

REVIEW

Unbecoming Language: Anti-Identitarian French Feminist Fictions. By ANNABEL L. KIM.
Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018. 296 pp.

‘To read without ever arriving at a reading’ (p. 50), to encounter language without interpreting its meaning, seems an impossible task for a monograph on modern and contemporary French fiction. Yet this is precisely what Annabel L. Kim endorses and enacts in her remarkable study of Nathalie Sarraute, Monique Wittig, and Anne F. Garréta. Through close engagement with these authors’ experimental texts, Kim lucidly excavates a poetics of anti-difference feminism, which she sees as ‘unbecoming’ the reader, reworking their subjectivity so that it is no longer contoured by identitarian categories such as gender, race, or sexuality. In the book’s Introduction, Kim begins by dismissing the literary identities to which Sarraute, Wittig, and Garréta are normally confined — the *nouveau roman*, the Mouvement de libération des femmes, and the Oulipo, respectively — arguing that these labels obscure a transitive chain of influence that illuminates and consolidates their shared disavowal of difference. The first chapter takes Sarraute as its focus, with Kim demonstrating how the indeterminacy of ‘tropismic’ language ‘sweeps us up into an almost interminable sentence that sets us down in a state of confusion about which subjects were doing what verbs at which points’ (p. 55). The second chapter beautifully integrates Wittig’s theoretical and fictional works. It leads with a masterful exegesis of the oft-ignored *Le Chantier littéraire*, both a eulogy to Sarraute and a treatise on the capacity of writing to function as a war machine — or Trojan horse — that can dismantle ‘the straight mind’ and rebuild a raw, lesbian relation to language in its place. By the third chapter, the baton of undoing difference has been passed from Wittig to Garréta, but where most have read *Sphinx* as a love story stripped of gender, Kim is the first to discuss critically Garréta’s caricatural descriptions of racial difference, framing them as an ironical takedown of alterity in all its insidious forms. Indeed, that race, sexuality, and gender are compounded and confused by class position is Kim’s only oversight, for whether such stratification could also be undone via language is an intriguing proposition deserving of further thought. Nevertheless, by drawing out the confluences between Sarraute, Wittig, and Garréta, without positing a straightforward inheritance, not only does Kim re-interpret novels which have heretofore been read as either apolitical (in Sarraute’s case) or straightforwardly feminist (with respect to Wittig and Garréta), but she greatly enriches the study of French feminism which has for too long been flattened — at least in the Anglo-American academe — to discussion of *écriture féminine*. Nowhere is this more powerfully achieved than in the book’s final chapter, in which Kim shifts the conception of feminist poetics as a writing of the feminine body to a writing that treats language as a body in itself: alive, material, autonomous, and to be experienced by the reader ‘corps-à-corps’ (as Wittig terms it). It is through this sensate, even sensuous, encounter with the non-human body of language that the reader confronts ‘the radical possibility of not having embodiment, desire, and relation determined by a difference that leads immediately to hierarchy’ (p. 237).

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