ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	THE NEW MEDUSAS: THE REWRITING OF MISOGYNISTIC MYTH IN 21ST-CENTURY FRENCH (FEMINIST) LITERATURE AND CINEMA
	Jillian Irene Bruns, Doctor of Philosophy of Modern French Studies, 2020
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My doctoral research explores the reemergence of the Medusa as a feminist figuration in contemporary francophone autofictional and cinematic productions. While the origin of the myth of Medusa can be traced back to Greek mythology, she has reappeared throughout intellectual history in order to illustrate the unspeakable and unfavorable aspects of femininity. My project repositions the gaze upon her through her instantiations in a corpus composed of women writers and filmmakers that are participating in the rewriting and the revision of misogynistic myth. My dissertation first studies the myth of Medusa as a historical concept from Antiquity, through her appearance in modern academic works in fields such as psychoanalysis and 20th-century French feminism. My study of Medusa also engages critical theory about the practice of writing myth

and mythmaking. Using this hybridized and interdisciplinary theoretical framework, I look at three instantiations of the Medusa and her gaze in contemporary French texts. My chapter "Gone Girls" studies the figure of the teenage punk heroine in Virginie Despentes' *Apocalypse bébé* and Catherine Breillat's *A ma sœur !*. Here the Medusa appropriates violence as a tool for achieving the aims of subversive feminism in a 21st-century context. In my next chapter "Petrified Colonial Pasts", I reveal a destructive and colonizing female gaze in Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* and Claire Denis' *White Material*. My following chapter "(im)Mortalized Mothers" looks at demythifying revisions of the mother-daughter relationship in Christine Angot's *Un amour impossible* and Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie*. I have named these six women writers and filmmakers the New Medusas because they revive the Medusa as a symbol of women's power instead of an object to be scorned. Through the New Medusas' gaze, their revisions of normative femininity permeate through our collective subconscious and become a positive symbol for women.

THE NEW MEDUSAS: THE REWRITING OF MISOGYNISTIC MYTH IN 21ST-CENTURY FRENCH (FEMINIST) LITERATURE AND CINEMA

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Modern French Studies
2020

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Acknowledgements

The first thing I realized as I started the process of writing my dissertation is that it is not something you can do on your own. Although the writer's condition is often a solitary one, the act of crafting a text and bringing it to fruition takes a village. I am proud to say that the work presented here is truly collaborative; to all those who have had a hand in my intellectual and academic formation, I attest that I would not have gotten this far without you.

I would like to thank my director Dr. Baillargeon for her patience, persistence, and insight that helped me navigate what otherwise seemed like an impossible task. I would also like to thank Dr. Orlando for her additional support this past year in Lyon, France. She made me feel like the department was never too far from home. I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to spend another year abroad in France thanks to being awarded a Department of French and Italian Dissertation Completion Fellowship. Much appreciation and respect are due to the other members of my committee Dr. Eades, Dr. Koser, and Dr. Lothian. The classes I took with you these past few years have had a profound effect on my evolution as an academic. I hope that the scholarship presented in the following chapters is a faithful reflection of the great impact of your teaching.

I also owe thanks to the wonderful women in my cohort and everyone with which I had the pleasure of sharing our office. My friends, family (including dogs), and my partner were tireless sources of support and strength during this process. Thank you for holding my hand and showing me that I could find my way.

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Chapter 1: The New Medusas

J'écris de chez les moches, pour les moches, les vieilles, les camionneuses, les frigides, les mal baisées, les imbaisables, les hystériques, les tarées, toutes les exclues du grand marché à la bonne meuf. Et je commence par là pour que les choses soient claires: je ne m'excuse de rien, je ne viens pas me plaindre. Je n'échangerais ma place contre aucune autre, parce qu'être Virginie Despentes me semble être une affaire plus intéressante à mener que n'importe quelle autre affaire.[1](9)
-Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Théorie*

Through their novels and films, Virginie Despentes, Catherine Breillat, Christine Angot, Claire Denis, Marguerite Duras, and Chantal Akerman subvert norms about femininity, authorship, cultural identity and group affiliation. I argue that these writers and filmmakers can be categorized as New Medusas; they are considered controversial through their rebellion against codes concerning womanhood, authorship and public performance. Their reputations precede them, and their vision of femininity is polemical. Through the text, their works provoke a destabilization or effacement of the foundations of normative society. The New Medusas act as outsiders within the domains they are most often associated: feminism, contemporary fiction, and cinema. They are resisting the normative constructions of the literary establishment; norms concerning the role played by

[1]"I am writing as an ugly one for the ugly ones: the old hags, the dykes, the frigid, the unfucked, the unfuckables, the neurotics, the psychos, for all those girls who don't get a look in the universal market of the consumable chick. I'm making no excuses for myself. I'm not complaining.I would never swap places, because it seems to me that being Virginie Despentes is a more interesting business than anything else going on out there." (Benson 7)
Translated by Stéphanie Benson. *King Kong Theory.* The Feminist Press, 2010.

the author herself and norms concerning what counts as literature or cinema. The New Medusas are constructing their authorial posture on their own terms. The concept of posture, as first presented by Pierre Bourdieu and further developed by Jérôme Meizoz, identifies the ways in which an author is socialized in literary practice by creating their position in the literary field (Meizoz 2010, 85). Virginie Despentes unapologetically and routinely transgresses the line between biography and fiction through her authorial posture. Although she has been considered a member of feminist autofictional authors due to the infusion of her experiences with rape, her involvement in the post punk scene, sex work and the pornography industry into her novels, her corpus resists any singular classification. At the beginning of her career, Despentes' film adaptation of her first novel *Baise-moi* received an X rating for pornographic imagery and excessive violence. More recently after spending several years in her position, she stepped down as one of ten members of the elite Parisian literary society Académie Goncourt,. In literary critiques and by mainstream media, her writing is commonly described as trash, punk rock and underground. She is portrayed as an outsider and rebel within the French literary scene. Most recently her article "Désormais on se lève et on se barre"[2], published in *Libération* in reaction to Roman Polanski winning a 2020 César (French equivalent of the Academy Awards), has gone viral and become a rallying cry for feminist and leftist political movements in France. Although

[2] "From Now On, We Stand Up and We Get Out" (Translation mine)
Despentes, Virginie. "Désormais on se lève et on se barre." *Libération.* 1 March 2020. www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/03/01/cesars-desormais-on-se-leve-et-on-se-barre_1780212

Catherine Breillat belongs to a different generation than Despentes, her work is continually pushing boundaries and resonating with a younger generation. Breillat draws heavily from her own autobiography as material for her films. When she is not personally implicated, through biography in her films, she often immerses herself as a subject into her writing process. Breillat's first novel *l'Homme facile* and several of her films have been censored by the French government for their graphic depictions of girlhood sexuality. Christine Angot's media persona is as equally provocative and well known as Despentes but for different reasons. She often creates conflict and clashes with interviewers when invited on live interview platforms. During some of these, she has ended up leaving in the middle of the scene. In the summer of 2019, she was fired from her position as onscreen columnist for the television show *On n'est pas couchés* after a long string of controversies and on-air verbal altercations. Her work and her public persona confront taboo directly. Her writings are often described as too heavy or too affective due to her dealing with incest, trauma and antisocial isolation. In *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives*, Shirley Ann Jordan describes Angot as "one of the literary world's most vibrantly theatrical new dramatis personae" (26). Marguerite Duras is also considered a controversial and rebellious figure. After her death in 1996, *The Independent* wrote in her obituary that "Marguerite Duras was the most contradictory, and in many ways perverse, figure on the Parisian literary scene during the post-war period, the subject of popular interest far beyond her many

readers, always controversial and both the source and the object of much argument"[3] (*Obituary*). Claire Denis is a highly prolific filmmaker who currently has directed over thirty films and participated as a writer for twenty. Denis is well known for creating shockingly gory horror films as well as politically charged cinematic oeuvres about postcolonial identity. Her corpus spans all genres but throughout her avant-garde directorial style is preserved. Although she maintains a low profile or removed public persona, the imagery found in her films are representative of subjectivity and everyday experience. In "Claire Denis, Auteur, Filmmaker *Extraordinaire*!", Michael T. Martin offers a close analysis of the latter in her films *Chocolat* and *Beau Travail*. He explains, "From nuanced to profoundly disturbing, Denis's take on difference and identity, and the personal and social displacements occasioned in the territories and postcolony, is deep and varied" (97). Her cinematic gaze takes a female perspective, which is ultimately her own. Chantal Akerman, Belgian filmmaker, resists the sensationalistic or highly stylized aesthetics of cinematography. In *Bordering On Fiction*, Catherine David describes Akerman's style as relying on capturing the ordinary at a slow almost real-time pace (54). Although during Chantal Akerman's cinematic career, her films were often lampooned by the press for being painstakingly boring or about nothing, her second film *Je, tu, il, elle* was banned for underage audiences due to a graphic erotic montage between two women. At the extradiegetic level of metatext, these six women become Medusa incarnates themselves because they

[3]Calder, John. "Obituary: Marguerite Duras." *The Independent*. 4 March 1996. www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-marguerite-duras-5625876.html

fascinate and terrify their public. I have named these six women writers and filmmakers the New Medusas because they revive the Medusa as a symbol of women's power instead of an object to be scorned. Women are often treated as objects (Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*); they are figured as passive recipients of many types of oppressive gazes. The New Medusas turn this assumption on its head: they take back the power of the male gaze by turning them into objects. It also reveals the violence of the objectifying gaze: Medusa reverses the power dynamic by possessing the ability to castrate, which in turn displays the potency of the gaze. Exploration of the gaze becomes even more important in our digital age, where we as subjects are almost constantly the object of the gaze of others while we, too, are simultaneously looking back at them. The six New Medusas figuring in my study have claimed the power to both show the way they see themselves and, consequently, the world while resisting a classifying gaze by operating in the margins. They are simultaneously acting as Medusas in real-world contexts, as author figures themselves, while attributing her monstrous aspects to the female characters in their texts and films. Through the new Medusas' gaze, their revisions of normative femininity permeate through our collective subconscious and become a positive symbol for women.

The Power of the (New) Medusa

The example set by the New Medusas reshapes both our conscious and subconscious constructions of myth about women's experience. The origin of the Medusa myth can be traced back to Greek mythology but she has reappeared

throughout intellectual history, notably by Sigmund Freud in *Das Medusenhaupt* (1922), in order to illustrate the unspeakable and unfavorable aspects of femininity. Since Antiquity, she had been primarily defined and written by men like the Roman poet Ovid and Freud. However, with the publication of Hélène Cixous' *Le Rire de la Méduse* (1975), Medusa was reclaimed as a symbol of feminist rebellion against patriarchy. Cixous' Medusa is the first to use her negativity and monstrosity as a position of power. Nearly half a century later, Medusa continues to maintain relevance in contemporary culture, as well as to feminist and critical theory. In April of 2019, *Bitch Media*, an American Independent Feminist Magazine, published an article about the Medusa titled "Snake Eyes: The Power to Turn the Patriarchy into Stone". Author Mackenzie Schwark explains that originally "the story of the Medusa is often seen as a tragedy: she is known for being powerless against Athena and Poseidon, doomed to a lonely life as a monstrous Gorgon, which most renditions describe as a punishment".[4] She concedes that although many believe her story to be one of revenge and torment "in rereading the myth of Medusa and Athena, a new mythological world in which women are protective of each other in a patriarchal society and their relationships are meant to serve as a lesson for others reveals itself".[5] Schwartz concludes that "whether in competition for affection or authority, women in patriarchies are repeatedly pitted against each other, but a

[4] Schwark, Mackenzie. "Snake Eyes: The Power to Turn the Patriarchy into Stone." *Bitch Media.* 23 April 2019. www.bitchmedia.org/article/medusa-turn-patriarchy-into-stone
[5] Schwark. "Snake Eyes."

feminist analysis of the myth of Medusa reclaims her curse as a powerful protection against the male gaze".[6] *Bitch Media* is not the only recent media to revive Medusa as a site of feminist power and repair after the trauma of rape. *Vice* also ran a piece on the Medusa in April of 2018 titled "The Timeless Myth of Medusa, a Rape Victim Turned into a Monster". The article explores Medusa's lineage from Ancient Greece to contemporary contexts as a sexualized symbol of women's rage. Author Christobel Hastings explores Medusa's appearance in classical mythology, contemporary pop culture, and as a site of academic inquiry. Hastings credits Hélène Cixous with the deconstruction of sexist biases that portray the female body as a threat and draws a connection between current new conversations about rape culture that restore Medusa's voice and plight. Hastings asserts that society has always been both fascinated and horrified by female sexuality which is illustrated through the continually reappearing Medusa. She notes that from the changing faces of Medusa, it becomes clear that "there is no universal truth to her myth. Beautiful victim, monstrous villain, powerful deity—she's all of those things, and more besides. Perhaps it's that mercurial nature that makes her an endless source of fascination".[7] Hastings, echoing Freud, argues that Medusa is "a site for our collective projections of both fear and desire: simultaneously a symbol of women's rage and a figure sexualized by the very patriarchal forces she is seeking vengeance against".[8] Women in power are a site

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[6] Schwark. "Snake Eyes."
[7] Hastings, Christobel. "The Timeless Myth of Medusa, a Rape Victim Turned into a Monster". *Vice.* 9 April 2018. www.vice.com/en_us/article/qvxwax/medusa-greek-myth-rape-victim-turned-into-a-monster
[8] Hastings. "The Timeless Myth of Medusa."

where collective fears and desires are projected. In her article "What Depictions of Medusa Say about the Way Society Views Powerful Women" for the online platform *Artsy*, Abigail Cain explains that for centuries "women in power (or fighting for power) have been compared to Medusa… Google any famous woman's name, from Angela Merkel to Nancy Pelosi, along with the word "Medusa." All of them have been photoshopped onto famous renditions of the Gorgon, from Caravaggio's round, shield-like painting to Antonio Canova's sculpture of Perseus touting Medusa's head".[9] As I have shown through these contemporary examples of the image of the Medusa being used as a way of tarnishing women in power, the vilification and objectification of Medusa is still continually reproduced today as societal norms struggle to adapt to the shattering of gender norms. Women with agency, who are active instead of passive, are portrayed as monsters. They are demonized because strong women represent a threat to male authority. Their monstrosity is expressed through their refusal to abide by normative gender roles. One such normative construct is the censure and condemnation of women's rage. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, the New Medusas are not afraid to express their frustration at their abuse and oppression.

The Medusa functions as a positive model of feminine rage because she has leveraged her justifiable anger into power. Freud's psychoanalysis postulates

[9] Cain, Abigail. "What Depictions of Medusa Say about the Way Society Views Powerful Women". *Artsy.* 20 May 2018. www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-depictions-medusa-way-society-views-powerful-women

that anger is an outgrowth of the destructive drive that should be subdued. Anger in this formulation is seen as being the result of the lack of virtue or self-control on the level of the individual and denies the plausibility that it is a justified reaction to societal or institutional oppression. Instead, for the New Medusas violence and anger are unleashed to bring about necessary change. For Virginie Despentes, anger is transformed into a feminist tool of consciousness building. Her neofeminism is considered radical because anger and destruction are seen as the primary modes of achieving change. Duras and Denis show anger and rejection of their otherness and defy this categorization through their embrace of their positionality. Marguerite Duras writes from her experience as a postcolonizing subject. Claire Denis shows us the same perspective in her films that rework memories and places from her own autobiography. For Christine Angot, her feminism is rooted in the valorization of the expression of the female experience. The anger that she feels in response to her childhood sexual abuse is leveraged into taboo breaking and sharing the emotions that women were traditionally expected to censor or not share publicly. Chantal Akerman incites anger from the spectator by showing the enclosed and oppressed qualities of women's everyday condition. The New Medusas mount a spirited rebellion against normative codes about women's behavior and the violence perpetrated by society, they refuse to be censored. This rebellion follows the example of Hélène Cixous as she writes in *Le Rire de la Méduse*. Cixous' work sought to reappropriate the Medusa as a figurehead of women's struggle. *Le Rire de la*

Méduse figures writing as a means to transcend the constraints of femininity. Cixous explains that, "By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions" (880). She continues, "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (880). She continues her reflection on writing by stating,

> To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal ; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being "too hot"; for not having both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing…) –tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the

marvelous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak.

(880)

Through the act of writing, women are able to escape patriarchal oppression and censoring. In becoming an author, the female writer affirms her autonomy, her body, her image and controls how others gaze upon her by writing herself. On the subject of the feminine being characterized as an abyss or the horrifying myth of the Medusa, Cixous asks "wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they only have to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (885). This resuscitation of the Medusa by Cixous is liberatory and of tremendous advantage for new figurations of the feminine. Cixous thus concludes that "a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way" (888). By channeling the Medusa and the power of her gaze, woman is able to "shatter the framework of institutions" and make space for herself (888). She does not seek to deny her destructive tendencies, instead she embraces them. In order to bring about change, the feminine text is necessarily monstrous. Cixous' valorization of Medusa is in direct opposition to Freud's misogynistic mythification of her. In his essay, *Das Medusenhaupt* (1922), Freud suggests that unlike more esoteric strains of mythology, the symbolism of the decapitated head of the Medusa can be easily

interpreted and analyzed by all because it represents an early psychoanalytical terror experienced by young boys. Freud postulates that "Kopfabschneiden=Kastrieren" (to decapitate=to castrate). He explains that the Medusa myth is a metaphor for the horror young boys experience when they see the adult female genitalia (of the mother) which is most likely surrounded by hair. Freud argues that the snakes represent amplification of the castration complex because they represent the hair. According to Freud, both the terror that Medusa incites and experiences herself has transformed her into an archetype denoting horrifying femininity that has embedded her into the psyche. This is evidenced by the proliferation of her image and her myth throughout all domains of cultural production.

Misogynistic Myth

My project repositions our gaze upon Medusa through her instantiations in a corpus composed of women writers and filmmakers who are participating in the rewriting and the revision of myth by becoming New Medusas themselves and producing them in their texts. Myth has, until very recently, also been primarily authored by men. In the chapter "La femme: le mythe et la réalite" of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone De Beauvoir argues that men have othered women through the use of myth. Thus myth has been a tool of patriarchy to place women in a false hierarchy. Besides foundational and creation myths, the body of myth contains stories that establish and sanctify society's values, customs, institutions and taboos. Myth is instructive and can play a significant role in the regulation of

community but it can also normalize inherent bias and the hidden prejudices of those doing its writing. In Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, he addresses the concept of myth in an annexed theoretical essay 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui'. Modern myth is created in order to transmit these messages that contain society's desired values and morals, Barthes claims that it is primarily the ruling class and media that generate and perpetuate ideologies that cement their position and power. The use of myth is a source of power, its stories can naturalize assigned essences and erase the complexity of human context. He maintains that myth is not eternal or linked to the actual essential qualities of objects, myth instead is a type of discourse that constructs a historicized signification to the object or symbol of the myth. Barthes further elaborates that mythical speech is not limited to the written word, instead it can be any cultural artefact or production including art, film and various other materials such as news reports, publicity campaigns, commercials, advertisements etc. As I argue in my dissertation, this is especially true for the nearly timeless and ever-evolving myth of Medusa. In her book *Literature and Fascination*, Sibylle Baumbach argues that myth has endured thanks in part to our growing appetite for grand narratives of fascination, which often revolve around dangerous female seduction. Baumbach describes our present-day Medusa as a multimodal image of intoxication, petrifaction, and luring attractiveness. This image of the Medusa, along with the many reifications by the women writers and filmmakers whom I study in the following chapters, all trace their origins back to the original Classical Greek myth.

From Gorgon to Femme Fatale

Medusa in Greek myth was first described as one of the three Gorgon sisters, all three were depicted as winged monsters with snakes for hair. Their parents were also monsters as the family was descended from the ancient marine deities, the Phorcys. The three Gorgon sisters appear on vases and carved reliefs in their monstrous forms from the beginning of the ancient Greek archeological period, but around 500 B.C. there was a marked change in Medusa's appearance. While she maintained her monstrous and terrifying form, she also took on traits of classical beauty. In *Metamorphoses,* Roman poet Ovid would further develop this aspect of the Medusa myth. His retelling of her story depicted Medusa as a ravishingly beautiful maiden, who was raped by Poseidon at the Temple of Athena after she rejected his advances. Athena, offended that Medusa had debased her temple, punished her by turning her into a monster. She had snakes for hair and her gaze turned men to stone. Later versions of the Medusa myth have her beheaded by Perseus who wielded a mirrored shield and could fly with the help of winged sandals that he received from Athena. Perseus was able to petrify Medusa using her own gaze reflected in his shield, he then beheaded her, keeping her head as a trophy of a vanquished monster. In this version, she was pregnant with Poseidon's child who after her beheading spontaneously sprung forth from her beheaded corpse as Pegasus. Perseus kept Medusa's head with him and used it as a weapon, first to stop his mother's wedding and then he later gave it to Athena to put on her battle shield. In Ovid's tale, he also attributes the

creation of the Red Sea coral reef to the Medusa; Perseus momentarily laid down her head on a beach in Ethiopia. Her blood spilled into the ocean and transformed the seaweed into the petrified coral reef. Since the beginning of the myth of Medusa, the images and iconography associated with her are just as important as the story.

The Medusa has appeared in artistic creation since her first appearance in classical Greek myth. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City recently featured an exposition dedicated entirely to her aptly called 'Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art'. The exhibition featured over sixty pieces. Their collection explores the beautification of the terrifying figure of the Gorgon. The choice of works demonstrates the evolution of Medusa' representation. It also highlights how her representations mark a divergence from other mythical female half-human beings such as sphinxes and sirens. Medusa set herself apart in the art canon by her increasingly anthropomorphic and humanized appearance. Also unlike other female deities, her embodied representations have outlived antiquity. Medusa continues to inspire and fascinate artists. After the classical era, she was depicted by artists such as Carvaggio (1595) and Cellini's bronze statue of Perseus standing atop Medusa's beheaded body (1554). The exhibition also identifies her reappearance as linked to wider social movements in modern and contemporary periods. In reaction to the emergence of women's empowerment in the late nineteenth century, Medusa regained relevance and time in the spotlight. There was an iconographic resurgence of her representation in artistic works. Late

nineteenth-century marks the emergence of the first wave of Anglo-American feminism when the ideals of womanhood changed with the Women's Movement. Medusa has maintained a continuous presence throughout history as an emblem and an icon of femininity. The Medusa has taken many forms, the mythology surrounding this symbol continues to evolve and adapt to the values of its contemporary society. The pervasiveness of this signifier and the modality of its signification speak to the importance and function of the Medusa myth, it addresses aspects of women's condition and experience that are not unique to one culture or civilization. The New Medusas reject the uniformity of universality, through the study of a multiplicity of her shifting forms and faces the hidden or inherent assumptions about women and femininity are revealed.

Nomadic Feminisms

The reemergence and reappearances of the Medusa as a feminist figuration are transnational and translinguistic, my research will start from a francophone literary point of origin but the research that it spawns knows no boundaries of language, discipline or genre. The use of the term figuration is a primary critical tool of my feminist methodology. In *Nomadic Subjects : Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory,* Rosi Braidotti defines figuration as "Figurations are not figurative ways of thinking, but rather materialistic mappings of situated, i.e., embedded and embodied, social positions" (4). The rewriting of the Medusa and her myth as an embodied figuration enables the telling of new stories that show the complexities of these embedded and embodied social

positions as well as revealing the scope of my project. These refigurations matter not only for a French or American audience but also for feminist and critical theory; what is at stake is a foundational myth of western culture. Evoking Bradiotti and the mapping of feminist figurations also calls into question which feminisms and from which embedded social contexts. Throughout the course of my dissertation, I designate the work of the writers and directors in my corpus as feminist but the use of this term evokes two distinct feminist lineages: French and Anglo-American. What sets these women apart is their refusal to stay boxed into any one type of feminism. As we will later see in my first chapter on Virginie Despentes, Catherine Breillat, and rebellion against manufactured and marketed conceptions of femininity, material feminism continues to have an influence on the writers and filmmakers in my corpus even though its academic moment has passed. At this same time, what English-speaking sources call French feminism or French Theory was ushered in by a later group of writers counting Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Cixous and Kristeva. As compared to its Anglo-American counterpart, this period of French feminism is less centered on the political aspects of women's condition and instead adopts a more philosophical and conceptual approach. Irigaray and Cixous identify the female body as a site of resistance and through writing the body they can dismantle phallocentric and male-dominated discourse. While all six women writers and filmmakers in my corpus engage with French and Anglo-American feminism, their works and praxis occupy a third space between two different traditions of feminist thought. The

New Medusas are redefining femininity, their revisions are destroying narrow normative constructs and instead showing the presence of infinitely different lived intersubjective experiences.

The New Medusan Gaze

In analyzing the works of the New Medusas, it is necessary to better understand the role that the gaze plays in the rewriting of Medusa and her myth. The female gaze is transformed into a site of agency because gazing is a power that needs to be claimed by women- it is not automatic. The New Medusas harness the power of being able to look, to show, and share their experience of being looked at as a monstrosity.

This gaze is a materialization of the feminine gaze first presented by western feminist cinema theory. Here I am referencing feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey and her foundational text 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. In this piece, she introduces the concept of a male gaze or scopophilia. She defines scopophilia as the act of looking or gazing as a source of pleasure. This pleasure takes other people as objects and subjects them to our controlling, curious and invasive gaze. It is objectifying. The spectator unconsciously assumes this chauvinistic and active/male position while women on screen are visually relegated to the passive/female. She highlights the cinematic tendency to portray women as objects that are pleasing to look upon from the positionality of the camera and, by extension, the audience but the women in the film are incapable of returning the gaze. The empowered female gaze seeks to uproot this

objectification, giving agency to women, and thus transforming them from objects into subjects. Mulvey goes on to define three types of female gaze: that of the filmmaker, the actor and the spectator. Mulvey also references Freud but instead borrows terms from psychoanalytic theory to describe the male gaze by the camera's positionality, narrative features and choice of props. Mulvey's scholarship, along with others like Teresa DeLauretis, helped open up the possibility and interest in alternative feminist cinema. The female gaze seeks to offer a feminine perspective or way of seeing that undoes the patriarchal structures and subjectively redefines them in reference to female desire and positionality. This reading of Medusa's gaze is a theoretical complement to Cixous' logocentric standpoint. Using a hybrid of myth and the female gaze, seen through the scope of this monstrous feminine archetype we can reimagine our visions of feminine sexuality, girlhood, motherhood and our relationship to the exile resulting from operating from the margins. These novels and films textually invoke the Medusa and the power of her gaze figuratively, stylistically, and metaphorically to unearth difficult or unspeakable aspects of monstrous femininity.

Archetype of the Abject

The Medusa is equal parts woman and monster. She is the embodiment of the monstrous feminine. In order to unpack our understanding of monstrosity and the feminine, it is necessary to review our conceptions of the monster. In "Monstruosité et Transversalité: Figures Contemporaines du Monstrueux", Jean

Foucart offers a definition that relays the power of the representation of monstrosity. He explains the monster is "l'autre qui nous dérange, nous pose des problèmes et nous met en question, enfin harcèle notre quiétude et exacerbe nos fantasmes. Souvent, le monstre attire, fascine et dégoûte à la fois ; en partie, sa fascination naît d'un attrait pour l'angoisse et l'abjection"[10] (47). These opposing interpretations of monster reveal the troubling duality or hybrid of the space that monstrosity occupies in our collective consciousness. The monster has the ability to provoke disgust and awe. This is not the only power accorded to monstrosity, one of its definitions in *Le Dictionnaire de la langue française* states that a monster is a "singularité qui subvertit l'ordre."[11] The New Medusas that I study in my dissertation assume this positionality of the other and render it into power through destruction. Through their Medusan gaze, they are able to disrupt and overturn normative institutions. There is also a monstrous power in the presentation of their perspective. The etymology of the word monster is linked with both the noun *monstrum* which is "a prodigy or a marvel" and the verb *monstrare* (montrer in French) that signifies the act of showing.[12] The New Medusas doubly occupy both this space of the abject and monstrous while performing the act of showing their feminine monstrosity within a public domain.

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[10] The Other that disturbs us, causes us problems and calls us into question, that lastly harrasses our peace and exacerbates our delusions. Often the monster allures, fascinates and disgusts us all at the same time. In part, this fascination stems from a taste for anxiety and abjection.
[11] "Monstre". *Dictionnaire de la Langue française.* 2019. www.lalanguefrancaise.com/dictionnaire/definition-monstre/
[12] "Monstre". *Dictionnaire de la Langue française.* 2019. www.lalanguefrancaise.com/dictionnaire/definition-monstre/

In Julia Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection,* Kristeva unifies the feminine with monstrosity within the concept of the abject. Kristeva takes the philosophical problem of the mind-body split as a starting point. She defies the designation of the abject as neither subject nor object, instead the abject is situated in the margins of self and society. Although these boundaries between subject and object are necessary for their mutual existence, the abject defies absolute definition. It "disturbs identity, system, order…[and] does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). The abject is "the place where meaning collapses" (2). The abject as a space that defies definition and is only characterized by its relational qualities helps us better understand the overlapping systems of oppression that focalize this positionality into a type of standpoint as the in-between. This understanding is also representative of the New Medusa's place within theoretical feminist discourse and their cultural reception in France. Virginie Despentes, Christine Angot, Marguerite Duras, Claire Denis, Chantal Akerman and Catherine Breillat are perceived as abject or as unruly because they are irreverently and publicly occupying positions normally afforded to men.

Inherent to the assignation of monstrosity is fear. Barbara Creed further elaborates on the abject in *The Monstrous Feminine.* Like Cixous, Creed also takes issue with Freud and his characterization of female sexuality as monstrous and castrating. Creed writes, "The concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallocentric ideology, is related

intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration" (2). She further postulates that "if we accept Freud's interpretation that the 'Medusa's Head' takes the place of a representation in the female genitals', we can see that the Medusan myth is mediated by a narrative about the difference of female sexuality as a difference which is grounded in monstrousness and which invokes castration anxiety in the male spectator" (2). Medusa's gaze is, in its inception, terrifying and castrating but there is simultaneously a doubling of the gaze; Medusa and men possess a violent and violating gaze. Medusa is monstrous because of the threatened male gaze upon her. Through the power of text and image, the New Medusas illustrate the power of the reciprocal gaze. Their unique vision is a tool for feminist practice, instead of using theory and critical discourse to explore women's issues and document their condition, the New Medusas show theirs from a personal standpoint. Medusa and her myth are still present and pertinent in our modern day. By studying her appearances past and present we can learn more about the assumptions and covert ways that women are portrayed negatively. Additionally, in studying her emergence as a symbol of power for women to rally behind as a reappropriation, we witness the feminist praxis of rewriting misogynistic myth. Their revisions permeate and valorize the intersubjective while redefining myth as a misogynistic literary form and cultural discourse.

Rewriting Girl, Mother and Other

My first chapter "Gone Girls" reveals the monstrous and abject qualities of the Medusan gaze in Virginie Despentes' *Apocalypse bébé* and Catherine

Breillat's *A ma sœur*. Here the New Medusas appropriate violence as a tool for achieving the aims of subversive feminism in a 21st-century context. Breillat and Despentes also explore sex in taboo contexts as a construct of power and agency. Both women occupy pluralistic spaces of author, filmmaker, social commentator and public figure. They have collaborated together on projects and belong to a loosely associated contemporary group of subversive neofeminists in France. Their stories adopt the gaze of the teenage punk heroine who transgresses and defies the hegemony of futurism to overturn imposed social norms that sanction women's and girls' behavior, appearance and identity. The positionality of the adolescent girl is powerful because she operates from the margins, she is in between child and woman. Just as Medusa has been vilified and seen as monstrous because of her repulsive feminine sexuality, the teenage punk heroines in Despentes' *Apocalypse bébé* and Breillat's *A ma sœur!* are ostracized for their refusal to conform to feminine standards of beauty and behavior. Despentes and Breillat expose the oppressive power of commercialized girlhood that indoctrinates status quo's norms behind a guise of women's liberation as empowered consumerism and obliterate the commodified and misogynistic promise of the future.

In the subsequent, second chapter "Petrified Colonial Pasts", I will look at Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* and Claire Denis' *White Material*. Their respective texts are suspended in France's historical colonial period. Through the New Medusa's gaze, Duras and Denis offer an

unapologetically critical vision of the French colonial project in Africa and Indochina as well as a negative disposition towards the possibility of hybridity. They show the French colonial project as failure that incurred a high personal cost for the inhabitants of the colonies and destruction of the land. Having spent their own respective childhoods in French colonial lands, Duras and Denis themselves remain fixed in their own pasts. Set in Indochina, Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* revisits the story of her love affair with an older Chinese businessman. Their love affair is doomed from the beginning because of what Duras posits is an incompatibility between East and West. The text itself attests to an obsession or fascination Duras has with this period of her life having already recounted the same story in her novel, *L'Amant* (1984) which was published almost ten years earlier. Claire Denis' similarly revisits her own childhood spent in Francophone Africa and filmic corpus with *White Material* which tells the story of Maria Vial, a French coffee plantation owner in an unnamed African country, who is fighting for her family and home in a country on the brink of civil war. Although the classification of this film as a return is more nuanced since the plot of *White Material* is not directly taken from Denis' biography, it constitutes a return or revisit to an earlier period of her professional career marked by the filming of *Chocolat* (1988). Filmed twenty years prior to *White Material, Chocolat* tells the story of a young girl named France who returns to her childhood home in Cameroon. For the filming of *White Material,* Denis returned to the same filming locations as seen in *Chocolat* and cast one of the same lead

actors. Duras and Denis insist on maintaining their gazes, and by extension that of the audience's, fixed on the horrors of France's colonial past.

My third and final chapter "(im)Mortalized Mothers" considers the reclamation of the mother figure and the exploration of the relationships between women, more specifically mother and daughter, in Christine Angot's *Un amour impossible* and Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie*. Here I will examine how the maternal figures create new definitions of what it means to be a mother and a daughter. In *Un amour impossible*, Christine Angot tells the story of a difficult relationship with her mother who ignored for years that her daughter was being sexually abused by her father. Angot creates a mother figure who is neither wholly good nor bad; she writes about her mother as she was, as she saw her. Chantal Akerman adopts a similar aesthetic in *No Home Movie*; the film resembles outtakes taken from home movies recorded with a handheld camera and the imagery is focused primarily on showing her mother and their home. The relationship between the daughter Chantal and her mother is complicated by the interval of painful periods of separation and the difficulty of intimacy when reunited. Akerman's portrait of the mother-daughter relationship is more honest and less idealized than the one found in romanticized myth about their bond. All of the authors in my corpus challenge archetypal and mythical discourse on femininity by rewriting Medusa and offer a new version of her that is defined by women. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, the New Medusas harness the power of the castrating gaze and turn it back on society itself.

Chapter 2: Gone Girls

Virginie Despentes and Catherine Breillat are often grouped together by literary and cinema critics as well as the mainstream media for their use of "crude" sex and violence in their works (Febvre 2003). The two also worked together on *Mutantes: Feminisme Porno Punk* (2009) a documentary that features a series of interviews with an international cast of intellectuals, writers, sex workers and queer militants on the subject of pro-sex feminism and post-pornography. Both Breillat and Despentes have also been inducted into what James Quandt of *Artforum* dubbed the New French Extremity (2004). Although Quandt's label was originally intended to be pejorative, the name has taken hold in critical cinema studies. It is now associated with roughly a dozen avant-garde French filmmakers. The movement has no singular overarching ideology, instead they are all unified by their transgressive content or as Quandt describes it as a "resurgence of the violational tradition of French culture"[13] (2016). Quandt's singling out of Breillat and Despentes also reveals the precarious position which women occupy in the literary and cinema industry. Despentes writes in *King Kong Théorie* that "quand vous devenez une fille publique, on vous tombe dessus de toutes parts, d'une façon particulière… Toutes ces discussions pour savoir si

[13] Quandt, James. "12 Years Later, The New French Extremity Is Still Pissing People Off." *Toronto International Film Festival: The Review.* 4 November 2016. www.tiff.net/the-review/12-years-later-the-new-french-extremity-is-still-pissing-people-off

j'avais le droit de dire ce que je disais"[14] (117-118). Despentes is writing from her experience as an established figure on the mainstream and underground literary scene in France.

Due to her treatment of controversial themes and outspoken character, at times Despentes' public persona looms larger than life. In a 2018 interview with Despentes, journalist Angelique Chrisafis leads her piece with "The wild child author of *Baise-moi* and former sex worker, has completed a trilogy, *Vernon Subutex*, which has secured her renown as a 'rock and roll Zola'"[15] (*The Guardian*). In his article "Que penser du dernier volet de *Vernon Subutex*", Gilles Khoury describes Despentes as a "monstre littéraire à l'écriture inimitable qui n'a pas peur de prendre des coups ou d'en donner"[16] (*L'Orient Le Jour*). Although she started her career as an underground militant feminist icon, Despentes has found enormous success with her most recent publications which have propelled her to mainstream renown. In addition to being a former sex worker and a 'rock and roll Zola', Virginie Despentes is a French writer, filmmaker and prominent public literary figure. She was catapulted to fame by the publication of her first novel

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[14] As soon as you become a public woman, all sorts of people are on your case, in a very particular way. All those discussions to determine whether I had the right to say what I was saying. (Benson 111-112)

[15] Chrisafis, Angelique. "Virginie Despentes: 'What is going on in men's heads when women's pleasure has become a problem?'." *The Guardian*. 31 August 2018. www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/31/virginie-despentes-interview-baise-moi-vernon-subutex

[16] Khoury, Gilles. "Que penser du dernier volet de *Vernon Subutex.*" *L'Orient Le Jour*. 18 August 2017. www.lorientlejour.com/article/1067830/que-penser-du-dernier-volet-de-vernon-subutex-.html
What to think of the latest installment of Vernon Subutex… a literary monster without comparison who isn't afraid to take or throw out a few punches. (Translation mine)

Baise-moi (1994) and later directed its film adaptation. She was inducted as a member of l'Académie Goncourt in 2016 after her mainstream literary success from the earlier referenced *Vernon Subutex* trilogy which was recently adapted into a television series by Canal+. Although Despentes' work reaches a wide mainstream audience, she is considered a well-known person of the French underground. Despentes is considered a member of the autofiction genre and her writings pull from lived experience in the sex industry. Often, her work focuses on marginalized youth characters who transgressively explore the limits of obscenity and taboo.

Virginie Despentes' corpus is ubiquitous for its trash aesthetic, pornographic aspects and her use of thematic and figurative violence. Her use of violence has purpose and function within her texts. In *De la violence et des femmes,* Michèle Schaal explains that,

> La violence, exercée ou subie, demeure une des préoccupations et un leitmotiv despentiens. Toutefois, cette brutalité artistique de Despentes possède une qualité propre : de la publication de son premier roman, *Baise-moi*, à son dernier ouvrage en date, *Apocalypse bébé*, l'auteure a particulièrement représenté la violence féminine. Cet aspect a engendré maintes critiques

négatives et autres rejets, eux-mêmes violents, de la part d'un public et universitaire et profane.[17] (265-266)

Violence becomes a vector of agency that empowers Valentine (and through flashback La Hyène), Despentes' teenage punk heroine(s), to refuse social norms and participation in society. Once she is untethered from normative mores about girlhood and femininity, her gaze becomes all-powerful. This destructive gaze is non-gendered, she obliterates everything in her path. For Despentes, violence within the text both towards and perpetrated by women as well as violence committed by the author herself on the extradiegetic level are all representative of her own brand of neofeminism. Unlike writers of *écriture féminine* such as Cixous, Despentes creates a subversive feminist type of writing where violence becomes the arm of subversion and she obliterates the monolith of convention. This violence towards the conventions of the written word, like her aestheticization of thematic violence as methodology, seeks to dismantle and reveal the gendered oppression by patriarchy that women and men suffer and ultimately appropriate violence as a type of feminist (de)signifying practice. This violence against heteronormativity also includes violence against traditional female symbols.

[17] Violence, whether perpetrated or suffered, remains one of her preoccupations and a leitmotif of Despentes. However, the artistic brutality of Despentes has its own quality: from the publication of her first novel, *Baise-moi,* to her latest work, *Apocalypse baby*, the author has especially focused on the representation of female violence. This aspect has given rise to many negative criticisms and other rejections, themselves violent, on the behalf of her audience, both academic and of laypersons. (Translation mine)

Like Virginie Despentes, Breillat is known for producing polemical work that openly confronts taboos about sexuality, intimacy, gender and violence. She also started her career early; Breillat published her first novel at the age of seventeen, which was immediately censored due to its graphic sexual content. This reputation and penchant for controversy precedes her written and filmic works. In *Les Inrockuptibles,* a French culture magazine similar to *Rolling Stone*, Serge Kaganski writes that, "Catherine Breillat a toujours déclenché la controverse. Sans doute parce qu'elle traite frontalement de sujets que l'on préfère habituellement esquiver ou aborder de biais; les relations humaines, le sexe, le désir, la guerre entre hommes et femmes, parce qu'elle essaie toujours de filmer l'infilmable"[18]. For the New Medusas Breillat and Despentes, they both use radical methods in order to bring visibility to their new brand of feminism. In *King Kong Théorie*, Despentes asserts that her feminism is "une révolution, pas un réaménagement des consignes marketing, pas une vague promotion de la fellation ou de l'échangisme, il n'est pas seulement question d'améliorer les salaires d'appoint"[19] (145). She continues, explaining that feminism is a collective adventure and reiterates that it is "une révolution, bien en marche. Une vision du

[18]Catherine Breillat has always sparked controversy. Without a doubt because she deals head-on with topics that one usually prefers to avoid or sidestep or approach indirectly; human relations, sex, desire, the war between men and women, because she always tries to film the unfilmable. (Translation mine)
Kaganski, Serge. "Dangereuse sous tous rapports: Catherine Breillat." *Les Inrockuptibles*. 23 October 1996.
www.lesinrocks.com/1996/10/23/cinema/actualite-cinema/dangereuse-sous-tous-rapports-catherine-breillat/

[19] Feminism is a revolution, not a rearranged marketing strategy, or some kind of promotion of fellatio or swinging; not just a matter of increasing secondary wages. (Benson 137)

monde, un choix. Il ne s'agit pas d'opposer les petits avantages des femmes aux petits acquis des hommes, mais bien de tout foutre en l'air"[20] (145). The new Medusan gaze per Despentes and Breillat seeks to create a new future through extreme destruction and upheaval of the status quo.

Despentes and Breillat push the boundaries of their respective genres by writing violent and castrating girlhood figures that gain self-actualization through non-discriminatory violence. No normative structure is immune to their monstrous gaze. Both feature adolescent girls that gain their power or come-of-age by an embodiment of the Medusa. These young Medusas seek to destroy society and its norms because they have been robbed of their ability to self-define femininity. Teenage punk heroines Valentine and Anais do not assert their power or value through a positively-read version of girlhood; the value of "girl" is not predicated on building their bright future as a woman. Instead, these Gone Girls may never become women, wherein lies their power.

Breaking New Ground at the Intersection of Punk and Feminism

I argue that these two works are participating in the creation of a new feminist figuration, one that merges a punk ethos and aesthetic with girlhood. I classify Despentes and Breillat, along with their teenage heroine characters, as punk through their subversion of gender expectations and social codes. Punk has long played an important role in feminist subcultures while remaining on the

[20] A revolution, well under way. A worldview. A choice. It's not a matter of contrasting women's small advantages with men's small assets, but of sending the whole lot flying. (Benson 137)

fringes of academic feminist theory. Third wave feminism is often traced back to the emergence of the Riot Grrrl feminist punk subculture that started in Olympia, Washington in the early 1990's. Although many notable feminist writers such as Kathy Ackerman, Donna Haraway and Laura Mulvey have been associated with punk, it is not an academic discipline or field- it is a subculture. The popular movement is centered around the figure of the Riot Grrl. As Ednie Kaeh Garrison describes in "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologics of the Third Wave",

> Riot Grrl is an alternative subculture built around opposition to presuppositions that young (usually white) U.S. girls and women are too preoccupied with themselves and boys to be interested in being political, creative, and loud. The tensions between this expectation and the political desires of members offers a powerful opportunity to learn different ways of resisting in a consumer-oriented culture. (*Feminist Studies* 142-143)

My articulation of punk as a feminist theoretical framework rejects patriarchy and its universalizing categories of womanhood, it brings visibility to taboo issues and allows for inclusion and pluralism as a cultural feminist movement.

The emergence of punk feminist subcultures and third wave feminism can be situated in overlapping historical contexts and thus they share many ideological aims. My use of the term punk feminism is original; it juxtaposes two

antiestablishment multilocational movements whose historiographies are entangled. Punk and some third wave feminisms endorse the embrace of subversive tactics, nihilism, grassroots activism, subjectivity, inclusion of marginalized groups, rejection of a normative universalizing identity and the shattering of taboo. In many ways, third wave feminism was a punk response to the exclusion, prescriptivism and homogeneity of second wave feminists including Cixous, de Beauvoir, and Kristeva. Third wave feminists champion individualism, diversity and continual redefinition of what it means to be a feminist. This period also marks the emergence of queer theory and queer alliance building which sought other forms of solidarity apart from the mainstream or dominant second wave feminism that was perceived as narrow in its view of race, sexuality, and class. Like punk, the positionality of third wave feminism is relational and tangentially located on a countercultural fringe of the conventional.

Negatively Refocusing Girlhood

The placement of punk feminism within the context of girlhood renews the radical potential of both fields; while punk is associated with nihilism and destruction, girlhood as a field of study often positively reads the figure of the girl and is focused on constructing futures. Girlhood Studies emerged around the same time as an interdisciplinary branch of Women's Studies. The field examines the social forces, culture and identity politics that define girls' lived experience

exclusively. Anita Harris in *All About the Girl : Culture, Power, and Identity* explains that

> Contemporary analytical frameworks for interpreting girls' lives are complicated by the intersections of constraint, autonomy and selective freedoms that they embody. Western girls' studies today must begin the encounter with young women who are standing at the corner of feminism and neoliberalism. (xvii)

Since the late twentieth century, discourse on girlhood has been overtaken by the more regressive girl power that worships feminine beauty, heterosexuality and other patriarchal norms. This early form of girl power was organized around a highly commodified and consumerist structure, girl power maintains high visibility in mainstream media because it sells. In "Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls: Consuming and Producing Feminism", Ellen Riordan explains that

> The idea of girl power, although quite admirable, unfortunately became reified into tangible commodities bought and sold most notably by entertainment corporations. These commodities are most evident in popular culture such as music (the Spice Girls), television (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), and the Internet (gURL sites). All of these examples point to how a use value, the idea of

> valuing girls, is changed into an exchange value, commodities intended to "empower" girls. (289-290)

The exploitation of girl power and girlhood were perhaps a harbinger for later forms of commodity feminism. The capitalization of feminism as a fetishized commodity asserts social control over women while allowing them to feel that they are participating in empowerment; this mainstream branch of women's liberation is precisely what the teenage punk heroines seek to destroy. In *Feminism for Sale: Commodity Feminism, Femininity and Subjectivity* (2018) Julie E. Dowsett asserts that commodity feminism is "a play on Karl Marx's conception of commodity fetishism, as the commodification of feminist critique and praxis. In its cultural sense, commodity feminism is the broad phenomenon in which liberal feminist discourses are appropriated for the purpose of selling commodities to women and girls" (3). In Despentes' and Breillat's works, Valentine and Anais refuse to join the ranks of the commodity feminists nor to perform a culturally sanctioned and commodified version of girlhood. They reject the positioning of the childhood subject as a positive symbol for the future. In my analysis of Despentes' *Apocalypse bébé* and Breillat's *A ma sœur !*, I will show how the two works negatively rewrite the figure of the adolescent girl as the "no future" punk anti-hero.

In his highly controversial book, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman argues that queer theory must reject the universalizing politic

of reproductive futurism. For Edelman, the figure of the child is necessarily normative and negates the essentialist qualities he attributes to queer: relentlessly narcissistic antisocial and future negating. Queer identity becomes self-negating if it invests in the future, this secures identification and acceptance of present collective beliefs. For Edelman, queerness must maintain a marginalized and destabilizing presence within social order to maintain its radical potential. He calls for an embrace of queer negativity, the abandon of a future horizon and to seek the breakdown of symbols and meaning. There is queer pleasure experienced from ceding to the destructive death drive. Edelman postulates,

> To figure the undoing of civil society, the death drive of the dominant order, is neither to be nor to become that drive; such a being is not the point. Rather, acceding to that figural position means recognizing and refusing the consequences of grounding reality in denial of that drive. As the death drive dissolves those congealments of identity that permit us to know and survive as ourselves, so the queer must insist of disturbing, on queering social organization as such—on disturbing, and therefore on queering ourselves and our investment in such organization. For queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one. (17)

Although Edelman does not claim any affiliation to or membership in the punk movement, the queer aims he outlines overlap with punk ethos of

anti-establishmentarianism, non-conformity, anti-collectivism and the elevation of individual liberty. Edelman's title *No Future*, is taken from an early British punk slogan of the same name which came from the Sex Pistols song "God Save the Queen". Their slogan represented their nihilistic and anarchist views. Punk nihilism can be conceptually described as consciousness-obliterating and self-destructive. This mentality is reflected in the representations of the teenage punk heroines presented in this chapter. Through the materialization of the destructive gazes of Anais and Valentine, the two girls seek to destroy all normative symbols, even themselves. In Jean Baudrillard's *L'Esprit du terrorisme* (2002), he postulates that modern humanity has a need to self-destruct and that the power of the terrorist is derived from the symbolism of slaughter. This is due to human life possessing what he calls "a parcel of capital". In *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* (1976), Baudrillard considers self-destruction or suicide as "the only political act worthy of the name" (131). Thus through death and self-destruction, the oppressive system of social control is normalized. Furthermore, violence is the best path to a feminist revolution. Michèle Schaal explains how Despentes' heroines face brutality:

> Face à la brutalité tant émotionnelle que physique subie par les héroïnes despentiennes, et face à la présence d'un sexisme toujours aussi virulent, la cruauté au féminin, fut-elle symbolique, apparaît

comme l'outil adéquat pour une nécessaire rébellion féministe.[21]

(280)

In the following section, my analysis in this chapter will center on Despentes' two heroines who are representative of the destructive girl, Valentine and La Hyène (through flashback). They share a similar point of origin for their metamorphosis into the embodiment of abject femininity. My exploration of this process for La Hyène and Valentine will reveal how these girls rejected conformity to idealized femininity and how they choose to transgress taboo and convention. Analysis of these two characters and their resorting to violence as a subversive feminist weapon also necessitates the presentation of the normative views on beauty, body, sexuality and behavior that are represented in the novel.

Virginie Despentes, Apocalypse bébé

Told from the perspective of private detective Lucie Toledo, *Apocalypse bébé* (2010) tells the story of the search for a runaway teen Valentine. Her quest has her cross paths with a host of fringe and marginalized characters in between Paris and Barcelona, including her somewhat unwilling co-detective La Hyène. The narrative standpoint is interspersed with chapters told from the first-person perspective of Valentine, her father the renowned author, her stepmother, her estranged biological mother and her estranged Muslim family which filters the

[21] Faced with a brutality suffered by Despentes' heroines that is emotional as much as it is physical and an equally virulent sexism, female cruelty, even symbolic, appears as the appropriate tool for a feminist rebellion. (Translation mine)

reader's image of Valentine through their respective gazes. The novel does not conclude once La Hyène and Lucie find Valentine in Barcelona and return her to her wealthy family in Paris. In a shocking final twist, Valentine commits a suicidal terrorist act by inserting a bomb into her vagina before a literary prize reception for her father at Paris' Grand Palais. In "Collapsing Boundaries to Expose Censorship and Expand Feminism in Virginie Despentes's *Apocalypse Baby"* Lea E. Wilson notes that "Valentine's violence in *Apocalypse bébé* stands out especially because she commits a terrorist attack; yet, her status as a teenage girl further forces readers to interrogate Despentes' motive in portraying such an assault" (157-158). While Wilson contends that Despentes is using Valentine's violence to "shock readers into considering Valentine as a nomadic character who cannot fully understand her position and, as a result, cannot develop a new social contract in which she can live freely" (158), I argue that Despentes uses Valentine's violence (in addition to La Hyène's) to illustrate the end of heteronormative femininity. My analysis in the following section will center on the two characters who are representative of the destructive girl, Valentine and La Hyène. They share a similar point of origin for their metamorphosis into the embodiment of abject femininity.

Search and Destroy: Symbolic Violence

In *Apocalypse bébé,* violence is the weapon of choice of Valentine and La Hyène as well as by Despentes herself at the metatextual level. As a result, there

are multiple levels of violence committed within the frame of the novel; there is actual violence depicted by La Hyène and Valentine, in addition there is Despentes' violent depiction of the violence as a reaction to symbolic violence against women which is itself a denunciation of said violence by pitting violence against violence. Pierre Bourdieu has treated this same question theoretically in *Challenging Symbolic Violence and the Naturalisation of Power Relations.* For Bourdieu, symbolic violence is systemically committed against symbols that threaten to disrupt the dominant order with the goal of oppressing them. The hierarchy of social ranking and place is absorbed at the individual level, even by those whom the paradigm oppresses. In *La domination masculine,* Bourdieu states that this disposition or *habitus* is "le principe de l'infériorité et de l'exclusion de la femme, que le système mythico-rituel ratifie et amplifie, au point d'en faire le principe de division de tout l'univers, n'est autre chose que la dissymétrie fondamentale… des rapports de production et de reproduction du capital symbolique"[22] (48). Whereas Bourdieu argues for the undoing of the naturalization of constructed power relations, Despentes reappropriates symbolic violence as a feminist tool for the destruction and subversion of symbols of masculinity and of normativity. In *Apocalypse bébé*, Despentes plays with this tension by portraying several female figures who accept the social order as Valentine's foils or symbolic opposites. Characters such as Valentine's

[22] The principle of inferiority and its exclusion of women, which the mythic ritual system ratifies and amplifies to the point that it becomes the universal segregating principle, is but the fundamental asymmetry... of the relations of production and reproduction of symbolic capital. (Translation mine)

stepmother, and initially Lucie Toledo, blame themselves for their suffering and failure to meet normative standards while the role of societal violence towards women remains hidden. The appropriation of violence is the sole means for these women to emancipate themselves from their subordinate status. Although the violence that Despentes' characters commit against signifiers of patriarchy is perceived as extreme, militant, and controversial, Valentine and La Hyène use violence positively as a rite of passage, and as a strategy to gain symbolic power. It is chiefly through violence that violence against women can be avenged.

La Hyène formally appropriates violence as a tool for self-actualization, as instrumental in her private detective work and, ultimately, for therapeutic destruction. La Hyène explains to Lucie,

> Y a rien qui marche comme la violence, pour bien communiquer…
>
> Elle monologue, en conduisant trop vite.
>
> -C'est un monde, il est comme ça. Je l'ai pas inventé. Y a pas de dignité, y a pas de douceur. Tous ceux qui sont droits, ou qui ont de l'honneur, ou qui sont doux, tous ceux-là ont été exterminés. Ça fait un moment que c'est en route. Y reste que des gens comme moi. La racaille. Les gens comme toi, je sais pas quoi te dire… vous pouvez pas vous en tirer.[23] (140-141)

[23] "Nothing works like a bit of violence to get you somewhere." She takes over at the wheel. My eyes are puffy and I have a sudden urge to go to sleep. She keeps on talking, driving too fast. "That's how it is, that's the real world. I didn't invent it. There is no dignity, there is no

La Hyène marks the distinction between those who possess a queer death drive and those who continue to inhabit normative constructions. La Hyène is not the only character who understands the revolutionary power of violence. When Valentine integrates into a group of Parisian crust punks, violence is their preferred method of provoking change. Her friend Magali claims that "un mouvement politique n'est valide que s'il a fait des morts. Sinon, c'est du féminisme : un hobby pour femmes entretenues. Il faut la violence. Sinon, personne n'écoute"[24] (338-339). Magali underlines how the use of violence as a subversive tool distinguishes itself from what she describes as tepid and ineffective feminism. Feminism, as it is portrayed here, is essentially opposed to the aggressive type. La Hyène also remarks on the transformative power of violence that is typically unavailable to women due to its association with the masculine. Meditating on her first murder, La Hyène postulates the immoral aspect of murder is fascinating. Furthermore, the act of committing one gave her access to what she considers a historical elite including terrorists, victorious empires, war heroes and dictators. La Hyène esteems that history itself is written by killers and through violence. The only method to achieve change in the world is through its appropriation. Valentine undertakes this same charge of using violence as a tool to bring order to society. She explains,

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gentleness. All the people who were good and honorable, all the nice guys, have been wiped out. And not yesterday either. All that's left is people like me, scum of the earth. People like you, what can I say, you're just not going to make it." (Reynolds 124)

[24] A political movement is only valid if it causes deaths. Otherwise it's just feminism: a hobby for kept women. You need violence. Otherwise nobody listens. (Reynolds 299)

> Elle ne voit autour d'elle aucun adulte qui ait une direction. Un reste de dignité. Compromissions, à tour de bras, ils se démènent pour justifier tout ça. Ils disent que c'est un choix. Tout ce qu'il faut bouffer de merde, ils avalent sans rechigner. Ils ne savent qu'obéir, à n'importe quel prix. Elle va mettre un coup de frein là-dedans. Le monde qu'ils ont construit, elle va y mettre un peu d'ordre.[25] (337)

As Valentine describes it, the world of adults has no interest or value. She sees them as being complicit or obeying at any cost which compels her to commit an act of violence that will overturn all normalcy. Valentine does not decide to murder like La Hyène, instead she has chosen an act of self-destruction on a larger scale: terrorism. The penultimate chapter of the novel is narrated by Valentine. She begins her testimony with a poem that foreshadows her impending attack:

> Je suis la peste, le choléra,
> la grippe aviaire et la bombe A.
> Petite salope radioactive,
> mon cœur ne comprend que le vice
> Transuraniens, humains poubelles,

[25] She doesn't see any adults around her with a sense of direction. Any remains of dignity. They compromise all along the line, and tie themselves in knots to justify it. They say it's their choice. All the shit you have to eat, they just swallow it down without flinching. All they know is how to do what they're told. How to survive at any price. Well, she's going to slam the brakes on. This world they've built, she's going to introduce some order to it. (Reynolds 298)

contaminant universel.[26] (302)

In this chapter, Valentine brings the novel to a shocking conclusion. After she is found in Barcelona by La Hyène and Lucie, the two detectives return her to her father's home in Paris. Valentine does not fight, or resist being returned to Paris. During the drive back, La Hyène proposes an escape, or way out, for Valentine not to return. Valentine asserts that she wants to return home and that she was wrong to have run away. It is revealed to the reader by her terrorist attack on the Palais Royal where her father was receiving a literary prize that she only consented to returning in order to carry out her suicide bombing. In addition to her poem, Valentine leaves behind a video testimony during the preparations for the attack. After claiming sole responsibility, she graphically films herself undressing and inserting the bomb. Her final act deconstructs the image of the innocent girl, of the loving daughter and of sexuality as a futurist practice. As I suggested earlier through a reading of Baudrillard, the act of suicide circumvents a natural death and annihilates the life capital attached to personhood. Her violence erases the normative structures that surround her. The Palais Royal and its surroundings are barely recognizable, the destruction is total. Valentine's terrorist act has ruptured and destroyed normalcy. Even though she destroyed herself in the process, the bombing has destroyed social order literally and symbolically. This subversion is literal because her act was directed towards her

[26] I'm plague, I'm cholera, Bird flu, the neutron bomb, I'm a radioactive bitch, I'm a vicious little witch. Aliens, humans, all polluters, Universal contaminators. (Reynolds 266)

father—killing him is her primary objective. Symbols of institutionality and patriarchy are also marked by her violence: the city infrastructure and decoration are overturned signaling the disruption of order. The sculpture of a cherub, representing youthful innocence and naiveté, is shattered. Valentine's final act is disturbing because it has ruptured the futurist fabric of daily existence, and has ravaged the optimistic belief in childhood and the benevolence of future generations.

Valentine is not the only character in the novel to self-actualize and achieve metamorphosis through violence. The private detective La Hyène also possesses a monstrous gaze and murderous effect on those who surround her. La Hyène is a quasi-mythic character in Despentes' corpus; first appearing in *Apocalypse bébé*, she is a leading protagonist in the *Vernon Subutex* Trilogy. She is a private detective residing in Paris, a militant lesbian, and sidekick to Lucie Toledo. La Hyène is feared and admired for her castrating gaze and seemingly supernatural detective abilities. Lucie first hears about La Hyène from her boss at the private detective agency where she works. La Hyène constructed and morphed into her new and nearly mythic version of herself, "Elle était devenue la Hyène… Ça ne lui déplaisait pas de jouer la gouine telle que la rêvent les hétéros : brute, marginale et capable de couper la bite à n'importe qui"[27] (266). Much of her power is located in her queer positionality and described as a site of resistance.

[27] She'd become the Hyena… She wasn't unhappy to play the dyke the way heteros expected: brutal, marginal, ready to cut the balls off anyone who crossed her. (Reynolds 235)

Although it is not revealed until much later in the novel, she became La Hyène when she committed her first murder during her teenage years. In an act of vengeance and in defense of her girlfriend, she kills her abusive father:

> Elle l'a tué il y a vingt-cinq ans. Elle l'a attendu à la sortie de son travail. Elle voulait lui parler, lui faire peur. Elle l'a suivi sans qu'il la remarque, il ne la connaissait pas. Elle enrageait de se sentir idiote, ne pas avoir préparé ce qu'elle voulait dire. Elle ne pouvait pas rentrer chez elle sans rien faire. Derrière la gare, à l'époque, c'était presque un terrain vague. Il a remonté une rue déserte, palissades le long d'un grand chantier, il était trop tard pour que quiconque y travaille encore.[28] (241)

The act of killing him was the first time she completed her metamorphosis:

> Elle avait chargé, comme un animal sauvage. Arrivée à sa hauteur, sans un mot, elle avait cogné. Pas pour venger sa petite amie qui était torturée. Un désir brutal s'était ouvert en elle. Le mettre au sol. Le forcer à la prendre en compte. Lui soutirer de l'angoisse, à n'importe quel prix. C'est surement à cette époque qu'elle a

[28] She killed him twenty-five years ago. She waited for him to come out of his workplace. She meant to talk to him, to give him a scare. She followed him without his seeing her, he didn't know her at all. She was furious with herself for feeling so foolish, furious for not preparing what she wanted to say to him. She couldn't go home without doing anything. Behind the station, in those days, it was a kind of wasteland. He set off walking up a deserted street: on one side, a fence ran along the edge of a big construction site. It was too late for anyone to be working there now. (Reynolds 212-213)

commencé à se déformer le cerveau, à force d'attendre qu'on la démasque, d'observer le moindre geste, d'analyser les sons. Quelque chose en elle a dû se débloquer.[29] (262)

The act of killing transformed her into La Hyène, her actions were no longer motivated by revenge or defense of her girlfriend. The satisfaction that she derives from violence causes her to morph physically, demonstrating that violence is transformative. This single act propels her into becoming her mythic self, it is also the basis for her work and her new identity.

La Hyène's taste for destruction and murder are never quenched. In her work as a freelance private detective, it is rumored that she will do more than make people disappear. La Hyène is described as being surrounded by death, "Autour d'elle, les morts accidentelles se multipliaient, les suicides, les overdoses, les petits rhumes suivis de décès surprenants, souvent après un passage à l'hôpital"[30] (272). Her presence is both castrating and petrifying, she is surrounded by a pattern of destruction. The capacity for violence is useful for her work and often is provoked during her investigations. Lucie Toledo is witness to this metamorphosis several times during their search for Valentine. La Hyène undergoes a terrifying metamorphosis while the two detectives are interrogating a

[29] She had charged at him like a wild beast. When she came level with him, she had lashed out. Not to avenge her girlfriend whom he'd been torturing. A sudden desire had surged up inside her. To feel him. To force him to reckon with her. To get her out of this anguish, whatever the cost. It must have been at that time that her way of thinking was transformed: though expecting always to be unmasked, she became capable of observing the slightest gesture, of analyzing every sound. Something inside her must have been released. (Reynolds 231-232)

[30] Around her, accidental deaths started to become frequent, suicides, overdoses, unexpected fatalities from a minor infection, often after a stay in the hospital. (Reynolds 240)

group of young men that used to go to underground shows with Valentine. Lucie narrates the scene :

> La Hyène était restée en arrière, silencieuse. Au moment de sortir, elle était revenue sur ses pas pour l'empoigner par la nuque, souriante, elle avait claqué des dents trois fois, à côté de son oreille : « Si on revient te voir, salope, je t'arrache la queue avec mes dents, d'accord ? » Kromag raconte que c'était comme rencontrer Hulk, le côté vert en moins : elle s'était transformée en monstre, n'importe qui serait parti en courant à ce moment-là.[31] (27)

Her monstrous form makes several appearances throughout the novel while they are searching for Valentine. During their investigation, Lucie and La Hyène discover that Valentine was raped by a group of boys her age at one of the *Panique dans ton cul* concerts. La Hyène is provoked into metamorphosis when she discovers what happened to Valentine, out of revenge she attacks the leader of the group. Lucie recounts:

> Elle est devenue quelqu'un d'autre, sa voix a changé, les prunelles de ses yeux ont changé, son visage est déformé par une colère

[31] The Hyena had stayed in the background, not saying a word. Then just as they were leaving, she had wheeled around, grabbed the man by the scruff of the neck, smiled, and snapped her teeth three times in his ear. "If we have to come back here, you turd, I will personally bite your cock off with my teeth, got that?" The way Cro-Mag tells it, it was like coming into contact with the Incredible Hulk, only not green: she'd mutated into a monster, anyone would have run a mile from her. (Reynolds 25)

> malsaine, encore contenue. Ses traits sont tirés. Elle n'est plus du tout jolie. Elle est métamorphosée. Et on voit bien qu'elle a de la marge : il ne s'agit que d'un préambule au pire.
>
> Il porte la main à sa joue, la marque est devenue rouge. Il est plus surpris qu'endolori, ouvre la bouche pour protester d'un air mauvais mais quand il voit la tête qu'elle fait il ne cherche même pas à masquer sa terreur. Il se tourne vers moi, pour me prendre à témoin. Je suis pétrifiée, moi aussi.[32] (132)

La Hyène's metamorphosis transforms her face into a monstrous mask like that of Medusa. Her gaze projects terror onto the object of her violence, Valentine's rapist, and onto her colleague, Lucie. The violence that La Hyène inflicts and embodies provokes fear in all those that surround her as she morphs. This monstrous and abject quality remains even when she has transformed out of her death drive state of frenzy. Lucie describes La Hyène after the attack, "Elle se comporte comme si elle avait recouvré tout son calme mais ses mains tremblent encore et son visage n'est pas tout à fait recomposé, quelque chose d'hagard déforme ses traits. Le pire, ça a été la jouissance, la jouissance évidente pendant

[32] She's become a different person, her voice has changed, the pupils of her eyes have changed, her whole face is transformed by a vicious yet still contained anger. Her features are drawn. She's not at all pretty now. She's metamorphosed. And you can tell she's got plenty in reserve. This is just for starters. The boy puts his hand to his cheek. The mark has gone red. He's more shocked than hurt, opens his mouth to protest indignantly, when he sees her face and doesn't even try to hide his terror. He turns to me to be a witness. I'm petrified too. If I dared, I'd intervene, thinking, what will his parents do to us when he goes running home to mommy to tell her about this? But I'm rooted to the spot, my legs won't move, my mind is frozen. (Reynolds 116-117)

qu'elle était sur lui"[33] (135). Despentes describes the extreme pleasure that La Hyène derives from inflicting violence as *jouissance*. Jouissance has been treated by many French theorists notably including Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, Georges Bataille, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. In *Les larmes d'Eros*, Georges Bataille describes an erotic jouissance that "consomme dans l'instant la totalité de son énergie vitale"[34] (110). Roland Barthes also explores oppositional notions of jouissance to sexual pleasure or gratification in *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973). Jane Gallop recapitulates that Barthes' "book repeatedly distinguishes between *plaisir* (comfortable, ego-assuring, recognized, and legitimated as culture) and *jouissance* (shocking, ego-disruptive, and in conflict with the canons of culture)" ("Precocious "Jouissance": Roland Barthes, Amatory Maladjustment, and Emotion", 566). Gallop asserts that Barthes' reading of *jouissance* becomes a space for queer subversion of normativity. She writes that *jouissance* "in opposition to plaisir, [it] is on the side of the perverted versus the normative, the shocking versus the legitimated; jouissance is on the side of queer" (566). As written by Despentes, the *jouissance* that La Hyène experiences is shocking and transgressive to the point of becoming all-consuming and erotic. It also transforms her face into something monstrous and ugly as if prettiness and beauty were holding La Hyène back from fully accessing her power.

[33] She acts as if she's completely calm again, but her hands are still shaking and her face hasn't completely recovered, her features still have a haggard look. The worst thing was the way she enjoyed it, visibly enjoyed it, when she was laying on top of him. (Reynolds 119-120)
[34] In the instant, it consumes the totality of its vital energy. (Translation mine)

"We Look The Same, We Talk The Same"

In the best-selling classic *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (1990) Naomi Wolf reveals how unattainable social expectations of feminine beauty increase when women gain power, legal recognition and professional success. In trying to fulfill society's impossible definition of flawless beauty, Wolf argues that the modern liberated woman finds herself disempowered by this myth and in a spiral of self-consciousness and self-hatred because of the perceived failure at beauty. As women's power increases in one sphere, new obstacles and challenges in the form of unattainable beauty standards keep her subordinated and incomplete. The publication of this text is identified as one of the flashpoints for the surge in feminist consciousness that we now describe as the third wave. Wolf was not the first to identify the beauty myth's complicity in reinforcing male dominance, Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* that exclusively girls are imposed a huge array of social expectations dictating appearance. In Virginie Despentes' corpus, she systematically deconstructs the beauty myth and shows how attaining beauty is often postulated as a rite of passage for girls into womanhood. Femininity is equated with the fulfillment of societal standards of appearance. With the character Valentine, Despentes shows how girls who do not fit into the mold are shunned and exiled to the margins. Despentes articulates this in her non-fiction theoretical text, *King Kong Théorie*. She argues that "même aujourd'hui que les femmes publient beaucoup de romans, on rencontre rarement de personnages

féminins aux physiques ingrats ou médiocres, inaptes à aimer les hommes ou à s'en faire aimer" (10). Valentine of *Apocalypse bébé* embodies and portrays this girlhood struggle to achieve ideals of feminine beauty. She seeks love from men and women who reject her because of her unidealized appearance and behavior.

Through descriptions given by the other characters in the novel, Valentine is described as fat. This designation and their concern are not for her health, instead they are concerned with the negative effect of her supposed extra weight on her appearance. Despentes never gives us a description of Valentine's body through narrative observation, rather it is conveyed always through dialogue or as a critique from one of the characters. Perception of Valentine is given through other people's gazes which objectify her through multiple layers of norms concerning femininity, attractiveness and acceptability. The first indication of Valentine's weight is located in the chapter where we meet her stepmother Claire, who describes Valentine's angry outbursts:

> L'adolescente était devenue violente, physiquement. La première fois qu'elle avait mis une claque à Claire, elles étaient seules dans la cuisine. Valentine buvait du coca en ouvrant une glace et gentiment Claire avait fait remarquer que ça faisait beaucoup de calories. « T'en fais pas pour moi, quand je serai grande je veux pas être pute comme toi »[35] (103).

[35] The teenager had become physically violent. The first time she slapped Claire they were alone in the kitchen. Valentine was drinking a Coke while getting an ice cream out of the fridge, and

This episode where Valentine attacks her stepmother for derogatory comments about her body and her appearance repeats several more times within the novel,

> Ça recommence. Ça s'est passé de nouveau dans la cuisine, elle m'a plaquée contre l'évier en me hurlant des choses terribles, je venais de lui conseiller de faire attention à ce qu'elle mange, elle m'a traitée de tous les noms. Maintenant j'ai peur quand je l'entends rentrer. Elle va dans sa chambre sans me parler, mais je sais qu'elle est là et j'ai peur qu'à n'importe quel moment elle en sorte et me frappe. J'ai peur le soir avant de m'endormir, je me dis que dans la nuit elle pourrait prendre un couteau et m'égorger. François me répète de ne pas m'en faire, que ça va lui passer, mais lui ne l'a jamais vue quand elle fait une crise. Elle est méconnaissable, c'est un monstre.[36] (116-117)

Valentine must constantly fight against the oppressive normative codes about female appearance, consequently one of her targets is necessarily her stepmother Claire. She is not the only person to critique Valentine from this perspective. The

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Claire mildly pointed out that that was a lot of calories. "Oh don't worry, I don't want to be a whore like you when I'm your age." (Reynolds 92)

[36] It's begun again. And in the kitchen again. She pushed me up against the sink, shouting the most awful things, I'd just advised her to be a bit more careful [about] what she eats, she called me all the names under the sun. Now I'm afraid when I hear her come into the house. She goes to her room without a word to me, but I know she's there, and I'm afraid any minute she's going to come out and hit me. I'm afraid at night before I go to sleep, I think: What if she got hold of a knife and came and cut my throat. François keeps telling me not to worry, she'll get over it, but he's never seen her when she gets in a rage. She's unrecognizable. A monster. (Reynolds 103-104)

reader sees this criticism again, even more explicitly when Vanessa, Valentine's biological mother, recounts their first meeting. She also tries to correct her on her weight and eating habits, "A la plage, je lui ai payé une glace, je lui ai demandé pourquoi elle ne faisait pas un peu plus attention à son poids, elle m'a dit que c'était génétique. Son père est mince, je suis mince, je n'ai pas su quoi dire" (212). In the body of the novel, both Claire and Vanessa recount their biographies in the chapters where they take first-person narrative. For both, women attaining an attractive appearance in the form of adherence to physical beauty are the sum of their lives' strivings. For Claire, her obsession with her appearance is a form of control over her body. Vanessa was born more conventionally attractive; her obsession with her appearance entailed maintenance of her habit for luxury goods and expensive clothes that have been secured by a series of rich husbands and lovers but ultimately the presence of Valentine annihilates all of this artifice. Vanessa recounts that after she and Valentine started meeting regularly, her carefully constructed façade became undone:

> Le face-à-face quotidien avec sa fille avait modifié le regard qu'elle portait sur elle-même… C'était avant tout la vision de sa trajectoire qu'elle l'obligeait à réviser. Gagnante, survivante, impitoyable : tous les termes qu'elle avait plaqués sur elle-même perdaient de leur évidence. Elle était une pauvre fille qui s'était démenée, de mariage médiocre en mariage médiocre, amassant comme un petit animal un petit pécule dérisoire, y consacrant toute

son énergie. C'était en regardant Valentine, et en cherchant comment lui raconter son histoire, que tout avait changé.[37] (214-215)

Valentine has a petrifying or destructive effect on her mother's carefully constructed myth of feminine identity. Vanessa saw herself as a successful woman because she married into money and power but her inability to assume any aspect of the maternal undoes her femininity. She is a slave to normative myths about womanhood and to the idea that money can buy identity. Although Vanessa is less traumatized than Claire by a fluctuating figure, her days are spent at a luxury private gym or in Pilates classes. She prides herself for having an even more perfect body at forty years old as compared to when she was twenty (188). Valentine does not abide by any of the restrictions or regimes that Vanessa and Claire submit themselves to: because they see her as fat, Valentine can never fit in.

In Anglo feminist history, during the second wave the publication of Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* marked the emergence of fat feminism. The movement also appeared in subcultures of punk feminism with the publication of

[37] But seeing her daughter every day, tête-à-tête, had modified her own view of herself. Not just by making her realize her age, with cruel sharpness, but making her unquestionably one of the ones who will soon be on the way out. It was above all the vision of her own trajectory that she'd been forced to confront. Surviving, making the best of it, ruthless: all the words she's applied to herself were losing their ability to convince. She was just a poor girl who'd drifted from one mediocre marriage to another, collecting her derisory capital, like a little squirrel collecting nuts, putting all her effort into that. It was when she looked at Valentine, and wondered how to describe her own life story to her, that it all changed. And she dared not touch her. She was incapable of physical affection, she wanted to make the gestures but couldn't manage it. Vanessa wasn't the woman she'd imagined herself to be. And Valentine made her realize that. (Reynolds 190)

fat feminist zines such as *Fat!So?: for people who don't apologize for their size* by Marilynn Wann and from The Fat Girl Collective *Fat Girl: a zine for fat dykes and the women who want them produced*. In *Apocalypse bébé*, Valentine's size and her eating habits are considered non-normative which cause her to be estranged from other women. Many in the novel think it is necessary to correct her behavior and her body, especially her mother Vanessa and stepmother Claire who are fully invested in beauty and size normativity. Towards the end of the novel, in a chapter where Valentine takes the first-person narrative, she describes her own evolution away from mainstream girl power-type girlhood towards her individualistic authentic transformed self. When she sees a group of girls her age, she is prompted to reflect upon her own personal history. Valentine has opted not to participate in the commodified version of girlhood as her peers by not dressing like them and getting rid of her mobile phone. She has rejected and subverted the system to which she is supposed to belong:

> Trois pouffiasses de son âge la croisent sans la calculer, elles ont les poignets chargés de bracelets, chacune un portable à la main, elles piaillent. Quand elle pense qu'elle ressemblait à ça, il n'y a pas si longtemps. Elle a beaucoup changé. Elle est très attentive à sa courte biographie. Elle la récapitule volontiers, c'est tout ce qu'elle possède aujourd'hui. Sa vie.[38] (302)

[38] Three teenage girls, her own age, walk toward her taking no notice, their wrists are laden with bracelets, they each hold a cellphone and are chattering away. She thinks she looked like that not so long ago. She's changed a lot. She is very attentive to her short biography. She looks back over

This passage also highlights a separate girlhood temporality, time is slowed down compared to the perceived timescale of adulthood. It is not clear if this ultra-saturated time scale is due to her age, her marginal status or as a foreshadowing of her imminent demise. Valentine, from the beginning of the novel, is already contextualized as a rebellious teenage girl because she is a runaway. Besides Lucie's description of Valentine as a loner, the two detectives know very little about the girl. La Hyène and Lucie Toledo are beginning their investigation by interviewing a few of her fellow classmates who they have tracked down at a local café off school grounds. The group describes Valentine as a loner who had no female friends. La Hyène pushes them further to find out if she has had a falling out with anyone in particular,

> Le frisé qui trouve que la police n'intervient pas assez prend la parole :
>
> -Valentine, elle est spéciale. Elle est sympa, mais elle est spéciale. Spécialement relou. Surtout quand elle a bu.
>
> -Elle, il faudrait la filmer pour faire des campagnes contre l'alcoolisme des jeunes. Tu veux tellement pas être elle quand elle est bourrée…

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it willingly, it's all she's got now. Her life. She remembers how the school terms followed one after another. (Reynolds 267)

> La brune reprend son explication, elle s'exprime comme une petite fille. Sa voix est nasillarde, désagréable :
>
> -Tu rigoles bien avec elle, si t'es toute seule, tout va bien. Elle est gentille. Mais elle te fait galérer, dès que c'est en plan sortir, tu galères avec elle. Elle boit. Elle boit jusqu'à tomber par terre, dès qu'il y a une fête tu peux être sûre qu'au lieu de t'éclater tu vas la prendre sur ton dos pour la traîner jusqu'au taxi, et elle vomira dedans, et il faudra le remonter chez elle. Et tu galères…[39] (72)

Valentine is judged as a bad girl because her behavior transgresses the standards of conduct even while others are rule-breaking, too. Good girlhood and femininity, according to her classmates, do not include visible drunkenness and its consequential outrageous behavior but Valentine does not care because she is punk. She is creating a space for women and girls where they can enjoy what is traditionally considered masculine. In "Uses of Alcohol among Women: Games of Resistance, Power and Pleasure," Eleni Papagaroufali affirms that "in many civilizations, women, as opposed to men, are excluded from taking strong alcohol and prohibited from experiencing the pleasures that accompany relative tipsiness"

[39] The curly-haired one, who didn't think the police were doing their job, intervenes. "Valentine's a bit weird. Kind of ok but weird. Very hot. Especially when she's had a few. She ought to be in the ads against binge drinking for teenagers. You really wouldn't want to be her when she is drunk." The brunette takes up her story again. She talks like a little girl, in an unpleasant whiny voice. "She can be funny if it's just the two of you, she's fine. She's nice. But if you go out somewhere, she can be a real drag. She binge drinks. She knocks it back till she can't stand up straight, and if you're at a party, no prizes for guessing you'll have no fun, you'll end up carrying her out to the taxi, and then she'll be sick all over it, and then you'll have to help her get up the stairs at home. See what I mean? A drag." (Reynolds 64)

(39). Papagaroufali asserts that this exclusion acts as a reinforcement of the unequal power structure of gender relations; women and girls are held to different and more restrictive standards than their male counterparts. Although reckless behavior is normally characteristic of youth party culture, the group esteems that Valentine takes it to a socially inappropriate extreme because she is a girl. La Hyène deduces that they have other reasons to judge Valentine negatively, presumably for promiscuous behavior. She asks bluntly how Valentine behaved with the boys,

> Un grand benêt au visage allongé, chevalin, intervient :
>
> -Elle peut te dire, cash « j'ai envie de te sucer, si ça t'intéresse, tu me le dis ». Enfin quand elle est arrivée, c'est ce qu'elle a fait. Les mecs qui lui plaisaient, elle est allée les voir, direct. Mais après, elle s'est calmée. En fait, ces derniers temps, elle nous calculait plus tellement.
>
> La brune reprend :
>
> -En soirée, franchement, avec les mecs, elle te met la honte. Elle boit, et après elle fait n'importe quoi avec n'importe qui. Mais je crois que dans son bahut d'avant, toutes les filles font comme ça. Enfin, c'est ce qu'elle m'a dit.
>
> -Alors ça t'a fatigué de sortir avec elle ?

-Ouais, et puis elle met le wild. Elle raconte des conneries…dures.

-Quel genre ?

-Ça peut être n'importe quoi, pourvu que ça fasse chier quelqu'un. Si t'es blonde, ça sera sur les blondes, si t'es juif, ça sera sur Israël, si t'es noir, c'est sur les bananiers, si t'es PD, c'est sur les sidaïques, et ainsi de suite, ça n'a pas de fin… ah y en a pour tout le monde, avec Valentine. Mais au bout d'un moment, tu peux plus… Tu veux passer une soirée tranquille !

Peu de réactions autour de la table. Leur apathie n'est pas troublée. Une fille sympa, sans problèmes. Rien à signaler. Mieux je connais cette génération, plus je l'imagine à l'âge adulte, et moins j'envisage de faire de vieux os.[40] (72-73)

Valentine's promiscuity and lack of shame are inherently disturbing and repulsive to her peers. She is transgressing social norms by refusing to conform to norms

[40] A gangling youth with a long, horsey face replies. "She can come onto you just like that, saying 'Wanna blow job? If you want one, just tell me.' Well that's what she used to do, when she first got here. Boys she liked, she'd go up to them, and, pow! Just like that, she'd come out with it. But she calmed down. In fact lately, she didn't seem to bother with us." The brunette takes up the story again. "Say you go out in the evening with a few guys, well honestly, you feel ashamed for her. When she drinks, she'll do anything with anyone. But I think in the school she was in before, the girls were all like that. Or so she said." "So you got fed up going out with her, that's it?" "Yeah… and she can be pretty wild too. She comes out with really mega awful stuff." "Like what?" "Oh anything, if it can upset someone. If you're a blonde, it's something bad about dumb blondes, if you're Jewish, it's anti-Israel, if you're black, she'll talk about banana trees, if you're gay, it's about AIDS, and so on. Valentine's always got an insult for everyone. And in the end you can't take it anymore, you just want a quiet evening." There are few reactions around the table. Their apathy hasn't been disturbed. A girl who was kind of okay, not too many problems. Nothing out of the ordinary. The more I see of this generation, the more I imagine how they'll be as adults and the less I want to make old bones. (Reynolds 65)

set by other girls her age. In "Sex in Public", Berlant and Warren ascribe the disgust experienced by her peers as a type of indoctrination by heteronormative culture: promiscuous sex is not allowed. They assert that heteronormative community "is imagined through scenes of intimacy, coupling and kinship" (554). The sexual futures of the heterosexual is limited to reproduction (554). This exchange with Valentine's classmates highlights the discomfort society has with women and girls being sexually dominant and unconcerned with the love plot. Theirs is figured as a dangerous and deviant sexuality. The second half of the conversation reveals that her uninhibited behavior seemingly extends to her unfiltered and abrasive speech. Valentine is depicted as lacking control but in later passages, we discover that her promiscuity is a carefully executed rebellion. Despentes writes that Valentine "couchait avec le plus de monde possible, car elle pensait qu'on s'améliore au lit comme on s'améliore au piano, en pratiquant"[41] (281). Ultimately, Valentine's behavior is unacceptable for a girl. She has chosen to act as if she were a boy. Her sexualization and objectification of masculine subjects commits violence against their symbolic power. Christine Détrez and Anne Simon describe how writers like Despentes figure virginity as a handicap to liberation and becoming other than censored girlhood. In *«Plus tu baises dur, moins tu cogites»: Littérature féminine contemporaine et sexualité—la fin des tabous?*, they state that "la libération est surtout une libération des mœurs: chez

[41] [Valentine] slept with as many men as she could. She thought you could improve in bed like you could playing the piano: by practice. (Reynolds 271)

ces jeunes filles ou jeunes femmes, aucune honte, aucun tabou"[42] (60). By refusing to adhere to society's standards on girlhood and requisite behavior, the defiant and promiscuous girl lessens the power of norms. Her rebellion is on the individual level but it has a widespread impact. She is able to transform and transgress normative girlhood into an abject and monstrous form of femininity.

Catherine Breillat, A ma sœur !

Catherine Breillat is a French filmmaker, novelist and cinema studies professor. She began her career at the age of 17 with the publication of her novel *l'Homme facile (*1968*).* It was banned by the French government for underage readers. She directed her first film in 1975 but subsequently spent several years working as an actress and experimenting with other creative outlets. Throughout her career, she has adapted many of her novels into films such as *36 Fillette* and *Romance X.* In 2009, Breillat collaborated with Despentes on *Mutantes: Féminisme Porno Punk.* Her corpus as a whole seeks to challenge and reinvent female sexuality. She often chooses to set these stories in the moment of transition between girlhood to adulthood. Her female protagonists use the discovery of pleasure, of sex and of individuality as escape from the constraints of adolescence. Like Despentes, Breillat is a highly visible public figure and as she describes herself and her reception in France in an interview with *The Telegraph*,

[42] The [sexual] liberation is especially a liberation from morals, for these young girls or young women there is no shame, no more taboo. (Translation mine)

"All true artists are hated. Only conformists are ever adored"[43] (Secher). Because of the controversial nature of her work, she describes that there are many actors, studios and others in the filmmaking industry that refuse to work with her. Predictably though, controversy has also brought visibility to her work.

The scholarship on Catherine Breillat focuses mostly on her filmic corpus instead of her writings. In his book *Catherine Breillat* (2009), Douglas Keesey, author of the first English-language book on the controversial director, explores her films through thematic groupings: female coming-of-age, women's sexual odyssey, masculinity in crisis and violence. He also underlines the pornographic aesthetic of her films. Breillat is known for her insistence on the use of the long shot for sexual scenes. This chapter specifically takes *A ma sœur !* as an object of analysis. *A ma sœur !* tells the story of overweight thirteen-year-old Anais, who is on vacation with her family including her beautiful older sister, Elena. One day when the two sisters venture into town to find a café, Elena meets Fernando, a young Italian law student, and falls in love with him. The film depicts a series of fifteen-year-old Elena's first sexual experiences with Fernando. Apart from the sex scenes, much of the film focuses on the relationship between the two sisters and how both family and society treat them differently due to their appearances. The pace of the majority of the movie is idyllic and at times slow, but the end of the film comes to a shocking conclusion. After a dramatic breakup between

[43] Secher, Benjamin. "Catherine Breillat: All True Artists are Hated." *The Telegraph*. 5 April 2008. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/starsandstories/3672302/Catherine-BreillatAll-true-artists-are-hated.html

Fernando and Elena that involves both families, Elena's mother hastily decides to drive the two girls back to Paris. Halfway home, her mother becomes tired and pulls over at a rest stop to sleep. Near dawn, an axe murderer arrives and kills Elena with the axe and strangles her mother to death. He takes Anais into the woods and rapes her, which she defiantly and proudly denies having happened when interviewed by the police. The film was banned in Canada for the depiction of teenage sexuality, but in 2001 it won the Manfred Salzgeber Award at the Berlin International Film Festival as well as the *France Culture* Award at Cannes Film Festival the same year. The fact that Breillat's film is both censored and commemorated speaks to the power of her directorial gaze. As I will explore in my analysis of the film, Breillat materializes a controversial and shockingly violent female gaze that undoes all symbols of conformity.

I argue that Breillat films *A ma sœur !* through the lens of the pornographic gaze as a means of committing retributive violence. This gaze is possessed by Anais and by the filmmaker herself, Catherine Breillat. In Despentes' documentary *Mutantes: Féminisme Punk Porno*, Breillat articulates her definition of the pornographic:

> Ça veut dire quoi la pornographie ? C'est un regard porté sur l'acte sexuel humain. Ça entraîne avec soi, des préjugés. Et toute une éthique judéo-chrétienne qui fait de la nudité, de l'obscénité, un fait-indignité humaine. Alors qu'il y a une indignité humaine à

> croire même à ces choses-là. C'est simplement la société qui a l'air de dire que la femme a un capital de dignité, et qu'on peut enlever au fur à mesure qu'elle commet des actes sexuels.[44] (31:43)

As demonstrated in my analysis of sequences and scenes from *A ma sœur !*, Breillat insists on practicing the pornographic gaze as a director. The pornographic gaze, in its most basic inception, is fixed on an unerotic depiction of sex. Breillat maintains that looking at the sex act is not fundamentally obscene or shameful, instead the forces of history and society have perpetrated symbolic violence against women by establishing a negative correlation between sexuality and dignity. In her films, Breillat's creatively resists and redefines the relationship between women and sex by showing the two together. Despentes identifies another reason why pornography is threatening in *King Kong Théorie*, she writes "le problème que pose le porno, c'est d'abord qu'il tape dans l'angle mort de la raison. Il s'adresse directement aux centres des fantasmes, sans passer par la parole, ni par la réflexion"[45] (91). Defining the pornographic by its access to innermost desires and fantasies does not limit its expression to the purely sexual. In *Genre Trouble and Extreme Cinema*, Troy Bordun

[44] What does it mean, pornography? It is the watching of the human sex act. Which brings prejudices along with it. And a Judeo-Christian ethic which makes nudity and obscenity a type of human indignity. All the while, there is a human indignity in believing these sorts of things. It's simply society who says that woman has a sum of dignity that depreciates little by little when she commits sex acts. (Translation mine)

[45] Pornography hits the blind corner of reason. It directly addresses our primitive fantasies, bypassing words and thought. (Benson 85)

defines Breillat's pornographic gaze as not only defined by on-screen nudity and sexuality but more precisely as one that overwhelms the consciousness of the spectator through the showing of catastrophe, death, acts of violence and terror (11). The reimagined pornographic female gaze studied here is represented by the fetishization of pleasure, not stemming from the erotic, but instead coming from a celebration of excess and the *jouissance* provoked by violence.

Fat Girl

Much like Valentine in *Apocalyspe bébé*, Anais is criticized for her appearance and failure to conform to beauty norms. She is portrayed as overweight and less pretty than her older sister Elena. This failure results in social ostracism and, more painfully, familial marginalization. In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo argues that society's obsession with fat, diet and thinness are by definition normative. Bordo writes "such preoccupation may function as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century, insuring [sic] the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining "docile bodies" sensitive to any departure from social norms" (186). Because Anais refuses to self-monitor and self-discipline she is ostracized and seen as uncontrolled and uncontrollable. Throughout the entire film, Breillat shows her exclusion from the visual family frame. Anais is constantly compared to her sister Elena who embodies the patriarchal ideal girl: thin, long straight hair, doe eyes and pledged to monogamy.

This pledge includes the association of sex with marriage or a promise to enter into a formal contract in the future. The hierarchization of female characters in her family according to adherence to these standards is especially apparent in the sequence where Anais and Elena's mother drives them into town to go shopping for new dresses. The spatial arrangement of preference begins in the car ride to the boutique. Mother and Elena are seated in front while Anais is relegated to the back seat. In a long shot taken from a low angle perspective, the camera shows Mother and Elena waltzing through the glass front doors of the store and into the well-decorated shop. During the entire scene, Anais is trailing behind them and obscured by their figures. We only see glimpses of her head, her arm or a leg peeking out from behind her mother and sister. The sequence next cuts to a scene of confrontation between the two sisters. We first see Elena looking at her reflection fondly while wearing a khaki shirtdress, Anais arrives in the foreground (behind Elena) wearing a light moss green dress in a similar cut. Anais' perceived attempt to copy Elena launches a tirade of insults directed towards her younger sister. The next scene of the sequence cuts to Anais standing with the store tailor with the same green dress, she is asking her to raise the hemline shorter and shorter. Her mother tries to interject by saying it would look better below the knee but Anais responds by saying she is the one who wears it so she should get to decide. Her mother calls her "une tête de cochon il n'y a rien faire"[46] (47:03). Attention is quickly diverted away from Anais when Elena appears at the top of

[46] A fat[pig]-head, she's a hopeless case. (Translation mine)

the store's marble staircase in a red dress. Anais is marginalized by the two people she is closest to—her mother and her older sister—because she does not fit society's ideal beauty standard nor reify the beauty myth as we previously explored through Naomi Wolf. In *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf also explores how this ideology divides and conquers women's alliances. She explains that "rivalry, resentment and hostility provoked by the beauty myth run deep" (284). The resentment is shared by all three female characters. Anais resents her mother and Elena for marginalizing her due to her failure to meet their physical ideal. Wolf also describes this, asserting "sisters commonly remember the grief of one being designated "the pretty one"" (284). Additionally, Elena and their mother resent Anais for her ugliness and try to shame her into changing herself.

Anais' inattention or lack of desire to manipulate her overweight body into thinness signifies another failure of femininity. Through the normative figure of her older sister Elena, Breillat shows us that girls and women are expected to keep constant vigilance of their own eating habits and of those who surround them. In a dinner table scene at the family's vacation home, Elena is performing several normative roles of femininity with her relationship to food and consumption. Fernando, Elena's new boyfriend, is invited to meet her family. Even though the young soon-to-be-lovers have only just met, at Elena's insistence, they are performing traditional heteronormative social expectations. Elena tries to mirror the dynamic between her mother and father. We first see this when

mother and daughter are away in the kitchen preparing their plates while the two men get to know each other while they wait to be served. The mother sits down with a plate for herself and the father, Elena does the same for herself and Fernando. She has prepared herself a small plate and a slightly bigger one for Fernando. As she places it in front of him, she asks if what she has chosen for him is ok. Fernando thanks her and says yes, it is perfect. Elena rolls her eyes dismissively indicating that he gave the wrong answer. She next turns her gaze to her mother and away from Fernando, she explains without being asked, and "non parce que je le mets en régime"[47] (9:42). He laughs and asks Elena directly if she thinks he is fat. Elena again, does not address Fernando directly, she makes eye contact with her mother and then looks back at Fernando to inspect his body. She concludes, "non mais bon quand même pour ton âge t'es pas maigre"[48] (10:02). Elena's observation that he is not thin corresponds with Anais' return to the visual frame. She was absent when everyone was seated and started eating. We see her in the background approaching the table. She is making her way back to her seat next to her father at the table. She sits to the right of him with a heaping plate of food that she has prepared for herself. Once Anais is seated, her father turns to her and asks sarcastically if she has gotten enough to eat. She replies that she was worried that there wouldn't be any left. Elena interjects, "franchement que

[47] No, it's because I'm putting him on a diet. (Translation mine)
[48] Not but really, you're not thin for your age. (Translation mine)

les gens se demandent pourquoi elle est grosse, c'est pas difficile à deviner, c'est parce qu'elle bouffe. Elle bouffe comme une truie à part il n'y a que ça"[49] (10:18). Their mother chastises Elena for blaming Anais, she defends her by reminding her that it is hormonal but during the interaction her mother is mockingly smiling. Elena continues pouting and says maybe her mom is right, but that Anais' eating habits disgust her. Elena announces that her sister has ruined her appetite as she pushes away her untouched small plate of food. For the rest of the sequence, the parents are chatting with Fernando while the two girls glare at each other across the table. The conversation between mother and Elena necessarily excludes everyone else, they are performing the predefined roles that structure normative femininity unlike Anais who is eating a large "unlady-like" amount of food. As Douglas Keesey describes, excess is "more than a defensive fortress, overeating for Anais is an act of rebellion against a society that would have her conform to its bodily norms" (48). As we discover in the film's following sequences, her refusal to moderate appetite and bend to norms is applied to her views on sex and promiscuity.

Practicing Promiscuity

Without yet having any sexual experiences of her own, Anais adopts a pro-promiscuity standpoint for girls. In *Promiscuities: The Secret*

[49] Honestly, people wonder why she's fat, it's not hard to figure out, it's because she stuffs her face. She stuffs her face like a sow, there's nothing more to it. (Translation mine)

Struggle for Womanhood, Naomi Wolf asserts that in our culture "we become women largely through experiencing, organizing and recounting the sexual stories of adolescence" (1). Within the frame of Breillat's film, sexual experimentation and desire is the formative experience of girlhood. The distinction between sexual experience as a necessary step for girls versus the simple expression of sexuality and eroticism is important for Breillat. As Keesey and others explain, "Breillat has often said that the subject of her films is not 'sexuality', but women's sexual identity and particularly the way in which patriarchal society makes women feel ashamed of their bodies and their desires (2006a: 106)" (11). This is first demonstrated to the spectator through dialogue between Anais and her sister Elena. Their conversation takes place during the film's first sequence after the title frame. The audio track of the conversation between Anais and her older sister cuts in at full volume even though we only see two figures walking in the background towards the foreground, whom we presume to be the two girls. We first hear Anais' voice, she is mocking her sister for scaring away boys with her clinginess. During their cruel repartee where they mock one another for being too dumb or too fat (respectively), they decide to have a contest to see who can first embark on a summer fling with a boy. While Elena vows to save herself for later, the younger Anais attests that she wants her first time to be with "no one" (2:38). As the two girls finish their conversation, the camera moves from a

tracking shot to a long shot of Anais and Elena leaving the vacation homes' gated community. As they are walking, behind them is a prominently displayed red and white gate on the road and the housing sign for "Parc de la Résidence, Domaine Privé". They are both wearing incognito trench style jackets, and walking hurriedly. This scene also shows them from the very beginning of the film escaping their confinement from the controlled vacation home grounds. This scene functions as a microcosm for the condition of girlhood where girls are treated as domestic property to be protected. As they venture out into town, they are alone. They cross no one in the street and seem like vagabonds. It almost appears as if they are spies or dressed in disguise. Their coats are meant to disguise their age and their gender. The ideological positions that both girls take within the body of the film is established in this scene. Elena assumes the traditional misogynistic perspective on sex that discourages females taking pleasure in the act, instead she sees sex as romantically symbolic and for its instrumental value. Anais, although not yet experienced, is against the traditional romantic view of sex. Her conception of the sex act removes it from intimacy and romantic ideals. Her viewpoint could be described as traditionally masculine, she sees sex as an activity to be enjoyed and a skill that one must improve through practice. This is the mentality that

Valentine demonstrated in *Apocalypse bébé*, wherein she likened practicing sex to practicing playing the piano.

Anais later repeats this disavowal for monogamous sex in the sequence following the dinner table fat shaming. The camera cuts to a shot of the poolside where we see Fernando staring at Elena's father who is talking on the telephone for work while Elena is lounging on a poolside chair hoping he looks at her instead. The camera cuts back to a medium shot of Anais in the pool swimming. She swims up to a wooden low dive dock, holds onto one of the beams, pretending it is her fiancé. She then swims up to another beam that she kisses and addresses as her lover. In her dialogue with her two (imaginary) suitors, she assures them that her promiscuity is well-intentioned and for the benefit of the other. The sequence ends with Anais getting out of the pool and grabbing the canister of sunscreen foam from her mother. She then walks to the pool wooden deck platform and seats herself. She stretches out her legs and decadently covers herself in the foam, rubbing it in with relish. She smiles provocatively at something off camera to the left in the last frame of the sequence. Anais is unafraid to show herself and act provocatively, she is resisting the pressure to control or reduce herself in size or character as a girl. Catherine Breillat articulates the importance of women being obscene and taking up space in Virginie Despentes' *Mutantes: Féminisme Porno Punk*. Speaking generally about the role of women filmmakers and the pornographic image, Breillat argues that

the idea of obscenity is a constructed social constraint destined to oppress women. She explains :

> La notion d'obscénité est un outil totalitaire pour réduire la femme, à finalement, un morceau de chair. Qu'est-ce qui est fait dans le sexe, particulièrement le sexe de la femme, qu'est-ce qui est fait dans l'acte du sexe humain, on met toute cette ignominie. C'est plus que la laideur, c'est un rejet. Les gens ont envie de vomir les gens alors trouvent ça bien, c'est une manière avec de la concupiscence, etc. ou d'une manière salace. Mais finalement pour trouver ça tout simplement de l'humanité, tout simplement la beauté, la laideur mêlée dans l'homme qui fait que, il est dans ce fragile équilibre que finalement, il est touchant. Il y a peu de gens qui le reconnaissent. Et qui d'autre peut le montrer? Les cinéastes ce sont les seuls qui peuvent le montrer, oui avec le matériel humain, c'est-à-dire avec des vrais sexes.[50] (27:43)

Through Breillat's depiction of Anais, she reveals an embodiment of female sexuality that is untamed and uncensored. Anais refuses to reduce herself to a

[50] After all, the notion of obscenity is a totalitarian tool used to cut down women to a piece of flesh. What is it about sex, especially the sex of women? What is it about the human sex act, that we assign it to be such a disgraceful act? It's more than vile, it's a rejection of it. Some people want to vomit, some people find it stimulating, it's lustful, it's salacious in a way. But after all, finding that it's all simply part of humanity, quite simply a thing of beauty, mingled with the ugliness in man that defines this fragile equilibrium, which is after all touching. There are very few people who recognize this fact. And of those who can show it, cinematographers are the only ones who can show it, yes, with human material, which is to say with actual genitals. (Translation mine)

smaller piece of flesh spatially. She also valorizes sex as a natural act between humans that can be untethered from its value or signification stemming from its romantic capacities. Anais champions sex for its erotic instead of romantic potential. In the following analytical section, I will look at how Breillat positions Anais' voyeuristic gaze as pornographic.

The Pornographic Gaze

Throughout the entirety of the film, the spectator participates in the surveillance of all intimate moments between Fernando and Elena through the perspective of Anais. The two sisters first meet Fernando at a café in the town next to the vacation home residence. Once the girls arrive at the café, they make their way through the tables looking for a seat or an empty spot. Anais is following behind her older sister when a young man smoking and drinking a beer invites Anais and Elena to share his table with him. Anais plops down in the chair next to him, he tells her that her friend (gesturing towards Elena) can share the table, too. Elena feigns offense that he assumed that the two girls were friends, retorting that Anais is her sister while she tugs on Anais' arm and forces her to give up her spot next to the young man. Elena then introduces herself and Anais to Fernando. During the entire exchange, Anais stands at the edge of the table after being displaced from the chair by Elena. Her arms are crossed, she glares down at the two, observing their exchange. Elena glares up at

Anais and commands, “tu vas pas rester là comme une gourde”[51] (4:39). Elena criticizes and puts down her sister as a competitive tactic and method to gain confidence. The performance of antagonistic relationships between women and girls upholds a misogynistic view of female-exclusive relationships which are defined in reference to desire for men.

Although Anais refuses to engage in intra-female competition while they are at the café, the following scene is strikingly banal. The writing emulates the flat characters and repartee loaded with stereotypes often performed in the beginning conversation sequences of the pornographic film genre. When the waiter arrives, Fernando offers to put them on his tab. Classically beautiful Elena shows restraint and adult-like behavior by asking for a coffee, while overweight Anais orders a banana split on which she gorges herself during Fernando and Elena’s passionate kissing session at the other side of the table. Anais rejects societal standards about girlhood behavior and appearance but within this sequence the only person this bothers is her older sister Elena. Furthermore, Elena takes it personally or as a reflection of her own value or stock because they are related. This attests to the commodification and animalization of women as a type of property, their grooming which extends back into youth or girlhood. In *Animals and Women: Feminist*

[51] You’re not going to sit there like a dumbass. (Translation mine)

Theoretical Explanations, Carol J. Adams describes how "non-human animal pejoratives frequently target women" which through metaphor imposes a negative image on women (12). Implicit in the image of woman or girl as animal is the objectification of the body as a sexualized instrument used to meet men's needs. Earlier in this chapter, when we were examining Despentes' *Apocalypse bébé*, Valentine's biological mother Vanessa draws the same parallel between womanhood and society's consideration of her like livestock when she calls herself a little animal. The initial conversation between Elena and Fernando is also evidence of the kept property or livestock type existence of young girls defined by confinement. Elena explains to Fernando that even though they are on vacation, the girls do not have the right to go out. Their conversation continues in discussion of their studies. The conversation then turns to a discussion of balancing student expectations with responsibility and familial expectations, especially those from Fernando's father who is a lawyer specializing in international law. Their hands interlocked and, as they gaze at each other, she replies that hers is a corporate director. They smile at each other and then kiss. Their exchange highlights the importance they both place on social standing and reputation as well as the importance of what Berlant and Warren call the "institutional matrix" that supports heteronormative forms of intimacy linked to monetary power (562). In the architecture of the domestic,

Berlant and Warren argue that it is dominated by professional and political domains (562). It also functions as a critique of the patriarchal capitalist model that Kristeva notes in her article "Le Temps des femmes", linear or monumental time kept women from forming their own spaces or independent structures of power. Elena is willingly complicit in the propagation of this patriarchal system; her identification with it as a source of power solidifies its position and disabuses her ability to subvert it. Elena's alliance is sealed with a kiss between the two. During this first kiss the camera pulls back to film the scene as a medium shot, included in the frame is their surroundings. We see the tables behind them, the waiter passing through the patio, the boat docks in the distance. These camera moves and the presence of movement within the visual frame are a reversal or inversion of the mechanisms of classical Hollywood films as described by Laura Mulvey. In *Death 24x a Second*, Mulvey describes how the dynamics of film are regularly interrupted by exhibitionistic moments of standstill- usually achieved through close-up shots. In *Framing Pictures*, Steven Jacobs explains that "while close-ups are included for the purpose of the glorification of the star, they suppress action and hence also the acting" (139). Breillat shows us the opposite of an exhibitionistic and exploitative kissing scene by opting for a medium shot and the continuation of action (however ordinary or banal) in their immediate surroundings. But when the camera cuts to Anais, it is a

close-up of her glaring at the two while she periodically shovels spoonfuls of banana split into her mouth without breaking her hateful gaze on Elena and Fernando. The waiter interrupts the new couple's kissing by asking them to pay the bill because he is finishing his shift. This event concludes the filmic sequence that takes place on the patio. The next scene cuts to Fernando driving his car, Elena gets in the front seat and when Anais tries to get into the back seat, she tells her that she will meet her at the front gate, inferring that Anais has to walk by herself. Apart from the short car ride to the gate, Anais is present for all the intimate moments shared between her older sister and Fernando thus by proxy, so is the spectator. Breillat's gaze here is both voyeuristic and pornographic.

Anais' invasive gaze is even more explicit when Breillat focuses on the young girl's voyeurism as she observes the young couple's sex taking place in the sisters' shared bedroom. This sequence is the first scene of sexual contact between Elena and Fernando. The two girls are sleeping in separate beds but in a shared room of their vacation home. In the middle of the night, Elena wakes up, turns on the light, and begins doing her makeup. Anais is woken up by the light and asks what she is doing. Anais asks if she is going out and says Elena is allowed to have Fernando meet her at the house. Elena ignores Anais, continues to look at herself in the mirror while applying makeup and tells her to go to sleep. Anais still does not know about what is about to happen, she asks what the purpose of applying makeup is if she is going to sleep. Anais closes her eyes and

clutches her pillow but does not turn away from the light or the view of Elena's bed. In the background in the distance, we hear a dog barking which announces Fernando's arrival. Fernando arrives in the next sequence, he had to pay off the gatekeeper in order to be let into the residence. Elena is making small talk and flirting but Fernando does not understand. Much of the foreplay between the two consists of conversation where Elena is trying to play hard to get, as she interrogates him about his other sexual experiences. She repeats conventional, normative logic like "si c'est trop facile, il n'y a plus de plaisir"[52] (17:42). He slowly convinces her to take off her bra and she lets him touch her. They continue to discuss his other sexual liaisons with girls. Elena asks "et moi si tu couches avec moi, je serais comme toutes les autres filles ? Même si tu couches avec moi?"[53] (21:59) The camera cuts to a closeup of Anais' face, she is awake and watching the two. She scratches her nose, looks up uncomfortably at the ceiling then covers her face with her hand, her fingers splayed open like a starfish. Eerie unsettling music is playing on the extradiegetic audio track. Anais turns her head back to the side directly facing her sister's bed and moves her fingers away from her eyes so that her gaze is unobstructed. The next shot pivots back to her sister's bed, the eerie music continues and we see Elena laying on the bed alone on her back. She is naked from the waist down, her sheer nightgown is partially pulled over her face. Fernando reenters the scene from the left of the frame, he also is

[52] If it's too easy, then there's no more pleasure. (Translation mine)
[53] And if you sleep with me, will I be like all the other girls? Even if you sleep with me? (Translation mine)

undressed from the waist down we see his erect penis. He approaches the bed then kneels on it slowly making his way on top of Elena. During a seven minute uncut shot (which stylistically borrows some codes of pornography), Fernando becomes upset when she suggests that she might not have sex with him. She tells him that she isn't ready to give him her virginity yet. He turns her over and convinces her to have anal sex with him. In "The View from the *Shortbus*, or All Those Fucking Movies", Nick Davis argues that this scene's "sexual frankness constitutes its own riposte to public ideologies of demure, uncurious femininity and to visual, formal, and psychoanalytic constructions of phallic power, not least through Breillat's refusal to cloak the male actors' erections through the customary and mythologizing logic of displacement" (*GLQ* 2008, 632). The negotiation or barter of sex acts in this scene is shockingly banal yet much more realistic than normally featured in cinema. In the canonical love plot, neither pursuer or pursued is pressured to abandon their virtues nor subvert the logic of moral hierarchies in order to cement their alliance and union. Instead, during this encounter between Elena and Fernando, she concedes to more deviant sex act (anal sex) in order to maintain her (vaginal) virginity. The hypocrisy of Elena's compromise is foreshadowed in the beginning of the movie when Anais says that Elena's definition of "not sleeping with" or abstinence is purely technical (1:53). The camera cuts away as she consents, through a medium shot we see Anais still in her bed still staring at the scene across the room. After he finishes they fall asleep together, the camera cuts back to show Elena and Fernando in bed at dawn. He

says he must leave but asks if Elena will perform oral sex on him before he does. She says no and gives excuses about her sister sleeping when Anais interrupts them by waking up yelling at them. Elena gets up angrily from the bed and stomps over to Anais. Elena slaps her across the face calling her a little slut and Anais laughs and responds "c'est moi la petite salope? C'est la meilleure de l'année celle-là. Ma sœur se fait tripoter toute la nuit sans se gêner sans se poser de question si je dors ou pas et c'est moi la salope ?"[54] (35:43). The sequence ends with Fernando dressing hurriedly and uncomfortably, he leaves as soon as he is dressed. Elena is upset and shocked by Anais' intrusion. Her insistence on watching her sister have sex (instead of turning away) is perceived as obscene and inappropriate for Anais. In the final section of my analysis of the film, I argue that Anais' gaze is troubling for its capacity for violence as well.

My last study of Anais' dangerously invasive and murderous gaze is situated in the film's shocking conclusion when Elena and the mother are murdered in front of Anais and she is subsequently raped by the killer. This sequence is the film's culmination; here Breillat demonstrates Anais' monstrous power through the use of cinematic horror aesthetics that are gory and traumatizing to the spectator. The sequence begins with a long shot of the family car. The nameless mother pulls over at a rest stop, we see the car pull into a parking lot surrounded by woods. While both Elena and her mother settle in and

[54] It's me the little slut? That's the best one I've heard all year. My sister gets herself felt up all night without caring or wondering if I'm asleep or not and I'm the slut? (Translation mine)

go to sleep, Anais stays awake in the backseat eating distractedly. The next scene cuts to a shot taken from her perspective from the backseat, her mother and sister both slumped over sleeping. All of a sudden, there is movement outside the car in the right half of the frame, the windshield shatters and a man's head appears, in his right arm he is wielding an axe. He first bashes in Elena's head, blood splatters on his face. The camera then cuts back to Anais. She stares at him intensely and continues chewing her candy but we know she is terrified because the camera cuts to a medium shot of her torso. She is involuntarily peeing on herself, the urine is streaming down the car seat. Next, he rips open the mother's dress and strangles her to death with her scarf. In the filming of this scene, Breillat explains that she was trying for "l'horreur dans la sidération"[55] (Clouzot 101). After Elena and the mother are killed, "the camera lingers over their supine bodies which seem in their stillness to be the posed subjects of glamour shots" (Keesey 58). The camera refocuses on Anais, she slowly lets herself out of the car. The killer steps back from the car and is standing opposite Anais. Both are staring at each other, paralyzed by the other's gaze. He begins walking towards her while she counters by backing away eventually into the wooded area. Once in the woods, he overtakes her and pushes her onto the ground pinning her arms above her head and pulls up her dress. We only see a close-up of Anais' face, he stuffs her underwear into her mouth and then rapes her. At first, Anais tries to fight him but by the end her arms are wrapped around his neck. After he finishes,

[55] Horror through sideration. (Translation mine)

Anais takes her underwear out of her mouth and they spend a moment intensely staring into each other's eyes. In "*À ma sœur!*: Erotic Bodies and the Primal Scene Reconfigured", Emily Fox-Kales argues that the shocking nature and brutality of the rape scene functions as a metaphor for the brutality of sexual initiation (16). Breillat's depiction of what happens next is equally provocative and polemical. The next sequence jumps to several hours later, when we see the family car which is now officially a crime scene. Forensic technicians are processing Elena's body by bagging her hands. The camera cuts back to the wooded area, where two policemen are helping Anais walk towards the crime scene and their captain. They bring her to the head detective and report that she says that she was not raped. Unprompted, Anais says almost with pride "si vous voulez pas me croire, [ne] me croyez pas"[56] (1:23:36). The policeman guiding her pivots her body to the left which turns her gaze towards the camera. We see her face as a terrifying Medusa; her hair is disheveled, she is staring intensely at something to the right of the camera, her eyes are dark and empty. Although Breillat's depiction of rape and the acceptance of the encounter by Anais has been received as highly problematic, Andrée Lafontaine suggests that eroticization of rape in Breillat's film is a way to survive the attack. Lafontaine postulates that "masochism could therefore be seen as the perfectly adapted social attitude: instead of confronting and rebelling against society's injustices and violences, the individual does violence to herself – takes this violence into her own hands – and

[56] If you don't want to believe me then don't. (Translation mine)

insures the smooth running of the system" (*Tapage Nocturne*, 314). In the following sequence, evidence of this trauma and its hardening effects are shown. The screen stays frozen on this shot as the credits begin to roll. In the background, upbeat Spanish acoustic guitar music starts to play. This is not the first time Breillat shows a close-up of Anais' mask-like face and monstrous gaze; the first is at the beginning of the film which opens with a black background and red cursive script. The soundtrack starts before the image track and then features a young girl's voice singing (who is later revealed to be Anais),

> Je m'ennuie de six à dix, de dix à six, de six à six. Toute la vie, le jour la nuit. Moi je m'ennuie, si encore je pouvais trouver mort ou vivant un homme un corps un animal. Est ça m'est égale. Pour rêver. Car je m'ennuie de six à dix, de dix à six, de six à six. Toute la vie, le jour la nuit. Moi je m'ennuie, si encore je pouvais trouver un homme une femme, un corps une âme. Un loup-garou, moi je m'en fous. Pour rêver.[57] (1:34)

During her song, still portrait shots of her face fade in and out on screen. Her face is disembodied, her head appears almost like a mask. Her gaze is unwavering and determined, her eye line is fixed on something unseen to the right of the frame. The film itself is framed by a beginning and end scene that shows Anais'

[57] I get so bored from 6:00 to 10:00, from 10:00 to 6:00, from 6:00 to 6:00. All my life, both day and night. I get so bored, if only I could find, alive or dead, a man, a body, an animal. I don't mind. Just to dream. For, I get so bored from 6:00 to 10:00, from 10:00 to 6:00, from 6:00 to 6:00. All my life, both day and night. I get so bored, if only I could find, alive or dead, a man, a woman, a body, a soul. A werewolf, I couldn't care less. Just to dream. (English subtitles from film)

hardened gaze. As Breillat frames Anais, she is fundamentally alone and violently ostracized from the rest of society. Because Anais (and Valentine) are exiled to the margins, their power to reshape society is increased; they are no longer held back by social norms and expectations. This is the power harnessed by New Medusas Depentes and Breillat, they are unburdened with the responsibility of creating or conserving for the future thus they are able to reimagine the present without inhibition.

Chapter 3: Petrified Colonial Pasts

"It was important to try to create a grammar for the story you want to tell. I was not looking for a style I could use on every film. I was interested in creating the feeling of a time that has gone-- the feeling that you are having a daydream. I was trying to create something with images seen from a certain distance."

-Claire Denis, interview *Los Angeles Times*

Whereas the New Medusas Virginie Despentes and Catherine Breillat terrorize the future with their nihilistic gaze, in this chapter we will see the petrified ravages of France's colonial past. The creative productions of these New Medusas remain enclosed in another era. More specifically, I propose to look at the petrification of these New Medusas' gaze in Claire Denis' *White Material* and in Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord.* My analysis will explore these colonial myths and practices specific to the depictions shown in the two works. Claire Denis' *White Material* and in Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* both revisit stories from their personal histories. Through their Medusan gazes, they reveal the oppression and exploitation by French colonial forces that were hidden behind the myth embedded in the ideology of *La Mission civilisatrice*. Claire Denis and Marguerite Duras offer a firsthand account of the destruction caused by French colonial forces, which at times inadvertently

included themselves. By reading these films and texts through a framework that considers the interpersonal, material, and environmental effects of colonialism, it is evident that Duras and Denis seek to convey the failure of the imperial mission. The colonial gaze is petrifying; it precludes the possibility of viable assimilation. My analysis also reveals how Denis and Duras employ this petrifying gaze that is transposed onto their white female protagonists. The issue of race creates an unresolved tension through the entirety of this chapter. Denis and Duras show two white characters who benefit from the color of their skin and links to colonial power while desperately trying to disavow their European heritage as part of their identity. On the larger scale of the metatext of their works, Duras and Denis, in their roles as writer and filmmaker, have been accused of this same hypocrisy.

Claire Denis was born in Paris in 1946 but spent most of her childhood in Francophone Africa, living in Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Senegal, and French Somaliland. Her father was a civil servant who moved the family every two years because he wanted his children to learn firsthand about geography. Her films draw from her own biography growing up in West Africa. Unlike Denis who was born in France, Marguerite Duras was born in Gia Dinh in French Indochina in 1914. She lived in what would be considered poverty by European standards with her mother and two brothers. Her father died when Marguerite was a child, her mother was forced to work to support the family. She earned a small stipend as a teacher and saved enough money to buy a rice paddy on the coast of Cambodia which ended up bankrupting her because the land was uncultivable. Duras first set

foot in France at the age of 18, she left behind her colonial home to study at university in Paris. She would remain there until her death in 1996 at the age of 81. Denis and Duras established their careers in France but their projects remain fixed in a petrified colonial past. Although they avoid direct political engagement with the issue of France's (post)colonial presence, their works address the question of the feasibility of hybridity between the imposed imperial forces and the oppressed.

Revising Hybridity

In Claire Denis' *White Material* (2009) and Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991), the enmeshing of the colonizer with the colonized is shown to be incompatible and impossible. For my dissertation, the concept of hybridity (and its failure) is crucial for the critical study of Denis' and Duras' works. Although the concept is not new to the field of postcolonial studies, it has only grown in importance and relevance to contemporary academic studies of literatures, languages, and cultures. Furthermore, my application of the theory of hybridity is temporally appropriate because I use it to explore the colonial vestiges presented by Duras and Denis. Both of their works belong to a historical era that is contemporaneous to the time period when hybridity theory emerges. The New Medusas Duras and Denis are detractors, through their works they show the impossibility of hybridity. Their skepticism also reveals a politic of negativity; Duras and Denis show that colonization is, at worst, theft and destruction in the

interest of profit and gain or, at best, a failed attempt at hybridity. Hybridity has been unpacked by many theorists in the field; as it is defined by Homi Bhabha, at the most basic level, hybridity is the mixing or mingling of East and West or colonized and colonizer. There are five subcategories of hybridity: racial, linguistic, literary, cultural, and religious. Since Bhabha's publication of *The Location of Culture* (1994), other specialists in the field have taken a critical approach to exploring the detrimental effects of French colonial myth as revealed by Duras and Denis. In Amar Acheraïou's *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization*, Acheraïou categorizes positively-read hybridity as only being situated in its time without taking into account the long-term or historical impact of the mixing. Hybridity, as seen through a critical retrospective lens, reveals that it is not possible to destabilize the power structure between colonizer and colonized. This revelation is not contemporary, Jean-Paul Sartre attests to this in his speech "Le colonialisme est un système" (1956). Even though the concept of hybridity never intended to be utopic or a blindly optimistic repair to the ravages of colonialism, its contemporary signification has strayed from its original meaning. Acheraïou argues that the concept of hybridity taken up by Bhabha, and more generally postcolonial scholars,

> Has seen its semantics rehabilitated and widely inflected to stand for inclusiveness, dialogism, subversion, and contestation of grand narratives. For most scholars in postcolonial and cultural studies hybridity represents a crucial emancipatory tool releasing the

> representations of identity as well as culture from the assumptions of purity and supremacy that fuel colonialist, nationalist, and essentialist discourses… As articulated in postcolonial studies hybridity theory sounds like a new form of utopianism; one that functions mostly as the yardstick by which are exclusively assessed the cultural encounters and processes of transnational communications at large. (6)

This skepticism and critique of the mutation of hybridity is further compounded by Acheraïou. He finds fault in the evolution of the field of its study up through its 21st century permutations. He explains,

> Despite its theoretical potential for emancipatory politics, therefore, the fact remains that the widespread idea of hybridity as an anti-imperialist agency, promoted by Bhabha and reiterated by [Robert] Young (1995) and Joseph Fink (1999) among others, proves highly problematic. One of the main problems with hybridity discourse is precisely that it has been tamed and accommodated not only by neoconservative scholars in the academy but also by global neocolonial structures of power and domination. (103)

Acheraïou's conception of hybridity as being complicit with contemporary forms of colonial oppression is shown in Denis' and Duras' works. The

New Medusas show how the promotion of diversity and mixity hides remaining inequalities instead of erasing them as it is inscribed in the "grand narrative" of colonial myth. In *Le Ventre des femmes*, decolonial theorist Françoise Vergès asserts that in societies racially structured between black and white "les notions de «métissage» et de «diversité» sont venues récemment élargir les frontières de ces privilèges, sans les déconstruire toutefois"[58] (18). In reaction to this split between some theorists in postcolonial and decolonial criticism, my analysis of works from Duras and Denis, I weave analysis from both throughout this chapter. The two strains of critical thought are equally important to my work due to their "radical potential in unsettling and reconstituting standard processes of knowledge production" (Bhambra 115). My dissertation shows how the conflict and dissension around the concept of hybridity within critical theory is also reflected in the colonial pasts evoked by Duras and Denis. In their texts, I argue that there is a resistance to the attempt at many forms of hybrid mixing that is practiced at the level of the individual as well as by institutions. Through their respective works, these two New Medusas show a petrified colonial past that cloaks domination and oppression by the colonial myth of hybridity.

Colonial Myth

[58] The notions of "melting pot" and "diversity" have recently come to enlarge the boundaries of these [white] privileges, nevertheless without deconstructing them. (Translation mine)

Denis' and Duras' works participate in documenting a negative vision of France's colonial project through the telling of their own personal stories. Denis sets her work in francophone Africa, Duras sets her corpus in French Indochina. Their perspectives through lived experience directly challenge the historical dominant discourse and myth about local practices and indigenous people. France's colonial project looms large in history but their small narratives confront cultural myth with reality. In his book *The French Colonial Myth and Constitution-making in the Fourth Republic,* D. Bruce Marshall examines the myth of the indissoluble link between France and its colonies from 1946-1958. This myth enforced the belief that France's role as an imperial force ensured its economic and political power on an international stage; more importantly it asserted that the French presence was to the benefit of the ruled. There were different histories of missions and methods in Indochina and Africa, but the destructive impact was the same. In the entry "French Colonial Rule-African Studies" from *Oxford Bibliographies,* Ruth Ginio and Jennifer Sessions reveal this myth too. They summarize that,

> Throughout Africa, French rule was characterized by sharp contradictions between a rhetorical commitment to the "civilization" of indigenous people through cultural, political, and economic reform, and the harsh realities of violent conquest, economic exploitation, legal inequality, and sociocultural disruption. At the same time, French domination was never as

> complete as the solid blue swathes on maps of "Greater France" would suggest. As in all empires, colonized people throughout French Africa developed strategies to resist or evade French authority, subvert or co-opt the so-called civilizing mission, and cope with the upheavals of occupation.[59]

The civilizing mission, or *mission civilisatrice* in French, was carried out in all of its territories including Indochina. Although it was propagated over the course of several centuries and multiple continents, there is no official definition or genealogy of the myth. In the 2012 issue of the French 18th Century Studies academic journal *Dix-huitième siècle,* authors Pernille Røge and Marion Leclair attempt to establish a definition in their article "L'économie politique en France et les origines intellectuelles de la « mission civilisatrice» en Afrique." They explain that

> Le concept de « mission civilisatrice » renvoie aux présupposés éthiques de l'entreprise coloniale française en Afrique et dans d'autres pays pendant la Troisième République. Il stipule la supériorité de la civilisation française sur toutes les autres civilisations et assigne aux Français la tâche, ou plutôt la « mission

[59] Ginio, Ruth and Jennifer Sessions. "French Colonial Rule-African Studies." *Oxford Bibliographies.* www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199846733/obo-9780199846733-0029.xml

», d'amener ces civilisations inférieures au niveau de la civilisation française.[60] (117)

Francoise Vergès offers a more blunt encapsulation of the ideology behind the mission civilisatrice. In *Un féminisme décolonial*, she describes how motives for economic exploitation were hidden behind political rhetoric. As she states,

> Cette idéologie a fourni son fondement aux politiques de développement qui disent en substance : « Vous êtes sous-développés mais vous pouvez être développés si vous adoptez nos technologies, nos manières de résoudre les problèmes sociaux et économiques. Vous devez imiter nos démocraties, le meilleur des systèmes, car vous ne savez pas ce qu'est la liberté, le respect des lois, la séparation des pouvoirs ».[61] (25)

Verges articulates what Duras and Denis show: that the ethos of the civilizing mission cloaked self-serving economic and political interests that benefited the rulers. Moreover, the New Medusas take the demythifying process a step further by showing that the universal benefits and success of colonialism for the ruling class constitute another layer of the fabrication of colonial myth.

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[60] The concept of "civilizing mission" is rooted in the ethical presuppositions of the French colonial enterprise in Africa and other countries during the Third Republic. It stipulates the superiority of French civilization over all others and assigns the French the task, or rather the "mission" of bringing these inferior civilizations to the level of French civilization. (Translation mine)

[61] This ideology furnished the political foundations which say: "You are underdeveloped but you can be developed if you adopt our technologies, our ways of resolving social and economic issues. You should imitate our democracies, the best of systems, because you don't understand liberty, respect of the rule of law, nor the separation of powers. (Translation mine)

Claire Denis, White Material

Released in 2009, *White Material* tells the story of Maria Vial, a white French coffee plantation owner in Francophone West Africa. She runs the failing farm with her ex-husband André. Despite an erupting civil war, Maria is determined to stay and protect her crops and her family. The film itself is a dizzying collection of temporally disjointed scenes; the beginning of the film starts with the end of the plot and flashes to the present unannounced, this oscillation takes place throughout its duration. *White Material* does not explicitly state the time period nor precise location where the action takes place, the country remains unnamed although it is Francophone and thus likely a former French colony. Because the film is disconnected from precise historical time and place, the message of the film is allegorical. This ambiguity has provoked controversy itself; the film was shot on location in Cameroon and at the time of its release the country was in a state of peace. From the beginning of the film, the country is shown in distress and on the brink of civil war between the Francophone and Anglophone (which is coincidentally the same current situation in Cameroon where the two regions have been at war since September 2017). Issach de Bankolé, cast in the role of Le Boxeur, also plays the lead role of Protée in Denis' breakout film *Chocolat* (which officially takes place in Cameroon). This casting choice creates an additional disruption of the time-space matrix of *White Material* and adds intertextual and intertemporal diegetic layers for the spectator. Denis creates a metatextual layer by referencing her own directorial corpus which

further highlights the importance of the past. As Kristin Hole explains in *Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics* (2016), "Denis's repeated use of actors also renders each film, each time, a singular encounter… This recurring cast (which also includes actors such as Béatrice Dalle, Michel Subor, Isaach de Bankolé and the late Yekaterina Golubeva) fragments the world of the film by bringing in extradiegetic connotations" (61). The narrative structure of *White Material* insists on flashbacks which further fragments the spectator's perception of time as linear and coherent. Instead, Denis employs an original female gaze which frames the action through a series of cyclical sequences and rejects reference to monumental or historical time. The first sequence of the film is the story's end; the rest of the film moves backwards in a non-linear trajectory. The only sense of temporal continuity is established through the changing of Maria's outfits instead of a linear plot trajectory. This disjointed narrative arc adds to the chaotic or pessimistic outlook imbued in the imagery of the film. Even though the film is set in a contemporary context that resembles the time period in which it was released (2009), Denis' directorial gaze is still firmly fixed on showing the traces of the past that remain in our present-day.

Petrified Temporality

In the beginning scenes of *White Material*, Denis shows us a cinematic gaze that is petrifying and colonizing on the metatextual or meta-aesthetic level. The images are shocking, disjointed and also difficult to follow due to the lack of

clear plot progression or significance. The visual track is accompanied by silence; the spectator is left with a disorganized montage of shots. *White Material* opens with a black screen and a single beam of light from a flashlight. The first shot cuts to a laughing African mask hanging on a white wall. The effect is troubling, the smile is sinister. Similar to artistic renderings of Medusa, the mask is both terrifying and fascinating at the same time. Next, the light falls on a photo of a woman. The beam of light shows us another mask in wood. The next shot shows us a scene from an anonymous perspective which continues to pan towards the left. The camera follows along a body in a supine position starting with its feet. It is revealed that it is the body of the Boxer. The light beam signifies a petrifying gaze. All that it looks upon becomes stone: the masks, the photo, a cadaver. None of these objects have life or movement. The scene is one of total destruction and stillness.

When Maria is first introduced in the film in the second sequence, she is shown alone and visually on the margins of society. The film's second sequence cuts back to the past of the film, the scene opens at midday where we see the main character Maria who is visually contrasted on the cinematic plane by her white skin and her curly unkempt red hair. She is in the process of trying to hitchhike. Maria's movements and expressions are frenetic and anxious. A car passes without stopping, her inability to find a ride demonstrates Maria's rejection by society. By a medium shot from the waist up, the chaos on Maria's face is doubly reflected by a dry, arid, and barren landscape. The composition of the long shots

of the landscape and close-ups of her face create a subtle causal link as if the destruction were caused by her colonial gaze. She turns towards the passing car and vigorously motions with her arms without success. She continues her walk down the road leading toward the spectator. Then the screen cuts to another shot of the wild and arid landscape; Maria cuts through the scene running. The audio track is overwhelmed by the cracking of dead vegetation under her footfalls. She wears a pale pink dress that blends with her whiteness. Here whiteness, the exiled postcolonial subject is resignified as an absence or a void. It becomes a liminal petrified destroyed space: white material. The colonizer here is not shown for her capacity to create but instead to destroy. The final scene of the film returns to the present of the beginning of the film, Maria is again wearing the same pink dress. She has returned to the plantation to find the front gate broken open. She stops in the middle of the road to look around herself in despair and then suddenly breaks off in a sprint towards the house. The spectator sees a thick black smoke billowing from the Vial plantation. The camera then cuts to a shot of Maria hiding in the wooden rafters of the ceiling. The next shot reveals the completely charred corpse of Manuel, Maria's son. The camera then cuts to a medium shot of Maria with a large bloodied stick in her hand. She has murdered her ex-father-in-law to avenge the death of her son. Symbolically, the film also concludes with Maria destroying the original colonizer: the first Vial in colonial Cameroon. Jennifer Friedliner, in "Cinematic Ends: The Ties that Unbind in Claire Denis's *White Material*", interprets her murder of the elder Vial Henri as a way to disassociate

herself from the evil of the French colonial project. Friedliner argues that "through the seemingly irrational act of murdering Henri, we may consider how Maria is able to occupy the place of the rebel and radically renounce the position of "filthy white" to which she has been assigned" (110). Yet this act is paradoxical since Henri Vial is responsible for her presence in the country. Because Maria cannot occupy the social position that she desires, she destroys the entire system even if she is implicated in her own obliteration.

The opening sequence and final scenes that I have just reviewed were separated within the diegetic film space. Stylistically, Denis' films are dominated by seemingly disconnected images that she expects the audience to arrange in narrative order. Hole states that in Denis' films "narrative moves constantly from character to character; scenes seem to interrupt scenes, always guided by tenuous and fragile links. Denis loves to end on interruptions as much as to start on them – scenes that remain enigmatic and unexplained with respect to the entirety of the film" (2016, 101). The continuity of plot is often interrupted, atemporal and fragmented. Naomi Greene, in *Landscapes of Loss*, describes Denis' jumbled depictions of temporality:

> Seen in terms that are at once geographical, temporal, and existential, the contrast between past and present assumes a mythic, or absolute, cast. In this respect, it is telling that the flashbacks of memory rarely lead up to, flow into the present.

> Instead, dramatic cuts –- which shift from one end of the globe to another, from one life to another–- emphasize the radical discontinuity of these two zones. Joined only by memory, past and present thus belong not to a world of temporality and history but to a kind of absolute realm consisting of "before" and "after". (140)

The narrative arc of nostalgia breaks with the norms of a historical narrative arc. Much like her stories speak to us through a backwards looking gaze, this fractured and hallucinatory gaze represents itself like the mythical gaze of Medusa. The destabilizing effect of ruptured temporality also functions as a metaphor for the effect of colonial presence on local history. Colonialism erases the history and the memories of the dominated culture with those of the colonizer. Framed by the theme of colonialism, this gaze of Denis shows us the fragmentation of the colonized through a rupture with temporality. Greene continues,

> But this "obsession" [the French on their lost colonial role] is not the only one that sets its mark on films about the colonial past. Many also point to the prominent role that memory has assumed in the contemporary French historical imagination. Foregrounding an issue that was only implicit in most retro works, some of the most noteworthy films of the colonial "cycle" explicitly filter the past through the screen of memory. (131)

The flashbacks and flashforwards create a false continuity in the temporal chain of the film's plot; and thus because the images inhabit a temporal paradox the characters, in these films of Denis can also inhabit a duality or ambiguity of positionality. Claire Denis breaks the boundary between the author (or here the director) and their work with this gorgonesque gaze. This boundary disappears in her films because she adds personal and autobiographical aspects in all of her films. She destroys the genre and conventions of narrativity.

The Failure of Hybridity

The cinematic imagery of *White Material* is characterized by the contrast between black and white; the starkness and the incompatibility of the two implies that blending is not possible. The character of Maria herself is a failed hybrid. As discussed earlier, her whiteness stands in stark contrast to the rest of her surroundings both by the director's gaze and how she is treated by the rest of the characters in the film. She is isolated socially and visually. Even though she is a representative of neocolonial presence in the Francophone African country, she rejects affiliation with France repeatedly throughout the film. The first instance is one flashback that appears within the first ten minutes of the film: a helicopter approaches her plantation, a soldier addresses her as Madame Vial and implores her to evacuate immediately. It is her last chance to leave because French troops will be pulling out of the country as soon as they leave her property. She refuses, they drop survival rations on her property that she curses, first picks up, then

quickly tosses back to the ground, and then kicks angrily with her foot. The sequence ends with her lament : "ces sales blancs, ils nous méprisent et on risque notre peau pour eux. Ils sont des méchants, nouveaux riches. Prétention, arrogance, orgueil…. Je pense qu'ils ne savent même pas l'apprécier"[62] (11:51). As she pronounces this last line of her tirade, there is a doubling of her lines. The helicopter pilot repeats the same lines. This scene reveals the arrogance and failed quality of these hybrid characters. They believe themselves to be the authentic products of a blending of colonial powers into the land and the people of their colonies, but they are permanently marked by their affiliation with European powers and commercial interests. They are inherently perceived as exploitative and driven by capital and thus rejected.

In other scenes, Maria insists on her belonging to the country over any fidelity to France. She tries to claim that her family has been there for several generations already and that Africa is the only home she knows. She also tries to invoke the same argument of belonging to the area when she encounters the rebels that are demanding money on the main road outside the gates of her plantation. She refuses to pay at first and tries reasoning with them by claiming that she knows their families and remembers them as children. Even though Maria Vial renounces her French origins and refuses to return to France because it is a country that is not a part of her identity, the following sequence shows two child

[62] These dirty whites, they despise us and we put out our necks for them. They're the bad guys, the nouveau riche. Pretentiousness, arrogance, pride… I think they don't even know how to appreciate it. (Translation mine)

rebel soldiers infiltrating her property while she is gone. In her house, they are bemused by its decidedly French appearance (signaling that she still has a material and nostalgic attachment to France). The house may be located in Africa, but the decoration and arrangement of the interior transports us back to France signaling the Vials' failed integration and permanent marking of difference. The sequence begins with a close-up shot of the hands of one of the child soldiers, he is in what appears to be her bathroom. He is gingerly touching a bath towel that is hanging on a bar. He picks it up and wipes his face with it. The other child soldier is washing his feet in the shower but is interrupted by the other. They leave the bathroom and their muddy footprints. Next, the two children tiptoe into Maria's bedroom, the camera cuts to a close-up of a few items on her dresser. The camera is fixed on a card with ancient Christian iconography on the left, a vertical row of small ceramic figurines and a black and white photo of a woman smoking in a mid-20th century dress. The camera cuts to a shot of one set of hands stealing a figurine. The other slides a delicate necklace and earrings off the dresser. They open the top drawer and pull out a heavy sachet made of French toile de Jouy. Inside is a pistol which they take with them. The camera cuts to her son Manuel, who has heard unfamiliar noises and gets out of bed to go investigate. The final shot of the sequence is a choppy traveling shot of the boys running out of the house, they grab Maria's dress from the ironing board and a rooster as they are leaving. This sequence is important because Denis, through the camera's gaze, orients the viewer's attention to the foreign or unfamiliar quality of Maria's living

environment. Even though she considers herself francophone African, through the eyes of the rebel children soldiers, she is still attached to a French identity and surrounds herself with objects and commodities that are from France. The jewelry and the ceramic figurines are objects that represent mass production, made of highly refined materials. This is what the locals consider to be 'white material'; the label can be applied to European produced commodities or the Europeans themselves. This sequence also underlines the inequality or difference of living conditions between the Vial family and the child soldiers. The condition of having versus not having becomes even more pronounced when they take the rooster especially given the animal's highly symbolic value. At the first level of signification, the rooster represents food or the basic need to eat for survival. This is a manifestation of a different level of class, it is more pressing than not having new towels or a variety of decorative objects. At the second level of signification, the rooster represents France as argues Bernard Richard in *Les emblèmes de la République.* The rooster or 'le coq gaulois' is an allegorical symbol that stands as an emblem for France. Originally a Christian symbol, it is also associated with war, combat and conquests. During the French Revolution, the law of April 9, 1791 designated it as a symbol of vigilance. Conversely during the Middle Ages, at times, the rooster was associated with negative qualities such as indulgence, quick-temperedness, and bravado. Within the diegetic space of *White Material*, these are the qualities that the locals attribute to the colonial powers. Their presence evokes the Christian crusades, wars of domination, and the centralizing

notion of nationhood. The act of taking the rooster is highly symbolic of the dominant theme of the film that France's reign and presence in Francophone Africa is over. They are taking back what they perceive to be rightfully theirs.

The rejection of Maria Vial as a failed hybrid (because she is marked by her whiteness) is present throughout the entirety of the film, her alienation is never resolved nor is she eventually invited to integrate into the community. At the end of the film (and the end of the story) there is a doubling of the beginning scenes showing her wandering down a road and through a destroyed forest, this time Maria is shown trying to flag down a bus. It stops for her reluctantly after she runs in front of it, but she is denied boarding, she is told there is no room for her. She ends up climbing onto an exterior ladder on the back of the bus, her position is far from secure. The bus makes it halfway into town before it is stopped by government forces, she is the only one shown to be interrogated by one of the soldiers. He asks her if she has seen or interacted with any of the rebel forces. She responds that she was forced to pay them once at a roadblock, her response displeases the soldier. He replies that "c'est à cause de gens comme toi qu'il n'y a pas de propreté dans ce pays"[63] (6:31). Within this particular shot, she is the only white French person and the military forces have isolated her exclusively for interrogation. Although it is not explicit, it is apparent that what he means by 'people like you' is a way of saying white neocolonial forces. The animosity of the former colonial subjects finally takes over and the ensuing

[63] It's because of people like you that this country is filthy. (Translation mine)

violence and devastation of the Vial family and their plantation marks the end of the film. In the last filmic sequence, Maria's son Manuel is locked in the burning plantation building. At the same time in the narrative frame, Cherif finds Maria distressed in the village trying to figure out how to get back home to protect her son. No buses would stop on the road, it was too dangerous. The camera cuts to the two sitting in the back of his private car, Maria is explaining why she must get back home urgently to protect her son and asks for Cherif's help. Cherif interrupts her while he is stroking her hair and says, "l'extrême blondeur attire une forme de malheur. C'est quelque chose qu'on désire à saccager. Les yeux bleus sont gênants. C'est pourtant son pays, il est né ici mais le pays ne l'aime pas"[64] (1:38:00). This quote from Cherif foreshadows the next sequence which shows Manuel being killed by the government forces that burndown the Vial plantation buildings with the family forced inside to die. The conversation with Cherif implies that Maria is partially responsible for the downfall and execution of her son and family through the eyes of the locals. Solely through their presence in Africa as white subjects, violence and instability were provoked.

Crops, Coffee, and Capitalism

I argue that through the violence, destruction, and waste which result from neocolonial capitalist exploitation shown in the film, Denis implicitly rejects the neocolonial French presence in the country. In *White Material*, the presence of the

[64] Extreme blondness attracts a type of misfortune. It's something we want to pillage. Blue eyes are troublesome. It's his country, he was born here but the country doesn't love him back. (Translation mine)

Vial family in Cameroon is credited to the cultivation of their coffee plantation. Anthony Wild explains in *Coffee: A Dark History* that coffee, as one of the primary colonial crops (after sugar and cocoa), was responsible for the rapid development of the slave trade. Coffee is a highly profitable crop and was brought to the grasslands of Cameroon and other parts of Africa by the French colonial administration in the early part of the 19th century. Although *White Material* takes place in the contemporary era, Denis demonstrates how the cultivation of coffee has stayed in the hands of a privileged class directly descended from the colonists. They have inherited the materials, resources and institutional knowledge of their trade. A subplot of the entire film is dedicated to showing the agricultural practices, processes and production of coffee cultivation. The process of preparing the coffee fruit into unroasted beans is a metaphor for the neoliberal exploitation of Africa. Denis devotes an entire multiple scene sequence to the process of 'whitewashing' the coffee beans. It begins with Maria dumping the bright red coffee berries into a low pool and washing them by kicking them around with her foot until they lose their color and turn into a greenish beige that matches the rest of the washed-out arid landscape. This process of washing the coffee and leeching it of its color can be seen as a metaphor for colonization.

The cultivation of coffee, analyzed from a labor economy standpoint, is a modern evolution of slavery or forced labor. This phenomenon has been documented in the overseas French territories (DOM-TOM) which are still officially part of the French state. Cameroon achieved independence in 1960;

many other Francophone West African nations became independent in the 1960's, as well. Nonetheless, as shown in *White Material*, the neoliberal presence of former colonial powers in these countries reproduce the same hierarchies, oppression and labor conditions from the colonial past. Vergès explains this process in La Réunion, "Au moment où les Français abandonnent peu à peu les travaux les plus pénibles, les moins qualifiés et les moins bien payés dans les hôpitaux, les crèches, les hospices, les postes, les douanes et les usines, les habitants des DOM sont invités à les occuper"[65] (*Le Ventre des femmes* 144). Although the unnamed country of *White Material* is no longer a French territory, there is the same distribution of labor and status. The Vial family plantation relies on poorly paid day laborers or groups of workers who are paid a small collective sum in addition to cramped shared living quarters and meals. At the school and the pharmacy, the workers are African and the directors or owners are white and French. At the elder Vial's home and compound, he employs all local Cameroonians to work as maids, landscapers, etc. Even though the country is free, the presence of Europeans is perceived as an impediment to achieving real independence and autonomy because they are hoarding and squandering the country's resources. The plantation is failing and in default from the beginning of the story. When Maria tries to visit the mayor Cherif at his house and his daughter answers the door and says that he is not there, Cherif is avoiding Maria because

[65] At the moment when the French are gradually abandoning the most grueling of jobs, the least qualified and the least well paid are invited to fill these positions in hospitals, daycares, hospices, postal work, customs offices and factories. (Translation mine)

he is meeting with her ex-husband André. André is getting ready to sign over the coffee plantation because it is worthless. He explains, "Ce n'est plus rentable chez nous. Et puis je ne vais pas me faire massacrer pour un petit bout de café. Et puis, la plantation ne vaut plus rien aujourd'hui"[66] (34 :20). This depreciation in value of colonial crops is also articulated in Duras' *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, where the land itself acts as an entity. It rejects the domination by exterior, foreign and colonizing forces. Denis shows the land as barren; it refuses to produce for the colonizer because, within the frame of *White Material*, it has already been entirely exploited. Cultivation of the land and its eventual mismanagement is one of several harmful outcomes of the French colonial conquest in Africa. Another form shown in the film is the French language.

One of the primary vectors of the *mission civilisatrice* is the imposition of French which masquerades as a progressive source of equality. The French language is perceived as an equalizing and educational force that affords opportunities to both sexes equally; this is not necessarily true for racialized or local populations who see forced linguistic assimilation as a form of oppression. Vergès asserts that even today in French territories "la langue française est même présentée au XXIe siècle comme un vecteur de la mission civilisatrice (féministe) car elle portait en elle l'idée de l'égalité femmes/hommes"[67] (52). In *Linguistique et colonialisme*, Jean-Louis Calvet describes the implementation of language

[66] Our place isn't profitable anymore. And anyway, I'm not going to get myself killed for a small lot of coffee. And anyway, the plantation isn't worth anything anymore. (Translation mine)
[67] The French language is even presented as a vector of the (feminist) civilizing mission because it carries with it the idea of equality between men and women. (Translation mine)

through education as a horizontal colonization that takes place after the initial act of domination. Within the film there are also linguistic remnants of colonization that hints at a grouping of the dichotomy between developed and developing nations. In the unnamed country where *White Materia*l is set, the conflation between French and American/Anglophone colonizing forces is expressed through language. At times, French and English are used interchangeably by the locals when they speak to Maria. When André negotiates signing his land over to mayor Cherif, he mixes Spanish with French (another colonial power) but when Cherif addresses his private militia he speaks in the local language that is not comprehensible to André. Indeed, in present-day Cameroon the recently erupted civil war is between the Francophone and Anglophone portions of the country. Within the space of *White Material*, Denis shows how both colonizing forces provoked the conflict as a result of their exploitation and destruction of the land and its inhabitants.

Staging a "Coup d'Etat"

Through the progression of the film, it becomes increasingly apparent that violence and war will erupt at any moment. The immediacy of the impending violence is evidenced by the closing of business in addition to the roads. A radio host (who makes several appearances throughout the film) implores his listeners to take down the house of "maman et papa" which signifies the colonial forces, or

more specifically the Vial family since theirs is the only home shown in the film and the cast of French colonial actors is limited to them. The radio host implores,

> Il y a toutes sortes d'objets à récupérer dans les maisons de maman et papa. Mais allez-y en douceur. Tout le monde doit avoir son dû. Et n'oublions jamais ce que le destin a promis entre nous. Et personne ne peut le changer. Garde aux imposteurs, aux beaux parleurs, garde aux frappeurs. Pour le white material, c'en est fini la tranquillité. Fini l'apéritif à l'ombre de véranda pendant que nos frères suent sang et eau. Ils désertent. Et ils ont bien raison d'avoir peur. Nos gouvernants tremblent déjà, ils sont en train de bourrer leurs valises avec qu'est-ce qu'ils ont accumulé pendant que vous n'aviez pas.[68] (31:48-32:41)

Later in the film, the radio host again encourages the young rebels to keep fighting and looting. In the background and also juxtaposed through cut shots are images of the local Total gas station burning. First, the scene is dominated by the building with the logo and smoke billowing behind it, the camera then cuts to a medium shot of the gas pumps being consumed by fire. The Vial family has been either massacred or forced to leave their plantation. As Claire Denis demonstrates,

[68] There are all kinds of things to retrieve in missus's and mister's houses. But not all at once. Everyone must have their due. And let us never forget what destiny has promised us. And nobody can change it. Watch out for impostors, the smooth talkers, watch out for the combative ones. For the white material, the peaceful times are done. Finished the cocktails in the shade of the veranda while our brothers sweat blood and water. They are deserting. And they are right to be afraid. Our governors are already trembling, they are packing their bags with what they have accumulated while you have not. (Translation mine)

the land and its people have rejected the original colonizing forces and their descendants. In both Duras' and Denis' works, this incompatibility is manifested in bleak and obscured horizons.

Dark Horizons

In Claire Denis' films, the human is deprioritized to the land on the visual plane. Although her films are often sentimental and emotive, the body and face shots can dominate the visual plane but they are always framed by the backdrop of landscape. In the opening and closing sequences of *White Material*, Denis' use of close-ups becomes an event in the film itself. The characters' faces become a sort of landscape for us to read. Denis often uses full shots and long shots in order to show wide sweeping landscape shots to provoke both a visual pleasure in the spectator but also to tether the body to the earth and the horizon. The horizon in *White Material* also functions as an indicator of the doomed nature of the colonial project and its effects on the environment. In phenomenology, the fusion of the horizon is representative of subjective historical consciousness. In Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical meditation *Wahrheit und Methode* (*Truth and Method* for English edition), he defines the horizon as,

> We define the concept of "situation" by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence the essential part of the concept of situation is the concept of "*horizon*." The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be

> seen from a particular vantage point... A person who has no horizon is a man who does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him. On the other hand, "to have a horizon" means not being limited to what is nearby, but to being able to see beyond it. (302)

Claire Denis and Marguerite Duras provide portraits of the horizon that are representative of the incompatibility or lack of a future between colonial idealism and the reality on the ground, this fundamentally negative vision contrasts with the optimism of Gadamer's definition. The bleak horizon functions as a symbolic materialization of the doomed nature of the French colonial presence.

In *White Material,* an analysis of the aesthetic and visual characteristics of the skyline is revelatory for Denis' positionality on the possibility of hybridity in postcolonial Cameroon. Throughout almost the entirety of the film, the horizon is obscured. Also, as seen earlier, the opening scene of the film plunges the audience into total darkness. In Claire Denis' other films, her opening sequences are highly symbolic and feature long shots of the horizon, the landscape and, often, a body of water. In *White Material*, the cinematic landscape is barren and foreboding, entirely devoid of life: depictions of the horizon are almost always obscured or hazy. Unlike the picturesque horizon shots of *Chocolat* or the oversaturated colorful landscape of *Beau Travail*, the horizon in *White Material* is filled with clouds, smoke or dust as evidence of a dry and destroyed landscape. Seen in the

opening scene of *White Material*, the same analysis can be applied to the closing sequence of the film. The bottom half of the screen shows the Vial family estate in ruin, smoke is pouring from all the buildings and soldiers are pacing around the property to make sure none of their condemned captives escape. The smoke stretches up and across the frame, it dominates the sky and the horizon. The film then cuts to a long shot of a field, the lead child rebel soldier is running across and seems to be fleeing. The sky is hazy, gray, and bleak. The rebel soldier tucks the Boxer's red beret into his pants, looks to our right which gives us a clear look at the blood streaming down his face, and then he exits the frame. The backing soundtrack is a dramatic violin, the viewer is left with an empty indistinct horizon and a feeling of foreboding for the future. Without ever explicitly stating her position or opinion, Denis' use of the horizon in *White Material* becomes a metaphor for her political and personal vision of the French colonial project. In Kristin Hole's *Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics*, she surmises that Denis provides a new way of seeing the world through subjective storytelling. As she states, "This framework seems useful, generative and even hopeful to me at this particular historical moment, when, despite the supposed loss of metanarratives, political and social discourses seem nonetheless to lean affectively towards the reductive and categorical" (160). Instead of reducing her portrait of her former home to a flat or superficial signification, Denis offers an inherently troubling portrait of Francophone Africa's petrified colonial past. Hole continues, explaining that "the affective reorientation and ethical sensibility they ask of us

may not offer a roadmap for politics but it may be the backdrop through which we can better ask questions of the political" (160). New Medusa Claire Denis does precisely what Hole describes in *White Material*, her insistence on a perpetual revisiting of France's colonial practices is politically and personally necessary for understanding the present moment.

Marguerite Duras, L'Amant de la Chine du Nord

Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991) revisits the plot of her more well-known novel *L'Amant*. The choice to analyze *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* instead of its precursor , *L'Amant,* is important because it reveals Duras' insistence or obsession for writing about colonialism and Indochina—a trait she shares with Claire Denis. In this second novel, Duras uses the same type of revision or rethinking of both her personal and colonial history. Raylene L. Ramsay surmises that "Duras has presented *L'Amant de la Chine du nord* as the most truthful of her autobiographies" (50). The project itself was inspired by her feud and rift with filmmaker Jean-Jacques Annaud during the filming of the filmic version of the novel. She disagreed with the way he was producing the film and the creative changes he made. Out of revenge, she took her rejected screenplay and expanded it into a novel. The published version analyzed here is still full of filmic notes, screen descriptions and directions for the filmography. *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* takes place during the colonial period in Indochina, a French territory that comprises modern-day Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Colonial

presence lasted over six decades, starting from when the late 19th century French forces took control of the entire region. In French Indochina, this was executed by introducing modernized infrastructure, education, social reforms and implementation of new technologies. France's interest in the Indochina region was focused on its environmental resources, raw materials and nearly free labor. Indochina formerly survived on a subsistence economy but French imperial presence transformed the region into a proto-capitalist system to produce rice and rubber. The imperial project was bolstered by the *mission civilisatrice*, the 19th century colonial ideology that posited white colonial forces as the saviors of the undeveloped regions of the globe. Marguerite Duras was born in the colonies of Indochina in the early 20th century. She was the daughter of two French parents who were educators who had emigrated as part of the civilizing mission. As an author, her perspective is rooted in the margins of the separation between participation in and resistance to the French colonial project. In the novel, the protagonist Marguerite is the first-generation of her family to be born in the colonies but she belongs to neither group. She is rejected by the other white colonial French while being unable to integrate into the local colonized population. As a result of her rejection and marginalization, she casts a petrifying gaze on all of her surroundings.

Duras' Commodifying Authorial Gaze

Marguerite Duras achieved renown for writing about Indochina from lived experience and the majority of her corpus is set in the colonial era. Many critical readings of her work highlight the ways in which she critiques the practices of French colonialism but some of her earlier writings contradict this assumption. In a much earlier publication, *L'Empire français* (1940), under the name of Donnadieu, she advocates for the presence of French colonial forces in Indochina. Duras affirms this same sentiment in an article on the subject of colonialism in the publication *l'Illustration* :

> Notre conception impériale est, en effet, la négation même du racisme. La France a donné à tous ses sujets d'outre-mer, sans faire de distinction entre les races, les mêmes possibilités de développement et les mêmes espoirs. L'indigène n'a jamais été traité en vaincu ; non seulement nous avons des devoirs envers lui, mais nous lui reconnaissons des droits sociaux et politiques et surtout celui d'acquérir des connaissances nouvelles. Certes, ce n'est pas à lui qu'il appartient de décider à quel moment il pourra user de ses capacités. C'est à nous, au moment voulu, d'alléger notre tutelle.[69] (27)

[69] Our imperial design is, indeed, the very negation of racism. France has given all her subjects overseas, without distinguishing between races, the same possibilities of development and the same hopes. The native has never been treated as vanquished; not only do we have moral obligations to him, but we are recognizing his social and political rights, especially that of acquiring new knowledge. Admittedly, it is not for him to decide when he can use his abilities. It is up to us, at the right time, to lighten our tutelage. (Translation mine)

Marguerite Duras later denied the attribution of this text signed with the last name Donnadieu. Her positionality is more nuanced within the body of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord.* Much scholarship has been dedicated to interrogating Duras the author's positionality on matters of colonialism and feminism; her discourse is at times conflicted, and at others ambiguous and ambivalent. As Yvonne Y. Hseih explains in "L'Évolution du discours anti-colonialiste dans *Un barrage contre le Pacifique, L'amant* et *L'amant de la Chine du nord* de Marguerite Duras*"*, "il est tout aussi difficile de se prononcer sur l'idéologie colonialiste ou anti-colonialiste qui sous-tend certaines œuvres de Duras, que de trancher par exemple la question de son féminisme, sujet controversé qui a fait couler beaucoup d'encre critique"[70] (55). As she affirms, "l'écriture durassienne échappera toujours à nos tentatives de la cerner dans une lecture univoque"[71] (56). This conflicted nature of perspective faithfully captures the paradoxes inherent in the New Medusas' petrified colonial pasts. Duras is transgressing conventions of narrative and voice by including ideological contradictions and hypocrisy in her autobiographical/autofictional work.

My discussion of her work focuses on the linguistic maneuvers Duras employs, through her use of language. Her narrative gaze has a paralyzing effect. Duras opens the novel with very sparse phrasing that reads like a screenplay. The

[70] It is just as difficult to make any claims to the colonialist or anticolonialist ideology which are supported in some of her works, as it is to definitively respond to the question of her feminism, a question about which much critical ink has been spilled. (Translation mine)
[71] Durasien writing will always escape our attempts to circumscribe it to a singular univocal reading. (Translation mine)

scenes are petrified by language that has no movement. The phrases are parsed into incomplete clauses and parataxis without any verbs. Duras, using her directorial voice, articulates that the diegetic space is frozen, "La scène est immobile. Personne ne bouge. Personne ne parle. Personne ne dit bonjour"[72] (125). I argue that Duras' rewriting of *L'Amant* is to a much greater degree an exercise of asserting the gaze over reaffirming the importance of her story. The gaze is omnipresent and all powerful. It supersedes the importance of all action within the space of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. The act of gazing is essential for Duras' prose and is a demonstration of power. As Raylene L. Ramsay explains in "Writing Power in Duras' 'L'Amant de la Chine du Nord'", "the repetition of the verb "to look" is used to effect shifts between seeing and being seen, between being the subject or the object of the gaze" (55). Ramsay attributes the shifts of gazing and being gazed at as an interactive process of domination. The question of looking is important in the political power dynamic between the lover and the young girl but additionally on the metatextual level; Duras as an author is gazing upon the past and petrifying it in a way that asserts her own power or domination.

Furthermore, in Duras' writing, there is an insistence on the gaze which is evidenced by her frequent use of the verb *regarder* (to look or to gaze at) and descriptions that are dominated by seemingly unrelated images. In its first version of *L'Amant*, Duras articulates this by affording prime importance to the gaze and vision for her writing projects. "Quinze ans et demi. [...] Tout est là et rien n'est

[72] The scene is motionless. No one moves. No one speaks. No one says hello. (Translation mine)

encore joué, je le vois dans les yeux, tout est déjà dans les yeux. Je veux écrire"[73] (29). She establishes an ontological ordering; seeing first and then writing. Writing is dependent on gazing. In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord,* the gaze that the young woman imposes on her young Chinese lover is absolute: one that encompasses all, it is infinite. It also becomes a source of power and agency, through the objectification of her lover she becomes a subject. Other women in the text do not have the same ability to gaze because they are not colonizing western subjects. The Chinese lover explains that in his culture, women cannot see their husbands before their engagement, "Elle n'a pas encore le droit de me regarder. [...] Les femmes chinoises elles entrent dans le rôle d'épousée quand elles ont eu le droit de nous voir, presque à la fin des fiançailles"[74] (211). Duras, with her elevated positionality as a white colonizing subject, rules over the non-European by transforming them into objects. Through a paralyzing and destructive gaze, Duras has colonized and objectified her subjects. They have no agency or linguistic power.

Through the use of her cinematic gaze, Duras petrifies the landscape and its people into statue-like figures. This is apparent almost immediately in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. While she is narrating her first meeting with her lover, Duras writes,

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[73] Fifteen and a half years old. [...] It's all there and yet nothing played out, I see it in the eyes, everything is already in the eyes. I want to write. (Translation mine)

[74] She doesn't have the right to look at me yet. [...] Chinese women come into the role of spouse when they have the right to see us, almost at the end of the engagement. (Translation mine)

> De la limousine noire est sorti un autre homme que celui du livre, un autre Chinois de la Mandchourie. Il est un peu différent de celui du livre : il est un peu plus robuste que lui, il a moins peur que lui, plus d'audace. Il a plus de beauté, plus de santé. Il est plus « pour le cinéma » que celui du livre. Et aussi il a moins de timidité que lui face à l'enfant.[75] (36)

The description of her Chinese lover negates his personhood and turns him into an object to be observed or admired. Her cinematic gaze is objectifying because it further separates him from the character he played in the novel. By rendering him as more suitable for the cinematic image and pleasing to the spectator, Duras is effeminizing him and making him into her subordinate. In the following passage in the novel, Duras continues to remove her lover from the subjective by creating an elision between his identity and the objects that surround or adorn him. Her description also can be read as an attempt to whitewash him, painting him as more European or de-orientalized in order to be her lover. Through the eyes of her younger self, the girl is seduced by what she sees as the hybridity of her future Chinese lover. She describes him as a mixture between Oriental and Western cultural signifiers,

[75] The man who gets out of the black limousine is other than the one in the book, but still Manchurian. He is a little different from the one in the book: he's a little more solid than the other, less frightened than the other, bolder. He is better-looking, more robust. He is more "cinematic" than the one in the book. And he's also less timid facing the child. (Hafrey 26)

> Autour de lui il y a le parfum de l'eau de Cologne européenne avec, plus lointaine, celui de l'opium et de la soie, du tussor de soie, de l'ambre de la soie, de l'ambre de la peau. Elle regarde tout. Le chauffeur, l'auto, et encore lui, le Chinois. L'enfance apparaît dans ces regards d'une curiosité déplacée, toujours surprenante, insatiable. Il la regarde regarder toutes ces nouveautés que le bac transporte ce jour-là.[76] (37)

Here Duras' gaze is colonizing and exoticizing. Suzanne Chester reveals three practices of Orientalism, as defined by Saïd, in Duras' subjugation of the Chinese lover: the erotization of the exotic, feminization of the Other and the representation of the Orient as a constant ontological essence (1992). Her description of his smell starts with a European or western product denoting his hybrid quality first. Next, her description shows that he smells of opium, amber, and silk, two commodities that have traditionally been exploited from the Orient by imperial forces. Her gaze also objectifies his body. It is focused on the sexual and the sensual. Duras fetishizes the colonized body. In this passage, Duras' vision of the colonized subject is a romanticized mix of the dominant colonial forces while continuing to subscribe to the myth that the Other or the Oriental possesses essentialized or in-born qualities.

[76] There is the scent of a European cologne about him, and the fainter one of opium and silk, tussore silk, amber silk, amber skin. She takes it all in. The chauffeur, the car, and then him again, the Chinese. Her childishness surfaces in the misplaced curiosity of her glance, always startling, insatiable. He looks at her looking at all the novelties the ferry carries that day. (Hafrey 27)

Throughout the novel, the theme of consumption and productivity are woven throughout and often associated with her lover as if he were a product or commodity. In the foreword, Duras explains what prompted her to write her novel and revisits the story already told in *L'Amant.* Having learned of the death of her lover, she writes : "je n'avais pas imaginé du tout que la mort du Chinois puisse se produire, la mort de son corps, de sa peau, de son sexe, de ses mains"[77] (11-12). Duras primarily defines him through his physicality. Her description focuses uniquely on the superficial, visual and material aspects of his existence. Starting with the body, and then the skin, her descriptors focus on his appearance instead of his intellectual, romantic or spiritual qualities. Next, she lists his genitalia and his hands. She focuses on the parts of his body that produced labor or certain goods for her. This conflation of the lover as a commodity is present throughout the entire story. At the end of the novel when she and her lover are about to separate and are experiencing heartbreak, their conversation is dominated by discussion of commercial colonial activity. During one of their last nights together, they talk about commerce:

> Elle lui demande s'il a des rizières, lui. Non, jamais les Chinois, il dit. Elle demande quel commerce ils font, les Chinois. Il dit : Celui de l'or, de l'opium beaucoup, et du thé aussi, beaucoup, des porcelaines aussi, de la laque, du bleu, des « bleus de Chine ». Il

[77] I hadn't at all imagined what his death would do to me, the death of his body, of his skin, of his sex, of his hands. (Translation mine)

> dit qu'il y a aussi les « compartiments » et les opérations boursières. Que la Bourse chinoise, elle est présente partout dans le monde entier. Que partout aussi, dans le monde entier maintenant on mange la cuisine chinoise, même les nids des hirondelles et les œufs couvées centenaires.[78] (213)

Their conversation is steeped in stereotypes and generalities. The exploitation of land through the cultivation of rice paddies is associated with French colonial forces. She defines Chinese imperialism through its well-known commodities and exports: tea, opium, porcelain, cuisine, banking and gold. The young girl's seduction of her older Chinese lover "pourrait s'inscrire tout aussi bien dans la lignée des romans exotiques et coloniaux à la Pierre Loti, dans lesquels un Européen entreprend une liaison amoureuse très inégale avec une jeune indigène, ce qui lui permet de mieux s'intégrer dans la vie locale"[79] (Hseih 58). The lover himself becomes colonized and commoditized by Duras, used as a resource. Within the scope of the novel, he only exists for her and in relation or context to her. This is further evidenced by the effacement of his identity

[78] She asks him if he has rice paddies. No, the Chinese never do, he says. She asks what business they do, the Chinese. He says: gold, a lot of opium and also tea, a lot, and porcelain, too, lacquerware, local blue wares, "Chinese export blues." He says that there are also cubicles and the stock market. It's everywhere in the whole world, the Chinese stock exchange. Also everywhere in the whole world now, people are eating Chinese food, even swallows' nests and hundred-year-old eggs. (Hafrey 207-208)

[79] Could also be in line with the Pierre Loti type of exoticizing and colonial novels in which a European enters into a very unequal love affair with a young native, which permits her to better integrate into local life. (Translation mine)

from his name, instead he is referentially designated by his nationality and ethnicity.

Sexual Domination and Exploitation

Young Duras is not the only Medusa-like figure who uses her position of racial privilege to sexually dominate "Oriental" men. From the very beginning of the novel, there is a femme fatale-type figure—Anne-Marie Stretter (who also appears in many other novels by Duras). As a white colonial subject, she is also depicted as excluded and surrounded by empty scenes. In "Archetypal Figures in Marguerite Duras' India Song", Renate Günter describes Anne-Marie Stretter as a simplified echo of the female protagonist (91). Duras' first description of her is almost mythological:

> Sous la lumière d'un lampadaire, une piste blanche traverse le parc. Elle est vide.
> Et voici, une femme en robe longue rouge sombre avance lentement dans l'espace blanc de la piste. Elle vient du fleuve.
> Elle disparaît dans la Résidence.
> La fête a dû finir tôt à cause de la chaleur. Reste ce disque oublié qui tourne dans un désert.
> La femme en rouge n'a pas réapparu. Elle doit être à l'intérieur de la Résidence.

Les terrasses du premier étage se sont éteintes et peu après son passage, au rez-de-chaussée, au cœur de la Résidence, des lampes ont été allumées.

La piste reste vide.

La femme en rouge ne revient pas.[80](19)

In this passage, a devastated and deserted white landscape is accented by a mysterious woman in red. White represents emptiness or an absence of color and life but it also represents the petrifying action of the colonial gaze. Colonial power and institutions are represented through a domesticating infrastructure. This is symbolized through lampposts and the light they give at night, the park and its empty trails and the residential building. There is a hint of both sex and mortality since she is portrayed in red. Also, her femininity and deity-like qualities are underlined by the fact that she came from the river much like Venus who according to myth was born or came into existence from the ocean. Madame Stretter is described as "coming from the river", but the allusion to the supernatural and elemental remains. Later in the novel, she reappears during the first encounter between Duras and her lover. This second description further cements the correlation between colonial power and its ability to destroy through

[80] In the glow of a streetlamp, a white path crosses the grounds. It is empty.
And then a woman in a long, dark-red dress moves slowly down the white space of the path. She comes from the river. She disappears into the residence.
The party must have ended early because of the heat. All that's left is a forgotten record playing in the desert. The woman in red hasn't reappeared. She must be inside the residence. The terraces on the second floor have gone dark, and shortly after her passing, lights on the ground floor have gone on, at the heart of the residence.
The path stays empty. The woman in red doesn't come back. (Hafrey 8-9)

sexuality. Through their conversation, it is revealed that Anne-Marie Stretter is literally a femme fatale:

> Sur le bac qui arrive elle vient de reconnaître la Lancia noire décapotable de la femme en robe rouge de la Valse de la nuit.
>
> Le Chinois demande qui c'est.
>
> L'enfant hésite à répondre. Elle ne répond pas au Chinois. Elle dit les noms « pour les dire ». Dans une sorte d'enchantement secret, elle dit :
>
> -C'est Madame Stretter. La femme de l'Administrateur général. A Vinh-Long on l'appelle A.M.S..
>
> Elle sourit, s'excuse de tellement en savoir.
>
> Le Chinois est intrigué par ce que dit l'enfant. Il dit qu'il a dû entendre parler de cette femme à Sadec. Mais il dit qu'il ne sait rien sur elle. Et puis il se souvient cependant… tout à coup… de ce nom-là…
>
> L'enfant dit :
>
> -Elle a beaucoup d'amants, c'est de ça que vous vous souvenez…
> -Je crois… oui… Ça doit être ça…
> -Il y en a eu un, très jeune, il se serait tué pour elle… je ne sais pas bien.

-Elle est belle… je croyais qu'elle était plus jeune… on dit qu'elle serait un peu folle…, non ?

Sur la folie, l'enfant n'avait pas d'avis. Elle dit :

-Je ne sais pas sur la folie.[81] (40)

After the presentation of her name and her position in the colonial administration, a description of her sexual habits and power follows. She is described as a sexual predator who uses young boys for sex and one even was condemned to death because of his relationship with her. She is described as beautiful or enchanting like Medusa was before she was punished by Athena and turned into a monster; her unleashed sexuality and power are accompanied by madness as well. In this passage, madness, sexuality, danger and death intermingle.

Throughout the entire novel, Duras establishes a correlation between the destructive and murderous qualities of the sexualized gaze. The sex act itself has the power to transform and destroy its subjects. When Duras describes her first

[81] On the other ferry, she has just recognized the black Lancia convertible of the woman in the red dress from the waltz the other night. The Chinese asks who it is. The child is slow to answer. She doesn't answer the Chinese. She says the names "just to say them." In a sort of secret incantation, she says: "It's Mme Stretter, Anne-Marie Stretter. The General Administrator's wife. In Vihn-Long, they call her A.M.S…." She smiles, apologizes for knowing so much about her. The Chinese is intrigued by what the child is saying. He says he must have heard people talk about that woman in Sadec. But he says he doesn't know anything about her. And then, suddenly, he does remember it after all, that name… The child says: "She has a lot of lovers, that's what you're remembering…" "Yes, I guess so. That must be it…" "There was one very young one, he supposedly killed himself over her. I don't know the whole story." "She is beautiful. I thought she'd be younger—people say she's a little crazy, right?" The child can't say if she's crazy. She says: "I don't know about crazy." (Hafrey 29-30)

sexual encounter with her lover, her account of the experience resembles that of a metamorphosis. Sex has colonized her own body:

> La douleur arrive dans le corps de l'enfant. Elle est d'abord vive. Puis terrible. Puis contradictoire. Comme rien d'autre. Rien : c'est alors en effet que cette douleur devient intenable qu'elle commence à s'éloigner. Qu'elle change, qu'elle devient bonne à en gémir, à en crier, qu'elle prend tout le corps, la tête, toute la force du corps, de la tête, et celle de la pensée, terrassée.
>
> La souffrance quitte le corps maigre, elle quitte la tête. Le corps reste ouvert sur le dehors. Il a été franchi, il saigne, il ne souffre plus. Ça ne s'appelle plus la douleur, ça s'appelle peut-être mourir. [82] (78)

Her encounter with her lover leaves her permanently changed. As she is gazing at herself after having sex for the first time, she finds her face destroyed and monstrous.

> Elle se regarde. Elle se voit. Elle voit le chapeau d'homme en feutre bois de rose au large ruban noir, les souliers noirs éculés avec les strass, le rouge à lèvres excessif du bac de la rencontre.

[82] Pain enters the child's body. It is sharp at first. Then awful. Then contradictory. Like nothing else. Nothing: and it's when the pain becomes unbearable that it becomes something good to moan at, scream at, takes over all of your body, your head, all of the strength in your body, your head, and in your totally defeated ability to think. The suffering leaves her skinny body, it leaves her head. Her body remains open to the outside. It has been breached, it is bleeding, its suffering is over. This can't be called pain anymore, it might be called death. (Hafrey 68-69)

> Elle se regarde elle- elle s'est approchée de son image. Elle s'approche encore. Ne se reconnaît pas bien. Elle ne comprend pas ce qui est arrivé. Elle le comprendra des années plus tard : elle a déjà le visage détruit de toute sa vie.[83] (84-85)

Both at the beginning of the *L'Amant* and the subsequent *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, she describes her face as devastated, horrible. Through the practice of sex, young Duras becomes a colonizer who destroys her surroundings and herself. Her destroyed face is a metaphor for the mark that the colonizer leaves on the land. Sex becomes an inherently and exploitative act that underlies unequal power relations.

Attempting Hybridity

In the grand scheme of the novel, Duras seems to be considering the possibility of a hybridized East and West culture through her relationship with her lover. As I argue in the next section, Duras attempts a naturalizing or essentializing type of hybridity. This merging encompasses cultural, racial, linguistic and commercial aspects. Duras' character in the novel, herself as a young girl, attempts to assimilate or mimic the taste of Eastern cultures. Duras describes her as:

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[83] She looks at herself. She sees herself. She sees the man's hat made of rosewood-colored felt with a wide black band, the down-at-the-heel black shoes with rhinestones, the overdone red lipstick from the ferry where they met. She looks at herself—she has come up close to her reflection. She comes even closer. Doesn't quite recognize herself. She doesn't understand what has happened. Years later, she will understand: her face is already the ruin it will be for the rest of her life. (Hafrey 76)

> Elle, elle est restée celle du livre, petite, maigre, hardie, difficile à attraper le sens, difficile à dire qui c'est, moins belle qu'il n'en paraît, pauvre, fille de pauvres, ancêtres pauvres, fermiers, cordonniers, première en français tout le temps partout et détestant la France, inconsolable du pays natal et d'enfance, crachant la viande rouge des steaks occidentaux, amoureuse des hommes faibles, sexuelle comme pas rencontrée encore. Folle de lire, de voir, insolente, libre.[84] (36)

Duras describes herself as being of an inferior class within the context of metropolitan France. She is the descendant of a poor working-class family but in colonial Indochina she is elevated to the elite when contrasted to the locals. However, this higher social status does not ensure her family's success in the colonies as evidenced by her mother's financial ruin due to dry crops. Because the girl is of a lower social class, she is neither compatible with her Chinese lover according to societal norms coding romantic arrangements. Nonetheless, this type of hybridity is attempted by the girl through her sexual relationship with her North Chinese lover. The impossibility (due to outside forces) of their pairing or of producing offspring is written by the doomed nature of their relationship. In a

[84] She, she has stayed the way she was in the book, small, skinny, tough, hard to get a sense of, hard to label, less pretty than she looks, poor, the daughter of poor people, poor ancestors, farmers, cobblers, always first in French at all her schools, yet disgusted by France, and mourning the country of her birth and youth, spitting out the red meat of Western steaks, with a taste for weak men, and sexy like you've never seen before. Wild about reading, seeing—fresh, free. (Hafrey 26)

passage where Duras recounts her pregnancy scare to her lover, the incompatibility of a blending of East and West is articulated even more explicitly. Duras writes about the child:

> Elle détourne son visage. Elle raconte :
>
> -Le mois dernier j'ai cru que j'attendais un enfant. J'avais un retard de mes règles de presque une semaine. D'abord j'ai eu peur, on a peur on ne sait pas bien pourquoi, et puis quand le sang est revenu… j'ai regretté…
>
> Elle se tait. Il la prend contre lui. Elle tremble. Elle ne pleure pas. Elle a froid
>
> d'avoir dit ça.
>
> -J'avais commencé à imaginer comment il serait. Je l'ai vu. C'était une espèce de Chinois comme toi. Tu étais là avec moi, tu jouais avec ses mains.
> Il ne dit rien. Elle demande si son père aurait cédé dans le cas de cet enfant.
> Le Chinois se tait.
> Puis il répond. Il dit que non, que c'aurait été dramatique mais qu'il n'aurait jamais cédé.

> L'enfant le regarde pleurer. Elle pleure à son tour en se cachant de lui. Elle dit qu'ils se reverront, que ce n'est pas possible autrement… Il ne répond pas.[85] (182)

In this passage, their dialogue reveals two fundamentally different conceptions of hybridity. The young girl is endorsing an optimistic view of the possibility of their having a child. She is conceiving of hybridity as natural and everywhere, it is the unavoidable outcome of their biological processes. It represents the triumph over the hegemonic sequestration of racial identity and promises a progression from the colonial to the postcolonial. Because she is a sheltered child, this vision of the future is naïve. The child's optimism is duly uninformed in light of the steps the French Empire took to ensure that there was not too much racial mixing between the French and the colonized peoples. As Vergès reveals in *Un féminisme décolonial*,

> Dans le monde esclavagiste et colonial, une profusion d'ouvrages de médecins ou d'observateurs avait été publiée sur la sexualité non-européenne et sur la manière dont le pouvoir colonial devait intervenir pour entrer dans l'intimité des couples, gérer les relations

[85] "Last month I thought I was going to have a baby. My period was almost a week late. At first I was scared, you get scared, you don't really know why, and then I started bleeding, I was sorry…" She falls silent. He takes her to him. She is trembling. She doesn't cry. She is cold from having said that. "I had started thinking about what he would be like. I saw him. He was sort of Chinese like you. You were there with me, you were playing with his hands." He doesn't say anything. She asks him if his father would have given in because of the child. The Chinese is silent. Then he answers no, it would have caused a scene, but he never would have given in. The child looks at him crying. She cries, too, hiding from him. She says they will see each other again, that it can't be any other way. He doesn't answer. (Hafrey 175)

> sexuelles entre Européens et non-Européens, et contrôler ce qui était perçu comme des excès ou des perversités. (52)

Conversely, her lover understands that both his non-European family and the colonists of French Indochina would have intervened had she continued to be pregnant. He, having the experience that comes with age, envisions the possibility of hybridity much more pessimistically and realistically. He understands that hybridity, as a material reality, inherits difficult interracial histories. The lover also understands that a racially hybrid child would erase the pride and affirmation of cultural power of his Chinese heritage. The relationship and possibility of creating offspring between the young French girl and the Chinese lover threatens to undermine the legitimacy and power of his father's family and his own lineage.

The incompatibility of their relationship also becomes apparent to Duras when her lover takes her family out to dinner and dancing. They are both depicted as being their own country and thus incapable of merging their sovereign states,

> Le Chinois est allé s'asseoir à une table. Sans doute pour être seul. Il est seul dans la ville, dans la vie aussi bien. Avec, au cœur, l'amour de cette enfant qui va partir, s'éloigner à jamais de lui, de son corps. Un deuil terrible habite le Chinois. Et l'enfant blanche le sait.
>
> Elle le regarde et, pour la première fois, elle découvre que la solitude a toujours été là, entre elle et lui, qu'elle, cette solitude-là,

chinoise, elle la gardait, elle était comme son pays autour de lui.

De même qu'elle était le lieu de leurs corps, de leur amour.[86] (165)

This passage highlights the foreignness of her Chinese lover. After seeing him in a context where he is expected to assimilate and blend into a dominant French cultural context, she understands that they are infinitely separate and incompatible. The failed nature of their hybridity results in solitude both within the confines of their relationship and with her peers.

Their taboo sexual pairing also later proves dangerous and harmful to the reputation of the young girl. She finds herself marginalized because she is perceived to have been tainted by sex with her Chinese lover. She finds herself excluded at school and, even as a white colonial female subject, is the object of a racializing and colonizing gaze. In an intimate conversation with her lover, the child recounts that she has been quarantined by her fellow classmates:

Elle lui parle de la quarantaine dont elle est l'objet au lycée. Elle rit :

-On ne me parle plus au lycée à cause de toi.

-C'est une idée que tu te fais.

[86] The Chinese has gone to a table to sit down. Probably to be alone. He is alone in the city, and in his life as well—with the love in his heart for this child who is going away, leaving him, his body, forever. A terrible mourning inhabits the Chinese. And the white child knows it.
She looks at him, and for the first time she realizes that the solitude has always been there, between her and him, a Chinese solitude that protected him, was like his country around him. Even as it was the place for their bodies, their love. (Hafrey 157)

-Non. Il y a eu des plaintes des mères d'élèves.

Il rit avec elle. Il demande de quoi elle a peur cette société. Elle dit :

-De la syphilis. De la peste. De la gale. Du choléra. Des Chinois.
-Pourquoi les Chinois ?
-Ils ne sont pas colonisés les Chinois, ils sont ici comme ils seraient en Amérique, ils voyagent. On peut pas les attraper pour les coloniser, on le regrette d'ailleurs.[87] (114)

Within the colonial context, hybridity through sexual connections was condemned by Indochina's European population. It was understood that the two populations should keep separate. This rejection of the colonial forces is also present in the Duras' descriptions of the Indochinese landscape.

Rice and the Land's Retribution

Just as in its colonial history, in Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord,* second to rubber, the cultivation of rice is of primary importance to the economic success of French Indochina. Rice paddies are exploited not only for rice destined for exportation but also for the production of the more lucrative rice

[87] She tells him about her isolation at school. She laughs: "They don't talk to me at school anymore because of you." "You're imagining it." "No. Some of the students' mothers have complained." He laughs with her. He asks her what they're afraid of. She says: "Syphilis. Plague. Mange. Cholera. The Chinese." "Why the Chinese?" "The Chinese—they haven't been colonized. Here they're the way they would be in America, they travel. You can't catch them to colonize them, and that upsets people." (Hafrey 104-105)

wine. The farming of rice was appropriated from the preexisting subsistence farming infrastructure. In a process that Duras describes in the novel, the French Colonial Office offered land to French citizens willing to emigrate to Indochina. They were given a lien on the land, with the expectation that they would pay back the price through future profits. Although historically, the cultivation of rice in Indochina was highly profitable, for Marguerite Duras' family it was a failure. In the novel, she describes her family's presence in Indochina as insolvent and in default.

> -Ce qu'il y a c'est les dettes. C'est vrai que toi, ça, tu peux pas savoir… ça rend fou. Les salaires de ma mère, ils servent à ça avant tout, à payer les intérêts des dettes. C'est ça la plus grosse dépense. Celle pour payer des rizières mortes, incultivables, volées, qu'on peut même pas donner en cadeau à des pauvres.[88] (168)

Like Maria Vial, her mother's attempt to exploit natural resources was a total failure. Her inability to cultivate a normally highly profitable crop metaphorically shows how the land punishes and ultimately rejects her because she is a descendant of colonization. Not only is she incapable of producing any income, but she is simultaneously incurring debt. This economic failure at the expense of a

[88] "What it is, is the debts. It's true that you, you can't understand that. It drives us crazy. My mother's salary mostly goes for that, for paying the interest on the debts. That's the biggest expense. Paying for dead, unworkable, stolen rice paddies you can't even give away to the poor." (Hafrey 160-161)

destroyed environment echoes the situation shown by Denis with the cultivation of coffee by the Vial family in *White Material*. Both texts reveal a colonial project without a future.

Only as Far as the Eye Can See

Much like Claire Denis' *White Material*, the horizon is omnipresent throughout *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. Here an obfuscated horizon foreshadows both the eventual expulsion of Duras' family and the fated and doomed nature of her relationship with her lover. Her descriptions create the feeling of being trapped, of no future, of being completely removed from the rest of the world. In a passage where they are laughing about her shoes and her hat, the mood suddenly changes.

> C'est là, ç'avait été là, après ce fou rire-là que s'était inversée l'histoire.
>
> Ils cessent de rire. Regardent ailleurs. Dehors, à perte de vue, les rizières. Le vide du ciel. La chaleur blême. Le soleil voilé.[89] (41)

Here, Duras describes the horizon as oppressive and obscured. The veiled sun also suggests a certain blockage or incapability of clearly seeing. The horizon operates as an extension or representative of the gaze which metaphorically illustrates the

[89] This is where, this was where the story turned itself around, after their fit of hysterical giggling. They stop laughing. They look away. Outside, rice paddies as far as the eye can see. Empty sky. Pale heat. Veiled sun. (Hafrey 31-32)

lack of future between the couple, it is a presentiment that suggests that there is no horizon to be seen for them or if there is a horizon it is described as empty.

The horizon is in the backdrop from the beginning during their first encounter, from the start the horizon predestined their relationship to fail. Later passages describe the horizon as having a suffocating effect on their romantic relationship. Describing her and her lover together in his car, she narrates:

> Ils sont dans la pénombre de l'auto ensemble enfermés.
>
> C'est cet arrêt du mouvement, de parler, ces faux regards vers la monotonie extérieure, la route, la lumière, les rizières jusqu'au ras du ciel, qui font cette histoire peu à peu se taire.[90] (41)

This description of the horizon is bleak and has a stifling effect. Duras describes the view of the outside as being monotonous because it is dominated by colonial signifiers: the road and rice paddies that extend as far as the eye can see. The gaze of Duras on the horizon can be read as a critique of the colonial project, it is one that is homogenizing and that suffocates the lively or natural qualities of the land. The horizon becomes a loaded signifier that she later describes as being weighed down by history:

> Ils regardent dehors.

[90] They are shut in together, in the twilight of the car. It's this stopping of motion, of speech, this pretense of watching the monotony outside, the road, the light, the rice paddies to the edge of the sky, that little by little silences the story. (Hafrey 32)

Ils regardent l'océan de rizière de la Cochinchine. La plaine d'eau traversée par les petites routes droites et blanches des charrettes d'enfants. L'enfer de la chaleur immobile, monumental. A perte de vue la platitude fabuleuse et soyeuse du Delta. L'enfant, elle parlera plus tard d'un pays indécis, d'enfance, des Flandres tropicales à peine délivrées de la mer.

Ils traversent l'immensité sans se parler.

Et puis c'est elle qui raconte : ce pays du sud de l'Indochine du sud il avait le même sol que la mer et ça pendant des millions d'années avant qu'il y ait la vie sur la terre, et que les paysans, ils continuent à faire comme les premiers hommes, à prendre le sol de la mer et à l'enfermer dans des talus de terre dure et à le laisser là pendant des années et des années pour le laver du sel avec l'eau de la pluie et le faire rizière prisonnière des hommes pour le reste du temps.[91]

(48-49)

The merging of water and land is a type of hybridity that Duras has deemed as imprisoning and oppressive which is more faithful to Bhabha's original nuanced

[91] They look outside. They look at the sea of rice paddies of Cochin China. The watery plain crisscrossed by little, straight white roads for the children's carts. The unmoving monumental hell of the heat. As far as the eye can see, the fabulous, silken flatness of the delta. Later she will speak, the child, of a vague country, from her childhood, a tropical Flanders barely rescued from the sea. They cross the expanse without speaking. And then it is she who does the talking: the southern lands of South Indochina were on the same level as the sea for millions of years before there was life on earth, and the peasants still do what the first men did, taking ground from the sea and enclosing it behind hard earthen dikes and leaving it there for years and years to wash out the salt with rain water and make a rice paddy imprisoned by man for all time. (Hafrey 39)

or conflicted assessment of hybridity. Instead of being surrounded by open sky, they are engulfed in a watery landscape that threatens to drown them. The vicious and violent quality of the land is later insisted on in her description of a sunset as a type of death or lack of possibility. She narrates,

> La rue de Cholen. Les lampadaires s'allument dans la lumière du crépuscule. Le ciel est déjà du bleu du soir, on peut le regarder sans se brûler les yeux.
>
> Au bord de la terre, le soleil est au bord de mourir. Il meurt.[92]
>
> (96-97)

Duras describes the sun as being swallowed up by the earth. The land and the horizon are attributed a sinister quality. Optimism, idealism, and the future as represented by the sun is destroyed by a land that rejects the colonial forces.

The symbolism of the horizon, because it is always looking forward, becomes prophetic for Duras. In the final pages of her novel, she describes her one last look at the Indochinese horizon from the deck of the boat she has boarded for France. Her description evokes a disorienting and surreal horizon:

> Sur les planchers du pont, sur les parois du bateau, sur la mer, avec le parcours du soleil dans le ciel et celui du bateau, se dessine, se dessine et se détruit à la même lenteur, une écriture illisible et

[92] The street in Cholon. The street lamps go on in the twilight. The sky is already evening blue, you can look at it without searing your eyes. At the earth's edge the sun, on the verge of dying. It dies. (Hafrey 87-88)

> déchirante d'ombres, d'arêtes, de traits de lumière brisée reprise dans les angles, les triangles d'une géométrie fugitive qui s'écroule au gré de l'ombre des vagues de la mer. Pour ensuite, de nouveau, inlassablement, encore exister.[93] (218-219)

The horizon she describes here is of a terrifying and unnatural beauty. The horizon is also of primary importance to her cinematic project. At the end of the novel, as a postscript, she offers additional instructions for the visual montage of her film. The horizon and landscape shots are very important even as stand-alone images. She prefaces before her list denoting appropriate landscape shots that:

> Les images proposées ci-dessous pourraient servir à la ponctuation d'un film tiré de ce livre. En aucun cas ces images – -dites plans de coupe –- ne devraient « rendre compte » du récit, ou le prolonger ou l'illustrer. Elles seraient distribuées dans le film au gré du metteur en scène et ne décideraient en rien de l'histoire. Les images proposées pourraient être reprises à tout moment, la nuit, le jour, à la saison sèche, à la saison des pluies. Etc.
>
> Je vois ces images comme un dehors qu'aurait le film, un « pays », celui de ces gens du livre, la contrée du film. Et seulement de lui, du film, sans aucune référence de conformité.

---

[93] On the planking, on the ship's bulwarks, on the sea, with the course of the sun through the sky and the ship, an unreadable and wrenching script takes shape, takes shape and destroys itself at the same slow pace—shadows, spines, shafts of broken light refocused in the angles, the triangles of a fleeting geometry that yields to the shadow of the ocean waves. And then, increasingly, lives again. (Hafrey 214)

Exemples d'images des plans dits de coupe :

Un ciel bleu crible de brillances.

Un fleuve vide dans son immensité dans une nuit indécise, relative.

Le jour qui se lève sur le fleuve. Sur le riz. Sur les routes droites et blanches qui traversent l'immensité soyeuse du riz.

Encore un fleuve dans toute sa largeur, immense. Seul le dessin vert de ses rives est immobile. Entre ses rives il avance vers la mer.

Entier. ÉNORME.[94] (233)

Her list continues onto the next page. Like in Claire Denis' *White Material*, through the horizon, both women offer a perspective of the feasibility of hybridity that is rooted in the bygone era of the diegetic space while practicing what some critics call the colonizing and destructive gaze of the white woman. Both works from Duras and Denis continuously gesture towards the past in an attempt to unearth answers and rewrite more truthful, although at times ambivalent and conflicted, accounts of colonial myth. This gesture is especially notable in the French literary and critical context since postcolonial studies are only very recently growing in recognition as an academic discipline in France (for instance

[94] The images suggested below could be used to punctuate a film based on this book. These images—called insert shots—would under no circumstances "explain" the story, or draw it out or illustrate it. They would be scattered through the film as the director chooses, and would in no way determine the story. The images proposed here could be reshot at any time, by night, by day, in the dry season, in the rainy season. And so on. I see these images as an exterior to the film, a "country," the one the people in this book are from, the world of the film. And of the film alone, with no attempt to reproduce reality. Examples of images for these insert shots: A blue sky bursting with light. An empty river in all its immensity in an uncertain, relative night. Daybreak over the river. Over the rice fields. On the straight white roads crossing the silken expanse of the fields. Another river in all its breadth, its vastness. Only the green line of its banks is unmoving. Between its banks it advances towards the sea. Complete. IMMENSE. (Hafrey 227-228)

Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* was translated into French in 2007, more than a decade after the original publication). Even though Postcolonial Studies are gaining ground in France, their polemical reception and continued rejection by some are evidence of the high stakes and conflicted nature of the nation's colonial history. Duras and Denis, unafraid to inject themselves into this intellectual debate, unashamedly assume a conflicted authorial position that puts into question the dominant narrative or myth about the French imperial projects while recognizing that they, too, are inevitably implicated and petrified in France's colonial past.

Chapter 4: (im)Mortalized Mothers

> Dans un livre hommage, on est obligé de mentir. Mais j'ai toujours eu l'idée de faire quelque chose autour de l'amour que l'on a pour sa mère, ce que c'est qu'être mère… Et je n'y arrivais pas ! Je me suis acharnée. Il n'y a pas plus fort que l'amour d'un enfant pour sa mère. Il fallait que j'arrive à écrire l'histoire de cet amour.[95]
>
> -Christine Angot, interview *Le Sud-Ouest*

Writing about mothers is nothing new, they are often the object of desire, nostalgia and veneration. In "Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype", Carl Jung defines the archetype of the mother as, "the qualities associated with it are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains" (16). On one hand, the mother figure is the embodiment of all that is good. Jung continues explaining that conversely, "on the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate" (16). Roland

[95] In a book of homage, one is obliged to lie. But I always had the idea of doing something about the love one has for their mother, what it is to be a mother… And I didn't succeed ! I worked relentlessly. There isn't a stronger love than the one a child has for its mother. I had to be able to write this love story. (Translation mine)

Barthes, echoing Jung, describes the mother figure's mythic and essentialized qualities, stating "dans notre culture la Mère est un être de pur instinct, mais encore lorsque sa fonction se socialise, c'est toujours dans un seul sens :[…] elle est éducatrice, institutrice, elle ouvre à l'enfant la conscience du monde moral"[96] ("Sur «La Mère» de Brecht", 144). Barthes continues his analysis, surmising that according to bourgeois ideology, "[le] rapport humain le plus «naturel»: [c'est] celui d'une mère et de son fils"[97] (145). In *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir further develops Barthes' criticism by arguing that maternal instinct itself is a pure construction, instead mothers are neither good nor bad nor emblematic, they are simply consequences of the contexts in which they are placed. Yet within the tomes of French literature, there are many mythic mothers that span the spectrum from good to bad. In Albert Cohen's *Le livre de ma mère*, his homage to his mother paints her as quasi-divine, loving, forgiving and generous despite being wronged or mistreated by her son. In Hervé Bazin's *Vipère au poing*, the stereotypically bad mother Folochoce is unattached, abusive and cruel to her children. There is also the absent mother, immortalized by characters like the prostitute Fantine who abandons Cosette in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Flaubert's heroine Emma Bovary is a self-absorbed and psychologically absent mother who abandons her children by suicide. Throughout the other works in my dissertation, examples of good, bad and absent maternal

[96] In our culture the Mother is a purely instinctive being, but again once her function becomes socialized, it's always in one direction:... she is the educator, teacher, she awakens the child to the world of moral conscience. (Translation mine)
[97] The most natural human relationship is that of mother to her son. (Translation mine)

figures also proliferate. In Despentes' *Apocalypse bébé,* there is the example of Valentine's dependent and passive stepmother along with the teenager's biological mother Vanessa who is absent, self-absorbed and lacks any attachment to her child. Marguerite Duras features her mother in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* but the relationship between mother and daughter is secondary to her preoccupation with her lover. The representation of the mother is always in relation to the archetype of the perfect mother. Dale Salwak, in his article "Motherhood in Literature", writes "literary mothers, whether good or bad, are memorable characters. Bad ones become cautionary tales of the depths that humans can sink to; good ones become emblematic of the love we all yearn for."[98] In this chapter, I argue that the New Medusas use a personal perspective to be more realistic to portray portraits of their mothers as they are instead of ones that have the idealism of archetype and myth transposed on them. Chantal Akerman's and Christine Angot's projects refuse to write testaments to their mothers' lives. Instead, they are redefining the genre of films and literature about mothers and use a personal, situated perspective. They are writing and filming from the position of the daughter. This singularity of subjective perspective and subject is of primary importance to Angot and Akerman's rewriting of myth about the intersection of womanhood through motherhood and daughterhood. This chapter examines the New Medusas' gaze that (im)mortalizes their mothers; the (im)mortalizing gaze is one that humanizes the mother figure, she becomes

[98] Salwak, Dale. "Motherhood in Literature." *Palgrave Macmillan.* www.palgrave.com/gp/why-publish/author-perspectives/motherhood-in-literature

fallible, flawed and stripped of her noble or divine character. Their narratives document the mother-daughter relationship first by the type of knowledge and vision that is shared between the two and second, the oscillation between closeness and separation which is reflected in the structure and content of their works.

These New Medusas desacralize the mythic mother as an object and render her human. As I argue in this chapter, Angot and Akerman's portraits of their mothers are brought to life through their choice of narrative form: conversation and dialogue between mother and daughter. In this chapter I will explore the mother-daughter relationships in Christine Angot's *Un amour impossible* and Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie.* My analysis of these two works will investigate a complicated maternal figure that is shown and written by their daughters; Angot is writing about the 'impossible' love for her mother who was complicit in the long-term sexual abuse the daughter character Christine suffers during visits to her estranged father. During the filming of Akerman's *No Home Movie,* she was unknowingly documenting the last months of her mother's life and their time together. Angot and Akerman become New Medusas through the sharing visions and familial scenes that are normally kept private. They are redefining the maternal homage and defying the taboo of tarnishing the sanctity of the mother figure by immortalizing their own in painfully honest portraits.

Mother-Daughter Dialogue

Dialogue is of primary importance in the narratological structure of Angot and Akerman's works, at first glance their works are largely composed of conversation between mother and daughter. The dialogue in Angot and Akerman's works is often seemingly without stated purpose or clear meaning. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that resistance to hierarchy of written forms is achieved through "double-voicedness" and dialogism. He states that "discourse lives, as it were, were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context" (284). *Un amour impossible* and *No Home Movie* employ dialogue in order to allow space for the (m)other as well as a subversion of the signifying practice of language. In opposition to the constraints of rhetorical discourse, Angot and Akerman use ordinary, everyday language that only gains meaning in the context of the Other- and in dialogue with the Other. I qualify this transgressive and subversive use of dialogue as a feminist act. As I have demonstrated in my previous chapters, the use of the term or label feminist can encompass a multitude of meanings, but as I will reveal in this chapter, their use of dialogue is feminist because it is defined in relation and context. Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry propose the concept of a feminist dialogic which "overcomes the public-private split which has become part of the rationalization of daily life… Feminists turn to Bakhtin's notion of the word and dialogue in order to break down this separation of public rationality and private intersubjectivity" (*Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic,* 1). As I will argue in this chapter, Akerman and Angot's dialogic defies the rhetoric of maternal homage by

revealing a living, participatory mother who is one because she is in interaction with her daughter. Conversely, other scholars in the field have categorized the use of (realistic) dialogue as an element of the essayistic turn, a genre that blends elements of fiction, autobiography and documentary. In *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia,* Caroline Eades and Elizabeth Papazian assert that "given the subversion of nearly all accepted aesthetic boundaries in the essay form, it seems the essayistic in film - as process, as experience, as experiment - also opens the road to its own subversion, as a form of dialectical thought that gravitates towards crisis" (8). Although the question of whether *No Home Movie* and *Un amour impossible* are essayistic are not at stake in this chapter, Eades and Papazian underline the emergent contemporary propensity of the dialogic to subvert dialectical thought through insistence on process and experimentation. Writ large, the New Medusas transgress the aesthetic boundaries of the dialogic through dialogue that talks about everything besides what the message of the film or novel is actually about; it is necessary to study what is said as much as what is omitted. French feminist Luce Irigaray asserts that listening to what is *not* said in women's discourse is of primary importance in psychoanalytic practice; as Sharon Todd explains in *Learning Desire: Perspectives on Pedagogy, Culture and the Unsaid*, the unsaid is representative of the feminine imaginary, in addition to being an expression of Otherness (2013). In addition to her perspectives on the unsaid, Irigary and feminist psychoanalytic theory also inform my interpretation

of Akerman and Angot's depictions of motherhood and the mother-daughter bond.

Psychoanalytic Visions of the Mother-Daughter Bond

Motherhood has long been written about by male thinkers as an abstract or idealized notion. More recently in the mid-twentieth century, feminist psychoanalysts sought to valorize lived experience as a way of rewriting misogynistic psychoanalytic myth. The field of feminist psychoanalysis emerged in the 1970's in reaction to Sigmund Freud's understanding of the mother's relationship with her children. Earlier versions of psychoanalytic theory posited that the strongest and primary bond between parent and child were between members of the opposite sex, with relationships to the father having primacy. This heteronormative framework also consequently understood mother-daughter and father-son relationships as being fundamentally antagonistic and competitive. Freud conceded that after the Oedipal stage (around age five) a secondary bond would be made with the parent of their same sex as soon as they repressed their desire for the parent of opposite sex. French feminist and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray sought to valorize the mother figure and her special bond with her daughter through critique of classical theory in essays such as *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère* (1981) and through creative writings like *Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre* (1979). She shows mothers in context to their relationships with their daughters as a bond that is defined by an exclusively female gaze and

positionality. Whereas Irigaray sought to destabilize hierarchy between mother-daughter, they are instead portrayed as egalitarian; mother takes care of daughter while daughter also takes care of mother. Whereas Irigaray accounts for this type of bond as conceptual and a consequence of strategic essentialism, in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) Nancy Chodorow identifies this relationship as it relates to kinship structures and learned mirroring of social behavior.

Whether one presupposes that the mother-daughter bond is due to an essential quality à la Irigaray, or if attachment is attributed as a learned behavior, this duality is present and found in the structure of both of the works I study in this chapter. As I will demonstrate in my analysis of Christine Angot's *Un amour impossible* and Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie*, this unique relationship between mother and daughter, which is characterized by alternating periods of subjectivity-breaching identification and despair from separation, is portrayed by their personal stories. Angot and Akerman show us that maternal figures can inhabit paradoxes, and that relations between mother and daughter are not always hierarchical or positive. They extend beyond the childhood caretaking phase, and show us that love and reverence can still exist, nonetheless. Angot and Akerman are normalizing dysfunction at the metatextual level per what constitutes a loving relationship between mother and daughter and at the textual level through a subversive dialogic that redirects our gaze to what is unsaid as well as stated.

Christine Angot, Un amour impossible

Christine Angot (née Schwartz) is a contemporary French novelist and playwright. She is best known for her novel *L'Inceste* (1999), where she reminisces about her childhood incestuous relationship with her father. To date her most well-known publication, the novel caused debate and sparked controversy about the decency of her continuing to talk about it in literary interviews. *Un amour impossible* is a reprisal of the narrative about her childhood traumas which is recounted in *L'Inceste* but instead replaces the father with the mother as the central focus. As I presented in my introduction to my dissertation, her presence, as portrayed by the media, is aggressive and conflict-seeking. Her positionality as an author seems to assume a standpoint of antisocial presence, which inhabits the seeming paradox between reclusion and visibility. As Gill Rye describes "Christine Angot's particular brand of life writing works on and at the threshold of the private and the public, private space, public place, text and life" (2010, 63). Angot is a controversial figure who inhabits an uncomfortable position in society by bringing attention and dialogue to taboo issues. Her authorial positionality as a writer of autofiction provokes questions of the place of the outspoken woman writer. One of the things that makes her stand out is the provocative nature of her persona and her work which raises questions about rhetorical form, the dissolution of autobiographical pact and the blurring of lines between fiction and reality. Scholarship such as Mercédès Baillargeon's recently released *Le personnel est politique : médias, esthétique, et politique de*

l'autofiction chez Christine Angot, Chloé Delaume, et Nelly Arcan and Francesca Forcolin's article "Christine Angot : Le Désir d'indigner le lecteur" explores the role of taboo, politics and literary conventionality in her corpus. In Gill Rye's *Narratives of Mothering: Women's Writing in Contemporary France* (2008), Christine Angot is studied for her subjective authorial positioning as a mother in *Léonore, toujours* (1994). Christine Angot also writes theoretical pieces about her creative works. She has published several essays, often concurrently with the fictional pieces. Wherein my scholarship on Angot differs is in its focus; much work has been dedicated to exploring her relationship with her father, her daughter Léonore and with larger questions of sexual orientation. Little to no attention has been given to study of *Un amour impossible* and the figure of her mother; as I will show in this chapter, this text and her portrait of the relationship between mother and daughter is no less controversial than the rest of her convention-defying corpus.

Angot confronts and dispels the myth of a totalizing or homogentisic nature of the mother-daughter bond in *Un amour impossible*. Her mother Rachel, is both good and bad. She is absent when her daughter needs her protection from her incestuous father yet smotheringly present after the years of sexual abuse have been revealed, even though it is too late to repair Christine's trust and reignite her desire for closeness. In *Un amour impossible,* she assumes a different narrative perspective which nearly erases the character of the father and reconstructs her personal history through her relationship with her mother. The novel's beginning

reaches back to the first meeting and courtship of Christine's parents and continues fifty years later to the confrontation between the molested child and the blinded mother. Framed by these two events as the novel's beginning and end, Angot tells a story of complicated and unrequited love between mother and daughter. Annexed to the J'ai Lu Edition (2016) of the text is an essay on the maternal archetype titled *Conférence à New York.* Angot explains the beginnings of the idea for her project and the importance of showing her mother instead of her father. *Conférence à New York* opens by charting the origin of her novel *Un amour impossible.* She expresses her subjective desire to return to a part of her biography that she had already written, but this time in order to untangle her narrative from the memory of her father.

It is important to note that as a writer of the autofiction genre, Angot's authorial gaze transgresses the rules of truth and fiction in the autobiographical text. At times, Christine Angot the writer can seem conflated with the heroine of *Un amour impossible* also named Christine. In *Figure III* (1989), Gérard Genette explores the ambiguities of the autobiographical text which blur the boundaries between three canonical narrative positions: narrator, author and character. The conflation of the three is part of Angot's transgressive authorial signature and style. In Philippe Lejeune's *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975), Lejeune argues that the autobiographical author is bound by a "pact" to represent his story truthfully if he is to expect fair treatment from his readers. Angot breaks this pact by mixing biography and fiction without revealing which is which. In "Victime

ou martyre?: scandale, paranoïa et tragédie dans *L'Inceste* et *Quitter la ville* de Christine Angot" Mercédès Baillargeon explains that "Angot tente donc de déjouer les attentes du lecteur en maintenant le doute entre fictif et factuel alors que, comme nous l'avons vu plus tôt, celui-ci voudra immanquablement distinguer le vrai du faux"[99] (90-91). Whether or not Angot's accounts are 'true', her use of an ambiguous gaze (which is both subjective and objective) helps construct new norms about the relationships between mothers and their daughters. Through her Medusan gaze she forces her mother and her readers to confront incest on the public stage. This imbues Angot's writing with a social and political dimension, she is sharing her truths about taboo issues which society collectively ignores, turns away from, or hides. Angot forces the reader to see these issues and by extension her authorial gaze becomes the gaze of her audience too.

Angot's Authorial Gaze

Like in Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord,* the gaze or vision that the daughter has of her mother creates the structure of her narrative in Angot's *Un amour impossible*. The authorial gaze in *Un amour impossible* is omnipotent and temporally unrestricted by the narrators' age, the story starts before the author herself had come into existence as it centers on her parents' first meeting. In *Conference à New York*, Angot addresses the place of the daughterly gaze in the elaboration of her novel. Through the act of seeing, the author

[99] Angot therefore tries to thwart the reader's expectations by maintaining the doubt between fictitious and factual when, as we saw earlier, he will inevitably want to distinguish the real from the fictitious. (Translation mine)

describes the attachment of mother-daughter and the elision of the self into the other. During the second half of the book, this closeness becomes unbearably painful as if it were a type of incest. In *Conference à New York*, Angot articulates the role it plays in her creative process. For her, the act of writing is a transcription of vision and the phenomenology of gazing is not restricted by experience. She states "Je retrouve : le regard absolu, et moi n'existant pas. Écrire c'est ça"[100] (245). Angot employs this in *Un amour impossible* by narrating the love story between her mother and father even though she was not yet born (nor conceived). Similarly, Angot too, in the present moment of her writing of the text also inhabits a daughterly gaze. She explains,

> Entre deux livres, j'ai toujours pensé à un autre moment ou à un autre : ma mère, faire un livre où on la verrait. Où on verrait ce que c'est avoir une mère. Dire ce qu'est cet amour. Et ce qu'il devient. Ecrire ce que je sais, depuis que je suis à son contact, c'est-à-dire toujours. Je pense à un tel livre depuis trente ans, depuis que j'écris. Pas un livre *sur* ma mère. Ça ce n'était pas possible.[101]
> (227)

[100] I find it again: the absolute gaze and me not existing. That is what it is to write. (Translation mine)
[101] Between two books, I always thought, at one moment or another, about my mother, write a book where we would see her. Or see what it is to have a mother. To say what this love is. And what it becomes. To write what I know, since I am in contact with her, that's to say always. I've thought about such a book for thirty years, as long as I've been writing. But not a book *on* my mother. That's not possible. (Translation mine, emphasis in original)

As a daughter, it is impossible for her to extract herself objectively from her mother. Angot also makes the distinction between writing on or about her mother and a type of writing that is predicated on showing. Personal attachment is of equal importance to the promulgation of her project, her subjectivity prevents her from creating objective work. Through the writing of her relationship with her mother, Angot refuses to extricate any sort of generalities about motherhood or daughterhood. Instead, she preserves the mother-daughter bond as singular. Her valorization of this bond, by extension, also displaces the father figure. She elaborates,

> Je parlais de la cohérence avec l'époque du père qui est finie. Les hommes. Leur pouvoir. Les femmes l'ont voulu maintenant elles l'ont. L'histoire de la femme. L'histoire de l'amour pour la mère. Voilà ce qu'il faut faire. Maintenant qu'elles règnent. Je me dis, oui, il faut faire ça, c'est le moment. Il faut arriver à comprendre ce qu'est une femme. D'où elle vient. La première femme que nous avons *vue* c'était notre mère.[102] (231)

Her insistence on the gaze and vision figures into her explanation of identification. This passage in Angot's essay also highlights the importance of

[102]I was speaking about the coherence of the age of the father which is over. Men. Their power. Women wanted it and now they have it. The history of women. The history of the love of mothers. Here's what we have to do. Now that they reign. I told myself, yes, I have to do it, now is the time. We must come to understand what a woman is. Where she comes from. The first woman that we ever *saw* that was our mother. (Translation mine, emphasis in original)

establishing lineage or history as it relates to exclusively women. Angot structures the beginnings of a matrilineal text where the reader sees her in action, in dialogue with her daughter. Matrilineality is distinct from the concept of matriarchy, a political and anthropological social system that has women in positions of power and excludes males. The bond between Rachel and Christine creates a matrilineal heritage of kinship and exclusively female social structure. Within the textual space of her novel, Angot establishes a heritage between women through identification with the eyes, or through the gaze. Christine, in the novel, explains how her pregnancy and the birth of her daughter Léonore strengthened the bond with her own mother Rachel. She recounts the day she gave birth:

> L'année où j'ai été enceinte, l'accouchement était prévu le 23 juillet. Claude faisait passer des examens, il serait absent tout le mois. Elle a loué un appartement à Nice. Quand j'ai perdu les eaux le 8, André et elle m'ont accompagnée à la clinique. On m'a installée dans une chambre, et elle est restée à côté de moi en attendant que Claude, qui avait été prévenue, fasse la route.
>
> La ressemblance entre elle et ma fille m'a tout suite frappée. J'ai glissé ma main dans le berceau, et je l'ai posée sur le bas du petit visage. Je me suis concentrée sur le front, le regard. C'était le même mélange de profondeur et de rayonnement.

-Elle a les mêmes yeux que toi maman.[103] (175-176)

The resemblance between Léonore and Rachel also has an immobilizing effect on Christine. The eyes and particularity of vision become the defining factor of matrilineal characteristics. Even though her daughter is a newborn and without experience, her eyes contain much power. The magical aspect of the gaze shared between mother and daughter also includes the capacity of vision. Rachel, Christine's mother is also enamored with the idea of vision as demonstrated by a prophecy she had of becoming a mother before she became pregnant. She recounts,

> -Tu sais Christine, un jour j'ai fait un rêve. J'y pense souvent à ce rêve. Je suis dans un tunnel, et je marche. Je marche, et j'en vois pas le bout de ce tunnel. Comme s'il avait pas de fin. A un moment, j'aperçois une petite lumière. Tout au fond tout au fond. Très loin. Je marche encore. La lumière s'agrandit. Mais j'en sors toujours pas ce tunnel. Tellement il est long. Je me dis « mais bon sang je vais jamais en sortir ». Et puis tout à coup : j'en sors. Et

[103] The year when I was pregnant, the due date was expected July 23rd. Claude was proctoring exams, he would be gone all month. She [her mother] rented an apartment in Nice. When my water broke on the 8th, she and Andre brought me to the private hospital. They set me up in my room and she stayed next to me while waiting for Claude who was on his way. She had let him know. The resemblance between her and my daughter struck me immediately. I slid my hand into the cradle and put it across the bottom half of her face. I focused on her forehead, her gaze. It was the same mix of depth and radiance. She has the same eyes as you, mama. (Translation mine)

juste à ce moment-là, un bébé me tombe dans les bras. Et je sais que c'est toi.[104] (89)

Here the contrast of life prior to motherhood is one that is filled with darkness, she is prescribing to the myth that women's identity and value is rooted in her reproductive capacities. The dark enclosed space of the tunnel can be compared to the womb or as a negative space representing the otherness of femininity. The tunnel itself is like a liminal space for Rachel especially since there is initially no light or end to the darkness. She is on a journey between two worlds or existences which is resolved by the birth of Christine. As a symbol, the tunnel is, in its most primal sense, the birth canal. Her journey through the birth canal into existence is immediately self-replicated and reproduced by the child falling into her arms. The mother-daughter bond allows her to self-actualize, it is the source of her being and her enlightenment.

The opposition between seeing/not-seeing becomes especially ironic in light of the sexual abuse that Christine endured during visits to her father. Reminiscent of Rachel's vision of motherhood that came to her in a dream, there is an episode where Rachel is given another prophecy that made sense once Christine was born. In a passage where Angot shows us her mother as a young

[104] You know Christine, one day I had a dream. I often think back to this dream. I am in a tunnel, and I am walking. I am walking and I don't see the end of the tunnel. As if there was no end. At some point, I see a tiny light. Deep down at the very end. So far. I am still walking. The light gets bigger. But I still am not out of the tunnel. It is so very long. I say "good lord, I am never going to get out". And all of a sudden I emerge. And at that very moment, a baby falls into my arms. And I know that it is you. (Translation mine)

woman and in conversation with her friend from work, it is suggested that Rachel consult a clairvoyant. Rachel takes the recommendation; her future with Pierre and Christine are predicted but the clairvoyant insists that her relationship with "C" will be the more important one. Angot's depiction of her mother's fascination with clairvoyance is non-judgemental, her authorial posture is one of ambiguity. Rather, I argue that read within the larger frame of the story, Rachel's insistence on supernatural vision juxtaposed to her blindness towards the incest creates a sense of tragedy. It is ultimately Rachel's lack of vision that makes her guilty.

The importance that Angot affords to the gaze and vision also accounts for Rachel's failures as a woman and mother. At times, Angot portrays her mother Rachel as blind and lacking vision. Themes of motherhood and a protective gaze also evoke Medusa; as an emblem it had a maternal function through the medieval era. At the homes of young virgins, a Medusa head was placed outside as protection, the monstrous and terror of her face was meant to scare away men. Ironically, Rachel has failed because she did not protect Christine against her father's continued sexual assault. She expresses regret and shame for not seeing the signs that Christine was being sexually abused by her father. She identifies her faults as a type of blindness:

> Après le déjeuner on s'est promenées. Le lendemain, on s'est revues au même endroit.

Les gens étaient en véranda ou en terrasse. Il faisait encore très chaud. On s'est installées à la même table que la veille. Dans la salle presque déserte.

-Je voulais te parler de quelque chose Christine. Tu sais, dans un de tes livres, a un moment, dans *Le Marché des amants* je crois, Bruno dit : « Elle est aveugle la dame ? »

-Oui.

-Sur le coup, ça m'a fait un choc quand j'ai lu cette phrase. Et puis j'ai réfléchi. Et je voulais te dire.

Elle a marqué une pause comme pour avaler sa salive.

-Je voulais te dire : oui. Sans doute j'étais aveugle. Crois bien que je le regrette. J'ai été tellement aveugle, tellement. Tellement.[105]

(198)

She does not express regret or shame for not having done anything, instead her blindness is of primary concern; she implies that had she known, she would have done something. In later dialogue between mother and daughter, Rachel reveals that her gaze is also subjective and subject to her affective state. Christine

[105] After lunch we went for a walk. The following day, we saw each other at the same place. People were either out on the veranda or on the patio. It was still very hot out. We settled in at the same table as the day before. In the nearly deserted dining room. -I wanted to speak to you about something Christine. You know, in one of your books, at one moment, in The Market of Lovers I think, Bruno says: Is she blind that lady? -Yes. -At the time, it gave me a shock when I read that sentence. And then I thought about it. And I wanted to tell you. She took a pause as if to take a big gulp. -I wanted to tell you that yes. Without a doubt I was blind. Believe that I regret it. I was so very blind, so blind. Terribly so. (Translation mine)

provokes the realization with a probing question about the faulty nature of her mother's gaze,

-Est ce que je peux te poser une question ?

-Bien sûr Christine.

-Pourquoi tu n'as rien vu ?

-Je peux te dire que toute ma vie je le regretterai.

-Rétrospectivement, tu as compris pourquoi ?

-J'avais perdu confiance en nous.

-C'est-à-dire ?

Ses mains étaient posées à plat sur la table. Belles, la peau claire, les doigts fins, les jointures peut-être un peu gonflées par l'âge, les ongles limés en arrondi et discrètement vernis.

-Après avoir vu ton père, quand tu rentrais à la maison, t'étais mal. Et je pensais que c'était parce que tu me retrouvais. J'avais perdu confiance en notre affection. J'ai été aveuglée. Et je peux te dire que, jusqu'au bout de ma vie, Christine, je le regretterai. Je me disais c'est normal elle en a marre de sa mère. J'avais une perte de confiance totale. En nous. En notre relation. En toi. Je me disais elle découvre quelque chose de plus gratifiant. J'imaginais pas qu'il puisse y avoir une autre raison à ton état. Je pensais que tu

étais mal parce que tu n'avais pas envie de me voir, de me retrouver moi. Parce que tu ne m'aimais plus.[106] (207)

Rachel was blinded by what she perceived as Christine's rejection of her, as she projected her own insecurities and anxieties. In reaction to what Rachel subjectively interpreted as rejection and painful separation from her daughter, she ironically failed to protect Christine from harm consequently irreparably straining their relationship. Through writing about the incest, Angot reinstates her mother's gaze. She is forced to see and confront her lapse in mothering.

The use of literature as a way of confronting abuses and injustices from the past has surged in popularity over the past few years in France. Released in January 2020, Vanessa Springora's *Le Constentement* describes in shocking detail her illicit relationship with renowned and award-winning author Gabriel Matzneff. She denounces him for his pedophilia as she was 14 years old and he 50 at the time of their affair. With his most recent novel *Qui a tué mon père* (2018), Edouard Louis presents the objective of his writing as a "littérature de la confrontation'. Pascal Broutin writes in his review of the novel that,

[106] -Can I ask you a question? -Of course Christine. -Why didn't you see it? -I can tell you that I will regret it for the rest of my life. -In retrospect, do you understand why?-I had lost faith in us. -What do you mean? Her hands were spread out flat on the table. Beautiful, the skin fair, delicate fingers, knuckles a bit swollen by age, nails filed into a rounded shape and discreetly polished. -After having seen your father, when you came back home, you were miserable. And I thought it was you were back with me. I had lost trust in our affection. I had become blinded. And I can tell you that, for the rest of my life Christine, I will regret it. I told myself it was normal to be fed up with one's mother. I had a total loss of confidence. In us. In our relationship. In you. I told myself she was discovering something else more gratifying. I had not imagined that there could have been another reason for your state. I thought you were miserable because you didn't want to see me, to be back with me. Because you no longer loved me. (Translation mine)

> Créer une littérature de confrontation est une question formelle. Comment trouver une forme pour empêcher les gens de tourner le regard. Dans nos vies on met en place beaucoup de stratégies pour ne pas être confronté à la réalité, au monde, à la violence sociale.[107]

Christine Angot performs this same type of literary confrontation, one that confronts her mother but also the reader and the public at large. As a daughter and a victim of sexual family violence, the author tries to make a public space for dialogue about these issues, as well. In "Public Places, Intimate Spaces: Christine Angot's Incest Narratives", Gill Rye explains how "through writing, through the public place of literature, Angot works to figure - to symbolize - to bring into culture something of a daughter's intimate experiences of incest" (72). *Un amour impossible* is a text that puts into question the definition of incest. Although as an event the details remain ambiguous, taken within the larger context of the work's dialogue and unstated discourse, Angot's conception and vision of incest is at the core and encompasses multiple levels of meaning. Rye asks "Is, for example, the incest relationship autobiographical? Or is it a literalization of unconscious desires that structure the psyche? Does it rather constitute a critique of society and the bourgeois family? Or does the incest relationship act as a figure for other oppressive relations?" (64). In agreement with Rye's assertion, I argue that the incest relationship is all of the above in Angot's oeuvre. Furthermore, I would add

[107] To create a literature of confrontation is a question of form. How to find a form to prevent people from turning away their gaze. In our lives, we put a lot of strategies in place to avoid confronting reality, the world, social violence. (Translation mine) cdi.esaat.free.fr/?p=2985

that the incest relationship on display in *Un amour impossible* is the one between mother and daughter.

Impossible Love or Incest?

In one of the novel's early passages taken from Christine's childhood, she experiences moments of inappropriate daughterly infatuation with her mother which eclipse the importance of the paternal figure. This is reflected in a drawing that Christine made of her family. Her mother analyzes her drawing and points the overinflated importance of the mother in its composition:

> Le père tu l'as fait tout petit. C'est un tout petit bonhomme, mais il est là. C'est très bien. Il est tout petit dans un coin de ta feuille, mais il existe. Tu as fait une petite fille, qui a à peu près la même taille que le père. Mais c'est bien. Parce que tout le monde est là, tout le monde est à sa place. Et tu as fait une mère. Mais une mère… mais une mère, mais tu as fait une mère alors là… Une mère… Énorme. Qui prend toute la page.[108] (101)

Here Christine's affection and love for her mother are inflated in size and importance in her drawing. The child Christine is unable to articulate this idealization of her mother, thus she expresses it in artistic form. In *Four*

[108] The father, you made it very small. It's a very little guy, but he's there. That's very good. He is very small in the corner of your page, but he exists. You made a little girl, who is just about the same size as the father. But it's very good. Because everyone is there, everyone has their spot. And you made a mother. But a mother… well, a mother, oh you made a mother… a mother who is… ENORMOUS. Who takes up the entire page. (Translation mine)

Archetypes, Carl Jung states that "many things arousing devotion or feelings of awe, as for instance the Church, university, city or country, heaven, earth, the woods, the sea or any still waters, matter even, the underworld and the moon, can be mother symbols" (15). Echoing Jung, in Gaston Bachelard's chapter on "L'eau maternelle et l'eau féminine" (1942) he offers an essentialized explanation that the love of the mother is often portrayed by an admiration of nature in creative depictions. He explains, "Toutes les formes d'amour reçoivent une composante de l'amour pour une mère. La nature est pour l'homme grandi, nous dit Mme Bonaparte, « une mère immensément élargie, éternelle et projetée dans l'infini »"[109] (136). Instead of using nature as a projection of her love for her mother, the enlarged and eternal qualities are represented through her larger than life homage or illustration. The significance of the drawing is doubly represented in the text through their mother-daughter dialogue, a secondary emphasis is attributed through Rachel's commentary and praise of the picture. The mother also constructs an idealized or romantic narrative around her relationship with her daughter. Christine's drawing also underlines one of the fundamental misunderstandings between mother and daughter, instead of her mother being concerned that the drawing portrayed a nearly absent father, Rachel is more fixated on the rendition of

[109] All forms of love contain a primary element of the love one has for their mother. For the grown up man, Mme Bonaparte tells us that nature is "an immensely amplified and eternal mother that is boundlessly projected into infinity". (Translation mine)

herself. Despite her mother's seeming self-centeredness, Christine is still (unwillingly) attached to her years later as an adult. She affirms that the experience of becoming a mother herself and mothering has reinforced the identification between Christine and Rachel, but this bond is not entirely positively viewed by Christine. In a letter to her mother, she writes:

> Ça commençait à me faire souffrir de parler de toi, surtout de notre amour, de l'image que j'ai de toi, faite de souvenirs, d'attente, de tellement de bonheur. J'espère que tu continueras à m'aimer. Il le faut. Léonore me dit « maman », en fait elle dit « minmin », elle commence à dire papa, elle imite l'aboiement du chien et le miaou du chat quand nous en voyons. L'arrêt des médicaments me fatigue beaucoup, mais j'essaye de tenir. Quand je pense que l'année prochaine j'aurai trente-cinq ans ! Je suis vraiment au milieu de Léonore et toi. Il ne se passe pas un jour, pas une heure où je ne pense à toi.[110] (176)

The theme of matrilineality or the charting of history and family through women reappears. Despite Angot's claim in *Conférence à New York* that her work would be realistic and resist abstraction, here she is participating

[110] It started to make me suffer to talk about you, especially our love, the image that I have of you, made of memories, expectation, and, especially, of happiness. I hope that you will continue to love me. It is necessary. Leonore calls me "mama", actually she says "mimi", she has started to say daddy, she imitates the bark of a dog and the meow of a cat whenever we see one. The cessation of medication is really tiring me but I am trying to hang in there. When I think that next year I will be thirty-five years old! I am truly in the middle of you and Leonore. Not a day, not an hour goes by that I don't think of you. (Translation mine)

in an idealized narrative of the mother-daughter bond: the idea that the relationship between mother and daughter can never be broken despite the hurt and trauma that they may have inflicted upon each other.

Good Mothers, Bad Mothers, Mad Mothers

One of the tensions underlying the novel is the paradox between the realistic and the idealistic notions of motherhood: between the good mother Rachel wants to be and Angot's depiction of a terribly flawed one whom she loves anyway (although not without reluctance or inner conflict). Throughout the novel, Rachel idealizes the experience of motherhood which creates a stark contrast from the reality of her situation. In dialogue with Christine, Rachel speaks to a maternal love that echoes the patriarchal portrait of angelic maternity. Rachel describes maternal love as universalized and eternal :

> Tu te souviens du poème de Victor Hugo ? « Oh l'amour d'une mère, amour que nul n'oublie… Chacun en a sa part et tous l'ont tout entier… » ? Bon. Ça, c'est l'amour entre une mère et son enfant. Il ne meurt jamais. Il ne se finit jamais. C'est un amour éternel.[111] (106)

The character Rachel reifies the notion of motherhood in its idealized form. She exposes the tendency of male writers to reify idealized figurations of mothers (here referencing Pagnol's *Le Château de ma mère*

[111] Do you remember Victor Hugo's poem? "Oh a mother's love, love that is not forgotten… Each of us has their share and everyone has it in its entirety…"? Well, that's the love between a mother and her child. It never dies. It is never finished. It is an eternal love. (Translation mine)

(1957) and Cohen's *Le livre de ma mère* (1954)) and subverts them in her oeuvre. As Angot explains in *Conference à New York*:

> Je ne peux pas laisser un trou à la place de ma mère dans mes livres. Ne laisser que des allusions, des vides. Il faut faire exploser cette idée, qui est devenue une idée reçue, de la mère complice. Qui a succédé à la mère angélique de Marcel Pagnol et d'Albert Cohen.[112] (239)

Rendering discourse mythical leaves empty space and erases real mothers (versus fictional) who are perhaps guilty or less than perfect. Rachel herself participates in the demythification of the idealized mother figure who gives herself fully to the needs of her child and the role of the mother. She is guilty, selfish, and jealous as well as needy and attached to her identity as a mother. Although Angot is careful to show that her mother never fully accepted her maternal role as one that eclipsed other parts of her identity, she explains to Christine that the love contained in the mother-daughter bond is not singularly fulfilling:

> Je suis très heureuse comme maman. Mais je ne suis pas qu'une maman. J'ai aussi une vie de femme. Il faut que je vive ma vie de femme. J'ai beaucoup de chance de t'avoir, mais tu es une petite

[112] I can't leave a hole in my mother's spot in my books. Only leaving allusions, empty space. The preconception, which has become common, of the complicit mother needs to be shattered. The one that has succeeded the angelic mother of Marcel Pagnol and Albert Cohen. (Translation mine)

fille, tu vois ? Tu es ma petite fille. C'est pas pareil. J'aimerais bien rencontrer un monsieur de mon âge. Tu comprends ?[113] (104)

As Angot describes her, Rachel is not a bad mother. She is simply her mother, a real person, a whole individual with a complex set of needs and desires. She is not only a mother and thus desires a different type of love than the one she shares with Christine. In this passage, she is seeking approval or approbation from Christine to detach from her but it is also ironic. Her mother is trying to explain to Christine that sexual or passionate love is different than the love experienced between parent and child, meanwhile the long-term sexual abuse Christine suffers at the hands of Pierre has deliberately corrupted the child's ability to separate the two. There is another layer of irony to their conversation because the mother is trying to talk to her child about sex using cloaked or indirect language, whereas Christine has already been introduced to the sex act by her other parent (in a traumatic and abusive manner).

In *Un amour impossible*, Angot reveals the incestuous relationship with her father in the middle of the novel. Although readers who are familiar with her corpus and her biography would already have knowledge of this event prior to the reveal in the book, the unaware reader is taken by surprise since the majority of the first half of the book is dedicated to idyllic descriptions of bonding and love

[113] I'm very happy as a mother. But I'm not only a mother. I also have my life as a woman. And I need to live my life as a woman. I am very lucky to have you but you're a little girl you know. You're my little girl. But it's not the same. I would very much like to meet a man my age. You understand? (Translation mine)

between a mother and her daughter. The news is broken to Rachel through her friend Marc. Even though it is not his intention to separate mother-daughter, his actions cause another schism between Rachel and Christine. Angot narrates the scene from an internal focalization of her mother's perspective:

> -J'ai des choses à te dire en ce qui concerne Christine et son père. Il ne faut absolument pas qu'elle aille à Paris ce week-end. Ce serait catastrophique pour elle. Car il la sodomise depuis des années.
>
> Elle a mis un temps avant de comprendre de quoi il s'agissait. Puis, elle a reçu un coup sur la tête.
>
> Au cours de la nuit qui a suivi, elle a eu une violente poussée de fièvre. La température est montée jusqu'à 41 degrés. Elle faisait une infection de trompes. Elle a été hospitalisée, elle est restée dix jours à l'hôpital. Elle tombait des nues. En même temps… elle n'était pas surprise.[114] (158-159)

Angot never figures her as responsible for the sexual trauma but she does suggest culpability by projecting that her mother was not surprised. There is also the

[114] -I have something to tell you that concerns Christine and her father. She absolutely cannot go to Paris this weekend. It will be catastrophic for her. Because he's been sodomizing her for years. It took a while to understand what it was all about. Then she received a blow to the head. During the night that followed, she came down suddenly with a violently high fever. Her temperature had risen to 106 degrees. Her fallopian tubes were infected. She was hospitalized, she stayed ten days in the hospital. It was a terrible shock. At the same time... she was not surprised. (Translation mine)

juxtaposition between her mother's violent physical reaction suggesting surprise and sublimated guilt. Angot, the author, also puts herself in the impossible position of repairing her mother's vision by recounting the thoughts and experiences of her mother that she never experienced firsthand. This history does not erase the unspeakable or inappropriate moments, instead a narrative of both good and bad mother are interwoven from the beginning and through the entirety of the novel to create the realistic and fallible mother. Angot chooses not to avert her gaze (nor by proxy her readers') from seeing the bad or uncomfortable depictions of her history and her relationship with a flawed mother.

In another passage where Angot imaginatively narrates her birth, she shows us a mother that seems to renounce or ignore her maternity. Angot's portrait of the reluctant mother is foreshadowed by a passage at the beginning of the novel where she describes her birth as complicated and rife with an incompatible tension. The author foreshadows that Rachel would be a less than perfect mother which was demonstrated in labor:

> C'était peut-être une réaction, un effet d'origine psychologique, dont on aurait trouvé l'explication dans la façon dont les derniers mois s'étaient écoulés. L'accouchement est devenu compliqué. Il était trop tard pour faire une césarienne, j'étais trop avancée. Et elle n'avait plus de contractions.

> Trente minutes c'était trop long, le temps de préparer la césarienne, je mourais. Le médecin a décidé d'avoir recours aux forceps. Elle avait eu des contractions toute la nuit, j'étais en danger. Il fallait l'endormir très vite. La suite allait être délicate. J'étais très engagée, et elle elle dormait.[115] (52)

The last sentence is especially indicative of the dynamic that would be established later between mother and daughter. Christine as 'engaged' and her mother 'asleep' which is emblematic of the mother-daughter dynamic that would later allow the traumatic incest experienced by Angot at the hands of her father. Without explicitly using the lexical field of vision and gaze that has previously been described, the imagery of sleeping invokes closed eyes and inability to see as well as portraying the disconnection of her mother. The proposed medical intervention of a cesarean and forceps by a male doctor also marks a separation of the mother-daughter bond. The valorization and presupposed importance of a vaginal childbirth continues to our present-day contemporary context, there is still stigma attached to cesarean sections. Natural childbirth is figured as essential to the mother-daughter bond. Despite the maternal shortcomings that are revealed during her birth scene, Angot sympathizes with the difficulties of her mother's

[115] It was perhaps a reaction, psychological in origin, whose explanation would be found in how the last few months went by. The pregnancy became very complicated. It was too late to perform a cesarean, I was too far down. And she wasn't having any more contractions.
The thirty minutes to prepare the cesarean was too long, I would die. The doctor decided to resort to forceps. She had been having contractions all night, I was in danger. She needed to be put to sleep immediately. What followed would be very risky. I was fully engaged and, she, she was asleep. (Translation mine)

inability to deliver Christine unassisted by offering an excuse or psychological explanation. She shows that the mother-daughter bond inhabits the (supposed) binary of love and repulsion. As she highlights in *Conférence à New York*, she succinctly identifies the co-existence of the mother as being one that she simultaneously loves and cannot tolerate (240). Instead of rejecting or deeming this paradox as undesirable, Angot asserts that this is the conflicted image that she wants to write. I argue that through the juxtaposition of the stories she tells in *L'inceste* and *Un amour impossible*, the portrait of Angot's mother can be described as a failure of the hegemonic and reified selfless maternal figure. Her complicated portrayal also rejects the polarity and mutual exclusivity of good versus bad. Rachel embodies both categories because Angot offers a realistic and actual depiction of her own mother.

Rachel has many moments where she doubts herself as a mother by describing herself as inadequate compared to Christine's estranged father. She is incapable of rendering the entirety of her feminine identity into that of the maternal figure; as a mother she voices what is an unspeakable truth for many women. Rachel laments not being able to offer Christine the things she thinks she desires in a parent and compares herself to Pierre. This exchange is another example of the emotional incest between mother and daughter, Rachel is transgressing the boundary of what is appropriate to share with her child:

> -Excuse moi Christine, je peux pas t'offrir plus que ce que je t'offre. On est allées se promener, on est allées au cinéma. Je peux

> pas faire plus. J'avoue. J'ai mes limites. J'ai pas le salaire de ton père, ni sa culture, je le regrette. Crois-le bien. Et je ne suis surement pas aussi intéressante que lui, je te l'accorde. Je voudrais bien moi aussi pouvoir t'offrir des choses qui t'intéressent.[116] (141)

What is unstated in this passage is that the only important failure on behalf of the mother is her inability or unwillingness to protect Christine from her sexually abusive father. Her mother is also blinded by her own insecurities surrounding Christine's father since he abandoned her too. Instead, in her monologue, Rachel focuses on the superficial or more socially recognized failures as a parent. As she compares herself to Christine's father, she finds herself lacking in her ability to offer anything material to Christine. She also falls short as a mother as a homemaker, as a single parent Rachel feels that she has been put in a precarious position where she is failing at both roles. Her mother's conception of home and her role within the confines of it is highly (hetero)normative. By showing an unhappy and less than ideal home in *Un amour impossible,* Angot rewrites the myth about the symbol of home and what it represents.

Is Home Where the Heart Is?

The idea of home and the domestic sphere are closely intertwined with our concept of motherhood and where she interacts with her daughter. The history of

[116] I'm sorry Christine but I can't give you anymore than I already am. We went for a walk, we went to the movies. I can't do more. I swear. I have my limits. I don't make your father's salary, don't have his culture, I regret it. Believe me. And I am surely not nearly as interesting as him, I will grant you that. I, too, would very much like to be able to offer you things that you like. (Translation mine)

home as sanctuary is a relatively recent phenomenon that can be traced back to the eighteenth century. With the introduction of industrialization and a wage economy, father figures lost authority and power within the home structure. In the *Myths of Motherhood,* Shari L. Thurer explains that

> At the same time, home was imbued with sentiment; it became a place "where the heart is" as well as, in its ideal manifestation, the locus of intimacy, peace, spontaneity, and unwavering devotion to people and principles beyond the self. Home was transformed from a mere four walls into a refuge, a haven where one might retreat for repose or renewal or inner fortification. These ideas, even today, are central to the bourgeois Western dream. (184)

Thurer's depiction of the home as being a haven, providing protection from the outside world is replicated by Angot in *Un amour impossible*. The home as an interior space is the primary locus of the mother-daughter bond. Furthermore, their relationship is threatened by the outside world which marginalizes her as a single mother, vilified even as a bad mother. Although she articulates the pressure to inhabit both public and private in much less critical terms, Angot's mother identifies this split of domains and attests a preference for home life. Here, the interior or domestic space is described as the primary feminine space. The exterior is equated with a

type of sociocultural violence against Rachel as a single mother (who is also poor and Jewish). She tries to persuade Christine:

> -Tu vois Christine qu'on peut être bien ici. Tu t'amuses bien. On est bien quand on est à l'intérieur. L'environnement on s'en fiche. L'extérieur est pas terrible, bon, mais l'extérieur c'est l'extérieur. On vit pas à l'extérieur.[117] (83)

Her acceptance of solitude and confinement to interior spaces also hints at her unwillingness to partake in public life outside of the home. In addition to the difficulty of being accepted as a single mother, Rachel is also rejected because of her Jewish heritage. At the beginning of the novel during Pierre and Rachel's courtship, the incompatibility of her Jewishness with his bourgeois Catholic upbringing is one of several excuses he gives for not marrying her. The marginalization of her mother is also demonstrated by her relationship with her co-workers and her dissatisfaction in the workplace:

> Elle ne se posait pas la question de savoir si elle était bien ou mal aux Châtillons. Ses préoccupations étaient de rembourser un emprunt à sa banque, et de s'installer dans son poste. Elle était responsable du personnel. Les quatre employées du service, dont l'une avait été candidate à la fonction qu'elle exerçait, étaient en

[117] You see Christine that we can be happy here. You really enjoy yourself. We're ok when we are inside. We don't care about our surroundings. Being outside isn't great, alright, the outside is outside, of course. One doesn't live outside. (Translation mine)

> guerre contre elle. Il y avait tous les jours un désaccord, un refus de faire ce qu'elle demandait, une arrivée sans dire bonjour, un départ sans dire au revoir, un propos désagréable et même une fois dans un couloir une remarque sur sa judéité lancée à la cantonade. [118] (130-131)

Her mother's rejection and isolation become emblematic of the unbalanced feminine condition that cannot rectify professional success, motherhood and femininity. Outside of her workplace in Chatillons, Rachel describes herself as being rejected by society at large. Solitude and isolation define the feminine condition for Angot. She describes Rachel as being rejected and shamed for being a "bad mother."

> Tu as raison de dire que tu as été rejetée. C'est une vaste entreprise de rejet. Social, pensé, voulu. Organisé. Et admis. Par tout le monde. Toute cette histoire c'est ça. Et jusqu'à la fin. Y compris avec ce qu'il t'a fait à toi aussi, avant tout. C'est la continuation de ce rejet. Pour humilier quelqu'un, le mieux c'est de lui faire honte, tu le sais. Et qu'est-ce qui pouvait te rendre plus honteuse que ça, que de devenir, en plus de tout le reste, alors même que tu pensais être sortie du tunnel, la mère d'une fille à qui son père fait ça ? Tu

[118] She didn't ask herself if she was happy or bad in Chatillons. Her focus was on paying off her bank loan and settling into her position. She was in charge of the staff. The four employees in her department, one of which had applied for the position she was in, were all in war against her. Everyday there was a clash, a refusal to do as she asked, arriving without saying hello, leaving without saying goodbye, nasty remarks and once, even, in the corridor a comment about her Jewishness thrown out to no one in particular. (Translation mine)

as été rejetée en raison de ton identité maman. Pas en raison de l'être humain que tu étais.[119] (208)

Angot's description of this social rejection portrays it as an institutional or socially engineered force; her mother Rachel is also figured as guilty or responsible for Pierre's sexual abuse of her daughter. Ultimately, Christine herself will end up participating in this rejection of Rachel. Towards the end of the story, where Christine becomes exceedingly more estranged from her mother, she describes the distance between the two as she becomes incapable of sharing domestic space or performing home-based activities with her mother. The mother-daughter physical closeness is no longer possible:

> L'intimité physique n'était plus possible. La promiscuité, le petit déjeuner, les habitudes alimentaires, la voir en robe de chambre, regarder le journal télévisé ensemble. C'était fini tout ça. Ça avait disparu. J'habitais Paris avec ma fille. Elle venait nous voir. Elle ne dormait à la maison que si j'étais absente, dès que je rentrais elle allait à l'hôtel. Pour éviter la cohabitation, les intrusions. La manipulation du linge sale, des serviettes, des draps, la vision des

[119] You are right to say that you were rejected. It is a vast enterprise of rejection. By society, thought out, deliberate. Organized. And accepted. By everyone. This whole story is that. And until the end. Above all, including what he did to you, too. It is the continuation of their rejection. To humiliate someone, the best way is to shame them, you know it. And what could make you more shameful than to become, in addition to everything else, even though you thought you were in the clear, the mother of a girl whose father did that to her? You were rejected because of your identity as a [failed] mother. Not because of the human being that you were. (Translation mine)

cotons démaquillants, celle des restes dans le frigidaire. On ne prenait aucun repas à l'intérieur.[120] (182)

This passage is representative of how Irigaray defines the mother-daughter relationship, one that is characterized by identification and separation. All the signifiers that Angot refers to as physical closeness can be read as identification. This identification is corporeal, she omits their conversations and dialogue from her definition of closeness. Instead, their intimacy is linked to bodily habits and functions; she is describing the mundane daily domestic chores and objects associated with women's experience. Angot rejects sharing physical proximity anymore because it represents a false proximity or artificial convention. In the interior space, it is tacitly understood that no one talks within it and no one talks about it when they are outside of it. Angot refuses to participate and opts for solitude and isolation. She cannot tolerate her mother's presence anymore, continuing to be in her company is more painful than choosing distance. Nearing the end of the novel, in a letter to her daughter, Rachel meditates on the seemingly permanent alienating quality of existence. She writes:

Christine,

[120] Physical closeness was no longer possible. No intimacy, breakfast, eating habits, seeing her in her house robe, watching the news together. All that was done. It had disappeared. I lived in Paris with my daughter. She would come to see us. She slept at the house if I was gone, as soon as I came back she went to the hotel. To avoid cohabitation, intrusions. The handling of dirty laundry, towels, sheets, the sight of makeup remover pads, leftovers in the refrigerator. We shared no meals at home. (Translation mine)

> Hier soir au téléphone, quand je t'ai dit que je me sentais seule depuis qu'André a ces problèmes, tu as dit : On est seul. J'ai répondu : C'est vrai, mais parfois on croit qu'on ne l'est pas. J'y ai repensé ce matin. Car tu m'as dit aussi : Mais il est là. Ces simples paroles m'ont fait du bien. Il m'est apparu que, même quand on ressent la solitude, c'est souvent faux. Quelqu'un qu'on aime, qui vous aime, qui est là par sa présence ou sa parole, ça représente la vie. Bon, je raconte peut-être n'importe quoi, mais j'ai envie de te le dire.[121] (192)

Though Rachel denies that solitude and isolation are permanent conditions, she concedes that she often feels alienated or alone even when she is not. This letter, like much of the correspondence between Rachel and Christine at the end of the novel, signals their growing separation and loss of intimacy. The less Christine is capable of tolerating her mother's physical presence, the more they communicate with each other in written word. The letter also hides a double meaning; much like the dialogue in *No Home Movie*, the words do not entirely match the message. Rachel writes the letter in the third person using impersonal pronouns to universalize a very personal plea to her daughter to remember her love for her and

[121] Christine, last night on the telephone, when I said that I had been feeling alone since Andre was having his problems, you said: we are alone. I responded: that's true but sometimes we believe that we aren't. I thought back to it this morning. Because you also told me: but he is there. These simple words did me good. It occurred to me, that even when we feel loneliness, the feeling is false. That there is someone to love, who loves you, who is there in their presence or by their words, that represents life. Well, what I'm saying might be nonsense but I wanted to tell you this. (Translation mine)

that their mother-daughter bond is unbreakable (despite Christine's attempts at the contrary). In both *Un amour impossible* and *No Home Movie*, the mother-daughter relationship is complicated by the seemingly contradictory need for closeness and independence as expressed indirectly using a unique code of communication between the two.

Chantal Akerman, No Home Movie

Chantal Akerman, Belgian film director, screenwriter, artist, and film professor, passed away just after the completion of *No Home Movie* in 2015. She was born in Brussels to a family of Polish Holocaust survivors. Akerman is best known for her film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), which cemented her status as an arthouse cinema critical favorite and as a participant in feminist filmmaking. Akerman's relationship with her mother was captured in her films *Toute une nuit* (1982) and *No Home Movie.* Akerman also wrote an autoportrait dedicated to her relationship with her mother in *Ma mère rit* (2013). Alisa Lebow sees *No Home Movie* "as the distillation of an entire oeuvre, artlessly yet honestly reduced to its most elemental form, with nearly all the tropes of a four-decade-long career present—borders, exile, duration, waiting, transience, Jewishness, home—and none more so than the trope of the mother" (2016, 54-55). In the entirety of Chantal Akerman's film corpus, the continuous presence of interior space (especially the kitchen as I argue later) is quintessentially linked to the maternal. In "Interiors and Interiority", Ewa

Lajer-Burcharth notes that "in much of her work, Akerman, too, challenged the notion of the self-same interiority, while keeping the image of a physical, inhabited interior front and center. It has been noted that, rather than a mere location, interior space has been the protagonist of her work" (446). In one of her first films, *La Chambre* (1972) she filmed herself enclosed in an apartment, she is the only subject in the film. The film only shows her sleeping and eating in total isolation. In *La Captive* (2000), a reprisal of Proust's *La Prisonnière*, a female subject is under constant surveillance and submission to the male gaze in the form of her male partner. She is confined to their apartment and in the few shots where she is seen in public, he is openly stalking her. In *No Home Movie*, Akerman voyeuristically documents the last autobiographical moments of a relationship between mother and daughter. Shortly after the film was finished her mother died and Akerman subsequently committed suicide.

No Home Movie is Akerman's last movie. It was filmed over the course of several months in 2014 and released in 2015 posthumously. During the several months of filming, Akerman had over 40 hours of footage of conversation with her mother which she edited down to less than two hours. These 115 minutes consist of the presupposed last intimate moments shared between a daughter and mother in what Margulies describes as a "hyperrealist aesthetic" ("Inside and Outside", 66). The majority of *No Home Movie* takes place in her mother's private residence either in the living room or the kitchen. Much of the footage of *No Home Movie* shows an empty apartment shot through deep focus; seemingly

under the effect of a petrifying gaze. The scenes themselves become unnaturally still as if in stone. There is little to no action on set or obvious narrative, the footage resembles outtakes or uncut footage from home movies (recorded on tape). As Brenda Longfellow describes, "Akerman has always played with duration via an attentiveness to the gestures and details of the everyday, but here each shot shades into a kind of unremitting banality" (2019, 114). When the scenes are populated with people, it often features Natalia or Chantal in aimless movement around her home, unaware or unconcerned that they are being filmed. The low camera angle mimics the perspective of a child, a child that is now parenting her aging mother. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis explains that Akerman's use of a low camera angle assumes "the position of looking, [it] evokes a generalized childhood view of a mother's actions, reasserting the regularity of these repetitive tasks and the (simultaneously maternal and) domestic scene in which they are performed" (2003, 33). The entire opening scene at her mother's has a pale pink tint, her mother's home is painted in light rose, the furniture and decorations are in similar muted pink tones. There is no dialogue or sound besides the muted noise from the street. Natalia's home appears as a feminine matrix, almost womb-like. The rest of their interactions are represented as conversations over video calls on their computers. In *No Home Movie*, Chantal Akerman presents us with a mother-daughter relationship that is characterized by the inability to be affectionate when close and the pain of separation when they are apart.

Daughterly Director

In *No Home Movie*, Akerman's gaze is the materialization of her identification and attachment to her mother. Akerman affirms her identity the most assertively behind the camera when the subject of her gaze is her mother. During one of the many kitchen table storytelling episodes, through their turn-taking narrative, they decide that they have the same eyes due to their mother-daughter bond. Preceding this reveal of resemblance, they are reciprocally praising each other for how beautiful Natalia found Chantal as a younger girl and Chantal found Natalia as her beautiful perfect mother. Natalia identifies the eyes as being her source of beauty. She says, "Mais tout le monde me disait « Mais quels yeux! Quelle beauté et quels yeux » et alors tu étais toujours dans la poussette encore. Tous les gens se penchaient sur toi pour voir tes yeux"[122] (31:26). This scene not only cements the bond between mother and daughter as being biological, it also figures the similitude of their eyes as a sharing of an essentialized gaze. Their gaze encompasses their way of seeing each other and seeing the world. This shared gaze that is tethered to her mother is a testament to their bond. The absence of Akerman or Chantal as her embodied self in front of the camera's lens informs us that she is resisting self-recognition or self-actualization. Akerman's presence within the visual filmic space is ephemeral; she chooses to present herself within the film exclusively as a

[122] But everyone would say to me "but what eyes. How beautiful and those eyes" and at that time you were still in your stroller. Everyone would perch over you so they could see your eyes. (Translation mine)

daughter. She shows nothing of her work as an internationally recognized director nor does she offer much explanation for her presence in Oklahoma (the location from where she calls her mother on Skype). The work that she performs as Chantal Akerman the director is hidden, the most important and prominent type of work she does within the diegetic space of the film is care for and bond with her mother. Their relationship is characterized by reciprocated caretaking, performance of household chores and daily ritual, as well as the sharing of personal oral histories.

The importance of storytelling is also important to their Jewish heritage but I argue that Jewish identity is secondary to the primacy of the act of documenting her mother. In "Documenting the Domestic: Chantal Akerman's Experimental Autobiography As Archive", Jane Simon defines this archival act as one of the primary characteristics of Akerman's cinema. As she states "Akerman has been interested in exploring the banalities of women's lives – and archiving the daily gestures and spaces of domestic life – from the beginning of her practice as a filmmaker" (159). Simon continues, "Akerman's experimental autobiography as archive is rich territory for feminist history, auto/biography studies and archival theory" (166). Natalia and Chantal are participating in this tradition of collecting, retelling and preserving their history through their presence in *No Home Movie*. Simon similarly describes Akerman's archive as operating on a small scale as an archive of a daughter's attachment to her mother (162). Conceptualized on a wider global scale, Simon asserts that Akerman is contributing to the archive of

Jewish stories and oral histories that would be lost without transcription. Although the Holocaust is never mentioned by name, the spectator understands that Akerman creates this personal and intimate archive in reaction to the erasure of the genocide and displacement suffered by her Jewish family and community. Brenda Longfellow explains this silence or unsaid quality as an act of resistance. She asserts that *No Home Movie* "is built around two formidable acts of resistance: one on the part of the mother, Natalia, who refuses to recount her experiences of the Holocaust, and the other on the part of the daughter/filmmaker, who refuses to fill in, to speak, for the other" (2019, 115). Another act of resistance in the film is Akerman's refusal to edit out or censor what ends up being an end-of-life documentary and autobiography for Chantal and Natalia. The scenes of her mother are not glorified or nostalgic—they are uncomfortably realistic. Her stylistic use of "uncomfortable realism" is also emblematic of the way she films her home.

Home: The Ties That Bind

All of the sequences that are filmed in the home depict scenes of closeness between mother and daughter. Akerman's depiction of home is layered and, at times, conflicting. Her reproduction of domestic tasks and the creation of a private space ruled exclusively by women mostly performing mundane household chores are complicated by the presence of a dialogue about Jewishness and the kinship

narrative that runs through the entire film. In *Transnational Women's Fiction: Unsettling Home and Homeland*, Susan Strehle writes

> Home has traditionally been thought in the West as a private, secluded space for settlement, separated from the public arena in a dichotomy of spheres. […] Settling homes has been understood for centuries as the most proper occupation for women, shielded as home was thought to be from the aggression, materialism, and competitiveness of the public arena. Home is imagined as a place of domestic order, separate from the outer public world of commerce, government, law, and other social institutions in which men exercise worldly power. From a perspective conjoining feminist and postcolonial theory, home reveals its deeper affiliation with the public realm, as a patriarchal space where power relations vital to the nation and culture are negotiated. Home reflects and resembles nation: not a retreat from the public and political, home expresses the same ideological pressures that contend within the nation. (1)

I argue that *No Home Movie,* as well as the rest of Akerman's corpus, invokes this antiquated and romanticized monolithic vision of sheltered home and domesticity. Home is a place of attachment, of assimilation and of inclusion; a safe space where issues of identity and belonging are

mitigated. Home is also a private setting that becomes a public stage for the exposition of women's housework. Material feminist Christine Delphy, in *Pour une théorie générale de l'exploitation,* explains how the issue of housework is a relatively new problem for society. Before the women's movement of the 1960's and 1970's, "nos riches sociétés occidentales ne percevaient pas le travail ménager comme une question théorique, encore moins politique"[123] (20). I argue that Akerman uses footage of women's work as a way of universalizing what is otherwise a very personal and intimate film. Akerman's cinema is dominated by real-time sequences of women doing housework. It is neither a denunciation nor a glorification–instead it is a realistic depiction of women's condition. Housework is also one of the only activities that is shared across the mother-daughter generational gap, even though we consider the issue as dated or irrelevant from a contemporary perspective it is of primary importance to the bonding between the two. The first scene where mother and daughter are shown together, they are sharing a meal that Chantal cooked and are sitting around the kitchen table together. Chantal has prepared potatoes with the skin on, as she explains, because it preserves the vitamin content of the vegetable. Anticipating a nagging remark from her mother, she asks, "Alors, je [ne] sais pas faire à manger?"

[123] Our rich Western societies do not perceive housework to be a theoretical question, even less so a political one. (Translation mine)

[124] (10:23). Even though Natalia answers affirmatively, she continues, "Tu [ne] crois que je sais rien faire?"[125] (10:32). Chantal is an adult but within the context of her mother's home, she is still reduced to seeking her approbation (or rebelling against the infantilizing tendency). Ruth Whippman, in "The Power of the 'Little Comment' in Mother Daughter Relationships", argues that oftentimes in mother daughter communication "little comments" along with non-verbal cues are used to express what is actually meant. This is a more negative or derogatory vision of the dynamics at play in the feminist dialogic where words cloak the actual meaning of the message. On the metatextual level, Akerman's inclusion of this dialogue attests to her commitment to showing the mother-daughter relationship as it really is as well as how and where it takes place. Her insistence on showing scenes taking place in the kitchen is a signifying act that evokes the archetypal symbolism of maternity and cooking. In his list of objects that are associated with the maternal, Carl Jung asserts that "hollow objects such as ovens and cooking vessels are associated with the mother archetype" (15). I argue that Akerman takes this symbolism a step further by transforming the space of the kitchen into a representation of the maternal and by extension femininity. Akerman's insistence on showing scenes of women gathering in kitchens also provokes the question of cooking and feminism. In *The Social Sex: A History of Female*

[124] So, I don't know how to cook? (Translation mine)
[125] You think I don't know how to do anything? (Translation mine)

Friendship, Marilyn Yalom identifies cooking and connection with food as a historical and contemporary source of bonding between women (2015). Cooking is not politicized or ungendered in *No Home Movie* but it is shown positively as a bonding activity between mother and daughter. This is Akerman's demythification of the feminine experience, one that is characterized by a strange comfort in mundane chores, ennui and familiarity. Through the kitchen as a female and feminist space, mother and daughter are able to be physically close and spend time together without pretense or discomfort. The kitchen becomes a locus of feminine collectivity and a place where knowledge is shared between women.

Kitchen Table Stories

The kitchen table is transformed into a milieu where individualism is elided by the bonds between mother and daughter. Elke Krasny comments on the transformative and subversive potential of the kitchen; she explains that "open dialectics traverse the kitchen space, where revolutions come about only very slowly but also become extremely effective on a micropolitical level" (2009, 260). Courtney Coombs and others attribute this potential for revolutionary thought as stemming from the act of assembling or coming together. They explain that it is especially important in the contemporary context of "an era of asynchronous eating—when so many people eat quickly or alone—the invitation to sit, eat and talk for as long as it feels comfortable and desirable, constitutes an

act of resistance" (*Feminist Review* 2016, 136). In *No Home Movie*, the kitchen table is one of the few places in Natalia's apartment where mother and daughter interact freely. I argue that when they are sitting together, doing nothing, this activity is an antidote to their individual loneliness. Through their conversation, they are also inferring shared values about women's place in society and, writ large, feminism. It becomes the one place in Natalia's apartment where they can comfortably spend quality time together. In one scene, Chantal is seated in her mother's chair at the kitchen table and Natalia is standing by the window talking on speakerphone with her sister. This exchange narrates the type of community Akerman is creating; she does not seek to expel men, they are instead subordinated to the authority of women. The historical charting of the prominence of women in her family reaches back to the late 19th and early 20th century. It is also an intergenerational hierarchy of power that is exchanged through the mother-daughter lineage. All three women are chiming in on a conversation about Natalia's mother (and Chantal's grandmother). The spectator arrives in the middle of this exchange with Natalia explaining into the phone, "C'était un couple, qui malgré tout, ça marchait." Chantal interjects, "Mais chacun de son côté." Natalia resumes her story, "Oui, lui était à la synagogue et maman à la mezour [maison] avec ses sœurs"[126] (24:43). This prompts Chantal to add that her grandmother liked to go to the cinema, to go out dancing and that she heard from her aunt that she had a lover. Natalia is nonplussed by the suggestion of infidelity, but she adds

[126] Theirs was a couple, that despite everything, worked./ But each one had their own side/ Yes, he was at the synagogue and mom at home with her sisters. (Translation mine)

that the rumored lover was the one who secured false papers for the family that permitted them to leave Auschwitz and escape to Belgium. Their conversation about Chantal's grandmother continues into the next series of scenes that are shot from a different perspective. In this sequence, they are seated at the table and the camera is fixed on a waist-up shot of Natalia. Akerman does not represent herself visually in this scene but the audio track features her in dialogue with her mother. Chantal propels the conversation by asking "Et ta mère a été déjà une féministe avant son âge ? Avant son temps"[127] (26:02). Natalia agrees and adds that her parents' marriage was harmonious because her father was extraordinarily handsome and sweet. She then nostalgically tells Chantal about her grandfather and how he was as a father. In their family, there was a reversal of parental disciplinary roles. Her father offered his children the most physical affection and the mother was the one who administered corporal punishment for not studying their Ashkenazi prayers. Their dialogue highlights the importance of documenting Jewish women's experience through the Holocaust and displacement without ever explicitly discussing the persecution, genocide (as was experienced first-hand by Natalia), or displacement that they suffered. The importance and role of memory is secondary or an extension of the need to belong. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth finds that "Akerman accepts her uprooted-ness as part of her heritage which she identifies less with the traditional diasporic mode of Jewish existence than with the burdens borne by the second-generation survivors of the Holocaust to which she belongs"

[127] And your mother was already a feminist before her age? Ahead of her time. (Translation mine)

(449). As Akerman demonstrates through her insistence on conversation, which Margulies calls “overlong and redundant dialogues” (63), the only way of documenting the memories of her Holocaust survivor mother is to record her storytelling. Nonetheless, Chantal’s presence (the daughter) or Akerman’s (the director) are always present and participating in these archival scenes.

The theme of dialogue or conversation is represented visually through the aesthetic features of *No Home Movie*. Within all of the scenes filmed at her mother’s apartment, there is a doubling of her directorial and personal gaze. With the exception of the scenes where Chantal appears in the diegetic frame, the perspective of the unattended camera and Akerman the filmmaker are elided. This doubling of perspective or presence in other works in Akerman’s corpus has been explored by Marceline Block in her article “Situating the Feminist Gaze and Spectatorship in Postwar Cinema” (2008). According to her, “in describing Akerman’s work in terms of a consistent “dialectic of form and content,” we might again rather describe this in terms of Bakhtinian dialogue and “double-voicing,” holding in suspension in the work itself a multiplicity of intentions" (264). While she is commenting on the auditory and vocal aspects of her non-autobiographical films such as *Un divan à New York* and *Jeanne Dielmann*, I argue that a parallel can be drawn to the visual presence or the gaze of Akerman in *No Home Movie.* There is also a doubling of dialogue through the two voices of mother and daughter, the two interlocutors reproduce one narrative. Akerman is demonstrating the importance of creating a personal archive that is

also destined for a public audience. Jane Simon argues that Akerman's self-documentary act is important for studies of ethnography, feminism and narratology. She asserts that "Akerman's experimental autobiographic archive of the domestic documents domestic space and its habits, mother–daughter relationships and personal memory, all of which typically fall outside of conventional archives but which nonetheless remain important sites for historical inquiry" (152). Akerman's archival act also redefines the mother-daughter relationship as one that is more horizontal in its power structure. Although she portrays herself as daughterly through perspective and her rapport with her mother, the status of daughter is not subordinated by the status of mother. They both tell the story together; the telling of family history is collaborative and shared. There is not one dominant speaker, instead they alternate in narration even if either one did not experience the story firsthand. The next sequence that takes place around the kitchen table shows mother and daughter having a (paradoxical) theoretical discussion about the love between parent and child. According to Chantal who cites Jewish tradition, one does not need to love their parents or show them affection; instead they should simply respect them. This scene illustrates the difficulty of expressing love between mother and daughter, as adults their attachment is no longer physically expressed through touch although they both still experience a longing for demonstrations of love. Brenda Longfellow argues that Akerman here "reveals much about how her relation to her mother is represented in *No Home Movie*, where the desire for passionate attachment

alternates with an equally powerful demand for distance and detachment" (127-128). There are additional intimate moments showing the interaction between mother and daughter that reveal the tension or strain of their connection; I argue that what Longfellow identifies as distance and detachment are actually two complementary voices which necessitate the others' existence in order to be represented in dialogue. The effect of space on their mother-daughter dialogue is demonstrated in a conversation Chantal has with her mother over Skype. For several minutes they tell each other how much they miss the other and talk about the next time Chantal can visit. As Alisa Lebow surmises in "Identity Slips: The Autobiographical Register in the work of Chantal Akerman" their stated dialogue is not faithful to what is self-evident about their separation,

> The distance that Akerman says she wants to efface actually remains stubbornly in place. It is the distance, in fact, that seems to allow their gushing intimacy. There is quite a difference between how the two women relate across the fibre optic channels versus when they are in the same physical space. The streams of effusive affection, the sobriquets and indulgent tone occur mainly during the periods of physical distance and the doubled mediation: Chantal repeatedly calls her mother "Mamiko," speaking in a sweetly charged voice, as if to a beloved child, and the mother tells her when she smiles a certain way, "I want to squeeze you in my

> arms." This cascade of affect evaporates into a trickle when they're proximate. (58)

My analysis differs from Lebow's in my insistence on reading the visual track of the film in addition to the mother-daughter dialogue. Even though they have an effusive conversation discussing how much they miss each other and what they both did during the day, I argue that the visual aspect of the sequence is disorienting to suggest the disturbing effect of their separation. During this exchange that the camera is fixed in a close-up shot of her mother's face on her computer screen, this extended close-up is the longest of the entire film's. As Lebow describes the "cascade of affect" that "evaporates" when the two are sharing physical quarters, the same could be said for the perspective and closeness of the camera. When the two reunite at the apartment, the camera retreats from the intimate close-up shots. The attachment between Chantal and her mother is shown as inherently uncomfortable because periods of identification and closeness will be interrupted by separation even though distance is necessary for Chantal to develop her own identity and independence. In an interview with Nicole Brenez during the Vienna International Film Festival, Akerman explains that "my mother never let me negotiate a real separation from her—or maybe I'm the one who couldn't do it, as I have trouble even existing. My mother still calls me "mon amour" all the time, I can't stand it"[128] (2011). Although Akerman claims not to

[128] Brenez, Nicole, and Viennale. *Chantal Akerman, the Pajama Interview*. Vienna International Film Festival, 2011. www.lolajournal.com/2/pajama.html

tolerate what she describes as suffocating affection from her mother, she has still chosen to include it in the film. Furthermore, in the portions when it is omitted, the absence of her mother is profoundly felt. There are additional periods of separation that Chantal experiences while she is in her mother's home but her mother is absent. The spectator is made to feel the same sense of distress produced by Chantal's isolation. Nearing the end of the film when it becomes apparent that Natalia is ill and will most likely not recover, the camera cuts to a somber rainy street, the shot is only composed of a dreary day with no people. Peppered throughout the film are multiple shots of the empty turquoise lawn chair in her mother's yard as well as the extended cuts of traveling and long shots of the Middle Eastern desert.

Distance as Death

The theme of death and separation has been addressed in my analysis of the domestic scenes filmed of Natalia and Chantal but it is of primary importance in understanding the extraordinarily long desert shots which begin the film as well as cut it in half. Brenda Longfellow argues that these scenes "do not index singularity, geography, or history; they are pure velocity and perpetual movement, marking a dramatic separation from the maternal space and narrative to embody a kind of virtuality, a suspension of time and a dissolution of identity of space and person" (125). There is little vegetation and no people. The effect is desolate and barren. The end of this sequence brings us to a body of water that appears to be

the sea. There are waves and seaweed; Akerman asserts her presence in the shot through her reflection in the water (1:03:02). The tracking shot moving to the left symbolizes a regressive or alternative movement. Traditional tracking shots move left to right as to symbolize the direction of reading or societal norms and institutionality in western culture. The filmic sequence literally brings us backwards to *la mer,* which is a homonym for the mother *la mère* in French. In this sequence, there is also a correlation between water and the maternal that echoes Bachelard's analysis in *L'eau maternelle et l'eau féminine*. In "Shaped by the Imagination: Myths of Water, Women, and Purity", Eleanor Ruth Hayman describes how the image of the female is linked to notions of water, purity and desire. She also outlines how mythic imagery of the female body is linked to water (2012, 23). Water makes another appearance as a signifier for her mother. A dark sequence that starts in the apartment is disorienting, the spectator cannot see clearly and can only hear the sound of running water and the camera is drawn towards searching for it. The disorientation and anxiety which is portrayed through handheld moving shots is resolved by our arrival to the well-lit bathroom from where the sound is coming. I argue that in the above described scenes, Akerman's use of water as a symbolic representation of the archetype of the mother signals to the spectator the loss of the real mother Nadia.

Chantal's mother's death is never announced or explicitly demonstrated in the narrative space, instead it is represented through a jarring set of sequences that constitute a dramatic aesthetic departure from the scenes of mother-daughter

conversation that make up the majority of the scenes. The final severance between mother and daughter is signified through the last scene in her mother's home after they say their good-byes (1:43:00). Akerman subsequently cuts to an overexposed and nearly all white shot of the view from her mother's balcony, the shot resembles the white light of afterlife. Then the film cuts to a still shot of the desolate desert scape that cleaves the film in two, but unlike the previous tracking shots, here the sequence is a completely still frame. The scene next cuts to the remnants of a small dried-up stream that ran between two hills, the focal point of the landscape shot is what appears to be a valley. From the presence of the white light and the still shot of the valley it is understood that her mother has died.

The end of the film is a disorienting collection of disjointed shots like those I have described above; the mother's absence and Chantal's subsequent depersonalization (evidenced by her own withdrawal from the filmic space) is the only thread linking them together. In the film's last scene, the viewer's gaze is redirected to the familiar mantle of the living room but this time there is no one included in the scene. Alisa Lebow states that it is "empty and inert, the final shot of the mother's apartment stares out from the screen, ominously, like a memento mori, the matching ornamental urns taking on the appearance of two ossuaries" (58). The apartment is eerily quiet, the only sound is Chantal's occasional listless shuffling of her feet and intermittent sounds from the street below. This is emblematic of the title *No Home Movie* because it no longer feels like this is a home: there are no people or conversation or daily activities or remnants of life.

Her isolation and depression at having lost her mother is metaphorically represented by the emptiness on screen and lack of action within the visual frame. As is suggested in Lebow's description of the two matching ornamental urns' somber and foreboding appearance, I argue that this last scene is the final illustration of the unbreakable mother-daughter bond. Chantal fails to individuate or separate herself from her attachment to her mother, in the final shot Chantal is symbolically forced to join her mother in death as is symbolized by the two seeming "ossuaries". The film never shows Chantal openly grieving or continuing to live without her mother, instead her representation on film has withdrawn or shrunk to the symbol of an empty urn that resides next to what I interpret as her mother. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler explores all the ways in which the human condition is undone by forces such as grief. On the process of mourning, Butler writes "I think instead that one mourns when one accepts the fact that the loss one undergoes will be one that changes you, changes you possibly forever, and that mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation the full result of which you cannot know in advance" (19). She argues that through this transformation, we necessarily must incorporate parts of the loved one lost in order to reconstitute the ego and the self. In *No Home Movie*, the loss of her mother was so devastating that the self could not reconstruct; the daughter's identity was so inextricably attached to the bond with her mother that after her mother's death she failed to exist at all. This disappearance of Chantal within the frame of the film underlines a theme running throughout the entire chapter, that

the mother cannot exist without the presence of her child (and perhaps vice versa). Thus, this is how the New Medusas Chantal Akerman and Christine Angot mortalize and demythify the archetype of the mother: by offering homage to their own mother from the standpoint of their own actual, lived experiences.

Conclusion: Writing with Heavy Hands

In addition to questioning misogynistic myth, at stake in the analysis of my dissertation is the position of the writer in relation to its text. In Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, a collection of five lectures he was about to deliver at the time of his death, the book's first chapter 'Lightness' tells the story of the Medusa as an embodiment of heaviness. He begins his talk by explaining "why I have come to regard lightness as a virtue rather than a fault, where among the works of the past I find examples of my ideal of lightness, and how I locate this quality in the present and project it into the future" (3). Heaviness, he explains, paralyzes him as a writer whenever he tries to transgress the boundaries between autobiography, history and fiction. Calvino argues that two literary tendencies have been in competition over the centuries: "one that seeks to make language a weightless element that hovers over things like a cloud, or, better, a fine dust, or better still, a magnetic field; another that seeks to imbue language with the weight and thickness and concreteness of objects and bodies and sensations" (18). Writing in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* at the end of the 20th century, Calvino is a primary example of how misogynistic myth of Medusa continues into our present-day and needs to be rewritten. The New Medusas write with a heavy hand (and perhaps a heavy heart) but they bring visibility and light to the unspeakable elements of life that society hides in the shadows. All six refuse to counter the violence and weight of the Medusa through the dematerialization and erasure advocated by Calvino. Their works find their

power in concretized writings about objects, sensations, and the body. The boundary between public and private is destroyed by the Medusa's gaze. A willingness and practice of sharing these intimate themes and experiences is one of the foundational features of womens' writing and feminism.

As I have shown in my chapters *Gone Girls*, *Petrified Colonial Pasts* and *(im)Mortalized Mothers*, the New Medusas are rewriting myths about femininity: what it means to be a girl, to be a mother, a daughter and to be a woman as Other. Through the rewriting of misogynistic myth, the New Medusas subvert the elite exclusionary order of literature, cinema, and critical theory discourse. In *The Encyclopedia of Feminism*, Lisa Tuttle writes that it is the work of feminist theory to ask new questions of old texts (1986). The New Medusas respond to this call by a strategic revisionist use of old tropes about femininity and gender imagery as a way of transforming the self. They also call into question the relationship between time and feminist movements. How does the past influence feminist projections into the future? And are there timeless or eternal truths inherent to women's condition? My dissertation unearths these points of contention between the different feminisms and puts them in dialogue with one another.

Gone Girls

As I show in the chapter "Gone Girls", it is only through the destruction of the entire society along with its norms that patriarchal oppression can be avenged. Virginie Despentes in *Apocalypse bébé* and Catherine Breillat in *A ma sœur !* reappropriate a destructive gaze and violence as a feminist tool of subversion and

as a sign of self-actualizing femininity as it is transposed onto the figure of the girl. In this chapter, I reveal the trauma and marginalization the girls experience at the hands of patriarchal society and how they claim this violence in order to subvert and rewrite rules about girlhood. On the meta-textual level this chapter illustrates the tensions and rivalries between the different waves of feminism. Breillat and Despentes are unabashedly sex positive and queer theory embracing which puts them in direct opposition to some tenants of second-wave feminism. I argue that the violence they commit against all that is normative also includes what they consider to be the more restrictive and regressive elements of earlier forms of feminism. If we return to the classical inception of the Medusa myth, competition between women was the primary cause of Medusa's transformation into a monster. Indeed, according to Ovid's account of the Medusa myth, it was Athena, another woman, who was ultimately responsible for turning Medusa into a monster. Poseidon raped Medusa in Athena's temple, but Athena blamed Medusa for being a temptress by virtue of being beautiful. Instead of showing solidarity or compassion, Athena shamed and afflicted violence on another woman for a crime committed by a man. The myth is replayed in Despentes' and Breillat's works on several levels: both teenage punk heroines Anais and Valentine experience sexual trauma and are hardened because of it, they also find no solace or comfort in the presence of other women. Instead, they experience violence at the hands of men and other women. In revenge and as a remedy, the

only solution is to destroy everything–even if they must sacrifice themselves and the future in the process.

Petrified Colonial Pasts

Like all the writers and filmmakers in my dissertation, both Marguerite Duras and Claire Denis throughout their careers have transgressed classifications through the blurring of the lines between fiction and autobiography. Through reading their depictions of the postcolonial gaze as an extension of the Medusa, a lived history emerges through use of metaphor and symbolism. For Duras and Denis, writing and filmmaking are a source of power and reclamation of submission or oppression by patriarchal forces. They refuse to be silenced by their positions in the margins and thereby commit to revealing inconvenient truths. Through their petrified colonial pasts, their experiences become immortalized and eternal. Also encapsulated in the New Medusas' Petrified Colonial Pasts are the traces of literary and intellectual theory; across the two historical periods of Duras and Denis' works there is a clear evolution or transmutation of the theoretical concept of hybridity. As I have shown in the introduction to "Petrified Colonial Pasts", the critical perception of hybridity has shifted from an (unfounded) optimism that it could create a positive, emancipatory space to an informed pessimism that is a consequence of time's demonstration of its conceptual limitations. They are unafraid to show vestiges of a colonial, political and theoretical past that is currently (or contemporaneously with their works) inappropriate and embarrassing. Claire Denis and Marguerite Duras show a high

level of self-awareness in the works I study in this chapter; they are cognizant of the fact that they have been criticized or unforgivingly interpreted in what I call the proto-versions of *White Material* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (Denis' *Chocolat* and Duras' *L'Amant*). The New Medusas are unafraid to revisit a problematic colonial past in which they are personally and directly implicated. Furthermore, their insistence on revisiting the historical or what may be maligned as dated instead of competing to be the newest or most contemporary is revolutionary. Like the Medusa, their power is inextricably linked to the traumas and transgressions of their pasts.

(im)Mortalized Mothers

Christine Angot's *Un amour impossible* and Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie* redefine the female gaze, they show us very real relationships between mother and daughter. Through their dialogues and their bond, the female dialectical rewrites myth about the mother-daughter bond and more generally the condition of women. In works such as Simone de Beauvoir's short autobiographical piece *Une mort très douce* (1964) she recounts the last months she spent with her mother before her death. Her narrative slips into theorizing on the oppressive condition of being a mother, a role that de Beauvoir rejects as part of her understanding of engaged feminist positionality. Conversely, Irigaray makes suggestions of how women can be self-determined and self-actualized through the repair and strengthening of the mother-daughter relationship that has been ravaged by patriarchal notions of femininity and motherhood. This bond is

characterized by the antagonistic forces of identification and separation which is largely emblematic of Akerman and Angot's entanglements with symbolic discourse. By showing a more reciprocal or horizontal type of relationship between daughter and mother, both Angot and Akerman are rejecting the hierarchization of the child as inferior to the symbolic authority of the mother.

They refuse to portray women characters as the typical construct of Woman as understood by the masculine imagination. Their representations defy the impetus to show or write characters that are a reflection or imitation of dominant universalized discourse. As seen in the works analyzed by Angot and Akerman, the mother symbolizes the antithesis of institutionality and is an expression of feminism for both. The female gaze is central since both Angot and Akerman reject logocentric depictions and universalized tropes on maternity. The New Medusas both express the importance of documentation and recording their narratives on both the intimate and the global scale. This chapter also asks the larger question: how do we celebrate and remember our mothers?

Throughout this chapter I have explored the ways in which the New Medusas mortalize the figure of the mother, while as my title "(im)Mortalized Mothers" suggests, the issue of immortality and death is equally present and important. Hanging over both *No Home Movie* and *Un amour impossible* is the specter of death and its finality. As I argued above in the final section, *No Home Movie* is a somber farewell to her mother and, by extension, to life itself.

Although Christine Angot's mother in *Un amour impossible* is still alive at the end of the novel, the love story between mother and daughter has long passed and is far beyond repair. Although I have shown how the New Medusas craft their own answers to the question of representation of the mother, my study also provokes new, troubling, and unresolved ones, too. What is it about mothers that make them so difficult to write about or venerate in real time? Why are they relegated to the realm of homage and retrospective? Why are they so hard (or as Angot puts it, *impossible)* to love?

The Many Faces of the New Medusas

The New Medusas follow the example set by Cixous in *Le Rire de la Méduse*; they refuse to write universalized depictions of reified femininity. These six women rewrite misogynistic myth by sharing their subjective truths. Nonetheless, in all of the works studied, there are many overlapping and shared experiences which further illustrate the importance of using an embodied symbol of femininity instead of parsing out or dividing experience and emotions from the human element. In the composition of my dissertation, I discovered a multiplicity of thematic textual threads that run through the entirety of my corpus. The chapter on rebellious girlhood could have featured the works of the other four New Medusas. The same interchangeability applies to the second chapter on the Medusa as a marginalized outsider or my last chapter on the mother-daughter bond. This is another way that women writers and filmmakers distinguish

themselves from convention: their novels and films do not adopt a singular thematic approach, instead they weave multiple themes and threads from life which is similarly jumbled with multiple meanings, conflicted signifiers and resistance to abstraction. In writing and in filmmaking, the New Medusas do not attempt to artificially assign a singular thematic meaning to their text. Instead, they write their bodies, they write their whole selves as women.

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