

## Dans l'béton, dans la merde : Anne Garréta's Intractable Materiality

- 1 Anne Garréta's *Dans l'béton* is a marked departure from the rest of her corpus. Published sixteen years after her previous novel, *Pas un jour* (2001), for which Garréta won the Prix Médicis and became established in the contemporary French literary scene, *Dans l'béton* is unlike any of the works that precede it. Gone (or at least, submerged) is the cynicism, the profound melancholia, the pervasive sense of loss. Present instead are humor and verve. Because the novel presents as a *récit d'enfance*, one filled with unorthodox and humorous spelling (e.g. *week-end* as *ouikinde*), readers and reviewers immediately made comparisons with Raymond Queneau and his néo-français in *Zazie dans le métro*<sup>1</sup>, with references to Céline, Burroughs, Despentès, and Melville thrown in as well. The one comparison that wasn't made, despite Garréta's making the intertext patently clear by naming one of the key characters in *Dans l'béton* Catherine Legrand, was with Monique Wittig's *L'opoponax*, a *récit d'enfance* whose protagonist is named Catherine Legrand. Given Wittig's conviction that literature could and should function as a Trojan horse, a weapon for battling conventions and reshaping reality<sup>2</sup>, dropping the novel's Wittigian point of reference makes us lose sight of its political project of breaking down the omnipresent structures of heterosexual nuclear family and race<sup>3</sup>. In this essay, I examine *Dans l'béton* in this political light, demonstrating that the novel is not simply "une aventure familiale"<sup>4</sup>, but a political one that passes through *béton* and *merde* as materials that elucidate Garréta's poetics as a politics.

### Beginning in It

- 2 Garréta's prolegomenon is a reflection on beginnings, but she doesn't begin, as does the apostle John, with the beginning – "in the beginning" (*John* 1:1) – but with a detour through concrete and family. The first sentence, "Le béton, c'est pas un métier de pédés"<sup>5</sup>, drops the reader into the middle of things, into the middle of the concrete that is the primordial and predominant material of the text. From the novel's very first words, we are, as the title announces, *dans l'béton*. After this introduction to the matter and the material at hand – concrete – we are then introduced to the narrative's principal actors: the narrator's father and her younger sister, who, along with the narrator, will form, not a love triangle but a concrete one. Through the process of mixing and laying concrete, what will be rendered visible and material – if only to be broken – is a nuclear, heterosexual family structure that can no longer hold.
- 3 All of this will become clearer, but for now, let us proceed with the prolegomenon, where, after the introduction of concrete and a heterosexual family – *le béton*, which brings father and children together, isn't *un métier de pédés* – the narrator grapples with the question of beginning:

Pour que ça soit clair, ce béton, faudrait que je vous explique une infinité de choses. Y faudrait que je mette tout bien en ordre. Et que je commence. Y faudrait.  
Mais par où commencer ? Par la fin ? Le début ? Le milieu ?  
Et où il est, le milieu ?

Dans la merde, ya pas de milieu. Ya juste la merde. C'est la merde, le milieu... Dans l'béton, c'est pareil.

Alors, autant commencer par le commencement. (DLB 9)

- 4 From the very beginning, Garréta establishes a relation of analogy between concrete and shit, and it's to shit that the narrator's mind turns to try to think through what it means to tell the story of being *dans l'béton*. Garréta thus signals that this story of being *dans l'béton* is the story of being *dans la merde*. The narrative problem is how to tell a proper story – with a beginning, middle, and end – about concrete, when concrete, like shit, cannot be demarcated into those different stages. Concrete and shit are both only what they are, through and through, their uniform consistency trumping the kinds of division that time would effect: one end of a turd is the same as the other end, one section of concrete is the same consistency and material as another section.
- 5 Certainly, one could place concrete into a temporalized structure so that one could say the preliminary steps of gathering the materials and mixing the concrete are a beginning, the laying of the concrete a kind of middle, and the fully hardened product an end, and do likewise with shit, so that the digestive process of eating food and breaking it down in the gastrointestinal tract is the beginning, the process of defecating, the middle, and the fully eliminated stool, a self-standing object now fully free from the body, the end. But such an imposition of temporal markers is artificial, and the beginning, middle, and end are obtained through recourse to material outside and other than the material at hand: the materials from which concrete is mixed aren't yet in and of themselves concrete, just as the food we take in isn't feces.
- 6 The parallel between concrete and shit is central to the proper functioning of the novel. We are meant to think shit through concrete, and, conversely, concrete through shit. Both function in the novel as weaponized materials that serve to concretize human relational structures (the kinship structure of family, in the first case, and racial structures, in the second). Garréta deploys concrete and shit as twinned weapons against invidious and seemingly necessary social structures (how can you raise a child without a family – without a mother and father?; how can you operate without a concept that accounts for the glaringly visible variations in skin pigmentation and the cultural and ideological trappings that follow from them?). Concrete and shit are the determining materials in, respectively, the familial and school spheres in which the narrator's picaresque adventures take place.
- 7 In the familial sphere, the father's penchant for concrete leads to all sorts of mishaps and disasters: the destruction of the washing machines used to mix concrete; the family's roof falling in; the younger sister, Angélique, being covered in wet concrete, which leads to the father leaving the two children behind to find help to break Angélique safely out of her concrete shell. In the school sphere, the world of children, the narrator and her sister receive an education in hierarchy, in what it means to be singled out as different – they witness, for instance, a boy in the schoolyard get persecuted and teased as a *pédé*, or a black orphan girl (Catherine Legrand) get persecuted for being black – and make the decision to fight back through weaponizing shit. Through the telescoping of family and school, of life in both its private and public spheres, hierarchy emerges as a through-line and foundational element of the narrator and her sister's lives. Garréta's *récit d'enfance* thus tells the story of a kind of political awakening or education, with concrete and shit as the primary materials at hand.

- 8 The novel's political project follows in the explicitly anti-hierarchical, anti-difference path laid by Garréta's previous works, and is consonant with the political impetus that drove Garréta's entrance into literature, where her debut novel, *Sphinx* (1986), was written in order to "fuck difference"<sup>6</sup>. The particular forms of difference and the ensuing hierarchy that *Dans l'béton* targets are those hypostatized in the nuclear heterosexual family and in race. With these political stakes thus articulated, the question of material arises: why does *Dans l'béton* require both concrete and shit for its program of undermining the paired structures of heterosexual kinship and racial difference?
- 9 In what follows, I take us through the parallel operations of concrete and shit, looking first at the way Garréta deploys concrete to attack heterosexual kinship, then at shit to see how she mobilizes it to attack racial difference and racism. In doing so, it will become clear why concrete and shit are non-exchangeable vectors for Garréta's project: shit cannot do to the nuclear family what concrete can, and concrete cannot act against racism as shit can. But despite their non-interchangeability, concrete and shit possess shared material qualities that make them operate similarly on a formal level and in their relation to temporality, such that they stand together, ultimately, for language itself.

### A Concrete Family

- 10 The modern heterosexual kinship structure of the nuclear family – a mother, a father, and children – is from the very beginning of the novel tied to concrete. Concrete, as seen in the incipit, is the very first object introduced in the text, and following closely behind in the second sentence is "notre père," whose role as the patriarch is deeply implicated in concrete: "Le béton, c'est pas un métier de pédés. C'est peut-être pour ça que notre père a décidé, dès qu'on a été en âge, ma ptite sœur et moi, de nous entraîner au mortier, à la dalle, au coffrage" (*DLB* 9). Under patriarchy, the father bears the responsibility for his family's wellbeing as well as its identity, as seen in the way the name of the father becomes the name of the children as well as of the mother. The project of ensuring the heterosexualization of his children, upon which the reproduction of the heterosexual family depends, is here tied to the father's penchant for concrete.
- 11 Garréta's trademark irony is at play here, given that mixing and working with concrete is a decidedly masculine task, one hardly suited to the project of rearing up girls in the ways of the femininity foundational to an operational heterosexuality. The only knowledge or education he transmits to his daughters revolves around concrete – how to mix it, how to diagnose a washing machine's weaknesses as a concrete-mixer, how to fix a broken washing machine/concrete-mixer, how to modernize through the manufacture and application of concrete (*DLB* 10–15). The father, insofar as he is related to his wife and children, is described as having these familial relations always mediated through concrete. He exists in the novel only through his compulsive and obsessive concrete mixing, and we never see him described or acting outside the context of concrete: making it, laying it, dealing with the consequences of it.
- 12 The father does not come out of the novel looking well: he is an authoritarian ("Il a toujours aimé pontifier. Pontifier aussi, parfois, et hardiment. Donner des ordres, surtout. C'est un chef et un pontife" (*DLB* 13)) who insists on indulging his concrete mania with little or no regard for his children, whom he mobilizes as free labor, or for his wife, who is literally in tears and on the verge of nervous exhaustion from her

incapacity to keep her children clean, as encrusted as they are – constantly – in bits of concrete that get everywhere, even in their food (DLB 10–11). Against the father's mania for concrete, the mother's mania for cleanliness ("Notre mère, elle voulait nous garder propres, même le ouikinde. C'était une de ses manies" (DLB 10)) does not stand a chance – the father's will reigns supreme as the will around which the entire home is organized.

- 13 It isn't that the father doesn't care for his family or is uninvested in their wellbeing, but rather that he is so egocentric (with concrete always on his mind) that all his projects for improving the life of his family pass through the very concrete that makes that life terrible. For him, concrete is a sign of modernization – the ultimate good and goal. So it is that when his wife inherits from "un vieux oncle" a primitive shack in the middle of the French countryside, she returns to Paris to work ("Fallait qu'elle retourne travailler. Qui sans ça nous offrirait nos bétonneuses, nos machines à laver, nos générateurs?" (DLB 30)) and he remains behind with his children to, as a surprise for his wife, modernize the shack:

On allait lui moderniser sa bicoque isolée, vite fait bien fait. Une ou deux dalles de béton, mais du béton léger, hein!... un béton paillé par exemple. Un chouia d'électricité, à peine un peu de plomberie et ça srait une fermette de rêve pour Parisien ou même pour Anglais pas trop tordu. Calme, bucolique et moderne en même temps. (DLB 30)

- 14 We have here a father who utterly fails at carrying out the patriarch's function as head and stabilizer of the family. In an inversion of gender roles, the father, who attempts to align himself with the straight masculinity of working with concrete, is in fact supported by his wife, who is the primary breadwinner and the source of funding for his stay-at-home DIY projects. The activity of working with concrete might be itself masculine, but the structure within which it occurs – financial dependence on his wife – is not.<sup>8</sup>
- 15 While the father's plan for the *bicoque* might seem noble, motivated by the desire to improve his wife's life and increase the value of her property, it quickly devolves. The father, totally caught up in his project of laying concrete on the shack's dirt floor, fails to notice when the *lessiveuse* being used to carry fresh concrete tips over, entirely covering Angélique (or Poulette, as she is affectionately called by her narrator-sister): "Si la lessiveuse, c'était le Vésuve, alors la bicoque, c'était Pompéi, et Poulette là-dessous ensevelie" (DLB 69). Once he does notice, his and the narrator's attempts at wiping off the concrete covering the little girl only succeed in further spreading the concrete over her body: "Plus on la taloche, plus on râcle cette morve de portland, plus notre Angélique en est tartinée et plus on s'tartine à son contact, plus on s'enlise dans le visqueux et s'embrenne dans le boulé" (DLB 75). To add to this catastrophe, the water pump completely breaks down so that there's no way to wash the concrete off Angélique. The father fails to find his mallet with which he had been intending on breaking the concrete shell open, despite the narrator's panicked protestations that he would kill her: " – Pourquoi papa, ô pourquoi tu veux l'assommer notre Angélique? Et à la masse encore! On ferait une omelette de la Poulette avant même d'avoir réussi à l'extraire de sa coquille" (DLB 82). He abandons the two young girls to find help, leaving them behind "dans le noir, dans la bicoque ouverte à tous vents, au plus profond trou du cul du monde" (DLB 83).
- 16 While Angélique sleeps, "bien à l'abri dans son sarcophage" (DLB 152), the narrator, exposed to the elements and surrounded by darkness, which terrifies her, tells stories, such as the story of battling the horde of racist boys to protect their friend Catherine

Legrand “pour pas sentir la solitude et l'horreur de la nuit” (DLB 152). The father, as in all his other enterprises, fails to secure help: in an absurd ludic turn, when his car breaks down, he tries to cut across the fields to return home, only to get lost, hopelessly scratched and torn up, finding and bringing back with him a gigantic bull that he had taken care of when it had been a calf. Salvation comes in the form of the narrator's grandmother, who, upon seeing that the children and father had not returned home the previous evening, had left in the night to come to the shack to see what had happened. At this point in the novel, which is nearly finished, the narrator, for the first time, reveals her gender, when, in joy, “je chante que la rivière est profonde et si tu voulais on dormirait ensemble dans un grand lit carré et qu'on serait heureuses jusqu'à la fin du monde” (DLB 153). In a feat echoing that of *Sphinx*, Garréta's narrator had, up to this point, not used any language that was explicitly gendered, so that the narrator's gender was suspended until the end, when who could have been Poulette's older brother is revealed to be her older sister. This gendering and matriarchal alignment with the grandmother – the narrator joins her sister and grandmother in the feminine *on* described as *heureuses* – repudiates the patriarchal model of family: the patriarch has failed to reproduce himself properly, lacking the son who would be able to transmit the name of the father.

- 17 The chain of endless catastrophes brought about by the father's misguided attempts at modernization and advancement serve to reveal heterosexual familiarity as irreparably damaged and damaging, dysfunctional and counterproductive. The heterosexual nuclear family and its masculinist logic are rejected to instead privilege relationships and alliances forged between women, between sister and sister, granddaughter and grandmother, and, as we'll see in the anti-racist part of the narrative, between girls<sup>9</sup>.
- 18 This outcome, in which the father is extraneous and useless, is to be expected in a novel critiquing heterosexual kinship, and at a much earlier point in the novel, Garréta foreshadows this breakdown of the traditional family via the breakdown of the paternal. In an episode demonstrating the father's general ineptitude, the father gets a shovelful of dirt and mouse droppings in his eyes, blinding him. With no water to flush out his eyes, he orders his daughters to spit into his face, which they do dutifully, imagining all sorts of delicious foods to stimulate their salivary glands. Looking back on this incident, the narrator describes it as “le jour où j'ai appris kya des fois où cracher à la gueule de ses ascendants, c'est un devoir filial. Et même, un devoir d'humanité” (DLB 39). If humankind is to advance or to be preserved, the paternal must be spat upon and rejected<sup>10</sup>.

### **The War against Racism**

- 19 The *devoir d'humanité* in *Dans l'béton* is twofold, and in addition to tearing down the paternal – the foundation of the heterosexual family – Garréta targets another social structure, that of racism and the instauration of racial difference subtending it. While the narrator and Angélique are abandoned by their father, the stories the narrator tells to comfort herself are those of school and play, areas in which the authority and structure of the nuclear family are displaced in favor of the kinds of structures children create for themselves in the absence of adult supervision. The stories that the narrator draws upon all have in common a structure where the narrator and Angélique are allied

together in righteous opposition to the aspiring patriarchs-in-training with whom they share spaces of school and play: in addition to protecting a little boy bullied as a *pédé*, the most dramatic story, to which the narrator devotes the most time and attention, is that of their coming together to protect Catherine Legrand from the boys who would persecute her.

- 20 Catherine Legrand is notably the protagonist of Monique Wittig's 1964 Prix Médicis-winning novel, *L'opopanax*, whose coming of age operates through the awakening of a lesbian consciousness and desire, where it is through positioning and claiming herself as the minoritarian subject of *lesbian* that she is able to fully enter into and claim subjectivity, as represented in the appropriation of *je* that occurs at the very end of the novel – a shock after hundreds of pages of third-person narration. Garréta's Catherine Legrand, however, is substantially transformed from Wittig's: Garréta's Legrand is an orphan and she is black. We are first introduced to her when the narrator recounts having, in the countryside, engaged in reenactments of medieval jousts with other children (riding bicycles instead of horses), only to have a boy insult Legrand: "un môme [...] s'avisait de faire le sang bleu et d'insulter une Dame, et des plus dignes et des plus belles. Parce qu'en effet, elle était noire, et même toute noire, sans famille avouable, car issue de l'Assistance et échouée chez la vieille pauvre du bord de la rivière" (*DLB* 95).
- 21 Legrand's blackness responds to the ways in which the French political and demographic landscape has shifted. In contrast to the implicit whiteness of France's women's and gay liberation movements, with which Wittig was deeply involved, the France of 2017 features in its political lexicon concepts such as *intersectionnalité* and *racisation*, which foreground racial politics<sup>11</sup>. And by being cast as an orphan, which effectively excludes Legrand from the heterosexual structure of the single-race nuclear family – she lives with an old, impoverished presumably white woman – Garréta brings together in her person the failures of both the kinship and racial structures that *Dans l'béton* targets.
- 22 Where Garréta uses concrete to break down the family, she turns to shit to attack racism. The narrator and Angélique, at the moment of the joust, immediately attack the "jaune sire médisant" (*DLB* 96) to defend Legrand's honor, who is "la première Dame à avoir honoré notre tribune, la première Dame noire sans doute à paraître en un tournoi à bicyclette tenue en ces lieux" (*DLB* 95). Immediately afterward, they begin planning another attack on the racist boy, reasoning that to avoid retaliation, "une fois pour toutes, il nous faut défaire le jaune sire félon" (*DLB* 102). The key weapon in their campaign against a shitty ideology turns out to be shit, of the bovine variety. The narrator, in a lengthy passage, outlines the qualities of cowshit that make it eminently weaponizable. The passage is worth citing in its entirety because it is here that the parallel between shit and concrete as materials is the clearest, so that Garréta's deployment of concrete against the family must also be taken as an instance of weaponization:

Et puis, on met au point et on teste notre arme secrète, notre arme suprême : la bouse-bombe.

La bouse-bombe, perfectionnée par mes soins, c'est tout à la fois un projectile à large cône de dispersion, un gaz de combat suffoquant, et une arme bactériologique. En tout cas, c'est pas une arme conventionnelle, et les traités internationaux sont muets à son propos.

Élaborée, comme son nom l'indique, à base de bouses de vache semi-sèches, c'est une

arme redoutable, mais d'un maniement délicat.

On va les cueillir vers midi sur la route où elles ont eu le temps de sécher après que les vaches les ont lâchées entre le pâturage et l'étable, aller et retour. Elles schlinguent d'autant plus que le bovin a tâté de l'ensilage. On sait les bonnes adresses, les bonnes étables. Un côté sec et rigide – celui qui a séché à l'air ; un côté mou par en dessous.

Toute la difficulté, c'est de la ramasser sans s'embouser ; tout l'art, c'est de la stocker sur clayettes sans l'assécher trop et sans soucier grand-mère qui nous voit trafiquer ces galettes de merde du matin au soir et se demande ce qu'on peut bien faire de tout cet engrais.

La bouse-bombe, on la déploie à courte aussi bien qu'à longue portée et on la vectorise de préférence à la raquette de badminton. C'est un art de régler le tir d'un truc pareil, mais Poulette et moi on se rebute jamais à l'entraînement. (DLB 103-04)

23 A few pages later, the narrator recounts how the *bouse-bombes* work to perfection:

C'est le moment crucial, le moment de dérouler notre carquette de bouse-bombes. [..]

Tir cadencé !

Feu roulant !

Nos bouse-bombes crépissent et immobilisent les rangs ennemis.

Arrivant en piqué, ça s'étend dans les bottes, ça s'insinue dans les cols de chemises.

Quand, tir tendu, ça coeuille le fantassin en pleine poire, c'est instantané. Y ferme les yeux, y ferme la bouche, il arrête de respirer. Ses mains lâchent la fourche, le manche de pioche, le caillou. Y s'débarbouille frénétiquement, et plus y s'débarbouille, plus y s'embouse. Et plus y s'embouse, moins il ose ouvrir les yeux et plus y s'carambole avec le reste de son régiment.

Notre barrage de bouse-bombe a semé la plus totale confusion sur le front Nord. (DLB 111)

24 Shit and concrete converge in their intractability as materials, and each of the passages above deals with a particular dimension of this intractability. The first, which relates the collection of the *bouses* and attends to their texture, points to the ways in which time plays an essential role in rendering both shit and concrete intractable. The experience one has of both materials is temporally contingent: concrete must be wet and fresh to be poured and shaped, shit must be dried (but not too dried) to be deployed as a weapon. With both materials, if one waits too long or not long enough, one cannot manage or properly manipulate them. Concrete, when wet, cannot support weight but when dry, cannot be molded. Shit, when wet, is not a good projectile; but if too dry, cannot be spread around as is the case in the second passage, where the enemy winds up blinding and soiling themselves in their attempts at getting rid of it.

25 The second passage, which relates the deployment of the *bouse-bombes*, has the particular viscosity of shit mirror that of concrete: both Angélique and the boys targeted by the *bouse-bombes* are covered in materials that they become enmired in in direct proportion to the attempts made at getting rid of them. This mirroring encourages us to read the Angélique-in-concrete scene through the enemies-in-shit scene, such that the relation between father and daughter is framed in adversarial ones. The father essentially treats his daughter as an enemy, which the narrator seems to understand when she cries out “papa, ô pourquoi tu veux l'assommer notre Angélique?”.

26 Shit and concrete are both intractable and essential. Shit is the girls' secret weapon, without which they would not have been able to defeat the racist boys, and concrete is

- the key to the father's projects of modernization, as well as a decisive material in concretizing the father's failures and limits, and by extension, those of the heterosexual nuclear family he attempts to construct around himself. By insisting on the weaponizable quality of both concrete and shit, these materials are imbued with political force – the force to resist the weight of the parts of the social order to which they are in opposition: the family, in concrete's case, and racism, in shit's case.
- 27 We are still left, however, with the question of the specificity of these materials. Why concrete to attack the family and shit to attack racism? Couldn't Garréta have reversed them so that the father was a fertilizer maniac terrorizing his family by going out and collecting excrement, experimenting with creating different kinds of fertilizer so that his daughters and wife always stank, becoming social pariahs as a result? Couldn't the girls have come up with ways of covering their racist enemies in fresh concrete instead and lay traps to get them stuck in concrete?
- 28 I would submit that there is a particular logic governing why Garréta attributes these functions to the materials she is working with. Garréta points to the ways in which the social structures of family and race are constructed, so that her readers might be better equipped to take them on themselves.
- 29 Family is cast as an “essential” structure if a clearly social or cultural one<sup>12</sup> – see, for example, the pervasive narrative of children needing both a mother and father if they are to develop properly<sup>13</sup> – whereas race seems biological, or natural. One can construct alternate families, of which blended, queer, or single-parent families are a clear example, but constructing or inhabiting an alternate race seems ridiculous on its face, as the scandal of Rachel Dolezal, and her claim to be a different race than the race she “is” demonstrates. And yet, race, like gender, is a social construct, and a fairly recent one at that<sup>14</sup>.
- 30 Garréta is aware of this divergence in the way the structures of family and race are perceived, and tailors the material of her resistance accordingly. Concrete – the material by which she targets the family – is used primarily for the construction of industrial, commercial, and infrastructural structures meant for collective use. By using concrete, Garréta simultaneously insists on the constructed nature of the family and gives lie to the idea that it is somehow a private structure. While the space of the nuclear family might be mapped onto domesticity or the private sphere, it is an immanently public structure foundational to a certain kind of sociality – namely, patriarchy and the various ideologies that are reproduced in its name, including racism<sup>15</sup>. Kristin Ross, in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, has shown how post-war France was deeply invested in a modernization tied to an Americanized culture of consumption and hygiene – to, in other words, technology<sup>16</sup>. Garréta responds to this characterization of modernization by tying it to the family, arguing effectively that the family is also a technology, by which a nation can build itself – it is just as much an infrastructural project as are the concrete highways that connect the nation.
- 31 And through shit, Garréta uses a “natural” material to target a “natural” phenomenon. It is important that the shit used for the *bouse-bombes* is cowshit: the bovine nature of this material draws attention to the way cowshit, which seems natural, a biological product, is itself only available to us because of domestication. The cow, in its common form, only exists as the consequence of significant human intervention, and the animality of the resulting species masks its human origins. It is also the fruit of technology – animal

husbandry. The decidedly non-natural origins of the cow point also to the non-natural origins of race. The weaponization of the shit that is a product of domestication places domestication itself under the sign of violence. The elevation of the family, the domestication of women, the domestication of race (e.g. the enslavement of blacks as chattel labor, the predominance of racial minorities in domestic service) – these are all structures obtained through physical and conceptual violence.

- 32 This, then, is the moral of *Dans l'béton*: everything that we have at our disposal comes to us through some sort of social intervention – if not the material itself, then the conceptual tools by which we make sense of it. This awareness of the processes by which we come to believe the things we do and inhabit the structures that form us, is a necessary step in beginning to undo them if we are to ever replace them. *Dans l'béton* thus has a decidedly political bent, but that is not the novel's only takeaway. Beyond a certain *prise de conscience politique*, Garréta is invested in a *prise de conscience poétique* as evidenced in her appropriation of Wittig's Catherine Legrand. Wittig's primary poético-political intervention was to insist on the materiality of language as the principal matter through which political reality might be shaped<sup>17</sup>. For Wittig, language is not an easy material. As evinced by her insistence on the labor and brute force that goes into stripping language of its sedimented social meaning to allow it to mean otherwise (something that happens uniquely in a literary context)<sup>18</sup>, it is a fundamentally intractable material.
- 33 Garréta, by insisting on the materiality of concrete and shit in *Dans l'béton*, primes her reader to be attentive to the materiality that is found in the text itself. The descriptions of concrete and shit are certainly evocative and operate on a physical register, but the actual material at hand is that of language, and it is no coincidence that the materials through which she would have language's materiality refracted are themselves intractable. Shit is hard to work with; concrete is hard to work with – and so too with language. Language, like shit and concrete, is intractable, and we seem not to have the time in our late capitalist lives (marked by scarcity of time and resources) to work with it, to do the work that Wittig, and following Wittig, Garréta, do in making it resist the flattening social order into which we are born and raised.
- 34 But as with shit and concrete, language is an imperative – we cannot simply be in it. We must do something with it: either allow it to cover us, encasing us in the world as it has always been (what happens to Angélique with concrete), or to blind us (what happens to the racist forces Angélique and the narrator combat), or, as Garréta suggests, work with it to do something completely different. In this light, the linguistic experimentation that obtains throughout *Dans l'béton*, seen in the highly unorthodox orthography in the passages cited, far from being preciousness, or a 21<sup>st</sup>-century imitation of Queneau's *néo-français*, is an example of what happens when we dare to work with and against language, rather than simply be in it.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sean James Rose, "Zazie dans le BTP", *Livres Hebdo*, September 22, 2017, URL : <http://www.livreshebdo.fr/article/zazie-dans-le-btp>; Eric Loret, "Anne F. Garréta, tambour béton", November

- 23, 2017, URL : [https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2017/11/23/anne-f-garreta-tambour-beton\\_5218988\\_3260.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2017/11/23/anne-f-garreta-tambour-beton_5218988_3260.html); Hubert Artus, "Anne F. Garréta Queer et Béton", *Causette*, October 1, 2017; Yaël Pachet, "Casser des murs avec une masse", *En attendant Nadeau*, n° 45, December 6-19, 2017, p. 21-23.
- <sup>2</sup> Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1992, p. 68–75.
- <sup>3</sup> See Annabel Kim, *Unbecoming Language*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2018 for a discussion of Garréta's previous works and their Wittigian influence.
- <sup>4</sup> Yaël Pachet, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
- <sup>5</sup> Anne Garréta, *Dans l'béton*, Paris, Grasset, 2017, p. 9, hereafter cited as *DLB*.
- <sup>6</sup> Annabel Kim, "The Riddle of Racial Difference in Anne Garréta's *Sphinx*", *Diacritics*, vol. 45, n° 1, 2017, p. 4–22.
- <sup>7</sup> These are not the only structures under attack in the novel. As the incipit's invocation of *pédés* suggests, a persistent if intermittent queerness is at play. *Pédé* circulates as a false epithet and identity marker that floats in the atmosphere without landing on or attaching to those subjects who might be considered to be "really" or authentically queer.
- <sup>8</sup> Garréta further undermines the father's functionality as patriarch by implying that he might not even be heterosexual, as he inherits from "un pédé, un vrai" (*DLB* 126). The father insists he never knew about his friend's homosexuality (*DLB* 128), his ignorance a way of distancing himself from the specter of homosexuality.
- <sup>9</sup> The mother is excluded from this model, likely because she is too closely aligned with the father as his spouse and the means through which he is able to reproduce himself, to be a proper ally.
- <sup>10</sup> This resonates strongly with feminist philosopher Sally Haslanger's assertion that "Providing our children the social bases for alternative family schemas [to the natural nuclear family] may not be only permissible, but morally good; it may even be a moral duty to combat bionormativity." Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 180.
- <sup>11</sup> *Intersectionnalité*, adopted from American *intersectionality* has become established as a feminist imperative as it has in the States. Even a "féministe historique" like Christine Delphy, a major figure of the MLF, calls for intersectional analyses of oppression. See Charlotte Bienaimé, "Christine Delphy (5/5) : Qui sont les autres ?", *À Voix nue*, January 18, 2019, URL : <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/a-voix-nue/christine-delphy-55-qui-sont-les-autres>. And the notion of race as a construct has been assimilated by the political establishment, compelling French president Emmanuel Macron and his administration to try to push through an amendment to France's constitution to remove the word *race* as it naturalizes race instead of acknowledging the social process of *racisation*. See Emmanuelle Saada, "Without Distinction of... Sex: The Constitutional Politics of Race and Sex in Contemporary France", 2018, URL : <https://youtu.be/uEnqPoN5qtM>.
- <sup>12</sup> See Susan Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, New York, Basic Books, 1989, for a strong critique of the notion that the heterosexual nuclear family has any natural foundation.
- <sup>13</sup> A case in point is the anti-gay marriage Manif pour Tous movement, which cast the necessity of the heterosexual nuclear family in psychoanalytic terms. The discourse around the nuclear family is recent and differs from the sorts of natalist narratives originating in the Third Republic. The nuclear family shifts the focus away from one of demographics and population growth (although it obviously is implicated in them) to one that is psychologizing, where the family becomes the metaphor of an ideal social order, as seen in Marlène Schiappa, the Secrétaire d'État auprès du Premier ministre chargée de l'Égalité entre les femmes et les hommes, describing France as needing a couple (obviously heterosexual) to rule over them ([https://twitter.com/FC\\_actu/status/993534510271778816](https://twitter.com/FC_actu/status/993534510271778816)).
- <sup>14</sup> Elsa Dorlin, *La matrice de la race: Généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la nation française*, Paris, La Découverte, 2006 reveals the relatively recent history of the construction of race as biological fact; Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality* examines what it means, philosophically and politically, for race and gender to be social constructs.
- <sup>15</sup> See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 3rd ed., New York, Routledge, 2014 for a persuasive argument casting the family unit as an efficient mechanism for reproducing ideologies of oppression and domination.
- <sup>16</sup> Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1995.
- <sup>17</sup> The entirety of Wittig's *Le chantier littéraire* could be summed up this way.
- <sup>18</sup> Monique Wittig, *Le chantier littéraire*, Lyon, Éditions iXe; Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2010, p. 96–97.