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*Unbecoming Language: Anti-Identitarian French Feminist Fictions* by Annabel L. Kim (review)

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ce qu'il adviendrait de la littérature à l'heure du triomphe du transhumanisme, d'un homme enfin libéré des entraves de son corps et de sa nature. «La littérature est-elle possible dans un monde délivré du malheur ? Peut-elle s'accommoder du bonheur manufacturé du meilleur des mondes ? Peut-on s'imaginer d'écrire ou de penser sans l'angoisse du néant et l'appréhension du non-être ?» (44). Ce sont de telles questions que Bruno Chaouat fait graviter autour de Blanchot, Sade, Gunther Anders, Proust, Kafka ou Agamben pour mieux souligner à quel point chacun d'entre nous fait, au quotidien, l'expérience d'«une singularité non déterminée» (53) qui contrecarre les fantasmes du transhumanisme. C'est aussi l'aspiration transgenre, notamment dans les analyses de Judith Butler, que Bruno Chaouat passe au crible d'un tout autre modèle de l'être qui en fera mieux saillir les contradictions et les limites : le sujet juif. Quant à la société de la transparence qui nous entoure et nous guette, intimement liée à un monde où tout serait calculable et mesurable, c'est l'opacité foncière du sujet qui la borne, celle-là même qui fonde la littérature et que l'essai nous invite à explorer, entre autres, sous la plume de Modiano.

On constatera ainsi à quel point le principe de la variation s'adapte à la démonstration qu'entend mener Bruno Chaouat. Elle autorise un parcours sinueux au sein d'une constellation de pensées, nous invite à arpenter des traditions littéraires, philosophiques et religieuses qui, face à notre monde contemporain, conservent tout leur poids. Celles-ci nous forcent à prendre une distance salutaire face à l'actualité la plus brûlante et à la regarder d'un œil neuf. Elles témoignent surtout d'une variété que le transhumanisme pourrait mettre en péril. C'est la raison pour laquelle le lecteur ne peut que souscrire au projet sous-jacent qui anime *L'Homme Trans* : «servir de prolégomènes à une anthropologie de la démesure—une trans-anthropologie» (19).

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Annabel L. Kim. *Unbecoming Language: Anti-Identitarian French Feminist Fictions*. Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2018. 263pp.

When one thinks of French feminist fiction and thought since Simone de Beauvoir's seminal works, many of the first names that come to mind are those of writers associated with psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and *écriture féminine*: Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva. In *Unbecom-*

*ing Language*, Annabel L. Kim argues that this differentialist tradition has overshadowed the rich contributions of anti-difference, anti-identitarian, “unbecoming” French feminist writers like Nathalie Sarraute, Monique Wittig, and Anne F. Garréta. Kim defines “unbecoming” as a relationship with language that breaks down heteropatriarchal identity categories and allows one to experience “subjectivity without subjecthood—where one is fully in oneself but free, fluid, unfixed, potential” (6). Kim’s exploration of the literary strategies angled at such experiences is a significant contribution to scholarship on French feminism and fiction, and should be of broad interest to scholars working across a variety of humanities disciplines.

One of the great strengths of *Unbecoming Language* is the coherence of its corpus and the specificity of its focus. The book is divided into four chapters: three in-depth author studies and a final chapter that synthesizes those studies and provides a concluding reading of each author. While *Unbecoming language* at first appears to trace a linear narrative of influence—in which Sarraute’s experiments with *tropismes* set the stage for the pronoun work of Wittig’s radical revolutionary feminist texts, which in turn give way to Garréta’s more elegiac and playful Oulipian fictions—Kim insists on contiguity and proximity rather than linear continuity (82). Indeed, throughout her close readings, Kim always privileges dialogic and relational gestures and never allows one writer—not even Wittig, who supplies so much of Kim’s analytical framework—to occupy a truly central or authoritative position in relation to the others. This mode of reading is perfectly in keeping with Kim’s conviction that language is a radically open and free space, that there are “as many types of relationships to language . . . as there are subjectivities” (232), and hence that there are multiple ways to use language to combat oppressive categories and reductive identities.

Clearly, as the book acknowledges (34), instituting the free and fluid subjectivity of unbecoming is a utopian project, one that seeks a “paradise” of words or of “freed language” (100, 114, 122, 123, 191) outside the discursive categories that undergird society as we know it. However, Kim refuses to place unbecoming at a safe remove from the present, as a horizon or ideal that texts could prefigure but not enact. Instead, Kim holds to the idea that unbecoming can be directly and presently experienced through contact with a language that, in distinction to socially imposed “discourse” (120–1), is “vital” (102), “living” (181), “vibrant” (234), “raw” (209), and materially embodied (194, 235). The gambit of *Unbecoming Language* is thus to posit that the experience of “self-decomposure” (30) is concretely available to readers who engage deeply with a particular kind of fiction.

This line of argument exposes *Unbecoming Language* to critique from those who, faithful to Derridean and poststructuralist conceptions of literary meaning, reject the premise of language's self-presence to itself or indeed of any full presence or "plenitude" (34). For those who are receptive to the book's founding premise, however, Kim's detailed readings offer ample examples of how writers and readers might construct an "affective and corporeal relationship" with the "embodied and vital entity" that is language (235).

As this overview suggests, *Unbecoming Language* puts forth an ambitious argument about what literary language can do and, just as importantly, undo. *Unbecoming Language* is a book that points to fruitful new avenues for analyzing unbecoming poetics across a broad spectrum of literary movements, and many aesthetic associations could be envisioned on the basis of Kim's readings. There are nevertheless places where the book's singular focus, the pains it takes to "loosen each writer's anchoring" in groups and literary categories (2), and its avoidance of treating French theory or queer theory as primary "characters" (25) risk isolating these writers as much as liberating them. Kim's approach necessitates a healthy suspicion of literary categories, and her insistence on decoupling Sarraute and Wittig from the New Novel (40) is certainly understandable given the well-documented masculinist tendencies of twentieth-century French avant-gardism. However, though this is perhaps a byproduct of an incomplete assimilation of the anti-categorical thought promoted by *Unbecoming Language*, as I read these delicate and challenging analyses of Sarraute, Wittig, and Garréta, I could not help but wonder how contemporary French literary studies—which has been characterized in part by an immoderate backlash against the "age of suspicion"—might use this anti-identitarian strain of thought to reemphasize the potentialities of a mid-century experimental corpus that was anything but apolitical. What would it mean to try to read someone like Claude Simon as an anti-identitarian writer? Could Sarraute's neutral conception of literary voice provide a blueprint for how to ungender the New Novel from within? And if we think more generally about the gender outlaws and sexual rebels of French modernist literature, how might this anti-identitarian poetics inflect Michael Lucey's influential work on the first person as "a problem in French literature" (*Never Say I*, Duke 2006)?

Such questions only begin to scratch the surface of the rich avenues of inquiry opened up by Kim's scholarship, and *Unbecoming Language* lays

out a compelling argument to reconsider feminist poetics from the perspective of the unbecoming work done to and through literary fiction. As such, this book will have a great deal to offer scholars of feminism, queer studies, French studies, and indeed of modern literature *tout court*.

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