

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Dirty Work: Labor, Dissatisfaction and Everyday Life
in Contemporary French Literature and Culture
(1975-present)

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in French and Francophone Studies

by

Dorthea Margery Fronsman-Cecil

2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Dirty Work: Labor, Dissatisfaction and Everyday Life
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Dorthea Margery Fronsman-Cecil
Doctor of Philosophy in French and Francophone Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2018
Professor Lia N. Brozgal, Chair

“Dirty Work: Labor, Dissatisfaction and Everyday Life in Contemporary French Literature and Culture (1975-present),” is an analysis of the representation of everyday activities – namely, of work, leisure, and consumerism – in contemporary French novels and other cultural productions. This dissertation examines how these contemporary texts use narrative, generic, and stylistic experiments to represent cynicism and dissatisfaction with everyday life as the consequences of neoliberal capitalist ideology and instrumentalist thinking, which define “work” as labor that produces commodities and profit and “leisure” as consumerism. In this way, these cultural productions critique capitalist instrumentalism for reducing human subjectivity to embodied economic struggle. I demonstrate how these texts portray dissatisfied laborers (and unemployed people) exhausted by unfulfilling work and financial precariousness, who implicate these conditions for thwarting their pursuit of more meaningful activities – artistic creation, meaningful work, love, community-building, political action – and existential freedom. By

problematizing the effects of capitalist ideology, economic inequality, and received ideas about work and art, the texts in the corpus portray creative work, political consciousness, and social engagement as essential to contemporary individuals' sense of subjective fulfillment and of belonging within French society. The corpus of this dissertation includes a wide range of authors, from best-selling novelists to "cult" underground figures: works by controversial but popular authors Michel Houellebecq and Frédéric Beigbeder; newer literary voices Nathalie Kuperman, Gauz, and Julien Campredon; and punk and underground writers Virginie Despentes, Kriss Vilà, and Jean-Louis Costes. In addition to fiction, the corpus includes songs, zines, and journalism. I read these narratives of everyday life – literary fiction, genre fiction, subcultural fiction, and other texts – through a critical lens informed by continental and Marxist philosophy, literary theory, and the social sciences. With this critical framework, I illustrate that the texts in the corpus portray creative work, social engagement, and political consciousness as essential to contemporary individuals' sense of subjective fulfillment and of belonging within French society. Finally, by recuperating the texts of subcultures for scholarly study, this dissertation also sheds timely critical light on texts overlooked by scholars for up to 43 years, illuminating their aesthetic and thematic correspondences with better-known works.

The dissertation of Dorteia Margery Fronsman-Cecil is approved.

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Brian Kim Stefans

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2018

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1-2-3-4...!

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(In review) “Le goût du jeu: pedagogical play, competition, and resistance to neoliberal capitalism in Nathalie Kuperman’s *Nous étions des êtres vivants*.” Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France Postgraduate Essay Prize. September 2017.

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“La prise de la Bastille libérerait des milliers de prisonniers de la consommation!” Gauz’s *Debout-payé* as contemporary French reimagining of the ‘Spirit of 68.’ The Power of the Powerless: A 1968 Retrospective. University of Arizona. November 2nd, 2018. Tucson, Arizona.

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“Le goût du jeu: work, play, competition, and capitalist pedagogy in Nathalie Kuperman’s *Nous étions des êtres vivants*.” Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France Annual Conference 2017: Work and Play. September 9th, 2017. University of Bangor, Bangor, Wales.

“Prolegomena toward a French punk literature: tracing the representation of punk culture and the punk political and sociocultural subject in contemporary French literature, 1977-present.” La Scène Punk en France: Quarante ans d’histoire. Philharmonie de Paris/ANR/CNRS. November 26th, 2016. Paris, France.

“Chômage grotesque: representations of the changing face of labor in France in the grotesque fabulism of Julien Campredon’s *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l’amour des elfes*.” Thinking Work/Penser le travail. The London Postgraduate French Conference. London, England. November 4th, 2016.

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“Trashy literature and literature from the trash: reading and gender apprenticeship in the Beurette Bildungsromans of Faïza Guène and Soraya Nini.” Bad Literature: Yale French Studies Graduate Conference, New Haven, CT. February 1st, 2014.

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LANGUAGES

English: native speaker

French: fluent, near-native

German: fluent

Spanish: conversational ability and reading knowledge

Low German dialect family: reading knowledge and basic speaking skills

Dutch: reading knowledge and basic speaking skills

Russian: reading knowledge and basic speaking skills

Italian: reading knowledge

Old French: reading knowledge

Introduction

“La morale capitaliste, piteuse parodie de la morale chrétienne, frappe d'anathème la chair du travailleur ; elle prend pour idéal de réduire le producteur au plus petit minimum de besoins, de supprimer ses joies et ses passions et de le condamner au rôle de machine délivrant du travail sans trêve ni merci. Les socialistes révolutionnaires ont à recommencer le combat qu'ont combattu les philosophes et les pamphlétaires de la bourgeoisie; ils ont à monter à l'assaut de la morale et des théories sociales du capitalisme; ils ont à démolir, dans les têtes de la classe appelée à l'action, les préjugés semés par la classe régnante; ils ont à proclamer, à la face des cafards de toutes les morales, que la terre cessera d'être la vallée de larmes du travailleur...” Paul Lafargue, foreword to *La Droit à la paresse*, 1880

“Pierre de Coubertin disait que l'important c'était de participer, mais l'important aujourd'hui c'est de participer le moins possible.” Corrine Maier, p. 14, *Bonjour paresse : de l'art et de la nécessité d'en faire le moins possible en entreprise*, 2008

Reading a wide corpus of contemporary French-language literary representations of work, consumer activity, and everyday life in both fiction and non-fiction, as well as of other cultural productions and texts, reveals one invariable conclusion: the French hate work. They do not, however, hate work on principle, or out of indolence, but rather most of them despise working in the conditions that have become the norm in late capitalism: they are fed up with working for companies that have no loyalty to them, weary of the grind of *métro-boulot-dodo*. Not only do they have no love for their work conditions, they also loathe going to shops and hearing advertising interspersed among the pop songs playing over the loudspeakers even as they're surrounded by packaging and promotions. They deplore having television as the most accessible form of leisure, are sick of “hanging out” in the shopping center or shopping online, and wish that they had time to make art, spend with their families and friends, build their communities, and enjoy their lives. So very many works repeat the same litany of dissatisfactions: novels, essays, sociological exposés, economic texts, political pamphlets, pop songs, pop-psych and management press articles, blogs, and movements of political protest. However, are we simply reading the same conclusion phrased hundreds of different ways, or are

there hundreds of slightly different viewpoints, experiences, and sources of everyday satisfaction and dissatisfaction? Where do these views intersect, and where do they diverge?

With few exceptions, the rhythms of work and leisure, with occasional recreational idleness, shape the daily lives of most adults in the contemporary Western world. However, since automatization has increased productivity and lessened the need for labor, under- and unemployment are also on the rise in the US and Europe, and many people are now asking how to prepare for a world with less work. In addition to the onward march of automatization, France has also shifted the bulk of its labor demand to the tertiary sector after much of its industrial jobs have vanished due to outsourcing; today, 76% of French workers (and 87% of women) work in the tertiary sector.¹ Neoliberal economic policies of labor and trade deregulation and privatization were France's response to the OPEC oil crisis and stagflation in 1973, which put a definitive end to the post-World War II boom known as the Trente Glorieuses.² According to sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, writing in 1999, neoliberal economic policies grew the French GDP, but put an end to the prosperity that individual French workers and their

¹ Collective author (INSEE). "Tableaux de l'économie française : Édition 2017." Published 2 March 2017. Accessed 16 July 2018. In the three-sector theory of economics, the primary sector of the economy is that of the harvesting, extraction, and collection of raw materials and foods. The secondary sector is that of manufacturing. The tertiary sector produces services rather than goods. France produced 1,941,000,000 USD in tertiary output in 2016, according to the CIA World Factbook. Economists offer conflicting analyses of the significance of the "tertiarization" of the economy, with some suggesting that it raises real wages and creates jobs, while others link increased employment in the tertiary sector to union-busting, casualization of labor, unsustainable urban population growth and gentrification, and income inequality between social groups and urban and rural areas.

² The "30 Glorious Years" were defined by economist Jean Fourastié in 1979 as the period between 1946 and 1975 in which French industry, boosted by the Marshall Plan and the Bretton Woods agreements, then by economic liberalization, grew at an unprecedented rate of about 5% per year between 1950 and 1973. The creation of a new "white collar" class of middle management changed the French way of life. Fourastié characterized this boom as a temporary consequence of increased automatization of production, as well as consumers' desire for new commodities (cars and appliances), unlikely to be sustained or repeated. However, a period of "stagflation" – rapid inflation and increasing unemployment that accompanied the end of economic growth – announced the end of the Trente Glorieuses in the late 60's. The oil crisis in 1973 put a definitive end to the period. *Les Trente Glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975*. Paris: Fayard, 1979.

families had known during the Trente Glorieuses.³ Furthermore, note Boltanski and Chiapello, the new economy has also birthed a new discourse on work, labor, and prosperity in management literature that justifies the growing economic inequality in France.⁴

This discourse extols the “flexibility” available – mostly to business, but also ostensibly to workers – in the new economy, despite the cost to labor rights, safe workplaces, life-work balance, and the financial security of individuals as well as of entire countries. This discourse evinces itself throughout the media, having thoroughly permeated economic and labor policy, business and management literature and press, and public debates, as well as cultural productions. It drives the deregulation of workplace safety, allowing employers to hire more interim labor for dangerous industrial work and fill their workplaces with subcontractors rather than employees, despite increases to workplace-related injuries, illness, and deaths.⁵ As France has continued to privatize nationalized businesses and deregulate labor with laws such as the 2016 Loi Travail (aka the Loi El Khomri, named after the Minister of Labor who introduced it, Myriam El Khomri), movements of inquietude such as 2016’s Nuit Debout have coalesced to protest the erosion of hard-won labor rights.⁶ However, in spite of widespread popular opposition from numerous major political parties and France’s largest unions, the Loi Travail passed in August 2016, removing more of labor unions’ power to negotiate and lengthening the full-time work week to 39 hours. The 2017 French presidential election of Emmanuel Macron heralded

³ Pp. 20-22. Boltanski, Luc, and Ève Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1999 (new edition 2011). Print.

⁴ Boltanski and Chiapello, 51, 60

⁵ See : Thébaud-Mony, Annie. *Travailler peut nuire gravement à votre santé. Sous-traitance des risques, mise en danger d'autrui, atteintes à la dignité, violences physiques et morales, cancers professionnels*. Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2007.

⁶ The full name is of the law is the “Loi n° 2016-1088 du 8 août 2016 relative au travail, à la modernisation du dialogue social et à la sécurisation des parcours professionnels.”

more liberalization, privatization, and deregulation of industry and labor, leaving many French labor leaders fearful for the future.⁷ Tellingly, although Macron took 66% of the total vote in 2017's final election, less than 75% of eligible voters in France voted. Slightly over 25% of French chose not to choose between Macron and Front National candidate Marine Le Pen by abstaining from voting. 11.47% of people who went to the polls voted "blanc" ("none of the above"), or voted "nul" by submitting incorrectly completed or defaced ballots.

A slew of data, both qualitative and quantitative, points to the sources of worker and consumer dissatisfaction in the 2010's. Surveys by the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE) document high unemployment, the many workers who wish to change jobs, and the failure of real wages to grow with the cost of living.⁸ Other surveys by INSEE, unions such as the CFDT (Confédération française démocratique du travail), private research firms such as Steelcase and GFK, and think tanks including the Institut Montaigne also indicate that vast numbers of workers are dissatisfied with their jobs. Workers say that they plan to retire early, that they don't like their work, that their work conditions are unacceptable, or that they can't find full-time work.⁹ Even right-wing newspapers such as *Le Figaro* have publicized these studies in articles with titles such as "La France, le pays où les salariés sont les moins heureux au travail." Articles that report the CFDT's "encouraging" data indicating that 78% of French people like their jobs also report that 64% are dissatisfied by their salaries and 56% fear

⁷ Noblecourt, Michel. "Emmanuel Macron a placé les syndicats sur la défensive." *Le Monde*. 17 Oct 2017. See also : Peillon, Luc. "Social Macron sème la zizanie chez les syndicats." *Libération*. 10 Oct. 2017.

⁸ Collective author (INSEE) "Emploi, chômage, revenus du travail – Dossier de presse." Published 3 July 2018. Accessed 12 August 2018. Insee.fr

⁹ Wasmer, Etienne. "Insatisfaction au travail : sortir de l'exception française." Institut Montaigne, 2012.

losing their jobs.¹⁰ At the same time, philosophers such as Gilles Lipovetsky, as well as numerous bloggers and journalists, have continued the French tradition, first explored by Henri Lefebvre in the 1950's (and later by Jean Baudrillard in the 1970's), of critiquing consumerism and work. These philosophers argue that everyday life is (or should be) made up of more fulfilling, meaningful, and even sacred activities than participating in capitalism; spending too much of everyday life consuming and working leads to alienation and unhappiness rather than pleasure.¹¹

While it is clear from an analysis of statistical data, as well as current trends in journalism and philosophy that many French people are dissatisfied with their work and with consumerism as the dominant mode of everyday life, the objective of this dissertation is not to look at French society, but instead at how French cultural productions represent, discuss, or satirize it. Here, we ask what fiction and other texts can say about worker-consumer dissatisfaction, the need for better work conditions, and the desire for more meaningful work and daily life that essays, statistics, and “think pieces” cannot. How do art's invented narratives, metaphors, aesthetic evocations, genres, forms, and style relate and crystallize ineffable dissatisfaction with the worker-consumer everyday and the need for more substantive philosophical and political subjective fulfillment? Finally, what can individual artists and writers each say about the different facets of this economic and subjective dissatisfaction of our everyday lives, born from our different classes, sectors and professions of work, ideological bents, and personal disposition

¹⁰ Bartnik, Marie. “Les Français préfèrent faire le ménage que travailler.” *Le Figaro* 10 November 2011. Louis, Paul. “La France, le pays où les salariés sont les moins heureux au travail.” *Le Figaro*. 4 March 2016. Crouzel, Cécile. Les Français aiment leur job, flirtent un peu au boulot et sont mal payés.” *Le Figaro* 12 December 2016.

¹¹ Lipovetsky, Gilles. *L'ère du vide : essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*. Paris: Gallimard Folio, 1989. Lipovetsky, Gilles. *Le Crépuscule Du Devoir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992. Lipovetsky, Gilles. *Le bonheur paradoxal : essai sur l'hyperconsommation*. Gallimard : 2006. See also : Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique de la vie quotidienne, tome 1*. Paris: L'Arche, 1947. *Critique de la vie quotidienne, tome 2*. Paris: L'Arche, 1961. Lefebvre, Henri. *Le Droit à la ville*. Paris: Anthropos, 1968. Baudrillard, Jean. *La société de consommation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

toward hopefulness or cynicism? How can fiction and other texts use these viewpoints to offer inventive solutions that even the most astute non-fiction analyses cannot see or suggest?

French literature scholars Aurélie Adler and Maryline Heck argue that the “grand cauchemar” of neoliberalism, as well as the ideological justifications for *la misère au travail* and individual economic precariousness, have inspired a contemporary strain of *littérature du travail* that constitutes *un retour au social* in French literature¹². Author Thierry Beinstingel suggests that the late 20th-century “return to work” in literature is also the result of the political and personal “prise de conscience” deriving from the student, worker, and activist movements that flourished in May 1968. This “prise de conscience,” Beinstingel argues, is also attributable to the Grenelle Agreements of the same year. The Grenelle agreements proletarianized the white-collar workforce, endowing them with a consciousness of being employees and subject to the vagaries of labor policy, and thus spurring them to unionize. Beinstingel maintains that the awareness that the white-collar class developed of their status as workers made it possible for them to see the inconsistencies and falsehoods of neoliberal managerial discourse, allowing authors to narrativize this awareness as a source of tension and discontent in workplace fiction.¹³ In addition to portraying French workers’ growing dissatisfaction with neoliberal ideology and the lack of fulfilling work, French literature since the 1980’s has represented workers burdened by overwork, harassment, and the dissolution of workplace “social culture.” As the employment market has changed due to increased automatization and other factors, workplace literature has also represented these changes. In contemporary fiction of work, protagonists reinvent

¹² Adler, Aurélie and Maryline Heck. *Écrire le travail au XXIème siècle : quelles implications politiques ?* Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2016.

¹³ Beinstingel, Thierry. “Langages et littératures du travail chez les écrivains français depuis mai 1968.” *Intercâmbio*, 2.5 (2012): 50-60.

themselves by plunging into new careers or exploring new types of work, from offbeat entrepreneurship to artistic endeavors. Some novels even portray the occupational and personal struggles of the unemployed.¹⁴

Of course, literature of work is not new to the 20th and 21st-century France. Indeed, literary representations of workers struggling, suffering, and starving, or searching for pleasure in everyday life, have endured since the 19th century. I would like to propose that contemporary literature and other cultural productions that represent, satirize, criticize, or destabilize common ideas of work and consumerism in capitalism as the most “legitimate” or “necessary” forms of “everyday life,” find kinship with at least two prior centuries’ worth of cultural productions. These cultural productions include fiction, philosophy, and theory, but also songs, journalism, manifestoes, and ephemera such as desk calendars with one suggestion per day for avoiding work. Since the industrial era, theories and fiction of work, everyday life, and indeed of dissatisfaction with both of these, have used the daily routines of modernity and capitalism as jumping-off points for discussions of and the public and private experiences and optics of human subjectivity, identity, sensibility, and socioeconomic existence.

Whence workplace fiction? The theoretical, philosophical, and artistic roots of contemporary literature and culture of labor, dissatisfaction, and consumerism

Debates and theories of appropriate ways to balance work and leisure have been part of French intellectual culture for well over five centuries. Passionate defenses of recreational “idleness” have existed in Western civilization since antiquity, as with Cicero’s *otium cum dignitate*, or worthy leisure. In the Renaissance, Montaigne made a case for idleness and leisure

¹⁴ Notable examples of novels featuring a quinquagenarian’s “réinvention après licenciement” include David Foenkinos’ two novels *La tête de l’emploi* (Paris: J’ai lu, 2014) and *Je vais mieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013). In both novels, the protagonists face severe on-the-job harassment, lose their jobs, then lose their wives in their divorces and fall into a depression before deciding to either follow their passion in the workplace (the protagonist of *Je vais mieux* goes from his unpleasant job in an architectural firm to designing a hotel that becomes successful) or considering offbeat alternatives (the protagonist in *La tête de l’emploi* opens a sex shop with his new girlfriend).

in his essay *De l'oisiveté*.¹⁵ 19th-century intellectuals such as the brothers Goncourt professed that artists and thinking people should “do nothing,” while Communards including Paul Lafargue claimed *Le droit à la paresse*, cloaking a similar defense of leisure in the provocative appropriation of capitalist logic that would call recreation “laziness.”¹⁶¹⁷ The modern literary canon in France has represented exploitative work conditions and dissatisfied workers since the early 19th century, when industrialization and advances in transportation birthed an industrial, urbanized working class and a national literary culture based upon the increasingly popular novel form. This realism grew up alongside a new strain of 19th-century Continental philosophy that considered the subject as worker and political movements promoting the idea that class struggle and class identity are crucial to the pursuit of subjective fulfillment and well-being.

In France, the modern idea of work as a universal value was first articulated in print during the late eighteenth century in Diderot and d’Alembert’s 1751 Encyclopedia entry. Work was defined as an: “Occupation journalière à laquelle l’homme est condamné par son besoin, & à laquelle il doit en même temps sa santé, sa subsistance, sa sérénité, son bon sens & sa vertu peut-être.”¹⁸ In the next century, the workers’ movements and early anarchists and socialists, such as Proudhon and Marx, began to ask if work, already “condemned” for its unpleasantness by Diderot and d’Alembert, was as valuable as it could be to workers living in economic misery. In

¹⁵ For a translation of Montaigne’s essay in modern French, see: Montaigne, Michel de. *Sur l'oisiveté et autres Essais en français modern*. Paris: Folio Sagesses, 2015.

¹⁶ “Je n'ai nulle ambition. Je ne ferai rien. C'est une monstruosité, mais c'est comme cela. La plus belle place du monde, la mieux appointée, on me la donnerait que je n'en voudrais pas.” Jules Goncourt, in a letter to his friend Louis Passy, 1851. Goncourt, Edmond and Jules de. *Correspondance générale (1843-1862), tome I, Édition établie, présentée et annotée par Pierre-Jean Dufief*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004.

¹⁷ Lafargue, Paul. *Le Droit à la paresse*. Paris, Henri Oriol : 1883. Reprinted in 2011. Paris: Editions Allia, 2011.

¹⁸ *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert. University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Spring 2013 Edition), Robert Morrissey (ed), 2 Apr. 2016. Web. <http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>.

contrast to philosophical theories of the subject from the late eighteenth century, such as those of Kant or Hegel, which mainly conceived the subject as a site of sensation and reflection on these sensations and knowledge, nineteenth-century philosophers began to conceive of a *social* subject. In response to the nineteenth-century advent of globalized industry, which changed the work habits and social fabrics of countries throughout the Western world, Occidental ideas of subjectivity within philosophy and the human sciences began to crystallize around the individual's participation in and identification with the working world. This was especially true within the theories of Marx, Engels, and the Marxist theorists who followed them. Karl Marx's early writing proposed a utopian idea of communism as a social and economic system that would allow the division between labor and leisure to dissolve, as all workers would be able to specialize in any type of work that interested them and work in whichever domain(s) they preferred.¹⁹ However, his later writing proposed a less utopian idea of work in which the burden of labor would be lifted by workers' ownership of the means of production, and the engagement of individual subjects with their class would allow them to achieve previously unimaginable subjective and individual fulfillment.

The "break" in Marx's philosophy – between humanistic attention to fulfilled subjectivity and logocentric, cynical, forced class consciousness that subjugated individual fulfillment to a historical notion of "progress" – has ever since fueled debates in leftist theory. (Indeed, Louis Althusser devoted much of his labor to articulating his theory of Marx's epistemological break, until his own "break" from the Communist Party and the psychotic "break" that led to him killing his staunchly Bolshevik wife in 1980.) However, the left has been in wide agreement since the 19th century that labor suffers under capitalism and that consumerism is a distraction

¹⁹ P. 35. Rojek, Chris. *Capitalism and Leisure Theory*. London: Routledge, 2015.

from tedium at best, or a scourge fueling debt and insecurity at worst, rather than an immanent part of modern daily life. The sociology that emerged in the late nineteenth century, such as that of Auguste Comte, examined the notion of the subject in relation to, or as being formed or deformed, by capitalist ideology, looking for the self that *must* be made up of something more than the desire to work and consume. Yet, at the same time, sociologists from Comte to Bourdieu (among others) have argued that capitalist ideology, as well as the material conditions and social roles that reify it, do leave a deep impression on us.

This epistemological category of productive, active subjectivity coevolved with a burgeoning cultural interest in creating representations of workers and laboring bodies on the job, and thus also of the exploitation and alienation of the working class, within literature, visual art, and popular song.²⁰ Within French literary production, these representations appear widely within works of 19th-century realist and naturalist fiction, in the “roman rural” and in the poetry and fiction of the “proletarian authors” such as Jean Reboul and Savinien Lapointe, whom politically engaged authors such as George Sand mentored after they were published in newspapers and journals edited and staffed by the emerging literate working class.²¹ French art and literature has offered representations of these everyday movements since realist literature and art began portraying the figure of the worker-as-subject.

Representation of working-class life, including its workplaces and tasks alongside its more intimate portrayals of domestic spaces and the inner lives of its characters, also allowed the realist art of the 19th century and beyond to relate the personal to the political. Georg Lukács

²⁰ For a look at late 19th-century songs of industrial laborers and the construction of a proletarian “espace de langage” within popular song, see Deniot, Joëlle. “Les ouvriers des chansons, de la Loire à la mer.” *Chanson réaliste*. 12 Feb. 2016. Web. <http://www.chanson-realiste.com/ouvriers.des.chansons.htm>

²¹ P. 175. Allen, James Smith. *Popular French Romanticism: Authors, Readers, and Books in the 19th Century*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981.

asserted that realist art and literature represented the interaction between subjectivity and the objective, ideological conditions of society, detailing the parallel relationship between the individual existence or ontological being of protagonists and their social and historical environment. In this way argued Lukács, realism related the smaller narratives of individuals of the working class to the shared struggles, desires, and triumphs of other members of the same class.²² French Studies scholar Lawrence Schehr contends that since realism went beyond simply portraying universal tendencies of human nature, representing its fictional subjects in identity with others in their social group, it was a literary movement characterized by an interest in alterity. In this way, it was better able to represent women, foreign subjects, and subaltern classes with nuance than prior French literature had been.²³ Realism presented portraits of modern subjects at odds with hegemonic norms and discourses, making inner experiences of sense and dissensus visible as the consequences of exterior social existence.

In the 1850's, works such as the novels of Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola, or the paintings of Gustave Courbet and Honoré Daumier, rejected the exotic themes and images of Romanticism to represent subjects of their time – particularly proletarian subjects and other marginalized social groups – engaged in the acts of everyday life. Protagonists could be seen working, doing housework, writing letters, eating, sleeping, shopping, making love, drinking themselves into madness, or burying their dead. Realist works of art explored individual tastes, thoughts, and desires as metonymy or antinomy of the social, material, objective world outside. This interest in the interaction between inner life and the material world echoes the dialectical definition of subjectivity current in the era's philosophy. This aestheticization of the interplay

²² P. 19. Lukács, Georg. *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle*. Trans. George Steiner. New York: Harper, 1964.

²³ Schehr, Lawrence. *Figures of Alterity: French Realism and Its Others*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

between inner and outer worlds also allowed fiction to do the artistic, aesthetic equivalent of a sociological task as well as a psychological one. By representing what a disconnect between the ideology of the subject's social milieu and their own values could do to a character's stability, motivations, or reliability as a narrator, fiction explored the affective lives and narrative trajectories of individuals whose interior and material existence fail to correspond to "normative" life within their society.

Realism's interest in representing everyday existence in the modern world permitted subsequent artistic movements to consider the modern subject absorbed within the social and material world, moving through the consumer marketplace and the crowd in his free time. As scholar Michael Sheringham noted, this 19th-century artistic interest in the interaction between in the interior self and the exterior, social movements of the workplace, the street, and the marketplace was evident in realist literature and art.²⁴ In France, the Symbolist tradition was marked by experiments to capture the feel and character of modernity, and to show the subject in physical, social, and emotional relationship to the spaces and encounters of the everyday world. Charles Baudelaire's *flâneur* is a figure of modern subjectivity within urban, modern everyday existence, his divagations through urban public social spaces marked by people-watching, window-shopping, and shared trajectories. A poetic vision of symbiotic interaction between self and crowd soothes and orients the *flâneur*, offering him social integration, aesthetic pleasure, and experiences of the self that the private, domestic sphere does not permit. However, in the late 19th century, these domestic images and spaces became central to the palette that artists and

²⁴ Sheringham also argues that this interest in everyday life is manifest within symbolism, surrealism, and the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century. These movements established a work- and consumer culture-based material tradition of representing the everyday within French literature, theory, and culture that continued through the 1960's and beyond. See: Sheringham, Michael. *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

authors used to portray modern life, allowing relatively insignificant and banal projects and objects to dominate the narrative focus, as within the texts of Joris-Karl Huysmans and Edmond de Goncourt. Without question, realism, naturalism, and symbolism's concern for these "modern" details was informed by the experiences of the subject-as-consumer's immersion in the city center shopping district's crowds, looking for items and services, seeing and being seen, and savoring their everyday life.

Like realism, symbolism, and decadent writing, 20th century modernism explored social codes and the trappings of the material world in relation to individuation. Modernist prose and poetry underscored this relationship between interior subjective experience and the material world. In modernist works, everyday objects represented routine, banality, and familiarity, while also offering visible allegories of the unfamiliar, newly broadened sense of knowledge and experience of the world that modern subjects acquired as they encountered the new technology and sciences. Examples of the modernists' unexpected uses of new "everyday" technological objects include Apollinaire's jets and the metaphor of the Eiffel Tower as a shepherd for the wandering flocks of Parisian urbanites, or Proust's characters' discussions of medical pathology.

Surrealism, while remaining engaged with a similarly materialist sensibility in its representations of modern subjective experience, worked to evade the expected, rational use of language, narrative causality, and the objects of the material, objective, physical world. Surrealism's worlds were furnished with commonly found everyday material objects playing surprising roles, as in André Breton's *Nadja*, in which the protagonist recounts his time spent bemused by Nadja's fascination with restaurant menus, or hypnotized by the flashing traffic lights, the cinema, and the dreamlike, technology- and consumer culture-saturated landscape of Paris. Walter Benjamin identified Breton's surrealist portrayal of everyday life as a narrative

world of “modern materialism,” a “little universe:”²⁵ Here, objects of the modern world represent either subjective desires or realities larger than everyday life, offering an unexpected *détournement* of these common objects’ prosaic character.

However, although surrealism set out to override or demolish the dominant mode of narrating modern existence as rational, linear, and logical, “Bretonian surrealism never quite parts company with the everyday... because ‘la magique-circonstancielle’ remains closely linked to a particular attitude or ‘comportement,’ a particular availability to experience.”²⁶ The “behavior” in question, of course, seeks new means of “experiencing,” viewing, organizing, desiring, and understanding of the modern world’s everyday material realities. The ability to understand daily experience in new ways is dependent upon a “disponibilité” (availability) to taking unexpected routes through everyday spaces and using familiar objects in new ways. According to Sheringham, this sense of “errance,” (wandering) “disponibilité,” “attente” (anticipation), and a sense of mystery and unexpectedness to events is the legacy that the Surrealists bequeathed to the Situationists. Only decades after the surrealists, the Situationists offered another subversive variation on representing the consumer-as-subject through *détournements* (reroutings) of previously established ideas, texts, and pathways within physical space. Situationist theories and works of art portrayed and promoted urban wandering, availability to new routes, spontaneous acts, and unusual uses of images and language, to show the “usure et perte d’importance”²⁷ of conventional understandings of textuality, art, time, and

²⁵ “That is to say that in the larger one, the cosmos, things look no different. There, too, are crossroads where ghostly signals flash from the traffic, and inconceivable connections and analogies between events are the order of the day.” P. 83. Benjamin, Walter. *Reflections*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken, 1978.

²⁶ Sheringham 120

²⁷ “Definitions.” *Internationale Situationniste* 1 (1958). http://ubumexico.centro.org.mx/text/si/Internationale_situationniste_1.pdf

space. Situationists idealized free individual movement as a means of defying the expectations of consumer culture, refusing capitalism's organization of public space and its demands upon us.

Looking at these historical literary movements and their topoi of representation allows us to outline a history of texts that critique the drudgery of the worker-consumerist everyday. These portraits of everyday life often attempt to point up the absurdity or insufficiency of hegemonic, normative ideas of subjects finding all the satisfaction that they need in labor, consumerism, leisure, and interactions with media. Therefore, it is crucial to our examination of contemporary fiction on labor, consumerism, dissatisfaction, and the search for subjective fulfillment in everyday life that we identify the wider body of historical movements and works of fiction on these themes. Unexpected literary modes challenging our received ideas and banal perceptions of everyday life – of work, leisure, and idleness – have been the modern literary canon's answer to the social sciences, as well as its major innovation to the literary task of representing humanity.

However, although we won't be examining the era between 1945 and 1975 in the following chapters, I would like to note the importance of this era to developing the ethos of postmodern dissatisfaction with capitalism in its cultural productions about everyday life and subjectivity. The literature, art, and culture of the Trente Glorieuses represented everyday life as a means of thinking and acting against the banality and alienation engendered by the consumer culture of the era. This aesthetic of consumer alienation, as well as the articulation of subjectivity as *resistance* to work/consumer culture and the everyday movement of the modernized world, informs the works from 1975 and onward that comprise the corpus of this dissertation.

Theoretical and methodological considerations: responding to cynical and hopeful writing on work, dissatisfaction, everyday life, and subjectivity

As we can see in the short history of literature and culture of dissatisfaction with labor and everyday life above, this dissertation responds to numerous theoretical texts *through* its

survey of cultural productions whose vision of the word dovetails with, approaches, or otherwise shares some features with these theories. In addition to replying to, and often contradicting, other secondary texts that discuss at least some of the authors in my corpus, I also draw my critical lens from philosophical, historical, and sociological texts presenting theories of everyday life, work, leisure, and subjectivity. Before proceeding to my chapter introductions, I would like to discuss the texts with which and authors with whom I am in dialogue in this dissertation.

In my dissertation, I respond to, or compare the definitions of work and the representation of “everyday dissatisfaction” within the cultural productions in my corpus to, the theories of numerous Marxist, Marxian, and post-Marxist philosophers and scholars. These thinkers range from Marx, Paul Lafargue, and Auguste Comte to Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, Kristin Ross, David Harvey, and Amilcar Cabral, among others. However, it is Hannah Arendt’s definitions of human activity (*vita activa*) from her 1958 book *The Human Condition* that form the basis of my definition of “work,” which I distinguish from remunerated labor and compare with other types of meaningful human activity. In her essay, Arendt offers a comparative intellectual history and analysis of the philosophical understanding of the activities of human life that “condition,” or shape, our world of things, thus also shaping our own material and biological existences. Marxists since the 19th century have written extensively about how labor conditions us. However, Hannah Arendt proposed an alternative model in “The Human Condition,” what she calls “vita activa” – decidedly different from the French “vie active,” or paid work activity.

Arendt takes Marxism to task for limiting the definition of work to labor, which she argues is mirrored in consumption – we work to buy disposable, consumable things, eat or use them up, then we go to work and begin the cycle anew. But what of creating objects of lasting worth, from heirloom crafts to texts? Have we forgotten that the Ancient Greeks considered the

human condition that of shared public and political existence? How did homo faber and homo oeconomicus – man the maker and man the economic subject – as well as a focus on production and property overtake the importance of other work, including creating art? Arendt argued for a new idea of human endeavors that condition the world: work, which produces durable objects and works of art; the labor that creates less permanent goods, and the social and political action that builds the world through its communities. I use Arendt’s ideas in my own work to classify books about rabid punks and homicidal pirates as also being “about working,” putting them in dialogue with representations of office and service workers. By placing my texts in dialogue with the sociological and economic theories of work and philosophical theories of subjectivity that their narratives reference, I highlight their representation of affective and material alternatives to “la misère au travail,” as well as to commodity fetishization and alienation. By valorizing the roles of collectivism, playfulness, collaboration, and creativity in work, these texts offer new ways to “classify” the labor and work of our everyday lives.

Structuralism and poststructuralism are just as important a part of the theorizing of everyday life as Marxist and Marxian theory in the 20th century. Accordingly, my discussion of the literature directly following the heyday of those theoretical turns uses structuralism and poststructuralism to examine how language and texts aim to challenge power (or style themselves as threats to power) just as they metaphorize and aestheticize material reality. Therefore, another theorist with whom I find myself in dialogue is Roland Barthes, whose notions of readerly and writerly texts (*textes lisibles et textes scriptibles*) allow me to characterize the “acting out” in Houellebecq and Beigbeder’s writing as a means of creating *jouissance*. I contend that the two authors seek transgressive physical and intellectual pleasure deriving from refusing *sage* or “nice, proper” uses of language and from splitting their identities

between their private selves and their public, “writerly” selves. Barthes’ theories of acritic and encratic language also inform my analysis of how punk culture and textuality works to define its essence and values with a resistant, anti-authoritarian discursive procedure that rattles the foundations of institutional discourses of power.

Although Barthes’ structuralist insistence on analyzing the *text* does not consider the social position of the texts’ enunciators or authors, I maintain that using Barthes does not necessitate avoiding discussions of the responsibility of an author in promulgating provocative or antisocial statements. Instead, Barthes helps to consider the authorial strategies of using provocative texts to command attention and destabilize discourses of power (which can be very effective when an author lacks power, agency, or social capital, as the punks do). These “destabilizing” or “jouissant” texts are also useful tools for authors such as Houellebecq and Beigbeder who wish to criticize power without implicating their individual status and privilege as social beings and without feeling obligated to propose solutions. As Michael Sheringham explains in his work *Everyday Life*, Barthes is an “incontournable” theorist of the everyday. I would be remiss to discuss contemporary works that critically represent everyday life without using Barthes’ theories of the dynamic, powerful potential of seemingly innocuous everyday language. Barthes’ theories allow us to examine how cultural productions resist the banal, yet omnipresent everyday language of power within their own discursivity. In a similar vein of discussing language as power and resistance to power, I also respond to some of Michel Foucault’s theories of self-writing to discuss the phenomenon of Houellebecq and Beigbeder’s use of a media- and textually-created persona within their texts and interviews. Foucault’s discussion of transgressive literature, as previously mentioned, is important to my reading of Jean-Louis Costes’ fiction as “porno-social realism” in Chapter 4.

This dissertation's theoretical framework is informed by the ideas and writing of scholars outside the Marxist philosophical tradition and structuralism/poststructuralism, too. Aesthetics theorist Rita Felski's work *Uses of Literature* informs my discussion of recognizable scenes of everyday life and enchantment in Jean-Louis Costes' fiction. Economic theory also lurks around the edges of each chapter's analysis, usually as the site from which discourses and controversies of labor and quality of life appear in the fictional works. While specific economic theories are not extensively cited in the fiction and other texts in my chapters, I found reflections of numerous economic and sociological theories in these cultural productions. Particularly prominent in these works were the ideas of Jean Fourastié in Gauz, of Michel Albert and others who warned of neoliberalism's undesirable effects in Kuperman, and Bernard Maris in Houellebecq. The theories of sociologists who examine labor and the economy resound through my primary fiction texts: in particular, I draw parallels with Auguste Comte, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Baudrillard, Luc Boltanski, Ève Chiapello, Annie Thébaud-Mony, and Louis Chauvel.

Although my dissertation strives to fill a gap by offering new viewpoints on much-discussed texts or approaching texts previously unaddressed in scholarship, French Studies scholarship on other modern and contemporary works does inform my analysis. Kristin Ross's writing on mid-20th century representation of, dissatisfaction with, and protest against labor and everyday life in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* and *The Afterlives of May '68* provided useful information and jumping-off points for discussing post-Trente Glorieuses culture. Michael Sheringham's tremendous work on the influences on and of Roland Barthes, Georges Perec, Georges Lefebvre, and Michel de Certeau in *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* provided an excellent model for analyzing how literature and culture represent and critique everyday life's practices and rhythms. I am also, in one way or another,

responding to Aurélie Adler and Maryline Heck, as well as to Sylvie Servoise and other scholars in their in-depth and thoughtful collection *Écrire le travail au XXI^e siècle: quelles implications politiques ?* I also must include the journalists and young punks speaking for themselves and their movement in Chapter 3 as “theorists” of a sort, in that their early articulations of “punkitude” provided the basis for an entire movement’s self-definition and discourse on its meaning. In my definition of what makes novels, songs, slogans, art, and other forms of textuality “punk,” I attend carefully to what these early punk “cultural analysts” said about punk culture to each other and to the world. In doing so, I connect a long thread of definitional discourse to the earliest days of the scene as well as to the aesthetics and narrative tendencies of French punk literary works and songs, which persist even now in the 2010’s. Likewise, I point to the resemblances between the punks’ “amateur theories” and the theories of the more established thinkers and scholars echoed by other writers in my corpus.

I would like to note that there are other connections between the “theories” that the authors of my corpus reflect or refer to in their fiction of work and everyday life. The authors’ shared literary tastes, cultural proclivities, and key theories of the world overlap, pertaining as much to punk and counterculture or subcultures in France – and sometimes to each other’s works – as they do to the “high theory” of sociological and philosophical disciplinary discourse. For example, Michel Houellebecq and Frédéric Beigbeder’s eclectic tastes bring them into association with other “transgressive” types. Houellebecq is known for his friendship with Virginie Despentes; both authors, considered by some critics to be “transgressive” or “trash” authors despite their eventual mainstream success, are as known for their personal lives and alleged sexual proclivities as they are for their writing. Houellebecq and Beigbeder both feature in the first chapter because of their professional and personal friendship; Beigbeder has written

about Houellebecq's works, and Houellebecq has returned the favor, even making Beigbeder a character in *La carte et le territoire*. Houellebecq and Beigbeder are also fans of punk; Houellebecq has collaborated on musical projects with Iggy Pop, the former singer of (proto-)punk band The Stooges. Beigbeder edited the diaries of famed French punk journalist and scene guru Alain Pacadis for publication. Jean-Louis Costes told me that he had never read Michel Houellebecq's fiction, but both authors have used the unusual term "porno-social" to describe art. (Houellebecq's protagonist in *Plateforme* imagines making a "porno-social" film about a romance between a good-hearted Westerner and a virtuous Thai masseuse, and the adjective could just as easily describe some of Houellebecq's own fiction; Costes uses it to describe his own art). Dominique Viart classifies both Houellebecq and Nathalie Kuperman among an ensemble of authors whose novels about working life represent "une sociologisation du roman contemporain." Julien Campredon cites lyrics by the Clash and makes punks into a "race" of proletarian "monsters" in his fiction. Kriss Vilà, author of the first French punk novel, primarily writes in the fantastical genres of horror and science fiction, which places him in kinship with the non-realist fiction about work and everyday life by Campredon and Costes. In addition to work, labor, and creativity, punk and the fantastical genres hover around the sensibilities of my entire corpus. What, indeed, is punk fiction but an attempt to diagnose sociological ills in the world of capitalism and work, and an effort to imagine a utopian solution in punk culture and identity – itself a fantastical project of sorts?

Finally, one last work functions as my silent dialogic counterpart throughout the entire dissertation. Corrine Maier's essay, *Bonjour Paresse* (2004), is notable both for its criticism of workplace culture and for its cynical insistence that it isn't criticizing capitalism per se. Maier repeats that she has nothing against capitalism, just business culture's lack of "humanism" and

“ethics,” its obscurantist “no man’s language,” its lack of equal chances for success, its “arnaques,” and its other means of harming its employees. Coincidentally, Maier’s criticism draws from the works of some of the same authors that I have included in my corpus, such as Michel Houellebecq’s *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and Frédéric Beigbeder’s *99F*. I find this fascinating as a tendency in a book that is ostensibly about a real-life problem and not about literature representing this problem. Perhaps, in the case of writing about work and everyday life (and writing *about* that “writing about work and everyday life,”) it is challenging to take fictional texts “at their own word,” at least not without thinking about how they use literary devices to say something about real life.

Maier also cannot help but allude to the theories of Hannah Arendt, Boltanski and Chiapello, Guy Debord, and Max Weber. When I read her work, I was struck by the symmetry between Maier’s choice of texts to analyze and my own choice of corpus. However, Maier uses readings of these same texts as the basis for her argument that the only solutions to the unethical world of business are to fleece one’s employer by shirking or stealing at work, or to quit one’s job and work somewhere else (but where?). I did not set out to refute Maier by using some of these same texts in my corpus or in my critical apparatus. Unlike Maier, I find that even the most cynical of these texts either blatantly offer, or at least hint at more interesting alternatives to continuing to work in a system that many of us find unpleasant and unfair. Indeed, my corpus includes a number of texts that hers doesn’t, and also criticizes the cynicism and inconsistency of the texts whose vision of the working world she takes as incontestable revelations. So, although I am not directly responding to Corrine Maier in my chapters, I am responding to a strain of cynical discourse on work, everyday life, capitalism, ethics, subjectivity, and satisfaction that her work crystallizes.

Of course, to look at contemporary works, which are overwhelmingly cynical about work and consumerism, we should also consider how they are imbued with what philosopher Peter Sloterdijk calls a “cynical reason.” “Cynical reason” is a counterfeit form of rationality influenced by the tendency to aim to “demask” and expose “false consciousness” that has existed since the first days of the European Enlightenment. When coupled with the tragic “proletarian reality” of life in an increasingly brutal economy, the inability of leftist workers’ movements to unite and oppose capitalism, and the pronounced reactionary and far-right tendencies that have bubbled in Europe since the late 19th century, “cynical reason” stifles healthy subjectivity. Cynical realists feel free to criticize, satirize, and generally mock the economic, social, and political powers creating this “proletarian reality” without proposing solutions.²⁸ This rationalization of a deep and abiding cynicism colors the arguably reactionary work of Michel Houellebecq, Frédéric Beigbeder, as well as lesser-known authors such as Jean-Louis Costes.

Counter-reactions both political and visceral to this cynicism, as well as occasional alternatives of varying degrees of viability, drive the narratives of Gauz, Nathalie Kuperman, Kriss Vilà, Virginie Despentes, and Julien Campredon. Yet all of the works in this corpus owe tremendous debts to the modes of representing everyday life that came before them, especially to the literary avant-gardes. Kriss Vilà and Virginie Despentes stage broke and desperate punks cruising and walking through the city without spending a recreational franc, thumbing their noses at consumerist flânerie. Costes and Campredon show the sinister side of the magique-circonstentielle with their grotesque, monstrous bosses and slave drivers exploiting ceremonial magic to find their fortune. Experimental, avant-garde narratives and startling metaphors make Kuperman and Gauz’s narratives of the daily lives of laborers into poetic calls for revolt.

²⁸ See: Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Trans. Michael Eldred. Foreword by Andreas Huyssen. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

These gritty portraits of everyday life and the French contemporary subject have never gotten entirely away from the utopian dreams of Marxism; in a sense, they are cynical because these dreams haven't come true. Thus, I contend that even in the mostly deeply cynical and pessimistic criticisms of the capitalist "system," the seeds of other, more ethical possibilities for fulfilling work and subjective existence are contained, like seeds within a fruit that has already fallen off a tree and begun to rot on the ground.

Chapter 1: "L'écriture ne soulage guère:" Labor, "creatives," action, and (art)work(s) in the novels of Michel Houellebecq and Frédéric Beigbeder

In my first chapter, I examine two bestselling, controversial, arguably reactionary authors for their shared approach to writing about labor and work, the work of art, the role of the author in their works, and for their curiously scabrous approach to moralizing. To wit, my first chapter analyzes Michel Houellebecq's *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994), *Plateforme* (2001), and *La carte et le territoire* (2010) and Frédéric Beigbeder's two novels about his protagonist Octave Parango, *99F* (2007) and *Au secours pardon* (2007). Aside from examining those novels, I look at how the two authors fashion caricatural literary personas for themselves in interviews, essays, autofiction, and other types of interactions with the media and their audience.

In other words, my research asks how Houellebecq and Beigbeder's fictional works identify and describe the economic, ideological, moral, and philosophical failings of capitalism, and how they valorize and represent art and creative work amidst other labor, rather than how they might try to fix the breakdown of society. By looking at these two moralists wearing the garb of cynics, who enjoy creating cagey ambiguity as to their own beliefs by playing games with their reputations and identifications in their writing and in the press, I show how the authors represent social and moral decay as a type of economic critique. I consider how the authors present everyday life (especially consumerist leisure) as an extension of the misery, the sense of

imprisonment, and the moral perversion consequent to capitalism. I also ask why both authors implicate creative work as the behavior of everyday life that holds the most potential for subjective fulfillment. Finally, I ask why the two authors enjoy creating literary personas and willfully making their “real” opinions, worldviews, and voices harder to discern, particularly given that they place a cacophony of other voices and controversial opinions in their fiction: those of fictionalized versions of themselves, other characters, and other writers that they cite.

Chapter 2: “La prise de la Bastille libérerait des milliers de prisonniers de consommation:” Creativity and globalization at work and play in Nathalie Kuperman’s *Nous étions des êtres vivants* and Gauz’s *Debout-payé*

In the second chapter of this dissertation, I move forward from the cynical 1990’s and early 2000’s novels of Michel Houellebecq and Frédéric Beigbeder to consider French fiction of the 2010’s. In my reading, I ask how Nathalie Kuperman’s *Nous étions des êtres vivants* (2012) and Gauz’s *Debout-payé* (2014) use creative narrative strategies and formal experiments to draw our attention to inequalities and logical inconsistencies in the postmodern, late-capitalist discourse on what a “good job” or a “bad/dirty job” is. To address labor, work, the work of art, the role of creativity in work, and the interplay between our identity as workers and as political or philosophical subjects, Kuperman and Gauz deploy an arsenal of literary constraints, innovations, and styles. These experiments include fragments, diachronic narratives, classical rhetorical devices associated with theatrical dramas rather than fiction, the tropes of the morality play, aphorisms, genre crossovers such as bilingual lexicons and examples of mathematical formulas, intertextuality, and unexpected uses of “nous” in place of the first-person singular. Here, I also ask how two 2010’s French novels that represent two different classes of workers can represent their common struggle to survive in an era of neoliberalism, rollbacks to labor rights, and the strange juxtaposition of adulation of American culture and economics against an ever-rising tide of xenophobia against people with origins in the Global South. Notably, in

addition to raising the problematic question of how these novels show “dirty jobs” as a strategy for implying what “a good job” – satisfying, meaningful, well-paid work – looks like in the 2010’s, we ask how these novels also address the cynicism endemic to subjects of late capitalism. Finally, we ask how Kuperman and Gauz’s fictions positions the activities of everyday life – work, leisure, consumerism, errands, and idleness – as spaces for reflection, remembrance, and small resistances to oppression.

Chapter 3: “Je suis punk, c’est fantastique:” work, leisure, and “punkitude” in French punk literature and culture

Whereas I look at novels of the working world in the first two chapters of my dissertation, the third and fourth chapters instead address the population of people who don’t, can’t, or won’t work – the unemployed underclass, the “marginiaux” such as punks, the children of the banlieues, and other people excluded from capitalism. Punkness (or, in French, *punkitude*) is not merely an aesthetic category or a style of music and dress. *Punkitude* is also a polyvalent discursive tendency that takes pleasure in defining itself through textuality and language; to self-define, punkitude contrasts punk individuality, autodidactic creation, self-determination, DIY (do it yourself) production and distribution with authoritarianism, conformity, and capitalism. Furthermore, as a movement also dubbed “rock du chômage” in its earliest days, the French punk scene has birthed a vast array of cultural productions that propose constructive criticism of work, unemployment, poverty, creative work, consumerism, and everyday life, as well as alternatives – some more feasible and salutary than others – to economic dissatisfaction. This chapter can only zoom in on a handful of examples from a rather broad corpus of punk cultural productions that explicitly address work, often directly linking punk culture’s DIY spirit – “anyone can do it” – to the preponderance of punk musicians and scenesters who also write fiction, journalism, screenplays, and poetry. Punk values, music, and narratives of punk life

inform the novels of Kriss Vilà, François Bégaudeau, Morgane Cassraïeu, Jean-François Bizot, Olivier Hodasava, François-Xavier Josset, Virginie Despentes, Louis-Stéphane Ulysse (who, like Despentes, was published by J'ai Lu), Johanna Almos, and Karim Berrouka. Bégaudeau and Berrouka are both also known for their music, as the singers and lyricists of two well-known French punk bands, respectively 1990's band Zabriskie Point and 1980's band Ludwig von 88. In addition to my examinations of two authors' novels – namely, Kriss Vilà's *Sang futur* (1977), the first punk novel written in French, and Virginie Despentes' *Teen spirit* (2002) and *Bye Bye Blondie* (2004) – I analyze other punk texts. Namely, I look at 1970's and 1980's punk zines and songs from France and elsewhere in the international punk scene.

This chapter asks some new research questions: if, within capitalist hegemony, we base so much of our sense of self, our satisfactions, and our everyday existence around work and consumerism, how can punk art empower “marginiaux” excluded from capitalism to find another path to work and working? What can punk culture “diagnose” about everyday life in capitalism? What power does one reclaim from capitalist hegemony and authoritarianism by identifying oneself in their own terms and creating art outside the artistic and literary establishment? To answer these questions, I examine how Vilà and Despentes' novels, as well as the zines and songs in my corpus, represent alternative forms of labor, such as working for oneself or creative work, as alternatives preferable to working to make profits for a boss. I look at how these works compare working as an employee to the liberating work of writing fiction and journalism, reintroducing the “creative worker” figure explored within the first two chapters garbed in punk style. I also explore how these texts embed sociological discourse and analysis in their works alongside aesthetic innovation and experimentation, as well as new ideals for happier everyday living. By reading punk texts, we find trenchant observations and ideas for praxis, as well as

cathartic fantasies of destroying systems of power and replacing them with a “new world,” in the visual, auditory, and verbal “noise” and “rage” of punk abjection and provocation.

Chapter 4: Perverse picaresque and *chômage grotesque*: Jean-Louis Costes’ *Guerriers Amoureux* and Julien Campredon’s *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l’amour des elfes*

In my fourth and final chapter, I train my critical focus on the non-realist fiction of Jean-Louis Costes and Julien Campredon. I discuss Costes’ novel *Guerriers Amoureux* (2013) and Campredon’s fabulist short fiction collection *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l’amour des elfes* (2006) for their representations of economic anxieties and the rhythms of work and everyday life, which the novels represent through a fantastical lens. In this chapter, I consider how departing from verisimilitude emphasizes the strangeness, alienation, and monstrosity of working and unemployment in the neoliberal 21st century, thus allowing fantastical or non-realist fiction to illuminate an otherwise invisible affective dimension of contemporary life. I ask how contrasting mundane or “base” everyday experience – sex and romance, leisure, entertainment, travel, work, and sometimes violence – with disruptions from the divine, the mystical, or the sinister implicates capitalism for its immoral, inhuman(e), even monstrous actions. Bridging from the punk cultural productions of Chapter 3 into literature that takes certain aesthetic cues from punk, noise, and DIY culture without identifying explicitly with the punk scene, I return to the problematic of French cultural productions that identify as, or are identified by others as *trash*. In France, “trash” refers not to disposable pop culture alone, but also to transgressive literature and art. In particular, I look at the parallels between transgressive “trash” and other artistic and literary modes, especially the literary grotesque and the picaresque. Furthermore, I juxtapose how the “trashy” or grotesque lives of Costes and Campredon’s characters echo economic theories arguing capitalism makes humans into “waste” and “trash.” Finally, I consider Costes’ writing as an unexpected entry into *la littérature de la banlieue* and Campredon’s short

fiction as modern-day Occitan literature. I ask how these modes of writing explore the question of what it is to be human, to be embodied, and to exist within French society despite extreme social and material inequality, as well as a “cultural geography” that excludes people outside of intra muros Paris from cultural integration.

The works on labor, dissatisfaction, and everyday life that I write about here have a shared artistic objective: to make what seems ordinary appear strange. These works accomplish this “estrangement” of the everyday through critical questioning, the imagining of something better, or allegories of the paranormal and mystical. However, their beauty also lies in their ability to make this “strangeness” familiar and recognizable through their sociological portraits of love, creation, and the sacred as well as mundane activities. Most of all, there is beauty in the insistence that people – even those excluded for their class, race, sexuality, gender identity, or disabilities, and even the most troubled ones – are people and subjects, not “trash.” Examining dissatisfaction as a generator of aesthetic possibilities is a useful way of examining contemporary French fiction and other cultural productions’ forms, genres, narratives, and themes, because dissatisfaction often has a remarkable potential. Only when we have identified the source of our dissatisfaction can we consider what might give us true subjective, political and philosophical, creative and vocational and social satisfaction. I invite you to approach this corpus of dissatisfaction with me as the first step to demanding a better world through art – not by envisioning improbable fictional utopias, but by insisting that everyday life can remain ordinary, but also marvelous, and simply much better for us all.

Chapter 1: “L’écriture ne soulage guère:” Labor, “creatives,” action, and (art)work(s) in the novels of Michel Houellebecq and Frédéric Beigbeder

To begin to explore my central research questions, I am dedicating my first chapter to analyzing the representation of “work” in its multifarious senses in five novels by two best-selling, but often controversial and critically divisive authors. Michel Houellebecq’s novels *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, *Plateforme*, and *La carte et le territoire*, and Frédéric Beigbeder’s novels *99F* and *Au secours pardon* are notable within the two authors’ bibliographies for their detailed narration of the *working* lives of contemporary subjects.²⁹ However, despite focusing on a specific facet of the everyday lives of modern people, the novels are also congruent with the rest of their authors’ works, notorious for their depictions of masculine insecurity, sexual aberrance, emotional dysfunction, and anomie. As with Houellebecq and Beigbeder’s other novels, these works are representations of the contemporary subject being pulled between the imperatives of two axiological polarities. On one hand, Houellebecq and Beigbeder’s protagonists are attracted to, or lament not pursuing, ethical lives characterized by meaningful work and strong family, romantic, and community relationships. On the other hand, the two authors’ narratives present this ethical way of living as a lost way of life within the

²⁹ Curiously, Elaine Blair of the *New York Review of Books* entitled her review of *La carte et le territoire* “Work, Not Sex, At Last.” Blair’s title demonstrates that Houellebecq’s representations of working life have been critically ignored as writing about work. However, Houellebecq’s editor Maurice Nadeau said that what interested him in Houellebecq’s first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, was precisely that “J’y ai trouvé quelque chose de nouveau : il parlait des cadres.” In Beigbeder’s case, his novel *s 99F* – which Sabine van Wesemael calls “un procès à charge contre les publicitaires” – and *Au secours pardon*, despite their unflattering portrayal of corporate executives and advertisers, were often dismissed as insincere. Author Thierry Beinstingel even denounced Beigbeder alongside Houellebecq as a “liberal”: “Pour autant, le cynisme annoncé par Houellebecq y est également clairement exposé comme marque du libéralisme le plus débridé. C’est le cas dans *99 francs* de Frédéric Beigbeder qui dénonce le monde publicitaire, en réalité faussement, puisque le lancement du livre se fit lui-même à grand renfort de publicité !” See: Blair, Elaine. “Work, Not Sex, At Last.” *New York Review of Books*. March 8 2010. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/03/08/work-not-sex-at-last/?pagination=false&fbclid=IwAR03o5js_fpexetmIv-CRYeMdJqUjM3A1OPwYn64H6-8WnsHc8frUOT0MF0. Accessed 10 June 2016. See also: Maury, Pierre. “Quatre de ses découvertes commentées par Maurice Nadeau lui-même.” *Le Soir* 20 April 2001. https://www.lesoir.be/art/livres-l-editeur-maurice-nadeau-fetera-ses-cent_t-20110429-01DGD.html. Accessed 29 May 2017. See also: Beinstingel, Thierry – *Langages et littératures du travail chez les écrivains français depuis mai 1968 Intercâmbio*, 2^a série, vol. 5, 2012, pp. 50-60

alienating and dehumanizing ideological and economic landscape of late 20th- and 21st-century France and in the Western world. Houellebecq and Beigbeder's novels present these miserable conditions as the fallout of neoliberal capitalism and the "failures" of what the authors term the "liberation movements" of baby boomers in the 1960's and 1970's.³⁰

Although Houellebecq and Beigbeder's works exude a sense of depressive resignation to the unethical social conditions of contemporary life, these novels also refer to the critical language and ideas of Marxist and neo-Marxist philosophy and theory, and sometimes reimagine "work" as artistic creation and family- or community-building as well as "labor." Their novels represent, but also criticize the dubious ethicality of advertising, consumer and professional identity overtaking subjectivity. While despairing at the preponderance of tertiary sector labor in post-industrial France, these writings praise the meaningful work of artisanal trades and artists. In fact, Houellebecq and Beigbeder's novels insert a multiplicity of representations of artists at work within a repertoire of other representations of, and polemics about, work and labor in late capitalism. Finally, their self-conscious narrators and protagonists juxtapose portraits of desultory consumerism with scenes in which characters lack motivation to work. These implied criticisms resemble Marxist and post-Marxist theories advanced within the mid-20th century, which is also the era at which both authors situate the breakdown of human relations into

³⁰ Scholar Kristin Ross emphasizes the 1960's and 1970's student-worker movements' anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist activism to dispel the notion that they merely pursued a nebulous "liberation," a term still used by former radicals such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who called May 1968 a "cultural rebellion" and a "failed revolt." When not modified (e.g. "the black liberation movement," etc.), the term evokes "sexual liberation," rock music, and hippie fashion. Although Herbert Marcuse spoke of the sensibility of "liberation movements" at the time to imagine how the aesthetics and values of the counterculture could contribute to true political liberation, Houellebecq uses the term "libération" cynically, dismissing political activism as meaningless window-dressing for the counterculture: "s'ils se situaient en principe dans une perspective politique de contestation du capitalisme, (les libertaires) s'accordaient avec l'industrie du divertissement sur l'essentiel: destruction des valeurs judéo-chrétiennes, apologie de la jeunesse et de la liberté individuelle." (p. 55, *Les particules élémentaires*. Paris: Flammarion, 1998). See: Marcuse, Herbert. *Essay on Liberation*. Boston: Beacon, 1969. See also: Ross, Kristin. *May '68 and its Afterlives*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2002.

exchanges of interest and transactions. Amidst their reflections on the contemporary subject's relationship to work, labor, culture, and works of art, the two authors also interweave references to each other's writing and public personalities, demonstrating the ability of art and intellectual work to create and reinforce social bonds.

Here, I demonstrate that dramatic conflicts of Beigbeder and Houellebecq's novels derive from the human need to create – whether we create art and writing, durable goods, or families and communities – being repressed by destructive political and economic imperatives. To parallel this reading, I propose a critical apparatus informed by their allusion to Marxian theories. Since these novels engage with social sciences and humanities discourses, but are not scientific writings, I read these references as oppositional aesthetic strategies as well as challenges to capitalist ideology. Additionally, to address their works' self-reflexive qualities, including self-insertion, I deploy the Foucauldian theory of *ethopoiesis* to analyze how their fiction both refers to and shapes the “characters” of “Houellebecq” and “Beigbeder” built through discussions of the authors' ethos (or self as reputation and as moral character) in secondary criticism.³¹ This permeability between self-fashioning and mimesis allows *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, *Plateforme*, and *La Carte et le territoire*, as well as *99F* and *Au secours pardon*, to position fiction as a forum for making several types of labor and work, as well as the value of work in contemporary France, visible. In addition to examining professional labor and the artefacts of trades and industry, these novels position literary personae as fictional artefacts or “works” that authors construct parallel to and within works of art. Houellebecq and Beigbeder experiment also

³¹ In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle insisted that both (theoretical) intellectual and practiced moral virtue were aspects of building *ethos* or reputation and using *ethos* as a rhetorical strategy. Since Foucault's idea of *ethopoiesis* drew on building or referring to both types of *ethos* in writing, I am insisting on the ambiguity in the term *ethos* in my discussion of Houellebecq and Beigbeder, whose novels portray characters whose actions fail to live up to their intellectual virtue, or the theoretical version of moral virtue that they conceive of but cannot always practice. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Terence Erwin. Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1999.

with art and writing as both representation and metaphor – these novels offer *writing about writing* as a key to the authors’ own poetics. In this way, the authors not only make artistic labor and ideology visible, but also art’s engagement with ideology.

Neonaturalism and nihilism: Why we work, why we consume... and why even bother?

My first question is how Michel Houellebecq and Frédéric Beigbeder’s novels represent and critique the changing role of work in late 20th and 21st-century France, the commercial side of everyday life, and the ethical failings of neoliberal capitalism. Beigbeder has identified both Houellebecq and himself as “postnaturalist” contemporary novelists, presumably because they render flawed, “realistic” psychological portraits of their protagonists. However, critics such as Sabine van Wesemael and Bruno Viard have pointed out both authors’ tendencies toward using fiction to propose social and sociological theories of contemporary life, similar to the “grand narratives” of 19th century realism.³² Beigbeder and Houellebecq’s fiction represents a world in which we perform and value certain types of work because it is profitable rather than satisfying, useful, or good for the world. The two authors’ novels explore this, presenting creative labor – the making of works of art – as “meaningful” type of work within a range of jobs and careers designated as either profitable or ethical. Their novels question which social, psychological, cultural, biological, and material needs motivate humans to work. However, rather than proposing solutions, the two authors create a poetics of despair that translates the economic and social anxieties of modern subjects, as well as the diminishing popularity of hopeful Marxist theories and the “end of humanism,” into a troubling aesthetic form.

³² See: Wesemael, Sabine van. *Le roman transgressif contemporain : De Bret Easton Ellis à Michel Houellebecq*. Paris: Editions L’Harmattan, 2011. See also: Viard, Bruno. *Les tiroirs de Michel Houellebecq*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013.

I would like to open my discussion of Beigbeder and Houellebecq's novels as criticism of contemporary work and "commercial" everyday life with an observation about the novels' "political stances." While both authors attract criticism for sexism, Eurocentrism, and the socially reactionary aspects of their novels' representation of the world, their novels demonstrate an affinity with economic leftism; Carole Sweeney refers to this "mixed" political ethos as "rouge-brun" in her analysis of Houellebecq's writing.³³ While these novels refer to Marxist and Marxian discourse, they use these ideas as rhetorical, poetical, and aesthetical devices in their (usually critical) representation and interpretation of work and everyday life rather than as a basis for proposing programmatic solutions. Beigbeder prefers to dramatically juxtapose citations from Marx with advertising slogans of scenes of exploitation, while Houellebecq practically crib analyses directly from Lukács, Comte, Marcuse, or Baudrillard. Yet it is Hannah Arendt's three classifications of *vita activa* (labor, work, and action) from *The Human Condition* that I find most useful for examining how these novels deconstruct and reimagine labor, work, and social relationships.³⁴ This is because the two authors' novels deny that motivation for work comes from money, instead insisting that work should create and maintain our "world of things" and the conditions for shared existence.

Beigbeder's novels *99F* and *Au secours pardon* draw their narrative tension from the lack of correspondence between, on the one hand, the intellectual virtue and sense of morality that advertising copywriter and model scout Octave Parango holds, and on the other, his behavior and

³³ However, I feel Sweeney's representation of Houellebecq's worldview with the "brown" of Nazi uniforms alongside the "red" of communism is misguided, although well-intentioned hyperbole. Much of Sweeney's analysis of Houellebecq's politics is built upon dismissing the separation between the author and his protagonists as a "deception" that Houellebecq creates to trumpet his own opinions without facing consequences. To avoid this conflation, I compare my examination of Houellebecq's work and its image of the world with the author's public persona. See: Sweeney, Carole. *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

³⁴ See: Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

that of his colleagues. Octave despises his job and what he becomes the longer he works in his industry, explaining to his reader that he wants to get fired, collect a generous pension, and have a happier life. Unfortunately, despite his desire for more meaningful work and an ethical existence, as well as his efforts to critique and change the culture of advertising, Octave's work leads him to repeatedly betray his values. These contrasts between sense of virtue and practice allow the narratives to contrast, and evaluate, different types of labor. For instance, Octave, who has recently ended his marriage, has taken up the company of Tamara, a beautiful and kind Beurette escort who is working to buy a home for herself and her family in Morocco. Although Tamara is a sex worker, Octave describes her as loyal and responsible – in short, she is virtuous – and thus will only kiss her. Tamara tells Octave about her work, and is truthful when she leaves Octave to visit another client; she, and her job, are portrayed as more honest than Octave and his work. Octave promises to help Tamara retire sooner and improve the culture of advertising by casting her in a commercial for a dairy dessert. He even explains his effort as a moral imperative to Tamara: “‘Tu n’as donc pas compris que je suis le nouveau Robin des Bois ?’ ‘Comment ça ?’ ‘Je prends aux riches pour donner aux filles.’”³⁵ By alluding to a literary trope of transgressing the “laws of the market,” Octave's figure of speech constructs a moral binary of evil, rich corporate workers and corporations, and virtuous, poor women in unenviable jobs. However, in this narrative, though Octave sympathizes with “virtue,” he remains “evil.”

When the CEO of the dairy dessert manufacturer rejects the idea of a Beurette spokesmodel, Octave tries to do double duty as capitalist and moralist. Octave frames hiring Tamara as a trendy, commercially viable choice to Philippe, the CEO (“Elle est juste un peu ‘Côté Sud’, c’est tendance, la mode est aux teints mats à la Inès Sastre-Jennifer Lopez-Salma

³⁵ 99F 98

Hayek-Penelope Cruz”), then attempts to convince Philippe to defy white supremacist attitudes. To persuade his boss, Octave shames him: “Arrête d’être nazi comme nos clients ! Putain, y’en a marre de se laisser fasciser comme ça !... Qui dira stop si toi, Philippe, le boss, tu ne mouftes pas devant le racisme et le négocionnisme de la communication mondiale !” His boss Philippe retorts: “Tu crois que je réfléchis jamais ! Bien sûr que ça me débecte le boulot, seulement moi je ne suis pas mégalomanie au point de croire que je vais tout révolutionner, bordel !... On n’y peut rien, c’est la cible qui est raciste, pas l’annonceur.”³⁶ Philippe thus reminds Octave that attempting to compromise between the immoral goals of advertising and the ethical probity of political engagement accomplishes neither. In this work environment, the ideal intern is Odile, “18 ans... embauchée comme stagiaire rédac pendant l’absence d’Octave. Elle n’aime que l’argent et la célébrité mais fait semblant d’être naïve.”³⁷ Unlike Octave, Odile and the others see no virtue or profit in trying to mediate between morality and capitalism.

However, in this environment, Octave begins to crack, and so does his colleague Charlie, who murders a Palm Beach corporate billionaire in her home with Octave and Tamara in tow. As his victim sits bound and gagged, Charlie screams at her that “il est temps que les actionnaires de fonds de pension américains sachent qu’ils ne peuvent pas détruire la vie de millions d’innocents sans rendre des comptes. Qui pourrit le monde ? Qui sont les méchants ?... Notre bouc émissaire, c’est vous.”³⁸ Although he has profited from the same system, Charlie frames his deed as an act of moral vengeance, as well as the consequence of a dehumanizing profit mentality that has made him and his generation, as Octave puts it, “les produits d’une époque... des produits tout

³⁶ 99F 136

³⁷ 99F 124

³⁸ 99F 196-7

court.”³⁹ Still, the court insists that these “products of their environment” are responsible for their actions and sentences both men to prison. *99F* presents a nightmarish vision of neoliberal France, where everyone and anything can be sold, but where a pretense of morality still exists.

Yet this is not the end of Octave’s story; the second book, *Au secours pardon*, takes Octave to Russia, using the hyper-liberalized economic environment and “anything goes” culture of post-Soviet Russia to allegorize the nightmare of consumerism and work in the postindustrial world. In *Au secours pardon*, Octave is a model scout for cosmetics conglomerate L’Idéal, a job where he will feel the same remorse and growing sense of derangement from his role in an unethical system. Octave knows that his work hurts women; not only does he sexually exploit the models and encourage them to objectify themselves in advertising campaigns to make money, he is aware that he is quite literally inculcating women with toxic notions of beauty. “Les produits de l’Idéal contenaient des additifs chimiques de synthèse, souvent à base de dérivés pétroliers... qui avaient la regrettable particularité de donner le cancer des ovaires et du sein... les produits... empoisonnaient les consommatrices comme le FSB ses agents réfugiés à Londres.”⁴⁰ Octave’s greed and his remorse for failing to have ethical relationships with women motivate him to quit his job with L’Idéal. He then joins the entourage of oil billionaire Sergueï Orlov, whose working life is narrated as a grotesque vision of 21st-century industry. Orlov’s “industry” harms women in two ways: first, his petroleum processing company supplies toxic ingredients to cosmetic companies, whose products imperil women’s health. Secondly, Orlov markets “hostage” and “torture” pornography films, which Octave claims are shot in factories where Orlov keeps women captive to harvest their breast milk, or to siphon the tears that roll down their faces as he

³⁹ 99F 241

⁴⁰ ASP 86

tortures them. Orlov then sells the breast milk and tears to the Russian elite. The very means of production in these secondary “industries” exploit and endanger women, making their bodies both metaphorical and literal objects and commodities for men. *Au secours pardon* thus creates a fable of the misery and dwindling prospects for employment in the post-industrial world.

Unlike Beigbeder’s world of advertising, with its outrageous budgets and increasingly outlandish degrees of corruption, as well as its extremes between which a compromise is hard to find, Houellebecq’s novels represent workers doing “everyday” labor for the unfulfilling motivation of “pouvoir d’achat,” unsure why they feel so unhappy. Unlike Octave’s professional life built upon exploitative glamour, Houellebecq’s protagonists live and work in the quiet, banal, and dreary way that millions of unknown, unnamed laborers do. The unnamed protagonist of Houellebecq’s *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, who is deeply dissatisfied with his work and his existence, also encounters a range of other dissatisfied laborers who suspect their work lacks purpose and meaning. He describes the barely repressed anger and sadness of his colleague Catherine Lechardoy, whose unmotivated coworker Patrick arrives hungover and late to work, then “pass(e) le reste de la matinée au telephone. Il parle fort...” Furious at working when her male colleague doesn’t, Catherine rages at the protagonist for his company’s poorly functioning software, as well as the lack of work ethic among her colleagues.

However, Catherine announces that she hasn’t given up hope on having a happier job and a better life; she takes night classes, saying that she works from 8 am to midnight each day because “il faut se battre pour avoir quelque chose, c’est ce qu’elle a toujours pensé.”⁴¹ Without reflecting on the implausibility that she has “*always* thought” this way, Catherine frames struggling and working 15 hours each day to succeed within a supposed meritocracy as a *choice*.

⁴¹ EDL 27-28

Ultimately, though, Catherine's protestations that she doesn't mind the work, that "le travail ne lui fait pas peur, à elle," reveal that many workers DO fear their work and "fight" to survive.

In this way, Houellebecq's portrait of postmodern work culture and workers who must feign enthusiasm despite their miserable work conditions evokes the vision of Western society criticized in early postmodern (that is, mid-20th century) Marxist critical theory such as that of Herbert Marcuse. In *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse explains Western society in the era after World War II as a "comfortable, smooth... democratic unfreedom" representing "technical progress" and a rationalized, utilitarian, functional society running for optimum productivity at the cost of individual happiness and well-being. "Indeed, what could be more rational than the suppression of individuality in the mechanization of socially necessary but painful performances: the regulation of free competition among unequally equipped economic subjects... ?"⁴² Just as Houellebecq's archetypes of unhappy workers such as Catherine Lechardoy "stay positive" about working against their own interest until they can no longer pretend to be happy, society imposes repressive "social interests" on individuals, asking them to remain happy and compliant. At the same, time, other social interests "perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice" by asking us to produce when we are exhausted and poorly paid.⁴³ Catherine's use of the word "fear" indicates her deeply seated, but suppressed emotional rebellion, which she attempts to ignore as she strives to succeed and toe the line of "technical rationality:" "consciousness of the total impossibility to continue to exist in this universe... is being barred in a society in which subjects as well as objects constitute instrumentalities in a whole that has its *raison d'être* in the

⁴² P. 1 Marcuse, Herbert. *One Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon, 1964.

⁴³ ODM 5

accomplishments of its overpowering productivity.”⁴⁴ “Fear of work” is actually the voice of human nature, of emotional and physical needs, within the unhappy laborer.

In contrast to Catherine’s repression of her own fear and sadness, coupled with her brave face before her colleagues (as well as the tears she sheds when she believes no one can hear), her colleague Jean-Yves Fréhaut paints a sunny picture of the “instrumentalization” of human psychology and consciousness under capitalist technocracy. Again, Houellebecq’s vision of “neoliberal attitudes” bears an uncanny resemblance to Marcuse’s description of technocracy and the rise of instrumentalism in psychology, linguistics, and political science. “The science of nature develops under the technological a priori which projects nature as potential instrumentality, stuff of control and organization.”⁴⁵ This acceptance of instrumentalism is embodied in Fréhaut, a young man who is promoted quickly, but seems to invest all of his energy in work and have no social life: “C’était, je l’ai dit, un homme heureux ; ceci dit, je ne lui envie pas ce bonheur.” Fréhaut, a programmer who is very interested in the theory of computer sciences, explains his belief that “toute relation, en particulier toute relation humaine, se réduit à un échange d’information... Un penseur de l’informatique aura tôt fait de se transformer en penseur de l’évolution sociale.”⁴⁶ For Houellebecq, as well as for Marcuse, postmodern technocracy and positivism, at the service of the productivist ideology of liberal capitalism, have reimagined social existence as an exchange of data which eliminates all elements of aesthetics, ethics, and metaphysics from humanness. In Houellebecq’s surprisingly Marxist-friendly criticism of postmodernity, modern subjects are not only expected to agree on this utilitarian,

⁴⁴ ODM 23

⁴⁵ ODM 153

⁴⁶ EDL 43

empirical, behaviorist view of the world, but, like Fréhaut, to be “happy” within it. Tellingly, Houellebecq’s working characters in *EDL*, *Plateforme*, and *La carte et le territoire* all have critical, even visceral reactions to this idea.

In some cases, Houellebecq’s cynical laborers are minor characters, like the Croatian plumber that protagonist and artist Jed Martin meets in *La Carte et le territoire*. As the plumber repairs Jed’s water heater, he tells Jed that he plans to move back to Croatia to open a jet-ski rental store for wealthy tourists. As the narration explains, “Jed ressentit une déception humaine obscure à l’idée de cet homme abandonnant la plomberie, artisanat noble, pour louer des engins bruyants et stupides à des petits péteux bourrés de fric habitant rue de la Faisanderie.”⁴⁷ Jed, whose interest in work and labor informs his photographs of industrial objects and paintings of “métiers” from prostitution to restaurant work and IT, is dismayed at the idea of abandoning the meaningful, lasting work of the trades for meaningless, but profitable labor.

At this point in the novel, Jed’s artistic vision of work is that of industry, which creates tangible objects whose minute details gesture toward the humans using them, both as imitation and by implying the laborer’s needs for precise tools: “les pièces de quincaillerie les plus rudimentaires... avaient déjà une précision d’usinage de l’ordre de 1/10 de millimètre. En somme... l’histoire de l’humanité pouvait en grande partie se confondre avec l’histoire de la maîtrise des métaux... *un hommage au travail humain*.”⁴⁸ Later, Jed tires of his industrial photos and the labor(er)s they evoke; Jed’s “post-industrial” art represents other professions. As the third-person narrator explains, “(Jed) Martin ne représente pas moins de 42 professions-type, offrant ainsi, pour l’étude des conditions productives de la société de son temps, un spectre

⁴⁷ LCLT 29

⁴⁸ LCLT 50-51

d'analyse particulièrement étendu et riche... Une image, relationnelle et dialectique, du fonctionnement de l'économie dans son ensemble.”⁴⁹ However, when Jed tries to represent artists among his portraits of *métiers*, he dislikes the results. He destroys his painting of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, which represents the two artists – who work with visual references to popular culture while also aiming to represent “big” themes of human experience such as religion – but fails to represent their *métier* by portraying their labor. Jed struggles with an ambitious task, as he aims not only to represent artists amidst other professionals, but another “big” human endeavor – the creation of works of art.

Since Jed struggles with finding a satisfying way to represent creative labor alongside other work, when he meets the self-inserted character, a best-selling author named Michel Houellebecq, he is captivated by the author's explanation that writing, and other art, can create an entire narrative around a durable consumer product. Houellebecq explains that a writer can do this by telling the story of the people who work with it, and narrating their labor activity: “On pourrait très bien imaginer un thriller avec un important marché portant sur des milliers de radiateurs, pour équiper, par exemple toutes les salles de classe d'un pays – des pots de vin, des interventions politiques, la commerciale très sexy d'une firme de radiateurs roumains. Dans ce cadre il pourrait très bien y avoir une longue description... de ce radiateur, et de modèles concurrents.” Jed observes that “vous avez besoin de personnages,” to which Houellebecq concedes : “Oui, c'est vrai. Même si mon vrai sujet étaient les processus industriels, sans personnages je ne pourrais rien faire.”⁵⁰ In other words, this narrative approach to representing work is successful because it shows that labor and its products cannot be fully separated, or

⁴⁹ LCLT 147

⁵⁰ LCLT 142-143

alienated, from the people who labor, even when we try to discount the role of workers. With this reminder that depicting labor entails showing humans producing and plying goods, Jed conceives of a technique – a way of working – representing creative labor as a human activity in his own artwork, a painted portrait of Houellebecq.⁵¹

However, the narrator-protagonist of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is probably the most frustrated laborer in all of Houellebecq's works, as well as the one who is most aware of his failure to be happy. The narrator explains that he only continues his job in software engineering because he has spent his life learning to live by "la règle." Without telling the reader what game the rule is part of, the protagonist is quick to describe the rule and its effects on individuals and society. It becomes evident through this description that the "game" is "contemporary life" and the way to "win" is through work, consumerism, obedience, and the sacrifice of personal or professional fulfillment: "La règle est complexe, multiforme. En dehors des heures de travail il y a des achats qu'il faut bien effectuer, les distributeurs automatiques où il faut bien retirer de l'argent. Surtout, il y a les différents règlements que vous devez faire parvenir aux organismes qui gèrent les différents aspects de votre vie... Pourtant vous n'avez pas d'amis."⁵² Keeping busy working and pouring money back into the same technocratic system that keeps you laboring every day forestalls a sense of loneliness and a sense of belonging within a system, but sometimes, "rien en vérité ne peut empêcher le retour de plus en plus fréquent de... solitude

⁵¹ By representing creative labor's relationship to other professions and labor, especially in considering unhappy writers and creators of narratives alongside other unhappy workers, Houellebecq's *La Carte et le territoire* situates itself in a corpus of contemporary fiction that aims to situate writing as another "métier." Sylvie Servoise maintains that works of fiction exploring "le rapport de l'écrivain comme travailleur aux autres travailleurs" by showing unhappy writers depart from older literary depictions of writers who were "happy workers" in their vocation of writing and miserable in their remunerated labor, thus de-emphasizing writing and artistic work as labor. "L'écrivain, un travailleur comme les autres?" *Écrire le travail au XXème siècle : quelles implications politiques ?* Ed. Aurélie Adler and Maryline Heck. Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2016. P. 55-66

⁵² EDL 12

absolue... un état de réelle souffrance...”⁵³ In this struggle, workers must compete for status and power, and also for social status and sexual and romantic relationships; in both markets, the most young, wealthy, and attractive always win. “Le sexe représente bel et bien un second système de différenciation, tout à fait indépendant de l’argent... un système de différenciation aussi impitoyable. ... Tout comme le libéralisme économique sans frein, et pour des raisons analogues, le libéralisme sexuel produit des phénomènes de paupérisation absolue.”⁵⁴ Houellebecq’s narrator thus represents contemporary everyday life, from work to consumerism to dating, as shaped by the reification of capitalist economic power differentials into social relationships.

Georg Lukács’ theory of reification, which has echoed in Marxist theory ever since, pervades Houellebecq’s vision of contemporary life; as Carole Sweeney notes, Houellebecq’s vision of the “rule” is concomitant with Lukács’ Marxist theories of the social and psychological influence of capitalism, as well as its effects on ideas of subjective fulfillment. Sweeney argues that Houellebecq also, in line with Slavoj Žižek, portrays neoliberalism as a system under which “the dynamics of reification penetrate more fully into the interiority of the subject... all human life becomes incorporated into the calculable field of rationalization and totalization... While this is by no means a new concern in modern literature or political thought, it is... the focus of Houellebecq’s writing(.) (I)solation, madness and death (are the) result(s) of (the) failure or refusal to invest wholeheartedly in this system of exchange... (and) the idea of self as a thing.”⁵⁵

Sweeney argues that Houellebecq’s protagonists are “‘bad’ subject(s)... who refus(e) the logic of the system, (and thus) malfunction within the system.”⁵⁶ I agree with Sweeney that Houellebecq’s works’ embed quasi-Marxist challenges to liberalism’s treatment of the self as a

⁵³ EDL 13

⁵⁴ EDL 100

⁵⁵ Pp. 42-43. Sweeney, Carole. *Michel Houellebecq and the literature of despair*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

⁵⁶ Sweeney 86

thing and of people as sources of labor rather than subjects. However, while Sweeney criticizes Houellebecq's works for not presenting a cohesive leftist political standpoint and veering into reactionary views of the world, I believe that this tendency in Houellebecq's works is an effort to criticize and moralize. His narrators revel in describing the injustices and unethicity of daily life in capitalism and the cynicism it engenders, "theorizing" about the contemporary subject's possible roles within capitalism and excoriating its failures to be humane. Beigbeder's protagonists share this same tendency toward "theorizing" and cynically moralizing.

These theories may be economic or sociological, but as often as not, Houellebecq and Beigbeder's novels offer armchair psychology to explain the contemporary world. In this way, their "theories" of modern life resemble critical theory such as that of Herbert Marcuse. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse used a psychoanalytic approach to discussing how social existence and ideology enforce the "happy consciousness." In this psychological state of "mandatory happiness," subjects "understand" that the technocratic order has their best interests at heart and enjoy its distracting "benefits." Likewise, Houellebecq and Beigbeder's novels also imply that sex and love's emotional and psychological content have become evacuated by the market, just as work has, and that therefore happiness in love is no more possible than in work and consumerism. Both authors' works speak of a system of "seduction" and power that has replaced love and warped the human consciousness, implying that culture has wrought a psychic disturbance at an unconscious level as well as a conscious one. However, in doing so, they offer an essentializing view of social and economic dynamics in which men are all greedy and immoral and women are their virtuous victims. Just as Octave imagines stealing from "les riches" to "donne(r) aux filles" and describes Russia as a land of models who moonlight as prostitutes and whose bodily secretions are bottled and sold, Houellebecq's protagonist in *EDL*

advances a theory of gendered “systems” of social being, which his culture’s values have corrupted and made dysfunctional. “Il y a un système basé sur l’argent, la domination, et la peur – un système plutôt masculin, appelons-le Mars ; il y a un système féminin basé sur la séduction et le sexe, appelons-le Vénus.”⁵⁷ Echoing other gendered theories of psychological disturbances, such as those of Jung and Lacan, the protagonist details his theories to his psychiatrist, who “me reprochait de parler en termes trop généraux, trop sociologiques... Je devais au contraire... essayer de me ‘recentrer sur moi-même.’” The narrator responds by saying ‘Mais j’en ai un peu assez, de moi-même...’ as though the self were another “thing” to tire of.

Like *EDL*’s protagonist, Octave advances gender-essentializing pop-psych “theories” explaining social inequalities and alienation as type of violence wrought by men, who feel that they have been “let down” by women and thus behave destructively to women. Octave explains why he has accepted working in industries that exploit and harm women, both directly and indirectly: “A l’adolescence notre mère cesse de nous toucher... à partir de la puberté notre corps n’est plus assez serré, bercé, trituré, léché, câliné, tâté, massé... Nous sommes drogués au désir. Il nous faut notre dose de corps frais et nouveaux, la société nous a formatés pour être embrassés comme des enfants éternellement gâtés, égocentriques et amnésiques.”⁵⁸ Just as the works of Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt School linked the economic forces of capitalism to dysfunction within the individual psyche and thus in society, as well as to commodified sexuality that cannot fulfill human psychological and emotional needs, Houellebecq and Beigbeder’s novels recount cautionary stories of capitalism stifling and perverting human relationships.

⁵⁷ EDL 138

⁵⁸ ASP 147-8

I would like to connect Houellebecq and Beigbeder's representation of workers as frustrated laborers longing to create more enduring works, as well as their representation of consumerism as parasitical to both labor and art, back to Marcuse's pronouncements as well. Marcuse spoke of art and literature of dissent as forces of "artistic alienation" that keep a gap between artistic expression, with its aesthetics as a means of expressing the anguish and frustration of living in our world, and the rational, technological, bourgeois world. Art offers "conflict with the world of progress, the negation of the order of business."⁵⁹ Yet Marcuse also argues "the absorbent power of society depletes the artistic dimension by assimilating its antagonistic contents,"⁶⁰ neutralizing the aesthetic rebellion of art and its challenge to the ideology of happy productivity. In a similar critique of the subsumption of rebellion into the market, Beigbeder's novels show that Octave's efforts for "socially conscious" campaigns become mere fodder for marketing and merchandising. Casting a Beurette model and helping L'Idéal construct a campaign with a Chechnyan model to raise awareness of the refugee crisis will increase profit margins, but otherwise changes nothing in its recuperation of subversion.

In Houellebecq's works, the same appropriation of resistance can be viewed from outside the machine of the advertising industry, in the real world. While in the shopping district of Rouen one weekend, *EDL*'s narrator watches the crowd:

"J'observe ensuite que tous ces gens semblent satisfaits d'eux-mêmes et de l'univers... c'est étonnant, voire un peu effrayant... Certains parmi les plus jeunes sont vêtus de blousons aux motifs empruntés au hard-rock le plus sauvage ; on peut y lire des phrases telles que 'Kill them all !' ou 'Fuck and destroy !'; mais tous communient dans la certitude de passer un agréable après-midi, essentiellement dévolu à la consommation..."⁶¹

⁵⁹ ODM 60

⁶⁰ ODM 61

⁶¹ EDL 70

The narrator notes that the young people's display of once-subversive messages on their clothing as accessories within a "look" does not seem to lead them to any sort of subversive or oppositional political behavior. In this way, Houellebecq's work narrativizes the subversion-recuperation dynamic that Marcuse details in *An Essay on Liberation*, which proposed that encounters with the aesthetics and "style" of liberation could potentially incite psychological changes that could lead to political action. However, Marcuse warned, if political and class consciousness didn't follow the encounter, the style would be recuperated into capitalism.

Beigbeder and Houellebecq's novels also try not only to explain why economics shapes labor, daily activities, and ideology, but also to show how the economic changes in post-industrial France have changed the conditions of labor and modeled our idea of "work" through the infinite, repeated activity of labor. Marxist theories since Marx have performed a similar task of representing and criticizing work in its ever-shifting forms. Even though he initially imagined an industrialized, completely automated world without labor, Marx rarely discussed work as a process with individual and durable ends (and end products) rather than constant churning of the machine of production. Hannah Arendt argued that with industrialization, labor's rhythms have altered our biological rhythms, imposing cycles of production onto our bodies' rest, work, and movement through space and time (as schedules, shifts, business hours, and so on).⁶²

Specialization and craftsmanship have been replaced by cheap, but not lasting commodities and the division of labor, which, "entirely appropriate and attuned to the laboring process, has

⁶² Concurrent theories of the shift from old ideas of time to new rhythms of life based around labor and consumption can be found in Guy Debord's *La société du spectacle*. For Debord, this shift is based in the means by which we fetishize merchandise, make ourselves into merchandise, and allow the the economy to "transformer le monde en économie" (38) and "la merchandise (à parvenir) à l'occupation totale de la vie sociale." (39) In Debord's opinion, humanity's experience of time is cyclical, and modernized capitalism – le spectacle – enacts "l'appropriation sociale du temps" to produce the experience of man and the figure of humanity "par le travail humain," in these work cycles, which correspond to Arendt's biologically-based, cyclical description of labor. Debord, Guy. *La société du spectacle*. Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967.

become one of the chief characteristics of the modern work processes, that is, of the fabrication and production of use objects... replacing the rigorous specialization formerly required for all workmanship.”⁶³ In the way that Marx and Marxists such as Arendt responded to, and described *work* in terms of endless and thus disposable *labor*, Houellebecq and Beigbeder lament old ways of working gone by, especially regarding the satisfaction and *permanence* that work is no longer expected to give. These novels also depict new ways of “work” as mere excuses for circulating and accumulating capital through debasement and exploitation.

This loss of craftsmanship and specialization to the division of labor, and the ensuing disappearance of trades, is the central preoccupation of *LCLT*'s protagonist Jed. However, the specter of lost ways of work within modern, post-industrialized capitalism also skulks around the edges of Houellebecq's other works. For instance, in *Plateforme*, protagonist Michel's girlfriend Valérie's family sells their pig farm when competition from industrialized farming threatens to bankrupt them. In Beigbeder's *Au secours pardon*, Octave reflects that the traditional sense of “métier” has been altered by shifts to the economy: “Mon métier n'en était pas vraiment un : ‘talent scout’, même le nom est pathétique. J'étais payé pour chercher la plus belle fille du monde... Parfois j'avais l'impression d'être un parasite, un contrebandier ou un proxénète ; une espèce de charognard qui ne se nourrirait que de chair fraîche.”⁶⁴ Although he profits from this system, Octave laments that jobs that encourage consumption and help the rich accumulate wealth, which cause harm to society rather than improving it, are prestigious and lucrative.

By looking at the characters who populate the two novelists' works who are either artists or people drawn to creative expression, we will also look at how Houellebecq and Beigbeder use

⁶³ THC 125

⁶⁴ ASP 27

the creative archetype to show human motivation to do lasting and fulfilling work as being repressed by the drive to labor and consume. As I have noted, Houellebecq and Beigbeder's portrait of the world follows those of thinkers such as Arendt and Marcuse, who discuss industrial consumerism's transformation of all work into labor. Furthermore, Beigbeder and Houellebecq are far from being the first novelists, or even the first generation of novelists portraying consumerism's influence on work. Kristin Ross's work on the 1960's in France analyzes the films, journalism, fiction, and art represented work and consumer culture, showing the changes to everyday life and national identity near the end of the colonial era. The critical "works about work" that Marcuse and Arendt wrote, as well as the artistic "works about work" that Ross analyzes in her (dare I say) "work about (art)works about work," treat the question of motivation to work as shifting with the transition of society in consumerism and the modernization of post-World War II Europe and the U.S. Houellebecq and Beigbeder's novels also represent protagonists whose motivations to create meaning through their work are stifled by economic constraints. In this way, their novels dismiss profit as the motivating force for work, suggesting that the desires to invent, innovate, and engage in world-changing or world-building through labor and work may guide us toward fulfillment.

In fact, in their novels, the need for creativity is framed as not only the condition for happiness in work, but as a necessary condition for maintaining one's mental and physical health. Work that denies and frustrates the human need to create, while also denying the value of human life in general, is shown as dangerous to individuals and society. As a case in point, Houellebecq's protagonist in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* derives no joy from his work or his personal life. After the spectacular failure of his last relationship, he has been single for two years; he has no contact with his family, and his only friend is an increasingly faithless preacher.

The protagonist-narrator's sole pleasurable activity is writing "fictions animalières" in his spare time: some, in the form of philosophical dialogues between animals, are meditations of ethics and love; one even takes the form of an "autoportrait adolescent." *Extension's* socially inept, depressive narrator and frustrated fabulist not only writes, but thinks about his writing as being work that comments on his society – a sort of realism or naturalism akin to Houellebecq's own fictional aims, while also being an aesthetic response to the sociological and philosophical themes that Houellebecq echoes in fiction. The narrator even offers a poetics of his own flat, minimalist writing among other theories of how writing can represent his broken world: "Toute cette accumulation de détails réalistes, censés camper des personnages nettement différenciés, m'est toujours apparue, je m'excuse de le dire, comme pure foutaise. ... Pour atteindre le but, autrement philosophique, que je me propose, il me faudra au contraire élaguer. Simplifier. Détruire un par un une foule de détails." Yet despite his insight into his style and the significance that writing holds for him, the narrator lacks insight into why he doesn't feel fulfilled by his work and his life.

This creative, artistic hobby is antithetical to his dull job as an information systems manager, which he feels should be fulfilling because it is a "good job:" he has job security, a handsome and charismatic supervisor, and a comfortable salary, and works for "une bonne boîte" that has developed corporate culture through free t-shirts and motivational seminars abroad.⁶⁵ He concedes that he enjoys "un joli pouvoir d'achat ;" while lonely, he is "satisfait de mon statut social."⁶⁶ Yet his work doesn't inspire its own kind of happiness or ask the protagonist to use his creativity: the narrator dreads his business travel explaining the company's poorly functioning

⁶⁵ EDL 17

⁶⁶ EDL 15

software in offices throughout France. Before a business trip (which culminates in the narrator almost convincing his colleague to murder two strangers, followed by said colleague's death by auto accident), the narrator pronounces: "ce déplacement en province va être sinistre." Indeed, the protagonist's body rebels against the stress and misery of this business trip: "J'ai commencé à éprouver des difficultés à respirer, même assis... Mon teint était cadavérique ; la douleur avait entamé un lent déplacement de l'épaule vers le cœur... J'avais l'impression que si ça continuait j'allais crever rapidement, dans les prochaines heures, en tout cas avant l'aube."⁶⁷ The emergency room doctors diagnose him with pericarditis, an irritation and inflammation of the membrane around the heart. The protagonist's pericarditis is also a metaphor for his depression and emotional heartache; his heart hurts so acutely that he can no longer move and labor.

Like Hannah Arendt's Marxian philosophy, which stated that the contemporary world has replaced the interpersonal, active life of politics with the heartless bureaucracies unconcerned with our political rights or philosophical fulfillment, Houellebecq's novels often portray heartless bureaucracies and private companies.⁶⁸ After his illness, EDL's protagonist is asked to return to work without a recovery period. After a nervous breakdown and two emotional outbursts at work, followed by a stay in a psychiatric hospital, the protagonist announces to his boss that he will be taking leave for depression. The boss assumes an insincere attitude of compassion that doesn't fool the protagonist: " Il ne me considérera plus jamais comme un égal, ni comme un successeur possible ; à ses yeux, je n'existe plus vraiment ; je suis déchu. De toute façon je sais

⁶⁷ EDL 73-4

⁶⁸ See Arendt, THC 38

qu'ils vont me renvoyer."⁶⁹ His employer's disregard for his body as anything besides a source of labor negates his economic worth, and thus his social "human worth."

Unable to recover his morale and the ability to work, the protagonist retires to the countryside to plan his suicide after a good meal and a walk in nature. "La richesse qui va mourir en moi est absolument prodigieuse... Depuis des années je marche aux côtés d'un fantôme qui me ressemble, et qui vit dans un paradis théorique, en relation étroite avec le monde. J'ai longtemps cru qu'il m'appartenait de le rejoindre. C'est fini... L'impression de séparation est totale..."⁷⁰ The reference to a "theoretical paradise" indicates that the protagonist has survived by "theorizing" that the world holds possibilities for him to love, to create, and to be fulfilled. This wording refers to the illusory "paradisiac" economic "theories" of neoliberalism, embodied by his colleague Fréhaut, while also enfolding the protagonist's habit of distancing himself from his emotions with the "sociological theories" for which his therapist reproached him. The death of his colleague Tisserand, who finally resigned himself to the idea that his wealth and social status cannot buy him love and happiness, underscores this gap between theories of human happiness and the practices – relationships, family, and creativity – that create real happiness.

While Houellebecq's characters often ruminate on work and economics in a general sense, *Plateforme*'s narrator and protagonist Michel fixates on the precise *problématique* of what motivates humans to work, often considering sociological, economic, and philosophical theories as possible explanations. However, Michel's own motivation to work is slim; the social and "world-building" utility of Michel's job in the Ministry of Culture eludes him: "Je travaille au Ministère de la Culture. Je prépare des dossiers pour le financement d'expositions, ou parfois de

⁶⁹ EDL 135

⁷⁰ EDL 156

spectacles. – Des spectacles ? – Des spectacles... de danse contemporaine... Je me sentais radicalement désespéré, envahi par la honte. – En somme, vous travaillez dans l’action culturelle. – Oui, c’est ça... On peut dire ça comme ça.”⁷¹ Michel’s girlfriend, Valérie, a hardworking *cadre* whose work is “un jeu intellectuel pas très intéressant ni très difficile,”⁷² is a creative, imaginative, and ambitious worker whose job is essentially finding new ways to market vacation packages from Nouvelles Frontières. Her family are former pig farmers who sold their unprofitable farm and became well-off property owners. Although Valérie is bored by pleasing customers and shareholders, consuming branded goods, and doing nothing that calls on her natural creativity, she cannot imagine quitting her dull job. In Houellebecq’s “grand narrative” of post-industrial, neoliberal economics, Valérie personifies the loss of a sense of “meaningful work” in France’s new economy.

Valérie describes her uncomfortable class mobility to Michel, detailing how she went from being a proletarian country girl who loved solitary walks in nature to a bourgeois teenager who tried unsuccessfully to interest herself in dating, fashion, and makeup. When they visit her family for the holidays, Michel finds several bound notebooks of Valérie’s teenage fan fiction of *Le Club des Cinq*, showing that she loved to write and create before she learned to love economic success more. Michel reflects: “Je me représentai soudain une petite fille imaginative, plutôt solitaire, que je ne connaîtrais jamais.”⁷³ Michel recognizes that Valérie’s work has suppressed her creative nature; Valérie knows this, too. She explains her sense of being “trapped” in her comfortable, but dissatisfying bourgeois lifestyle: “Je suis prise dans un système

⁷¹ P 18

⁷² P 171

⁷³ P 189

qui ne m'apporte pas grand-chose, et que je sais au demeurant inutile ; mais je ne vois pas comment m'y échapper."⁷⁴ Neither can her colleague Jean-Yves, who actually "travaillait parce qu'il avait le goût du travail ; c'était à la fois mystérieux et limpide."⁷⁵ In spite of this, Jean-Yves admits that "j'ai des doutes, de plus en plus souvent, sur l'intérêt du monde qu'on est en train de construire."⁷⁶ The idea that work and labor create and thus "construct the world" in *Plateforme* is not far from Arendt's suggestion that the human condition is to change the world through work and action. Jean-Yves and Valérie see that their world-building isn't positive, but cannot propose another "platform" for meaningful existence.

Although Michel doesn't see the "value" of his job in the public arts sector – which suggests that he has a highly instrumentalist, profit-oriented idea of "work" – he is fascinated to discover others' motivation to work, aside from money. On vacation, Michel talks to his fellow tourists about their jobs, then reflects silently that as he rests, he isn't doing anything "useful:" "Pendant ce temps des gens travaillent ; ils produisaient des denrées utiles, ou parfois inutiles. Ils produisaient. Qu'avais-je produit, moi-même, pendant mes quarante années d'existence ?... Des gens comme moi, on aurait pu s'en passer."⁷⁷ Likewise, after a day spent watching Valérie and Jean-Yves at work, Michel falls further into instrumentalist self-recrimination:

"Dans la société où nous vivions, le principal intéressement au travail était constitué par le salaire, et plus généralement par les avantages financiers ; le prestige, l'honneur de la fonction tenaient dorénavant une place beaucoup moins grande. Il existait cependant, (ce) qui permettait de maintenir en vie les inutiles, les incompetents, et les nuisibles – dont, dans une certaine mesure, je faisais partie."⁷⁸

⁷⁴ P 158

⁷⁵ P 296

⁷⁶ P 193

⁷⁷ P 86

⁷⁸ P 160

How can work make us feel useful, wonders Michel? A trip to Cuba brings him closer to his answer. When Michel and Valérie visit Cuba to do a study of one of her tourism agency's unsuccessful resorts, Michel is fascinated by a tour of defunct factories, noting that Cuba – impoverished by a U.S. economic embargo – couldn't keep workers motivated despite an ideology touting the importance of labor. As an old nickel processing factory worker explains that in times of desperate poverty, all the workers stole from their factory, Michel realizes that neither ideology nor economic comfort alone can be enough to motivate workers:

“Qu'est-ce qui pouvait inciter les êtres humains, exactement, à accomplir les travaux ennuyeux et pénibles ? Ça me paraissait la seule question politique qui vaille d'être posée. Le témoignage du vieil ouvrier était accablant, sans rémission : à son avis, uniquement l'argent ; de toute évidence en tout cas la révolution avait échoué à créer l'homme nouveau, accessible à des motivations plus altruistes.”⁷⁹

Yet Michel also concedes that just as communist countries failed to create economic motivation, despite trying to create intrinsic motivation through lip service to valuing laborers and offering hope for class egalitarianism, the West has done even worse. Because of this, everyone – rich or poor, in the West or in nominally “communist” countries, where state-owned enterprises continue to exploit laborers – is forced to commodify their time, labor, and even their bodies to simply make a living in a world whose priorities center around capital. Houellebecq's novels represent the labor of the typical *cadre* as being as sterile as his protagonists' personal, romantic, and family existence, filled with desultory, repeated cycles that lead to no greater end.

Consequently, Houellebecq's protagonists' sense of being in the world is diminished. The definition of laboring that Arendt uses is that of fertility, of work that “procures the necessities of life for more than one man or one family... (whose) products do not stay in the world long enough to become a part of it.” However, Arendt's analysis insists that despite its ancillary

⁷⁹ p 231

relationship to the continuation of human life, “laboring activity... is oblivious to the *world* to the point of worldlessness.”⁸⁰ Busied in their labor and economic struggle, the narrators of *EDL* and *Plateforme* become so detached from the world that they both commit suicide. However, Michel of *Plateforme* first changes the world grotesquely. In order to “solve” the poverty of the developing world and the loneliness of Westerners, he proposes that Nouvelles Frontières open sex tourism resorts in developing countries. Valérie is killed when fundamentalist terrorists bomb a resort, destroying Michel’s dreams of raising a family with her and his will to live.

The motivation to work is conflated with the motivation to live in all Houellebecq’s novels, especially in *La Carte et le territoire*. For Jed, his motivation to work is an almost mystical vocation. “Jed devait être interrogé à de nombreuses reprises sur ce que signifiait, à ses yeux, le fait d’être un artiste... Etre artiste, à ses yeux, c’était avant tout être quelqu’un de soumis... à des messages mystérieux, imprévisibles...”⁸¹ Throughout the novel, Jed’s efforts to represent work in art as the “human activity” par excellence parallel his efforts to be closer to his father Jean-Pierre, an architect who is losing the motivation to live after retiring. Jean-Pierre, who busied himself so intensely with his work after his wife’s suicide that he had no time to be a parent, and thus sent Jed to a *pension* for most of his schooling, seems not to know how to live without working. Early in the novel, Jed says to his elderly father : “Tu pourrais certainement te retirer, profiter un peu de la vie.’...’Mais qu’est-ce que je ferais ?” replies Jean-Pierre, his voice like that of “un enfant égaré.”⁸² Soon after retiring, Jean-Pierre loses his ability to live in plurality with other humans; on Christmas, Jean-Pierre asks Jed to have him over to his

⁸⁰ THC 118

⁸¹ LCLT 106

⁸² LCLT 115

apartment for the meal instead of dining out: “Je ne supporte plus la gueule des êtres humains...” explains Jean-Pierre.⁸³ Despite his son’s great artistic success, a comfortable retirement, and becoming closer to his son, Jean-Pierre ultimately commits assisted suicide in Switzerland.

However, before he dies, Jean-Pierre reveals to Jed that he always saw himself not as a businessman, but an artist. Jean-Pierre recounts his youthful dreams and ambitions from the halcyon days of 1968: “Paris était gai à l’époque, on... allait reconstruire le monde... On était comme une bande d’artistes.”⁸⁴ Jean-Pierre and his friends were an artistic and theoretical collective who wrote architectural theory and designed avant-garde living structures influenced by the ideas and designs of English writer and designer William Morris and French philosopher Charles Fourier. They published “4 ou 5 articles dans une revue d’architecture qu’on a signés à plusieurs. Ces articles ont eu un certain retentissement... mais il a fallu travailler... nous sommes rentrés dans de gros cabinets d’architectes, et la vie est tout de suite devenue beaucoup moins amusante.”⁸⁵ Jean-Pierre started his own firm to be able to pursue his original ideas, but found that ultimately he depended more on the revenues he drew designing prefab, nearly identical “résidences balnéaires à la con pour des touristes débiles, sous le contrôle de promoteurs foncièrement malhonnêtes et d’une vulgarité presque infinie.” Jean-Pierre reveals to Jed that he is continuing a familial lineage of artists within his work: “J’ai été très soutenu par ton grand-père. Je crois qu’il avait une ambition artistique, comme photographe, mais il n’a jamais eu la possibilité de prendre autre chose que des mariages et des communions.” For Jed, “L’idée que son père avait fait lui aussi les Beaux-Arts, que l’architecture appartenait aux disciplines

⁸³ LCLT 211

⁸⁴ LCLT 222

⁸⁵ LCLT 223

artistiques, était surprenante, inconfortable...”⁸⁶ Although unwittingly, Jed has decided to continue his family’s trade by also becoming an artist. In *La carte*, Houellebecq acknowledges that the Baby Boomers may have wanted creative, meaningful work and life and a better world, but were instead overtaken by the market as the “gaies” early 1970’s disappeared into the austerity of the mid- and late-1970’s. This novel provides an ambitious portrait of the shocks to the French economy, to work, and to family and community life that the post-Trente Glorieuses era represents, as well as the abandonment of ideals of collective, anti-capitalist life and theory (such as Jean-Pierre and his collective’s dissolution) that this era imposed on its former idealists.

Like Houellebecq’s novels, Beigbeder’s novels consider the motivation for work in conjunction with creativity and “world-building,” as well as the attraction of being an “artist” and “creative” rather than a corporate cadre. However, unlike Houellebecq, who prefers to refer to Marxist criticism and philosophy’s critical goals and theories by imposing them on portraits of society and characters, Beigbeder directly juxtaposes citations from Marxist-Hegelian philosophy, or images of Marx himself, upon Octave’s empty corporate existence. Although Octave holds the title of “créatif,” he fills out his description of the job with Marxist criticism, bringing in an older critique to lament the “new,” post-industrial economy in France for how little it has changed old ways of misery: “La croissance signifie seulement de plus en plus de production vaine, ‘une immense accumulation de marchandises,’ (Karl Marx).”⁸⁷ Octave’s internal dialogue even weighs in with Marxist and Hegelian theory when he regrets his preferences for prostitutes over committed relationships, perhaps because he is more comfortable participating in commercial existence than creating something real: ““Le vrai est un moment du

⁸⁶ LCLT 219

⁸⁷ 99F 25. Citation of Marx’s name between parentheses is in the original text.

faux’, a écrit Guy Debord – après Hegel – et ils étaient plus intelligents que toi,”⁸⁸ Octave chides himself, trapped in an interminable, cocaine-fueled dialectic with no hope for *Aufhebung*, which becomes more obsessional aesthetic material than a helpful guide.

Debord’s ideas reemerge mockingly in Octave’s inner monologue: “La mondialisation ne s’intéressant plus aux hommes, il vous fallait devenir des produits pour que la société s’intéresse à vous. Le capitalisme transforme les gens en yaourts périssables, drogués au Spectacle, c’est-à-dire dressés pour écraser leur prochain.”⁸⁹ In the former Soviet Union, where he has taken a job manipulating “pauvresses” into believing that they have a future in modeling before he sleeps with them and discards them, Octave soberly marvels at how quickly Russia has become “drugged on the Spectacle,” metamorphosing into a frighteningly exploitative neoliberal disaster: “La statue de Karl Marx semble déprimée, contrainte de regarder le Bolchoï s’effondrer... 14 ans plus tôt, il n’y avait pas de panneaux publicitaires dans votre ville ; à présent on en compte davantage qu’à Paris... C’est le même Marx qui écrivit que ‘rien n’échappe aux effets corrosifs du capitalisme ?...’”⁹⁰ The values of Marxist and post-Marxist philosophy, “collapsed” and “corroded,” are a leading thread in Beigbeder’s work. Since Octave responds to these citations and figures cynically or elegiacally rather than rationally, contrasting them with the post-Cold War world and his ignoble behavior, *99F* and *Au secours pardon* trade in a post-Marxist *aesthetics* rather than a critical perspective.

Indeed, the “philosophy” of the world presented in Beigbeder’s novels, which present a mournful representation of globalized capitalism as an ineluctable force of misery, media

⁸⁸ 99F 73

⁸⁹ 99F 241

⁹⁰ ASP 95-96

overload, failed ideology, and the end of humanism is close to what Peter Sloterdijk developed in his 1983 work “Critique of Cynical Reason.” Octave gloomily cites Sloterdijk to explain why he is striking out to Russia:

“ Les gens devenaient complètement dingues depuis que l’égocentrisme était devenu l’idéologie dominante... Les investissements annuels en achat d’espace auraient pu supprimer dix fois la faim dans le monde mais on estimait plus urgent de matraquer des visages pour que les marques de luxe restent dans le ‘top of mind’ des affamés. Peter Sloterdijk avait baptisé ce système le ‘désirisme sans frontières’... C’est une époque où la seule utopie était physique. La série télé qui résumait le mieux la première décennie du XXI^e siècle était intitulée ‘Nip/Tuck’.⁹¹”

The turn away from the humanistic values of materialist philosophy is similar in essence to what Sloterdijk indicts as a postmodern philosophical “collapse of dualism.” By turning from the anarchic, critical, and liberating *kynicism* of Diogenes and the first Cynics to a dour, nihilistic, anti-humanist cynicism, says Sloterdijk, contemporary society rejects its liberated “animal” side and human dualism. A refusal of dualism – good/bad, human/animal, old/young – in contemporary culture indicates the collapse of dialectical reasoning that intermediates between dualisms, a phenomenon Marcuse diagnosed as part of “one dimensional thinking” and instrumentalism. Sloterdijk’s suggestion that the world has dissolved into “spaces of coexistence,” which critic Michael Kempe calls “posthumanism,” is mirrored in Octave’s observations. Yet this “coexistence” fails to create closeness; Octave’s ideal of “liberté” is “le célibat et le manque d’attachements sociaux et humains,⁹²” having no social responsibilities. Beigbeder’s work suggests that society has foresworn “natural bodies” and “human nature,” represented by the plastic surgery-centered televised drama, and has slipped into glossy, profitable mediatization rather than shared physical, material, human existence. As Octave

⁹¹ ASP 33

⁹² 99F 189

presents it: “On n’a rien à perdre quand on n’aime personne. Ce n’est pas du nihilisme : c’est du capitalisme.” In Beigbeder’s novels, capitalism is an antihumanism that precedes posthumanism.

The refusal to share human existence, or to believe that human needs are important, leads to a lack of motivation to work, as well as to an inability to engage with other humans through meaningful art. In *99F*, Octave suggests that “creatives” come into work late, do as little work as possible, and remember that they aren’t speaking to the public through advertising, but “aux 20 personnes à Paris susceptibles de [les] embaucher.”⁹³ The real “work” of the “creative” is to create false desires through consumer marketing, though this “world-changing” work destroys rather than creates: “Cette civilisation repose sur les faux désirs que tu conçois. Elle va mourir.”⁹⁴ By the time he arrives in Russia, Octave struggles to enjoy his previous passion for reading: “Je lisais des livres de poche en soulignant certaines phrases avant de jeter (le livre et le stylo) à une poubelle.”⁹⁵ Octave loses his creativity along with his connection with art.

Since the work of advertising first demands, then suppresses creativity, while also providing no interest other than profit, Octave and his production team lack motivation to work, and perform the roles of “creatives” and “artists” while rejecting all artistic innovation. They evaluate several musicians’ demos as background music for a commercial but dismiss them all for their inability to correspond to the brand identity’s imagined “cible,” “Madame Michu de Valenciennes.” “On les écoute?... Trop branché... Trop hard... Trop kitsch... Trop lent... Trop cheap... ‘Pour action, note la productrice, demander aux musiciens de retravailler.’”⁹⁶ In the end,

⁹³ 99F 54

⁹⁴ 99F 76

⁹⁵ ASP 24

⁹⁶ 99F 106

the “creatives” elect to rework an already-used piece of incidental music instead of fostering a new work that could change the world even a bit. Octave’s entourage of commercial artists continually advance new ideas, but are obliged to revise and rebrand old concepts. Octave’s bizarre “literary” campaign for a dairy dessert, which features models jogging and playing volleyball while discussing hermeneutics and physics, is eventually rewritten by the client and his bosses into a dull spot where a woman discusses being beautiful because she eats the product.

In “rebellion,” Octave and his staff shoot an “arty” version of the ad where his love interest Tamara rolls around on a lawn smearing herself with dairy dessert and cooing innuendo. The vain, pretentious attempt at artistic transgression is entered and then short-listed for the Lion d’Or award for best ad spot at Cannes. Octave and his colleague Charlie, along with other ad execs “déguisés en SDFs,” with their scruffy beards and faded jeans, schmooze in Cannes and attempt to discuss the artistic merit of the nominated spots. Their meeting at Cannes allows them to play-act the role of the artist with none of the satisfaction of creating lasting art. Later, in Russia, Octave admits that he has lost the desire to work, and instead of seeking beauty, seeks power over women: “Les femmes sont mon sacerdoce. Je veux les conquérir comme un continent.”⁹⁷ Beigbeder’s novel represents a world devoid of the beauty and social bonds built by meaningful work(s), art, and humanism; in this world, humans become combatants rather than lovers of the good, the just, and the beautiful – these being Plato’s *teloi* for ethical living.

Houellebecq and Beigbeder’s discussions of creative work and creativity as a motivation for work invoke, then refute, instrumentalist thinking, which discounts work that doesn’t generate profit as “useless.” In counting the cost to human life incurred by making humans into instruments, these novels enumerate the consequent loss of human happiness and ethical ties. As

⁹⁷ 99F 47

the two authors' works also represent the figure of the worker who suffers because their work is mindless and uncreative, and because they are unvalued as humans, they also imply that art is one of the conditions of human existence that keeps societies healthy. Without creativity, we all suffer; with creativity, we know what it is to be human. With this in mind, I would like to devote the second half of this chapter to exploring how Houellebecq and Beigbeder's make their self-insertions and proxies into allegories for the condition of the artist-as-worker, while also casting the work of art as an "instrument" of interpreting the world and interpreting the self.

On ethopoietic visibility: text as work, literary persona as work(er)

« Je refuse d'ouvrir le roman d'un écrivain qui pense à autre chose que son propre plaisir !... La justification artistique autorisait toutes les expériences... » Frédéric Beigbeder, *Au secours pardon*

« L'écriture ne soulage guère. Elle retrace, elle délimite. Elle introduit un soupçon de cohérence, l'idée d'un réalisme. On patauge toujours dans un brouillard sanglant, mais il y a quelques repères. Le chaos n'est plus qu'à quelques mètres... Quel contraste avec le pouvoir absolu, miraculeux, de la lecture ! » Michel Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*

While both Michel Houellebecq and Frédéric Beigbeder can boast critical plaudits, book prizes, bestsellers, and translations into numerous other languages, the two authors are also friends whose works display an aesthetic and thematic kinship, and have thus attracted a similarly mixed, even polarized critical reception.⁹⁸ Houellebecq and Beigbeder have not only observed how the press has constructed them as literary media personae, with distinct personalities and ethos (indicated by their representations of *fin de siècle* France) which they often "play" in public appearances and interviews. In a self-reflexive gesture, they have also

⁹⁸ Houellebecq has been awarded a Goncourt for his 2010 novel *La carte et le territoire* and national literary prizes in Ireland and Spain, among other awards. Beigbeder won a Prix Interallié for *Windows on the World* in 2003 and the Prix Renaudot for *Un roman français* in 2009. The two authors have long enjoyed each other's company, as Beigbeder has detailed in numerous pieces on Houellebecq's writing, even praising Houellebecq's *La Carte et le territoire* – in which "Beigbeder" appears as a character who gives love advice to Jed and mourns the author "Houellebecq's" death – as a work "qui rédéfinit l'art du roman." This section examines Beigbeder's citation of Houellebecq's poetry from *Le sens du combat* in 99F, as well as the "Beigbeder" character in LCLT.

reinforced, yet also parodied these judgments of “themselves” (as personae, if not as individuals) by styling self-representations that cannily mirror these public images within their novels.

While Michel Houellebecq’s presentation of a “Houellebecq character” is limited to self-insertion and self-reflexive essays and interviews (and to playing himself in 2014 drama-comedy film *L’enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq*), Frédéric Beigbeder has produced actual *écriture du soi* in memoirs and autofiction.⁹⁹ Therefore, we can easily compare his autofiction/autobiographical persona of “Beigbeder the writer” to the protagonist of *99F* and *Au secours pardon*, commitment-phobic advertising copywriter Octave Parango. Like Beigbeder, Octave describes childhood emotional neglect, due to his Lothario father’s preference for the company of young women, and a single mother who worked constantly and had little time for her sons. Octave and memorialist Beigbeder both mention family homes in Pau. More remarkably, both Octave and Beigbeder describe having grandfathers with a wide circle of literary friendships; this detail is consistent between autofiction/memoir *Un roman français* and the two Octave Parango novels. Beigbeder and Octave both work as advertising copywriters, are beleaguered by a reputed cocaine addiction, have both established literary prizes and worked on the presidential campaign of a Parti Communiste candidate (which Beigbeder did for Robert Hue in 2002).

Critics discussing Beigbeder’s writing have dismissed his work for its style and content, but also for making a spectacle of his life by mirroring and exaggerating his biography in novels with unsympathetic protagonists such as Octave. In negative and positive evaluations of his work, Beigbeder is known as a “touche-à-tout” or “un couteau Suisse,” “le symbole de la nouvelle génération de romanciers qui agacent l’intelligentsia”¹⁰⁰ and in spite of the serious

⁹⁹ *Windows on the World*. Paris: Grasset, 2003. *Un roman français*. Paris : Grasset, 2009.

¹⁰⁰ P. 7. Durand, Alain-Philippe. “Frédéric Beigbeder et ses doubles.” Durand, Alain-Philippe, ed. *Frédéric Beigbeder et ses doubles*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008.

consideration that critics such as Alain-Philippe Durand, Naomi Mandel, Sabine van Wesemael, and others have given him, “il y a les critiques, et notamment certains universitaires et intellectuels, dont une grande majorité considère que Beigbeder en tant qu’écrivain n’existe pas et que son œuvre ne mérite pas une attention sérieuse.”¹⁰¹ As Maria Patrescu observes in her article on *Un roman français*, not only have few academics chosen to make Beigbeder’s work into a subject of intellectual inquiry, but the flood of press coverage that appears with each of his published works stands in remarkable contrast to academic attention. “À part les nombreux comptes-rendus dans les journaux français les plus connus, peu de critiques se sont penchés sur ce livre, bien qu’il fût couronné par beaucoup de succès.”¹⁰² Beigbeder’s legitimacy in the scholarly world, meager though it may be with only a smattering of articles and two scholarly books covering his prolific output, seems to exist not because of, but in spite of his popularity, which appears to damage his reputation among scholars rather than enhancing it.

Beigbeder has also drawn negative attention for notorious episodes in his personal life, some of which he has made into (often comical and self-deprecating) fodder for his fiction. For instance, Beigbeder’s arrest for cocaine possession in 2008, when he was found by police snorting the substance of the hood of another, unknown person’s parked car, has spurred controversy. This undignified acting-out, followed by his night in jail awaiting bail, drew widespread ridicule in the press. Beigbeder’s adaptation of this real-life into his autofiction work in *Un roman français* becomes an episode of comic self-fashioning. The character of “Beigbeder” defends himself and his writer friend’s folly to the flummoxed police officers as not

¹⁰¹ Mourer, Victor. “Beigbeder: profondeur ou désinvolture?” *Zone critique*. 12 October 2014. Zone-critique.com. Accessed 22 July 2016.

¹⁰² Patrescu, Maria. “L’image de la prison et la fragmentation du récit dans le roman du XXème siècle : Gérard Etienne et Frédéric Beigbeder.” *Voix plurielles* 8.2 (2011) 94-108

merely a poor idea, but the actions of misunderstood, and presumably tortured *artists*. Beigbeder and his friend are caught in flagrante by police who reprimand them for their “provocation” and choice not to take drugs in privacy “comme tout le monde.” The character of Frédéric and his friend ‘Le poète,’ who have already explained that “la vie est un cauchemar” and that drugs are their “paradis artificiel,” take umbrage at the suggestion that they should be like “everyone.” As he dusts cocaine off the car’s hood with his scarf, “Frédéric” replies “Nous ne sommes pas tout le monde, mon commandant. Nous sommes des ZÉCRIVVAINS. OKAY?”¹⁰³ (sic) By representing his actions as those of a writer, who is thus not like “everyone else,” Beigbeder writes himself as a character playing the role of “troubled writer.” By using his public, work-based *reputation* as an artist and writer rather than a more personal motivation to excuse his poor behavior, Beigbeder fashions his real-life persona by writing this episode of reputation-building into his text. In this sense, Beigbeder uses his fiction to perform what Foucault, referencing Plutarch, refers to as an “ethopoietic” function, in which self-writing doesn’t establish or reveal the truth of events, inner life, or motivation, but acts as “un opérateur de la transformation de la vérité en êthos”¹⁰⁴ – ethos as reputation as well as moral and ethical convictions. Beigbeder’s one-dimensional “Frédéric” reminds the reader that even in an ostensibly confessional piece of autofiction, the author may be building his persona’s ethos rather than telling truths.

This type of ethos-building, as well as symmetry between Beigbeder’s biography and that of Octave, protagonist of *99F* and *Au secours pardon*, leads Beigbeder’s fiction to apostrophize the reader. In this way, Beigbeder’s text makes its ambiguous, playful game of narrative positionality explicit, emphasizing the unclear, fuzzy “place” or “voice” of the author in the text

¹⁰³ P. 39 Beigbeder, Frédéric. *Un roman français*. Grasset, 2009.

¹⁰⁴ P. 5. Foucault, Michel. “Ecriture de soi.” *Corps écrit* 5 (Feb. 1983): 3-23.

– that is, where the author is in the work. Octave repeatedly addresses the reader directly to talk about his personal labors within advertising, as well as ethos-building by presenting grand theories of advertising as discursive, textual manipulation: “Permettez-moi de vous rappeler que la publicité est une technique d’intoxication cérébrale inventée par l’Américain Albert Davis Lasker en 1899, elle a surtout été développée avec beaucoup d’efficacité par Joseph Goebbels dans les années 1930...”¹⁰⁵ The metaphor of textual intoxication applies to Octave’s novel as well as to his advertising, which offers readers a pleasurable, intoxicating “buzz” through experimental poetic prose, love poems, and humor, but also describes sickening, corrosive anger, self-loathing, manipulation, and violence. At times, Octave describes advertising to the reader as an “intoxicating” interaction between himself and his readership – who is the audience for both his commercials and his novels – for whom he is a “pusher” of desire: “Je vous drogue à la nouveauté, c’est qu’elle ne reste jamais neuve... Les gens heureux ne consomment pas. Votre souffrance dope le commerce.”¹⁰⁶ This slippery *je* of Octave-the-advertiser as written by Beigbeder-the-advertiser-cum-author reminds us that fiction writing is manipulation in its own way. Octave is sketching a caricatural self-portrait, and he is as aware as Beigbeder is of his blurring of narrative positionality and ethical responsibility for the ills of advertising.

These apostrophes sometimes take a more opaque form, but also can be playful. In *99F*, Octave’s campaign for a low-fat dairy dessert shows its spokesmodels engaged in various intellectual conversations. The tagline for the ad touts the virtues of beauty and being “mince sauf dans la tête,” which may respond to Beigbeder’s critics for labeling him as a sensationalist “pretty boy” or a “bad boy” rather than a serious novelist. In the commercial, two models

¹⁰⁵ 99F 32

¹⁰⁶ 99F 17

jogging on the beach exchange lines of obscurantist literary jargon: “‘L’exégèse onomastique se trouve en butte au rédhibitoire herméneutique.’ L’autre répond: ‘Attention toutefois à ne pas tomber dans la paronomase ontologique.’”¹⁰⁷ Put in simpler terms, the exchange should read something like this : “Interpreting a text as though the author and the protagonist of the same name are the same person is an inadvisable tactic.” “Anyway, keep in mind not to confuse one being for another similar being sharing its characteristics.” This absurdly embedded warning not to conflate author and protagonist reminds us that Octave is not a faithful representation of Beigbeder, but a *version décalée*. This nod to Beigbeder’s willful distortion of his biographical details and “persona” in Octave, as well as to his desire to keep the two somewhat separate, reminds us that Octave’s world is mimesis and metaphor, not reality.

The (admittedly obscured) allusion to hermeneutics and exegesis also invites the reader to contemplate the *mise en abîme* within *99F*. Octave explains that in addition to narrating his life from his first-person perspective, he is *also* writing a novel denouncing the advertising industry, which will perform the work of criticism and sabotage that Octave longs to do but cannot in his *paid* work. The reader must wonder whether Octave is thus claiming to be the author of the novel they are reading, or the author of a *different* novel, which they may not ever read. Furthermore, the reader could wonder whether the slippage between writing styles in *99F* demarcates the division between two novels. The narrative alternates between first, second, and third person to discuss Octave, while also alternating between narrating Octave’s life and that of his mentor (and recurring Beigbeder character Marc Marronnier). The prose, too, veers between a straightforward narrative style and a disjointed style that resembles experimental verse. However, there is no

¹⁰⁷ 99F 27

clear boundary between the text of “Octave’s” novel and its “frame” of *99F*, which is labeled as a consumer product, rather than a work of art, by its name and the emphasis on its “cheapness.”

However, as we are viewing Octave at work as a copywriter – a profession whose practitioners are known as *créatifs* – in a novel that he may have authored (at least in the novel’s plot, although not in reality), then we are invited to contemplate the distance between that writing work and more traditionally “creative” fiction writing. While Octave narrates writing ad copy, he also narrates struggling with writer’s block. At one point, Octave grumbles about the challenges of “creative” work: “Créatif n’est pas un boulot si facile. La réputation de ce métier souffre de son apparente simplicité. Tout le monde croit qu’il peut en faire autant...”¹⁰⁸

However, within the deliberate blurring between the biographies of Octave and the “character” of Beigbeder, this seemingly offhanded complaint collapses two narrative boundaries. Octave’s various interpellations to the reader weaken the separation between the text, the narrator, and the immediate audience of the readership (although ambiguity and opaqueness do not allow this boundary to collapse entirely). However, discussing the reputation of “creatives” (not only of their artworks, but of creatives themselves as laborers with an ordinary “boulot” that “everyone” could do), invokes an invisible third party of critics who criticize writing (and who often criticize writers in personal terms). By quarreling with critics and his “reputation,” Beigbeder’s self-aware narrative shapes his ethos, thus performing an ethopoietic function.

Beigbeder also uses his fictionalized double Octave’s narration in *99F* and *Au secours pardon* to mix the registers of truth-telling, ethos-building, and literary artefact-building. Octave describes his urge to write fiction as a socially productive truth-telling as well a way to scratch his itch to create a work of art: “Tout écrivain est un cafteur. Toute littérature est délation. Je ne

¹⁰⁸ 99F 46

vois pas l'intérêt d'écrire des romans si ce n'est pas pour cracher dans la soupe..."¹⁰⁹ Still, at the same time, Octave presents himself not as a complex person, but more of a *creation*, a metonymic extension of the era and society that have created his profession, his lifestyle, and his values. "Je ne suis pas un gentil narrateur... L'idéal serait que vous commenciez par me détester, avant de détester l'époque qui m'a créé."¹¹⁰ This self-conscious fashioning of himself as a product of his environment, as an unlikeable and unreliable narrator, makes him self-reflexive – a character aware of being a character. Octave also explains that he is writing "la confession d'un enfant du millénaire."¹¹¹ Although we may normally imagine a "confession" as a type of soul-baring, Octave's distancing techniques – of saying not that it is *his* confession, but merely *the* confession of *a* child of the turn of the millennium, a "narrator" created by his era – signals to the reader that his narrative is a literary fabrication rather than the truth.

By simultaneously confessing his sins and shifting the blame for them onto his society's values, Octave builds an intertextual rapprochement between his character and other troubled social critics from the French literary tradition. After the fashion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Octave attributes his misdeeds and his persona to the "malaise of modernity." Both authors contend that the modern era (and thus also its attendant qualities, including industrialization – driven by capitalism, the birth of consumerism, the appearance of romance as a motivation for marriage) is axiologically deficient. Unable to produce constructive values, through families, education, and work and consumerism, modernity forms people like Octave and Jean-Jacques the narrator who must compartmentalize their identities (and do so arguably through "confessions")

¹⁰⁹ 99F 29

¹¹⁰ 99F 20

¹¹¹ 99F 31

separating the self who criticizes from the self being criticized). Octave and Jean-Jacques both insist that the reader acknowledge their awareness of their ethical failings. However, like Rousseau-as-autobiographer, Octave's disgust for himself isn't enough to make him lead a more ethical existence, or to remain true to the "transparency" expected in self-writing by avoiding excessive irony.¹¹² Octave admits that he behaves this way "CAR J'AI PEUR"¹¹³ of poverty, which means that making money takes priority over other "values" for him.

Octave's presentation of himself as a writer and "creative" worker and of his writing as literature, aside from their resemblances with Beigbeder's life, also lead to Octave presenting a history of "apprenticeship" through reading. *99F* and *Au secours pardon* not only invoke intertexts, but also refer to a host of metaphors from other works in the modern literary and theoretical canon; Octave thus recontextualizes their significance in his narratives as tropes. Evoking the metaphor of a lily growing in his lungs, Octave uses Boris Vian's metaphor of tuberculosis for obsessional love, insisting that all lovers and literary figures smother in the same obsession with emotion: "c'est de cette maladie que Tchekov, Kafka, DH Lawrence, Frédéric Chopin, George Orwell et sainte Thérèse de Lisieux sont morts ; quant à Camus, Moravia, Boudard, Marie Bashkirtseff et Katherine Mansfield, auraient-ils écrit les mêmes livres sans cette infection ?"¹¹⁴ Octave suggests to others wishing to succeed in advertising that they arrive late and shirk their work, suggesting that they explain themselves (rather obscurely) with a citation from Barthes if anyone complains: "Ce n'est pas le rêve qui fait vendre, c'est le sens."¹¹⁵ While

¹¹² This characterization of Rousseau's writing of morality and "values" is developed in Katrin Froese's work *Rousseau and Nietzsche: Toward an Aesthetic Morality*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001.

¹¹³ 99F 15

¹¹⁴ Octave first uses this metaphor in 99F on p. 184. The citation is from ASP p. 201.

¹¹⁵ 99F 56

entering the imposing office tower of Madone dairy products to pitch an ad, Octave recites a Houellebecq quatrain in the elevator: “‘Les cadres montent vers leur calvaire/Dans des ascenseurs de nickel/Je vois passer les secrétaires/Qui se remettent du rimmel.’ Et cela me faisait tout drôle de me sentir à l’intérieur d’un poème froid.”¹¹⁶ This sense of being “inside a *cold* poem” is a reflection on representing the “cold,” inhuman corporate world in literature, which alludes by extension to other intertexts of “work/business fiction.” Living inside a cold world creates a cold literature, where human warmth cannot surface even in metaphors and artworks.¹¹⁷ Yet in an even colder intertextual reference, Octave’s coworker Charlie invokes Céline’s “coupable” as he rants about the misery of the world under neoliberalism before murdering a wealthy woman; Octave reflects on the judiciousness of Céline as a moral example.¹¹⁸

Octave is frustrated that his writing is edited and manipulated by the companies who hire him; this lack of control over his writing, which an author would have but an advertiser doesn’t, makes him sometimes wish he was writing literature. Yet Octave delights in the influence and controlling power of his work (his labor) and his works (the texts of the commercials he writes): “J’aime imaginer des phrases. Aucun métier ne donne autant de pouvoir aux mots. Un rédacteur publicitaire, c’est un auteur d’aphorismes qui se vendent... Quand Cioran écrivit ‘Je rêve d’un monde où l’on mourrait pour une virgule,’ se doutait-il qu’il parlait du monde des concepteurs-

¹¹⁶ 23 99F. This citation comes from Houellebecq’s poem entitled *Le sens du combat (II)*, from the collection *Le sens du combat*. Paris: Flammarion, 1996.

¹¹⁷ Chris Reyns-Chikuma has developed the theory that 99F should be considered within a French literary lineage of the “fiction d’affaires:” “Une fiction d’affaires est une fiction dans laquelle les personnages, et/ou mécanismes, et/ou institutions économiques sont mis au centre de la représentation du texte...” which also “participe(nt) à la mise en scène et à la mise en question ludique de la littérature engagée et critique d’un certain capitalisme.” Reyns-Chikuma notes that this tradition would include works from the 19th and 20th centuries’ literary canon by Balzac, Zola, and Perec, among others. Reyns-Chikuma, C(h)ris. “La fiction d’affaires : Une autre exception française? 99 Francs de Frédéric Beigbeder.” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 12.4 (2008) 455-462.

¹¹⁸ 99F 197

rédacteurs ?”¹¹⁹ Octave takes writerly delight in reshaping Barthes and Cioran’s metaphors, betraying that he knows that advertising language is more powerful than literary writing.

To evoke Barthes once again, Octave – voracious reader, advertising “créatif,” and aspiring novelist – evinces a textual pleasure. In Roland Barthes’ *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973), Barthes reshapes Lacan’s idea of *jouissance*, or orgasmic pleasure derived not only from sexuality, but from various types of “acting out,” to discuss the difference between the readerly text and the writerly text. For Barthes, the readerly text, or *le texte lisible*, bases itself in the “sage, conforme, plagiaire” use of language that writers use to evoke sense, reason, and adherence to norms, obeying the state of language “tel qu’il a été fixé par l’école, le bon usage, la littérature, la culture.”¹²⁰ On the other hand, the writerly text (*le texte scriptible*) splits the subject between this well-behaved use of language and the texts they write to discuss neurotic, aberrant mental states. In exploding “bon usage,” *les textes scriptibles* revel in the description of neurosis, play games with language, and seduce the reader with words. Since these texts “veulent être lus,” they display frankly “ce peu de névrose nécessaire à la séduction de leurs lecteurs : ces textes terribles sont tout de même des textes coquets.”¹²¹ Octave, by drawing in intertexts, playfully reshaping citations, baring his soul in stories of his ill-fated love affairs, as well as his sad childhood and his drug use – in short, his catalogue of neuroses – demands that readers read his words and put themselves in his shoes. Beigbeder’s proxies announce their predilection for producing all manner of *textes scriptibles*, from confessional to novel form to cheeky ad campaigns. Although he is not above “seducing” his readers with his dysfunctions – infidelities,

¹¹⁹ 99F 48

¹²⁰ Barthes, Roland. “Le Plaisir du texte.” p. 7. *Oeuvres complètes : Livres, textes, entretiens. 1972-1976. Contient nouveaux essais critiques*. Paris: Seuil, 2002.

¹²¹ Barthes LPT 8

drug use, depression, suicidal ideation – Octave seems to derive more joy from reminding the reader that he is manipulating them with *writing*, even using the metaphor of *jouissance*: “C’est si bon de pénétrer votre cerveau. Je jouis dans votre hémisphère droit. Votre désir ne vous appartient plus ; je vous impose le mien.”¹²² Both “terrible” and “coquet,” Octave is also self-consciously fashioning his ethos as a writer.

Octave’s scriptural activity and literary obsessions seem to both please and afflict him. In *99F*, Octave goes to rehab after ending an unfaithful marriage and overdosing on cocaine; there, he restlessly and compulsively pens his novel and love poems never to be sent. In *Au secours pardon*, Octave continues using his writerly and literary obsessions as his lens to the world; early in the novel, a citation from Dostoyevsky appears, explaining: “Je n’ai qu’une visée : être libre. J’y sacrifie tout.” This citation’s placement as an epigraph to the first portion of the novel prepares the reader for a narrative of “constrained liberty” and the tendency to avoid recounting emotions, instead discussing everything from career activity to sentimental life through borrowed literary metaphors. As Octave narrates his remorse for sexually exploiting and objectifying the young Russian models, he dashes off florid and remorseful couplets for each of them. Octave consorts with grotesquely unethical oil billionaire Sergueï Orlov, “L’Oligarque,” who appeals to Octave for literary reasons: this “homme trapu et vulgaire... (est) fasciné par la littérature comme moi... avait copié la véranda de sa maison sur celle de Tchekov à Melikhovo.”¹²³ Just as L’Oligarque aims to fashion his life after Russian literature, Octave aims to do the same, boiling down women’s personalities into short poems and transforming his life into a novel.

¹²² 99F 19

¹²³ ASP 284

After becoming smitten with Lena, a 14-year-old aspiring model, Octave cannot describe her without borrowing more intertextual metaphors. To Octave, Lena “signifies” rather than lives; he conjures her as a possessor of the literary archetype of the “Russian soul” first outlined in the writing of Nikolai Gogol. Octave sees Lena as supernaturally beautiful, cultivated and self-sacrificing, yet melancholic and often masochistic, an archetype congruent with the traditional image of women in Russian literature.¹²⁴ Octave views Lena as a metonymic extension of her city, literary capital Saint Petersburg, where they visit the homes of Pushkin, Nabokov, Gogol, and Dostoyevsky. Unreliable narrator Octave claims that Lena tells him he is “plus cool qu’Emmanuel Kant”¹²⁵ and cites Baudelaire when he tells her she is beautiful: “Je suis belle, ô mortels/Comme un rêve en pierre!”¹²⁶ In Lena’s journal, which alternates with Octave’s narration, a different vision of Lena emerges, which belies Octave’s assertion of her maturity. Lena admits that she learned the Baudelaire poem at school and blurted it out nervously. Her affinities are for techno parties and smoking joints with her friends rather than great literary works. She also describes her unhappy home life, her dislike of her prepubescent body, and her crushes on classmates. Octave objectifies Lena as a model, but also by making her into a literary character, fabricates a chimera that he worships instead of knowing Lena personally.

Disturbed by his own sadistic sexual impulses, Octave starts visiting an Orthodox priest; in confessing his violent fantasies, he extends the metaphor of literary confession invoked in *99F*. Octave explains to his confessor that he was destined to be a writer rather than a corporate shill; writing literature would have obviated his descent into ignoble behavior. Octave ethos-

¹²⁴ See also: Heldt, Barbara. *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.

¹²⁵ ASP 196

¹²⁶ ASP 233

builds, discussing his family instead of talking about his own feelings and deeds: “mon grand-père aimait recevoir des écrivains dans sa belle maison : Jean Cocteau, René Benjamin, Paul Valéry...C’est sûrement sa bibliothèque qui m’a donné envie d’écrire... je sens que la clé de ma folie se cache dans ce manoir britannique.”¹²⁷ Octave narrates consciously, both to the priest and in the novel’s narrative, how he has deranged himself by pursuing capital instead of his authorial vocation. Notably, Octave – who lives in a “cold poem,” who transforms women into poems and metaphors, and who prefers ethopoiesis to truth-telling – is himself a “poem.” An “octave” is an octet, a poem or stanza of eight lines; it is also the French version of the first name Octavio, shared with existential surrealist poet Octavio Paz. Finally, an octave is a measure of aesthetic liminality, the interval between two musical notes. Octave narrates his own liminality between cold reality and aesthetic escapes into writing and art.

Perhaps because of the similarities between Octave and Beigbeder himself, Beigbeder has drawn opprobrium, both as criticism of his work and for Beigbeder’s “character.” Consequently, Beigbeder’s self-writing plays into this confusion between himself and his public literary persona(e). In *Un roman français*, “Frédéric” explains his belief that the chief of police in Paris is holding him in jail longer than necessary to punish not “Frédéric Beigbeder,” but his literary proxy Octave. Beigbeder has made similar statements in interviews that followed the publication of *Un roman français*. While these statements illustrate his self-awareness of the perception he has fostered of Octave as a fictional stand-in for “Frédéric Beigbeder, author,” they also lead the reader’s eye back to the image of Octave. The style of narration that “Frédéric” offers of his life and his memories, like Octave’s narration, is replete with literary metaphors, conversations with friends and family, literary citations, and song lyrics. Rather than earnest, intimate narratives, the

¹²⁷ 99F 176

novels catalog verbal fragments read, heard, and thought in a style that distances Beigbeder and his narrators from the reader. In this way, Beigbeder's self-fashioning is like the *hupomnemata* of public figures that Foucault describes in *L'écriture du soi*:

Les hupomnêmata... pouvaient être des livres de compte, des registres publics, des carnets individuels servant d'aide-mémoire... On y consignait des citations, des fragments d'ouvrages, des exemples et des actions dont on avait été témoin ou dont on avait lu le récit, des réflexions ou des raisonnements qu'on avait entendus ou qui étaient venus à l'esprit. Ils constituaient une mémoire matérielle des choses lues, entendues ou pensées... (ils) ne doivent pas cependant être compris comme des journaux intimes... Ils ne constituent pas un « récit de soi-même ».

While Beigbeder's confrère Houellebecq has "enjoyed" making himself into a scurrilous but nevertheless writerly character in public appearances and his fiction, and cannot resist literary allusions, his ethopoietic writing is not circular and fragmented, and does not refuse intimacy in the same way. Before I proceed into a discussion of Houellebecq's exploitation of the *décalage* between the persona of "Houellebecq" that appears in the press, his individual person, and self-insertion, I would like to note one factor that critics tend to overlook. Although Beigbeder's autofictional protagonist bears his own name, "Michel Houellebecq" is no one's real name. This pseudonym distinguishes a literary persona, comparable to but not synonymous with Michel Thomas, who took his grandmother's maiden name as a pen name. Every willing usage of the name "Michel Houellebecq" in works that present a version of the author can be understood as the author examining his persona as a third party. In the film *L'enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* (2014), for instance, Thomas/Houellebecq plays the character of "Michel Houellebecq," but not Michel Thomas. Thomas' creation of the outrageous persona and ethos of "Houellebecq" in his media appearances, as well as reinforcement of that ethos in his fiction, can be understood as part of the author's literary, or perhaps meta-literary endeavors. I contend that Houellebecq and Beigbeder's self-representation as "troubled artists" and *as* creative workers is an important feature of their writing; as Michel Houellebecq says about his essays, his life is a

type of “matériau romanesque.” Like Beigbeder, through cagey games with narrative positionality and self-insertion while commenting on creative and literary passion as motivations for work, Houellebecq uses the character “(arche)type” of artist as a vehicle for discussing the nature and motivation of creative work, while also comparing creative work to other labor.

Despite biographical similarities and even the first name “Michel” between several of Houellebecq’s protagonists and himself, only *La carte et le territoire* features the character of ‘bestselling author Michel Houellebecq.’ I argue that Houellebecq’s Goncourt-winning 5th novel is only the most developed, deliberate instance of his longstanding manipulation of his public persona as “matériau romanesque.”¹²⁸ The author’s role in creating the character of “Michel Houellebecq, author and critic” extends beyond his fictional self-insertion. In *L’enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* (2014), the author portrays a “sad-sack version of himself” who debates his kidnappers about histories of genocide, his own writing, and alexandrine poetry.¹²⁹ Although Houellebecq is not the first celebrity or author to have portrayed himself in a film or to have “self-inserted” an eponymous character in his fiction, we should note that “Houellebecq”, as much as his writing, has been heavily mediatized for over 20 years now. “Houellebecq” as persona has been the subject of critical speculation and appraisal, mostly unflattering, since his first literary success. This interplay between critics, literary works, author’s persona, and critical judgments of authorial intent also constitutes a narrative, featuring “troubled author Michel Houellebecq” as its antiheroic protagonist. Houellebecq’s media coverage has been dogged by

¹²⁸ This is Houellebecq’s description of his critical essays collected in *Interventions I and II*, presumably because Houellebecq’s novels often digress into critical reflections on texts ranging from Marx and Fourier to Jules Verne and *Elle*, in addition to offering opinions on cultural subjects such as the role of art in consumer society.

¹²⁹ Foundas, Scott. “Berlin Film Review: ‘The Kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq.’” *Variety* 11 February 2014. Variety.com. Accessed 2 February 2016.

scandals since his first major literary success with *Les Particules Élémentaires* (1996). The novel didn't really take off until the following literary season, when it was a bestseller and Prix Novembre winner. In the Anglophone press as in the French, the work and the author received many backhanded compliments. Adam Gopnik of the *New Yorker* wrote:

less a novel than a(n)... eighteenth-century conte moral, at once a narrative and a philosophical essay, in which an obsession with oral sex oscillates strangely with fatuous ideological posturing... It is obscene, hateful, pretentious, half educated (sic), funny, ambitious, and oddly moving... Writer conceives teh (sic) book as a sign of the moment when leftist thought passed from a real-world model to a permanent form of poetic dissent...¹³⁰

Although by including Houellebecq's appraisal of the novel in his review, Gopnik tried to further denigrate the book's inconsistencies, it is an astute analysis. Houellebecq's confounding of the personal – notably the emotional and aesthetic experiences of the world – and the political is the essence of his *poetics*.

Unfortunately, an author's provocative poetics will never be as juicy of fodder for gossip as personal scandals are, and Houellebecq's brashness, frank sexual fixations, callous snap judgments, and desire for "poetic dissent" make for excellent scandal. *Particules'* indictment of the Boomers and the transmutation of the quest for political liberation into self-indulgence made real-world babas cool bristle. Yves Donnars, founder of L'Espace du Possible, took Houellebecq and his publisher Flammarion to court for portraying L'Espace as a theatre of depravity peopled by a troupe of self-centered New Age libertines whose neglected children became neurotics and serial killers. Critic Christian Authier explains in *Le Nouvel Ordre Sexuel* that upon the book's publication, L'Espace du Possible demanded in a civil court trial that all copies of the book be

¹³⁰ Gopnik, Adam. "Paris Journal: Noel Contendere." *The New Yorker*, December 28, 1998 P. 61

recalled and destroyed.¹³¹ Some reviewers suggested that Houellebecq exalted in defiling the rosy vision of “generation ‘68” as a type of polemic gesture refusing political correctness. Critics began to treat Houellebecq’s fiction and his protagonists as mouthpieces for his personal worldview.¹³² Houellebecq’s ascendancy as a critically acclaimed, bestselling writer created a parallel “literary” invention: a brash, self-destructive, reactionary media personality.

As further successes followed his subsequent novels, Houellebecq perpetuated this image by provoking his critics and readers with callous, often offensive statements about politics and religion. Houellebecq faced, but ultimately was exonerated of charges of inciting racial violence in 2002 after discussing his depiction of Muslims in *Plateforme* and adding other unfavorable remarks on Islam in an interview in *Lire*. Although Houellebecq vehemently denied racism as a motivation in his trial and in numerous interviews, his comment about Islam is remarkable not only for its volatility, but for its strange repositioning of his judgment as literary criticism.

“(J)’ai eu une espèce de révélation négative dans le Sinäi, là où Moïse a reçu les Dix Commandements... j’ai éprouvé un rejet total pour les monothéismes. Dans ce paysage... très inspirant, je me suis dit que le fait de croire à un seul Dieu était le fait d’un crétin... Et la religion la plus con, c’est quand même l’islam. Quand on lit le Coran, on est effondré !... La Bible, au moins, c’est très beau, parce que les Juifs ont un sacré talent littéraire...”¹³³

¹³¹ In fact, before the second print run of the book, Houellebecq and Flammarion had to alter the text: the campsite was no longer situated in its original (and actual) region of France and was dubbed Le Lieu du Changement. P. 55. Authier, Christian. *Le nouvel ordre sexuel*. Paris: Editions Bartillat, 2002.

¹³² “Pourtant, le roman n’est pas sans ambiguïté et procure un malaise certain, qui n’ira pas sans polémique: pas tant à cause du refus délibéré de son auteur d’être « politiquement correct » (au contraire) que du fait de raccourcis rapides - ainsi les serial killers d’aujourd’hui seraient les « enfants naturels » des hippies, l’épuisement des jouissances sexuelles poussant des individus « libérés des contraintes morales ordinaires » vers les « jouissances de la cruauté » - ou de sa fascination pour le génie génétique (même s’il a donné à son savant le nom de Djerzinski, le grand massacreur stalinien). C’est le paradoxe Houellebecq : tandis qu’il a tous les traits - et le style - d’un moraliste, il déroute par de brusques écarts en eaux troubles qu’un seul goût de la provocation ne suffit pas à expliquer.” Antoine de Gaudemar. “Houellebecq, mutant moderne.” *Libération*. 27 August 1998. https://next.liberation.fr/livres/1998/08/27/houellebecq-mutant-moderne_244465. Accessed 20 August 2016. I agree with de Gaudemar that tendency of Houellebecq’s to moralize against the failures of neoliberalism, which he somewhat unjustly links to “liberation movements” of the 60’s and 70’s, is typical throughout his oeuvre.

¹³³ Sénécal, Didier. “Michel Houellebecq.” *Lire* 1 September 2001. https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/michel-houellebecq_804761.html. Accessed 10 January 2010.

Houellebecq's remark, behind which he stood for years, is also notable for its ignorance of Islam as literary tradition, the poetics and spiritual enlightenment of which are only accessible through reading knowledge of Arabic and study of the Quran's prosody and metaphors. In addition to criticizing Islam as though he were reviewing the Quran as literature, Houellebecq cited Bible as literature and as an aesthetic and poetic influence in *Le Figaro* in 2016: "Saint Paul a été l'une de mes grosses influences pour *Rester Vivant*. La Bible, c'est complètement con mais c'est bien écrit."¹³⁴ In 2015, Houellebecq also backpedaled on his opinion about Islam and the literary value of the Quran, presumably after reading a better translation. However, Houellebecq made the allowance that Islamic extremists – whom he claims to "fear" when asked if he is "Islamophobic" after the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, in which his friend Bernard Maris was killed – may not be reading the Quran very well:

"I said [when *Soumission* came out in France] that I was reassured after having read the Qur'an. That said, maybe I hadn't thought it through enough before saying that, because objectively, there's just as little chance of Muslims reading the Qur'an as Christians reading the Bible. So what really counts in both cases is who is the clergy, or middleman, or interpreter. And in the case of Islam, that's very open."¹³⁵

Returning to Barthes' suggestion that "textes scriptibles" offer both reader and writer a type of enjoyment through outlandishness and coquettish neurotic details, Houellebecq tends to express his social and political views with open references to his neuroses, refusing to be "sage" or adhere to "bon usage" in interviews as well as in writing. Conscious that he is being observed, Houellebecq often frames his outlandish statements in interviews not as his own opinions, but as literary judgments from a passionate reader, writer, and critic.

¹³⁴ Delbrassinne, Laura. "Houellebecq : « La Bible, c'est con mais c'est bien écrit »." *Le Figaro* 30 June 2016. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/cinema/2016/06/30/03002-20160630ARTFIG00218-houellebecq-la-bible-c-est-con-mais-c-est-bien-ecrit.php>. Accessed 3 August 2016.

¹³⁵ Chrisafis, Angelique. "Michel Houellebecq: 'Am I Islamophobic? Probably, yes,'" *The Guardian* 6 Sep 2015. Accessed 10 September 2015.

Houellebecq's public/literary persona, or ethos, has also been shaped by ongoing disputes about his politics. While his friend Beigbeder has been denounced more mildly for his casual "anti-féminisme branché," and has allayed more extensive criticism with tongue-in-cheek ethos-building – "(je suis) un hétéro-connard, ami des gays," Houellebecq has been overtly labeled a misogynist by feminist critics such as Carole Sweeney and Sophie Patrick. Likewise, Houellebecq has drawn ire for postmodernist fascination with the 1960's as a cultural turning point, signaling post-World War II consumer culture and new (and to Houellebecq, often failed) ideas of thinking about work and relationships. Houellebecq's sense of the 1960's and 1970's political movements as shams and failed revolts has gained him positive attention from right-wing "Nouveaux philosophes" such as Bernard-Henri Lévy, while ruining his reputation with many left and liberal critics. As Adam Gopnik asserted shortly after the publication of Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Soumission*: "Like most satirists worth reading, Houellebecq is a conservative. 'I show the disasters produced by the liberalization of values,' he has said."¹³⁷ The tag of "reactionary" is pinned even more frequently to Houellebecq's worldview than "conservative." "Houellebecq is considerably slyer than your average neoreactionary," remarks Ross Douthat in *The New York Times*.¹³⁸ And yet, writing in *Le Monde* in 2011, Marc Weitzmann identifies Houellebecq as part of a "vague droitière" without a clear ideological platform within French intellectualism and literature, which is "ni 'conservatrice' ni 'néo-

¹³⁷ Gopnik, Adam. "The Next Thing: Michel Houellebecq's Francophobic Satire." *The New Yorker* 26 January 2015. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/26/next-thing>. Accessed 10 September 2016.

¹³⁸ Douthat, Ross. "Houellebecq's Islam, Houellebecq's West." *The New York Times* 4 November 2015. <https://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/11/04/houellebecqs-islam-houellebecqs-west/>. Accessed 7 November 2015.

conservatrice' mais franchement réactionnaire... (qui) naît d'un vide idéologique."¹³⁹ Likewise, in his 2002 essay *Le Rappel à l'ordre. Enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires*, Daniel Lindenberg includes Houellebecq within the reactionary backlash against the mythos of May 1968 as a liberating revolt. Houellebecq eventually answered his critics in *Ennemis publics*:

“(je suis) nihiliste, réactionnaire, cynique, raciste et misogyne honteux : ce serait encore me faire trop d'honneur que de me ranger dans la peu ragoûtante famille des *anarchistes de droite*; fondamentalement, je ne suis qu'un *beauf*. Auteur plat, sans style, je n'ai accédé à la notoriété littéraire que par suite d'une invraisemblable faute de goût commise, il y a quelques années, par des critiques déboussolés.”¹⁴⁰

By surpassing his critics in making self-lacerating insults to his politics, his writing, and even his personality, Houellebecq makes visible a self-reflexive awareness of his unflattering public ethos as an “uneducated” “writer without style.” Additionally, Houellebecq makes his willingness to play with his ethos visible in a showily dysfunctional *texte scriptible*.

Of course, Houellebecq's case, like Beigbeder's, involves literary doubling not only in interviews and essays, but also in fiction. Houellebecq's protagonists often create literature and works of art: the protagonist-narrator and occasional fabulist of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, shock comic and actor Daniel in *Possibilité d'une île*, *Particules*' Bruno, who writes essays, and his occasional poet half-brother Michel, and *La carte*'s visual artist Jed. A cartoonish “Houellebecq” appears in *La carte et le territoire* as a character, as does a verisimilar version of his friend Beigbeder. “Beigbeder” counsels Jed about romantic relationships, becomes maudlin and sings off-key when drunk, and weeps at “Houellebecq's” funeral after “the author” is

¹³⁹ Weitzmann, Marc. “La vague ‘droitière’ est réactionnaire.” *Le Monde* 4 May 2011. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2011/05/04/la-vague-droitiere-est-reactionnaire_1516777_3232.html. Accessed 25 September 2016.

¹⁴⁰ Houellebecq, Michel and Bernard-Henri Lévy. *Ennemis publiques*. Paris: Flammarion-Grasset & Fasquelle, 2008. P. 4

brutally hacked to bits by a murderer, just as Beigbeder actually defends Houellebecq from critics who slice his persona and his works to ribbons.

While Beigbeder's more traditional "écriture de soi" has drawn much critical admiration, Houellebecq's use of his public persona as character within *La carte et le territoire* did not draw unanimously favorable criticism. Some critics lauded Houellebecq's willingness to present himself as a "sujet sensible" and flawed being:

"Le roman, par son dispositif narratif, exprime l'humilité du « vrai » Houellebecq. D'abord, il réduit son propre personnage à une « vieille tortue malade » qui « puait un peu »... Il met ensuite en scène sa propre disparition, ce qui n'empêche pas le roman de continuer, preuve qu'il n'y est pas indispensable. En jouant sur tous les registres de l'humilité... Houellebecq la convertit en un chef-d'œuvre d'autodérision."¹⁴¹

However, Houellebecq's self-inserted character drew the scorn of Goncourt jury member Tahar ben Jelloun, who dismissed this aspect of the book as one self-indulgence among others in 2010, comparing his work reading it as a jury member to the tedium of grading student papers:

"As a member of the Goncourt Academy, I had the privilege of receiving via express mail a copy of the book. And I read it, pen in hand. I read and commented on 427 pages just as I did when I was a teacher and corrected students' papers... I wrote down some of the delirious ravings that bothered me. The first is the idea of inserting himself as a character in his own novel. Michel Houellebecq speaks of himself, proclaiming himself an important author, translated throughout the world, unappreciated by critics and essentially misunderstood in his own time. And he wants to bear witness to his own era... He needs to speak well of himself and has put these compliments into others' mouths."¹⁴²

It is hard to know whether the self-inserted "Houellebecq" character is a mark of authorial humility or self-aggrandizement, especially due to Houellebecq's reputation for

¹⁴¹ D'Afflon, Aymeric. "L'animal lecteur, et autres sujets sensibles : La Carte et le Territoire de Michel Houellebecq." *Littérature* 136 (2011) pp. 62-74

¹⁴² My translation from the original Italian. Ben Jelloun, Tahar. "Il Caso Houellebecq." *Repubblica* 19 August 2010. <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2010/08/19/il-caso-houellebecq.html>. Accessed 13 April 2013.

characteristically cynical ambiguity.¹⁴³ However, considering Houellebecq's preference for manipulating his public image, linking discussion of his viewpoints and *ethics* in absurd, showy, "jouissant" ways to his *ethos* as a writer, this analysis of his ethopoiesis will discuss how he represents "Houellebecq" as a character in a fictional narrative.

In *La carte et le territoire*, the protagonist Jed Martin and the Houellebecq character both acknowledge "Houellebecq's" outrageous statements and extravagantly erratic and troubled outbursts as self-reflexive displays. Jed visits "Houellebecq" three times, first to request that Houellebecq write an essay for the press booklet for his upcoming gallery show, then on more personal terms. Jed first sees a functional, productive, and passionate artist, but later encounters a depressive, drunken, maudlin wreck, who goes to bed at 4 p.m. and avows that he has lost interest in writing fiction. By their third meeting, "Houellebecq" is no longer merely depressive, but disconsolate and drunken and bizarre; the writer weeps about defunct consumer goods, announces his diminishing sense of belonging to the human race, and gorges himself on pâté.

Jed wonders whether this "role-playing" is deliberate. At dinner with "Houellebecq," Jed comments to Houellebecq that he sees this behavior as performance of reputation; as "Houellebecq" explains his appreciation for Thailand and its prostitutes, Jed comments drily: "Là, il me semble que vous jouez un peu votre propre rôle... – Oui, c'est vrai,"¹⁴⁴ affirms the author's proxy. After this observation, "Houellebecq" explains his role-playing to Jed without being prompted. As an author who represents French national identity in transition but lives

¹⁴³ Among critics who have made narratological studies of Houellebecq's poetical and enunciatory ambiguity, see Liesbeth Korthals Althes, "Persuasion et Ambiguïté dans un roman à thèse postmoderne (Les Particules Élémentaires)." *Michel Houellebecq*. Van Wesemael, Sabine, ed. Amsterdam : Rodopi, 2004. Carole Sweeney's *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (2013) argues that Houellebecq is merely playing at ambiguity by placing provocative denunciations of feminism and Islam in the mouths of his characters.

¹⁴⁴ LCLT 146

outside France, Houellebecq admits taking and talking about an interest in wine because "ça me donne une contenance – ça fait français."¹⁴⁵ Jed thinks (in the omniscient third-person narration) that although this "spectacle" of dysfunction is in part performed for his benefit, it is touching, even potentially seductive: "D'après tout ce qu'il savait des femmes, il paraissait probable que certaines d'entre elles aient pu s'éprendre de ce débris torturé qui dodelinait maintenant de la tête devant lui en dévorant des tranches de pâté de campagne, manifestement devenu indifférent à tout ce qui pouvait apparenter à une relation amoureuse, et vraisemblablement aussi à toute relation humaine."¹⁴⁶ Jed is also "seduced" by this pathos and hopes to become "Houellebecq's" friend. In a supermarket, Jed thinks that "Houellebecq," who "partageait son goût pour la grande distribution" would appreciate the "Salad Bar" as a gesture toward the supermarket as a utopian consumer paradise that "recouvrerait l'ensemble des besoins humains."¹⁴⁷ Like "Houellebecq," Jed has strong affective responses to the effects of "big things" – economics and ideology – on the "small and banal" social and material conditions, tastes, and habits of everyday life.

Jed also addresses "Houellebecq's" performance of his persona directly, mentioning that he had expected "Houellebecq" to drink more heavily. The author retorts: "Vous savez, ce sont les journalistes qui m'ont fait la réputation d'un ivrogne... aucun d'entre eux (n'a) jamais réalisé que si je buvais beaucoup en leur présence, c'était uniquement pour parvenir à les supporter."¹⁴⁸ In other words, the press exaggerates Houellebecq's drinking in their "character studies," but their aggressive scrutiny drives him to drink, creating his image in that sense too.

¹⁴⁵ LCLT 146

¹⁴⁶ LCLT 175

¹⁴⁷ LCLT 196

¹⁴⁸ LCLT 147

However, despite condemning the press, *La carte* unflinchingly scrutinizes and parodies Houellebecq's personality as well as his writing style. This deprecation of his "half-educated," "pretentious" writing and style, which is a large part of Houellebecq's public reputation and thus as important to his *ethos* as his putative political opinions or the "personality" his work conveys, is critical to any ethopoeitic self-portrait. Criticism of Houellebecq's writing style has proliferated since the 1990's to the extent that one critic has followed the debate in an essay published in 2015.¹⁴⁹ As Samuel Estier explains,

"La controverse autour de son style a tourné autour de sa prétendue absence de style... (du fait) qu'il écrivait « mal ». Éric Naulleau... (a) parlé de laideur, Denis Demonpion d'artifice de séduction. Pierre Assouline... disait que la seule invention stylistique chez Houellebecq était le point-virgule... Michel Onfray, un temps, Marie Redonnet, qui parle d'« impuissance de la langue », Jean-François Patricola qui évoque un bric-à-brac de clichés, voire une imposture."¹⁵⁰

This mediated image of Houellebecq as literary fumbler and shoddy verbal stylist is reflected by the caricatural "self"-portrait in *La carte*. An assortment of garbled words streams from "Houellebecq's" mouth. Jed notices, but pretends to ignore odd locutions such as "foutrement" ou "Foucra bouldou ! Bistroye ! Bistroye !" ... des mots bizarres, parfois désuets ou franchement impropres, quand ce n'étaient pas des néologismes enfantins"¹⁵¹ in "Houellebecq's" speech. Houellebecq's text emphasizes his persona's impropriety and self-destruction, cheerfully offering this persona up again to the critics who have long attached evaluations of his person to his work.¹⁵² Houellebecq's refusal of "bon usage" and all things *sage*, as well as the occasional

¹⁴⁹ Estier, Samuel. *À propos du « style » de Houellebecq. Retour sur une controverse (1998-2010)*, postface de Jérôme Meizoz. Lausanne : Archipel Essais, n°21, 2015.

¹⁵⁰ Falconnier, Isabelle. "Samuel Estier : chez Houellebecq, le style, c'est l'homme. Cela dérange." *Hebdo* 4 February 2016. Hebdo.ch. Accessed 20 Feb. 2016.

¹⁵¹ 173 LCLT

¹⁵² In the *Guardian* in 2000, Emily Eakin described "a sexist Stalinist eugenicist... a pornographer and a homophobe... (who) slurred... and mumbled: 'how would you like to be in my erotic film?'" Eakin, Emily. "Publish and be damned." *The Guardian* 19 November 2000.

aphasiac outburst of invented words and what the narrative refers to repeatedly as the writer-character's "seductions," make *La carte* a seductive, dysfunctional *texte scriptible*.

Noting "Houellebecq's" habit of re-enacting his press persona as "dysfunctional writer," as well as his enjoyment-seeking verbal and textual output outside the boundaries of "le bon usage," Jed also takes liberties with his representation of the writing environment of "Houellebecq," of whom Jed paints a portrait for his series of "peintures des métiers."

Interrupting the third-person narrator with text credited to an art historian, *La carte* explains that Jed doesn't represent Houellebecq's office *as it is*, but in a stylized and altered form. The narration following Jed and "Houellebecq" offers visual details of "Houellebecq's" work environment: the walls of the office are covered with visual cues, with "photos, représentant les endroits où il situait les scènes de ses romans," with few papers hanging around the flat surfaces.¹⁵³ Instead, Jed's painting represents the "métier" and an inaccurate image of the writer and artist at work, situating a personal portrait of the author seated "à un bureau recouvert de feuilles écrites ou demi-écrites. Derrière lui... le mur blanc est entièrement tapissé de feuilles manuscrites collées les unes contre les autres, sans le moindre interstice."¹⁵⁴ To portray "Houellebecq" *as writer*, Jed's painting represents *writing* as the material product of creative labor rather than representing the labor itself. Still, the novel evokes an image of this labor by

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/nov/19/fiction.michelhouellebecq>. Accessed 5 March 2015. (15 years later, in the same paper's literary section, Angelique Chrisafis describes Houellebecq's "anti-fashion... too-short cord trousers... smoothing his frizzy combover with a nicotine-stained finger," noting that "he broke down in tears in a TV interview" after losing his friend Bernard Maris in the Charlie Hebdo attack. See: Chrisafis, Angelique. "Michel Houellebecq: Am I Islamophobic? Probably, yes." *The Guardian* 6 September 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/06/michel-houellebecq-submission-am-i-islamophobic-probably-yes>. Accessed 10 September 2015.)

¹⁵³ LCLT 184

¹⁵⁴ LCLT 184

describing “Houellebecq’s” office full of photos, indicating that he uses visuals – not just images, but physical photos – to inspire writing.

Since the image of the writer-worker that Jed paints is a fiction itself, the novel uses is imaginary paratext (a critical art history text about Jed Martin’s work) to create a *mise en abîme* of representations that make artists’ work as fabricators visible and apparent. The paratext suggests that since Jed ignores the office full of photos to paint an office covered in sheets of text, “Jed Martin semble dans son travail accorder une énorme importance au texte, se polariser sur le texte détaché de toute référence réelle.”¹⁵⁵ This *mise en scène* of Jed’s creative process contrasts Jed’s painting – an unfaithful, yet verisimilar representation of “Houellebecq’s” creative labor – with “Houellebecq’s” actual office in a way that shows that Jed’s work is also interested in detaching itself from the “real reference” of the photo-filled office. In this way, the novel narrates the process of Jed’s artistic *métier* as he paints a *portrait du métier*. Jed’s painting fails to represent “Houellebecq” as a person, portraying him as an author-as-persona that will stand in for the real person in the record of art history. Inventiveness and fabrication – which are falsifying, fictional, and thus performative and seductive elements of any creative process – are thus praised in the “essay.” The paratext points out Jed’s artistic liberties in not representing, but *interpreting* creative work (in this case, “Houellebecq”’s writing, itself also a fabrication rather than a faithful, pure mimetic representation of the world). Through a *mise en abîme* of texts, real and fictional, *La carte et le territoire* offers a Houellebecqian poetics that designates art as a site of critique and interpretation, not a mirror to the world or the artist who creates the work.

Like Houellebecq’s, Jed’s fame comes from him “se lançant dans une série de portraits de travailleurs en situation... à la recherche de la valeur de la vie... ce sont les métiers, et au-delà

¹⁵⁵ LCLT 184

des métiers, l'organisation du travail qu'il veut figer..."¹⁵⁶ Through writing about Jed's quest to make art that interprets and represents work as a grand human endeavor, *La carte* indicts the "market idea" of art as saleable product and consumer good. Instead, the novel asks, and attempts to answer, a few other questions: What does art do besides produce material goods? Is the artist just a laborer? How can we represent labor? Can we represent artistic labor without just representing artistic works, as Jed does in his portrait of "Houellebecq?" What role does media in the postmodern era play in forming our ideas and attitudes about artworks and "art-workers?" What is the human motivation for any kind of work? What portion of the artist – as person, and as a persona – can appear in their works? Is a public persona a work of (meta-fiction?)

Conclusion: can work give relief?

In conclusion, Houellebecq and Beigbeder's works are parables of a world where each human is treated as *animal laborans* and offered no opportunities for creativity. Consumerism's false needs have displaced human needs in the Western ideology, and individuals and society suffer as a result. In response to losing belief in the Marxist utopias still imagined in the mid-twentieth century, these novels represent how the post-1968, post-Trente Glorieuses subject loses ethical relationships in a world being destroyed by capitalism instead of being built through meaningful work. The instrumentalist thinking of capitalism has devalued the type of work and action that generate beauty, art, and connections between people instead of profit. Despite their highly cynical vision of Western society, these texts suggest to us that repetitive, self-consuming labor could become work again if we concern ourselves more with creativity, imagination, playfulness, and enjoyment in our working lives. Human relationships perverted by the capitalist imperatives to produce, consume, and profit, as well as by subjects who have lost their sense of

¹⁵⁶ P. 103. Maris, Bernard. *Houellebecq économiste*. Paris: Flammarion, 2014

self, require these ludic, constructive attributes of human life once again, to help us reprioritize human value over capital. Houellebecq and Beigbeder's novels also suggest that the self makes a remarkable material to model as a work of art. The two authors' ethopoiesis creates enjoyment for the writers and their audience through cheekily implicating the authors within their works but denying perfect representational symmetry. Houellebecq and Beigbeder's novels thus remind us that impulses to work, create, enjoy oneself, and build relationships with the people around us are intertwined. When we deny the human need to reach outward toward others and care for ourselves through everyday actions and work(s), life is miserable indeed.

Chapter 2 : “La prise de la Bastille libérerait des milliers de prisonniers de consommation:” Creativity and globalization at work and play in Nathalie Kuperman’s *Nous étions des êtres vivants* and Gauz’s *Debout-payé*

To address contemporary French fiction’s themes of play, competition, and creativity within modern working life, I discuss two novels written since 2010 in this second chapter. First, I analyze the depiction of work and French radical history in Nathalie Kuperman’s 2010 novel *Nous étions des êtres vivants*. I examine how Kuperman’s narrative allegorizes several controversies related to the increasing popularity of neoliberal economic ideology in France within corporate office space. Kuperman uses the setting of a magazine publisher to emphasize how corporate business deprives white-collar workers of creative and playful tasks, as well as job security and labor rights, while scaling back children’s options for creative play as it promotes branded toys and games. In doing so, Kuperman’s novel problematizes the effects of these changing ideologies on France’s workforce and children, implying that with the loss of constructive, imaginative work and play, contemporary subjects of all ages lose the critical thinking skills and sense of solidarity required for political emancipation.

In this chapter, I will also examine Gauz’s 2014 novel *Debout-payé*, which uses playful humor as well as references to economic and postcolonial theory to illustrate the challenges of African sans-papiers in the workforce. Gauz’s novel’s protagonists endure poorly paid, mind-dulling service industry work without losing the creativity and resourcefulness that guide them toward stability and a *carte de séjour*. Through exercises of observation and reflection designed to keep himself awake during long shifts as a security guard, protagonist Ossiri theorizes unsatisfying jobs and consumerism as economic and social forces which simultaneously reinforce and reshape French identity. Ossiri’s first-person fragments of poetical prose are as likely to contain musings about math and bodily functions as they are to offer trenchant and wry

observations of francité in flux after the end of the Trente Glorieuses spurred alterations to France's economic, ideological, and demographic landscapes. The novel's two alternating narratives – Ossiri's voice alternates with a third-person narrative recounting the history of Ossiri, his family, and friends – reflect polemically, wistfully, humorously, and critically on African diasporic identity in France. Additionally, Gauz's work addresses the precise disruptions to Ivoirian and Franco-Ivoirian identity incurred by Françafrique and France's neoimperialist interference in African politics. While *Debout-payé* tells the story of Gauz's protagonist and entourage first and foremost through recounting their lives working in France, a larger story of the Ivory Coast's colonial and postcolonial history weaves through its twin narratives, with threads of theories and praxis from the radical history of France's 1960's and 1970's throughout.

By analyzing these texts in light of recent French history and contemporary crises in French economic, social, political, and cultural identity, I show how these two authors' works portray a French economic and social climate that limits opportunities for political and philosophical subjective fulfillment. These novels portray work and everyday life in contemporary France from two different perspectives: from that of the white-collar, primarily white middle class, and from the viewpoint of working poor immigrants of color excluded from economic security. Both novels critically examine how contemporary France continues to glamorize and refer to the mythos of May '68 without truly carrying on the era's legacy of labor rights, anti-consumerism, anti-racism and anti-colonialism, though certain French still dare to imagine what new radical praxis might look like in the 2010's. Through their reflections on recent history, these works interrogate ideas of uniform Frenchness in the 21st century, while linking the struggle for political and personal emancipation to labor and creativity.

“Le goût du jeu (a taste for the game):” pedagogical play, competition, and resistance to neoliberal capitalism in Nathalie Kuperman’s *Nous étions des êtres vivants*

Since cultural productions such as literature often respond to everyday personal and political preoccupations, the frustrations of work, social relationships, and daily life are common themes in contemporary French fiction. As Aurélie Adler and Maryline Heck noted, this dissatisfaction with work and daily life has an economic basis: “l’idéologie libérale triomphante des années 1980... cette période de ‘grand cauchemar,’” produced “un certain retour au social et... une nouvelle approche littéraire du monde du travail” in French literature.¹⁵⁷ The ascendancy of neoliberal economic ideology in France began after the French post-World War II economic boom known as the Trente Glorieuses ended with the OPEC oil crisis in 1974. Although economists such as Jean Fourastié warned that the large-scale economic expansion of the Trente Glorieuses was unlikely to be sustained or repeated, France joined other Western countries hoping to ensure continued economic growth by implementing neoliberal economic policies.¹⁵⁸ However, as sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello noted, while the French “economy” is judged to be doing well because gross national product has increased due to neoliberal economic policies, real wages have dwindled and individuals and families are experiencing a high debt load and increasing financial precariousness.¹⁵⁹ The French workforce faces increasing under- and unemployment and experiences intense dissatisfaction with their work.¹⁶⁰ Workplace fiction narrativizes this dissatisfaction and instability. Transformations to

¹⁵⁷ P. 9. Adler, Aurélie and Maryline Heck. “Introduction.” In *Écrire le travail au XXI^e siècle : quelles implications politiques ?*, edited by Adler, Aurélie et Maryline Heck, 7-14. Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2016.

¹⁵⁸ For more information on the unique economic phenomenon of the Trente Glorieuses, see: Fourastié, Jean. *Les trente glorieuses : ou, La Révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975*. Paris: Fayard, 1979.

¹⁵⁹ P. 20-22. Boltanski, Luc, and Ève Chiapello. *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, 2nd ed. Paris: Gallimard, 2011.

¹⁶⁰ Boltanski and Chiapello 51, 60

French cultural attitudes about work since the 1960's and 1970's have also inspired ongoing economic, sociological, and political debates. Author Thierry Beinstingel suggests that this new crop of workplace literature reflects the white-collar workforce's new awareness of work's changing nature and of their social and economic roles as laborers after the struggles of May-June '68, which spurred the labor reform of the Grenelle agreements and increased unionization across all sectors of employment.¹⁶¹ Beinstingel also suggests that authors developed a new consciousness of labor dynamics and a renewed interest in representing everyday life in fiction during this era.¹⁶² This new crop of workplace fiction spurred Place de la Médiation, a firm that mediates between employees and employers in conflict, to establish a *Prix du roman d'entreprise et du travail* in 2009.¹⁶³

Despite widespread economic dissatisfaction, psychologists and sociologists agree that subjective psychological and social motivation for working exists and can be influenced by language, ideology, and psychological techniques.¹⁶⁴ Experts in management theory have also noticed that promoting feelings of sociable playfulness and creativity in the workplace can motivate an increasingly dissatisfied workforce. After 1960's liberation movements introduced a

¹⁶¹ P. 51-53. Beinstingel, Thierry. "Langages et littératures du travail chez les écrivains français depuis mai 1968." *Intercâmbio*, vol. 2 no. 5, 2012, pp. 50-60. <http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/10566.pdf>

¹⁶² Beinstingel 58

¹⁶³ Unfortunately, the prize itself might reinforce neoliberal workplace culture in France. Labour Minister Myriam El Khomri presented the 2016 prize to Slimane Kader (for a book published in 2014) a month after proposing the unpopular *Loi Travail*, which reduced unions' negotiating power and decreased overtime pay. El Khomri's law (eventually ratified in August 2016), was opposed by all French labor unions, activist movements like Nuit Debout, and many major political parties. John Marks has also pointed out that after being awarded the prize, Delphine de Vigan refused to accept it.

¹⁶⁴ For examples of psychological theories of work motivation that separate intrinsic motivation from the extrinsic motivation of earning a living, see: Gagné, Marylène, and Edward L. Deci. "Self-determination theory and work motivation." *Journal of Organizational behavior* 26. (2005): 331-362. See also: Herzberg, Frederick, Bernard Mausner, and Barbara Bloch Snyderman. *The motivation to work*. Vol. 1. New York: Transaction Publishers, 2011. For sociological theories of why we work, see: Leonard, Nancy H., Laura L. Beauvais, and Richard W. Scholl. "Work motivation: The incorporation of self-concept-based processes." *Human relations* 52.8 (1999): 969-998.

pro-social vocabulary of *le don* (gift-giving), *la souplesse* (flexibility), *la convivialité* (sociability), and *la créativité* to daily life, 1990's "neomanagement" literature appropriated this same language within managerial discourse to motivate workers.¹⁶⁵ However, despite management literature's absorption of the language of "flexibility," "creativity," and "freedom" – language associated with liberation movements known for their ludic character – corporate models of profit and performance don't reward playful attitudes and creative problem-solving if they don't also increase productivity. Role-playing, play-acting, and agonism do figure within professional life, albeit with the aim of increasing "performance" and loyalty to one's employer, as with corporate retreats and office competitions for finishing work faster or increasing sales. Although work holds potential for creativity, conviviality, pro-social behavior, and philosophical and political emancipation, it is often decidedly unplayful. However, must this be the case? Can considering the value of play in work help us imagine workplace culture and economic systems that prioritize meeting human needs above accumulating capital?

Nathalie Kuperman's 2010 novel *Nous étions des êtres vivants* has already garnered scholarly attention for its portrayal of workers engaging with discourses and controversies from the French political and intellectual traditions of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, making it a noteworthy entry into the corpus of contemporary French workplace fiction. John Marks (2017) refers to these novels' representation of problems in French work culture as a reflection of French values as a Deleuzian "clinical" effort to diagnose problems within society.¹⁶⁶ Marks and Dominique Viart (2011) have both argued that Kuperman's work is part of a corpus of contemporary French literature on work that mines other discourses – Viart charts the text's

¹⁶⁵ Boltanski and Chiapello 99-144

¹⁶⁶ Marks, John. "Le roman d'entreprise: Breaking the silence." *French Cultural Studies* 28.4 (2017) pp. 371–386.

references to sociological writing on work while Marks examines the novel's use of the self-referential, neologism-riddled jargon or "novlangue" of neomanagement.¹⁶⁷ Jeremy Lane's article (2015), contends that *Nous étions des êtres vivants*, despite "criticis(ing)... the heightened forms of exploitation inherent to processes of neo-liberal globalisation and their accompanying coercive management practices," nevertheless "(relies) on...conservative, even misogynistic, assumptions about women and their supposedly proper roles as wives and mothers" in which women are "desexed" by their choice to pursue careers rather than families.¹⁶⁸ Lane argues that Kuperman's novel serves as a reactionary polemic, implying that "family, community and French nation are... threatened by the aggressive forces of neo-liberal capitalism... (which are) coded as being inherently foreign or 'Anglo-Saxon' in origin."¹⁶⁹ However, while I agree with Lane that reactionary discourses emerge through the novel, I maintain that they constitute a different sort of polemic – one that is highly critical of the injustices that it portrays.

Furthermore, while I agree with Lane that Kuperman codes neoliberalism as "Anglo-Saxon," or more specifically "American," and threatening to "French" values, I maintain that the novel's critique of neoliberal ideology as a specifically American export is strategic. The novel

¹⁶⁷ Viart, Dominique. "Écrire le travail: vers une sociologisation du roman contemporain". In: S Servoise (ed.) *Le Travail sans fin: Discours et représentations à l'œuvre*. Special issue of *Raison Publique* 15 (2011): 13–34. "Novlangue" is the French translation of Newspeak, the language promulgated by the totalitarian political party Ingsoc in George Orwell's *1984*. By comparing managerial jargon to the ever-shifting, manipulative Newspeak or Orwell's novels, Viart advances a Whorfian argument, implying by controlling the language used to describe the working world, management culture also shapes or controls what workers and the public think about workplace conditions and their tolerability. Interestingly, in a new French translation of *1984* done in 2018, translator Josée Kamoun renders Newspeak as *néoparler*: "S'il avait voulu écrire *novlangue*, il aurait écrit *newlanguage*. Or ça n'est pas une langue, c'est une anti-langue." This observation arguably applies just as well to management "newspeak." Frammery, Catherine. "Big Brother retraduit (et trahi ?) en 2018." *Le Temps*, 19 juin 2018. <https://www.letemps.ch/opinions/big-brother-retraduit-trahi-2018>. Accessed 5 July 2018.

¹⁶⁸ P. 513-514 Lane, Jeremy F. "'Come you spirits unsex me!' Representations of the Female Executive in Recent French Film and Fiction." *Modern & Contemporary France* 23:4, 511-528.

¹⁶⁹ Lane 514

frames France's embrace of oppressive ideologies from foreign countries as a pattern of choosing expediency and profit to the detriment of human rights, comparing "collaboration" with American-style neoliberalism to France's Pétainisme in World War II. I also argue that the novel's women characters' dilemmas illustrate the harmful impacts of neoliberalism and misogyny on working women, which subjects them to gender discrimination and the "glass ceiling," as well as other labor problems such as discrimination against people with disabilities, mandatory overtime, and harassment. Finally, I propose to contribute to the discussion of Kuperman's novel as a dissection of discourse and an entry within the corpus of French "sociological" fiction on work by analyzing the novel's metaphors of "play(s)" and "playing." This allows me to approach the "archetypal" qualities of the novel's characters as a deliberate characteristic of Kuperman's *mise en scène*. I argue that the novel accomplishes its axiological task of opposition to oppressive managerial discourses on work by deploying a leitmotiv of "jeux" or the verb "jouer" – games/gambling and playing, which includes discussions of "characters," "stakes," and "role-playing" – as a rhetorical strategy. By reconfiguring corporate office space as a "terrain de jeux" or a "theatre" for a "morality play" in which corporate bosses and neoliberalism threaten a free French society, Kuperman's work slyly suggests radical psychological, pedagogical, and philosophical theories of liberation through work and/as play, and more crucially, play *at work*.

Nous étions des êtres vivants follows the change in ownership and work conditions at Société Mercandier Presse, a publisher of children's magazines encouraging educational play. When businessman Paul Cathéter rebuys the company, which had been foundering for three years due to declining sales in print media, Mercandier's employees are initially relieved. However, the more they

learn about Cathéter, “un vulgaire homme d’affaires, un faiseur de pognon, un requin,”¹⁷⁰ “une machine broyeuse dont nous craignons l’intelligence implacable,”¹⁷¹ whose business plan will transform Mercandier into “une IP Factory... manag(ée) à l’américaine,”¹⁷² the more they oppose his plan to make Mercandier a “paid editorial content”-generating R & D firm. Beyond their dismay at his business plan, they consider Cathéter, a “corpulent” man “(qui) aime l’Amérique du Nord,” foreign and invasive. “Nous n’avions pas imaginé que le danger pourrait venir de si loin.”¹⁷³ With Cathéter coded as “vulgar,” “large,” “relentless,” and “American,” the staff fears losing their personal and national identities to the bogeyman of American neoliberalism embodied by Cathéter, ignoring France’s own adoption of neoliberalism.

Although *Nous étions des êtres vivants* represents contemporary attitudes about work, social values, and national identity, the novel also invokes older traditions by employing ancient Greek literary and theatrical conventions. The narration alternates between various characters’ first-person narration and “le chœur,” representing Mercandier’s employees as a plural subject with a shared voice. As the collective voice of commentary and lamentation, *le chœur* resembles a “Greek chorus,” alluding to another type of “play.” The characters’ names also draw from Ancient Greek language and mythology. Tyrannical boss Paul Cathéter’s last name resembles the medical instrument, whose name derives from *kathienai*, ‘to let or send down, thrust in;’ likewise, Cathéter will let or send down his staff, firing and degrading them, after thrusting himself into their previously stable work environment. Slow, but dependable Agathe Rougier’s first name means ‘good, noble,’ in Ancient Greek; Ariane Stein’s first name is a variant of the

¹⁷⁰ P. 26. Kuperman, Nathalie. *Nous étions des êtres vivants*. Paris: Gallimard, 2010.

¹⁷¹ Kuperman 161

¹⁷² Kuperman 26

¹⁷³ Kuperman 19

Greek mythological character Ariadne, who betrayed her husband Dionysus to help Theseus navigate the labyrinth and defeat the Minotaur.¹⁷⁴ Ariane's stealthy navigation of the physical spaces within Mercandier's former office (referred to as "le labyrinthe"¹⁷⁵), her betrayal of her colleagues, and her unexpected ascendancy within the figurative channels of Mercandier's hierarchy parallel Ariadne's story. As in Hellenic tragedy, or as in a modern "morality play," hubristic and corrupt characters meet their downfall; moreover, the "tragic" conclusion implies a cathartic revenge on Cathéter. *Nous étions des êtres vivants* also resembles a morality play in that characters represent moral virtues and vices, such as 'goodness' (Agathe), duplicity (Ariane), or identification with Anglo-American values and elitism (as with Patrick Sabaroff, whose English first name derives from the Latin "patricius," meaning "nobleman").

The novel's three-page prelude, which precedes the first "act," introduces the employees while illustrating their workplace and the creative, playful tasks of their work. One person composes and edits photo layouts while another staff member edits and polishes an article's copy. A third, satisfied at negotiating a low per-unit price for the toy to be given out with the magazine, playfully squeezes the toy dinosaur's stomach so it opens its mouth in a saucy imitation of laughing or shouting. "Le cœur" then contrasts this playful work, in which they have a pedagogical role developing educational games for children, with their future under Cathéter, in which they must encourage children to consume instead of teaching them to create. "Nous devons maintenant nous intéresser aux jeux vidéo, aux jouets, aux sites Internet... nous pensons aux enfants qui (lisent) les belles histoires illustrées, qui réfléchi(ssent) pour réaliser les

¹⁷⁴ The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* speculates that Ariadne was already married to Dionysus when she ran away with Theseus, based on the mysterious accusation that Dionysus makes that deprives Theseus of his "joy" of Ariadne after they elope (see *Odyssey* XI, 321-5). See: Rose, Herbert Jennings, Charles Martin Robertson, and B. C. Dietrich. "Ariadne." *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

¹⁷⁵ Kuperman 192

jeux... concocter les recettes... lever le mystère de l'énigme."¹⁷⁶ The chorus also must "play" new "roles": they must pretend not to be "triste(s) de travail" and must generate profit for Cathéter, despite losing the satisfying creative, playful, and pedagogical tasks of their work.¹⁷⁷ In this way, *Nous étions des êtres vivants* links play and pedagogy to ideology, suggesting that late-stage capitalism not only hurts adults by worsening their work conditions, but also harms children by teaching them to consume rather than to think critically – and furthermore, that the latter subtends the former.

The novel also features a dissident figure in editor Christophe Perritoni, whose revolts include vomiting in a meeting with Cathéter after eating spoiled soup from the office's vending machine – literally rejecting what his employer expects him to swallow – as well as anti-authoritarian insults, chastising his colleagues for their apathy, and suggesting that the staff sequester their abusive boss in his office. In the metonymic space of the office, in which the characters' bodies act out French workers' suffering and their various passive and active resistances, Perritoni is a figure of rebellion and dissidence. This role is suggested by his name's near-homophony with the word *peritonitis*, an inflammation of the lining of the abdominal wall that leads to nausea and vomiting, suggesting that Perritoni will not "stomach" Cathéter's new order. The novel juxtaposes Perritoni's bilious resistance with the quiet physical rebellions of his colleagues, who admire his resistance but don't act in kind, instead adopting physical positions that "act out" and embody their ambivalence about trying to keep their jobs. Mercandier's employees are "ni assis ni debout... hésitant entre deux positions, à genoux, sur une jambe ou le

¹⁷⁶ Kuperman 30-31

¹⁷⁷ Kuperman 34

dos appuyé contre une arête d'étagère;”¹⁷⁸; ‘nous prenons des postures qui espèrent signifier que nous sommes en désaccord.’¹⁷⁹ Their bodies betray their desires to leave, forcing them into sick leave and crises of “inquiétudes, de peur... d'apparitions d'eczéma... de pleurs sans raison apparente, de fatigue.”¹⁸⁰ By showing the chorus looking to Perritoni as inspiration for their own “revolt” against Cathéter’s erasure of their company’s “volet social,” playful work, and pedagogical roles, the novel evokes a long history of political resistance in France that has sought liberation in all sectors of social and personal existence.

Indeed, within this radical tradition, the struggle for better work conditions was part of a larger social struggle that also extended to promoting children’s emancipation. Notions of creativity and play as being ideologically didactic, and thus important, have been central to French anti-capitalist thought since the first socialist theories of education in the 19th century. Communard Paul Lafargue, as well as then-popular foreign theorists published in France such as Russian social anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, suggested that education can either subjugate or emancipate children, and believed that education should teach critical and creative skills as well as practical knowledge. These ideas later found purchase in Marxist child psychology and pedagogical theory of the 20th century, in both the Soviet Union and the West. The Soviet child psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s theories of play as emancipation proposed that imaginative, creative play liberates children by teaching them critical thinking skills. “The creation of an imaginary situation... is the first effect of the child’s emancipation from situational

¹⁷⁸ Kuperman 17

¹⁷⁹ Kuperman 30

¹⁸⁰ Kuperman 45

constraints.”¹⁸¹ For instance, by pretending that a stick is a “horse” and “riding” it, children learn to think in terms of abstractions; in doing so, they can imagine a different, perhaps better life.

In a similar vein, Western Marxist theorists and “humanist educators” such as those of the “New Education” movement developed educational methods intended to liberate children. These ideas circulated in the *air du temps* of the global 1960’s, along with other theories of political and personal liberation. Starting in the 1930’s, Communist-Syndicalist French “New Education” pedagogical theorist Célestin Freinet eschewed lectures and hierarchy, privileging cooperative play, interactive and student-led lessons, and collective self-management and creation through student-run presses and arts workshops; his theories were published in a collection in 1964. As political scientist Julie Pagis explained, Freinet’s ideas on education, along with Ivan Illich’s, were popular among the student revolutionaries of May ’68, who believed that the authoritarianism of the French educational system reflected the coercion and violence of capitalism.¹⁸² In the French leftist intellectual imaginary, education and work have long been viewed as complementary parts of human activity, in which capitalist ideology is either taught or deconstructed. Perritoni, who persistently reminds his colleagues of France’s past revolts as they protest the loss of their playful and pedagogical labor, evokes the French intellectual and political history of imagining ways of working, learning, and playing that could liberate children and adults.

In addition to silently embodying the resistance that they long to voice in the office’s physical space, Mercandier’s staff also worry that their access to the social and economic space

¹⁸¹ P. 15 Vygotsky, Lev S. “Play and Its Role in the Mental Development of the Child.” [“Igra i ee rol v umstvennom razvittii rebenka.”] *International Research in Early Childhood Education* 3, vol. 7, no. 2, (1966) 2016, pp. 3-25.

¹⁸² P. 371. Pagis, Julie. “Déscolarisons l’école.” *Mai-juin 1968*. Eds. Dammam, Dominique, et al. 370-382. Ivry-sur-Seine: Les Éditions de l’Atelier/Éditions Ouvrières, 2008.

of Paris, as well as the amount of space that they can access freely in their own offices, will be compromised by Cathéter's plan to move their offices to a less expensive neighborhood. After Cathéter announces the imminent relocation of Mercandier, the staff imagines how far from their homes they might soon be working. After one of them suggests the far-flung suburb of Pontault-Combault, Agathe jokingly asks: "c'est en France ?... Le nom fait rêver, on dirait l'Afrique."¹⁸³ Their fear of being pushed out to the *banlieues*, and thus out of "French" social space, diagnoses economically-motivated urbanism in Paris as a means of denying certain people – immigrants, people of color, and other undervalued laborers – access to transit, work, education, and a sense of national social belonging. The novel's portrayal of Cathéter's business plan, which obstructs his workers' access to their workplace and thus to "French" social space, suggests that giving businesses "freedom" to profit denies workers and vulnerable people free movement and access to resources. To Mercandier's staff, their new position in "foreign territory" feels like exile rather than an exciting foray into the global economy. The "choir" complains that company memos now speak to them in a type of "foreign language:" "C'est quoi le volet social ? C'est quoi une part manquante ?... L'ordinateur accepte ces termes, il ne les souligne pas d'une zigouigoui rouge pour indiquer une erreur de l'orthographe."¹⁸⁴ The staff must adapt to the unfamiliar codes of business language at the same time as they learn the new workplace "code" of selling brand-name toys rather than building children's imaginative, critical skills through play.

Their sense of losing national and social identity after social or symbolic expulsion from "France" also makes the chorus feel disconnected from French cultural history, including its left-wing revolts and labor movements. Lost within their sense of separation from France's radical

¹⁸³ Kuperman 24

¹⁸⁴ Kuperman 36

past, the chorus wonders aloud what has become of active resistance, as well as its symbols, anthems, and values. They can only hazily evoke the “chansons révolutionnaires qui nous rappellent qu’un autre monde a existé, un monde de courage et revendications, un monde où l’on arrête de travailler en même temps pour exprimer la réprobation.”¹⁸⁵ After undergoing harassment, a forced relocation, mandatory overtime, and mass layoffs, the chorus finally remembers their union representatives’ advice before the buyout, which they had ignored to save their jobs: “nous les avons un peu oubliées, celles qui ont tout fait pour que les choses se passent autrement, qui n’ont cessé de nous prévenir du danger que représente l’acceptation d’être rachetés par un escroc, qui nous ont encouragés à faire grève, à alerter les médias, à nous mobiliser.”¹⁸⁶ Just as the staff has avoided using the word “grève” or naming the revolutions in question, employing vague terms to describe a seemingly distant radical past in France, their selective memory effaces their knowledge of current possibilities for resistance.

By illustrating Mercandier’s employees feeling powerless and distant from this “other world,” Kuperman’s novel aestheticizes the French public’s negative feelings about their country’s adoption of neoliberalism and the ensuing losses to labor rights. In France, economists have been critical of “American-style” neoliberal economics and business since the model took root there in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. In the early 1990s, French economist Michel Albert argued that neoliberal (or what he called “*néoaméricain*”) business and economic models in France represented a threat to national economic stability, having enabled unregulated salaries, mass layoffs, and “*dualisme social*” in the US.¹⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the EU and France have

¹⁸⁵ Kuperman 46

¹⁸⁶ Kuperman 176

¹⁸⁷ In the ‘neo-American’ model, Albert explains, unilateral management decisions replace consensus, evaluations are based mainly on productivity, and flexible hiring and firing practices privilege flexibility over stability. In the

embraced trade and labor deregulation, provoking controversy in the social sciences and the public sphere about how France's economy can function without adopting the "Anglo-American" economic model.¹⁸⁸

Despite the common branding of neoliberalism as an "Anglo-American" import, the French desire to "renew" liberal economic doctrine is much older than the 1970's and has little to do with American influence. In fact, it is closely linked with more ignoble forms of political and economic collaboration from France's past. As François Denord establishes,

"Contrairement à ce que l'on affirme souvent, le néo-libéralisme n'est pas apparu après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, mais pendant les années 1930. Il a connu un premier essai de théorisation lors du Colloque Walter Lippmann, qui s'est tenu à Paris en août 1938 en vue de coordonner une action internationale contre le 'planisme' alors en vogue et de fonder un 'néo-libéralisme' qui tiendrait compte des interventions de l'État dans l'économie. De cette réunion est né le Centre International d'Études pour la Rénovation du Libéralisme (C.I.R.L.), qui a joué un rôle de prototype pour la Société du Mont Pèlerin, société savante et réseau d'influence, qui réunit chaque année depuis 1947 les partisans du néo-libéralisme. Le colloque Lippmann a été organisé par Louis Rougier, fils d'un médecin, né à Lyon en 1889."¹⁸⁹

Louis Rougier, a political philosopher who taught in several *lycées* and universities during his career, entered academe on the basis of his thesis on logic, which declared that there are no empirical truths outside the human mind. However, despite his "post-truth" philosophy and academic career, Rougier is mostly remembered for his unrepentant Pétainisme. As Olivier Dard notes, not only did he take a position in the Vichy government and act as

rhéan ('Rhine-style') system once popular in Europe, professional agencies set salaries, and businesses hire and train employees for careers. See: Albert, Michel. *Capitalisme contre capitalisme*. Paris: Seuil, 1991.

¹⁸⁸ For valuable perspectives on this question, see: Bourdieu, Pierre. "L'essence du néolibéralisme." *Le Monde diplomatique* March 1998: 3-6 ; Maris, Bernard. *Keynes ou l'économiste citoyen*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1999. See also: Teper, Bernard and Michel Zerbato. *Néolibéralisme et crise de la dette*. Chanteloup les Vignes: Osez la République Sociale, 2012. See also: *Etre humain en système capitaliste ? L'impact psychologique du néolibéralisme*. Gap: Yves Michel, Collection: Société civile, 2015. See also: Dardot, Pierre and Christian Laval. *Ce cauchemar qui n'en finit pas: Comment le néolibéralisme défait la démocratie*. Paris: La Découverte, Collection Cahiers libres, 2016.

¹⁸⁹ P. 3. Denord, François. 2001. "Aux origines du néo-libéralisme en France. Louis Rougier et le Colloque Walter Lippmann de 1938." *Le Mouvement Social* vol. 195, no. 2, 2001, pp. 9-34.

intermediary between Philippe Pétain and Winston Churchill in 1940, but he also defended Pétain long after 1945, even published works referring to France's post-war *épuration* as totalitarian.¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, Rougier joined the Association pour défendre la mémoire du maréchal Pétain, a group that petitioned the United Nations in 1951 to pardon Pétain, claiming that the Allies has committed war crimes and human rights violations during the liberation of France.¹⁹¹ Later, in the 1970's, Rougier made alliances with members of the Nouvelle Droite, including Alain de Benoist.¹⁹² As an early proponent of neoliberalism in France as well as a defender of fascism, Rougier provides a fascinating case study for critics interested in connecting the economic workings of neoliberalism to ideologies of repression and dehumanization. Moreover, Rougier also shares a last name with *Nous étions des êtres vivants*' character Agathe Rougier, which suggests that Kuperman's novel's name game and its archetypal characters are more knowing than they may appear at first.

The novel mirrors controversies over neoliberal economics and discourse to create narrative tension, pitting the employees of Mercandier against their "neoliberally inclined" colleagues and their new boss. For instance, the subplot involving photo editor Patrick Sabaroff troubles the notion that competitive games in the workplace are always healthy; when games are used for determining human worth rather than as sociable, ludic activities, "capitalist play" destroys human social bonds. Sabaroff enthuses after the news of Cathéter's buyout that French business now welcomes neoliberalism and "neomanagement:" "Je serai enfin heureux... Nous

¹⁹⁰ P. 58. Dard, Olivier. "Louis Rougier: itinéraire intellectuel et politique, des années vingt à Nouvelle École." *Philosophia Scientiæ. Travaux d'histoire et de philosophie des sciences CS 7*, 2007, pp. 50-64.

¹⁹¹ P. 111-113. Rousso, Henry. "A contre-courant, l'Association pour défendre la mémoire du maréchal Pétain," in *Mémoire de la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, edited by Alfred Wahl, 111-123. Metz: Centre de recherche histoire et civilisation de l'Université de Metz, 1984.

¹⁹² Dard 50, 61

avons surmonté notre déficit et nous exerçons enfin une activité en accord avec le monde d'aujourd'hui.”¹⁹³ Sabaroff supports Cathéter’s plan to “optimize” Mercandier by firing nine employees in the next year, “pour alléger la masse salariale... et permettre à l’entreprise de devenir rentable.”¹⁹⁴ Cathéter will make future layoffs by observing the staff’s qualities of “adaptation, de leurs capacités à absorber plus de travail, de leur volonté à participer à un projet, même s’il ne leur convient pas.”¹⁹⁵ Unlike most of his colleagues, Sabaroff supports these “idées qui ne nous effleurent même pas l’esprit” as brilliant innovations promoting efficiency. Seeming to anticipate 2016’s Loi Travail and its minority of supporters, Sabaroff scorns supporters of the 35-hour work week: “Je ne vois pas le prétendu mal qui nous attend... Leur peur, c’est qu’il revienne sur les accords des 35 heures... Mais si nous ne faisons pas d’efforts, tout s’écroulera. Cet esprit individualiste me fait le cafard.”¹⁹⁶ Sabaroff’s dismissal of labor rights as “individualistic” is strikingly ironic, given his lack of identification with his colleagues.

The novel uses Sabaroff’s enjoyment of other types of games and contests to allegorize his love of ruthless “competition” in the “game” of work. Sabaroff, who has sped up his packing by stealthily appropriating extra boxes, believes that Cathéter should have evaluated the employees by observing them on the day they packed up their office to move to the new location: “Si j’arrive à l’approcher, il faudrait que je lui suggère des techniques de cet ordre, sous forme de jeux, pour jauger les gens et les mettre aux places qui leur correspondent.”¹⁹⁷ Thus Sabaroff imagines workplace “games” not as tools for fostering sociable productivity, but as

¹⁹³ Kuperman 26-27

¹⁹⁴ Kuperman 147

¹⁹⁵ Kuperman 148

¹⁹⁶ Kuperman 32-33

¹⁹⁷ Kuperman 75

performance metrics that eliminate the “slow” and “weak.” Sabaroff’s moving boxes contain “un jeu de stratégie que j’ai reçu pour les visuels en vue d’un concours ;”¹⁹⁸ although Sabaroff views himself as an elite “winner,” his colleagues see him as sycophantic, “lui qui n’a de cesse de prouver à quel point il produit, à quel point il se donne corps et âme à la boîte.”¹⁹⁹ However, his dedication to competitiveness also threatens Cathéter’s authority. Cathéter fires Sabaroff, rationalizing that “(Sabaroff) a fait des pieds et des mains pour obtenir un rendez-vous avec moi... il est prudent de se méfier de ce type de comportement.”²⁰⁰ A surprised Sabaroff broods, unable to understand why he hasn’t been promoted: “J’ai honte. J’avais enfin l’impression d’avoir trouvé un chef.”²⁰¹ In the end, Sabaroff’s desire to follow a “leader” is his undoing.

The novel also represents others eager to “play the game,” even when doing so goes against their best interests. For instance, Directrice Générale Muriel Dupont-Delvich, who nurtures green plants in her office and considers herself someone who “aime les gens,” realizes that to play the role of manager, she must “apprendre à désolidariser du groupe... (à) m’éloigne(r) d’eux... à considérer leurs plaintes comme des humeurs déplacées.”²⁰² Resolving to succeed (and to convince her dementia-addled father to validate her accomplishments), Muriel adopts a post-feminist, consumerist attitude of individualist success: “j’étais destinée à n’être que l’épouse d’un mari riche et puissant. J’ai préféré être *à moi seule* le mari puissant, la femme, la maison, les vacances et les enfants. Les bijoux, le pouvoir, les fringues de marques... toutes ces

¹⁹⁸ Kuperman 75

¹⁹⁹ Kuperman 126

²⁰⁰ Kuperman 149

²⁰¹ Kuperman 179

²⁰² Kuperman 48

choses, je les ai obtenues... *sans dépendre de personne.*"²⁰³ Muriel also avoids stereotypically feminine gender roles, choosing neutral job titles that don't evoke her gender. In this way, she hopes to gain authority usually only afforded to men, as well as her father's approval: "Je veux devenir directeur général depuis trop longtemps pour ne pas accepter la proposition. Je préfère DG, ce n'est ni féminin, ni masculin."²⁰⁴ Unfortunately, Muriel soon realizes that her role in Cathéter's "game" is to fire employees for no reason other than increasing Mercandier's profits.

With some regrets, Muriel identifies diligent and talented editor Ariane Stein, with whom her once-friendly relationship has been strained since Ariane conceived her first child. After the birth of Ariane's son, Muriel harassed Ariane with charges of lessened dedication and productivity, until management sanctioned Muriel and demanded that she desist. With her fabricated performance review of Ariane, Muriel chooses power over worker (and feminist) solidarity. However, by maintaining a system where women must choose between work and family, Muriel inadvertently assures that she will also hit the glass ceiling. On Mercandier's moving day, Muriel must also move her father into a retirement community. Cathéter calls Muriel to upbraid her for taking time for personal matters *after work*: "Vous plantez les gens de la société dans un moment crucial... je me fiche de votre père... Si vous voulez faire passer vos problèmes personnels en priorité, il fallait refuser ce poste!"²⁰⁵ Realizing that Cathéter equates all familial and social responsibilities with personal problems, Muriel resigns.

Later, Muriel understands that just as her ex-husband intimidated her into an abortion when she wanted a child, uncaring men have again pressured her into making sacrifices against

²⁰³ Kuperman 69, my italics

²⁰⁴ Kuperman 36

²⁰⁵ Kuperman 134

her will, for her security but never for love. Analogizing her self-serving actions to French collaboration with the Nazis during World War II, Muriel calls herself a “collabo” for having given Ariane away to a boss who is “hermétique à toute expression d’humanité,” leaving her unemployed in an uncaring economy.²⁰⁶ Muriel tells Cathéter that she will sue him for his blackmail, but Cathéter responds disdainfully, “nous n’avons pas le temps de jouer à ces petits jeux,” as he can afford expert legal counsel and assumes that she cannot.²⁰⁷ Although Muriel’s lawyer warns her that “c’est un escroc, mais c’est un bon,” he takes her case, perhaps because the game’s stakes are thrillingly high: “l’enjeu le séduit,” just as it enticed Muriel.²⁰⁸

Indeed, the language of “le jeu” and “jouer” pervade the language of business used by Mercandier’s staff, as well as Cathéter himself; Cathéter describes his business strategy as a game: “je joue cash, voyez-vous.”²⁰⁹ Muriel, too, explains that she took her management role initially because she likes helping others play the game, “les embauchant, les formant... les encourageant... simplement par gout du risque, du jeu, du challenge.”²¹⁰ The chorus also describes their enjoyment of being “too busy,” how they love to “refuser un déjeuner en arguant un boulot fou, un stress énorme... C’est avec une jouissance ignorante que nous nous proclamons indisponibles... Je suis débordé, dit-on... mais l’on aime que ça déborde.”²¹¹ The novel reflects 21st-century French work culture’s embrace of an putatively “American” standard

²⁰⁶ Kuperman 32

²⁰⁷ Kuperman 171

²⁰⁸ Kuperman 195

²⁰⁹ Kuperman 138

²¹⁰ Kuperman 49

²¹¹ Kuperman 41

of “busyness” as a sign of status.²¹² Cathéter’s speed-ups initially appeal to the staff’s love of “busyness,” but quickly threatens those who cannot keep up with the pace with layoffs. “Nous avons une conscience soudaine et cauchemardesque de la précarité de nos existences dans l’entreprise... Les journaux deviendraient des produits au même titre que les yaourts.”²¹³ The work at Mercandier has gone from skilled, creative work – a sort of artisanat – to industrialized, impersonal, and artless production. However, when the reduction to personnel after layoffs dramatically raises the workload, with the threat of more lay-offs for missing impossibly tight deadlines, Mercandier’s employees note anxiously that they may need to pull out of the game before they lose it: “*Tirer son épingle du jeu* est une expression qu’aucun de nous n’ose prononcer.”²¹⁴ If their work is a game, it is a joyless one with few prospects for “winning.”

The narrative of *Nous étions des êtres vivants* mimics a morality play by showing that the mirthless “game” of capitalist competition leads to unethically “playing dirty.” For instance, editor Ariane Stein doesn’t enjoy “playing the game” of her job: “Je n’aime pas particulièrement mon travail... Je lis des manuscrits... (et) propose aux auteurs des améliorations. Je suis également conceptrice de jeux.”²¹⁵ However, game designer Ariane also knowingly plays “le jeu” of work, metaphorically “betting” that her material needs will lead her to betray her preferences for other work, or even betray her colleagues by “cheating” them: “Pari que je m’apprête à trahir, parce que: la nourriture, le loyer, les vêtements de mes enfants.”²¹⁶ Ariane,

²¹² For more on the French adoption of American-style “busyness” as a status symbol, see: Aubert, Nicole and Christophe Roux-Dufort. *Le culte de l’urgence : La société malade du temps*. Paris: Flammarion, 2003. Print.

²¹³ Kuperman 225

²¹⁴ Kuperman 62

²¹⁵ Kuperman 32

²¹⁶ Kuperman 32

who has recently suffered financial and emotional losses after divorcing, despairs at her intuition that Cathéter will fire her. To create a diversion and forestall being fired, Ariane stays after hours in Mercandier's now-former offices, cutting open moving boxes and simulating a break-in. This *coup de théâtre* effectively re-stages the pillaging of Mercandier's resources and the sense of violation that the staff feels after Cathéter's buyout. Although the custodian who gives Ariane access to the office after hours is unaware of her plan to create chaos, he is suspicious of her motivations for staying late; tellingly, he warns her not to betray her colleagues and become a 'kapo' in her efforts to protect herself from being fired.

Ariane's stealthy vandalism leads her to engage critically with symbols of unsatisfying, uncreative "capitalist play" and leisure. While rifling through her colleague Agathe's moving boxes, Ariane notices a Barbie sticker on Agathe's office phone. She then imagines the famously branded, gender norm-enforcing doll's unwholesome pleasure at her betraying Agathe, Muriel, and her other women colleagues to save herself: "Barbie jouit. Elle voit s'agiter en moi toutes les ressources inutiles conviées par l'envie et la jalousie... Elle est fière d'elle, cette sorte d'ordure qui aime que les femmes s'entre-tuent."²¹⁷ Ariane identifies the toy as not a symbol of ludic joy, but a malign force of consumerism that socializes women to internalize feminine competition.

In Muriel's office, Ariane finds a box full of samples of the toys that the magazine gives away, which Muriel has hoarded to enjoy as non-functional possessions rather than as tools for play and stress relief. Another box is filled with spa accessories: "un coussin bourré de noyaux de cerises pour détendre la nuque... un spray anti-fatigue à la camomille."²¹⁸ In addition to absurdly touting chamomile, an herb known for inducing drowsiness, as a means of fighting

²¹⁷ Kuperman 100

²¹⁸ Kuperman 124.

fatigue, Muriel's "stash" offers only dubious and fleeting potential for relief from overwork. Sociologists since Jean Baudrillard have theorized that such products promote bien-être ("well-being/wellness") rather than health – a "Band-Aid" model of keeping workers well enough to function and produce instead of curing illness stemming from exploitative work conditions.²¹⁹ Muriel's "stashes" of toys and anti-stress accessories belie her desires to preserve her health through play and nurturing, which she has abdicated to "play the game" of profitability, but they strike Ariane as examples of Muriel's selfish desire for luxury rather than as tools for self-care. After redistributing Muriel's stash by packaging the individual objects and mailing them to her colleagues, Ariane finds printouts of Muriel's e-mails naming her to be fired.

After the colleagues move into their new office building the following Monday, they are disheartened to see that their offices are smaller, have no doors, and are designed to keep workers visible at all times. The metonymic space of the office shows the shrinking of private time and space in French society as the demands of "always-on" work infringe upon rest and leisure. As the shocked staff complains about their new offices and speculates about the eviscerated moving boxes, Ariane exploits the confusion to furtively meet with Cathéter, who promotes her when she offers to find Mercandier's saboteur. Marveling at her rapid ascendancy and at saving her job, Ariane reflects: "Je me sens presque bien... C'est la première fois de ma vie que je me livre à un jeu de rôles pour obtenir ce que je veux."²²⁰ Ariane realizes that by her own moral standards, she has become a villain.

²¹⁹ P. 59-62. Baudrillard, Jean. *La société de consommation*. Paris: Gallimard Folio Essais, 1970. For a critique of "wellness" as a symptom of neoliberalism, which puts the onus for "happiness" and "wellness" on workers rather than the businesses and policymakers who have stripped their labor rights and economic security, see also: Cederström, Carl and Andre Spicer. *The Wellness Syndrome*. New York and London: Polity, 2015.

²²⁰ Kuperman 216

However, Ariane consoles herself, deciding that she is not a villain or a traitor, but is simply playing a new character in a scenario that she couldn't otherwise control: "Je suis un personnage. Mais il n'y a pas de mal en moi. Je joue tout simplement à tenter de sauver ma peau, à explorer mon pouvoir, à risquer d'être une autre, pour le bien de mes enfants." Although Ariane rationalizes her role-playing as a survival strategy, the staff sees her new alliance with Cathéter as a betrayal, refusing her orders and taunting her with "Tais-toi ! Traître... et des qualificatifs terribles qui avaient trait à la collaboration sous les régimes dictatoriaux."²²¹ When Ariane's colleagues unmask her as a "kapo" who "cheats" and "collaborates" to win the "game" of working for Cathéter, they refuse her orders. In Kuperman's narrative, resistance against capitalist individualism becomes possible once workers analogize neoliberal "collaboration" with France's shameful fascist past.

Unfortunately, the "game" of competitive productivity in the neoliberal workplace necessarily has some who "lose" when they cannot meet its exhausting demands. Agathe Rougier, perfectionistic but slow, has devoted her life to her work; lonely Agathe vacillates between wishing she could transform her cat into a lover, disdaining her colleagues' family lives as dull and their offspring as ugly, and contemplating suicide. Agathe mainly regrets that her years of "giving herself" to Mercandier have given her nothing in return, as her labor is not valuable to Cathéter: "J'ai envie de pleurer... quand je songe aux heures de travail que je leur ai données."²²² Agathe begins to fixate on taking her dolls from childhood out of storage, to play with them as she did when she was young. As a child, Agathe explains, "je les ai passées en revue pour étudier la forme de leurs jambes, de leurs bras, de leurs seins... je coiffais leurs

²²¹ Kuperman 227

²²² Kuperman 20

cheveux, et je faisais des concours.”²²³ Yet this desire does not reflect a desire to escape into girlish play. As a child, having already internalized the world’s judgment of women at a young age, Agathe was unable to enjoy playtime’s ludic potential, making her games agonizing rehearsals of competitions in which the same doll inevitably won each time. Agathe, whose last name carries a possible evocation of an early French neoliberal loyal to an elitist totalitarian ideology, has not fared well in the battle of neoliberalism. She regrets that “je n’ai rien fait de mon goût pour les concours et je ne me suis jamais mesurée aux autres,” stricken that her “taste for the game” has not better equipped her to play it.²²⁴

At Mercandier, jokes of mass layoffs have turned dark; Agathe explains, “On parle de la sélection naturelle, au point d’en avoir fait un sigle. ‘Tu es prêt pour la SN ?’”²²⁵ Use of the expression ‘natural selection’ alludes to Cathéter’s neomanagement practice as a form of Social Darwinism. The choir agrees that while they are “solidaires” with Agathe, none of them will risk elimination by admitting that they also struggle to meet deadlines: “Pas un de nous n’a dit: ‘Je suis lent, moi aussi.’”²²⁶ Rather than cooperating for their shared survival, the staff chooses to compete with Agathe and try to save themselves. When Cathéter fires Agathe, he explains to his “kapo” Ariane that he has fired Agathe for her struggles with mental health and her resulting slower productivity: “Vous garderiez, vous, une personne qui s’installe en arrêt maladie de longues semaines tous les trois ans pour dépression ?... L’entreprise ne peut pas se laisser ralentir par les faibles.”²²⁷ Cathéter’s “neo-American” management style assigns diligent Agathe a new,

²²³ Kuperman 22

²²⁴ Kuperman 23

²²⁵ Kuperman 41-42

²²⁶ Kuperman 41

²²⁷ Kuperman 215

marginal identity as “inefficient” and “disabled.” As sociologist Harlan Hahn stated, the ascendancy of neoliberal economics in the US in the 80’s spurred “a significant shift in the definition of disability from a medical orientation which focuses on functional impairments, to a sociopolitical perspective... relat(ing) disability to dominant modes of production,” defining disability as an inability to work as quickly as one’s more “able” colleagues.²²⁸ Disability studies scholar Michael Oliver argued that the definition of disability as functional impairment in the workplace rationalizes the “production” of a permanent economic underclass of disabled persons alongside other types of industrial production.²²⁹ A largely destitute population of disabled persons is necessary condition of continued economic expansion and the “success” of capitalism.

However, as Jean Baudrillard argued, economic expansion depends on sacrificing workers’ health to an unsustainable workload and pace, which often renders otherwise well and able-bodied people too sick or too physically incapacitated to work. This view of people as disposable sources of labor, which excludes large swathes of ‘outcast proletariat’ from work and wears out once-healthy laborers with heavy workloads (and mirrors other types of “waste,” such as overproduction and industrial waste) is a feature of what scholar Michelle Yates called the ‘human-as-waste’ model of capitalism. Kuperman’s novel illustrates that in the “Neo-American” business model, the value of workers depends not upon their humanity, but upon their ability to create profits without being affected by illness or other human needs. With her striking name and thwarted “goût pour les concours,” Agathe Rougier embodies the irony of embracing a system

²²⁸ P. 551. Hahn, Harlan. “Advertising the Acceptably Employable Image: Disability and Capitalism.” *Policy Studies Journal*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2017, pp. 551-570.

²²⁹ Oliver, Michael J. “Capitalism, disability, and ideology: A materialist critique of the Normalization principle.” In *A Quarter-century of Normalization and Social Role Valorization: Evolution and Impact*. Eds. Flynn, Robert John and Lemay, Raymond A., 163-173. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1999.

that claims only to wish to be “competitive” and maximize profits, but in fact treats humanity and the earth as disposable and depends upon our continued “collaboration” to exist. The novel’s end, which leaves ambiguous whether the staff of Mercandier takes up Perritoni’s suggestion to sequester Cathéter in his office, or whether they just laugh hysterically at his proposal, abruptly abandons the reader at a moment of high narrative tension. Will they take action, revolt, and “play on the same team” against oppressive bosses and policies? Or will they just have a good laugh at the idea that they could ever regain labor rights and control over their workplaces, then get back to “collaborating?” As we are never told what they decide, the decision is left to us.

Amidst a large crop of late 20th-century and early 21st-century “sociological” workplace fiction, Kuperman’s narrative is far from being the only one to problematize the idea that French neoliberal economic ideology derives from to the relationship between France and America, or indeed to compare French neoliberalism to French collaboration with Nazi Germany. The latter comparison provides the metaphor at the heart of the eighth book by French fiction author François Emmanuel, a novella entitled *La question humaine* (published in 2000) and re-emerges several times throughout Frédéric Beigbeder’s novel *99 F*, also published in 2000. *Nous étions des êtres vivants* sets itself apart by moving away from this fin de siècle cynicism and considering strategies for surviving, and for even beating the game, as in Perritoni’s proposed revolt against Cathéter. Through positioning Agathe’s trials and the defeat and dismissal of her co-workers Sabaroff, Muriel, and the rest of the “chorus” as moves in a game that workers always lose, Kuperman’s work dramatizes the axiological faults of neoliberal capitalist economic ideology. Winning these games is neither a moral victory nor a professional success; it merely stands as proof that you are willing to cheat. Yet those who succeed by “collaborating” and betraying their own morals will quickly lose to more immoral opponents. However, what if we

played new games instead, such as “cooperating with colleagues,” or “going on strike?” Kuperman’s novel thus offers possible models of the creativity, solidarity, community-building, dissidence, and labor activism that will rehumanize our workplaces and societies, suggesting that we may be able to work and play for pleasure rather than profit if we team up and “play fair.”

“Laisse le travail des vautours aux vautours” : Precarious labor, *sans-papiers*, and the spirit of ’68 in Gauz’s *Debout-payé*

While *Nous étions des êtres vivants* employs a sense of defeat and deliberately vague symbols of revolt to evoke contemporary French subjects’ sense of distance from its radical history, Gauz’s novel *Debout-payé* (2014) deals with the legacy of May ’68 head-on. Since the beginning of the rise of neoliberalism in France in the early 1990s, many contemporary novels of working life portray the frustrations of white-collar professionals facing speed-up, overwork, harassment, and lay-offs in changing corporate work environments.²³⁰ Gauz’s work, on the other hand, is part of a small handful of contemporary fiction works that represent the working class, blue-collar professions, and the service sector.²³¹ *Debout-payé*, an intergenerational saga of family and friends from the Ivory Coast who have come to France to attend university and work from the end of the Trente Glorieuses onward, discusses the role of African immigrant workers in the ever-expanding service industry in France. Gauz’s novel tracks the interaction of service employees and their customers brought together in relationships of buying, selling, and working,

²³⁰ See also: Foenkinos, David. *Je vais mieux*. Paris: Gallimard, 2013. *La tête de l’emploi*. Paris: J’ai lu, 2014. Oyarbide, Christian. *Mortel management*. Paris: Editea, 2009. Quintreau, Laurent. *Marge brute*. Paris: Denoël, 2006. Salvaing, François. *La boîte*. Paris: Fayard, 1998.

²³¹ See also: Beinstingel, Thierry. *Ils désertent*. Paris: Fayard, 2012. Beinstingel, Thierry. *Retour aux mots sauvages*. Paris: Fayard, 2010. Coquet, Clotilde. *Parle-moi du sous-sol*. Paris: Fayard, 2014. Campredon, Julien. *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l’amour des elfes*. Arles: Monsieur Toussaint Louverture, 2006. Nini, Soraya. *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*. Paris: Fixot, 1993. Bon, François. *Daewoo*. Paris: Fayard, 2004.

while postmodern, globalized capitalism recolonizes and shrinks the world even as it drives families and friends apart.

In 1974, brilliant medical student André, his equally brilliant postcolonial Marxist sociologist wife Angela, and André's cousin Ferdinand face expulsion under the xenophobic policies of newly-elected president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. About 25 years later, Angela's son Ossiri goes to Paris, where he meets his friend Kassoum. While a third-person, omniscient narrative tells the story of his parents' generation, the story of Kassoum and Ossiri's life in Paris is told from Ossiri's perspective, written in the third person, but using a poetical, fragmented, prose style to narrate Ossiri's working life as a security guard and observations of everyday life in cosmopolitan Paris. As Ossiri explains, in this line of work, "pour ne pas tomber dans la facilité oisive ou... dans le zèle imbécile et l'agressivité aigrie, il faut soit savoir se vider sa tête de toute considération...au-dessus de l'instinct ou du réflexe spinal, soit avoir une vie intérieure très intense."²³² Ossiri, a former high school teacher, keeps alert with his observations of the world, which are filtered through a postcolonial Marxist lens thanks to his mother Angela's lessons in radical history, political theory, and her everyday political praxis. Consequently, Ossiri observes Paris as a city in need of "liberation," and encourages his friend and roommate Kassoum, an "enfant du ghetto de Treichville" in Abidjan, to connect with beauty, culture, and meaningful work despite their positions in the sans-papiers (undocumented immigrant) underclass of Paris.

To situate Ossiri and Kassoum in 2000s France, the omniscient narrative begins the novel by showing the two friends waiting in line at a group hiring event, signaling that it will represent a specific sector of the working world. Instead of standing in line for one-to-one or panel

²³² P. 15. Gauz. *Debout-payé*. Paris: Le Nouvel Attila, 2014

interviews, in which one applicant meets a hiring manager or owner (or several managers or owners) at a time, the men must still wait in line before being admitted to be seen by a panel of managers as a large group. Gauz's narrative's portrayal of group hiring allows the reader to more closely view his characters' positions in and sentiments about the impersonal, even dehumanizing professional climate of the service industry. This "more formal and more bureaucratic" recruitment process, born of corporate business management's tendency to prefer efficiency over warmth because it must hire large numbers of laborers for positions with high turnover, has already been popular in the United States since the 1990s.²³³ *Debout-payé* thus establishes that 21st century African working-class immigrants already work within the "néoaméricain" business climate that Kuperman's Caucasian, white-collar protagonists feared.

The narrative also contrasts two eras of work as a means of pointing up the contemporary's working world's lack of a human, personal touch. We learn later that Ossiri and Kassoum previously worked at a security firm run by Ossiri's family friend Ferdinand. Now that Ferdinand's firm has folded after the events of September 11th, 2001 increased xenophobic sentiments in Europe, Ossiri and Kassoum are seeking employment with a firm run by white Frenchmen, who are still willing to hire *sans-papiers*. The novel opens with a description of a line of men filing up a flight of stairs toward a "mâle dominant," an HR manager.²³⁴ The narrator first presents them as an undifferentiated, anonymous mass of "Africains" with no specific nationalities, walking up a stairway so narrow that only one person can pass at a time. The single

²³³ "Organizational theory... offers two main reasons why recruitment practices of larger firms will be more formal and more bureaucratic... The efficiency imperative (Williamson, 1975) would hold that organizations involved in recurring transactions (such as hiring labor) will attempt to internalize these procedures... to economize costs. Larger firms need formalized procedures to speed the processing of large numbers of applications and the filling of multiple jobs." P. 842. Barber, Alison E., et al. "A tale of two job markets: Organizational size and its effects on hiring practices and job search behavior." *Personnel Psychology* 52.4 (1999): 841-868.

²³⁴ Gauz 12

file line restricting their ascension symbolically parallels the limited opportunities for African immigrants to rise to the top of their workplace or their society; by identifying them as “Africains,” the narrative erases their national and personal subjectivity.

Yet the narrative voice quickly ironizes on the idea of presenting them merely as Africans: “Son besoin de main-d’œuvre est immense... Le bruit s’est très vite répandu dans la ‘communauté’ africaine.” With mocking quotation marks sending up the idea of a homogeneous African community, the narrative continues:

“Congolais, Ivoiriens, Maliens, Guinéens, Béninois, Sénégalais, etc., l’œil exercé identifie facilement les nationalités par le style vestimentaire. La combinaison polo-jean Levi’s 501 des Ivoiriens ; le blouson cuir noir trop grand des Maliens... Dans le doute, c’est l’oreille qui prend le relais car dans la bouche d’un Africain, les accents que prend la langue française sont des marqueurs d’origine aussi fiables... qu’une tumeur maligne pour diagnostiquer le cancer.”²³⁵

Although the narrative voice shows that the employees appear to the French boss only as “Africans,” it quickly changes viewpoints to an omniscient perspective that encompasses the individual men, who appear to each other as Congolese, Ivoirian, Malian, and so forth. In this way, the narrative voice immediately signals its aim of dissolving neocolonial ideas of “Africa” as a homogeneous place, flattened and erased of its specificity to be made more comprehensible to the French, who nevertheless view it as an affliction, a “cancer” to diagnose. The third-person omniscient narrative voice continues to mock the white, neocolonial French narrative of “Africa,” “Africans,” and “blackness:” “Les Noirs sont costauds... les Noirs sont obéissants... Impossible de ne pas penser à ce ramassis de clichés du bon sauvage qui sommeillent de façon atavique à la fois dans chacun des Blancs chargés de recrutement et dans chacun des Noirs venus exploiter ces clichés dans sa faveur.”²³⁶ By evoking the mentality of white French whose view of

²³⁵ Gauz 12

²³⁶ Gauz 14

African Francophones is still shaped by colonial discourse, as well as the perspective of African Francophones who are critical of said discourse, the narrative deconstructs White French culture's ideas of blackness and "africanité" as disparate from Frenchness.

After introducing Ossiri and Kassoum as they were beginning their working days, *Debout-payé* quickly steps back in time to the mid-1970s, introducing Ossiri's parents André and Angela and their friend Ferdinand, who are working and studying in Paris and living at the MECI (Maison d'Etudiants de Côte d'Ivoire). The narrative expounds upon how the immigrant experience in France changed after the sense of hope and radicalism around May 68, as an ideology of "France for the French" overtook French national politics and shaped French identity at the end of the Trente Glorieuses.²³⁷ The novel portrays the MECI as a hotbed for internationalist Marxist organizing and theory, which historian Françoise Blum notes was a real part of French radical history. The Fédération des étudiants d'Afrique Noire en France (FEANF), an *association* and de facto student union organized in 1951, held meetings at the MECI. Blum notes that the FEANF contributed much to student organizing and consciousness-raising, as well as to the elaboration of new Marxist political theories and the incorporation of international Marxist theory within student organizing.

"Outre son rôle d'ordre syndical, la FEANF a fonctionné dès ses origines comme un lieu d'élaboration d'une pensée théorique de libération de la tutelle coloniale, en lien avec d'autres pôles attractifs pour les étudiants, tels Présence africaine, qui publia notamment, un numéro conçu par la Fédération et intitulé 'Les Etudiants noirs parlent'... La FEANF fut tôt indépendantiste, rejetant les pourparlers engagés entre les parlementaires français et africains...(comme) des compromis... l'indépendance serait révolutionnaire et unitaire, ou ne serait pas. En ce sens, la Fédération appela à voter non au referendum de 1958, qui instaurait une Communauté

²³⁷ Giscard d'Estaing's slogan "Il faut une France forte" was accompanied by a term of deregulation, scaling back of labor rights, and anti-immigration policies, to the point that Lionel Stoléro, Giscard d'Estaing's secretary to the minister of labor and participation, declared in 1980 that "il n'est plus question d'accueillir un seul étranger en France." In 1974, Giscard d'Estaing's government suspended the right of immigrants to have their families join them in France – unless the immigrants came from the European Community. See: Berstein, Serge, René Remond and Jean-François Sirinelli. *Les Années Giscard : institutions et pratiques politiques 1974-1978*. Paris: Fayard, 2003.

francoafricaine. Elle mérite sans doute... de figurer pour l'histoire au rang des mouvements de libération nationale."²³⁸

By showing that Angela and André participate in meetings with MECI radicals and subscribe to postcolonial Marxist theories, *Debout-payé* implies that they were involved in the FEANF.

However, André's cousin Ferdinand remains skeptical about the need for political action. Ferdinand, who arrived in Paris in early 1974, "n'arrivait pas à voir 'La Crise' de ses propres yeux," due to the contrast between his hometown Abidjan's underdevelopment and widespread poverty and the seemingly incessant expansion, visible "busyness," and flow of frivolous consumer goods he sees in Paris, not to mention his observation of African immigrants at work. "Les rues étaient toujours aussi... bien balayées par les frères maliens; les cousins arabes continuaient de... (faire) pousser les buildings à la vitesse des champignons les lendemains de pluie... les 'Félix Potin' et les Prisunic étaient toujours remplis d'autant de victuailles et objets plus ou moins inutiles..."²³⁹ André explains "comment la Crise a mis fin aux Trente Glorieuses, trente ans de bonheur et de plein-emploi," and how Westerners responded to the oil crisis²⁴⁰ "en pensant à toutes leurs usines, leurs centrales thermales, leur plastique, leurs voitures, leurs habits, leurs perruques... leurs télévisions, etc., les Occidentaux, Américains en tête, ont pris peur."²⁴¹

²³⁸ Blum, Françoise. "Ce que les Indépendances firent à la FEANF : des étudiants en diaspora face à leurs Etats." *Etudiants africains en mouvements : contribution à une histoire des années 68*. Eds. Françoise Blum; Pierre Guidi; Ophélie Rillon. Pp. 265-279 Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, Histoire contemporaine, 2016

²³⁹ Gauz 64

²⁴⁰ The "choc pétrolier" in 1974 occurred after the Yom Kippur War brought contentious relations between the West and the Middle East to a head. The countries of OPEC raised the price of a barrel of oil from \$4.31 to \$10.11 in one day, on January 1st, 1974. Oil prices increased 10 times over from 1970 to 1979, in part because of the end of the Bretton-Woods agreement, which ended restrictions putting a fixed price on gold and the final link between the American dollar and the gold standard, leading to the devaluation of the US dollar, inflation and stagflation throughout the 1970s. For more information, see: Hammes, David, and Douglas Wills. "Black Gold: the end of Bretton Woods and the Oil-Price shocks of the 1970's." *The Independent Review* IX.4 (2005): 501-511

²⁴¹ Gauz 63

André convincingly makes the link between the economic crisis and the rise in racist, xenophobic anti-immigration policies.

Yet Ferdinand believes that he can also establish himself in this seemingly miraculous prosperity. Ferdinand has taken André's old job as a security guard at Les Grands Moulins de Paris. At the mills, the factory workers, who consulted André for medical advice, call him "Doc" because they mistake him for André. Ferdinand bears this racism calmly: "Beaucoup de gens... continuaient à l'appeler 'Doc.'... Cela ne le dérangeait pas de ressembler à son brillant cousin... même s'il était conscient que c'était à cause d'un mélange de clichés racistes, de négligence, et de paresse intellectuelle."²⁴² Ferdinand decides that his economic status, his title, and the ability to bring his fiancée to France matter more than fighting against injustice and discrimination: "Pour lui... le plus important était désormais l'habit de la responsabilité qu'il avait : les jolis souliers noirs, le bel uniforme bleu... Il se sentait important pour la première fois de sa vie."²⁴³ In this way, Ferdinand chooses not to protest, but to trust in the market, enjoy his new "respectability," and remain productive instead of risking revolt.

Ferdinand is also frustrated by the frequent protests and meetings of the Communist students in the MECI, where he lives with André and Angela; as many French did during the neoliberal late 1970s, Ferdinand scorns the holdover Communist students as quarrelsome *râleurs*. Ferdinand finds their meetings on issues like "l'attitude des intellectuels africains devant les conséquences du choc pétrolier" pointless, mockingly referring to the Ivoirian Communists as "réunionnais" for their endless 'réunions.' Unaware of the fact that his fellow students are

²⁴² Gauz 69

²⁴³ Ibid.

meeting to preserve their prospects for employment and visas, Ferdinand laughs to himself that at least the strident whistle blown to call meetings wakes him up in time for work.²⁴⁴

While the political Zeitgeist right before the election suggests that “les étrangers étaient devenus trop nombreux en France... ils arrachaient désormais leur travail aux vrais Français,” Ferdinand remains indifferent.²⁴⁵ However, when Giscard d’Estaing becomes president and appoints Michel Poniatowski Minister of State and Minister of the Interior, the MECI radicals meet to discuss Poniatowski’s introduction of the “carte de séjour ‘contre’ les étrangers” rather than hurrying to renew their visas. Ferdinand scorns their protests, and instead applies for his carte de séjour based on André and Angela’s advice. While the MECI radicals miss their opportunity and become sans-papiers, Ferdinand starts his own security company so he can bring his fiancée to France. *Debout-payé* frames the delicate position of immigrants aware of their economic precariousness, clarifying why they may complain privately about racism, xenophobia, and exploitation rather jeopardizing their jobs and social status with political protest.

However, André’s wife Angela represents an entirely different idea of negotiating a hybrid identity between africanité and francité: her radical Marxism and penchant for postcolonial theory have radicalized her view of the longstanding relationship between France and Côte d’Ivoire. Angela’s story is told within the third-person narration, which recounts her son Ossiri’s life in Paris about 25 years after her return home. Ossiri’s sudden flood of memories surge to the surface one day when, bored at work, he contemplates a symbolic image of African womanhood posted in the “petite cabane de vigile:” a Western Union poster featuring an image

²⁴⁴ Gauz 52

²⁴⁵ Gauz 71

of a smiling woman and her son, clothed in colorful pagnes, in a photo held by a black man's hand. Ossiri reconstructs the narrative that this image suggests to its intended recipients:

“‘Envoyez de l'argent au pays.’ La femme s'était noué sur la tête un morceau de pagne. Sa camisole aux motifs vifs et multicolores était coupée dans le même tissu que sa coiffe. Un wax hollandais... La pièce de tissu vaut au moins le salaire mensuel d'un petit fonctionnaire de Ouagadougou... La femme était figée dans un large sourire que surmontaient des pommettes bien rondelettes... la femme respirait l'embonpoint et le bonheur... L'enfant était debout à côté de la femme. Il portait une chemise en pagne, lui aussi. Sûrement un fancy. On ne coudrait pas des chemises d'un enfant dans des wax hollandais... Pour les enfants, 'fancy est mieux !'”²⁴⁶

As Ossiri considers Ivoirian conventional wisdom about which pagnes are better for children's clothes based on a French advertising image, he dissects the semiotics of the image of Africanité as seen through French eyes, especially the image of African femininity. To the French eyes that Ossiri and other Africans can see through as they look at the ad, African men gaze on their women, who inspire them as they complacently work in the French system to earn money to send “au pays.” “Au pays,” this smiling, agreeable woman remains dependent on him and on French-earned money. Ossiri notes how the ad multiplies these signifiers: “le pagne comme marqueur d'africanité. Le publiciste connaissait parfaitement son abécédaire des clichés... avec le complément de lieu ‘au pays,’ on pouvait aussi dire qu'il maîtrisait son petit-nègre de poche.”²⁴⁷ Through his reflection upon this neocolonial image of Africanité – smiling, complacent dependence garbed in native dress, assumptions that African immigrants will take poorly-paid jobs to preserve the system and their place in it – Ossiri is reminded of Angela.

However, he is not reminded of Angela because the woman in the image resembles her; rather, he remembers her lessons about the adoption of the pagne by Africans. “Des esclaves noirs travaillèrent sans relâche pendant quatre siècles... durant lesquels les Blancs... vendirent

²⁴⁶ Gauz 107-109

²⁴⁷ Gauz 110

au monde entier les produits agricoles les plus financièrement rentables de tous les temps... La canne à sucre et le coton en étaient les plus emblématiques.”²⁴⁸ Angela links American cotton production by enslaved Africans back to European imperialism in Africa, noting that Europe maintained colonial power not only through slavery, but also by creating new markets to monopolize. When cheap cotton flooded Europe and could no longer be profitably sold there, “ils eurent une brillante idée : l’Afrique ... un grand réservoir de consommateurs... Ils déversèrent des kilomètres... de pagnes sur toutes nos côtes... Les Africains se mirent à couvrir leurs beaux corps avec ces étoffes... L’achèvement ridiculement coloré du cycle infernal de l’humiliation des nègres commencée depuis l’esclavage.”²⁴⁹ Angela’s discourse explains to Ossiri, and to the reader, that politically conscious postcolonial Africans see the pagne not as a warm, sentimental emblem of Africanité, but as a symbol of ongoing French presence in Africa.

By teaching her children to associate contemporary Ivoirian culture with French colonialism, and thus with capitalism, Angela embodies the postcolonial imperative of radically rethinking *africanité*. In this way, Ossiri remembers his childhood in Abidjan as the beginning of his relationship with French culture and his consideration of how Frenchness informed his Ivoirian identity. As Homi Bhabha argued in his essay *Difference, discrimination, and the discourse of colonialism*, although the work of previous postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said suggested that “colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the coloniser,” the colonial subject is always constructed in a “repertoire of conflictual positions.” These conflicting positions make of him the site of “both fixity and fantasy,” and thus divide his identity and allow

²⁴⁸ Gauz 113

²⁴⁹ Gauz 113-115

him to choose to identify with one part or another of it.²⁵⁰ Angela has taught her son to use this sense of divided identity to reclaim precolonial African heritage and to reject the corrupting influence of the “Françafricain” identity promoted by Ivoirian political leader President Félix-Hophouët-Boigny, which many Ivoirians in the nominally decolonized Ivory Coast adopt. Gauz does not mention la Françafrique by name, but he alludes to it in *Debout-payé* by discussing historical crises related to Hophouët-Boigny’s leadership.²⁵¹

Angela’s praxis emphasizes that the personal is also political. She gives her children Bété names rather than French names like their classmates. In her home, she forbids bread, dairy products, Nesquik, la Vache qui rit, and other French consumer products brought to the Ivory Coast by Françafrique: “on ne peut pas être indépendants quand même ce qu’on mange vient de ceux qui nous aliènent.” As an ideological and material protest against Françafrique, Angela feeds her children only “Igname, manioc, ‘riz couché’, banane, sous toutes les formes... elle déployait un trésor d’imagination pour qu’ils n’enviassent pas leurs camarades de classe nourris à la tartine de beurre Président...”²⁵² Just as May ’68 involved “Maoist experiments of going to the people... (of) intellectuals who took up jobs on the assembly line in factories”²⁵³ and “complex meetings between workers and intellectuals... or of historians and farmers,”²⁵⁴ Angela “refus(e) le très lucratif poste de maître-assistant que le ministère d’éducation lui proposa à

²⁵⁰ P. 200. Bhabha, Homi. “Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism.” *The Politics of Theory*. Eds Barker, Francis et al. Essex: University of Essex, 1983.

²⁵¹ “Françafrique,” a term first used approvingly by Hophouët-Boigny, refers to France’s continued economic and political control in former colonies in Africa. For more on the history of Françafrique, see : Verschave, François-Xavier. *La Françafrique: Le plus long scandale de la République*. Vol. 380. Paris: Stock, 1998.

²⁵² Gauz 117

²⁵³ Ross 99

²⁵⁴ Ross 130

l'Université d'Abidjan." Much to her family's chagrin, "elle avait décidé de rester la modeste institutrice qu'elle était avant de partir en France continuer des études que l'Université nationale ne pouvait lui dispenser." Since her working life is part of her lived praxis, Angela refuses to commit "le suicide des classes... (une théorie) inventé(e)... par un certain Amilcar Cabral, une espèce de Che Guevara à mélanine."²⁵⁵ Angela follows Cabral's suggestions for strengthening her country's underclass with anticolonial ideology. Although her family mocks "Amil-caca-bral" and Angela's decision to remain a schoolteacher, Angela chooses to radicalize children as an educator and have more time to educate her own children.

Gauz's narrative represents how radical culture during the 60s in France influenced students like Angela via globalizing the circulation of political theory, thus turning the capitalist logic of circulation of goods on its head by bringing innovation from the "Third World" to the West.²⁵⁶ Having brought his radical ideas to France just as Angela did, Ossiri remembers his mother's wisdom, but also her fiery delivery: "Ossiri se souvenait aussi des gestes, lents et assurés... de cette flamme qui embrasait ses yeux, du regard subjugué de son frère et ses sœurs...

²⁵⁵ Gauz 116. Cabral proposed such sacrifices, theories, historical studies, and the refusal of "class suicide" as a radical praxis in 1966: "On the political level our own reality... can only be transformed by detailed knowledge of it, by our own efforts, by our own sacrifices..." Cabral warns that an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist ideology is the only way to hold back "(l)mperialism... (which is) capital in action" and will repeat itself as long as capitalism continues. Cabral, Amilcar. "The Weapon of Theory." *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976.

²⁵⁶ As Kristin Ross noted, the preeminent press for third-world radical anticolonial theory in Europe was Editions Maspero in Paris. Maspero was not only the first press to publish Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* with its preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, but also published the first French-language editions of works by Ben Barka, Guevara, and Cabral. Although one of the justifications for imperialism is often that cultural and intellectual capital necessarily emanates from the metropolis out to the colonies, thus supposedly "civilizing" the colonies, Ross points out that "one of the great gauchiste particularities of the time (was that) theory itself was not being generated from Europe but from the Third World." (P. 80., *May '68 and its Afterlives*.)

Et cela le réchauffait...” inside the security post at the chilly, abandoned mills.²⁵⁷ His mother’s love and unconquerable radical spirit allow Ossiri to face the mental desert of his job.

The third-person, non-linear saga of two generations of family and friends also narrates Ossiri’s friendship with Kassoum, another young man from Abidjan, and how Ossiri helps him free his mind from the capitalist imperialist mentality that oppresses him. Kassoum and the other residents of the MECI, unlike Ossiri, do not work regularly, and consequently, they don’t circulate within the city. They are only sporadically employed, and thus fall into the lassitude of people who have nowhere in particular to be all day. “Comme dans tous les ghettos du monde, les Méciens bougeaient peu... incapables d’une simple balade à l’air libre sur le pont de leur galère. Aucun mur, aucun geôlier ne les retenait... Mais chez la plupart des humains, le ghetto, riche ou pauvre, rétrécit l’horizon, il fabrique des barreaux dans la tête.”²⁵⁸ Kassoum is shaken from his own sense of immobility by observing Ossiri’s mysterious comings and goings: “Kassoum connaissait ce syndrome du ghetto... il n’allait pas recommencer à Paris. Il voyait Ossiri... il décida de le suivre.”²⁵⁹ By shadowing Ossiri’s urban explorations, Kassoum discovers experiences and places that he never imagined he could access without money, where French culture is free for the taking and Ivoirian and African culture flourish within Paris. Eventually, Ossiri realizes that Kassoum is following him and invites him to join him in these lively outings.

Arguably, Kassoum and Ossiri’s existential status alters with this process of reclaiming space and reorganizing their sense of presence within the commodified space of Paris. These adventures and their liberating effect on the two men function in the way that Marxist theorists of

²⁵⁷ Gauz 119

²⁵⁸ Gauz 187-188

²⁵⁹ Gauz 188

the 20th century suggested that the reorientation of the subject within the commodified, monetized spaces of urban life existed as a means of reclaiming subjectivity within capitalism. For instance, Ossiri and Kassoum's explorations defy the capitalist logic of Paris's urbanist reorganization after Haussmannization. In his work on the psychology of urban space, the *Arcades Project* (written from the 1920s through 1940) Walter Benjamin famously called Haussmannization the "manifest expression" of the "phantasmagoria of civilization" within capitalism. The city is reshaped to encourage flânerie and push the poor to the social and spatial margins of the city, thus celebrating "the pomp and splendor... of commodity-producing society."²⁶⁰ Thus, resisting the paths of Haussmanization amounts to an act of psychic defiance.

Later in the 20th century, in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the Situationists worked to problematize poetics and the possibilities for originality and creativity within modern capitalist society, reclaiming form, art, and beauty from the strictures of representation and elite institutions such as museums. However, a large project of the Situationists was that of psychogeography and the *dérive* (drift). According to Situationist Guy Debord, psychogeography was the "étude des lois exactes et des effets précis du milieu géographique, consciemment aménagé ou non, agissant directement sur le comportement affectif des individus."²⁶¹ By becoming conscious of the lassitude and immobility that he and the other Méciens feel as poor, disenfranchised sans-papiers stuck in the insalubrious building of the MECI, Kassoum compares this sense of constraint to the hopelessness he felt in the muddy, rubble-filled ghetto of Treichville. As he breaks out of this sense of existential unfreedom by "drifting" without

²⁶⁰ P. 235. Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

²⁶¹ P. 38. Debord, Guy-Ernest. *Œuvres*. Paris: Gallimard, 2006.

spending a centime in the commodified urban space of Paris, Kassoum is creating his own psychogeographic study.²⁶²

However, Kassoum and Ossiri's explorations of the city are not a mere test of existential or psychological freedom. Their "drift" is a physical and political act of defiance against the colonized mentality that suggests they do not belong in France, opposing the capitalist and imperialist narratives that underscore that African immigrants are unwelcome there. Kassoum's sense of being "enfermé" within the prison of an unknowable, confining city of commodified spaces and a country hostile to African immigrants has disconnected him from his sense of having a body able to circulate through space. Ossiri eventually insists that Kassoum look up at the sky, to see that he is not situated in an imprisoning complex of buildings, but in the world's natural and geographical space, where he is free to go where he pleases. As he looks up, Kassoum's memories of home emerge at the sight of Paris's blue sky, helping him feel and see his lack of confinement: "Le ciel était bleu. Cela pouvait sembler banal mais Kassoum comprit ce que Ossiri voulait lui montrer. A Abidjan, jamais le ciel n'était bleu. Il était toujours chargé de nuages... cumulus massifs gris-noir avant de se répandre en de violentes pluies tropicales."²⁶³ Kassoum's sense of subjectivity, long diminished by poverty and his sense of being worthless and unwelcome in the world, takes form as he compares the sky of Paris to the sky over Abidjan.

²⁶² Debord, too, pursued an existential project through psychogeography; as McKenzie Wark notes, Debord's idea of "Situations" was influenced by Sartre's "writing during wartime... (his) example of a situation is telling: 'Remove the prohibition to circulate in the street after curfew, and what meaning can there be for me to have the freedom ... to take a walk at night?'... The street Sartre wants to walk is the subject of his freedom... (But) what meaning can there be in the freedom to walk... through Paris... (with the curfew) of the occupation lifted?... The dérive appears almost as if it is a direct answer... The dérive is the experimental mapping of a situation, the trace of the possibilities of realizing a desire." Wark, McKenzie. *The Beach Beneath the Street: the Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International*. New York: Verso, 2011.

²⁶³ Gauz 190

In this sense, Ossiri and Kassoum's exploration of Paris fits well within Debord's definition of the *dérive*, which emphasizes that walking through the city is not merely useful for amusement, for novel sights, or as the prelude to consumerism and leisure. Urban exploration can be "indissolublement liée à la reconnaissance d'effets de nature psychogéographique et à l'affirmation ludique-constructive ce qui l'oppose en tous points aux notions classiques de voyage et de promenade."²⁶⁴ While conventional notions of traveling, which emphasize tourism, "discovery" and "spending money," usually don't include the travel of immigrants, Kassoum begins to understand after four weeks of following Ossiri that they are not unwelcome *sans-papiers*, but playful travelers, explorers, and thus subjects and citizens of the world. "Il comprit... qu'il était dans une autre culture, un autre monde, avec ses beautés et ses laideurs... comme partout ailleurs... Ossiri lui révéla combien il était riche du simple fait d'avoir voyagé,"²⁶⁵ although Kassoum and Ossiri are materially poor. The value of movement is not expressed in lavish spending during vacations and outings in the city, but in the gathering of new experiences and the sense of freedom and subjective fulfillment that our awareness of our unfettered movement allows us to feel. Gauz's narrative details the long list of the "treasures" that are free for Ivoirian immigrants to take in Paris, in an enumeration that makes visible and substantive Ossiri and Kassoum's reclaiming of space and joy in the commodified city:

"des secteurs gratuits du musée du Louvre ; une exposition photo dans une drôle de maison... une promenade au cimetière du Père-Lachaise... plusieurs petits concerts gratuits dans des bars de Belleville... un pèlerinage dans une médiathèque où il y avait plus de disques de musique africaine que dans tout Abidjan... une boîte de nuit à Bastille où tous les videurs étaient... d'Adobo (à Abidjan) ; et même une pièce de théâtre (à) Ménilmontant."²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Debord 65

²⁶⁵ Gauz 189

²⁶⁶ Gauz 188-189

Ossiri and Kassoum's "ludic" peregrinations thus defy the capitalist logic of urbanism, the the deep grooves made by centuries, of consumerist flânerie, and xenophobic notions of France as a homogeneous country with no place for Africans and their cultural contributions.

The two friends also assist others' *détournement* of commodified space within their work as security guards at the now-shuttered Grands Moulins de Paris. The narrative voice describes Ossiri's work in this "ruine magnifique," where he enjoys making rounds and experiencing a "sensation de vertige quand il levait les yeux en certains endroits où montait un enchevêtrement de poutres de béton et de grands tubes métalliques."²⁶⁷ In addition to contemplating the sublime aesthetic impression of what a facility built for productivity and consumerism looks like when dormant, Ossiri also enjoys visiting a wall that he dubs the "galerie d'art" during his rounds. There, he meets graffiti artists, who "s'en allaient gentiment quand ils se faisaient prendre. Mais Ossiri leur expliquait qu'ils pouvaient revenir parachever leurs œuvres le soir, à la fin de son service ; il savait que Kassoum, son remplacement de nuit, ne faisait jamais les rondes."²⁶⁸ Since Ossiri alerts the street artists to a suitable time to return, and since Kassoum doesn't deter them, the two friends allow the street artists to create "de véritables fresques."²⁶⁹ Ossiri enjoys and encourages graffiti as a creative means of producing "la beauté dans la rue."

In addition to *Debout-payé*'s third-person generational saga, the narrative interweaves another third-person narrative from Ossiri's perspective. This narrative catalogues Ossiri's alternately poignant, trenchant, and humorous reflections on human interaction within the urban spaces of late capitalism. Each day, Ossiri spends long shifts as a security guard, first within a

²⁶⁷ Gauz 119

²⁶⁸ Gauz 122

²⁶⁹ Ibid

location of fast-fashion chain Camaïeu near République, then a few months later in a Sephora on the Champs-Élysées that constantly teems with international tourists. Ossiri's observations address topics ranging from the smells of bodies and their functions within the parfumerie and wondering whether one would direct the sexless, genderless angel at the Place de la Bastille to Camaïeu or Célio, to more serious considerations. His creative, engaged mind floats from economic theory (how complex mathematical operations such as Laplace transformations must serve capitalism by determining sale pricing), to his own theories that women of color always want the hair textures and styles of the ethnicities directly to the north of their homelands. However, the one overarching theme that unites Ossiri's reflections is that of human nature – psychology, acculturation, movements, social relationships, and use of time – struggling to adapt to the commodified time and space of globalized capitalism. Ossiri uses the ideology critique that his mother bestowed upon her children, as well as his own humor and knowledge, to observe French culture and social norms, juxtaposing them with the “repertoire of cultural positions” that immigrants and foreign visitors enact in everyday life.

As Ossiri circulates from home to work in the 11th arrondissement of Paris, he has multiple opportunities each day to observe the neighborhoods around the Bastille and Place de la République. We begin to follow Ossiri's footsteps in the third-person “saga” narrative, as he moves from the area near République to the Goncourt metro stop, proceeding from one form of cosmopolitan neighborhood to another. Ossiri starts in a global urban marketplace full of immigrants and goods from the developing world: “Un bar tenu par un Kabyle, le magasin de vêtements d'un Chinois... le taxiphone d'un Tamoul... boucherie algérienne... un restaurant turc... boutique des Balkans... l'épicerie africaine du Coréen... cabinet médical juif...

Descendre la rue du Faubourg-du-Temple ressemble à une promenade sur une tour de Babel.”²⁷⁰

Yet, as he draws closer to the Goncourt métro stop, although he does not leave a commodified space full of goods and people from around the world, he arrives in a space of assimilated cosmopolitanism, of Western European luxury goods and banks. Near Goncourt, it is “plus français, plus occidentalement homogène, plus ‘normal’...”²⁷¹ This putative normalcy encompasses multinational businesses and sleek, chic restaurants rather than mom and pop shops and kebab takeaways: “bars à bobos, Caisse d’Epargne, boulangerie à l’ancienne, Le Crédit Lyonnais, pizzeria italienne, Le Crédit Agricole, revendeur Apple, librairie-papeterie, BNP Paribas...” Likewise, this space also comprises institutions of French culture whose names and structures serve as monuments to France’s history: “lycée à nom et prénom de défunt, deux écoles primaires avec liste d’enfants déportés pendant la guerre...”²⁷² Ossiri marks his passage from a heterogeneous, non-corporate space of the cosmopolitan city to one whose homogeneity reifies an image of Frenchness through Western brands, goods, and tastes, and references to France’s past. This is more than a movement through space; Ossiri’s daily commute “ressemble à un voyage dans le temps.”²⁷³ which we can take to refer to the worn façades of the multicultural street of independent commerce to the shiny surface of multinational business and finance – from modernity to postmodernity. In this way, Debut-payé introduces two sides of cosmopolitan Paris, presenting Ossiri as a bicultural, critical traveler who enjoys comparing the opposing faces of contemporary Paris and while occupying space and social roles in both.

²⁷⁰ Gauz 15-16

²⁷¹ Gauz 16

²⁷² Gauz 17

²⁷³ Ibid.

As Fredric Jameson's theories of postmodernism explain, capitalism's reorganization of the world and public space is not merely aesthetic or pragmatic, but ideological. All modes of existence, from art to public space, display and glorify not the human subject, but commodities and their workings as a dazzling, inviting display which gestures toward us. Jameson suggests that this disappearance of the centered subject – “the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual”²⁷⁴ – has made way for new non-representational modes of showing and seeing. From literary pastiche and the immersive “total flow” of quick cuts in film and television, to the organization of cities through architecture and city planning, postmodernity transforms our vision of the world, as well as of moving and existing within its spaces. We become captivated by the “extraordinary surfaces of the photorealist cityscape... urban squalor can be a delight to the eyes when expressed in commodification... an unparalleled quantum leap in the alienation of daily life in the city can now be experienced in the form of a strange new hallucinatory exhilaration.”²⁷⁵ *Debout-payé* juxtaposes alienated anxiety and consumer ecstasy, living bodies and cool, slick screens, in a fragmented, postmodern literary style that nevertheless accounts for the inevitable assertion of human needs and social bonds in the commodified spaces of the city.

Using a series of mostly discrete fragments narrated in the third person, the narrative decenters Ossiri even as it recounts his working life at Camaïeu and Sephora as well as his inner life. The narrative details the “delight,” rapture and even arousal of shoppers engaged in consumer activity in an alienated city: as kitschy dance music plays, “une vieille dame... bouge doucement ses hanches, dodeline de la tête tout en fouillant dans les robes à -70%... Telle une bite au milieu de ses gonades, le signe %... se balance au-dessus des têtes de ces femmes excitées

²⁷⁴ P. 15. Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991. Print.

²⁷⁵ Jameson 23

par les soldes.”²⁷⁶ Women of different nationalities and languages cry out with joy to see a beloved Sephora parfumerie in the middle of the urban labyrinth of Paris: “les gens s’éc(ri)ent à haute voix comme s’ils venaient de voir une vieille connaissance dans les bras de laquelle ils allaient se jeter: ‘Sephoraaaaa !’, version française. ‘Oh my god ! Sephooooora !’, version anglaise.”²⁷⁷ Shoppers unwittingly repeat banal comments (“trop mignon ce p’tit haut”²⁷⁸ at Camaïeu, “ça sent trop bon !”²⁷⁹ at Sephora). Ossiri also describes the onerous employee obligation of dancing “la rampe” in front of the Champs-Élysées Sephora: “Cinq ou six fois par jour, les vendeurs et les vendeuses forment une haie à l’entrée. La musique est alors mise au volume maximal et tout le monde danse en battant des mains plus ou moins en rythme.” Despite the unskilled, unrhythmic dancing, “C’est une des grandes attractions de l’avenue. Il y a systématiquement un attroupement devant le magasin... Chacun sort son appareil photo ou son téléphone... Le ‘spectacle,’ ils le regardent par écrans interposés.”²⁸⁰ By placing “spectacle” in quotes, Gauz’s novel offers a sly wink at Guy Debord’s use of the term to describe the experience of being affectively and psychologically ensnared within the rhythm and space of consumption.

Nevertheless, the globalized, gleaming surfaces of a city engineered for consumption are not the only evidence of global capitalist imperialism’s power to reorganize human interaction, or our use of space and time. Geographer and social theorist David Harvey argues that globalization has created what he calls “time-space compression,” or the acceleration of

²⁷⁶ Gauz 45-46

²⁷⁷ Gauz 80

²⁷⁸ Gauz 30

²⁷⁹ Gauz 79

²⁸⁰ Gauz 100

economic activities as a force that speeds the movement of goods and people. People and commodities move from space to space, city to city, and nation to nation, keeping pace with the production, circulation, and exchange of capital.²⁸¹ Likewise, in *Debout-payé*, Ossiri's work brings him into contact with others' experience of globalized capitalism. Since Camaïeu's clothing is predominantly made in China, Ossiri quips, "Un Chinois dans un magasin de fringues, c'est un retour à l'envoyeur."²⁸² These clothes, which are "fabriqués sur les mensurations moyennes de la femme blanche, naturellement plate, par des ouvrières chinoises, naturellement très plates," also manufacture and sell a vision of normative femininity, styled on white Frenchwomen.²⁸³ This normative vision, reified into retail clothing, excludes all other women's bodies: "Les Africaines prennent rarement autre chose que des hauts à cause de leur anatomie callipyge,"²⁸⁴ literally unable to fit into oppressive beauty standards.

The African women that Ossiri observes in Camaïeu have traveled through capitalist time-space with little time to adjust to their new culture; France's values, represented through its commodities, strike them as foolish. Two Ivoirian nannies comment to each other over a pile of "pre-distressed" jeans at Camaïeu: "'Moi, je n'achète pas les jeans *wôrô-wôrô* qui vont se gâter vite là!' 'Tu as raison, ma sœur. Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire de faire des trous dans les jeans avant même qu'on les achète?'"²⁸⁵ Employing the epithet *wôrô-wôrô* (after the public taxis in Abidjan, known to be in constant disrepair), the women demonstrate a distaste for the disposable commodities of the West that has not yet been acculturated out of them. Ossiri also notes the

²⁸¹ Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992.

²⁸² Gauz 27

²⁸³ Gauz 27

²⁸⁴ Gauz 27

²⁸⁵ Gauz 33

Ivoirian-French slang: standing around doing low-stakes security work doesn't feel like working, so his job is called a *debout-payé*. Since Ivoirians usually know dogs as aggressive feral animals rather than pets, night security guards with guard dogs takes the dog's name by metonymy: Soufè-wourou, "chien de nuit." Ossiri and his fellow Ivoirians in France deal with the cognitive dissonance engendered by the absurdities of Western work and consumer culture with a wry repertoire of descriptors that preserve their own cultural specificity as it adapts to, but still criticizes, capitalist French values.

Yet many other global citizens who roam the same commodified spaces as these women have developed a taste for the image of France presented by the luxury goods at Sephora. Ossiri observes that from the youth of the banlieues to Saudi Arabian emirs and princesses, "Sephorabia" "est très fréquenté par des Arabes de tous horizons... le voile se porte dans tous les styles" as a fashionable accessory in different lengths, degrees of coverage, materials, and motifs.²⁸⁶ He adds that hammams were the original Sephoras, "les premiers centres de soins et de beauté... mascara, khôl, henné, huile d'argan, graphite, rouge à lèvres... l'art du maquillage... trouve ses racines dans la culture arabe."²⁸⁷ Through this reflection that Arabs come to the west to follow the beauty culture that the West adapted from them, Ossiri theorizes a type of globalization-rooted attraction that Sephora exercises on Middle Easterners and Beurs alike.

Ossiri also notes that 80% of the products are made by French firm LVMH, which adds *Frenchness* to the signifiers of luxury produced by the commodification of beauty; *francité* confers a prestige that attracts the wealthy of the world. He notes that many shoppers come from Dubai, "ville-centre commercial" directly to the Champs-Elysees, "rue-centre commercial" for

²⁸⁶ Gauz 82

²⁸⁷ Gauz 84

their experience of Paris and France: “Le pétrole fait voyager loin, mais rétrécit l’horizon.”²⁸⁸

The affluent voyagers of the Arab world mingle with the youth of the Parisian banlieues, occupying the same narrow consumer space with the same activity, performing what French eyes see as different types of “*arabité*” through the restricting medium of consumer tastes and fashion. Each national and social group prefers a different brand; these preferences suggest symbolic wish fulfillment – the Tunisian refugees of the revolution prefer Diesel’s Only the Brave, and impoverished banlieue youth prefer Paco Rabanne’s One Million, in its bottle shaped like a bar of gold. However, consumerism also breaks down national divisions, even when the only divisions remaining are between national brand preferences: Ossiri notes that Dior J’adore perfume “exerce une attraction systématique et très puissante sur les femmes arabes, chinoises et européennes de l’Est,” women of different “Eastern” cultures whose shared understanding of the West is elusive and mediated through advertising images of consumer luxury.²⁸⁹

Ossiri’s role in these environments, of course, is not merely to observe; he helps guide customers, trails potential shoplifters, and even finds himself in hot pursuit of one before considering that the man may have a weapon. Yet his observations come to him unbidden, from the mental activity of trying to stay alert, fighting boredom and a sense of uselessness or waste, dealing with the “impossible créativité” bubbling through his mind even as he keeps an impassive face and stands still. Ossiri cannot help but make creative sociological observations in the commodified space of his workplaces as a means of resisting this consumerist, work-related ennui. This leads him to a series of uncomfortable reflections on the strange symbols of postmodernity: a woman’s tattoo of a lotus is immediately apparent to Ossiri as being in the

²⁸⁸ Gauz 86

²⁸⁹ Gauz 99

image of a corporate logo: “(le) lotus a le même graphisme que ‘Lotus’, la marque de papier hygiénique.”²⁹⁰ Thus, a Buddhist holy symbol of rebirth and purity among uncleanness reappears, transformed to represent a product selling Western ideas of hygiene and cleanliness.

Such symbols with dual sacred and profane significance intrigue Ossiri. Like other Marxists before him, Ossiri notes clashes of register between human desires for sacred beauty and capitalist materialism, which emphasizes the world of things and scientific, economic instrumentality and “rationalism” and thus “desacralizes” human experience.²⁹¹ Ossiri cannot help but comment on the jarring juxtaposition of sacred referentiality and capitalist materiality in products such as Camaïeu’s pig-skin leather jacket “Hadès:” “Un tel manteau est-il interdit aux musulmans et aux juifs? Hadès, le blouson Haram... Hadès, le blouson pas Casher...” Or, in the language of Camaïeu: “Moins 70% sur le blouson 100% cuir de croûte de porc à 99,95 euros : blouson Hadès, la démarque de la *tentation*.”²⁹² Ossiri also wonders how he would explain life in postmodern Paris to the divine forces represented in the historical landmarks of early modern Paris. Looking at the golden angel atop the Bastille, Ossiri imagines the angel’s perplexity at being told that people are acting strange because “c’est les soldes.”²⁹³

Yet one register of the history of human life in Paris still announces itself to Ossiri as he works and moves through the shopping districts in which he works: that of the alternative to consumerism, of anti-capitalist revolution, quietly simmering beneath the smooth surface of the

²⁹⁰ Gauz 39

²⁹¹ Hannah Arendt argues that the absorption of human experiences into labor and consumerism removes us from the sacred and metaphysical, making property “sacred.” A few years later, Herbert Marcuse derided the same capitalist instrumentality for evacuating the inner life of humans, “making the metaphysical into the physical, the inner into the outer.” See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 61-66. See also: Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, p. 234-5.

²⁹² Gauz 43, my italics

²⁹³ Gauz 34

city. Ossiri studies the sales techniques of the clerks at Sephora, who are paid on commission, and admires the ingenuity of the man he has nicknamed “le Crieur.” “Le Crieur”’s strategy is to declaim the slogans of May 1968 before intoning a meaningless, rhythmic scansion that purportedly describes the perfume he is selling, but is in fact the same description for every perfume; only the radical slogan changes each time. Ossiri is amused that the sales clerk moves through his repertoire of radical positions without being noticed: “Il est interdit d’interdire... Narcisco Rodriguez...” “Sous les pavés, la plage... Bleu de Chanel...” When Ossiri confronts him, asking him if anyone has commented on the use of the slogans of France’s last moment of mass revolt, the clerk laughs and explains: “Bien sûr que non. Les gens ne comprennent rien et ne veulent rien comprendre. Ils veulent juste acheter.”²⁹⁴ The clerk dismisses the need for representational description of the products in a move that would have made Situationists like Guy Debord, who advocated for the end of representation in art as a radical tactic, recoil with distaste upon seeing their methods and slogans appropriated so cynically: “Ce qu’ils aiment, c’est la musique des mots,” exclaiming that he especially enjoys one pleasant-sounding, but contextually meaningless word in his canned description: “C’est pourquoi je suis très fier du ‘benjoin...’ ça sonne bien ça, non?”²⁹⁵ Ossiri hears the Crieur begin anew the next week with “Soyons réalistes, demandons l’impossible.” Thus Ossiri allows himself to dream the impossible for a brief moment in his day spent in mind-body dualism, reinforcing consumerism with his body and resisting with his mind. The “Crieur,” he thinks, would never dare to try “pendons la charogne stalinienne” for Dior, or “L’art est mort, ne consommons pas son cadavre,” for Yves

²⁹⁴ Gauz 159-161

²⁹⁵ Gauz 161

Saint Laurent, or for Kenzo, “La barricade ferme la rue mais ouvre la voie.”²⁹⁶ Although the jarring, incongruous misuse of 1968’s discourse in the Crieur’s slogans might dismay Ossiri and others in the know, its presence does open up another *voie* for Ossiri: the pathway to imagining a time now past, and to the “impossible possibilities” that this entails.

In fact, dreaming the “impossible dream” of new revolts helps Ossiri observe how human social and bodily needs reassert themselves in commodified space. In addition to observing Ivoirian women using a culturally specific vocabulary to denounce the illogic of consumerism, Ossiri watches other people. He sees a couple kissing greedily in Camaïeu; in Sephora, a very tall, pale white man with a huge bleached blond Mohawk is holding the hand of a very pregnant, very petite black woman; they speak to each other so quietly that Ossiri wonders how they can hear each other, marveling at how they reclaim intimacy in consumer space. In Sephora, an Arab woman, unveiled, belches loudly, then calls out “Allhamdulillah” when she realizes that Ossiri has noticed her, following the custom of thanking God if one is fortunate enough to belch after a good meal. Another woman, who wears a full burqa, puts tester makeup under her veil, holding it out like a tent as she applies it and checks her image in a hand mirror, then puts the testers back. A girl in a motorized wheelchair and her sister move through Camaïeu, giddily exclaiming to each other as they shop; the able-bodied girl helps her sister, placing garments to try on upon the back bar of the wheelchair. A Saudi princess has her guards ask Ossiri if he has any relatives in her country, because he resembles a friend whom she hasn’t seen in many years. Even people who are working break out of their roles to enjoy moments of shared humanity. Camaïeu clerks dance to the canned music and laugh together, and the security guards at Sephora communicate using a private code based on the slang of several different Francophone African countries.

²⁹⁶ Gauz 161

Ossiri gives Carambars® to his coworkers, writing the dehumanizing trademark symbol even as he describes his friendly gesture and notes that skinny employees get two candy bars. Wherever he goes, Ossiri observes the human desire for social connections reclaiming commodified space.

Ossiri does not expect a revolution, but with his mind open to radical possibility, he can bring its spirit to his explorations of the city with Kassoum. His connection with the language of radical history provides Ossiri with opportunities for creativity, a more meaningful existence, and the identification with a type of Frenchness that resists commodification – that of its revolutionary past and resistant culture. Ossiri uses this resistant mentality to imagine the return of revolutionary history: “Si elle se répétait aujourd’hui, la prise de la Bastille libérerait des milliers de prisonniers de la consommation.”²⁹⁷ Until such a historical shift becomes possible again, however, Ossiri uses his identification with the ideals of resistance to postmodern capitalism to stay awake and stay alive in a city that would prefer to push him to its margins. His influence on Kassoum remains even after Ossiri mysteriously vanishes one day, possibly having been deported. Two days before his disappearance, he makes Kassoum promise to stop doing “debout-payés” as soon as he has his carte de séjour, reminding him that he had seen him happiest working with the gardeners. Now that Kassoum has rights of citizenship, he can find a fulfilling profession and create more “beauty in the streets” through his work.

Kassoum knows that Ossiri hasn’t gone back to Abidjan; he just knows not to worry – “instinct de la rue.” One day, in the pocket of his jacket, Kassoum finds a note written in Ossiri’s handwriting: “Laisse le travail des vautours aux vautours.” This ending of the book is symmetrical to the novel’s beginning; at the start of *Debout-payé*, Ossiri had to discourage Kassoum from head-butting a young, blacked-out drunk Frenchwoman who has attached herself

²⁹⁷ Gauz 40

to the two men in the wee hours of the morning, narrowly missing their shoes as she vomits. Exhorting Kassoum to care for the incapacitated woman rather than to respond in frustration, Ossiri told his friend not to live as a “vautour.” At the end of the novel, Kassoum has found a career, and is the husband of the young woman whom he helped find a safe place in his apartment when she was sick and vulnerable; soon, she will bear their child. Finally, Kassoum has the luxury of no longer eating the “charogne capitaliste” in his working life. Upon finding Ossiri’s written reminder, Kassoum cries for the first time, realizing how his friendship with Ossiri has transformed his life. *Debout-payé* uses this narrative symmetry to demonstrate that through meaningful work and the “action” of building lives together, human vulnerability becomes strength, allowing us to forge connections and resist being “vultures” together.

Conclusion: (re)opening the path to working together

In both *Nous étions des êtres vivants* and *Debout-payé*, we find contemporary fiction that threatens to explode the (neo)liberal discourse that global capitalism brings people together *qua* humans and “free” subjects. These novels underscore that we live with certain needs – for creativity, playfulness, community, love, and care – that laboring, consuming, and circulating or accumulating capital cannot fulfill. While Kuperman’s novel plays at coding neoliberalism and globalized capitalism as American, it ultimately denounces France’s own history as “collabos” and indicts the French embrace of neoliberalism for erasing the legacy of radicalism and revolt. Gauz’s novel also astutely observes this history, linking France’s colonial past and its still-common discourses on “white Frenchness” to inequities and injustices of capitalism. Yet, while Kuperman and Gauz’s novels avoid trading in the reflexive cynicism that afflicts Michel Houellebecq and Frédéric Beigbeder’s protagonists, the protagonists of *Nous étions des êtres vivants* and *Debout-payé* still cannot revolt. Watching discontent simmer and dreaming of

“possible impossibilities,” they await the catalyst that will bring more viable movements of political resistance together. Nevertheless, Gauz and Kuperman’s novels provide sketches for new radical possibilities in contemporary France, while also demanding that we remain honest about France’s “other” history of imperialism and political atrocities in the name of profit.

Chapter 3: “Je suis punk, c’est fantastique:” work, leisure, and “punkitude” in French punk literature and culture

Within criticism of cultural productions representing dissatisfaction with work and everyday life within late-stage capitalism, an analysis of punk culture can provide a pertinent counterpart to readings of more conventional art. In the series of economic crises that have accompanied post-Trente Glorieuses labor deregulation, fictional works have represented the work conditions that lead to mental and physical health risks and injuries. Via new theories of labor and economic reform, economists and managers suggest that socioeconomic stability and contentment in the workplace can be restored with new professions, revised educational and training models, “work-sharing,” and guaranteed basic income. More radical solutions, including the idea of a “société post-travail,” have also interested social sciences researchers in the US and France since the 1990’s.²⁹⁸ Yet even before the advent of “post-work” theory, French punk cultural productions advanced radical solutions to “la misère au travail.” In this chapter, I examine how punk texts (novels, songs and journalism) challenge “defeated” and “reformist” representations and theories of work, consumerism, and subjectivity. In doing so, I demonstrate how the discourses and theories of Marxist social sciences, hybridized with the aesthetic influences borrowed from modern literary canon and from rock culture of the 1950’s through the early 1970’s, re-emerge in punk culture’s art, self-identifications, and discursive tendencies.

While punk culture, outside of its subgenres of street punk and oi, is not usually associated with promoting a “work ethic,” all strains of punk music and culture are critical of the

²⁹⁸ See: Hunnicutt, Benjamin. *Kellogg’s Six Hour Day*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996. See also: Durand, Jean-Pierre. “Vers la société du post-travail ?” *L’homme et la société* 109.3 (1993) pp. 117-126). More recently, Hunnicutt has raised the history of diminishing labor rights and leisure time in his book *Work Without End: Abandoning Shorter Hours for the Right to Work*. Philadelphia: Temple, 2010. In the same line of inquiry is David Frayne’s book *The Refusal of Work: Rethinking Post-Work Theory and Practice*. London, Chicago: Zed/U of Chicago Press, 2015.

values of work culture and consumerism.²⁹⁹ Punk in France has grown within the shadow of France's economic downturn following the end of the Trente Glorieuses and the OPEC oil crisis, and was astutely dubbed "le rock de chômage... la poésie de la décomposition industrielle" in early press coverage.³⁰⁰ Cultural historians have described the emergence of radical politics (anti-war protests, student and worker revolts) in tandem with radical youth culture (rock concerts, be-ins, freakouts) as part of a "global sixties," or as the origins of the international revolts of "global '68." By the same token, we can also describe the punk music and culture that originated in the mid-1970's as a global movement.³⁰¹

In the mid-1970's in the United States and Western Europe, often-unemployed and newly radicalized youth created punk culture – recording albums, writing zines, and organizing performances, festivals, and rallies – to protest the return to economic austerity and authoritarian politics. As Neil Nehring notes in his work *Flowers in the Dustbin: Culture, Anarchy, and Postwar England*, "punk signaled a transition from consumption to desperation in the basis of

²⁹⁹ Skinhead culture, characterized by an affection for reggae, ska, and oi! – an offshoot of punk music with themes of working-class youth culture – is often also beloved of punks. Punk and oi have cross-pollinated since the late 1970s, when bands such as Cock Sparrer and Sham 69 responded to early punk's affinities for conceptual art and critical theory as a type of elitism unfriendly to working-class punks. The movement of oi bands that followed wrote songs with a simpler musical structure and lyrical themes of working life (including being exploited by bosses), romance, drinking in pubs, football (soccer) fandom, and other common experiences of working-class life.

³⁰⁰ Saltron, Didier. "Deux nuits de punk-rock au palais des Glaces." *Le Quotidien de Paris* 27 avril 1977. Punk archive, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Viewed 6 August 2016.

³⁰¹ For a discussion of "global 1968," see: Suri, Jeremi. *The Global Revolutions of 1968*. New York: Norton, 2007. See also: Kurlansky, Mark. *1968: The Year That Rocked the World*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2003. Scholarship on punk identifies the "birth of punk" in 1976 due to the serendipitous, spontaneous flourishing of a series of cultural events across the US and Western Europe. In the UK, 1976 heralded the first issues of *Sniffin' Glue* fanzine, the Sex Pistols' first singles, and the first punk novel – Gideon Sams' *The Punk*. In the US, there was *Punk Magazine*, the Ramones' first album, and the first visits of New York proto-punk and punk bands to the UK and Europe. In France, the first punk bands (Stinky Toys and Métal Urbain) formed, punk/no wave musician Lizzy Mercier Descloux' did a poetic collaboration with New York punk musicians Patti Smith and Richard Hell, and the Mont de Marsan festival (the first punk festival in Europe), which featured both French and British punk bands, took place. Furthermore, in 1976, East Germany's "Godmother of Punk" Nina Hagen made her first visits to West Germany and the UK. Due to these events, and numerous other recordings, concerts and festivals, publications, visits, encounters, and collaborations, the birth of punk was a global historical moment.

youth cultures. If the sixties counterculture was at base a radical consumerism, in the midseventies... teenage frustration (was) caused... not by easily-shocked adults, but by an intractable economic situation.”³⁰² Greil Marcus’ seminal book *Lipstick Traces*, which acknowledges punk’s debt to prior avant-garde and dissident artistic movements from Symbolism to Situationism, also frames punk as a response to the mid-1970’s economic crisis in Europe and the US. Marcus cites an interview with Bernard Rhodes, a member of the Sex Pistols’ inner circle who later managed the Clash... “I was listening to the radio in ’75, and there was some expert [claiming that]... there’ll be 800,000 people unemployed by 1979, while another guy was saying that if that happened there’d be chaos... anarchy in the streets. *That* was the root of punk. One *knew* that.”³⁰³ By reacting to economic misery with lyrics of outrage, unrest, and anger, punk questioned the utility of continuing to work and consume despite being guaranteed no happiness or stability in return.

In this chapter, I contend that in France, as in other Western cultures where punk was born, the spirit of punk rock has generated its own discursively reproduced, culturally specific ethos of what French punks refer to as *punkitude*, best translated as “punkness.”³⁰⁴ *Punkitude* troubles existing discourse about the desirability and inevitability of conforming to hegemonic narratives of subjectivity, identity, and everyday life in late capitalism. As a response to material inequality and economic precariousness, punk culture articulates *punkitude* as a “way of life,” and “spirit” of social protest, independent production and distribution, artistic experimentation,

³⁰² P. 283. Nehring, Neil. *Flowers in the Dustbin: Culture, Anarchy, and Postwar England*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.

³⁰³ P. 13. Marcus, Greil. *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989.

³⁰⁴ It is worth noting that *punkitude* comprises the morpheme *-tude* preceded by “punk” to evoke (punk) *attitude*. *Punkitude* always implies an attitude about the world, a punk “philosophy” with its own discursive features.

and anti-authoritarianism. However, the ideas of radical materialist thinkers such as Proudhon and Marx, which were so influential to previous counter-cultures and avant-garde artists, inform the punk perspective, if more as a means of expressing discontent than as political philosophies or social remedies. Even if *punkitude* does not always propose a concrete alternative to “mainstream” or normative existence within work and consumer culture, such as political action or “dropping out” of the mainstream, it elicits an affective response of “rage” directed at the “system.” Furthermore, punk also calls upon “regular people” to challenge notions that only an educated elite can or should produce art and discourse. This anti-elitist ethos of *punkitude* is evident not only within song lyrics and other punk textuality, e.g. zines and journalism, but also in literature. Punk novels represent the negotiation between autonomy and material survival by placing punk discursivity in the mouths and writings of their protagonists. Just as real-life punks sing and write arguments about what punk is, and criticize hegemonic ideas about work and consumerism, punk literature portrays these discursive practices.

This chapter engages with prior criticism of punk culture and punk literary writing – referred to as “punk fiction,” or “punk lit” – to situate punk literature, songs, journalism, and zines within an ensemble of “punk textuality.” I examine this strain of discursive practices defining punk and its proletarian rage in France since punk’s earliest days in 1976, comparing how “outsiders” (such as mainstream journalists) define punk(itude) to the self-definitions of “insiders” such as musicians and authors. Although a sizeable corpus of punk novels now exists in French literature, this chapter highlights three novels alongside a discussion of the sources of the discourse of *punkitude*. First, it is essential to examine Kriss Vilà’s proto-splatterpunk “roman policier” *Sang futur* (1977), the first punk novel ever written and published in France.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁵ *Sang futur* is also notable as the first punk novel written by a self-identified punk. Although the first “punk novel,” *The Punk* by 16-year-old Gideon Sams, was published a year earlier, Sams didn’t identify as a punk; he

Sang futur represents and crystallizes ideological and aesthetic *punkitude* through fantastical, horror, and *noir* genre conventions and metaphors. The novel also integrates punk visual, auditory, and material culture alongside its narrative; in addition to describing punk music's sonic elements, *Sang futur* captures the visual style of *punkitude* with photographs of punks showing off their style and topical cartoons. Next, I analyze two novels by Virginie Despentes, who was initially a transgressive punk author and filmmaker, but is now a bestselling and award-winning "mainstream" author. In her two novels about punks and the punk scene, *Teen spirit* and *Bye Bye Blondie*, Despentes' punk novels engage with the first iteration of *punkitude* "destroy," which later became a marketable cliché, by representing how changes to punk's self-definition and French society affected working-class punks in the 1990's and 2000's.³⁰⁶ I will also highlight how French punk culture has used allusions to French historical events and personalities, including references to specific details of working life and economic crises, to insert itself within the French countercultural political and artistic tradition.

Toward a "punk literature": punk discursivity and an ontology of punkitude

While it is easy to identify punk songs, zines, and other forms of textuality, the idea that "punk literature" should exist as a generic category seems surprising, or even contradictory to punks and scholars alike. How can we reconcile ideas of punk as resistance to institutions, norms, elitism, and conformity within capital-L Literature? Punk writers, who are often autodidacts, also lack the social and cultural capital necessary to institutional integration and

enjoyed hard rock and metal, yet was captivated by the idea of writing a punk character. Sams, Gideon. *The Punk*. London: Corgi Books, 1977.

³⁰⁶ Despentes' successful *Vernon Subutex* trilogy, consistently describes her characters' subculture as *rock* rather than punk, highlighting their preference for Anglophone alt-rock, such as Nirvana, Blur, Hole, LCD Soundsystem, Prince, etc. rather than the French punk preferred by her characters in *Bye Bye Blondie* and *Teen Spirit*. *Vernon Subutex* also offers an ambitious grand narrative of French society across different classes and races rather than the primarily marginal milieu of her earlier works. Here, I am only discussing her novels with punk protagonists.

scholarly attention. This may explain, in part, why little French Studies scholarship exists on representations of punk culture and values in French literature, apart from two articles discussing Virginie Despentes' writing style as "punk."³⁰⁷

Furthermore, aside from the topicality or themes, or the ontological pronouncements of certain authors who identify as "punks," explaining how *punkitude*, particularly French *punkitude*, is conveyed in punk literature is a more challenging question. Punk culture has long been a scene whose ethos of "do-it-yourself" art and music has collapsed distinctions between fan and artist, or between works and audience. However, as Fabien Hein reminds us, DIY has a long history in France: "Le DIY existe sans doute depuis l'aube des temps. Au mieux pourrait-on dire que le punk rock est son aurore... La pratique punk permet... de construire, d'apprendre, d'expérimenter, de bricoler, de participer..."³⁰⁸ France's history of political protest and revolutions offers glimpses of this "DIY" artistic ethos *avant la lettre*, especially as a form of political praxis.³⁰⁹ The heady experimentation with new ways of life that distinguished May/June 1968 and the years directly afterward (including a successful experiment in *autogestion* at the Lip clock factory from 1973-1977) has fueled the punk ideals of DIY and

³⁰⁷ See : Saint-Amand, Denis. "Quelque part entre Charleville et l'Arcadie. Esquisse d'une lecture croisée des postures de Virginie Despentes et de Patti Smith." *CONTEXTES. Revue de sociologie de la littérature* 8 (2011). See also: Schaal, Michèle A. "Un conte de fées punk-rock féministe:" Bye Bye Blondie" de Virginie Despentes." *Dalhousie French Studies* 99 (2012): 49-61. While both critics attempt to show how the authors that they discuss are "punk," neither of these two critics' extensive bodies of scholarship contains other work addressing punk culture. Both critics also use a definition of punk values and culture that is heavily grounded in Dick Hebdige's 1979 monograph *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. The flaws in Hebdige's arguments, as well as the problems with defining an entire subculture based on 4 years of activity in one country, make it necessary to draw from other, more recent analyses when discussing punk culture in the 21st century. (See note below.) Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: the meaning of style*. London: Routledge, 1979.

³⁰⁸ P. 9-10 Hein, Fabien. *Do it yourself ! Autodetermination et culture punk*. Paris: Le Passager Clandestin, 2012.

³⁰⁹ As Kristin Ross and Jacques Rancière have discussed, tradespeople became enthusiastic about creating art at revolutionary moments in France's past, such as in the Saint-Simonian movement preceding the revolution of 1830, or in the communities that led the Communal uprising in Paris in 1871. See : Ross, Kristin. *Communal Luxury*. New York: Verso, 2015; Rancière, Jacques. *La Nuit des Proletaires. Archives du rêve ouvrier*. Paris: Fayard, 1981.

shaped the longstanding relationship between punk, the proletarian class, and “high art,” especially literature.³¹⁰ If “any kid can pick up a guitar and become a rock ‘n’ roll star, despite or because of his lack of ability, talent, intelligence, limitation, or potential,” then anyone, even a frustrated (or unemployed) worker, can pen song lyrics, a poem, or a novel.³¹¹

Noting this willful collapse between artist and audience, existing scholarship on punk literature emphasizes its tendency to criticize and trouble existing hierarchies of art. Denis Saint-Amand suggests that punk and “rock” authors cultivate a permeability between their communicative positions as rock/punk fan, literary figure, and self-taught “rock” writer (as a songwriter, journalist, or blogger). In doing so, they create a range of postures and “mises en scène de soi”³¹² that “romp(ent) avec la représentation stéréotypée de l’auteur en intellectuel propre et... engagent une réflexion non seulement sur leur propre statut, mais aussi sur les limites de l’autonomie du littéraire.”³¹³ The strange idea that artists, musicians, or writers are “creators” rather than “workers” is exposed and contradicted by texts such as Patti Smith’s poems and Virginie Despentes’ music blogs. In one, an autodidact factory worker creates Rimbaud-inspired verse, and in the other, a successful author and filmmaker presents herself as “a fan like any other.” By dismantling the separation between positions within the hermeneutic circle, punk texts impart the idea that “anyone” can write, inviting the reader-interpreter to go beyond the acts of reception and interpretation to create their own text. As Brian James Schill asserts, “stories about punks by punks... form a more robust punk ‘assemblage of enunciations,’

³¹⁰ Hein 28

³¹¹ Holmstrom, John. “Editorial.” *Punk Magazine* 3, 1977. https://www.punkmagazine.com/vault/back_issues/03/editorial.html. Accessed 20 October 2016.

³¹² Saint-Amand 2

³¹³ Saint-Amand 5

to quote Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari... the punk novel turns the masters' Deleuzian 'machine' against itself... subsequently dismantling the assemblages to which punks are penitently joined."³¹⁴ Punk literature, then, juxtaposes literary style with other types of language – everyday, informal, and lyrical – in an effort to dissolve the boundaries between literary writing and everyday language, between writer and reader.

There is, of course, literature that is “punk” because punks pen it. Many punks, from first-wave punk songwriters and musicians Patti Smith and Richard Hell in the US and 80's and 90's French punk singers and lyricists Karim Berrouka and François Bégaudeau, have written and published fiction and poetry. Some punk music even bears an intertextual and aesthetic kinship with literature. Patti Smith drew inspiration from William S. Burroughs' *The Wild Boys* in her song “Land.” UK late-70s and 80s anarcho-punks Crass referenced George Orwell in “Nineteen Eighty-Bore.” Éric Débris of first-wave French punk band Métal Urbain explained that his band derived inspiration for their musical style from their reading: “On avait beaucoup lu Oscar Wilde qui appartenait au mouvement esthétique antinaturaliste, et... nous tentons d'appliquer ses théories à la musique... l'un de mes livres de chevet est alors *À rebours*, de Joris-Karl Huysmans.”³¹⁵ Punk offers “untrained,” but creative people permission to create, explore, and enjoy the “high arts” and literature as well as rock music.

However, if a literary work isn't written by a punk musician, what makes it “punk” and not merely “resistantly” intent upon dissolving the boundaries between readers and authors? In the “resistant text,” the “meaning,” arguments, and values are anchored within its anti-authoritarian ethos. Neil Nehring suggests that the meaning of resistant “art” is to foment

³¹⁴ Schill 137

³¹⁵ P. 192, 195. Débris, Éric. “Une musique métallique, un rock urbain (interview avec Métal Urbain).” Eudeline, Christian. *Nos années punk : 1972-1978*. Pp. 184- 221. Paris : Denoël, 2002.

resistance and collapse existing hierarchies that place “art” above other “culture” within an elevated aesthetic realm that forecloses everyday life and “regular people/non-artists.” Resistant art not only foments political dissension, it encourages the reader or fan to become an artist. Punk fits into a long tradition of resistant art challenging the separation between artist and audience and inserting revolutionary politics and polemics. Yet, unlike other works of resistant art, punk art suggests a praxis based in the idea that the “personal is political:” self-determination, self-management, and self-governance through DIY – do it yourself – art. To specifically discuss what makes fiction and literature “punk,” Miriam Rivett contends that like other forms of punk art, punk literature also characterizes itself by a post-industrial, self-taught rock ‘n’ roll aesthetic and announces itself *as* punk.³¹⁶ It is made by punks, for punks, with punk sensibility and ethos – with *punkitude* – and a link to the punk rock subculture. However, Rivett’s ontology of punk literature is oddly tautological – punk lit is punk because it’s punk.

As I do not find this argument sufficient to explain punk literature, I would also like to introduce (and disagree with some arguments in) Brian Schill’s scholarship on punk fiction. In his definition of what punkness *is*, what it looks and feels like, especially in literary form, Schill argues for punk’s historical literary inclination. As Schill points out, punks turned “toward narrative literature rather early in their history, developing, over the course of thirty years, an extensive body of punk fiction.”³¹⁷ Schill agrees with Rivett that punk fiction is “stories about punks,” yet he also describes an aesthetic essence, or poetics of punk, as well as noting its

³¹⁶ Rivett, Miriam. “Misfit lit: ‘Punk writing’, and representations of punk through writing and publishing.” *Punk Rock: So What?* Ed. Roger Sabin. London: Routledge, 2002. 43-60. The “punk” aesthetic to which Rivett alludes is consistent throughout the history of punk. The early look of punk zines, album art, and fashion is informed by collage art, ransom notes, and détournements of previously existing artworks and texts, which later expanded to include hand-drawn line art representing deformed human figures, weapons or nuclear mushroom clouds, or defaced images of politicians. Punk texts also use crass or morbid humor, mockery of popular and political figures, mental illness as a metaphor of a dissident spirit, and descriptions of war and other tragedies.

³¹⁷ Schill, Brian James. “Shame & the Politics of Punk Fiction.” *Arizona Quarterly* 69:4 (Winter 2013), 133-158.

penchant for storytelling and self-identification. However, Schill maintains that punk aesthetics are ones of abjection, and “becoming animal” which likewise permeate punk fiction, declaring that “novelization allows punks to formalize, document, and even classify, their liturgy of shame.” However, Schill bases his argument in readings of English-language song lyrics and fiction, without considering non-Anglophone punk scenes or factoring in the multiplicity of cultural, racial, gender, and sexual identities in Anglophone countries and their punk scenes.³¹⁸

While Schill makes a link between abjection and shame in punk culture and shapes his discussion of punk literary poetics around this connection, it is not clear that punk abjection is always linked to shame, especially shame about being a punk. Punk songs and other texts, not only from the US and England, but also from France and the rest of the world, revel in the most literal abjection as a metaphor for expelling the received ideas and “rage” against the “system” inside us.³¹⁹ However, it seems hasty to dismiss the numerous songs entitled “Punk and Proud” in dozens of languages, including their French corollaries, such as Komptoir Chaos’ “Punk et

³¹⁸ However, Schill’s definition of “punk” includes discussion of non-punk, indie bands such as Q and Not U, Nirvana, and Modest Mouse. His list of “punk fiction” also includes “punxploitation,” or books about by authors who don’t identify as punk, such as Bad Al’s “Punk Novel,” or Joshua Furst’s “The Sabotage Café,” among others. Schill’s argument of “punk shame” is based in part on Aaron “Cometbus” Elliott’s novel *Double Duce*, Richard Hell’s novels, and a handful of coming-out novels. However, Hell and Elliott were both raised in secular Jewish families; Cometbus writes about Jewish punk identity. Exploring Jewish identity, the shared trauma of the Holocaust, the Jewish literary and exegetic tradition, and cultural “guilt” in connection with Anglophone punk culture could prove useful. For the punk coming-out novels, further consideration of the relationship between LGBTQ+ culture, stigma and homophobia, trauma and shame might also prove fruitful. For a history of the relationship between the Jewish diaspora and American punk culture (including a chapter on Richard Hell, né Richard Meyers), see Beeber, Steven Lee. *The Heebie Jeebies at CBGB’s: A Secret History of Jewish Punk*. Chicago: The Chicago Review Press, 2008. See also: Croland, Michael. *Oy oy oy gevalt!: Jews and Punk*. Toronto: Praeger, 2016. For a discussion of “Jewish guilt,” see Dein, Simon. “The origins of Jewish guilt: Psychological, theological, and cultural perspectives.” *Journal of spirituality in mental health* 15.2 (2013): 123-137.

³¹⁹ To cite a few examples: Swedish hardcore punks Puke, American band Vomit Pigs, Dead Kennedys’ “Religious Vomit,” as well as a litany of French bands and songs that would give Julia Kristeva herself pause: Métal Urbain’s comeback album “J’irai chier dans ton vomi,” Amiens punk band No Name for All’s “Vomir dans un caniveau,” as well as Saint-Etienne raw punk band Vomit for Breakfast, French crossover punks Ultra Vomit from Nantes, Auch’s grindcore punks Vomit Yourself, and many other unsavory examples. See: Dead Kennedys. “Religious Vomit.” *In God We Trust, Inc.*, Alternative Tentacles, 1981. See also: No Name for All. “Vomir dans un caniveau.” *Demo*, Self-released, 2010.

Fier.”³²⁰ Zabriskie Point’s “(Je suis) Punk,” which dismisses other rebellions as empty poses that fit into “the system:” “Y'avait un temps j'étais étudiant/ J'étais poli j'étais charmant/ J'étais étudiant en littérature/ J'avais du jugement et des idées sûres/Aujourd'hui j'suis Punk c'est plus marrant... c'est pas compliqué, 'suffit d'être sûr de ses raisons/ Dépasser le stade anarchico-psychédélique/ Savourer l'plaisir du politique”).³²¹ Another example is 1970’s Parisian punks Bulldozer’s “J’suis Punk” (in which singer and “Marxiste de tendance Groucho” Gerry Zipanar yelps a “franchouillard” joke connecting the radical 1960’s to 1970’s punk: “Avant j'étais beatnik et je fumais du hakik, maintenant j’me prends des flashes avec des gros rouges qui tâchent, c'est plus économique c'est plus pratique, j'suis PUNK c'est fantastique!”).³²² Les Rapaces de l’Espace’s sing “Je suis punk et je t’emmerde;”³²³ while Nono Futur’s anti-fashion “Je suis punk” announces “je n’ai pas besoin des rangers pour patauger des fachos.”³²⁴ Punks enjoy defining their culture and announcing their pride in being punk, in not tolerating the abuse of bosses, long work days, and “the system.” Yet, since punk embraces its own contradictions, pride need not exclude abjection.

It is this troubling of registers, genres, media, enunciatory positions, artistic hierarchies and norms that attaches punk literature and textuality to the punk musical subculture. Punk culture’s attention to troubling these paradigms and obverting discourse with a perverse, often tasteless *jouissance*, has been one of its most enduring (if not endearing) characteristics. By

³²⁰ Komptoir Chaos. “Punk et Fier.” *Premières Sommatons*, Anark’oi/Kanal Hysterik, 2009.

³²¹ Zabriskie Point. “(Je suis) Punk.” Various artists: *Dites-le avec les fleurs*, Combat Rock, 1996.

³²² Bulldozer. “J’suis Punk.” *Bulldozer*, RCA Victor, 1978.

³²³ Les Rapaces de l’Espace. “Je suis punk et je t’emmerde.” *Palais des sports ’71*, Self-released, 2017.

³²⁴ Nono Futur. “Je suis punk.” *Narvalo Manifesto*, Self-released, 2006.

examining French punk textuality, we find a repeated desire to speak (or shriek, howl, scream), even with no clear, sustainable alternatives to propose. The punks' attempts to shock other unhappy youth into action constitute a resistant discursive tendency.

To discuss the punk "anti-discourse" in my readings of the punk journalism and fiction that follow, I utilize Roland Barthes' notions of encratic and acratic language. In Barthes' terminology, power is reinforced and imposed through the language of institutions such as churches, schools, and governments, or through advertising and marketing. This language, which Barthes calls encratic, is discursive (in the sense that *dis-cursus* is the act of circulating or moving from one place to another fluidly), but also "vague, diffus, apparemment naturel, et donc difficile à repérer... le langage de l'opinion courante...à la fois clandestin et triomphant."³²⁵ On the other hand, what Barthes calls acratic language effects "le brouillage du système" and opposes institutional power, but not always by declaring itself as revolutionary or resistant. Acratic language is not comprised uniquely of slogans directly denouncing power. It distinguishes itself by its paradoxes (*para-doxa*, above the 'doxa' – Barthes' term for the messages of institutional power), its absurdity, and its offensive images that don't seek to dominate or overturn power, but to hinder the discourse of power's ability to circulate. Acratic language points up the absurdities and contradictions of the *doxa* and makes authority figures uncomfortable: "il est construit sur une pensée, non sur une idéologie."³²⁶ As we will see in a moment, the desire to fix and define punk becomes a discursive push-and-pull between authority figures' encratic pronouncements and the punks who wish to destabilize power and its language.

³²⁵ P. 124 Barthes, Roland. *Le bruissement de la langue*. Paris: Seuil, 1984.

³²⁶ Barthes LBL 125

In 1977, the first full year of punk in France, the French press documented the punk scene in all its effulgent outrageousness, depicting smiling punks in their inventive outfits, but also rounding up statements from members of bands, fans, and alternately enthusiastic and aghast journalists. Seemingly everyone who was aware of the nascent punk scene attempted to explain to the readership of these papers what this youthful craze called punk *was*. Before the scene had many bands of its own, bands from abroad were invited to explain punk to an entranced Alain Pacadis, a rock journalist for *Libération* who went on to become one of the foremost chroniclers of punk and a fixture of the Paris punk scene.³²⁷ In this piece, Pacadis spoke with Stinky Toys from Paris and the Clash from London. Joe Strummer, the singer and lyricist for the Clash who often served as the band's mouthpiece, explains the Clash's anarchist ideals to Pacadis. Strummer proclaims, "Je crois qu'il ne faut suivre aucun chef. Je crois en l'organisation," before adding that "The Clash est le groupe le plus politisé de la scène anglaise."³²⁸ Pacadis' inclusion of Strummer's analysis indicates that despite punk's antiauthoritarian bent, not all punks were seriously "political" in the way that the Clash were.

In the same article, evoking an iconoclastic but non-politicized spirit, Pacadis introduces Parisian punk band Stinky Toys with singer Elli Medeiros' explanation of punk as *joie de vivre*: "Ils n'ont ni Dieu, ni religion, et n'en veulent pas, car ni l'un, ni l'autre ne peut les satisfaire : 'Moi, je connais plusieurs trucs qui peuvent nous rendre heureux : donnez-nous beaucoup de bière et jouons très fort.' (- Elli Medeiros)" As Pacadis' article highlights, early punk's anti-authoritarian spirit ranged from professions of anarchist values (such as Strummer's decree of

³²⁷ The collection of Pacadis' notes about concerts and evenings out originally published in 1978, *Un jeune homme chic* (Éditions Le Sagittaire), was reprinted in 2002 by Éditions Denoël with a preface written by Frédéric Beigbeder.

³²⁸ Pacadis, Alain. "Entretien avec the Clash et Stinky Toys." *Libération* 3 mai 1977. Punk archive, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Viewed 6 August 2016.

needing “no master,” only autonomous “organization”) to a more individualist “liberation” through sensation and creation. The punk subject speaks for itself, but is not always consistent; however, defining oneself as a social and political subject engaged in changing the world as Strummer did (à la Marxian political philosophy and all who responded to it) is “just as punk” as Elli Medeiros’ privileging of sensation. We will see that early punks tended to advocate liberation of the individual subject through new sensations much as Medeiros did, although later punks were more socially engaged.

Despite Pacadis positioning himself as a member of the Parisian punk scene and thus its advocate and mouthpiece, other journalists obligingly attempted to explain punk and “punkness” to a puzzled mainstream audience. In *Le Matin*, Hervé Muller made an earnest effort to describe punk’s ethos and poetics, while also emphasizing its lack of ideological coherence: “C’est tout un esprit provocateur du rock qu’il s’agit de préserver. Une intellectualisation frénétique est venue... en faire une idéologie fourre-tout.”³²⁹ Despite Muller’s skepticism that punk could constitute a consistent worldview, those journalists and critics who tried to “parler de ‘punkitude’ et... disserter avec le plus grand sérieux sur le sujet” were clearly attempting to pin down and crystallize a consistent definition, spirit, philosophy, or aesthetic of punkitude. Muller suggests that “la musique se préoccupe plus d’énergie que d’originalité,” but does not note the emphasis in punk on hearkening back to the early musical motifs of rock to mock them, or the importance of “anyone can play” as an ethos of punk that demands simplicity.³³⁰ He also suggests that punks

³²⁹ Muller, Hervé. “Les petites frappes du rock.” *Le Matin* 10 mai 1977. Punk archive, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Viewed 6 August 2016.

³³⁰ See Starshooter’s “Quelle Crise Baby,” which revamps 60’s rock riffs and 70’s cowbell percussion with lyrics narrating a series of friends’ suicides and a coda where the lyrics “j’veux pas m’flinguer” are repeated. Later, Starshooter would more overtly lampoon and *francisier* 60’s rock motifs with their song “Get Baque,” which reuses the chorus of the Beatles’ “Get Back” but features verses such as “On veut plus des Beatles et d leur musique de merde, bonne à faire danser les minets, les radios nous bassinent pour assurer leurs salaires, j’en ai rien à foutre qu’ils crèvent !” The chorus is transliterated into French phonetics on the lyric sheet: “get baque, get baque get

subscribe to a Situationist-esque idea of détournement, whereby “plagiarism” is an appropriate radical response to a world that commercializes art into property – “le plagiat est chez eux pratique acceptée.” Muller claims that the notion of critical writing to describe *la punkitude* opposes the movement’s anti-authoritarianism – “l’affaire a pris des proportions les plus ridicules, les esprits éclairés développant le punk à grand renfort de références culturelles, élitistes et dénuées d’humour, c’est-à-dire aux antipodes du sujet.” Muller seems unaware that these “elite cultural references” were brought into punk not by outsiders and critics, but by its musicians and creators. (Would that Muller had been aware of the debt owed to Huysmans, Rimbaud, and the Situationists by the most prominent punk musicians currently active in France, the UK, and the US.) However, he correctly perceives the punk fashion made up of flea market and *seconde main* finds cut up and stitched back together, wild makeup, bondage gear, piercings, and other extreme elements, as “provocation” of a largely uncomprehending “establishment” of bourgeois parents and bosses.

Although Muller either doesn’t understand the aesthetic tendencies that he describes as strategic choices for punks or doesn’t want to indulge in semiotic analysis, he does interpret the *content* of punk lyrics and their polemical potential. Muller characterizes punk songs’ transgressive subjects (such as sex, drugs, political violence, suicide, euthanasia, fighting with police, and so forth) as being written and sung “moitié par dérision, moitié pour refléter l’esprit agressif et voyou de certains groupes de rock de la grande ville industrielle, pour qui leur musique est un défolement.” Muller insists on the word *voyou*, which corresponds to the older, “official” definition of the English word *punk* – a synonym of “criminal” or “thug.” However, Muller uses *voyou* not as a substantive but as an adjective, to describe the *esprit* or essence of

baque tou ouaire iou ouance bilongue...” See: Starshooter. “Quelle crise baby.” *Pin-Up Blonde/Quelle crise Baby*, Pathé Marconi EMI, 1977. See also: Starshooter. “Get baque.” *Get baque*, Pathé, 1978.

punk. The “esprit voyou de la ville industrielle” transforms from the worldview of alienated youth into a poetics. Through outrageous textuality, dress, and simplified, raw rock, young people excluded from labor and artistic creation play caricatured versions of the “delinquents” that they are already seen as. This “défoulement” reclaims agency through making life into art.

Beyond the desire to explain punk’s “spirit,” some journalists attended to a more critical analysis of punk’s semiotics, language, and style. In *Le Quotidien de Paris* in May 1977, Didier Saltron expanded on Muller’s ideas, attempting to reconcile punk’s contradictions of destructiveness and creation. Saltron described punkitude by remarking that punks alternated, in a Barthesian “acritic” sense and in the typical sense, *paradoxically* between creative optimism and nihilism, sometimes using a narrative position of disdainful distance and irony (echoing Muller, “les moyens dérisoires”), yet at other times using a ludic and direct exuberance (“une effervescence”) in order to “ridiculiser la société” and create their “rock du chômage... la poésie de la décomposition industrielle... un sursaut désespéré et rageur... qui pour construire sa révolte puise paradoxalement à ses sources historiques, quand elles ne sont pas antiques.”³³¹ Saltron thus recognized the punk project to refashion the topoi of rock music and culture through pastiche and playful exaggeration or parody of older tropes.

However, there remained an unsympathetic element of the public and press that misunderstood the aggressive sonics and aesthetics of punk as a call to real-life violence and intemperance. In *Le Matin* in May 1977, Richard Cannavo and Anne Chabrol called punks: “malsain(s)... sauvage(s)... tellement en marge qu’ils ne sont plus nulle part. C’est une insulte. A la société, à l’Establishment. Au genre humain, aussi... C’est le grand brassage. On trouve tout... Des portraits de Marx et de Hitler... et beaucoup de croix gammées... Il y a la coke, le shoot, la

³³¹ Saltron, Didier. “Deux nuits de punk-rock au palais des Glaces.” *Le Quotidien de Paris* 27 avril 1977. Punk archive, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Viewed 6 August 2016.

défonce...Avec leurs cheveux ras, avec leurs drogues, avec leurs insignes nazis... on a classé les punks... à l'extrême droite.”³³²

Using their journalistic authority and social capital to denounce punk as degenerate, Cannavo and Chabrol took a position of moral outrage common to press coverage of early punk. Unlike Muller and Saltron, who analyzed the punk ensemble of juxtaposed and distorted visual and musical references as a pastiche with its own semiotic value, Cannavo and Chabrol refuse to detach individual elements of punk pastiche from earlier cultural or political contexts. Cannavo and Chabrol thus read punk's codes as moral or political messages promoting totalitarianism, debauchery, drug abuse, and violence. How could these “voyous” be savvy enough to grotesquely exaggerate clichés of marginality? By appealing to authority and “morality”, Cannavo and Chabrol used encratic language to stifle and exclude the voices of young punks.

However, one week later, in the following issue, *Le Matin* published a response to Cannavo and Chabrol's article penned by an anonymous punk. In this article entitled *Les punks s'expliquent*, punks and bands such as woman-led Stinky Toys and the all-woman LUV directly refute Cannavo and Chabrol's portrait of punk culture as far-right, denying “toute appartenance à une quelconque idéologie fasciste, raciste, ou nazie.” The anonymous author continues :

Un insigne nazi porté dans la même chemise d'un portrait de Marx ne garde pas son sens initial. Nous ne sommes pas les héritiers du vieux monde. Marx, Hitler, Mao... sont tous aussi ridicules les uns que les autres... Les punks ne sont pas racistes... C'est vous, les journalistes, qui préparez 'l'été de la haine' en montant les gens contre nous.”³³³

Thus, the anonymous author retorts in a statement denying not only an identification with fascism, but with any coherent ideology whatsoever. She also argues with Cannavo and

³³² Cannavo, Richard et Anne Chabrol. “Attention ! Les punks arrivent.” *Le Matin* 21 mai 1977. Punk archive, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Viewed 6 August 2016.

³³³ Anonymous. “Les punks s'expliquent.” *Le Matin* 28 mai 1977. Punk archive, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Viewed 6 August 2016.

Chabrol's dismissal of the punks as violent junkies, adding that "la plupart des groupes punks rejettent l'usage des drogues." This article refutes Cannavo and Chabrol's censure, contextualizing punk's language and aesthetics as communication strategies for troubling oppressive political and social norms and discourses without suggesting a programmatic, organized response. The punks aren't "egalitarian," but "anti;" anti-racist, anti-drug (in some cases), anti-normativity, but also anti-apathy, so pro-reaction, pro-change, pro-smashing the old world. While I am skeptical that the swastika can be successfully decontextualized and given new meaning through mocking juxtaposition, the punks are clearly not promoting an adherence to fascist or racist ideologies through their irreverent and incongruous use of it. The swastika's connotations of fascist "purity" and elitism are confounded when it appears beside a portrait of Marx and ripped-up flea market clothes, fetish/bondage gear, plastic garbage bag dresses, shaved heads, disfiguring makeup and piercings, and other symbols of marginality. Punk troubles norms but refuses to declare a logocentric position – characteristics of Barthes' acritic language.

The writer of the article expounds upon the punks' use of aesthetics (from fashion to album and zine art) to provoke a "reaction" in a society where the baba cool is banalized and unthreatening. She takes Cannavo and Chabrol to task for so carelessly dismissing the aesthetic strategies of punk as aimless, mindless violence and insalubriousness for its own sake:

"L'image commença à paraître...l'image agressive, dérangeante... Les cheveux longs et les jeans : ce n'est plus un outrage pour personne. Alors nous avons (notre mode)...Nous allons essayer de faire bouger les gens, de les faire réagir...L'apathie est notre ennemi !... Plutôt que de chercher... à informer, les journalistes ont préféré écrire des articles de choc..."

This same anonymous punk author frames "la haine" (hatred) attributed to the punks as the motor driving them to protest and create, rather a force motivating a senseless destruction. "1976... une année charnière, nous en avons tous assez, on avait pas mal d'énergie et pas mal de haine. A notre tour, nous allons créer... Et que pouvons-nous faire, sinon du rock sauvage, brut,

et résolument honnête ?” The author adds that punk is not directed toward the older adults covering music in the press, either to shock them or to impress them, but to liberate a generation of disenfranchised, marginalized youth and give them a forum to express themselves : “Les mêmes de quinze ans attendent de vrais 45 tours plein d’énergie et d’honnêteté... nous voulons que ces 45 tours leur donnent envie de monter leur propre groupe.” Metaphorical or aesthetic “violence” in the lyrics and style of the music, as well as in one’s appearance, is meant to provoke righteous, “honest” anger, fueling “energy” for artistic expression.

In a similar vein, another anonymous punk writes in *Libération*, explaining that punk’s energy provides a sort of visceral élan vital, offering youth who had felt excluded from discourse and prosperity new hope and a voice to cry out with (and to create speech – a discursive act):

“Depuis pas mal de temps en compulsant mes disques, rien, vraiment rien ne me faisait plus bander... Je ressentais une forme de violence, de révolte, de dégoût face aux magouilles sordides de la Société pour mieux nous apprivoiser dans ses filets. Je pressentais une urgence, un cri, une sorte d’anarchie brûlait en moi... Le punk, cette forme de non-espoir... redonnait en moi un nouvel espoir, nous étions donc soudain des millions... le punk insufflait en moi une nouvelle sensation de vie, donnait le degré ultime de lucidité face au discours politique.”³³⁴

Again, a punk explains that “violence,” “disgust,” and “hatred” are symbolic catalysts for a response of “urgency” and “outcry” to the political, economic, and subjective *impotence* that young people feel (which this punk connotes by saying that they need music that makes them “bander”). With rebellious music, art, style, and language, punk culture ultimately engenders a new affective response – a sense of “potency” through the expression of frustration and “rage.” As the punk in the above article states, the “hopelessness” of punk translates into a sense of *hope* when punks act in solidarity with other youth, revolting against what the young author identifies and derides as a hegemonic “political discourse.” If the only consistent logos of punk is a

³³⁴ “Christine.” “Enfin le punk (2).” *Libération* 22 June 1977. Punk archive, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Viewed 6 August 2016.

tautology that attempts to encompass an aesthetics, a style of living, a resistance to oppression in a multitude of forms, and an identity – “j’suis punk” – then we should recognize this desire to speak and define oneself an integral to punk aesthetics and punkitude. As members of an artistic and cultural movement that denies authority, punks insist upon being speaking subjects, which makes *punkitude* difficult to pin down and define, other than as a desire for resistant discourse within a rock-informed art and music culture. As Jacky Paupé adds in June 1977, “Le punk véhicule toutes les contradictions.”³³⁵ This confusion of voices defining punkness in numerous different, discordant, but accepted ways endows punkness with a polyvalence.

Despite the concrete political and social engagement of certain punks, enough punks preferred a more dissolute resistance that outsiders to the scene were rightfully confused to discover that punk used abjection to critical ends and didn’t merely revel in scabrous existences. The first 10 years of punk in France included plenty of this metaphorical “hatred,” “violence,” “disgust,” and abjection, as much for being playfully revolting as for truly revolting against authority. Concerts filled with the stylized violence of punk dancing (pogoing, moshing) and gobbing (spitting on bands and audiences). In addition to sensationalistic statements about revolutions and chaos, bands recorded songs about fights between punks and police (such as “Baston” by Bérurier Noir), as well as a huge body of apologias of *la défonce* (such as “Je Bois et je suis le roi” by Gogol 1er, or Bulldozer’s proclamation “j’me prends des flashs avec des gros rouges qui tachent,”).³³⁶ Many simply tasteless songs also proliferated, such as “Euthanasie” by

³³⁵ Paupé, Jacky. “(Untitled article.)” *Libération* 9 June 1977. Punk archive, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Viewed 6 August 2016.

³³⁶ See: Bérurier Noir. “Baston.” *Macadam Massacre*, Rock Radical Records, 1984. Gogol 1er et la Horde. “Je bois et je suis le roi.” *Le Retour de la Horde*, Accord, 1986.

Les Olivensteins.³³⁷ Outsiders and critics thus developed an idea of the nihilistic, decadent, hopeless and even reactionary punk, and represented these clichéd “punks *destroy*” in cinema, television, and other media. Yet the late 1970’s and early 1980’s demonstrated a backlash to this lack of engagement and these images of violence. The movements of anarcho-punk and peace punk sprung up alongside movements of street punk, as well as “la musique alternative française” that included Ludwig von 88, Laid Thénardier, and Gogol 1er, and other, less “serious” strains of punk or post-punk.

In the 1980’s, innumerable punk songs protesting unemployment, unfair work conditions, and consumerism, or simply proclaiming working-class identity and ire, were sung and recorded in the US and the UK, and also in France: Wunderbach’s “Les Bons Français” (1983) (“Bons français, rien à foutre/Tant pis ...Moi j’y suis pour rien/ Si tous les matins/ Je ne veux pas me lever/ Je ne veux pas travailler/J’veux pas finir prolo/ Me crever au boulot/Moisir dans un bureau/Mon avenir dans le dos”); or Oberkampf’s “Tout ce fric” (Plus t’as d’argent et plus on t’en prêtera... mais à force de frimer tu seras bientôt coincé... l’argent fait pas le bonheur, qui a dit cette connerie ?”).³³⁸ Even though the first decade of punk was dynamic, passionate, it did not yet have a coherent program. However, once thing was clear in numerous songs: punk’s status as a working-class protest against the misery of capitalism. This is reflected in the first French punk novel, Kriss Vilà’s 1977 crime thriller *Sang futur*, which seems to revel joyfully in abjection, marginality, and contradictions, but clearly protests “la misère au travail.” In the 1980’s, these gestures of rebellion, both dissolute and organized, shaped a praxis of punkitude that sutured its contradictions together. This contradictory spirit, which eventually inspires ideas for creating a

³³⁷ Les Olivensteins. “Euthanasie.” *Fier de ne rien faire, Euthanasie, Je suis négatif*, Mélodie Massacre, 1979.

³³⁸ Wunderbach. “Les Bons Français.” *Wunderbach*, Self-released, 1983. Oberkampf. “Tout ce fric.” *Couleurs sur Paris*, Oberkampf Records, 1983.

life and working without losing one's punk spirit and identity, guides the lives of the protagonists in Virginie Despentes' two "punk" novels, *Teen spirit* (2002) and *Bye Bye blondie* (2004).

“Punk, ça veut dire la classe:” Rage, creativity, and discursive punkitude in Kriss Vilà's *Sang futur*

It was this less coherent, less codified, and more nihilistic beginning period of punk that is the setting the Kriss Vilà's cult punk novel *Sang futur* (1976). Upon being interviewed in 2016, Vilà affirmed that his work has largely mined and promulgated subversive politics and culture since the 1960's. Vilà, a self-professed communist, is the president of SELF (le Syndicat des Écrivains de Langue Française), a union that helps writers advocate for better working conditions and wages; punk rage against “work misery” can become a basis for action. Vilà described his youthful immersion in the underground culture of science fiction fanzines, to which he began contributing in the 1960's. Although Vilà was already in his 30's when punk came to France, he was attracted to the subversive energy of the movement, as well as its ethos of removing art from a rarefied cultural context and endowing self-taught artists with the authority to create and live as artists. “Non, je n'ai pas fait d'entraînement formel ; je suis écrivain autodidacte. J'ai trouvé une affinité pour le punk à l'époque.” Vilà's involvement with early French punk, alongside his already-active career in writing genre and pulp fiction, inspired him to portray the punk culture of 1977 in a vicious *polar* (crime novel) that recounts the exploits of a rabid gang of punks, who transmit the virus of *punkitude* by biting their victims, à la romantic and (post-)industrial monsters such as vampires and zombies.

Sang futur nests the text of the novel in a “punk,” collage-influenced graphic design that incorporates cartoons and photos of Parisian punks showing off their smirks, their original outfits, or even their nude bodies into the novel's pages; physical copies of the book are

distinctive pieces of punk material culture. The text is replete with visual and linguistic irregularities, lowercase and capital letters randomly alternating, nonstandard punctuation, and onomatopoeic text filing irregularly over the narrative text. An all-caps onomatopoeia representing the clattering of a subway train moving down the tracks appears in one passage; Vilà created it by taking his paper out of the typewriter, folding it and placing it back in and then typing, so that BOMBOMBOMBOMBOM marched diagonally across the page. This creates a visual effect like that of the “ransom note” typography favored by UK punks the Sex Pistols.

In my interview with him, Vilà explained his enthusiasm for punk in 1977: “Puisque je m’identifiais à la scène punk, je connaissais certaines personnes, ainsi que certains groupes, qui sont sur les photos.” His use of irregular type, capitalization, punctuation, and strings of letters parading up and down the novel’s pages was intended as a gesture toward punk’s experimental aesthetics in literature: “Le punk voulait détruire les conventions du rock ; moi je voulais détruire les codes littéraires.”³³⁹ Vilà’s book evinces a playful autodidactic experimentalism that draws on a punk aesthetic. While articulating a self-definition of punk – a discursive act – the novel also creates a narrative that discusses *what punk is* in literal and metaphorical terms. Furthermore, *Sang futur* registers its punk objections to work, validating artistic creation as an alternative to dreary, exploited laboring in everyday life

Sang futur represents the purposeful marginality of punk culture, as well as the rejection of the “vieux monde,” or “old world,” that the anonymous punk writing in *Le Monde* named as the bête noire of their generation (“Nous ne sommes pas les héritiers du vieux monde”). This refusal of the values of the “old world” appears not only in the characters’ criminal behavior – taking drugs, casual sex, violence, hatred of the police, defrauding public transports,

³³⁹ Vilà, Kriss. Personal interview. Paris, France: 2 September 2016.

pickpocketing – but through several metaphors of transformation and marginality. The metaphors of transformation underscore the separation from the *vieux monde* and “straight,” bourgeois society that one chooses with punk. The central metaphor of transformation in the novel is that of “la rage,” which carries a double signification of illness/dementia (“rabies”) and of anger or outrage against the system, which the punks in *Le Matin* and *Libération* described as crucial to their affinity with punk and their desire to find more constructive means of expression. As the punks writing in the newspaper articles on punk from 1977 did, Vilà’s characters use the language of “la haine,” and “le dégoût,” which provide “l’énergie” of creative expression. As I previously noted, anger, rage, and hatred are punk “tropes” representing catalysts for creation and action – that is, they incite not only destruction but creation.

The novel uses metaphors of transformation to embody the shift from “hopelessness” to “hope” via “hatred” that the writers in the press coverage on punk discuss. The transformation from non-punk to punk is shown in a sensational light – the characters shoot heroin and frequent depraved murderer Dickkie La Hyène (sic). However, aside from those behaviors (which are unsurprising touches, given that marginal figures in the genres of the *polar* often are distinguished by this caricatural villainy), transformation into punks also implies access to new possibilities for creativity. The punks in the novel, after being bitten, also create music and writing. The protagonist, who goes by the name Déçu, or sometimes “Jauni Hallyday,” makes creative work by singing with a band: “Je roule mes yeux comme des soucoupes, j’attrape le micro, le fais tourner autour de mon poing... et je crache: ‘GABRIELLE... TU BRULES MON ESPRIT... ET L’ENFER...’ Totenkopf le bassiste, Skinny à la batterie, et Raoul le guitariste s’excitent comme des bêtes sur leur instrument.”³⁴⁰ In the band’s entourage, we also

³⁴⁰ P. 28. Vilà, Kriss. *Sang futur*. Paris: Le Dernier Terrain Vague, 1977.

find El Coco Kid, “écrivain pourri,”³⁴¹ who writes all night in his dingy, cold apartment. El Coco Kid types manifestos in which he defines punkness, detailing his disgust for the dreariness of poorly-paid labor – the postindustrial “career opportunities” for young people – and consumerism. In these manifestoes, El Coco Kid notes the absurdity of bare subsistence, drudge work, and consumer anomie – what he calls “la sous-vie” (“underlife” or “subvival,” in contrast to “la survie,” or “survival”) – in a society of abundance.

El Coco Kid is unemployed, but he works for himself instead of punching a clock; drawing on the sounds and messages of punk music to inspire his writing sessions, El Coco Kid creates in the squalor of a squatted storage room: “...Le kid branche le petit radiateur électrique avant d’aller s’asseoir à la table de camping... Coco Kid a seulement envie d’entendre... la musique des Punks et... danser sur les toits des voitures Anarchie dans la ville endormie... Barbouillez les murs d’inscriptions PUNK...”³⁴² Meditating on punk’s sound and significance, El Coco Kid puts himself into a state of mind propitious to writing song lyrics. While the novel unsurprisingly features a punk band – the musicians Skinny, Momort, Totenkopf, and Déçu are known as the White Spirit Flash Klub – it is perhaps more of a surprise that El Coco Kid is called a member of the “band,” despite not performing music with them. “El Coco Kid écrivain Punk Membre Actif du White Spirit Flash Klub”³⁴³ personifies the impulse of *punkitude* to accompany its sonic force with a textuality that both defines punk and *is* punk in style and theme. Instead of dreary labor, punks prefer *work* – namely, creative work(s).

³⁴¹ Sang futur (SF) 44

³⁴² SF 52-53

³⁴³ SF 14

However, the novel's metaphors of transformation go beyond discussing the changes to behavior and worldview that punks adopt. Vilà's novel's "transformations" include the idea of a "virus" of punk being spread by bites leaving visible marks, as well as representing a transgender character's gender rebellion as the ultimate embodiment of punk desire and liberation from oppression through "alternative" work and everyday life. By recontextualizing the romantic trope of the monster's enchanted bite and offering a radical vision of punk gender resistance, *Sang futur* shows transformation as one of punk's powers. Various passages feature, among descriptions of rooms and people, a visible "morsure" signaling a character's recent or ongoing transformation from "normal" to "punk," particularly in the descriptions of female characters.

The punks attempt to lure other adults, precarious workers and exhausted metro passengers, into dropping out of the daily grind and pursuing *punkitude* and renewed youth: "(Nous) franchissons le hall de vente des tickets et reluquons la vieille en blouse bleue qui tricote assise dans la cabine vitrée... *Je lui ferais bien ma morsure...* Kitty les yeux verts... T-shirt rouge déchiré, une épingle à nourrice piqué dans le lobe de l'oreille droite, se dirige doucement vers la cabine... Elle souffle, 'Hey, on t'emmène ?'³⁴⁴" In another instance, Kitty attempts to seduce another grown woman, who is headed home after a long day of work, into their tribe: "– On peut aller dans un endroit chauffé... Et on peut peut-être aller chez toi, non ? – Non, fait la fille sans ralentir. Kitty remonte le col de sa veste, soupire. – Tant pis. Arrache à la fille son sac à main."³⁴⁵ A scene of the group of punks cruising the city involves the singer Déçu growing jealous as his newly punk lover Sarah, who has left the daily grind for a gender transition and a job as a stripper, turns her attention to the drummer Skinny. As he observes them, he notes: "ils

³⁴⁴ SF 19-20

³⁴⁵ SF 76-77

portaient tous deux la trace d'une morsure à l'épaule droite."³⁴⁶ When the exhausted workers refuse the offer to be bitten and initiated into the punks, the punks "act out" to punish them for defending propriety, property, and consumerism.. A public group kiss-and-grope disgusts the ticket seller; when the bartender threatens to throw the punks out, they wreck the bar.

The punks' frequentation of their dealer implicates them within a type of subcultural opposition or resistance transformed into violence. Dealer Dickkie La Hyène sees the vice squad police that he systematically entraps and kills as enemies of freedom through action and sensations. The police begin to search for Dickkie, but soon follow every punk they see, hoping to be led to Dickkie's hideout. The police begin tracking punks first by questioning anyone with a punk style. They are only able to eventually tell the members of the White Spirit Flash Klub apart by one identifying feature: "– Ceux du White Spirit Flash Club portent tous la trace d'une morsure..., avait expliqué l'indic. – Encore des conneries symbolardes, a ricané le flic. L'indic a hoché négativement la tête. – C'est comme ça qu'ils se refilent la rage...– La rage ? – Comme les chiens. – Alors, vous savez ce qu'il vous reste à faire." Despite the informant insisting that the bite marks have a literal signification – they are the signs of the "rabies" virus carried by the punks – the police officer is correct that the bite marks are symbolic. The "violence, dégoût, et haine" mentioned by the punks in the newspapers and in the writing of El Coco Kid (of "sa rage de vivre, son mépris total de la sous-vie,"³⁴⁷) are visually represented in the bite marks that signal "rage" and disinterest in a "sage" acceptance of work and consumerism, which marks the punks for destruction.

³⁴⁶ SF 104

³⁴⁷ SF 15

Yet alongside these symbols exist other symbols of marginality and transformation. The narrator (whose humorous sobriquet of Jauni Hallyday draws on tropes of French rock rebellion only to mock them), is shown in an intimate moment with the “bande”’s new member, Sarah. The narrative voice pans its gaze over the room in which the two tryst, lingering on the décor of symbols of a 20th-century violence and proto-punk rock culture: “des posters de Marilyn et de la Bombe punaisés... peu de meubles... une armoire à glace entrouverte et un lit... des paquets de ‘Série Noire’ et d’autres bouquins... des vieilles galettes des Stones, du Velvet et des Stooges... des vêtements de femme éparpillés aux quatre coins de la chambre...”³⁴⁸ As the narrative “eye” lights upon the two figures in the bed, we see their bite marks. Déçu recalls his first meeting with the bombshell trans woman, when Kitty warned Sarah: “Méfie-toi, il va te mordre,”³⁴⁹ but recalls that Sarah had leveled an unfrightened stare on him, interested in joining a new, self-designated type of marginal community. In another segment, a young woman accepts their invitation to ride in “la belle bagnole des Punks:” “‘Envie de faire un petit tour... Starlet ?’ Les vieux décrépits... regardaient de leur côté... l’air de se demander si ça les concernait ou pas. Les plus jeunes, eux, savaient... ‘Hey, miss Gazoline...’ Elle m’a regardé venir, sans bouger. ‘J’aimais mieux Starlet !’ ‘Ah bon ? Alors, va pour Starlet !’ Une morsure, fillette ?” In the passages detailing the “offers” of bites and transformation, the women receiving the offers are portrayed as downtrodden and already marginalized. The subway ticket seller works a dull, poorly-paid job; the younger woman in the subway is too exhausted from work to understand Kitty’s advances at first; Sarah and “Starlet” ride in the punks’ “bagnole” as a change from subways, walking, and unglamorous opportunities for daily life. The punk characters cannot imagine why women

³⁴⁸ SF 55-56

³⁴⁹ SF 63

working long days in poorly-paid “feminine” careers and making fatigued subway commutes home wouldn’t choose liberation through punk. The novel represents both cis and trans women, as well as young people in general, as being likely to accept the punks’ offers of transformation, suggesting that marginalized persons understand *punkitude* as power.

The character of Sarah embodies the empowering potential of marginalized people aligning their worldview with punk. Sarah’s body, a site of resistance to gender violence, homophobia, transphobia, and cis-hetero beauty norms, also becomes a site of punk resistance to bourgeois mores, and to working and living the “straight world,” in all senses of “straight.” Some characters call Sarah a “travesti” and a “castré,” but I would like to emphasize that in the 70’s, terminology discussing transgender identity, transvestitism, and gender fluidity did not consistently separate these categories; I will use “she/her” as the pronouns for Sarah, just as the book does. Despite confusing transvestitism, transgender identity, and gender fluidity, the novel usually refers to Sarah by the pronoun “elle” and feminine adjectives. Even when the narrator Déçu is jealous of Sarah’s relations with Skinny, Dickkie, and Kitty, and calls Sarah “le travelo, le castrat,” he continues to use “elle” as Sarah’s pronoun.³⁵⁰

The narrative casually recounts the story of Sarah’s gender transition as she has told it to Déçu: “Maintenant c’est une femme. Sarah conçoit et vit sa vie comme celle d’une femme. A subi voilà deux ans, à Hong Kong ou Panama ou Marseille, l’ablation de son appendice. A deux

³⁵⁰ The narrative occasionally complicates Sarah’s gender beyond the gender binary: “Kitty caressait Sarah. ‘T’es pas un garçon’, a-t-elle soufflé. ‘Non.’ ‘Ni une fille’, a-t-elle repris. ‘...’” (SF 140) However, Emi Koyama notes that “trans is often used as an inclusive term encompassing a wide range of gender norm violations that involve some discontinuity between the sex a person is designed a birth and (their) gender identity and expression.” Koyama, Emi. “The Transfeminist Manifesto.” *Catching a wave: Reclaiming feminism for the 21st century*. Edited by Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeyer. Boston: Northeastern UP, 2003. 244-259. In an interview, queer feminist Kate Tossey explained that queer communities rarely distinguished between gender fluidity and transgender identity until the mid-1990s. For these reasons, I refer to Sarah as a trans woman, despite her gender nonconformity, because the distinction between non-binary gender and transgender identity wasn’t codified at the time, and because the novel uses the feminine pronoun and states that Sarah “lives as a woman.” Tossey, Kate. “Re: Gender Fluidity in the Queer Community.” Received by Dorthea Fronsman-Cecil, 15 September, 2016.

beaux seins, elle prend des piqûres pour ça, et les joues un rien trop creuses... Un regard de femme...”³⁵¹ In leaving behind male gender identity, Sarah has also left behind the *métro-boulot-dodo* grind, and now is a *stripteaseuse* in a nightclub. Yet, although Sarah has had her penis removed and takes hormones, her body eludes a simple identification with male or female gender due to her refusal to have a new sexual organ put in its place; instead, Sarah is tattooed with a *red* swastika between her thighs. This “croix rouge gammée” presents a semiotic polysemy, being transgressive not only for evoking the Nazi symbol, but also for its irreverence toward Nazi ideology through its color, placement, semiotic value, and purpose. As we saw before, punk aesthetic appropriation of the swastika juxtaposes it with symbols of conflicting ideologies and aesthetics to show its impotence and absurdity. The red swastika is not a symbol of power displayed on a flag or an armband, as opposed to the black *Hakenkreuz* of the Nazi insignias worn irreverently by famous punks (such as Sid Vicious, Siouxsie Sioux, or the punks mentioned in the inflammatory article in *Le Matin*). Its placement on the body of a transgender woman – a “decadent” punk working a “marginal” job as a stripper – and its function as a replacement for her genitals (and the site from which she urinates), show that Vilà’s punks reject Nazi obsessions of “purity,” the “discipline” of work and idealized bodies, and authoritarianism.

Furthermore, the red swastika is the Buddhist symbol for *dharma*, the cosmic law only visible to those who transcend the desires and material trappings of worldly, human reality and the self – the human world is, of course, the only one where money and work are important. The punks go on an anti-cosmic quest for “punk dharma,” rejecting the oppressive material reality of their world and the “la sous-vie” of work and consumerism. Their evasion of the material world requires not transcendence, but a descent into self-destruction; the punks annihilate the ego

³⁵¹ SF 60

through the sensations of music, drugs, sex, and violence. Sarah's symbol of punk dharma – the forswearing of ego, the world, and the self – is juxtaposed with other gendered trappings – her pneumatic bust, low-cut dresses, and platinum Marilyn Monroe coiffure – which contrast with her neutered sex. This juxtaposition suggests that rejection of normative identity, including gender identity and life in conventional society, liberates us from the illusions of our world.

This refusal appeals to even the more homophobic, transphobic men in the group, such as Momort the bassist, as attractively punk. Momort has “une dent contre (elle)” for the confused sexual arousal her appearance provokes: “Il a son épingle de nourrice qui lui démange le slip chaque fois qu’il la regarde, et ça le fait flipper de l’avoir raide pour un travelo... (il) se dit qu’un vrai mâle doit préférer les cannettes de bière et les bonnes moules...” Mockingly, the narrator, who continues to refer to Sarah as “elle” even when evoking Momort’s internal monologue that calls her “un travelo,” mocks gender norms in the next line – “C’est quoi, un vrai mâle ?”³⁵² However, Momort has already tried to grope Sarah against her will, to which Sarah responded by threatening to cut him with a razor if he tried it again.

Like the other punks in his troupe, Momort’s daily life is a quest for what Dickkie and El Coco Kid refer to as “sensation,” through casual sex, loud music, late nights, petty theft, violence, and hard drugs. Yet Momort complains to anyone who will listen about Sarah’s gender identity.³⁵³ “C’est pas moral,” grumbles Momort repeatedly to bassist Totenkopf, who confesses to Momort that he has seen Sarah nude. Momort responds with interest despite his professed

³⁵² SF 72

³⁵³ This argument is unlikely to impress the other punks in his “bande,” such as Kitty, who has declared already to a bartender asking her “Vous avez quel âge, jeune fille ?” before agreeing to serve her: “J’suis pas une fille.” (23) One of the most intriguing “rebellious” traits of Vilà’s punks is their preference for blurring gender boundaries.

disgust for Sarah: “Et alors ? C’était comment ? Choucard ?”³⁵⁴ Although he switches to a dehumanizing “ça” to discuss Sarah, his statement that she is “choucard” (early-to-mid 20th-century Parisian slang for “attractive” or “cute”) is telling, despite use of the masculine form of the adjective. Totenkopf’s answers by revealing of the secret of her effaced sex: “J’ai eu le temps de mater entre ses cuisses... et j’ai vu... Rien, mec, y avait rien... Mais le tatouage, c’est vrai. Ce travelo-là, mec, il a fait une croix gammée rouge tatouée entre les cuisses !” In addition to his relief that Sarah has no phallus, Momort is delighted by Sarah’s resistance to *all* gender norms and her embrace of a transgressive symbol beloved of punks. Momort exclaims to Totenkopf: “Hey, mais... c’est Punk, ça !” “Ça change tout !”³⁵⁵ Sarah is embraced as a fellow rebel, a seductive embodiment of the para-doxal punk id.

Furthermore, Sarah contributes to the discursive labor of punks to define *punkitude*, praising punk as the possibility of choosing your own definition to Dickkie as he clumsily flirts with her. The narrative emphasizes his confusion about her gender: “Punk, mec, ça veut dire la classe !” a fait Dickkie la Hyène, examinant Sarah de la tête aux pieds. *Mec ?* Il était bourré comme une huître.” Sarah counters with her own definition: “Punk est creux... c’est une décoration du vide,”³⁵⁶ she says, unzipping her pants to show Dickkie her tattooed lack of sex. The punks find a thrilling, even erotic vitality in defining their movement, if only to give it a “hollow” definition – Dickkie’s suggestion that punk is class or style is similar to Dick Hebdige’s theory of punk subcultural style as symbolic revolt.³⁵⁷ In Sarah’s version, punk is

³⁵⁴ SF 111

³⁵⁵ SF 111

³⁵⁶ SF 136

³⁵⁷ Hebdige cites Barthes’ theory of “myths” as not restricted to language, but also present in a secondary semiological system in which objects evoke hegemonic discourses and “culture.” Thus he argues that punk style’s détournements of fashion and everyday objects revolt against them, while also creating a bricolage of avant-garde

hollow or a blank, but you can fill it in with whatever you like – its emptiness as a category leaves it open and free. The use of punk language as para-Doxa is neatly summed up in Sarah’s declaration of preferring a “void” or a “blank” to define punk, just as she prefers a flat, tattooed space to a new sexual organ. One thinks here of early New York punks Richard Hell and the Voidoids explaining in 1976 that they (and all punks) belong to the “blank generation.”

As previously discussed, filling in these “blanks” with “sensation” as an alternative to the “sous-vie” (bare *subsistence* with an unfulfilling job or with no job at all) is an explicitly professed goal of Vilà’s self-destructive punks. This adherence to “sensation” and the eagerness to self-define fuels the language and creative labor/work of the characters, especially of the “chroniqueur punk” and “écrivain pourri”³⁵⁸ El Coco Kid. The “chroniqueur” weaves a definitional discourse of what punk is and who punks are into his texts, employing a disordered, menacing style and images of the post-industrial city. El Coco Kid conceives of the expression of “sous-vie” (“sublife,” “sub-vival”) for describing the gloomy quotidian existence of the working poor and unemployed in 1977 Paris: “El Coco Kid écrivain Punk va vous cracher la laideur des villes Exprimer sa rage de vivre son mépris total de la sous-vie... Consommateurs béats gobant les radiations... l’espoir de sous-vivre un peu plus longtemps...” (sic)³⁵⁹ Not eager to sub-vive for long himself, El Coco Kid guzzles the fuel of modern mobility and “disponibilité” before his writing session. No longer merely human, but also animal and machine, El Coco Kid “tape comme une bête” after guzzling a strange narco-industrial brew “de bière ajoutée à la graisse de

art techniques and working-class style that provides a consistent “fit” or homology with punk’s ethos and values. Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: the meaning of style*. London: Routledge, 1979. PP. 2, 5-11, 13, 15-16, 18-19, 25, 73-78, 84, 89-92, 100-114

³⁵⁸ SF 40, 44

³⁵⁹ SF p. 17

moteur ajouté à la Coke.”³⁶⁰ Thus drunk on the “essence” (in a sense both of quiddity/quintessence and gasoline) of the city crawling with cars and people addicted to “speed” of all sorts, El Coco Kid waxes acatically about the lack of options for sur/subvival that a young, poor punk has in late-70’s Paris: “ÇA OU L’USINE QUEL CHOIX Perspectives de bureaux grisâtres... le silence le néant et la mort PUNK OU PAS on est toujours l’esclave de quelque chose...”³⁶¹ El Coco Kid writes to express his rage at being destined to live only to work or to starve, or perhaps both.

El Coco Kid seeks an atavistic pleasure that allows him to “s’écarter,” – idiomatically, to have fun, but literally to “break into pieces,” atomized by alienation and his lack of social cohesion with others. “Hurler comme un loup son besoin de Sensations la fureur animale s’emparant de lui l’urgence de vivre de séCLATER (*sic*) Plus jamais la galère de la sous-vie...”³⁶² Or, more succinctly: “La survie c’est de la merde.”³⁶³ We also see his rage against the remaining members of the old, already co-opted counter-culture. El Coco Kid disavows the “vieux monde” with a rant against the “babacools” still roaming Paris in the mid-70’s, using deliberately amateurish misspellings throughout the short text:

“Le baba-baba, ou baba vulgaris, arborre ordinairement une longue ‘chevelure’ dégueulasse... on le reconnaît également à son duffle-coat, à ses espadrilles et ses jeans ÉVASÉS ! A la vue d’un vrè Punk, le babacool change généralement de trottoir... en laissant traîner sur son passage une infect odeure appelé par lui patchouli... le baba se nourri en principe de graines et d’herbes... fume du haschick dans un ‘chielhomme’... Il rêve généralement de crècher à la campagne et d’avoir un élevage de chèvres... au moin une foi dans sa vie, il part en pélerinaje aux Inde ou au Nes Pâle... LE BABACOOOL EST LA HAINE DES PUNKS !” (*sic*)³⁶⁴

³⁶⁰ SF P. 15

³⁶¹ SF p. 17

³⁶² SF P. 93

³⁶³ SF 40

³⁶⁴ SF p. 113

If the “hippie” is anathema to the punks, what is it that the punks love besides sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll, *just like* the hippies? Punks love negating the old and inventing the new. El Coco Kid’s punk writing offers a dynamic Hegelian negation of bourgeois hegemony *and* the vitiated remnants of 1968’s counterculture. By revealing the contradictions within “respectable society” and the “counterculture,” El Coco Kid dissolves and discards the static, habitual ideas of counterculture and “society,” adapting newly fluid version of the old categories of “rebellion” and “work” to his era and his life. His punk expression thus becomes a means of pursuing pleasure – “faut que j’*méclate*,”³⁶⁵ he thinks, before beginning to type – while also being work, albeit enjoyable artistic work. Because writing is work, sometimes El Coco Kid wishes to shirk it: “Pas très envie de bosser, aujourd’hui... M’importe comment la littérature c’est de la merde, la littérature il chie dessus.”³⁶⁶ The idea of his work being embraced within the literary establishment is threatening to its punk negation and freeing blankness.

While they are uninterested in the return to the earth, soft drugs, and leaving their city, El Coco Kid and his fellows remain critical of their numb, hurried, repetitive routines in the city and insist on the importance of *feeling* something. As El Coco Kid notes, “L’héroïne ne vous fera pas vivre longtemps mais au moins on la Sent en Soi maintenant et pas demain...” El Coco Kid analogizes the sting of the needle and its marks to the bites the punks use to spread their virus: “Morsure liquide à la saignée du bras Dickkie en train de vous la faire la FLASH... la sensation de partir en arrière VOUS SENTEZ vous n’êtes plus vous vous n’y êtes plus de tout...”³⁶⁷ El Coco Kid and his gang chase sensation sometimes with the goal of feeling more like themselves,

³⁶⁵ SF 88

³⁶⁶ SF 26-27

³⁶⁷ SF 17

sometimes attempting to erase their *selves*, becoming “blanks” in an anti-transcendence and negation. This ambivalent pull between sensation and self-erasure, between transformation and destruction, characterizes Vilà’s punks.

Dickkie la Hyène finds himself explaining punk to a prospective victim, who is confused as much by Dickkie’s appearance as by his kidnapping. The victim inquires, “Vous êtes fasciste ? – Nan, pas fasciste. Punk ! – C’est quoi, Punk ? – La Sensation !”³⁶⁸ The punks also use body modification to display their subcultural identification while eliciting new feelings: “épingle à nourrice plantée dans la lèvre broche de métal fichée dans la paroi nasale pour rien le plaisir la Sensation s’évanouir la douleur le Sang la Sensation.”³⁶⁹ Sensation isn’t limited to murder and drug abuse; in the void of unemployment and poverty, music and concerts are other sources of sensation and vitality: “On dit noize... ça ne se comprend pas, ça se vit... NO FUTURE Hurlement du métal;”³⁷⁰ outside of concerts, El Coco Kid craves the music, “a seulement envie d’entendre Hurler les Guitares. Sentir bouillonner en lui la musique des Punks.”³⁷¹ Punk joy comes from searching for a meaningful way of life in creative work, such as El Coco Kid’s writing, the affirmation of identifying oneself as punk and defining what that means, or the “noize” of punk gigs. El Coco Kid’s desire to “hurler” and the “hurlement du métal” of a concert are inarticulate noises; the vocabulary of “hurlement” and “s’écarter” is disruptive, but like most acatic speech, not constructive. These “hurlements” also suggest other famous subcultural howls against alienation in the 20th century, namely Allen Ginsberg’s 1956 poem *Howl*, Guy Debord’s

³⁶⁸ SF P. 98

³⁶⁹ SF P. 54

³⁷⁰ SF P. 148

³⁷¹ SF p. 53

1952 film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, or the French SF and horror comic anthology magazine *Métal hurlant*, which was first published in 1974.

Indeed, the book alludes to the poetics, tropes, and works of Beat literature and the Situationists. Like these earlier countercultures, Vilà's punk profess a decadent nyctophilia. Déçu exclaims his joy at living in "la nuit Punk. La nuit c'est mon truc," reminding us of the Situationists' love for the night (see *La Nuit* by Michèle Bernstein, or Guy Debord's film of one year after *Sang futur*, 1978's *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* – "We spin around the night consumed by the fire").³⁷² The punks' *dérives* through the city turn the Beat/Situationist love of open roads and cities on its head; the punks make improvised circuits of Paris that inevitably lead them to gray, nondescript banlieues that are rarely named. No famous landmarks of the city or routes are mentioned; the punks' cruising only takes them to places like Pantin. The punks rarely stop moving except to write, make music, or take drugs; they drive endlessly through Paris while listening to Blue Oyster Cult, stopping only to recruit new punks with invitations to ride.

The cars in *Sang futur* are not merely fast, freeing devices for modern pleasure; Vilà's portrayal of car culture also shows cars as accessories to danger and violence. Dickkie kidnaps a victim with the intention of killing him, but instead forces his victim to take them to his home in an HLM and then to drink himself into unconsciousness. Dickkie steals his victim's car, then cruises it to his next murder. Likewise, an automobile features in one of El Coco Kid's fictions of punk violence, a fantasy of human flesh melded with automotive steel in a dance of death reminiscent of J.G. Ballard's 1973 novel *Crash*: "Vos Yeux sous les lunettes réfléchissant l'éclat jaune des phares Vos doigts autour du volant... caressant le levier de vitesses files de carcasses

³⁷² SF 101

alignées... hurlement des pneus sensation abstraite Votre visage bondissant à travers le pare-brise... Tueurs nihilistes la bagnole c'est bien mieux !"³⁷³ The freedom and mobility normally promised by cars is mockingly collapsed by the punks' circulatory cruising and carjacking, as well as by fantasies of cars destroying alienated, powerless contemporary subjects.

In addition to this juxtaposition of physical mobility and political, psychological "immobility," the narrative voice uses Marxist theories of labor as the counterpart of consumption. This choice of theoretical references highlights discrepancies between capitalist "freedom" and the economic and political powerlessness of subjects working for "survie" or "sous-vie." I would like to highlight a passage near the end of the novel that inserts the phrase "consommer c'est produire." This phrase alludes to a phrase by French anarchist political theorist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, as cited and refuted by Karl Marx, then later reworked by Jean Baudrillard. This passage bears the title "gauchiste," giving the character featured in the narrative only a vague identity as a political subject (which is notable, given that the "political" leanings of the punks are primarily protest and "sensation"-seeking rather than constructive ideological action). The qualification of "gauchiste" is perhaps actually a pointed criticism; the Parti Communiste Français abandoned their commitment to the "dictature du prolétariat" and to revolution in the 22nd Congress a year before in 1976, instead outlining the goal of reforming capitalism into socialism. Onetime revolutionaries became reformist *gauchistes*.³⁷⁴ (Vilà, who identifies as a Marxist, would have been struck by this political event at the time.)³⁷⁵

³⁷³ SF 53

³⁷⁴ Georges Marchais' declaration of the PCF's new reformist platform drew criticism from other Communists in France, who broke from the party while continuing to identify as Communists rather than "gauchistes" (The PCF had started building "gauchiste" coalitions with the Parti Socialiste in an effort to win wider support. See: Balibar, Étienne. *La Dictature du Proletariat*. Paris: Maspero, 1976.

³⁷⁵ Vilà, Kriss. Personal Interview.

After an unpleasant encounter with the punks near closing time, a bartender reflects on the quiet misery of his life and his coming vacation. The narrative follows his stream of consciousness, tossing in a telegraphic fragment amidst the bartender's thoughts: "prolétaire mieux logé, productivité augmentée;" follows plans to move to a larger apartment; plans for a vacation prompt the mocking interjection "consommer, c'est produire,"³⁷⁶ The alienated bartender's lack of social rapports is revealed – "s'il arrivait à convaincre une fille de partir avec lui..." on his coming vacation, he could "s'offrir une semaine de grande vie et d'amour" amidst the isolation of his daily life. The bartender fears that he cannot "communicate" his desire for love to his girlfriend with the unimpressive commodity of a budget winter vacation. However, his fears of "failure to communicate" and loneliness guide him to a grotesque fate.

The lonely bartender can no longer resign himself to going home, alone, to the apartment he no longer wants to live in, to rest before another unfulfilling day at work: "Il en avait marre. Marre d'être rien... un numéro de sécu, un rien de rien... Il a senti sur son visage le vent poussiéreux du tunnel, regardé le mur gris." Abruptly, he jumps to his death in the metro's catacombs: "Son corps... a été broyé... Traînée de sang qui se mêle à la poussière grasse et aux bois huileux des traverses."³⁷⁷ Lacking revolutionary zeal, but still burdened with his class consciousness as an exploited worker, the bartender loses his instinct for sur/subvival; his spirit is flattened by the burdens of his precarious economic existence, obligation to toil and consume endlessly, and the indifference of the "system." Like his hopes, his body is crushed by the

³⁷⁶ In *The Philosophy of Misery*, Proudhon used this phrase to compare the proletariat to Prometheus: "pour lui, consommer c'est produire, il est clair que chaque journée de consommation, n'emportant que le produit de la veille, laisse un excédent de produit au jour du lendemain." Marx critiqued Proudhon's model, arguing that having a mere day of advance in the cycle of labor and endlessly consuming each previous day's labor was a "grotesque" obligation to perpetual, constant toil and consumption. P. 85-86. Marx, Karl. *Misère de la philosophie: réponse à la Philosophie de la misère de M. Proudhon* (1847). Paris: Messidor, 1976.

³⁷⁷ SF P. 115

“system” (albeit the *système de transports*) and absorbed into the dust and oil on the tracks, thus reintegrated into the uncaring machinery of the city and his society. The subway train is the physical manifestation of the *train-train* of the consumer-laborer quotidian.

Vilà’s ’77 punks want nothing to do with this burden. Apostrophized at a shop counter by a supermarket manager – “vous désirez, les jeunes ?” – the punks know that the shop’s stock cannot fulfill their desires for freedom and agency. They are being addressed but not interpellated, and not knowing another way to seize their subjectivity, they respond that they wish to “détruire les marchandises.”³⁷⁸ In a society where our labor, leisure, bodies, and identities have become commodified, the punks resist by destroying themselves, having a grand time in the process. The punks know that we must escape the system; the problem is that in the punk view from 1977, it’s too late to dream of a better world. We produce, we consume, and we die; or we stop producing and consuming, drop out... and then die. No one offers a viable alternative to capitalism’s daily rhythms of unrewarding, poorly-paid labor and sub-vival.

Punks’ hope of creating a better society, albeit that of the punk counterculture, was not possible in “no future” 1977. However, some signs of a budding punk political consciousness are visible in 1970’s punk culture. While *Sang futur* smolders with 1970’s nihilist punk rage, it also presages punk’s future political action. Ahead of its time, the novel depicts Sarah’s relationship with the other punks to polemicize against oppressive gender norms. A distaste for “consommation” and “marchandises” foreshadows DIY punk values. Later, in the 1980’s, punks acknowledged the “future” had arrived and began to envision a way to survive within it. With the development of DIY culture and the rejection of “mainstream” labels and media outlets, increased political engagement, and the emergence of sub-subcultures of anarcho-punk and

³⁷⁸ SF 150

peace punk, punk imagined ways to act “in defence (sic) of our future,” as the anarchist hardcore band Discharge sang in 1984. While earlier French punk criticized the “system” without coherent calls to action, French punk in the later 1980s and 1990s also often adopted a more constructive, even revolutionary, approach to political rhetoric.³⁷⁹

French punk zines of the 1980s, such as 1986’s *Manifestes*, provide a record of French punkitude’s explicitly political turn. The zine published rants against work, reviews of DIY punk albums, coverage of punk in Eastern Europe, and reports on police suppression of punk venues, squats, and pirate radio stations, as well as countless “bavures racistes contre des beurs... (et) des antillais” and other people of color.³⁸⁰ Bands interviewed in the zine encourage readers to take political action; the editor even glorifies riots as a method of fighting police violence, including an incendiary cut-and-pasted newspaper headline: “200 punks réinventent Mai 68 à Montreuil.” With these polemics, the French punk scene explicitly asks for punks to identify with and act in solidarity with others who face systemic state oppression, bigotry, and marginalization.

Two decades later, Virginie Despentes’ novels *Bye Bye Blondie* (2004) and *Teen spirit* (2002) tell the stories of grown-up punks who came of age in the politically engaged French punk scene of the 1980s. By representing punk protagonists who act in solidarity with other

³⁷⁹ Examples include Kidnap’s 1984 album “Il faudra bien qu’un jour tout change,” and early songs “No SS” and “Révolution.” See also: Les Thugs, famous for anti-racist songs such as “Dirty White Race;” Bérurier Noir’s “Porcherie,” with a well-known live version featuring the chant “la jeunesse emmerde le Front National” and their anti-imperialist, anti-war, pro-refugee single “Vietnam Laos Cambodge;” Final Blast’s “Apatrides,” and their self-titled song, an anti-nuclear weapons polemic; Primitiv Bunko’s “Une seule loi (la liberté)” and “Le Pouvoir Est Maudit;” etc. See: Kidnap. *Il faudra bien qu’un jour tout change*, Chaos Productions, 1983. Kidnap. *Révolution (demos)*, Euthanasie, 2000. Les Thugs. “Dirty White Race.” *Dirty White Race*, Vinyl Solution, 1988. Bérurier Noir. “Vietnam Laos Cambodge.” *Vietnam Laos Cambodge*, Bondage Records, 1988. Bérurier Noir. “Porcherie.” *Concerto pour Détraqués*, Bondage, 1985. Bérurier Noir. “Porcherie.” *Viva Bertaga*, New Rose/Folklore de la Zone Mondiale, 1990. Final Blast. “Apatrides.” *Final Blast*, Self-released, 1985. Final Blast. “Final Blast.” *Rapt/Final Blast*, Chaos Produzioni, 1986. Primitiv Bunko. “Une seule loi.” *Vai Et Sä Huomaa Et Uskonto On Syypää Miljooniin Uhreihin?*, Panx, 1999. Primitiv Bunko. “Le Pouvoir Est Maudit.” Various Artists, *Animal Liberation*, Awakening Records, 1999.

³⁸⁰ P. 3 Author unknown. *Manifestes* 4. 1986. In the archive of La Fanzinothèque, Poitiers, France.

working-class people, people of color, and anyone who is struggling, Desportes' two punk novels illustrate how the French punk scene of the 1980's and beyond developed values of resistance, solidarity, and DIY creativity. Moreover, *Bye Bye Blondie* and *Teen spirit* show how these values act as life-saving forces for punks "en galère." Through punk scenes, *Bye Bye Blondie*'s protagonist Gloria and *Teen spirit*'s Bruno find friends as adolescents; as adults, they learn to funnel punk rage into a passion for creating, working, and living on their own terms.

"Le fils du cheminot" and the woman from "une lignée dans le lumpen prol:" Punk as class struggle and solidarity in Virginie Desportes' *Bye Bye Blondie* and *Teen spirit*

While Vilà distilled the cynical punk spirit of '77 – characterized by the misery of the *crise économique* that ended the Trente Glorieuses and dampened the revolutionary zeal of "génération 1968" – Virginie Desportes' novels depict the changes to *punkitude* and its discourse made by punk's adoption of pro-social values during the 80's, 90's, and 2000's. Bruno and Gloria, who were teenage punks in the 80's, are shocked as adults to find out that "no future" gave way to a postmodern present neoliberalism, MTV, and still-omnipresent ads and consumer culture. In addition to the diachronic depiction of *punkitude*, Desportes' novels represent French punk's *Frenchness*, emanating a sincere affection for France and its people, places, and culture. In contrast to the gray, often undescribed or at least nondescript banlieues and endless, sinuous thoroughfares of Vilà's punk Paris, Desportes' France not only portrays a visible, specific urban and rural geography, but also evokes an audible Frenchness through French music, accents, and slang. Gloria's hometown of Nancy is rainy all year round, industrial and dreary, but full of good-natured, down-to-earth punks whose thick Lorrain accent doesn't allow them to pronounce an open French *o* like the Parisians.³⁸¹ When teenage Gloria and her boyfriend Éric run away to Paris, they visit the punk shop New Rose (also the site of a seminal punk record label), frequent

³⁸¹ P. 31. Desportes, Virginie. *Bye Bye Blondie*. Paris: Grasset, 2004.

the former location of Les Halles and the flea markets with all the other “kids” looking for punk fashion; they squat at Juvisy before heading to a concert in Grenoble. For Bruno, Paris’ center is Barbès, where Sandra lives. Bruno’s daughter Nancy hopes that he knows his famous neighbors in the 18th: “On peut aller à la Porte de Clignancourt chercher la maison de Joey Starr ?”³⁸² Along with NTM, Gloria and Bruno’s worlds are filled with the music and lyrics of French artists, from punk and hardcore to nu-metal and rap: Taxi Girl, OTH, Bérurier Noir, Warum Joe, Wunderbach, Parabellum, La Souris Déglinguée, Watcha, Pleymo, Kickback, and many others.

Contemporary France, as represented in Despentès’ two punk novels, is that of the late 90’s and 2000’s post-tech bubble burst corporate work culture. Bruno, a thirty-year-old man who “jouai(t) dans un groupe assez merdique, mais un petit peu populaire” when he was young, is proud of his “parcours top radical, ma ligne ‘zéro compromis... le mythe que j’aurais du talent, si jamais je faisais quelque chose.”³⁸³ However, Bruno also admits to being a “claustrophobe radical,”³⁸⁴ who no longer can bring himself to do his previous job of translation or write the novel that he has long fantasized about. After Bruno’s girlfriend Catherine kicks him out, his high school girlfriend Alice, an ex-punkette turned businesswoman, informs him that he is the father of her thirteen-year-old daughter. Panicking at his sudden homelessness and parental responsibilities, Bruno catastrophizes when updating his friend Sandra: “je ne suis pas capable de vivre normalement. C’est trop pour ma tête. Un loyer, un boulot, un patron, des impôts, prendre

³⁸² Starr is a rapper and actor who rose to fame in 90’s gangsta rap group NTM, known for their hit “Laisse pas traîner ton fils” (1998) and their response to N.W.A.’s protest song “Fuck tha Police,” (1988) entitled “Fuck the Police” (1993) NTM’s “Fuck the police” enjoyed renewed popularity as a song on the soundtrack to classic banlieue film *La Haine* (1995). Bruno is simultaneously amused, exasperated, and ashamed that Nancy imagines that his life might correspond so closely to Starr’s life, or at least to Starr’s portrait of banlieue life in NTM’s lyrics.

³⁸³ P. 13-14. Despentès, Virginie. *Teen spirit*. Paris: Grasset, 2002.

³⁸⁴ TS 10

le métro... Je pourrai pas. Je ferai clochard.”³⁸⁵ Although Bruno’s social status as an agoraphobic “prolo punk” makes him cynical about the unfulfilling possibilities for work in neoliberal France, he is not significantly more cynical than other Gen X and Millennial French, who also report high levels of work dissatisfaction and long periods of economic “galère.”³⁸⁶

Gloria (born Stéphanie) from *Bye Bye Blondie*, a Gen X-er in her thirties like Bruno, is also unemployed and cynical about reintegrating within society. Gloria reminisces about her youth in the “début des années 80, (où), elle venait de découvrir – abasourdie que quelque chose d’aussi proche d’elle existe – les Sex Pistols, Bérurier Noir, Sham 69 et Taxi Girl. Les cheveux soigneusement teints au bleu de méthylène...”³⁸⁷ She dubs herself Gloria, a first name that permits her to embody punkitude, after learning to play the garage rock song “G-L-O-R-I-A” on the guitar. Punk poetess Patti Smith’s 1975 cover had famously recuperated the male gaze and sung of Smith’s desire for “Gloria,” either as a partner or an idol or both, rewriting the song into a punk feminist anthem: “Jesus died for somebody’s sins, but not mine... I only belong to me.” Despentés’ Gloria also makes her body a site of resistance to heterosexist beauty norms guaranteed to destabilize authority. She juxtaposes seductive lace stockings or fishnets and

³⁸⁵ TS 34

³⁸⁶ Bruno’s generation in France (“Generation X”) and the Millennials hope for fulfilling jobs despite high unemployment: “L’ISSP 2005 montre que les moins de 30 ans (et) les 30 à 50 ans... (considèrent) qu’avoir un emploi intéressant est important (71% (et) 68%)... 28% des moins de 30 ans (et) 18% des 30/50 considèrent que le fait que l’emploi permette de venir en aide à d’autres personnes et d’être utile à la société est important.” (Méda, Dominique and Patricia Vendramin. “Les générations entretiennent-elles un rapport différent au travail ?” *SociologieS, Théories et recherches*. 27 December 2010. <http://journals.openedition.org/sociologies/3349>. Accessed 20 November 2017.) However, their aspirations and high levels of education and training notwithstanding, Xers and Millennials “s’insèrent de plus en plus mal (et) connaissent des périodes de chômage (et de “galère”) de plus en plus graves... dans l’absolu (ce qui s’explique par la “crise”) (et) aussi relativement aux générations précédentes.” (Béduwé, Catherine and Jean-Michel Espinasse. “France : politique éducative, amélioration des compétences et absorption des diplômés par l’économie.” *Sociologie du Travail, contre le chômage la formation ? Variations européennes* Volume 37 no. 4 (November 1995), pp. 527-556.

³⁸⁷ Bye Bye Blondie (BBB) 18

ripped vinyl miniskirts with aggressive and outlandish accessories: dyed hair and green spiked wigs, severe black eye makeup and dead-white skin; tough Rangers or Doc Marten boots, spiked leather bracelets; and a men's army jacket on which she has written "nucléaire oui merci" (spoofing the slogan of an international anti-nuclear movement popular in 1980's France).³⁸⁸ Unfortunately, her parents are also outraged by her punk identity and desire for independence. Gloria's father hits her when she attempts to go out to meet a boy: "première baffe, pour lui apprendre à insister, puis une deuxième, pour lui apprendre à se coucher par terre quand on commence à la frapper."³⁸⁹ Gloria defends herself, but her father beats her more severely before calling a doctor to inject her with tranquilizers; Gloria's "punk rage" has developed as a response to misogyny, symbolized by the physical abuse that her father inflicts upon her.

After regaining consciousness, Gloria discovers that her parents have placed her in a psychiatric hospital; quickly, she is befriended by a young rocker named *Éric*, whose well-off family has decided to teach him a similar lesson about obedience. Although *Éric* is permitted to leave the hospital sooner, his flirtatious letters and rock 'n' roll irreverence cheer Gloria up. This helps soothe her heartbreak that her punk friends, "les potes de galère," don't visit her; they act unsurprised that she's in the psychiatric ward. However, she is hearted by the visit of one faithful punk friend who stands outside the hospital walls, chanting "Libérez Gloria !" and blasting *Bérurier Noir*'s album "Macadam Massacre" on a boom box.³⁹⁰ Gloria appreciates these efforts

³⁸⁸ BBB 44

³⁸⁹ BBB 46

³⁹⁰ Desportes has a long personal history with *Bérurier Noir*, one of the most beloved French punk bands of all time; she spent her youth following the tours of *Bérurier Noir* before becoming part of the band's entourage, and she eventually co-wrote a history of the band with author Roland Cros in 2005. By inserting the album "Macadam Massacre" in the story of Gloria's institutionalization, Desportes uses punk cultural references as a type of shorthand that evokes Gloria's sentiments and experience. The album's songs speak directly to Gloria's unhappy situation: "Baston" discusses police harassment of punks, as well as racial profiling; "Hôpital Lobotomie" and "Amputé" discuss being given a lobotomy so "je ne crains plus la loi;" "Noir les horreurs" discusses oppression and

to keep her morale high, since her psychiatrist maligns her appearance in therapy: “Pourquoi refusez-vous d’être une femme?... Pourquoi vous enlaidir ?” Gloria imagines retorting, “eh oh, ça s’appelle le mouvement punk... aucun rapport avec j’ai une chatte une bite ou une paire d’ailes.”³⁹¹ Although Gloria longs for validation and freedom, her punk identity gives her strength to resist misogynist beauty standards and the pathologizing of her self-expression.

After Gloria’s release, she meets Éric again, dating him until Éric’s family sends him to a reform school in Switzerland. Gloria responds by breaking into Éric’s home, screaming insults while she smashes their furniture. The young couple loses contact, but two decades later, Éric has become a television host and celebrity, and decides to find Gloria in Nancy so they can mend fences. As an adult, Gloria lives on welfare and drinks heavily; after her childhood physical abuse, her forced separation from Éric, the death of her parents, and the loss of her friends to drink and drugs over the years, Gloria’s “punk rage” has transmuted into a disabling, self-destructive fury. Now Gloria sabotages her relationships with her characteristic violent outbursts, which have become a reassuring pattern for her despite their abjection. “(E)lle a pris goût à l’agression... un sale plaisir, dégradant, dangereux, qui lui fait honte.”³⁹² Although Gloria warns Éric that she “n’étai(t) pas faite pour être heureuse” and tries to reject him, Éric’s love and his praise of Gloria’s “prolo punk” values encourage Gloria to try to refocus her rage.

In addition to struggling with disabling mental illnesses that keeps them unemployed, both Bruno and Gloria have a class consciousness that comes from growing up in working-class

madness, “Je vis dans la guerre/Je n’aime pas mon père/Je vis dans l’suicide;” Loran, guitarist of Bérurier Noir, has talked about his experiences with institutionalization, due to his communication and behavioral problems as a child, which he describes as his “côté autiste.” (Richard, Olivier. “Loran, le Béro druide.” *Brain Magazine* May 2013. <http://www.brain-magazine.fr/article/interviews/14136-B%C3%A9rurier-Noir---Loran,-le-B%C3%A9ru-druide>. Accessed 8 June 2017.)

³⁹¹ BBB 53-54

³⁹² BBB 29

families and the punk subculture that emerged during the mid-1970's and 1980's economic crises. For Bruno and Gloria, as for the other punks of their generation throughout Europe, *punkitude* valorizes both political and performative opposition to bourgeois values and capitalism while performing a working-class identity.³⁹³ As an adolescent, Gloria is thrilled that Éric's wealthy parents dislike her, that "chaque fois qu'il la ramenait à la maison, ses parents étaient accablés... La mère d'Éric... lui lançait des coups d'œil affligés que Gloria recevait comme des compliments: elle avait réussi son look."³⁹⁴ Although the punks reject the 1960s-1970s "babas cool," like these earlier French countercultures, the punks use slang versions of Marxian theoretical terminology (the proletariat is *les prolos*, and the bourgeoisie are *bourges* and *nantis*). French countercultural art aimed to destabilize hegemonic bourgeois values and denounce the politicians using the *crise économique* to justify policies of austerity and repression.³⁹⁵ Despentès' working-class punks love to *épater la bourgeoisie*, or insult and offend

³⁹³ Paul Fryer notes in 1986: "The rhetoric of punk has always insisted that both the music and the style were strictly working-class, the expression of the dispossessed and the economically downtrodden. Punk was "'Sounds From The Street" rather than 'The Sound Of The Suburbs.'" "Punk and the new wave of British rock: Working class heroes and art school attitudes." *Popular Music & Society*, 10:4, 1-15. French punk of the late 1980's also embraced a working-class identity, or identified with poverty: les Cadavres' "7h23" complained about the routine of metro-boulot-dodo "6h30 le réveil sonne, j'ai la tête qui bourdonne... tic tac, tic, et cetera... avancer, se taire, continuer;" Bérurier Noir proclaimed themselves "souvent fauché(s), toujours marteau(x);" punk band O.T.H even considered their future: "Parfois je me demande comment j'finirai ma vie (- Tu finiras clodo, finiras clodo !)...J'aurai peut-être un chien et un gosse et ma femme...(- Tu finiras tout seul, finiras tout seul !) Le monde entier à mes pieds, mes chaussettes pas trouées... Je ne suis pas de la race des voraces ; je finirai clodo, finirai clodo..." Les Cadavres. "7h23." *Existence Saine*, Forbidden Records, 1989. Bérurier Noir. *Souvent Fauché, Toujours Marteau*, Bondage Records, 1989. O.T.H. "Euthanaïse pour les rockers." *Réussite*, Art Trafic, 1984.

³⁹⁴ BBB 106

³⁹⁵ As Guillaume Désanges and François Piron suggest, the French countercultures of the 20th and 21st centuries operated in symbiosis with philosophy and political militancy: these "mouvements d'émancipation et de contestation (créent) de nouvelles formes d'avant-garde où les cultures populaires (cinéma, rock, bande dessinée, journalisme, télévision, graffiti...) influent sur les champs plus traditionnels de la culture (littérature, philosophie, art contemporain, théâtre)... Une humeur spécifique imprègne les marges françaises... l'émergence d'un « mouvement de la jeunesse », grandi à l'ombre de la « société du spectacle » de Guy Debord, irrévérencieux... à la crise qui devient le motif central de la politique, de Giscard à Mitterrand." *L'esprit français : Contre-cultures, 1969-1989*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte et La Maison Rouge, 2017.

the “bourges” at any cost. However, this defiant class consciousness destabilizes *prolos* Bruno and Gloria’s relationships with people – including punks – from *bourge* families.

In *Teen spirit*, Bruno’s working-class status separated him from Alice, but later allows him to earn his daughter’s trust and respect. As a teenager, Bruno, “le fils du cheminot” (the son of a railroad worker) dated Alice, a “vraie bourge de souche”³⁹⁶ whose parents decided to move away without a word after Alice became pregnant by Bruno. Bruno has become callous about his teenage heartbreak, yet upon meeting Alice as an adult, his feelings of being young, unhappy, and powerless re-emerge. Bruno feels immature and inferior, “coincé dans ce corps d’adulte avec mon cerveau de petit garçon”³⁹⁷ upon meeting his daughter Nancy for the first time in businesswoman Alice’s elegant apartment. Bruno, who is ashamed to admit that he doesn’t have a car, is mortified when his daughter discusses taking the subway as an act of rebellion against her mother: “Elle disait ‘j’ai pris le métro’ comme elle aurait dit ‘j’égorge les vieilles.’”³⁹⁸ Although Nancy initially tells Bruno that “Maman m’a dit que tu étais un peu comme un clodo,”³⁹⁹ she quickly tries to build complicity with her father, calling her mother “raciste” and her mother’s boyfriends “cons (et) riches.”

By flouting her mother’s bourgeois tastes, gleefully citing her favorite lines from hip-hop songs and using slang to ask who will pay for “le manger” that they have just eaten, Nancy strikes Bruno as having “des saillies de banlieue.” Mystified by his daughter’s behavior (and still unable to understand Alice’s teenage romance with him as a similar type of performative

³⁹⁶ TS 16

³⁹⁷ TS 53

³⁹⁸ TS 62

³⁹⁹ TS 57

“slumming,”) Bruno wonders “qui (avait) donné à des gosses de riche l’envie de parler comme des pauvres.”⁴⁰⁰ Nancy also asks her father to allow her to adopt a “punk” style by dyeing her hair or getting a piercing or a tattoo, which he refuses; to Bruno, the disruptive behavior of “les gosses de riche” reads as posturing rather than rebellion, since it fits in neatly with trends and consumer behavior. However, Alice’s awareness of their class differences, while it lacks the analytical features of Bruno’s class consciousness, affects her as much as it does Bruno. Bruno feels that Alice is almost disappointed that although he is unemployed and aimless, he is an attentive parent who doesn’t correspond to her “fantasme d’un bad boy... plus destroy.”⁴⁰¹ After realizing he has always represented a “punk” escape from bourgeois existence to Alice, Bruno understands how he can “subvert” Nancy.

Likewise, in *Bye Bye Blondie*, Gloria’s class status makes her attractively subversive to Éric, whose parents are “des bourges, grave” who stifle his rock rebellion and monitor his behavior.⁴⁰² The young punks in Gloria’s circle in Nancy – a city whose textile, steel, and mining industries resisted economic crises until the early 21st century – pride themselves in being “de la classe ouvrière.” Some of her friends have affiliated with the blue-collar skinhead culture; when Gloria, who is a child of a *cheminot* like *Teen spirit*’s Bruno, first meets Éric outside the hospital, she is disdainful of his affected “faux prolo” skinhead look of shaved head, “bombers verts et jeans retroussés”⁴⁰³ and “badges Komintern Sect et Skrewdriver.” Gloria scolds him for the band

⁴⁰⁰ TS 60

⁴⁰¹ TS 89

⁴⁰² BBB 78

⁴⁰³ BBB 91

badges: “tu traînes avec des fafs, t’écoutes des groupes de merde.”⁴⁰⁴ Éric later abandons his “skinhead” look for punk after being exposed to Gloria’s model of anti-fascist working-class rebellion; the couple later “bashes” fascist skins together in a “baston” at a Bérurier Noir concert.

Unfortunately, Éric’s fetishization of working-class status as a punk accessory does not make him more sensitive to the effects of material and economic inequality on Gloria. When they meet outside the psychiatric hospital for the first time, Éric remarks to Gloria that she looks “un peu pouilleuse, comme punkette,” seemingly unaware that she can’t afford smarter punk clothes, before bringing her to his family’s apartment, where a maid shows them into a home “grand comme un hypermarché.”⁴⁰⁵ To save for a trip to London with Éric, Gloria works all summer while he goes skiing with his family in Switzerland. For Gloria, Karl Marx’s criticism of capitalist ideology encouraging endless deferral of pleasure in order to accumulate capital proves miserably true: “c’était son premier boulot, elle venait juste d’avoir seize ans... une fois adulte, elle préfér(er)ait clochardiser que passer sa vie à genoux à l’aube dans un hypermarché qui pue le détergent... Gloria ne sortait même pas le week-end, pour ne pas dépenser un seul des précieux centimes qu’elle mettait de côté.” When Éric returns from his vacation, he convinces Gloria to run away to live a supposedly “authentic” punk life of squatting and hitchhiking rather than the vacation she had dreamt of while working at her dreary “prolo” job.

Even as adults, an uncomfortable economic disparity, accentuated by Gloria’s “prolo punk” class consciousness and Éric’s lack thereof, creates tension. Éric rhapsodizes to Gloria

⁴⁰⁴ BBB 95. Komintern Sect were a French punk/oi band from Orléans whose “provocative” image and lyrics, which vacillated from pro-Franco songs to anti-fascist lyrics and hammers and sickles; French punks usually considered them cryptofascists. Skrewdriver were a notorious English fascist oi band. Fascist ideology is not de rigueur for skinheads; the original UK skinhead culture was born around working-class consciousness and Jamaican reggae/ska music, and was vocally anti-racist.

⁴⁰⁵ BBB 97

about future vacations in exotic locales that they will take together. Irritated that as “un privilégié,” Éric doesn’t understand that she has not chosen her “rock” life completely freely, Gloria reminds him that she is the still-poor and marginal descendant of “une lignée dans le lumpen prole... t’as vu comment je vis ? C’est le RMI, pas la bohème.”⁴⁰⁶Éric complains about his bourgeois professional and social milieu, praising Gloria’s honesty and pragmatism, but both are uncomfortable with their economic disparity. When Gloria accompanies Éric to chic boutiques on a shopping trip, Gloria’s “prolo punk” pride dissolves and she fills with existential despair: “Tout ici est comme si elle et tous ceux qu’elle connaît n’étaient rien... son RMI, ses potes crasseux, ses meubles Ikéa... leurs petits arrangements et mille façons de survivre, elle sent son univers entier écrasé par l’arrogance de ces vitrines... et ces gens.”⁴⁰⁷ Although Éric usually rains compliments and physical affection on Gloria, she can’t refrain from insulting his tastes – “ça pue la mort dans tes boutiques, ça me donne trop envie de dégueuler.” Class conflict becomes Gloria’s tactic for dealing with her insecurity: “Systématiquement, elle remet ça, c’est son excuse à tout, son sésame foutez-moi la paix. ‘Moi qui suis qu’une prolo et j’ai rien et vous vous avez trop de tout.’” In turn, Éric denigrates Gloria’s speech: “‘Comment tu me parles ? T’es malade ou quoi ?’... ‘Mais tu t’entends, Blondie ? T’es PAS dans *Scarface* le retour... t’as presque trente-cinq ans, tu parles encore comme un crétin de gosse...’ ‘Désolée d’avoir grandi où j’ai grandi... Tu crois que toi tu t’exprimes comment, baltringue ?’”⁴⁰⁸ The couple’s disputes

⁴⁰⁶ BBB 175

⁴⁰⁷ BBB 176

⁴⁰⁸ BBB 181

around Gloria's "prolo punk" *habitus* (the ensemble of tastes, manners and ways of social being that class and social status condition) and Éric's bourgeois one dominate their relationship.⁴⁰⁹

Bye Bye Blondie and *Teen Spirit* delimit these contrasts between socioeconomic classes and *habitus* as a polemic gesture, suggesting that different classes find punk attractive for different reasons. On the one hand, for Despentés' "bourge" characters Éric and Alice (and Nancy), involvement with punks and punk culture is an occasional "escape hatch" from stifling bourgeois roles. On the other hand, for working class and poor youth and adults such as Gloria and Bruno, punk is one of the only ways to find a welcoming social milieu and festivity in the margins of society. Although *Bye Bye Blondie* and *Teen spirit* emphasize that difference, the novels also show that punk culture and values can surmount these social and class boundaries.

Despentés' novels also show punk as a subculture of solidarity between people in difficulty by representing the devastating effects of mental illness on "prolos" and "bourges" alike. Gloria and Bruno resent Éric and Alice's economic success despite their punk pasts, thanks to their parents' influence and affluence. However, when they recognize Alice and Éric's struggles with depression and anxiety, both "prolos" sympathize with the "bourges" and try to help them. When Éric attempts suicide after months of ugly disputes with Gloria, she finally understands why Éric has trouble accommodating Gloria's attitude that her "douleur (est) la seule qui compte, t'as le monopole, c'est toi la seule qui souffre." After reflecting on Éric's confinement in the psychiatric hospital and the Swiss school, his depression, and his parents' death, Gloria resolves to find a way "pour que ça devienne minimum viable."⁴¹⁰ In *Teen spirit*, Nancy confides that Alice is suicidal, abuses tranquilizers, drinks a bottle of whisky every night,

⁴⁰⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre. *La distinction*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979.

⁴¹⁰ BBB 245

and “fait des marques aux poignets au couteau le soir... j’ai une mère merdique et paumée.”

Bruno confesses that he “(a) toujours eu de l’affection pour les gens qui n’allaient pas bien ;” as Gloria’s description of her teenage punk friends suggested, punk scenes offer “potes de galère.” Bruno then resolves to help provide stability for Nancy and Alice by doing chores at Alice’s and spending more time with Nancy.⁴¹¹

Although Bruno and Gloria struggle to be well enough to work, they eventually draw strength from their punk values, which helps them build closer family and romantic relationships and find their own fulfillment through more meaningful work. In *Bye Bye Blondie*, Gloria finds new confidence by recalling her punk past in the arms of the man who lived it with her. Through Éric’s tenderness and attempts to soothe her “rage,” Gloria finds comfort in love and regains a sense “de la bienveillance... Les débats géopolitiques qui se livrent sous les draps lui donnent l’étrange impression de coucher pour la première fois avec un adulte... le goût de calme que ça avait.”⁴¹² Éric’s friend Claire, curious about his past with Gloria, urges Gloria to tell the teenagers’ punk love story. Gloria also recounts her outbursts against authority: in the hospital, at her own home, and against Éric’s family. After Claire is enraptured by the story, Éric suggests that Gloria write a screenplay and use his entertainment industry connections to make a film.

Gloria enjoys her new option for work, happily exercising her punk predilection for self-definition by describing “punk love” and glorifying anti-authoritarian exploits to the world; she throws herself into her work after years of unemployment. Éric is impressed by her work ethic when the work is interesting: “tu foutais rien, à fond, mais tu t’y mets, à fond.”⁴¹³ However,

⁴¹¹ TS 128-130

⁴¹² BBB 159-161

⁴¹³ BBB 200

excavating the memories of her youth confronts Gloria with traumatic memories. “Elle a d’abord cru que (l’écriture) lui ferait du bien, de se pencher sur son passé, mettre un peu d’ordre... mais ça n’est rien que la vulnérabilité qui se répand et prend les commandes.”⁴¹⁴ This sense of vulnerability ignites Gloria’s volatile anger, leading her to erratic outbursts and arguments with the producer, who wants her to make her screenplay more palatable to a non-punk audience.

After her disputes with Éric grow uglier, Gloria flees back to Nancy, ashamed because “personne ne peut vivre avec moi.” Gloria’s old punk friend Michel reminds her that by loving her and encouraging her to express herself through creative work, Éric has saved her life. Michel chastises Gloria: “t’es casse-couilles, t’aimes trop souffrir.” When Gloria complains that she can’t fit in with Éric’s entertainment industry friends, Michel suggests pragmatically: “pourquoi t’écris pas un deuxième scénario ?” Gloria can tell her punk truth in a second screenplay, but, as Michel reminds her, true love is hard to find more than once, especially for spirited punkettes like Gloria. “Fais gaffe, cette fois, avant de tout foutre en l’air.”⁴¹⁵ Gloria realizes that in spite of everything, “elle est chez elle” with Éric, and must learn to express her “rage” through her work.

Like Gloria, *Teen spirit*’s Bruno has long been dissatisfied with the options for work that he had as a working-class punk, but his punk values motivate him to take control of his life and help his daughter learn to resist consumer-laborer misery. Bruno loathes that Alice allows Nancy to watch hours of MTV and other commercial media, saying that “les programmes pour mômes... pén(ètrent) tous les crânes des gosses pour y enfoncer des mensonges : le bonheur, c’est être conforme, ça s’obtient en se payant des trucs, et pour ça il faut obéir...”⁴¹⁶ Likewise,

⁴¹⁴ BBB 203

⁴¹⁵ BBB 226

⁴¹⁶ TS 42

Bruno is disgusted by Alice's obsession "par des purs trucs de psychopathe : la bourse, l'immobilier... les grandes marques de fringues,"⁴¹⁷ as consolation for her miserable professional life; Alice has "une vie... de merde... des horaires d'esclave, toujours joignable au téléphone... [elle est] dégradée par la fatigue, la guerre des nerfs et le vide émotif ambiant."⁴¹⁸ Bruno fears that Nancy's constant exposure to messages of "conformity" are preparing her for the same sort of miserable bourgeois adulthood as her mother.

Accordingly, Bruno is delighted when Nancy loses interest in Britney Spears as well as the bourgeois accoutrements of her mother, preferring the company of Bruno and his friend Sandra, a grown-up "punkette" and rock journalist. Sandra dresses Nancy in punk fashion and takes her to metal and hardcore concerts, which simultaneously pleases and worries Bruno. When Bruno must retrieve Nancy from repeated falls in the mosh pit, he scolds her by saying that "tu es une meuf, putain. T'as rien à foutre dans la fosse." Sandra shoots him an angry look after his sexist comment; Bruno relents and instead appeals to Nancy's sense of autonomy, reminding her that he wouldn't be at the next concert to keep an eye on her.⁴¹⁹ Sandra tells Bruno that parents, especially mothers, spoil their sons while disciplining and belittling their daughters.⁴²⁰ Bruno is thus aware of the imperative to build Nancy's confidence and her will to resist bourgeois, misogynistic beauty and behavioral standards. When Nancy, who often agonizes about her weight and appearance, sobs that she fears being "ratée comme mes parents," Bruno tells her she is "parfaite comme tu es:" "Je la couvrais de compliments, tout le temps.

⁴¹⁷ TS 80

⁴¹⁸ TS 100

⁴¹⁹ TS 120

⁴²⁰ TS 88

C'est Sandra qui m'avait expliqué qu'elle en avait besoin."⁴²¹ Sandra's punk feminism helps Bruno evolve as a man who respects women and a father to Nancy.

Bruno credits Sandra not only with giving him a place to stay when he became homeless, but for inspiring him through her punk values: loyalty, solidarity, authenticity, anti-authoritarianism, "doing it yourself," a passion for music and culture, and working-class pride. With her moral model, Bruno recovers a sense of integrity and responsibility to others: "Avec (Sandra), je me reconnectais à de très vieux moments. Elle était un pur produit de l'aristocratie punk-rock : mal née, fauchée... habitant dans les pires quartiers... elle avait ce sens du dérisoire... et elle mettait un point d'honneur d'être droite. Avoir une parole, garder la tête haute, un sens de l'amitié."⁴²² Sandra embodies punk resistance to the oppression of work culture: although she loves her work as a rock reviewer, Sandra still rails against authority figures and the "business" aspect of her job, confiding in Bruno how much she hates keeping silent when a TV producer that she had been excited to work with calls her "ma chérie."⁴²³ At the same time, Sandra tries to build Bruno's confidence as a writer, asking questions and referring him to editors so he will work on the novel that he has always wanted to write: "Mais pourquoi tu n'arrives pas à écrire ? C'est quoi, ce blocage ?... Il faut que tu fasses quelque chose."⁴²⁴ With Sandra's encouragement, Bruno returns to his work of translating novels and plans to write his own.

Because his friendship with Sandra reminds Bruno that professional prestige and income don't determine human value, he is better able to face adult life. This pays off in his relationship

⁴²¹ TS 128

⁴²² TS 110

⁴²³ TS 86

⁴²⁴ TS 109

with his daughter, who is thrilled to have a “rebel” father who has time to spend with her. Bruno’s habits as a “punk fauché” help him amuse Nancy on the walks they take throughout every neighborhood in the city; Bruno delights his daughter by pointing out masterful or humorous street art, strange statues, and interesting people, while never spending a *centime*. Through this “dérive” away from consumerism, Bruno teaches Nancy to reclaim her city as a site of culture rather than a vast shopping center. Nancy soon makes Bruno proud by referring to a woman who cuts in front of them in a line at the bakery a “vieille bourge” and asking him: “’Tu l’as bientôt fini, ton livre ?’” With his daughter’s enthusiasm and Sandra’s encouragement, Bruno realizes that “je voulais vraiment écrire ce livre, je ne le commençais pas, mais je le désirais plus rageusement que jamais.”⁴²⁵ The figure of “punk rage” re-emerges here in a newly functional guise. As we recall, French punks in the 1977 newspapers explained that their “dégoût, désespoir, et colère” at being powerless against the world’s injustice led them into the punk subculture; Kriss Vilà’s fictional punks from 1977 spread this “rage” through zombie bites, music, and manifestos. However, over 20 years later, punk values of solidarity and creativity help Gloria and Bruno channel their sense of dissatisfaction with “the system” into a passion for creating family and social bonds, working, creating art, and perhaps building a new world.

However, the same “vieux monde” that the French punks of 1977 reviled in the press, and which Vilà’s punks tried to destroy, will not simply fade away; the punk dream of creating a new society has always predicated the destruction of the old one. *Teen spirit* concludes with Bruno, Sandra, Nancy, and Alice in Alice’s apartment after preventing Nancy from running away. The four of them wake up to seeing the World Trade Center collapse on Alice’s TV; it is September 11th, 2001. Bruno and Sandra are simultaneously horrified and “heureux que ce vieux

⁴²⁵ TS 97

monde s'écroule et crève... (on est) des gens mal adaptés que les situations de chaos remettent paradoxalement en phase."⁴²⁶ Nancy holds her sobbing mother, and Bruno holds Sandra's hand in one hand and Nancy's in the other, declaring to an unspecified "tu" that could be Sandra, Nancy, or even Alice: "Putain, je suis vraiment content que tu sois là." Resolved to "faire ce qu'on avait à faire," Bruno finds that his punk values have given him the strength not to despair at what he lacks, but instead to look at "le peu qu'on ait qui vaille vraiment" and "s'en réjouir."⁴²⁷ Bruno's punk joy derives from his friends, family, work, creative projects, autonomy – and the chance to fashion the debris of the old world into something new and beautiful.

Conclusion: "Anger is your power"

Since the 1970's, French and international punk art – music, literature, zines, journalism, visual art, and so forth – has consistently employed a vocabulary that people unfamiliar with the subculture often interpret as anti-social: "rage," "anger," "disgust," "despair," "destruction," "rejection," and abjection. Sociologist Jeffrey S. Debies-Carl notes in his 2017 work *Punk Rock and the Politics of Place: Building a Better Tomorrow* that cultural criticism attempting to find the "meaning" or "essence" of punk culture often regards its language, culture, and politics as juvenile rebellion or delinquency without considering punk's constructive tendencies. Debies-Carl argues that this view of punk ignores that punk has worked to establish scenes and sites of resistance in communities through the world, a Lefebvre-esque "politics of space" that reclaims the fabric of cities from privatization to create room for art and social change.⁴²⁸ Furthermore, sociologists Philip Lewin and J. Patrick Williams join Debies-Carl in denouncing other critics'

⁴²⁶ TS 157

⁴²⁷ TS 158

⁴²⁸ Debies-Carl, Jeffrey S. *Punk Rock and the Politics of Place: Building a Better Tomorrow*. London: Routledge, 2014.

tendencies to focus on the outrageous appearance of punks, contending that previous cultural studies investigations of punk such as Dick Hebdige's focus too much on punk style. Lewin and Williams argue that punks also "construct a concept of authenticity that relies on ideological commitment;"⁴²⁹ punk defines itself by its social behavior, political organization, and ethos, not only by appearance, style, and material culture. I agree with Debies-Carl, Lewin, and Williams that punk is a pro-social, ideologically committed, politically resistant subculture, and I will add that punk *expresses* its values through artistic activity and through texts, from songs to novels.

While I agree with other scholars that thinking about punk's poetics (as Brian Schill does) and aesthetics (as Neil Nehring does) helps us understand punk art, I fear that "punkness" as resistant, critical *discourse* is overlooked in literature studies amidst the noise of its *style* (in lyrics and prose). Punk rage's lack of didactic solutions and its disinterest in fitting neatly into the system have made even its most pointed critiques oblique to outsiders. To cite the Clash's 1979 anthem *Clampdown*, which warns young people not to give their lives to "work and more work," or to blame other oppressed people – ethnic, racial, and religious minorities – for their misery, punk reminds us that "anger can be power – d'you know that you can use it?"⁴³⁰ My critical aim here is to demonstrate the importance of reading "punk rage" not only as "sound and fury" (or "noise"), but as a topos of punk textuality inciting class consciousness, resistance, and action. This "rage" and the need for "sensations" urge us to *feel something* in a numb, apathetic, and desperate world; punk art in its various forms calls (and even screams) for new practices of art, work, domestic life, politics, and playfulness.

⁴²⁹ Lewin, Philip and J. Patrick Williams. "The Ideology and Practice of Authenticity in Punk Subculture." Vannini, Phillip, and J. Patrick Williams, eds. *Authenticity in culture, self, and society*. London: Ashgate, 2009.

⁴³⁰ The Clash. "Clampdown." *London Calling*, CBS, 1979.

Chapter 4: Perverse picaresque and *chômage grotesque*: Jean-Louis Costes' *Guerriers Amoureux* and Julien Campredon's *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l'amour des elfes*

In this final chapter, I examine two 21st century works of fiction: *Guerriers Amoureux*, a 2013 novel by underground musician, performance artist, and writer Jean-Louis Costes, and the 2006 fabulist short story collection *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l'amour des elfes* by Julien Campredon. Since the novels in my first two chapters, as well as Virginie Despentes' punk novels in Chapter 3, represent work and everyday life in a realist light, I propose to examine Costes and Campredon's fantastical texts, which share the same fascination with the worker-consumer quotidian, but suggest different, otherworldly alternatives to this "dissatisfaction." Both authors are active, contemporary creators who write about work and the everyday in the "late capitalism" of the 2010's (albeit by employing bizarre, seamy, or horrific images).⁴³¹ I have chosen to examine their works for their use of mysticism, both divine and demonic, alongside use of the literary grotesque, transgression, abjection, trash, and "genre" fiction tropes.⁴³² I argue that Costes and Campredon deploy these clashing registers – the "lowest" experiences of sex and violence alongside "higher" searches for love, existential meaning, and knowledge of the mystical and divine – to allegorize the "desacralization" of everyday experience within capitalism, which reduces humanness to embodied economic struggle. In this way, both authors

⁴³¹ "Late capitalism" is a term that first gained popularity in the early-to-mid 20th century, when many prominent economists such as Joseph Schumpeter believed that capitalism was doomed to fail because the social and material inequities that it created were too devastating to repair. The expression has also appeared extensively in the writings of the philosophers of the Frankfurt School and postmodernist theorist Fredric Jameson's writings. I use the term here to signify that these works of fiction likewise paint the social and material inequalities of countries with capitalist economies as being as too catastrophic to overcome or resolve.

⁴³² While in the United States, "trash culture" refers to "disposable" pop culture enjoyed by a wide audience – reality television, pop music, fast fashion and fast food – the French use of "trash" signifies a less marketable strain of culture. In French, "trash" is "vil, ordurier ; qui évoque une vie et des valeurs liées à un monde glauque, comme la saleté, la sexualité malsaine, la toxicomanie et la violence," "se dit d'une tendance contemporaine d'utiliser un mauvais goût agressif, dans le but de provoquer, de choquer." (Definitions of "trash" from Wiktionary and Dictionnaire Larousse, respectively. <https://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/trash> ; <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/trash/10910030?q=trash#802555>)

contrast the humanness of subjects excluded from work and economic stability to the inhuman, sometimes monstrous forces of capitalism that have marginalized and sometimes corrupted them – the everyday sacred sits cheek by jowl with the “everyday evils” of profit-seeking mentality. Neither author has received much (in Costes’ case), or none (in Campredon’s case) scholarly attention for their writing, and thus no critic analyzes the “bizarre” or mystical aspects of their fiction about real-world economic struggle.⁴³³

Furthermore, both Campredon and Costes portray a marginality that is as cultural and geographic as it is socioeconomic. In an interview, Julien Campredon noted:

“Ce qui est différent (dans mon écriture), c’est que mes récits se déroulent dans les provinces. Vous remarquerez que la plupart de romans contemporains français se déroulent dans ce cadre parisien. En plus, toutes les grandes maisons d’édition sont à Paris. Il est bien difficile pour un écrivain provincial de réussir... Je parle l’occitan, je l’enseigne à mon fils... et j’ai l’impression de parler une langue secrète. Vous connaissez Paris mieux que moi, bien que je sois français. Le ‘Pariscentrisme’ efface les autres expériences de la vie en France. C’est une espèce de colonialisme.”⁴³⁴

Likewise, Costes explains that living in the extreme poverty and desperation of Seine Saint-Denis estranged him from the French artistic establishment, as well as from most Parisians:

“(J)’habitais 30 ans dans la banlieue nord de Paris... (l)es gens parlent de ces sujets sérieux tous les jours. Qui s’est fait attaquer, qui est mort, qui a été violée, qui a eu sa voiture cassée... On est obligé de changer ses idées... instinctivement on se modifie. Et on voit même qu’on peut plus communiquer avec les gens qui habitent dans le centre de Paris.”⁴³⁵

Since both Costes and Campredon’s works take place entirely in the provinces and in Paris’s *banlieues*, their works represent an often-overlooked side of French daily life. As Campredon

⁴³³ A monograph on Jean-Louis Costes’ performance and visual art entitled *L’art brutal de Jean-Louis Costes* does exist, but doesn’t devote much critical attention to Costes’ writing. The monograph is penned mainly by journalists and other artists, although one of them does interview Jean-Claude Moineau, an artist attached to the activities of May ’68 who stopped making art in 1969 and became an art critic and professor at Paris 8. A deeper literary studies analysis of Costes’ work does not yet exist, which is why I will foreground a discussion of Costes’ writing here. See: Carver, Lisa, et al. *L’Art brutal de Jean-Louis Costes*. Paris: L’Exposition Radicale, 2012.

⁴³⁴ Campredon, Julien. Personal Interview. 18 December 2016, Paris, France.

⁴³⁵ Costes, Jean-Louis. Personal interview. 2 August 2016. Sillé-le-Guillaume, France.

notes, French contemporary fiction, films, and television often represent daily life in France by foregrounding the urbane, comfortable lifestyle of middle-class and wealthy people living in *intra muros* Paris. However, while Costes and Campredon's characters are economically and geographically marginalized, and may even behave in horrific ways, their humanness cannot be overlooked; they toil, they cry, they fall in love, they bleed when injured, they doubt their choices. As literary scholar Rita Felski argues in her essay *Uses of Literature*, literature's ability to make us feel – which has long been known as its aesthetic potential – can offer us “knowledge,” “recognition,” and “enchantment” that lifts us from our own subjective perspective into other types of emotional and cognitive experiences. These characters' touching, humanizing qualities, in concert with their suffering in economic exclusion, solicit the reader's emotional recognition. At the same time, their contact with forces greater than themselves – both holy and evil – allow the texts to induce reactions of “enchantment” and estrangement from the reader.

Pushing the limit: the aesthetic and ethical potential of Costes' transgressive fiction

French noise and “trash” artist Jean-Louis Costes has been notorious in French and international DIY, punk, and noise music scenes, as well as in the performance art world, since his debut in the DIY “tape-trading” subculture of the early 1980's. During the last three and a half decades, Costes has self-released several dozen cassettes and CD's of electronically-based noise music sung in English, French, German, and Japanese with various collaborators. Costes has also exhibited his visual art and installations in French museums, and he has acted in several controversial contemporary French films.⁴³⁶ For much of the 1980's and 1990's, Costes' most

⁴³⁶ Although Costes does not identify with punk culture, he had a role in 2000's *Baise-moi*, an adaptation of Virginie Despentes' “punk porno” serial killer road novel of the same title. (The film, which was directed by Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, also starred Raffaëlla Anderson and the late Karen Lancaume, two notable Beurette porn actresses who also acted in mainstream films, as well as gonzo journalist and punk singer Patrick Eudeline.) Costes also played in Gaspar Noé's infamous *Irréversible* (2002) as “Fistman,” among other films, and directed a 1995 film entitled “I Love Snuff.”

productive collaborative partnership was with his former spouse, American writer and performance artist Lisa Crystal Carver, as Suckdog. Suckdog's output consisted of noise recordings and "opéras porno-sociaux" written by Carver and Costes. Since the 1990's, Costes has toured the US and Europe, sometimes with other collaborating artists.

In addition to his albums and performances, Costes has been writing and publishing short fiction since the 1990s. He has written and published four novels (*Viva la merda*, Éditions Hermaphrodites, 2003; *Grand-père*, Fayard, 2006; *Un bunker en banlieue*, Eretic Art, 2008; *Guerriers Amoureux*, Eretic Art, 2013) and a handful of graphic novels, including one based on *Guerriers Amoureux*. Costes' choice to designate his work as "trash" signals his equally "trashy" poetics: his work represents all that is *glauque* in our world; his prose and its repulsive images spill forth abundantly and maniacally; his art, including his fiction, is peopled with banlieue-dwelling characters whose economic exclusion makes them into "human waste." Costes' willful poetics of trash emphasizes the horror of extreme economic inequality, which treats peoples as disposable sources of labor and capital.⁴³⁷ His oeuvre's emphasis on "social" aspects of human life, from sexuality and religion to working life and consumerism, makes *Guerriers Amoureux* a nauseating but often oddly perspicacious view of work and everyday life.⁴³⁸

Costes' has published his literary production mostly with his own publishing house, despite Fayard publishing his first novel *Grand-père*, "La folle épopée du grand-père de Costes au début du 20ème siècle : cosaque en Russie, légionnaire au Maroc, bagnard en Guyane et collabo en 1940." After *Grand-père*, Costes' increasingly "trashy" – that is to say, scabrous,

⁴³⁷ See: Yates, Michelle. "The Human-as-Waste, the Labor Theory of Value and Disposability in Contemporary Capitalism." *Antipode* 43.5 (2011): 1679-1695

⁴³⁸ Costes' performance art consists of what he terms "opéras porno-sociaux," with electronic music written by Costes and spectacles featuring simulated violence, sex, "scat" and other abject fetish behavior. These "operas" address topics such as life in abusive families, gender socialization, religious belief, and romantic relationships.

disjointed, violent – novels were rejected by Fayard, then by other publishers. Refusing to compromise his artistic vision to achieve further mainstream exposure, Costes began publishing his own work, as well as the writing and art of his longtime friends and collaborators, through his own label and publishing company, Eretic Art.⁴³⁹ Under the Eretic imprimatur, Costes has released “scato-road novel” *Viva la merda*, deranged doomsday isolationist fantasy *Un bunker en banlieue*, and 2013’s *Guerriers Amoureux*. Costes explains that his decision to write fiction came as much from the need to respond to angry reactions to his other art as from his own desire to create. In 2016, Costes recounted how in the 1990’s, he began writing short texts for his new website, to “explain” his work for his audience after facing obscenity trials in French courts⁴⁴⁰:

“Vers '96, (j’ai commencé) à avoir un site web, donc j’ai mis des textes sur mon site. Je comprenais pas (sic) l’impact internet... il y avait personne (sic) qui a gardé un site web en 96. Je m’attendais même pas (sic) à avoir trois personnes dessus ! J’ai mis les textes... pour meubler le site, en fait... c’étaient des textes courts. Et comme j’avais des procès, j’ai commencé à faire des textes pour m’expliquer aussi sur mes œuvres... j’étais bien obligé d’argumenter sur (la) fiction, la différence entre un auteur et son œuvre, et ses personnages... Donc j’ai commencé à faire ça sur Internet, et puis après j’ai commencé à parler d’autres choses. C’est comme ça que j’ai écrit un texte sur mon grand-père... dix pages, comme ça. Après il y a eu des revues qui en ont demandé... J’ai commencé à les publier dans des revues. Il y avait une grosse maison d’édition ou travaillait une personne qui a découvert Bukowski, en fait. C’est un Français qui l’a publié, qui a eu le premier contrat mondial à signer à Bukowski... cette personne-là lisait les petites revues. Il

⁴³⁹ While Costes has not explained his choice of name for his label/publishing house, the word strikes the ear and the eye as a portmanteau word of *erotic* and *emetic*, two adjectives that would aptly suit the themes of his writing, music, and art. The French word for *heretic*, *hérétique*, also comes to mind – this is more humorous when one considers that Costes’ wife runs her own publishing house specializing in Catholic religious literature.

⁴⁴⁰ In response to harassment from his neighbors in Seine-Saint-Denis, who included rapper Kool Shen (of NTM fame) and a gang of FN-voting neo-Nazis, Costes made albums such as “Livrez les Blanches aux Bicots” (1989) (featuring Costes’ off-kilter but putatively anti-racist songs such as “Je veux livrer ma blanche aux bicots,” written mockingly from the perspective of a “minable” and impotent racist white man) as well as “NTMFN” (Nique Ta Mère Front National). The latter album featured songs ridiculing both the fascists and the vainglorious gangsta rap duo of Kool Shen and Joey Starr, such as “Dans mon HLM,” “Casse ta race” (another of Costes’ efforts at making an anti-racist song, with the howled chorus urging both white and black people to “casse ta race comme je casse la mienne !”) Although Costes has recorded a number of songs viciously mocking fascists and authority figures, he faced court trials from various anti-racist groups. See: Giard, Agnès. “Autel Costes.” *Technikart* 01 Février 2001. <http://www.technikart.com/autel-costes/>. Accessed 10 October 2016.)

a lu "Grand-père," de 10 pages, et il m'a contacté. Il a dit 'si vous faisiez un roman dans ce style, je le prendrais chez Fayard,' qui était la plus grosse maison d'édition en France."⁴⁴¹

Costes himself sees his work as an expression not only of the "minable," depraved, and weak side of human nature, but also an expression of the human desire to connect with something larger than ourselves. Costes' pieces intermingle accounts of religious awakenings and saints' martyrdoms with other "extreme" experiences such as birth, death, sex, and loss of control over bodily functions; he feels that these "extreme" experiences are so similar that they occupy a similar emotional resonance and can be represented side by side within the same work. "La religion, l'art, le théâtre, ce n'est pas très clair, ils ont quelque chose de commun, un point où tu peux passer bien d'un à l'autre."⁴⁴² Costes' creative process between media is also disinclined toward the "boundaries" of specialized technique for different art forms. *Grand-père* is his most cohesive novel; it bears the earmarks of being professionally edited to tighten Costes' overabundant, coarse, slangy style. However, his subsequent fiction has same the speedy, logorrheic, minimally-revised quality of his songwriting and his performance pieces. Perhaps due to his exodus from the French literary scene, Costes' fiction has been the subject of more scholarly analysis for its alleged legal status as obscenity than its literary merits.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴¹ Costes, Jean-Louis. Personal interview. 2 August 2016. Sillé-le-Guillaume, France.

⁴⁴² See: Mars, Benoît and Antonie Mocquet. *Les petits oiseaux chantent : un film sur Jean-Louis Costes*. Independent production, 2007. See also : Carver, Lisa et al. *Costes: L'art brutal de Jean-Louis Costes*. Paris: Exposition radicale, 2012

⁴⁴³ Reviews of Costes' recordings, performances, visual art, and novels have appeared in publications such as *Charile Hebdo*, *Sud-Ouest*, *Chicago Reader*, *Petit Bulletin de Lyon*, and *France-Inter*. A laudatory analysis by journalist and author Christophe Bourseiller (a specialist on extremist politics and avant-garde art movements, including the Situationists) appears in Bourseiller's book *Les Forcenés du désir* (Paris: Denoël, 2000). However, the scholarship that focuses on Costes' writing comes from the domains of law and philosophy – Costes' legal battles established new precedents in France, for copyright law as well as the responsibility of online servers for obscene or (even allegedly) hateful content on their websites. See: Schafer, Valérie. "From far away to a click away: The French state and public services in the 1990s." Niels Brügger, Ralph Schroeder (eds), *The Web as History*, Londres, UCL Press, 2017, p. 117-133. See also: Strowel, Alain. "La lutte contre les activités liberticides sur Internet." *Pas de liberté pour les ennemis de la liberté ?* Eds. Dumont, Hugues, et al. Pp. 411-443. Brussels: Bruylant, 2000.

Costes' writing, like the rest of his art, tends toward social commentary with a scabrous veneer. Scenes of sadomasochism, "trips scato" (coprophilia), and demonic possession sit side by side with unflinching, detailed scenes of urban poverty, violence, drug abuse and dealing, terrorism, and slave labor. Yet Costes' art and writing also explore human social experiences: friendship, love, family life, religion, and work drive the plot of *Guerriers Amoureux*. Costes explains in interviews that he tries not to shock, not to propose solutions, but to represent "real life's" problems and joys in simple terms that anyone can understand.⁴⁴⁴ *Guerriers Amoureux* may be a "trash" fantasy, but it portrays the struggles of a real segment of France's population: young people from intergenerational poverty whose families, brought to the HLM and perhaps even to France by blue collar manufacturing jobs during the Trente Glorieuses, are permanently "en galère" after the collapse of the French industrial sector. Still, while the narrative presents the teens sympathetically, they learn very little from their journeys, brushes with death, and their experiences with the mysticism and the sacred. In this way, *Guerriers Amoureux* evokes the picaresque genre, in which we follow the scurrilous exploits of anti-heroic protagonists.

Guerriers amoureux's protagonist Patou begins the novel by explaining that his wild adventures began when he had just been kicked out of high school, much to the dismay of his mother, who is herself disabled: "Ma mère furieuse voulait plus m'entretenir. 'Pédé ! drogué ! T'es comme ton père ! Si tu vas pas à l'école, faut que tu bosses !' Cette conne joue la prolo

⁴⁴⁴ "J'ai pas (sic) l'idée de faire un truc underground subversif. Je pense juste que je fais un truc qui me plaît, bien sûr, mais donc qui peut plaire à d'autres gens... Je cherche à faire quelque chose qui me touche, et j'imagine que ça va plaire à d'autres gens. Je suis toujours surpris que ça leur plaise pas (sic) !... Je suis pas (sic) du tout dans l'idée d'ennuyer les gens, ni de les provoquer. Je cherche à faire un truc, c'est tout quoi... Comme quand je vais voir un film de Fassbinder... Ou de Lars von Trier. Je fais 'waouh.'" Personal interview with Costes, August 2016. "Je suis beaucoup moins radical que ce qui fait l'actualité : les attentats, la guerre, la misère... C'est l'actualité qui est radicale, ce n'est pas moi... Je suis comme un gamin au fond de la classe qui dessine, qui fait son truc sans qu'on y prête beaucoup d'attention." Loubes, Christophe. "L'artiste Jean-Louis Costes à Bordeaux : 'C'est l'actualité qui est radicale, pas moi.'" *Sud-Ouest*. 15 March 2017. <https://www.sudouest.fr/2017/03/14/l-artiste-jean-louis-costes-a-bordeaux-c-est-l-actualite-qui-est-radical-pas-moi-3276897-2780.php>. Accessed 29 November 2017.

surmenée, mais en vrai elle fout rien. Toute la journée sous médocs devant la télé.”⁴⁴⁵ Yet Patou, who calls himself the “sous-blanc” of his HLM, is also a “prolo” unable to work. As “humans as waste” must do to survive when excluded from production and work within “legitimate” capitalism, Patou and his best friend Momo have turned to the black market for their livelihood. Patou cannot do this work either; he spends his days in a stupor induced by smoking his supply of crack cocaine, incapable of motivating himself to sell it: “Je gagne pas de tunes, mais j’ai toujours de quoi me casser la tête.”⁴⁴⁶ Patou escapes Bobigny by stealing his mother’s credit card, itself almost miraculous as an “incroyable” fount of cash, and taking a flight to Guyana.

In Guyana, he meets (and beds with) Klaus, a war-damaged, coprophiliac German ex-Legionnaire who convinces him that “si tu veux faire fortune, faut chercher de l’or... d’abord, faut acheter un bulldozer;” the pair secures their fortune by robbing a prostitute, whom Klaus murders. Subsisting on crack and tinned sardines, the odd couple meet with Klaus’ fellow ex-Legionnaire Gérard, prodigal son of a local indigenous tribe’s chief, who helps Patou find a gold mine. Gérard, whose loyalty to his *frère de combat* Klaus extends to Patou, initiates the two Europeans into the Wayana tribe’s religious ceremonial rites, through which they bond. Through his newly found mystical experience of the world, Patou is graced with a vision of the tribe’s god and mythological guardian, the snake-deity Poïnéké Yum. Poïnéké Yum guides Patou to a rich vein of gold that the Wayana refuse to mine because it is their god’s home. Patou’s willing return to his separation from the sacred, with which his Wayana friends are still connected, is directly linked to his economic success within capitalism.

⁴⁴⁵ P. S. Costes, Jean-Louis. *Guerriers Amoureux*. Paris: Eretic, 2013.

⁴⁴⁶ GA (*Guerriers Amoureux*) 5

As de facto owners of the gold mine that Patou discovers, Patou and Klaus draw their inspiration from the 6th-century text holy text, the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, to be effective “managers” of indentured workers that they have acquired by trading with Gérard’s tribe. Although Saint Benedict’s text is still used as the basis for organizing the Benedictine monastic order, Patou’s understanding of the *Rule* casts its prescriptions of hard work and asceticism more as a manual for slave drivers and profiteering than as a text pointing the way to communion with God. Indeed, Patou’s modernization of the Benedictine rule of order removes all congress with God in favor of exploiting labor and promoting frivolous escapism as a distraction. Costes’ novel lampoons the Protestant work ethic’s recasting of work as the conduit to capital rather than as a meditative exercise and necessary part of life in the way that Saint Benedict prescribes.

Newly “bourgeois” Patou explains that he keeps his “prolos” subdued with overwork, mind-altering substances, and mindless entertainment. “Saint Benoît essayait de mater les barbares. Et il a trouvé une méthode super efficace : les fatiguer par le travail, et les abrutir par le vin et la prière. On fait pareil. Sauf qu’on a remplacé le vin par le crack, et la prière par la télé.”⁴⁴⁷ While analogizing his neocolonial voyage and enslavement of the Amazonians with Benedict’s “civilizing mission,” Patou also explains that he has modernized Benedict’s doctrine in another way. Commodified leisure through desultory entertainment is Patou’s arm for keeping workers in line as a capitalist overlord: “Ils ont un super écran géant. On leur balance toute la nuit des matchs de foot et de porno. Rien de tel qu’une bonne branlette et deux buts pour endormir le prolo...” In this way, Patou keeps the “prolos” from “awakening” to the idea of revolt (or other awareness of something bigger and better, such as an experience of religion), despite their dreadful work conditions. “Pas de temps de prendre des pauses. Juste deux petits

⁴⁴⁷ GA 116

breaks caca et crack vite fait.”⁴⁴⁸ If the workers try to rest while not on break, Patou and Klaus beat or whip them. If a worker steals, Patou pretends to give him the chance for a vacation to recover his work ethic; Patou accompanies the worker to the river, ostensibly to embark him on a boat headed home, but instead Patou shoots him. The body and its most immediate needs, as well as the demands of production and profit, eclipse other human needs – for pleasure, for knowledge of the sacred, for dignity and respect – in a world where “prolos” are disposable.

Patou also takes a Wayana woman as his wife, delighted that in the sadistic pleasure that she takes in her new undemocratic power: her “management” of the “prolos” includes invasive body cavity searches, assaults, and swift assassinations for thieves. Whereas the rest of her tribe refused to defile their god’s home by mining the vein of gold found there, “Pépita” succumbs to the allure of wealth and power. However, she eventually faces punishment for desecrating Poïnéké Yum’s home: the Brazilian government blows up the mine, killing Pépita and forcing Patou to flee to Brazil. In Brazil, Patou manipulates an HR manager into giving him a high-security cleaning job on the classified site of tactical rocket launches, for which he is singularly unqualified. “C’est quand même étonnant qu’un zonard comme moi se retrouve ici. J’ai dealé du shit toute ma jeunesse... Je passe six mois en forêt à trafiquer des armes, du crack, et de l’or. Et malgré tout ça, je me balade dans le hangar de la fusée. La zone la plus sécurisée du monde. Y a un bug !” However, Patou’s explanation of how he obtained his job shows that knowing and flattering the right person leads to a “good job” more assuredly than do “honorable” traits such as hard work and experience: “Faut dire que Francine, la meuf de l’interim, a bien bidouillé mon CV... Je la baise et je squatte son appart... C’est un bon deal.”⁴⁴⁹ His talent for the “art” of the

⁴⁴⁸ GA 116

⁴⁴⁹ GA 192

“deal” (in more than one sense) and his white privilege compensate for Patou’s deficiencies, such as a lack of skills, experience, or education, just as they have for other notable capitalist icons and scam artists. However, in the end, Patou once more faces the wrath of God, or at least of those who claim to serve him, when extremist Islamic terrorists hijack his base. The terrorists successfully launch a rocket, bomb New York City, and frame Patou for the hijacking.

In this way, Costes’ “shocking” textuality fits within an established literary mode – that of transgressive literature. Literary transgressions remind us of sex and violence’s power to cause extreme emotional and visceral reactions; the limits that transgressions in literature cross are not merely those of good taste, but of class, hierarchical political power, and religion. In his 1963 essay “Preface to Transgression,” Michel Foucault expanded upon previous theoretical definitions of literary transgressions as rebellion or dissent, theorizing that transgressions in art defy the capitalist ideology that has become sacred in the absence of religion.⁴⁵⁰ Foucault’s theory of literary transgression is based upon Georges Bataille’s works; Bataille suggested, and Foucault agreed, that the Christian mystical tradition, forgotten or suppressed in secular modernity, obscures the limits between human experiences. Sexual desire becomes indistinguishable from other physical extremes of violence, pain, and religious rapture.

“Jamais pourtant la sexualité n’a eu un sens plus immédiatement naturel et n’a connu sans doute un aussi grand ‘bonheur d’expression’ que dans le monde chrétien des corps déchus et du péché. Toute une mystique, toute une spiritualité le prouvent, qui ne savaient point diviser les formes continues de désir, de l’ivresse, de la pénétration, de l’extase, et de l’épanchement qui défaille ;

⁴⁵⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin designated the ritualized transgressions of fairs and festivals, as well as of the liminal “crossroads” of marketplaces, as devices that profane and overturn authority and received ideas. Literary transgression has also been theorized as an anti-authoritarian mode of representation by other critics including Marcel Detienne (1977), Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1989), and Bonnie and Hans Braendlin (1996). See: Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. See also: Detienne, Marcel. *Dionysos mis à mort*. Paris: Gallimard, collection Tel, 1977. See also: Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White. *The politics and poetics of transgression*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986. See also: Braendlin, Bonnie and Hans P. Braendlin. *Authority and Transgression in Literature and Film*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996.

tous ces mouvements, elles les sentaient se poursuivre, sans interruption ni limite, jusqu'au cœur d'un amour divin dont ils étaient le dernier évitement et la source en retour."⁴⁵¹

However, modern man's separation from the divine fits in within a typically Foucauldian theory of "knowledge" as a manifestation of power. Rather than confounding these ecstatic experiences within divine love, modern sexuality has been "portée à la limite" by science, medicine, and psychoanalysis in a de-mystification that effectively desacralizes and banalizes the erotic into a framework of institutional power. Art representing human sexuality in "extreme" or provocative language transgresses "proper" mores and institutional power. Foucault's theory of the literary value of transgressions maintains that the creation and enjoyment of transgressive art is a type of knowledge operation that degrades and ruptures epistemological, phenomenological, and existential categories of self and world. As Foucault's theory suggests transgressive literature does, Costes' writing intermingles portrayals of "lowliness" – human depravity and weakness – alongside "higher," more meaningful experiences of birth, death, and the divine or sacred, thus representing and reconciling multiple disparate facets of human existence.

Since Costes' art also grounds itself in the everyday experiences of work and consumerism, it is also useful to remember that Foucault argued that these splits of the philosophical subject derive from nothing other than the most banal everyday experiences of work, consumption, and need. "Le XX^e siècle (a)... découvre les catégories parentes de la dépense, de l'excès, de la limite, de la transgression : la forme étrange et irréductible de ces gestes sans retour qui consomment et consomment."⁴⁵² The contemporary subject has difficulty establishing her own subjective needs and desires outside of "pensée de l'homme au travail et l'homme producteur – qui fut celle de la culture européenne depuis la fin du XVIII^e siècle, (pour

⁴⁵¹ Foucault, Michel. *Préface à la transgression*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994 ; Nouvelles Editions Lignes, 2014. Print.

⁴⁵² Foucault 45

laquelle) la consommation se définissait par le seul besoin et le besoin se mesurait au seul modèle de la faim.”⁴⁵³ Foucault explains that this denial of needs leaves the contemporary subject in search of some type of meaning – social, existential, or otherwise – that capitalism cannot provide. “Sans doute le besoin a-t-il un tout autre statut ou du moins obéit-il à un régime dont les lois sont irréductibles à une dialectique de la production.”⁴⁵⁴ This subject-as-worker, stuck in a perpetual cycle of need and hunger based on the endless ideology of “recherche du profit... (qui) introduisait l’homme dans une dialectique de la production,” fights for survival in a world, but also to recognize and fulfill their human needs for comfort, love, and spirituality. Literature that pushes us beyond our own limits of experience into new “knowledge” – of bodies, of love, of God, and of work and everyday life – offers contemporary readers a reconciliation of their philosophical *Gestalt*, so unkindly fractured by capitalism. By presenting queasy portraits of the “dirty work” occasioned by marginalization, *Guerriers Amoureux* lays bare the role of economics and class in the splitting of the subject from more meaningful human experiences.

Costes’ work represents transgressions that push the limits of what humans can experience as embodied subjects in the late capitalist West, but also repeatedly dramatizes separation from religion, the sacred, and God as a source of the contemporary subject’s sense of desperation. For these themes, Costes’ work has even been defended by unlikely champions such as esoteric scholar and Catholic anti-modernist reactionary “philosopher” Laurent James.⁴⁵⁵ Just

⁴⁵³ Foucault 45

⁴⁵⁴ Foucault 46

⁴⁵⁵ Laurent James’ apologia of Costes appeared in the short-lived literary revue *Cancer !*, named after a novel by Mehdi Belhaj Kacem (a metaphysical nihilist writer and enthusiast of communist philosopher Alain Badiou). *Cancer!* published a stylistically coherent but ideologically disparate stable of authors, including Laurent Joffrin, Alain de Benoist, Daniel Lindenberg, Jean-Louis Costes, Stéphane Zagdanski, Philippe Muray, Frédéric Beigbeder, Dominique Noguez, Michel Crépu, Gérard Delteil and Richard Pinhas. The revue courted controversy by opening its pages to anti-fascist anarchist playwright, author, poet and filmmaker Fernando Arrabal as well as to reactionaries of the Nouvelle Droite such as Alain Soral. In his essay *Le Rappel à l’ordre : Enquête sur les nouveaux*

as Foucault argues that those religious rites and the eroticism that parallels them are “knowledge operations,” literature that depicts these acts can grant another pathway to knowledge of the divine. *Guerriers Amoureux* offers the reader the chance to follow their strange route toward knowledge and recognition of the reality above our own – the path to the sacred and metaphysical leads down the trash chute.

The novel’s other two lead characters, both of them youth of color, also embark on outrageous voyages to seek their fortune, and higher meaning, in the world outside of Bobigny. Unfortunately, they fare even more poorly than their white friend Patou in school and work, thus foreclosing their opportunities for success in the professional world and the aboveground economy. Patou’s friend and lover Momo begins the novel as the “caïd de la cité,” a successful crack dealer with a BMW, trips to the beach and to exclusive discos, and his pick of the young women in his HLM. The narrative frames his “charmed” life as a fairy tale upon introducing him: “Momo avait tous les attributs du prince charmant,” or perhaps a kingpin of the “alternative economy” available to “wasted” humans.⁴⁵⁶ Patou has already fallen for a beautiful, clever Haitian girl named Darlène, and has been secretly trysting with her, but when the “prince” Momo meets Darlène, he sweeps her off her feet. The two boys continue their sadomasochistic couplings, but Momo and Darlène’s relationship crazes Patou with jealousy; Patou eventually turns Momo in to the police for dealing drugs.

réactionnaires, Marxist essayist, journalist, and political historian Daniel Lindenberg condemned *Cancer !* for its willingness to publish overtly far right-wing “provocateurs.”” However, Lindenberg later published his own writing in *Cancer!* The 1990’s French intellectual and cultural milieu that embraced Costes has itself often been embroiled in controversies stemming as much from its own giddy, arguably irresponsible attempts to present an aesthetics of “transgression” for transgression’s sake as from any actual political views – an underground aesthetics mined throughout Europe and the US throughout the 90’s with similarly politically confounding results.

⁴⁵⁶ GA 15

When Momo goes to prison, he fears that his opportunities for work and independence have disappeared. However, while Momo is locked up, he meets a mob boss named Dédé, “qui lui a proposé du *boulot* à sa sortie. Dédé a fait trente ans de taule pour torture, meurtre, trafic de coke, et traite de blanches... alors *le taf*, il le connaît mieux que personne.”⁴⁵⁷ Momo, who lacks above-board opportunities for work and school as a child of the cité, accepts Dédé’s offers of “work,” then returns to his neighborhood to pull off jewelry heists and knock over armed trucks. This move toward dramatic violence temporarily helps Momo feel like he has finally found his purpose in life. “Avant on était rien. *Les damnés de la terre*, les bons à rien. Les arabes de merde. Et maintenant, on est au sommet. Ennemi numéro un de la société. Comme à Hollywood... Et le héros dans Yahoo News, c’est moi ! Je tue donc j’existe.”⁴⁵⁸ However, by invoking “les damnés de la terre,” the novel contradicts Momo’s belief that senseless violence is the pathway to a meaningful existence: the expression “les damnés de la terre” alludes to both the *Internationale* and the Paris commune, as well as to Frantz Fanon’s revolutionary anti-colonial text.

With this reference, Momo’s violent deeds are juxtaposed with North Africans fighting righteous battles against French colonialism during the French-Algerian war, as well as the violence of French troops torturing, killing, and imprisoning Algerians in Algeria. By evoking the French-Algerian war, the narrative also elliptically suggests the police aggression against Algerian anti-war protesters in France that happened at the same time, reminding readers of the long history of anti-Beur racism in France as it explains Momo’s anger and desire to be seen. Violence does indeed have its place as a weapon against oppression; as Jean-Paul Sartre suggested in his introduction to Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre*, killing the French oppressor

⁴⁵⁷ GA 71, my italics

⁴⁵⁸ GA 75, my italics

can restore a lost sense of humanity and national subjectivity: “En le premier temps de la révolte, *il faut tuer : abattre un Européen c'est faire d'une pierre deux coups*, supprimer en même temps un oppresseur et un opprimé : *restent un homme mort et un homme libre ; le survivant, pour la première fois, sent un sol national sous la plante de ses pieds.*”⁴⁵⁹ As Momo is searching for this subjectivity in France rather than on the *sol national* of the Maghreb, his violence might appear gratuitous. Yet because he is left without a “legitimate” path to success, or any other ways of settling the score or of being known and seen in his own country, Momo seeks his glory with other “cow-boys de banlieue” in truly dirty jobs.⁴⁶⁰ By inserting a reference to revolutionary texts in the mouth of a young Beur convinced that senseless violence is his only way to “exist,” the novel sympathetically suggests that the Beurs of the banlieue who appear to be immolating themselves in violence are merely looking for their liberation in the wrong places.

After being caught and sent back to prison, Momo despairs at losing his chance for life of luxury. When he is offered the chance to be broken out of prison to join a group of supposed “jihadists,” Momo accepts, desirous of righteous violence and a path to holiness through war. However, the jihad mission involves miserable toil, starvation, and taking orders from a wealthy, white blond man, a “bobo” recently converted to Islam who inexplicably is at the top of the hierarchy of Momo’s cell. Baffled by his white boss and the fact that all of his weapons come from the West, Momo is forced to wonder, “et si le djihad était une invention de ces enculés de blancs pour faire crever les musulmans ?”⁴⁶¹ Momo is only offered “la paix du guerrier” – of striking back at his oppressors by killing, then dying. Yet this tranquility is illusory; as the young

⁴⁵⁹ P. 29. Sartre, Jean-Paul. Preface to Fanon, Frantz. *Les Damnés de la terre*. Paris: Éditions Maspéro, 1961.

⁴⁶⁰ GA 76

⁴⁶¹ GA 172

jihadists of the *cit * prepare to die, their missed opportunities still haunt them. “Tous les mauvais d lires du pass  reviennent. Les meufs, les  tudes, les parents. Tout ce qu’on a rat . Le cauchemar permanent.”⁴⁶² Momo remains afraid of his own death, fearful that he has perhaps chosen the wrong pathway to holiness – his transgressions have only been motivated by his desire for reconciliation with the sacred and for a meaningful life.

By an absurd twist of fate, Momo’s cell hijacks the military base where Patou works and kills Darl ne by dropping a bomb on New York, where she now lives. Confronted by Patou as he prepares to die, Momo expresses his regrets: “Pourquoi t’as fait  a ?” “Je sais pas.” “C’est du gros n’importe quoi.”⁴⁶³ Similar to *Madame Bovary*’s implication that Emma Bovary received bad ideas of the world through her youthful reading of romantic literature, the boys blame their French teacher for filling their heads with romantic myths of (colonial) adventures in the New World. “Cette conne de prof de fran ais... Sa litt rature romantique de merde... nous a fait tomber dans le d lire jungle et gu rilla.”⁴⁶⁴ Wherever he goes, the long shadow of France’s imperial legacy and its socioeconomic fallout for people of color pursue Momo.

The experiences of the boys’ friend and lover Darl ne also illustrate the lack of “mainstream” opportunities for success in work afforded to banlieue youth, while also linking the poverty and social exclusion of people of color in France back to French imperialism. Like Patou and Momo, Darl ne strikes out of her *cit *, leaving France and Europe for the New World.

⁴⁶² GA 266

⁴⁶³ GA 271

⁴⁶⁴ GA 271. The boys’ surprisingly sophisticated observation that French romantic literature provides a good deal of “n’importe quoi” regarding Europeans’ chances for conquest and success in the New World is one that many literature critics share. For more on this, see: Prasad, Pratima. *Colonialism, Race, and the French Romantic Imagination*. London: Routledge, 2009. For further observations on European romanticism and the colonial imagination, see: Fulford, Timothy, and Peter J. Kitson, eds. *Romanticism and colonialism: Writing and empire, 1780-1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Darlène begins as a free spirited “good girl;” when Patou flirts by offering her hashish, she laughs at him, explaining that “je ne suis pas une droguée.”⁴⁶⁵ Her main pleasures in life consist of Mister Freezes, Michael Jackson songs, and success in school. Yet Darlène also desires opportunities for fun – she dates Momo because he offers her vacations, attention, and status. Darlène suffers assaults at the hands of jealous neighborhood girls once Momo has been taken to prison; traumatized by the attack, Darlène becomes catatonic. Her mother, a prostitute who has fought for economic stability and a future for her daughter – symbolized by “les meubles qui avaient coûté trois ans de RMI”⁴⁶⁶ that stand in stark contrast to the run-down HLM where they live – fears for her daughter’s chances of success: “Une fille si bien élevée, si bonne à l’école. Mon Dieu, quel malheur !”⁴⁶⁷ After Darlène has lost her chance for material success on the terms of Western society, the text reintroduces a sense of enchantment to the narrative by framing the social and material inequality that afflicts the banlieue as a more metaphysically-based evil. Darlène, sad and without opportunities, becomes “possessed,” mutilating herself, vandalizing her mother’s apartment, and dancing while singing about her sexual exploits.

Darlène’s mother takes her daughter to her Haitian evangelical church, “un vieux hangar transformé en temple, au fond de la zone industrielle,” a geographically marginal holy site for immigrants reclaimed from the post-industrial wasteland that has “cursed” the banlieues with poverty.⁴⁶⁸ Darlène’s “salvation” comes through a mystical encounter with a snake, recasting the traditional symbol of trickery and evil as a godsend for “the wretched of the earth.” Having

⁴⁶⁵ GA 7

⁴⁶⁶ GA 38

⁴⁶⁷ GA 31

⁴⁶⁸ GA 38

manifested her misery as an “antichrist” that she carries in her womb, Darlène is “exorcised” by a boa constrictor that squeezes her until she “births” the fetus. Darlène marries the priest, who takes her to America, where they perform this ritual exorcism every week. Her mother is “si heureuse que sa fille parte avec un saint homme,” where she is safe from the “curse” of poverty, “loin de l’enfer de la banlieue nord, où les petits immigrés sont possédés par les démons du crime, de la drogue, et de la prostitution.”⁴⁶⁹ However, her husband’s American church resembles the temple in the Parisian banlieue: the New York church occupies a similarly unexpected, secular, post-industrial space on the edge of the Bronx: this holy space reclaims “un piteux hangar désaffecté au bord du fleuve pollué... Mais la foule se pressait dans cette petite oasis chrétienne, perdue en enfer. Pauvre matériellement, mais riche spirituellement.”⁴⁷⁰ With this transference between one resacralized industrial site and another, the trope of the banlieue – coded in fiction as a zone already culturally and geographically exterior to (white, bourgeois) Paris – extends its boundaries outlandishly far. Darlène’s work opportunities are still born of the misery of immigrants whose troubles began with colonialism, but her mystic gift transforms this curse into salvation. Within the “wasted” zones of the banlieues and outer boroughs, humans “wasted” by systemic and social inequalities reclaim a space for the sacred, offering themselves long-withheld “riches.”

Costes’ novel portrays teenage protagonists who desire a more fulfilling existence, but who are trapped in a limitless cycle of desire for flashy status goods despite their poverty. Darlène enjoys Mister Freezes, Coca-Cola, BN cookies, and backpacks and school organizers branded with popular cartoon characters such as the Smurfs. Momo lives exclusively to make

⁴⁶⁹ GA 43

⁴⁷⁰ GA 248

money and enjoy consumer luxury in the absence of economic security and other types of success. Patou fares somewhat better than his friends in terms of making money and remaining free, yet still narrowly escapes death multiple times. While he flees the Brazilian government officials who have blown up his gold mine, Patou finds himself obsessively craving – even fetishizing – Western commodities while he traverses the jungle. “Et on rêve surtout d’un bon Coca bien frais ! Les gauchistes qui crachent sur le coca sont jamais sortis de leur fac. Pour le crevard au fond de la jungle, c’est le fantasme absolu... Pas un faux coca Leader Price. Un vrai... Bourré de sucre et de caféine. Le paradis !”⁴⁷¹ Patou’s use of the metaphor of “paradis” flies mockingly in the face of the sacred experiences in nature and with the Wayanas that he has discovered, showing the persistence of ideology to filter our perceptions of even the most banal everyday pleasures. After he finds his way across the Amazon river to a village, Patou finally buys and drinks his much longed-for taste of the West: “J’ai enfin réussi à me lever pour aller m’acheter une canette fraîche de Coca à l’épicerie du village. J’en rêvais trop... Ah, la civilisation, on a beau critiquer, ça a du bon ! Passez un mois en forêt à bouffer des limaces, et au retour vous adorerez le capitalisme.”⁴⁷² Although Patou first found himself in his “bordel” due to his exclusion from capitalism, his satisfaction with the most meager consumer comforts allows him to remain a proponent of the economic system that has nearly killed him several times over.

For the three teenage protagonists of *Guerriers Amoureux*, Bobigny is indeed socially and economically separate from the “world” of Paris; crossing into the city, and into work and economic stability, is harder than escaping the country and fighting one’s way through the jungle. Yet fleeing the country and the continent also allows the teens to cross another boundary:

⁴⁷¹ GA 184

⁴⁷² GA 188

that of the veil separating their pedestrian, yet unpleasant banlieue lives from the experience of beauty and the sacred. The mystical elements in Costes' narrative confound the lines between Christianity, Islam, evangelical Christianity, Voodoo, indigenous spirituality, pantheism, and the "enchantment" of leaving one type of everyday life behind. When he leaves his cité, Patou encounters nature for the first time in the form of a "potager pourri"⁴⁷³, which causes him to lose the boundaries of his sense of self and be guided by a "larger," "mystical" force: "L'impression de participer à un grand mouvement de migration vers la lumière. Mêmes les gazs (sic) d'échappement m'enchangent les poumons. Gazs (sic) toxiques mystiques."⁴⁷⁴ Patou marvels at the lush, verdant Amazon, calling it "le pays des fées."⁴⁷⁵ He follows a panther through the jungle as though it were a benevolent spirit guide; "je commençais à l'aimer ce gros matou qui nous guidait. On se croirait dans le Livre de la jungle. Le roi des animaux initie l'homme à la nature."⁴⁷⁶ After hallucinatory encounters with the Wayana serpent-god during his participation in rituals, Patou has prophetic dreams of the "dieu-serpent." To avenge Darlène after Momo's terrorist cell has killed her with a bomb, Patou and the Wayanas drink a potion that transforms them into invulnerable serpents made of light, then fight Momo and his cohort to the death.

In a similar movement toward the mystical and the divine, Momo becomes fatigued of being "un rebeu de cité de merde," of "baiser des bimbos en plastique"⁴⁷⁷ while he is in prison. Desirous of the fraternal love of the mad, bearded Islamist cellmate who enchants him with melodious psalms, Momo decides to become an extremist after a reverie of the desert straight out

⁴⁷³ GA 48

⁴⁷⁴ GA 49

⁴⁷⁵ GA 69

⁴⁷⁶ GA 69

⁴⁷⁷ GA 91

of a Disney film. “Il comprenait pas les paroles, mais il sentait que ça parlait d’amour. Un prince et une belle voilée dans le désert. Tout est mélangé dans sa tête. Les vacances en Algérie... Et le dessin animé. ‘Je vais t’offrir un monde de mille et une splendeurs.’ Le chant du barbu lui rappelait Aladin sur son tapis volant avec Yasmine.”⁴⁷⁸ After the “barbu”’s mystical psalmodies remind Momo of the exoticized (Western) cartoon of *Aladdin*, the helicopter that transports him and the other jihadists also appears to him as “un truc à helices comme dans Tintin.”⁴⁷⁹ Momo’s only experiences of religious community and the love of God are mediated by cartoons.

Of the three friends, Darlène is best able to connect with the transcendent and divine. In her husband’s Haitian evangelical church in the Bronx, Darlène is possessed and exorcised in the same rite with the snake each Sunday, repeatedly transgressing the same line of blasphemy and violence and patching over this fissured limit with newfound salvation. Darlène’s repeated salvation is more than theatre; instead of being killed by the atomic bomb blast that Momo has helped engineer, Darlène is judged by God as one of the few faithful, and thus walks the earth after the atomic apocalypse has killed most Americans. Unable to continue working as an evangelical priestess because her charred, destroyed body has a “look trop trash,” Darlène becomes a celebrated Voodoo priestess. Her post-apocalyptic beauty and mystical power, as well as Patou’s longstanding love for her, “envoût(ent)”⁴⁸⁰ Patou in a literal sense as well as a metaphorical one. The novel’s apocalyptic conclusion, alongside its stories of sin, redemption, and religious conversion make *Guerriers Amoureux* an unexpected eschatological narrative.

⁴⁷⁸ GA 92

⁴⁷⁹ GA 163

⁴⁸⁰ GA 280

Guerriers Amoureux also makes the transgression of limits between the ordinary and the extraordinary visible in physical space. Patou's exploration of the Amazon leads to the proliferation of more of these crossable, reappearing limits: "La végétation est si dense. Un éternel mur vert qu'on défonce sans répit, mais se dresse toujours intact devant nous... Et faire un pont tous les cent mètres, tellement ya (sic) des rivières en Amazonie."⁴⁸¹ Patou proceeds through these limits, destroys them, and creates new ones with this bulldozer, pushing a destructive path through the vegetation in order to set up a profitable enterprise. Momo, too, finds that his new perspective on the world allows him to see boundaries and borders dissolve. From a plane, Momo contemplates the desert: "Faut être là, fourmi dans l'infini, pour vraiment sentir. Ça change de la banlieue sans horizon. Plus de murs, plus de maisons. La planète Terre se dévoile dans toute sa gloire."⁴⁸² Finally able to see the limit of the horizon, Momo senses that the limit or "veil" covering the beauty and grace of God's creation has been lifted, erasing another kind of separation and permitting enchantment to seep into the ordinary.

Alas, even if the veil is temporarily lifted and a boundary into new knowledge and enchantment is crossed, Patou finds that fleeing his "cursed" ghetto leads him not to a divine new world, but to more of the same misery that he wanted to escape, also engendered by the same forces of globalized capitalism: "Drogués, flics, bastons. Je me barre d'une banlieue pourrie pour retomber dans une autre. *Toute la terre est une grande cité, ou quoi ?*"⁴⁸³ Patou also discovers that the Wayanas, although they continue their indigenous religious rituals and worship their serpent-god, now also have smartphones, TV, and other technology, which they pay for

⁴⁸¹ GA 77

⁴⁸² GA 168

⁴⁸³ GA 56, my italics

with “subventions européennes pour les peuples en voie de disparation ! Et aussi, trafic d’armes, d’or, de crack.”⁴⁸⁴ The Wayana tribespeople exchange Western goods with other tribes for gold, the universal currency of the Amazon, which neatly corresponds to Western market economies: “Des jeunes indiens de Cayenne en short de foot et casquette Lacoste, vendent des sardines Leader Price, du riz, des tronçonneuses... de la coke et des fusils d’assaut. Tous les prix sont affichés en grammes d’or. Un gramme la boîte de sardines, cent grammes la Kalashnikov. J’aurais jamais cru qu’il y avait autant de business au fond de l’Amazonie !”⁴⁸⁵ Guyana’s indigenous tribes, thanks to Western imperialism, are now possessed by the same capitalist demons that afflict the “pauvres immigrés” and “zonards” of Bobigny.

Yet Patou and his friends also experience difficulties leaving behind this capitalist misery, in part because the aesthetic forces of consumerist media have colonized their very imaginations. Like Momo, Patou’s perceptions of his adventures are mediated through a prism of media references, especially to Disney films and other cartoons. For instance, Patou’s Legionnaire friend Klaus’s desire to purchase a bulldozer and prospect for gold leads him to torture and murder prostitute Esmeralda when she won’t reveal the location of her cash stash. As Klaus eviscerates her, Esmeralda’s swallowed “treasure” spills out from her intestines in a musical ringing sound of coins and gems colliding as they spill forth: “Glouglouglou diguedigueding ! Comme la boîte à musique quand la fée apparaît dans Walt Disney.”⁴⁸⁶ As Patou comes close to death during his many misadventures in the Amazon, he implores his cartoon heroes for guidance and wisdom: “*Un ogre vert et malicieux, habite au fond d’un marais*

⁴⁸⁴ GA 99

⁴⁸⁵ GA 130

⁴⁸⁶ GA 68

depuis l'éternité... J'ai chanté la chanson de Shrek pour m'encourager... Shrek, roi du marais, sauve-moi !"⁴⁸⁷ After the rough route back to urban civilization has shredded his clothes, Patou decides to buy himself a new outfit and go job-hunting: "Avec l'incroyable carte bleue de Maman, j'ai acheté au Disneystore du centre commercial un tee-shirt Mickey, un short Donald, et des chaussettes Winnie l'Ourson."⁴⁸⁸ Perversely garbed in clothes representing the beloved icons of millions of children, Patou, who has now raped women, murdered men, enslaved marginalized peoples, and engaged in necrophilia and bestiality, charms the HR representative at a high-security aerospace base, herself a "fan de Winnie l'ourson," into offering him a job.

Later, when Patou must flee that same base after being framed for the terrorist bombing of New York, he convinces a Brazilian poacher to transport him to safety in exchange for his Disney outfit. When the poacher dies in an accident, Patou pilfers the clothes from the poacher's corpse. Despite his misadventures occasioned by his economic need and the misdeeds that he commits along the way, Patou praises the benevolence of the *génie du capitalisme*, which he imagines as a Tinkerbell-esque figure when the poacher agrees to help him: "Encore une fois, la fée Walt Disney m'a souri."⁴⁸⁹ By associating bloodthirsty, perverse picaros with these characters, Costes' novel lays bare the strangeness of turning childhood into an opportunity for monetizing play and turning enchanting, didactic fairy tales into brand names.. Costes' pastiche poetics of French-style transgressive "trash" also have a subversive place for the squeaky-clean, but shallow American pop "trash culture" of the Disney merchandise and media empire. Yet the

⁴⁸⁷ GA 217

⁴⁸⁸ GA 190

⁴⁸⁹ GA 219

appearance of fairies, talking animals, spirit guides, and magical transformations introduces a sense of enchantment to the grotesque lives of Patou and his friends

When Patou is reunited with his lovers, the regretful Islamist and the unfaithful priestess, all three of them remember that love and their desire for knowledge of the divine are more powerful forces than capital. Upon learning that his atomic attack on New York has killed Darlène and that Patou intends to kill him as revenge, Momo begs Patou to pardon him first, baptize him, and ensure that he doesn't go to hell. Patou kisses his friend-turned-lover-turned-terrorist, exorcises him, and baptizes him (lacking holy water, Patou improvises and recites prayers while urinating on his friend) before avenging the terrorist cell's attack on his Wayana friends. Darlène returns to Patou; they marry and dream of the day when they will reunite with Momo in heaven, bypassing the limits of the material, secular world to live together forever in peace and love. However, rather than allowing the reader to enjoy a wholesome image of beatific ascension into heaven, the narrative presents a sexualized, materialized image of eternal life as "l'éternelle partouze cosmique entre nous trois ! La Sainte Trinité des amoureux !"⁴⁹⁰ As the story ends, one final evocation of the three disgraced, disfigured protagonists in eternal, holy rut signals the retreat of the sacred back into the absence of God. Costes seems to only have invited us to find the treasure in this world's "trash" if he is our guide through the landfill.

In the second portion of this chapter, we depart from the "trash" of Jean-Louis Costes' novel to examine Julien Campredon's vision of society. While Costes' work shows the potential for enlightenment and enchantment, as well as contact with the divine and sacred, within daily life's effluvium, Campredon's work is rather more sinister. In *Brûlons tous ces punks pour*

⁴⁹⁰ GA 284

l'amour des elfes, there are no gods, many devils, and worst of all, no way out of either mundane or metaphysical suffering under capitalism.

Everyday devils: the grotesquerie of socioeconomic injustice in Julien Campredon's fabulist fiction

Julien Campredon, while also preferring to allegorize social ills within magical experiences rather than to offer realistic solutions, is rather less “transgressive” than Costes. Yet, at the same time, Campredon’s fiction also interweaves the social, empirical, and scientific with the irrational, mystical, and inexplicable. *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l'amour des elfes* presents a varied cast of often underemployed, underpaid, highly criticized, or unemployed French workers, including artists, public employees, and researchers in various types of economic and magical trouble. Those careers, which are not in the service sector or in private business, and thus are at odds with the privileging of profit in contemporary ideas of labor, figure centrally in Campredon’s fabulist short stories. The postmodern “fables” in *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l'amour des elfes* pit younger workers against the Baby Boomers whose policies and cultural values changed the fabric of everyday life and the values and rhythms of labor in France.

In contrast to Jean-Louis Costes’ prolific and multimedia artistic output, Campredon’s body of work is smaller and is entirely composed of fiction writing: a novel, *Boris le Babylonien contre l'Aligot Littéraire* (2006), and 3 collections of short stories in 2007, 2011, and 2012. Campredon’s contemporary fabulist short stories trade in more “high” cultural references than Costes’ novels, often parodying other genres and literary conventions, including the literature of the Occitan folk tradition. Campredon’s fiction also would not qualify as “trash,” due to its literary qualities as well as its less abject depictions of sex and violence. However, like Costes, Campredon does not flinch from portraying the grotesquerie of everyday life in the “new economy.” The short stories in *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l'amour des elfes* represent the

often-unseen forces behind everyday human suffering – unemployment, poverty, unfair labor conditions, economic and social marginalization – as motivated by a metaphysical evil as well as the banal greediness of late-stage capitalism. While philosophers writing about historical tragedies, particularly about the Holocaust, have long suggested that the most monstrous deeds of humans are driven by “banal” profit-seeking under capitalism, Campredon’s work is unusual in that it uses this perception to fuel stories of devils, vampires, monsters, and elves.⁴⁹¹

Instead of dwelling merely in deprivation of opportunities and material comfort for exploited workers, Campredon’s narratives enter a register of destabilizing exaggeration and body horror. His villains go beyond solipsism and inconsideration into monstrous behavior indeed, from refusing employees sick leave for work-related injuries to murder and demonic curses. I argue that Campredon allegorizes this vertigo-inducing chasm between economic comfort and misery, between classes, or between generations of workers, within startling portraits of the human body turned monstrous, demonic, or prodigious. These monstrous allegories impose a critical question on my reading of this book: how can we explain the convergences in Campredon’s text between different, often horrific forms of alterity, metamorphosis, and destabilization – economic, physical, material, and metaphysical? Why is this the generic, thematic, and semantic mode that Campredon’s text privileges within stories of unhappy working life and their search for employment? For this reading of Campredon’s fabulism and its overtly horrifying treatment of the problems of work in contemporary France, I

⁴⁹¹ Henri Lefebvre, for instance, argues that the xenophobic, anti-Semitic Nazi ideology and the disarray of the concentration camps was a consequence or extension of the profit-seeking ideology of capitalism. The Nazis rationalized their attacks on Jewish “everyday life,” such as destroying or seizing Jewish-owned businesses and forcing Jewish people into unpaid labor in “work camps,” as a means of strengthening the German economy after the financial crash and inflation following World War I. Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique de la vie quotidienne, Tome I*. Paris: Editions l’Arche, 1947.

use Rémi Astruc's work on the literary grotesque to discuss how Campredon's work inspires empathy and pity for the plight of modern workers.

Astruc's essay *Le Renouveau du grotesque dans le roman du XXe siècle* departs from other theorizations of the literary grotesque, arguing that the grotesque is not merely an aesthetic or narrative mode, but a means of seeing and understanding the complex nature of physicality and embodied human existence. The literary grotesque is peopled with characters whose bodies have something of the abnormal and unnatural about them, such as humans with animal body parts or whose limbs are plants. Furthermore, the grotesque always involves a break with pure representational mimesis. (Here, I am reminded of Rita Felski's use of the Ricoeurian argument that mimesis is more often metaphorical than purely representational, and thus is useful for inciting "imperfect" recognition, disidentification, shock, and enchantment.) The grotesque also brings in uncanny and fantastical elements, offering narratives an oneiric quality. However, unlike surrealism or magical realism, the grotesque foregrounds this disorientation. Rather than attempting to draw out the agreeable strangeness within familiar activities or the hidden wonder of the everyday, the grotesque is defined "en termes de ce qui échappe," that which appears to dwell in "les dernières zones d'ombre."⁴⁹²

Nevertheless, Astruc insists that grotesquerie is not built merely on disorientation before horrific and abnormal physicality. For Astruc, the grotesque always carries within its first impressions of strangeness a large grain of the familiar, even banal. Gargoyles, for instance, were a common feature of churches and were thus seen every day, losing their striking strangeness until someone contemplated their faces and bodies. Trolls, their French cousins *drosles* (where the word

⁴⁹² Astruc, Rémi. P. 4. *Le Renouveau du grotesque dans le roman du XXe siècle : Essai d'anthropologie littéraire*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2010.

“drôle,” funny and strange, has its origins), and other “diables familiers” that appear horrific upon first glance will help us with our household chores and other tasks of daily living if we enter into a demonic contract or pact with them. Thus Astruc reminds us that ambiguity, especially that of “l’alliance de l’inoffensif et du dangereux, de l’innocent et du malin, du bénin et du grave que conserve encore par sa polysémie l’adjectif drôle,” is the defining characteristic of the grotesque. We are struck and riveted by its contradictions, “bien que s’écartant de l’idéal de la beauté classique, [il] trouve grâce aux yeux... par l’étonnante variété et étrangeté qui est la sienne,”⁴⁹³ which jar us by reminding us that the malign is as common as the benign in everyday life.

Astruc maintains that the power of the grotesque is to shock us into seeing beyond the veil of the banal so that we can account for the misfortunes and cruelties of everyday life. If stories of poverty and exploitation aren’t enough to startle and shock us into recognition and knowledge, Campredon’s monsters, gratuitous violence, spells, and demons could be. As Astruc argues, the Other commands our attention through either powerful beauty, striking ugliness, or something that comprises the two: our attention is “tout entier ramassé(e) dans cette perception tyrannique et totalitaire de l’Autre,” which provokes “la stupeur du témoin – ses yeux ne pouvant, pendant quelques instants au moins, se détacher de l’objet admirable ou atroce.”⁴⁹⁴ While we may sometimes turn away from a grotesque scene in everyday life, we are likely to “rubberneck” at an auto accident before looking away from it in disgust. In a similar sense, the aesthetics and disorienting narratives of the grotesque literary mode elicit a transfixed reaction and a compulsion to gaze and contemplate from the viewer or witness.

⁴⁹³ Astruc 8

⁴⁹⁴ Astruc 14

Critical definitions of the grotesque in art and literature all insist that it elicits conflicting or contrary responses. Astruc's piece critically appraises Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque, which other critics have used widely. Bakhtin insisted that the grotesque calls forth social reversal and renewal through its destabilization of social hierarchies and dichotomies of classification such as self-Other, human-animal, or human-monster. However, Bakhtin's definition does not suggest that the grotesque creates knowledge so much as it upsets previous ideas. After Bakhtin, many critics thus understand the grotesque as eluding knowledge, understanding, and an easy definition. Astruc's definition insists instead that the grotesque is a regime of knowledge that points out, but also reconciles contradictions, as it consists of "tout ce qui dans une œuvre d'art relève d'une manière générale de l'extravagance, du désordre, de l'hétérogénéité ou du déséquilibre."⁴⁹⁵ The grotesque is an aesthetic and narrative mode of excess, alterity, metamorphosis, and revelation, inspiring not only disgust, but also empathy and pity; the grotesque prompts a social, ethical reaction toward what transfixes us.

Within *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l'amour des elfes*, the aesthetic regime of the grotesque as *unheimlich* prodigiousness, alterity, oneiric logic, and destabilization, coupled with the most *heimlich* familiarity marks all the stories at one point or another.⁴⁹⁶ Even the introduction, which purports to be a note from the editor, dissects and mocks the role of the editor and provides a grotesque portrait of apprenticeships, professionalization for creative

⁴⁹⁵ Astruc 8

⁴⁹⁶ Here, I want to remind us that what is *heimlich* is not merely homelike and "familiar," but also occulted within us, buried so deep in our nature that it is "secret" or clandestine (which the word means in everyday German) in its destabilization of recognition and reason. That which is *unheimlich* thus awakens and reflects something deep inside of us that we cannot name. "A reconnaître notre inquiétante étrangeté, nous n'en souffrirons ni n'en jouirons de dehors. L'étrange est en moi, donc nous sommes tous des étrangers. Si je suis étranger, il n'y a pas d'étrangers... L'inquiétante étrangeté... installe la différence en nous sous sa forme la plus déséparante, et la donne comme condition ultime de notre être avec les autres. Pp. 285-286 Kristeva, Julia. *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*. Paris: Librairie Artheme Fayard, 1988.

workers, and the current debate over the arts that calls into the question the validity and “usefulness” of fiction. The voice of the “editor” begins: “Julien Campredon est une légende et si vous demandiez à tous les éditeurs, ils seraient unanimes : il n’existe pas. Je le sais puisque je suis son éditeur... L’éditeur... a le droit de dévoiler quelque chose de très intime sur son auteur.”⁴⁹⁷ While promising to reveal a surprising “secret” and a biography of his “author,” the editor’s voice jarringly delegitimizes Campredon’s existence and thus his authenticity as an “author” before shifting into narrative mode; Campredon both exists and eerily “unexists.”

The editor explains Campredon’s authorial vocation by telling the story of the author receiving a volume of Borges short stories as a birthday present. The text explains in a strange turn of phrase that “Julien s’est plongé dans Borges,” emphasizing the metonymy of Borges’ literary corpus as a continuation of his physical person. “Campredon” attempts to penetrate the text’s obscurity by entering and possessing its author’s body, which could allow him to find the “true” value of Borges’ fabulism: he “s’est évertué à en découvrir la vérité, vérité qu’il avait présumée nécessairement infatuée et fausse.”⁴⁹⁸ The narrative then tells us that after confounding fiction and reality, as well as the boundaries of his Self with Borges’ Other, “Campredon” embarks in a quest to find the “Livre Absolu” from Borges’ stories. This book, which contains every book ever written and ever to be written, is an enticingly protean “magma intellectuel,” a heterogeneous, and thus somewhat grotesque resource that somehow contains both everything we know (familiar works of literature) and all works not yet written (unfamiliar). Rather than becoming an author merely by writing, the “Campredon” character seeks this magic book;

⁴⁹⁷ P. 10 Campredon, Julien. *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l’amour des elfes*. (BTCPLDE) Arles: Monsieur Toussaint Louverture, 2006. As this edition is no longer in print and is difficult to obtain, I am referring to the reprint published by Pocket in 2013. Some of the short stories from the original edition do not appear in the reprint, but I have obtained those stories from Julien Campredon.

⁴⁹⁸ BTCPLDE 10

finally, he will be “l’écrivain que ma mère a toujours rêvé que je sois,” thanks to the book’s magical, transformative powers.⁴⁹⁹ Containing an analysis of Borges’ *Fictions* that collapses its ambitiously diverse contents within one story, as well as by melding an editor’s note with a fictionalized biography, Campredon’s fiction fixes itself within a disorienting hybrid generic category that is itself grotesque for its stunning, riveting contractions and absurdities.

As Sylvie Servoise suggests in her essay “L’écrivain, un travailleur comme les autres ?”, fictional representations of artists tend to represent creative work as unlike other “everyday” work, suitable for sensitive “creatives” unable to labor more “regularly.”⁵⁰⁰ However, Campredon’s quixotic narrative of professionalization turns this idea on its head by depicting his professional preparation as a quest far more rigorous than other sorts of job training. The narrative perspective shifts to that of the “Campredon” character, who explains that his professional (trans)formation proceeds along an extravagant course. As the “Campredon” character tries to become a “real author,” his quest for the magical resource that will help him attain his professional goals requires him to perform superhuman physical and intellectual feats. “J’ai donc voyagé par voies de terre et de mer, dans un ballon gonflé à l’hélium en compagnie d’un Russe unijambiste ; j’ai aussi chevauché et pédalé, couru et nagé. Pour obtenir toutes les cartes du monde, j’ai dû tuer les nombreux gardiens de ces cartes... j’ai dû apprendre toutes les langues du monde.” In addition to performing wondrous feats, he must resort to strange jobs whose details cannot all be named: “J’ai fait des pauses pour me revigorer et financer mes expéditions : j’ai vécu au Liban et j’ai coupé le bois des Cévennes, j’ai eu un fils par-delà l’océan

⁴⁹⁹ BTCPLDE 13

⁵⁰⁰ Servoise, Sylvie. *Écritures du travail, écritures politiques ?* Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Collection Roman XXI, 2016.

et j'ai gouverné une île dont je tairai le nom."⁵⁰¹ This hyperbolic journey eventually leads "Campredon" to the library with the book. Much to his surprise, rather than finding a dazzling palace of literature, "Campredon" finds himself in a shabby old library where the carpets are covered in cigarette burns. The library's unattractiveness, "une succession déprimante d'étages administrativement identiques,"⁵⁰² is not compensated by its new status as a "médiathèque" – "mais maintenant, nous avons aussi des DVD et des CD, et bientôt une cyberbase." This publicly-funded ugliness and disdain for books allegorizes public and state indifference toward funding and preserving art and literature. The building is also a destabilizing trap: "un vrai labyrinthe" rather than a promising place to attain professional fulfillment.

Inside the ugly "bibliothèque universelle," Campredon has his credentials called into question by a middle-aged librarian. After "Campredon" requests their holdings of Borges, the librarian feigns unfamiliarity with the author, before looking him up in the *Petit Robert* and complaining that what the *Petit Robert* offers, "C'est un peu léger comme présentation."⁵⁰³ When Campredon explains that the interest of Borges is not within his biography in the *Petit Robert*, but in his fiction, specifically in his work titled *Fictions*, the librarian takes umbrage at Campredon's request. Not only does the librarian declare that he has never heard of "fiction," he asserts that every author is in fact an "autobiographe," denying the importance of creative work in an absurd formulation that implies that imagined, invented narratives simply don't exist.

The author defends himself: "Vous vous trompez sans aucun doute. Foin des autobiographes, je suis un créateur, un artiste et un inventeur... je suis même membre d'une

⁵⁰¹ BTCPLDE 10

⁵⁰² BTCPLDE 11

⁵⁰³ BTCPLDE 15

association d'écrivains!... Tout de même, je vais à des lectures théâtrales organisées par le ministère !”⁵⁰⁴ The assertion of his professional status as “fiction author” within the text is first rendered absurd, then made comical through its exaggerated inaptitude within the context of (false) biography. Although (the author) Campredon is writing his professional “biography,” the reader must acknowledge that the narrative voice isn’t *his* voice: it first starts as the voice of his editor, before recounting a fictional narrative from the perspective of a character named “Campredon.” Rather than the standard *dédoublément* of the writer that theorists of self-writing from Foucault to Philippe Lejeune discuss, the author multiplies this “splitting of the subject” into at least 3 subjects that are not only “*décalés*” but utterly fictitious. This splitting and multiplication of Campredon (the person) into three fictional subjects arguing about his status as a writer makes his role as the inventor and orchestrator of his work both more apparent and more bizarre. These other voices “possess” the author’s pen and insert fractured, tripled images of the writer, shown explaining writing as “profession” and work, into his work of fiction.

The librarian chastises “Campredon” for his irresponsibility as an author “qui raconte que des inepties,” discounting the pleasure of invention and escape by suggesting that a library is little more than a place where books of facts are collected: “La vocation de la bibliothèque est d’emmagasiner l’ensemble des récits d’une humanité qui se raconte.”⁵⁰⁵ As “Campredon” attempts to leave, offended that the reality of fiction as a form of art (and work) is denied, the librarian responds by spitting in his face, calling him an anarchist and threatening him with violence. “Campredon” sneaks into the library to hide from the enraged librarian, but is caught after a few days. The cruel librarians punish his audacity in imagining himself as an artist by

⁵⁰⁴ BTCPPLDE 18

⁵⁰⁵ BTCPPLDE 18

forcing him into a desk job as an office assistant with a temporary contract. Demanding once again that he not see himself as a creator, the library administration allows him to leave only when he admits that he is, in a way, writing about himself. In this scenario of implausible professional training, crowned by an ultimate denial of the relevance of creative work that reduces the creator to disposable “temp” labor, the story establishes the dehumanizing, absurd, violent conditions that await the workers in these stories. At the same time, this story uses the grotesque mode as a tool for reimagining everyday social situations – such as a dull job – and eliciting empathy by portraying bad jobs and the devaluation of art as work as akin to imprisonment and a refusal to acknowledge artists’ humanity.

Narratives of humiliation for young workers attempting to establish themselves professionally color the other stories in the collection to varying degrees. In “Avant Cuba,” a young man in the ANPE, or unemployment office, falls into a reverie while his Baby Boomer counselor criticizes him for not applying to enough jobs, nearly losing his client’s records by misusing the computer. The counselor, Monsieur Condevielh, is described thusly: “Si dans la vie il est quelqu’un de très gentil, au travail... il *travaille*.”⁵⁰⁶ By opposing “gentillesse” with “travail,” the narrative quickly establishes that kindness and empathy are out of place in the cutthroat world of work.⁵⁰⁷ Although Monsieur Condevielh is as inept at making his computer

⁵⁰⁶ BTCPLDE 25

⁵⁰⁷ Tellingly, an entire managerial and socio-psychological discussion about being “too nice” or “nice enough” at work has also emerged amidst the economic crisis within neoliberalism. The magazine *Management’s* spinoff *Capital* published an article in 2011 encouraging its readers to find the “middle path” between being too nice and too aggressive: in an article entitled “Peut-on être gentil et réussir son travail professionnel ?” Anne-Isabelle Six eventually suggests that being nice and considerate is preferable not because treating others with respect is ethical and moral, but because being “un salaud” only has a financial and managerial benefit in the short term: *Figaro Madame* agreed in their article “Faut-il être gentil au bureau ?” that being “nice” (helping others, offering kind words, and seeing oneself as part of a team) was only a good business strategy up to a certain limit. In France, as well as in the US, “niceness” has been taken as the term of choice to be debated rather than “ethics” in business. See: Six, Anne-Isabelle. “Peut-on être gentil et réussir son travail professionnel ?” *Capital* 11 December 2011. <https://www.capital.fr/votre-carriere/peut-on-etre-gentil-et-reussir-sa-vie-professionnelle-684380>.

work as he is at finding work for his clients, the line for his services extends out the door. The scene cuts to the exterior of the building, where the Baby Boomers have overtly dehumanized, enslaved, and even kidnapped the “disposable” unemployed youth.

Outside, the air is gauzy with “moiteur” – a haze of ambiguity that furnishes nightmare visuals where “il est difficile de savoir si ce sont les cigarettes qui fument ou les deux jeunes gens qui fondent.” A loud, disembodied voice complains about the loitering job-seekers, confusing the employment office with a charity: “Ce n’est pas fini, non ? On se croirait chez les sauvages. Quelle idée décidément d’avoir installé cette antenne de la soupe populaire dans ce quartier !” The disembodied voice offers a commentary throughout the scene that can nevertheless not be assigned to any character present so much as to “opinion populaire.” On the street, “Un seigneur de l’époque baby-boom” moves down the road in a rickshaw pulled by an exhausted youth toward a press shop manned by another young person. The Boomer “prince régional” pays the young press shop keeper with “une poignée de piécettes dont une partie passe à travers une plaque d’égout” before beginning a tirade against the press shop keeper’s generation, especially against his rickshaw driver, whose break he has judged unnecessary. “Les jeunes ne lisent plus de nos jours. – Si votre Altesse veut bien me permettre, personnellement... – Foutaises mon ami... aujourd’hui la jeunesse n’est bonne qu’à, au pire, pousser des charrettes, au mieux, vendre des journaux... le niveau scolaire a tellement baissé... c’est aussi une question de motivation,” he says. The “prince” then gives his rickshaw driver, who is urinating against a wall after being denied his break, a lash of his whip before unleashing a volley of curses.

Accessed 12 December 2017. See also: Quillet, Lucile. “Faut-il être gentil au bureau ?” *Madame Figaro* 3 November 2016. <http://madame.lefigaro.fr/societe/madame-network-faut-il-etre-gentil-au-bureau-180915-98318>. Accessed 12 December 2017.

This scene represents a hot-button contemporary debate through the lens of grotesque fabulism. Although sociologists have suggested since the 1990's that the economic policies of neoliberalism favored by the Baby Boomers have created widespread social and economic inequality that has placed their children's generation in economic peril, a "backlash" has hotly contested this theory. This backlash suggests that contemporary youth simply lack "motivation," blaming them for not taking up careers in the trades and blue-collar sector. A 2016 paper by Hippolyte d'Albis and Ikpidi Badji suggests that this is not "intergenerational change" (the thesis of sociologist Louis Chauvel) but, in the words of *Nouvelle Usine*, "s'il y a des jeunes sacrifiés en France, ce sont les Neet ("Not in education, employment or training"), cette frange de la population jeune, prolétarisée, en rupture scolaire, souvent d'origine étrangère, qui ne dispose d'aucun atout... Leur sort ne renvoie pas à une fracture intergénérationnelle, mais aux inégalités sociales qui minent la cohésion nationale."⁵⁰⁸ The thesis of d'Albis and Badji has been reiterated in Salon.fr, Le Monde, and numerous other French publications, alongside the equally publicized comments of millionaire Tim Gurner that Millennials aren't buying houses not because of low earnings and student loan debt, but because they go out to eat frequently. The "public opinion" of the "seigneur" and the disembodied voice, as well as the lash of the seignorial whip, is merely a grotesquely exaggerated version of public debate around, and scolding of, the "laziness" of younger generations, and denials that neoliberal economic policies have "sacrificed" them. The hazy air that makes it appear that the young people are "melting," as well as the abjection of

⁵⁰⁸ Chauvel, Louis. "Enfants de baby-boomers : génération sacrifiée ?" *Le Monde* October 19th 2006. http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/chat/2006/10/16/enfants-de-baby-boomers-generation-sacrifiee_823785_3224.html#pD6CHLgQmlRhvMgB.99. Accessed 21 July 2016. See also by the same author: *Le Destin des générations. Structure sociale et cohortes en France au XXe siècle*. Paris: PUF, 1998 ; *Les Classes moyennes à la dérive*, Paris: Seuil, 2006. For the backlash, see: Albis, Hippolyte d' and Ikpidi Badji. "Les inégalités de niveaux de vie entre les générations en France." *Economie et Statistique / Economics and Statistics n° 491-492* (2017) 491-492, 71-92.

being forced to urinate in public space rather than being given a break and a discreet place for relief, suggests a disintegration of the young people's bodies and sense of humanity. Tellingly, as the youth outside the job office protest, they insult the "seigneurs" by crying "Soixante-huitard à la noix !" "Vieux trotskistes moisis !" ⁵⁰⁹ The young protesters criticize their elders in terms indicting them for abandoning their struggles for equality and emancipation for young people.

The job-seeker, plunged into his dream that makes class struggle a physical combat, and the other youth at the ANPE must fight a 60-year-old retiree, who is absconding with his young secretary thrown over his shoulder as she cries out "au viol." In a nightmarish reflection of the popular discourse that Boomers have destroyed the economy and the work prospects for future generations, he announces to the young people around him that he plans to literally destroy their opportunities to succeed him in the workforce: "Il a loué un camion de déménagement pour vider son bureau dont il a prévu de tout embarquer... après, il brûlera les locaux ; il ne laissera rien. 'Vous entendez ? Rien ! Je... vous baisera tous, oui, un par un !... Oui, vous tous qui en avez après mon travail. *Mon travail !*" ⁵¹⁰ The retiree then turns into a bat-like monster and flies into the Capitol building, clutching his secretary. There, he transforms back into a man but continues in vampiric form by trying to bite his secretary's neck, saying the only thing young secretaries "surdiplômées" are good for is sex. The use of the prefix "sur" implies that his secretary's education is extravagant and wasteful, given her fate in underemployment. The vampire-retiree chastises the young job-seekers: "Ce que tu reproches à moi que tu ne connais pas, tu es incapable de le reprocher à tes propres parents !" ⁵¹¹ After he affirms that the conflict is not just

⁵⁰⁹ BTCPPLDE 31

⁵¹⁰ BTCPPLDE 32

⁵¹¹ BTCPPLDE 38

between workers and managers, but between generations, the secretary slays her vampiric Boomer boss. After the cathartic climax of his long dream about intergenerational class conflict, the young jobseeker wakes up. His job counselor derides the young man's "laziness" as he fumbles through his files, still unable to locate his client's records.

While the first short story encapsulates its oneiric, grotesque qualities within a dream sequence, it establishes the tendency toward visual images of destabilization and the transfixed contemplation of otherness that continues in other stories in the collection. In *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l'amour des elfes*' eponymous second story, a young bourgeois job-seeker discovers that his long-desired internship at a museum requires him to work as an unpaid security guard. This young narrator, whom the other security guards initially deride as "un bourgeois qui se croit en visite" because of his discomfort with the security equipment of semi-automatic rifles and grenades, is envious of his employers. The young aspiring "bourge" is enraptured by his contact with the haute bourgeoisie, "les gens qui vivent dans ces services... des elfes : race supérieure ou élite sirupeuse qui boit du champagne et de la musique de chambre."⁵¹² As a "race," the elves are uncanny and non-human in many respects (such as their ability to "drink" music).

These bureaucrats, museum directors, and artists, are so separate from him that he can only gaze, transfixed, upon these "notables issus du milieu culturel," dressed in "diamants et autres soieries, au point de prendre des allures de train féérique... J'avais été entraîné pareil à une plume dans ce courant diaphane ventilé par les créatures exquises."⁵¹³ His closer encounters with them further demonstrate their alterity, which the narrator describes as apparent in their seemingly floating, footless bodies: "Les artistes... ils étaient grands, ils étaient aryens et face à

⁵¹² BTCPLDE 43

⁵¹³ BTCPLDE 44

eux, nous n'étions rien, de la poussière... Ils étaient dans des peignoirs en satin et je crois qu'ils n'avaient pas de pieds car de toucher ce monde de leurs orteils, ça les aurait salis.”⁵¹⁴ In opposition to the bourgeoisie, who in his metaphor are as “aériens” as they are “aryens,” the security guards are stocky, squat men in military surplus: “Un homme sec en tenue militaire un peu désuète – il portait un short anglais – me faisait face les poings sur les hanches, tétant du coin des lèvres un cigare cubain.”⁵¹⁵ The guards, who refer to him repeatedly as “con,” use porn star Clara Morgane’s name as their password and are not allowed to take time off for the horrific injuries incurred in their work; however, they serve the “bourges” with an inexplicable loyalty.

While the narrator dreams of joining the “elves” himself with a job in in the arts sector of public service, the horrific nature of his unpaid internship quickly reveals itself. On his first evening, his “prolo” colleagues call out to him when some young vandals with boots and Mohawks begin their childish pranks for the evening. As the “punks” prepare to pour dish soap into the fountain, the guards take up machine guns and grenades to launch a counter-attack:

“Déjà qu'ils nous ont arraché les fleurs du parterre l'autre jour. Et les flics qui ne font rien!...’ Les punks nous attaquaient, en conséquence de quoi ma sulfateuse les découpait en rondelles... Benji me collait un joint entre les lèvres... tandis que nous cassions du punk au cri de ‘Putains de Viets !’ On est sorti verser de l'essence sur les cadavres déchiquetés des punks qu'on a ensuite enflammés... (Puis) on s'est bourré la gueule... (et) a ouvert un cassoulet.”⁵¹⁶

The working-class security guards’ loyalty to their bourgeois superiors and violence against the punks, as well as the guards’ cries of “putains de viets” and their rations of canned cassoulet, evoke other unjust wars fought to protect bourgeois interests.⁵¹⁷ Like any war, the war

⁵¹⁴ BTCPLDE 48

⁵¹⁵ BTCPLDE 48

⁵¹⁶ BTCPLDE 46-47

⁵¹⁷ With this literary appearance of tinned cassoulet, we may also be reminded of an older, nihilistic complaint about the miserable opportunities for work for the French registered in Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit*: “Je préférais rester stupéfié là, tremblotant, baveux dans les 400, que d’être forcé, lucide, d’imaginer ce qui

between the elves and the punks has its casualties, aside from the punks, who fight back as best as they can. “(Serge crie) ‘Couvrez-moi, j’arrive !’ ... Il avait une horde incroyable aux fesses qui le harcelait de cannettes de bière, seringues, et autres armes punks... Un drogué à crête iroquoise lui perfore la cuisse avec la hampe d’un drapeau municipale volé sur la façade d’une administration.”⁵¹⁸ The punks fight against the museum’s abuse of authority with symbols of public interest such as flags as well as their marginal “weapons” of choice, emphasizing that abuses of power and state-sanctioned violence affect everyone, not just marginal people.

However, although the security guards fight for the “bourges,” no one protects them from the punks that they’re fighting, or from themselves. An injured security guard sustains an grotesque injury from a mislaunched explosive: “Benji, qui a été blessé par un cocktail Molotov, agitait dans tous les sens son attelle qui commençait à sentir le pus.”⁵¹⁹ When his “elf” boss refuses him time off, Benji must have his arm amputated. Another guard is killed in a bloody shootout with the police when he rebels against his orders to kill the vandals, accidentally killing the city museum’s director instead. Nevertheless, the guards provide justifications for the unreasonable demands of the “elves:” “Le Vieux nous a rejoints et tandis qu’il gravait sur le bois de sa crosse autant de croix qu’il avait abattu de punks, la veille... il s’est mis à déballer ses théories longuement étayées tout en haut de son clocher. ‘Tu vois, les punks, c’est que de la racaille, ils ne sont même pas croyants.’”⁵²⁰ There are also civilian casualties: “(on) a même tué

m’attendait à Fort-Gono... Pendant que je mijotais ainsi, des jours et des semaines, mes allumettes s’épuisèrent. Nous en manquions. Robinson ne m’avait laissé derrière lui que du ‘Cassoulet à la bordelaise.’” The canned cassoulet, which in its home-cooked form is a specialty of the Languedoc region where Campredon’s stories are set, is another example of Campredon’s comic protests against the “colonizing” and erasure of regional cultures in France. P. 174. Céline, Louis-Ferdinand. *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. Paris: Denoël, 1932.

⁵¹⁸ BTCPLDE 51

⁵¹⁹ BTCPLDE 49

⁵²⁰ BTCPLDE 47

une vieille matinale qui, par erreur, faisait chier son chien sur la pelouse...”⁵²¹ Although the narrator supports these actions, he has misgivings about his colleagues’ eagerness for violence, although not out of any sort of pacifist inclination: “J’avais cru que la camaraderie me permettrait d’intégrer ce cercle d’homme rudes, mais assurément s’ils acceptaient de brûler des punks... ce n’était pas par amour du Beau.”⁵²² For the narrator, the elves “incarnent le Beau,” whereas he and the other workers are “du pas beau qui pue la mort, la sueur, et le cassoulet.”⁵²³ Although the values of the bourgeois “elfes” are enforced by an unpaid, vulnerable class of solidier-workers who kill dissident subcultural youth, the “bourge” narrator excuses this grotesque violence because it defends art, as well as elitism and economic privilege, from the economically excluded punks who avenge themselves by tagging the museum’s edifice. The punks, who are characterized as grotesque by their abandon to the lower body’s more base, abject functions, mill around on the ground level of the museum while the guards and elves watch from above. In this way, the punks oppose the floating, footless elves not only in class, but in the orientation of their bodies in physical space: “totalement bourrées... (ils) essayaient simplement de vomir ou de pisser sur le perron. Alors, on les tuait.” Although the punks’ ugliness stems from their poverty and the hopelessness common to all “zonards,” killing them is justifiable, and even “beautiful,” because of their socioeconomic and physical “lowness.”

The horrific work conditions, as well as the police’s threats to kill the guards if they don’t stop their bourgeois-ordained war against the punks, eventually encourage the lead guard “Serge” to kill a police officer and go on the lam. Because of Serge’s insubordination, all the

⁵²¹ BTCPPLDE 51

⁵²² BTCPPLDE 48

⁵²³ BTCPPLDE 48

guards are fired except the narrator, who is hired as the new museum director and rejoins the bourgeoisie. In doing so, he abdicates his grotesque working-class social position among the guards, yet accedes to a new type of grotesquerie among the “elves.” The narrator describes the grisly slaughter of punks, civilian casualties, and injured workers in the language of human bodily functions and frailty – urinating, vomiting, bleeding, running, sweating, and stinking. The elves are coded as superhuman, *not human*. Their bodies, which don’t sweat, stink, or bleed, signify the abstraction of Beauty rather than humanness; they even lack feet to keep their bodies in contact with the earth, making them unearthly and “not of this world,” although concerned with the human world’s ideas and art – they are *surnaturels* and *im-mondes* in this sense, though also *mondains*. The elves, as well as their bourgeois values that can only be maintained through violence and exploitation, are monstrous or grotesque in their own way.⁵²⁴

As tensions between classes, professional categories, and generations drive the plots of certain stories, municipal jobs are again shown as a type of public servitude with strict exigencies and bloody costs for failing to please bosses and voters. In the chiasmatic fable, “Le lièvre, l’olivier, et le représentant en ronds-points,” the tragic fate of a village plays out repeatedly in terms that mock its foundational mythos. Puntredon, a fictional village in Languedoc, “associe de façon totémique un lièvre et un olivier à la fondation du village.” The inhabitants of the village elect a new mayor after brutally murdering the old one in a more industrial slick of oil than what

⁵²⁴ The figure of the punk as resistant to economic injustice appears again in short glimpses in the original edition of the collection. The story “L’angoisse de la feuille de vigne” begins as a worker drives to his new job after “(son) beau-frère devait partir au Portugal dans le cadre d’un échange de chômeurs entre la France et ce pays ami.” The soundtrack as he drives to his new job harvesting grapes in a vineyard, which will occasion many absurdities and dangers for all the workers, is the Clash’s “Career Opportunities,” which Campredon cites as an epigraph at the start of the story: “They offered me the office, offered me the shop. They said I’d better take anything they’d got. Do you want make tea at the BBC? Do you wanna be, do you really wanna be a cop ? Career opportunities the ones they never knock. Every job they offer you is to keep you off the dock. Career opportunities the ones they never knock...” The Clash’s anthem against underemployment, and the expectations that working-class youth will be grateful for unfulfilling and poorly paid work, serves as commentary on the stories in the collection. See: The Clash. “Career Opportunities.” *The Clash*, CBS, 1977.

the region's olive trees suggest: "le dernier maire... avait été lynché par la population pour avoir endetté son village de 423 habitants en faisant construire un parking aérien... Ses administrés, fous de colère, avaient fini par le noyer dans un baquet d'huile de vidange, après avoir découvert le nouveau montant de leur taxe foncière."⁵²⁵ The new mayor celebrates by parading through the village in his car after his election, extending the contrast of registers between the mythical-mystical history of the village and its grotesquely industrialized, automated present.

At an intersection, the mayor is visited by an apparition, which first appears as "une forme qui, selon lui, pouvait aussi bien s'apparenter à l'autostoppeur qu'au sanglier, renard, ou autre ragondin."⁵²⁶ As a storm erupts, the fuzzy figure whose appearance wavers between animal forms resolves into that of a man. "Encadré par 2 éclairs, un homme de petite taille en imperméable-lunettes-raie sur le côté lui apparut distinctement,"⁵²⁷ In a disaster that resuscitates the totems of the village's foundational myth by demolishing the structures built at its founding, the mayor is tricked into agreeing to demolish the village's 13th century market halls to make way for an enormous, bizarrely complex roundabout, "(une) croix occitane avec 52 feux de signalisation."⁵²⁸ The mayor, influenced by this malign Languedocian spirit, must reproduce the *croix occitane*, the languedocian blazon that was the symbol of the Cathars before they were vanquished by the Inquisition. He must also toast the "roundabout representative" with the languedocian liqueur *carthagène* before giving him a *bise* to seal the contract. Much like the Faust legend first circulated in 16th-century Germany recounts, one meets the devil at a

⁵²⁵ BTCPPLDE 65

⁵²⁶ BTCPPLDE 66

⁵²⁷ BTCPPLDE 66

⁵²⁸ BTCPPLDE 68

crossroads, makes a pact, and seals the pact with a kiss. As a “représentant des rond-points” who tricks public representatives into signing private contracts, this crossroads demon reproduces crossroads (and opportunities for devilry) in a modernized, aggressive fashion.

Facing the vengeful totems of the village, the mayor attempts to block the passage of the hare and the olive tree through his front door’s threshold, in another strange and liminal encounter between the mystical world and the municipal, modern professional world. The hare, who “parl(e) toujours en patois et sen(t) mauvais” and the olive tree, with “son haleine de tapenade, qui se plaint d’être abattu pendant la construction du rond-point,” force the mayor to sign another contract that he doesn’t fully understand.⁵²⁹ After unsuccessfully arguing for the necessity of the traffic circle,” the mayor “finit écartelé par ses contribuables rendus sanguinaires.”⁵³⁰ The village elects a new mayor, whom the same crossroads-dwelling privatizing devil persuades to build “une sortie en rocade,” symbolizing the economic, political, and cultural “crossroads” and Faustian bargains which France faces as it pursues increased liberalization and privatization. The desires of the public, who are quick to destroy their public servants, and the private developers who take advantage of governments and citizens, are shown here as grotesque, even demonic forces of destabilization.

Fonctionnaires also appear as other sorts of domestic devils. In “De l’homme idéal de ma femme, d’elle, et de ma maîtresse,” an unemployed man is terrorized by his ANPE job counselor into giving the counselor a key to his house. His counselor must regularly visit to make sure he is job-hunting, but also to ensure that he is pleasing his wife through his behavior and lovemaking. In this story, the husband must placate his unhappy wife by finding her a new lover. However, as

⁵²⁹ BTCPPLDE 69

⁵³⁰ BTCPPLDE 69

he is unemployed and unable to pay off any of the attractive, successful men that he knows so his wife can have a more desirable lover than him, he is forced to disguise himself and wear false pectoral muscles. His seduction of his wife cannot take place until he finds an affordable hotel, which he searches for in the “rues prolétariennes” of his city; unemployment and poverty destroy his ability to attract his wife, threatens the integrity of his family, and deprive him of everyday pleasure.⁵³¹

In this story, Campredon’s fiction provides a bizarrely exaggerated portrait of the current reality for unemployed “proletarians,” who must tolerate the unwelcome meddling of the employment office in their lives, and for public workers saddled with ridiculous and unpleasantly invasive tasks. The story also enters into another contemporary debate on the role of the government in the lives of workers: in France, the demonization of public services and employees has also been an effective rhetorical tool in the neoliberal campaign to privatize the public sector. Initially controversial in the early 1980’s, privatization has since gained adherents from right-wing parties such as the l’Union pour la France, centrist parties including l’Union du Centre, and le Parti Socialiste, and left-wing parties of the Majorité Plurielle. Since Jacques Chirac first sold construction materials firm Saint-Gobain (which was only nationalized for four years), bank BNP, and TV network TF1 in 1986, every French president has privatized more of France’s national industries. Under President Emmanuel Macron, many French worry that privatizing Pôle Emploi (formerly the ANPE) will increase inequality in hiring, since Pôle Emploi will have a financial motivation to concentrate its services upon “successful,” “productive” workers.

“Pour Jean-Charles Steyger, de la FSU, syndicat dans Libération, privatiser Pôle emploi serait contre-productif. ‘(S)i on s’oriente vers un modèle anglo-saxon privé, les plus faibles risquent d’être oubliés’. Ainsi, si Pôle Emploi devient privé, ses agents de recrutements pourraient être

⁵³¹BTCPPLDE 104

payées aux résultats, le risque étant... de ne plus ‘s’embêter avec ceux qui seront les moins employables’... Selon lui... l’universalité du service public... est en jeu.”⁵³²

Campredon’s ANPE-centered dramas provide still-current fabulist renderings of anxiety and humiliation of workers across multiple sectors of the French neoliberal economic landscape.

However, not every story in Campredon’s collection draws its narrative tension from the vexed relationship between citizens and the public sector that serves them imperfectly. In the eponymous story in the collection and “Avant Cuba,” class struggle between the workers and what the stories explicitly term “la bourgeoisie” provides the conflicts and obstacles that drive the plot of these short stories. Another fable, “La Branleuse Espagnole,” features a man, “un docker à Sète,” who falls in love with a beautiful woman who refuses to leave the water.⁵³³ After the docker crosses the world eight times without his beloved agreeing to leave the water, “Je l’ai chopée par les cheveux et je te l’ai remontée sur le radeau. Putain, ce n’était pas une pachole, c’était un poisson ! Elle a pleuré. Elle m’a dit je ne suis pas un poisson, je suis une sirène.”⁵³⁴ Disappointed, the docker explains to his mermaid that he had assumed that the unfamiliar, ethereal creature who refused to “go all the way” with him, despite him playing hard rock songs to her to profess his “amour prolétaire,” had simply been a “bourge.”⁵³⁵

⁵³² For more on the privatization of Pôle Emploi, see: Edip, Alexandra. “Polemik: Faut-il privatiser Pôle Emploi ?” *Capital*, 28 September 2017. Accessed 14 May 2018. <https://www.capital.fr/polemik/faut-il-privatiser-pole-emploi-1246476>. For a history of French privatization and its effects on the French economy, see: Maclean, Mairi. “Privatisation in France 1993–94: New Departures, or a Case of plus ça change?” *West European Politics* 18.2 (1995): 273-290.

⁵³³ Being that the stories all take place in the Occitan-speaking regions of France, and use symbols such as the Occitan cross, a devil drinking “carthagène,” another devil called “Le Catalan” in the final story, a careful reader will notice that this title is another example of humor related to the Occitan people’s historically troubled, conflictual relationship with Spain.

⁵³⁴ BTCPLDE 90

⁵³⁵ BTCPLDE 88

While these stories often place workers and the bourgeoisie into class struggle, they do not all explicitly place the Baby Boomers and the generations who follow them – namely, Generation X and the Millennials – into an adversarial relationship. However, the final story in the collection, “Diablerie Diabolique au Club-house,” uses both of these conflicts to generate narrative tension. In this story, two bourgeois sexagenarians, former golf pro Jacques and professor Docteur Bonanit, strike a pact with the devil to allow them more free time and eternal youth. To make their deal, “Les deux notables fermèrent les yeux pour murmurer les paroles sataniques que l’on se transmet de génération en génération dans les familles bourgeoises.”⁵³⁶ In this story, economic privilege is explicitly coded as an evil force that saps young people’s lifeblood (and labor). Although Bonanit and Jacques don’t have fangs, their curse physically drains their victims. The genetic research used to rejuvenate Bonanit requires injections of a youth-giving serum derived from experiments on fruit flies, performed by unpaid “thésards” who are confined to the lab. Just as in the collection’s story “Avant Cuba” with its vampire-retiree, and as in the classical vampire trope, an older, privileged class drains the youthful have-nots of fluid and vitality to sustain themselves. Of course, metaphors of wealthy “vampires” “draining” the poor have long appeared in both fiction and economic theory. Before vampire fiction and film invoked class struggle by portraying vampires as landed aristocracy, Marx used the vampire as a metaphor for capital: “Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.”⁵³⁷ Just as literary criticism of vampire fiction analyzes these texts’ economic metaphors, Marxist criticism analyzes Marx’s (and Engels’, and other Marxists’) predilection for vampire metaphors. These works, which also

⁵³⁶ BTCPLDE 115

⁵³⁷ P. 342. Marx, Karl. *Capital. I: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1 (1867)*, trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Harmondsworth, 1976

usually respond to Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, consider the fluid (no pun intended) rhetorical relationship between literary and economic metaphors of vampires and class struggle.⁵³⁸

Bonanit, fatigued of constantly justifying his lengthy golf excursions, has already attempted to distract his fellow doctor friends from the fact that he delegates most of his research (which uses fruit flies to test genetic treatments against the signs of aging) to his graduate students. Bonanit mangles Latin into malapropisms to intimidate his fellows into stopping their questions about his work. "Je suis un homme débordé, mais, comme disait mon maître, mens sana in corpore sana... bla-bla et caetera desunt."⁵³⁹ This detail may remind us of an episode in a much earlier work of the grotesque in the French canon: Rabelais' buffoonish, elitist Sorbonne professors in *Gargantua*, who use ungrammatical Latin to distract from their incompetence and retain their power. In fact, Jacques is mangling an expression signifying a "healthy mind in a healthy body," adding an expression for unqualifiable abundance (et caetera, or "and for the rest,") followed by "desunt" ("they are lacking, missing"). Jacques' carelessness with an expression of bodily health betrays his equally careless willingness to grotesquely manipulate bodies for his own economic gain, adding unnatural "extras" (of energy and well-being) to some bodies, and from others sapping their necessary vitality into a "lack."

In exchange for Bonanit using his genetics research to benefit Jacques and Jacques helping Bonanit to improve his golf game, "Le Catalan" (an Occitan word for the Devil) gives Bonanit the memory of a goldfish and curses Jacques to only be able to use Times New Roman

⁵³⁸ See: Panichas, George E. "Vampires, werewolves, and economic exploitation." *Social Theory and Practice* 7.2 (1981): 223-242. See also: McNally, David. *Monsters of the Market*. Boston: Brill, 2011. For Marx's vampires, see: Morrissette, Jason J. "Marxferatu: The Vampire Metaphor as a Tool for Teaching Marx's Critique of Capitalism." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 46.3 (2013): 637-642. See also: MacLellan, Matthew. "Marx's Vampires: An Althusserian Critique." *Rethinking Marxism* 25.4 (2013): 549-565. For an analysis that situates Marx's writing in the nineteenth-century Gothic tradition, see: Neocleous, Mark. "The Political Economy of the Dead: Marx's Vampires." *History of Political Thought* 24.4 No. 4 (Winter 2003): 668-684.

⁵³⁹ BTCPLDE 111

font. Despite these curses, Bonanit's golf game improves; he plays more often and assigns his work, as well as the responsibility for cleaning the lab, to his young doctoral student and assistant Sylvie, whom he forbids to leave the office. Sylvie recalls that she suspected at the start of her internship that her workload would be vampirically intense: "Les sergent recruteurs... avaient bien rigolé quand ils lui avaint menti," claiming that Sylvie would have time for her own research and would take credit for any advances to Bonanit's work that she made. Although their laughter is suspicious, Sylvie takes the position, unaware that the recruiters would say anything to get her to sign a contract, because "on avait alors besoin de sang frais pour nettoyer celui des anciens."⁵⁴⁰ Since Sylvie, or as Bonanit calls her in a dehumanizing, even mechanizing turn of phrase, Machine, "ne travaillait pas...assez vite" by herself to suit the requirements of the research, he imprisons her in the lab. "Désormais, elle n'aurait plus à quitter le laboratoire : il allait débloquent des crédits pour lui acheter un lit pliant en toile porteuse en polyester et structure en acier ainsi qu'un micro-ondes – le stock de nouilles chinoises suivrait... Sylvie comprit qu'il attendait à ce qu'elle le remerciât."⁵⁴¹ As Jacques seems to grow younger thanks to his Faustian pact, Sylvie rapidly ages in his place, her body grotesquely metamorphosing: one breast suddenly droops to her waist; she blinks her eyes and develops deep crows' feet.

Since Sylvie finally decides to summon le Catalan to help her avenge her mistreatment, the narrative implies that in the neoliberal rollback of laborer's rights, exploited workers are better off summoning the devil than their union rep. Bonanit loses his job after his memory loss causes him to miss appointments and leads to his patients' deaths. The government, who have noticed that a newly youthful Jacques' vital records show that he is only 24, make him repay his

⁵⁴⁰ BTCPLDE 112

⁵⁴¹ BTCPLDE 117

retirement benefits. Newly impoverished, Jacques must find a job, but his CV is unanimously rejected by prospective employers for his use of Times New Roman: “l’usage de cette police typographique étant trop commun, nous avons craint de votre part un manque d’ambition comme de créativité et nous n’avons même pas examiné le dossier.”⁵⁴² Campredon’s narrative thereby signals that young people (or anyone who appears to be young, like Jacques) often find themselves denied employment for arbitrary reasons. In a reversal that shifts Sylvie’s impotence and rapid aging into power, she is promoted to director; “Elle va... se faire retirer les varices et la cellulite, de quoi lui ôter les rares scrupules qui l’effleurent quand elle couche avec ses thésards.”⁵⁴³ Although the reader may have previously empathized with Sylvie’s exploitation and the grotesquely rapid aging of her body, the tables are turned. Sylvie’s new economic privilege, accented by her generational status, helps her monstrously exploit her grad students.

As the story and the collection conclude, Jacques, now a gas station attendant, hears “le rire du Catalan” as he watches Sylvie drive away from the filling station after he fills her luxury car.⁵⁴⁴ “The Devil’s laughter” here is removed from its ancient Roman and Schopenhauerian context as the moment of disillusionment that follows intercourse. Schopenhauer defines the Devil’s laughter as the moment when “sexual desire, especially when by fixation of one particular woman it is concentrated into the power of love, is the quintessence of the rascality of this noble world, for it promises so unspeakably, infinitely, and extravagantly much, and

⁵⁴² BTCPPLDE 123. We may, amidst Bonanit and Jacques’ self-indulgent, monstrous decadence and exploitation, and alongside Jacques’ brutalizing of rhetorical bodies in Latin, wonder if the repetition of “Times New Roman” is also meant to evoke to a “new Roman times” of abuses of power, excess, and exploitation of the poor.

⁵⁴³ BTCPPLDE 123

⁵⁴⁴ BTCPPLDE 124

performs so contemptibly little.”⁵⁴⁵ The “devil’s laughter,” though it can certainly be interpreted in a misogynistic context – as can Bonanit and Jacques’ treatment of Sylvie – is also a discussion of human “slavery” to a biological imperative more concerned with reproducing itself (and human life) than in human happiness. Likewise, Jacques’ desire to use biological science to rejuvenate and continue his own life and prosperity shows no concern for happiness (either his own, Bonanit’s, or Sylvie’s), twisting the human imperative to live and propagate into a monstrous capitalist gambit for eternal life at the expense of others’ survival.

“Le Catalan” is only one example of how Campredon’s narrative integrates his grotesqueries of socioeconomic inequality alongside a geographical and cultural marginality. Campredon discussed in our interview that his sense of Occitan linguistic and cultural identity spurs him to represent the South of France within its specificity. Campredon’s “docker à Sète” explains that he is an “immigré:” “Non, moi je suis né à Vinassan, dans l’Aude. Mais la vie ce n’est pas une fatalité, bordel ! Un jour je me suis dit putain, j’ai envie d’espace. Alors je suis venu à Sète. ” Entranced by the woman that he doesn’t yet know is a mermaid, the docker considers dating her as a transgressive journey into economic and social territory that is normally off limits to him; he is captivated by the “vraie pachole blonde, dans le genre bourgeoise... Je n’ai pas osé à cause de son côté pointu, style bêcheuse à avoir des diplômes ou un père médecin... J’avoue que ce ‘pas pour toi’, forcément, ça m’a excité.”⁵⁴⁶ In her company, he travels to other far-flung, exotic locales: “Pour toutes ces raisons et bien d’autres, elle me semblait exotique... ça me faisait comme si elle me disait viens, viens, viens à Marseille ou

⁵⁴⁵ P. 326. Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The Wisdom of Life: And Other Essays by Arthur Schopenhauer*. Translated by Bailey Saunders and Ernest Belfort Bax. London: Dunne, 1901.

⁵⁴⁶ BTCPLDE 84

même plus loin. Toulon peut-être !”⁵⁴⁷ Similar jokes of “going out of the way” by traveling elsewhere in southern France appear in several of the stories in *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l’amour des elfes*. In the “editor’s note,” the universal library “est vite devenue pour moi un Eldorado, sorte de Marseille d’avant la hausse de l’immobilier,” emphasizing the cultural and geographical differences between different regions of “Southern France.”

In addition to the appearance of tinned cassoulet in the eponymous short story, a “Fête du Cassoulet” in “L’homme idéal de ma femme” (which takes place in Carcassonne) presents a good job opportunity for the unemployed husband. Pretending to be another man to please his wife, “Je me présentai avec un accent nîmois (30000) et lui donnai rendez-vous le lendemain dans un hôtel borgne de Castelnaudary (11400).” The couple travel regionally as well: “Nous sommes donc allés en amoureux au musée à Toulouse (31000)... puis dans la foulée on est parti se promener dans le Lot où nous avons dîné avant de rejoindre Carcassonne par l’autoroute de Cahors (46000).” Campredon’s insertion of the different cities’ postal codes reminds the reader that France’s southern regions are not only rich in cultural diversity and accents, but also vast enough to occasion far-reaching voyages across different administrative departments. This emphasis on the heterogeneity of the *départements* across the area that Parisians collapse into “Southern France” does more than provide local color. In addition to his violent metaphors of instability, hybridity, and monstrosity, Campredon’s “Southern accent” also reminds readers of the French tendency to suppress or “kill” hybrid French-regional identities in the interest of nation-building.⁵⁴⁸ The sympathetic assertion of regional identity is just as striking as the stories’

⁵⁴⁷ BTCPLDE 85

⁵⁴⁸ The Occitan movement, which includes a revolutionary leftist separatist faction as well as a faction of reactionary Southerners eager to keep languages and cultural traditions alive in the contemporary era, developed in response to a long history of French policy-making that de-officialized regional languages, designating them as *patois* unfit to be taught in public schools. During the French Revolution, these patois, were perceived as obstacles

grotesques. Considering this aspect of Campredon's collection may provide a fruitful avenue for readings of his other story collections, or of his new, unpublished novel, which he wrote in Occitan.⁵⁴⁹

Conclusion: finding (critical) treasure and beauty in (literary) trash and grotesquerie

In a cultural moment where political thought often polemicizes against economic liberalization, precarious labor, and an increasingly exploitative work culture, French fiction has offered many compelling, if unsettling representations of this new world of labor. I chose to write about Costes' and Campredon's work to explore distinctive and original narrative and aesthetic modes of representing everyday life in neoliberal France. Through transgressive trash, the grotesque, horror tropes, magical realism, theosophic and totemic visions and encounters, and troubling of the boundaries of geographic France as well as of "Frenchness," Costes and Campredon bring the strangeness of everyday life to our attention. In doing so, their fiction also reminds us that our perception of the everyday usually is so concerned with work, leisure, consumerism, and survival that we don't look for what could be mystical, beautiful, and otherworldly in our "normal lives." Not merely useful as aesthetic devices that bring us into contemplation of beauty, these metaphors spur shock, recognition, and knowledge of our world that helps us perceive, and then recompose, the splinters of our fractured philosophical subjectivity. Perhaps, through opening our critical perspectives to "trashy" and monstrous

to building a republican nation Campredon's humorous details cataloguing the cultural specificity of Occitanité, suggests that this cultural maginalization is another "daily devil" for Campredon's characters. See: Cortier, Claude, and Laurent Puren. "Français et langues régionales et/ou minoritaires : une mise en convergence difficile." *Repères. Recherches en didactique du français langue maternelle* 38 (2008): 63-80.

⁵⁴⁹ The original edition of *Brûlons tous ces punks...* was published with one story, "Las memorias d'una treva," which appeared translated into Occitan as well as in French. This story, a quest of one Daniel Ardaillès to find the historical places and traces of his Occitan ancestors, is not in the re-edition by Pocket.

representations of our devilish everyday world, we will find in this art what we need to recognize and combat all that is monstrous in society and in ourselves.

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