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Polly Galis, *Frank French Feminisms: Sex, Sexuality and the Body in the Work of Ernaux, Huston and Arcan*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2023. x + 314 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$67.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-1800792418; \$67.95 U.S. (pdf). ISBN 9-78-1800792425; \$67.95 U.S. (e-pub). ISBN 9-78-1800792432.

Review by Joëlle Papillon, McMaster University.

With *Frank French Feminisms*, Polly Galis offers an ambitious, well-researched and interesting contribution to the study of major Francophone writers Annie Ernaux, Nancy Huston, and Nelly Arcan. The book is divided into three sections revolving respectively on 1. the “counter-narrative” (p. 14) they offer to common discourses about women’s experiences of sexuality, 2. the various discourses on gender and the “feminine condition” present in their fiction and non-fiction, as well as 3. the role of women’s bodies in their works and peritext (such as book jackets, interviews with the authors, etc.). Each of these sections is in turn composed of three chapters containing in-depth analysis of relevant texts by each writer. This format, while making for some inevitable repetitions, allows Galis to do justice to each writer by showing their unique positions and propositions around the three key questions she raises. She stresses that through their very different literary projects, Ernaux, Huston, and Arcan destabilize the binaries that structure our lives in the realms of sexuality and gender (p. 20)-binaries such as feminine/masculine, active/passive, and object/subject.

One of the most impressive aspects of the book is the author’s ability to navigate an extremely wide primary corpus, which leads her to observe changes (or continuity) in a writer’s treatment of sex, sexuality, and the body throughout her career or in the various genres she adopts. This allows Galis, for example, to nuance Huston’s rather rigid conception of women’s bodily and social experiences as expressed in her non-fiction by arguing that several of the female characters in her novels escape the narrow categories she assigns women in essays like *Reflets dans un œil d’homme* (2012). Such “contradictions” are underlined for each of the three writers in relation to different aspects of their work or their persona--be it in the perceived incompatibility of Arcan’s “blonde bombshell” look (p. 269) and her highly intelligent and intense texts, or in Ernaux’s condemnation of sexist forms of control over women’s sexuality and concurrent professed enjoyment of songs and other forms of popular culture that put forward limited views of what women can or should do with their bodies (p. 46).

These tensions seem to be at the heart of the notion of “frank feminism” that Galis puts forward in her book. Unfortunately, the author doesn’t develop this idea, so the readers are left guessing as to what exactly “frank feminism” is and how it differs from apparently similar ideas such as Roxane Gay’s

“bad feminist,” a term she coined to capture the common contradictions between our feminist ideals and our everyday practices that often fall short (at least in the eyes of others). Although she gestures (p. 3) towards Gay’s “bad feminist” and Deborah Frances-White’s “guilty feminist” when presenting her own notion,[1] Galis doesn’t explain the need for yet another expression: “These Anglophone feminist concepts highlight the barriers to our collective feminist ambitions that lie within *us* as well as society at large as a potentially more productive means of achieving our feminist goals. I argue for a similarly balanced contribution to French feminisms in the work of Ernaux, Huston, and Arcan that I deem not ‘bad’ or ‘guilty’ but ‘frank’” (pp. 3-4). What is “frank” about “frank feminism”? The fact that most of us can’t live up to feminist ideals? As far as I can tell, Galis uses the expression “frank feminism” in part to capture that the writers discussed do not trust that feminist projects are “realistic;” she points out at the very beginning of her essay that Ernaux, Huston, and Arcan have each expressed at some point a discomfort with having the label “feminist” associated with themselves or with their work (p. 1). Rather, according to Galis, they prefer a more “pragmatic” approach to issues of gender justice. I have never understood this argument, which comes up time and again. Feminist theory and feminist practices *are* pragmatic: they exist to effect concrete changes in the lives of people who identify as women, girls, non-binary, or gender nonconforming. As embodied feminist thinkers living in the world, we are acutely aware of the everyday brutal realities of heterosexist racist societies, and we strive to find ways to survive their violence and to end it.

Why are we constantly cataloguing women writers’ contradictions or ambiguities when it comes to feminism? Ernaux’s and Arcan’s entire oeuvre could be said to be (among many other things) a snapshot of what living under patriarchy as a girl and as a woman feels like, and how it limits one’s options in myriads of visible and invisible ways. These ideas flicker on and off in Galis’s book, for example when she states that Arcan “reveals that hyper-conformity can constitute a sign of feminist protest in itself as a satirical mode of witnessing” (p. 97). It’s unfortunate that excellent remarks such as these remain punctual observations, because centering them would have allowed *Frank French Feminisms* to offer a strong proposition for rethinking how (and why) we assess “the feminist value” of various works.

That said, what Galis accomplishes is significant. The analyses are compelling and speak well to one another. Although all three writers studied now have considerable scholarship dedicated to them, *Frank French Feminisms* offers new insights on the works of Ernaux, Huston, and Arcan. The chapters on Ernaux are particularly interesting, possibly because her oeuvre explores the questions of sex, sexuality, and the body in such diverse ways--from the experience of breast cancer to liaisons with much younger men, from surviving a clandestine abortion to the aftermath of so called “slut-shaming,” and more. Galis makes several excellent remarks on how in Ernaux’s early works, factors such as class and gender structure the possible expressions of girls’ sexual curiosity and expression of desire. Ultimately, working-class models of femininity appear less constraining than their upper-class counterparts, “thanks to their sexual and bodily excesses, their energetic exuberance and their flagrant disregard for traditionally feminine conduct and duties” (p. 114). In another chapter, Galis convincingly argues that Ernaux’s retelling of her personal experiences of desire, sexuality, and painful embodiment “evacuate the element of indignity with which they are commonly associated,” (p. 202) which is empowering not only for her but for her readers who are incited to identify with her.

Galis follows “the Madonna-whore complex” (p. 61) in Huston’s oeuvre explaining the author’s anti-pornographic argument in *Mosaïque de la pornographie* published in the heydays of the so-called

“feminist sex wars” of the 1980’s; this essay follows Andrea Dworkin’s and Catharine MacKinnon’s line of thinking and conceives of pornography as a form of gender-based violence. Galis confronts these ideas with sex scenes in Huston’s more recent novels such as *Infrarouge* (2010) to see how she attempts to depict sex without causing harm (which results from the reproduction of disempowering scenarios). Galis could have been more critical of some outrageous scenes she quotes--most notably when a character in Huston’s *Instrument des ténèbres* (1996) experiences some sort of ecstasy while being raped. This cavalier treatment of the tired rape-as-revelation trope by Huston could be said to be more than “ethically problematic” (p. 228), especially for a writer who has expressed such concerns about mainstream pornography’s violence towards women.

A significant focus of the chapters dedicated to Arcan is the “agonizing double bind” (p. 242) caused by the pressure to present oneself as a sexual object for consumption while being blamed for playing the game (p. 241). Galis convincingly demonstrates, among other things, how Arcan uses the “larva/Smurfette” binary in *Putain* (2001) to show how “women often experience themselves as falsely divided beings” (p. 174) as a result of the extreme negative conditioning we experience from early girlhood. However, in her discussion of Arcan’s work, Galis collapses the narrative voice and protagonist of *Folle* (2004) with the author, something she presents as a “liberty” (p. 74) she can take since others have done so before her. Although justifiable to some extent in *Folle* since the character is named “Nelly Arcan,” this is not the case in *Putain* (2001) which does not stop Galis from talking about the “relationship between Arcan and her father” (p. 166) when commenting on the narrator’s experience. Whether justified or not, this practice of blurring the lines between the books’ content and the author’s life does considerable disservice to Arcan. Galis justly notes that “the body is repeatedly figured as a form of entrapment” for women in Arcan’s work (p. 158), and it seems that in not distinguishing between author and character (something frequently done in critical and popular discussion of Arcan), we are entrapping Arcan further in the situations she denounces. Similarly, some remarks about the author’s death by suicide are unnecessary and feel exploitative, for example when Galis identifies possible motives for Arcan’s decision to end her life (p. 77). When discussing her legacy, Galis notes that numerous readers express “a protective love for Arcan, of a ‘hands-off-my-Nelly’ type” (p. 254). This is most certainly true and I couldn’t help but wish the chapters devoted to Arcan in *Frank French Feminisms* were more considerate and did not overly drag Arcan into her texts.

Although some aspects of the work remain problematic, *Frank French Feminisms* offers a sound reading of how three important writers broach topics that prove to be major points of contention having to do with gendered experience and sexuality. Galis argues that if Ernaux, Huston, and Arcan create a space where toxic dominant sexual discourses are still resonating, they do so in order to “advance a feminist thesis or objective” (p. 267). This idea is well supported by detailed analysis of thirty or so novels, essays, diaries and other non-fiction works, illuminating each writer’s complexity and bringing to light their original and lasting contributions to the understanding of the perilous path to (white) womanhood.

NOTES

[1] Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014); Deborah Frances-White, *The Guilty Feminist: From Our Noble Goals to Our Worst Hypocrisies* (London: Virago, 2018).

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