individual instead of the systems which are responsible for oppression. As she notes, “the attention to the social dimension of sex, one of feminism’s key insights, is eclipsed by a political program that advocates the self- transformation of sexual relations – relations seemingly separated from their locations in political and economic systems” (22).

It is therefore within the limitations of this debate surrounding the importance of the recourse to the personal, that the value of Bataille's *Histoire de l'œil* merits examination. While the critiques and praise of Bataille's text by Dworkin, Sontag, and Rubin Suleiman all hold value within their particular frameworks, they all lack a focused address to the larger matrices of power that influence the importance of the text as a site for a reexamination of the language of sexual violence. However, these limitations are not the fault of these authors, but rather can be found within Bataille's text. While the present analysis demonstrates that the characters, the narrative, and the language of the text successfully re-examine the nature of the relationship between language and its application towards accounts of sexual violence, it is the overemphasis of the personal contained within a subject as conceived only through inner experience that limits the story's potential for a larger re-signification of discourse. By refusing to engage with the subject as a political being as well as a personal one, Bataille's text falls short of achieving a discursive challenge to the contemporary language of sexual violence.

To conclude this chapter, I will remark that through our reading of Bataille's *Histoire de l'œil*, the text dramatically reconfigures the notion of the subject as it pertains to sexual violence, in which violence is a means of establishing not only sovereignty, but also continuity. In this sense the violence is transformed into a tool for existential relief. Furthermore, upon examining the various female characters of the novel, it becomes clear that Bataille's notion of the subject allows, much like Sade, for a liberated female subject so long as she appropriate the virile acts of sex and violence that more often than not find women as their victims than their perpetrators. As such, Bataille's female subjects are limited to a constrained notion of subjectivity which necessi-

tates violence in order to reject traditional female norms. Nevertheless, in spite of these limitations the story still manages to reexamine the value of pornography as a literary genre, demonstrating the value of pornographic literature to challenge the rules of discourse, providing the potential for this genre to achieve a discursive re-signification of women's role in sexual violence, so long as that discourse endows women with not only sexual, but also political agency.

Chapter 3: The intersections of the personal and political in Despentés' *Baise-moi*

Having examined two historical examples of transgressive literature, those of Sade and Bataille, I now move to an author of contemporary France, Virginie Despentés, particularly her 1993 novel *Baise-moi*. Departing strongly from the masculine visions of subjectivity previously studied, Despentés's writing radically transforms the discourse on sexual violence into an unapologetically feminist account of the intersection of political and personal agency in the face of such violence. It is in this framework that I begin with an analysis of Despentés's *King Kong Theory*, a highly personal yet theoretical essay in which she constructs an account of her own subjectivity with regards to her experiences with rape, pornography, and prostitution. In it she stresses the importance of constructing a discourse on these issues that is shamelessly personal. In doing so, she hopes to transform the political systems which have enabled the discourse on sex and sexuality to have been historically constructed on masculine terms by reconstructing it through a female lens. Upon arriving at Despentés's radical reformulation of the female subject, I shall then examine her fictionalized account of such a subject as it is presented in her novel, *Baise-moi*, exploring the tensions between autonomy and sexuality, virility and violence, that are present within the novel. While Despentés's theoretical work presented in *King Kong Theory* can be seen as expressing a discourse constructed along the lines of what is real as opposed to the fictional narrative presented in *Baise-moi*, whose content details a level of female violence that can be seen only as fantasy, both texts challenge the existing standards placed upon women in contemporary society in a way that is strikingly similar in their emphasis on the role of violence

as a means of thinking through the patriarchal standards of femininity.¹¹ By examining the texts together, it becomes clear that Despentés's work demonstrates that the importance of fictional representation of women is equally valuable to theorizing the condition of women in that both rely on discourse, the tool of language, as the primary means for combatting the oppression of women. As such, through my concurrent analysis of these two texts I aim to demonstrate that Despentés's work not only renegotiates the parameters of one women's response to sexual violence, but it also destabilizes existing discursive models of such a response through an appropriation of phallogentric conventions in an effort to reclaim female agency at the limits of language.

Despentés opens her essay *King Kong Theory* with a declaration of her subversive Otherness, one that reconfigures alterity within a dichotomous framework that isn't between man-woman, female-male, but rather between between "good" women, that is to say women who are exchangeable withing a capitalist system, and "bad" woman, meaning those who are unmarketable. She writes, "I am writing as an ugly one for the ugly ones: the old hags, the dykes, the frigid, the unfucked, the unfuckables, the neurotics, the psychos, for all those girls who don't get a look in the universal market of the consumable chick" (KKT 9). As such, Despentés immediately refuses to engage in the patriarchal construction of what a woman should be, by critiquing the requirement to be simultaneously beautiful and fuckable in the service of patriarchal capitalist consumption, while also engaging with this ideal through a vulgarity of language that affirms the value of being ugly, unfuckable, frigid, thereby rebelling against the norms which typically assign these traits as the trashcan of female value. By adopting vulgar (stereotypically masculine)

¹¹ I use the term "real" to indicate that Despentés's theory draws upon the material conditions that she and women at large face within a patriarchal and capitalist society

language, Desportes denounces these systems of patriarchal capitalist domination and radically affirms herself through her shortcomings of submitting to these systems, writing, “I would never swap places, because it seems to me that being Virginie Desportes is a more interesting business than anything else going on out there” (9). As such, the essay is inherently Desportes’s own, endowed with a credibility stemming from her acknowledgement of the impossible impositions placed upon women within patriarchy while remaining alienated from its demands by refusing to participate within them.

Despite placing the essay within a highly personal framework centered on her own subjectivity as a woman, Desportes makes clear that her project is one that is inherently political by placing her own emancipation from traditional feminine roles within the historical context that enables it. Enumerating the various achievements of the feminist movement that aided her independence, she highlights her access to contraception in early adolescence, her capacity to open a bank account without male consent, to dress and screw as she pleases and without fear of consequence, to masturbate, and to work both as a writer and a prostitute (18-19). Nevertheless, despite this semblance of equality in public and private life, she notes that this independence is still restricted by the threat of violence, “since time immemorial, leaving the cage has been met with brutal sanctions” (20). While historically these sanctions were justified by naturalizing female inferiority, that is to say that the oppression of women is inherent to women’s status as the “weaker sex”, Desportes identifies that with the progress of the women’s rights movement in the 70s a naturalized account of female oppression is no longer tenable in order to enforce patriarchy. As the economic and sexual status of women changed in the 70s to offer them more free-

dom and agency through entrance into the workforce and gaining access to their own reproductive freedom through legalized abortion and contraception, it became clear to society that “everyday life has shown us that men are by nature neither superior to nor even that different from women” (20). Rather, she argues, with the gains afforded to women during 70s, patriarchy had to reinvent itself and find new basis for controlling women, which Despentès locates in the shifting cultural expectations placed on them. Whether it be the demand for “submission to an aesthetic ideal” (20) or the way that “motherhood has become the essential female experience, valued above all others” (21), the new justification for the domination of women relied on erecting new standards for femininity that remain extremely rigid, and as such, require a denial of women’s own agency in their lives in order to prove themselves as “real” women, even if this ideal is actually unachievable. As such women have been coerced into believing that “our independence is harmful” (22-23), in order to infantilize them and make “women feel like failures” (21). Therefore, through the reconstruction of role of women along new and impossible standards of femininity, the power structure of patriarchy has maintained itself, and women, despite their economic and reproductive freedom, are still denied the right to self determination.

For Despentès, disenfranchising women from their agency and sense of self determination serves not only to render women inferior to men, but also acts as a coercive trick in maintaining the unequal economic system that is capitalism. By using methods of infantilization to rob individuals of their capacity to choose, capitalism can maintain its never-ending search to expand capital through individual consumption. “A good consumer is an insecure consumer,” she writes (21). In connecting patriarchy to capitalism, Despentès acknowledges that while it may

disproportionately affect women, it is also harmful to men, seeking to render them equally insecure by placing impossible standards upon, such as the requirement to be a protector, brave, or aggressive (28). Hence, she notes, “The special treatment until now reserved for women with shame as the primary tool for ensuring their isolation, passivity, and lack of protest, could now be extended to all” (29). It is in this sense that Despentes places her critique squarely within an anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist vein. Sourcing the problematics of such a system as the genderless infantilization of its subjects, thus stripping them of their capacity for agency, she calls for not only the emancipation of women, but for a complete gender revolution. She writes, “Unless we step into the uncharted territory of the gender revolution, we know exactly where we will be regressing, an all-powerful state that infantilizes us, interferes in our decisions for our own good, keeps us in a childish state of ignorance, fear of punishment, and exclusion” (29).

With the political implications of her project thus declared as being an attempt to challenge the intertwined systems of patriarchy and capitalism, Despentes returns to her personal account of the violent repercussions of such a system, seeking to place that violence within discourse to dispel the primary tool of shame, beginning with a lucid account of her own rape. “July 1986, I’m seventeen. There are two of us, both wearing mini-skirts, I have on stripy tights and red Converse,” she begins, framing her rape within the popular justification that the clothing choice of women implicates their responsibility for their rape (33). Using irony as a weapon, she reminds us that men are taught to believe that “because we’re wearing miniskirts, and one of us has green hair and the other orange, we must “fuck like rabbits” and so the rape they are carrying out is not actually rape” (35). She highlights the masculine language of sexual violence which

produces the psychological distance from the act of sexual violence that patriarchy creates, noting that, “men are still doing what women learned to do centuries ago: call it something else, euphemize, beautify it, above all not using *that* word to describe what they’ve done” (36). As such, language is transformed into yet another patriarchal tool to ensure that women remain powerless within its system, a point taken up by Luce Irigaray in her groundbreaking essay *This Sex Which is not One*. In the essay, Irigaray argues, using the framework of psychoanalysis, that women have been asphyxiated from any appeal towards a unified subjectivity seeing as all language has been constructed along the lines of “masculine parameters” (23). She argues for a new type of *écriture féminine* which rejects such phallogentric rules of language in order to liberate women from an estranged and disunited conception of sexuality. While Irigaray correctly identifies both the dominance of masculine values present within language and the effect this has on women’s capacity to conceive themselves as subjects, her strategy of estranging women from such phallogentric conventions of language, presented in her essay *The Power of Discourse*, is that women use language “from an “outside” that is exempt, in part, from phallogentric law” (68). However, locating such an “outside” is problematic, even for Irigaray, and as such, Despentes instead turns to a strategy of appropriation, using phallogentric conventions of language such as vulgarity and irony, as well as a blatant appeal to violence, in order to break free from complacency and victimization that phallogentric language requires of women. Despentes thus uses the paradigm of phallogentric constructions of language to reassert her power over the narrative of sexual violence and challenge the way that such constructions have rendered men complacent in its discursive response to such a violence.

However, while Desportes acknowledges the specificity of masculine complacency as it relates to the discourse on sexual violence, she also asserts that this lack of language afforded to rape envelops women as equally as it does men, noting, “the attacked, as well as the attackers, skirt around the word. Silence on both fronts” (KKT 37). Furthermore, even Desportes, despite her declarations of radical independence, was still entrapped by the patriarchal system that enables silence around sexual violence, implicating herself in this system. She writes, “the few times—mostly very drunk—when I have wanted to tell this story, have I used the word? Never” (36). By placing her own incapacity to speak out against her rape, she correctly identifies the onus of overcoming such a violence to the systems which enable such a silence, instead of the individual, stating that, “rape is a well-defined political strategy: the barebones of capitalism, it is the crude and blunt representation of the exercise of power” (50). Nevertheless, the trauma inflicted by such an act of violence still requires a reclamation of agency when constrained within such a system, and Desportes was acutely aware of this lack, specifically relating it to the lack of literature on rape, “but this crucial and fundamental trauma—the very definition of femininity, “the body that can be taken by force and must remain defenseless— was not a part of literature. Not a single woman who had been through the process of rape had taken to words to craft a novel out of her experience” (38).

It wasn't until she came across an article by Camille Paglia, in which Paglia argues that rape is the risk women take by stepping out of the house, that Desportes was able to regain a sense of agency surrounding the narrative of her own rape, stating, “Paglia changed everything: it was no longer a matter of denial or collapse, but of dealing with it” (40). By dislocating the response

to rape from one which required a narrative of victimization to one which demanded female agency, changing the discourse from one which is passive to one which is active, Despentes reconceptualizes the ontological origins of rape within the epistemological questions surrounding violence, specifically the gendered assumptions about violence embedded within patriarchal systems. As Despentes notes, “a powerful and ancient political strategy has taught women not to defend themselves. It’s a double constraint as usual—at the same time making sure we know that nothing worse could happen to us, and yet that we must neither defend nor revenge ourselves. Just suffer” (43). As such, Despentes questions the impossibility of women to respond to the sexual violence committed against them with their own violence, noting that this violence is expected to be turned on themselves, “Post-rape, the only acceptable response is to turn the violence inwards, onto yourself” (45). Instead, Despentes reaffirms that rape is not something to be endured, but to be dealt with. By reconfiguring the reaction to rape as one that requires an active confrontation with it instead of passive acceptance, she argues that women can reclaim their sense of self, even when faced with such a violence. However, it must be noted that to do isn’t to deny rape and the violent effect it has on those who experience it, but rather to affirm it, albeit on her terms. Accordingly, for her rape is “is a founding event. Of who I am as a writer, and as a woman who is no longer quite a woman. It is both that which disfigures me and that which makes me” (50). By positing her own subjectivity as being indebted to her rape in conjunction with her condemnation of the lack of discursive models that exist to speak about it, what Despentes achieves with *King Kong Theory* is a call to action to reimagine the problem of sexual violence not through a denial of its gruesome nature, which only serves the political systems

which enable rape, but through an affirmation through language. It is only then that those who experience such acts can reassert their self through it, or to use Despentés words, deal with it.

It is within this theoretical framework that we now turn to *Baise-moi*, Despentés's debut novel, which, while published thirteen years prior to *King Kong Theory*, overcomes the discursive vacuum surrounding rape that Despentés critiques in her essay, and can therefore be viewed as a response to such a lack of literature in the sense that it not only places the question of sexual violence front and center, but also in that it does so in a way that is deeply embedded in an examination of the intersections the patriarchal, capitalist systems that Despentés sees as its origin. The novel tells the story of two women, Nadine and Manu, who after experiencing the violence of the society which marginalizes them, join forces on a road-trip throughout France in which they weaponize the violence and sex done to them back onto the society which enables it. While the novel explores various facets of this society, breaking taboos surrounding sex work, incest, and notions of female virility, what is striking about the novel as it pertains to my analysis isn't the unification of a singular feminine subjectivity constructed along the lines of these transgressions, but rather the way she embeds the transgressions of Nadine and Manu through the intersections of their respective identities and the differing degrees of agency they derive from them. As such, the heroines of *Baise-moi* incarnate a split conception of Otherness, where gender is considered through its relationship to the class and racial divide between the protagonists; Despentés's novel, therefore, confronts sexual violence not only through a consideration of the subject and their personal agency, but also by contrasting such agency with the political systems that determine it.

Desportes configures the split in the identities between her heroines in the opening chapters, in which the narratives of the two characters are originally presented as distinctly separate. Opening the novel with Nadine, whose presence dominates the story, we are immediately confronted with the feminine virility that characterizes Desportes's work, as Nadine is depicted openly masturbating to pornography in the living room while drinking whisky, an act that her roommate Séverine is quick to condemn, "You're really sick and you're going to make me sick" (12).¹² After Nadine curtly tells her to go to the kitchen if she is so disturbed, Séverine remains, lamenting over a man who has yet to call her back after a casual sexual encounter while repeating to herself that "she isn't that kind of girl" (13).¹³ The juxtaposition between Séverine and Nadine in the opening pages serves to frame Nadine's identity as primarily one constructed in opposition to patriarchal norms of femininity. In telling Séverine to go to the kitchen, a retort which implies Séverine should embrace the traditional assignment of women to housework, accompanied by the blatant indulgence in her sexuality through the act of masturbation, Nadine positions herself as embodying masculine notions of overt sexuality and drinking, while also demonstrating a certain resentment towards women who indulge traditional notions of femininity.

As the opening of the novel progresses, Nadine continues to assert herself outside of traditional feminine roles, in which it is revealed that she is a sex worker. She goes to meet up with her friend Francis, with whom she has a casual relationship, only for him to be murdered in the

¹² Original citation, "T'es vraiment malade et tu finiras par me rendre malade," (12). All translations from *Baise-moi* are my own.

¹³ Original citation, "qu'elle n'est pas une fille comme ça" (13).

street. She returns home to Séverine who continues to condemn Nadine's behavior, "Every time it's the same, if I make a comment you respond with a joke and walk away" (73).¹⁴ Nadine begins to examine her roommate's femininity in disgust, her "elegance, almost refined" leads her into a violent and uncontrollable rage "before even having had the idea, the hands of Nadine instinctively find their mark along the neck of Séverine and inherent themselves with rage" (73).¹⁵ Nadine impulsively murders Séverine and in doing so, reveals a crucial aspect of her subjectivity. By framing Nadine's will to murder within her contempt for her roommate, who incarnates traditional feminine roles, her violence, while rooted in disgust for patriarchal notions of femininity, is misdirected against the woman who represents the system, revealing a certain internalized misogyny to her character. Furthermore, by characterizing such a violence as being instinctive and without thought, her agency in the act she commits is rendered obsolete. Nadine personifies a certain one-dimensionality in regard to her position in society. While she abhors the demands placed on women in patriarchal society, her strategy in dealing with her disgust is to incarnate patriarchal values, rendering such a strategy to be contextualized outside of a critique of patriarchy as a political system. Instead, Nadine's rejection of patriarchy is constructed on the terms of her own identity and sovereignty, as well as her own capacity to act against it. Accordingly, Nadine's further transgressive actions throughout the novel can be seen as deriving from a sense

¹⁴ Original citation, "À chaque fois c'est pareil; si je fais une réflexion, tu réponds une coterie et tu t'en vas" (73).

¹⁵ Original citation, "Avant même qu'elle en ait l'idée, les mains de Nadine trouvent d'instinct leur marques le long du cou de Séverine et l'enserrent avec rage" (73).

of overcoming her own lack of agency without a strong consideration of the political systems that marginalize her.

In contrast, the reader's introduction to Manu is set up in a remarkably different paradigm. To begin, Manu's racial and class identities – she is both Arab and working class – relegate her to a more marginalized position in society. This position in society is immediately placed into discourse along its political implications, in which she is introduced as engaging in a conversation about “police violence, injustice, racism, and the youth who must react and organize themselves” (18).¹⁶ In terms of her subjectivity, she is described as “not having the soul of a heroine. She has gotten used to having a colorless life, her stomach full of shit, and to shutting up” (19).¹⁷ In this sense, her sense of self possession, of her personal agency, is drastically different from Nadine's, whose relationship to the world is described as “abruptly pacified,” in which, “nothing bothers her and everything amuses her” (16).¹⁸

Most notably, however, is that Manu's first murder is the result of sexual violence, an event detailed in the graphic depiction of her rape in the eighth chapter of the novel, which marks a turning point in Manu's development as subject. Refusing to allow her attackers to take pleasure in their violence, she remains stoic throughout the rape, resulting in the rapists commenting, “I feel like I'm fucking a corpse,” and “she isn't even crying, see that. Fuck, she's not a

¹⁶ Original citation “la violence policière, l'injustice, le racisme et les gens qui doivent réagir et s'organiser,” (18).

¹⁷ Original citation, “n'a pas l'âme d'une héroïne. Elle s'est habituée à avoir la vie terne, le ventre plein de merde, et à fermer sa gueule” (19).

¹⁸ Original citation “Elle sent la distance entre elle et le monde brusquement pacifiée, rien ne l'inquiète et tout l'amuse” (16).

woman” (63).¹⁹ It is this refusal to give into the attempted eroticization of her rape that enables her to maintain her dignity throughout the ordeal and to reassert a sense of agency over the violence committed against her by dislocating the origin of her victimization from herself to the political systems that enable such violence to occur. Much like Despentes’s argument in *King Kong Theory*, in which she argues that rape be considered a fact of life for women and thus should be seen as something to be dealt with lucidly, Manu responds to the rape by noting to her friend Karla, who was also raped, “it is just something that happens, we are only ever girls. Now it’s over, you’ll see, it’s going to be ok” (65-66).²⁰ However it is also her stoicism that causes her to be condemned by those around her. For example Karla, in responding to Manu’s acceptance of the ordeal, reaffirms the patriarchal narrative that rape is a reflection on the imprudence of the woman, exclaiming, “you can’t believe I’m like that” (66).²¹ This condemnation also comes from her brother, who when seeing Manu, attempts to exert himself within the patriarchal role of protector by demanding to know what had happened, and who presumably take matters into his own hands. She responds by shooting him point blank, refusing to allow the narrative of her rape to be reconfigured within these patriarchal systems. As such, Manu’s violence can be seen as responding to the violence of patriarchy through a different framework than Nadine, who killed out of uncontrollable rage against the false threat of the feminine woman. Rather, Manu directs her

¹⁹ Original citation, “J’ai l’impression de baiser un cadavre,” and “Elle a même pas pleuré celle-là. Putain, c’est même pas une femme, ça” (63).

²⁰ Original citation, “C’est just des trucs qui arrivent... On est jamais que des filles. Maintenant, c’est passé, tu vas voir, ça va aller” (65-66)

²¹ Original citation, “faut pas croire que j’suis comme ça” (66).

violence towards those whose attempt to steal her subjectivity (her own agency in deciding how she responds to sexual violence), attacking patriarchy not only for its impossible demands of propriety, but its demands of victimization.

While Desportes sets up her novel along these opposing lines of feminine subjectivity, it would be reductive to overlook the camaraderie borne out of the similarities between the two as representing a specifically anti-patriarchal thematic. Both heroines are marginalized for their gender, specifically in the ways they reject traditional feminine roles through their shared enjoyment of sex, alcohol, and participation in sex work, leading to various levels of violence committed against them. In response, they both choose to adopt a strategy of appropriating that violence in an attempt to reassert their agency and to rebel against the demands of patriarchy by using its tools. It is through this unification in their estrangement from patriarchal constructions of femininity with their celebration of gratuitous violence that the novel challenges the phallogentric framework of both sexuality and violence, using that framework to emerge as subjects, a point noted by Nicole Fayard, who writes, “Manu and Nadine kill those whose gaze judges and assigns status, and those who attempt to deprive them of their subjective autonomy and turn them into objects and the Other” (72).

However, despite the similarities between Manu and Nadine’s identities, the contrast between them is ultimately irreconcilable. The dissimilarities between the two become more so apparent at the end of the story, in which Manu is killed during an attempted murder, to which Nadine responds by burning her body in the woods before intending to kill herself, only to be apprehended by the police. While the death of Manu and arrest of Nadine both serve to restore the

patriarchal order, ultimately restricting the agency they previously enjoyed and unifying them in condemnation, the discrepancy in the price they pay cannot be ignored and merits an examination. Using the framework outlined in my character analysis, that Nadine represents an attempt to overthrow patriarchy in a firmly personal framework without a consideration for the political and economic systems that reinforce rape as a tool of capitalist oppression whereas Manu's violence considers the larger implications of such systems, the ending can be read as an affirmation of patriarchal capitalist society to tolerate attempts to dismantle the effects of its violence, so long as such attempts do not take aim at the systemic sources, and instead are configured within a personal framework.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Desportes conceives her fictional subjects in entirely different power matrices than did Sade and Bataille. While both Sade and Bataille's subjects operated within worlds of unconstrained agency, in which the consequences for their transgressive actions never produced material repercussions, Nadine and Manu have already had their agency restricted by the social powers of patriarchy and capitalism, even before their violent transgressions begin. It is in this sense that Desportes's subjects are responding to exterior forces, conditions of violence created independent of their subjectivity, as opposed to a response to interior forces as with Sade and Bataille. Returning to the critique of the patriarchal parameters of language presented by Irigaray, it then becomes clear that to imagine a discourse outside of such parameters is unfeasible. Instead, Desportes utilizes these parameters to her advantage. By thrusting her heroines into the systems of power that subjugate them both materially and discursively, ultimately ending in their demise, Desportes demonstrates that such a system of patri-

archy is so embedded in its own violence, as well as the language it uses to enforce it, that it is not the responsibility of Desportes's heroines to overcome their marginalization. Instead, she demonstrates that such a system is incapable of reconceptualizing itself outside of its own power matrices when confronted with their affects from those it deems "Other". It is therefore through the overt exposure of these power matrices, and the weight they bear on the protagonists, that reinforces Desportes's aim to dismantle not only the patriarchal notion of female infantilization, but to link such an infantilization to capitalist systems, framing violence as not only being a subjective and personal obstacle, a matter resolved within the self, but as a systemic symptom of clearly defined power structures. Therefore, in calling out such power structures through a lucid portrayal of the interpersonal violence that they manifest, Desportes affirms that sexual violence must be viewed as a collective, and thus dispels the discourse surrounding it from a solitary framework.

Conclusion

I would now like to return to aim of this study outlined in the introduction, which was to examine the ways that transgressive literature is capable of re-imagining a discourse on sexual violence that affirms its nature in order to remove it from the solitude that renders its victims powerless. Based on my readings of Sade, Bataille, and Despentés, I ascertain that such a literature must be one that not only reveals the abject nature of its subject matter, but that also engages with the political systems that enable such a violence to be enacted both materially and discursively to the effect that those who have experienced sexual violence are capable of rendering themselves as subjects as opposed to victims. As such, the texts presented within this study have demonstrated both the complications and possibilities of creating such a discourse through transgressive literature.

Beginning with Sade, my analysis of his work presented in *Juliette* has demonstrated the untenability of conceiving a response to sexual violence through an appeal to an ethical framework founded on a reason. While his work suggests that violence, sexual and otherwise, constitutes the ontological basis of the human being in a way that is celebratory, and thus cannot be seen as providing a discursive model that seeks to confront that violence, his fearlessness to shine a light on the abject reality that is inherent to sexual violence reconfigures the methodology that must be taken in order to confront it.

Continuing with Bataille, I have shown that his pornographic imagination manifested in *Histoire de l'œil*, renders pornography as a literary genre inherently valuable in contextualizing the origins of sexual violence along the terms of the subject and their search for continuity. While

many of the pitfalls inherent to patriarchal culture remain present in Bataille's text, rendering it problematic in the sense that it still engages with the common representation of women as victims, the text has also proved to be significant in this study because it prompted a dialogue among many feminist thinkers to rethink the value of pornographic literature as it relates to feminist epistemologies.

Finally, in my analysis of Desportes's work in *King Kong Theory* and *Baise-moi*, I have suggested that transgressive literature only becomes materially valuable when it engages with its subject through a framework that is as personal as it is political. With Desportes we arrive at a true reconfiguration of the discourse on sexual violence, one which not only affirms its abject nature, but situates that nature as not being in any way inherent to the human condition, but as a tool of oppression in service to patriarchal and capitalist power systems. As such, Desportes's work demonstrates that when these systems are radically engaged with along the material and discursive consequences, not only can the victims of sexual violence restore a sense of agency to themselves, but the systems responsible for this violence are also revealed to be constructions, and accordingly, they are capable of being challenged.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Natalia Myers
natalia.myers50@gmail.com

Education

BACHELOR OF ARTS IN FRENCH AND FRANCOPHONE STUDIES | THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY | 2020

- Member of the Schreyer Honors College
- Concentration: French Culture

BACHELOR OF ARTS IN PHILOSOPHY | THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY | 2020

- Member of the Schreyer Honors College
- Concentration: Arts and Humanities

STUDY ABROAD | UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA | JULY-AUGUST 2017

- Completed coursework in Intercultural Communication and Media Studies

STUDY ABROAD | IES PARIS | AUGUST-DECEMBER 2018

- Advanced and integrated coursework in French grammar, film studies, literary studies, and philosophy

Experience

YOGA INSTRUCTOR | LILA YOGA | AUGUST 2019-FEBRUARY 2020

- Responsible for facilitating community yoga classes at various skill levels

MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS INTERN | ACCUWEATHER | SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2017

- Job responsibilities included reviewing and editing press releases and curating visual media for marketing purposes

ORGANIZING FELLOW | HILLARY CLINTON FOR AMERICA | SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER 2016

- Helped to recruit, train, and manage over 500 volunteers
- Executed field events including voter registration drives, phone banks, and canvassing