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Annabel Kim, *Unbecoming Language: Anti-identitarian French Feminist Fictions.* Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2018. viii + 263 pp. Bibliography and index. $59.95 (hc). ISBN 978-0-8142-1384-1; $29.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8142-5501-8 (pb).

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By placing Nathalie Sarraute alongside Monique Wittig and Anne Garréta in her study of anti-identitarian French feminist fictions, Annabel Kim offers a new reading of three major French writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries while creating what she terms "a poetics of unbecoming" (p. 18). From the outset, Kim places her project within the lineage of queer and gender studies as well as *écriture féminine*, and announces her intention to challenge those pre-existing theoretical frameworks. She defines the new poetics that she is endeavoring to create as follows: "unbecoming…describes the state of subjectivity without subjecthood enacted by these writers without tying it to an ism (like universalism), which denotes ideology. Unbecoming is a state, not an ideology. It is an experience, not a position--one that is open to any and all readers" (p. 17). She borrows the term "unbecoming" (p. 31) from Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, a work in which Halberstam creates an "archive of anti-disciplinarity" meant to counter the pervasive narrative of success of North American thought.[1]

Opening with an ambitious question, "What in the world needs to be undone?" (p. 1), *Unbecoming Language*'s introduction presents a very thorough and informative literature review, expanded upon throughout the book. Kim's writing style is highly engaging, flowing easily from one idea to the next through clear transitions. She effortlessly carries her readers through the meanderings of her thoughts and analyses, leading us to compelling logical conclusions, in a manner reminiscent of Plato's maieutic.

The book is organized chronologically, following the studied authors' life order, with the first chapter entitled "Sarraute's Indeterminacy: A Universe without Contours." In this chapter, as is the case throughout her monograph, Kim skillfully oscillates between close readings and conceptualizations while demonstrating a sophisticated knowledge of her subject material and of the biography of the author being discussed. For instance, she reminds the reader that, during the Second World War, Sarraute was a Jew in occupied France, which led to her disbarring as a lawyer and her divorcing her husband to protect him, which are facts that often remain unacknowleged in Sarraute studies--especially in France, or at least until recently. This is set to change soon, with the release of the French translation of Ann Jefferson's biography, *Nathalie Sarraute* (trans. Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat and Aude de Saint-Loup, Paris: Flammarion, 2019), the release of which was marked with a conference devoted to Sarraute organized by the Musée

d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme in Paris in September 2019, as well as other events commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Sarraute's passing.[2]

This first chapter is organized into six subsections: "the neutral: a universe without contours," "the political Sarraute," "*Tropismes*: a different kind of language," "the runaway tropism," "the tropism after *Tropismes*," and "beginnings and provocations." Kim reads Sarraute against *écriture féminine*, reminding her reader that "Sarraute refuses to have her writing identified as an example of *écriture féminine*, as somehow fundamentally shaped and informed by her sexual difference as a woman, by speaking about her work's capacity to transcend such categories" (p. 78), thereby setting the stage for Sarraute's inscription into anti-identitarian Feminism and the poetics of unbecoming.

Kim further demonstrates that it is not only logical to study Wittig and Garréta on a continuum with Sarraute, but also that Sarraute provided the very conditions for the possibility and emergence of the other two writers' theory: "in our sameness, each of us is infinite, a universe without contours. This conviction makes Wittig and Garréta's writing possible" (p. 78). This liberating contourlessness that is characteristic of Sarraute's writing is taken up by Wittig and later by Garréta, both of whom strive to erase, in their own ways, these contours that used to seem so essential.

Chapter two is then devoted to Wittig and entitled "Inside Wittig's *Chantier*: To Build a Trojan Horse." It is broken into eight main sections: "Putting Wittig back together again," "Infiltrating the academy: *Le Chantier littéraire* as Trojan Horse," "inside the literary worksite," "literature as trojan horse," "Wittig's materialism," "the demands of *L'Opoponax*," "Wittig's Sarrautian revolution," and "beyond discourse." Kim focuses on Wittig's work as a tribute to Sarraute and on "*Le Chantier littéraire* as a eulogy to Sarraute, bearing witness to Sarraute's life and work through a personal account of Wittig's own work and thought" (p. 83). Kim argues for *Le Chantier* as "an overlooked text, and as both an *ars poetica* and an explicitly literary revisiting of the political theory of *The Straight Mind*. This extended meditation on Sarraute's writing, which fuses these two projects--one literary, one political--together, is in effect Wittig's way of putting back together her cleaved self. Wittig takes the literary Wittig and the political Wittig and uses Sarraute to reassemble them" (p. 83). Through her analysis of *Le Chantier littéraire*, Kim demonstrates that Wittig uses Sarraute's work as the blueprint for it, and to attack the foundation of the straight mind and its seeming universality in order "to replace it with the original social contract, the paradise of freed language" (p. 123). Therefore, the author argues that, in this perspective, Sarraute set the stage for the poetics of unbecoming and for Wittig's queer Feminism.

Chapter three, entitled "Garréta. No Subject Here," is structured around three subsections: "*Sphinx*: Difference is never the answer," "*La Décomposition* (1999): Decomposing Identity," and "Queerer than Queer." This chapter further builds on Kim's project to break away from restrictive categories and to highlight how all three writers have so far been read through too narrow a lens: "We've seen how the political nature of Sarraute's writing and the aesthetic, literary nature of Wittig's writing have been occluded by the categories used to account for them. Garréta's literary project has been similarly occluded by categorization (as an Oulipo member)" (p. 125). Thus, the poetics of unbecoming is primarily an attempt to go against and beyond categorization and the oppressive and hierarchal effects of categories.

Kim recontextualizes *La Décomposition*, published at the close of the decade when queer theory was being born in the United States and introduced into academic discourse, and following the publications of Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, Michael Warner's edited volume *Fear of a Queer Planet* and the special "Queer Theory" issue of *differences*.[3] However, Kim shows that, even though Garréta can be read in the continuity of these emerging trends, she "pushes queer destabilization to its limit, imbuing her acts of destabilization with so much forceful, consistent pressure that they actually break down identity completely, rather than simply creating openings within it" (p. 164). In the same manner as Wittig took her inspiration from Sarraute, Garréta is Wittig's literary heiress, especially in *Sphinx*, in which she turns "the pronoun into a war machine" (p. 163). However, Kim shows the ways in which Garréta is not only influenced by Wittig, but also by Sarraute, most notably in *La Décomposition*, in which her "pronoun-work more closely resembles Sarraute's. Her use of the pronouns *tu* and *vous* destabilize the reader's pronominal position and turn the reader's subjectivity into a site that's always changing, thwarting whatever will the reader might have to enter the text as a stable, identity-laden subject" (p. 163).

Having completed a close literary and theoretical analysis of the three writers on whom she is grounding her own theory, Kim uses the fourth chapter, titled "Toward a Poetics of Unbecoming; Or, Language Has a Body," to elaborate and synthetize her project. She moves beyond the anti-identitarian processes highlighted in the previous three chapters in her individual analyses of the three writers and situates her poetics of unbecoming against *écriture féminine* and its dominating position in feminist poetics. In so doing, she reminds her reader that French Feminism is a somewhat artificial category created by American feminist academics to codify Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray in an effort to counter the overbearing "maleness" of French theory. As such, the reification of French Feminism under the sign of difference is not set in stone and Kim demonstrates how the new triad she is proposing––Sarraute, Wittig, and Garréta––can serve as a counter-point to the traditional Cixous-Kristeva-Irigaray one and an anti-difference French feminist alternative. Furthermore, Kim's study underscores the vital aspect played by language in Sarraute, Wittig and Garréta's texts, whereby language is an embodied entity with which the three writers engage in a corporeal relationship. However, Kim emphasizes the non-humanness of this corporeality and its role in preventing the construction of difference, thus avoiding the pitfall of trapping us in identity. Just as *écriture feminine* can be read as an "emancipatory feminist poetics grounded in the body" (p. 166), the poetics of unbecoming is also grounded in the body, albeit in the body of language and not in difference as an alternative to opposition. For Wittig, for instance, difference cannot be non-oppositional because it is often tied to hierarchy and, consequently, to domination.

In her conclusion, titled "Unbecoming Language," Kim summarizes her various points and her goal to highlight the ways in which Sarraute, Wittig, and Garréta write against difference and identity, by focusing on language as a tool for unbecoming. Ultimately, the author defines her poetics of unbecoming as "a poetics of desire, not desire in language…but desire *for* language" (author's emphasis, p. 168). As Sarraute is currently being granted renewed attention on the twentieth anniversary of her death [4], Kim's study appears all the more timely and relevant. Given its innovative critical approach, *Unbecoming Language: Anti-identitarian French Feminist Fictions* has the potential to challenge our current perceptions of all the "isms" that Kim denounces and to pave the way for a new critical framework, opening the floor to a twenty-first-century debate on French Feminism and its American categorization.

NOTES

[1] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[2] Ann Jefferson, *Nathalie Sarraute*, trans. Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat and Aude de Saint-Loup (Paris: Flammarion, 2019).

[3] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1990), Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) and Teresa De Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3/2(1991).

[4] See the recent conference, "Nathalie Sarraute: vingt ans après," organized by the Bibliothèque nationale de la France on October 17-18, 2019, at the INHA and at the IEA/Hôtel de Lauzun, in Paris.

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