Gender, Genre, and Pleasure: Eroticism and its Limits in French and Francophone Literature (1950-2010)

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Abstract

This dissertation has two primary goals, the first of which revolves around disentangling the genre of erotic literature from interrelated categories, most prominently pornography and romance. An extremely understudied and widely misunderstood literary genre, erotica has been dismissed in both the academic sphere and the popular milieu with accusations of being "classy smut" or "explicit romance", yet in doing so, erotic literature's unique aesthetic, affective, and philosophical qualities are ignored. Part of this issue originates in the way in which pornography and romance are studied; while the psychological effects of reading the two are still being studied, there is very little research done on how readers interact with these texts emotionally. By using affective literary criticism to scrutinize how readers engage with these genres and why they choose them, this dissertation clarifies the manner in which erotica stimulates the reader cognitively, challenging him or her to reconsider notions of desire, love, and power. This, in turn, cleaves a difference between pornography, the primary aim of which is to please the reader sexually, and romance, a genre that consistently satisfies the reader emotionally, neither of which challenge the reader's worldview.

The second objective of this dissertation is to reposition erotic literature as a viable object for feminist analysis, both in the Global North and the Global South. For a variety of reasons, feminist authors and activists in both the United States and Europe have ignored erotica, either considering it too explicit or not explicit enough to advance women's liberation, yet the genre's potential for innovative expression, intellectual debate, and intimate connection could lend itself to such causes. The corpus, which spans the mid-1950s to the mid-2000s and includes Dominique Aury's *Histoire d'O* (1954), Guillaume Lescable's *Lobster* (2003), Catherine Breillat's *Pornocracie* (2001), and Nedjma's *L'Amande* (2004), possesses unique aesthetic qualities that either implicitly or explicitly break down boundaries between Self and Other, providing models for how feminist writers could use erotica for their praxes.

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Introduction

Historical Context: Spectres of Obscenity and Pornography

In 1857, Gustave Flaubert was famously tried for obscenity due to the numerous adulterous scenes in his masterpiece *Madame Bovary*. As Sarane Alexandrian recounts of the affair, "Flaubert jugé à la 6e Chambre correctionnelle pour *Madame Bovary*, dont le procureur Pinard dénonça dans son réquisitoire « la couleur lascive »"[1] (Alexandrian 212). Of particular focus during the trial was the infamous carriage scene in which the married Emma and her lover Léon remain enclosed in a coach for several hours, presumably having sex, a curious aspect given that Flaubert had modified his original manuscript at the behest of his publishers, instead "...ask[ing] a note be inserted indicating this piece of pre-censorship to his readers. This note doubtless drew the attention of potential censors by suggesting the missing passage was explicit in a way it is not" (Harrison 46). Perhaps owing to changes in readers' moralities and sensibilities, modern editions tend to omit this note and include the text as it was originally written. Nevertheless, it seems almost ludicrous in hindsight that what would become one of the most influential and widely-read novels in the 19th-century French literary canon would be nearly banned outright, but Flaubert's arrest and court case testify to the broader question of the often tense relationship between a text's vulgarity and value. In the popular imagination, it would seem as though the two are antithetical, with the more obscenity contained in a text inversely correlated to its value as a serious literary object. To complicate this matter further, the notion of worth seems additionally related to the historical context of a work's creation, affecting the way a text is interpreted and judged, such as the aforementioned depictions of adultery in Flaubert's novel for which he was brought to court on charges of "outrages aux bonnes mœurs" [*insults to public decency*].

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[1] "Flaubert was tried in the 6th Correctional Chamber for *Madame Bovary*, whose "lascivious color" was denounced by Prosecutor Pinard in his indictment." Translation mine.

Yet the trial organized around *Madame Bovary* was only one in a highly-publicized series of similar legal proceedings that affected several other canonical texts of the era, such as Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857). As Harrison explains, "The law under which *Madame Bovary* was prosecuted was that of 17 May 1819, which remained in force until 1881 and which aimed to suppress the exhibition, distribution, or sale of any printed matter which constituted an 'outrage à la morale publique et religieuse et aux bonnes mœurs'. …Most of the writers who were tried during the nineteenth century (of which there were twenty-four in all, the majority of them tried for offences to *les bonnes mœurs*) seemingly felt scant respect for the courts which tried them and for the justice they supposedly represented" (Harrison 52-3). However, this time period marked a turning point for censorship in France, as Flaubert successfully defended his work, the lawyers serving as his counsel painting the author as "...the respectable, predictable bourgeois individual to whom sound intentions could be attributed" which signified "...the developing crisis in the self-confidence of the censoring authorities with regard to the foundations of their own criteria of evaluation" (Harrison 48).[2] As opposed to simply looking at the content of works, judicial bodies began to consider the author's background and character, as well as his or her intentions when creating texts considered obscene. Perhaps because of this shift in standards, legal reforms were adopted towards the end of the century, not unlike those in North America and the United Kingdom, most prominently the *Loi sur la liberté de la presse du 29 juillet 1881* [Law on the Freedom of the Press of 29 July 1881], also referred to as the Lisbonne Law.

[2] Similar crises and reforms related to the freedom of the press occurred during and after the French Revolution, particularly with regards to the genre of libertine literature. Libertinage, a subgenre of erotic literature that appeared in the 18th century, combined explicit writing about sexuality with political and philosophical discourse that served to envisage a post-monarchical French state. Obscenity trials did occur during this time period, albeit not with any substantial frequency. Despite popular belief, the Marquis de Sade – perhaps the most infamous and widely-studied libertine author – was never convicted of obscenity in court; rather, his arrest and trial related to an alleged kidnapping and rape which led to imprisonment in a series of mental institutions until the end of his life. For more on censorship in 18th century France, see Darnton, Robert and Daniel Roche. 1989. *Revolution in Print: the Press in France, 1775-1800*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Inspired by the *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du citoyen de 1789*, the Law on the Freedom of the Press is considered one of the fundamental legal documents on the freedom of speech in France. The law had wide-reaching effects, not only concretely defining legal standards for slander and libel but also liberalizing and revitalizing the literary outputs of French presses, with certain contemporary estimates proclaiming that the number of periodicals and newspapers roughly doubled within a decade of the law being passed (Schwartz 29-30). Although censorship and obscenity trials became increasingly rare, some exceptions were made for propaganda, particularly during times of war. In 1894, the *Procès des trente* [Trial of the Thirty] took place, which charged thirty anarchists with *associations de malfaiteurs* [criminal associations], ultimately seeking to legitimize the *lois scélérates* [villainous laws] that were passed beginning in the previous year. These were largely meant to curb freedom of expression, particularly among anarchists. The Lisbonne Law largely held until Nazi occupation of France during World War II, wherein efforts were made to censor all newsprint, radio, and film in order to minimize the activities of dissenters.[3]

The 1950s saw the dismantling of many censorship laws that were instituted in the previous decade, though this does not imply an absence of censorship. While speaking about films banned for sexual content after 1944, Hervé observes a consistent number as the years pass, which he attributes to changing standards, "Au delà, il semble que cette cause d'intervention de la censure ne diminue pas, mais que la pudeur des censeurs augmente et les amène à taire leur motivation. Cette hypothèse est étayée par le grand nombre de films interdits aux moins de 16 ans sans explications mais dont le titre est suffisamment évocateur pour nous laisser entrevoir leur contenu : on peut citer *Gigolette*, *Princesse des faubourgs*,

[3] The Press Law, though a step forward, also had its limits—particularly with regards to works deemed to incite political unrest or threaten the state. The eventual collapse of these freedoms during the Nazi occupation of France further illustrated the vulnerability of literary freedom in times of political instability. For more details about censorship in the 19th century, see Matlock, Jann. 1996. *The Limits of Reformism: The Novel, Censorship, and the Politics of Adultery in Nineteenth-Century France*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Esclaves du désir ou *Confessions dans la nuit*" (Hervé 95). Yet independent of their reasoning for censoring or banning films, obscenity laws have only rarely been evoked in court settings post-Occupation.[4] A rare exception can be found in the 1950s. Jean Genet's *Querelle de Brest* (1947) was illustrated with 29 homoerotic illustrations by Jean Cocteau and tells the story of attractive sailor, thief, and murderer Georges and includes several explicit scenes of gay sex. The first edition was published anonymously and limited to a run of 525 copies, and in 1954, Genet's publishers was prosecuted for affront to public decency by the Criminal Court of the Seine but ultimately had the charges dismissed on procedural grounds almost two years later.[5]

I bring up notions of obscenity in post-Revolutionary France at the beginning of this study on eroticism not to be overly verbose but rather for a specific reason. The usage of the term *pornography* after its invention in the mid-19th century gradually increased to the point of eclipsing the word "obscene," eventually becoming the most used term for works considered inappropriate for general audiences, particularly after the 1960s. One can largely attribute this change in vocabulary to the rise of the pornographic industry. There is no obscenity industry; rather, pornography becomes a product, and obscenity has gone from the private sphere to the public market, perhaps explaining the near-absence of obscenity trials in the current year. Yet with the rise of the seemingly all-encompassing term *pornographic*, similar but related concepts seem to lose their unique identities, having been referred to as *pornography* or, at least in the US, the more euphemistic *adult entertainment*. That is, if everything obscene becomes pornographic, then where does that leave notions of the bawdy and the erotic, for example?

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[4] In the present day, most cases of censorship in France relate to racist, anti-religious, and homophobic hate speech as well as the promotion of illegal drug use (Amnesty International).

[5] For more information about the publication history of Genet's text, as well as several examples of Cocteau's drawings, see this excellent 2019 exhibit by the University of Indiana Libraries and the Kinsey Institute on banned books: <https://bannedbooks.indiana.edu/items/show/35.>

Concerning the lattermost specifically, if the pornography continues to make its presence more and more known in the public sphere, can the same be said of erotica? Is there such a thing as the erotic industry that produces products on a mass scale in the same way that the pornographic industry does with films? If so, how are the two different? If not, why? How does erotic literature differ from pornographic literature? Could the two terms be used in the place of one another? If not, other than the question of production and consumption that surrounds a capitalistic marketplace which would hypothetically separate them from pornography, is there something else that could separate erotica from obscenity? It is here that my dissertation intervenes. While the notion of eroticism has been ill-defined, both in the popular milieu and in the domains of feminist and sexuality studies, I explore the term's limits by comparing it with other associated genres, such as pornography and romance, particularly with regards to their differing aims and effects on readers. Though the term likely comes from the Greek word *eros* (the emotion of love), many theorists, most notably Jean-Jacques Pauvert, have argued that the notion of literary eroticism is separate from romance, and other genres that frequently depict the physical act of sex, such as pornographic, bawdy, banned, and obscene, are additionally distinguished from erotic literature. However, these studies fail to provide any meaningful differences between erotica, pornography, and romance. Certainly, there exists some overlap between these textual genres in that they transgress morality and implicate sexuality either explicitly or implicitly**,** but there must be some significant distinction between the two genres. After all, if *erotic* can be substituted for *pornographic* or *romantic*, for example, what is the utility of the former term? Why not use *pornography* as a catch-all for every work deemed sexually explicit or *romance* for all texts that combine emotions and sex? Is it only the historical use of the term that keeps it in circulation? Is this enough justification to keep using the word, or might there be other reasons?

Notes on Positionality and Terminology

In order to avoid any ambiguity moving forward, it would be prudent to mention both my own position, as well as the usage of terminology in this dissertation. Given that a large part of my research deals with feminism in both the Global North and the Global South, I am cognizant that my position as a white American man may give some readers pause.[6] Even in the present day, the role of men within the feminist movement provokes widely disparate reactions, and it is my firm belief that feminism should center and privilege female voices. It is not my intention to speak over women, even and especially in spaces that are ostensibly meant to deconstruct and critique such practices, and it is for this reason that I would refer to my own position as pro-feminist or a feminist ally. It is likewise neither my aim to minimize the importance of the works by female authors nor to misrepresent their experiences.

Despite the relatively nebulous definition of the erotic within both scholarly texts and the popular imagination, the primary focus of this work is the genre of erotic literature. Terms such as *erotic*, *eroticism*, and *erotica* are not synonymous. The first term, *erotic*, which seemingly would refer to the popular sense of being sexual without overtness, is rather a philosophical concept worked on by several notable French literary scholars, including Georges Bataille and Jean-Jacques Pauvert. While this does relate to human sexuality, the concept relates to not only the physical sensation of sex but additionally the cognitive and emotional effects. The second term, *eroticism*, serves as a noun form of the adjectival first term and refers to the collective manifestation of this quality in an individual text or collection of literary texts and its study. The third term, *erotica*, refers to the literary genre

[6] While the expression "Global South" has been defined in a variety of ways, I refer to the territories, both individually and collectively, whose past histories and present realities are shaped by a legacy of colonization, racism, and exploitation. The epistemologies found therein are still formed by an ever-shifting international economy that often excludes or otherwise prevents them from participating. This is not synonymous with the term "non-Western," which can encompass countries outside of the United States, Canada, and Western Europe that do not grapple with legacies of being colonized, such as Japan.

primarily concerned with the erotic. It should also be noted that, while it is difficult for many to remain neutral on issues such as pornography or romance while discussing questions of feminism, I have done my best to remain so in this work. While my perceptions on these genres as objects of feminist liberation are mixed, this dissertation is not primarily concerned with pornography or romance but rather uses them to explore erotica as a core subject. Consequently, I have attempted to reserve the vocalizing of moral positions on more polemical topics in order to minimize diversions.

Not unlike the word *erotic*, the term *affect theory* is used in this dissertation interchangeably with *reader-response theory*. Developed in the late 1960s by American and German literary scholars, affective literary criticism considers the reader, particularly his or her subjective response, as key to the interpretation and reception of a text. For example, while all literature may be considered in terms of eliciting a response from readers, pornography (and perhaps erotica) are unique in that the principle concern is arousing a sexual response from readers. While many of its foundational members, notably Louise Rosenblatt and Norman R. Holland, referred to this form of analysis as *reader-response theory*, in more recent years, it has come to be referred to as *affective literary criticism* as more branches have developed, such as sociological reader-response theory, psychoanalytic reader-response theory, and subjective reader-response theory. Despite this small nuance, I use the two terms synonymously, referring to both the wider literary school of thought, as well as the original, more foundational theories.

While this study strives to present information as clearly and concretely as possible, it is worth noting that erotic literature is a highly understudied genre, perhaps due to its ill-defined nature. Consequently, many theoretical works penned in French on the topic generally do not have official English translations and vice-versa; when possible, a published English version is cited, though otherwise and unless noted, translations are my own.

Theoretical Concepts and Critical Frameworks

This research primarily uses feminist theory to study eroticism for several reasons. Firstly, this form of epistemological analysis – with the exception of perhaps film studies – has the largest and most consistent body of research about sexuality and media, dating back to at least the 1980s. Secondly, given the popular conception of pornography's association with the visual and, by extension, the masculine, alongside erotica's connection to the emotional and, by extension, the feminine, it seems logical to center this work around feminism and women's studies. That is to say, if erotic literature forms the central focus of this dissertation and the literary genre has been referred to as "pornography for women'' in popular culture, then it would be natural to use theory focused on women as the primary philosophical lens through which the literary sources are read in this work. Thirdly, as discussed more thoroughly in the first and second chapters of this dissertation, while efforts to reclaim both pornographic films and romance novels as potentially feminist objects have occurred since the late 2000s, there have been very few, if any, such attempts to reposition erotic literature as either empowering or otherwise feminist in nature. This is particularly curious, given the increasing visibility and popularity of the so-called erotic romance (most infamously E.L. James's *Fifty Shades* series [2011-2012], discussed more in chapter three). Sometimes referred to humorously as "mommy porn," perhaps due to its popularity with women above the age of thirty, category romance traditionally presents a more conventional heterosexual courtship with more veiled references to sexuality than its erotic and pornographic peers. Yet with the popularization of the erotic romance, the lines between the two categories begin to blur, and one must ask how the genre of romance differs from erotic literature and, by extension, pornography.

During the so-called American feminist sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s pro-pornography feminists argued with anti-pornography feminists about the merits of pornography for the broader feminist movement, a debate that has continued to the present.[7] With both of these positions, the term *pornography* appears to be used as a catch-all for every form of sexually explicit material, both written and visual, and independent of its actual content. Only rarely is erotic literature mentioned as such and, in almost all of these instances, it is dismissed as no different from pornography, albeit for different reasons. Many anti-pornography feminists, but especially Catharine MacKinnon, habitually view erotica as equally as exploitative as pornography, advancing an androcentric view of pleasure founded upon the objectification of the female body. By contrast, pro-sex feminists, such as Ellen Willis, believe erotic literature to be inferior to pornography due to the former genre's supposed usage of euphemistic language to focus on emotions instead of sex, thereby not going far enough to challenge popular stereotypes about female sexuality, particularly those that cast women as overly sentimental or unconcerned with physical pleasure. In France, these arguments shaped much of feminism in the 1990s, though as with the American feminist theory of the decades prior, the texts produced by major thinkers tend to ignore erotica entirely as an avenue for feminist liberation.

The previously mentioned affective literary criticism forms another important critical framework for this research. Many prominent thinkers ranging from Michel Foucault and Susan Sontag have worked with the nebulous concept of eroticism but have usually used it interchangeably with the pornographic, failing to account for any difference between the two concepts and perpetuating the all-encompassing usage of the latter term. Others still, most

[7] For the purpose of clarity, the so-called American feminist sex wars refers to debates surrounding the value of pornography for women's liberation that arose in the late 1970s and intensified during the early to mid-1980s. During this time, mainstream feminism split into two distinct camps: anti-pornography feminists (sometimes referred to as *radical feminists*) and pro-sex feminists (sometimes referred to as *liberal feminists* and, on rare occasions, derisively as *libertarian feminists*). For more information, see Ferguson, Ann. 1984. "Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists." *Signs* 10 (1): 106-112.

notably Georges Bataille, began projects with the explicit aim of focusing on eroticism but ultimately did not define what the term actually means, despite composing an entire text on the topic. One commonality between these authors can be identified as their focus on the contents of texts without considering how the objects of their analyses affect readers on physical, emotional, or cognitive levels. This stands in stark contrast to affective criticism, a form of literary theory developed in the 1960s and 1970s as a reaction to Barthes's *La mort de l'auteur* (1968) by European and American academics, such as Stanley Fish, Norman R. Holland, Wolfgang Iser, Albert Mordell, and Louise Rosenblatt. Unlike more formalist criticism, reader-response privileges the reader over the author, positing that the meaning and reception of a text is derived from the reader as opposed to the author.

Given the intensely personal nature of sexuality, it would be logical to consider not just how authors express themselves through their erotic texts but how readers respond to these works in order to better understand the limits of the genre, though this has not been attempted with erotica at present.[8] However, the founders of reader-response theory have worked with a variety of genres and forms, ranging from contemporary horror to classical poetry, and these observations can still prove useful. This is particularly true when considering the voluminous body of research that has emerged from feminist theorists, particularly on the psychological effects of watching or reading pornography. Yet if we accept, for example, the claims of Gail Dines, Andrea Dworkin, and Robin Morgan that sexual assault increases as pornography becomes more readily available due to the consumer dehumanizing women, can the same be said of erotica? How does one genre affect readers differently than others, if at all? What are their unique stylistic qualities, and how do these

[8] It is worth noting that Mordell is the only one of these authors who explicitly touches upon questions of eroticism in his most widely-read text, *The Erotic Motive in Literature* (1919). Oddly, it would appear as though he uses the concept as synonymous with the psychoanalytic unconscious. Although intriguing, it is his other theories that are most useful in the context of this research.

differences impact reading choices? That is, why do certain readers choose one and not the other?

Chapter Structure and Argument

This work is structured into four chapters, the initial three of which dissect and interrogate the limits of various literary genres on affective, aesthetic, and ontological levels, while the latter moves outside of the Western literary canon. Chapter 1 begins with a brief sketch of the difficult relationship between pornography and feminism during the second-wave and early third-wave feminist movement in the United States and France. After a brief engagement with affective literary criticism, I turn to Dominique Aury's *Histoire d'O* (1954), perhaps one of the most notorious BDSM novels of the contemporary age. Though dismissed by second-wave anti-pornography feminist thinkers as another example of pornographic literary misogyny, I argue that the text itself would be better aligned with erotica by virtue of its focus on personal growth and preoccupation with broader philosophical questions, such as the nature of sacrifice and the politics of love.

Chapter 2 deals primarily with romance literature. Popular thought dictates that both romance and erotica handle sexuality in veiled terms, with the language euphemistic and centered around emotions as opposed to physicality. Yet, as with pornography, what – if anything – separates the two genres? If both deal with feelings and relationships, is the distinction merely a matter of how much sexuality is in a work? How does the increasing popularity of the so-called "erotic romance" blur what lines may exist? I argue that, while romance literature can reinforce unfortunate racist and sexist stereotypes and focuses largely on the pursuit and possession of someone else, erotic literature attempts to understand another individual through the pursuit of an emotional or sexual relationship. I begin with a brief discussion that outlines the historical origins of romance novels in North America, England, and France in order to better outline the conventions of the genre, such as love triangles,

helpers and harmers, rigid gender roles, and a happy ending. After this, I transition to an exploration of the influence of feminism on more contemporary texts; of particular note is the advent of so-called "chick lit," a female-centered genre that recounts the pressures of modern womanhood, often implicating a romance. As with the first chapter, affect theory helps in distinguishing romance from other genres, and it is for this reason that a discussion of this theoretical approach follows. This chapter focuses on an analysis of Guillaume Lescable's *Lobster* (2003). Classified as belonging to a number of different genres, I argue that the text, while borrowing several conventions of the romance genre, best represents an erotic text due to its dissolution of boundaries not only between human and animal but additionally male and female and predator and prey.

Chapter 3 of this project expands on what defines erotic literature more concretely; while this may seem redundant, given the first two sections of the work which discussed pornography and romance alongside erotica, when we have established what erotic literature is not, a richer discussion ensues about what erotic literature is and where its appeal lies. If we accept that pornography as a literary and filmic genre is defined primarily by its focus on physical sensation and romance novels and films by their focus on emotional feeling, then what can we say characterizes erotica? Is the genre defined by another affective concept, such as intellectual stimulation, or a certain aesthetic quality, such as its language? What is the effect – sexual or otherwise – of erotica on the reader and is this different from those solicited by pornography and romance? And perhaps more polemically, can one argue that erotic literature is removed from concepts such as sexuality or feeling entirely? This section begins with a discussion of George Bataille's *L'Erotisme* (1957), perhaps the longest text dedicated to eroticism as a philosophical concept. While this work is groundbreaking in its subject matter, particularly for its time, retrospective criticism has been mixed, with some pointing out several glaring faults in Bataille's methodology, such as his failure to actually define

eroticism concretely in either the introduction or the conclusion of the text. From there, I transition into a synthesis of feminist conceptions of eroticism and erotica, both in the United States and France, with a particular focus on poststructuralism, especially the concept of *écriture féminine*. Described by Hélène Cixous as a parallel to masturbation, this form of writing, which is largely – but not exclusively – practiced by women, appears to have as its ultimate goal reclaiming of the subject and paving the way for a more complete sense of Self. Some brief notes on affect theory follow. While this may seem redundant, given that theorists who developed reader-response theory generally avoided the genre of erotic literature, as previously noted, I focus on the notion of fantasy in this section. The chapter focuses on an analysis of Catherine Breillat's *Pornocratie* (2001), a critically divisive and often maligned novel that continues discussions surrounding eroticism roughly fifty years after Bataille. Breillat's arguments related to the stigmatization of sexual expression not only serve as a means of problematizing the Self but additionally serve as a means to reposition erotic literature as a viable project for identity-based struggles.

Chapter 4 broadens the scope of erotica beyond its traditional North American and European-centric focus to include a transnational perspective. While the inclusion of theorists and authors of color may initially appear to be tokenism, this is not my intention. Rather, my goal is to critically engage with diverse cultural and historical contexts that offer unique insights into erotica's role in challenging hegemonic sexual and gender norms. By examining works from the Global South, this chapter aims to highlight how these authors and theorists contribute to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of erotica's potential for feminist praxis, demonstrating that these perspectives are integral to the broader discourse, not supplementary or secondary. This chapter poses several unique challenges not present in the other parts of this dissertation, many of which related to the lack of materials that directly confront the production of erotic literature in the postcolonial Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

region, as well as the specific cultural context in which such texts are written and published. As opposed to the first and second chapters – wherein a large body of research exists on pornography and romance, respectively – and the third chapter – in which the theoretical texts on erotica were largely written by members of the French and US intelligentsia – the number of sources that deal with contemporary erotic literature in the Global South is far fewer. Furthermore, the texts that are analyzed in the third chapter deal primarily with the barriers of publishing erotica in Western Europe and North America from the 1970s to the current year, which does not account for the unique historical and social factors that limit the production of erotica in the MENA region, such as the influence of Islam and the continued presence of colonial-era laws. While some transnational and postcolonial feminists have written about the role of sexuality in a non-Western-centric feminist praxis, these have only been tangential discussions related to either heterosexual (or, more rarely, homosexual male) pornography and prostitution that reinforce imperialist mentalities by exploiting the postcolonial world through an increasingly-globalized capitalist system, as well as the propagation of colonialist fantasies about sexuality of men and women in the Global South. Can erotica serve as both an avenue for anti-colonial feminist praxis, then? Or is this literary genre completely antithetical to the goals of postcolonial and transnational feminist scholars? This chapter begins with an outlining of the position of American transnational feminist theorists towards pornography and erotica. As with the first chapter, it is not my intention to center US thinkers; rather, several prominent US-based feminists were involved with the development of transnational feminism. After this, I shift towards two examples of Franco-Arab authors who use erotic themes within their work, Abdellah Taïa's *Une mélancolie arabe* (2008) and Assia Djebar's *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985), in order to illustrate the potential liberatory potential of the erotic for writers in the Global South. In the final part of this chapter, I analyze Nedjma's *L'Amande* (2004). Marketed as the first modern erotic novel

written by a Muslim woman, the text uses explicit sexual language but is not considered pornographic in tone. The insistence on intimacy which ultimately leads to the dissolution of boundaries between Self and Other – as reflected in the narrator's personal history and the structure of the narrative – firmly aligns the narrative with erotic work.

All of the primary texts in this dissertation were selected for a myriad of overlapping reasons. Firstly, despite all of their critical and commercial success, there has been almost nothing written about most of them in the scholarly domain. The sole exception may be Aury's novel, which is usually not discussed in terms of its genre and instead has various themes as its object of analysis, such as violence or religion. Secondly, given the importance of feminism to this dissertation, it was my intention to represent as many female voices as possible. However, Lescable's novel was included in order to broaden the scope of the bibliography. Thirdly and finally, almost all of the primary texts – once again with the exception of Aury's novel – have been categorized as erotic works by either their publishers or the public concensus, thereby minimizing any diversions to argue about their categorization. This work is done despite the difficulties in defining erotica which include but are not limited to the subjectivity of such an endeavor, as well as the often tense relationship between the genre and the nature of literary canon itself, which has a tendency to marginalize erotic works, presumably under the pretext that such novels are paraliterary in nature or otherwise unserious due to their preoccupation with sexuality.

Ultimately, my argument consists of two main points. Firstly, erotica is an independent literary genre that uses depictions of sex alongside more philosophical questions that challenge the reader's assumptions and stereotypes, engaging with readers on sexual, emotional, and intellectual levels, unlike examples from the pornographic or romance genres As noted by affective literary scholars and as discussed further in chapters one through three, pornography tends to prioritize the reader's orgasm, while romance frequently aims to satisfy

the reader's emotions. Secondly, in contrast to pornography and romance, wherein possession of the Other or being possessed by the Other forms an important aspect of the protagonist's trajectory, as outlined by both feminist and reader-response theorists, erotic literature breaks down the boundary between Self and Other. Consequently, a feminist eroticism, one that destigmatizes the female body, is founded on mutual pleasure, and allows for communication and intimacy, is an entirely separate project from the reclamation of pornography and romance yet still feasible as a means to dismantle patriarchy, racism, and homophobia, both in the Global North and the Global South. French literature, which possesses a developed body of erotic literature and literary criticism related to erotic literature, represents a promising domain for this argument.[9]

[9] See Pauvert's *La Littérature érotique*, especially the preface and chapter 6, for an insightful analysis of libertinage and other pre-Revolution erotic novels.

Chapter 1 – *Rethinking Pornography:* The Story of O *as an Erotic Novel*

Introduction

In her widely-read and widely-critiqued *Intercourse* (1987), radical feminist Andrea Dworkin engages in a lengthy discussion of Georges Bataille's *L'histoire de l'œil* (1928), an erotic novella whose episodic plot largely consists of scenes depicting extreme sex acts and graphic bodily mutilation. Instead of analyzing the work under the lens of psychoanalysis, as Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag have done, Dworkin focuses on the text's representation of the female body, ultimately dismissing *L'œil* as "classy pornography" (*Intercourse* 242).[10] In doing so, she reinforces the misguided, albeit popularized, belief that there is little difference between erotica and pornography aside from a perceived elegance or sophistication. Yet Dworkin's comments about both Bataille's text – and erotic literature broadly – additionally serve as an unfortunate reminder of the often-tense relationship of erotica with feminism, in large part due to a frequent conflation of the erotic with the pornographic among feminist writers. Both anti-pornography and pro-sex crusaders from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s have either dismissed the genre, believing it to be synonymous with the pornographic or, more troublingly, ignored the question of eroticism entirely in their texts.[11]

As erotic literature has come into being as an independent genre over the past three decades or so, contemporary activists and writers from all manners of feminist backgrounds have continued to conflate the erotic with the pornographic. Yet if the two genres are interchangeable, what is the utility in having both terms? Is *erotica* simply a colorful euphemism to avoid using the more emotionally and politically charged term *pornography*? What (if anything) separates the two on aesthetic, affective, philosophical, and psychological

[10] For context, Dworkin's comment is made in the middle of a lengthy discussion about two of Georges Bataille's works: *Histoire de l'oeil* (1928) and *L'Erotisme* (1957). She argues that Bataille's definition of eroticism, which forms the main question in the latter, hinges entirely on the death of the Other, usually women. More detailed commentaries on Bataille's notion of eroticism will be found in the following two chapters.

[11] Examples of other anti-pornography activists who make this mistake but are not cited explicitly in this work include Robin Morgan, Diana Russell, Gail Dines, and Robert Jensen; notable writers in the sex-positive camp who likewise conflated erotica and pornography are Marcia Pally and Susie Bright, who worked largely in the context of anti-censorship.

levels? Though this project, at its core, does not center on pornography, using the vast body of scholarship that centers on this genre may be a helpful entry point into the larger issue of erotica. In order to (re)define the notion of erotica, it seems necessary to elaborate on what erotica is not. Ultimately, this chapter will focus on a reading of another text dismissed as "classy pornography," Domique Aury's iconic *Histoire d'O* (1954). While many radical feminists have categorized Aury's work as misogynistic pornography due to its depiction of the female body during scenes of extreme BDSM, I argue that the novel would be more appropriately categorized as erotica. Though there are constant references to sexuality in-text (a similarity between pornography and erotica), *O* does not present sex solely for the sake of titillation, as in the case of pornographic literature. Rather, Aury's novel uses sexuality to convey broader preoccupations with subjecthood, freedom, and love, broader philosophical concerns that are more typical of erotic literature.

American feminist scholarship forms an important contextual piece of this chapter. During the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s to mid-1980s, pornography became an important rallying point for debates on the feminist potential of both the filmic and written modes. This is not to say that European feminist scholars have not shared such concerns, but American feminists' preoccupations with sexual liberation predate most French feminist discussions of pornography and have shaped the manner in which non-Anglophone feminists engage with the genre. Though some authors, most notably Xavière Gauthier, did discuss pornography in their academic works during the 1970s and 1980s, this was generally not done in relation to women's liberation, and there has been comparatively little discussion of this genre among French feminists until very recently. During the mid-2000s, a number of French writers, most of whom either directed or acted in pornographic films previously, began discussing the liberating potential of pornography for women who choose to either produce or appear in such productions. This movement, likely inspired by the genre of

feminist pornography, which began in the United States during the late 1990s with Candida Royalle, Tristan Taormino, and Erika Lust, has continued to the present day. Perhaps because of the influence of American second- and third-wave feminism, within many of these theoretical works, erotica is either conflated with the pornographic or ignored entirely, and this is reinforced by French writers who have devoted their careers to feminism. For example, in Virginie Despentes's memoir-meets-manifesto *King King Theory* (2006), Despentes discusses, among other salient topics – for example, marriage and sexual violence – the liberatory potential of prostitution and pornography for women but does not comment on erotica at any point. Such authors, while contributing to feminist discourse in important ways, often fail to concretely distinguish between erotica and pornography. Consequently, while the place of pornography in feminism remains controversial and widely debated, erotica's potential to advance a feminist praxis has been overlooked in the US and France.

Following this discussion of feminist theory, I engage with questions of affective criticism. While also not mentioning erotica specifically, reader-response theory does make several pertinent insights into pornography and the manner in which consumers of the genre engage with texts from pornographic and other genres. While fantasy remains an important aspect of all literary genres, as several scholars – most prominently Norman R. Holland – have argued, readers of pornography are not asked to react in the same manner to such works, which largely privilege a sexual response. As I argue, erotic literature instead places such a response alongside emotional and philosophical concerns.

Finally, I turn to Dominique Aury's now-iconic *Histoire d'O* (1954) to illustrate my points. Though the novel has been praised for its literary style and credited as a trailblazer for other female authors, a great deal of controversy has followed the work in the past three decades. Feminist writers, both in the United States and France, have condemned the work as misogynistic due to its objectification of the female body and the explicit violence against the

eponymous protagonist, having written countless articles and book chapters that denounce the text as pornographic in nature. Certainly, there is more than enough reason to categorize the work as such; with its near-constant references to the body and the affective sexual response of most readers, it is easy to believe that Aury's work falls into the trappings of its starker predecessors. However, doing so overlooks its qualities that better align it with erotic literature, particularly with regards to O's inner life and the presence of love in the novel. Consequently, *O* represents an example of an erotic text, one with a certain degree of feminist potential.

Erotica and Pornography in the American Feminist Sex Wars

Since the beginning of the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s, various feminist thinkers in the United States have discussed the question of pornography, often in the broader context of female sexual agency. Though it is difficult to ascertain who was the first to include concerns related to pornography into his or her feminist praxis, discussions about pornography caused an irreparable fracture to develop within the second-wave feminist movement, leading to what would retrospectively be referred to as *the feminist sex wars*, a prolonged debate between feminists about the role of pornography in the women's liberation movement. Unfortunately, regardless of one's positionality in the feminist sex wars, most writers from this time period neglect erotica entirely or use pornography interchangeably with erotica. This is not to imply that non-American feminists did not express any interest in pornography during or after this time period. On the contrary, as will be discussed later in this section, many French feminists published texts which directly or indirectly confronted the question of pornography's worth (or lack thereof) for the feminist movement, particularly towards the end of the millennium. However, given the lasting importance of the American feminist debates on pornography on Western feminism in the 1990s until the present day, it is here that this section begins.

One of the more polemical anti-pornography feminist voices of the 1980s emerged with Catharine MacKinnon, whose efforts to ban pornography gained some traction in the American Midwest. Her arguments were varied and founded on both social and legal criticisms of pornography and were best summarized in her 1981 essay "Sex and Violence: A Perspective," as well as 1987's "Desire and Power." In the former, MacKinnon elaborates on her critiques of the pornographic industry, ultimately arguing that the appeal of pornography lies in its near-constant depiction of violence against women; furthermore, this assertion additionally extends to erotica, "What pornography says about us is that we enjoy degradation, that we are turned on by being degraded. For me that obliterates the line, as a line at all, between pornography on one hand and erotica on the other…" (MacKinnon 265). Questions of feminism aside, what is particularly unsettling about MacKinnon's discussion of pornography is its repeated conflation with erotica. As MacKinnon explicitly states throughout "Sex and Violence," for radical anti-porn feminism, the distinction between pornography and erotica does not exist, as both genres share an inherent misogyny due to their dehumanization and exploitation of the female body. The notion of a feminist erotic is, at least in MacKinnon's world, a contradiction, given that the genre by its very nature upholds male supremacy. Such arguments were advanced by MacKinnon's contemporaries, who continually conflated pornography with erotica and denied the possibility for either to be considered as viable feminist genres until much later.

A similarly radical perspective can be found in the majority of Andrea Dworkin's works. The question of erotica is explicitly raised in 1981's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, wherein Dworkin states in no uncertain terms that the manner in which she defines pornography relates to its etymological origin, bearing little relationship to the erotic. As she plainly states, "The word pornography does not mean 'writing about sex' or 'depictions of the 'erotic' or 'depictions of sexual acts' or 'depictions of nude bodies' or 'sexual

representations' or any other such euphemism. It means the graphic depiction of women as vile whores" (*Pornography* 200). In her critique of the genre, Dworkin highlights that the word *pornography* once referred to artistic representations of prostitution specifically, dismissing popular conceptions of the word's origins as related to nudity or sex broadly. However, one must note that she repeats the decisions that MacKinnon made when discussing the genre, placing the erotic alongside the pornographic, yet Dworkin's argument separates itself from MacKinnon's by dismissing the belief that the latter has anything to do with the former. This is reinforced by her later discussions of pornography as a cultural artifact that, at its core, focuses on the exposure and degradation of the female body. But if pornography is, as Dworkin articulates throughout her literary output, defined by its connection to the dehumanization and objectification of women, can the same be said of erotica? Can eroticism be presented in manners that are different from pornography? Even among those who have critiqued Dworkin's work, as well as within the scholarship that she inspired, many have failed to account for the erotic when discussing representations of female sexuality.

On the opposite side of the feminist sex wars, the self-appointed sex-positive feminists honed counterarguments related to the place of pornography vis-à-vis feminism. Arguably the most well-known of these came from Gayle Rubin, who argued in her essay "Thinking Sex" that condemnation of certain sexual behaviors, including looking at or participating in the production of pornography, is founded upon the creation of a conservative sexual morality, one that anti-porn feminists are too happy to repeat. Throughout her essay, it would seem as though Rubin uses the term *erotic* as similar to, but not synonymous with, questions of sexuality. As she observes at the beginning of her essay while discussing the feminist sex wars, "Contemporary conflicts over sexual values and erotic conduct have much in common with the religious disputes of earlier centuries" (Rubin 267). Throughout her

essay, Rubin uses the term *erotic* multiple times as an adjective to describe physical actions, such as "erotic stimulation," "erotic acts," and so forth; by contrast, sexuality appears more abstract and collective, usually referring to what one thinks (beliefs and morality) as opposed to what one actually does (actions and deeds). Though it is certainly possible that it was utilized as a means of avoiding unnecessary repetition, Rubin's use of the term *erotic* in such instances is curious. It would appear as though a close relationship between the erotic and sex exists based on their frequent association in Rubin's theories of sexuality. Furthermore, one must note that Rubin associates the erotic with action, a connection that is usually made with the pornographic, as opposed to feeling, more often allied with the erotic. Semantic details aside, Rubin's closing remarks are extremely forward-thinking, as she argues that we must not censor pornography or abolish the sex industry in order to combat sexism but rather look at misogyny within the sex industry and on a broader societal level. As Rubin explains, "The sex industry is hardly a feminist utopia. It reflects the sexism that exists in society as a whole. We need to analyze and oppose the manifestations of gender inequality specific to the sex industry. But this is not the same as attempting to wipe out commercial sex" (301-2). Sexuality (and, by extension, representations of sexuality) present new possibilities for feminist inquiry and creativity, and this presumably includes erotic literature. However, in order to realize that potential, we must recognize the political dimensions of sexuality and its implication for marginalized populations. While ultimately denouncing the anti-feminist bias of the sex trade, Rubin refrains from denouncing pornography as inherently contrary to a feminist praxis.

This is also the opinion of noted pro-sex feminist activist Ellen Willis, who wrote several critiques of eroticism and erotica in favor of the pornographic throughout the 1970s and 1980s, though unlike her contemporaries, this had little to do with the actual content of erotic novels. Her issue, it would seem, focuses on the usage of the term *erotic* and its

connotations. In her 1979 essay entitled "Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography", Willis states her belief that the words *erotic* and *erotica* are pointlessly vague and hold little substance when compared to the more concrete legal term *pornography*. Throughout most of her literary output, she makes her frustrations with the framing of erotic texts within feminist conversations very clear, arguing that such discussions only focus on the emotional nature of erotic texts, which only serves to repeat stereotypes about female sexuality:

> And the view of sex that most often emerges from talk about "erotica" is as sentimental and euphemistic as the word itself: lovemaking should be beautiful, romantic, soft, nice, and devoid of messiness, vulgarity, impulses to power, or indeed aggression of any sort. Above all, the emphasis should be on *relationships*, not (yuck) *organs*. This goody-goody concept of eroticism is not feminist but feminine. (Willis 224)

For Willis, the use of the term *erotica* is marked by a saccharine sentimentality, one that disregards questions of violence entirely and additionally fragments the self into "soft" and "messy" parts, only the former of which appear in erotic texts; consequently, erotica – not unlike romance – becomes both a hyper-sanitized and a stereotypically feminine but not *feminist* genre.

There is admittedly a certain degree of merit in Willis's claims. By focusing on the relationships between characters in a literary work without interrogating underlying power relations, as she argues, feminist conceptions of erotica actually serve to work against a sustainable feminist project. It is for this reason, as well as the need to destigmatize women's sexual pleasure that, for Willis, pornography represents a more viable feminist object of analysis than erotica. This sentiment has, from the 1990s onwards, gained traction as the genre of feminist pornography has taken root.

Other pro-sex feminists, including some of Rubin's and Willis's contemporaries, have built upon this work and proposed other manners in which sexuality can represent a potentially empowering manner of expressing oneself in the world. For Rubin, it would

appear as though feminism incorporates a collective sexual liberation free of the constraints related to what can and cannot be done with bodies, while Willis appears to have a similar vision, albeit one in which the explicit nature of sex is not concealed, at least in written language. The merits of these perspectives, as well as debates around sexual expression broadly, have continued in US feminism as pornography becomes increasingly visible, with Ariel Levy, Lisa Duggan, Kate Ellis, Nan D. Hunter, Stoya, Carol Vance, and many other voices interrogating the feminist value of pornography. These American writers are additionally in conversation with authors in Europe and elsewhere, often in direct response to one another, and usually committing the same unfortunate errors when marginalizing erotic literature.

Pornography as Erotica / Erotica as Porn: French Feminist Perspectives

On the other side of the Atlantic, the question of pornography was an important, albeit somewhat marginalized, issue among French feminists until more recently. One particular exception of note was that of Xavière Gauthier, who published *Dire nos sexualités* in 1976. Largely written against the medicalization of sexuality, and in particular the blossoming domain of sexology, Gauthier's text makes several singular observations about pornography while simultaneously critiquing research conducted by Kinsey, Hirschfeld, and Zwang. She mentions rather offhandedly in the introduction of the text, "La pornographie, c'est la distraction, l'amusement, et si possible, le plaisir" (Gauthier 9).[12] In contrast to more radical American feminists, rather than ban explicit media, Gauthier rejects what can best be described as a masculine, intellectualized erotica throughout the work, instead advocating for an accessible, female-friendly pornography. While Gauthier repeats her belief that erotica is an elitist or more elevated version of pornography at several points throughout the text, her

[12] "Pornography, it's distraction, amusement, and – possibly – pleasure." Translation mine.

stressing the potential of pornography as an object of pleasure in the citation above seems anachronistically forward-thinking for a text penned in 1976. However, in establishing the adversarial relationship between pornography and erotica, Gauthier repeats notions of erotica as possessing a subjective seriousness or sophistication in contrast to a more playful or amusing pornography.

Though Gauthier valorizes the possibility of *pornographie* throughout her text, erotic novelist and publisher Jean-Jacques Pauvert mentions that she additionally wrote novels considered erotica, a particularly interesting conundrum, given her distaste for that classification. As he notes, "Elle milite pour une « pornographie » immédiatement accessible, sans fausse pudeur ni recherche chantournée. Position très sensible dans *Dire nos sexualités*, mais aussi dans les nombreuses notices de livres « érotiques » fournies par Xavière Gauthier dans le lacunaire *Dictionnaire des œuvres érotiques* produit par Pascal Pia sur la fin de sa vie" (*Métamorphose* 279).[13] Though, by her own admission, the primary concern of her texts is sexuality, a key factor of pornography, Gauthier's inclusion in and contributions to collections of erotic literature is curious. If Gauthier's disdain for supposedly elitist erotic literature is well-documented, why categorize her alongside such authors? This may be in large part due to mistakes on the part of editors of such volumes, who had not read Gauthier's works beforehand, but perhaps Gauthier's meditations could point to a reconsideration of pornography and erotica as separate entities that possess their own distinctive qualities. More contemporary feminist thinkers from France have continued Gauthier's work and focused their efforts on pornographic film, leaving erotica by the proverbial wayside.

A direct response to American radical feminist theory can be found within the texts penned by Ovidie. Born Eloïse Becht but better known by the mononym that she took during

[13] "She [Gauthier] advocates for an immediately accessible 'pornography' without false modesty nor elaborate research. A very sensible position in *Dire nos sexualités*, but also in the numerous notes in the 'erotic' books by Xavière Gauthier in the incomplete *Dictionnaire des œuvres érotiques* produced by Pascal Pia at the end of his life." Translation mine.

her years working as an adult performer between 1999 and 2003, Ovidie has penned eleven texts since leaving the pornographic industry. Though arguably best known for *Sex Philo* (2012), written alongside philosophy professor Francis Métivier, Ovidie's *Porno Manifesto* (2002) more directly confronts the issue of pornography. Unfortunately, not only does Ovidie neglect to discuss pornography broadly and instead focus entirely on pornographic film, she neglects erotica entirely; however, her observations on the genre conventions of pornography are not without merit. Following the lengthy personal narrative detailing the author's decision to engage with sex work that serves as the text's introduction, the second chapter contains several pertinent critiques of the common misconceptions surrounding pornography, including the etymological arguments advanced by Dworkin. While she does not define pornography explicitly, Ovidie dismisses defining the genre solely by its linguistic or historical associations, explaining, "L'étymologie d'un mot ne donne pas la signification moderne dudit mot" (Ovidie 57).[14] Furthermore, "La pornographie n'a pas en elle-même de but lucratif. Son intérêt peut être ludique ou artistique et demeurer dans la sphère du non-monnayable" (Ovidie 58).[15] Put slightly more concisely, Ovidie's point is that though the etymological parts of the word *pornography* may refer to prostitution and therefore an economic exchange that implies sexual acts of some sort, the word no longer automatically carries this meaning. With the rise of amateur or arthouse pornography, for example, pornography as an artistic genre is gradually shifting away from prioritizing economic motivations for its creation. Certainly, it would be difficult to argue this with more mainstream pornographic works, though, as Ovidie remarks, it would be equally erroneous to state that all works that have pornographic aspects or fall under the genre of pornography are created in order to benefit their authors financially. As opposed to using sexuality for the sake

[14] "The etymology of a word does not give the modern meaning of said word." Translation mine.
[15] "Pornography in itself does not have a lucrative goal. Its preoccupations can be playful or artistic and remain in the sphere of the non-profitable." Translation mine.

of titillation or shock, some authors or creators may use sex to advance more complex stylistic or philosophical goals and still have their work classified as pornography. It is here that the split between erotica and pornography becomes apparent; namely, in the principle concern of a text.

This ambiguity of the term *pornography* complicates colloquial definitions of erotica somewhat; erotic literature is, popularly imagined, a lighter, less explicit, or more emotionally or intellectually engaging vision of sexuality (the "classy porn" of which Dworkin spoke). If, as Ovidie argues, pornography can not only be sexually fulfilling, but also aesthetically appealing, for audiences, then what, if anything, separates pornography from erotica? Is pornography something that we simply know when we see it? While I would agree with Ovidie's initial assessment, I would also argue that while pornography in all of its many forms may use sexuality in artistic manners, the primary focus of the genre is still sexuality and the reader's response to that sexuality. That is to say, while the pornography of which Ovidie speaks presumably implicates sex, potentially including the possible unconventional manners in which one can depict sex acts, the presence of sexuality for such pieces, in whatever medium, remains central. Whether or not this holds true for erotica as either a filmic or literary genre is not explained in Ovidie's text. Like other contemporary feminist theorists, Ovidie repositions pornography as possessing a certain liberatory potential but overlooks erotica as potentially representing a feminist artifact.

Throughout the second- and third-wave feminist movements in both the United States and France, erotica has thus largely been conflated with pornography or ignored entirely. Why might this be, and to what end? A possible explanation can perhaps be found when considering the poorly-defined nature of erotic literature itself, even amongst specialists of the genre. Beginning in the late 1950s or so, literary scholars, most of whom had connections to France, wrote several surveys of erotica in an attempt to better define the genre.

Unfortunately, while their efforts were useful in laying a foundation for future scholars, such texts only served to further muddy the proverbial waters separating erotica and pornography.

The Problem of Intellectualizing Erotica

Though erotic texts have, as author and publisher Jean-Jacques Pauvert argued at multiple points in his career, been written since the earliest forms of prehistoric literature, the study of erotica as a literary genre is much more recent. In the modern era, most erotic literature has been consumed in secret, with the clandestine libraries of eighteenth-century France serving as a particularly noteworthy example of the private consumption of the genre. However, in the mid-twentieth century, a small group of literary scholars, most of whom were French and possessed ties to the publishing industry, began to outline the conventions of erotic literature in order to better understand its place within or alongside the mainstream literary canon. While these endeavors produced influential texts for both literary studies and sexuality studies, in the current age, these efforts leave much to be desired, largely due to the vagueness of any definition that these authors posited. To better outline a cohesive aesthetic of erotic literature and the erotic more broadly, it would be helpful to revisit past thinkers' discussions of erotic literature in order to develop a better understanding of past and present conventions for the genre.

Joseph-Marie Lo Duca, an Italian-born French critic best known for his co-editing of the *Bibliothèque internationale d'érotologie* between 1958 and 1967, made several glaring oversights in his 1959 *Histoire de l'érotisme*. Similar to Andrea Dworkin's discussion of pornography, his distinction between pornography and eroticism originates in their etymologies. Lorca cites definitions for *érotique* and *pornographique* in a version of the *Dictionnaire Littré* which read, "Érotique : adj. Qui appartient, qui se rapporte à l'amour. Terme de médecine. Délire érotique, délire caractérisé par une propension sans frein pour les jouissances de l'amour. …Pornographie : s.f., 1) Traité sur la prostitution. Description des

prostituées par rapport à l'hygiène publique" (Duca 11).[16] While lacking Dworkin's social commentary about misogyny, Duca uses a similar rhetorical strategy of defining each genre through its linguistic roots to make his point. However, in doing so, Duca oversimplifies both erotica and pornography, which can both equally implicate love and prostitution, such as in the ludic pornography that Ovidie references.

Interestingly, perhaps owing to the time period in which the text was written, Duca frames erotic desire as only applicable when discussing the opposite sex. Put briefly, "Le désir érotique ne peut être que le désir spécifique de l'autre sexe, comportant la double condition de l'objet (l'individu de l'autre sexe ou apparemment de l'autre sexe) et du but (de l'acte sexuel)" (9).[17] This heterosexualization of the erotic serves to place boundaries on the concept in ways that were not done in the works by feminist scholars referenced earlier. However, denying the existence of a homosexual erotic seems unfortunate at best; if, as Duca proposes, the erotic has a relationship to desire for the opposite sex, then does this mean that gay and lesbian love is beyond or separate from the erotic? Despite Duca's rather unfortunate oversights concerning eroticism, there is one particularly interesting note concerning pornography. When discussing the proliferation of eroticism in popular media, Duca notes, "Nous répétons que, dès que le sexe triomphe, commence la pornographie et justement cesse l'érotisme qui n'a plus alors sa raison d'être" (10).[18] As previously noted, while both pornography and erotica inspire a sexual affective response in their readers, as Duca explains, a threshold exists wherein as soon as sexuality becomes the principal focus of a text, it becomes more strongly associated with the genre of pornography. This sentiment is novel in

[16] "Erotic: adjective. That which belongs to, has a rapport with love. Medical term : erotic delirium. A delirium characterized by an unbridled propensity for the pleasures of love. …Pornography: Treatise on prostitution. A description of prostitutes with relation to public hygiene." Translation mine.
[17] "Erotic desire can only be the specific desire for the opposite sex, compromising the double condition of the object (the individual of the other sex or apparently of the other sex) and the goal of the sexual act." Translation mine.
[18] "We repeat that, as soon as sex triumphs, pornography begins and eroticism ceases thusly, which no longer has its reason for being." Translation mine.

the field of studies of the erotic and, perhaps surprisingly, one that has not been discussed by Duca's successors. Beginning in the 1960s, scholars of sexuality studies began to focus an increasing amount of effort on defining erotic literature as separate from pornography, though these efforts only produced vague and imprecise distinctions between the two genres.

Considered the father of the erotic literary establishment in France, Jean-Jacques Pauvert was one of the foremost scholars and publishers of erotic literature in the 1960s and 1970s. However, this does not imply that his works are without fault. In his *La Littérature érotique* (2000), he begins with a discussion of the stigmatization of erotic literary production due to its conflation with pornography, noting, "On voit le glissement de sens qui emmène irrésistiblement le mot au cours des siècles vers une acceptation péjorative, allant finalement rejoindre les adjectifs dont on stigmatise une certaine production « libre, grivoise, cynique ou obscène »" (*Littérature* 10).[19] Perhaps in large part due to the term's inconsistent definition, the erotic could be interpreted as transcending literary genre entirely. As he notes in the forward of his *Métamorphose du sentiment érotique* (2011)*:*

> « Littérature érotique » est une formule qui me paraît vide de sens, comme « littérature prolétarienne » ou « littérature policière » …Et pourtant, de même qu'il envisage assez volontiers, devant des arguments bien motivés, le classement d'un livre dans les catégories régionale, prolétarienne, féminine ou autre, le lecteur actuel ressent souvent au fond de lui la possibilité – et même la nécessité – de pouvoir dire d'un ouvrage qu'il appartient ou n'appartient pas à la littérature érotique. Tout se passe comme si ce lecteur avait plus ou moins à l'esprit la définition de la littérature érotique telle que plusieurs siècles de censure l'ont très souvent donnée dans les derniers siècles. (*Métamorphose* 19-20)[20]

[19] "We see the shift in meaning that irresistibly leads the word to a pejorative acceptance over the centuries, finally going on to join the adjectives whose production is stigmatized as 'free, bawdy, cynical, or obscene.'" Translation mine.

[20] "'Erotic literature' is a formula that seems empty of meaning to me, like 'proletarian literature' or 'police literature.' …And yet, just as he imagines quite willingly, in the face of well-meaning arguments, the classification of a book in regional, proletarian, feminine or other categories, today's reader feels in his heart the possibility – and even the necessity – of being able to say of a work that it does or does not belong to erotic literature. Everything happens as if this reader more or less had in mind the definition of erotic literature as several centuries of censorship had very often given it in recent centuries." Translation mine.

Put more succinctly, when considering genre in relation to erotic literature, Pauvert remarks that such categorizations are ultimately as empty of meaning as other literary categories. Certainly, on the most superficial level, this assertion seems rather naive, if not irresponsible; after all, without any sort of classification for literature, notions of canon, intertextuality, interdisciplinarity, and specialization are all compromised.

However, Pauvert's argument is much more complex. Rather than occupying a space that is solely dedicated to eroticism, Pauvert argues that the erotic permeates (or does not permeate) literature in other, more concretely-established genres. As opposed to a force that exists solely for itself, the erotic is an ever-changing and versatile concept that can be applied to other literatures. Consequently, regardless of a text's genre classification, readers are compelled to categorize a text as either erotic or unerotic. What more concretely defines the erotic is, as Pauvert explains later in his text, informed by past taboos and censorship, a point to which we will return later in this dissertation in the third chapter. It is here that his arguments break down, as Pauvert ultimately fails to explore the limits of his terminology. That is to say, if any text can be erotic, then what exactly makes erotic literature unique as a genre, which exists in the literary establishment regardless of how *vide de sens* it may seem to Pauvert? Any explicit definition of erotica that he posits is far too broad and easily applied to the pornography, further blurring the line between the two. For example, Pauvert notes that literature considered erotic in the modern period possesses the following qualities:

> 1. qui outrageait les bonnes mœurs – et/ou, pendant quelques siècles du moins, la religion établie.
> 2. Dont l'intention apparente était « d'exciter les passions sensuelles ».
> 3. Qui niait « les principes fondamentaux de la morale sociale, familiale ou individuelle ».
> 4. Dont le langage, les tableaux, descriptions, etc., étaient « indécents », « pornographiques », « grivois », ou « obscènes » (ou tout autre qualificatif

> correspondant à l'impression produite, nécessairement choquante, du moins pour le plus grand nombre). (*Métamorphose* 20)[21]

While this is certainly one step in describing such a nebulous concept as the erotic, what is most important for our purposes is that not only does this definition use the pornographic to clarify the erotic but additionally, each of the points that Pauvert proposes can be applied to the pornographic. To respond to his first and third points, one could argue quite easily that pornography offends notions of acceptable customs or morality, particularly in areas where open expressions of sexuality are taboo or forbidden, and this is to say nothing about time periods wherein pornographic media were widely considered scandalous. Furthermore, as previously noted when discussing the role of pornography within feminism, in the United States and France, both erotica's and pornography's explicit goal of inspiring a sexual response are well-documented, though the implications of doing so for women's liberation are what have inspired much debate. Finally, using the pornographic as a means to define the erotic as separate from pornography and other related genres seems circular at best. And so we return to one of our primary questions: what, then, separates erotica from pornography? It would seem as though, at least in Pauvert's terms, there is very little that distinguishes the two genres, a criticism that has resurfaced when some of the works penned by both Pauvert and his predecessors have been read retrospectively.

Within sexuality studies, and specifically studies of the erotic, there are thus a wide variety of issues that present themselves, some of which also arise when examining second-wave feminist theory. For one, the erotic is often used synonymously with the pornographic or the differences between the two are reduced to superficial idiosyncrasies. The erotic is additionally sometimes overcomplicated to the point of remaining too theoretical; without a

[21] "1. That which outraged good morals – and/or, for a few centuries at least, established religion. 2. Whose apparent intention was 'to excite sensual passions.' 3. Who denied 'the fundamental principles of social, familial, and individual morality.' 4. Whose language, imagery, descriptions, and so forth, were 'indecent,' 'pornographic,' bawdy,' or 'obscene' (or any other qualifier corresponding to the impression produced, usually shocking, to the largest number of readers." Translation mine.

sense of materialism to ground such an abstract and nebulous concept as eroticism, attempting to define it concretely becomes a Herculean task. Furthermore, though many theorists approach notions of affect, it is largely forgotten within most of these texts. In large part because the two genres arouse physical sensations from the reader, pornography and erotica are believed to be interchangeable. However, one must consider the extent to which each genre does this. That is to say, while pornography privileges physical sensation, I argue that erotica is concerned with the physical alongside the emotional and the intellectual. To better understand why, it may be fruitful to make a brief digression to discuss the notion of visuality with regards to both literature broadly and, perhaps more importantly, the representation of sexuality within literary texts.

Gazing Back: Visuality and Pornography

The notion of the male gaze has been a particularly well-studied phenomenon amongst feminist film scholars, with scholars such as Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) and Teresa de Lauretis in her text *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984) contributing to the development of the idea. Groundbreaking for the study of cinema and eventually applied to other domains ranging from visual arts to literature, the concept broadly refers to the creation and consumption of media by objectifying both women and the broader world through a heterosexual and male perspective. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most film scholars, particularly those of feminist backgrounds, have argued that mainstream pornography has traditionally been a genre steeped in the male gaze, made both by and for men, though feminist pornography has gained a certain degree of visibility since the late 1990s. Yet as the notion of the male gaze has picked up traction, an increasing number of scholars have asked what a potential feminine aesthetic or a female gaze could look like, and it is here that I would venture that the genre of erotica could potentially present an opportunity to develop such conventions, both in film and

in literature. One central aspect of this aesthetic could be found in one of Roland Barthes's works.

In several texts that discuss the intersection between visuality, sexuality, and writing, there are references to the concept of *jouissance.* As the editors of *New French Feminisms* point out in one succinct footnote, "[*jouissance*] is a word used by Helene Cixous to refer to that intense, rapturous pleasure which women know and men fear" (Marks and Courtivron 95n8). Though there does not appear to be a clear consensus among feminists on what constitutes this idea, it would appear that *jouissance* is a form of pleasure or sexual ecstasy that encompasses all aspects of one's lived experience. For those who work on *écriture féminine*, *jouissance* remains a source for women's creative power that must be expressed through writing, a point to which this work will return in the third chapter. This usage of *jouissance* further underlines the erotic aspects of writing, which were elaborated on by many of Cixous' contemporaries, in particular Roland Barthes. As Barthes writes in his now-seminal *Le Plaisir du Texte* (1973):

> L'endroit le plus érotique d'un corps n'est-il pas là où le vêtement bâille ? …c'est l'intermittence, comme l'a bien dit la psychanalyse, qui est érotique : celle de la peau qui scintille entre deux pièces (la chemise entrouverte, le gant et la manche) ; c'est ce scintillement même qui séduit, ou encore : la mise en scène d'une apparition-disparition.
>
> Ce n'est pas là le plaisir du strip-tease corporel ou du suspense narratif. Dans l'un et l'autre cas, pas de déchirure, pas de bords : un dévoilement progressif : toute l'excitation se réfugie dans l'espoir de voir le sexe (rêve de collégien) ou de connaître la fin de l'histoire (satisfaction romanesque). (Barthes 19-20)[22]

[22] Is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes*? …[I]t is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove, and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance.

The pleasure of the text is not the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense. In these cases, there is no tear, no edges: a gradual unveiling: the entire excitation takes refuge in the *hope* of seeing the sexual organ (schoolboy's dream) or in knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction). (Barthes and Miller 9-10)

Barthes creates a distinction between seeing nudity, which presumably excites the sexual organs, and the *possibility* of seeing nudity, which appeals to the imagination (and perhaps the sexual organs, as well). This seems logical; if we take the example in Barthes's text – that of the open shirt – one could say that the suggestion of nudity is not only physically stimulating but additionally works to stimulate the reader's fantasies. If, for example, a literary character were to be described as wearing such a shirt, the reader would be able to picture a small part of his or her chest but additionally begin wondering what the rest of the character's torso looks like. Yet if Barthes's assertions are true, namely that a dichotomy exists within literary history and the study of this history between feelings and ideas, it would be worth asking whether these two concepts are mutually exclusive. In the case of erotica, I would argue, it is extremely difficult to separate the heart and the head, and the prolonged, subtle glances punctuated by lengthy waiting of which Barthes speaks soliciting emotions and thoughts simultaneously; however, this is not the case with pornography, which privileges a physical response and thusly immediately gives the reader nudity. This contrast, in turn, might work against the androcentric gaze of pornography and perhaps could form part of a feminist eroticism. The muted or understated sexuality of the latter would engage the reader intellectually while pornography's explicit and bombastic aesthetics appeal primarily, if not solely, to a reader's sexual instincts. Yet this subtle versus explicit dichotomy between erotic literature and pornography is not the only distinction that Barthes posits.

Further on in his text, Barthes divides the textual effect of all literature into two categories: *plaisir* (often translated as "pleasure") and the previously-mentioned *jouissance*. Although both feelings are beyond words, it would appear as though the former relates more to a purely physical sensation, while the latter seems to be more about an action, one that is done to readers and inspires a sort of collective experience in contrast to pleasure's individual scope. Both, as he argues, can be a product of reading. While speaking of erotic literature,

Barthes notes that the term *erotic* when applied to most literature designated as such is a misnomer, stating:

> Les livres dits « érotiques » (il faut ajouter : de facture courante, pour excepter Sade et quelques autres) représentent moins la scène érotique que son attente, sa préparation, sa montée ; c'est en cela qu'ils sont « excitants » ; et lorsque la scène arrive, il y a naturellement déception, déflation. Autrement dit, ce sont des livres du Désir, non du Plaisir. Ou plus malicieusement, ils mettent en scène le Plaisir tel que le voit la psychanalyse. Un même sens dit ici et là que tout cela est bien décevant. (Barthes 92).[23]

The suggestion of sexual content is not in itself erotic, according to Barthes, as appealing as it may be to the imagination. Something else – presumably the *jouissance* that he discusses immediately before the citation above, in addition to the expectation, preparation, and waiting – is necessary to elevate such works from books of desire to erotica. Perhaps inadvertently, Barthes has helped to create another distinction between pornography and erotica. Whereas pornography seems to have the reader's pleasure as its ultimate goal with little concern given to the author or any other textual aspect, this is not the case with erotica. While the reader's pleasure, I would argue, is still an important characteristic of erotic literature, the notion of collectivity among readership is somewhat more pronounced in this genre, particularly given that Barthes spends the next few sections of *Plaisir* implicating the author in this collectivity, perhaps forming another aspect of a feminist eroticism.

Within all of these discussions about erotic literature, each author intentionally or unintentionally breaches questions of readership. In contrast to previous thinkers who contend that the erotica-versus-pornography distinction falls upon questions of agency or violence, as well as those who express apathy or otherwise claim that the difference does not matter at all, it would seem as though the reader plays an important role in clarifying the

[23] So-called "erotic" books (one must add: of recent vintage, in order to except Sade and a few others) *represent* not so much the erotic scene as an expectation of it, the preparation for it, its ascent; that is what makes them "exciting"; and when the scene occurs, naturally there is disappointment, deflation. In other words, these are books of Desire, not of Pleasure. Or, more mischievously, they represent Pleasure *as seen by psychoanalysis*. A like meaning says, in both instances, that *the whole thing is very disappointing*. (Barthes and Miller 58)

difference between the two genres. After all, in recent years, a popular belief relates to the social acceptability of a reader consuming each genre in public, which is typically unacceptable in a case of pornography and acceptable (to a point) in the case of erotic literature, a more pertinent question may be related to the manner in which authors ask readers to respond to texts.

The Big O: Affect and Pornography

Based on readings of pornography that have been elaborated upon by both feminist theorists and sexuality scholars, a key concern related to the definition of pornography revolves around the reader's psychological response to such texts, though few in these domains have explicitly examined the relationship between reader and text on an emotional level. Feminists instead raise questions about the dehumanization of the female form and whether or not readers will consequently objectify women by reading or watching pornography, particularly vis-à-vis rape and sexual assault; conversely, sexuality scholars use questions of transgression and morality, either collective or individual, to advance a definition of both erotica and pornography. Much has been discussed about the degradation of women's bodies within and as a consequence of pornography, but are these texts asking their readers to do the same? What exactly is the reader intended to feel or do when reading pornographic novels? Can pornography not only satisfy readers sexually but additionally make them laugh, cry, or reflect? If so, doesn't this only complicate the boundaries between pornography and erotic literature? It seems appropriate, then, to probe further into questions of readership, and affect theory would appear to be the most effective means of doing so.

Perhaps inspired by Barthes's essays "La mort de l'auteur" (1968) and *Le plaisir du texte* (1973), affective literary criticism considers the reader, particularly his or her subjective response, as key to the interpretation and reception of a text, though it does not deny the importance of the author. While all literature may be considered in terms of eliciting a

response from readers, pornography (and perhaps erotica) are unique in that the principle concern is arousing a sexual response from readers. Whereas other literary genres attempt to elicit other emotional responses from readers (for example horror, which attempts to solicit fear), pornography is primarily concerned with the reader's orgasm. This is not to say that others are not possible, but rather that the arousal of sexual feelings is the most important response for pornography. As Norman R. Holland notes in *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (1968), whereas other forms of literature attempt to manage fantasy for some higher purpose (such as philosophical or social commentary), pornography only concerns itself with sexual release. As he explains:

> The psychoanalytic theory of literature holds that the writer expresses and disguises childhood fantasies. The reader unconsciously elaborates the fantasy content of the literary work with his own version of these fantasies. …Psychoanalytic studies by the hundreds demonstrate the presence of these fantasies in literature. Equally clearly, though, except for pornography, literature is not just these fantasies–something happens to them. (*Dynamics* 52)

Fantasy is thus implicated on the level of the author and the reader, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the reader is given a certain modicum of freedom to build upon the fantasies that the author has written. However, as Holland notes, while this is true for all genres of literature, pornography presents a unique case in that fantasies are ultimately only used for sexual gratification by readers of the genre. Other genres, for example, may ask readers to reflect on abstract or concrete topics, such as politics, love, or war, perhaps to inspire change, but this is not the case with pornography. As Ovidie remarks in the previous section, while the aesthetics of pornography may be artistic and individual works created outside of capitalist mode of production, the end results are still the same, namely sexual release. In short, while the characters, dialogue, and so forth may differ between pornographic texts and film, the intention is to bring the viewer to climax. This begs the question of whether or not the same can be said of erotic literature. If we accept that erotica and pornography are

separate and distinct literary genres, then it would follow that they may or may not have the same direction for their fantasies. Whereas pornography, as Holland explains, uses fantasy solely for sexual release, what does erotica intend to do with fantasy? I would argue that erotica does have sexual release as an objective; however, the genre additionally uses fantasy to stimulate the reader on other levels, not unlike other literary genres. That is to say, erotica represents a nexus between pornography and other literary genres, such as romance, horror, philosophy, and so forth. Whereas pornography's sole purpose is to bring the reader to orgasm, the aims of erotic literature are more complex. Later in the text, Holland continues, "There are other literary situations where one can make quick surmises about affect: pornography, for example, or biography. It is hard to imagine someone's responding to pure pornography by anything other than direct sexual arousal or a defensive reaction of disgust" (*Dynamics* 289). One must note, however, that while disgust is certainly a plausible reaction to pornography, particularly in response to those texts or films that deal with taboo subjects, one can assume that an author's goal is likely not to evoke this reaction. Rather, and speaking particularly of more mainstream pornographic works, in order to better sell a textual product, it logically follows that film studios and publishing houses would attempt to minimize any revulsion that consumers of pornography may feel and instead maximize a text's sexual appeal. Before continuing, it may be prudent to anticipate one potential criticism that may arise due to taking this position.

Perhaps the largest criticism of affective literary studies concerns its seemingly subjective nature which is focused entirely on an individual reader's reaction to a text. Though interpretation may be dependent on the individual, as Holland notes, "The difference [in reception] comes from the differences of character. The sameness comes from the sameness in the resources used to create the experience" (*5 Readers* 247-8). That is to say, whereas what one may find appealing while reading pornographic literature may vary, the

genre as a whole being based on sexual appeal is a product of the established norms inherent to the genre (and perhaps even to a broader society), which may explain the similarity in different readers' reactions. While individuals experience and articulate their own unique reactions to a literary work, these reactions are generally limited in terms of the diversity. This is again applicable to pornography; as previously noted, readers' tastes may vary among those who choose to consume pornography, but there exists a finite number of emotions that such texts may evoke from readers and viewers, independent of whether or not a pornographic film or novel appeals to their sensibilities. This is important to keep in mind when discussing erotic film and literature, particularly in the following chapters. For now, I shall turn to a text usually maligned as pornographic and problematize this categorization in order to better illustrate the claims that have been made previously in this chapter.

Perhaps one of the more compelling examples of erotica to be written within the past seventy years, Dominique Aury's *Histoire d'O* (written in 1954 and translated into English by Grove Press as the *Story of O* in 1966) problematizes the genre conventions outlined previously in this chapter.[24] In large part due to its heavy focalization on sexuality and the affective response of the reader, most scholarly and popular sources have categorized the novel as pornography, with the most detailed and virulent critiques originating from feminist writers, who devote several volumes of criticism to the perceived misogyny embodied by the novel. Admittedly, there is a certain degree of merit in such critiques; with its themes of female sexual submission and aggressive male gaze, arguments which underscore antifeminist undercurrents in the work have a certain weight. However, as noted in the introduction of this dissertation, it is not my intention to debate the feminist or antifeminist merit of pornography. Rather, this chapter focuses on pornography's relationship to erotica,

[24] Some versions of *O*, but particularly the earliest English translations from the original French, are attributed to Pauline Réage as opposed to Dominique Aury for an unknown reason. These are both pseudonyms for the same author, born Anne Desclos. For the sake of clarity and cohesion, the author of the work will be referred to solely as Dominique Aury in this project.

and despite the positioning of *O* as a pornographic text by some feminist authors, I would argue that this designation is not appropriate. Not unlike the earlier libertine novels of the 18th century, *O* uses sexuality as a vessel to carry its broader emotional and philosophical concerns, ultimately asking readers to question the nature of personal expression, love, and power. Put differently, while the sexual is an inherent aspect of erotica, it is not the primary focus but instead intermingled with the intellectual and the emotional, unlike the case of pornography. Undoubtedly, these lead to disparate affective values between the two genres and can perhaps be useful in developing a separate aesthetic convention for erotic literature.

Histoire d'O (1954)*: A Pornographic Classic?*

Though such a summary would be reductionist, the *Story of O*'s plot can best be summarized as a lengthy string of increasingly extreme sexual encounters between the eponymous protagonist as she gradually enters BDSM (a combination of the acronyms B/D [Bondage and Discipline], D/S [Dominance and Submission], and S/M [Sadism and Masochism] that encompasses a wide variety of non-normative or "kinky" sexual practices) relationships with two different men. The novel begins with a woman only known as O, a Parisian fashion photographer, who becomes the sexual slave of her lover, René. After being sent to a château in Roissy, a suburb to the northeast of Paris, she is subject to a series of painful sexual tortures which include, but are not limited to, whipping, branding, genital mutilation, and countless sexual adventures with both men and women, which are all ordered by René. O is then passed along to Sir Stephen, supposedly René's half-brother. When she shows hesitancy towards Sir Stephen's even more violent sexual predilections, O is sent to Anne-Marie, the openly lesbian confidante of the two brothers, whose torture almost kills O but ultimately succeeds in breaking her spirit. At the end of the novel, O is presented to the guests at one of Stephen's lavish cocktail parties, nude with the exception of a feathered owl mask, and subjected to further sexual humiliation. The epilogue, which was not included in

the text's earliest incarnations for unknown reasons, states that O recognizes Stephen's growing boredom with her, and, rather than face his rejection, asks for permission to commit suicide; after some time, Stephen consents.[25] While the plot of the novel may sound uninspired for readers in the current year, particularly those with any knowledge of libertinage, the text received a generally positive critical and popular reaction. While *O* was recognized for its unconventional style and received the Prix des Deux Magots in 1955, it also received a publicity ban from French authorities, which additionally occurred in the United States upon the announcement of an English translation by Grove Press in 1966. Furthermore, the text was attacked by feminists, particularly the *Mouvement de libération des femmes*, for its perceived catering to overly-male sexual fantasies. When the magazine *L'Express* ran a feature on the best-seller shortly after its filmic adaptation was produced in 1975, a handful of feminists in France began protesting outside of the publication's Paris headquarters.

Despite – or perhaps because of – this furor of attention, many still believe *O* to be a pornographic classic, having inspired numerous imitators, including Emmanuelle Arsen, Thierry Jonquet, and many others. In recent years, though, a few scholars have more critically analyzed the novel under a feminist lens. Noted American psychoanalyst Kaja Silverman, for example, speaks about the construction of protagonist O as a sexual object, insisting on the near-absence of O's internal life. Consequently, according to Silverman, the text is appropriately viewed as pornography. Though O admittedly, "…has no independent thoughts at any point during the two novels, and virtually no thoughts whatever for the first thirty pages of *Histoire d'O*," this is not to imply that the eponymous character is without any sort of intellectual or emotional capacity (Silverman 332). She continues, "It is in fact by the

[25] Despite her wish to die, the protagonist appears in *O*'s 1969 sequel, *Retour à Roissy*. Following a similar structure for most of its narrative as the first installment, the later novel ends with O, still unhappy with her circumstances, being offered the possibility of freedom.

constant violation of her body that O comes to have whatever interiority she ever enjoys. We are told, for instance, that O is most exposed or open when she is 'covered' with marks. This seeming paradox alerts us to the fact that the whip-lashes which criss-cross her body construct her as an object to be maltreated" (332). The violence of the text, on which many other feminist scholars have commented, would seem to give O a sense of interiority by exposing both her body and, after the initial episodes, her innermost thoughts and desires as a reaction to her treatment. However, as Silverman argues, this ceaseless violence is ultimately only to reinforce O's status as a sexual object.

Even O's name itself contributes to her supposed complete denial of the self. Andrea Dworkin, perhaps unsurprisingly, took issue with what she described as pornography, noting that, "[O] is a woman, and to name her O, zero, emptiness, says it all. Her ideal state is one of complete passivity, nothingness, a submission so absolute that she transcends human form…" (*Hating* 57). Throughout the text, O is reduced to only a single-letter name which alludes not-so-subtly to any number of the orifices of the human form. O's status as a sexual object, Dworkin claims, is additionally reinforced through the repeated sexual episodes in the work, which largely disregard O's pleasure and safety and instead focus on the whims of those who are inflicting the torture upon her. During the meeting where O pledges eternal allegiance to René and Stephen, for example, there is little concern for O's wellbeing. The two men have, "Le droit de disposer de son corps à leur gré, en quelque lieu et de quelque manière qu'il leur plût, le droit de la tenir enchaînée, le droit de la fouetter comme une esclave ou comme une condamnée pour la moindre faute ou pour leur plaisir, le droit de ne pas tenir compte de ses supplications ni de ses cris, s'ils la faisaient crier" (Aury 92).[26] Likely due to the inherent power differential in the relationship between O and her masters, rather than discuss how O

[26] "The right to dispose of her body as they saw fit, in whatever place and in whatever manner they pleased, the right to keep her in chains, the right to flog her as a slave is flogged or as one is sentenced to punishment, for whatever the cause or for none save that of their pleasure, the right to ignore her pleadings and outcries, if they were to make her cry out" (Aury and Paulhan 80).

benefits from the arrangement, René and Stephen instead focus entirely on the pleasure that they gain from their sexual encounters with O. For radical feminists, such a heavy concern for male sexual pleasure at the cost of women's comfort epitomizes patriarchy, with the narrative reproducing such relationships for both the men in the novel, as well as the mean reading it.

The graphic, near-ceaseless violence of the text appears to be a particular point of concern for many radical feminists. Anti-pornography activist Susan Griffin echoed some of Silverman's earlier sentiments in her essay entitled "Sadomasochism and the Erosion of Self: A Critical Reading of Story of O," arguing that the novel only exists for the sexual gratification of the reader with only a hollow pursuit of personal liberation motivating the narrative. For Griffin, *O* represents the ultimate objectification of women through its use of BDSM and, more importantly, the suppression of the innermost self through O's constant torture. As she states:

> *The Story of O* leads us to an increasing absence of consciousness. The very theme of the novel is a negation of the self. And once that self is destroyed, the reader is left with a blank page, with silence. Thus this book which was supposed to lead us on a quest gives us only the shell of a quest. Like the form of an animal that is not an animal, or the shape of a female body that is only a doll, the shape of this 'quest' only resembles what we seek. Inside this quest we discover only emptiness. And if we read *The Story of O* to find ourselves, we find nothing. (Griffin 194-5)

Despite the intriguing observation about the inherent despair of O's trajectory, this seems a rather superficial and perhaps even nihilistic reading of *O*, particularly given the motivation for the supposedly empty quest. While O does indeed have her body violated throughout her journey, it is important to keep in mind what she had hoped to find when beginning this trajectory. Though it may seem that the pursuit of sexual pleasure motivates the narrative, we must question why the narrative ends with O's suicide. I would argue that it is rather O's love, either for René or Stephen, that ultimately drives the narrative and her decisions along the way, giving her a semblance of an inner life and subjectivity. Furthermore, it is this

emotion that helps in differentiating the work from pornography; despite the sexual torture that the eponymous character is subjected to throughout the work, O's love for the men around her underlies several important philosophical concerns related to power, agency, selfhood, and Otherness.

To return to our issue of the similarities and differences between pornographic fiction like *The Story of O* and other literary genres, by her own admission, Aury wrote the novel as a means of pleasing her own lover, prominent French critic Jean Paulhan, who ultimately passed it to publisher Jean-Jacques Pauvert.[27] In the preface by Paulhan, he note the element of fantasy that characterizes the work, implying that *O* was based not on real people or events but rather fictional ones, not unlike "…un conte de fées – on sait que les contes de fées sont les romans érotiques des enfants – comme dans un de ces châteaux féeriques, qui semblent tout à fait abandonnés. …S'il est un mot qui me vient d'abord à l'esprit quand je songe à *O*, c'est le mot de décence. C'est un mot qu'il serait trop difficile de justifier" (Aury IV).[28] Though it could certainly be interpreted as a way of downplaying the serious literary merit of Aury's text, comparing the novel to fantastical children's stories serves a secondary purpose. Paulhan could be attempting to minimize the offense caused by Aury's text. Though children's stories, particularly in their original iterations, often contain gruesome acts of violence (for example, the painful mutilation of the antagonist at the conclusion of the Grimm version of *Snow White*), Paulhan reminds readers that these are fictional narratives that do not have any basis in the material world. Furthermore, Paulhan's use of the word *décence* (translated as either *decency* or *dignity*) reminds readers that, despite their contents, both fairy tales and novels like *O* have a greater moral or philosophical worth than may be apparent

[27] For more information, see St. Jorre, John de. 1994. "The Unmasking of O." *New York Times*. August 1994.
[28] "...a fairy-tale — fairy-tales, we know, are the erotic novels of children —, advancing as though making my way through one of those fairy-tale castles which seems completely deserted… It (sic) there is any one word that comes to my mind when I think of The Story of O, it is decency. It might prove rather too difficult to justify that word; so let us continue" (Aury and Paulhan 201-2).

upon first reading. Whereas there is usually a didactic moral in children's stories, it is possible that the same could be said of erotic literature, such as Paulhan's and Aury's work. Though he does not at any point justify his use of the word *décence* in the preface, perhaps this is what Paulhan is referencing: the ability of erotic literature to use fantasy in order to instruct readers. Within this direct line that Paulhan draws between fairy tales and *O* is an almost ontological undercurrent of fantasy that touches upon the affective response of the reader. His use of *songe* as a verb to speak about the novel perhaps evokes reference to the dreamlike nature of the text, not unlike the fairy tales to which he makes reference.

The comparison between *O* and a fairy tale suggests that love plays a significant role in the narrative. In many fairy tales, love is the narrative device that delivers the protagonist from the initial unpleasant circumstances, and I would argue that this is likewise the case in Aury's text, albeit with some important caveats. In the preface, Paulhan poses the novel as a love letter, one that speaks to not only what men want, but also what women seek in relationships. He states that *O* should be seen as a profound expression of desire and affection, arguing, "Il se peut que les chaînes des chansons naïves ni les « je t'aime à en mourir » ne soient pas une simple métaphore. Ni ce que disent les rôdeuses à leur amant de cœur : « Je t'ai dans la peau, fais de moi ce que tu voudras. » …Il se peut qu'Héloïse, quand elle écrivait à Abélard : « Je serai ta fille de joie », n'ait pas simplement voulu faire une jolie phrase. Sans doute l'*Histoire d'O* est-elle la plus farouche lettre d'amour qu'un homme ait jamais reçue" (Aury XIV).[29] These comparisons with other texts ally Aury's novel not only with popular contemporary works but additionally with sacred medieval romantic exchanges,

[29] "It may be that the bonds and chains in naive songs and the 'I die of love for thee' are not simply metaphors, nor, likewise, what the street-walkers declare to their true loves: 'I've got you under my skin, do with me whatever you wish.' …It may be that in writing to Abelard: 'I shall be thy whore' Heloise did not simply wish to turn a pretty phrase. The Story of O is surely the most fiercely intense love-letter a man could ever receive" (Aury and Paulhan 209-10).

a dialectic that continues throughout the novel as O achieves a certain type of sainthood through her sexual suffering.

As Silverman notes, "Yet midway through her initial stay at Roissy, O arrives not only at a constant awareness of her body, but at something approximating an inner life – the inner life of a mystic or a saint" (Silverman 332), a suffering that Susan Sontag refers to as "an ascent through degradation" (Sontag 55). As a result, it is difficult to say that O does not possess an inner life; like a religious figure, the interiority of her character is defined by her devotion to worship. However, instead of a god, O's dedication is to her first (and later, second) partner. Her obsessive love for René (and, after leaving Roissy, Stephen) forms an important part of her character and the narrative arc, which begins with O's decision to become a sexual slave to please René and ends with her supposed suicide to avoid Stephen's rejection. It is by making this decision that O becomes a sacrificial figure, suffering for her dedication to the one she loves. Beginning with her transfer from René to Stephen, she asks "Est-ce que j'ai pêché ?," a mantra that she will continue to repeat for the remainder of the novel. Not unlike the Christian martyrs in the late Roman Empire, she is whipped and beaten almost to death but refuses to renounce René until O is forced to confront the realization that God has abandoned her. In her absence, René has moved on to other women, yet she still remains faithful to him and struggles to justify his behavior. In a state of emotional turmoil, the narrator explains:

> Elle se sentait statue de cendres, âcre, inutile, et damnée comme les statues de sel de Gomorrhe. Car elle était coupable. Ceux qui aiment Dieu et que Dieu délaisse dans la nuit obscure, sont coupables, puisqu'ils sont délaissés. Ils cherchent leurs fautes dans leur souvenir. Elle cherchait les siennes. Elle ne trouvait que d'insignifiantes complaisances, qui étaient plus dans sa disposition que dans ses actes. …mais quels actes ? Car elle n'avait à se reprocher que des pensées et des tentations fugitives. (Aury 116-7)[30]

[30] "She felt like a pillar of salt, a statue of ash, bitter, useless and damned, like the salt statues of Gomorrah. For she was guilt-ridden, a sinner. Those who love God and whom God abandons in the darkness of the night are guilty, they are sinners because they are abandoned. What sins have they committed? They search for them in their memory of the past. She would seek for them in hers. She would find nothing beyond silly little self-

O's suffering eventually goes beyond that of a religious devotee or a martyr but perhaps becomes that of a saint. Like a Christian penitent flogging themselves, O believes that God – in this case, her lover René – has abandoned her for some imperceptible sin and seeks his forgiveness; however, she fails to receive it. Despite her lack of sin, God has left her, and she is only punished further for blind faith but still holds on to it in the hope of being acknowledged by him again.

O's religious devotion to René, I would argue, serves a singular purpose. By continuing to love René despite his obvious lack of presence in her life, I would argue that O ultimately transcends the Self, giving all to others. At first glance, this may confirm the accusations lobbed by radical feminists such as Dworkin about the antifeminist nature of the text; namely, the tendency for women to relinquish their comfort and freedom in order to be exploited by men. However, one must ask if this giving of oneself is done for the reader's pleasure, as in mainstream pornography. Within many pornographic texts and films, the sexual act is performed and either described or filmed with the reader or viewer in mind. It is his or her pleasure that is paramount to the work. By contrast, it would appear as though O's treatment is described in ways that emphasize not only the pleasure that she derives from it but additionally the manner in which such treatment is necessary for her development as a character. The text frequently utilizes both direct and indirect comparisons between sacredness and profanity, a defining characteristic of not only this particular work, but of erotic literature as a genre, discussed further in the third chapter. Undoubtedly, however, this focus on love impacts the reader on some level, perhaps either detracting from or adding to the sexual scenes, beginning in the first few pages of the novel.

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indulgences which derived more from her disposition than anything she had done. …but what acts? For she could only reproach herself with thoughts and ephemeral temptations" (Aury and Paulhan 96-7).

In the initial scenes of the narrative, the eponymous character begins to become disillusioned with life and her career as a fashion photographer, perhaps in part due to the urban milieu. Disconnected from the world around her, she is reduced to the objects that she wears: "Elle est vêtue comme elle l'est toujours : des souliers avec de hauts talons, un tailleur à jupe plissée, une blouse de soir, et pas de chapeau. Mais de grands gants qui montent sur les manches de son tailleur, et elle porte dans son sac de cuir ses papiers, sa poudre et son rouge" (Aury 1-2).[31] With almost the entirety of the rest of Aury's novel meticulously detailing O's body and the numerous sexual acts that are performed on her, it is curious that the novel opens with such a banal scene, with O entering a taxi, although she is not by herself. Her only confidante, we can presume, is René, her lover of several years. Immediately upon meeting him, the woman who is soon to become O wordlessly establishes her unflagging devotion to him by consenting, at some point before the narrative's opening, to accompany him to the place where she will be first debauched. René explains, "…Maintenant, tu es prête. Je te laisse. Tu vas descendre et sonner à la porte. Tu suivras qui t'ouvrira, tu feras ce qu'on t'ordonnera. Si tu n'entrais pas tout de suite, on viendrait te chercher, si tu n'obéissais pas tout de suite, on te ferait obéir. Ton sac? Non, tu n'as plus besoin de ton sac. Tu es seulement la fille que je fournis. Si, si, je serai là. Va" (Aury 3-4).[32] After he reassures her and explains the regulations at Roissy, O metaphorically relinquishes her agency by choice through leaving her possessions in the vehicle and entering the house, whereupon her clothes will be removed.

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[31] "She is wearing what she always wears: high heels, a suit with a peated (sic) skirt, a silk blouse, no hat. But she has on long gloves reaching up to the sleeves of her jacket, in her leather handbag she's got her papers, and her compact and lipstick" (Aury and Paulhan 7).

[32] "...You're ready. Here's where I leave you. You're going to get out and go to the door and ring the bell. Someone will open the door, whoever it is you'll do as he says. You'll do it right away and willingly of your own accord, else they'll make you, if you don't obey at once, they'll make you obey. What? No, you don't need your bag anymore. You don't need anything, you're just the whore, I'm the pimp who's furnishing you. Yes, certainly, I'll be there, Sure [*sic*]. Now go" (Aury and Paulhan 9).

However, O's stay in the house will not be permanent, and after she retains some small traces of free will, she is sent to a harsher circle in Samois for further punishment. Before she is sent to the enigmatic Anne-Marie, O and René exchange rings and promise to see one another again, almost as in a wedding ceremony. As the anonymous narrator observes, "Elle ne dit rien, osant à peine passer les mains sur ses poignets, n'osant pas les porter à son cou. Il la pria ensuite de choisir, parmi des bagues toutes semblables qu'il lui présentait dans un petit coffret de bois, celle qui irait à son annulaire gauche" (Aury 61-2).[33] A detailed description of O's new ring follows, providing a visual aspect to this particular scene. This may be a reference to the literary and romantic affiliation between Aury and Paulhan, but if the reader accepts that *O* could potentially be a modern fairy tale, then O's ring could serve as a sort of marriage proposal. The formal presentation of the ceremonial object to her, complete with an ornate box, as well as her insistence on wearing the trinket on her finger, seems to echo the ceremonial offering of an engagement ring, and O wearing it for the rest of the narrative demonstrates an acceptance on her part. The promises that René makes to see her again after this scene could also echo ceremonial vows. The sections that depict O and René's faux-marriage are interspersed with shocking scenes of sexual torture, highlighting the emotional resonance of the former. The reader cannot help but be touched or possibly even puzzled by O's loyalty. However, this union is not to last, as O ultimately falls in love with Stephen. While certainly not typical for a fairy tale, O's emotional infidelity to René adds a layer of investment for the reader to digest outside of the more salacious content, adding another layer of emotional investment. The text thus solicits not only a sexual response from the reader, but also an emotional and, as we will see, an intellectual response, as well.

[33] "She said not a word, hardly daring touch [*sic*] her fingers to her wrists, not daring raise [*sic*] them to her neck. He then asked her to choose, from amongst all those identical rings he was presenting to her in a little wooden case, the one which would go on the ring-finger of her left hand" (Aury and Paulhan 54).

With the overarching themes of love and fidelity, it would follow that there is a confessional aspect to *O*, as well, both for the character and perhaps even for the author. Paulhan again notes, "Mais l'histoire d'*O*, d'un bout à l'autre, est plutôt conduite comme une action d'éclat. On songe à un discours, plutôt qu'à un journal intime. Mais la lettre est adressée à qui ? Mais le discours, qui veut-il convaincre ? A qui le demander ? Je ne sais même pas qui vous êtes" (Aury V).[34] Interestingly, Paulhan continues with assertions of his near-certainty that the reader is female, playing on old-fashioned stereotypes that the emotional and sensual nature of the work appeals more to women, ignoring the violence in the text entirely, perhaps in another rhetorical move to elevate the status of the work or downplay its more shocking elements. Yet if we approach the *Histoire d'O* on a metaphorical level, one could argue that these texts serve as a literary form of sexual relation. Through the act of confessing in an intimate setting, both reader and author can experience pleasure as they mutually explore fantasies. Indeed, as Paulhan notes, *O* is not intended to be a private, solitary experience meant solely for the author like the *journal intime* that he describes; rather, the novel should be conceptualized as an address, public and capable of being interrogated by the audience, making reference to both a collective and individual readership that contrasts with the lone consumption of pornography. The reader's response, as Pelham describes at the end of the citation, depends upon their own experiences and preferences.

In the text itself, love forms an important part of O's relationship with René and, later in the narrative, with René's half-brother, Stephen. When she is given to the latter, a brief discussion ensues which attempts to separate sexuality and love. Stephen begins the conversation, "…Il lui prit les deux poignets, et de la droite la gifla à la tour des bras. Elle chancela, et serait tombée s'il ne l'avait maintenue. « Mettez-vous à genoux pour m'écouter,

[34] "But from beginning to end, the *Story of O* is rather managed like a brilliant feat of arms. This has the look more of a speech or lecture than of plain effusion; of a letter more than of a diary. But to whom is the letter addressed? And whom does the discourse aim to convince? Whom is one to ask? I don't even know who you are" (Aury and Paulhan 202).

dit-il, je crains que René ne vous ait bien mal dressée. – J'obéis toujours à René, balbutia-t-elle. –Vous confondez l'amour et l'obéissance. Vous m'obéirez sans m'aimer, et sans que je vous aime »" (Aury 108).[35] Though O maintains that she loves René, a statement that she has vocalized at least two times in the novel before this instance, Stephen is the only other character who responds to O's statement. Dismissing her feelings as simply confusion, Stephen alludes to the conflation of love with obedience, stating that his relationship with O will be based solely on obligation. This necessity to obey causes constant emotional turmoil for O, who appears to believe that love and obedience need not necessarily be mutually exclusive. Somewhat earlier in the text, the narrator observes that O is cognizant of the power differential between herself and René but does not seem bothered by this due to her passionate love for him, "Et si passionnément qu'O aimât René, et lui elle il y avait entre eux comme une égalité (quand ce n'aurait été que l'égalité d'âge), qui annulait en elle le sentiment de l'obéissance, la conscience de sa soumission" (Aury 138).[36] Whereas René has power over O in their master-slave relationship, O's feelings give her a sense of power (or perhaps a sense of ignorance) so that she forgets or is unaware of the inegalitarian nature of her relationship with René. This dichotomy between love and obedience gives us an extraordinary look into O's internal life and poses several questions. Are love and obedience mutually exclusive? Can one be free while also loving another person? Such questions go beyond the singular aims of pornographic novels, a point elaborated on by Paulhan himself.

Despite some of its fiercest critics denouncing the work as an example of run-of-the-mill, albeit particularly degrading pornography, Paulhan acknowledges the transgressive

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[35] "Then he trapped her two wrists in his left hand, swung his right hand back and slapped her hard. She wavered, staggered, would have fallen had he not held her upright. 'Kneel down, I have something to say to you,' he said. 'I'm afraid René has prepared you very poorly.' 'I always obey René,' she stammered. 'You fail to distinguish between love and obedience. You're going to obey me without loving me and without my loving you'" (Aury and Paulhan 90).

[36] "And however passionately O might love René, and he her, between the two of them there subsisted an equality, a parity (even were it but that of age), which nullified in her the feeling of obedience, the consciousness of submission" (Aury and Paulhan 112).

nature of the novel, remarking in the preface, "C'est d'une autre sorte de livres dangereux qu'il s'agit ici. Précisément, des érotiques. …Mais quels dangers ? Il en est un du moins, que j'aperçois très bien de mon poste. C'est un danger modeste. L'*Histoire d'O*, de toute évidence, est l'un de ces livres qui marquent leur lecteur – qui ne le laissent pas tout à fait, ou pas du tout, tel qu'ils l'ont trouvé : curieusement mêlés à l'influence qu'ils exercent, et se transforment avec elle" (Aury III-IV).[37] The points on danger and transgression will become important in the following two chapters, but Paulhan's notes on the genre of the text are telling. According to him, *O* is more aptly considered an erotic novel because, like others in the same genre, it impacts the reader in a particular manner. Perhaps consequently, some contemporary readers have ardently defended the work as a classic work of erotica. In her article entitled "The End of Pornography: The Story of *Story of O*," Amy Wyngaard uses both *erotic* and *pornographic* interchangeably when describing the content of Aury's text but ultimately seems to classify it as a work of erotica, in large part due to its literary novelty and impact on a collective readership. Though there is some relationship to pornography, the text ultimately embraces the erotic, as she notes, "By virtue of its aesthetic and literary qualities, Aury's work distinguished itself from the starker forms of representation that define the contemporary category of pornography—sex for sex's sake. The book, which resisted being labeled as 'smut,' ultimately enabled explicitly erotic fiction—and, perhaps most importantly, explicitly erotic fiction by and about women—to become (more) socially acceptable reading material and enter into mainstream American culture" (Wyngaard 982-3). Wyngaard dismisses claims of *O* presenting sex solely for the pleasure of the reader. Rather, the text's singular stylistic qualities, as well as its philosophical dimensions, takes it outside of the

[37] "We are dealing here with another sort of dangerous books. With erotic ones, to be precise. …But what dangers? From where I am standing, I have a clear view of at least one. It is a modest danger. By all evidence the *Story of O* is one of those books which mark the reader — which do not leave him entirely, or at all, such as he was before: one of those books whose meaning is curiously bound up with the influence they exert, which become transformed as that influence changes" (Aury and Paulhan 200-1).

realm of pornography. Furthermore, Wyngaard notes its transgressive nature, in terms of both author and reception. Aury's text, written by a woman about women's sexualities, paved the way for future female authors to work with erotica while additionally opening minds to the genre.

Yet stating that *O* should be viewed as erotica simply because its author happens to be female seems rather base, reinforcing the often repeated trope of erotica as a feminine literary genre. Wyngaard additionally comments on the style of the work, arguing that Aury's novel did not simply use sex simply for the purpose of arousal, which distinguishes it from earlier, more conventional pornography but additionally used its style to inspire intellectual stimulation in the reader. This, either knowingly or unknowingly on Wyngaard's part, neatly dovetails with questions of affect theory. As Holland argues in the previous section, pornography asks readers to use the fantasies presented in the text solely for sexual arousal; if we accept this alongside Wyngaard's proposal of Aury's work going beyond this singular aim, then it follows that *O* should be classified as an erotic work. So what, then, does Aury's text ask the reader to do with the fantasies in the work? As Wyngaard discusses later in her article, *O* as a literary phenomenon cannot be reduced to its sexual nature but rather raises larger questions of freedom, selfhood, and womanhood that are more apparent in the novel's follow-up, also by Aury, the aforementioned *Retour à Roissy* (1969), first translated as *Return to the Château* in 1971. As she notes, "The sequel, presented by the author as a deliberate 'degradation' of Story of O, portrayed a questioning and unhappy protagonist who is offered the option of freedom at the open-ended conclusion" (994). Whereas *O* may present fantasy to the reader in order to incite a sexual response, the text (and its sequel) ask the reader to question the nature of larger concepts such as gender, love, and power. If we return to several of the questions asked previously, can love coexist with sexual freedom? Can love refuse to inherently implicate dominance and submission, even outside of mutually-

consensual BDSM relationships? Or does love always implicate an unstable and unequal power dynamic? It would appear as though the answer to the first two questions is a resounding *no* based on what is presented in both *O* and *Retour*, for O ultimately leaves the BDSM circles in which she becomes established, abandoning those she comes to love in order to regain control of her life. It is because of this intellectual engagement with broader philosophical questions that Aury's text is more appropriately considered an erotic novel as opposed to a pornographic text.

Though feminist critics largely condemned *O* due to what was perceived as unnecessary violence towards the female body for the pleasure of men, this seems rather superficial as an analysis. Certainly, there is much to say about the constantly-shifting power dynamics that motivate a substantial quantity of the plot, but such an analysis would be overly clinical, ignoring the emotional and intellectual undercurrents of the novel. Though scenes that meticulously describe the eponymous character's suffering form a large part of the novel and elicit a sexual response from readers, O's love for René and later Stephen, as well as the text's singular style and tone additionally appeal to the reader on an emotional and intellectual level. Pornography, as defined by affective criticism, uses fantasy to appeal only to a reader's sense of sexuality, and although there is little mention of erotic literature in such texts, I would argue that erotica appeals to a reader on sexual, emotional, and intellectual levels. Should we accept this as true, then it would be more appropriate to categorize *O* as an erotic text as opposed to a pornographic one. Correcting this error marks one step towards defining an aesthetic of erotic literature more concretely.

Conclusion

While this dissertation focuses on the genre of erotic literature, it is crucial to outline what constitutes the genre of pornography for two reasons. Firstly, on a rhetorical level, in order to better explain what erotica is, it would be helpful to elaborate on what it is not. By

concretely analyzing the pornographic genre on both a feminist and affective level, such as with feminist theorists like Andrea Dworkin and Xavière Gauthier, and literary scholars, most notably Joseph-Marie Lo Duca and Jean-Jacques Pauvert, we can presume that erotica possesses some of the same qualities, though both erotic literature and pornographic literature additionally have their own individual idiosyncrasies. Concerning the question of affect, I have agreed with arguments that state that while both genres attempt to incite a sexual response in readers through the use of fantasy, pornography does not ask the reader to do anything with these fantasies outside of the sexual. Erotica, like other literary genres, instead asks readers to use fantasies for another purpose, such as a textual manner to advance the plot of a text or a metatextual way to include social, philosophical, or political commentary, though erotic literature is unique in that sexual release remains a concern for authors of the genre.

Secondly, scholars of both feminism and sexuality studies have largely overlooked erotica as a site for potential radical change for the manner in which sexuality is viewed. From the 1970s onwards, feminist activists in the United States have considered pornography (and particularly pornographic films) as artifacts that serve as a testament to patriarchal, male-centric desires to degrade, harm, and objectify women's bodies, though this is admittedly changing with the third-wave feminist movement and the increasing mainstream presence (and, to a lesser extent, acceptance) of pornography. When erotica does rarely find itself the object of discussion by such authors, it is often conflated with pornography, likely because of the two genres' aforementioned shared preoccupation with the sexual pleasure of the reader. In France, pornography remained a somewhat marginal concern for feminist thinkers, though towards the late 2000s, several writers, some of them former sex workers themselves, brought this concern to the forefront of the feminist cause. However, even in the rare instances where erotica is mentioned, little is done to separate the genre from

pornography. In a surprisingly similar move, scholars of sexuality likewise use erotica and pornography in surprisingly similar manners. Any attempt at categorizing or defining the erotic (or the pornographic, for that matter) is carried out with definitions that are too broad or cumbersome to separate the genre from associated terms. Whereas the debate over pornography–filmic, textual, or otherwise–as a feminist or anti-feminist genre has continued until the present day, erotica's potential for feminist inquiry has been overlooked. I would argue, as I do in the following chapter, that erotica can serve as a meaningful genre for feminist resistance in large part due to the importance of fantasy that serves as a basis for texts categorized as such.

While the *Histoire d'O* may have been classified as pornography by both literary critics and feminist theorists, I have advocated that erotica may serve as a more suitable genre. While the text may incite a sexual response in readers, this is not the only function of the fantasy in the text. The novel poses larger philosophical questions about the nature of love, the possibility of freedom, and the limitations of one's agency. Though feminist scholars have critiqued the novel for its treatment of the female body (and perhaps rightfully so), reducing Aury's text to simple pornography solely based on its sexual content seems like a superficial reading at best. The definition of pornography by scholars of sexuality additionally poses challenges to efforts aimed at developing an erotic aesthetic or concretely delineating erotic literature from pornographic literature. Though well-intentioned, these efforts posited definitions of the erotic which were too narrow or broad, either excessively limiting erotica or broadly defining the genre to the point where it becomes interchangeable with pornography. Affective literary criticism presents new possibilities for defining erotica as a literary genre due to its primary focus centering on the reader and his or her individual reaction to works. Though most discussion in this mode of literary analysis has focused on

pornography, observations about other literary forms and genres has many implications for erotic literature.

Though Aury's novel does indeed intend to solicit a sexual response from readers, a hallmark of pornography according to feminist theorists, scholars of sexuality, and literary critics who work with affect theory, this is not the only emotional response that the text seeks. The text's focus on love, confessional nature, and emotional resonance distinguish Aury's work from more conventional pornography, which may implicate all of the aforementioned elements but not necessarily give them the same gravity. It is for this reason that I argue that *O* represents an erotic novel as opposed to a pornographic text, though perhaps not an example particularly pleasing to some feminists, given the rather extreme acts of sexual violence that occur constantly in the text. However, those who write erotica with the intention of engaging with feminist criticism can learn (and, as we will see later, have learned) much from *O*'s example in order to produce erotic novels that represent the female body and the agency of female characters in more affirming manners.

Chapter 2 – *Rewriting Romance:* Lobster *and Conceptions of Otherness*

Introduction

As noted by several radical feminist thinkers cited in the previous chapter, pornography can be interpreted as a visual and textual genre that appeals mainly to male power fantasies. Even after the American feminist sex wars of the 1980s that divided feminist activism and scholarship into anti-pornography and pro-sex camps, debates have continued in both the United States and Europe over the value (if any) of pornography towards women's liberation, with some claiming that the masculine gaze of pornography can be reclaimed to advance a feminist praxis. Yet if we accept as true – as antiquated a belief as it seems – that pornography is a "masculine" genre, then what genre, if any, allows women to play with both power and sexuality? Can such a genre exist within the dominant literary conventions which privilege an androcentric mode of writing?

Within the past twenty years or so, the domain of literary studies has seen an abundance of feminist scholarship that has positioned the romance genre as both a feminist and antifeminist artifact. Earlier thinkers in the 1980s, most famously Germaine Greer, tended to conceive of the formulaic plots that ended in a heterosexual marriage as contrary to women's liberation, but as the genre has evolved to incorporate more contemporary social happenings, such as women in the workforce and single motherhood, an increasing number of feminist writers have grown to accept romance literature as advancing a pro-woman stance in the 1990s and 2000s, particularly given the almost-universal female authorship and readership. However, since the publication of what is being dubbed as the erotic romance (such as E.L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* in 2011), the question of a feminist romance is being revisited. Perhaps most pressingly within the context of this research, if romance novels can be considered erotic in nature, what does this mean for the literary genre of erotica? What, if anything, separates the erotic romance from erotica? Is it the ostensible focus on a singular couple that forms the core of the romance novel which distinguishes it

from a work of erotic literature? Why do readers choose romance literature and not erotica and vice versa? Is the choice motivated solely by the relative social acceptability of romance literature or, on a more basic level, its widespread accessibility? Studying erotic literature alongside another literary genre – in this case, romance literature – remains an important practice to continue in this chapter. As discussed in the previous chapter, given that erotic literature is often miscategorized as pornography or dismissed as a softer or inferior form of pornography, and also given the emergence of the so-called erotic romance (more colloquially referred to as "mommy porn"), there exist strong connections and contradictions between these three genres, at least in the popular imagination.

In this chapter, I argue that the categorization of romance and erotica is not simply a question or language or plot, but is rather dependent on the question of affect. As in the case of pornography, category romance presents formulaic plotlines with their own sets of stock characters and clichés; unlike pornography, though, romance does not explicitly aim to achieve sexual climax for the reader. As noted in the first chapter of this project, based on the works of both literary scholars such as Roland Barthes, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, and Norman R. Holland, and American and French feminists ranging from Andrea Dworkin and Audre Lorde to Ovidie, pornography represents a direct and overt appeal to the reader's libido wherein the presentation of sex for his or her pleasure is the primary – but not necessarily only – function of such texts. Erotica, far from being synonymous with pornography or simply an elevated version of the genre, entails a more nuanced depiction of sex alongside broader philosophical concerns, largely intended to stimulate the reader intellectually, as well as sexually. Romance's effect on the reader, as I argue in this chapter, is dependent on his or her emotional satisfaction. Though wildly different in their production, style, and reception, some overlap with regards to plots and characters can be found between romance, pornography, and erotica. Notably, both category romance and mainstream pornography usually reinforce a

reader's worldview by repeating gender stereotypes, such as the presumed sexual availability of women for men, thereby retaining the hegemonic order between Self and Other. This is, in part, due to the intense focus on the pursuit of a relationship which forms the central plot of most modern Harlequin romance novels. Erotica, by contrast, focuses on dismantling stereotypes and reconceptualizing the relationship between Self and Other.

In Guillaume Lescable's *Lobster* (2003), a text that seemingly defies genre classification, several conventions of romance novels are presented. The novel begins by spinning a surreal yarn about the love triangle between two humans and the eponymous crustacean, with a heavy focus on the romantic pursuit of the protagonist, and imitates several stylistic aspects of romance novels, such as a euphemistic approach to sex. As the narrative continues, however, this structure breaks down, the characters becoming more impulsive, the language more explicit, and the ending far from a happily ever after. While some readers have reacted to the novel with amusement or shock, the deeper philosophical questions that the text provokes have largely been ignored. As opposed to category romance and pornography, which aim to satisfy the reader temporarily on emotional and physical levels, respectively, Lescable's novel asks readers to reconsider the relationship between humans and animals and between the Self and Other, including nonhuman Others. Consequently, *Lobster*, while initially appropriating several conventions of romance novels and categorized under several different genres, is best classified as an erotic text.

I begin with a brief discussion that outlines the historical origins of romance novels in North America, England, and France in order to better detail the conventions of the genre, such as characters who serve as helpers and harmers, rigid gender roles, and a happy ending. While it admittedly may seem like an odd choice to begin a work supposedly focused on French literature with a discussion of the Anglophone publishing industry, this is done intentionally to emphasize the aspects of English romance literature that were borrowed by or

imposed upon writers of category romance in French while also noting the changes that were made for the tastes of Francophone readers.

After this, I transition to an exploration of the influence of feminism on more contemporary texts; of particular note is the advent of so-called "chick lit" in the late 1990s, a female-centered genre that recounts the pressures of modern womanhood, often implicating the aforementioned romantic conventions. Unfortunately, while such novels are superficially more progressive in their presentation of gender roles and sexuality, these texts are often as limiting as their older forms. An analysis of another development in romance literature – the erotic romance – follows. The existence of such a subgenre is particularly curious, as it begs at least two pressing questions: 1) What is the difference (if any) between the erotic romance and erotic literature? and 2) Why do readers choose one and not the other?

Affect theory, also called reader-response theory, may hold some answers, and it is for this reason that a discussion of this theoretical approach follows. Developed largely by American and German academics in the 1960s and 1970s, most notably Norman R. Holland, Stanley Fish, and Wolfgang Iser, affective literary criticism is comprised of several different branches, though all privilege the reader over the author and agree that the meaning of a text is derived from the reader as opposed to the author. While the contents of erotic romances and erotic literature may appear similar, I would argue that the most important, though certainly not the only, difference between the two relates to the ethical, intellectual, moral, and psychological dilemmas provoked by erotica literature. This chapter concludes with an analysis of Lescable's novel in order to illustrate this point. Classified as a number of different genres, I argue that the text, while borrowing several conventions of the romance genre, best represents an erotic text due to its willingness to challenge the reader in daring and unexpected ways.

Beginnings of the Category Romance

While the category romance novel (often referred to as a Harlequin novel and referred to as *le roman Harlequin* in Francophone countries) is now an internationally-consumed product, its origins are relatively recent, with the genre's success occurring as a direct result of the material conditions of the mid-twentieth century.[38] The transition to mass-produced texts occurred due to three factors, according to Bridget Fowler. These reasons include "…the transition to capitalism, Protestantism and patriarchal relations. In turn, cheap mass romances emerged after the 'domestication' of working women, that is, after married women had withdrawn from partnerships in production into economic dependence on men, from 1842 onwards" (Fowler 2). In large part due to the intensification of traditional economic, religious, and gendered institutions during the Industrial Revolution in North America and England, the market was prepared for the category romance. Though romance novels were released by a variety of presses in the earliest years, one publisher perfected the large-scale production of these texts in the twentieth century.

The commercial prominence of romance literature began with the publishing house known as Mills and Boon in the United Kingdom, a joint venture started by Gerald Mills and Charles Boon in 1908. The pair originally printed a variety of texts for both educational and recreational purposes. In the mid-1950s, in large part due to competition from rival textbook publishers, the firm abandoned their pedagogical pursuits and began specializing in romance novels, having seen the enormously profitable potential in the genre. All of their romance novels from this time became known as "brown books" due to their standardized appearance: brown spines with the author's name in black, the logo on the right corner, and the book jackets a variety of bright colors. As Dixon notes, this paratextual decision on the part of Mills and Boon could be interpreted as following the nascent tendency to market books as

[38] This is not to imply, though, that romance novels did not exist prior to this time period. Most literary historians, for example, point to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) as the first modern romance novel,

products meant for popular consumption as opposed to individual works of high art: “This was the start, following the trend of the day, of advertising Mills & Boon books as commodities, rather than promoting individual authors. The company developed a mail-order catalogue system (now known as Reader Service), which informed readers of future publications. They also continued to advertise forthcoming books in the backs of the novels, a practice which continues today” (Dixon 17). After several changes in location and ownership (most importantly, the inauguration of regular collaborations with Canadian romance publisher Harlequin Books in 1958, leading to the colloquial moniker “Harlequin romance” to describe such novels), the firm quickly became successful, having found its niche: “By the mid-1980s Mills & Boon was a publishing phenomenon, selling in the region of 250 million copies of their books worldwide. This helped to make Harlequin the world’s largest publisher of romances, with 80 per cent [*sic*] of the world market, including translations into 18 languages, and with sales in some 98 countries” (Dixon 23). The near-monopoly of the romance market by Harlequin alongside the treatment of the novel as a product has, perhaps unsurprisingly, led to a standardization of the Harlequin’s publications across geographic and linguistic lines. This was most apparent during the publishing house’s first few decades, during which direct translations of existing Anglophone romance novels were used to appeal to foreign markets.

Despite their intense consumption on an international scale, very few Harlequin romance novels were originally written in French (or any non-English language, for that matter). Researchers instead note the tendency for publishers to translate these texts originally published in English into other languages instead of soliciting original, non-Anglophone works. Literary scholar Diana Holmes describes the publication process of Harlequin novels in France, which held true until the late 1970s, “Harlequin novels are all written by English-language, mainly North American, authors, and mainly set in the USA:

the job of the local company—in this case, Harlequin-France—is to study the local market, select the most marketable novels, employ and oversee a team of translators, and deploy a sales strategy in line with Harlequin's global policy, but adapted to the local culture" (Holmes 119). According to Harlequin-France's website, these techniques are effective, with roughly twelve million volumes purchased annually in France. This is, however, only a small percentage of the total number of romance novels sold per year, though one must note that French-language romance novels represent a recent shift in the Harlequin publishing industry with the explicit intention of catering to non-Anglophone readerships.

It was not until 1977 when the first French authors appeared in Harlequin's catalogue under a new collection, now known as *la Collection Colombine* (or in Anglophone territories, the Colombine Collection, presumably named after the buxom and flirty stock character in the Italian *commedia dell'arte*). Jacques Marchand summarizes the beginnings of this occurrence in France, "Au départ, on vendait en France des romans traduits de l'anglais mais on a créé bientôt une nouvelle collection, la *Collection Colombine*, composée exclusivement (du moins, en principe) de romans écrits directement en français par une dizaine d'auteures-maison du pays" (Marchand 353).[39] As the number of collections available to Francophone readers has increased in the years since, it has become difficult to ascertain any dissimilarities between the various French-language Harlequin collections that exist at present: "La série Harlequin possède différentes collections en français, dont les principales sont Harlequin, Harlequin Romantique, Harlequin Séduction et la Collection Colombine… Nous n'avons pu déceler de différence notable entre les contenus des deux collections: un procédé de marketing est peut-être à l'origine de cette subdivision" (Bédard-Cazabon 400-1).[40] Though

[39] "Initially, novels translated from English were sold in France, but a new collection was created soon after, the Colombine Collection, made up of exclusively (at least in principle) of novels written in French by a dozen in-house authors from the country." Translation mine.

[40] "The Harlequin collection has different collections in French, of which the main ones are Harlequin, Harlequin Romantique, Harlequin Seduction, and the Colombine Collection. …We could not detect any notable

several differences serve to distinguish French Harlequin novels from the American counterparts, their structures are largely identical. But not only are these works read similarly regardless of language, the texts are often homogenous within the same language, as indicated by Bédard-Cazabon's inability to distinguish between French Harlequin collections.

While the plots of the category romance seem interchangeable, as evidenced by critics failing to distinguish between various novels and collections, there exists a certain degree of variation between time periods, and several narrative-based aspects are more emphasized or downplayed depending on cultural background. France, for example, can be divided into eras which parallel – but are not the same as – their American counterparts. These periods largely concern the representation of the heroine and, to a much lesser extent, the hero, with the Francophone case documented as such:

> La première période va de 1977 à 1982 ou 1983. Elle est marquée par le fait que l'héroïne, toujours plus jeune que le héros, est vierge, souvent orpheline ou en tout cas éloignée de ses parents ; le roman se termine par une promesse de mariage et souvent l'évocation d'un désir (partagé) d'enfants. …La deuxième période s'ouvre par l'apparition de femmes divorcées, veuves ou ayant déjà connu une relation sexuelle, elles sont plus âgées. La virginité disparaît, au sens strict, elle n'est même pratiquement plus évoquée, comme si cela n'avait jamais été un problème. …Dans la troisième période, il arrive que ce soit le héros qui change de lieu d'habitation… (Péquignot 118 and 120)[41]

These changes between the different periods of romance novels can be explained, at least in part, by changing social conditions. Within the first period of romance novels, the female protagonist is defined principally by her desire for children and marriage, as well as her virginity. However, with the increasing visibility and influence of second- and third-wave

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difference between the contents of the two collections: the marketing process may be the origin of this division." Translation mine.

[41] "The first period goes between 1977 to 1982 or 1983. It is marked by the fact that the heroine, always younger than the hero, is a virgin, usually an orphan or in any case estranged from her parents; the novel ends with the promise of marriage and often the evocation of a (shared) desire for children. …The second period begins with the appearance of women who are divorced, widowed, or otherwise having known a sexual relationship. These women are usually older. Virginity disappears, in a strict sense, as it is practically never brought up, as if this had never been a problem. …In the third period, it happens that it is the hero who changes his residence…" Translation mine.

feminism from the 1980s onwards in Western Europe, divorce became less polemical, and it was no longer unthinkable for women who had already been in a committed sexual relationship to seek out companionship. The female protagonists of this second era may or may not wish for marriage or children and the happy ending of such texts may instead be related to having both a career and a new romantic partner, pointing to changing attitudes related to women entering and remaining in the workforce. Likewise, in the third wave of romance novels, it was not uncommon for the hero to move in with the heroine, perhaps pointing to shifting opinions related to cohabitation and property, particularly after a committed relationship had been established.

Though there may be some overlap between their plot structures and the emergence of various heroine archetypes, several important differences exist between Francophone and Anglophone Harlequin novels. For Harlequin in France, the presence of violence, but especially sexual violence, is heavily downplayed in the publisher's texts, even in the first wave of romance novels. While speculating on the market failures of gay and lesbian romance in the first and second periods of Harlequin in Europe, Péquignot makes several hypotheses on the disparate representations of violence: "Une autre tendance, peu représentée en France, a également disparu, on y racontait des violences des hommes sur les femmes, voire même des viols. Il semble que ce soit sous la pression des mouvements féministes américains que Harlequin y ait renoncé, mais il n'y en eut que peu en France et sous une forme très édulcorée par rapport à l'original américain : commercialement on peut supposer que SAS ou Brigade Mondaine avaient saturé le marché" (Péquignot 119).[42] French-language romance novels, Péquignot supposes, had no need for the inclusion of rape as a plot device,

[42] "Another trend, little represented in France, has also disappeared, wherein there were stories of violence by men against women, even rape. It seems as though there was pressure from American feminist movements that Harlequin renounced it, but there were only a few of these stories in France and in a very watered-down form compared to the American originals. Commercially, we can assume that SAS or Brigade Mondaine had saturated the market." Translation mine.

given the ready availability of pulp fiction (explicitly naming SAS, an acronym for *Son Altesse Sérénissime*, a popular series of spy novels written by Gérard de Villiers) and crime novels (referring to *Brigade Mondaine*, a long-running series of detective novels that ran from 1975 to 2012).

Aside from the question of having alternate texts or genres to depict such events, the lack of sexual violence may additionally point to audience tastes or cultural norms. Violence may remain a more taboo subject in European cultures, which Péquignot hints at with an explicit reference to the then-budding feminist movement's reservations towards describing such events in romance texts. This would, at first glance, align French romance novels with a slightly more progressive feminist sensibility, one that does not even need to include the question of romanticization of sexual violence due to its very absence, though the homogeneity of character and plot, alongside all of the clichés therein, belies such a progressive nature and ultimately help in distinguishing the genre from erotica.

Unlikely Bedfellows: Romance and Feminism

During the second-wave of American feminism, most activists and writers were adverse to the idea of romance novels within women's liberation, in large part due to the centrality of female virginity, heterosexual love, and marriage to the heroine's journey, as well as the abundance of rape that frequently served as a means of moving the plot forward. Yet as feminist thought made its way into mainstream popular culture, romance adapted on a superficial level to include changing social norms. In Harlequin novels written from the 1970s onwards, there still exists tension between feminism and romance, though the idea of a feminist romance is not as contradictory as it may have once seemed. For example, in Melanie Millburne's *Back in Her Husband's Bed* (2005), protagonist Carli challenges her eventual lover Xavier's views on women's careers, asking him why she should be expected to give up her career based on her sex alone. As the novel progresses, she helps him realize

that the law firm at which they both work discriminates against women, leading to the happy ending of Carli being made partner at the office and the beginning of her relationship with Xavier. Other novels with similar themes include Annie West's *The Sheikh's Ransomed Bride* (2007), Sarah Morgan's *Public Wife, Private Mistress* (2006), and Lynne Graham's *The Disobedient Mistress* (2002). One scholar noted that, while she surveyed romance novels from this time period, "A small number of romances sampled appeared to be antifeminist in that they either explicitly critique moves towards equality or they ended with the hero exerting significant control over the heroine in some way" while at the same time, "…explicit references to feminism and feminists provide an indication that some authors deliberately include feminist issues in their work" (Vivanco 1062-3). Perhaps the most evident site of this tension between romance and feminism is the wedding scene that often serves as the conclusion to Harlequin novels.

Whereas a minority of contemporary romance fiction ends with the hero and heroine marrying and settling into hegemonic gender roles, most conclude with the pair in a more progressive arrangement: "The heroines of the Modern line who struggle not to be seen as 'gold diggers' and who seek to be taken into the hero's confidence may be read as attempting to redefine the institution of marriage so that it is no longer a sexual/financial transaction but a relationship built around emotional trust and intimacy" (Vivanco 1070). This reconsideration of marriage in such novels may serve as a critique of the rejection of romantic relationships with men by militant second-wave feminist authors and instead advocate for a more egalitarian relationship that third-wave feminist critics have espoused. For many a heroine, this means continuing with the career path that she deems correct for herself: "While some heroines wish to care for their children full-time, many others demand the right to have a career, partly in order to retain some economic independence but mainly

because of the sense of achievement they derive from their work and the direct connection it gives them to the wider community" (Vivanco 1072).

Jay Dixon's historical account of the Mills and Boon publishing house echoes such sentiments. He argues that, while dominant archetypes for both heroes and heroines exist in the romance genre, these categories change roughly every decade or so. For example, the influence of second-wave feminism could be felt in texts written in the 1970s and 1980s, which were, "…dominated by achievement-orientated female archetypes, who fight for what they want, and who see themselves equal to men. Emancipated feminists are transmuted in Mills & Boon terminology into 'feisty' heroines who fight the hero at every turn until he recognizes them as an autonomous individual" (Dixon 90). At the end of such novels, "…the heroine stops fighting, not to become a dutiful wife, but because she has, through her stand against him, turned the hero into the man she wants" (Dixon 91). However, such modifications to the romance formula are likely not done benignly; rather, Weisser implies that they are done entirely for the reader's appeal, which translates into larger sales, "Underlying the overt changes—the heroine, already not a virgin, has premarital sex with the hero and is free to choose education and career or domesticity—the essential romantic ideology remains. The outside of the box may have more color or variety, but the gift within is the same, thanks to its enormous power to please…and sell" (Weisser 141). Eventually, these changes to the romance novel (brought about, at least in part, due to feminism making its way into the mainstream) would collectively give rise to a new archetype of heroine in a unique subgenre.

The decreasing tendency to depict heroines as either virginal brides or hardened career women in romance novels would, in the 1990s, give birth to an entirely new sub-genre of romance literature. Classified as "chick lit," most scholars credit Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) for inaugurating this subgenre of romance literature, which possesses

several pertinent characteristics related to tonality and the characterization of the heroine that serve to distinguish it from more mainstream Harlequin novels:

> L'héroïne de ces fictions, souvent écrites à la première personne, parfois sous la forme d'un journal intime, est une jolie jeune femme d'une trentaine d'années, célibataire mais entourée d'un groupe d'amis solidaires. Obsédée par son apparence, elle vit dans une grande métropole et travaille souvent dans les médias; son travail est harassant, voire inintéressant. Elle est à la recherche du grand amour et doit fréquemment affronter des situations tragi-comiques; elle cumule différentes addictions: alcool, chocolat, drogue, sexe, shopping, tabac, etc. Maladroite et gaffeuse, c'est une femme « normale » qui manque de confiance en elle; sa capacité d'autodérision rend le récit particulièrement divertissant et instaure une complicité avec les lectrices. Passionnée de mode, elle partage aussi les mêmes références culturelles que les lectrices de sa génération, renforçant encore le processus d'identification. Elle regarde les mêmes émissions de télévision, a vu les mêmes films, écoute les mêmes chanteurs de variété, recherche les mêmes marques de créateurs et est attirée par les mêmes marques de luxe. Le ton adopté est celui de la comédie et la fin est heureuse: l'héroïne parvient à trouver l'amour… (Hache-Bissett 103)[43]

In large part due to the influence of feminism, the heroines of chick lit possess their own careers and additionally have no hesitations about engaging in unladylike behaviors, such as excessive eating and premarital sex. Yet like their more idyllic counterparts found in Harlequin novels, the deepest desires of the heroines in chick lit include finding a suitor and marrying him. It is possible that these heroines are perhaps serving as a modern parody of the Harlequin heroines of yesteryear, satirizing the sanitized, idealized vision of love and womanhood presented in Harlequin novels. Unlike the romance heroines of their mothers' generation, protagonists such as Bridget Jones do not depict an image of women as they *should be* but rather as they often *are*. These characters frequently deal with relatable,

[43] "The heroine of these fictions, often written in the first person, sometimes in the form of a diary, is a pretty young woman in her thirties, single but surrounded by a group of supportive friends. Obsessed with her appearance, she lives in a large city and often works in the media; her work is exhausting, even uninteresting. She is searching for true love and frequently faces tragicomic situations; she acquires different addictions: alcohol, chocolate, drugs, sex, shopping, smoking, and so forth. Awkward and clumsy, she is a 'normal' woman who lacks self-confidence; its capacity for self-mockery makes the story particularly compelling and establishes a relationship with readers. Passionate about fashion, she also shares the same cultural references as the readers of her generation, further strengthening the identification process. She watches the same television shows, has seen the same movies, listens to the same pop singers, seeks out the same fashion designers, and is drawn to the same luxury brands. The tone adapted is that of comedy and the ending is happy: the heroine manages to find love…" Translation mine.

everyday issues, ranging from still being in love with an unsuitable ex-boyfriend, difficulties with completing tasks in the workplace, and failing at trendy diets, to more complex and emotional questions, such as living in a world full of choices that were not available to previous generations of women, feeling left behind by friends who are getting married and having children, and anxieties towards growing old alone. However, one must ask if this supposed "realistic" image of women is equally as limiting as the Harlequin novels of yesteryear.

Many have taken notice of the superficially-stark transition from Harlequin novels to chick lit, with some similarities and differences eliciting a stronger response from feminist critics. Gill summarizes the frequent comparisons between heroines of the two genres as such:

> On the one hand chick lit heroines are much more likely than their romantic forebears to be presented as financially independent, working outside the home, and sexually assertive. On the other, as we have noted, heroines still frequently require 'rescuing' at regular intervals — from crooks and conmen, single motherhood, or even from themselves — as when male characters recognize that the hard, successful outer shell is not the real woman inside (in this sense showing that men in chick lit, like earlier romantic heroes, are still presented as knowing better about what women want and who they are than women themselves). Chick lit heroines are still represented as regarding many other women as figures of mistrust and competition rather than sisterhood, and still as primarily defining themselves in terms of their relationship to a man — perhaps even more so than in earlier romances, as singlehood is so thoroughly pathologised [*sic*] in this genre. (Gill 496)

Gill's argument seems reasonable; instead of viewing other women as meaningful sources of support and solidarity, chick lit presents such relationships as obstacles to a romance with a man who can see past the heroine's idiosyncratic behaviors and perceived inadequacies and save her from the difficulties of life. While there are some positive aspects of such heroines – namely, the propensity to have a career and be sexually liberated – these characters are still defined by their relationships to men. This unfortunate aspect of chick lit only serves to repeat the issues that plague Harlequin romance. Yet perhaps the largest difference between

the two genres is not only in their depictions of sexuality, but rather the manner in which the two genres depict the female body. Gill notes the troubling manner in which narrators describe the female protagonist in chick lit, "…the body in chick lit novels is constructed in a highly specific way: it is a body that is always already unruly and which requires constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling [*sic*] in order to conform to judgments of normative femininity" (Gill 496). While some may have interpreted the emergence of a supposedly more "realistic" heroine in the modern romance novel as positive, a deeper feminist reading problematizes such assertions. The descriptions of the heroine's body, presented with its flaws meticulously detailed, are not a mark of an elaborate gendered criticism, for these faults are viewed by the heroine as an obstacle to her happiness. Though it is possible that, because she succeeds at her romantic endeavors, the authors attempt to argue that real women's faults will not limit them romantically, one must ask why the heroine cannot simply accept her imperfections from the beginning. The answer, basic as it may seem, deals with the capitalist forces that shape the publishing market. That is, the manner in which these texts are marketed bears a striking similarity to that of previous iterations of romance novels, albeit taken to extremes.

Despite their differences, chick lit and Harlequin share far more similarities. Many, such as Marchand, have commented upon the widespread marketing of both mainstream Harlequin novels and chick lit:

> Ce qui déroute de prime abord quiconque cherche à comprendre quelque chose au phénomène Harlequin, c'est la globalité, l'intégralité de la prise en charge d'un genre littéraire par une stratégie de marketing. Le système est tellement perfectionné, constamment testé et mis au point jusque dans ses moindres détails… La clé du succès d'Harlequin, et son innovation principale, se trouve en fait dans l'application systématique à une entreprise d'édition du principe de la standardisation du produit. Tous les aspects de la production du roman sont standardisés: son contenu, son style, sa longueur, sa présentation typographique, son illustration, son prix, sa publicité et sa

> distribution. Cette standardisation permet d'abord de minimiser les coûts de production et de diffusion. (Marchand 351 and 354)[44]

Furthermore, Hache-Bissette notes the connection between the intensely-positive reception and behind-the-scenes crafting of texts within the two genres, but particularly chick lit, which may point to a desire to reflect the lives of women as they are and could potentially be:

> Son ancrage [celui du chick-lit] fort dans les préoccupations existentielles de ses lectrices est l'une des raisons de son succès. …L'appropriation du terme de *Chick lit* a constitué la première étape de marketisation de cette littérature, le *packing* a suivi avec un choix de *design* pour les couvertures qui ne laisse aucun doute quant à la cible féminine visée… Pour dynamiser les ventes, les éditeurs développent aussi volontiers leurs marques-auteurs en médiatisant à l'envi les auteurs – jeunes et belles – dans les magazines féminins et à la télévision. (Hache-Bissette 107)[45]

On a paratextual level, both chick lit and Harlequin romances are meticulously curated by publishers. From the typeface to the cover to the marketing of these novels, everything is designed to appeal to the female readers who identify with the heroines of the text inside. This has even led to some clothing and cosmetics companies, particularly those of luxury fashion houses, to negotiate brand deals with publishers.[46] Consequently, some popular critics refer to chick lit as "post-feminist," in large part due to the ambiguous relationship that these novels possess in relation to contemporary feminism. Gill argues:

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[44] "What initially disconcerts anyone who seeks to understand something about the Harlequin phenomenon is the globality, the totality of the direction of a literary genre by a marketing strategy. The system is so perfected, constantly tested and refined down to the smallest detail. …The key to Harlequin's success, and its main innovation, is found in the systemic application to a publishing company's principle of product standardization. All aspects of novel production are standardized: content, style, length, typographical presentation, cover photo, price, advertising, distribution. This standardization makes it possible to minimize production and distribution costs." Translation mine.

[45] "Its strong anchoring [that of chick lit] in the existential concerns of its readers is one of the reasons for its success. …The appropriation of the term *chick lit* constituted the first step in the marketing of this literature, the packaging followed with a choice of design for the covers which leaves no doubt as to the targeted female audience. …To boost sales, publishers are also happy to develop their authors' brands by publicizing their writers – young and beautiful – in women's magazines and on television." Translation mine.

[46] For more on this, see Johnson, Naomi R. 2010. "Consuming Desires: Consumption, Romance, and Sexuality in Best-Selling Teen Romance Novels." *Women's Studies in Communication* 33: 54-73. This very illuminating study found that, in chick lit series aimed at teenagers, a brand name was mentioned at least once per page. The purpose, as Johnson argues, is to connect conscious selection and consumption of expensive brand name products with a sexualized and commodified femininity that ultimately leads to a successful romantic relationship.

> Closely related to this neoliberal construction of power, the body and subjectivity, is the development of what we regard as a distinctively postfeminist sensibility in contemporary culture that can be seen clearly in chick lit. One feature of this concerns the ambivalent manner in which feminist ideas are treated within the novels. Feminism is not ignored or even straightforwardly attacked (as some backlash theorists might have it) but is simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated. A certain kind of (liberal) feminist perspective is treated as commonsense, whilst at the same time feminism and feminists are treated as hash, punitive and inauthentic. (Gill 497)

The notion of a post-feminist sensibility – one in which an individual's gender does not impact his or her lived experience and feminism is simultaneously acknowledged as having done its part but that such activism now seems either excessive or unnecessary – could certainly be argued, given chick lit's perceived apathy in actually changing gender relations or otherwise challenging the status quo. While heroines may balk at the idea of being treated unequally in the workplace or having to relinquish their careers to become housewives, topics that were once very pertinent to second-wave feminism, any character that dissuades the heroine from pursuing her romantic relationship in favor of independence is ironically dismissed as nagging or shrill.

While this equality between men and women in chick lit may be a thin veneer that cracks under scrutiny, there may be a silver lining in assigning a post-feminist label to chick lit. If men and women are socially considered equals in such novels, "Ces romans peuvent être vus comme des satires, souvent incisives, de la société mais ils ne cherchent jamais à la révolutionner" (Hache-Bissette 107). This is a point to which I intend to return in the following sections, specifically with regards to the comparison of affect between romance and pornography. Like the pornographic literary genre, romance novels serve as a means of repeating hegemonic gender norms, despite any changes that may have occurred since the 1970s, and even if chick lit serves as a satire of male-female relations, it still does not seek to change such dynamics.

Nevertheless, despite the often fraught and difficult relationship between feminism and romance, as Doreen Thierauf warns, the romance genre does possess feminist potential. Readers must, however, be aware of the market forces that shape the writing and dissemination of these texts that can be antifeminist, though the fantasies that they articulate are not inherently negative. She argues:

> Critics are correct to be wary of views that appropriate women's submission fantasies to promote agendas hostile to feminism, but they should not dismiss the fantasies themselves. Romance novels' fictions of marital intimidation challenge feminism by creating literary sexual subjects at feminism's far limits, while market-driven imperatives structure these fantasies' dissemination. (Thierauf 621-2)

This assertion echoes many scholars' arguments from the previous chapter on pornography, and it is here that we must ask what separates romance from more explicit literary genres. While pornographic and romance structures are largely long-established formulas, minute changes that have occurred since the 1970s have responded to social changes and readers' tastes, conducted at least in part to increase sales. For example, in the 2000s, the advent of more explicit romances, most visibly the *50 Shades of Grey* series, could be interpreted as a response to the increasing visibility and acceptance of pornography or pornographic conventions, as well as a desire for readers to see their fantasies reflected in more explicit romance texts. Yet as romance novels become more explicit, what can we say distinguishes one genre from another?

Blurred Lines: The Erotic Romance

One of the more recent emergences in the genre of romance literature can be seen in what publishers and scholars alike refer to as the erotic romance (though the moniker *bodice-ripper* is usually seen in reference to historical erotic romances, and both are sometimes collectively categorized under the colloquial neologism *mommy porn*, a term used to refer to sexually explicit texts that are marketed to and generally appeal to women, such as *Gabriel's*

Inferno by Sylvain Reynard (2011) and the aforementioned *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James (2011). In addition to their more sexual content, novels grouped under this loosely defined sub-genre of category romance still have a romantic relationship as their main preoccupation. Romance writer and scholar Catherine M. Roach interprets the explosion of erotic romance novels in the 2010s to broader societal changes, such as digital publishing and more liberal sexual practices, noting, "Like the wider romance narrative that operates throughout the culture, romance novels are in the midst of a sea change as they mirror shifting sexual norms for women" (Roach 79-80). Since their earliest forms, the vast majority of category romance has focused on a heterosexual partnership, though the advent of the bodice-ripper has served as a means of revolutionizing the genre by explicitly insisting on the importance of sex and pleasure within such relationships. This has, perhaps understandably, changed the manner in which feminist criticism has responded to romance, with many thinkers paradoxically beginning to situate the erotic romance as a form of – or even sometimes synonymous with – pornography. Yet when they do so, the term *erotic* becomes reduced to pure sexuality, a feature not typically associated with such texts, which has only caused further problems in establishing a coherent definition for the genre.

As a direct result of an increasingly-visible sexuality within the romance genre, some feminist theorists have attempted to erase the boundary between erotica, pornography, and romance entirely; however, perhaps inspired by the rapidly-developing filmic genre of feminist pornography, within the past decade or so, some feminist writers have embraced the erotic romance as a means of "…reclaiming porn and rehabilitating its definition in feminist and queer directions" (Roach 88). While this may seem like a noble project, subsuming erotic literature and category romance under the umbrella term of *pornography* seems irresponsible, as doing so ultimately ignores each genre's more distinctive qualities. Still, the notion of romance as pornography has gained some traction. Among many other voices, Roach states

her belief quite clearly that the erotic romance functions as a variety of feminist pornography created by women and for women, in large part due to its focus on female sexual agency. Perhaps ironically, despite using the monikers *romance*, *erotica*, and *pornography* almost interchangeably throughout her work, Roach does argue for a clear distinction between romance and other genres. Even though she directly equates romance with pornography, Roach argues that the moment of climax serves as a difference between the two:

> Romance fiction is porn, but it's a particular type of woman-oriented feminist porn with a *telos*, or narrative goal. Romance fiction is teleological, building and driving toward this climax of the narrative. This narrative goal, I argue, is the happily-ever-after moment best encapsulated in the hero's declaration of love. In other words, the moment where one most sees romance fiction as pornography is, paradoxically, not in the sex scenes themselves. As I've already noted, these sex scenes aren't even on the page in some of the books. Instead, one sees romance fiction as porn in the happily-ever-after ending, especially in that key moment of climax when the hero declares his love. This is the moment when the hero is won, when he proves himself to be finally and fully on the side of love. (Roach 101)

The declaration of love serves as both a narrative and sensual climax for both the heroine and the readers throughout all subcategories of the romance genre, including in gay and lesbian romance fiction, as Roach later argues. Sex, if it is present in a text at all, generally serves as foreplay for the main event, the "I love you" that leads to the narrative's denouement. Such a proposition is curious; after all, it seems tenuous at best to refer to a novel as pornographic when no overt sexuality can be seen in the narrative. Yet the declaration of love appears to fulfill the same narrative and affective function as the physical climax of orgasm in pornography, resolving the tension that the narrative has built up through the course of the text and allowing characters and readers alike to bask in the afterglow.

But is this emotional climax what distinguishes romance in its many forms from the physical climax depicted in pornography and erotica? Yes and no. It would appear as though pornography distinguishes itself most evidently – though not exclusively – from romance literature with regards to the explicitness of language, though the focus on relationships and

the emotional nature of such a pursuit also serves to distinguish romance from related genres. Mariam Darce Frenier notes that, "Although the new romances were often designated 'porn for women,' their readers still eschewed the kind of pornography written for men, preferring language that veiled sexual encounters" (Frenier 10). Romance writer Kathryn Falk echoes this sentiment about the preference for implicit sex scenes among the genre's aficionados: "Romance readers don't want to read of the sex act in graphic terms. …You will not find the words *penis*, *cunnilingus*, *sodomy*, or any textbook term in a category romance" (Falk 113). Even in their lines specifically devoted to more explicit content, many publishing houses advise authors to stray away from using anatomically-correct language, instead offering a list of more euphemistic terms (such as using the term *hardness* to refer to a male genitalia). But why might this be? For what reasons do readers (and publishers) not want to see references to explicit sexuality in romance novels? Why do readers choose romance and not pornography? These are questions to which I will return in the following section, but for now, it may be fruitful to more deeply interrogate the representation of implied sexuality in romance.

Obviously, the preference for less graphic descriptions of sex does not suggest the total absence of sexuality from mainstream romance novels. In her work's most surprising move, Jan Cohn argues for the centrality of sexuality to the romance genre, "Sexuality is the *res gestae* of romance, the stuff out of which the story is made. If one eliminates the sexual material, the story line remaining is entirely rudimentary" (Cohn 20). The reason for this lies within the character arc that the heroine follows. Even amongst the most conservative publishing houses, authors seem to accept the idea of selfhood as inherently sexual; the heroine of a romance novel becomes fully herself, finding happiness and satisfaction through the sexual awakening the romance hero elicits in her. Yet despite the significance of sexuality to the romance genre, this sexuality is presented as unthreatening to dominant sexual norms due to its conventionality:

> Romance is female fantasy, but female fantasy within the confines of conservative ideology. Romance fictions leave in place the essential structures of sexual ideology, but they make critical adjustments to that structure, adjustments that, only in fantasy, redistribute power in the sexual relations between men and women. More precisely, the sexual plot of popular romance reverses actual power relations by reducing them to the sexual relations between one particular woman and one particular man, between heroine and hero alone. The heroine's victory is personal, unique, and in its uniqueness, makes no overt attack on existing conditions. In part, the heroine's victory is precisely her reward for good behavior, but this, once again, points only to the fundamental sexual conservatism of romance. (Cohn 36)

Whereas pornography depicts a more explicit and exaggerated form of sexuality, romance tends to shy towards an equally-idealized, but much more traditional, vision of relationships between men and women, defined principally by the adoption of monogamy and strict gender roles, even in more modern romance novels. As previously noted in the discussion of chick lit, while heroines may have more than one sexual partner throughout the narrative, sometimes beginning the narrative with a boyfriend or husband, romance novels almost always conclude with the heroine having successfully entered a new monogamous relationship with the hero. At no point are the couple's sexual exploits shown to the reader outside of euphemistic scenes, and such episodes usually depict men as dominant and sexually aggressive, with women taking a more passive and demure role. As Cohn notes, the heroine's victory - a new lover and the happiness that comes with the relationship - is often only achieved when she has undergone some modification to either her appearance or comportment in order to better assimilate into hegemonic models of femininity, thereby exhibiting the traditional "good behavior" associated with women and ultimately receiving the recognition and respect of a potential male suitor. By becoming less career-minded, more attractive, or simply more feminine, the heroine can symbolically dominate the hero by becoming an object of desire for him while paradoxically limiting her own power. This argument seems reasonable; while men and women seemingly end up sharing power in a heterosexual union at the end of a romance novel, this egalitarian dynamic can only come

within the confines of traditional roles for men and women. The promise of an equal partnership comes at a cost; namely, both the hero and the heroine having to fit into narrow gender confines. The scripts of romance novels – the heroine's original loneliness, her encounters with the hero, his refusal of her feelings before the eventual romantic confession, and the happily ever after – only serve to reinforce stereotypical gendered behaviors for both men and women. Like pornography, the promise of egalitarianism and liberation through romance novels can be viewed as a hollow one. The development of characters, however, serves to distinguish romance from pornography outside of more sexual scenes.

While romance literature may seem like a genre wherein the reader can voyeuristically watch scenes play out, despite likely knowing what the end result will be, a surprising amount of introspection can be found in romance novels. For example, authors of Harlequin novels often spend significant parts of the narration in their works on describing the heroine's internal thoughts. As Yvan Boulet concludes in his sociological study of contemporary French romance novels, "Les discours narrativisé et transposé apparaissent dans une proportion moindre (17%) et sont en grande partie réservés à traduire la pensée de l'héroïne. Mais à cause de l'ambiguïté de l'énonciation du discours, il arrive constamment que ces monologues intérieurs se confondent avec les fonctions de description et de commentaire du narrateur" (Boulet 371).[47] This focus on interiority helps to distinguish romance from mainstream pornographic literary works due to the primary focus on such texts. As was argued previously in the first chapter of this project, most works of pornography dedicate themselves solely to the pursuit of pleasure, with the protagonist's thoughts rarely, if ever, making an appearance. Romance instead concentrates a significant portion of its narrative to the heroine's emotional journey as she gradually falls in love with

[47] "Narrativized and indirect discourse appears in a similar proportion (17%) and is largely reserved for translating the heroine's thoughts. But because of the ambiguity in the expression of this discourse, it happens constantly that these interior monologues merge with the descriptive and commentary-based functions of the narrator." Translation mine.

the hero, ostensibly to create a connection with the reader and assist with guiding his or her fantasies.

For some, the defining characteristic of romance is related to the interaction of fantasy with reality within the text. Thierauf makes a particularly salient point about the power of fantasy within the romance genre and the importance of social conditions in shaping sexual fantasies when reading romance:

> …fantasies do not emerge from a space outside of culture; they must derive from a historically available and constantly changing repertoire of sexual scripts and social codes to function in a given culture. The standard tropes of contemporary romance plots, such as the heroine's virginity; her warm-heartedness and protectiveness; her painful-and-ecstatic initiation into intercourse; her unconscious, yet flawless beauty; her clumsiness legitimizing the hero's assumption of control over her body; her physical waifishness; her inner resourcefulness; and her Cinderella-like relief from domestic drudgery, might appear archaic, but the (seemingly) long duration of their cultural survival turns these tropes into originary "true" and "pure" signifiers of women's sexuality. (Thierauf 615)

Romance novels serve as a mirror (however imperfect) of the society around them, reflecting the ever-complicated notions of "what women want" and "what women *should* want" through the employment of clichés. Certainly, many of the specific tropes related to contemporary romance novels are unique to the genre, such as the meet cute or a makeover scene. Even the pornography that feminist scholars have attempted to ally with romance possesses its own clichés, tropes, and stock characters. Their ubiquity, it would seem, serve as a testament to the formulaic nature of the genre, helping to guide the reader through the narrative with relatively little fuss. Perhaps one of the most enduring stock characters is the career woman, who Dixon first identifies as appearing in the 1920s and 1930s; this archetypal heroine disappeared during the 1950s, only to reappear after the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s. (Dixon 86 and 90). Though she usually begins the narrative as single-mindedly trying to ascend the corporate ladder, she almost inevitably ends up getting married to the romantic hero, usually a boss or client who is not only handsome but supportive of her

career. As with the case of the declaration of love, however, the surface-level differences in clichés between the two genres only obscures their lack of engagement with the anxieties and inequalities that serve as their foundation.

The presence of tropes in category romance, as well as the material conditions that inspire them and construct a fantasy for the reader, only poses more issues in concretely distinguishing the romance genre from pornography. Though a self-admitted fan of the romance genre, Thierauf critiques the often unequal power dynamics between hero and heroine and, more troublingly, the perpetuation of misogyny within more contemporary works. While speaking of the media buzz around *Twilight* (2005) and *50 Shades of Grey* (2011), she argues, "Romance fiction, even if it increasingly employs sexually transgressive or kinky practices to provide readers with a transient sense of abandon and freedom, functions as a reactionary genre reveling in the perpetuation of existing social power hierarchies" (Thierauf 618). Though the wrapping paper may be different, with the gift tag labeled *romance* or *pornography*, the object inside of the box is the same. As in the case of mainstream pornography, romance fiction embraces and reflects dominant norms of sex and gender by employing clichés but ultimately fails to deconstruct and critique them. Even in novels that may seem more transgressive, this sense of freedom is only superficial, and dominant norms still underlie the narrative. In this respect, perhaps romance and pornography are more alike than originally believed. Yet the original question of this chapter remains unresolved: what - if anything - distinguishes romance from pornography and erotica?

Perhaps the most useful manner of interrogating this will be to ask separate questions entirely. Why do readers choose romance and not pornography or erotica? What does the category romance offer readers that other genres do not? And where does subjecthood - both for the literary protagonist and the real-world reader - lie? As in the case of the previous

chapter, asking more about the reader's position may serve as a means to clarify distinctions in genre.

Touchy-Feely: Romance and Affect Theory

Affective literary criticism – also referred to as reader-response theory – gained much traction in the 1970s before falling towards the proverbial wayside. The field began with Louise Rosenblatt and was further developed by Stanley Fish, David R. Holland, and Wolfgang Iser. It is not to be confused with either the notion of affect that Eve Sedgwick developed in *Tendencies* (1993) and *Touching Feeling* (2003) nor that which Lauren Berlant pioneered in the 2011 text *Cruel Optimism.* Though the latter version of affect does concern emotion in similar ways, Berlant's theory largely has to do with the postmodernist notion that the world is shaped not only by objective and factual histories and conditions but also by subjective and personal experiences and feelings. Of particular note are Berlant's Marxist leanings within this notion, as the text ultimately argues that the material pressures of late capitalism erode hopes of upward mobility among the working class. Rather, the affective literary criticism referred to here deals with the transactional nature of reading between the reader and the author, the reception of various literary works by the broader public, and both the individual and collective responses of readers to texts. According to theorists Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, "As a theoretical paradigm, reader-response criticism explores three principal questions: do our various responses to literary works produce the same (or similar) readings; can literary texts genuinely enjoy as many meanings as readers are able to create?; are some readings essentially more valid and justifiable than others?" (Davis and Womack 51). The value in reader-response theory lies in its ability to provide insight into the reading process itself, as well as the manner in which the writing of works informs interpretation. Though the major players in the field differ in their theoretical backgrounds, which run the gamut from psychoanalytic criticism to feminist philosophy, all agree that the

interpretation of literature done by readers is framed by a variety of constructions and experiences. As Louise Rosenblatt summarizes, albeit in a discussion of poetry:

> The reader's attention to the text activates certain elements in his past experience–external reference, internal response–that have become linked with verbal symbols. Meaning will emerge from a network of relationships among the things symbolized *as he senses them*. The symbols point to these sensations, images, objects, ideas, relationships, with the particular associations or feeling-tones created by his past experiences with them in actual life or in literature. The selection and organization of responses to some degree hinge on the assumptions, the expectations, or sense of possible structures, that he brings out of the stream of his life. Thus built into the raw material of the literary process itself is the particular world of the reader. (Rosenblatt 11)

The reader is, according to Rosenblatt, not a blank canvas who passively takes in information but rather an active part of the reading process, reacting and interpreting to the text in a manner which depends on his or her attitudes, beliefs, preferences, and prejudices. This results in a wide variety of reactions and interpretations among readers; however, this does not mean that all readers' responses are valid, nor does Rosenblatt imply that there are as many interpretations of texts as there are readers.

Perhaps the most common concern vis-à-vis affective literary criticism relates to its seemingly subjective nature. However, it is worth noting that most experts in the field do not advocate for an entirely personal approach to reading and criticism. Iser, for example, notes that there must be objective evidence in order to support a reader's subjective experience. He begins with a hypothetical, "If, for instance, we praise a novel because its characters are realistic, we are endowing a verifiable criterion with a subjective assessment, whose claim to validity lies at best in a consensus. Objective evidence for subjective preferences does not make the value judgment itself objective, but merely objectifies the preferences" (Iser 25). Iser further justifies his position by arguing that the notion of an imagined reader is in itself fallacious, as readers bring their own unique experiences when engaging with a text.

Davis and Womack elaborate on the importance of affective literary criticism to feminist thought and, more specifically, to this project, evoking the notion of gendered reading. This theory posits that women and men construct and reinforce certain worldviews through reading that are based on their real-world experience as gendered beings. While summarizing Patrocinio P. Schweickart's essay "Towards a Feminist Theory of Reading," the pair conclude, "Schweickart asserts that feminist theory must imagine ways in which to establish a privileged status for the experiences and interests of women readers. ...The androcentric canon works in a vicious cycle, Schweickart observes, that succeeds in replicating the implementation of androcentric interpretive strategies, which, she reasons, logically ensure the canonization of androcentric texts and the marginalization of gynocentric literature" (Davis and Womack 75).[48] As Davis notes, reading and writing have power that can normalize or marginalize; affective reading can be used to push back against the notions of canon that privilege male readers and authors.

Ultimately, it would seem, the goal of affect theory is to move away from monolithic, author-centric notions of reading and instead view the reader as an equally-vital participant in literary interpretation and analysis. And it is here with the question of readership that I shall continue my inquiry. If romance novels, as feminist and literary scholars have argued, follow a narrow set of conventions with regard to their presentation, plot, and themes, then to what do they owe their enormous commercial success? Why would readers enjoy the same story retold countless times with only superficial differences to distinguish each one? Are these reasons the same as those which explain the consumption of pornography, a genre which likewise embraces convention as fervently? And, more to the point, why are books whose main preoccupation concerns romantic relationships so regularly associated with female

[48] For more on Schweickart's fascinating perspective, see Schweickart, Patrocinio P. 1986. "Reading Ourselves: Towards a Feminist Theory of Reading." In *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*. Eds. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart. Pp. 31-62. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

readership? Why not, for example, horror or science fiction? As with the case of pornography, it may be helpful to ask questions about readership in order to better distinguish romance from pornography and erotica.

Perhaps the clearest answers to questions surrounding the appeal of romance can be found in Janice Radway's landmark survey, *Reading the Romance* (1984). Based on the interviews Radway conducted with hundreds of romance enthusiasts, it appears as though the majority of readers' investment stems from the emotional aspects of category romance. As previously mentioned, the confession of love serves as not only a crucial moment to advance the romance plot but additionally as a means to release tension that the narrative has built up, allowing for a satisfying payoff for the reader. However, Radway does not believe that this need for validation from the hero inherently represents an antifeminist practice. Rather, as romance novelist and scholar Jay Dixon notes in a retrospective on Radway's corpus, "The fact that an adult woman wants love from her partner does not indicate that she wants to be treated as a child. What she does want is to be cared for and supported as an equal, just as she cares for and supports her partner – male or female" (Dixon 31). The climax of the romance story, the "I love you" that the hero utters, serves as not only an emotional and narrative climax, but additionally as the fulfillment of an egalitarian promise. The hero acknowledges the reciprocity of his feelings for the heroine, allowing for the beginning of a relationship founded on mutual affection and support. There is a certain vicariousness within this confession on the part of the reader, as the hero's admission may also serve as a form of wish fulfillment for those who aspire to be part of such an idyllic romantic relationship. Yet while these depictions of an equal partnership wherein the hero and the heroine share mundanities and joys in the same measure serve as a fundamental source of pleasure and engagement for readers, some are skeptical of the egalitarianism of the romantic confession.

As pointed out by Tania Modeleski in *Loving with a Vengeance* (1990), vicarious fantasy is indeed where the appeal of the romance novel lies, though the hero's confession does not represent a sign of mutual respect for the heroine. Rather, his "I love you" serves as a testament to the suffering that the heroine inflicts as a consequence of her emotional and psychological power over him. By confessing his love for the heroine, the hero admits that the heroine has successfully dominated him, holding absolute control over his psychological and emotional well-being. The crux of Modeleski's argument relies on this almost-sadistic pleasure, "A great deal of our satisfaction in reading these novels comes, I am convinced, from the elements of a revenge fantasy, from our conviction that the woman is bringing the man to his knees and that all the while he is being so hateful, he is internally groveling, groveling, groveling…" (Modleski 37). In a Foucauldian move, Modeleski meticulously considers the power implications within the hero's confession, ultimately concluding that mutuality has nothing to do with this particular cliché. Rather, in contrast to earlier thinkers who argued for the reader's pleasure originating in the affection that the hero finally demonstrates towards the heroine by admitting his feelings for her, this moment conceals women's unconscious desire for revenge, ostensibly in retribution for the injustices of patriarchy. The assumed-female romance reader's pleasure actually comes from seeing women wield power over men and enacting an unconscious fantasy that female readers hold.

Whatever the case may be, vicarious fantasy seems to be responsible for maintaining readers' relationship with romance, perhaps due to allowing a reassessment of norms surrounding romantic relationships. Whether readers hope for a relationship founded on respect and love or they hold a desire to see the opposite sex reduced to powerlessness, readers of romance seek to envision alternate possibilities for their relationships and perhaps even themselves. However, as scholars of affect theory – namely, Mordell – have argued, this fantasy is not meant to actually propel the reader to any sort of action, and the exploration of

the Self can only be conducted within limited confines. Kay Mussell also explains, "The romance fantasy is retrogressive; it does not promote genuine change or individual growth. Instead, it works as conservative force, palliating and ameliorating the effects of chaos and change by portraying traditional modes of being and aspiration as more fulfilling and exciting than they may seem in reality" (Mussell 173). Fantasy, as it is inspired by romance, does not seek a sexual response from the reader, as in the case of pornography. Instead, these fantasies exist solely for their own sake, never truly challenging the reader. While readers may imagine alternate possibilities for themselves – such as a doting partner or a position of power – this can only be done within the narrow confines of the romance novel, which is often constrained by the demands of publishers, as well as the genre's constant tropes, as outlined previously.

Yet not only have tropes changed within romance novels, the notion of romance itself may be evolving. As Diane Elam noted in her interrogation into affect and postmodernity, there exists some recent resistance to the notion of romance as it has been traditionally represented in literature. Though Elam focuses her analysis largely on Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), many have identified Guillaume Lescable's *Lobster* (2003) as another text which rethinks romance. Considered an allegorical or erotic romance, like many French works considered part of the romance genre, *Lobster* appropriates many of the clichés developed by Anglophone publishers; however, unlike its contemporaries, Lescable's novel adds in the eponymous crustacean as a participant in the primary relationship. Due to this narrative choice, as well as several other idiosyncrasies, I would argue that the manner in which these tropes are utilized and subsequently deconstructed asks more of the reader than a typical category romance. Through the text's characterization of the titular character, referred to as Lobster even in the French edition, as well as the frequent interactions with his human paramour, the narrative asks readers to reconsider notions of selfhood, Otherness, and

animality. Ultimately, I would argue that the text would be more appropriately considered as an erotic text, albeit perhaps one with questionable feminist value.

Lobster Lover: Lescable's Lobster

At the end of 1936, Salvador Dali presented his now-iconic *Lobster Telephone* to the English poet Edward James, an avid supporter of the surrealist movement. One of his most well-known and idiosyncratic pieces, the sculpture highlights one of the many motifs that recur throughout Dali's work. As scholars of modernism have remarked, the crustacean, which appeared in no fewer than six of Dali's works, was intrinsically linked to food, consumption, and sex. In *Lobster Telephone*, for example, the crustacean's tail, where its sexual organs are located, is placed directly on the mouthpiece, giving the impression that the speaker is stimulating the animal when speaking into the receiver, thereby connecting the animal to sexuality. Another example followed three years later when, in 1939, Dali created an exhibit entitled *Dream of Venus* for the World's Fair in New York, which consisted of dressing live models in gowns adorned with fresh seafood. On all of their clothing, Dali, in a surprisingly subtle move, covered the women's sexual organs with a lobster. This association of the lobster with sex, so unexpected and shocking in its audacity, additionally found itself in other domains.

Elsa Schiaparelli, one of Coco Chanel's most enduring rivals, helped to shape women's fashion in the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s. Forced to close her fashion house in 1954 (though the brand was purchased by Tod's in the 2010s and gave its first runway show post-revival in 2023), Schiaparelli's collaborations with the great artists of her generation, most notably Jean Cocteau and Salvador Dali, helped to distinguish her from her French nemesis. Among the most popular and well-known pieces that survive from the House of Schiaparelli's height is the Lobster Dress, an off-white organza gown created in 1937 which features a silk-screen print of the eponymous crustacean drawn by Dali on the front of

the skirt. Once again referencing Dali's conception of lobsters as sexual creatures, the animal is placed between the legs of the wearer, with the tail of the lobster fanning upward toward the model's pubic region, and its claws towards her knees. When first worn by American socialite Wallis Simpson in a *Vogue* photo spread done before her marriage to the Duke of Windsor, the dress caused significant controversy, with public opinion towards Simpson becoming even more unfavorable due to her perceived sexual freedom.

Other references to lobsters as sexual creatures in popular culture are minor but still important to consider. On the 14th episode of the second season of the now-iconic NBC sitcom *Friends*, Phoebe (played by Lisa Kudrow) explains her theory about love to Ross (played by David Schwimmer). According to Phoebe, everyone has a soulmate, not unlike lobsters who mate for life. Despite this being untrue, lobsters became associated with romantic, monogamous love in the popular imagination as opposed to the more vulgar sexuality that they advanced in Dali's artworks. Furthermore, the 2017 film *Lobster*, which bears no relation to Lescable's novel, takes place in a speculative future where humans must find a romantic partner or be turned into an animal. In one monologue, a character states that he would want to be a lobster due to the crustacean's long lifespan and life-long fertility. Yet nowhere has the depiction of lobsters as sexual beings been as transparent as in Guillaume Lecasble's novel.

Published in 2003 and translated into English by Poly McLean in 2005, *Lobster* marks Lescable's first foray into writing. Born in 1954, Guillaume Lescable first gained prominence as a painter; as per his biography, he began making short films after his first solo exhibition at the age of thirty before turning his focus to novels, which Lescable claims are informed by visual arts (Center for the Art of Translation). His second novel *Cut* (2005), as well as *Lobster*, were released to much critical interest, with many reviewers noting the unique plot of each text. Written from the point of view of the eponymous crustacean, Lescable's debut

novel documents the creature's obsessive love for a young heroin addict named Angelina, having reconciled his memories of her eating his father with his newfound affection, culminating in the two engaging in sexual intercourse aboard the *Titanic*. As the doomed vessel begins to sink, the two are separated in the chaos, and Angelina escapes in a lifeboat, returning to New York with her father, with the pair deciding to relocate to Paris shortly thereafter. Lobster, out of anger for having eaten his own mother, scavenges the body of Angelina's mother and vows to be reunited with his beloved at any cost. Further difficulties ensue when Jules, an amateur fisherman and tattoo enthusiast living near Angelina on the rue de la Roquette, captures Lobster but decides to keep him as a pet due to the animal's unique coloration, eventually developing his own romantic feelings for Angelina, turning the plot into a warped love triangle between two humans and a crustacean. At the end of the story, Angelina suddenly and inexplicably commits suicide by drowning, leading to Lobster boiling himself alive atop Jules' stove, unable or unwilling to live without his warm-blooded paramour. Despite its bizarre nature, the story made a splash among many reviewers in the popular press, but particularly Nicholas Lezard of *The Guardian*, who referred to it as an "outrageous, erotic masterpiece." Other reviewers have categorized the novel alternatively as erotica, soft-core pornography, and romance, among other genres. What about Lescable's work leaves it seemingly able to escape classification? What moniker, if one needs to be applied, would suit the text best, and why?

While I would agree the novel may seem like a category romance due to its appropriation of several tropes and clichés that characterize the genre, doing so would be a rather superficial assessment of such a profoundly complex narrative. Reducing the plot to a simple love triangle would be grossly reductionist, particularly given the affective qualities of the work. I therefore argue that Lecasble's text is not a work of niche pornography or a slightly unconventional romance meant to provoke or placate the reader; rather, it is a text

possessing a forward-thinking eroticism that unsettles and reader due to its breaking down the seemingly-rigid dichotomy between Self and Other, as well as humans and animals. Though told in the third person, the unnamed narrator gives Lobster complex emotions (ranging from love to hate and happiness to sadness), as well as a long-term memory and the ability to formulate and execute plans (as reflected by Lobster's fantasies of getting wed to Angelina). All of these cognitive and emotional processes are typically not associated with animals and instead ascribed to humans as what separates people from animals; however, though Lobster does not possess the body of a man, he does have the intellect and emotions of a human, which serves to problematize the seemingly-rigid boundary between the two categories and demystify the animalistic Other. Indeed, whereas the Lobster begins the narrative as a creature capable of complex thought despite his physical form, the humans in the work are depicted as increasingly single-minded, following only their instincts and acting either on impulse or to satisfy their short-term needs, not unlike animals. In both cases, the sexual body possesses features of both species, blurring the line between what is the Self and the Other. Ultimately, I argue that, in large part due to these great philosophical preoccupations, Lescable's work is erotic insofar as it uses love and sexuality not for their own sake but rather as a means to ask the reader to reconceptualize the relationship, sexual or otherwise, between oneself and the natural world.

From the very first scene of the text, Lobster is depicted as a highly introspective creature, capable of feeling complex human emotions and embodying a type of non-human subjectivity. However, while he experiences the tribulations of love and its many emotional follies, the text acknowledges that this greater understanding of passion is not innate. Rather, it was awakened inside of him upon realizing his love for a human woman. As the narrator of the text states, "La beauté d'Anjelina peut provoquer la fièvre. Lobster la sent monter. Son corps chauffe mais n'efface pas le sentiment de vengeance. Il ne sait comment faire, pour la

première fois confronté à l'obligation de choisir ; non par instinct, mais par raison" (Lescable 15).[49] Not unlike romance heroes whose passions are awakened through an initial meeting with the heroine, Lobster cannot be a fully conscious subject before meeting Angelina. Before this moment, he was like any other crustacean, using his natural inclinations to focus on survival. But with these newfound feelings for Angelina, he must begin to use rationality to solve problems, namely how to seduce the unlikely object of his affection. He can no longer rely on animal instincts and instead begins to use humanlike logic to formulate a plan. Here is where Lobster begins life anew as a hybrid creature, possessing the mind of a human Self and the body of a crustacean Other. This difference between the two breaks down and is further exacerbated by the way in which Lobster's anatomy is described when he ultimately succeeds in his machinations.

The interactions between Lobster and Angelina are marked with a tenderness characteristic of category romance that creates a strong juxtaposition to the violent actions of others in his species. The sexual liaison between Angelina and Lobster is described as "divine," with Lobster's motivations centering around his altruistic desire to bring Angelina pleasure. The terms used are largely euphemistic and perhaps reflect the influence of erotic romances. Their intercourse begins as such, "Lobster y introduit sa pince, qu'il referme sur le clitoris avec le naturel d'un amant averti. Ce qu'il fait ensuite à Anjelina lui chauffe à ce point les sangs qu'elle reprend connaissance. Cambre ses reins. Lobster, soulevé dans les airs, raidit sa queue qui claque l'eau en retombant à contretemps du cul d'Anjelina. Ainsi commence leur danse nuptiale" (Lescable 18).[50] One must note the usage of non-human

[49] "Angelina's beauty is enough to bring on fevers, and Lobster feels one mounting in him. His body heats up, but it doesn't stop his craving for vengeance. He doesn't know what to do – for the first time he is being forced to use his reason, rather than his instinct" (Lescable and McLean 17).

[50] "Lobster put his claw in and closed it on the clitoris with the dexterity of a practiced lover. What he did to Angelina next so warmed her insides that she returned to life, arching her back. Lobster was thrown into the air, stiffening his tail as he slapped back against the water in time with Angelina's rhythm. And so their wedding dance began." (Lescable and McLean 20).

biological terms, such as *pince* [*claw*] when referring to Lobster's anatomy in this scene. Though Lobster possesses the mind, emotions, and hands of a human man and a fully-realized Subject, he is neither fully human nor referred to as such. The narrator includes details related to his tail and feelers throughout the work, never fully allowing the reader to forget Lobster's Otherness and his difference from Angelina during the interspecies love affair. He represents a particularly singular hybrid, a creature that is between animal and human, both simultaneously but never fully either. This singularity is further reinforced by Angelina's sexual interactions with other lobsters, which prove much less pleasant.

After losing Lobster to the void of the Atlantic, Angelina begins to purchase crustaceans by the crate, believing that all lobsters are capable of understanding and engaging safely with human sexuality. Her first time attempting to prove this theory leads to a particularly macabre scene that marks a stark departure from category romance, which is explained thus: "Anjelina se dit qu'après tout les dons de Lobster sont peut-être propres à tous les homards. Elle retire sa culotte. S'assied sur la table. Remonte sa jupe. Prend le homard encore vivant. Le positionne devant son sexe. Il ne bouge pas. Elle le secoue, frotte ses pinces contre son clitoris. …La douleur qui la traverse lui arrache un cri aigu. Le homard tombe sur le carrelage avec dans sa pince le petit morceau de chair sectionné" (Lescable 29-30).[51] Whereas Lobster's lovemaking bears positive descriptions and uses human anatomical terms to construct a lobster-human hybrid, other lobsters in the text are marked by total animality and Otherness. Unlike Lobster, they possess claws as opposed to hands which do not bring pleasure but only physical scars. There is no internal life to these creatures and no similarity to humans, only responses to outside stimuli. This scene consequently harkens back

[51] "Angelina decided that it was after all possible that Lobster's gifts belonged to his species as a whole. She took off her panties. Sat on the table. Pulled up her skirt. Picked up the still-living lobster. Positioned it in front of her cunt. It didn't move. She shook it, rubbing the pincers against her clitoris. …The pain wrenched a high-pitched wail from deep inside her. The lobster fell to the tiled floor with small pieces of severed flesh in its pincers" (Lescable and McLean 31-2).

to Lobster's uniqueness as a hybrid creature, possessing the physical form of crustacean with the spirit, mind, and body parts of both a human and a lobster. This is likewise the case for Lobster's companions, who gradually lose their humanity and follow only their instincts as the text progresses, beginning with their bodies.

The "lobsterfication" of human flesh is made most explicit in the case of Jules. After giving Angelina a tattoo of a lobster on the remains of her clitoris and realizing his overwhelming attraction to her, Jules awakens the following day, only to realize that, "...[S]a bite recouverte d'une carapace de homard. Rouge. Son premier geste est de vouloir l'arracher. Il ne s'arrache qu'un cri de douleur. …Il s'allonge sur la banquette. Le velours a gardé le parfum d'Anjelina. Machinalement, il se tripote. Réflexe primordial" (Lescable 98-9).[52] Here we see perhaps the most transparent reference to Dali's sexualization of the lobster, with the animal's body once again in close proximity to a human's reproductive organs (as in the aforementioned case of the *Dream of Venus* exhibit). Lescable's novel takes this a step further, however, with the lobster not just covering the man's genitals but rather taking their place entirely, Jules' lower half having inexplicably become a hardened shell but otherwise functional. This reference to the skin as a shell reappears at many points throughout the narrative, such as after this scene, wherein Angelina wakes up and removes the bandages from her midsection. The narrator describes how "Son tatouage est couvert de petites croûtes marron. Comme une vraie carapace" (Lescable 101).[53] Another example follows the first sexual encounter between Angelina and Lobster wherein the former bathes before, "Elle plaque Lobster contre sa peau, compare leur rougeur. « Tu vois, maintenant nous sommes pareils », lui chuchote-t-elle'" (Lescable 20).[54] In both excerpts, human skin is directly

[52] "His cock was covered with a lobster's shell. Red. His first instinct was to try and pull it off. All that happened was a yelp of pain. …He lay down on the bench. The velvet still smelled of Angelina. Mechanically, he started playing with himself. Primordial instinct" (Lescable and McLean 100-1).
[53] "Her tattoo was covered in little brown scabs. Like a real shell" (Lescable and McLean 103).
[54] "Clasping Lobster to her naked body, she compared their redness, whispering, 'look, we're the same now'" (Lescable and McLean 22).

compared to a Lobster's shell in both texture and color, blurring the lines between human and animal and continuing to distinguish the narrative from the more idealized physiques of the protagonists in pornography and romance, even in their more modern forms. Very few, if any, examples of chick lit contain scenes with such drastic transformations, with the closest approximation being a makeover scene. Later on, Jules hallucinates that his hands have been replaced by claws, transforming his body into a grotesque lobster-human hybrid, fusing the human subject with the Otherized body of a Lobster, not unlike Lobster's form during his tryst with Angelina. One must also note the place of the words *machinalement* [*mechanically*] and *primordial* alongside *réflexe* [*instinct*] in the excerpt. These terms, so astutely chosen, harken back to the Otherized nonhuman and naturalistic primitiveness. Though many would be perturbed to find their genitals replaced by lobster anatomy, Jules disregards this emotional response and instead follows his animal instincts, masturbating to orgasm. Like the crustacean that mutilated Angelina, Jules responds to outside stimuli (in this case, Angelina's scent as opposed to her touch) and does what he feels is right without any hesitation or second thought. It is at this point of the narrative that Jules ceases to be fully human and instead slips into the liminal space between man and crustacean that Lobster also occupies. His body slowly becomes increasingly unfamiliar and his mind more animalistic, and this continues in the last scene of the novel, wherein Jules loses another piece of his humanity and seems to dissolve into animality entirely.

Although Lescable's work may be one of the only erotic texts to explore such intellectual themes, it is not the only work that explores the often-porous relationship between humans and animals. Arguably the best-known work that deals with the subject remains Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), in which the protagonist gradually transforms into a large insect, sometimes translated as a cockroach or a beetle. Another more contemporary example can be found in Marie Darrieussecq's debut novel *Truismes* (1996). The text recounts the

female narrator's tenure in a Parisian pharmacy during which she is constantly sexually harassed by both her employer and the customers. As the narrative continues, she begins to notice subtle bodily changes, such as more notable curves and pain near her tailbone until she finds herself in a pig's body. From here, the novel grows increasingly surreal, as a dictatorship takes over France and declares war on surrounding nations; the narrator, having learned to shift from human to animal form, falls in love with a werewolf who is perhaps ironically killed by the Society for Animal Protection. Heartbroken, she confides in her mother, the manager of a slaughterhouse, who intends to murder her daughter for consumption, only for the narrator to kill her mother and escape to a nearby forest, where she lives almost exclusively in porcine form, emerging only to write her story.

A similarly painful end meets Lescable's characters. During the final pages of the novel, it is revealed that Angelina has impulsively jumped into the Seine with her pockets full of rocks, with the text implying that survivor's guilt has driven her to despair. Following Angelina's suicide, instead of mourning, Jules swims to the body and begins to consume Angelina's corpse, much in the same way that Angela consumed Lobster's father abord the *Titanic* and Lobster devoured Angelina's mother after she perished among the wreckage of the vessel. The final words of the text read, "Jules repart avec l'espoir d'échapper à cette envie de chair humaine. …Il enlace le corps flasque qui ne demande qu'à lui glisser des mains. Il ouvre un à un les boutons de la robe. Soulève la blouse. Dévoile le tatouage. Mord dedans. Aspire le bouillon. Des petits poissons se précipitent, pour tenter de glober du liquide entre sa bouche et l'orifice. Il les chasse. « Un charognard, je suis devenu un charognard », se répète-t-il, lové contre elle en chien de fusil" (Lescable 106-9).[55] Whereas Lobster consumes

[55] "Jules swam off, hoping to escape this appetite for human flesh… He hugged the flaccid body that desired only to slip from his hands. Undid the buttons of the dress, one at a time. Pulled up the blouse. Uncovered the tattoo. Bit into it. Sucked the fluid. Small fish rushed over, avid for any liquid leaking between the orifice and his mouth. He chased them away. 'A scavenger. I've become a scavenger,' he said to himself, spooned against her" (Lescable and McLean 108-10).

the corpse of Angelina's mother out of vengeance, Jules cannot point to any compelling emotional reason why he feels the need to feed upon Angelina's body. When he has finished, he can only blame his hunger and the nature of what he has become – a scavenger – as an explanation. It is here, I would argue, that the novel most evidently separates itself from its romance counterparts; as opposed to placating the reader with happily ever afters and resolving the central conflict through marriage, Lescable's text ends in tragedy, with two of the central characters perishing and the third as a transformed human-animal hybrid. As with his appetite for sex, Jules' motivations have shifted towards the animalistic, focusing on survival in the immediate future and disregarding social taboos about the consumption of human flesh entirely. This further completes his transformation into a lobster-slash-human, with Jules having become an Otherized hybrid which bears little resemblance to the human subject that appeared at the beginning of the narrative, breaking down the boundary between human and animal. We must also note the sexualized nature of the scene; as previously noted, the tattoo to which the narrator is referring is placed near Angelina's sexual organs. Jules' feeding upon Angelina, beginning with this part of her body, is an extremely sensual image, one that also harkens back to Dali's *Lobster Telephone*, though perhaps in a reversed form of the original. Instead of a human placing his or her mouth near the lobster's sexual organs, as is the case with the aforementioned sculpture, Lescable's text concludes with a lobster-slash-human placing his mouth around the reproductive organs of a human. Such an image serves as not only a contrast to Dali's work but additionally harkens back to the beginning of the novel, an animalistic man with no inner life being juxtaposed to a human lobster who is capable of love and reason. The image also serves to further separate the work from the romance genre; in contrast to the emotional orgasm that is brought about by the confession of love in the category romance novel, we find a despairing anticlimax in Lescable's work, with

two-thirds of the love triangle dead and the participants unable or unwilling to articulate their feelings for one another.

Though the novel began with a seemingly-simple quest for love, not unlike more conventional romances, such a trajectory is complicated not only by the presence of the eponymous Lobster but also by the characters' increasingly instinctive or irrational behaviors. Consequently, the novel does not represent an example of romance, despite the focus on love and relationships. Rather, the novel, I would argue, would be better classified as an erotic text; while the text may have as its central conflict a love triangle, this is one of the only few similarities between Lescable's text and its more mainstream counterparts. Perhaps more important than plot, though, is the effect of the novel on readers. As opposed to more traditional romance narratives, *Lobster* seems almost written to problematize notions of love, sex, and desire while also asking several questions about the nature of humankind and the limits of animality through its use of the eponymous crustacean as an equal participant in the aforementioned love triangle.

Conclusion

As romance novels become increasingly open to discussing the sexual episodes of its characters, the lines between romance, pornography, and erotica grow increasingly less clear. Though many would point to obvious, narrative-level conventions (such as the absence or presence of explicit sexuality) to distinguish them, such observations neglect the increasing presence of subgenres such as the erotic romance, which incorporates pornographic conventions alongside those of the category romance but use erotic as a descriptor. The question of the reader and his or her affective response to such texts serves as a more useful means to distinguish romance from related genres. As previously mentioned in the first chapter of this project, scholars of affect theory have argued that pornography is a singular literary genre insofar as novels categorized under this genre generally seek to elicit a sexual

response from their readers. While speaking of romance novels, the same critics have alleged that popular category romances appeal largely to their readers' emotions, evoking fantasies that do not seek to challenge hegemonic gender and sexual norms.

Despite this, as with pornography, there has been some effort in advancing arguments about the feminist potential of romance novels, albeit with mixed results. With the advent of chick lit, texts that depict less idealized heroines than their Harlequin counterparts, many feminist literary scholars in both the English-speaking world and France have argued for the feminist potential of modern romance fiction. However, detractors have contended that, due to the manner in which the heroine is characterized, the romance narrative only serves as a means of limiting women further. In short, while there may be some superficial differences between old and new category romances, the messages remain the same. Perhaps pornography and romance are more similar than originally thought. Yet the same question presents itself as it did in the first chapter of this project: where does erotica lie in all of this? If erotic literature is a genre in its own right, what separates it from other genres if these other genres can be considered erotic or even erotica? Do readers react differently to erotica and, if so, how?

In the case of Guillaume Lescable's *Lobster* (2003), a text alternately classified as romance, erotica, and pornography, I have argued that the category of erotic literature represents the most promising designation for the novel. While pornography and romance attempt to satisfy the reader sexually or emotionally, respectively, they do not challenge the reader and instead possess a singular goal. Lescable's novel, by contrast, may satisfy one or even both of these objectives due to its usage of several conventions found in the two genres, but it also asks the reader to question the relationship between humans and animals, between Self and Other. The novel's conventional plot, rendered unconventional by the presence of the eponymous Lobster, implicates giving a conscious subjectivity to some animals while

objectifying the humans in the narrative by rendering them animalistic. Perhaps, as the novel suggests, little separates the two. The novel's final scenes ask the reader to consider what would happen if animals could demonstrate agency and express conscious desires and perspectives. How would our relationship with animals change, if at all? What difference or differences would then separate humans from animals? What would we learn about ourselves and the broader natural world around us? And, perhaps most importantly, how would such creatures coexist (or not) with humans? Like a lobster itself, these questions are difficult and dangerous, but, if approached with discretion, prepared carefully, and cracked wide open, they can prove to be both nourishing and satisfying.

Chapter 3 – *Reconceptualizing Erotica:* Pornocratie *and the Limits of Erotic Literature*

Introduction

One of the focal questions presented in the previous chapter concerns the motivations of readers for choosing romance over pornography. Such an inquiry remains at the heart of this project and, more broadly, of second- and third-wave feminism.[56] At the end of her widely read "Lust Horizons" (1981), pro-sex pioneer Ellen Willis speculates on the future of the feminist movement, ultimately suggesting a more promising direction for mainstream feminism, "But a truly radical movement must look (to borrow a phrase from Rosalind Petchesky) beyond the right to choose, and keep focusing on the fundamental questions. Why do we choose what we choose? What would we choose if we had a real choice?" (Willis 14). This notion of choice not only applies to, for example, the decision for men and women to work or raise children, but additionally to one's reading choices. Why, indeed, do some readers opt to engage with certain literary genres and not others, while other readers instead decide that all are equally appealing (or equally unappealing)? Is such a choice in itself illusory? Does it even matter? And, perhaps most importantly in the context of this research, if readers were able to choose freely between pornography, romance, and erotica or even to reject the entire gamut of the options presented, what would they select and for what reason(s)?

Throughout the course of the past two chapters, I have outlined the conventions of erotic literature by excluding what does not characterize the genre, focusing on – among other topics – possible explanations that clarify why readers do and do not choose to read

[56] For the purpose of clarity, I define third-wave feminism in the same manner as the US's National Women's History Museum**.** As noted on the website of a recent retrospective exhibition on the subject, this era of feminist activism and writing began in the 1990s in the US, spurred by, "...women's rights activists [who] longed for a movement that continued the work of their predecessors while addressing their current struggles," in particular "...the various challenges women from different races, classes, and gender identities were facing." Though it difficult to pinpoint the moment that separated the second- and third waves of feminism, most scholars point to the HIV/AIDS crisis of the mid-1980s or the Anita Hill hearings in 1991, which dealt with accusations of sexual harassment against then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of workplace sexual harassment, as important moments in the development of a third-wave consciousness. For more information, see "The Third Wave," <https://www.womenshistory.org/exhibits/feminism-third-wave.>

pornographic or romance novels, many of which relate primarily to the focus of such texts and their impact on readers. It is my intention in this section to more concretely determine what distinguishes the enigmatic, ever-shifting category of erotica from pornography and romance in order to better define what characterizes the foremost literary genre. If we accept that pornography as a literary and filmic genre is defined principally by its focus on physical sensation and romance novels and films by their focus on emotional feeling – a possible explanation for which readers may choose works from each genre and not others – then what can we say characterizes erotica? Does erotica blend the aforementioned two affective qualities in varying amounts? Or is the genre defined by another affective concept or a certain aesthetic quality? What is the effect of erotica on the reader – sexual, emotional, or otherwise – and is this different from those solicited by pornography and romance? And perhaps more polemically, can one argue that erotic literature is removed from concepts such as sexuality and feeling entirely?

Based on both reader-response theory and feminist scholarship, I maintain that differences between pornography, erotica, and related genres hinge upon questions of affect, readership, and representation. As outlined in the first chapter of this work, feminist perspectives on pornography vary widely due to the non-monolithic nature of feminism, particularly after the so-called feminist sex wars in the 1980s. Different individuals hold diverse viewpoints, and their opinions on the genre of pornography are influenced by a variety of factors including their cultural background, individual beliefs, and the specific feminist theories to which they subscribe. Since the 1990s, feminist thinkers have increasingly begun to approach the issue of pornography from an intersectional perspective, recognizing that the varying impact of pornography depends on factors such as race, class, and sexual orientation, thereby adding further layers of complexity and nuance to these

conversations.[57] However, one common belief among American and French feminists on the subject of pornography is that as literary and filmic genre, it is defined by the representation of sexual acts in highly-formulaic ways. Consequently, as affective literary scholars argue, the genre's aims are centered largely around the sexual release for the reader, characters and scenarios repeating *ad infinitum*, and ultimately not challenging his or her imagination in any meaningful way. The cliché plotlines so deeply ingrained even in popular culture ranging from a pizza delivery for which the recipient cannot pay with money, a medical examination which proves too titillating for the patient, and so forth serve as a testament to the repetitive nature of mainstream pornography, with the only variation between them being the performers. However, this industrialized approach to the production of pornographic media is not unique to the genre and can also be seen among the largest publishers of romance novels.

As was discussed in the second chapter of this research, romance novels likewise only serve to reinforce the reader's worldview with several stylistic and narrative conventions, such as a euphemistic sexuality, an idealized hero who saves the beautiful heroine from the difficulties of her life, and a happy ending that usually ends in marriage. As with pornography, these homogenic plotlines, offering readers similar stories, usually only modified superficial aspects of the characters. Though the traditional narrative arc of category romance may be seen as emotionally satisfying for those who choose to indulge in the genre, these narratives have historically upheld stereotypical gender roles to ensure a nonthreatening product. While speaking of the happy ending of category romance novels, as Jan Cohn observed in the previous chapter, "The heroine's victory is personal, unique, and in its uniqueness, makes no overt attack on existing conditions. In part, the heroine's victory is

[57] For two particularly clear examples, see Jennifer C. Nash's *The Black Body in Ecstasy* (2014), which attempts to reclaim Golden Age pornography as a site of Black feminist resistance; and the middle three chapters of Celine Parreñas Shimizu's *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (2007), which outlines the often-negative depictions of Asian and Asian-American women in mainstream pornography and the sex tourism industry, particularly those that appeal to Orientalist sensibilities of US consumers.

precisely her reward for good behavior, but this, once again, points only to the fundamental sexual conservatism of romance" (Cohn 30). In short, the heroine's marriage to the hero serves as a demonstration to her conformity to traditionally feminine behavior, upholding patriarchal expectations for women. Despite the efforts of some authors in the genre to depict a wider variety of heroines who undergo personal growth, the ultimate goal for these characters is still a romantic relationship, usually culminating in marriage. Since the 1990s, an attempt at a feminist analysis of romance has been made by scholars, albeit with mixed results; such efforts have increased after the advent of so-called "chick-lit," dating to the mid- to late 1990s, specifically the 1996 novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* and its subsequent 2001 filmic adaptation. While the heroines of these texts often have careers and lives of their own, as well as physical imperfections, unlike the category romance heroines of the past, a focus on the protagonist's appearance and her search for romance only perpetuate the failings of mainstream category romance. Yet, as with pornography, efforts to reclaim the genre by feminist thinkers have continued until the present day, particularly as the publishing industry has placed a greater emphasis on diversity and inclusivity in romance novels since the 2000s, with authors and publishers working to include characters with different ethnicities, sexual orientations, and life experiences.[58] Like the case of its hardcore analogue, romance incorporates heavy uses of tropes, clichés, and scripts, and while the readers may indulge in self-exploration through fantasy, such exploration is conducted within confines that are limited by the aforementioned conventions, such as the focus on marriage. Consequently, as in the case of pornography, romance remains a contentious subject within feminist debates, despite an increasing popular and scholarly interest in the genre.

[58] For one particularly nuanced reading of chick lit and its relationship to (post)feminism, see Harzewski, Stephanie. *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. Print. Her research on the topic, particularly on the marketing, authorship, and readership communities, is particularly well-written and refreshing, and the analysis of popular works of chick lit take into account a variety of feminist positions.

Based on the discussions of pornography and romance in the previous two chapters of this work, in this chapter, I argue that erotic literature represents one promising avenue to disrupt networks of power and explore fantasy, sexuality, and selfhood due to the manner in which the genre engages with readers' reactions and responses to texts considered erotic. Given the hypercapitalistic nature of the pornographic and Harlequin romance publishing industries, pornography and romance frequently use formulaic plots and stock characters, and sometimes even the same ones – the wealthy landowner who woos the poor peasant girl; the homely secretary who is seduced by her new, handsome boss; the Arab sheik who falls in love with a naïve American tourist; and so forth – ostensibly in order to produce as many texts as possible in a short time. Concerning the latter specifically, as per their website for prospective authors, Harlequin Publishers US proudly boasts of releasing at least 60 texts per month in both digital and paperback formats and nearly 750 different titles annually (Harlequin LLC). Yet there is no erotica industry – with the closest approximation being more informal modes of distribution, such as various Internet sites where erotic stories are not published for profit – and thus no streamlined mode of production. For this reason, I argue that erotic literature has a tendency to avoid using repeated clichés and tropes, thereby challenging the reader and instead recognizing the importance of the individual's intellectual stimulation in sexual encounters alongside sexual and emotional matters.

Furthermore, there is the question of how the Self is positioned in relation to the Other in these texts. Pornography, due to its intense focus on the sex act itself and romance, which traditionally prioritizes the pursuit of marriage, can have a tendency to prioritize domination and possession of another, as some feminist writers on pornography and romance have argued. Anti-pornography feminist thinkers ranging from Robin Morgan to Catharine MacKinnon have denounced pornography as male-centered and upholding patriarchal structures, ultimately promoting male supremacy through the objectification and violation of

the female body. As the former writer famously declared, “Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice,” drawing parallels between pornography and sexual assault (Morgan 111). Likewise, as some literary historians have pointed out, such as Bruno Péquignot, cited in the preceding chapter, category romance novels largely contain a similar plot with slight variations wherein the heroine is saved from her mundane life through marriage to a handsome and wealthy man. As opposed to having her own career and accumulating wealth independently, many heroines become obsessed with taking possession of a man through marriage, thus becoming dependent on another for her livelihood.

There has been some resistance to these claims from pro-sex feminists such as Ellen Willis and Gayle Rubin, both of whom have argued for both the mutual pleasure and potential destigmatization of female sexuality through pornography, as well as what is perceived as misguided puritanism of anti-pornography feminists. As Rubin remarks, “There is an implicit theory of causality in antiporn analysis in which a wildly exaggerated role is attributed to pornography in the creation, maintenance, and representation of women’s subordination. Gender inequality and contemptuous attitudes toward women are endemic to this society and are consequently reflected in all of our media, including advertising and pornography. They do not originate in pornography and migrate from there into the rest of popular culture. It is important to recall that rape, violence against women, oppression, and exploitation of women, and the attitudes which encouraged and justified these activities have been present throughout most of human history and predate the existence of commercial erotica by several millennia” (Rubin 260-1). Contemporary feminist writers such as Jessica Van Slooten have noted the changing trends in the romance publishing industry which have led to a more equal depiction of relationships that account for changing gender roles in Western society, and this is to say nothing of the feminist reclamation of pornography and romance, most evidently through advent of feminist pornography, in the mid-2000s. As I

argue here, while eroticism as defined by Georges Bataille has been met with some criticism from feminist writers due to its focus on destroying the female Other, reconsidering eroticism and erotica broadly could inspire a more egalitarian sexuality, one that – as in the case of pornography and romance – could theoretically lend itself to a feminist praxis. Unlike pornography and romance, erotic literature defines itself by dissolving the boundaries between Self and Other through its unique and unexpected depictions of sex and love that are free of the repetitive clichés of the other textual genres. In contrast to these related, erotic literature does not have at its goal the possession or domination of another but rather the understanding and acceptance of the Other. The effect of erotic literature on the reader is thus not one centered on titillation or emotionality, as in the case of pornography and romance, respectively, but rather one of intellectual stimulation and, ultimately, the cultivation of empathy.

I begin this section with a revision of George Bataille's *L'Erotisme* (1957), perhaps the longest and most explicit philosophical text written about historical conceptions of eroticism. Though a significant text in a variety of disciplines ranging from religious studies to sociology, Bataille's treatise is not without fault; since the 1980s, feminist literary scholars have criticized the notion of eroticism as being androcentric and hyperfocused on the destruction of the female body. Consequently, to build on Bataille's ideas and pivot to a more equitable conception of the erotic, I transition into a synthesis of feminist conceptions of eroticism and erotica, both in the United States and France, by surveying the works of Andrea Dworkin, Ellen Willis, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. Though it may seem like an unorthodox methodological decision to discuss the works of American radical and pro-sex feminists with texts penned by French poststructuralist feminists from the 1980s, particularly in research focused on more contemporary erotic fiction, the dialogue between the two is important in underlining qualities of eroticism on both material and abstract levels. Though

erotica as a literary genre and eroticism as a concept are spoken about by each group in differing and even contradictory manners, each feminist perspective offer a fuller picture of what characterizes the erotic and, ultimately, the qualities that serve to distinguish it from related genres and, perhaps more importantly, what it can offer feminist thought on an overarching level.

Some brief notes on affective literary criticism follow, largely in an effort to distinguish the effect that erotic texts have on readers from those classified as pornographic or romantic. As noted in previous chapters, this is not synonymous with the affect theory developed by Eve Sedgwick and Lauren Berlant in the 1990s and the 2010s, respectively; rather, these affective literary theorists, among them Stanley Fish and Norman R. Holland, began their work in the 1970s in the domain of Anglophone literature and largely concentrated their research on the response of readers to written texts. It is important to note that no texts center on erotic literature specifically, with major scholars instead opting to discuss related but not synonymous genres, such as popular romance, as well as horror and drama. However, despite the lack of critical studies on erotica, affective literary criticism does write at length about the notion of fantasy, albeit in relation to other literary genres. While it is never explicitly applied to the erotic literature, given the universal nature of fantasy among readers of literature, it can presumably be applied to this genre, as well. Doing so is important for two reasons: firstly, by examining fantasy in relation to erotic literature, its appeal for readers may be better clarified; and secondly, focusing on fantasy could ultimately serve to distinguish erotica from pornography and romance. Some scholars of reader-response theory, most notably Albert Mordell and Norman R. Holland, have argued that the reader's fantasy is meticulously guided in the latter two genres towards a singular purpose – sexual release or emotional fulfillment, respectively, and this has been discussed by other literary scholars who specialize in pornography and romance. As noted in the previous

chapter, for example, Kay Mussell argues, “The romance fantasy is retrogressive; it does not promote genuine change or individual growth. Instead, it works as a conservative force, palliating and ameliorating the effects of chaos and change by portraying traditional modes of being and aspiration as more fulfilling and exciting than they may seem in reality” (Mussell 173). The emotions evoked by literature in these genres may be varied, but the primary purpose remains the same. However, the fantasy inspired by erotica is more complicated and can be for numerous purposes ranging from sexual to emotional but primarily stimulate the reader’s intellectual capacities.

After this, the chapter concludes with an analysis of Catherine Breillat’s *Pornocratie* (2001), a critically divisive and often misunderstood novel that continues discussions surrounding eroticism roughly fifty years after Bataille. The novel, which appears to simultaneously serve as Breillat’s confessional booth and manifesto, largely outlines her beliefs on sex, marriage, prostitution, taboos, and pornography as at least two unnamed protagonists – one of which is presumably a heterosexual woman and another who is likely a gay man – speak to one another over the course of several days. Perhaps because of its lack of explicit sex, many critics have categorized the work as erotic in nature; while I would agree with this conclusion, I would disagree with the reasoning. During several exchanges between the main characters, Breillat makes several salient points about sexuality and love while inviting the reader explicitly to participate in these conversations. Unlike pornography and romance, the reader is not a passive voyeur but rather becomes a participant, however unwilling, in the text, breaking down the boundaries between text and reader. The goal of the text is not to appeal to the reader’s libido or emotions but rather to consider the manner in which love, sex, and sexuality can be conducted in new and unexpected ways. Most importantly, Breillat’s arguments related to the destigmatization of sexual expression not only serve as a means to reposition erotic literature as a viable project for identity-based struggles;

as she states towards the end of the work, that which embraces transgression or difference should not be immediately condemned but perhaps considered as a fact of life, perhaps pointing to a normalization of not only female sexuality, but additionally depictions of non-white bodies and homosexuality. Like other erotic novels, Breillat's *Pornocratie* (2001) represents, if not the potential that could arise from seeing this liberation come to fruition, then at least a step towards a normalization of marginalized bodies and desires.

Eroticism Revisited

Unlike studies of pornography and romance, the earliest discussions of eroticism were conducted by French scholars. Arguably the most significant and widely read of these was penned by Georges Bataille; aptly titled *L'Érotisme* (1957), the study continues to influence a wide variety of disciplines ranging from anthropology to women's studies. At the crux of Bataille's argument lies his belief that eroticism distinguishes itself as a philosophical concept due to its ability to connect sexuality to more abstract concepts, such as subjecthood, violence, and death. Following a strand of evolutionary anthropology, Bataille argues that eroticism serves as a defining feature of human sexuality and separates it from animal sexuality, in large part due to eroticism's greater emphasis on internal sensation. While sexuality for both humans and animals has most commonly been used for procreation, as Bataille argues, only human sexuality seems to involve psychological and emotional aspects. As he notes in the opening lines of his text:

> De l'érotisme, il est possible de dire qu'il est l'approbation de la vie jusque dans la mort. A proprement parler, ce n'est pas une définition, mais je pense que cette formule donne le sens de l'érotisme mieux qu'une autre. S'il s'agissait de définition précise, il faudrait certainement partir de l'activité sexuelle de reproduction dont l'érotisme est une forme particulière. L'activité sexuelle de reproduction est commune aux animaux sexués et aux hommes, mais apparemment les hommes seuls ont fait de leur activité sexuelle une activité érotique, ce qui différencie l'érotisme et l'activité

> sexuelle simple étant une recherche psychologique indépendante de la fin naturelle donnée dans la reproduction et dans le souci des enfants. (Bataille 17)[59]

Bataille raises several questions about the nature of human cognition while outlining the singular qualities of eroticism that serve to clarify the murky distinction between the pornographic and the erotic. As opposed to pure sexual activity (which, we can presume, he attributes to animals and most likely the pornographic) and sexual activity used for the purpose of reproduction (ostensibly connected to everyday life for both humans and animals), the erotic goes beyond questions of pleasure and procreation and concerns psychological and emotional reactions that implicate notions of Selfhood. The awareness of one's own subjectivity within the realm of sexuality serves as a contrast not only between human sexuality and animal sexuality but additionally between sex as an act and the erotic as an abstraction. As Bataille argues throughout his work, eroticism is related to the search for personal fulfillment and, ultimately, the Self. Yet while Bataille maintains that eroticism represents an internal experience, this does not inherently signify an individualistic phenomenon, as eroticism is dependent on the presence of an Other.

For Bataille, eroticism represents a manner of achieving spiritual ecstasy, but this is neither inherently pleasurable nor solitary. The feeling of eroticism should not be read as synonymous with orgasm or even the concept of *jouissance* that was discussed in the previous chapter; rather, as opposed to a pleasurable sensation, the erotic in Bataille's world seems characterized by a near-constant violation. Bataille does not necessarily refer to rape or BDSM but rather conceptualizes the ecstasy of eroticism as an act of violence inflicted on us by the Other that reveals the continuity of human life outside of its discontinuous, daily

[59] "Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death. Strictly speaking, this is not a definition, but I think the formula gives the meaning of eroticism better than any other. If a precise definition were called for, the starting point would certainly have to be sexual reproductive activity, of which eroticism is a special form. Sexual reproductive activity is common to sexual animals and men, but only men appear to have turned their sexual activity into erotic activity. Eroticism, unlike simple sexual activity, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction and the desire for children" (Bataille and Dalwood 11).

nature. He speaks of the violent nature of this rupture and the manner in which it viscerally affects the Subject, explaining, "Toute la mise en œuvre de l'érotisme a pour fin d'atteindre l'être au plus intime, au point où le cœur manque… Toute la mise en œuvre érotique a pour principe une destruction de la structure de l'être fermé qu'est à l'état normal un partenaire de jeu" (Bataille 24).[60] The usage of the terms "destruction" and "destroy" in both the original French and English translation reveals the manner in which eroticism represents not only a crucial break within the monotony of human existence but additionally the violence associated with it through the dissolution, destruction, or questioning of the Self. This, in turn, further separates eroticism as a philosophical concept from the pornography and romance. As scholars of affect theory have argued previously, pornography does not challenge a subject's position but instead reaffirms it with the sole aim of achieving sexual release, and similar arguments have been made concerning romance novels; namely, that category romance novels focus entirely on the emotional release of the reader, usually the confession of love that forms the climax of these novels. The erotic, by contrast, goes beyond these singular goals, penetrating the human psyche and destroying the boundaries between Self and Other. Yet if violence holds a sacred position within Bataille's conception of eroticism, where does sexual intercourse enter the proverbial picture?

After his clarification about the distinction between human and animal sexualities, Bataille attempts to situate human sexuality within his discussions of eroticism, albeit solely in relation to the taboo. As he notes, when speaking about sex, "L'interdit qui s'oppose en nous à la liberté sexuelle est général, universel ; les interdits particuliers en sont les aspects variables. Je suis étonné de le dire le premier aussi nettement. Il est banal d'isoler un

[60] "The whole business of eroticism is to strike to the inmost core of the living being, so that the heart stands still. …The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives" (Bataille and Dalwood 17).

« interdit » particulier, comme l'est la prohibition de l'inceste qui est seulement un « aspect », et de n'en chercher l'explication qu'en dehors de son universel fondement qu'est l'interdit informe et universel dont la sexualité est l'objet" (Bataille 58).[61] Unlike his contemporaries, most notably Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bataille posits that all aspects of human sexuality are taboo, not just certain ones thought of as universal, such as the display of male erections or incest. It is, according to him, only the degree to which they are acceptable and the particular practices that are prohibited that differ between cultures. Bataille's discussions about sexuality are novel in that he argues that sexual intercourse – even when done in acceptable circumstances according to the culture and time period – has been conceptualized as a form of violence (and thus a taboo) due to its interference with productive work. He states, "L'interdit répond au travail, le travail à la production : dans le temps *profane* du travail, la société accumule les ressources, la consommation est réduite à la quantité nécessaire à la production" (Bataille 77).[62] While fundamental to his conception of eroticism, this point raises several questions, perhaps most pressingly whether or not *all* sex is capable of allowing the subject to achieve a sense of eroticism. That is, if we accept that sex acts, even those which occur in acceptable circumstances depending on the culture, are taboo due to their distraction from engaging in productive work, and the taboo possesses a unique relationship to eroticism, does this mean that sex is in itself erotic? Unfortunately, this is not a question to which Bataille responds, even during his discussion of breaking the taboo.

The main agent in shaping this idea of all forms of human sexuality as taboo, Bataille argues, can be traced back to organized religion as opposed to capitalism, as his Marxist

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[61] "The taboo within us against sexual liberty is general and universal; the particular prohibitions are variable aspects of it. I am astonished to be the first person to state this so unequivocally. It is ridiculous to isolate a specific 'taboo' such as the one on incest, just one aspect of the general taboo, and look for its explanation outside its universal basis, namely the amorphous and universal prohibitions bearing on sexuality" (Bataille and Dalwood 50-1).

[62] "Taboos are there to make work possible; work is productive; during the profane period allotted to work consumption is reduced to the minimum consistent with continued production" (Bataille and Dalwood 68).

contemporaries would argue. Due to the importance of various faiths in generating the taboo which ultimately forms the basis of eroticism, Bataille frequently juxtaposes the sacred and the profane in his text, reinforcing the notion that both are fundamental to an understanding of eroticism as a philosophical concept. Yet curiously, as Bataille argues, it is not the abolition of the taboo created by Judeo-Christian religions in particular that forms the primary philosophical goal of his text but rather its transgression: "La transgression n'est pas la négation de l'interdit, mais elle le dépasse et le complète" (Bataille 77).[63] This transgression, as Bataille later argues, forms a major aspect of eroticism which further distinguishes the concept from animal sexuality and cements it as a fundamental part of the human experience, bringing the argumentative line of the text back to the beginning. While Bataille's work has assisted in the development of a more concrete understanding of eroticism (and, by extension, erotica), it is admittedly not without its issues.

Bataille's conception of eroticism, though important for studies of sexuality within the realms of anthropology, art history, and film and literary studies due to its apparent novelty, has received its fair share of criticism from the 1970s onwards. The author's style, as noted in the introduction of the 2001 Penguin translation into English, can best be described as "leisurely and repetitive"; while these aspects are seemingly viewed positively by the publisher, perhaps due to the relative ease of the text's translation, such repetition can distract from Bataille's broader argument (Bataille and Dalwood xi). Furthermore, as several contemporary reviewers have mentioned, one must note that despite devoting an entire publication to the subject, Bataille ultimately fails to actually define eroticism in any overt manner, as in the case of Pauvert's work.[64] Others, not unlike Breton and Sartre, have been wary of Bataille's reliance on abstract spirituality and mysticism. There is admittedly some

[63] "The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it" (Bataille and Dalwood 63).
[64] For one particularly nuanced critique, see Price, Mark. "Eroticism by Georges Bataille." *Philosophy Now*, vol. 46, 2004, pp. 43-44. Online.

validity to these reactions, as well. Many of the chapters in the second half of the text are devoted to analyzing anecdotes and legends alongside studies of art and literature, as in the case of the chapter entitled "Mysticism and Sensuality." These instances of treating fables and myths with the same reverence as photography and literature have been – and perhaps should be – met with criticism. Yet more critiques have come from feminist scholars, who have decried Bataille's perceived misogyny. Throughout his discussion of eroticism, Bataille reinforces hegemonic gender roles, stating that in concepts related to the erotic, namely the destruction of the Self, "...le partenaire masculin a en principe un rôle actif, la partie féminine est passive. C'est essentiellement la partie passive, féminine, qui est dissoute en tant qu'être constitué," pointing to the default Self as male, and this is to say nothing of the presumed heterosexuality of both participants, a presumption which Duca also made in the first chapter of this work (Bataille 24).[65] Bataille's tendency to deny women agency or identity, such as when speaking of how they are sacrificed for the male subject to experience eroticism, could additionally seem misogynistic, "L'amant ne désagrège pas moins la femme aimée que le sacrificateur sanglant l'homme ou l'animal immolé. La femme dans les mains de celui qui l'assaille est dépossédée de son être" (Bataille 100).[66] However, one could argue that what holds more importance for Bataille in his theories of eroticism than the difference between man and woman is the distinction between humans and animals. For Bataille, the very capacity for eroticism is not a marker of male domination, as radical feminists like Dworkin and MacKinnon argue, but rather a testament to humankind's greater emotional and intellectual capacity. Yet if Bataille's theories cannot be reconciled with a feminist praxis, what could an egalitarian eroticism look like? How do feminist theorists conceptualize the erotic, and how can this be used for feminist liberation? Similar answers can be found within

[65] "…the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive" (Bataille and Dalwood 17).
[66] "The lover strips the beloved of her identity no less than the blood-stained priest his human or animal victim. The woman in the hands of her assailant is despoiled of her being" (Bataille and Dalwood 90).

the works of American and French feminist thinkers from the 1980s. While there are some differences of opinion with regards to the aesthetics of a feminist erotic, it would seem as though many of these activists and philosophers agree that language plays an important role in constructing a less misogynistic form of eroticism.

A Feminist Erotic?

The creation of male subjectivity in opposition to women's status as an object echoes a broader societal criticism voiced by Simone de Beauvoir in her widely cited *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949). Considered a groundbreaking work of feminist philosophy (despite de Beauvoir's later issues with the term *feminist* and the feminist movement), the text argues, among other salient points, that women have been defined throughout history in opposition to men and have been considered Other. While speaking of the condition of women generally in the introduction to the work, de Beauvoir summarizes one of her most enduring arguments succinctly, "Elle se détermine et se différencie par rapport à l'homme et non celui-ci par rapport à elle ; elle est l'inessentiel en face de l'essentiel. Il est le Sujet, il est l'Absolu : elle est l'Autre" (de Beauvoir 16).[67] Bataille's work repeats such an oversight, focusing on an androcentric conception of eroticism in which women must be passive objects possessed and destroyed in order for the active male subject to reach this state. Man, in Bataille's universe of eroticism, occupies the default position, while women are only accessories to their self-actualization. Similarly, Carolyn Dean plainly asks where "...women figure in the scheme of things" if they are mainly used as a means for men to achieve subjectivity in Bataille's text (Dean 244-5). This pressing question should be extrapolated: Is it possible for women to experience a state of eroticism as defined by Bataille? If so, who is being sacrificed – a man or a woman? Is the destruction of the Other necessary, and can there be an eroticism that does

[67] "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute–she is the Other" (de Beauvoir and Parshley XVI).

not depend on such a violent act? It would seem that the answer would be a *yes*, albeit one with several caveats. In an attempt to appropriate Bataille's notions of eroticism and reposition it as a form of *écriture feminine*, Karla L. Schultz analyzes the representations of sex and death in the works of various Anglophone women poets, ultimately surmising that Bataille's text can be reinterpreted to focus on mutual pleasure.[68] Another example can be found in Chris Vanderwees's "Complicating Eroticism and the Male Gaze." Though largely focused on Bataille's fiction, the author argues that the female protagonist of *The Story of the Eye* (1928), Simone, "...does not so easily assimilate into the passive female roles that Bataille outlines when referring to continuous experience in *Erotism*" (Vanderwees 9). She does this, Vanderwee argues, by interrupting the male gaze and thus denying pleasure to the male subject, refusing to be an object for his self-actualization. One example comes from the end of the text; after committing a series of bizarre and violent crimes and fleeing to Spain, Simone and the unnamed male protagonist witness a bullfight during which the matador is killed. As the narration describes the matador's right eye dangling from its socket, Simone has an orgasm, which Vanderwee interprets as erotic pleasure from violence and death, not unlike that which men experience but through the literal destruction of the male body and, more specifically, the gaze itself. While certainly a well-chosen case study, one must wonder if the violence with which Bataille conceives eroticism is necessary in order to experience it. Must the subject – either male or female – destroy another or be destroyed in order to attain a sense of the erotic? It could perhaps be useful to problematize the notion of what eroticism means, its aims, and the possibilities that lie within the concept, as other thinkers working on the subject have done beginning in the 1980s.

[68] For more on this, see Schultz, Karla L. 1987. "Bataille's *L'Erotisme* in Light of Recent Love Poetry." *Pacific Coast Philology* 22 (1-2): 78-87.

Though feminist scholars have, like Bataille, argued that eroticism represents a manner of both questioning and exploring the Self, several thinkers in the second- and third-wave feminist movement have disagreed with his assertion that the erotic represents a violent force vis-à-vis subjectivity. Rather, eroticism can be utilized in a constructive or generative manner to more holistically explore and create the Self, and this holds particularly true for subjects at the margins. In her essay entitled "The Erotic as Power," Black feminist author Audre Lorde positions eroticism as a potentially empowering experience, one that allows all people to connect with their innermost feelings to eventually overcome the discontinuity on which Bataille comments, eventually becoming unified subjects on individual and collective levels. Though Lorde is loosely associated with the anti-pornography movement and thus may not be referring to the literary genre of erotica, she speaks plainly of the erotic's connection to subjectivity:

> The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. (Lorde 54)

Within her work, Lorde explains the nuances between physical sensation and emotional feeling in an effort to distinguish between the pornographic and the erotic, respectively. However, these mediations reveal a greater preoccupation with notions of representation, selfhood, and subjectivity that help in differentiating the two concepts. Lorde argues that pornography separates emotional feelings from physical pleasure, ultimately denying the former. The erotic allows for a more complete and less fragmented experience, one in which emotional feeling and physical pleasure are interwoven, thereby allowing for radical change in other facets of life. As she later argues, it is in large part due to eroticism's engagement with feelings that Lorde encourages all people, but particularly women of color, to accept the

erotic as a source of power in order to engage more fully on an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual level with the world, leading to the creation of a new conception of the Self.

As opposed to the destruction of the Self that Bataille's eroticism facilitates, Lorde does not position the erotic as an inherently violating experience but instead one of empowerment. The new Self that she imagines does not come about through the defacement of an older Self but rather through the development of the current Self. As she explains, "The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire" (Lorde 54). The erotic can serve as a form of personal growth, allowing all people to become reacquainted with the totality of their emotional feelings and strive for complete satisfaction with themselves. While it is not clear what exactly inspires the erotic as a feeling or an experience for her, Lorde does elaborate on the effects of recognizing and celebrating the diversity of such experiences and the importance of mutual exchange; namely, that acknowledging our inner sense of eroticism can allow individuals tap into their innermost feelings and lead to more authentic expression, particularly with each other. As she explains, "The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes with sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. …In order to be utilized, our erotic feelings must be recognized. The need for sharing deep feeling is a human need" (Lorde 56 and 58). Lorde's recognition and celebration of mutual and equitable exchange with others makes her unique among her contemporaries, and her discussion of the erotic as a site of liberation for marginalized peoples is intriguing. Unlike *jouissance*, which is sometimes conceptualized as related to aggression and possession, Lorde's joy is defined as a pleasure that comes from

mutual sharing and forms a crucial aspect of her vision of the erotic.[69] Other scholars have additionally captured the joy of the erotic – and sexuality generally – while exploring its liberatory potentials, albeit with a few caveats. For many feminist thinkers, the manner of representing oneself is key to both eroticism and feminist liberation.

After the exploration of the various philosophical dimensions of eroticism, it would be prudent to delve into the world of literature and examine how authors employ this concept in the creation of texts for a better understanding of its power and significance. Perhaps inspired by the American phenomenon of feminist pornography, several notable French feminists such as Émilie Jouvet and the Taiwan-born Shu Lea Cheang have produced artistic and scholarly works on the subject of pornography by and for women, but few have matched the candidness and zeal of Virginie Despentes. In her 2006 manifesto-meets-autobiography entitled *King Kong Théorie*, Despentes elaborates on her vision of feminism, which includes a necessity to rethink the way we view pornographic films and texts, as well as those who take part in their production. While never invoking eroticism or erotica specifically, this reconsideration and reclamation could very easily apply to both. Despentes paints a clear portrait of how one can arrive at a feminist version of pornography; namely, through the knowledge and articulation of women's sexualities by women. In particular, Despentes notes the limitations of the manners in which men have represented and misrepresented women, both on-screen and on the written page, arguing, "Quand des hommes mettent en scène des personnages de femmes, c'est rarement dans le but d'essayer de comprendre ce qu'elles vivent et ressentent en tant que femmes. C'est plutôt une façon de mettre en scène leur sensibilité d'hommes, dans un corps de femme" (Despentes 49).[70] Instead of representing

[69] For more on Lacan's theories of *jouissance*, see Lacan's "The Ethics of Psychoanalysis" (1959-1960) and "The Other Side of Psychoanalysis" (1969-1970).

[70] "When men create female characters, is it rarely an attempt to understand what the characters are experiencing and feeling as women. It tends instead to be a way of depicting a male sensibility in a female body" (Despentes and Benson 42).

women in what she deems as an accurate manner, male writers and directors instead choose to simply project their own worldview into a female body. As Despentes states, women in male-dominated media industries do not represent women, but rather men's *idea* of what it is to be a woman. The notion of self-representation is a curious one and has vital implications for the creation of a new form of eroticism and erotic texts broadly. If women could freely write about their desires and pleasure on their own terms, it would seem as though this would be the first step in creating a feminist version of the erotic not unlike that which is described by Lorde, whose reservations with the pornographic industry are equally as strong as those of Despentes but different in their reasoning. The denial of feeling as both a physical and emotional sensation is one of pornography's injustices, according to Lorde, while Despentes rallies against the misrepresentation of the female body. Were those at the margins free to express themselves openly and honestly, this would serve to distinguish the resulting works of erotica from both the sterility and the misrepresentations that, as Lorde and Despentes argue, seem inherent to pornographic mediums. Yet while this notion of "woman-writing-woman" seems promising, it is not one that is particularly new.

The arguments of Lorde and Despentes have been preceded by earlier feminist scholars who have stressed not only the possibility of the erotic as a means of exploring and constructing the Self, but also the significance of self-expression in such a project. Though it is not explicitly about erotica as a literary or filmic genre, in what is her best-known essay, "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1975), Hélène Cixous stresses the importance of writing – an act that she conceptualizes as erotic or otherwise sexual in itself, stating in no uncertain terms that the creation of a text is taboo and involves transgression, explicitly drawing parallels to onanism – to destabilize and critique the manner in which women have been represented, in the hopes of ultimately reclaiming the female subject and paving the way for a more complete sense of selfhood. Cixous outlines the problem quite succinctly at the beginning of

the text, arguing that women feel ashamed of writing due to the lack of canonical female writers, comparing the quotidian practice of writing to that of the experience of masturbation:

> …ou qu'écrivant, irrésistiblement, comme nous nous masturbions en cachette, c'était non pas pour aller plus loin, mais pour atténuer un peu la tension, juste assez pour que le trop cesse de tourmenter. Et puis dès qu'on a joui, on se dépêche de se culpabiliser – pour se faire pardonner ; ou d'oublier, d'enterrer, jusqu'à la prochaine. (*Méduse* 39-40)[71]

The project for Cixous, as it stands, is to move away from the manner in which male writing (which, she astutely notes, is not exclusive to male writers, as women can reproduce these misrepresentations through the adoption of masculine conventions), and presumably this includes works that are considered erotic and pornographic by both men and women. In contrast to American anti-pornography feminists, whose aims largely included criminalizing or stigmatizing pornographic representations of sex due to their perceived misogyny, Cixous recognizes the importance of openly expressing sexuality for the reconceptualization of individual and collective subjecthood, albeit with several caveats. Unlike Bataille's conception of the erotic, which is linked heavily to destruction, Cixous's version is inherently tied to creation, not unlike that which Lorde explains. However, this eroticism is theorized differently from that of Lorde's insofar as Cixous's instructions are clearer: write. By her tying eroticism to literary production, the erotic becomes a generative force that should be embraced without shame in order to reclaim the representation of women's bodies and experiences, if not language itself, from (usually) male writers whose writing does not do either justice.

One must, however, note the limitations of Cixous's conceptual framework. Perhaps the largest criticism, which the author acknowledges herself, relates to the overly abstract nature of this *écriture féminine*. While the erotic is more or less clearly defined by Cixous

[71] "You wrote, irresistibly, as when we masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as soon as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilty–so as to be forgiven; or to forget, to bury it for next time" (Cixous and Cohen 877).

vis-à-vis other actions and concepts, this is not the case with the broader concern of the essay. As Cixous notes, “Impossible de *définir* une pratique féminine de l’écriture, d’une impossibilité qui se maintiendra car on ne pourra jamais *théoriser* cette pratique, l’enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu’elle n’existe pas. …Elle ne se laissera penser que par les sujets casseurs des automatismes, les coureurs de bords qu’aucune autorité ne subjugue jamais” (Cixous 50-1).[72] Perhaps in large part due to the idealized and almost utopian vision of writing, Cixous’s *écriture féminine* escapes any sort of objective categorization. In response, Cixous dismisses such efforts as attempting to fit this manner of writing into a masculine, phallogocentric paradigm. Regardless, the power of the erotic rings clear within Cixous’s essay as she celebrates both the sexed body and language itself as a source of pleasure and resistance. Though not about erotic literature *per se*, Cixous suggests that writing itself can be an erotic act that can be a deeply sensual and liberating experience, particularly when women write about their own experiences and lives.[73] An egalitarian erotic, then, involved not only a sincere sharing with readers, as Lorde mentions, but additionally the representation of oneself. While the genre of erotic literature is not explicitly discussed, one must ask whether or not women *can* represent the female body in pornography without falling into the same traps as their masculine counterparts, as well as whether or not men can accurately depict women’s sexual pleasure in erotica, perhaps because of the manner in which language itself describes sexuality. Other feminist theorists have critically examined

[72] “It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that remains, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded–which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. …It will be conceived only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate” (Cixous and Cohen 883).

[73] Cixous elaborates a bit on the philosophical underpinnings of womanspeak – and the connection of eroticism and sexuality to writing broadly – in several of her other works. In "La venue à l'écriture” (1977), for example, she explores the idea of *écriture féminine* (or *feminine writing*) and how women can use language to express their experiences, including erotic and sensual ones. The essay was originally published in. “Le Livre de Prométhée” (1983), a collection of poems and prose that often deals with themes of desire, love, and the body. Most recently, Cixous’s essay "L’Amour même dans la boîte aux lettres” (2008) also includes letters and writings that touch upon love, desire, and the erotic.

the relationship between the sexed body and language, the results of which additionally serve a feminist erotic

Like Cixous and Despentes, Luce Irigaray did not explicitly theorize about erotica as a literary genre, but many of her writings do discuss the erotic, gendered aspects of writing, and the need for self-representation. In *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977), Irigaray argues that women's sexual pleasure has always been defined in relation to men's – echoing de Beauvoir's discussion of woman as Other – and that this conceptualization has permeated into the realm of language, "La sexualité féminine a toujours été pensée à partir de paramètres masculins… La femme dans cet imaginaire sexuel, n'est que support, plus ou moins complaisant, à la mise en acte des fantasmes de l'homme. …Le désir de la femme ne parlerait pas la même langue que celui de l'homme" while citing psychoanalysis as an example of how female sexuality has been misjudged and misinterpreted (Irigaray 23 and 25).[74] As opposed to men's desire, Irigaray argues that women's sexuality is more focused on touching and feeling as opposed to seeing, which only serves to cast women as passive objects to be looked at by men. This harkens back to criticisms of Bataille's work, which takes Irigaray's thought process a step further by likewise viewing women as objects or tools, but unlike the patriarchal conceptions of women's sexuality that Irigaray discusses, eroticism as Bataille conceives it involves an active male subject not only looking at the passive female object but actively destroying her and himself for his own personal and intellectual development. Yet therein lies the problem for Irigaray. Not unlike Cixous, Irigaray argues that sex as a biological difference between male and female, as well as sex as a physical act between two people, is based on the dominant masculine language which cannot adequately express women's pleasure. As language develops and maps words onto sexuality, desire

[74] "Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters. …Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies. …Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's" (Irigaray and Porter 23 and 25).

increasingly becomes conceptualized as men taking women as objects for their own enjoyment. Concerning the transition to an egalitarian eroticism specifically, although Irigaray states that female desire is capable of being expressed, it is not possible to do so within the parameters of male language, in large part due to its androcentric nature and the multiplicity of women's sexualities. A new form of expression is thus required.

Due to the plurality of female sexuality, women require a feminine language (referred to by Irigaray as *parler femme* but usually translated as *womanspeak*), similar to what Cixous posits with *écriture féminine*. Though perhaps somehow more abstract than *écriture féminine*, Irigaray attempts to define womanspeak and explain its necessity: "Or, *la femme a des sexes un peu partout*. Elle jouit d'un peu partout. Sans parler même de l'hystérisation de tout son corps, la géographie de son plaisir est bien plus diversifiée, multiple dans ses différences, complexe, subtile, qu'on ne l'imagine…" (Irigaray 28).[75] As Cixous remarks, *écriture féminine* possesses the potential for women to write in more free and creative ways, a possibility that Irigaray also implies within her discussion of *parler femme*. Though there is still some ambiguity as to what this hypothetical new language actually looks like, both Cixous and Irigaray have advocated for women expressing themselves and writing about their own experiences as the first step towards using this proposed new language. It is through women reclaiming and expressing their own sexualities for themselves rather than for men's pleasure that female authors can establish a new point of view from which androcentric modes of expression can be deconstructed not only on an ontological level but on a material level, as well.

Though some criticisms exist concerning the demonization of not only male authors but also female authors who write in a more conventional or linear form, this is not to suggest

[75] "*But woman has sex organs more or less everywhere*. She finds pleasure almost anywhere. Even if we refrain from invoking the hystericization [*sic*] of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined–in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness" (Irigaray and Porter 28).

that such authors are unable to represent women's sexualities well. As Cixous herself noted when providing examples of authors whose styles epitomized *écriture féminine*, many male authors, including Jean Genet and André Gide, are capable of utlizing this new mode of expression. As Cixous notes in her later works, it is not the biological sex of the author that matters, but the *kind* of writing. That is, one must not confuse the sex of the author with the sex of his or her texts:

> La plupart des femmes sont comme ça : elles font l'écriture de l'autre, c'est-à-dire de l'homme, et dans la naïveté, elles le déclarent, et le maintiennent, et elles font en effet une écriture qui est masculine. Il faut faire très attention quand on veut travailler sur la féminité dans l'écriture, à ne pas se faire piéger par les noms : ce n'est pas parce que c'est signé avec un nom de femme que c'est une écriture féminine. Ça peut très bien être une écriture masculine et inversement, ce n'est pas parce que c'est signé par un nom d'homme que la féminité serait exclue. C'est rare mais enfin il y a de la féminité dans des écritures signées d'hommes, ça arrive. (*Tête* 12)[76]

Though *écriture féminine* and womanspeak may appear as a woman-exclusive project when dealing with erotica and other genres, men are capable of participating in and engaging with this form of writing which often contains erotic and sexual aspects. While both may be promising new manners for erotica to be written, it is worth noting that these new forms of writing seem more concerned about the writer than the reader. If *écriture féminine* and womanspeak are meant to articulate the writer's pleasure and deconstruct a masculine vision of language in the process, how does that affect the reader? How do readers respond to erotic texts written in more conventional manners versus those written in these new forms of expression? What commonalities and differences exist between not only the writing but also the reception of the two different manners of expression? Is there such a concept as a reader-focused *écriture féminine* or *parler femme*? I would argue that, while erotic literature may

[76] "Most women are like this: they do someone else's–man's–writing, and in their innocence sustain it and give it voice, and end up producing writing that's in effect masculine. Great care must be taken in working on feminine writing not to get trapped by names: to be signed with a woman's name doesn't necessarily make a piece of writing feminine. It could quite well be masculine writing, and conversely, the fact that a piece of writing is signed with a man's name does not in itself exclude femininity. It's rare, but you can sometimes feel femininity in writings signed by men: it does happen" (Cixous and Kuhn 52).

benefit in creating a sense of intimacy with the reader from some elements of these new manners of expression, particularly if they implicate a confessional tone and a nonlinear style, it may be prudent to return to notions of affect theory in order to consider the manner in which erotic literature affects readers, if at all. As noted in the first and second chapters of this project, this branch of literary criticism represents a reaction to more author-centric forms of analysis; while pornography and romance are only briefly mentioned by certain theorists, erotica remains strangely absent from such works, although several remarks about literature as a medium of expression can easily be applied to the genre, serving to underline the unique aspects of pornography, romance, and erotica. Consequently, the distinctions between each genre will become clearer.

Feeling in Totality: Erotica and Affect Theory

As noted in previous chapters, this notion of affect theory does not refer to the group of theories most recently developed by Eve Sedgwick and expanded upon by Lauren Berlant (as in, the "affective turn"). While there is some overlap in that both the affective turn and affective literary criticism implicate emotion, Berlant's notion goes further to criticize the manner in which individual and collective experiences, emotional or otherwise, fall outside of semiotic representation and heavily incorporates Marxism in such conversations. Affective literary criticism (also called "reader-response theory") concerns itself with the individual and collective emotional and cognitive responses to literary works. Very few, if any, literary scholars who have contributed to the field of affective literary criticism have focused their efforts on erotic literature. Instead, and perhaps owing to most of these texts' dates, any references to literature considered obscene or taboo concerns pornography, while discussions of romance are somewhat more commonplace. According to these theorists, most notably Norman R. Holland and his collaborators, while all genres of literature ask the reader to do something with the fantasies that they create, pornography is the only one which fulfills a

sexual function, while romance appeals to a reader's emotional needs. The question, then, must be posed: How does erotica fit into this equation? If it also implies sexual release for its readership, does this mean that erotic literature is a subgenre of pornography? And likewise, if erotic literature appeals to the reader's emotions, can erotica be considered a type of romance? Can erotic literature be both? Or does erotica simply not ask readers to find sexual release or emotional fulfillment but instead ask something else of them?

Perhaps as a response to Barthes's essays "La mort de l'auteur" (1968) and *Le plaisir du texte* (1973), affective literary criticism considers the importance of the reader to the interpretation and reception of a text, though the author still plays a significant role in that process. Reading, according to nearly all scholars of reader-response theory, is considered as a relationship between readers and authors that is constantly developing and in flux. Pioneered in the 1970s by Wolfgang Iser and Louise Rosenblatt, reader-response theory largely argues that literature and literary study has two separate poles: the efferent, which mainly focuses on the information in a text written by the author, such as facts related to plot and character, and the aesthetic, which deals more with the reader's individual experience with a text. In other words, the former refers to the text itself in an objective manner, such as how many words are on the page, where they are positioned, and how the sentences link together to tell a coherent story. The latter deals with the interpretation of a text, which is informed by a variety of constructions and factors, such as an individual's preferences and knowledge. According to Rosenblatt, while this may seem as though it can give rise to pure emotional readings founded entirely on the subjective experiences of a reader, it is not possible for someone to fully disengage from either sort of reading, meaning that every interpretation is formed by both efferent and aesthetic aspects of a text:

> The still very influential "objective" critics' readiness to attack the straw man of art-as-pure-emotion may also lead to the misapprehension that my distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading is equivalent to a distinction between, on the one hand,

> referential or cognitive, versus on the other, affective or emotive, uses of language. I reject this because even what seem to be the most purely referential uses of language proceed within an ever-present matrix of feeling, which the nonasethetic [*sic*], efferent stance pushes into the fringe of awareness. Even more important: the reader evoking a work of art is not focused only on the affective impact of verbal symbols, but must attend to their cognitive import, often as the core of the other dimensions of consciousness. Precisely because this is so, the distinction between nonasethetic [*sic*] and aesthetic lies not in the presence or absence of emotive and cognitive elements but in the primary direction and focus of the reader's attention. (Rosenblatt 45)

Comprehension, according to those who have contributed to reader-response theory, is not completely arbitrary but rather controlled by both the author and the reader; what *is* arbitrary is how the text relates to personal experience and the genre itself. Concerning the latter, while all works are capable of producing a variety of different readings, each genre has as its fundamental goal one or a small set of responses. Horror, for example, can tap into our deepest fears and anxieties, leading to meditations on the human psyche, broader existential questions, the afterlife, and the presence of supernatural forces. In recent years, the genre has also served as a means of social commentary. However, it is worth noting that these are intellectual responses that are outside of the scope of existing research conducted by affective literary critics. Consequently, as Rosenblatt later argues, the emotional response of readers of horror is usually limited to shock or fear. In addition, there is still a necessity for objective evidence in one's analysis, meaning that the aesthetic reading felt by the reader must be supported by the efferent reading. The notion of an entirely subjective reader-centric literary theory is consequently, as Rosenblatt argues, fallacious. While theorists have mentioned both pornography and romance in their work, as discussed in the previous two chapters of this work, erotic literature – if there is indeed a difference between this genre and the others – has been largely ignored, provoking questions about its effects on readers.

Though no scholar of affect theory has devoted an entire text or even a chapter of a larger work to erotic literature, some literary scholars have discussed affect vis-à-vis

sexuality.[77] However, with regards to erotica as a literary genre, several observations about the nature of the author-reader relationship in literature broadly provide a certain modicum of insight. Among theorists who work on so-called reader-response theory, almost all agree on two points: 1) Fantasy is provoked by all forms and genres of literature, and this presumably includes erotica; and 2) Fantasies are not inherently a part of texts themselves but require constant mediation between authors and readers. Though certain contemporary schools of literary analysis, such as psychoanalysis, may contend that fantasy originates in the text itself as a result of the author's unconscious, affective literary criticism argues that, "The fantasy does not lie latent in the work–only the materials for the fantasy that each reader will then create for himself in the terms that give him pleasure (and the fantasy the reader creates may or may not coincide with the fantasy the writer intended while writing)" (Holland 117). This fantasy, considered a relationship between author and reader, is mediated meticulously by writers in order to lead readers to one of several emotional conclusions which are dependent on several factors, most importantly the genre of the text. Unlike many other branches of literary criticism, the reader – and particularly the reader's imagination – hold an important place within this branch of analysis.

Both Albert Mordell and Norman R. Holland, other early contributors to affective criticism, argue that sexuality does not simply represent an aspect of literature but additionally a unifying aspect of the human condition, a parallel to Bataille's discussion about the distinction between human and animal sexuality. Yet instead of discussing transgression and taboos, as in the case of Bataille's text, affective literary scholars instead maintain the focus on the individual subject, particularly his or her cognitive experience with sexuality. According to Mordell and Holland, perhaps the most important area wherein sexuality

[77] For more information, see Teresa Brennan's research, especially *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), which touches on how affect and emotions can circulate between individuals. Ann Cvetkovich has also explored the intersections of affect, trauma, and sexuality, most evidently in *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), a text that briefly discusses, among other topics, the affective dimensions of sexual experiences and relationships.

manifests is within the imagination. The latter clarifies earlier in his text, "Man is averse to admitting certain facts about his mental love life. People are often shocked by the immorality of the dreams which reveal their unconscious lives. …He who thinks that the wealthy are too much absorbed in accumulating more riches and the poor too much worn out by the struggle for existence, to be occupied with erotic fancies, is mistaken" (Holland 15). Though an important step in discussing erotic literature, Holland's sections on the euphemistic "erotic fantasies" read as somewhat generic, though his conceptualization of eroticism as universal seems intriguing as a different avenue than that which Bataille pursues. Though the taboo often prevents individuals from vocalizing what they find appealing, erotic fantasies – that is to say, ostensibly those about sex and love simultaneously – are common and occur regardless of gender, race, and social class. Yet if, as these theorists argue, pornography is intended to stimulate the reader's libido and romance is intended to appeal to the reader's emotions, then wherein lies the appeal of erotic literature? What reaction – if any – does erotic literature attempt to provoke from the reader? The answers to these questions are complicated by popular associations with adjacent genres.

If one defines the genre of erotica according to the colloquial usage of the term – that is, as "light" or "classy pornography" or "pornography with plot" or even "softcore pornography" – then what sex acts are considered hardcore or softcore? Where is the line between light or classy and heavy or trashy? How much plot is too much plot before a work of pornography becomes erotica? Likewise, how much sex is too much sex before a work of erotica becomes pornography? What is the threshold for the amount of emotion that causes an erotic text to cross the threshold into the territory of romance? Is it possible for erotic literature to implicate sex and love while distinguishing itself from pornography and romance? Do erotic romances and erotica have the same effect on readers? All of these questions possess a finite number of answers but are still incredibly subjective. A newer,

more reader-focused manner of distinguishing the two genres is necessary, one that focuses less on authors and texts and more on readers.

Despite its seemingly-inseparable connection to both sex and love, as well as what is both seen and felt, I would argue that erotica goes beyond the sexuality presented in pornography and the romantic relationships focused on by romance and possesses as many commonalities with philosophy as it does with these two literary forms, stimulating the reader sexually, emotionally, and most importantly, mentally. As noted by both Mordell and Barthes, fantasy – not unlike their conception of eroticism – is universal when reading, meaning that all readers engage in imaginative play when immersed in a text, even subconsciously. While pornography and romance focus solely on sexuality and sentimentality, respectively, erotica goes beyond such a binary system, perhaps accepting the reader as inherently sexual and emotionally complex. Working under the presumption that all readers possess such fantasies, ones that involve both sex and love, erotica can construct and deconstruct these fantasies without the constraints of romance and pornography, such as the rigid standardization of the conventions that define the latter two genres. By presenting sex and love in unconventional or unpredictable manners, which may work against the male-centric conceptions of language and pleasure Cixous and Irigaray outline, erotic literature goes beyond the comparatively simplistic goals of pornography and romance and instead aims to strike at a reader's intellect, challenging him or her with new and unexpected expressions of sexuality that can present women not as Others to be destroyed or consumed but rather equal participants whose sexualities are multifaceted, distinct, personal, and valuable. Some feminist authors have attempted a more egalitarian version of eroticism, impacting both texts and readers in a myriad of ways.

A unique sort of engagement with the reader can be best seen in Catherine Breillat's *Pornocratie* (2001), a text that explicitly argues against obscenity, possession, and taboos that

often characterize not only pornography and romance but also the version of eroticism that Bataille embraces, instead advocating for a utopian erotic centered around acceptance, diversity, mutuality, and understanding. Due to the novel's lack of defined characters, conversational, almost theatrical narration, and explicit questions in second-person narration, the reader becomes implicated, however unwillingly, into the text in ways not typical of pornography and romance, which only ask a passive participation in the pursuit of pleasure. Ultimately, erotica like Breillat's text may provoke sexual arousal or an emotional response within the reader, but the primary function of the novel and those in the same genre is to provoke the reader's intellect by considering the deeper philosophical questions with which the novel deals.

Catherine Breillat's Pornocratie *(2001): Dismantling the Taboo*

Within many of Catherine Breillat's works, one can see a preoccupation with disrupting convention. One of France's most polemical female writers and filmmakers, Breillat's first novel, *L'homme facile*, was released in 1978. Since then, she since written five novels, briefly worked as an actor, and currently lectures at the European Graduate School. However, she is perhaps best known as a film director. Throughout her cinematic works, female sexuality tends to be the primary subject. *Catherine et Cie* (1975), *Une vraie jeune fille* (1976), and *36 Fillette* (1988) all have young but sexually curious women as their protagonists, with nudity and unsimulated sex appearing in all of these films. Breillat's literary output, including *Pornocratie* (2001), her best-selling and most widely read text, continues her trend of addressing representations of the female body, albeit with some notable differences. The novel, unlike Breillat's more conventionally structured plotlines in the rest of her literary œuvre, violates social and literary norms through its nonlinear plot and almost nonexistent narration but, unlike many contemporary works of erotica, assumes a completely different tonality. Upon its publication, the novel – as well as its 2004 filmic

version, *Anatomie de l'enfer* – was generally not received well by critics, with many dismissing the work as pretentious and tedious at best or baffling and incomprehensible at worst. Perhaps some of these criticisms can be traced back to Breillat's multidisciplinary background, particularly her experience as a filmmaker and a writer. With regards to *Pornocratie* (2001) specifically, Breillat has spoken lengthily about the difficulties of making the film's script – which was written before she had considered publishing it in a novel format, only for the text to be released before Breillat had the opportunity to produce its cinematic adaptation – suitable for readers of fiction, which in turn informed her directorial choices. In an interview with *Senses of Cinema*, an online film-centric magazine, she explains, "That's why I wrote the book, *Pornocratie*, as a way to flush out the poetic language of the script. The writing of the script led me to the writing of the literature. Ultimately I kept the original script, and I just added voiceover and the last five pages from my own book [to the film]" (Murphy). By her own admission, Breillat uses the novel as a manner to expand on the ideas of her then-unproduced screenplay, perhaps alienating or boring readers due to the lack of substantial differences in their plotlines or dialogue. Some of the issues with the novel in particular might also be traced to her choice of using the prefix *porn-* in the title, which perhaps establishes certain expectations within the reader that do not necessarily coincide with the content of the work.

The name of Breillat's text may, at first glance, align the work with genres considered obscene, perhaps setting up a conventional pornographic narrative with explicit scenes of sexuality, though the work may be equally as effectively aligned with philosophy as it is with literature based on its moniker alone.[78] The word *pornocratie* first appears during an exchange about sex as both a physical and social act, with one character arguing that all sex

[78] Although they share a name, Breillat's text is not directly related to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's posthumous *La Pornocratie ou les femmes dans les temps modernes* (1875). However, given the fervent support of patriarchal structures from Proudhon within his text, is it possible that Breillat has appropriated the title with more subversive intent.

fits into the eponymous pornocracy. Etymologically, the suffix *-cratie* (or, in English, *-cracy*), implies rule within some sort of official or unofficial hierarchy of power (as in the case of *democracy* or *autocracy*). The prefix *porno-* was discussed in the first chapter of this work and, as radical feminist Andrea Dworkin explains, refers to prostitution or the exchange of sex for goods or services. Instead of offering titillation to the reader, the title of the work raises concerns about notions of power and sex within a society wherein those who offer or solicit pleasure are operating with inherently unequal levels of agency within a system designed around this inequality. The title could also be interpreted ironically by the would-be reader, as although the eponymous pornocracy is never fully explained, it is mentioned at several points and never described in neutral terms. Despite being named after a system ostensibly built around sex or prostitution, the text pushes back against inequalities in sexual relationships throughout the dialogues that compose the overwhelming majority of its content. The initial conversations help to set this stage, solidifying the intrinsic link between power and sex that continues throughout Breillat's novel which is referenced in its title. However, despite the sexual conversations between the characters, the actual plot itself is surprisingly bare-bones, with the structure of the novel reminiscent of those produced by 18th-century libertines, most notably the Marquis de Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), albeit without any actual sex scenes between the characters.

Breillat's text, which contains virtually no narration, opens with the female protagonist approaching at least one man in a gay disco, offering an opportunity to explore her body and sexuality broadly over the course of three nights. The other party accepts and follows her to an undefined space wherein both the woman and the man/men spend the rest of the text discussing various topics ranging from homosexuality to criminality to friendship to motherhood. The dialogues occur in a large paragraph of around one page each and often possess no quotation marks or conversational verbs, such as *said* or *explained*. These

exchanges, while arranged one-after-another in the text, could theoretically have occurred in any order due to their seemingly unprovoked nature and the lack of references to temporality, and the reader would likely experience few issues reading the majority of them in a random sequence. Consistently, the discussions take place between at least two unnamed participants who are interchangeably referred to as *je*, *tu*, *elle*, *lui*, and *vous* throughout the work. Like Sade's novel, which uses conversations about sexual libertinage to critique existing social and political orders, Breillat's work seems focused on using sexuality, in particular taboo sexual practices like homosexuality, as a means of critiquing broader systems of gender, sex, and relationships while also advocating for a destigmatization of pleasure, especially female pleasure. As the narrative progresses, the reader learns that the characters, however many there may be, spend a few days in the same undefined space, resulting in several deeper philosophical discussions about sexual difference, patriarchy, and the body. I would argue that the conversations between the two protagonists of Breillat's text, alongside the nonlinear structure of the novel, problematize the more conventional structure of more "male" modes of writing, as well as androcentric conceptions of eroticism, such as the one posited by Bataille. Put differently, Breillat's novel represents a new form of eroticism, one that could be affirming for women and useful for a feminist praxis. Breillat's novel gradually erodes the boundaries between Self and Other, real-world reader and fictional character, and the male protagonist(s) and the female protagonist as the characters' voices intermingle and the reader becomes implicated – however unwillingly – in the work through the near-constant usage of interrogatives and the *tu* and *vous* pronouns. Moreover, Breillat's appropriation and critique of Bataille's eroticism banalize transgression and obscenity, positing a new vision of eroticism that affords agency to female subjects and resists the focus on domination and destruction that characterizes Bataille's erotic.

The text begins with a discussion of the physical realities of biological sex and simultaneously problematizes this distinction, echoing the sentiments of many French feminists, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray. The protagonist states, "Car le sexe des femmes est bien plus grand que celui de l'homme, en ça il est le plein et ils sont le vide" (Breillat 11).[79] Like the feminist philosophers whose works proceeded Breillat's text by roughly thirty-five years, the protagonist argues against the essentialist nature of biological determinism vis-à-vis gender by inverting popularly-held beliefs about men's supposed superiority, arguing that, because a woman's sex encapsulates the man's, it is technically larger, meaning that it is actually man who represents a void or nothingness. The female protagonist also refutes equally-common notions related to love and sex by arguing that desire is not a question of ownership, but rather of possibility. Towards the end of the text, she states, "Le désir n'est pas la possession. La résolution du désir ne réside pas dans l'abaissement de l'autre pour rendre la possession aisée et comme plus rédhibitoire" (Breillat 134).[80] Perhaps to distance their conception of desire from the more popularized form seen in pornographic or romance novels, one of the unnamed protagonists states that possession does not form the ultimate goal of desire. As explained slightly later, the will to possess another – sexually or otherwise – leads to dehumanization and obsession. Rather, "Le désir ne vient pas de l'envie de possession, ou même d'être possédé, ce qui déjà implique une imbrication plus brûlante, de l'enchevêtrement, l'éparpillement fusionnel des chairs. Non. Le désir vient de la nouveauté excessive qui fait que tout espoir d'une fornication possible est comme la promesse d'une nouvelle vie" (Breillat 126).[81] Such a remark arguably shows the idealistic

[79] "For the sex of women is much bigger than that of men, in that hers is of fullness and theirs is of emptiness" (Breillat and Buck 20).
[80] "Desire is not possession. The resolution of desire doesn't lie in the abasement of the other in order to make possession easy and in a way more redhibitory" (Breillat and Buck 100).
[81] "Desire doesn't come from the longing to possess, or even to be possessed, which already implies and more burning imbrication, tangling up, the fusional scattering of flesh. No. Desire comes from the excessive novelty which makes all hope of a possible fornication be like the promise of a new life" (Breillat and Buck 95).

vision of Breillat's erotic wherein desire is outside the realms of taboo, social control, or complex networks of power, permitting a pleasure that holds a deep meaning for both partners. This, in turn, places Breillat's text in a separate space than the realms of both romance and pornography and firmly establishes its different aims, beginning with its conception of desire and sexuality.

While desire may have a strong relationship to sexual intercourse, it is what this sexual intercourse (imagined or real) signifies that is important in Breillat's narrative. Whereas sexuality has, in Bataille's conception of eroticism, been linked to possession and death, Breillat repositions sexuality as fundamental to a birth of sorts. Perhaps this is meant as the literal baby that is produced through sexual intercourse, but I would argue that Breillat instead refers to a new conceptualization or reconceptualization of the Other, one that is produced through desire, love, and sex. As noted earlier in this chapter, according to Bataille's outline of eroticism as a philosophical concept, sexual intercourse often represents an important taboo to be transgressed, serving to abruptly break down the self-contained, discontinuous nature of human life by showing its continuity. The usually-female Other is sacrificed in this process for the usually-male subject to achieve eroticism and, ultimately, complete a complex yet human quest for a deeper sense of Self. Breillat's protagonists likewise discuss the possibility of a new conception of both Self and Other arising from sexual intercourse, though Breillat avoids Bataille's more violent and misogynistic elements through two rhetorical moves. Firstly, Breillat's characters do not view what results from this dissolution of boundaries between the Self and the Other as destructive but rather as productive, a moment of possibility, connection, and hope. Secondly, within this discussion, Breillat does not explicitly gender the Self and the Other as Bataille does; whereas the latter viewed sexual intercourse as an act wherein the male subject destroyed the female object of his desire, as well as himself, Breillat's novel refuses to conform to this model and instead

allows the subject and the object of desire to be either sex, opening this eroticism to homosexual people and positioning the female participant(s) as capable of experiencing it. Whether or not this seemingly-egalitarian model of eroticism actually occurs appears to be a rather polemical matter of debate for the two characters, as they discuss this question over the next several pages.

For all of the conversation surrounding the psychological and emotional aspect of love, Breillat does not neglect its sexual aspects, wherein the reader notes an exception to the characters' reluctance to possess the Other. Echoing sentiments from radical feminists of the inherent misogyny of sexual politics, her characters note how the union of male and female bodies can occasionally be violating or traumatic. However, such moments are not inherently negative but can rather be useful in the production of new manners of speaking and thinking about sexuality and the taboo. At one point in the text, one of the interlocutors explicitly states:

> La seule possession qui existe, c'est cette faculté d'évasion soudaine du monde étroit de la chair sitôt que vous nous pénétrez, cette faculté de déserter le monde à la mesure de la merveilleuse répugnance que nous inspire le fait de nous avilir dans la copulation avec vous, nous abîmer vous dis-je, nous incomparablement belle et pure, dans cet accouplement monstrueux qui est celui du mâle et de la femelle. En éprouver un rejet tel qu'il est la propulsion divinement cosmique de notre jouissance. L'amour physique c'est le passage, le passage vertigineux du tabou. (Breillat 112-3)[82]

Here the characters create an explicit connection between possession and heterosexual penetration, referring to the union of male and female as *monstrueux* (*monstrous*). Although the text decries the possession of another in desire, here an exception appears to be made in sexuality due to the radical potential of such an act. In stark contrast to popular ideas of the

[82] "The only possession existing is that option for sudden escape from the narrow world of the flesh as soon as you penetrate us. That option to desert the world is in proposition to the marvelous loathing that the fact of degrading ourselves through copulation with you inspires in us, spoiling us I'm telling you, we the comparably beautiful and pure, in this monstrous coupling of male and female. To feel a rejection so powerful it is the divinely cosmic propulsion of our jouissance. Physical love is the crossing, the vertiginous crossing of the taboo" (Breillat and Buck 87).

term *erotic* to designate sanitized, idealistic intercourse, Breillat's terminology is characterized by a visceral unpleasantness. This may harken back to Kristeva's notion of abjection, a post-structuralist term that generally refers to a feeling of subjective horror brought about by reminders of mortality (such as blood or feces) that disturbs a sense of individual identity, breaking down the distinction between what is Self and what is Other.[83] As Kristeva notes in the first few sections of the essay, "Frontière sans doute, l'abjection est surtout l'ambiguïté. Parce que, tout en démarquant, elle ne détache pas radicalement le sujet de ce qui le menace – au contraire, elle l'avoue en perpétuel danger" (Kristeva 17).[84] Kristeva subsequently engages in a lengthy discussion on cadavers shortly thereafter to provide an example of such an object that provokes such a feeling of abjection, but she is quick to note that it is not a question of cleanliness but rather, "...ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles" (Kristeva 12).[85] The monstrous male-female hybrid of which Breillat's characters speak resides in the liminal spaces between human and non-human, male and female, and familiar and unfamiliar. This image evokes the myth of the androgyne found in Plato's *Symposium*, which involves a humanoid creature with both male and female characteristics, possessing four arms, four legs, and two heads, further cementing the philosophical nature of Breillat's text. Yet this image also lends an abjective quality to work; heterosexual intercourse, for the interlocutor, evokes a feeling of horror due to the seeming convergence of masculine and feminine – the *merveilleuse répugnance* to which Breillat refers – which is related to the erotic, specifically

[83] Among Kristeva's impressive bibliography, perhaps the most interesting text that explicitly deals with sexuality and touches upon questions of eroticism is the philosophical work *Tales of Love* (1987). Psychoanalyst Catherine Millot has also written on topics related to sexuality and desire, specifically in relation to transgender theory, most importantly in the book *Horsexe* (1990).

[84] "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it– on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (Kristeva and Roudiez 9).

[85] "...what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva and Roudiez 4).

the profane and sacred aspect of the taboo that forms the basis of Bataille's conception of eroticism, although Kristeva does not make this connection or mention Bataille in the essay. While Bataille's eroticism revolves around finding the Self through the possessing and destruction of the Other – a stark contrast to Kristeva's abjection, which instead breaks down such boundaries between Self and Other without one necessarily destroying the other – both use similar means, such as the taboo, of arriving at their philosophical ends. It is here that Breillat's contribution lies; as opposed to repeating Bataille's arguably anti-feminist conception of eroticism, Breillat instead refines it, producing an eroticism that leads to the female participant on equal footing with the male participant (or two participants of the same sex on the same footing), with possession largely avoided except in the sex act, which permits a rebirth for both parties instead of only one. This is not, however, to imply that Breillat's erotic is synonymous with Kristeva's abjection. Instead of provoking a disgust or dread within the subject who witnesses the boundaries between Self and Other dissolve, as with Kristeva's discussion of dead bodies or feces, Breillat's vision of eroticism is a generative moment of connection between two people in possession of one another. The boundaries between Self and Other are dismantled, but although there is *répugnance*, it is *merveilleuse*, founded on curiosity, understanding, communication, and pleasure, all without the violence inherent to Bataille's erotic or the discomfort of Kristeva's abjection. As the forward to the English-language edition explains, "*Pornocracy*, finally, offers a highly utopian vision of sexuality. Transcendence (of disgust, of social control, of the very idea of pornography) is possible if one is willing to confront the 'obscenity' of the female body. …Humiliation is no longer possible. …Once this point is reached, *Pornocracy* tells us, pleasure can begin" (Krauss 15). Put differently, it is only by really looking at the Other as they are, flaws and all – in this case, the female body – that we can go beyond existing conceptions of sexuality in order to move towards a more equitable version of it. The

numerous references Breillat makes in reference to the taboo serve as not only crucial to her vision of eroticism, as in the case of Bataille, but additionally a commentary on the norms of human sexuality and a metatextual reference to the structure of the novel itself, which violates narrative and structural conventions at several points.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for Breillat's work, transgression is brought up explicitly at several other points in the text but is made most apparent during a discussion concerning homosexuality. The protagonist's male companion states, "Plus tard je lui ai demandé comment il avait pu la regarder. Il a dit, c'est le corps qui a voulu ça, c'est un regard tactile, imprévisible" (Breillat 21).[86] According to the likewise-unnamed male companion(s) to the protagonist, homosexuality represents a transgression of the natural order in that it is not only uncommon but additionally does not produce biological offspring. However, like heterosexuality, this type of sexuality is based primarily on desire, which is tied closely to sexuality, the body, and its responses to visual and tactile stimuli. In this way, Breillat's text deconstructs the stigmatization of homosexuality by not only comparing it to heterosexual desire, but also pointing to its natural causes. Rather than possessing any sort of inherent value as either moral or immoral, homosexual desire simply represents a natural variation among humans. The taboo of homosexuality would ideally not exist in Breillat's world, as there would be nothing forbidden about such desire, though this idealistic discussion is dismissed as such, reminding the reader of the stigmatized nature of same-sex intercourse.

Nevertheless, the questions that the protagonist poses to her companion concerning what he finds appealing about men and how he prefers to have sex with other men serve to demystify the homosexual body and work towards the destigmatization of homosexuality within the novel, contributing to a sense of eroticism by transgressing and transcending the

[86] "I asked him later how he could have looked at her. He said, it's the body that wanted it, it's a tactile, unforeseeable look" (Breillat and Buck 25).

taboo around same-sex desire. Not unlike seeing the female Other by confronting her natural, unvarnished body, Breillat seems to extend humanizing the homosexual Other by directly confronting the reality of gay male desire. In an intriguing rhetorical move, this discussion on homosexuality serves to break down notions of Self and Other by pushing back against popular psychoanalytic interpretations, further opening up the possibility of eroticism to homosexual individuals. Freudian psychoanalysis argues that the notion of homosexuality represents a variant of narcissism. In a critical study on gay men and psychoanalysis, Hubert Lisandre summarizes Freud's argument in opposition to heterosexuality, "L'homosexualité, à l'inverse, désigne, une forme de libido tout à fait caractéristique : ce serait celle du narcissisme. Celui-ci, en psychanalyse, ne recoupe pas exactement son usage courant, où il s'entend le plus souvent comme un défaut, voir comme une pathologie" (Lisandre 117).[87] Though Lisandre does note that this usage of narcissism in relationship to homosexuality does not hold the same meaning as it does in the 21st century and later critiques this conception of homosexuality as overly complex and too technical, as well as the works of other psychoanalysts (namely Claude Lockner) as homophobic, he does not posit a more affirming means of interpreting homosexuality through a psychoanalytic lens. Freud's vision of homosexuality (but particularly male homosexuality) relies on narcissism wherein the subject of desire is the same as the object; namely, the Self. As Lisandre notes, reasons for this differ, largely revolving around a failed Oedopius complex, though the result is the same. Breillat's text pushes back on this, arguing for parallels between homosexuality and heterosexuality, implying that the former is equally as much about the Self and the Other, two separate beings, as the latter, while also demystifying the homosexual Other for a largely heterosexual readership. Consequently, the breaking down of boundaries between two

[87] "Homosexuality, on the other hand, designates a very characteristic form of libido: it would be that of narcissism. This, in psychoanalysis, does not correspond exactly to its current use, where it is most often understood as a defect, or even as a pathology." Translation mine.

participants within an erotic experience can be extended to homosexuals, further distinguishing Breillat's conception from Bataille's. Yet Breillat's inclusivity within the erotic experience is not just limited to those of marginalized sexualities but extends to the reader of the text.

While *Pornocratie* (2001) is certainly not a typical novel in its form and content, it does use many traditional rhetorical devices (such as similes, prolepses, and so forth), but there are several important aspects that are absent from Breillat's work, important omissions that distinguish the text from both conventional pornographic and romantic prose. In addition to the fact that none of the characters possess names or concrete identities outside of their genders and sexualities, the timeline and setting of the work are likewise unclear, perhaps permitting a certain universality so that the reader can place themself as one of the interlocutors. While we know that the female speaker paid for the male speaker's (or speakers') company for several days, we cannot be sure of the order of the conversations; as noted previously, since they are isolated from one another and never have any sort of transition, the dialogues could theoretically occur in any chronological order. Furthermore, the reader has no idea where the characters are, as the text is composed entirely of conversations without any narration describing the physical space or any references to descriptions of a room or its contents in the conversations. The boundaries between fiction and reality additionally become blurred as the reader is implicated within the dialogues through the usage of the second person, with the phrase "Qu'est-ce que *vous* pensez? [What do *you* think?]", among others, repeated throughout the work. The use of the second person is ambiguous, potentially referring to the diegetic interlocutor as well as the reader. A second-person pronoun can have multiple intentions ranging from increasing reader engagement, generating empathy and identification, or creating a sense of psychological intimacy, but in all cases, it draws the reader further into the text. Breillat's usage of the second person

pronoun involves the reader in the characters' conversations against his or her will, making the reader a more active participant in the uncomfortable topics discussed and perhaps more actively working to change his or her perspective. Through the usage of such atypical literary techniques, Breillat could be embracing a form of *écriture féminine* or *parler femme*, rejecting masculine writing conventions and embracing a more idiosyncratic manner of communication. These unusual aspects of Breillat's style, however, are only part of her larger project, which would seem to implicate breaking down not only the conventions of the literary medium but also conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality by focusing on both the material body and abstract feelings, such as when speaking about the often exploitative nature of sex and love.

As the text progresses, lines become increasingly blurred as the male interlocutor(s), who are ostensibly homosexual, voluntarily perform(s) sexual acts on the female speaker. In one conversation, the narrator describes the culmination of the characters' time together, briefly describing their sexual union. As the text states, "Ainsi l'emmena-t-elle entre ses jambes la chevauchant et le chevauchant dans un indescriptible mélange et une jouissance où il n'était jamais parvenu. Une jouissance pure et simple" (Breillat 120-1).[88] Admittedly, this exchange may seem homophobic at first glance, with some detractors concerned that Breillat may be denying a static sexual identity to the openly-gay male participant(s) and instead privileging heterosexual intercourse through the *jouissance* that he had never felt before. Not so. Though a seemingly-rigid category of sexuality, homosexual and heterosexual identities interweave and blend together in Breillat's erotic world, the boundaries between men and women and gay and straight dissolving. It is not gay identity specifically that Breillat deconstructs here but *all* identity. Through contact with the Other who happens to be female,

[88] "And so she took him between her legs, riding it and riding him in an indescribable mingling and a jouissance he had never reached. A jouissance pure and simple" (Breillat and Buck 91).

the male subject is able to achieve a higher state of being and vice-versa, regardless of his sexuality.

The boundaries between pleasure and pain grow increasingly unclear as the text progresses, culminating in a scene involving the male speaker forcing the handle of a spade into the female character's sex organ. The episode is described in highly specific terms that focus on both her discomfort and her sexual pleasure. The narrator explains, "C'est un instrument ancien, paysan, assez beau avec la patine du bois dur du manche et la mince couche de rouille luisante des dents en métal non encore corrodé mais coloré par le temps. Il enfonce maintenant tant qu'il peut le manche dans le vagin, il ne mesure pas sa force. Il est impossible qu'elle dorme encore et il est probable qu'il lui a fait mal car elle a eu un bref gémissement…" (Breillat 87).[89] This, I would argue, forms an important distinction between Breillat's eroticism and that of pornography and romance. Whereas the latter two genres have a tendency to focus solely on pleasure for the sake of the reader, erotica embraces feeling in its totality, elaborating on both positive and negative stimuli. Although unexpected, the intrusion is initially unpleasant for the female interlocutor but eventually becomes pleasurable, a stark contrast to mainstream pornography and category romance, which largely focus solely on the pleasurable aspects of sex and love. The notion of sensation as it is presented in the novel not only serves as an important aspect of Breillat's eroticism but additionally to the classification of the work as an erotic text alongside the psychological dimensions of sex.

Feeling as both a physical sensation and an emotional experience appears as a topic of conversation at several points in *Pornocratie* (2001), usually after a discussion about desire or sex, though other ways of processing and engaging with sexuality are mentioned. As the

[89] "It's an old tool, rustic, rather beautiful with a patina of hard wood on its haft and a thin coat of glinting rust on the metal teeth not yet corroded but colored by time. He plunges the haft into the vagina as deep as possible, he doesn't gauge his strength. It's impossible for her to still be asleep, and it's probably he hurts her for she offers a brief moan" (Breillat and Buck 66-7).

narrator explains, while imagination is more important than a bodily response in the formation of desire, both are ultimately necessary. She states quite plainly to her male companion(s), "Alors il constate le propre renflement de sa braguette et que le désir le saisit de la femme pour la deuxième fois, et que ce désir ne venait pas de ce qu'il voyait mais de l'avilissement imaginaire qu'il lui faisait subir. Ce désir il ne le devait qu'à lui-même" (Breillat 83).[90] As opposed to what is *seen*, the protagonist of Breillat's text argues that it is what one *imagines* that inspires desire. This aligns quite well with Barthes's discussion of the relationship between eroticism, pleasure, and reading, outlined earlier in the first chapter. To reiterate Barthes' argument in *Le Plaisir du Texte* (1973):

> L'endroit le plus érotique d'un corps n'est-il pas *là où le vêtement bâille* ? …c'est l'intermittence, comme l'a bien dit la psychanalyse, qui est érotique : cella de la peau qui scintille entre deux pièces (le pantalon et le tricot), entre deux bords (la chemise entrouverte, la gant et la manche); c'est ce scintillement même qui séduit, ou encore : la mise en scène d'une apparition-disparition.
>
> Ce n'est pas là le plaisir du strip-tease corporel ou du suspense narratif. Dans l'un et l'autre cas, pas de déchirure, pas de bords : un dévoilement progressif : toute l'excitation se réfugie dans l'espoir de voir le sexe (rêve de collégien) ou de connaître la fin de l'histoire (satisfaction romanesque). (Barthes 19-20)[91]

Barthes notes that what is considered erotic is largely linked to the expectation or the possibility of seeing nudity as opposed to the overt presentation of it. This would appear to be the case within Breillat's novel, wherein the sexual act is never represented and sex repeatedly finds itself only alluded to in conversations. This leads to the question of what pleasure can be taken from the novel. Is the text intended to give the reader pleasure in an unconventional manner? Or is the text intended to deprive the reader of the pleasures that

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[90] "He notices then the swelling of his fly and that desire for the woman that has taken hold of him for the second time, and that this desire doesn't come from what he saw, but from the imaginary degradation he submitted her to. He owed this desire alone to himself" (Breillat and Buck 64).

[91] "Is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes*? …[I]t is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove, and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance. The pleasure of the text is not the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense. In these cases, there is no tear, no edges: a gradual unveiling: the entire excitation takes refuge in the *hope* of seeing the sexual organ (schoolboy's dream) or in knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction)" (Barthes and Miller 9-10).

they might expect from a more conventional romance novel or pornographic text? I would venture that the latter forms a more important aspect of Breillat's text. As opposed to more conventionally structured works within either genre, the novel only begins with a woman and man meeting and distinguishes itself thereafter. The text does not describe any aspect of the mise-en-scène, including the characters themselves, that would even allow the reader to imagine most aspects of the narrative in a concrete way. Yet perhaps this is where pleasure is located; namely, by the reader's imagination going beyond what is typical while he or she reads. Through mentally filling in the gaps of Breillat's text that would otherwise be given in a typical work of pornography or romance, the reader might take pleasure in imagining the space and the characters as he or she chooses, along with what occurs in-between dialogues. This pleasure of imagining is shared by the characters in Breillat's novel.

Barthes quickly notes in the second paragraph that the reader's pleasure does not rely upon the suspension of the narrative (which he astutely compares to a striptease), but rather the *hope* that the suspense will be broken and all will be revealed. The first section of the citation illustrates such an example; using references to psychoanalysis, he points out that seeing fragments of the human body either through or between clothing possess an erotic quality as opposed to overt nudity due to the *suggestion* of nakedness. This aligns with what Breillat's unnamed protagonist states about sexuality, explaining to her companion(s) that the suggestion of sexuality is pleasurable for her lover. She even goes so far as to use Barthes's own language, stating that this is a *désir* that originates in the excitement that comes from what is not seen or felt but rather imagined. Erotic sexual desire, according to Breillat, only comes from oneself and lives in the imagination, providing a rare point of commonality with the eroticism theorized by Bataille. However, the latter does note that eroticism is an internal experience, but this is largely due to the nature of taboos which prevent any discussion of the erotic as opposed to the influence of a cerebral or imaginative aspect, as in the case of

Breillat's eroticism. As Bataille remarks, "...l'érotisme laisse dans la solitude. L'érotisme est au moins ce dont il est difficile de parler. Pour des raisons qui ne sont pas seulement conventionnelles, l'érotisme est défini par le secret. Il ne peut être public. …Il s'agit d'un sujet interdit. Rien n'est interdit absolument, il y a toujours des transgressions" (Bataille 278).[92] Though Bataille does acknowledge the paradoxical nature of his text on eroticism being written and published despite the subject's taboo nature, this is dismissed by claims of the acceptability of taboo discussions within the realm of philosophy. This initially seems like a flimsy defense, yet one must concede the consistency of Bataille's logic. While his erotic is defined by secrecy and transgression, which can but are not always exciting or pleasurable, Breillat's erotic, it would seem, is instead defined by a more ludic quality that involves the pleasure originating in fantasy and play, as well as the pain that can occur when these go wrong. This would go against the way pornography and romance engage with fantasy, instead stringing the reader along through storylines, thereby limiting the imaginative possibilities. Breillat's erotic, and perhaps erotic literature as a genre, permits numerous potentials for the reader's fantasies by allowing for ambiguity within the narrative. Yet Breillat goes beyond simply stimulating the reader's imagination and advocates making his or her fantasies, even those that are highly taboo, public. The first step in doing so, according to her characters, is by abandoning the notion of the taboo completely in order to transcend it.

In one of the final discussions between the characters in *Pornocratie* (2001), the nature of obscenity is raised, provoking another discussion that separates Breillat's erotic from those that preceded her. Unlike Bataille, who views the taboo, as well as the transgression of the taboo, as a necessary component of eroticism, Breillat seems to view the taboo as an impediment to eroticism. As the unnamed woman notes, "Nous sommes l'un pour

[92] " ...eroticism is a solitary activity. At the least it is a matter difficult to discuss. For not only conventional reasons, eroticism is defined by secrecy. It cannot be public. …There is a taboo in force. Nothing is absolutely forbidden, for there are always transgressions" (Bataille and Dalwood 252).

l'autre entièrement connus. Nous avons résolu le secret fétide de l'obscénité : Simplement ce qui est, est. Ce n'est ni beau ni laid. Ni mal ni bien. C'est" (Breillat 133).[93] Throughout the text, Breillat's characters discuss sexual taboos so frequently that, by the ending lines, they become completely banal, yet it is not their transgression that defines the erotic in Breillat's world. Rather, it is the connection through sexuality and the possibilities afforded by such a connection that allow the boundaries between Self and Other to erode and for the Self to develop. In those moments, the female body, homosexuality, and other taboo subjects have simply become a normalized part of human existence. The Self looks at the Other and learns how to communicate, how to understand, and how to please him or her. This eroticism, in stark contrast to that theorized by Bataille, implicates the imagination, allowing readers to freely explore their fantasies without concern for taboos or restraints. By eliminating the narration in her novel, Breillat's work invites (or perhaps forces) the reader to imagine the characters and the situation. Consequently, the reader is denied the pleasures offered by a conventional novel that would show them everything and remove the responsibility and the resulting pleasure derived from imagining these scenarios. Yet, as Breillat implies, the female body must first be demystified through speaking about all of its capacities, including those that might put some readers ill at ease, ranging from orgasm to menstruation to childbirth, which is done in *Pornocracy* (2001) through the female character's discussions of these taboo topics. It is here that Breillat's erotic – and erotic literature as a genre – can be useful for a feminist liberation, allowing women the space to articulate their own desires and pleasures without the constraints imposed by pornography and romance. The way these fantasies can be translated into action, both in the so-called West and elsewhere, forms the basis of the next chapter of this project.

[93] "We are entirely known one for the other. We have solved the fetid secret of obscenity: What is, is. Simply. It is neither beautiful nor ugly. Neither good nor bad. It is" (Breillat and Buck 99-100).

Conclusion

While erotic literature may seemingly possess some of the same qualities as pornography and romance, such as an emphasis on relationships and sex, the manner in which it engages with these characteristics and the effect on the reader serve to distinguish erotica from these related genres. In large part due to its relatively freer structure, erotica is defined by its capacity to solicit an engagement that goes beyond the sexual or the emotional from its readers. Furthermore, as discussed by Bataille in the seminal text *L'Érotisme* (1957), the dissolution of the boundary between Self and Other manifests itself differently in erotic literature. Pornography, according to both feminist and literary scholars, has the reader's sexual pleasure as its main focus, while the genre of contemporary romance is defined by an overabundance of emotions; neither challenges the reader, instead maintaining the boundary between Self and Other through notions of domination and possession. Erotic literature instead breaks down such barriers. Some, such as Georges Bataille, have considered this as a moment of violence, but others, such as Catherine Breillat, conceptualize this moment as a productive moment, one that allows for a new multitude of possibilities.

These possibilities are aided by the relative freedom of the reader to fantasize. As scholars of affective literary criticism, but particularly Albert Mordell and Norman R. Holland, have mentioned, many genres see authors meticulously guide their readers to a handful of limited responses. Pornography, as they argue, generally prioritizes the reader's sexual satisfaction, while romance typically has the reader's emotional satisfaction as its main aim. Stereotypes and formulae avoid challenging readers' worldviews. By contrast, erotic literature privileges intellectual engagement with the reader alongside sexual and emotional engagement, causing the reader to rethink established norms surrounding love, sex, and power.

Nowhere does this become more apparent than in Breillat's *Pornocratie* (2001). Though it features some emotional dialogues between the unnamed protagonists based on sex, the text also introduces philosophical elements that are absent from most pornographic and romance novels whose plots instead revolve around a narrow set of conventions. Throughout Breillat's text, the two protagonists discuss sex in a manner that frankly critiques popularized misconceptions about sexuality while also implicating the reader in the dialogues. Within many of these conversations, Georges Bataille's notion of eroticism is critiqued, with the erotic in Breillat's novel seeming to involve the dissolution of boundaries between Self and Other through introspection and empathy and the potential meaningful connections that can be drawn between the two participants as separate Selves demystifying the Other. Imagination forms a crucial aspect of Breillat's eroticism, the locus wherein sexuality can be played with and molded. Ultimately, the novel argues that although certain sexualities or sexual practices may be considered taboo, their value – aesthetic or otherwise – is unimportant; rather, these aspects of human sexuality are simply a fundamental part of human existence. The implications for erotica as an object of feminist study are vital to demystify the female body and articulate frequently taboo perspectives on female pleasure in order to achieve a more egalitarian form of sexuality.

In her introduction to Nelly Arcan's final published work, 2011's *Burqa de chair* (translated in 2014 as *Burqa of Skin*), Nancy Huston argues that, even if the pornography as a textual and filmic medium could be automated or if robots holograms could be programmed to no longer think or remember or emote and simply have sex for the pleasure of others, "Ça ne marcherait pas car, dans le théâtre p & p [de la pornographie], la jouissance vient précisément de ce que l'on traite comme s'il ne l'était pas un être qui est humain"

(*Philosophe* 28).[94] Yet at the same time, "L'abolition [est] inconcevable en la matière…" (29).[95] And this, I think, represents the seemingly-eternal intellectual struggle with pornography (and, to a lesser extent, romance); on one hand, the desire for fulfillment, however vicarious, through a medium which some radical feminist thinkers have labeled as violent or objectifying, while on the other hand, the impractical difficulty with abolishing the production and consumption of such media, perhaps pointing to its very inevitability.

Yet if pornography in its many forms can, as the self-appointed sex-positive feminists have argued, serve as an affirming medium, one in which those directly involved in the performing, direction, writing, and consumption of such texts exercise total agency and control over their sexuality, then it would serve to reason that erotica possesses such potential, as well. As noted previously, Audre Lorde argued for a collective return to the erotic based on its capacity to create new subjects and lead to collective liberation; admittedly, Lorde's *we*, as in most of her other works, likely refers to non-white women, but I would broaden the scope of this pronoun further. As a result of the conflation of erotica with pornography and romance, we (that is to say, readers, writers, and scholars) have forgotten or ignored the transformative potential of erotic literature, believing it to privilege sexuality in the same manner as pornography or feelings as with romance, the only distinctions superficial and irrelevant. But in doing so, we neglect how erotica uses sexuality to connect emotionally and intellectually with readers, perhaps closing ourselves off to new pleasures, emotions, and ideas, as well as to the pleasures, emotions, and ideas of others. A radical rethinking of erotica is necessary. Perhaps once this occurs, once erotic literature has been given the same attention as adjacent genres, once readers and writers are no longer afraid or hesitant to embrace feeling in its totality, not just the physical sensation of sexual pleasure but also the

[94] "But no. It wouldn't work. Because in the p&p theatre [of pornography], climax comes precisely for the very reason that someone is treating a human being inhumanly" (*Philosopher* 24).
[95] "An abolition is inconceivable in this matter." (24).

emotional sensations that so frequently go hand-in-hand with sexuality, the same polemics will eventually divide producers and consumers of erotica, as in the case of pornography. But perhaps not. Perhaps what follows will be a world which allows for more feelings, unashamed honesty, deeper connections, and a greater degree of freedom – in our reading choices and in our bedrooms.

Chapter 4 – Reassessing Pleasure: *L'Amande* as Transnational Feminist Resistance

Introduction

As outlined in the first chapter of this study, the question of pornography drew battlelines between American pro-sex and anti-porn feminists in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At the same time, though, feminist authors and activists of color focused on the intersection between race-based and sex-based oppression, though this is not to imply that some Black radical feminist writings critical of pornography do not exist.[96] African-American feminist texts have played a crucial role in shaping feminist discourses since the 1990s, offering critical frameworks for understanding the intersections of race, gender, and systemic oppression. As the American feminist movement evolved, these contributions resonated with women from postcolonial societies who similarly grappled with patriarchy, sexism, and the enduring legacies of colonialism, leading to the development of what would become known as transnational or third-world feminism. However, as Evelyne Accad observes, discussions of sexuality within these movements have often been fraught with tension. She notes that "...in most discussions of third world feminism, sexuality and the privatized oppression of women by men are relegated to secondary issues. When sexuality and/or male domination is raised as a significant factor, conflicts arise over the validity of Marxism versus feminism, economic equality versus sexual equality, national revolution versus women's rights…" (Accad 238). These tensions, while reflecting distinct historical and sociopolitical contexts, underscore the broader challenge of negotiating multiple axes of oppression. Both African-American feminists and women from postcolonial societies confront interlocking structures of domination, whether shaped by racialized patriarchy in the United States or by

[96] For two particularly good examples of works that outline the condition of Black women in contemporary American society and potential paths to liberation, the Combahee River Collective's "Collective Statement" (1977) and bell hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984). Other important, older sources that inform Black feminist theory include Sojourner Truth's discourse "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851) and Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1892). Texts written by Black feminists that are critical of pornography include Audre Lorde's previously-cited essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1978) and Particia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1991).

(neo)colonial and nationalist struggles elsewhere. Their shared commitment to dismantling these hierarchies demonstrates the deep connections between their feminist projects, despite differing geopolitical and cultural contexts.

Yet despite transnational feminists' focus on the patriarchy, sexism, and legacies of colonialism on economic and social disparities that women in the Global South face, sexuality *is* a concern for women in these parts of the world. Citing a research project that she conducted throughout the MENA region in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Accad continues, "...[C]ontrary to the perspectives of many intellectuals and political women and men involved in the U.S. and/or Middle East, my interviews with rural and urban women indicate that sexuality is of utmost concern to women. In fact it is often women from the neediest levels of society who are the most outspoken on the subject of sex, love, and their relationships to their husbands and family, and who, contrary to what some intellectuals have expressed, see the need for change in these areas of their lives" (Accad 239). Prominent Arab feminists have attempted to address women and sexuality in their work, such as Nawal El Saadawi in Egypt. A renowned feminist, writer, and physician, El Saadawi was one of the first to critically examine the intersection of gender, sexuality, and power in Arab societies. Many of her works, such as *Al-Wajh al-'ari lil-mar'a al-'arabiyy* (1977) which was translated as *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980), tackle issues such as female genital mutilation (FGM), virginity, and patriarchal control over women's bodies. Fatima Mernissi, a sociologist, feminist, and writer from Morocco, explored the ways Islam and patriarchy intersect to regulate women's sexuality. Her book *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* (1975) examines sexual politics in Arab-Muslim societies and challenges traditional interpretations of gender roles in Islam. Palestinian anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod penned *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013), which discusses how sexuality, honor, and modesty are intertwined in Arab societies and critiques Western narratives about Arab women's sexuality.

Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian journalist and activist, wrote *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution* (2015), a provocative text that challenges the oppressive structures regulating women's sexuality in the Arab world, ultimately advocating for sexual liberation as a form of resistance against patriarchy. These thinkers and writers offer diverse perspectives on how sexuality, gender, and culture intersect in the Arab world, a concern for women who live and work in these societies.

Although the women in Accad's research specifically cite issues related to sexuality and marriage as concerns, and despite the voluminous theoretical foundation on Arab women's navigation of sexual politics in the MENA region, few scholars who have worked within a transnational feminist framework have commented on how fiction writing can be used as a means of liberation. Why not use erotica as a means of expression to open up possibilities for the destigmatization of women's pleasure and the demystification of the female body, perhaps small parts of a broader feminist project that includes topics such as poverty, domestic violence, and so forth? Are material concerns, such as illiteracy and poverty, too widespread for this to be viable? Is it the taboo of sexuality that keeps transnational feminist theorists from recognizing the potential of erotic literature to resist male-centric views of women's sexuality? Perhaps these problems simply boil down to a matter of scope, as the number of erotic texts published by authors outside of the Global North is relatively small? Any paratextual elements of erotic fiction might perpetuate stereotypes and exoticize non-Western cultures, making it difficult to argue for their feminist potential without first addressing these issues. As Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) illustrates, Western representations of the "Orient" have long relied on fantasies that construct non-Western, particularly Middle Eastern and Asian, women as hypersexualized, passive, or mysterious objects of desire, reinforcing colonialist and patriarchal discourses rather than challenging them.

Consequently, it stands to reason that literature that engages with sexuality may inadvertently reinforce colonial stereotypes, making scholars cautious, leading feminist priorities to shift towards issues such as violence against women, economic inequality, and political representation, thereby sidelining erotic texts. In recent years, transnational and postcolonial feminists have penned their mixed reactions to the role of sexuality in a non-Western-centric feminist praxis, ranging from M. Jacqui Alexander's negative view to Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's cautious skepticism.[97] Nevertheless, these are tangential discussions related to either heterosexual (or, more rarely, homosexual male) pornography and prostitution. These forms of sex work have largely been critiqued for their neocolonialist nature, namely the exploitation of individuals and communities in the developing world through an increasingly-globalized capitalist system, as well as the propagation of colonialist fantasies about the sexuality of men and women from outside of the US and Europe.[98] Yet, as Selma Dabbagh mentions in the introduction of the anthology *We Wrote in Symbols: Love and Lust by Arab Women Writers* (2021), the power of both exchange between women and the erotic for women's empowerment is crucial: "...[T]he illicit is hard to police and often adds fuel to desire. …The harem, represented most frequently as a place of dulled imprisonment, could also provide solace, solidarity, intrigue, and protection from a public sphere and men; a place of sensuality between women and a place to exchange sex tips and

[97] Alexander's article "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen" offers a particularly scathing critique of the manner in which colonial and imperialist thought, but particularly those surrounding sexuality, have been forced onto Caribbean nations in order to uphold patriarchy and sexism. Furthermore, while not about sex entirely, Oyěwùmí's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) offers a critique of Western feminism's dominance in African Studies, instead offering a more holistic and transnational feminist lens.

[98] One foundational critique of this tendency that draws upon sexuality, desire, and exoticism is Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), which contains two chapters on white men and Black women and Black men and white women. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said dissected the Western fantasies about the Orient, including the fixation on the supposed exoticism and sensuality of Arab women and the hypermasculine or "threatening" image of Arab men. These depictions were central to Western colonial projects and the justification of their "civilizing missions." Mernissi's aforementioned *Beyond the Veil* (1975) also interrogated the historical and colonial myths about Arab and Muslim women's sexuality, critiquing both Western Orientalist perspectives and local patriarchal structures.

advice. Prohibition also gives rise to rabid hypocrisy, creativity when it comes to subversion, mind-bending wars of nerves, ludicrous situations, hilarity in camaraderie – all wonderful materials for the writer's pen" (Dabbagh 7-8). While sexuality can be weaponized and abused to reproduce inequalities on both global and local scales, are such assertions by transnational and postcolonial feminist scholars about the sexual exploitation of men and women in the Global South true for literature? Can erotica serve as an avenue for an anti-colonial or postcolonial feminist praxis that ultimately leads to liberation? Or are texts categorized under this literary genre completely antithetical to the goals of postcolonial and transnational feminist scholars?

In this chapter, I argue that erotic literature lends itself well to discussions of (post-)colonialism, feminism, and sexuality in a non-Western context due to the direct manner in which such novels engage with these subjects and problematize existing hierarchies and orders. As conversations surrounding sexuality – but especially women's sexuality – are sometimes taboo or even illegal, depending on the time period and society, the purpose of this chapter is not to be proscriptive, particularly given my own position as a white, US-based scholar. I do not equate open conversations on sexuality or sexual practices to "progress" or a linear movement toward "progress," as this reinforces the supposed superiority of American and European conceptions of modernity. However, I do point to erotic literature as a valuable avenue for postcolonial and transnational feminist thinkers. Such texts have the potential to challenge and subvert dominant, androcentric narratives about female sexuality, offering new perspectives and voices from marginalized communities and ultimately serving as a form of resistance to the simultaneous oppressions of patriarchy, capitalism, and racism, among others.

I begin by briefly outlining the basic tenets of transnational feminist theory. This branch of feminism, which eventually came to define the broader third-wave feminist

movement, concerns itself largely with grappling not only with current patriarchal systems that impact women's day-to-day lives in the Global South in manners different than those of women in the West but also colonial histories that continue to reproduce inequality on an international stage. Related to (but not synonymous with) postcolonial feminism, transnational feminism includes such influential authors as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, M. Jacqui Alexander, Fatima Mernissi, and Caren Kaplan. Within the texts produced by these theorists, erotic literature is never mentioned directly, and pornography only receives the rare reference, with transnational and postcolonial feminisms tending to focus on more "on-the-ground" subjects such as sex tourism and human trafficking. Given that I explore the intersections of race, gender, nation, and migrant status in this chapter and how they inform counterhegemonic practices, an intersectional and transnational approach is necessary when speaking about the production of erotic texts and their use for feminist liberation outside of the Global North.

After this, I briefly provide some context by examining texts written by Franco-Arab authors and the manner in which these writers engage with eroticism as an artistic aesthetic, a literary device, and a philosophical concept. Though generally not classified as erotica, these works ranges from Abdellah Taïa's *Une mélancolie arabe* (2008), a novel that repeatedly confronts the taboo of gay sex, sometimes directly alongside discussions of religion in reference to Bataille's eroticism, to Assia Djebar's *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985), which scholars have argued contained veiled references to the female body alongside the violence of colonization, once again harkening back to Bataille's conception of eroticism. Within these texts, the authors engage with sexuality in a variety of different ways which ultimately include an erotic element that could serve as a model to other writers, but particularly those within the Maghreb region, not unlike more contemporary works.

Finally, I segue into a deeper analysis of Nedjma's *L'Amande* (2004). Marketed, perhaps erroneously, as the first erotic novel written by a Muslim woman, the text uses explicit sexual language to recount the torrid affair between a Berber divorcée grappling with a traumatic past and her handsome and cosmopolitan but aloof lover in Morocco. The pair fall in and out of love with one another, with their relationship portrayed as an ever-shifting game until the narrator, unable to reconcile her jealousy over her partner's infidelity, decides to leave the relationship and devote her life to writing. The novel's transgressive narrative that covers taboo subject matter and its unrelenting focus on female sexual pleasure serve to question the place of women in Morocco's society, the nature of power in interpersonal relationships, and the manner in which both individual and collective histories impact the present. Ultimately, I argue that the reconceptualization of erotic novels such as Nedjma's text as feminist objects represents neither a teleological nor a final step in the process of feminist liberation; rather, erotic literature such as *L'Amande* (2004) can be used within many different feminist struggles on a global scale to achieve sexual, economic, and political equality.

Going Beyond the United States: Postcolonial and Transnational Feminisms and Sexuality

Before we continue, a brief note on terminology. In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991), American-Indian feminist author Chandra Talpade Mohanty discusses both the conditions of African-American women and Black women globally, though her claims can be extrapolated to women of all races in the Global South. While speaking about the term "woman of color," Mohanty explains the connection between women of color in the United States and abroad, stating, "This is a term which designates a political constituency, not a biological or even sociological one. It is a sociopolitical designation for people of African, Caribbean, Asian, and Latin American descent, and native peoples of the U.S. It also refers to 'new immigrants' to the U.S. in the last decade–Arab,

Korean, Thai, Laotian, etc. What seems to constitute 'women of color' or 'third world women' as a viable oppositional alliance is a *common context of struggle* rather than color or racial identifications. Similarly, it is third world women's oppositional *political* relation to sexist, racist, and imperialist structures that constitute our potential commonality" (Mohanty 7). To be a woman of color, then, has less to do with one's geographical position or racial identification and more to do with a political condition; namely, that of struggle, usually against sexism, racism, and (neo)colonialism.

One of the few Black American feminist authors to extrapolate her work on American women of color into a global context is Patricia Hill Collins, who – along with Mohanty – is considered one of the founding figures of transnational feminism. When discussing the work of feminist scholars from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Senegal, she concludes, "Yet social relationships within these three nation-states differ: Domination is structured differently in Senegal, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Thus, regardless of how any given matrix is actually organized either across time or from society to society, the concept of a matrix of domination encapsulates the universality of intersecting oppressions as organized through diverse local realities" (Hill Collins 246). By her own admission, Collins contends that American feminisms have historically done a poor job at incorporating the experiences and oppressions of non-US women of color. The reason for this, it would appear, relate to the manner in which nation and culture contribute to the oppression of women. As she notes, "U.S. Black feminisms will remain hindered in its goal of fostering Black women's empowerment in a context of social justice until it incorporates more comprehensive analyses of how nation can constitute another form of oppression" (Hill Collins 247). The transnational feminism that Collins envisions incorporates local histories but acknowledges that "Intersecting oppressions do not stop at U.S. borders. Intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation constitute global phenomena that have a particular

organization within the United States" (Hill Collins 250). Though Collins refers to her own concept of the *matrix of oppression* (alternately called the *matrix of domination*) to refer to the ways race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationhood all simultaneously impact one's oppression, a more widely-recognized term would be *intersectionality*, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s.

While writing about race and gender for a legal review, Crenshaw argues that "Neither Black liberationist politics nor feminist theory can ignore the intersectional experiences of those whom the movements claim as their respective constituents," ultimately asking for both movements to keep both racism and sexism in mind when engaging in advocacy work (Crenshaw 334). Transnational, postcolonial, and woman of color feminisms consequently consider how other forms of oppression operate and impact one's viewpoint and interactions with the world. An intersectional feminism seeks to critique not only sexism but additionally racism, classism, ableism, and so forth. As Crenshaw notes, ethnicity and nationality are implicitly bound up in matrices of oppression and are thus crucial to consider when dealing with women's experiences and writing, but especially that which comes from postcolonial spheres. This is particularly useful for the discussion and analysis of texts written by women in North Africa, who often must deal with other forms of oppression alongside misogyny, such as classism. Among the most important and vocal transnational feminists in the MENA region, Egyptian writer Mervat Hatem critiques the way transnational feminism often sidelines the role of imperialism in shaping global gender inequalities and has argued extensively about the need for feminist frameworks that address colonial legacies and economic disparities. Although she is originally from Pakistan, Saba Mahmood's work deeply resonates in Arab contexts. Her *Politics of Piety* (2004) challenges the secular and liberal bias in transnational feminist critiques, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of women's agency within Islamic and Arab societies. Nadje Al-Ali, an Iraqi feminist author,

has repeatedly critiqued how transnational feminism can reproduce neocolonial discourses, especially regarding Arab women's rights in conflict zones, such as post-9/11 Iraq, in *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (2009). Her works on feminist activism in the country emphasize the need for local agency and voices in shaping feminist agendas.

When discussing women's texts on sexuality in North Africa, one must be conscious of the manner in which a variety of identities (as well as state apparatuses) impact what is and is not acceptable and the degree of leniency afforded to each writer. Several pertinent cultural and geographical aspects related to Francophone North Africa should thus be discussed before continuing further. Speaking of Morocco, Doris H. Gray notes the centrality of religion to the structure of society, summarizing, "The importance of Islam for national cohesion in Morocco is paramount because religion is a central marker of national distinction. Though religion, culture, and customs are closely intertwined in any country, in Morocco there is an official link between religion, the state, and the law. …The absence of a barrier between state and religion in Morocco is also reflected in daily life, where religion is anything but a private matter" (Gray 17). The influence of Islam perhaps unsurprisingly extends to the publishing industry in both Morocco and in the broader Maghreb region. Within many texts written by North African writers, the importance of religion, as well as the governmental censorship that is at least partially a result of religion's power, are serious concerns for authors – but especially women authors – who wish to write candidly about taboo subjects. As recounted by Nevine El Nossery, Moroccan artist and writer Zainab Fasiki had obstacles publishing her first book *Hshouma. Corps et sexualité au Maroc* (2019), "*Hshoumma* was published in Paris by the publisher Massot, as Fasiki could not find a publisher in Morocco who would agree to publish such a provocative book. Fasiki had initially wanted to write the book in the Moroccan Darija dialect, but due to strict censorship

and a lack of technical words in the dialect about sexuality and the body, she had to write the book in French, a language spoken widely among North Africans, particularly young people" (El Nossery 133-4). These claims were elaborated on by Fasiki herself during an interview with the radio station Franceinfo wherein she explains, "Dans mon pays, nos corps et les relations sexuelles sont normés par les lois de l'Etat, mais aussi par l'islam, la culture marocaine, les traditions familiales et la société…" (Magnan).[99] Perhaps inadvertently illustrating Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, Fasiki notes the influence of religion, culture, local and national traditions, governmental institutions, and Moroccan society broadly on the sexual liberty of women, which forms a significant portion of her artistic output. Yet the influence of Islam is only one of several contributing factors to the expression of sexuality in the region.

The question of local and national government has been discussed by transnational feminists vis-à-vis women's sexuality. Erotica, and by extension, the sexual autonomy of women, represents a dangerous force for the nation-state. As M. Jacqui Alexander argues:

> Women's sexual agency, our sexual and our erotic autonomy have always been troublesome for the state. They pose a challenge to the ideological anchor of an originary nuclear family, a source of legitimation for the state, which perpetuates the fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society. ...Particularly for the neocolonial state it signals danger to respectability–not only to respectable Black middle-class families, but, most significantly, to Black middle-class womanhood, given the putative impulse of this eroticism to corrupt, and to corrupt completely. (*Autonomy* 64)

Because the state, to use Alexander's term, relies so heavily on reproduction, the sexual freedom of women represents an obstacle, particularly for postcolonial states who must also consider notions of respectability on the international stage. Erotic literature, as hinted at with Alexander's discussions of the importance of motherhood to the conception of womanhood in

[99] "In my country, our bodies and sexual relations are regulated by state laws but also by Islam, Moroccan culture, family traditions, and society…" Translation mine.

more traditional societies, could potentially promote the dangerous idea of sexuality for pleasure as an alternate possibility outside of traditional models where sex is used for reproduction within a heterosexual marriage. However, the production of erotic literature, particularly texts written both by and for women in the Maghreb, can not only permit female authors to express themselves in new ways and articulate sexual fantasies and desires, but in doing so also dismantles taboos around women's pleasure and agency. This "for women by women" approach stands in stark contrast to mainstream pornography, which focuses strongly on male pleasure, as well as romance, which has a tendency to reinforce ethnic and sexual stereotypes while only describing sex in euphemistic language and, particularly in older novels, within the confines of marriage. If we accept this as true, then we arrive at a more pressing question: how can writers from Arab-Muslim cultural backgrounds, both in the West and elsewhere, engage more with writing and publishing in order to get a wider variety of voices heard within the genre of erotic literature when such institutions are historically exclusionary of such writers? And, perhaps more pressingly, how can this be done when sexuality remains taboo in many cultures in the Global South? Examining the corpus of erotic literature to come from North Africa and writers of North African descent could prove useful in providing models for how to subvert such strict societal conventions.

Past and Present Erotic Writings in North Africa

One of the more infamous erotic texts originating in North Africa is *The Perfumed Garden*, a fifteenth-century sex manual written by Tunisian Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Nefzawi and first published on a mass scale in French in 1886. However, Arab authors have penned a variety of similar texts during the region's lengthy history of erotic writing. José Miguel Puerta Vílchez explains, "From the third century onward a literature of eroticism began to take shape in Arab-Islamic culture. Most scholars attribute this development to the new contacts that Arab civilization was making with other cultures, particularly Hindu and

Persian; to the arrival of slaves from the large areas now under Islamic rule, resulting in ethical and legal issues about sexual matters; and to the evolution and change in social relations, the male gaze, and aesthetic judgment of women, especially in courtly settings, since among the new governing elites luxury and pleasure were becoming symbols of power" (Vilchez 559). His text describes several such treatises on sexuality, including *Tuhfat al-'arūs wa-nuzhat al-nufūs* (*The Gift of the Bride and the Diversion of Souls*) and *Dīwān al-sabāba* (*Collection of Ardent Love*). Both of these texts deal with sex and romance in relation to Islam and praise sexuality as good and necessary for the purpose of procreation by mixing philosophical musings about the nature of love before transitioning to a didactic tone, the author giving marriage advice to both husbands and wives on how to best please one another, both in the bedroom and elsewhere in the household. In more recent years, women have penned less didactic texts on sexuality, particularly within the realm of fiction.

Since at least the 1960s, Arab women writers have published erotic novels that often challenge dominant narratives surrounding female sexuality. For example, Moroccan writer Rita El Khayat (*La Liaison*, 1995), Algerian author Ahlam Mosteghanemi (*Memory of the Flesh*, 1993), Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif (*In the Eye of the Sun*, 1992), Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh (*Women of Sand and Myrrh*, 1989; *The Story of Zahra*, 1980), Egyptian feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi (*Woman at Point Zero*, 1975), and Syrian novelist Ghada al-Samman (the at-present untranslated *Ayunak Qidray* or literally *Your Eyes Are My Destiny*, 1962) have all produced texts incorporating the theme of women's sexuality. Among those whose careers began in France, arguably the most well-known remains Syrian writer Salwa al-Neimi, who penned *Burhān al-asal* (2007, translated as *La Preuve par le miel* in 2008 and *The Proof of the Honey* in 2009) while living in Paris. Leïla Slimani, a prominent Franco-Moroccan author, is similarly renowned for her bold exploration of women's sexuality, agency, and societal constraints in her works. Slimani's critically acclaimed novels delve into

the complexities of desire, freedom, and the challenges women face in navigating their private and public lives. Of particular note is her *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* (2014, translated as *Adèle* in 2019), which additionally caused a critical splash in France when it was first released, though by her own admission, Slimani was not entirely pleased with certain reviews. In the foreword to a separate work, she mentions that, "...certains journalistes français se sont étonnés qu'une Marocaine puisse écrire un tel livre. Ils entendaient par là « un livre libre et sexuel », un livre trash et cru, qui raconte l'histoire d'une femme souffrant d'addiction au sexe. Comme si, culturellement, j'aurais dû être plus pudique, plus réservée" (Slimani 15).[100] These reviews to which Slimani makes reference only reinforce stereotypes of Arab women as modest and unwilling to touch upon subjects related to sexuality, even in their artistic works. One of her most recent non-fiction books, *Le Pays des autres* (2020), examines the intricate realities of women's sexuality in Morocco, shedding light on the cultural taboos and social dynamics between men and women, and her latest book, *Corps et sexualité au Maroc* (2024), continues her incisive examination of these themes, focusing on the realities of bodily autonomy and sexual politics in Moroccan society. Through a blend of personal narratives, social critique, and historical analysis, Slimani reiterates the persistent taboos and struggles surrounding gender and sexuality, challenging conservative norms and traditional narratives, and advocating for greater freedom and recognition of women's rights in the Arab world in her literary output. Other authors at the margins have also written candidly about sex and desire, espousing a certain eroticism in their works, sometimes to make broader points about society.[101]

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[100] "...some French journalists expressed surprise that a Moroccan woman could write such a book. What they meant by that was an 'unconstrained book,' a 'sexy book,' a straight-talking, popular book, the story of a woman suffering from sex addiction. As if, by culture, I should have been more prudish, more reserved" (Slimani and Lewis 1).

[101] Several Francophone and Arabic novels by Arab writers explore the juxtaposition of Islam and sexuality, particularly through themes of eroticism, homosexuality, and the tension between the sacred and the profane. Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de sable* (1985) and its sequel, *La Nuit sacrée* (1987), delve into gender identity and societal constraints, narrating the story of a girl raised as a boy while engaging with themes of desire and

Abdellah Taïa : Une mélancolie arabe *(2008)*

Although not a female author, Moroccan author Abdellah Taïa has published several works in Morocco and France which often openly discuss the taboo subject of gay desire. It is not my intention to imply that women and gay men face oppression in the same manner. However, homosexual intercourse – not unlike female sexuality broadly – remains stigmatized in many areas of the world, and I would argue that the potential of erotica for feminist activism could also be used for gay liberation, as well. An open and honest textual engagement of homosexual fantasies and sexuality, while initially shocking for some readerships, could theoretically challenge both heteronormativity and anti-gay attitudes and perhaps eventually lead to a gradual destigmatization of homosexuality. Originally from Rabat in Morocco, Taïa arrived in Switzerland on a university scholarship in 1998 before relocating to Paris the following year. He attained notoriety in the mid-2000s as a novelist and filmmaker, with some of his most notable works including *Le rouge du tarbouche* (2004), *L'Armée du salut* (2006), and *Un pays pour mourir* (2015). His more recent novels and films include *La Vie lente* (2019), *Vivre à ta lumière* (2022), and *Le Bastion des larmes* (2024). Nearly all of these either explicitly or implicitly deal with homosexuality and the cultural differences between Europe and North Africa, a reoccurring theme that has garnered attention for Taïa's œuvre.[102] Throughout many of his works, Taïa touches upon questions of

religious expectations. Fawzia Zouari's *Le corps de ma mère* (2016) examines female sexuality, repression, and Islamic traditions through a deeply personal and poetic lens, adding to the conversation on gender and bodily autonomy. In Arabic literature, Rachid El-Daif's *Dear Mr. Kawabata* (1995) explores homosexuality in a Lebanese context, capturing the protagonist's internal struggles with desire and religious conservatism. And Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), a seminal work in Arabic feminist literature, exposes the violence, oppression, and commodification of female sexuality in Egypt through the life story of a woman condemned to death.

[102] Abdellah Taïa challenges taboos in multiple novels, including *Le Jour du Roi* (2010) which explores the conflicts between personal desire, religious morality, and exile. His other works, such as *Un pays pour mourir* (2015) and *Celui qui est digne d'être aimé* (2017), further engage with themes of homosexuality, migration, and the intersection of sexual identity with the postcolonial realities of the Arab world. Additionally, the collective work *Lettres à un jeune marocain* (2009), which includes contributions from Taïa, offers a broader perspective on gender, sexuality, and religion in contemporary Morocco.

Bataille's eroticism, particularly the intersection of the sacred, the profane, and sexuality, but expands this conception beyond Bataille's heterosexual paradigm. This, in turn, may provide a model for other gay and lesbian authors at the margins, including those in the MENA region.

This homosexual eroticism forms a particularly important aspect of Taïa's *Une mélancolie arabe* (2008). The novel, arguably an autobiographical or semi-autobiographical account, lucidly recounts not only the manner in which the protagonist, also named Abdellah, is marginalized within Morocco due to his homosexuality, but also the complicated and difficult experience of being marked as an Other, especially within the gay community, upon his immigration to France. Several scenes involving sex are presented in the novel with varying degrees of explicitness, the first of which occurs when the fictional Abdellah is only about twelve years old. A neighbor boy, Chouaïb, takes advantage of his curiosity and attempts to force himself on the protagonist. While the sex act is described in explicit terms, the violence of the encounter proves uncomfortable both for the fictional Abdellah and the reader, "Son sexe, de plus en plus dur était en bataille. En plein attaque. Mais je ne cédais pas. Il a alors attrapé ma tête, m'a tiré les cheveux et a dit, autoritaire, vulgaire: « Ouvre tes fesses, j'ai dit… Ouvre-les bien je te viole…" (Taïa 24).[103] Due to fear of the other boy (as indicated by the erect phallus which is described as in a position of "attaque"), the young Abdellah remains unwilling to complete the sex act and protests repeatedly before attacking Chouaïb, causing four other neighbor boys to investigate. Due to his frank discussion of sex between men in countries where this is taboo, some have argued that Taïa's works contain elements of eroticism.[104] I would agree with this remark, though not entirely with the

[103] "His cock grew harder and harder. It stuck straight out. He was ready, ready to attack me, but I wouldn't surrender. He grabbed me by the head, pulled my hair back, and in a tough guy, I'm-the-man-in-charge voice told me, 'Open your ass, I said, open it… Open your ass or I'm going to have to rape you" (Taïa and Stock 23-4).

[104] For more on this, see Pomp, Joseph. 2018. "Translating Desire: The Multilingual and Inter-Artistic Practice of Abdellah Taïa." *French Forum* 43 (3): 475–90. < https://www.jstor.org/stable/26665059 >. Accessed 15 June

reasoning. Rather, the text could be considered erotic due to scenes such as these aligning with Bataille's conception of eroticism. As outlined in the previous chapter, within Bataille's theory of the erotic, there is a destruction of the passive and feminine Other by an active and masculine subject by which the latter achieves a state of eroticism. While it may seem as though Taïa's account does not fit within this paradigm due to the participants being of the same sex, this is not so; as he discusses earlier, the fictional Abdellah is referred to as the female name Leila by Chouaïb, ostensibly to either browbeat the other boy into giving in to his advances, to remind him of his immaturity, or to feminize him and thereby downplay the homosexual nature of the encounter. Like the female participant in Bataille's conception of the erotic, the fictional Abdellah takes on the role of that of an object who is consumed as the boundaries between Self and Other are destroyed.

Moreover, within many sections of the novel, Islam is juxtaposed with sexuality, confirming Bataille's assertion of eroticism bridging the sacred and the profane, in this case religion and homosexual intercourse. As the other neighborhood boys undress in order to assist Chouaïb in raping Abdellah, "C'est à ce moment-là que Dieu m'a sauvé. Le muezzin de la mosquée du quartier a commencé à appeler à la prière d'Al-Asr. On l'entendait bien. …Chouaïb a crié à ses copains : «Arrêtez ! Arrêtez ! On va attendre que le muezzin finisse son appel… Ce n'est pas bien de continuer en même temps que lui… On va attendre… »" (Taïa 27).[105] Though Bataille's conception of eroticism may be confined to a heterosexual and Judeo-Christian paradigm, the philosophical concept could be applied to this particular episode of Taïa's novel. The calling of the community to prayer serves as a reminder of the

2023. Pomp draws comparisons between the homoeroticism in Taïa's works and that of both classical Persian authors and that of more contemporary writers, most notably Mohammed Choukri's *Le pain nu* (1973 and translated as *For Bread Alone*), which proved equally as controversial as Taïa's novels for its frank depiction of homosexuality, with the novel banned in Morocco until 2000.

[105] "That's when God stepped in. That's the moment when God saved me. The muezzin from the neighborhood mosque started the Al-Asr call to prayer. We had no trouble hearing him. …Chouaïb shouted to his friends, "Stop! Stop! Let's wait until the muezzin finishes… It wouldn't be right to do this while he's still calling the faithful…" (Taïa and Stock 27).

sacredness of the mosque within Abdellah's town, as well as possibly the manner in which religion has a deep impact on him, even unconsciously. Another reminder of religion can be seen in the mise-en-scène. Abdellah lies upon Chouaïb's bed, surrounded by the five other boys, perhaps giving the impression of a sacrificial altar. Chouaïb is aware of the profanity of sex and perhaps fears God, urging his friends to wait until after the call has concluded. As Bataille notes in his work, the sacred and the profane go hand-in-hand in producing a sense of eroticism through the establishment of taboos that must be transgressed. Speaking of Christianity in particular, Bataille elaborates, "De même que le simple interdit créa, dans la violence organisée des transgressions, l'érotisme premier, par un interdit de la transgression organisée, le christianisme à son tour approfondit les degrés du trouble sensuel" (Bataille 141).[106] As with Christianity, Islam forbids certain sexual practices, including homosexual sex, and additionally discourages missing the call to prayer. While the other neighborhood boys are willing to transgress the former taboo, they are incapable of violating the latter one. This ultimately saves the fictional Abdellah from a violent sexual experience. This link between the sacred and the profane would align the work more concretely with Bataille's erotic, albeit with a twist given the all-male nature of the scene. Taïa's inclusion of homosexuality in his work, while groundbreaking in several ways, has been expanded upon by other scholars.

While I focus primarily in this analysis on the link between the sacred and the profane which aligns the work more concretely with Bataille's erotic, it is necessary to underscore that this concept has been also explored by several critics examining sexuality in Arab and Francophone literature. Khaled El-Rouayheb, in *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (2005), traces historical attitudes toward same-sex desire in Islamic

[106] "Just as the simple taboo created eroticism in the first place in the organised [*sic*] violence of transgression, Christianity in its turn deepened the degree of sensual disturbance by forbidding organised [*sic*] transgression" (Bataille and Dalwood 127).

societies, highlighting how notions of eroticism and morality evolved over time. Joseph Massad, in *Desiring Arabs* (2007), critiques the imposition of Western sexual categories onto Arab societies, arguing that colonial and postcolonial discourses have reshaped understandings of sexuality in the region. Mounira Charrad's *States and Women's Rights* (2001) provides a broader sociopolitical analysis of gender and sexual norms in North Africa, emphasizing the role of kinship and state power. These critical perspectives offer important frameworks for understanding how eroticism, gender, and religious constraints intersect in Arab literary and cultural productions.[107] Yet other novels from the same region additionally fit into Bataille's conception of eroticism.

Assia Djebar : L'Amour, la fantasia *(1985)*

Though not as explicit, the violence depicted in many of Assia Djebar's texts is no less shocking. Within *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), Djebar juxtaposes a collective violation of Algeria's landscape – not unlike the fictional Abdellah's literal near-rape – to expose the trauma of colonization. Born Fatima-Zohra Imalayen in Algeria in 1936, Djebar chose her nom de plume shortly before the publication of her first novel, *La Soif* (1957). Other major works include *Les impatients* (1958), *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* (1962), *Les Alouettes naïves* (1967), and *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980). Throughout her literary career, Djebar enjoyed consistently positive critical attention, particularly in France, where she was elected to the Académie française in 2005, making her the first North African to hold such a position, and was frequently considered for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Other than *L'Amour, la fantasia*, several of Assia Djebar's novels explore the intersection of colonial domination, gendered violence, and women's sexuality. *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980) examines the confinement of Algerian women in both physical and

[107] For more on the topic, see Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976) as foundational texts for analyzing the regulation of desire and the ways in which power structures shape sexual identities.

metaphorical spaces, drawing parallels between colonial subjugation and the control of female bodies, while also delving into female desire, agency, and the constraints imposed by both colonial and patriarchal structures. Similarly, *Ombre sultane* (1987) explores the psychological and corporeal dimensions of desire, betrayal, and female solidarity, portraying intimate relationships between women as sites of both empowerment and oppression, where sexuality becomes intertwined with memory and trauma. Through these novels, Djebar constructs an intricate critique of the ways in which colonialism and patriarchy regulate women's bodies and desires, making them compelling contributions to discussions on eroticism, power, and resistance.

The violence and sexuality found in Djebar's texts harkens back to Bataille's conception of eroticism, even if they may not be considered works of erotica. Djebar uses an erotic sensuality to emphasize the violating nature of the French colonial activities in Algeria by personifying colonial lands as women struggling against conquest, rape, and dishonor, thereby using sexuality as a means of decolonization. The exploitation brought about by the French colonization of Djebar's native Algeria is compared to the violation of the female body ostensibly to critique the violent imposition of French forces attempting to maintain control of the colony. While not particularly erotic in the colloquial sense of being appealing, the events of many of Djebar's texts align with the eroticism presented by Georges Bataille. When speaking about Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), for example, David Waterman astutely notes that during the events of the novel occurring during the Algerian struggle for independence from France, "The female body and occupied Algeria become as one, and because both are determined by not only nature but culture as well, both are related to history; the body/country becomes a text which carries the historical record. The body is not only a material form, but imaginary as well; Djebar makes a strong connection between the sexuality of the female body but the eroticism of war" (Waterman 319). This conception of

death alongside sensuality – juxtaposing a masculine warfare upon a feminine territory – represents a facet of eroticism that Bataille elaborated on his *L'Érotisme* (1957); namely, the transgression of the taboo, in this case murder.

Bataille's conception of eroticism, as noted in the previous chapter, usually contains an element of sexuality alongside one of death. For Bataille, eroticism and death both involve the destruction of a continuous object and the reestablishment of continuity for the active subject. Through the observation of – or participation in – murder, the subject acknowledges a continuity between himself or herself and others by recognizing the inevitability of a state in which he or she ceases to exist as a direct result of transgressing the taboo on killing. This is also the case during wartime, albeit with several rules. As Bataille explains, "L'activité sexuelle n'est interdite qu'en des cas déterminés, mais il en est de même du meurtre : si l'interdit qui s'y oppose est plus lourdement et plus généralement formulé que les interdits sexuels, il se borne, comme ces derniers, à réduire la possibilité de tuer à certaines situations. Il se formule avec une simplicité massive : « Tu ne tueras point. » Et il est vrai qu'il est universel, mais il est évidemment sous-entendu : « sinon en cas de guerre, et en d'autres conditions que le corps social à prévues, plus ou moins »" (Bataille 80).[108] The death of soldiers in Djebar's work during the continued colonial efforts in Algeria is compared to the violation of territorial sovereignty and, by extension, the violation of the female body. While killing would ordinarily be forbidden under normal circumstances, this becomes less of a taboo during the violent conflicts that transpired during Algeria's struggle for independence. Nevertheless, while the taboo has been lessened, the death of another still has the same effect on the subject; namely, the reminder of discontinuity. As with such depictions of death,

[108] "Sexual activity is only forbidden in certain cases, but then so is murder; it may be more roundly and more generally forbidden than sexual activity is, but the taboo, like that on sex, only serves to limit killing to certain specific situations. The formula has massive simplicity: 'Thou shalt not kill.' Universal, yes, but obvious exceptions are implied–'except in wartime, and other circumstances allowed, more or less, by the body politic'" (Bataille and Dalwood 72).

Bataille explains that during the sex act, two bodies come together in doing so temporarily destroy the separate subjects that existed before, once more providing a reminder of the continuity between people. Through the juxtaposition of death in war and the violation of a feminized land, Djebar's writing can certainly be said to contain elements of Bataille's eroticism. As one description of a battlefield reads, "Mais pourquoi, au-dessus des cadavres qui vont pourrir sur les successifs champs de bataille, cette première campagne d'Algérie fait-elle entendre les bruits d'une copulation obscène ?" (Djebar 29).[109] The question, albeit rhetorical, encapsulates Bataille's theories on eroticism. As he argues, the inclusion of violence – the rotting corpses in Djebar's text – alongside the sex act elevates eroticism above more primitive forms of sexuality. Another example is seen later in the novel wherein a couple of young dancers, Fatima and Meriam, receive two French officers for a night of passion only to be murdered and robbed shortly thereafter by other foreign invaders. The text describes the two young women's bodies as "quasiment nues jusqu'à la ceinture, les hanches visibles à travers la déchirure du tissu, sans coiffe ni diadème, ni pendeloques, ni anneaux de cheville, ni collier de pièces d'or, ni agrafes de verroterie…" (Djebar 189).[110] The nudity of the dancers' bodies alongside the violence that took their lives lends the scene a certain eroticism not unlike that which Bataille proposed, juxtaposing the sensuality of the female form with their lifeless bodies. Furthermore, the violation of Fatima and Meriam's corpses through the plundering of their jewels parallels that of Algeria, echoing the first lines of the fourth chapter which describe the looting of Algiers.

The theme of women being symbols of sexual colonial fantasy, while also working on dismantling this image, recurs throughout Djebar's works, such as in *Femmes d'Alger dans*

[109] "But why, above the corpses that will rot on successive battlefields, does this first Algerian campaign reverberate with the sounds of an obscene copulation?" (Djebar and Blair 19).
[110] "....lying half naked up to the waist, their thighs visible through the torn fabric of their clothes, without head-dress or diadem, without earrings or anklets, without necklaces of coral or gold coins, without glass-beaded clasps…" (Djebar and Blair 166).

leur appartement (1979), where Djebar portrays Algerian women as both symbols of resistance and subjects navigating the aftermath of colonial trauma. In this work, Djebar tackles themes of sexuality, trauma, and resistance with remarkable sensitivity. She explores how colonialism and patriarchal traditions have intersected to silence women's voices and constrain their bodies. Through intimate narratives, Djebar delves into the private and collective experiences of Algerian women, including their desires, fears, and the ways they navigate societal restrictions. She portrays women's sexuality not as a spectacle but as a site of agency, struggle, and self-definition. Her characters frequently reflect on the tension between their personal desires and the expectations imposed on them by family, tradition, and the postcolonial state. The stories in *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* are deeply sensual, not in a gratuitous sense but as a means to reclaim the narrative around women's bodies and desires. Djebar's use of eroticism is subtle yet powerful, highlighting the ways in which women's sexuality has been both repressed and politicized under colonial and patriarchal rule. By giving voice to these experiences, Djebar challenges the silences that have historically surrounded women's lives, reclaiming their stories as integral to Algeria's cultural and historical fabric, and as sites of resistance. The question remains, though: While Djebar's work – and those that she inspired – uses eroticism and sexuality as a critique of colonialism, perhaps in an effort to inspire social change, can a work of erotica do the same?

I would argue that this is absolutely a possibility for erotic literature, though as with romance novels, authors and publishers must be cautious to not repeat racial or sex-based stereotypes; though these may help sell the work to a broader audience due to their flattening of nuance, they do not bode well for a particularly liberatory text. However, one must note that, regardless of the author's race, ethnicity, or nation, the question of affect largely remains the same; as mentioned in the previous two chapters, romance novels only reinforce the boundary between Self and Other through their focus on possession and repetition of various

clichés and tropes. Erotica instead, through its focus on dissolving the distinction between Self and Other, can serve as a promising means of enacting feminist and anti-colonial work by allowing for readers to experience sexuality through the eyes of the marginalized Other. Tropes and clichés generally lacking in erotica aid in this by further challenging the reader to look beyond whatever presuppositions, if any. This reclamation of sexuality and subjectivity and imparting of a new perspective finds a different yet provocative expression in Nedjma's *L'Amande* (2004), which engages more explicitly with eroticism and female pleasure.

Described by the media, the text's French publishers, and the author herself as one of the only contemporary examples of erotica written by a Muslim woman, *L'Amande* initially appears as a typical erotic romance. During the course of the narrative, the plot traces a Moroccan divorcée's sexual and romantic liaison with a hedonistic and successful doctor from their initial meeting until after the dissolution of the partnership and includes several sexual encounters with varying degrees of explicitness. However, under this conventional façade, the work underlines several greater preoccupations with colonialism, trauma, ethnocentrism, cultural erasure, and the treatment of women in North Africa. Ultimately, the text can be read as a testament to erotic literature's potential to challenge existing orders and problematize the boundaries between male and female, wealthy and impoverished, and Self and Other.

L'Amande (2004)

On the cover of its first French edition, *L'Amande* proudly boasts its dubious status as the first erotic novel written by a woman in North Africa, yet surprisingly, little else is known about the author behind the work. Known mononymously as Nedjma, the author is described on the English version's rear jacket as being "...in her forties and [living] in the Maghreb region." Other than these scant details related to gender, age, and current residence, journalists have hypothesized that the mysterious author is most likely of Moroccan origin,

though it is not clear on what these assumptions are based. It can, however, be assumed that Nedjma appreciates the texts of Algerian novelist Kateb Yacine, having taken her *nom de plume* from his 1956 novel of the same name, ostensibly to protect herself from intimidation or arrest. Originally published in France before making its way back to North Africa, Nedjma's *L'Amande* was an instant best-seller in twenty-six countries where it was not immediately banned and has since been translated into several other languages, including English and Spanish in 2005. Nedjma then penned a handful of other novels including *La traversée des sens* (2009), *D'ambre et de soie* (2015), and *Les Coquelicots* (2023), all of which deal with similar themes as her debut novel, ranging from womanhood to sexuality to religion. While all of Nedjma's later works have received a warm reception, particularly in Francophone territories, none have matched the commercial success of *L'Amande* (2004). The novel uses a fragmented yet circular style to describe the memories of Badra, the female narrator, most prominently those of her romantic and sexual adventures in 1960s Morocco with a cosmopolitan but capricious cardiologist known as Driss, before leaving him to chase her true passion of writing, perhaps serving as both a confessional booth and a memoir for the author or perhaps being a work of fiction altogether. Other storylines include the protagonist's forced marriage at the age of seventeen to a neglectful partner, her decision to flee to her childhood village to Tangiers, and the death of an extended family member.

Interwoven with these memories are the conversations – usually about sex, love, gossip, domestic matters, and other private concerns – between Badra and other women in her social circles, most importantly her mother, her aunt Selma, the female inhabitants of Badra's childhood village, and the local prostitutes in Tangiers. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Nedjma insists on the radical political implications of documenting these intimate exchanges between women in the Arab world, which involved "talk[ing] about the body, it is the last taboo, one where all the political and religious prohibitions are

concentrated. It is the last battle for democracy. I didn't want to write politically, but I did look for something radical. It is a cry of protest" (Riding). This revolutionary writing praxis is defended in the text itself, where the narrator defends the instinctual nature of sexuality, citing the numerous animals in her community which often copulate openly and without shame, "J'ai rougi de ce que j'ai écrit, puis l'ai trouvé très juste. Qu'est-ce qui m'empêche de poursuivre [l'écriture] ? Les poules caquettent dans la cour, les vaches vêlent et donnent un lait épais, les lapins forniquent et mettent bas tous les mois. Le monde tourne rond. Moi aussi. De quoi devrais-je avoir honte ?" (Nedjma 14).[111] While not necessarily political in the sense of relating to governmental affairs (though, particularly in Nedjma's supposed home country of Morocco, this could certainly be the case, given the government's ability to censor materials), writing about sex does serve as an act of transgression and resistance, as Badra's initial blush indicates. Though initially ashamed of the nature of her writing ostensibly due to its taboo nature, perhaps another reference to Bataille's eroticism, Badra considers the frequency with which sexual acts occur between domesticated animals who are – by all appearances – unashamed of copulating for the sake of reproduction. Ultimately, she surmises that, due to its seemingly natural state, exploring her sexuality in a literary medium could only lead to further changes in herself, serving as perhaps a call for other Arab women to engage in a similar exercise for the sake of self-exploration. This logic additionally harkens back to Nedjma's own words; as she notes in the previously cited interview with the *New York Times*, in North African cultures, the body (but especially the female body) represents a taboo site that must be kept hidden for political and religious reasons. She also points to the potential for the body, and by extension sex, to be democratic actions that could destabilize the totalitarian, patriarchal regime that keeps men and women in unequal

[111] "I blushed about what I had written, then found it to be very right. What is to stop me from continuing [to write]? The chickens are cackling in the courtyard, the cows are calving and giving lavish milk, the rabbits fornicate and give birth every month. The world is turning. So am I. What should I be ashamed of?" (Nedjma and Hunter 7-8).

positions. Writing, for both Badra and presumably Nedjma, is a revolutionary way to destigmatize the female body.

As opposed to writing simply for her own sexual pleasure or even that of the reader, Nedjma's motivations – and those of her protagonist, who is revealed to have written the novel in a Proustian metatextual moment at the work's conclusion – stem from a desire to protest the censorship and stigmatization of the body by using explicit sexuality as a tool for social and political change. This is not unlike what was attempted by some eighteenth-century libertines, some of whom are referenced in passing in Nedjma's text (such as when Badra is examining her lover's collection of books and remarks on his predilection for the Marquis de Sade's texts). In retrospectives of Sade's work, several commentators have noted the political dimensions of sexuality, with the focus of Sade's œuvre largely focused on the (re)construction of post-Revolutionary French society. As one generalist work on Sade explains, "In other words, sexual contact is the most intimate between humans and in that 'embrace' there can be no lies, no deceptions, no secrets. …The French intellect needed to be shocked into freedom…" (Weiss 5-6). Sade's use of sex is, according to Weiss, meant to provoke an affective reaction from the 18th-century French intelligentsia and ultimately lead to a reconceptualization of the place of the clergy, the role of women, and the dangers of outside influences on the post-Revolutionary French state. Human sexuality becomes a tool in Sade's work, meant to be utilized alongside philosophy to critique monarchist attitudes and envision a new French state wherein sexual liberty is granted alongside gender equality, the legalization of homosexuality, and a more egalitarian class structure. This presumably separates the work from pornography, which has as its singular aim the orgasm of the reader and any broader social criticism as an aside or pretext. *L'Amande* could serve similar purposes as Sade's work, albeit in separate social, temporal, and geographical contexts.

Yet the transgressive nature of Nedjma's work goes beyond the sexual content, as one must interrogate the question of the author's choice of language on a paratextual level. Though there are ten different translations of Nedjma's novel, the work has never been officially released in Arabic, with the first version appearing in French in 2004 (interestingly, Badra notes at one point in the novel that the quality of her French is poor, implying that she primarily communicates in either Arabic or one of several Berber languages and thus "writes" in her preferred tongue). Several arguments could be put forward for this decision. As noted earlier in this chapter, given the comparative lack of taboos around sex in France vis-à-vis North Africa, one could argue that the number of publishers and the market for erotica is larger in France and publishers more willing to work with such novels due to their ability to be sold in commercial establishments without fear of reprisal from governmental or religious authorities. The author's race and ethnicity also add an element of exoticism and mystery, which might have helped with marketing in Western Europe, that would be lost if the work was initially published by a North African press. While there could certainly be some merit to these arguments, I would argue that the decision to write in French additionally points to a form of resistance against patriarchal modes of expression, not unlike that shown with other Francophone authors, particularly those from North Africa. Some studies of Assia Djebar, for example, have interpreted the usage of French both by the female protagonists in her novels and by the author herself as creating a linguistic space that contrasts that which is created by Arabic. Both women writers and women characters opt to speak and write in French so that they do not use the sacred language of the Koran. By doing so, they possess more freedom to talk about sexuality and, perhaps as importantly, not defile the language of Islam.[112] Though there is some criticism to be raised about the appropriation of a colonizer's

[112] For more on this, Djebar's obituary published in the *New York Times* discusses the author's ambivalence in using French – the language of colonizers – in order to critique the colonial order. Other scholarly works that have worked with this notion of French-as-resistance include Zahia Smail Salhi's article "Between the

language, it is possible that Nedjma's decision to write in French was partially inspired by the history of the language's use among women within the Maghreb. Not unlike the North African women who adopted French during the colonial era and used it as a means to express themselves more freely, *L'Amande* creates a space for female voices that allows a greater freedom of expression. The tone of the work consequently becomes more conversational and intimate, reinforcing the subtitle of *Roman intime*.

Other instances of this expression in the novels' titles are seldom but have occurred in older texts. Some of the earlier references to the *roman intime* are found among the bibliographies of Charles Marchal, who published *Médéric: Roman intime* in 1842, and Antoine Albalat, who penned *L'inassouvie: Roman intime* in 1882 and *Un Adultère: Roman intime* in 1883. While containing no overt sexuality, these works are best described as domestic dramas, which may explain the use of the term *intime*, a word that carries associations related to the private sphere and the conflicts that occur out of the public eye.[113] As with these works of the 19th century, Nedjma's novel offers a great deal of personal introspection and a detailed account of one's private affairs, touching upon personal and sometimes polemical topics ranging from femininity to marriage to sexuality. Unlike these older works, however, in its contemplations of these subjects, the text ultimately makes several salient critiques about the society in which it was written. By her own admission in the preface to the work, the author intends to make the body as visible as possible and engage in frank dialogues about sexuality in a safe environment, echoing Nedjma's interview with the *New York Times*; the inclusion of *intime* brings to mind notions of confidentiality,

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Languages of Silence and the Woman's Word: Gender and Language in the Work of Assia Djebar" and, in a more general context, Fatima Sadiqi's *Women, Gender, and Language in Morocco* (2002).

[113] Unfortunately, though their works have been digitized by the Bibliothèque nationale, very little scholarly discussion has centered on either author. Marchal's novels did not seem to be popular at the time of their publication, perhaps due to a crowded marketplace with numerous options by more well-known authors, and have consequently been forgotten. Meanwhile, Albalat is better regarded for his non-fiction writing, particularly his works on literary style, with his fiction reduced to a footnote in references to his life.

secrecy, and perhaps even carries somewhat sensual connotations. Some, such as Alexandra Destais, have interpreted the usage of the term to distinguish the novel from other authors, but especially other female Francophone authors, who have explored similar themes:

> Ce n'est pourtant pas la première fois qu'une femme musulmane transgresse les tabous en évoquant les jeux de l'amour et du sexe: Hanan el-Cheikh, romancière libanaise, ose mettre en scène l'homosexualité féminine tandis que l'Irakienne Alia Mamdouh analyse dans *La Passion* les rapports de force amoureux. Dans *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*, Assia Djebar raconte les neuf nuits d'un couple non marié et fait de la rencontre sensuelle un tremplin pour l'exploration d'une mémoire historique que la parole libre des amants ressuscite. Cependant, tandis que chez celle-ci la sexualité est rendue par un langage indirect, volontiers image, Nedjma ose nommer directement les choses du sexe et les plaisirs du corps tout en criant sa colère pour la société oppressante qui brime la sexualite, d'où la portée politique de ce livre. ...Hostile aux tabous de la culture arabe comme à la banalisation occidentale de l'érotisme, Nedjma cherche dans un premier temps à renouer avec une riche tradition érotique fondée sur la déculpabilisation de la chair. (Destatis 64-5)[114]

Nedjma's novel, as Destais argues, uses the word *intime* as a means of not only referring to love and sex, but also of making reference to and ultimately criticizing the society around these feelings and activities that forces them into the private sphere. Yet the inclusion of the descriptor *intime*, I would argue, serves two other purposes. Firstly, on an affective level, the word carries a connotation of confidence and care; the protagonist is speaking on a personal and honest level with the reader, and her words are to be trusted. Secondly, the term *intime* serves to categorize the novel and underline its singular nature, not only vis-à-vis other female Francophone authors, but against the established canon itself. As opposed to simply being a *roman*, Nedjma's work is self-categorized as an intimate novel, a genre which does

[114] "However, this is not the first time that a Muslim woman has transgressed taboos by evoking the games of love and sex. Hannan el-Cheikh, a Lebanese novelist, dares to portray female homosexuality, while the Iraqi Alia Mamdouh analyzes the relationship between power and love in *La Passion*. In *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*, Assia Djebar tells the story of nine nights between an unmarried couple and makes the sensual encounter a springboard for the exploration of historical memory that the free expression of the lovers evokes. While in the lattermost sexuality is rendered by an indirect language, full of imagery, Nedjma deigns to name directly the subjects of sex and the pleasures of the body all while crying out her anger for the oppressive society that hinders sexuality, hence the political scope of the book… Hostile to the taboos of Arab culture as well as the Western banalization of eroticism, Nedjma searches to reconnect with a rich erotic tradition based on the guiltlessness of the flesh." Translation mine.

not formally exist in modern literary studies, despite older texts rarely including such a subtitle.

That said, though the novel is – based on its marketing and reception – considered a work of erotica, it is unclear as to why the publishers have categorized it as such. This could simply be a means of indicating an explicit, albeit softer, sexuality in the work that does not represent the focus of the novel's plot. It is also possible that Plon, the publisher, is attempting to appeal to the female readership that they believe most likely to read the work by not using such politically charged terms as *pornography*, which may also carry misogynistic connotations. There might additionally be legal barriers in some countries which regulate or ban the promotion of pornography, even in the literary press. Whatever the case may be, I would argue that this was the correct categorization of Nedjma's work, though not necessarily for any of the reasons listed above. Rather, as has been argued in the third chapter of this research, as opposed to reinforcing the reader's worldview, the work challenges readers by constantly subverting the boundary between Self and Other, impacting the reader in many different ways. While there is an explicit sexuality present in the novel, the sex presented is not for the titillation of the reader, as in the case of pornography. Sex is not only used as a form of personal growth for the protagonist but additionally serves as a tool to make a broader criticism about the marginalization of women within North African society. While there are scenes that portray sexuality as playful and pleasurable, particularly towards the end of the novel, those that appear earlier in the text show sex as painful, difficult, and objectifying, particularly for women. This disparate portrayal of sex – which alternately makes the reader uncomfortable and interested – would perhaps better categorize the work as erotic in nature.

Intriguingly, the Other to which Cheilan might refer is not a separate character from the narrator but rather the same person as the Self. In Nedjma's novel, the protagonist is at

the margins of North African society. She is not only a woman, but a divorcée, as well as a member of the Berber minority; given that the story is told using first-person narration, Badra is centered as the Self and the knowable "I" through which the events of the story are filtered but is Otherized in the narrative through her background and marginal place within the urbane Moroccan milieu which serves as one of the novel's primary settings. Throughout the text, the reader notes a stark series of dichotomies which position Badra as both Self and Other, ranging from Arab/Berber, the cosmopolitan Tangiers/the rural village of Imchouk, and Badra as a child/Badra as an adult. Equally as important as these comparisons and no less jarring, the text tends to juxtapose the intimate pleasures of sexuality with profoundly traumatic violence. The most evident example of this comes when Badra recalls a deep sense of violation shortly before her wedding in the rural village from which she originates, Imchouk. The depth of Badra's pain is typically not associated with popular conceptions of erotic literature, which stereotypically deals with more pleasurable physical and emotional sensations. At the behest of her husband-to-be, she is forced to undergo a virginity examination, during which she notes, "L'examen a été bref et douloureux, et j'ai gardé sa brûlure comme une balle reçue en plein front. Je me suis juste demandé si elle s'était lavé les mains avant de me violer en toute impunité" (Nedjma 43).[115] The narrator's concern about cleanliness, a perfectly normal worry when dealing with matters of healthcare, is juxtaposed with her shocking usage of the word *violer*, stating in no uncertain terms that the procedure that was performed on her constituted rape. Whereas Badra is aware that sexuality can prove pleasurable, given her self-professed habit of masturbating in private, sex is presented in more clinical, violating light before the ceremony has even taken place, tainting the marriage before it has even occurred. The reader shares in Badra's pain and, due to the plain, albeit

[115] "The examination was short and painful, and its burning stayed with me like a bullet received right in the face. I only wondered whether, before raping me in all impunity, she had washed her hands" (Nedjma and Hunter 34).

violent language (as conveyed through the words *balle* [bullet] and *violer* [rape]), associated sex with not pleasure but instead an extreme, uncharacteristic discomfort. Given that he ordered the virginity test, the narrator's husband becomes the object of her increasing resentment, causing her to withhold sex as both a form of protest and a means of avoiding further violation and trauma.

Within a year of the marriage, Badra's family eventually take notice of the couple's lack of children and encourage her to stay with her husband, despite the apparent infertility of at least one party. In a private conversation, her sister offers advice to make sex pleasurable for both husband and wife, "–Eh bien, débrouille-toi pour avoir ta part. Le plaisir s'apprend, lui aussi," to which Badra admits to herself, "...elle semblait avoir oublié ce qu'avait été ma nuit de noces, les horreurs de la première fois. Je n'ai jamais eu ma part de plaisir" (Nedjma 52).[116] Though sex is initially associated with procreation and the continuation of the family line, the women in Badra's family are not ignorant to sexual pleasure and insist that it can still be part of a successful marriage, even if childbearing is not possible. These conversations take place behind closed doors, with women openly discussing sex with one another. Still traumatized by the previous virginity test, Badra only associates sex with a sense of deeply painful violation, describing her first time as a set of *horreurs* (horrors), further deepening the reader's empathy for her. As other emotional and psychological aspects of sexuality are introduced into the work, the reader's sympathy is extended towards other women in the village.

The conflicting nature of sexuality is further exacerbated by the introduction of guilt for both Badra and other women around her. While Badra was presumably aware of the stigmatization of sex for women before her marriage, it is not until after she and her husband

[116] "'Pleasure, too, can be learned.' …She seemed to have forgotten what my wedding night had been like, the horrors of the first time. I never had my share of pleasure" (Nedjma and Hunter 43).

are unable to conceive children that shame begins being directed not only towards her but also at any woman who acts in ways that are considered sexually immoral within the text. Interestingly, these moral positions are never directly attributed to religion but rather seem to implicitly be attributed to culture. One example, rather early in the text, involves Badra's brother, Ali, whose marriage to the daughter of a school principal, Souad, is rushed after seducing the young girl near a religious monument, in what is perhaps another nod to Bataille's sacred-profane dialectic. However, it is she who is shamed for the act after falling pregnant, with Badra explicitly noting how Ali has escaped culpability for his role in the child's conception. She recounts the event and her mother's frustration with Ali's bride-to-be, "Le soir venu, quelqu'un a jeté les affaires de l'adolescente devant notre porte avant de disparaître dans la nuit. …« On me l'a imposée et ça, je ne le lui pardonnerai pas », ressassait-elle [la mère de Badra et d'Ali] à ses filles et voisines, oubliant que ce « on » avait pour nom Ali, son fils, et que Souad n'était qu'une gamine" (Nedjma 73).[117] Though Ali was also responsible for the pregnancy, the only consequence for him is that he must be married, as the family's honor only depends on women – not men – remaining virgins before marriage. Souad shares the same fate, although her new mother-in-law views her as a burden, constantly subjecting the girl to humiliating domestic work as a punishment. In large part due to her immense pity for the young woman, one could argue that there lies a sort of criticism related to the handling of this situation and – more broadly – the treatment of women who become pregnant out of wedlock within Moroccan society. Yet in the context of the narrative, this episode only seems to cause Badra to become more secretive about her still-nascent sexuality, though she does find a modicum of support among the other village women.

[117] "When the evening came, someone threw the girl's belongings in front of our door and disappeared into the night. …'They forced her upon me, and I'll never forgive her for that,' she (Badra and Ali's mother) would repeat over and over to her daughters and neighbors, forgetting that 'they' had a name, which was Ali, and that Souad was only a kid" (Nedjma and Hunter 62).

After Badra's marriage and Souad's joining the household, the domestic sphere becomes an extremely important space within her life, in large part due to the freedom that women have to discuss taboo sexual subjects among themselves. During a flashback scene in which Badra recounts her juvenile curiosity about the sexual lives of adults, she recalls the bawdy conversations between her aunt and the other women who live nearby. While completing everyday tasks away from men, the women frequently make jokes and give advice about sex with their husbands, openly sharing what they like and dislike in the bedroom. This lends a sense of eroticism to the work similar to that posited by Bataille while additionally reinforcing the intimate nature of the text. In one particularly inspired scene, Badra recalls how, while taking a brief moment of rest during some domestic duties, one of the neighbors acts out the awkward nature of the way that her husband makes love, "Bornia était parfois inspirée. Elle se levait et esquissait quelques mouvements de bassin qui déclenchaient l'hystérie de l'assemblée. Il arrivait que la femme d'Aziz le berger prenne le relais. Armée d'une carotte, elle se fichait l'imposant tige entre les cuisses et esquissait une danse paillarde, agitant la carotte de haut en bas et de droit à gauche, avec des déhanchements franchement lubriques. Mères et epouses riaient…" (Nedjma 97).[118] While women in the novel are generally not permitted to speak about sex openly in public, but especially not in front of men, these women are more inclined to do so amongst themselves, transgressing the taboos of their culture, albeit only in specific company. In addition to suggestive dancing, the women additionally discuss their husbands' penises, share tips for breast health, and gossip about the recent happenings in the village.

While these scenes may not necessarily be erotic in the popular sense of being sexually arousing, they are erotic in the sense that they permit the participants to achieve a

[118] "Sometimes Bornia was inspired. She would stand up and make some vague motions with her pelvis that would unleash hysterical laughter from the group. On occasion, the wife of Aziz the shepherd would take over. Armed with a carrot, she would stick the big stalk between her thighs and do a bawdy dance, moving the carrot up and down and from right to left, swaying lewdly. Mothers and wives laughed…" (Nedjma and Hunter 87).

fuller sense of Self, albeit not through the destruction of the Other but rather through the building of connections. The violation of taboos (namely, the open mention of sex) is done in the private sphere and in front of other women, but there is still transgression nonetheless, which lends a sense of eroticism in the Bataillean sense. As Bataille suggests, transgression forms the basis of both the taboo and eroticism, arguing against the abolition of the taboo on the basis that, "La transgression n'est pas la négation de l'interdit, mais elle le dépasse et le complète" (Bataille 77).[119] While several of the women laugh, as at the end of the citation, Badra notes that several older or more conservative women attempt to halt such discussions or refocus the group's efforts on the domestic tasks at hand. The specter of the taboo hangs over these interactions, but it is in their transgression and – in the case of Bornia with her carrot – their mockery that these taboos are transcended and lose their power. The women use the exchange of private information as an opportunity to bond and create solidarity with one another. It is through the forbidden, yet generative, transgression of the taboo during these interactions that I would argue that they are erotic and further establishes the novel as a work of erotica. Yet it is not just speaking about taboo subjects that contribute to a sense of eroticism within the work, as writing serves a similar function. After the scene between the village women of Badra's childhood, the novel abruptly flashes forward to her current life in Tangiers before switching back and forth between past and present, seemingly at random. This duality between past and present, rural and urban, and child and adult, fractures both the narrative and the protagonist into multiple parts, which she only makes whole again through the act of writing.

Throughout the novel, the narrative structure reflects a certain multiplicity and Badra herself describes her sense of Self as consistently multiple. Several commentators have commented on the almost-intentional structuring of the novel and the protagonist's

[119] "The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it" (Bataille and Dalwood 63).

characterization, seemingly random at first though concealing an intentional dualism. Rao explains, "...les récits entrelacés de l'enfance à Imchouk et de l'installation à Tanger obéissent à des temporalités différentes. Le premier de ces récits est clairement structuré par les offices socio-religieux (mariage, hammam des noces, nuit de la défloration) et la galerie de portraits (oncle Slimane et tante Selma, Ali, les marginales, le potier, Naïma, Hazima) peuplant l'univers de la jeune Badra. Cette temporalité "officielle," qui caractérise la condition de 'pre-exil,' est fondamentalement celle de la répétition machinale du rite et de l'obligation - bien souvent teintée d'hypocrisie - de tenir son rôle" (Rao 227).[120] Rao's argument, namely that the text takes place in two temporalities – the past and the present – seems obvious given Badra's age in both sections of the novel, but it is her depiction of the earlier stage that is curious. While Rao argues that the young Badra's story is defined by a multitude of characters and socio-religious figures and traditions, what does the adult Badra's story contain? Presumably, the opposite of what was presented on the former part; namely, a solitude and an absence of religion, which is best represented by the manner in which Badra sees herself.

One must also note the manner in which Badra describes herself and her own body. At the beginning of the novel, she conceptualizes her physicality in a contingent fashion, echoing Cixous, Irigaray, and other feminist thinkers when arguing for the multiplicity yet singularity of the female sexual body, "Tout, dans le corps, est capable de délire. De plaisir" (Nedjma 13).[121] Luce Irigaray's work is deeply concerned with the gendered body and its expression in language, culture, and identity. For Irigaray, the female body is not defined by a

[120] "The intertwined childhood stories in Imchouk and settling into Tangier obey two different temporalities. The former of these stories is clearly structured by socio-religious agents (marriage, wedding customs, night of consummation) and the gallery of character portraits (Uncle Slimane and Aunt Selma, Ali, and those at the margins like the potter, Naïma, Hazima), populating Badra's universe. This "official" temporality that characterizes the 'pre-exile' condition is fundamentally that of the automatic repetition of traditions and obligations - often tinged by hypocrisy - to play one's role." Translation mine.
[121] "Everything on the body is capable of frenzy. Of pleasure" (Nedjma and Hunter 7).

singular essence but by a range of experiences and possibilities, which are always in flux and constantly shaped by social and cultural forces. Irigaray's assertion that the female body has been obscured, overlooked, or misunderstood within patriarchal discourse and should not be defined by lack but rather possibility, "Or, *la femme a des sexes un peu partout*. Elle jouit d'un peu partout. Sans parler même de l'hystérisation de tout son corps, la géographie de son plaisir est bien plus diversifiée, multiple dans ses différences, complexe, subtile, qu'on ne l'imagine…." (Irigaray 28).[122] By insisting on the multiplicity of women's experiences and the unknown dimensions of their bodies, Irigaray invites us to reconsider not just how we see the female body, but how we conceptualize female subjectivity and identity. In addition to writing, engaging in sex on her own terms serves as a manner for Badra to process the trauma of her marriage, as well as recognize and learn more about her sexuality. Unlike the aforementioned feminist thinkers, the narrator grounds her assertion through a more materialist lens, focusing on the biological as opposed to the spiritual, as in the case of Cixous. While Cixous emphasizes the symbolic and unconscious aspects of the body's expression, the narrator highlights the lived, physical experiences of the female body, offering a more grounded perspective on gender and agency. Furthermore, Nedjma's protagonist does not limit the full-body potential for pleasure solely to the female body; rather, one can presume that the male body is also capable of feeling such all-encompassing pleasure, whether through writing or other activities.

Yet the novel does not solely critique the narrator's family but rather the patriarchal nature of Arab societies as a whole which forces men and women into certain roles. The eroticism of the novel becomes apparent in the preface wherein Badra (or Nedjma herself), having been established as both the author and the narrator of the text, states the implications

[122] "But *woman has sex organs more or less everywhere*. She finds pleasure almost anywhere. Even if we refrain from invoking the hystericization of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined…" (Irigaray and Porter 7).

of its goal: “A travers ces lignes où se mêlent sperme et prière, j’ai tenté d’abattre les cloisons qui séparent aujourd'hui le céleste du terrestre, le corps de l’âme, le mystique de l’érotisme. …Avec l’ambition de redonner aux femmes de mon sang une parole confisquée par leurs pères, frères et époux. En hommage à l’ancienne civilisation des Arabes où le désir se déclinait jusque dans l'architecture, où l’amour était débarrassé du péché, où jouir et faire jouir était un devoir du croyant” (Nedjma 8).[123] In the introduction, the writer of the text outlines its purpose, breaking down the boundaries between the abstract (such as the celestial or the mystic) and the concrete (the terrestrial and, oddly enough, the erotic). The author uses the sacred – prayer – and the profane – semen – in a rhetorical move that fits squarely into Bataille’s conception of eroticism. As he notes at several points in his philosophical text, the sacred exists side-by-side with the erotic due to the imposition of boundaries and taboos that must be broken for eroticism to exist. In one chapter dedicated entirely to the subject of Christianity, Bataille explains the importance of the orgy for Christian thinkers, “L’orgie, où se maintient, au delà [*sic*] du plaisir individuel, le sens sacré de l’érotisme, devait être l’objet d’une attention particulière de l’Eglise. L’Eglise s’opposa généralement à l’érotisme. Mais l’opposition se fondait sur un caractère profane du Mal qu’était l’activité sexuelle en dehors du mariage. Il fallut que d’abord, à tout prix, disparût le sentiment auquel accédait la transgression de l’interdit” (Bataille 138).[124] In order to achieve a sense of eroticism and a continuous Self, the taboo on premarital or extramarital sex has to be transgressed in the context of an orgy. The sacredness of sexual pleasure becomes profane through its change in

[123] “Through these lines, in which sperm and prayer are joined, I have attempted to break down the walls that now separate the celestial from the terrestrial, body from soul, the mystical from the erotic. …My ambition is to give back to the women of my blood the power of speech confiscated by their fathers, brothers, and husbands. In tribute to the ancient Arab civilization in which desire came in many forms, even in architecture, where love was liberated from being sinful, in which both having and giving pleasure was one of the duties of the believer” (Nedjma and Hunter 1).

[124] “The orgy with its emphasis on the sacred nature of eroticism transcending individual pleasure was to become the subject of special attention from the Church. The Church was in general against eroticism, but this opposition was based on the profane evil of sexual activity outside marriage. The feelings roused by the transgression of the taboo had to be suppressed at all costs” (Bataille and Dalwood 125).

the number of participants and the context in which sexual activity is taking place; namely, with at least one other person who is not married to the other participants. However, Badra or Nedjma takes this a step further by using Bataille's eroticism to position the text as an act of liberation not just for the protagonist but for all women, serving as an articulation of female sexuality that has been confiscated and stolen by male relatives and husbands. Her hope is a return to an older Arab civilization, presumably that of the *Perfumed Garden*, one in which both men and women are not shamed for sexual pleasure. Within the narrative, this possibility does not appear for Badra until after her divorce and relocation to Tangiers, where she has a chance meeting with the man with whom she falls in love and is able to experience a more liberated, if not egalitarian, version of sexuality.

Though the flashbacks in the novel largely focus on Badra's adolescence and marriage, with a propensity to discuss taboo and largely traumatic sexual episodes that occur during the narrator's early life, the events recounted in the present concern her sexual and emotional relationship with Driss, a wealthy Moroccan cardiologist who she meets in Tangiers while living with her aunt, Selma. Admittedly, at first glance, certain elements of their relationship seem more at home in a romance novel. Badra frequently mentions love, particularly in the early stages of her connection with Driss, stating once, "En ce temps-là, j'étais ailleurs. Dans l'amour et la mièvrerie. Je me mordais les lèvres pour les rendre plus rouges et je chantonnais des airs égyptiens pour me donner une contenance quand Driss s'annoncait" (Nedjma 105).[125] However, the focus on emotions and relationships does not automatically imply a connection to the romance category, including the erotic romance subgenre. For one, the explicitness of the language used when Driss and Badra are together betrays the conventions of the romance genre. While there may be scenes of overt sexuality

[125] "At the time, however, I was somewhere else, besotted with love and sentimentalism. I would bite my lips to make them redder and hum little Egyptian melodies to give an impression of composure when Driss came to the house, for he would announce each upcoming visit to my aunt via a porter" (Nedjma and Hunter 97).

in erotic romances, novels in this subgenre generally do not refer to sex organs in overt terms, preferring more euphemistic monikers in both French and English ("his hardness" or "her sex" instead of anatomically-correct words or even slang). While Badra is expressive in describing her feelings for Driss, she is equally as explicit with the details of their physical interactions. Secondly, I would argue that the emphasis on feelings forms a part of the intimate quality of the work and only further reinforces the emphasis on breaking down boundaries between Self (Badra as both the narrator and protagonist) and Other (also Badra but also, at least in this case, the reader) that drives the text as Badra confesses increasingly more to him or her, creating a connection beyond the sexual (as in pornography) and the emotional (as in romance).

Badra's relationship with Driss continues, with no fewer than three scenes of graphic sexuality that meticulously describe oral, anal, and vaginal sex, as well as masturbation, all of which take place in Driss's apartment. Though some of these interactions are uncomfortable for Badra, they only serve to deepen her fondness for Driss. She slowly makes changes to her appearance and daily life to make her more or less available for Driss, depending on her mood, much to the chagrin of Badra's relatives, "J'ai abandonné le voile pour les robes qu'il m'offrait, les escarpins, les foulards et les bijoux qui valaient une fortune. Tante Selma bougonnait : « Puisqu'il te baise et t'entretient, qu'est-ce qui l'empêche de te demander en mariage ? Il est en train de faire de toi une pute de luxe »" (Nedjma 149).[126] Sex, but especially a sex in a casual relationship, appears to be connected to a sort of blasphemy, as Badra abandons the traditional veil, shoes, and accessories expected of North African women in favor of dresses, high heels, and expensive jewelry. Though the characters around her pressure Badra into marriage, she resists, preferring her relationship with Driss as it is,

[126] "I stopped wearing the veil and exchanged it for the dresses he gave me, the pumps, shawls, and jewelry that cost a fortune. Aunt Selma grumbled, 'Since he's fucking you and keeping you, what's preventing him from asking you to marry him? He's busy making a high-class whore of you'" (Nedjma and Hunter 137).

perhaps rejecting traditional notions of sex within the confines of a marriage and instead preferring a more modern conception of relationships wherein casual sex, which goes against religious teachings, is common. Nevertheless, reality sets in, and their happiness dwindles as Driss begins openly having affairs – twice in front of Badra while she is in the same room – and though she continues to have sex with him (as well as the two women alongside Driss in a particularly passionless orgy scene), it is not until he speaks about his sexual history with men that Badra definitively breaks off their relationship. Though she justifies her decision in passing by claiming to have realized that Driss is incapable of love, Badra's reasoning for leaving him is never explained further. It is possible that she sees the manner in which Driss disposed of his male lovers and refuses to be cast aside in a similar fashion. Driss's fleeting relationships with other men could also serve as a reminder of male sexual liberty that is denied to Badra and the other women around her. While it is not clear if Badra is free to sleep with other men within the confines of their relationship, her ties to Driss may make this more difficult. At the conclusion of the story, the narrator's sense of Self is described, "J'en ai connu des hommes, après ma rupture avec Driss. Connaître n'est pas aimer et aimer m'était devenu impossible. …Mon cœur brisé n'a pas tardé à devenir multiple" (Nedjma 231 and 235).[127] Nedjma's protagonist not only echoes previous feminist thinkers by discussing the plurality of sexual pleasure but additionally the multiplicity of the Self. As opposed to a contingent vision of Selfhood, the narrator instead acknowledges the possibility of the Self being fragmented, the "multifaced" heart of which Badra speaks, though this is not viewed negatively in Nedjma's novel. Rather, it is used constructively, as a means to further explore other parts of the Self that are ultimately brought together by a new passion.

[127] "After my breakup with Driss, I knew other men. Knowing is not loving—loving had become impossible for me. …When I left Driss, my broken heart did not wait to become multifaceted" (Nedjma and Hunter 213 and 217).

By the end of the novel, fourteen years have passed. Badra lives comfortably, with various lovers throughout the years providing financial and social stability for her. She begins her memoirs, finding an area in her life which gives her more pleasure than sex: writing. Badra describes the act of writing as a highly sensual and erotic experience that encompasses her whole body and mirrors the sex act: "Mais j'ai décidé d'écrire pareil : librement, sans chichis, la tête claire et le sexe frémissant" (Nedjma 16).[128] Like Cixous before her, Nedjma's protagonist feels intense pleasure when writing, in large part due to the freedom it provides her to continue exploring sexuality in a safe and nonjudgmental environment. Writing clandestinely additionally allows Badra to reconnect her with her body and agency, ultimately leading to a more complete, if not contingent, sense of Self. In a conversation with an unknown visitor, Badra seems to respond to polite society more broadly about her lack of sex-based guilt:

> –N'as-tu pas honte de ce que tu viens d'écrire ?
> J'ai répliqué sans bouger :
> –Tu n'avais qu'à ne pas lire. (Nedjma 258-9)[129]

When writing about taboo subjects related to sexuality, marriage, and gender roles, Badra – and perhaps Nedjma herself – refuse to feel shame and instead put such an impetus on the reader. Those who object to conversations around such controversial topics should simply excuse themselves from such discussions or stop reading texts that center around such themes, perhaps implying that either such objections are shameful or that sexual talk is inevitable. Though shame is a powerful motivator for silence when the taboo is concerned, putting the responsibility on those with objections potentially allows for a greater amount of

[128] "But I decided to write in a similar vein: freely, informally, with a clear head and a quivering sex" (Nedjma and Hunter 10).
[129] "'Aren't you ashamed of what you've just written?' Without budging, I answered: 'All you had to do was not read it'" (Nedjma and Hunter 236).

conversation around sex and gender, both in Europe, where Nedjma's work was initially published, and abroad, where her texts eventually returned.

The boundary between Self and Other in Nedjma's narrative is an arguably less destructive relationship than that proposed by Bataille. Whereas the latter author makes claims about the violent relationship between Self and Other that characterizes eroticism, the former seems to present a form of eroticism that ultimately becomes more generative than destructive. After a relatively calm rupture with Driss, the enigmatic male Other throughout the novel, Badra instead chooses to engage in writing, a vocation that she finds as erotic and fulfilling as sex, perhaps due to its ability to make her feel whole and complete by processing her trauma. Having started the narrative as the abused wife of an unloving husband, Badra is aware of her oppression – and that of Moroccan women broadly, as in the case of Souad – and longs for a more independent life outside of the constraints of marriage. Her subsequent escape from Imchouk to Tangiers initially permits her to view sex and relationships as pleasurable, her liaison with Driss bringing her some joy. Yet when Badra expects and does not receive fidelity from him, she finds herself equally unsatisfied and breaks off the relationship. As opposed to destroying the Other – either Driss of herself – Badra returns to the Self, finding a sense of freedom as a writer who holds nothing back from the reader and cultivating an erotic bond with her sexuality and her texts. It is through her trajectory that the reader can observe alternate possibilities. Nedjma's use of explicit sexuality in her writing is a powerful tool for challenging the stigma around female pleasure. In a society where women's sexuality is often stigmatized or silenced, her candid portrayal of sexual desire empowers women to speak openly about their bodies and desires without guilt or shame. Erotic literature, for Nedjma, is not just about rebellion; it is a means of liberation, allowing women to reclaim their sexual autonomy and redefine their identities. Her work invites a

broader conversation about the need for women to own and express their pleasure, positioning eroticism as a path toward both personal freedom and political resistance.

Conclusion

Though erotic literature has a contentious place within the second- and third-wave American and European feminist movements, the genre can be used for feminist means, both in the Global North and in the Global South. As was discussed in the first chapter of this project, most feminist thinkers in both the US and Europe have avoided touching upon erotica due to the genre being considered as either equally as exploitative as pornography or too euphemistic, not unlike romance. However, when the genre has been brought up, it has been dismissed as equally exploitative and male-focused by feminist thinkers. This is not, of course, to say that criticisms of related genres are not valid or that this work is not important. As has been previously argued in the first two chapters of this study, romance and pornography have the tendency to rely on clichés, largely in order to focus on explicit sexuality or a romantic relationship, respectively. Yet for feminist writers who work with transnational feminism and postcolonial literatures, erotic novels have likewise been marginalized. It is also not my intention to downplay the crucial nature of the work done by these artists and authors; however, the focus on other themes ignores the potential of erotic literature to serve a feminist praxis abroad, specifically by pushing back against traditional models of family, sexuality, and womanhood.

Erotic literature's value to transnational and anti-colonial feminism hinges upon a focus on women's pleasure, the demystification of the female body by speaking candidly and honestly as opposed to in moralistic terms, and transgressing cultural and social taboos related to relationships, sex, and love. Erotic literature is valuable to transnational and anti-colonial feminism by focusing on women's pleasure and challenging the historical silencing of female sexuality. It empowers women to reclaim ownership of their bodies and desires,

countering patriarchal norms that reduce women to passive objects. By demystifying the female body and speaking openly about sexuality, the genre breaks cultural taboos and challenges moralistic views that shame women's desires. Moreover, it transgresses colonial and social boundaries around relationships and sex, offering new possibilities for intimacy that resist domination. In doing so, erotic literature becomes a tool for decolonization and feminist liberation, allowing women to redefine their sexual agency on their own terms.

By making the non-Western body visible, authors can explore their own sexualities while simultaneously allowing readers to do the same in a safe space that acknowledges current limitations on doing so but pushes back against them. Though some Francophone writers, such as Assia Djebar and Abdellah Taïa, have incorporated erotic elements into their own works, perhaps due to social or legal boundaries, entire works of erotica are rarer. Nedjma's *L'Amande* presents a more overt example of erotic literature by a female author living in a postcolonial region. The text, seemingly a romance, actually serves as a rallying cry for female sexual agency, the vocalization of mistreatment that married women face, and the importance of writing. Badra, at the edge of Moroccan society, rejects the traditional values imposed on her by fleeing an abusive marriage and finding pleasure and value in a relationship with another man. Ultimately, however, she realizes the unhealthily co-dependent nature of this second relationship and instead decides to pursue her own interests. This trajectory, while perhaps a bit dreary, possesses a strong feminist merit due to its transgressive nature. While living in a society that stigmatizes sex outside of the confines of marriage as well as divorce, particularly for women, Badra focuses on her own pleasure, whether with men or with writing. Though classified as an erotic novel, ostensibly for its explicitly sexual content, the dissolution of the boundaries between Self and Other through the protagonist's simultaneous marginality and centrality in the narrative, as well as the separate temporalities of the narrative, would better justify this classification. Consequently,

erotica can, I have argued here, serve as a viable feminist praxis for not only mainstream Western feminisms, but additionally postcolonial and transnational feminisms.

As sexuality becomes an increasingly public topic of conversation in North America and Europe, one must wonder whether other societies will follow suit. Though, as previously mentioned, it is not my intention to suggest that the conceptualization of sex in the West is a standard to which other societies must aspire, in erotic novels women writers may use sexuality, either veiled or explicit, to push back against patriarchy and perhaps provoke social change in other areas. However, this possibility may face some resistance. For many authors in the Global South, it is difficult or even illegal to write about sexuality in even the most indirect manners due to cultural or religious reasons. Yet the first step has been taken by several authors studied in this chapter – to write with abandon, with passion, and with honesty, both for oneself and for others.

Conclusion

In the fifty years since its publication, Georges Bataille's *L'Erotisme* (1974) has provoked and sustained commentaries on its merit as a literary or philosophical text. Several aspects of the work – most notably its argument surrounding eroticism being outside of more primal sexuality, as well as the lengthy discussion of the relationship between the profane and the sacred – have served as a focus in works by other scholars and public figures, both before and after it was released. Susan Sontag, for example, rejects what she refers to as an "aesthetics of art" in favor of an "erotics of art" in *Against Interpretation* (1966), while Michel Foucault coins the term *ars erotica* in *Scientia Sexualis* (1984) to describe the way pleasure rules in ancient societies. Yet despite the innovation of this text, Bataille's work is not without criticism. When viewed under a feminist lens, the misogynistic nature of certain aspects of Bataille's conception of eroticism can be seen, notably the necessity to destroy the feminine Other in order for the male Self to achieve a self-actualizing eroticism.

Indeed, some of the more vocal critiques of *L'Erotisme*, as well as Bataille's broader œuvre, have been carried out by American radical feminists in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Andrea Dworkin, for example, wrote several texts that argue against what she perceives as the dehumanization of women through pornography, focusing on several sections of Bataille's fiction, most often his *Story of the Eye* (1928). Within one of her most widely-read works, 1987's *Intercourse*, Dworkin reduces the eroticism presented in Bataille's work to a form of "classy pornography," one that fetishizes women's sexual subordination to men through explicit and implicit violence. Yet in doing so, the erotic becomes reduced to a derivative of the pornographic, causing the nuance between the two genres to become lost. As other anti-pornography feminists like Robin Morgan and Catharine MacKinnon argue, pornographic and erotic content are essentially the same insofar as they advance a male-focused sexuality through objectifying and violating the female body. Consequently, these

authors and activists fail to critically consider the nuance of the two terms and dismiss erotica as another form of sexual violence against women that is no different from pornography, despite differences in aesthetics, authorship, and readership.

Admittedly, Bataille's theoretical work contains some shortcomings. Despite its unique subject matter, his underlying goal of defining eroticism as a philosophical concept is never fully realized, and the undercurrent of misogyny that characterizes his discussion of the erotic is understandably concerning. Yet this is not to imply that feminist critics of Bataille's text are without fault, either. Although there are some merits to questioning the androcentric nature of Bataille's writing by anti-pornography feminists, reducing the difference between pornography and erotica to perceived sophistication flattens any nuance. However, the criticisms of erotica by other feminist camps possess faults of their own, often failing to recognize any difference between the two genres.

Other second-wave American feminists in the 1960s through the 1980s maintain a more divided position on eroticism and erotica, particularly among the self-appointed pro-sex feminists. Some, such as Carole Vance and Ellen Willis, dismiss erotic literature as too euphemistic and focused on emotional feelings as opposed to the physical sensations, perhaps pointing to a distinction between the erotic and pornographic as one of internal versus external sensation. Others seem to privilege the erotic over the pornographic. Writers and activists like Gayle Rubin and Gloria Steinem, despite having varied opinions of the feminist merit of pornography, opt instead to celebrate the power of the erotic to uplift and validate women but, like their anti-pornography counterparts, fail to explain the difference between the erotic and the pornographic in concrete terms. Poststructuralist French feminists repeat this oversight, most notably Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who extol the power of the erotic, comparing masturbation as an erotic act to writing as a potentially liberatory act. For Cixous, writing becomes a means of reclaiming and expressing the feminine, transcending

patriarchal norms and connecting the body to language. However, this focus on the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of the body often overlooks the material, lived experiences of women. The materialist perspective offered by some feminist thinkers provides a counterpoint, prioritizing the physical realities of the body and its social conditions over its metaphorical or symbolic power in the realm of language and desire. While these activists and writers from both sides of the Atlantic clearly outline the stakes of their arguments by highlighting the power of eroticism to liberate women from androcentric conceptions of sexuality and pleasure, an actual definition of the erotic can simply not be found; put differently, by focusing on what the erotic can *do*, what it actually *is* falls by the proverbial wayside. At best, it would seem that for many of these writers – but most explicitly Audre Lorde – the erotic appears to be a type of inherent sensual knowledge linked largely to the unique emotional and mental responses experienced by the female sex, which raises concerns about gender stereotypes and bioessentialism. The erotic thus holds a tenuous position within second-wave feminist criticism in the United States and France, either being as exploitative as pornography or not explicit enough, either tediously euphemistic or potentially revelatory.

One oversight on the part of feminist thinkers may be the heavy focus on the contents of texts as opposed to their effect on readers, and it is here that my dissertation intervenes. Erotic literature, unlike pornography or romance, does not have a singular purpose but instead uses depictions of sex alongside more philosophical questions that challenge the reader's assumptions and stereotypes. Furthermore, in contrast to pornography and romance, wherein possession of the Other or being possessed by the Other often forms an important aspect of the protagonist's trajectory, erotic literature breaks down the boundary between Self and Other.

This contributes to the discourse surrounding erotic literature and eroticism within the domains of literary studies and the broader domain of the humanities, which often fail to

actually define what constitutes either. Bataille's text, as previously noted, goes to great lengths to examine what inspires the erotic and distinguishes the erotic from sheer sexuality but never actually expands on what the concept actually is. Likewise, the publisher Jean Jacques Pauvert dedicated several works explicitly discussing the qualities of erotica, and while these possess some utility, such texts contain several logical gaps. In his *Métamorphose du sentiment érotique* (2011), Pauvert attempts to define erotic literature along several criteria, such as violating social norms and exciting a reader's sexual passions, yet the same can be said of pornography.[130]

A new way of conceptualizing erotic literature, one that respects its unique qualities as a genre, is necessary, and it is here that my work intervenes. In contrast to feminist thinkers who dismiss erotic literature and literary scholars who erroneously define the genre, I have argued that erotica, in the context of the feminist struggle, is a completely separate genre from pornography and romance and can serve as a viable means of empowerment for women, regardless of geographic location. While the so-called feminist sex wars raged in the Anglosphere during the late 1970s and 1980s, the genre of erotica was lost in the proverbial shuffle and dismissed by each side for separate reasons. Meanwhile, perhaps due to their comparatively sexually liberal society, French feminists did not generally comment on pornography until roughly a decade later, with many expressing similarly polarized sentiments. It has not been my intention to raise questions of pornography's morality or worth, feminist or otherwise, in this research; likewise, my personal feelings towards romance as a feminist object of analysis are irrelevant. The voluminous body of work that already exists on these two genres in the realm of feminist studies serves as a testament to their still-polemical nature. Affective literary criticism – otherwise referred to as reader-

[130] For a more lengthy list of these qualities, see footnote 15 of Chapter 1 of this project or Pauvert, Jean-Jacques. *La Littérature érotique*. Paris: Flammarion, 2000. 20.

response theory – has further elaborated on these literary genres, once again ignoring erotica but providing several pertinent points about the manner in which readers respond in finite ways to a variety of genres. Norman R. Holland, Wolfgang Iser, and Louise Rosenblatt have described the manner in which pornographic texts have the reader's orgasm as their singular aim, while romance novels are meant to serve as emotional fulfillment for the reader. Unlike pornography and romance, though, erotic literature engages with a reader in deeper ways, usually on an intellectual level alongside emotional and sexual ones to push him or her to question existing orders. Consequently, the genre possesses potential for feminist activists and authors both in the US and Western Europe and elsewhere in the world.

As I argue in the first chapter of this work, erotica is a separate genre from pornography due to its effect on readers insofar as the former genre often attempts to engage with readers on an intellectual level alongside emotional and sexual ones. The chapter opens with a discussion of the fraught relationship between pornography and feminism during the second-wave and early third-wave feminist movement in the United States and France before analyzing Dominique Aury's *Histoire d'O* (1954). Though dismissed by second-wave anti-pornography feminist thinkers as another example of misogynistic pornography, I argue that the text itself would be better aligned with erotica by virtue of its focus on personal growth and preoccupation with broader philosophical questions, such as the nature of sacrifice and the politics of love. Ultimately, Aury's novel challenges popular conceptions of love and freedom, highlighting erotica's capacity for intellectual and emotional depth. By exploring themes of transformation and power, it invites a reassessment of genre beyond moralistic critique.

The second chapter deals primarily with romance literature. Popular thought dictates that both romance and erotica handle sexuality in veiled terms, with the language euphemistic and centered around emotions as opposed to physicality. Yet there are substantial differences

between the two, ultimately leading to my argument that while romance literature can reinforce unfortunate racist and sexist stereotypes and focuses largely on the pursuit and possession of another individual, erotic literature attempts to understand another individual through the pursuit of an emotional or sexual relationship. This was most evident when considering Guillaume Lescable's *Lobster* (2003). Variously classified as belonging to a number of different genres, I argue that the text, while borrowing several conventions of the romance genre, best represents an erotic text due to its dissolution of boundaries not only between human and animal but additionally male and female and pursuer and pursued. Thus, *Lobster* exemplifies how erotica transcends romance by breaking rigid boundaries and reimagining relationships. Its exploration of identity and desire underscores the genre's unique potential for deeper inquiry.

The third chapter of this project expands on what defines erotic literature more concretely as opposed to in direct contrast to other genres. It begins with George Bataille's aforementioned philosophical work *L'Erotisme* (1957), before delving into an analysis of Catherine Breillat's *Pornocratie* (2001), a novel with an idiosyncratic structure that posits a new vision for sexuality broadly. Although she incorporates certain elements of Bataille's eroticism, Breillat's erotic is founded upon the understanding of the other participant instead of his or her destruction. Breillat accomplishes this through her discussions of the stigmatization of sexual expression and the horror yet necessity to look at the unvarnished female body which serve as a means of problematizing the Self and additionally repositions erotic literature as a viable project for identity-based struggles. I have demonstrated how Breillat's *Pornocratie* highlights erotic literature's role in challenging norms and redefining identity, and by problematizing the relation between Self and Other, the novel reaffirms erotica's potential as a site for critical and personal exploration.

The fourth chapter of this work expands the scope of erotica from a North American and European-centric focus to the Global South. While there have been some minor discussions of pornography within transnational and postcolonial branches of feminist theory, erotic literature has been ignored in favor of more "on the ground" concerns, such as prostitution and human trafficking. Still, this does not imply that women outside of the Global North have not engaged in the production of erotic literature. Nedjma's *L'Amande* (2004) serves as one such example. Marketed as the first modern erotic novel written by a Muslim woman, the text uses explicit sexual language but is not considered pornographic in tone. The insistence on intimacy which ultimately leads to the dissolution of boundaries between Self and Other – as reflected in the narrator's personal history and the structure of the narrative – firmly align the narrative with erotic work, one that could serve as a model for other authors in order to advocate for female sexual agency within the Global South. Thus, erotic literature in the Global South, as exemplified by *L'Amande*, serves as a powerful tool for dismantling patriarchal structures and reclaiming female sexual agency. Similarly, Abdellah Taïa's *Une mélancolie arabe* and Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia,* studied in this chapter as well, further demonstrate how literature in North Africa contributes to the decolonization of gender and sexuality by appropriating Bataille's conception of eroticism but applying it in unexpected ways within local cultures and historical events, offering a transgressive space for self-definition and resistance against colonial and patriarchal forces. By centering intimacy and attempting to connect with the reader, such works challenge dominant narratives that marginalize women's desires and bodies, as well as perhaps homosexual desires and bodies. Ultimately, erotica provides a literary model for reimagining gender and power beyond Western paradigms.

Novels studied in this work, which range from *The Story of O* (1954) to *Lobster* (2003) to *Pornocratie* (2001) to *L'Amande* (2004), serve as examples of erotic literature not

due to the sexuality portrayed in varying degrees of explicitness, but rather because of their effects on readers. These novels, as opposed to placating the reader with representations of the dominant status quo, ask him or her to imagine relationships in a more egalitarian way, not only between characters but additionally between the reader and the text. Sex is used in these novels as a means of connecting with readers in a personal and honest way, a practice that helps in distinguishing these novels from pornographic ones. Affective literary criticism, which may initially seem based entirely on the reader's subjective experiences, actually provides a highly useful role when discussing the differences between erotica and other genres. As noted by the pioneers of the field, reader-response criticism relies on a finite number of emotional and psychological reactions to a passage, as well as a general consensus as opposed to taking into account each individual's feelings. While the pornographic and romance genres have several references made to them within reader-response theory, considering the reader within studies of erotic literature can be more productive in distinguishing it from related genres, and it is here that my dissertation also intervenes. If we accept that erotica is separate from pornography and is distinguished by a less transactional and more transformative nature, then this genre could be more promising in terms of advancing a feminist cause both domestically and internationally for three reasons. Firstly, by allowing readers to connect with fictional characters on the margins of society, it may be easier to empathize with oppressed people in the real world, such as women, people of color, and homosexuals. Secondly, for those actively advocating on behalf of such groups, erotic literature could present a new avenue by offering a new way of conceptualizing sexuality, both for women and for men. Thirdly and finally, given erotica's cosmopolitan nature, these efforts at a feminist liberation could extend globally, permitting a reconceptualization of gendered power dynamics, both in the bedroom and beyond.

Future research can continue this project's aims in several ways. Firstly, one could expand the scope to questions of sexual orientation by interrogating erotica aimed at homosexual readerships, a point touched upon in the fourth chapter. While this project intends to deal with feminist issues (as well as racial, ethnic, and national ones to a lesser extent), the question of erotica as a genre with the potential for gay liberation is worth posing. Given that the primary texts of this project are centered entirely on heterosexual couples, one must ask if novels that depict same-sex partnerships affect readers in similar manners and to the same ends. Secondly, the references that were used in this research contain texts printed by both academic and popular publishing houses. Erotic novels written by amateur authors on the Internet were not included due to the sheer volume of material, though it is possible that more niche texts penned by non-professional writers may disprove some of my conclusions. After all, on a paratextual level, works professionally published are done so in a capitalistic system in which the end goal is to sell copies and generate revenue, which may lead to authors either self-censoring or having their work altered by editors. Novels that deal with particularly extreme or marginal sexual practices are likely excluded from being brought to a larger public by a publishing industry which could view such works as detrimental to a company's image and sales. A comparative freedom permitted on certain websites, particularly those who do not intend to make a profit and are thus outside of the for-profit publishing industry, could encourage the discussion of certain subjects not found in published erotic works, thereby affecting readers differently than the works surveyed here. Thirdly, one can also consider the question of autobiography and autofiction when discussing erotic literature. Many novels, but most obviously Catherine Millet's *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2002) or Anaïs Nin's *Delta of Venus* (1977), incorporate elements that are drawn from each individual author's life and describe deeply personal sexual experiences that he or she has had. Though this is not a consistent feature of erotic literature, this aspect of some texts

classified as erotic warrants further commentary, particularly when considering notions of fantasy that often go hand-in-hand with the act of reading. To what degree and in what ways does the presence of autobiographical elements of a text impact the way in which fantasy is created, as well as its affective qualities? Do autobiographical texts affect readers in the same way as fictional texts due to the subject's distance from the reader, or do novels categorized as such instead prohibit any sort of fantasy due to the ostensibly true events described happening to a real person whose photograph is frequently on the back cover? Fourthly, while using eye tracking and neural scanning are relatively common in neuroscientific sexalogical research in a variety of subfields ranging from pornography to paraphilias, there are very few – if any – studies in which words are shown to research participants and their psychological and physical responses recorded, with images being the preferred format in such experiments.[131] Though scientific research should always be read with an open and critical mind and should not always be held up as the end-all truth, given how rapidly new discoveries throw old ones into question, such research could serve to build upon affective literary criticism by providing hard data to support claims about readers' cognitive and emotional reactions to texts. Fifthly and finally, this work focuses on erotic literature and only makes reference to erotic film in passing, particularly with regards to Catherine Breillat's output in the third chapter. While I would have been keen to explore this emerging cinematic genre – in particularly the films from the *nouvelle extrémité française* such as Virginie Despentes's *Baise-moi* (2000) or Gaspar Noé's *Love* (2015) – the scope of the project would become too broad and could potentially have been difficult for readers to follow. Still, the power of the visual vis-à-vis eroticism could build upon several essays

[131] For more information, see Wenzlaff et al. 2016. "Video-Based Eye Tracking in Sex Research: A Systematic Literature Review." *Journal of Sex Research* 53 (8): 1008-1019. As the researchers note, the use of eye tracking in sexology is relatively new, with most of the current data focusing on perceived physical attraction, forensic applications – such as studies on sex offenders – and differences between men and women and homosexual and heterosexual participants. All of the studies, it would seem, use images.

written by Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag and perhaps serve to distinguish erotica from pornography more starkly.

Nevertheless, this dissertation does contribute to the field of literature due to its engagement with an understudied genre with no clear definition. Through my outlining the conventions of the erotic literature, it can be more easily integrated into a feminist praxis, both in the Global North and in the Global South. This integration allows for a more nuanced understanding of how erotic narratives can challenge traditional gender roles and provide a platform for female sexual agency. In the Global South, where cultural and societal constraints around sexuality are often more rigid, erotic literature becomes a radical form of resistance, subverting patriarchal norms and offering women a space to assert control over their bodies and desires. By focusing on connecting with marginalized individuals and communities, erotic literature can serve as a potential avenue for feminist thinkers as a means of resisting the oppressions of patriarchy, capitalism, neocolonialism, and racism by imaging new possibilities for male-female dynamics, for equality within the confines of marriage and beyond, and for the pursuit of sexual pleasure, envisioning new possibilities for intimacy, equality, and autonomy.

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