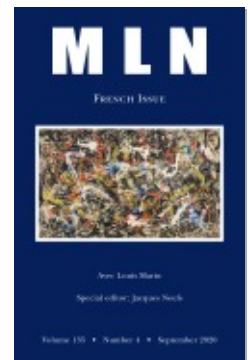*Unbecoming Language: Anti-Identitarian French Feminist Fictions* by Annabel L. Kim (review)

Raquelle K. Bostow

Annabel L. Kim. *Unbecoming Language: Anti-Identitarian French Feminist Fictions.*
   The Ohio State UP, 2018. 263 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8142-1384-1.

Annabel Kim's book *Unbecoming Language* breathes new life into French
feminist theory and fiction. While labeling the book as "theory" is a misno-
mer, Kim's argument that the writers and novels studied present a poetics of
"unbecoming" not only re-endows literary narrative with the stimulating power
to generate theoretical ideas, but also allows literature to energize French
feminism and theory with the politicized charge of "anti-difference," long
neglected in American studies of these traditions and movements.

   Kim defines "anti-difference French feminism" as a rejection of the idea
of sexual difference as essential and argues instead that such difference is
constructed (2). While some strands of differentialist French feminism also
argue that difference is constructed, Kim's anti-difference French feminism
imagines the possibility of leaving the idea of "difference" behind altogether.
In *Unbecoming Language*, Kim unveils anti-differentialist thought that presents
subjectivity without subjecthood, what Kim calls unbecoming, by reading
together for the first time the works of Nathalie Sarraute, Monique Wittig, and
Anne Garréta. Collectively, Kim claims that their works "hollow out difference
and rework our subjectivity" by resisting the literary fabrication of identity
(4). This process of unbecoming is stimulated by these authors' common
belief in "language's potential to transform a reality marked by compulsory
identification and seemingly inescapable difference" (84). Kim establishes an
anti-differentialist feminist poetics through this thorough study and places it
firmly on par with differentialist French feminism. *Unbecoming Language* makes
a valuable contribution to the field of French Studies, and to its branches of
French feminisms and contemporary French fiction, but also to the study of
contemporary literature more broadly.

   The book's introduction provides a presentation of the main argument
as well as a helpful biography of each writer studied before moving on to
definitions of terms and methodology. Working with the claim that difference
is built on sameness—that is, that identity categories require collectives of
"sameness" that bind individuals within an identity category—Kim argues that
Sarraute, Wittig, and Garréta instead forego the idea of difference, which, the
author powerfully asserts, has practical applications. In the introduction and
elsewhere, Kim interrogates the ways in which engaging with "unbecoming
language" might influence the way we unknow ourselves and thus others. This
becomes an underlying goal of the book: to propose a radical disarmament
that makes "difference" easier to bear, or at the very least, to remember that
our world based on difference is a fictive fabrication. The project is admit-
tedly utopian (34), but refreshing and welcomed. The introduction presents
ample evidence to demonstrate the relationship between these three authors
and the book's organization and methodology are major strengths. *Unbecom-
ing Language* is organized into four chapters: the first three examine each
writer's corpus independently through the lens of "unbecoming language,"

while tending to their overlaps, and the fourth constructs a feminist poetics inspired by the combined study of Sarraute, Wittig, and Garréta.

Another strength in Kim's approach is the choice to read these authors outside of a theoretical framework. While the reader may expect to engage with "French theory" or "queer theory" in a book that argues for the disintegration of identity, Kim's work insists rather on these novels' capacity to fashion theory on their own, thereby resisting the division between "narrativity" (or literature) and "theory." This approach seems appropriate given that reading these authors through a pre-existing theoretical framework would not correspond with the book's project to shed identity labels, as Kim explains. Instead, these authors generate a new relationship with language that allows for a "subjectivity without subjecthood," or "a non-delineated subjectivity" (32) . . . a framework that could very well become a "theory" itself.

In Chapter 1, "Sarraute's Indeterminacy," Kim rejects the traditional reading that categorizes Sarraute as a New Novelist or as a woman writer. Instead, Kim asks about the possibilities that arise when Sarraute is read alongside Wittig and Garréta as a writer of anti-difference. Reading through this lens, Kim underscores Sarraute's own resistance to the categorization of "woman writer" and concomitant emphasis on humankind's "neutrality." Sarraute's investment in language as a living body, which removes contours and renders subjectivity indeterminate, enacts a "neutrality [Sarraute] believes is shared by all" (43). This neutrality, playing in the lexical field of indeterminacy, emerges through Sarraute's vision of language as emancipatory in its ability to dissolve difference, which Kim understands as a political act, thereby presenting another unconventional reading as Sarraute is often read as an apolitical writer.

Kim traces Sarraute's political indeterminacy from *Tropismes* (1939) through her mid- and late-career works, *Les Fruits d'or* (1963) and *Tu ne t'aimes pas* (1989). In opposition to the "dead" language of realism, Sarraute's living language, as animated in her tropisms, disturbs preconceived notions and urges readers to release hasty conclusions, thereby moving away from the "interpretative" mode and toward the "sensate" mode (49–50). By the end of the chapter—and through numerous engaging close readings that bring the book to life—Kim illustrates how Sarraute's living language fashions uncertainty as a resistance to normative language through pronoun work and the attribution of non-human descriptors to human characters that counter readers' expectations. Sarraute's work to rid pronouns of concrete referents and the emphasis on neutrality throughout her œuvre influenced the political drive of Wittig's texts; as Kim illustrates, these two authors were mutually influential on one another, together developing a radical indeterminacy that asks readers to disinvest in the notion of difference as fundamental to subjectivity.

Chapter 2, "Inside Wittig's *Chantier*," serves as the crux of Kim's book, as Wittig connects Sarraute and Garréta in this literary genealogy of anti-difference French feminist fictions. In this section, Kim reads Wittig as a writer, a decision that goes against the grain as Wittig is most often taken up as a theorist (81). While *The Straight Mind* is Wittig's most popular work, and the one that

placed her firmly in American scholarship as a radical lesbian thinker, Kim insists that we need to place Wittig's *Le Chantier littéraire* (2010) alongside *The Straight Mind* (1992) in order to fully grasp Wittig's corpus as deconstructing the invention of difference, sexual and otherwise. Kim's study of *Le Chantier* "put[s] the writer back together again" by mending the "political Wittig" and "literary Wittig" into one thinker, ultimately serving an overarching argument of Kim's book: these three writers are political because they are literary (84). As Kim demonstrates, Wittig's *Le Chantier littéraire* takes up Sarraute's writing as a political resistance to the use of language as a reinforcement of difference—and it is primarily through *literature*, where one is most able to labor on language, that one can embark on "the radical experience of indifferentiation and indeterminacy" (82). In Kim's reading of *Le Chantier*, we discover that for Wittig, deeply inspired by Saurratian thought, language is both conceptual and real. It is also liberating in that it belongs and is accessible to everyone, thereby fashioning an egalitarian social contract that invites all to construct within the literary "worksite," or *chantier* (96); however, it is up to the writer (and reader) to bring language to life, to create new forms that disrupt the old, in order to create new meanings and realities, thereby activating Wittig's Trojan horse (98).

Kim uses Wittig's metaphor of the Trojan horse introduced in *Le Chantier* to illustrate how language can be a "war machine" that destroys identity and difference in Wittig's *L'Opoponax*. In this reading, Wittig's pronoun work emerges as a way to degender femininity and to universalize the experience of childhood, but more importantly, to "restor[e] individual subjectivity not yet interpellated by the ideology of the straight mind into assuming an identity" (114). Through this deft analysis, Kim ties together the disparate parts of Wittig's textual corpus and also insists on literature's potential to influence everyday life, if reader and writer "take th[e] transformative experience of language from the literary worksite into the extraliterary space of the world to turn social space, and its language, into its own *chantier*" (115). Garréta, as Kim substantiates, would be inspired by Wittig's *chantier* to create her own revolutionary writing against difference that refuses categories and prevents readers from identifying with her characters, ultimately asking the reader to release their own identity in the process.

Unbecoming Language follows with a third chapter that mimics the style of the previous two: Chapter 3, "Garréta: No Subject Here," is dedicated to a close study of Garréta's novels *Sphinx* (1986) and *La Décomposition* (1999). The fourth chapter, "Towards a Poetics of Unbecoming; or, Language Has a Body," teases out a poetics of unbecoming that emerges from reading these authors' works together. In this final chapter, Kim contemplates the consequences of relating to language as a body and the ways in which a corporeal language opens up possibilities for a feminist poetics of unbecoming that generates a desire not based on difference, unlike the poetics of *écriture feminine*. By insisting on language as corporeal, as do Sarraute, Wittig, and Garréta, Kim's poetics offers a language stripped of "deterministic meaning" to create a living, "vibrant"

language that allows us to step out of our differentiated identities and unbecome, thereby envisioning language that acts on and shapes the human (234). And yet, this poetics does not eradicate difference, but proposes a difference as existing not between humans, but between human and "living" language. In a framework inspired by Wittig that casts "difference" as hierarchical, one might question the purpose of declaring a difference between human and language; is language really resistant to falling into categories of hierarchy? Kim accepts that it may be difficult for readers to grasp or accept the idea of embodied autonomous language, but this difficulty does not prevent fertile readings of language's potential as liberating force in the works of Sarraute, Wittig and Garréta.

Unbecoming Language is a formidable demonstration of thorough close reading, which makes this book is a pleasure to read. Kim's writing style is poetic, approachable, and pedagogical in its clear argumentation, and I appreciated its break with academic discourse through an engagement with the reader as "you." After reading this compelling study, readers will be reminded of language's transformative nature and energized by this understudied strand of French feminism. *Unbecoming Language* is a necessary read for those interested in French feminisms, contemporary French fiction, and in the fields of gender studies, queer theory, and new materialisms, and for anyone interested in the question of difference and the role it plays in literary history and in our everyday lives.

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Irving Goh. *L'Existence prépositionnelle.* Galilée, 2019. 128 pages. ISBN 978-2718609836.

On parle au cinéma d'« avant-première », ou sous forme abrégée de « première », pour parler d'une projection auprès d'un public restreint, précédant l'exploitation publique du film. Ce que le livre convaincant d'Irving Goh nous propose est cette avant-première pour la philosophie elle-même : non pas une « philosophie première » au sens de l'offre à tous des principes d'une *prima philosophia*, d'une ontologie première, mais plutôt une philosophie avant-première qui insisterait sur ce qui précède la mise à disposition de ces principes au nom d'une validité universelle.

Insister sur ce qui précède la mise à jour des principes ontologiques qui ordonnent la philosophie est devenu geste classique, dans une séquence qui commencerait avec la philosophie transcendantale (de Kant à Husserl) et aurait trouvé dans la déconstruction (de Heidegger à Derrida) sa forme achevée : toute mise à jour des catégories de la philosophie révèle une part de nuit, tout principe un archi-principe rebelle au principe, toute condition de possibilité une condition d'impossibilité. Ce geste terminal est devenu à ce