

studies in contemporary women's writing

Gill Rye with
Amaleena Damlé (eds)



Experiment and
Experience

Women's Writing in France
2000–2010

PETER LANG

Experiment and Experience is a collection of critical essays on twenty-first-century women-authored literature in France. In particular, the volume focuses on how contemporary women's writing engages creatively with socio-political issues and real-life experiences. Authors covered include well-established names, the 'new generation' of writers who first came to the fore of the French literary scene in the 1990s and whose work has now matured into an important oeuvre, as well as new emerging writers of the 2000s, whose work is already attracting scholarly and critical attention. Within the overarching theme of 'experiment and experience', the contributors explore a range of issues: identities, family relations, violence, borders and limits, and the environment. They consider fiction, autobiography, writing for the theatre, autofiction and other hybrid genres and forms. Their analyses highlight difficult issues, refreshing perspectives and exciting new themes at the start of the new millennium and moving forward into the coming decades.

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Experiment and Experience

Studies in Contemporary Women's Writing

Series Editor

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VOLUME 1



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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Note on Translations

In the interests of appealing to the cross-cultural readership of this book series, throughout this volume English translations of quotations from French primary texts are given in square brackets following the original. For French secondary texts, interviews, etc., quotations are either from a published English translation (with corresponding references) or are the contributor's own translation. In the latter case, the reference given is to the original text. The original French is only quoted as well where specifically important.

GILL RYE

Introduction

As this book series, *Studies in Contemporary Women's Writing*, attests, post-1968 women's writing continues to be a rich field of study for researchers and students alike in the anglophone world. This volume focuses on the *recent* contemporary in women's writing in France – the first decade of the twenty-first century. It coalesces around the notion of *expérience*, which translates into English as both experiment and experience, as a key trend in this period.¹ The term 'experiment', in this context, relates particularly to creativity and innovation, to experimental forms and genres, to imagination and fantasy and to new ways of reading and approaching these aspects of literature. This is not to say that these kinds of creativity are necessarily completely new – indeed, in many cases, there are clear forerunners and traditions in which they can be situated – but, rather, it is to emphasize their contemporaneity in the relation between text and life, the creativity of their response to the experiential. French literature is often accused by anglophone publishers and critics of being 'abstract', inward-looking and distant from socio-cultural concerns but, although conventional notions of character and plot may at times be disrupted – even shattered – this collection shows how recent women's writing in France is connected to, responds to and engages with real-life issues and socio-cultural trends both within and beyond France. 'Experience' here, then, relates specifically to women's experiences, and to the voices and perspectives of women narrators, authors and protagonists. This is not to ghettoize women's writing as a coherent movement or as one only dealing with 'women's issues', whatever those may be. Rather, it is to demonstrate that, while addressing issues

1 See also Damlé and Rye (2013) for a broader scope of trends and issues in women's writing in twenty-first-century France.

that are important to women, female authors are also dealing with topics that involve society as a whole and humanity more generally. The volume aims, in particular, to tease out the relationship between experiment and experience, between text and life. Thus it brings together a group of essays which explore the concepts of 'experiment and experience' across a range of writing. Within this over-arching theme, the contributors explore a variety of issues – identities, family relations, violence, victimhood, borders and limits, migration and exile, and the environment. They consider fiction, autobiography, writing for the theatre, autofiction and other hybrid forms and genres. In all cases, they employ critical and theoretical models which illuminate women's perspectives and experiences as represented and narrated in the texts, while also performing close readings – paying close attention to the literary techniques and strategies employed. The chapters are grouped into three sections: Writing (and) the Self, Family Matters and Crossing Borders.

In France, what was termed 'a new generation' of women authors came to the fore of the literary scene in the 1990s, attracting a great deal of critical and scholarly attention.² The work of young writers, such as Christine Angot, Marie Darrieussecq, Virginie Despentes, Clotilde Escalle, Lorette Nobécourt and Amélie Nothomb, was often controversially received by critics, especially in their representation of female sexuality. Building on, and yet developing in quite different directions, the notion of 'writing the body' of feminist writers of the 1970s and 1980s, such as Hélène Cixous, Chantal Chawaf, Marie Cardinal, Annie Ernaux and Annie Leclerc, the 1990s saw a whole spectrum of factors – including violence, humour, coercion and distance – incorporated into the representation of women's bodies and desires. This trend continued into the first decade of the new millennium, with Catherine Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001) [*The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*] and Marie Nimier's tongue-in-cheek *La Nouvelle Pornographie* (2000) [*The New Pornography*]. However, while women's experiences of their bodies are, at the end of that decade, still an important

2 See, for example, Jordan (2004); Morello and Rodgers (2002); Rye (2002, 2004, 2005); Rye and Tarr (2006); Rye and Wornton (2002); Sarrey-Strack (2002).

topic in women's writing, the breadth of bodily themes has further diversified, with anorexia, abortion, pregnancy, birth, illness and death now also recurrent themes, and new ways of representing them are being explored.³

In feminism and women's writing alike, then, the self is an embodied self and a social subject, in relation with others. The autobiographical impetus that represented women's *prise de parole* in post-1968 feminist texts has continued to develop new hybrid forms of life-writing. Finding ways of writing the self and of portraying the female subject that reflect women's diverse social and intimate experiences in the twenty-first century is an ongoing challenge for writers. The collection opens with Amaleena Damlé's examination of Virginie Despentes's feminist manifesto-cum-memoir, *King-Kong théorie* (2006) [*King Kong Theory*] which situates Despentes's work in relation to earlier formulations of feminism in France and also to theorists and philosophers of the posthuman. Rather than creating labels or categories for Despentes's angry, polemical, up-front brand of subjective twenty-first-century feminism, Damlé carefully analyses her approach to a series of complex real-life issues that continue to challenge and divide feminist thinkers today as they do other social agents: rape, prostitution and pornography. At a time when protests about rape in India are highlighting the shameful and violent treatment of women in that culture – and, indeed, (hopefully) leading cultures elsewhere, including the West, to reflect on their own treatment of women – it is significant that Despentes's positioning on the subject has been generated by the personal experiences of being raped and of working in the sex industry. Moreover, in analysing the irreducibility of the female subject in Despentes's thinking, Damlé's chapter thus sets out valuable markers for other contributions to this volume in relation to the female subject, writing (and) the self, and self–other relations.

France of the 1990s witnessed an autofictional turn in women's writing, a mode of life-writing in which the status of the narrating 'I' is always uncertain and unstable. The autofictional form lends itself particularly to

3 See, for example, Jordan (2013a) on visual experimentation in texts dealing with illness and death. See also Damlé (2013, forthcoming).

self-exploration and creation, to expressing split identities and subjects, trauma, wounding and victimhood – with Angot, Sophie Calle and Chloé Delaume well-known practitioners. It also serves well to express the fragmentation of identity in hybridity, migration and exile. Contemporary women's writing in French 'constitutes some of autofiction's most distinctive practice', yet it is still under-theorized as a women-centred genre, as Shirley Jordan (2013b: 77, 84) notes. In this volume, it will be seen how autofictional modes, which allow for a nuanced and complex sense of self to be brought into play, are generating, in particular, new sustained reflections on, and reinventions of, sexual relations in twenty-first-century women's writing.

Jeri English's examination of Camille Laurens's autofictional *Dans ces bras-là* (2000) [*In His Arms*] continues in the vein of Damlé's philosophy-based analysis of sexual politics by returning to Simone de Beauvoir's existential thinking on women. Laurens's text explores self-identity in heterosexual relations – though not in the violent situations of Despentès's text – employing, as Diana Holmes (2005) argues, the classic romance motif but approaching men as 'others' from a modern women's perspective as a desiring and speaking subject. Holmes situates this in contrast to women being regarded, and regarding themselves, as men's 'other', as in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. English takes this analysis further, comparing Laurens's approach with Beauvoir's existential perspectives in her essays as well as her memoirs. She shows how Laurens's text seeks and privileges Beauvoirian intersubjective relations, while – through the autofictional narrative, which destabilizes the 'I' – resisting the construction of the unified self, intrinsic to Beauvoir's existential and autobiographical projects. This 'return' to Beauvoir is thus not simply a homage, more than sixty years after the publication of *The Second Sex*. Rather, it takes what is still useful from her philosophy to analyse contemporary relations between the sexes, while showing how Laurens's choice of genre – her textuality – speaks to modern readers (both male and female) and resists the objectification of the writing, desiring self.

Relations with the other/lover are also the subject of Ania Wroblewski's chapter on Sophie Calle and Annie Ernaux. Like Despentès and Laurens, Calle and Ernaux both write from personal experience, yet not in straightforward autobiographical terms. Wroblewski identifies traumatic

scenes – which she terms ‘absolute crimes’ – at the heart of Calle’s and Ernaux’s work, which trigger their creative endeavours and their respective approaches to sex and femininity. Here, victimhood is in tension with writing as revenge, and Wroblewski reflects on the ethics of the writers’ self–other relations as they incorporate real people into their texts.

The last chapter in the first section brings the issue of self-expression to the work of post-independence Algerian authors, Maïssa Bey, and Leïla Marouane who lives in exile in France. Here, Siobhán McIlvanney privileges storytelling as a weapon in women’s ongoing struggle for independence in the ‘hyperpatriarchal society’ of contemporary Algeria, where sexual and religious oppression is rife and the upheavals of the Arab Spring elsewhere in the Arab world have not taken place. Both authors employ fragmented narratives, in which the past and present interweave. Thus their texts are not only concerned with self-expression. Rather, they are also linked to the social condition of women in Algeria more generally and, as McIlvanney notes, offer ‘a written legacy of a transgenerational female experience’. Women’s sexuality is a key point of tension here and, for McIlvanney, transgressive acts in the texts serve to reassert the boundaries of the self and to claim independence. In this optic, imaginative writing is thus in itself a political act, a gesture of rebellion, and an optimistic impetus, something along the lines – perhaps – of Despentès’s thinking.

Family relationships are also a frequent topic in women’s writing and, indeed, in French literature more generally (Viart 1999; Barnet and Welch 2007). In particular, the (often rather fraught) mother–daughter relationship has been one of the most common topics in women’s writing over the centuries and into the contemporary period (Hirsch 1989). However, changing demographics undoubtedly have an impact on how family relationships are being experienced in France, as elsewhere (Roudinesco 2002): divorce and family breakdown with concomitant changes in family groupings; grandparents increasingly involved in childcare; new possibilities of parenting generated by the new reproductive technologies and the desires of same-sex couples to parent; population mobility via voluntary or forced migration; and, in the latter half of the decade particularly, economic precarity and austerity.

As women's horizons changed in the wake of the feminist achievements of the 1970s, more women were able to combine motherhood with other aspects of their lives⁴ or, more recently, simply to express their ambivalence about motherhood (Parker 2005; Rye 2009a). Julie Rodgers's chapter on Florence Emptaz's *Fête des mères* (2009) [*Mother's Day*] draws out the tensions of this potentially increasing absence (or at least distance) of mothers from their children's lives, as more mothers maintain (or renew) their professional careers or take distance from family life by other means.⁵ Such a distancing coexists – yet conflicts – with discourses of intensive mothering, in which 'good mothering' is aligned with proactive presence and mothers who refuse this pressure are labelled as 'bad', but who may, in feminist terms, be considered 'empowered' (O'Reilly 2004, 2008). Rodgers analyses the adult daughter-narrator's angry narrative at her mother's abandonment of her young family in Emptaz's text, exploring the contentious issues at stake in what is arguably a departure from traditional mother–daughter narratives.

Mothers are also largely absent from Dominique Mainard's texts. Jean Anderson's chapter examines the potentially positive role of grandmother figures in otherwise failing intergenerational relationships in Mainard's work. As in McIlvanney's chapter on Algerian authors, storytelling is a key element, which here Anderson connects with traditions of the old woman or grandmother as storyteller in the extended family. In this context, storytelling may serve to educate, to transmit values, act as an aid to socialization or impart a sense of genealogy and family history. Yet, in

- 4 Contrary to Beauvoir's position in *The Second Sex*. Despite France's history of enabling women to maintain their position in the workforce more easily than in other countries (including the UK) – for example, through state provision of nursery schooling from the age of two – pronatalist ideologies and lack of legalized contraception during the early post-war period were additional factors in limiting the numbers of women in paid work in the 1950s and 1960s (see, for example, Gregory and Tidd 2000).
- 5 Although the economic crisis and high unemployment in France are, again, fostering a 'return-to-the-home' discourse for mothers (see, for example, Badinter 2012; Colombani and Toranian 2010).

a twenty-first-century context, although grandmothers may once again have prolonged contact with their grandchildren while their own children work, Mainard ultimately rejects, Anderson suggests, what may be a rather romantic view of the grandmother as providing the vital link between generations. Like Emptaz, Mainard would seem to offer no forgiveness to the absent or estranged mother.

Moving on from grandmothers as mother-surrogates in Anderson's chapter, Gill Rye turns to surrogate mothers themselves. Surrogacy has been particularly topical in France in the 2000s because of the long-running review of the French bio-ethical laws, under which it is banned and continues to be banned even after the revision. Rye's analysis considers representations of surrogacy in the light of changing family and kinship patterns, which the universalism of the French Republic is finding difficult to accommodate. France's universalist constitution has a contentious relationship with identity politics and difference, its laws unable to address the demands of marginal groups. Thus, for example, the PaCS law of the late 1990s, which legalized civil partnerships, could not be offered only to same-sex couples, although it patently addressed their needs first and foremost.⁶ Moreover, *filiation*, which determines who can and cannot be a parent of a child under French law, categorically rejects the idea of two parents of the same sex or of a child having more than two parents. Nonetheless, new reproductive technologies and the rise of same-sex families, in France as elsewhere, are bringing about a blurring of boundaries, an interrogation of conventional parenting roles and a fundamental questioning of even who or what a mother is. Here, then, an important role for literary production is to represent and explore scenarios that are not, as yet, recognized in French law but which exist in practice in France and in other countries.

Alexandra Kurmann's chapter, which closes Part II, returns to the question of parental absence, this time in the context of migration and the migrant condition. In her analysis of Linda Lê's oeuvre, Kurmann charts,

6 PaCS is an acronym for Pacte Civil de Solidarité [Civil Solidarity Pact, or civil partnership agreement]. In fact, a significant number of heterosexual couples have taken the opportunity to become *pacésés* as an alternative to marriage.

from a psychoanalytical perspective, the foreclosure of the absent father. The absent, exiled and abandoned father figure has paradoxically been a constant presence in L  s texts while the mother was largely absent. However, a later text, published in 2007, returns to the father, in a different way, which also, Kurmann argues, serves to reveal a new concern with the mother.

In their various explorations of family relationships, these four chapters all, in some sense, deal with perceived failings of the family and family relationships. Absent mothers and fathers are blamed and idealized respectively and surrogate relationships are experimented with but do not always seem to replace ‘the real thing’. This may hark back to ambivalent mother–daughter relations seen in women’s writing in previous decades, where it sometimes seems that whatever mothers do is wrong from their daughters’ perspectives. However, it will be interesting to see how the new possibilities of kinship and family relations that are gradually coming into the mainstream in the twenty-first century are inscribed into literature in the future – from the perspectives of parents and, a generation hence perhaps, from the point of view of their offspring.

Part III of this volume, ‘Crossing Borders’, brings together various kinds of crossings, in which, above all, boundaries – geopolitical, cultural and generic – are traversed and permeated to reflect twenty-first-century cultural, political and technological realities in the production of new kinds of writing: the crossings of cultures, through migration and hybridity; the crossing of species, through metaphor and fantasy; the crossing of thresholds, through experimental theatre; and the crossings of linguistic and technological borders, through writing and performance.

Margaret E. Gray’s chapter on Cameroonian author Calixthe Beyala’s novel *Comment cuisiner son mari    l’africaine* (2000) [*How to Cook One’s Husband African Style*] focuses, like Kurmann’s, on experiences of migration. Here, formal experimentation – the novel is also a book of recipes – relates to the classic situation of the migrant: the past and one’s cultural heritage held in tension with the need (or pressure) to integrate into the new society and a sense that one does not quite belong in either culture. Yet, for Gray, this hybrid text is not simply a metaphor for the negotiation of migrant identity, of which there have been many examples in twentieth-century French literature. Rather, its subtle blending of ‘recipe-into-narrative’

and ‘narrative-into-recipe’ constitutes, in Gray’s reading, a sophisticated mode of expression for the differentiated identities that third-wave feminism adumbrates, together with those of new contexts of migration in the twenty-first century. In addition to continued migration from France’s ex-colonies, one could cite, for example, the growing complexity of cosmopolitan living due to factors such as the Schengen agreement, which came into force in 1999, enabling greater population mobility within and across Europe; and the tensions between perceptions of Western Europe as ‘rich’ and the impact of the global financial crisis of the late 2000s on employment and living standards.

Like Damlé at the opening of this volume, Lucile Desblache analyses Despentès’s *King Kong théorie* but here, this text is just one element of her engagement with apes in literature, which also focuses on a short story by Marie Darrieussecq and a novel by Héléna Marienské. An example of the twenty-first-century turn to animal studies in French literature, Desblache’s chapter relates to third-wave and posthuman feminisms, as does Damlé’s, and also to environmental, ecological and primatological and inter-species concerns. Moreover, in the context of the post-war baby-boom reaching old age, producing larger than ever ageing populations and the concomitant problems of how to care for them, Desblache’s analysis of Marienské’s novel *Rhésus* (2006) [*Rhesus*] also relates to power relations in the treatment of the elderly.

The last two chapters in this volume both relate once again to the movement of people, to population mobility, exile and migration, in each case in a world revolutionized by technology, in which all kinds of borders are permeable. Interestingly, they also both focus on writing for the theatre which employs and engages with new media. Mary Noonan’s chapter on the exciting, experimental work of Noëlle Renaude shows how her radical interrogation of theatrical form is a ‘theatre of the text’, staging the writing self and indeed writing itself. Her plays evoke the circular and repetitive movements of family networks and the chaotic displacements of mass migration, bodies – and words, languages – moving in space, overflowing into and criss-crossing the geographical space of France, where, as recent deportations of Roma people show, immigration is not always the positive experience it is anticipated to be. Here again, then, as in the chapter on

Beyala, the focus on textual form engages with the socio-political world rather than denying it. In Renaude's case, the collapse of boundaries between body and text in her work enables her audiences and readers to feel – to experience – the fear, the chaos, the loss and the exhilaration involved in different kinds of border-crossings.

Marie-Claire Barnet's study of recent works by Marie Darrieussecq, which brings this volume to a close, continues the literary evocation of the twenty-first-century's ever-changing technological age, as it impacts on individuals and in a global context, where regional, national and global identities are at stake and in flux. In her dazzling analysis of three of Darrieussecq's works – a short story, the novel *Le Pays* (2005) [*The Country*] and the multi-lingual play set in Iceland (conceived before but performed concurrently with the Icelandic financial crisis), *Le Musée de la mer* (2009) [*The Aquarium*] – Barnet summons up the themes of war, conflict and crisis, borders and boundaries and what these mean as they become blurred and porous, virtual networks and ever-faster technologies of information gathering, communication and dissemination, as well as ways of relating to the past and to death. Ultimately, Barnet argues, Darrieussecq's works invite us to reflect on the so-called 'crisis' of the subject and of literature in this brave new virtual world, in terms not only of what we fear we may lose, but also of the opportunities and new horizons it offers to writers and readers of the future.

In its analysis of texts published in the first decade of the twenty-first century, then, this volume has a retrospective dimension, looking back to the immediate past. Yet, in its engagement with the changing world and with the textual experiments that address twenty-first-century lived experiences, it also opens out to the future, to confront and reflect on real-life issues and trends that are likely to impact on the way we live – and write and read – in the decades to come.

PART I

Writing (and) the Self

AMALEENA DAMLÉ

The Mutant Metamorphic Subject: Femininity and Embodiment in Virginie Despentes's *King Kong théorie*

The first decade of the new millennium has been witness to the ongoing re-evaluation of the political, social, economic and cultural imperatives of feminism, in France, as across the globe. In academic, practical, popular and everyday contexts, feminism continues to be hotly debated and contested, critically reassessed and reformulated as a means of thinking about the realities of contemporary female experience, and of assuring equality and agency for women into the twenty-first century. Yet, uncomfortably, feminism itself remains an uneasy term, often rejected as an aggressive attack on masculinity, or an unnecessarily bleak and humourless framing of social relations. Where feminism is not entirely cast aside or overlooked, it is in many contexts resisted as an outdated irrelevance in a contemporary society whose daughters seem increasingly and suspiciously detached from the (not so) historical legacy of women's struggles for emancipation. As contemporary feminist thinkers and theorists attempt to articulate and to espouse a renewed sense of engagement with gender politics, they have set their concerns alongside and against previous forms of feminism, redefining their terms as the so-called third-wavers or through various multilayered and slippery perspectives refracted through the blurry lens of postfeminism.

In France, contemporary feminism has been confronted in particular with the task of interrogating and redefining the reified notion of 'French feminism'. To anglophone scholars, 'French feminism' connotes the early 1970s feminist writings of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, whose rather artificial bracketing as a trio of thinkers has since been signalled by various theorists (for example, Duchén 1986; Delphy 2001; Moi 1985) as indicating, on the one hand, a problematic exoticization, and, on

the other, an overarching emphasis on the intellectual abstraction of psychoanalytical and deconstructive theories that has served to eclipse the realities of diverse feminist movements and activities within the French political landscape of the time. Further, as Lisa Walsh explains, the very definition of French feminism has become a practice in citation that is enmeshed in complicated processes of translation, transferral and othering: ‘From the 1970s forward [...] “French feminism” comes most commonly to refer to a variety of feminism qualified not only by its national origins, but also by something else – a certain supplement that somehow loosely traces the reception of these diverse psychoanalytically informed theories of sexual differences within a more or less foreign Anglo-American context’ (Walsh 2004: 6). It has been commonly acknowledged that in France itself, notions of sexual difference and *écriture féminine* had become unfashionable by the mid-1980s (see, for example, Célestin, DalMolin and Courtivron 2003: 1). And as new feminist voices have come to the fore in France, there has been a notable sense of resistance to the kinds of labelling that has arguably reduced the dynamism of former French feminist thinkers to strictly defined or essentialist positions.¹

This chapter aims to analyse this sense of resistance and to explore the opening out of contemporary feminist perspectives in France to the multilayered and metamorphic constitution of femininity, embodiment and the subject of feminism. It takes as its focus one of the key feminist texts published in the first decade of twenty-first-century France: Virginie Despentes’s provocative manifesto, *King Kong théorie* [*King Kong Theory*], which appeared with Grasset & Fasquelle in 2006. Despentes is a

1 Critical overviews of recent feminism in France, for example, such as Célestin, DalMolin and Courtivron (2003) and Walsh (2004), highlight the diversity of the contemporary perspectives, and their titles – respectively, *Beyond French Feminism* and ‘The Swell of the Third Wave’ – point to as yet uncertain futures, instead of attempting definitive categorizations of current trends. This sense of resistance to categorization can also be seen more broadly in the attitudes of female authors to labels such as ‘women’s writing’, in contrast to the close connection between feminism and *écriture féminine* of the previous generation (see Jordan 2004; and Damlé 2014, forthcoming).