



PROJECT MUSE®

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

Zoe Petropoulou

Women in French Studies, Volume 28, 2020, pp. 144-145 (Review)

Published by Women in French Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wfs.2020.0020>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/775746>

Cheryl Toman

University of Alabama

Kim, Annabel L. *Unbecoming Language. Anti-Identitarian French Feminist Fictions*. The Ohio State University Press, 2018. Pp. 272. ISBN 978-0-8142-1384-1. \$55.75 (cloth). \$29.95 (paperback and eBook).

In this detailed study of the work of Sarraute, Wittig and Garréta, Annabelle Kim calls for critical research on the topic of difference—or rather anti-difference—and its political role in literature. *Unbecoming Language* presents a way of being without difference in Sarraute's, Wittig's and Garréta's literary work as the book problematizes and resists difference as the concept that makes categories possible. Kim proposes three distinct ways of addressing the issue rooted in the historic times of the authors. For Sarraute, the problem comes from the categorization of social forces that impose deadening contours. For Wittig, it is the straight mind as the dominant social order that sorts humanity and imposes a hierarchy. And finally, for Garréta, the answer can be found in a call to a queer world and the writer's willingness to deconstruct identity. According to Kim, all three resist difference because it produces hierarchy and oppression. These can be any type of difference categories such as sex, race, class, sexual orientation and nationality: all three write novels that refuse to accept these categories as givens and reject the idea that difference is a necessary condition for human existence.

Kim refuses to restrict Sarraute, Wittig and Garréta to the pre-determined categories to which they have been relegated by critical theory over time. She draws attention to their interrelationship and intergenerational chain of influence, as she calls it, which has been forgotten so far by the histories of French feminism. This process creates a space where one is not just a passive consumer of a language that determines the shape of who one is and what sort of life one lives. The encounter with language makes it possible for one to exist differently and to be freed of the determinism of difference. Kim calls this subjectivity without subjecthood *unbecoming*, where one is fluid, unfixed in potential, and infinite. For Kim, all three writers forgo subjecthood through and in relationship with language. They bring the reader into their close encounter with a language that can rework subjectivity and unchain it from the confines of subjecthood for as long as we are in contact with it.

In that context, the novel not only thinks but acts as a political tool. Kim meticulously focuses on the interrelation of the three writers and their defiance of categorization, building a persuasive case for anti-difference politics in their writing that builds an alternative framework for perceiving French feminism. For Kim, Sarraute is a central influence on Wittig's writing and Wittig in turn is essential in Garréta's writing.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is devoted to Sarraute's work, which Kim proposes should be studied and read outside the New Novel. Her literary writing is political, and her work *Tropisms* should be seen in a political light as anti-identitarian writing that seeks to provide us with an

encounter with unbecoming language. In the second chapter, Kim presents Wittig's writing as a new reality of being, whether already present or situated in the future. Her work resists the language of the old reality, which can be best described as discourse-language that has been used to form utterances that, through repetition, acquire meaning intelligible to the social order that created that meaning to begin with. It is language rather than discourse that constructs or shapes reality. While Sarraute comes from a bourgeois environment, Wittig is defined as a political and polemic writer from the beginning. It is important to her to create language without the hierarchy ascribed to gender by patriarchy. For Wittig, literary texts are like Trojan horses, as they are capable of transforming reality. She creates a lesbian corpus, a new language to take universality away from the masculine and to destroy gender with the new language that creates it. The third chapter is devoted to Garréta. She confronts identity but instead occupies a negative position and destroys the so-called world in the texts as she privileges destruction and isolation. The first three chapters exemplify each writer's use of language to unbecome within the context of their historical specificities. In the fourth chapter, Kim draws the main ideas that contribute to their theories and their interrelation. Since the writers she deals with live in different moments, their experience of both literature and difference is unique for each one. Each writer opens possibilities for the next. The fourth chapter also examines the three writers and their connection to language to theorize a poetics of unbecoming grounded in the experience of language delineated by textual characteristics; one is called in his/her contact with language to "unbecome" in one's experience with it. Kim, Sarraute, Wittig and Garréta aim to strip language of the socially determined and deterministic meaning it is wrapped up with as it enables readers to have a fresh experience of living.

Kim's excellent understanding of Sarraute's, Wittig's and Garréta's writing challenges us at the same time to question the categories of feminist writing and queer identity politics as we know them so far. This book takes us beyond an in-depth reading of the three writers and proposes a valuable contribution to queer theory and identity politics.

Zoe Petropoulou

St. John's University

Lorusso, Silvia. *Le Charme sans la beauté, vie de Sophie Cottin*. Classiques Garnier, 2018. Pp 350. ISBN 978-2-406-08007-7. 39€ (papier).

Silvia Lorusso's biography of Sophie Cottin, *Le Charme sans la beauté, vie de Sophie Cottin*, fills an impressive lacuna on its subject, mysterious even in her own time (1770-1807). As Lorusso's "Avant-Propos" points out, this is one of the most troubled periods in French history (13), and yet, even the greatest historians of the time, Latouche and Sainte-Beuve for instance, report conflicting stories about this great authoress. Lorusso proposes to reveal the contradiction between fact and fiction through her own meticulous research in various correspondences housed in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Her motivation,