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Annabel L. Kim, *Cacophonies. The Excremental Canon of French Literature*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. 288 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$108.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9-78-1517910877; \$27.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-1517910884.

Review by Mercédès Baillargeon, University of Massachusetts Lowell.

In *Cacophonies. The Excremental Canon of French Literature*, Annabel L. Kim takes us on a wild ride through French literature of the last century to uncover the ethical, poetic, ontological, and political implications of shit in literature. While Kim calls for a “fecal awakening in French studies” in her introduction, she apologizes in advance for the discomfort her topic and the way she approaches it may create, but argues against the sanitation of fecality in literature and society and insists that much can be learned about the world and its potentiality through the study of literature. As she explains in her introduction, she privileges the term “shit” over others (excrement, feces, turd, diarrhea, etc.) because it does not hide its shittiness behind sanitized vocabulary, but instead goes straight to the corporeal, visceral, and real dimension of what she calls “excremental literature” (pp. 5-6). Though Kim situates her work in line with recent research on gut health, environmental concerns, and waste management, *Cacophonies* is essentially a work of literary and philosophical analysis. As a literary scholar, few things bring me as much joy or pleasure as what I consider to be a true literary analysis of works; this is what Kim gives us. Kim’s book offers a fresh, fun(ny), clever, and innovative perspective on canonical texts while weaving through her analysis a discussion about life and death, and about how shit ultimately brings us back to that. With razor-sharp focus, she offers a reading of key passages in the works of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Genet, Marguerite Duras, Romain Gary, Anne Garréta, and Daniel Pennac. She shows how these prominent writers’ *oeuvres* are excremental at their core. As Kim identifies, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, shit serves as an expression of the existential fear of death, animality, the reality of our bodies, and the transience of life on Earth. In short, I would say that she is interested in how shitty literature becomes the ontological and philosophical expression of some of these deepest, darkest fears. In her book, divided into three larger sections, each chapter is essentially organized around the close reading of works by one or two writers and moves across a century of literary history to come back, almost full circle, to humanist ideals and our shared experience of shit, shit serving as the ultimate equalizer (we all shit, we all die).

As Kim argues in her introduction, writing shit is not a new phenomenon in literature; from Rabelais to Sade, authors wrote about shit to push against etiquette, to provoke a reaction, or to amuse a crowd with base humor. However, the rise of the bourgeoisie in nineteenth-century literature led to a purge; though shit remained present in the works of authors such as Balzac,

Flaubert, and Zola, it gradually, over the course of the nineteenth century, seemed to move away from its bodily origin to become more closely associated with the social body, becoming increasingly metaphorical in its way of renouncing its relations with the physical body and dissociating itself from its shared, universal, corporeal origin (p. 19). She discusses French language's affinity with shit; expressions such as "je t'emmerde," "tu me fais chier," "emmerder," or "va chier" all share a scatological root. She distances herself from the usual literary suspects, namely Bataille, whom she sees as operating a kind of "fecal illusion," meaning that the allusion (to shit) tends to pass as presence (of shit) in our readings of his infamous *Histoire de l'oeil*. She also distances her point of view from a psychoanalytical understanding of shit, denouncing how Freud and Kristeva are more interested in what shit stands for rather than what shit does, which is what *Cacaphonies* is ultimately interested in studying. Thus, she concludes that the excrementality of French literature is the dark underbelly of the French Enlightenment and serves as the concrete, embodied, and temporal expression of France's universalism. From grotesque to the cleanliness and industrialization of waste management, Kim's project is to speak directly about shit in twentieth and twenty-first-century French literature despite our best efforts—as literary critics and as a society—to ignore its existence.

Her study of many well-known and lesser-known twentieth and twenty-first-century French writers starts with Céline. Beyond Céline's infamous antisemitism and shitty politics, many critics such as Henri Godard, Julia Kristeva, and Alice Kaplan have long thought of Céline's work as dematerialized, deodorized, and cut from reality. For Kim, however, Céline's work is actually "a call to fecalize the modern French canon, rather than dismiss fecality as incidental or unimportant" (p. 43) and presents a literary politics of abundant excrementality. Writing about *Mort à crédit*, Kim sees in Ferdinand's preference not to wipe his ass clean after taking a dump a paradoxical antisocial logic. On the one hand, Ferdinand's stench pushes other people away, which is fine by him since people serve as a distraction from death. On the other hand, if shit is the ultimate equalizer and reminder of death, then Ferdinand's dirty asshole is also something that connects all human beings together in their mortality in a shared community; we all die, and when we do, we all release our sphincters and cover ourselves with shit. Thus, writing appears as a way to resist death and the effects of time, and literature, as the writer's primary material, reworked through formal innovation, appears as the ultimate site of resistance to death and the passage of time. Kim writes: "Céline's work is effectively a call to fecalize the modern French canon, rather than dismiss its fecality as incidental or unimportant. This is a radical kind of literary politics, one that turns the logic of the canon on its head and throws a wrench into the process by which literary and cultural capital are determined, accrued, and reproduced. Fecal matter, in the context of the French tradition, turns out to be a literary matter, one that would rework our very definition and sense of literariness: French literature is literary not despite but *because* of its fecality" (p. 44). This may be the guise under which Kim places her entire book; to refuse the call to disembodiment French literature and to embrace the (already existing) fecality of the French literary canon.

Her second chapter, devoted to Beckett's *Molloy*, acknowledges the long tradition of Beckett scholars who have approached his work as philosophy, or in relation to philosophy, and proposes instead to walk directly into Beckett's own "shit philosophy," as she calls it. Kim sees Beckett in the continuation of Céline's work; if Céline's poetics was shit, then Beckett's is flatulence. Indeed, *Molloy*'s obsession is with farts rather than shit; "with the flatulent narrative serving as a reminder to follow our noses to the smell's anal origins and the shit that is the material of philosophy, the matter from which knowledge of self and an ontological foundation can be

constructed” (p. 96). Or, as Kim also puts it, “[i]f philosophy is shit, then fiction is the fart that reminds us of where shit comes from” (p. 96). Nevertheless, beyond Beckett’s scatological references (and humor) of some of his characters’ names (Krapp, la Comtesse Caca), or the fact that the city of Ballyba is built on shit, what appears to me as one of her most original contributions in this book is her analysis of Beckett and how he seemingly dethrones philosophy as cogito (Descartes’ *je pense donc je suis*) to place the genuine seat of knowledge in the body, the gut. Writing thus becomes a joyful interruption of life’s existential agony and dread, in a way similar to that in which defecating can also be seen as the joyful transformation of food into nourishment and that the body is, in fact, still alive, an “ontological *sabbat*,” as she calls it—“a raucous, excessive coming together of thought and emotion that takes the convergence of these two things in the caverns of the body as the key to changing a shitty world into creative shit” (p. 102). This passage thus marks Beckett’s legacy as one in which language and flatulent literature are left to circulate freely and become a transformative force for the reader’s mind, highlighting the power of literature.

It is through the lens of “fecal freedom” that Kim chooses to examine the works of Sartre and Genet in chapter three. Beyond their fraught friendship, what ties them together, according to Kim, is how fecality serves as a singular expression of freedom in such a way that existentialism becomes a project of radical excrementality in both their works. Indeed, in Sartre’s philosophy, freedom is embedded in contingency. If bad faith has been primarily understood as a question of consciousness, the paradoxical free decision to deny to ourselves this inescapable freedom, it is also an embodied and visceral issue. From *La Nausée* to *L’Enfance d’un chef*, a less studied parody of a *bildungsroman*, Sartre moves from nausea to diarrhea; if we can say that vomit is the rejection of unprocessed food, then feces is the result of the body having processed the food it has taken in. She sees here a metaphor for the contingency of freedom as an existentialist ideal; you get to do what you want with the hand you have been dealt. As she writes, “[r]ead existentially, vomit would be the result of the incapacity to process contingency, the reality of one’s situation in the world; feces would then be the result of having properly digested contingency” (pp. 118-119). Genet’s existentialism operates along similar terms, but presents itself as more fundamentally anti-power, seeking freedom in the face of power. Kim focuses her reading of *Notre-Dame-des-fleurs* on Genet’s use of shit to express the arbitrariness of life; there is no good or bad, no driving force that drives our lives. As Kim puts it, “[b]y embracing what is considered abject—criminality, homosexuality, excrementality—and treating as abject what has been deemed good-law-abidingness, heterosexuality, cleanliness—Genet hollows out the abject so that it can no longer signify as it used to. Abjection becomes a desiccated, empty shell” (p. 122). For both writers, writing becomes a way to express their investment in *excrémentalisme*, a play on *existentialisme*, and their respective commitment to freedom.

Chapter four focuses on what Kim calls “fecal care ethics,” and puts in dialogue two seemingly opposed works, *La Douleur* by Marguerite Duras and *La Vie devant soi* by Romain Gary. In this chapter, she examines the relation between ourselves and others from an ethical perspective, considering the porous boundaries that form an ethics of care. In *La Douleur*, published in 1985, Duras recounts the return of her then-husband, journalist Robert Antelme, from the concentration camps. He may have survived internment, but he is not entirely on the side of the living. As he is skin and bones and can barely eat, Duras describes with detachment the incredible quantity of shit his body produced and how she repetitively wiped his ass clean, as if it were her own, blurring the boundary between self and other. As Kim explains, “Antelme’s shit stands in for the inhuman, for suffering, for the unspeakable horrors of the concentrationary universe, for

death, while at the same time evoking life..." (p. 139); as long as he shits, Antelme is still alive. Most importantly, Duras's descriptions refuse to present care as a gendered practice; they present it as an animalistic instinct, an ethical imperative to help in the face of someone else's suffering. Similarly, in Gary's *La Vie devant soi*, Momo's instinct is to care for Madame Rosa as her physical health declines to her death; once her health gets so bad that she should have been sent to the hospital, Momo brings her down to the "shithole," as he calls it, where he stays in hiding with her as she pisses and shits herself until she passes away. As the narrator describes his situation in the hole, Momo's self-understanding, in the end, is immanently relational through his care and love for Madame Rosa, who, upon her death, is presented anew with a concentrationary experience. In both *La Douleur* and *La Vie devant soi*, the experience of shit highlights the shared experience of the Nazi camps and relationality; the ethics of care presented in both novels thus reminds us of the permeability and porosity of the self.

Moving away from ethics as the kind of relationality that binds individuals together, Kim shifts her attention in the last section of her book to politics, meaning the structures that determine the way we relate to each other, focusing on the works of Anne Garréta and Daniel Pennac. These two chapters feel, in my opinion, somewhat more rushed and less accomplished than the previous ones, perhaps because of a tight timeline or publication pressures, while still offering meaningful insight. Kim interrogates Anne Garréta's 2017 novel *Dans l'béton*, which focuses on Garréta's childhood and her father's family business of selling concrete. [1] As Kim highlights, the book presents a main character borrowing the same name as the one in Monique Wittig's *L'Opoponax*, placing her novel squarely under the guise of politics, given how Wittig understood literary experimentation as a form of intervention in the political world. With its plays on words, puns, and orality, Garréta's most recent novel has also been compared to work by Queneau, Melville, Céline, Burroughs, and Despentès (p. 164). For Kim, however, the most interesting point in Garréta's work is how she creates an analogy between shit and concrete, which are united in their shapelessness, their lack of limits or separation; "[w]e are meant to think shit through concrete, and, conversely, concrete through shit, and both function in the novel as weaponized materials that serve to crystallize or concretize human relational structures (the kinship of family, in the first case, and the challenges and imperatives posed by racial structures, in the second)" (p. 166). Indeed, this novel is as much about dismantling structures of racism as deconstructing patriarchal institutions of kinship and family, considered the basis on which the nation-state is built and reproduces itself. In the end, Kim concludes by reinforcing her interpretation of Garréta's novel in continuity with Wittig's work using language as something like shit—to be worked on, weaponized, or resisted. Language (in a way similar to both shit and concrete in their material dimension) becomes the material from which a writer's work (and a feminist intervention) may be accomplished as a way to work with and against language, and, thus, the social order.

Her last chapter argues for a democratization of shit and literature by detour of Daniel Pennac's excremental poetics as literary politics. Favoring the form of the journal in an attempt to thwart death and leave a trace, *Journal d'un corps* by Pennac describes the evolution and degradation of the body throughout a lifetime, in which "[t]he fecal is mobilized to level differences and transcend them..." (p. 186), reminding us that none of us will escape the grip of death. Following detours via Guibert, Rousseau, Wittig, and others, Kim argues that Pennac's focus on shit in his life-writing functions as a way to offer a different kind of life-writing which short-circuits memory and goes straight to the visceral, through the embodied activation of our own body defecating. As Kim accurately reminds us, it is an automatic bodily response that, upon fear or

death, our sphincters instinctively release to expel the excrements our intestine contained; a shared experience that does not discriminate. As Dominique Laporte demonstrates in *History of Shit*, *propreté* and *propriété* are intimately linked, dating back to a time when people were ordered to dispose of their shit without it affecting their neighbor's property, adding yet another physical distinction between the self and other. Though, for Kim, the distinction between *propre* and *impropre*, *propreté* and *propriété*, she argues that *Journal d'un corps* attempts to democratize and dirty literature by calling attention to its own literariness. Through his fecal poetics, Pennac questions what defines literature, in and of itself (is it beauty? truth? institutional recognition?). Thus, Pennac's fecal poetic ultimately not only blurs the boundary between self and other, resisting *propriété*, but also questions to whom literature belongs.

Kim concludes her study with the idea of "caca communism," an expression she borrows from Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, highlighting literature as a shared experience, as ungoverned and ungovernable, and belonging to everyone. Kim's conclusion makes sense, and I would tend, as a literary scholar who loves to play with elements of form, aesthetics, and politics, to return to the undeniable power of literature to contest the world that is and create worlds to be. A thread found throughout her book, that she does not address frontally and that would have been interesting to discuss is the place that fecality has always occupied in queer writing. Kim includes iconic queer writers; she analyzes Genet, Gary, and Garréta, includes conversations about Guibert, and discusses Bersani's *Is the rectum a grave?* Perhaps because of a desire to steer clear from the question of AIDS, which in itself would veer the discussion towards a different kind of politics (queer activism from the 80s and 90s), rather than towards the more existential question of subjecthood that she privileges here, or because of her anti-identitarian perspective, Kim never addresses the question of queerness, which could be done without fully engaging in identity politics. To me, her work still begs the question of whether queer existences could be a privileged site for exploring, contesting, or redefining subjectivity through an aesthetic, political, and ontological use of shit. All that being said, Kim ends on a solid conclusion that literature cannot be domesticated, despite our best attempts, and makes a solid case that, by taking up the canon anew and focusing on its shit, we can redistribute prestige, all works valued equally. A fun, irreverent read, Kim makes an original and clever contribution to both literary and French studies.

#### NOTE

[1] Anne Garréta, *Dans l'béton* (Paris: Grasset, 2017).

Mercédès Baillargeon  
University of Massachusetts Lowell  
[Mercedes\\_Baillargeon@uml.edu](mailto:Mercedes_Baillargeon@uml.edu)

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