

Beyond “French-American” Binary Thinking on Non-Binary Gender.

Louisa Mackenzie
University of Washington

A French 12-year-old student using a popular 2016 textbook for *EMC* (*enseignement moral et civique*, a relatively new subject) would encounter, in chapters 16 and 17, the following seemingly positive messages: boys and girls can be anything they want to be; gender stereotypes should not stop a boy from becoming a midwife or a girl from becoming a crane operator; and, in English, “Gender discrimination stunts potential,” on a full-page photographic reproduction of an Australian poster featuring a happy girl with a Superman costume under her dress (figure 1; Tourillon and Fellahi 2016, 320, 321, 331).¹



Figure 1. “Stereotype THIS.” Pages 320, 321, and 331, from Nathan 2016 textbook on *Histoire – Géographie – EMC*

I did not select these three pages at random. In fact, my initial encounter with them was not in the Nathan textbook itself, but on a web site run by a French activist and watchdog group called [VigiGender](#), which had selected them to alert parents to what they consider to be the dangers of gender theory in schools. Under the rubric “[Les pages de manuels scolaires fondées sur le genre](#),” the page provides many examples of gender “ideology” in school textbooks, with the aim

¹ The textbook is for students in *cinquième*, the equivalent of 7th grade in the USA, and is still in use at the time of writing (January 2019). Most of chapter 16 entitled “[Ma vie au collège](#)” can be previewed online (note: slow-loading site); chapter 17, entitled “L’égalité et la solidarité, pour vivre ensemble” which contains the “stereotype this” poster, is not available in the free previews but can be viewed full-screen on the [VigiGender](#) site.

of training parents and teachers to identify how children are being indoctrinated against traditional family values and gender roles. I will return in more detail to this group later; for now, I would like to draw attention to the third page in the spread, the “stereotype THIS” poster (figure 1). It is easy to understand the appeal of the image to the textbook’s authors: the girl’s laugh is delightful, the Superman logo is an universally-recognized metonymy for boundless power and justice, and the visual impact of its bursting out from under the pink-skirted dress—a typical code for feminine stereotypes—makes an immediate point about needing to break free from restrictive gender roles to reveal the supergirl within. Setting aside the anti-femme implications of the torn dress,² the overall message seems positive: Young girls are superheroes just waiting to break free!

However, VigiGender clearly saw this page as a particularly noteworthy example of gender propaganda. My reflections on why this might be the case underlie much of the rest of this paper. My attention was held by the English on the poster (of Australian origin), and the undeniably US-Anglophone resonance of the Superman logo. Were the VigiGender activists objecting not only to the message about gender roles, but also to the presence of the English language and US popular culture? It is surely significant that the group’s name uses the English word *gender* to indicate their antagonist: they are vigilant not just against *genre* but, more specifically, *gender*. What might that tell us about the kind of strategies likely to be successful for advocacy groups proposing gender-expansive and gender-nonconforming ideas and language in French? The English language and the US are viewed with suspicion in French political discourse, equated with a *communautarisme* seen as destabilizing for Republican values, a “relativisme culturel absolu que prônent certains multiculturalistes américains extrêmes” (Schnapper 2004, 184). Identity-based advocacy for minority groups is easily rejected in France based on its perceived origins in American political correctness, but it is true that such advocacy is often produced in conversation between French and English-speaking communities. How do I, a native English speaker in an English publication, engage non-binary Francophone questions respectfully and productively, in a way that will not be seen as a culturally-insensitive imposition? And how can a case be made for non-binary-inclusive French that does not lend itself to immediate dismissal as an American import?

For reasons addressed in the introduction and many of the contributions here, advocacy for non-binary and/or gender-neutral French language options for GNC³ individuals poses a particular set of strategic challenges in the cultural, linguistic, and political spheres. French is—or seems to

² Transfeminist work on transmisogyny (e.g. Serano 2007) points out the denigration inherent to critiques of “typically” feminine/femme presentation. In this case, the idea that the girl’s pink dress is necessarily coded as weaker than the superman logo shows the extent to which even gender progressives have internalized masculine supremacy.

³ I will hereafter use GNC as a shorthand for transgender, intersex, non-binary, gender-expansive, and any of the other ways in which individuals choose to self-define in critical relation to, or distance from, the gender binary. Ultimately, self-identification should be respected, both for reasons of individual dignity and respect, and because it is widely considered to be a best practice in terms of trans health and well-being (Riggle et al., 2011).

be—more extensively bi-gendered than English.⁴ In fact, the very issue of non-binary pronouns might itself present as a particularly Anglophone question, and our discussion of it in Francophone contexts might be seen as a culturally and linguistically oblivious one-way export, of English into French. I take this tension seriously, situating it within the broader context of the French-American oppositional frame which often surfaces in discussions of *communautarisme* (mostly sex/gender and race) in France. “America” (i.e. the USA) often figures in such debates, as Eric Fassin points out, as a rhetorical antagonist for political purposes which is “good to think” (Fassin 1999, 224).⁵ More than a set of social realities, “America” in French political discussions is an ideological move, and as Bruno Perreau has shown with respect to gender and sexual minority rights in particular, this “French notion of an American invasion is a fantasy expressing the fear of the propagation of homosexuality” (Perreau 2016, 2).

This is not to dismiss the validity of Francophone resistance to Anglophone dominance in the world (linguistic, social, economic, or cultural); much of this resistance aligns with my own politics. I nevertheless argue for the need to move beyond the “French-American” oppositional habit of thinking about gender. There are two main reasons for this. The first is more broadly theoretical: many analyses of the production of gender theories in both linguistic spaces have troubled the idea of a hard-wired difference between “French” and “English” (usually “American”) gender ideologies. I am interested in the work of scholars and activists working in and between both languages, who deconstruct essentialist understandings of French and/or American gendered ideologies in order to show how they have mutually shaped each other along transnational axes. The second reason is strategic and pragmatic. If non-binary language has any chance of being “legitimized”⁶ in French, both the language and its justifications must be as detached as possible from a sense that they are English impositions. In other words, while my more abstract position here is that the binary conception of French *versus* American gender theories does not hold up to scrutiny, my pragmatic position is that the notion of such an opposition nevertheless holds great social power in France,⁷ particularly although not exclusively among those most likely to be hostile to trans and GNC discourses. VigiGender’s own amalgam between gender-progressive politics and the Anglosphere confirms this. Association with “American gender theory” must therefore tactically be reframed.

⁴ Although see section 3 of Blase Provitola’s chapter in this special issue, which explains how in some ways the ability to self-gender in French can be advantageous, and the English “they” can be limiting.

⁵ As Fassin explains, “when debating issues of multiculturalism, minorities, and citizenship, the reference to North America is almost always limited to a discussion of the United States” (Fassin 1999, 224).

⁶ See the introduction to this Salon for the ironic register of “legitimizing.” See also Florence Ashley’s contribution here, especially the section entitled “Institutionnalisation et acceptation du français neutre” for some of the problems associated with institutional recognition.

⁷ I limit my remarks to publications and movements from hexagonal France, as it is the Francophone space I am familiar with and feel somewhat authorized to intervene in.

I suggest focusing on native Francophone GNC self-expressions, rather than thinking in terms of simple equivalences to or reception of/reaction to English discourse in French-speaking spaces. Trans and gender-nonconforming people exist and have always existed in Francophone countries—it would be absurd to think they are simply copying a fad coming from the US (or that trans visibility in the US is itself a “trend”).⁸ France has a long history of trans activism and struggle which bottoms and paves the way for current debates (Thomas, Espineira and Alessandrin 2013; Foerster 2012).⁹ It thus behooves the Anglophones among us to listen to and amplify their self-expressions. As we do so, we must also understand that while Francophone GNC people—activists in particular—may sometimes find English discourses helpful, this does not mean that they are mimicking or importing those sources wholesale. GNC language and advocacy in France, even when produced in dialogue with English thinkers, is not a simple one-way translation exercise. It might indeed be more helpful to think of gender as a kind of “untranslatable” in the sense used by Emily Apter: “not a fact of nature, an object, but an effect caught up in history and culture, and that ceaselessly reinvents itself” (Apter and Cassin 2014, xix).¹⁰

In what follows, after a brief positioning with respect to transatlantic gender scholarship, I will: 1) review some cultural and institutional (juridical, medical) contexts relevant to our understanding of current GNC visibility and rights in France; and 2) look at increasing GNC visibility in some French popular cultural spaces on- and off-line, arguing that change is more likely to come from the creative work happening in GNC communities outside institutional *dispositifs*.

⁸ The frame of the “trend” has emerged as a particularly harmful response to trans advocacy in the US, in particular the idea of “rapid-onset gender dysphoria” or ROGD among children (Littman 2018), based on questionable methodology but unfortunately now widely circulating in trans-hostile circles. Jennifer Finney Boylan’s op-ed response in the *New York Times* is a helpful mainstream retort, writing “gender variance is a fundamental truth of human biology, not some wacky dance craze” (Finney Boylan 2019).

⁹ The 4-part radio documentary series “[Les transidentités racontées par les trans](#)” provides an in-depth and moving testimonial to trans histories in France from WWII on (Kervran 2018), focusing in particular on activist groups including [OUTrans](#), [Ouest Trans](#), [Acceptess T](#), [Le Zoo](#), [Observatoire des transidentités](#), [Act Up-Paris](#), [GAT](#) (Groupe activiste trans).

¹⁰ In Apter and Cassin’s *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, there is in fact an entry on “Gender” which parses the untranslatability of the sex/gender dichotomy in English as well as how the opposition has been challenged in English itself (Ménard and Deutscher 2014, 375-80).

I. “Transatlantic” Gender Theory

Several scholars have pushed back against an either-or habit of thinking about French or US gender theories. François Cusset’s work is well-known for its explorations of the hybrid, transatlantic nature of gender and queer theories, and of critical theory more generally (Cusset 2002, 2003). Anne Berger argues that “[w]hat is designated as ‘gender theory’ today is thus in more than one respect a Franco-American invention” (Berger 2014, 4), and Bruno Perreau reminds us that “[Anglophone] queer theory has been largely inspired by French writers and thinkers” (Perreau 2016, 2).

Despite this transatlantic axis of co-production, the conceptual power of “American gender studies” is very strong in France. Catherine Halpern’s overview of gender studies’ evolution in the mainstream magazine *Sciences humaines* does not hesitate to identify the academic field as entirely of American origin, and even French feminism as “une invention américaine” (Halpern 2008, 12; although see Delphy 1995 for a more nuanced take on the American-ness of French feminism). Halpern describes gender studies in France in oppositional terms: “Après bien des résistances, les très américaines gender studies ont aujourd’hui le vent en poupe en France [...] les relations France/Etats-Unis mêl[ent] fascination et défiance, complicité et incompréhension” (Halpern 2008, 12). One notes the vocabulary of an almost-hostile takeover (*résistances*, *défiance*), the use of the English “gender studies” despite there being an institutionally-sanctioned French equivalent (*études de genre*), and the lack of attribution of agency to native French gender studies and feminist scholars, as if they were simply passive receptors of a foreign field of study. Indeed, many overviews of gender studies in France, even by authors aligned with the field’s goals, repeat this notion of intellectual importation into France and catch-up by French academics.¹¹

Clearly, the idea of a one-way imposition of American gender ideologies onto French academia, however notional and simplistic, is a serious political actant (see Laugier 2005, for analysis of how French feminism has internalized suspicion of *communautarisme*). It is important to acknowledge that this binary thinking exists, and especially that it has been powerfully mobilized by gender conservatives in France. This is not merely an academic quarrel; Bruno Perreau has brilliantly shown how French opponents of marriage equality skillfully mobilized a hostility to American “gender theory” (Perreau 2016) in the political sphere, with significant real-world consequences. Strategically, this means that advocacy for French GNC communities should be detached as much as possible from suspicion of US ideological take-over. Those of us who work in Anglophone contexts should look at how new linguistic forms and political claims are being created by Francophone GNC people themselves, and amplify their self-expressions in our classrooms and elsewhere.

¹¹ Although see [Lagrange and Rennes \(2010\)](#), for an important push-back, and Bereni (2012), for explanation of why France might seem to be lagging behind.

II. Hostility to “American Gender Theory” in France

Les études de genre are, by all metrics, expanding in France and reflecting unambiguous student interest and demand ([Bereni 2012](#), [Dauvergne 2016](#)). Sciences Po created a research and teaching program on gender in 2010, which caused a fair amount of reflection in the press ([Lagrave and Rennes 2010](#)). The *Master Sciences sociales* program at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) offers, within its sociology track, a popular specialization in [Genre Politique et Sexualités](#) (links to page describing academic year 2019-20). However, as *les études de genre* gain institutional visibility, the backlash has mobilized and taken on a decidedly anti-Anglophone flavor. Sometimes, the USA is mentioned explicitly, but more often, it is evoked employing coded language that acquires a specific resonance for the targeting of a subgroup (a tactic known as dog-whistling in political discourse). What follows are several examples of how this sense of hostile takeover by the USA is being instrumentalized in public discourse, often in very savvy ways, to advance political agendas that we can assume are trans-hostile, even if they don't specifically engage trans.

Outside the academy in France, anti-Americanism often shows up in backlash to #MeToo. A familiar example is a collective letter in *Le Monde* signed by 100 prominent French women including Catherine Deneuve, complaining that this antagonistic puritanical movement was deforming the flirtatious nuances of French gender relations ([Collectif 2018](#)). Supporting this letter in a *New York Times* op-ed in which she insists on an essential difference between French and US feminisms, Agnès Poirier denounces the “new French feminism” entirely because it is “an American import” ([Poirier 2018](#)). The authors of these opinions overlook the fact that actual French victims of assault, many of them working-class women, chose and found power in #MeToo and, just as often, [#BalanceTonPorc](#); this activism wasn't forced on them. The choice of the English #MeToo versus the French hashtag is not innocent here; it further detracts from the French specificity of the movement by implying that French feminists were simply mimicking US discourses, and thus that the polemic was not specifically relevant to France.¹²

It is not only secular discourse that blames the USA for gender-expansive thinking in France. In 2016, the Pope specifically addressed gender studies at a speech during the JMJ (*Journée mondiale de la jeunesse*) in Poland, announcing that France was the victim of “une colonisation idéologique” coming from “des pays très influents”--an example of the above-mentioned dog-whistling ([Ouest-France 2016](#)). Also in 2016, [VigiGender](#), the above-mentioned education watchdog group concerned with anti-Catholic indoctrination in French public schools, distributed 20,000 brochures in French schools alerting parents of the danger of gender in schools ([VigiGender 2016](#)) (figure 2). As well as in their name, the group frequently uses the

¹² In Francophone Canada, the hashtag campaign was #MoiAussi. While #BalanceTonPorc in France was certainly inspired by the US press coverage of the Weinstein scandals, the ensuing debates were entirely made-in-France, revealing grim statistics on domestic violence and workplace harassment (Lecoq 2017), and resulting in proposals for systemic legal changes, unlike in the US where consequences were mostly individualized. In a [radio interview](#) on RTL for example, Marlene Schiappa, State Secretary for Equality, explained that she was specifically inspired by #balancetonporc for many of her policy proposals (Haddad 2017).

English *gender* in their literature and web sites, as a signal boost to this idea of an American imposition. (When the French *genre* is used, it is usually as part of the expression *théorie du genre* whose negative and Anglophobic connotations are well-documented by Bruno Perreau, 2016). On its [homepage](#), VigiGender invites parents and other concerned citizens to “dépose[r] votre témoignage sur la diffusion du Gender [sic], (Ecoles, crèches)” (figure 3), creating the sense of ideological warfare, an invasion of dangerous foreign ideas into the institutions of the French state, which must be resisted and denounced. Group members have authored an impressive array of web pages to explain the effects of Gender on the development of children, and, as their tagline puts it, to put a “Stop au Gender à l’école” (figure 2).¹³

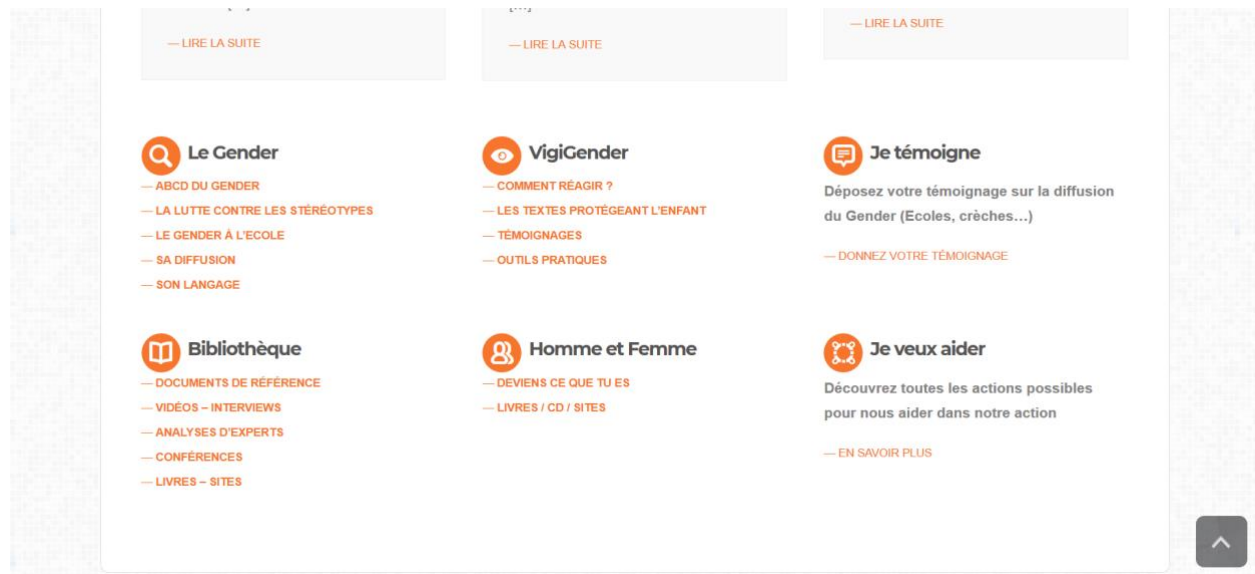


Figure 2. Home page of Vigi-gender.fr, bottom of page. Call for information on the “spreading of Gender”. (Last consulted 22 January 2019).

¹³ It is worth pointing out, however, that the majority of public school teachers in France refused to distribute or use these brochures in school, as reported on [Europe 1 on Oct. 4, 2016](#).



Figure 3. Home page of VigiGender.fr., top of page. Front page of brochure distributed to schools. (Last consulted 22 January 2019).

The front page of VigiGender’s brochure can be seen on their home page (figure 3), featuring a rather sad-looking infant and promising a shocking revelation about how children are being socialized in schools. The powerful visual and rhetorical mobilization of the figure of the innocent Child (Edelman 2004) shows the extent to which French anxiety about gender roles is tied up with national identity formations through the unit of family. The Child also recalls the degree to which French national education is standardized and seen as a site of reproduction of Republican values: “École et République sont indissociables. Elles doivent le rester,” insisted the Education Minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem in 2015 (Ministère 2015, 3).

It is not surprising therefore that the notion of gender studies as a threatening foreigner is found at the highest levels of state. In December 2016, Valérie Pécresse (présidente of the regional council of Île-de-France and member of Les Républicains) cut regional financing for “la théorie du genre” (Peiron 2016). It is important to note that the use of *théorie* rather than *études* is usually pejorative in French discussions of the field (Battaglia and Perreau 2013; Levet 2014; Fillod 2014). Pécresse made a clear distinction between *égalité* (assumed to be a native French value), and *l’indifférenciation des sexes* denounced as *une idéologie*. While she does not explicitly say it is an Anglophone ideology, the implication would be clear to anyone listening: “Je suis pour l’égalité homme-femme, c’est à la racine de mes convictions. L’égalité oui, mais pas l’indifférenciation des sexes [qui est] un projet politique, une idéologie. On ne subventionnera pas la théorie du genre” (quoted in Daumas 2016.)

If Pécresse stopped short of directly blaming the Americans, a fellow politician, Bruno Retailleau—senator for Vendée and president of Les Républicains—indexed one American in particular. During the French parliamentary debates surrounding *le mariage pour tous* in 2013 (le Sénat 2013b), Senator Retailleau defended the adoption of an amendment (number 272) to the law that would have produced a governmental report on the consequences of gender theory in

France ([le Sénat 2013a](#)). Arguing that *la théorie du genre* (again, the delegitimizing use of *théorie* over *études*) aims to redefine the family unit and make women suspicious of motherhood, among other things, Retailleau identifies the root of the problem as ... Judith Butler.¹⁴ Butler's name actually appears, as a kind of threatening foreign agent at the origins of gender theory, in the [minutes](#) of the senate debate, which are worth quoting at some length:

Celle qui a pensé, conçu **la théorie du genre, Judith Butler**, a écrit un livre intitulé *Trouble dans le genre : le féminisme et la subversion de l'identité*. Demander un rapport, c'est savoir si nos enfants sont soumis à **une subversion**, et laquelle. Je vous rappelle que cette théorie pousse à une déconstruction-reconstruction en matière de genre, c'est évident, mais aussi en matière de **famille**, laquelle devient suspecte puisque la femme y serait maintenue dans un état de domination, soumettant aussi les enfants à un déterminisme naturel négatif. La maternité y est aussi perçue comme suspecte puisque l'idée de la seule reproduction naturelle doit être déconstruite au profit de l'idée selon laquelle l'enfant ne se reçoit pas, il se désire. [...] A partir du moment où cette théorie est reconnue comme telle et qu'elle fait l'objet d'un enseignement – sans doute n'est-elle d'ailleurs pas complètement étrangère à l'inspiration de ce texte -- , il me semble que le Gouvernement serait bien inspiré de proposer à la **représentation nationale** un rapport sur les conséquences de cette théorie, en tout cas de son enseignement ([le Sénat 2013a](#), my emphasis).

Retailleau's amendment was not adopted. However, the rhetoric of national defense against a foreign agent (US gender theory, Judith Butler) threatening the family is no accident. Hostility to gender studies in many national contexts uses the family as a sort of moral ground zero. France is no exception; the deployment of "family" as a vulnerable structure in need of protecting against the forces of modernity, globalism, secularism, etc., is both shared with other states, and particular to its own history. I have already mentioned Bruno Perreau's authoritative study on the implications of anti-American thinking on gay marriage as it relates to normative forms of kinships and thus nationhood in France (Perreau 2016). Camille Robcis has also argued that attempts to restructure gender and kinship in France run up against a specifically French set of values which links gender with the family as a site of reproduction of future French citizens (Robcis 2016). Although religion plays an important role in French gender conservatism, for both Robcis and Perreau this is only part of the story. Defending heteronormativity in France is about reaffirming the dearly-held values of universalism seen as under assault everywhere, as Robcis explains in an interview with *Libération*'s Cécile Daumas: "En France le genre, la sexualité et la parenté ne relèvent pas simplement de l'ordre privé, ils forment des structures universelles et transhistoriques au fondement de l'ordre public, de l'Etat de droit. Défendre la norme de la famille hétérosexuelle, cela permet de réaffirmer un universalisme assiégé de toutes parts : par le postcolonialisme, la globalisation, l'Union européenne, et l'expansion croissante du « modèle américain »" ([Daumas 2016](#)).

Both Robcis and Perreau's arguments about the nation state's role in constituting gendered identities are pertinent to the rights of trans French citizens trying to live authentically under statist constraints. Focusing specifically on transgender French individuals, Todd Sekuler has

¹⁴ See Perreau 2016 for in-depth analysis of the ways in which social conservatives in France have weaponized a fear of Butler's work.

argued that they have developed, sometimes strategically and sometimes under coercion, a politics of model citizenship (Sekuler 2013). Sekuler demonstrates that with various recent changes to the law, the French trans subject is being assimilated into the universalizing discourse of French national identity, being stabilized, made acceptable and productive, with racist and classist implications. There is also the politics of binary passing, which, for many, is a performance that is at best exhausting and at worst traumatic: Karine Espineira convincingly shows that the encounter between the trans body and the French state, specifically around care, initiates a process of ranking in accordance with a notion of “real” trans (Espineira 2011). Espineira’s work confirms the role of the nation state in France as a powerful discursive condition regulating trans identities and bodies (see also Reeser 2013).

What is more, the state has no apparatus to deal with non-binary or intersex citizens.¹⁵ Things might have seemed hopeful after a judge in Tours ordered in 2015 that a state identity card be changed to “sexe neutre” for one single intersex person who had been assigned male ([Tribunal de Grande instance de Tours 2015](#)). However, already in the language of the decision we can see the rhetoric of denial of the existence of intersex people as a group: “[Il conviendra] d’ordonner que soit substituée dans son acte de naissance à la mention « de sexe masculin », la mention « sexe neutre », qui peut se définir comme n’appartenant à aucun des genres masculin ou féminin, préférable à « intersexe » qui conduit à une catégorisation qu’il convient d’éviter (ne s’agissant pas de reconnaître un nouveau genre) et qui apparaît plus stigmatisant” ([Tribunal de Grande instance de Tours 2015](#), 4). The irony of the judge’s concern about stigmatization, while also calling intersex a “new gender” and thus denying the existence throughout history of up to 2% of the human population (Blackless et al. 2000), is not lost. Perhaps taking their cue from this frame of resistance to a new legal category in general, the court of appeals in Orleans denied the change ([Le Monde 2016](#)). The judge’s anxiety had to do with the possible universalizing of what was considered even by the Tours judge as an entirely individual case: to recognize “sexe neutre” would be a threat to the bi-gendered foundations of the family and thus the state. We see in the judge’s language an appeal to the state’s interests in binary gender as overwhelmingly more important than individual well-being, and a categorical refusal of any “other sexual category”. Admitting that the Human Rights Commission of the European Council supports a “droit à l’identité sexuelle, droit lié à l’épanouissement personnel”, the judge nevertheless argues that member states have the right to interpret that in their best interests:

[A]dmettre la requête de Monsieur Y... X... reviendrait à reconnaître, sous couvert d’une simple rectification d’état civil, l’existence **d’une autre catégorie sexuelle** [...] les textes français ne prévoient en aucune façon la possibilité de porter la mention " sexe neutre " sur l’acte de l’intéressé, qu’elle poursuit un **but légitime** dès lors que des **considérations d’intérêt général fondent** le refus opposé au requérant de voir inscrire à l’état civil la mention " sexe neutre ", l’identité sexuelle mentionnée à l’état civil **constituant un élément nécessaire à notre organisation sociale et juridique**, en raison notamment de ses incidences sur le **droit de la famille, la filiation et la procréation** ([Cour d’appel d’Orléans 2016](#), my emphasis).

¹⁵ It is important [not to conflate](#) non-binary and intersex. For very elementary definitions of both, see the Glossary. I am not trying to flatten these or any other differences here, but rather make a point about the inability of the French *état civil* to accommodate gender beyond the binary.

To read these legal decisions is to understand the extent to which the French state is invested in binary gender as a building-block for its social and judicial self-conception, and explicitly against individual self-identification outside the binary, even if in the name of personal freedom and “épanouissement”. The sexagenarian plaintiff in this case expressed great distress at the decision, leading the lawyer to accuse the state of “une violence supplémentaire” (Le Monde 2016). It is not an overstatement to say that the state, in refusing to recognize many trans and all intersex citizens’ identities, is an agent of trauma.

Some readers might be inclined to dismiss the use of the word trauma with respect to misgendering and coercive gender assignment. However, if we center the voices of those affected, it becomes impossible to deny the violence inherent to social and medical gender coercion. A 2016 documentary report by ARTE entitled “[N’être ni fille ni garçon](#)”--viewable online in its entirety--features the experience of French intersex activist Vincent Guillot, who was the victim of multiple IGMs (Intersex Genital Mutilations) as a child, at the hands of a doctor who wanted to “build a boy” (Lohr et al. 2016).¹⁶ Audio extracts from Vincent’s interviews in this film were subsequently included in an episode of “Les Nouvelles Vagues” on Radio France Culture (April 3, 2017), one in a series on “neutralités” focussing on “sexe neutre” ([Besserie 2017](#)). The episode, which includes detailed commentaries by legal experts Benjamin Moron-Puech and Marie-Xavière Catto, convincingly frames the distress of many intersex people as a problem of social and judicial rejection, not inherent to their bodies. I have transcribed Vincent’s words below, but recommend that readers also take the time to [watch](#) the source, for the different sensory effects and affects produced by listening to a human voice. (Content warning for both: severe medical and emotional abuse, depression, dysphoria).

J’ai très tôt eu conscience que j’étais pas un garçon et que j’étais pas une fille, mais comme dans ce monde il existe des garçons et des filles, donc on disait que j’étais un garçon, et voilà, quoi, j’sais pas, et puis à sept ans on m’a fait croire que j’avais l’appendicite, on m’a hospitalisé pour la première opération. Ils ont essayé de, de fabriquer un garçon donc ils ont retiré ce qu’il y avait qui leur plaisait pas, puis voilà quoi, donc, ce qui leur plaisait pas c’est ... on est à peu près sûr qu’il y avait un utérus ou une partie d’utérus, après, le reste, est-ce qu’il y avait des ovaires, des testicules, est-ce qu’il y avait euh, autre chose? euh, voilà, moi, j’en sais rien, j’en saurai jamais rien, mes parents n’en ont rien su, voilà, ils réparaient le garçon qui était râté ... c’est pas en ces termes qu’ils disaient à mes parents mais c’est comme ça que mes parents l’ont toujours perçu, et ma mère m’a toujours dit même quelques jours avant sa mort, c’aurait été si simple si tu étais mort à la naissance ([Bessiere 2017, 8:26-9:34](#)).¹⁷

Another interview chosen for inclusion on this episode gives voice to Dannie, who was coercively and medically assigned male, is living with female pronouns, but identifies with

¹⁶ The entire documentary can be viewed online at [ARTE](#). Vincent Guillot is active in the movement to abolish all IGM (Intersex Genital Mutilation) in France and beyond; Vincent presented the fifth periodic report of France to the Convention of the Rights of the Child, along with the NGO [Zwischengeschlecht.org](#) / [StopIGM.org](#).

¹⁷ The embedded audio clip is from France Culture’s [podcast episode](#) of the program. The original section of Vincent’s interview in the [ARTE documentary](#) is at timestamp 00:48-01:56.

neither.¹⁸ In this [audio clip](#), Dannie opens up about the deep and multiple wounds inflicted not by intersex itself, but by the relentless abuse of misgendering and denial on the part of the state:

J'ai fait ce qu'on appelle une vraie dépression. Mon mal-être venait de ce rôle qu'on me faisait jouer depuis le départ, et qui ne me convenait absolument pas. Et donc, c'était, c'était un peu l'horreur. Mais euh, oui, assigner quelqu'un à une vie qui leur correspond pas, c'est de la torture. Disons que le rôle social féminin est plus confortable, en ce qui me concerne, parce que c'est plus facile d'être une fille ratée qu'un garçon raté. Bon, c'est vrai que j'ai quand même passé trente ans à pointer le doigt vers le ciel en disant tel est [?] .. Il y a des cases, et on rentre pas dans les cases. Donc, euh, un peu c'est, c'est une sortie de l'humanité, quelque part. Et dans notre monde actuel, la différence est une maladie. Mais qui peut soutenir ça? ([Bessiere 2017, 20:08-21:21](#)).

The pain of both Vincent and Dannie is almost unimaginable to anyone more or less comfortable with their assigned gender, and recognized as such by society. But we must try, if not to imagine it, at least not to question its depth or its reality. Both speakers evoke an unbearable discourse of failure: Vincent's "garçon qui était raté," and Dannie's "fille ratée": if there is failure, though, it comes from the state, both its external institutions and our own internalizations of its power.

III. Creating Non-Binary French Within Institutional Spaces?

These examples are limit cases of binary gender's inhumanity (Dannie's "sortie de l'humanité" is particularly hard-hitting). There is clearly an urgent need to open up the discourse of gender to recognize GNC individuals of all kinds. So, where is this opening-up happening? Not at the legislative level, as we have seen: even if the decision of the judge from Tours had been upheld, it would not have set a legal precedent in the French system, unlike under common law. Medical discourse seems equally unlikely to admit non-binary sex/gender in French: despite the few doctors advocating for intersex recognition, the profession as a whole still concurs with Dr. Sabine Malivoir who, interviewed for the same ARTE documentary as Vincent Guillot, [stated categorically](#): "on reste homme, femme [...] il y a pas d'intermédiaire, sur le plan psychologique, c'est extrêmement important d'être dans un repaire sexué, ne serait-ce que pour exister dans le langage, euh, dans la langue française c'est masculin féminin, et il faut se nommer à un moment donné" ([Lohr et al. 2016, 15:21-15:45](#)). There is hope that legal and medical discourses will catch up, but for more immediate representation, we must look elsewhere.

Maybe the institutionalized *études de genre* is taking up non-binary questions? Even there, however, Sam Bourcier argues that "French études de genre are ultimately still bound up in sexual difference" (Bourcier 2017). The 2016 [Encyclopedie critique du genre](#) does have an article on bi-categorization, but—perhaps surprisingly—nothing on *non-binarité* (Rennes and Jaunait 2016), although this would surely change in an updated edition. The many vigorous feminist defenses and illustrations of *écriture inclusive* (EI) also skirt the non-binary question. Eliane Viennot, widely considered an authority on the historical linguistic justifications for EI, does not engage non-binary language in her widely-cited work on the politicized creep, starting in the seventeenth century, of masculine-preferring grammar rules (Viennot 2014). In fact, she

¹⁸ Dannie's words were originally part of an interview on another France Culture programme, "Les pieds sur terre," an episode entitled "[Rencontres intersexes](#)" (Kronlund 2017, 07:53-09:21). I have extracted the audio from the "Nouvelles Vagues" podcast.

explicitly rejects neutral pronouns: in a conversation with *Libération*'s Juliette Debord, she speculates that neo-pronouns such as *iel* would not work because of binary adjectival agreement rules in French (Debord 2017). In English, however, she says that the neutral third-person pronoun works. Viennot, the *grande dame* of inclusive writing, seems to think "they" is untranslatable.¹⁹

French transfeminists argue for a radical anti-assimilationist politics that "is not an abstract critique of this theoretical dualism. Rather, it traffics in actually existing non-binary lives, bodies, identities, and genders on a collective social level" (Bourcier and Espineira 2016). These transfeminist "scholactivists" literally embody their scholarship: in both their activism and teaching, they perform acts of gender refusal and defiance in public, and present alternative models of engagement for academia (Borghi, Bourcier and Prieur 2016), embracing rather than refusing their situation within the communities they study.²⁰ A related model of scholarship, perhaps more accessible for individuals reluctant to put their bodies out in public, is provided by Karine Espineira's *La Transidentité* (2008) and Luca Greco's *Dans les coulisses du genre* (2018), both of which show that academic analysis and theoretical framing can take television and performance seriously as sites of identity formation. Popular media and sexual-gender minority communities, both on and offline, are much faster-moving sites of identity formation than print media, which will always be playing catch-up to a degree, and it is here that we find some of the most creative approaches to GNC self-expression.²¹

IV. Creating Non-binary French in Popular Media

In this final section, I draw attention to just some of the many sites where GNC language and identities are being explored in French, with the hope that some of these resources might be useful to teachers interested in showing students how French non-binary voices are finding ways to express themselves. A much-discussed [plot line](#) of the popular soap opera *Plus belle la vie*, developed in early 2018, sees the character Clara coming out as Antoine, and introduces a young trans man Dimitri played by a trans actor. Taking this narrative arc seriously as social commentary, an article on the online site of *Rue89* (owned by *Nouvel Obs*) helpfully provides a glossary for young French viewers who want to explain this to their parents ([Noyon and Brouse 2018](#)). The article in *Rue89* cleverly imagines a dialogue between a curious but mostly-ignorant parent, and a well-informed younger viewer who patiently explains non-binary, genderfluid, transgender, pronouns, misgendering, depathologization, and more, citing Judith Butler, Marie-Yeuse Thomas, Anne Fausto-Sterling and others. It is fair to assume, given the multigenerational

¹⁹ See contributions to this special issue by Vinay Swamy, Florence Ashley, and Flora Bolter, for more sustained reflections on the comparisons and contrasts between *écriture inclusive* and non-binary-inclusive French.

²⁰ The pedagogical and activist work of Bourcier's Zoo seminars (1996-2000) also provides a model for a transformative and engaged GNC scholarship (Bourcier 1998; Perreau 2016, 85-86).

²¹ Even the 2012 *Transcyclopédie*, while containing an article on binarité, does not mention non-binary trans identities or language ([Espineira et al., 2012](#), 12). However, two of its editors now run the online [Observatoire des Transidentités](#), which has articles and resources on non-binary issues. See below for further discussion of the *Observatoire*.

and popular reach of *Plus belle la vie*, that this kind of media representation will have a wider impact than academic scholarship alone. This is not to dismiss the significance of academic work: rather, Noyon and Brouse in *Rue89* do important translational work showing how theory relates to lived experience via media representation. The assumption that older generations are ignorant of trans identities does unfortunately erase the long and particular histories of trans activism in France, and the experiences of elders paving the way for this moment of visibility. However, sociologically speaking, this TV plot line and the *Rue89* article are an excellent example of what Karine Espineira explores in her foundational study of how “un groupe discriminé devient acceptable, vecteur de mode et porteur d’une culture propre *médiatisable, transmissible*” through televised media (Espineira 2008, 9).

It is not hard to find GNC-affirming articles in the popular press, especially online. Where non-binary people are themselves given voice, it is often an invitation to the writer to try out more innovative linguistic forms. In a feature on the multimedia web project *Les Quatre Heures*, Arièle Bonte, invited to a meeting of the Mouvement d’affirmation des jeunes lesbiennes, Gays, Bis & Trans (MAG) in Paris, describes “des formes linguistiques nouvelles qui émergent pour mieux coller aux ressentis : « iel », « olle », « ul »”, and respects her subjects’ pronoun choices when writing about them in the third person— although she does misleadingly say that the idea of gender fluidity was “born in the USA” (Bonte 2016)!

Gender and sexual minorities are finding and talking to each other on line in ways that don’t just support their identities, but also create them and negotiate their vocabularies. The [Observatoire des transidentités](#) is an excellent example, a veritable clearing-house of analysis and links to trans resources which run the gamut from popular culture to academic. Run by Maud-Yeuse Thomas, Karine Solène Espineira et Héloïse Guimin-Fati, and in the spirit of Sam Bourcier’s Zoo seminars from the 1990s, their mission is to “établir un état des lieux des questions trans et inter et publie[r] des analyses [...] dans le cadre d’un travail de terrain et d’analyses socioculturelles” (Thomas, Espineira and Guimin-Fati, n.d.) Thomas and Espineira also co-edited the *Transyclopédie* (Espineira et al. 2012), and the online *Observatoire* in some ways is a continuation of that project, allowing for dynamic and evolving conversation on trans issues not limited by print media.

Activist Oliver Rowland provided a detailed breakdown and analysis on the *Observatoire* site of the presence of non-binary communities online, in both English and French, which confirms the importance of virtual spaces as sites of identity formation (Rowland 2015). While Rowland admits the significance of English terminology and resources for non-binary expression in French, they bear witness to increasing interest in native Francophone communities, for example, requests to join their [Facebook group](#). In addition, Rowland discusses the work they have done to translate English non-binary terminology into French. They communicated with Facebook France in 2014 to suggest French equivalents for some of the English gender options: “autre,” “genre en questionnement,” “bigenre,” “de genre fluide,” and many more, most of which Facebook adopted. But Rowland also realized, when polling members of French online communities regarding preferred gender, that untranslated English terms were more meaningful for some Francophone GNC people, in particular “genderqueer” and “genderfluid.” While Rowland saw this as an expansive and productive approach to gender expression, Facebook

preferred to be “plus franco-français” and not include any untranslated English in their gender options ([Rowland 2015](#)).

It is undeniable that Anglophone formations of gender are influential in French-speaking GNC communities, but interesting that the appeal seems stronger in informal aggregations : the more official a community (e.g. Facebook), the more they are attached to finding “pure” French equivalents. The appeal of English to more marginalized communities is clearly not a simple result of US ideological colonialism. Francophone GNC individuals and groups are engaged in a creative, transformative and agentic relationship with English. To put it more theoretically, Francophone gender nonconformity, in its relation with English, is “a philosophy of languages together [...] a political theory of community” (Apter 2014, xix), existing in a “perpetual process of translation” (Bourcier 2015). Translation is not something that is done, but something that is always being done in the gerundive; with Deleuze and Guattari we might say that *they* and *iel* and the myriad of gender-expansive terms and identities in both languages are “becoming-translated.”

In his contribution to this special issue, Vinay Swamy analyses the work of the transfeminist artist [Sophie Labelle](#), showing how her bilingual work exemplifies linguistic innovation and translation of trans vocabularies between French and English. While Labelle is perhaps the best-known figure of trans popular culture working explicitly between two languages, a comparable agentic and dynamic translation process can be found in the work of the blog “[La vie en queer](#)” (LVEQ, formerly “Unique en son genre.”) The anonymous non-binary trans author publishes weekly on trans and related issues, and has conducted several surveys among readers on gender identity construction and preferred terminology.²² The 2017 survey revealed a preponderance of responders (about three-quarters of 309 total) under the age of 25, assigned female at birth, identifying as *non-binaire*; the preferred neo-pronoun was *iel* at 55%, well ahead of *ael* at 12% (La vie en queer 2017). LVEQ’s Facebook posts often address the relations between French and English: for example in a March 2018 post they insist on the particular work done by *iel* or other French neo-pronouns in efforts to translate English “they”: “Non, lorsque vous traduisez en français un texte où une personne non-binaire est désignée par ses pronoms neutres (they) vous n’avez pas le droit de les remplacer par des pronoms masculins ou féminins juste parce que ça vous arrange. They se traduit par iel, point final (ou éventuellement un autre pronom servant de neutre en français)” (LVEQ, Facebook post, [March 20, 2018](#)). And, in an interesting comment to another post, they call themselves out for defaulting in French to the English acronyms [AMAB](#) and [AFAB](#), explaining the prevalence of English discourse in trans activism and stating their intention to make an effort to use French equivalents “*afan*” and “*agan*” (figure 4):

²² They have published results from [2016 and 2017](#); 2018 will be published soon on the blog. See also the blog “[En tous genres](#)”, by alexentousgenres, in particular the list of preferred neo-pronouns with suggestions on rules of agreement ([En tous genres 2017](#)); and the Facebook group “[Collectif non-binaire](#).”



La vie en queer Il y a également des termes francophones (afan pour assigné.e fille à la naissance / agan pour assigné.e garçon a la naissance). L'emploi plus prévalent des termes anglophones est sûrement du au fait que les ressources anglophones sont plus nombreuses et les militant.es francophones sont très imprégnés du langage anglophone auprès duquel iels se renseignent. Puis à force de lire afab et amab partout on prend l'habitude. Je devrais faire plus d'effort pour dire afan et agan.

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Figure 4. LVEQ, Facebook comment, [March 18, 2018](#).

LVEQ's self-awareness embraces, rather than simplifies, the complex relations between English and French in Francophone gender formations. It is possible for seemingly contradictory truths to co-exist: trans Francophone communities, especially younger and/or non-binary groups, find English discourse useful and affirming, but they also transform such discourse and make it their own when they do choose it. International, multi-lingual trans advocacy allied with media representation and virtual (online) communities are creating the conditions in which, finally, non-binary self-expression is thinkable. It is the discourse that is new, not the gender; or perhaps both are co-evolving in a Mobius strip of relationality.

The non-binary linguist and writer [Alpheratz](#) is emerging as a mandatory reference in discussions on gender-neutral or -expansive French. Their *Grammaire du français inclusif*, which expands considerations of inclusive writing to a third or neutral gender, is based on academic work undertaken at Paris IV Sorbonne under the direction of Philippe Monneret ([Alpheratz 2018](#)), and they have published several articles on neutral French making a case for the “al-system” (Alpheratz's own pronoun is *al* with neutral agreements as outlined in the lexicon). They have also published a novel, *Requiem*, written using the al-system.²³ I am interested here less in the grammatical details of Alpheratz's system itself, but in the public reception of their work and what it says about the process of socio-linguistic legitimation.

Interviewed on France Culture's “Le magazine de la rédaction” on the topic of inclusive writing, Alpheratz was invited to dialogue with the eminent linguist Bernard Cerquiglini ([Kieffer and Joubin 2017](#)). Cerquiglini, who stars in a popular television segment “[Merci professeur!](#)” is perhaps the closest thing France has to a media celebrity linguist, and he is supportive of the principles of inclusive writing, as he makes clear in [this section of the interview](#) (38:07-39:54). That Alpheratz spoke alongside Cerquiglini on France Culture is a sign that non-binary French is

²³ Florence Ashley's contribution to this special issue considers a variation of the al-system in some grammatical detail, and invites other linguists to expand or to add their own suggestions, recognizing that official sanction of a gender-neutral option will require time.

at least being noticed, and considered worthy of debate with a figurehead of linguistic capital. Their conversation is worth [listening to](#) and citing at length. What is interesting in Alpheratz's presentation of gender-neutral French (as well as their unapologetic [oral use of the pronoun *al*](#) instead of the "universal" masculine *il*) is their insistence that neutral French is responding to a need that is already present. For example, when Alpheratz contributes to the conversation about whether one should say *sénateur* (masculine) or *sénatrice* (feminine) by saying that the neologism *sénataire* could easily function as a neutral epicene word, the interviewer Valentine Joubin exclaims "c'est un nouveau mot!" Alpheratz replies that this is simply linguistic change in action ("la langue évolue ainsi,") and then stipulates that such changes happen because there is a social need for them: "Pourquoi ces gens inventent des mots? Ce n'est pas parce que ces personnes s'ennuient, non ... *al* [sic] est possible que le français inclusif réponde à un besoin que le français standard échoue à satisfaire en termes d'expression de la personne, la langue évolue [...] nous sommes en train de sortir de la bicatégorisation des genres." When Joubin picks up on *al* and calls it a "pronom qui n'existe pas", Alpheratz responds with a forceful declaration of existence of neutrality and gender-neutral people. Alpheratz's affirmation of the neutral gender as something that in essence pre-exists the linguistic frame that would authorize it, provides a fitting conclusion, especially since they underline the creative role played by social media and younger French speakers.

[Alpheratz] : Vous êtes en train de me dire que ma thèse, qui est entièrement sur le genre neutre, porte sur rien [...] si, bien sûr qu'il existe... de quel genre est le mot *iel*?"

[Joubin]: J'avoue, je ne sais même pas ce que ça veut dire.

[Alpheratz] : J'ai pas entendu une seule fois prononcer le mot d'usage, facebook, un milliard d'utilisateurs [sic] dans le monde, toute la jeunesse sur facebook, enfin, une grande partie, qui elle est très productive en terme de néologies et en termes linguistiques, c'est elle qui est en train de créer le genre neutre. Le genre neutre avec des mots comme *iel*, avec des mots comme *bonjour à touz*, de quel genre est ce mot madame? Bon, moi j'essaie d'apporter une réponse en disant que cela relève peut-être du genre neutre.

[...]

[Cerquiglini] : Pour l'instant, il n'y pas de neutre en français [...] soit on décide de créer un genre, des morphèmes, des pronoms, ce que vous faites en tant qu'écrivaine, vous avez le droit, mais d'ici à généraliser ça dans la langue, ça me semble un petit peu audacieux.

[Alpheratz] : Oui c'est audacieux, mais c'est effectivement la voie que je poursuis, et quand vous dites cela n'existe pas ... *cela existe*, vous m'entendez depuis toute à l'heure, *cela existe, j'existe, je suis là* [...] *et je ne suis pas seul·e*. ([Kieffer and Joubin 2017, 46:00-49:52](#). My emphasis.)

Cerquiglini is in many ways a sympathetic ally to feminist arguments about inclusive writing. However, even he draws a line in the sand when it comes to a neutral gender. For him, there is still a prescriptive difference between language as a kind of social contract, and a creative experiment in a novel ("ce que vous faites en tant qu'écrivaine"). Indeed, he finds Alpheratz's extrapolative claim for a neutral gender (users are creating these words to be neutral, therefore neutrality exists) to be audacious. Faced with this, Alpheratz replies quite simply with a reaffirmation of their existence : "J'existe, et je ne suis pas seul·e."

“I exist, and I am not alone.” This simple but powerful declaration by a non-binary person on Radio France Culture, one of the bastions of French culture, might seem to some to be a trivial moment. But in fact, it signifies a profound, if slow, shifting towards the possibility of gender-nonconforming self-expression in French. For now, *iel*, *al*, *ille*, *touz*, and the chaotic, creative non-binary lexical field, can mostly be traced in popular culture and online communities. However, if academics and teachers pay attention to this emerging discourse, we will not only be able to witness a significant socio-linguistic shift, we will be better equipped to understand and respect our gender nonconforming colleagues, friends, and students.

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Louisa Mackenzie, Co-Editor of this issue, is Associate Professor of French Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. Author of [*The Poetry of Place: Lyric, Landscape, and Ideology in Renaissance France*](#) (Toronto 2011), and co-editor with Stephanie Posthumus of [*French Thinking about Animals*](#) (Michigan State, 2014), they have also published articles on early modern French queer ecologies and human-animal relations.