

Uncovering class in the works of Annie Ernaux, Christine Angot and Virginie Despentes

Jemima Rose Jobling

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Modern Languages
Newcastle University

June 2022

Abstract

This thesis addresses expressions and performances of class in the texts of three contemporary French women writers: Annie Ernaux, Christine Angot and Virginie Despentes. Unearthing the foundational underpinnings of class-consciousness across their texts, this study examines class expression and its interactions with lived and embodied experience. All three of these writers' oeuvres expose the intimacies of contemporary women's issues, and their texts explore myriad experiences, such as abortion, birth and marriage, abuse, rape and incest, and motherhood, daughterhood and girlhood. Whilst vastly different in their approach, and providing each a unique readerly experience, all three writers studied feature a self-confessed espousal of the 'subliterary' and an unshaking focus on female experience and, crucially, dynamics of class.

Critical writings on class currently feel largely dissatisfying. Whilst Angot, Despentes and Ernaux criticism has somewhat (and often only implicitly) addressed the class-based currents across these authors' texts, critical appraisals focused solely on class remain a relative scarcity. Discussions of class in Ernaux have centred around questions of place (McIlvanney (2001)), staining (Jordan (2007)) and psychological shame and anxiety (Kemp (2013), Day (2007)). In the case of Angot, interrogative threads around class dynamics have surfaced only briefly in studies into the incest trope and trauma theory (Cruickshank (2009), Rye (2010)). Despentes' graphically violent and sexual writings have garnered critical attention largely focused on gender-based (rather than class-based) transgression and radicalism (Fayard (2006), Jordan (2004)). As such, this study is the first to centre the textual performance of class across Ernaux, Angot and Despentes.

In approaching class via the umbrella motifs of access and exclusion, and through exploring a range of thought-provoking thematics, including vulgarity and vulnerability, and respectability and abjectness, this thesis exposes the pertinent and timely conclusions to be drawn at the interstices of class and gender dynamics in contemporary French women's writing.

Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Shirley Jordan and Kathryn Robson, with whom it has been a privilege to work over the past four years. I will forever be thankful for their guidance, advice, patience and reassurance throughout this project and particularly in recent turbulent times. I am grateful, too, to the School of Modern Languages at Newcastle, and for the studentship that has made the writing of this thesis possible. My sincere thanks go to Pauline Henry-Tierney, Teresa Ludden and Beate Muller, for their invaluable advice in progress review panels throughout the years, as well as to Siobhán McIlvanney, for joining Pauline in acting as my thesis examiner. I would also like to thank Isabelle McNeill, Amaleena Damlé, Emma Wilson and Ian James, for their support and encouragement, and for nurturing my love of French film and literature. To Jemima Short, Alex Young and the SML girls, thank you for your friendship, solidarity and wisdom during my time at Newcastle and beyond. And thank you, too, to Jessica Rushton, with whom, in the midst of a global pandemic, I jointly organised a seminar series with the CCWW and had the pleasure of forging a loving friendship.

I am forever thankful to my mum and dad, for scooping me back into the family nest and sharing countless walks, chats and cups of tea. I am thankful, too, for Felix and Tabby, for always being there for laughs and cuddles. For Sam, without whom my life, in academia and beyond, would be unrecognisably grey, and, along with Amy, Juliette and Cathy, whose endless love, pub trips, and long-distance phone calls have been indispensable. I am eternally grateful, too, to Sarah, for putting me back in touch with my gut. And, lastly, a big thank you to Pendle, Raven, Woody and heavenly Sunny, for being the very best office companions.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Introduction: ‘Class matter[s]’	1
Chapter 1. ‘Toutes ces chambres imbriquées les unes dans les autres’: Mapping Class, Sex and Identity in the Works of Annie Ernaux	39
1.1 Access and Exclusion: Situating Sex, Ernauxian Space and Social Class.....	41
1.2 ‘Malheur et [...] métamorphose’: The Construction of Class Consciousness in <i>Mémoire de fille</i>	52
1.3 ‘La même tristesse [...] les mêmes attentes, les mêmes désirs’?: The Re-Opening of Class Wounds in <i>Se perdre</i>	63
1.4 ‘Le moyen d’une révélation’: The Instrumentalisation of Sex in <i>L’Usage de la photo</i> and <i>Le jeune homme</i>	72
1.5 Conclusion.....	77
Chapter 2. ‘Allusive mais constante’: Unearthing Class in Christine Angot’s <i>Une semaine de vacances</i> and <i>L’Inceste</i>	80
2.1 ‘« Inceste » et « domination »’: Disentangling Incest and Class.....	83
2.2 Angot’s ‘web of [...] violations’: Mapping Intrusion.....	87
2.3 ‘Implicite mais terriblement insistante’: Tracing Class Power in <i>Une semaine de vacances</i>	91
2.4 ‘Depuis toujours’: The Endurance of Class Consciousness in <i>L’Inceste</i>	108
2.5 Conclusion.....	121
Chapter 3. ‘Prolotte de la féminité’: Reading Class Through Feminine Performance in Virginie Despentes’ <i>Baise-moi</i> and <i>Vernon Subutex</i>	124
3.1 ‘Rebelle, trash, punk’: Despentes’ Writerly Style and its Provenance in Performance.....	125
3.2 ‘King Kong Girl’ and Her Rebellious Femininity.....	137
3.3 ‘Éléphante dégénérée dans une maison de poupée’: Class Encounters in <i>Baise-moi</i>	143
3.4 ‘Se [glisser] dans la peau des autres’: Iterations and Intersections of Class and Femininity in <i>Vernon Subutex 1</i>	157
3.5 Conclusion.....	169

Conclusion: Revealing 'hidden injuries' in Classed Writings.....170
Bibliography.....174

Introduction: 'Class matter[s]' ¹

la différence qui joue dans l'écriture est davantage [...] de nature sociale que sexuelle²

Annie Ernaux

la différence de classe est au cœur de [l']histoire³

Christine Angot

je vois la condition féminine liée à la classe⁴

Virginie Despentes

This thesis addresses expressions of class across the works of three prominent contemporary French women writers: Annie Ernaux, Christine Angot and Virginie Despentes. All three share working-class roots that tendril through their texts and sustain within them a heavy focus on class dynamics and on working-class experience. Indeed, as the following study exposes, the writings of Ernaux, Angot and Despentes are permeated, undercut and formed by questions of class. Although their subject matter collectively covers a vast array of 20th century and contemporary gendered experiences, including sexuality and relationships, abortion and birth, incest and trauma, and loss and passion, what the writers' texts consistently share in common is their unshaking attentiveness to questions of female experience and its intersections with dynamics of class.

My analysis follows an understanding of class as defined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Especially pertinent to the current study are Bourdieu's explanations of distinction and concept of the habitus.⁵ The latter can be defined as an amalgamation of the ways in which the social, economic and cultural environments we are born into crystallise and become naturalised within us, influencing and classifying our habits, skills, tastes and perceptions. The practises and penchants of the middle and upper classes are considered 'legitimate' and 'superior'. Those belonging to these groups, Bourdieu argues, recognise themselves via difference and distinction from an 'inferior' other. As Sally Munt expresses in

¹ Skeggs, Beverley, *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: SAGE, 2002), p15, see also hooks, bell, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York & London, Routledge, 2000)

² Ernaux, Annie, *Le vrai lieu : Entretiens avec Michelle Porte* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), p58

³ Tanette, Sylvie, 'Je rêvais de faire un livre qui dirait ce que c'est, avoir une mère', *Onlalu* (2015) <<https://www.onlalu.com/christine-angot-sylvie-tanette-amour-impossible-15090/>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁴ Costa, Marianne, 'Despentes: anarcho-féministe', *Le Magazine* (2007) <<http://www.lemagazine.info/?Despentes-anarcho-feministe>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁵ See Bourdieu, Pierre, *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement* [ebook] (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2016) Available at <http://www.leseditionsdeminuit.fr/livre-La_Distinction-1954-1-1-0-1.html> [last accessed August 2021]

her introduction to the edited volume, *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, 'for middle-class and working-class [...] subjects alike, identity comes through identification and differentiation'.⁶ Sociologist Beverley Skeggs engages with Bourdieu's theories when she writes that 'when we are born, we enter an inherited social space from which comes access to and acquisition of differential amounts of capital assets'.⁷ The distribution of these 'assets', both economic and cultural, make manifest socio-economic conditions that are

très étroitement liées aux différentes positions possibles dans l'espace social et par là, étroitement insérées dans les systèmes de dispositions (habitus) caractéristiques des différentes classes et fractions de classe. Le goût classe, et classe celui qui classe : les sujets sociaux se distinguent par les distinctions qu'ils opèrent, entre le beau et le laid, le distingué et le vulgaire⁸

For Bourdieu, social class identity goes beyond the economic (class, indeed, 'is more than money'⁹) and hinges on a distinction informed by difference, judgement and taste. Society is arranged along these cultural class divides, the maintenance of which continually takes place via 'le caractère sacré, séparé et séparant, de la culture légitime'.¹⁰

Beyond consideration as a 'dominant theme' (as it has sometimes been treated), in this thesis I treat class as utterly holistic, recognising its reverberations through both material and immaterial worlds. Indeed,

despite its objective existence as an empirical category, and its enduring subjective existence as lived experience, the effects of relative deprivation not only affect life-chances (quantifiably), but also lifestyles, in the way that we measure and differentiate our social status (qualifiably)¹¹

The Angot quotation chosen for this chapter's epigraph locates class 'au cœur de l'histoire'. It is to be understood, then, as a facet of social identity that is deep-set and all-pervasive, 'something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your psyche, at the very core of your

⁶ Munt, Sally 'Introduction' to *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. Munt, Sally (London & New York: Cassell, 2000), p11

⁷ Skeggs, Beverley, 'The Appearance of Class: Challenges in Gay Space' in *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. Munt, Sally (London & New York: Cassell, 2000), p136

⁸ Bourdieu, *La distinction*, p22

⁹ hooks, *op. cit.*, p146

¹⁰ Bourdieu, *La distinction*, p75

¹¹ Munt, *op. cit.*, p3

being'.¹² Class is not only deeply-rooted, but is also constantly reiterated and reaffirmed in even the smallest details of everyday life. According to Bourdieu in his *Ce que parler veut dire*, class manifests

au travers des suggestions qui sont inscrites dans les aspects les plus insignifiants en apparence des choses, des situations ou des pratiques de l'existence ordinaire [...] les manières de regarder, de se tenir, de garder le silence, ou même de parler (« regards désapprobateurs », « tons » ou « airs de reproche », etc.) sont chargées d'injonctions qui ne sont si puissantes, si difficiles à révoquer, que parce qu'elles sont *silencieuses et insidieuses, insistantes et insinuanes* [...] *ce code secret*¹³ (my emphasis)

Indeed, 'everyday life is saturated with class relations'.¹⁴ As such, my analyses of class expression in this study maintain an acute attentiveness to details, particularly those pertaining to (for now, very briefly) dynamics of looking, of tone and of voice. As Bourdieu asserts, class relations can be articulated in ways that are silent, secret and insidious. Although they can be difficult to trace in their corrosive slipperiness, class dynamics are persistent and articulated everywhere, even, as this study demonstrates, where they are not uppermost. It is these covert indications of class 'which are not reducible to economic exchange'¹⁵ that this thesis considers. The works of Annie Ernaux, Christine Angot and Virginie Despentes – and, in turn, this thesis – uncover dynamics of class and bring them to the surface. If, following Bourdieu, class is built through continued and all-pervasive processes of identification and othering, arguably a classless subject – or a classless writing – cannot strictly exist. When the adjective 'classed' is used in the context of this study to refer to identity or writing, I use it as shorthand for subjects (authors and protagonists) and texts that do not belong to the world of the dominant classes. I use it to encompass those who identify as working-class, have undergone class shift (*transfuges de classe*), whose writing features class as a predominant theme and, furthermore, as a pointed and conscious part of its construction, in terms of both style and subject matter. My analysis examines the ways in which Ernaux, Angot and Despentes communicate the lived experience of class consciousness, its 'hidden injuries and brutalities', its 'emotional, social and spiritual damage'.¹⁶ This thesis explores the

¹² Lawler, Steph, 'Escape and Escapism: Representing Working-Class Women' in *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. Munt, Sally (London & New York: Cassell, 2000), p117

¹³ Bourdieu, Pierre, *Ce que parler veut dire* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), p29

¹⁴ Munt, *op. cit.*, p10

¹⁵ Lawler, *op. cit.*, p113

¹⁶ Bromley, Roger, 'The Theme That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Class and Recent British Film' in *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. Munt, Sally (London & New York: Cassell, 2000), p57

ways in which their texts, implicitly and/or explicitly unearth class, '[saisissent] les mécanismes de cette séparation'¹⁷ between social worlds and make them available to their readers.

This introductory chapter first and foremost establishes class criticism thus far in relation to my chosen three authors and demarcates this study's contribution to existing thought. It then moves onto addressing and expanding on the reasoning for bringing them together in this study. Although Ernaux, Angot and Despentès arguably 'do not form a tidy, familiar line-up',¹⁸ a reading across their articulations of class, I argue, can provide all the more rich and interesting conclusions. This segment outlines some of the fascinating parallels and contrasts that make of them distinct yet resonant voices articulating class in the contemporary French context. The subsequent section comprises a literature review illuminating the intersection of class and gender in critical studies more broadly. Spanning sociology, cultural theorists and autobiography, this review grounds my analysis in a hybrid approach attendant to the wide-ranging effects of class oppression. This hybridity is doubly appropriate given the hybrid formal experimentation that Ernaux, Angot and Despentès all adopt and the fundamental place of tension from which all three write (discussions of which will also follow in subsequent pages). The second half of this literature review is structured around the various *pistes* of enquiry that my analysis hinges upon throughout this study. Through discussions of space (access, exclusion), taste (excess, abjection, judgement), voice (speech, silence) and performance (staging, encounter, reiteration), I outline and justify the lenses through which I consider the works of the three authors. Thereafter follow individual chapter summaries that detail the justifications for the chosen texts, the specifics of their analysis, and the arguments proffered in each case. The final section of this introduction reflects on the current moment and addresses the timeliness of this reinvigoration of questions of class and the urgency of '[making] class matter'.¹⁹

Annie Ernaux, Christine Angot and Virginie Despentes : 'Écrire le social et le sexuel'²⁰

The bringing of class to Annie Ernaux is not new. Ernaux's life-writing has long been understood as explicitly class-inflected (Day (1990), McIlvanney (2001), Thomas (1999) and (2006), Hugueny-Leger (2008)). The writer 'a fait le choix non d'ignorer divisions et

¹⁷ Ernaux, *Le vrai lieu*, p65

¹⁸ Hughes, Edward, *Egalitarian Strangeness: On Class Disturbance and Levelling in Modern and Contemporary French Narrative* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), p17

¹⁹ Skeggs, *Formations of Class & Gender*, p15

²⁰ Ernaux, Annie, *L'Écriture comme un couteau : Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2003), p108

inégalités, mais au contraire de les mettre à jour'.²¹ It is the drive to provide 'literary representations of working-class experience which fuels Ernaux's writing project'.²² Her vast corpus is permeated with issues of class from its very beginnings with *Les Armoires vides* (1974) to its most recent manifestations (2016's *Mémoire de fille* and 2022's *Le jeune homme*). Siobhán McIlvanney's assertion in 2001 that Ernaux's texts constitute 'a meticulous, and retrospective, dissection of childhood and adolescence', that they 'uncover sources of ideological pressure [...] cultural mechanisms',²³ remains true. Through her narratives, the author has enacted a recurrent autoethnographic gesture in her returning to and rewriting of both the traumatic and everyday events that have formed and forged her classed selfhood. Trauma more broadly is a theme common across all three authors analysed in this thesis, but one that is arguably most infamously central to the works of Angot. Angot's autofictional writings are well-known for their persistent reworking and exposing of the incestuous abuse she suffered at the hands of her father as a child. Critics have tended to neglect, however, the writer's commitment to exposing the trauma of class oppression. Although her texts are replete with representations of incest and its lasting scars and shame, I argue in this thesis that they are foundationally – and concomitantly – informed by class concerns. My analysis of class in Despentès marks a turn away from life-writing. Her narratives create vivid fictional worlds housed in recognisable and contemporary urban landscapes. Nevertheless, several of her texts feature recurring themes drawn, as I will outline, from personal experience ((sexual) violence, sex work, the world of punk subculture, etc.). Although very different from Ernaux and Angot in terms of form (she has also, for example, channelled her writerly energy into feminist theory, graphic novels and even rap music), her style and subject matter are also informed by very real and raw lived experiences of class oppression.

Whilst Ernaux class criticism has seen a historic focus on shame and anxiety, there remains a puzzling dearth of academic writings around the myriad class-based questions raised in the narratives of Angot and Despentès. Indeed, considerations of class in contemporary French (women's) writing can most often be found in Ernaux criticism. (Two other prominent voices articulating class in the French contemporary – Didier Eribon²⁴ and Édouard Louis – tend to incite critical engagement more so in the realm of queer studies and

²¹ Huguéy-Léger, Élise, 'Entre conformisme et subversion: La Portée du paratexte dans l'œuvre d'Annie Ernaux', *Romance Studies*, 26:1, (2008) pp33-42, p34

²² McIlvanney, Siobhán, *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), p66

²³ *Ibid.*, p8

²⁴ Recently, however, there has been some critical enquiry into the intersecting influences of sexual and social class identity in Eribon. See Rieger-Ladich, Markus and Wortmann, Kai 'Enabling Violations: Social Class and Sexual Identity in Didier Eribon's "Returning to Reims"', *Childhood Vulnerability*, 3 (2021), pp79-92.

around sexual identity). This project thus not only interrogates afresh class-based currents in Ernaux, but simultaneously constitutes the first dedicated critical appraisal of class in Angot and Despentès, giving analytical voice to the ‘arrangement social, auquel tout le monde participe’,²⁵ the ‘dynamiques de pouvoir sociales’²⁶ so prevalently felt across their oeuvres. My analysis considers form and textual performance and hinges on the central question: how do these three women writers bring class to the fore in contemporary French literature?

Separated not only by age and place, Ernaux, Angot and Despentès are all fascinatingly distinct in matters of form and in their authorial postures. Mindful of the potential questions raised by my bringing together these three very different authors, I wish to outline here some of the parallels, as well as some of the particularities, that make them compelling for side-by-side study. First and foremost, as I have already stated, all three writers share their origins in working-class childhoods. It is thus unsurprising that class is so pervasive across their corpuses. Ernaux’s writings are steeped in class. The reiterative ‘return to origins’ (McIlvanney (2001)) that her texts enact brings the reader time and time again to the early wounds of class consciousness. Memories of her working-class childhood²⁷ in rural Normandy sit in often disorientating tension with the more bourgeois world, through education and marriage,²⁸ she continues to inhabit in adulthood. This sense of class movement and internal conflict leads Ernaux to identify herself repeatedly and explicitly as a ‘transfuge de classe’²⁹ and her narratives demand reading with and through this fundamental tension.

Angot, too, has repeatedly revisited her childhood in her texts and examined it through the lenses, as previously mentioned, of both incest and social class. An Angot text notable for its more overt handling of class is *Un amour impossible* where the narrator (an autofictional construct named ‘Christine’) traces her origins from her parents’ first meeting through to her own adulthood. (As Alice Blackhurst recently noted, this is a novel ‘whose mode of sociological excavation bears some similarity’³⁰ to Ernaux’s *Une femme*). The childhood depicted in *Un amour impossible* is one plagued by class, in that the grooming and abuse suffered by Christine is partly predicated on imbalanced power dynamics and differing claims to social capital and legitimacy. For the father, ‘le représentant d’une classe sociale

²⁵ Angot, Christine, *Un amour impossible* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015), p205

²⁶ Schaal, Michèle, ‘Une nécessaire rébellion féministe : de la violence au féminin chez Virginie Despentès’ in *Rebelles et criminelles chez les écrivaines d’expression française*, ed. Chevillot, Frédérique and Trout Hall, Colette (Leiden: Rodopi, 2013), p280

²⁷ See, for example, Ernaux, *La place* (1983), *La honte* (1997), *Mémoire de fille* (2016)

²⁸ See Ernaux, *La femme gelée* (1981)

²⁹ Ernaux, Annie, *Retour à Yvetot* (Paris: Éditions du Mauconduit, 2013), p29 (just one example of Ernaux’s employment of this term)

³⁰ Blackhurst, Alice, ‘Living Fictions’, *Sidecar* (2022) <<https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/living-fictions>> [last accessed June 2022]

supérieure', incest is 'l'instrument par lequel il est signifié à la classe inférieure qu'elle restera à sa place'.³¹ Indeed, one possible interpretation of the titular 'impossible' love is that it represents that between her two parents due, ostensibly, to their differing social status. In the closing pages of the text, the young narrator spells out this toxic dynamic to her mother:

Vous pouviez avoir une relation, mais à condition de respecter certaines règles, qui garantissaient que tu n'infiltrerais pas son monde. Qu'il y aurait des limites. La séparation de vos deux mondes devait être établie, et la supériorité du sien devait être maintenue, bien au-dessus [...] C'est pas une histoire privée ça tu comprends. C'est pas un arrangement personnel, c'est un arrangement social, auquel tout le monde participe, y compris toi. C'est l'histoire du rejet social'.³²

In short for now (I will revisit this text in more detail in chapter 2), my analysis argues that this origin story, this sense of class consciousness, applies beyond *Un amour impossible* and can be traced throughout Angot's literary project as a fundamental thrust.

Although Despentès does not deal explicitly with her own childhood in her fictional texts, we know her to be the 'working-class daughter of postal workers from Nancy'.³³ As a queer³⁴ woman writer of working-class origins, and, what is more, one who talks openly about her past sex work, Despentès writes necessarily from 'la position d'une marginale',³⁵ something that has even seen her described as literature's 'voice of the marginalised'.³⁶ Her texts speak from and for a doubly marginalised 'under-underclass'³⁷ located at the intersection of working-class womanhood, and she writes self-professedly 'de chez les moches, pour les moches [...] toutes les *exclues* du grand marché à la bonne meuf'³⁸ (my emphasis). Ever nestled in the 'sleazy French underworld, with its background of bars, drugs, violence, and prostitution',³⁹ Despentian characters (characters that are, as Virginie Sauzon

³¹ Devarrieux, Claire, review of *Un amour impossible* for *Libération* (2015) No longer available online <https://www.liberation.fr/cahier-ete-2015/2015/08/14/christine-angot_1363547/> [last accessed June 2020]

³² Angot, *Un amour impossible*, p205

³³ Chrisafis, Angelique, 'Virginie Despentès: 'What is going on in men's heads when women's pleasure has become a problem?', *The Guardian* (2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/31/virginie-despentès-interview-baise-moi-vernon-subutex>> [last accessed June 2022]

³⁴ Despentès came out as a lesbian at the age of 35, around the time of writing and publishing *King Kong Théorie* (2006) (See Oyler, Lauren, 'Behind the Scenes With Virginie Despentès', *Vice* (2015) <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/evgg8a/behind-the-scenes-with-virginie-despentès>> [last accessed June 2022] and Hughes, Sarah, 'Virginie Despentès: 'If you are a lesbian, you really are less restricted by life', *inews* (2020) <<https://inews.co.uk/culture/books/virginie-despentès-vernon-subutex-3-man-booker-prize-lesbian-loneliness-interview-463909>> [last accessed June 2022])

³⁵ Costa, *op. cit.*

³⁶ Chrisafis, *op. cit.*

³⁷ Jordan, Shirley, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), p118

³⁸ Despentès, Virginie, *King Kong Théorie* (Paris : Grasset, 2006), p9

³⁹ Fayard, Nicole, 'The Rebellious Body as Parody: *Baise-moi* by Virginie Despentès', *French Studies*, 60:1 (2006) pp63-77, p65

outlines, 'toujours extrêmes et en butte à la société moralisatrice et castratrice'⁴⁰) stage a brutal and unrelenting exposition of, in particular, feminine, working-class experience.

All three authors examined in this study have presences on the literary scene as voices articulating class. In Ernaux's texts, class is up front. She starts her own conversation on class and invites her readers to examine with her the makings of class consciousness. She interacts with and draws inspiration from notable writers and thinkers of class such as Bourdieu and Didier Eribon⁴¹ (both of whom I will return to later in this introductory chapter). Indeed, in Ernaux's texts class is handled so overtly that they 'can be seen to provide literary representation of Bourdieu's [sociology]'.⁴² For readers of Angot, class is entangled within and obfuscated by the shocking and unsettling incest trope and is thus less conspicuously present. In Desportes, though class is certainly conspicuous, it is not always easily extricable from the intersectional nexus of identities that her texts present. For Desportes:

L'intersectionnalité, dans la lignée du black feminism et du féminisme postcolonial, c'est la congruence de formes multiples de domination. Racisme, sexisme, homo/trans/lesbophobie se conjuguent, se multiplient, et ce sont ces entrelacs qu'il s'agit de saisir et de dénouer⁴³

Indeed, the fact that 'gender identities are embedded in several intersecting domains of social power and social difference'⁴⁴ can be felt acutely across the works of all three of the writers studied here. This thesis untangles these *entrelacs* and examines how the texts of Ernaux, Angot and Desportes articulate and perform the tensions produced at these intersections. Each brings their necessarily unique class experience to their writing and through their distinct styles each inaugurates a different approach to the question of class.

It would be remiss of any discussion of class involving these authors to ignore the relationships all three cultivate with the public, the differing media presences that they court as writers of working-class origin. All three are fascinating to watch in interview, to watch

⁴⁰ Sauzon, Virginie, 'Virginie Desportes et les récits de la violence sexuelle : une déconstruction littéraire et féministe des rhétoriques de la racialisation', *Genre, sexualité et société*, 7 (2012) <<https://journals.openedition.org/gss/2328>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁴¹ See Ernaux, Annie, "'Fils de la honte'", *BibliObs* (2009) <<https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/documents/20091022.BIB4255/fils-de-la-honte-par-annie-ernaux.html>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁴² McIlvanney, *op. cit.*, p15

⁴³ Didry, Claude, 'Lire *Vernon Subutex* 1, 2 et 3 de Virginie Desportes. Compte rendu, compte tenu d'un état d'urgence', *L'Homme & la Société*, 1-2, 203-204 (2017), pp249-260, p249

⁴⁴ Abrams, Laura, 'Contextual Variations in Young Women's Gender Identity Negotiations', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 27:1 (2003), pp64-74, p73

'perform'. Ernaux is delicately and softly spoken, something that might strike listeners as unexpected given her subject matter's hard-hitting rawness, or indeed fitting given its extreme vulnerability. In television and radio interviews from the 1980s through to the present day, Ernaux has brought questions of class to the cultural fore. Throughout the years, each of her publications has made waves in the traditionally bourgeois world of literature. As a woman who dared to write openly and graphically about issues such as abortion, sex and domestic violence, her uncomfortable subject matter has posed repeated challenges to social and cultural conservatism. Despite and because of this boldness, she is now one of France's most celebrated authors. During an interview with the writer for *France Culture* in November 2021, Olivia Gesbert describes her as a sort of 'marraine littéraire' who has 'ouvert la voie'⁴⁵ for filmmakers, writers and sociologists alike.

Never has such a warm appellation been accorded to Angot. If we are to consider Ernaux as class-based literature's 'acceptable face', Angot is arguably its most outspoken and antagonistic advocate. She is famously acerbic and argumentative on panel shows and in interviews and has gained notoriety for her 'incapacité à dialoguer'⁴⁶. Indeed, 'in spite of a purported desire to be 'read, and not seen', she is a familiar presence in the French media, regularly dispatching unpalatable opinions and clashing with her interlocutors'.⁴⁷ Inside and outside of her texts, Angot toys with a sense of doubt and ensures that her readers and audience can never be sure whether her hostility is genuine expression or part of the wider formation of the authorial construct that is 'Christine Angot'. Much has been written in critical writings about this staging and sustaining of doubt in Angot, about her 'play between autobiography, fiction and performance'⁴⁸ (Sadoux (2002), Edwards (2013), Rye (2004)). Whether confrontational intentionally or otherwise, Angot and/or her authorial persona flout the rules of polite society, specifically here in its traditionally bourgeois cultural manifestations of radio and television.

Despentès, generally speaking, is a much more good-humoured presence in interviews, charming and casual yet captivating. Where her authorial persona can be understood as

⁴⁵ Gesbert, Olivia, 'Transfuges de classe : à l'origine était... Annie Ernaux', podcast, *France Culture* (2021) <<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/la-grande-table-idees/transfuges-de-classe-a-l-origine-etait-annie-ernaux-4751566>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁴⁶ Casagrande, Léa, 'Les audiences d' "On n'est pas couché" s'écroulent. L'émission est-elle en crise?', *Les Inrockuptibles* (2017) <<https://www.lesinrocks.com/actu/les-audiences-don-est-pas-couche-secroulent-lemission-est-elle-en-crise-152039-09-11-2017/>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁴⁷ Blackhurst, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ Rye, Gill, 'In Uncertain Terms: Mothering without Guilt in Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Mal de mer* and Christine Angot's *Léonore, toujours*', *L'Esprit Createur*, 45:1 (2005), pp5-15, p6

rebellious in class terms is in her conscious though unforced curation of a 'trash' image. She presents more like a rockstar than the kind of author figure we might traditionally expect, always seen wearing band t-shirts and smoking hand-rolled cigarettes, legs spread wide and slouching. We might also consider the writerly 'space' that Despentès and her writings claim in the bourgeois literary world and, notably, in the metaphorical 'territory' of violence typically reserved for men ('parce qu'elle est une femme [...] la violence n'est pas son territoire'⁴⁹). Her texts (*Baise-moi* in particular) and her media presence stage transgressions of gendered writerly 'space' and present juxtapositions between what is expected from a woman writer and what is delivered. When looking at class in and around Ernaux, Angot and Despentès, their presence in the public eye and their conscious construction of authorial postures (and how these have changed over the years) mean that pertinent insights can be drawn from articles and radio and television interviews with them. Given that they clearly form part of how these three writers articulate their classed stories, the analysis throughout this thesis frequently draws from findings from these media.

Their attentiveness to authorial image is just one of the ways in which these three writers have caused a stir in the literary world. All three cultivate challenges – both inside their texts and in the public eye – around acceptability and taste, excess and discretion and access and exclusion. These notions, in turn, are bound up with questions of class and gender and thus form an integral part of the analytical frame I employ throughout this study. (Further elaboration of these notions and how they relate to the three authors and to my analysis will follow in the coming pages.) What is more, albeit in differing ways, all three cultivate provocative styles. For Ernaux, Angot and Despentès, style gets shaped within a nexus of class belonging and exclusion. Although vastly different, the modes of expression that all three writers adopt are forged by class concerns. Ernaux's self-identified *écriture plate* is born from an early sense of class belonging. Although she writes from the more ambivalent position of a *transfuge de classe*, she explicitly connects her writing style to a working-class heritage: 'l'écriture plate me vient naturellement, celle-là même que j'utilisais en écrivant autrefois à mes parents pour leur dire les nouvelles essentielles'.⁵⁰ She connects it, too, to the work of the ethnographer, a means of being 'ethnologue de [soi]-même'.⁵¹ In the case of Angot, as this study explores, the 'vitriolic ranting'⁵² that characterises some of her texts is informed, in part,

⁴⁹ Despentès, *King Kong Théorie*, p46

⁵⁰ Ernaux, Annie, *La place* in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp435-496, p442

⁵¹ Ernaux, Annie, *La honte* in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp211-268, p224

⁵² Edwards, Natalie, "'Écrire pour ne plus avoir honte": Christine Angot's and Annie Ernaux's Shameless Bodies' in *The Female Face of Shame*, ed. Moran, Patricia and Johnson, Erica (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p66

by anger at class-based exclusion. At other times, her style is disruptive for its disquieting sense of control (in *Une semaine de vacances*, for example). Despentés' style, too, remains defiantly true to her class roots ('Mon style me correspond tout à fait [...] Je ne me pose pas la question. Je suis comme ça. Je suis pas restée assez longtemps à l'école pour écrire "comme il faut"'⁵³). In their respective curation of authorial personas and within their texts, all three writers demonstrate acute awareness of the power of the abject and of the extent to which class disturbs as 'matter out of place'⁵⁴ in the literary sphere (I will also return to notions of abjectness later in this introduction). Ernaux, Angot and Despentés all disturb and disrupt in their exposition of class marginalisation. Furthermore, as upwardly mobile writing subjects, their authorial presences mark 'intrusions' into the literary sphere traditionally reserved for the middle and upper classes. Their works play intensively on these questions of acceptability and transgression.

In their texts all three authors also present engagements with varying degrees and forms of shame. In her *Formations of Class and Gender*, sociologist Beverley Skeggs outlines shame and its links with class oppression and identity formation. She establishes the inherent and insidious coercion shame brings, identifying its roots in judgement and othering.⁵⁵ It involves both external and internalised judgement and feelings of inadequacy, of falling short of the (perpetually constructing and constructed) norm or ideal. Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick and Adam Frank also recognise the hierarchical power structures at play in the shaming mechanism when they identify 'contempt [as] the mark of the oppressor'⁵⁶ and shame and humiliation as the tormentors of the oppressed. Contempt and shame, they write, 'maintain distance between individuals, *classes*, and nations'⁵⁷ (my emphasis). This evocation of distance and separation echoes ideas found in Bourdieu's *La distinction : Critique sociale du judgement*. Here he writes:

il est dans les verdicts péremptoires qui, au nom du *goût*, renvoient au ridicule, à l'indignité, à la *honte*, au *silence* [...] des hommes et des femmes à qui manque simplement, aux yeux de leurs juges, ce qui fait *la bonne manière* d'être et de faire⁵⁸ (my emphasis)

⁵³ Tallon, Jean-Louis, 'Entretien avec Virginie Despentés', *HorsPress* (2002) < <https://erato.pagesperso-orange.fr/horspress/despente.htm> > [last accessed June 2022]

⁵⁴ Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London: Routledge, 2001), p36

⁵⁵ Skeggs, *Formations of Class & Gender*, p123

⁵⁶ Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Eve and Frank, Adam, *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p139

⁵⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁸ Bourdieu, *La distinction : Critique sociale du judgement*, p1210

(Matters of taste, ideas around silence and questions of the 'right' way of being and acting will also be explored in my analysis). Shame, then, can be understood as central to a thorough understanding of dynamics of class (and gender) and therefore crucial to the present study. Indeed, shame has long been a pertinent topic for scholars of contemporary women's writing and, given the title of one of her most well-known texts *La honte*, it is perhaps unsurprising this is particularly true in critical writings on Ernaux. Considerations of class- and sex-based shame have been brought to the writer repeatedly over the past twenty years (see, for example, Day (1990), McIlvanney (2001), Willging (2001), Thumerel (2004), Thomas (2006), Edwards 2013)). Her writing project is suffused with and (at least partly) motivated by a need to examine her own shame and to seek to uncover its social construction. For Ernaux, her working-class origins have at times been felt as a 'shameful stain',⁵⁹ something that is particularly evident in the much-referenced and analysed passage from *La honte* that describes her memory of the moment her classmates saw her mother in a crumpled, urine-stained nightdress⁶⁰ and details her deep-rooted, enduring humiliation and jarring introduction to class awareness. For Ernaux as for Bourdieu,⁶¹ class identity is shaped through reiterative, insinuating and shaming judgements: 'la honte n'est que répétition et accumulation'⁶² (the importance of ideas of reiteration and repetition to this study will be explored and explained further in subsequent sections.) Ernaux understands class and class shame as deeply embedded. In *La honte* she writes, 'la honte est devenue un mode de vie pour moi. À la limite je ne la percevais même plus, elle était *dans le corps* même'⁶³ (my emphasis).

Angot's writerly position, by contrast, involves a hostile, outward form of shaming (of the other). Her texts, as well as her authorial persona, create difficult and uncomfortable confrontations. She is a writer who 'plays very deliberately with socially codified ideas of shame'.⁶⁴ Angot mobilises her trauma- and class-based shame into anger that is variably thrown at her readers, her audience, her fellow writers and, at times, inward onto the self. Anger born from oppression and injustice is a force that also motivates Despentès.⁶⁵ As she has stated in interview, 'la haine et la colère sont deux énergies très contemporaines que je

⁵⁹ Thomas, Lyn, 'Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness: Finding a Place in the French Feminist Canon?', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 15:2 (2006), pp159-168, p164

⁶⁰ Ernaux, *La honte*, p257

⁶¹ Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire*, p29

⁶² Ernaux, *La honte*, p266

⁶³ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁴ Edwards, *op. cit.*, p62

⁶⁵ Elkin, Lauren, 'For the Ugly Ones: The Spiky Feminist Anger of Virginie Despentes', *The Paris Review* (2018)

<<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/09/05/for-the-ugly-ones-the-spiky-feminist-anger-of-virginie-despentes/>> [last accessed June 2022]

connais bien. La colère m'a habitée longtemps'.⁶⁶ She does, however, appear to shirk class shame altogether:

*Tu as changé mais tu n'as pas renié la femme que tu as été: femme de ménage, prostituée, actrice porno, stripteaseuse... Non, je ne renie rien, ni d'avoir écrit Baise-moi, ni aucun de mes livres... Tu peux changer sans être obligée d'avoir honte de l'étape d'avant*⁶⁷

This is confirmed in her *King Kong Théorie* when she writes, 'quand j'étais au RMI, je ne ressentais aucune honte d'être une exclue, juste de la colère'.⁶⁸ Waves of shame and anger of varying magnitude and direction pulsate through the corpuses of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès alike and these emotive energies articulate, at the same time that they amplify, their classed stories.

Another similarity can be drawn between these authors' articulations of class in their experimentation with form. All three experiment with different media and forms of expression. Shirley Jordan identifies Ernaux and Angot as two writers who are 'deeply preoccupied with form'.⁶⁹ For the former, *L'Usage de la photo* marked a venture into phototext. Indeed, 'Ernaux's project [...] has received sustained analysis as an experiment in hybridity which fuses other types of writing (ethnography, life-writing, confessional literature) for purposes both personal and feminist'.⁷⁰ The same recognition of hybridity can be applied to Angot and Despentès. Angot has turned her writerly hand to theatre and short essays (with *L'Usage de la vie*, for example) whilst Despentès has arguably been the most expansive and energetic in her experimentation, producing punk rap music,⁷¹ *bandes dessinées* and even a theoretical essay-cum-manifesto (*King Kong Théorie*). I will return to this question of adequate narrative form when I lay out my theoretical considerations and framework in the following pages.

Although Ernaux, Angot and Despentès share interesting similarities, it is through their differences and their different approaches to articulating class and gender that they are most

⁶⁶ Crom, Natalie, 'Virginie Despentès : "La société est devenue plus prude, l'atmosphère plus réactionnaire"', *Télérama* (2015) <<https://www.telerama.fr/livre/virginie-despentès,121233.php>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁶⁷ Taddei, Frédéric, 'Virginie Despentès: "J'aime bien voir des petites culottes dans les films"', *GQ* (2015) < <https://www.gqmagazine.fr/pop-culture/interview/articles/virginie-despentès-jaime-bien-voir-des-petites-culottes-dans-les-films/23533>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁶⁸ Despentès, *King Kong Théorie*, p10

⁶⁹ Jordan, Shirley, 'Overstepping the Boundaries: Sexual Awakening, Trauma and Writing in Annie Ernaux's *Mémoire de fille* and Christine Angot's *Une semaine de vacances*', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 59:3 (2019), pp5-18, p5

⁷⁰ Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, p102

⁷¹ In 1990 in Lyon, 4 years before the publication of her first hit novel *Baise-moi*, Virginie Despentès recorded an album of feminist punk rap, *Fear of a Female Planet*, with her band Straight Royeur. In Chapter 3, this thesis offers the first critical consideration of this early manifestation of her artistic project and examines its implications for her expression of class.

fascinating and compelling for analysis. All three make for separate case studies of class expression. In 2006, Lyn Thomas wrote of Ernaux's texts that they 'are unique in French women's writing of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries because of their foregrounding of social class'.⁷² Through my analysis I argue that, though they are distinct, they are not in this way unique. Class concerns are at the forefront across the works of all three authors considered here, and it is, in part, the curious lack of attention to this glaring aspect of Angot and Desportes' works that motivates this study. This thesis is driven by a desire to shed light on this under-analysed facet of their writings and, indeed, of academic inquiry more broadly.

Reinvigorating the 'forgotten' issue'⁷³ of Class

Class, having been declared a 'forgotten'⁷⁴ or even 'dead'⁷⁵ issue, is a broadly underrepresented field of study in literature, in sociology and indeed across all disciplines of academic study. Furthermore, critical explorations of the interconnected identity axes of gender and class are especially sparse. In the following section, I explore those places where class, and its intersections with gender, have been theorised and spoken about to this point, address some of the reasons for its relative absence in academic writings, and establish where and how these findings inform my own analytical approach.

At the start of my project, a review of existing literature revealed that women were long neglected from academic writings on class. Through the 20th century, explorations of class were framed from ever-phallogocentric and purely sociological perspectives, 'measured by occupation [...] income or education'.⁷⁶ Further still, understandings of social stratifications were based largely on statistics and figures collected from male subjects, 'a father's occupation'⁷⁷ and their relative acquisition of wealth. The paternal 'head' of the household was repeatedly taken as the natural representative of the whole family, and women and children went undocumented in such terms. Jane Marceau's *Class and Status in France: Economic Change and Social Immobility 1945-1975* (1977) and Duncan Gallie's *Social Inequality and Class Radicalism in France and Britain* (1983), for example, both feature an extreme focus on fathers and sons as social barometers of class understandings and categorisations in the middle of the century. Both of these texts adopt ideas from Marx and

⁷² Thomas, *Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness*, p160

⁷³ Day, Lorraine, Thomas, Lyn and Ernaux, Annie, 'Exploring the Interspace: Recent Dialogues around the Work of Annie Ernaux', *Feminist Review*, 74, *Fiction and Theory: Crossing Boundaries* (2003), pp98-104, p100

⁷⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁷⁵ Munt, *op. cit.*, p3

⁷⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁷⁷ Steedman, Carolyn, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p55

Bourdieu to decipher male-centred data on distributions of capital, and on the relative rigidity and impenetrability of class-borders in order to comment on class- and status-based conditions of the time. Although Bourdieu 'has been [...] useful for enabling feminists to put the issue of class back onto the feminist agenda',⁷⁸ Lisa Adkins and Beverley Skeggs' *Feminism After Bourdieu* lays bare his theories' shortcomings in terms of sexuality and gender and explores 'how Bourdieu can be put to use but with limits'.⁷⁹ Although Bourdieu's ideas on class, distinction and taste (as outlined in this introduction's opening paragraphs) provide the basis of the ideas explored in this thesis, discussions of capital and considerations of class in mainly economic and sociological terms will be relatively absent from my thesis due to their inherent neglect of consideration of the lived experience and emotions of class. Indeed, 'socio-economic categories mask a complicated reality'⁸⁰ and '[evacuate] structural inequality and exploitation from perceptions of lived experience'.⁸¹ Where class 'is acknowledged still to be important it is studied in terms which miss much of its experiential significance'.⁸² It is this experiential level of class and gender – as expressed through writing – which my analysis reinvigorates. Here and throughout this study I use 'lived experience' to mean, non-exhaustively, the biographical facts of the authors' lives, their real-world interactions with others and real-world relationships, the legacies of the social, political and cultural environments in which they have moved and continue to move, and the ways in which all of these may influence and surface throughout their works. Ideas around cultural capital thus feature heavily in my analysis.

A turn to feminist, working-class sociologists such as Beverley Skeggs and Diane Reay helps to illuminate the question of where women's class stories *are* available. Over the years feminist critics and thinkers have grappled with class as a concept, often retrospectively compelled to unpick the threads of years of 'malestream'⁸³ class 'statistics' to establish where in the vast 'patriarchal mode of production'⁸⁴ women and girls have been left behind. Yet still we see a relative dearth in academic writings around interactions of class and gender dynamics, something that is made even more surprising given the increasing importance afforded to intersectionality in modern feminist discourse. As Despentes herself has commented in interview, 'there is something very strong, in France, about censorship and

⁷⁸ Adkins, Lisa and Skeggs, Beverley, *Feminism After Bourdieu* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p20

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p30

⁸⁰ Steedman, *op. cit.*, p55

⁸¹ Munt, *op. cit.*, p3

⁸² Sayer, Andrew, 'What Are You Worth?: Why Class is an Embarrassing Subject', *Sociological Research Online*, 7:3 (2002) <<https://www.socresonline.org.uk/7/3/sayer.html>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁸³ Abbott, Pamela and Sapsford, Roger, *Women and Social Class* (London: Tavistock, 1987), p34

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p16

class struggles'.⁸⁵ Numerous reasons have been posited for this silence and scarcity. Reay outlines how the advent of late capitalism accounts for some of the more recent reticence in writers and thinkers to tackle class. As she asserts:

The working classes are no longer entitled to a sense of unfairness because everything from their financial situation and the state of their health to their children's schooling has been repackaged under late capitalism as the responsibility of the individual alone.⁸⁶

As Didier Eribon has succinctly expressed, 'plus de destins sociaux, mais de « responsabilité individuelle »'.⁸⁷ What is more, in *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and Her Audience*, Lyn Thomas addressed the fact that 'class, perhaps more than ever, is a taboo subject, and the person who raises it, in British or French social contexts, is likely to be accused of 'having a chip on their shoulder''.⁸⁸ Class, then, is a controversial topic and one that is (perhaps ironically) 'distasteful'. But why is it so disturbing to have class so at the fore of writing (by women)? That it can be considered so is indicative of the binding strength of the socially imposed codes of respectability and propriety, the rigidity of the rules regarding what is allowed to be written and who is allowed to write.

Skeggs also speculates as to why the experiences of the 'working-class woman' have never gained particular academic momentum asking:

have feminists avoided class because it is impossible to measure accurately? [...] Or is it that for those who now get to write and represent feminist (and) cultural theory class is not experienced or felt as immediately as gender? It may not be recognised as a problem for those who have the privilege to ignore it⁸⁹

Indeed, as she continues, 'to think that class does not matter is only a prerogative of those unaffected by the deprivations and exclusions it produces'.⁹⁰ In other words, class is largely absent from academic study as those who have felt its most devastating effects are rarely able

⁸⁵ Kelly, Alan, 'Virginie Despentes interviewed' *3AM Magazine* (2009) <<https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/virginie-despentes-interviewed/>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁸⁶ Reay, Diane, 'The Double-Bind of the 'Working-Class' Feminist Academic: The Success of Failure or the Failure of Success?' in *Class Matters: 'Working-Class' Women's Perspectives on Social Class*, ed. Mahony, Pat and Zmroczek, Christine (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997), p23

⁸⁷ Eribon, Didier, *Retour à Reims* (Paris: Fayard, 2009), p147

⁸⁸ Thomas, Lyn, *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and Her Audience* (New York: Berg, 1999), p152

⁸⁹ Skeggs, *Formations of Class & Gender*, p6

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p7

to have their voices heard. Myriad factors contribute to this sad and unfair reality, including ostracism of the working-class from ideas of 'culture' at large,⁹¹ the countless barriers to further education for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and, of course, the elitism of the academy. As Siobhán McIlvanney has suggested in the case of Ernaux, reluctance to talk about class

may be further aggravated by a form of political correctness, in that Ernaux's writing portrays the difficulties encountered by a working-class woman in gaining access to literature, and potential critics do not wish to be affiliated to a bourgeois cultural domain seen to perpetuate such difficulties⁹²

Class, then, is a sensitive topic. It is also one that is frequently obscured. As established in this introduction's opening pages, it is difficult to extricate class from the intersectional web of influences that make up identity formation. Intersectionality as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw⁹³ acknowledges the convergence of multiple vectors of oppression on individuals (with specific reference to the marginalisation of Black women). Reluctance to examine class perhaps stems partly from possible complications produced by these identity entanglements. Indeed, from the Angot and Desportes quotations chosen for this introduction's epigraph – 'la différence de classe est au cœur de [l']histoire',⁹⁴ 'je vois la condition féminine liée à la classe'⁹⁵ – we can glean an understanding of class as not only deeply embedded but also interlinked with issues of gender. Undoubtedly, all of the above, in conjunction with years of neglectful phallogentrism, all play their part in working-class women's silence in the feminist academic canon. My thesis is in part motivated by this academic and cultural oversight. Ernaux, Angot and Desportes constitute three voices that *have* broken through over the latter half of the 20th century as women writers of working-class origin articulating class.

As previously established, it is clear that stale statistical facts have little to do with the experiential level of lived, classed and gendered existence. Whilst these kinds of considerations may provide helpful background for theories of class oppression, they offer little in terms of expression of its lived reality. Continuing my research into writings and

⁹¹ We might here think of Bourdieu's binarised, hierarchical distinctions of 'high/low culture' (Adkins and Skeggs, *Feminism After Bourdieu*, p22)

⁹² McIlvanney, *op. cit.*, p14

⁹³ See Crenshaw, Kimberlé, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43:6 (1991), pp1241-1299

⁹⁴ Tanette, *op. cit.*

⁹⁵ Costa, *op. cit.*

theorisations of class, I encountered Pat Mahony and Christine Zmroczek's edited volume, *Class Matters*. Towards the millennium this text staged an impassioned call to shift focus to the lived experience of class:

the experiential level of class oppression [...] [enables] us to grasp the nature of the influences on the formation of working-class women's identities and the ways in which these in turn affect our possibilities, real and perceived⁹⁶

Class Matters also demonstrates explicitly the fact that all academic writings from feminist thinkers on lived working-class experience necessarily come from a historical perspective of social mobility and class shift; those writing from these real experiences in an academic context necessarily lived a working-class childhood. Like Ernaux and indeed, we might argue, Angot and Despentès, they are *transfuges de classe*. Mahony and Zmroczek's text is rife with personal accounts of working-class girlhood and with concerns about potentially betraying those same working-class roots. One of the most outspoken examples of this can be found in Reay's chapter on the 'double-bind' of being a working-class, feminist academic. Reay's study foregrounds and reiterates the simultaneous inherent, double-edged unease and sense of responsibility for those studying lived class experience in an academic context, voicing the struggle 'to continue questioning academic culture and values while acknowledging the extent to which we are caught up in them'.⁹⁷ Kim Clancy also recognises the dual-bind felt by those women writers addressing and exposing their working-class pasts and expresses it via concerns of loss and disingenuousness, asking 'what was lost, exchanged, bartered in this journey from one class to another?'⁹⁸ Whilst a change of class is not, of course, a prerequisite for writing about the working class, the essays addressing class shift in *Class Matters* are apposite to this study of class expressions across three *transfuges de classe*.

It is obvious that clean answers as to the academic handling of working-class identity were (and are) consistently frustrated. Feminist writers on this topic continued to incorporate personal accounts and collected data in their hybrid studies of selves 'both out of place and out of time'.⁹⁹ Not only had traditional academic handlings of class proven insufficient in their initial failure to recognise female experience, they were also inadequate – as demonstrated by

⁹⁶ Mahony, Pat and Zmroczek, Catherine, 'Why Class Matters' in *Class Matters: 'Working-Class' Women's Perspectives on Social Class*, ed. Mahony, Pat and Zmroczek Catherine (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997), p2

⁹⁷ Reay, *op. cit.*, p23

⁹⁸ Clancy, Kim, 'Academic as Anarchist: Working-Class Lives into Middle-Class Culture' in *Class Matters: 'Working-Class' Women's Perspectives on Social Class*, ed. Mahony, Pat and Zmroczek, Catherine (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997), p45

⁹⁹ Reay, *op. cit.*, p24

the enduring dependence on hybrid modes of research and expression – in terms of form (I shall return to and elaborate questions of (hybrid) form shortly). Class, then, continues to be a slippery concept with which to wrangle in the study of gender and sexuality. Whilst this has undoubtedly hindered academic exploration of this area, it is also one of the reasons such ideas make for such rich and compelling study.

After the turn of the millennium, academic focus on intersections of class and gender saw a turn to the body, heralded by scholars such as Skeggs. In *Class, Self, Culture*, Skeggs draws (as her texts often do) on Bourdieu's interpretations of capital and maps these onto ideas surrounding the inscription of class and of femininity upon bodies, and the potential use of class and gender markers as tools (both of oppression and empowerment).¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless she retains sociological distance and her primary focus is how systemic processes of 'inscription, exchange, evaluation, perspective [...] *make class* in the contemporary'.¹⁰¹ Considerations of (sociological) distance are crucial to explorations of life-writing, and thus feature heavily in chapters 1 and 2 dedicated to Ernaux and Angot respectively. There is also a (albeit more muted) sociological undertone, I argue, running through the largely fictional works of Despentès. Questions of positionality, of distanced and/or immersive perspectives and performance inform my analysis across all three authors. In her research, Skeggs consistently keeps questions of form, of voice and of perspective in frame, examining 'the possibilities for how class can be spoken and known, both directly and indirectly, across a range of sites'.¹⁰² Concurrent with the slipperiness so relentlessly present in academic handling of class as a concept, she rejects the pursuit of fixed categories and posits that 'analysis of class should [...] aim to capture the ambiguity produced through struggle and fuzzy boundaries'.¹⁰³

'Catégories et [...] cadres'¹⁰⁴: Framing Class Analysis

Given the difficulties I have here outlined of unearthing and examining the all-pervasiveness of class, my analysis draws from the literature explored in this introduction a focalisation through various class-inflected interpretative frames. The following section outlines some of the themes and ideas kept in frame throughout this thesis and upon which my analysis of the works of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès hinge.

¹⁰⁰ Skeggs, Beverley, 'The Toilet Paper: Femininity, Class and Mis-recognition', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24:3/4 (2001), pp295-307

¹⁰¹ Skeggs, Beverley, *Class, Self, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), p3

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p5

¹⁰³ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁰⁴ Eribon, *op. cit.*, p58

Firstly, let us unpack some of the implications of notions of ‘ambiguity’ and ‘fuzzy boundaries’ evoked by Skeggs above. Lauren Berlant has written that ‘a simple boundary can reverberate and make the world intelligible’.¹⁰⁵ Where Berlant credits boundaries with ‘[making] the world intelligible’, Mary Douglas attributes them with an originary societal function and purpose: ‘the idea of society is a powerful image [...] this image has form; it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure’.¹⁰⁶ Alongside Bourdieu’s theories, we may thus understand a classed society as structured around a series of margins and boundaries, via distinction and separation. In her *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, bell hooks discusses the difficulties of straddling and moving across class lines. This movement is not ‘clean’, is not a ‘simple matter’.¹⁰⁷ It can create abjection and discordance, ‘a clash in etiquette, values, the way we do things’.¹⁰⁸ Julia Kristeva adopts Douglas’ understanding of the abject as ‘matter out of place’¹⁰⁹ when she writes that

ce n’est [...] pas l’absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend abject, mais ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. *L’entre-deux, l’ambigu*’¹¹⁰ (my emphasis)

The sense of displacement suggested in Douglas and Kristeva’s theorisations of the abject corresponds with the transgressive nature of the classed writings of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès alike. As previously established, Ernaux, Angot and Despentès, whether explicitly or implicitly expressed, share a sense of upward class trajectory, of being *entre-deux*. All three understand class as a topic in literature as ‘matter out of place’. Further still, as women writers of working-class origin, all three understand their authorial presences as potentially transgressive figures ‘out of place’ in the world of literature. They – and their texts – resist clean categorisations and create ambiguity. Indeed, ‘l’abjection est surtout ambiguïté’.¹¹¹ Douglas underscores the power inherent to this ambiguity:

¹⁰⁵ Berlant, Lauren, ‘Intimacy: A Special Issue’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1998), pp281-288, p283

¹⁰⁶ Douglas, *op. cit.*, p115

¹⁰⁷ hooks, *op. cit.*, p147

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p152

¹⁰⁹ Douglas, *op. cit.*, p36

¹¹⁰ Kristeva, Julia, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur : Essai sur l’abjection* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980) [ebook], p21

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p28

So many ideas about power are based on an idea of society as a series of forms contrasted with surrounding non-form. There is a power [...] in the inarticulate area, margins, confused lines, and beyond the external boundaries¹¹²

I am interested here in the ways in which Ernaux, Angot and Despentès create new modes of class expression in their crossing, transgressing and disturbing of naturalised boundaries. My analysis of their works thus pays close attention to the articulation of fuzzy lines between class boundaries, maintaining focus on the power inherent to the ambiguity created at these borders and by writers, narrators and characters positioned at their nexuses.

Notions of transgression and trespassing bring me to another lens of analysis adopted in this thesis: that of space. Across the authors and texts examined in this study, I employ the key motifs of access and exclusion, intrusion and eruption, and remain attentive to ideas of containment and freedom and their unequal distribution. In any exploration of class it is vital to reflect upon how space is dictated and by whom, both inside narratives and in the wider literary sphere. Essential, too, are considerations of who can use these (textual and physical) spaces, who can gain access and who is excluded and on what grounds. The significant, reciprocal relationships between space, spatial praxis and class have long been stressed by philosophical and theoretical writers alike. Bourdieu, who has repeatedly been drawn into critical discussions of Ernaux's work (Ladimer (2000), McIlvanney (2001), Thomas (2008)), saw the direct correlation between space and class, between social space and physical space, and demonstrated how power relations of the former are affirmed and played out in the latter. In his *La Misère du monde*, he outlines: 'la structure de l'espace social se manifeste ainsi, dans les contextes les plus divers, sous la forme d'oppositions spatiales, l'espace habité (ou approprié) fonctionnant comme une sorte de symbolisation spontanée de l'espace social'.¹¹³ Indeed, 'la position d'un agent dans l'espace social s'exprime dans le lieu de l'espace physique où il est situé (celui dont on dit qu'il est "sans feu ni lieu" ou "sans domicile fixe" n'a - quasiment - pas d'existence sociale)¹¹⁴. In his *Choses dites* (1987), in a chapter titled *Espace social et pouvoir symbolique*, Bourdieu defines social reality as:

est un ensemble de *relations invisibles*, celles-là mêmes qui constituent un *espace de positions* extérieures les unes aux autres, définies les unes par rapport aux autres, par

¹¹² Douglas, *op. cit.*, p99

¹¹³ Bourdieu, Pierre, 'Effets de lieu' in *La Misère du monde*, ed. P. Bourdieu (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), p160

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p161

la proximité, le voisinage, ou par la distance, et aussi par la position relative, au-dessus ou au-dessous, ou encore, entre, au milieu¹¹⁵ (my emphasis)

Michel de Certeau's analyses of spatial praxis also evidence this underpinning social element to the using, inhabiting and constructing of space/place. In his *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), he outlines how 'spatial practices [...] *secretly* structure the determining conditions of social life'¹¹⁶ (my emphasis).¹¹⁷ Although not explicitly concerned with social class, Certeau brings questions of space and place to Foucauldian understandings of structures of power (*Surveiller et punir* (1975)), underlining the insidious and, crucially, inconspicuous ways that organising structures 'secretly' govern and dictate space. Accordingly, this study pays particular attention to encounters with institutionalised and policing spaces and bodies, whether these be schools, churches, the police, the city or the sacred 'space' of the bourgeois family unit.

Sally Munt understands class identity as 'lived through spatial practices: subjects exist within spaces that are marked by circumscription and symbolic violence'.¹¹⁸ Space, according to Ernaux in *Le vrai lieu*, is always infused with social meaning, both in a physical, geographically demarcated way and in a more abstract, affective way: 'dans une ville il y a toujours des séparations qui ne sont pas visibles à l'étranger qui arrive, mais inscrites subtilement *dans le territoire et dans les têtes*'¹¹⁹ (my emphasis). Indeed, 'le lieu – *géographique, social* – où l'on naît et celui où l'on vit offrent sur les textes écrits, non pas une explication, mais l'arrière-fond de la réalité où [...] ils sont ancrés'¹²⁰ (my emphasis). My analysis across Ernaux, Angot and Despentès considers space as it is inscribed in minds (and, consequently, in writing) and explores ideas of spaces as repositories of (class) memory and trauma. I also understand space in terms of position(ing), contemplating the spaces all three authors occupy or claim and the ways in which they write from consciously classed positions. Further still, my analysis features considerations of 'the interspace between writer and readers'¹²¹ and the spaces that readers are invited, expected or forced to occupy through two-way dynamics of intruder and voyeur. Maintaining sensitivity to all of these considerations of

¹¹⁵ Bourdieu, Pierre, 'Espace social et pouvoir symbolique', *Choses dites* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1987), p150

¹¹⁶ De Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p96

¹¹⁷ The word 'secretly' here suggests a need to unearth, an imperative to dig deeper should we wish to expose the inner workings of the stratifying systems of society. In turn, I hope, this provides further justification for this project of class-based literary exploration and excavation.

¹¹⁸ Munt, *op. cit.*, p12

¹¹⁹ Ernaux, *Le vrai lieu*, p24

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p9

¹²¹ Day, Thomas and Ernaux, *op. cit.*, p103

space, my analysis traces the sense of class tension and class displacement played out and performed through Ernaux, Angot and Despentès' texts.

A turn once more to Ernaux's *Le vrai lieu* shows us that ideas of containment extend beyond the geographical to the behavioural in conceptions of class. For Ernaux, working-class expression is less 'contained', infused with 'une forme de violence [...] de puissance corporelle non-contrôlée'¹²² whereas that of the bourgeois subject is marked by 'l'acquisition d'une « discrétion » corporelle'.¹²³ Her childhood steeped in working-class culture is presented as being characterised by cacophonous yet joyful excess, 'de bonheurs, de plaisirs, considérés souvent comme vulgaires ou inférieurs [...] les fêtes, les repas, les chansons'.¹²⁴ Assimilation into bourgeois culture, on the other hand, requires carefully maintained constraint and 'va toujours, avec certaines façons de parler, de se comporter, certains goûts, une distinction d'ordre social'.¹²⁵ These ideas of order and excess, this sense of overspilling the boundaries of social order and being 'too much' echo the disruption of order suggested in Kristeva's application of the abject as 'ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles'.¹²⁶ In class terms, Munt observes that judgements of abjectness are cast 'downwards' and seem

to emerge from boundaries being threatened, from a feminine excess which needs restraint, of fat, cigarette-smoking, beer-drinking men who have become a drain on the social body (they leak, they weep, they rage: excrescent and grotesque)¹²⁷

I do not, of course, wish to perpetuate these stereotypes nor in any way suggest that I subscribe to them. Nevertheless, these ideas around what is good and proper, what is excessive or vulgar, undoubtedly carry heavy societal class implications. The works of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès engage playfully with these notions. At times their texts feature an excessive or uncomfortable vulnerability. Sometimes they are excessively violent and/or sexual. They may provoke discomfort or stoke up disgust. My analysis across these authors asks: where do these (classed) judgements come from? How do these authors' texts articulate or manipulate them? What power dynamics are at play within them?

¹²² Ernaux, *Le vrai lieu*, p28

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p27

¹²⁴ *Loc. cit.*

¹²⁵ *Loc. cit.*

¹²⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p21

¹²⁷ Munt, *op. cit.*, p8

We may also note the prevalence of the body in conceptions of vulgarity and excess. In her work on pollution and dirt, Douglas discusses the body as a societal symbol or microcosm. We must, she says, be prepared 'to see in the body a symbol of society'.¹²⁸ Indeed, 'the body is a model which can stand for any bounded system'.¹²⁹ Bodily excess is thus perceived as threatening to social order. Like Munt, Skeggs notes the historic alignment of working-class bodies with excess. The latter, however, maintains particular focus on working-class women: 'working-class women have often been associated with the lower unruly order of bodily functions, such as that of expulsion and leakage (and reproduction), which signified lack of discipline and vulgarity'.¹³⁰ As Steph Lawler also observes, 'white and black working-class women [are] constituted in terms of excess, vulgarity and sexuality, rather than in terms of the containment, taste and asexuality (or restricted heterosexuality) associated with femininity'.¹³¹ Class, indeed, 'plays a central role in the regulation of femininity'.¹³² These ideas will become particularly pertinent in chapter 3 where I read class in Despentès' works through the feminine and as presented in her women protagonists.

The structuring of society around these binarised oppositions of excess/containment, 'vice/virtue, filth/cleanliness, animality/civilization [...] [is] raced as well as *classed*'¹³³ (my emphasis). Such oppositions create and maintain difference and distinction between bodies. As William Miller writes in *The Anatomy of Disgust*:

Disgust, along with contempt, as well as other emotions in various settings, recognizes and maintains difference. Disgust helps define boundaries between us and them and me and you. It helps prevent our way from being subsumed into their way. Disgust, along with desire, locates the bounds of the other, either as something to be avoided, repelled, or attacked, or, in other settings, as something to be emulated, imitated, or married¹³⁴

The body, in its appearance, its boundaries, and its functions, cannot help but be steeped in class. In my analysis I share Skeggs' understanding that 'to be classed is to embody a physicality which will always be a means of recognition (of either similarity or difference)'.¹³⁵ As such, my explorations of the chosen texts in this thesis pay close attention to positionings

¹²⁸ Douglas, *op. cit.*, p115

¹²⁹ *Loc. cit.*

¹³⁰ Skeggs, *The Appearance of Class*, pp133-134

¹³¹ Lawler, *op. cit.*, p124

¹³² *Ibid.*, p122

¹³³ Skeggs, *The Appearance of Class*, pp131-132

¹³⁴ Miller, William, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p50

¹³⁵ Skeggs, *The Appearance of Class*, p143

and readings of bodies and to the ways in which they are used to articulate class. It is important to acknowledge here that all bodies might be considered classed bodies, and specify that when the adjective 'classed' is used in relation to bodies in this study, I employ it to designate the kinds of bodies my chosen three authors present in their texts that stand to be devalued according to class-informed judgements about excess, propriety, gender norms, normalised beauty standards, etc. Also key to questions of positioning and reading are dynamics of looking, framing and screening. My analysis considers the gaze as 'a vector of oppression'¹³⁶ and judgement, asking: what frames our gaze when we 'look' in a classed way? What frames the reading (or, indeed, the writing) of classed texts?

Matters of excess, vulgarity, disgust and distinction are, of course, inextricable from Bourdieu's conception of taste. Indeed, 'les goûts sont sans doute avant tout des *dégoûts*, faits d'horreur ou d'intolérance *viscérale*'¹³⁷ (my emphasis). Another means by which the reader is called to consider class across the works of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès is through incited engagements and considerations of judgement and 'that pernicious social arbiter – taste'.¹³⁸ As previously established, Bourdieu's theories demonstrate how naturalised 'distinctions of taste manifest distinctions of class'¹³⁹ in that the cultural tastes of the middle and upper classes are legitimated as 'inherently 'tasteful''.¹⁴⁰ Matters of taste are inseparable from questions of class. Indeed, 'taste is not just systematically linked to class. It reinforces class distinctions'.¹⁴¹ My analysis follows Jon Cook in adopting Bourdieu's conceptualisations and understanding taste as a 'manifestation of class, and [...] as a negotiation across class boundaries',¹⁴² as 'constantly drawing and redrawing the boundaries between and within classes'.¹⁴³ Across the works of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès, negotiations across, between and within class boundaries can be felt acutely. Their texts, be they autoethnographic, autofictional or fictional, express the tension inherent to movements and conflicts between classes and to existences wrought across class lines. The tension engendered in their classed texts is multifaceted and multidirectional. We may consider the tensions, for instance, between text and lived experience, between author and narrator and between author and reader. Particularly pertinent in the works of Ernaux and Angot are the tensions between the

¹³⁶ Thomas, Lyn, 'Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness: Finding a Place in the French Feminist Canon?', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 15:2 (2006), pp159-168, p165

¹³⁷ Bourdieu, *La distinction*, p131

¹³⁸ Munt, *op. cit.*, p12

¹³⁹ Cook, Jon, 'Culture, Class and Taste' in *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. S. R. Munt (London & New York: Cassell, 2000), p97

¹⁴⁰ Lawler, *op. cit.*, p116

¹⁴¹ Cook, *op. cit.*, p102

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p111

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p100

working-class child and the upwardly mobile adult, between the innocent ignorance of childhood and the greater clarity of adulthood.

Ernaux shares with Didier Eribon, another prominent writer in the French literary scene articulating class, an upward social mobility through higher education.

Through their at once personal and political writings, both Ernaux and Eribon seek to communicate the tension and the 'sentiment déroutant'¹⁴⁴ of being caught between two worlds. Their texts share a sense of uneasy or unsuccessful reconciliation, an attempt to alleviate 'le malaise produit par l'appartenance à deux mondes différents, séparés l'un de l'autre par tant de distance qu'ils paraissent inconciliables, mais qui coexistent néanmoins dans tout ce que l'on est'.¹⁴⁵ As a fellow *transfuge de classe*, Eribon has, like Ernaux, 'toujours été entre deux'.¹⁴⁶ In *Retour à Reims* he outlines:

il me fallut passer d'un registre à l'autre, d'un univers à l'autre, mais cet écartèlement entre les deux personnes que j'étais, entre les deux rôles que je devais jouer, entre mes deux identités sociales, de moins en moins liées l'une à l'autre, de moins en moins compatibles entre elles, produisait en moi une tension bien difficile à supporter et, en tout cas, fort déstabilisante¹⁴⁷

Eribon and Ernaux's classed writings seek to capture some of this tension and convey the inescapable inner tumult of being caught *entre-deux*. In the British context, Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* remains an enduringly pertinent and oft-referenced case study of class consciousness. Steedman, too, shared in Ernaux and Eribon's upward social mobility. Acknowledging the importance of honouring 'the child who continues to live in the adult it becomes',¹⁴⁸ like Ernaux and Angot she draws on her childhood to make sense of her present. She sees her working-class childhood 'as evidence that can be used',¹⁴⁹ as 'a kind of history, the continually reworked and re-used personal history that lies at the heart of each present'.¹⁵⁰ Steedman examines the endurance of class-consciousness and its early formation, deeming it 'a structure of feeling that can be learned in childhood [...] Class and gender, and their articulations, are the bits and pieces from which

¹⁴⁴ Eribon, *op. cit.*, pp31-32

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p16

¹⁴⁶ Ernaux, *Le vrai lieu*, p21

¹⁴⁷ Eribon, *op. cit.*, p192

¹⁴⁸ Steedman, *op. cit.*, p10

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p104

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p128

psychological selfhood is made'.¹⁵¹ For Steedman, the writing of classed stories engenders an inherent tension. This is a tension with the 'central story', the dominant life narrative(s) of the middle and upper classes:

Accounts of working-class life are told by tension and ambiguity, out on the borderlands. The story – my mother's story, a hundred thousand others – cannot be absorbed into the central one: it is both its disruption and its essential counterpoint¹⁵²

In this thesis I examine the classed writings of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès with this in mind, highlighting moments of 'ambiguity' and 'disruption' and applying this sense of tension broadly. A particularly striking mode of tension evidenced by all three authors is a tension between forms. Steedman champions 'the narrative form of case-study' for its ability to '[show] what went into its writing [...] the bits and pieces from which it is made up, in a way that history refuses to do, and that fiction can't'.¹⁵³ Steedman writes extensively about narrative form and positions stories as 'interpretive device[s]': 'once a story is told, it ceases to be a story: it becomes a piece of history, an interpretive device'.¹⁵⁴ Accordingly, *Landscape for a Good Woman* takes a hybridised form that straddles analysis and memoir, the ethnographic and the autobiographical. With this text she offers a book 'about lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretive devices of the culture don't quite work'.¹⁵⁵ ('Borderlands' are one of the most frequently occurring features of Steedman's *landscape*. In this repetition we see underscored further the centrality of notions of boundaries, space, exclusion and marginality to the telling of classed stories).

Writing is, indeed, according to Ernaux, 'a social commitment not just in terms of content, but also of form'.¹⁵⁶ In his work on Eribon (and in his contribution to the aptly named edited volume, *What Forms Can Do* (Crowley and Jordan (2020))), Edward Hughes notes that 'the historical archive, sociological enquiry and the genre of conventional autobiography become the orbits along which the personal is ambiguously and obscurely tracked'.¹⁵⁷ In my analysis I broaden this further to include a consideration of class as expressed through the

¹⁵¹ Steedman, *op. cit.*, p7

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p22

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p21

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p143

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p5

¹⁵⁶ Thomas, *Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness*, p161

¹⁵⁷ Hughes, Edward 'Circuits of Reappropriation: Accessing the Real in the Work of Didier Eribon' in *What Forms Can Do: The Work of Form in 20th- and 21st- Century French Literature and Thought*, ed. Crowley, Patrick and Jordan Shirley (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), p180

sociologically inflected – though fictional – works of Despentès. All three writers analysed in this thesis, as previously established, evidence experiment with form. They thus, as Gill Rye has written of Angot, operate to varying extents ‘in the interstices of genres and at and on their borders’.¹⁵⁸ In their subversive generic slipperiness, all three constantly bring into question the relation of writing (Jordan (2007)) and of reading (Edwards (2010)) to lived experience, and it is in this vein that I wish to continue critical exploration of the writing of class experience.

Another sense of tension perceptible across the works of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès is the sense of tension between speech and silence, between telling and withholding. Turning to another prominent British writer of working-class origin, the works of Jeanette Winterson explicitly explore these ideas. In its opening pages she describes her (semi-)autobiographical work *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2012) as the textual ‘silent twin’¹⁵⁹ of her earlier *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (1985), establishing it as a later reworking that addresses that which she had previously ‘left out’.¹⁶⁰ We see this kind of ‘gap-filling’ gesture in the later works of Ernaux and Angot (*Mémoire de fille* and *Une semaine de vacances*, for instance). Such dynamics of speech and silence provoke questions about the ways in which age, gender and class influence the kinds of expression open to – or forbidden to – certain speakers. The manifestation and inscription of class in and through language remains at the forefront of the analysis in this thesis.

Classed ideas of taste and excess remain pertinent to considerations of speech and language. All three authors examined in this thesis have prompted criticism for texts that play with ideas of vulgarity and impropriety and flirt with the ‘non-literary’. We may be reminded, for example, of Ernaux’s famous *écriture plate* that aims to impart ‘dans la littérature quelque chose de dur, de lourd, de violent même, lié aux conditions de vie, à la langue du monde [...] ouvrier et paysan’.¹⁶¹ We may think, too, of Angot’s unravelling syntax and distressingly detailed accounts of abuse, or of Despentès’ expletive-laden, pornographic texts deemed dismissively by some as ‘antiliterary, anti-intellectual, and “trashy”’.¹⁶² My analysis homes in

¹⁵⁸ Rye, Gill, *L’histoire d’amour chez Christine Angot: romance or betrayal?* [Unpublished paper presented at ‘Diversity and Difference in France and the Francophone World’ conference, 20th-21st century French and Francophone Studies International Colloquium, April 1-3 2004, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida (Panel: Gender/Genre Difference and the Love Story)] <<https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/345/>> [last accessed June 2022], p5

¹⁵⁹ Winterson, Jeanette, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (London: Vintage, 2012), p8

¹⁶⁰ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁶¹ Ernaux, *L’Écriture comme un couteau*, p33

¹⁶² Schaal, Michèle, ‘Introduction to Special Issue on Virginie Despentès. From Margins to Center (?)’, *Rocky Mountain Review*, 72:1 (2018), pp14-35, p15

on the finest details of all three authors' linguistic choices, and exposes therewithin the careful, multidimensional construction of class across their works.

Ernaux, Angot and Despentès alike all incite strong reactions not just for their use of language, but also for the sentiments their classed texts communicate. Their narratives voice raw expressions of anxiety, anger and frustration, and deal with uncomfortable emotions that transgress the boundaries of traditional 'femininity' (docile, tender, sweet-tempered). The riotous works of Despentès, for instance, mobilise and nuance anger beyond its received definitions. For her, 'anger is not depression, anger is working with desire and humour. Anger is destructive, but very active'.¹⁶³ Interestingly for the present study, Despentès points out how anger is also seen as particularly problematic when expressed by working-class people. Addressing the violence in *Baise-moi* in an interview with Alan Kelly, she notes how critics of the text

sincerely felt that France would be a better space if we don't talk about violence from the lowest class [...] They don't want these popular cultures to explode. They think we should all shut the fuck up and listen to our elites [...] they are doing anything they can to forbid expressions of anger from the lower classes¹⁶⁴

If anger in Angot reads as intrusive, antagonistic and anxious, in Despentès it is eruptive and uproarious and spills over into textual, filmic and musical expression (as will be expanded upon further in chapters 2 and 3). All three authors draw on legitimate and fluctuating emotions of anger, anxiety and frustration to varying degrees in their construction of classed texts.

A further potentially distasteful sentiment expressed across all three writers' narratives is that of desire and yearning. This, too, is perceptible in varying ways and constructed through the smallest linguistic details. Readers of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès encounter expressions of desire for material possessions, for cultural capital from which narrators and characters are excluded. We are also confronted with myriad taboo sexual desires, related to sexuality, kink and even incest. Their texts communicate, too, desire for freedom from class- and gender-constraint, for financial and bodily freedom. They variably

¹⁶³ Kelly, *op. cit.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

express yearning for acceptance and inclusion, or for rebellion and vengeance. Desire and longing, as bell hooks¹⁶⁵, Steedman¹⁶⁶ and several sociologists¹⁶⁷ have pointed out, can form an important part of class stories and expressions of exclusion and marginalisation.

Steedman's *Landscape*, for example, outlines her mother's 'desires [...] for specific forms of femininity which were not available to her',¹⁶⁸ both culturally and financially, because of her class position. Generally painted as shallow or distasteful, 'women's desires for and envy of respectability and material goods are marked as apolitical, trivial, pretentious [...] Yet [...] these desires, this envy, should be situated within *political* struggles around dispossession and exclusion'.¹⁶⁹

Perceptible across the works of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès is a desire, too, for recognition or acknowledgement, a longing to be heard. Édouard Louis, another prominent French writer of working-class origin, addresses this particular desire, bringing 'ideas of repetition and listening together'.¹⁷⁰ In his *Qui a tué mon père*, he writes of his father's life:

mais est-ce qu'il ne faudrait pas se répéter quand je parle de ta vie, puisque des vies comme la tienne personne n'a envie de les entendre ? Est-ce qu'il ne faudrait pas se répéter jusqu'à ce qu'ils nous écoutent ?¹⁷¹

Like Louis, Ernaux, Angot and Despentès all feature a sense of repetition in their works. Their narratives enact repeated returns to the same themes or, in some cases, events, and in doing so invite readerly consideration of ideas of reiteration and performativity. Performance is integral across the works of the authors considered in this thesis, and thus forms part of the analytical framework I bring to the texts of all three. I understand reiteration and repetition in their texts as a gesture of continual retelling and reframing. I also consider the mimic qualities of this repetition and explore the ways in which their works, their narrators and their characters might be thought of as textual performances of the corrosive, accumulating construction of class consciousness.

¹⁶⁵ See hooks, *op. cit.*, p24

¹⁶⁶ See Steedman, *op. cit.*, p6

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, Lawler, *op. cit.*

¹⁶⁸ Lawler, *op. cit.*, p125

¹⁶⁹ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷⁰ Edy, Delphine, 'Édouard Louis et l'écriture de soi. Quand la poétique performe le réel', *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte*, 45, 3-4 (2021), pp445-479, p453

¹⁷¹ Louis, Édouard, *Qui a tué mon père* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2018), pp22-23

As quoted earlier in this introduction, in *La honte* Ernaux writes that class shame ‘n’est que répétition et accumulation’.¹⁷² We might be reminded, too, of Bourdieu’s belief that class takes root in ways that are ‘silencieuses et insidieuses, *insistantes* et insinuanes’¹⁷³ (my emphasis). As Judith Butler asserts in their theorisations of gender performativity, ‘performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms’.¹⁷⁴ Butler evokes Bourdieu in their work, demonstrating how the understanding of social rules more broadly is an ‘embodied activity’: ‘if a subject becomes a subject by entering the normativity of language, then in some important ways, these rules precede and orchestrate the very formation of the subject’.¹⁷⁵ The reiteration and performance of norms, then, creates distinction within individuals and between classes. Indeed, Bourdieu’s *habitus* refers to those embodied rituals of everydayness by which a given culture produces and sustains belief in its own “obviousness”.¹⁷⁶ Butler applies Bourdieu’s thinking to their theorisations of performativity and in this way understands that

the habitus is formed, but it is also formative: it is in this sense that the bodily habitus constitutes a tacit form of performativity, a citational chain lived and believed at the level of the body¹⁷⁷

I have already discussed the importance of bodies in articulating class, and Butler here again underscores their significance in enacting these reiterative social practices. Skeggs, too, understands both class and femininity as being read on the body: ‘because appearance is always produced on the body [...] the body is read as truth’.¹⁷⁸ Indeed, ‘the body, Bourdieu argues, is the most tangible manifestation of the “person”’.¹⁷⁹ Skeggs follows Butler in seeing ‘gender as produced and sustained through a process of performance and attribution (or “reading” of others’ embodied being)’¹⁸⁰ (Stevi Jackson tracks how these ideas predate Butler yet were made ‘fashionable’ by *Gender Trouble* (1990)¹⁸¹). In this way, through her explorations of femininity as symbolic and/or cultural capital,¹⁸² and her engagement with Butler’s exposition of ‘the surface politics of the body’,¹⁸³ Skeggs outlines how ‘class underpins

¹⁷² Ernaux, *La honte*, p266

¹⁷³ Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire*, p29

¹⁷⁴ Butler, Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), p95

¹⁷⁵ Butler, Judith, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), p135

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p152

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p155

¹⁷⁸ Skeggs, *The Toilet Paper*, p300

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p303

¹⁸⁰ Jackson, Stevi, ‘Why a Materialist Feminism is (Still) Possible – and Necessary’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 24, 3/4 (2001), pp283-293, p288

¹⁸¹ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁸² See Skeggs, *The Toilet Paper*, p296 and Skeggs, *Formations of Class & Gender*, p8

¹⁸³ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p185

any reading of bodies on the basis of appearance'.¹⁸⁴ Crucially for our analysis here – and again in line with Butler's theorisation of gender – Skeggs underlines the *fallacy* of easy readability and criticises the damaging systems of judgement, classification and mis-recognition inherent to this 'visual evaluation'. In this way, the subject, she argues, is fixed 'in exclusion, pathology, harm, and pain'.¹⁸⁵ The performance of gender and class engendered by and read upon the body open it up to risk. Munt, for example, has outlined her fears around the ways in which her body reveals her working-class upbringing, how she

feared exposure [...] in eating, talking, domestic rituals, professional practices, money, shopping, clothes, in my subtle daily being, in my 'structure of feeling' there existed an anxious anticipation that my carefully wrought emplacement would at any time produce ejection¹⁸⁶

As Skeggs also understands, 'appearance and recognition are central to the processes by which some groups are denied access to economic and cultural resources because they are not recognized as being worthy recipients'.¹⁸⁷ Given the imbrication of the body with questions of performativity, my analysis maintains acute attention to the ways in which Ernaux, Angot and Despentès present bodies, the ways in which matters of class 'form' their protagonists, and the ways in which their texts stage performances of the iterative processes that *make* class. Indeed, the reiterative, repetitive writing practices of all three authors bring readerly focus repeatedly to questions of class. As Delphine Edy notes:

La répétition [...] produit un effet de focalisation, comme au cinéma lorsque la caméra revient sur un visage, un objet ou un plan, comme pour nous indiquer que c'est là qu'il y a quelque chose à chercher, engageant alors une prise de conscience critique¹⁸⁸

Pushing beyond ideas of repetition, this study also considers the ways in which the works of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès provoke emotional engagement, inviting a sort of 'lecture active',¹⁸⁹ placing their readers at the heart of their textual performances of class and drawing them in differing ways into class awareness. This being said, it is important to unpack and remain sensitive to, not only the multiple meanings and manifestations of the term

¹⁸⁴ Skeggs, *The Toilet Paper*, p295

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p296

¹⁸⁶ Munt, *op. cit.*, pp9-10

¹⁸⁷ Skeggs, *The Appearance of Class*, p129

¹⁸⁸ Edy, *op. cit.*, p477

¹⁸⁹ *Loc. cit.*

'performance', but also its inherent tensions and ambiguities. By this I mean, for instance, maintaining an awareness of the ways in which these class performances may be exaggerated, as well as the potentiality for the texts studied to display, or constitute in and of themselves, exaggerated behaviour. Ideas of performance may also suggest a certain amount of artificiality or inauthenticity, and perhaps even motivations relating to entertainment and spectacle. 'Performance' and performativity are terms that contain a multitude of potential interpretations and resonances and, accordingly, my analysis maintains a sensitivity to these nuances, keeping them in view as it attends to the authors' various textual performances of class.

The interpretive frames I have mentioned here are the kind of issues that resurface again and again in critical considerations of class. Each analytical chapter dedicated to Ernaux, Angot and Despentès examines their writerly handling of class alongside questions of boundaries and ambiguity, excess and abjection, taste and distinction, and reiteration and performance. The analysis in each case is also considered through the lenses of space and the body and through various manifestations of tension. In accordance with Ernaux, Angot and Despentès' shifting forms, in this study I adopt a hybrid theoretical framework with sociological and ethnographic underpinnings, one informed by the sociologists as well as the cultural and literary theorists this literature review has explored. I nevertheless remain conscious of this thesis as a work of literary criticism. What interests me is the ways in which these authors *write* their lives, the ways they find and explore to tell their stories and the various performances of class dynamics and class consciousness that surface with and through their texts. I bring this theoretical framework to Ernaux, Angot and Despentès and use it to understand and unpack encounters where class awareness, class distinction and class prejudice crystallise and come sometimes glaringly, sometimes covertly to the fore. Throughout the chosen texts and across this thesis' chapters I select and analyse these instances and explore their carefully choreographed dynamics down to the smallest symbolic, linguistic and rhythmic details. Although class is a pervasive category and is woven throughout the texts of these three authors, examination of these moments and snapshots helps to illuminate the writing of class in action. Within these encounters that 'distinguish' and classify, I examine the ways in which Ernaux, Angot and Despentès stage textual performances of class and cultivate provocations about the classed notions of acceptability and taste, excess and discretion, and access and exclusion. In this way, my study exposes the

potential for class compassion and understanding produced in the spaces between formal categories, as well as in textual encounters between reader and writer.

Chapter Outlines

The analytical chapters that make up the main body of this thesis consist of three separate dedicated studies. Ernaux, Angot and Despentès are approached chronologically in terms of age and writing careers, spanning an evolution in class expression, both within their individual corpuses and holistically across all three. Chapter 1, “‘Toutes ces chambres imbriquées les unes dans les autres’: Mapping Class, Sex and Identity in the Works of Annie Ernaux”, acknowledges that considerations of class and sex have been brought to the writer’s work repeatedly throughout the years. That said, in this thesis my analysis of Ernaux unpacks the question of class in relation to two texts hitherto unexplored in these terms: one of her most recent novels, *Mémoire de fille* (2016) and the diaristic *Se perdre* (2001). Chapter 1 first and foremost invites a consideration of space in Ernaux’s writing, both the spaces that feature within her texts and the reader-writer space of the text, and how these relate to and are infused with class. Ernaux shares with Winterson a metaphysical envisioning of writing. For Ernaux, ‘ouvrir un livre, c’est vraiment pousser une porte’¹⁹⁰ whilst in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, Winterson asserts that ‘a book is a door’.¹⁹¹ Indeed:

the crossing in and out, the different worlds, the significant spaces, are private coordinates that in my fiction I have tried to make paradigmatic [...] The story crosses the threshold from my world into yours. We meet each other on the steps of the story¹⁹²

Ernaux’s construction and consideration of space, I argue, contribute to the performance of class dynamics that her texts convey. My analysis of *Mémoire de fille* centres on this staging of space but maintains particular focus on the text’s exposition of the bedroom or *chambre* space. With attentiveness to spatially orientated details, I examine how dynamics of access and exclusion are mapped out and communicate the anxiety engendered in imbalanced power dynamics, including those of class. *Mémoire de fille* evokes sex-based trauma and awakening (Jordan (2019)) but it also, as my analysis shows, demonstrates a traumatic coming-into-awareness of the violent divisiveness of class dynamics.

¹⁹⁰ Ernaux, *Le vrai lieu*, p88

¹⁹¹ Winterson, *op. cit.*, p38

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p61

The chapter then moves to consideration of *Se perdre*, a much earlier and formally very different text but one that nonetheless echoes some of the same concerns. As the sister text to *Passion simple*, *Se perdre* portrays the loss of self involved in an obsessively passionate love affair and is perhaps an unlikely text to examine in class terms. However, I argue that classed concerns and judgements resurface throughout the narrative. My analysis focuses on the ways in which the class- and sex-based wounds inflicted in the childhood time of *Mémoire de fille* produce a tension sustained into the adult relationship in *Se perdre*. Albeit enduring, this class anxiousness and consciousness is one that evolves. As Steedman writes in her *Landscape for a Good Woman*,

Children do not possess a social analysis of what is happening to them, or around them, so the landscape and the pictures it presents have to remain a background, taking on meaning later, from different circumstances¹⁹³

The retriggering of class wounds in *Se perdre*, and the variable power imbalance between the narrator and her lover, highlight a more nuanced and complex consideration of class than the immediacy of the initiatory experiences expressed in *Mémoire de fille*. I close this chapter with a brief discussion of *L'Usage de la photo* (2005) and *Le jeune homme* (2022). In these two more recent texts, the narrator definitely and productively courts class- and sex-based shame on her own terms. Examining dynamics of access across these texts, I highlight the ways in which the writer explores class identity through her writing of sex.

Chapter 2, “Allusive mais constante’: Unearthing Class in Christine Angot’s *Une semaine de vacances* and *L’Inceste’*, first addresses the curious lack of focus on class in critical explorations of the writer, particularly in comparison to the relative ubiquity of class discussions about her writing in wider, more mainstream media. This absence is all the more curious given Angot’s direct addressing of this facet of her life-writing, most notably in her *Un amour impossible*. Many speculative reasons for this dearth of focus on class have been established in this introductory chapter, but in the specific case of Angot it seems that her writing of class has been overshadowed by a critical emphasis on the arguably much more immediately shocking and upsetting trope of incestuous abuse. In this thesis I argue that this abuse is in fact made possible by and predicated on class difference and imbalanced power

¹⁹³ Steedman, *op. cit.*, p28

dynamics. As such, this chapter analyses *Une semaine de vacances* (2012) and *L’Inceste* (1999), two texts that deal directly with this abuse and its aftereffects and thus, I suggest, implicitly yet insidiously with questions of class. Examining dynamics of access and exclusion, and introducing a third analytical lens of intrusion, I explore how Angot’s texts perform (sex- and class-based trauma, how they perform the violent, regulating powers of class distinction and the naturalising of class hierarchy and entitlement. My analysis uses Béatrix Le Wita’s ethnography of French bourgeois culture, *Ni vue ni connue: Approche ethnographique de la culture bourgeoise* (1988), as a tool for unpacking these dynamics, and hinges on the abusive, middle-class father figure. Indeed, Angot’s texts make upsettingly clear Steedman’s claim that

each child grows up in an adult world that is specified by both politics and social existence, and they are reared by adults who consciously know and who consciously manipulate the particularities of the world that shaped them¹⁹⁴

Une semaine de vacances and *L’Inceste* offer very different reading experiences. The first has a distressingly clinical, almost ethnographically driven way of treating its traumatic subject matter. The suggested child narrator is entirely absent and *Une semaine de vacances* is written exclusively in the third person. *L’Inceste*, by contrast, has a deeply vocal yet unrelentingly introspective quality. Its disorientating, nonlinear expression of a drawn-out emotional crisis once again demonstrates how class wounds persist and how traumatic memories from childhood can be triggered and unravelled in the adult ‘present’. With close attentiveness to Angot’s rhythmic and linguistic choices, chapter 2 constitutes the first dedicated study of the performance of class dynamics her texts stage.

Chapter 3 of this thesis, “Prolotte de la féminité’: Reading Class Through Feminine Performance in Virginie Despentes’ *Baise-moi* and *Vernon Subutex*’, focuses on the writer’s articulations and performances of class. Examining the intersections of class and gender dynamics, and with particular focus on evocations of and challenges to taste and propriety, I unpack encounters with and between characters that stage tensions across class lines. With her texts and their vast array of characters, Despentes creates a powerful and immersive framework that draws her readers into considerations of gender, class and judgement. Although it acknowledges the fictional specificity of (much of) Despentes’ writing, my analysis considers its underpinnings of real-life experience through, for instance, incorporation of her

¹⁹⁴ Steedman, *op. cit.*, p123

auto-theoretical manifesto *King Kong Théorie*. I examine, too, Desportes' wider formal experimentation (an experimentation, as previously established, that is central to the construction of classed narratives). I open the chapter with a detailed exploration of her hitherto overlooked punk rap feminist album, *Fear of a Female Planet* (1990), with her band Straight Royeur. Arguably, this music might have been largely disregarded because it does not constitute 'high culture', something that perhaps befits a writer whose punk image and grunge aesthetic (both in her texts and films and in her presentation of her authorial persona) were initially seen by some as an infraction into the literary sphere. Desportes' affiliation with punk further situates her as a '[player] in the game of judgements of taste' in that punks 'violate what is held to be in good taste'.¹⁹⁵ In bringing critical focus to this punk rap album as the earliest manifestation of Desportes' artistic project, my analysis foregrounds an attention to performance and demonstrates the foundational and enduring class consciousness that runs throughout and beyond Desportes' literary corpus.

In this chapter I track the performances of class in Desportes' first publication, *Baise-moi* (1994), and in her most recent texts, the *Vernon Subutex* trilogy (2015-2017). *Baise-moi* exploded onto the literary scene and caused uproar for its unapologetic portrayal of female-perpetrated violence and sexuality via a duo of sex-worker protagonists representative of the marginalised. *Vernon Subutex* spans three large tomes as Desportes deftly weaves her narrative through myriad contemporary perspectives. In the first volume in particular she introduces a vast cast of characters who, despite their varying levels of privilege and social standing, all orbit around the central figure of Vernon, an aging record shop owner marginalised due to his poverty and subsequent homelessness. In my examination of class encounters in these texts, I once again consider dynamics of access, exclusion, intrusion and, additionally, eruption. Given Desportes' proclivity for writing the urban and social margins, questions of space and positioning both with and within the texts remain pertinent to my analysis in chapter 3. I read class in Desportes through her transgressive problematisations of the feminine, and, as such, incorporate the works of Beverley Skeggs, particularly her findings on expectations and regulations of gender and how these differ between social classes. Examining Desportes' stylistic and linguistic choices, I look at seemingly peripheral characters such as Séverine (*Baise-moi*) and Émilie (*Vernon Subutex*) and demonstrate how even the briefest of encounters highlight and crystallise class concerns. Each dedicated

¹⁹⁵ Cook, *op. cit.*, p109

chapter highlights each of these authors as prominent literary figures articulating class in the contemporary.

‘[Making] class matter’¹⁹⁶

In resistance to its relative absence in academic fields of study, this thesis contributes to a readdressing of the question of class. It also constitutes a timely reinvigoration of class given recent global events and the COVID-19 pandemic. In a time of collective (though unbalanced) grief, precarity and turmoil, questions of inequality and of unfair and unchecked privilege are felt even more acutely. That said, it is important to ‘préciser d’où [je prends] la parole’¹⁹⁷ and acknowledge my own position as a white woman who is middle-class and university-educated. I acknowledge, also, the white specificity of my chosen corpus and maintain sensitivity to questions of intersectionality. With this thesis I do not wish to flatten classed stories (like Steedman, my ‘point is *not* to say that all working-class childhoods are the same’¹⁹⁸ and this extends through all stages of life experience) nor bend them to fit any given argument. Indeed, ‘the differences are as important as the similarities’.¹⁹⁹ My study aims to draw attention to the specificities of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès’ classed narratives, not just their common ground. I wish to highlight their stories and therewithin their expressions of legitimate class-based pain, anger and injustice. In attentively unpacking the detail of their texts I seek to expand understanding of their writerly projects under this lens.

I follow Edward Hughes in seeking to explore the ways that writers find to ‘expose or unwrite antagonistic social relations which have congealed into a state of settled ordinariness’ and ‘make available to their readers modes of attention that resist the naturalization of inequality’.²⁰⁰ What I am examining in each author, fundamentally, is the performances of class dynamics that their texts formulate and enact, and the varied ways that each chooses to attend to the challenge of conveying the lived experience of class. This thesis sheds further light on a fundamental aspect of the works of Ernaux, Angot and Despentès: the all-prevailing, all-permeating class consciousness that unravels and stretches throughout each of their oeuvres.

¹⁹⁶ Skeggs, *Formations of Class & Gender*, p15

¹⁹⁷ Arbizu, Susana and Belin, Henri, ‘King Kong Théorie : Entretien avec Virginie Despentès’, *Mauvaiseherbe’s Weblog* (2008) <<https://mauvaiseherbe.wordpress.com/2008/09/11/king-kong-theorie-entretien-avec-virginie-despentès/>> [last accessed June 2022]

¹⁹⁸ Steedman, *op. cit.*, p16

¹⁹⁹ Bromley, *op. cit.*, p67

²⁰⁰ Hughes, *Egalitarian Strangeness*, p14

Chapter 1. 'Toutes ces chambres imbriquées les unes dans les autres'²⁰¹: Mapping Class, Sex and Identity in the Works of Annie Ernaux

'Sexuality flows in a channel laid down by class awareness'²⁰² writes Lorraine Day in her analysis of Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides*. In *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins*, Siobhán McIlvanney agrees that in Ernaux's writing, 'the portrayal of female sexuality cannot be read without reference to the formative parameters of social class'.²⁰³ Indeed, opening out our scope further, sociologist Beverley Skeggs, in her feminist, ethnographic study of white working-class British girls, posits that 'sexuality is always mediated through respectability'.²⁰⁴ McIlvanney's study of Ernaux echoes Skeggs' breaking down of societal codes and recognises 'the correlation between social class and sexual immorality'.²⁰⁵ As Skeggs reiterates elsewhere, 'definitions of sexuality [are] deeply linked to class'.²⁰⁶ Given the profound imbrication of class and sex, it is thus unsurprising that sex and sexuality feature heavily in a chapter exploring Ernaux's writing of class.

This chapter mines class in Ernaux through the prism of sexuality and, via the spatial notions of access and exclusion, examines her narrating of sex as writerly impetus for exploring classed identity. I consider the spaces through and with which the writer crafts her classed stories, as well as the metaphorical spaces these stories create (for instance, the potential spaces opened up between narrator and/or text and reader). In this chapter I expose the continuities and evolutions in Ernaux's writing of class identity. A level of class awareness is maintained through the sexual relationships narrated throughout the writer's oeuvre. Through her writing of sex and sexual encounters, I argue, Ernaux's narrator continually situates herself in class terms and, retrospectively, makes available the insidious class-based dynamic that shaped her sense of self. My analysis first examines the early inception of the 'filles scandaleuses'²⁰⁷ at the cross-section of class- and sex-based trauma in Ernaux's *Mémoire de fille* (2016). Then, turning analytical attention to *Se perdre* (2001) and incorporating discussion of *L'Usage de la photo* (2005), I trace how, through the narration of her sex life as

²⁰¹ Ernaux, Annie, *Se perdre in Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp697-876, p748

²⁰² Day, Lorraine, 'Class, sexuality and subjectivity in Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides*' in *Contemporary French fiction by women: Feminist perspectives*, ed. by M. Attack and P. Powrie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p53

²⁰³ McIlvanney, Siobhán, *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), p17

²⁰⁴ Skeggs, Beverley, *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: SAGE, 2002), p14

²⁰⁵ McIlvanney, *op. cit.* p24

²⁰⁶ Skeggs, Beverley, 'The Appearance of Class: Challenges in Gay Space' in *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. S. R. Munt (London & New York: Cassell, 2000), p131

²⁰⁷ Ernaux, Annie, *Le jeune homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2022), p31

an adult *transfuge de classe*, the writer revisits these painful memories and courts this signifier of 'scandaleuse' on her own terms. Finally, I turn to Ernaux's most recently published work, *Le jeune homme* (2022). If this short text, as the endorsement on the back of the jacket claims, is 'une clé pour lire l'œuvre d'Annie Ernaux – son rapport au temps et à l'écriture',²⁰⁸ I suggest it provides a key, furthermore, for reading Ernaux's writing of sexuality and, crucially, class identity. Lyn Thomas has explored how the writer's use of intertextual and literary references and her narrator's 'complex and evolving relationship to them' have allowed her to develop her core theme of 'the impact on identity of the move from working-class to middle-class culture'.²⁰⁹ With the following analysis, I show that a tracing of her complex and evolving writing of sex also sheds further light on this fundamental aspect of her work. Examining how the author situates herself in classed terms through her narration of sexual relationships, I consider Ernaux's writerly trajectory as a *transfuge de classe*.

As Thomas and Emma Webb have expressed, 'if class is in many ways Ernaux's dominant theme, it is never separated from issues of gender and sexuality'.²¹⁰ Class, gender and sexuality are, indeed, 'inextricably linked in Ernaux's writing'.²¹¹ It makes sense, then, that class, sexuality and shame have long converged in critical investigations on Ernaux. Within these writings, several pertinent trends have emerged. McIlvanney and Thomas analyse the formative influences that shape sexuality and selfhood in Ernaux's works. The latter has outlined the writer's 'construction of a relational self'²¹² and analysed her narrators' apparent seeking of 'compensation' and 'succour' through sexual relationships with men.²¹³ McIlvanney identifies in Ernaux's writing a cyclical revisiting of her roots, something through which the writer constructs a critique of the naturalised inferiority of working-class culture and launches a continual challenge to the bourgeois dictates that would keep expressions of female sexuality out of the realm of literature. For Day, too, sexuality is intricately entangled with class in Ernaux, and is born from the 'legacy of an upbringing that equated the pursuit of sexual pleasure with social disgrace'.²¹⁴ As explored by Michèle Bacholle (2003) and Elise Hugueny-Léger (2008), disgrace, shame and betrayal are folded into Ernaux's writing of class and sex. Both Bacholle and Chloë Taylor Merleau (2004) recognise the deeply-set ideas of

²⁰⁸ Ernaux, Annie, *Le jeune homme*

²⁰⁹ Thomas, Lyn, 'Reading and Writing with Bourdieu: Popular and Literary Intertexts in Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides*', *Institute for the Study of European Transformations*, 4 (2008), pp1-21, p3

²¹⁰ Thomas, Lyn and Webb, Emma, 'Writing from Experience: The Place of the Personal in French Feminist Writing', *Feminist Review*, 61 (Snakes and Ladders: Reviewing Feminisms at Century's End (Spring, 1999)), pp27-48, p29

²¹¹ Thomas, 'Reading and Writing with Bourdieu', p20

²¹² Thomas, *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and Her Audience*, p91

²¹³ *Ibid.* p96

²¹⁴ Day, Lorraine, *Writing Shame and Desire: The Work of Annie Ernaux* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), p223

confession, religion and sin that influence Ernaux's writing of shame. Bethany Ladimer (2002) sees the interlinking of class- and sex-based shame throughout her oeuvre as the result of an internalisation of the middle-class gaze. Several Ernaux scholars, perhaps Thomas most notably ((Thomas and Webb 1999), (Thomas 2008)), focus in on the sense of loss often conveyed through her writing of class and sex. This sense of loss constitutes a loss of both self and of the culture of origin, both of which remain important to the analysis of class and sex in this chapter.

The texts considered in the following analysis – *Mémoire de fille* and *Se perdre*, as well as *L'Usage de la photo* and *Le jeune homme* – all detail significant sexual experiences in the life of the narrating subject(s). As such, all four of these texts are fascinatingly revealing in terms of dynamics of class. With this chapter, I bring class considerations to a set of texts previously largely unexamined in these terms. I bring too, a fresh critical angle to Ernaux's writing of class via sex through an analysis of the dynamics of access, exclusion and distancing. Across these four works, I trace and highlight how the inscription of sex across Ernaux's oeuvre produces ways of knowing, as well as narrating, the classed self. Before embarking on this analysis, however, let us further outline and elaborate our understandings of sex and space in Ernaux, as well as their implications for matters of class.

1.1 Access and Exclusion: Situating Sex, Ernauxian Space and Social Class

An imbrication of class and sex, as I have outlined, underpins Ernaux's expansive corpus, from its very beginning with *Les Armoires vides* through to the contemporary moment with *Le jeune homme*. Whilst sex and desire might broadly be considered aspects of human experience that transcend class, in Ernaux it is through sex and desire that class can be felt most acutely. Such imbrication inspires myriad broader questions: how and why can class and sexual relationships be so enmeshed? How and why can the self be 'lost' through sex? Why can class be felt so acutely in sex? How is class experienced through sexual acts and through sexual attraction? And, indeed, we might follow Shirley Jordan in asking, 'what part does a woman's sexuality play in terms of her sense of self'?²¹⁵

Sex, I suggest, is highly revealing of the self in class terms. It is a space within which we may divulge our private tastes and desires. It entails intimate instances where the body is particularly exposed and vulnerable. It thus engenders an acute embodied awareness of the

²¹⁵ Jordan, Shirley, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), p54

self, and of the self-as-body. If sex is a space where an internal, cerebral sense of self might be 'abandoned' or temporarily 'forgotten', it remains a space where bodily awareness, both of the self and of the other(s),²¹⁶ is heightened. According to Ladimer, 'class and gender are linked by the body'.²¹⁷ Such an evocation of a simple 'link' arguably lacks further nuance. Further still, I argue, and as I explored via Butler and Skeggs in this thesis' introduction, class and gender are, in part, produced by and *read* on the body. Taste, wealth and lifestyle, as well as degrees of alignment with or investment in gender norms are all displayed and manifested in and by the body. We might understand this bodily site of judgement as, by extension, a site of exhibitions and readings of sexuality and desire. It thus makes sense that sex – that place where the body is at its most exposed – constitutes a space where these facets of identity may come to the fore. Vulnerability and vulgarity, taste and distaste, and notions of bodily excess – all potentially disgusting or undesirable²¹⁸ in polite, everyday contexts – can be explored as exciting or alluring through sex. In this play with traditionally-received societal codes, the potentiality for shame is heightened in sexual encounters. The intimacy of sex and the openness it requires can stoke up deeply-rooted feelings, including class-based insecurities and doubts. As this chapter explores, this is particularly true of Ernaux's *Mémoire de fille* whereby readers learn that the narrator's earliest sexual experiences and trauma are class-inflected. Sex and sexual relationships are high-stakes, vulnerable interactions²¹⁹ and the senses of both risk and exposure are redoubled through their narration in published texts. One of the ways by which Ernaux anchors her risk-laden writing of sex and class is through carefully considered dynamics of space.

That said, it is worth outlining what an examination of Ernaux's construction of textual spaces can illuminate in terms of her handling of class. What, indeed, is to be gained by looking at space? As established in the introduction to this thesis, the using, inhabiting and construction of space are intimately bound up with questions of class and are recognised as such by thinkers such as Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu. As I outline, Bourdieu (for whose theories Ernaux's works arguably 'provide literary representation'²²⁰) understands social and physical space as directly correlated: 'l'espace habité [...] fonctionnant comme une

²¹⁶ It is important to note that the sex explored by Ernaux and thus by this chapter is heterosexual sex from the perspective of a woman. Queer sex and sexualities necessarily further complicate intersections of class and sex. For further reading, see Munt, Sally, 'Introduction' to *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. Munt, Sally (London & New York: Cassell, 2000) and Preciado, Paul, *Testo Junkie: Sexe, drogue et biopolitique* (Paris: Grasset, 2008), pp79-95.

²¹⁷ Ladimer, Bethany, 'Cracking the Codes: Social Class and Gender in Annie Ernaux', *Chimères*, 26:1 (2002), pp53-69, p59

²¹⁸ For a fascinating exploration of double-edged ideas around the alluring/the disgusting see Brinkema, Eugenie, *The Form of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

²¹⁹ They are high-stakes in several senses, both emotional and physical (the risk of emotional or physical injury, of rejection, of pregnancy, of infection, etc.).

²²⁰ McIlvanney, *op. cit.* p15

sorte de symbolisation spontanée de l'espace social'.²²¹ Michèle Touret, in *Les lieux dans les romans d'Annie Ernaux*, identifies in Ernaux's work a similar preoccupation with the social implications of space. As Touret notes, Ernaux 'ne montre pas les lieux dans leurs singularités mais énonce leurs qualités sociales et leur effet sur les individus'.²²² Touret attributes this interest in how bodies interact with space, in 'being-in-space', to a philosophical heritage born from a phenomenological thrust. In describing Ernaux's writerly handling and presentation of *lieux* she writes:

Il s'agit de « descriptions phénoménologiques », en complète rupture avec le « topos naturaliste ». N'est décrit que ce qui est dans le champ de la perception, de l'être-dans-le-monde [...] Dans ces approches phénoménologiques, l'auteur va droit à la fonction du lieu qui fait de l'être humain un « être au monde. »²²³

In the ensuing discussion which appears in the volume following Touret's analysis, Ernaux herself agrees that 'le lieu en lui-même n'existe pas, seulement sa fonction, son signe social'.²²⁴ It would seem, then, remiss that an investigation into expressions of social class in Ernaux's texts should leave out one of its obviously vital dimensions: the question of space. Space, as we have outlined here, cannot help but be inscribed with, informed by and indicative of social class relations. Touret's analysis provides a secondary motivation for my bringing together of social class and space here in that it constitutes the first – and, currently, only – comprehensive look at the use of space, place and *lieux* in Ernaux, something that the writer herself corroborates in the subsequent discussion: 'c'est la première fois que j'entends une analyse sur mon écriture des lieux'.²²⁵ However, differing from our project here, Touret glosses over the 'forgotten'²²⁶ issue of social class in relation to space and place, choosing instead to focus on issues of intimacy and subjectivity.

Given all of the above, it is more than surprising that class and space have not explicitly been brought together thus far in Ernaux criticism. The very language employed in critical texts on the writer often exhibits an inclination towards the physical and the spatial. Indeed,

²²¹ P Bourdieu, Pierre, 'Effets de lieu' in *La Misère du monde*, ed. Bourdieu, Pierre (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), p160

²²² Touret, Michèle, 'Les lieux dans les romans d'Annie Ernaux ou "Sauver sa circonstance (ce qui a toujours été autour d'elle, continuellement)'" in Best, Francine, Blanckeman, Bruno and Dugast-Portes, Francine ed. *Annie Ernaux: le Temps et la Mémoire* (Stock : Paris, 2014), p114

²²³ Ibid., p120

²²⁴ Ibid., p119

²²⁵ Ibid., p118

²²⁶ Ernaux, Annie, Day, Lorraine and Thomas, Lyn, 'Exploring the Interspace: Recent Dialogues around the Work of Annie Ernaux', *Feminist Review*, No. 74, Fiction and Theory: Crossing Boundaries (2003), pp98-104, p100

this includes the language Ernaux herself employs in interviews and in texts where she discusses her writerly approach. Her oeuvre is one that is wrought with physicality. Even the very titles of her works signal an orientation towards the necessarily physical (or, at least, somewhat spatial) notions of place/space, of inside/outside, and of absence/presence. The very briefest of thumbs through *Écrire la vie* – an anthology published in 2011 highlighting just a selection of texts from Ernaux’s lengthy corpus – confirms this: *Les Armoires vides*, *La place*, *Journal du dehors*, and *La vie extérieure*²²⁷ all allude to self-situation in spatial terms. This fixation on the spatial extends to Ernaux’s more ‘experimental’ or interview-based texts such as, for example, *Retour à Yvetot* and *Le vrai lieu*. Writing in 2019 for *Le Monde*, philosopher Alexandre Jollien described the latter in the following, plainly physical terms:

Avec *Retour à Yvetot* [...] Annie Ernaux offre un extraordinaire *livre-univers* qui nous plonge en plein dans les années 1940 et au cœur de notre humanité. Grâce à une sorte de génial « *Google Maps littéraire* », le lecteur est entraîné dans une exploration des plus libératrices. [...] Il *entre* dans l’épicerie-mercerie parentale, entend la 4CV paternelle, *se glisse* sur les bancs d’école, rencontre une mère devant son café, se laisse enseigner par cet être exceptionnel, cette féministe en qui vibre une constante et profonde empathie envers les démunis²²⁸ (my emphasis)

This quotation flags up space on multiple levels (sensorial, bodily, physical) and chimes with Delphine Edy’s description of Ernaux’s work as constituting a kind of cartography: ‘son œuvre littéraire [...] cherche à nommer, *cartographier*, *décrire*’²²⁹ (my emphasis). To read *Retour à Yvetot* is to delve – or to be thrust (or *plongé*) – into a vivid spatial imaginary²³⁰ and I would argue the same of many of its textual precursors. Indeed, in her analysis of Ernaux’s *Mémoire de fille*, Akane Kawakami has noted its heavy ‘sense of entering fully into the past environment’, stressing ‘the physical quality of this experience’.²³¹ To read an Ernauxian text is to be transported into an immersive space of reading and to find oneself both navigating through a complex map of deeply personal, specific and undoubtedly *classed* memories

²²⁷ The reader may note here the somewhat striking prevalence of binaries (outside vs. inside, for instance). An exploration of space in the terms outlined here necessarily invokes a sense of movement, of pulsation and of the *va-et-vient* that make up embodied, social experience. The tensions told via Ernaux’s literary suspension of and toggle between these spatial/physical binaries is what interests me here.

²²⁸ Jollien, Alexandre, ‘« Retour à Yvetot », d’Annie Ernaux : la chronique « livre audio » d’Alexandre Jollien’, *Le Monde* (2019) < https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2019/07/12/retour-a-yvetot-d-annie-ernaux-la-chronique-livre-audio-d-alexandre-jollien_5488461_3260.html > [last accessed June 2022]

²²⁹ Edy, *op. cit.* p445

²³⁰ And, of course, a vivid spatial memory. Ernaux’s texts, in their recourse to *vrais lieux*, build up an ever more detailed, accumulative picture of her past (of which *Mémoire de fille* has been dubbed the missing piece (Houot, Laurence, ‘“Mémoire de fille”: Annie Ernaux livre la pièce précieuse manquante de son œuvre’, *Franceinfo* (2016) < https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/livres/roman/memoire-de-fille-annie-ernaux-livre-la-piece-precieuse-manquante-de-son-oeuvre_3390705.html > [last accessed June 2022]).

²³¹ Kawakami, Akane, ‘Time Travelling in Ernaux’s *Mémoire de fille*’, *French Studies*, 73:2 (2019), pp253-265, p259

(‘l’épicerie-mercerie parentale [...] la 4CV paternelle’, etc.) and across a web of universality that strikes ‘au cœur de notre humanité’. Her deft and compassionate approach to writing is undoubtedly central to the vast yet traversable and penetrable *livre[s]-univers* that she creates. All of her texts are arguably even more remarkably evocative and immersive given the famously pared-back – and class-inflected – writerly style that she quite consciously employs. Her ‘écriture est dépouillée [...] elle est clinique, sèche’²³² but it is also, crucially, an attempt at recapturing the language of her working-class childhood and roots: ‘l’écriture plate me vient naturellement, celle-là même que j’utilisais en écrivant autrefois à mes parents pour leur dire les nouvelles essentielles’.²³³ The discussion resulting from Touret’s analysis flags this *écriture plate* as an inherent and effective part of the construction of Ernausian space. As one participant remarks emphatically, ‘malgré l’économie de moyens, on VOIT ! [...] il y a deux fois rien mais on a des images’.²³⁴ Ernaux employs the language of almost ethnographic, ‘thick’ description, seeking to convey everyday realities plainly yet vividly. Although it may be considered a ‘flat’, factual²³⁵ writing, it is one that creates multidimensional, immersive reading experiences.

Beyond the potential physicality of the Ernausian readerly experience, we might, too, consider the text *itself* as physical space. In discussions of her work the writer often employs a metaphorical language evoking construction, entering and penetrating. As seen in this thesis’ introduction, Ernaux shares with Jeanette Winterson an envisaging of texts as providing ‘door[s]’²³⁶: ‘ouvrir un livre, c’est vraiment pousser une porte’.²³⁷ Ernaux demonstrates an understanding of the text as a material space and, what is more, the *construction* of the text as a material endeavour. ‘Quand j’écris’, she tells us, ‘tout est *chose, matière* devant moi, extériorité, que ce soit mes sentiments, mon corps, mes pensées ou le comportement des gens dans le RER’²³⁸ (my emphasis). Indeed, in interviews she has expressed her desire that ‘les mots deviennent comme des choses, comme des pierres’²³⁹ and has articulated her vision of writing as ‘une construction. C’est une construction qui se fait avec des mots, des mots dans

²³² Ernaux, Annie and Rérolle, Raphaëlle, ‘Écrire, écrire, pourquoi? Annie Ernaux: Entretien avec Raphaëlle Rérolle’ (Paris: Éditions de la Bibliothèque publique d’information, 2011) <<http://books.openedition.org/bibpompidou/1086>> [last accessed June 2022]

²³³ Ernaux, Annie, *La place in Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp435-496, p442

²³⁴ Touret, *op. cit.* p120

²³⁵ Edy, *op. cit.* p445

²³⁶ Winterson, Jeanette, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (London: Vintage, 2012), p38

²³⁷ Ernaux, Annie, *Le vrai lieu : Entretiens avec Michelle Porte* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), p88

²³⁸ Ernaux, Annie, *L’Écriture comme un couteau : Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2003), p152

²³⁹ Ernaux and Rérolle, *op. cit.*

une phrase, la phrase dans le paragraphe et le paragraphe dans le livre'.²⁴⁰ Similarly, in *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, she outlines her

désir que chaque phrase soit lourde de choses réelles, que les mots ne soient plus des mots [...] qu'ils se transforment, aussitôt écrits/lus, en une réalité « dure », par opposition à « légère », comme on le dit dans le bâtiment²⁴¹

This metaphor itself contains an infusion of class as Ernaux chooses to present the act of writing as construction or blue-collar work. In his recent work on class disturbance in contemporary French literature, Edward Hughes asks 'how might literary texts [...] imagine worlds in which class borders might be weakened or occluded?'.²⁴² Of similar metaphors employed by other authors he asserts that:

the linkage between the arduous, uninviting task facing the writer and the work of the miner instantly rids literary composition of glamour, unless, that is, it acquires a circuitous prestige by virtue of its association with a demanding physical work linked to productive necessity²⁴³

Whether we are to understand Ernaux's aligning of literature with manual labour as a transgressive gesture or in poor, privileged taste, there is no doubt that it sparks consideration of class concerns and perhaps a sense of self suspended across class lines.

For Ernaux, words are the individual building blocks of these textual constructions and the act of cementing them together stages yet another reaching out to the spatial. In *Le vrai lieu*, Ernaux tells us of the writing of her *journaux extimes* (*La vie extérieure* and *Journal du dehors*) that 'c'était aussi une façon de [s]'appropriier le territoire, d'être plus proche d'une population à la fois extrêmement diverse et très éparpillée sur de grands espaces'.²⁴⁴ This reaching out to the spatial thus coincides with a constant reaching out to the other, to the reader. Ernaux's textual constructions, her *livres-univers*, extend to us a writerly hand and invite us over the proverbial threshold. Upon completing a text, the author feels, 'c'est comme

²⁴⁰ Bacholle, Michèle, 'Interview with Annie Ernaux: Écrire le vécu', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 2:1 (1998), pp141-151, p147

²⁴¹ Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, p124

²⁴² Hughes, Edward, *Egalitarian Strangeness: On Class Disturbance and Levelling in Modern and Contemporary French Narrative* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), p3

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p4

²⁴⁴ Ernaux, *Le vrai lieu*, p18

si [elle avait] bâti une maison. Où quelqu'un peut entrer, comme dans sa propre vie à lui'.²⁴⁵ As previously mentioned, for Ernaux as for Winterson, 'cette idée d'entrer dans un livre n'est pas qu'un cliché. Ouvrir un livre, c'est vraiment pousser une porte et se trouver dans un lieu où il va se passer des choses pour soi'.²⁴⁶ Like that identified by Edy in her exploration of the (classed) writings of Louis and Eribon, we can see that Ernaux employs 'la métaphore spatiale du *texte comme lieu*'²⁴⁷ (Edy's italics).

The writing as well as the reading of an Ernauxian text entails a sense of (wilful and/or necessary) entering. In *L'Écriture comme un couteau* we learn that the writing of each text begins with the *déclencheur* of a 'désir de [s]'engager, de [s]'immerger, dans quelque chose'²⁴⁸ (my emphasis). Similarly addressed (though in less positive, more dangerous terms) in the closing lines of *Se perdre*, exposing oneself through the medium of writing feels 'comme une porte de cave qui s'ouvre, où il faut entrer coûte que coûte'.²⁴⁹ For Ernaux, 'c'est un *lieu*, l'écriture, un lieu immatériel'²⁵⁰ (my emphasis). Her most devoted readers might view this association of literature with a sort of spatial imaginary as born from a childhood spent immersed in books, escaping the confines of daily life and exploring the hidden, hallowed halls of lives alien to her own. Indeed, as she writes in *Retour à Yvetot*, 'les livres ont [...] constitué très tôt *le territoire de mon imaginaire*, de ma projection dans des histoires et des mondes que je connaissais pas'²⁵¹ (my emphasis). One of the aims of this chapter is to consider the ways in which Ernaux might be writing to achieve the inverse, examining how her texts might map out the *territoire* – or, to borrow from Steedman, the 'landscape' – of uneasy, classed terrain that some of her readers (like the young Ernaux in *Retour à Yvetot*) may not know.

This physical or spatial thrust to Ernaux's work extends to her construction of the 'je'. In interview, the writer increasingly talks about the deployment of her 'je' as not only a technique that underlines a transpersonal approach (as is undoubtedly true and as has often been explored in Ernaux criticism in terms of subjectivity²⁵²) but as a construction of a *lieu*. This *lieu* of the 'je', of the narrated, projected self, is one that is traversable and open. It is a 'je transpersonnel'.²⁵³ It is one that, along with the text itself, invites her readers to visit or

²⁴⁵ Ernaux, *Le vrai lieu*, p91

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p88

²⁴⁷ D. Edy, *op. cit.* p447

²⁴⁸ Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, p133

²⁴⁹ Ernaux, *Se perdre*, p875

²⁵⁰ Ernaux, *Le vrai lieu*, p65

²⁵¹ Ernaux, Annie, *Retour à Yvetot* (Paris: Éditions du Mauconduit, 2013), p26

²⁵² See, for example, McIlvanney *op. cit.*

²⁵³ McIlvanney, *op. cit.* p5

inhabit it. Ernaux says: 'le "je" que j'emploie est une sorte de *lieu traversé* par des expériences très peu particulières, banales même (la mort, l'inégalité sociale et culturelle, la passion, les transports en commun)'²⁵⁴ (my emphasis). Elsewhere, she goes on: 'ce « je » que j'utilise [...] est moins le lieu d'une histoire singulière [...] que d'une expérience générale'.²⁵⁵ What is more, 'le « je » est *lieu de passage* d'une déchirure avec le père, *lieu* d'une passion, d'un sentiment de honte sociale'²⁵⁶ (my emphasis). In an interview with Raphaëlle Rérolle entitled 'Écrire, écrire, pourquoi?', she further describes her 'je' as 'un lieu qui est traversé par une passion, par la déchirure sociale, par la honte et [...] par ce qui arrive au corps'.²⁵⁷ Ernaux's spatial imaginary is thus multiform. It encompasses the spaces of both reading and writing. The *lieu* of the 'je' is housed in the *lieu* of the text, is engaged in specific spatially-orientated practices, and is permeated by class shame and displacement. It is also important to note that it is not a neutral space. It constitutes a site of writerly control and positioning and gesture that, as we have already seen, can extend a welcoming hand and an invitation for inhabiting, exchange and engagement. However, it is a site also fraught with tensions where Ernaux as writer simultaneously cultivates a (sometimes hostile) distancing, a place where the warm writerly hand can transform into an accusatory, pointing finger (or, indeed, engage both at the same time). One of Day's many illuminating interviews with the writer exposes this complicated relationship:

LD : Je me demande quelle réaction vous aimez provoquer chez les lecteurs ... le retournement sur soi, l'ouverture sur le monde, le malaise, la honte ... Voulez-vous que le lecteur devienne le 'je' qui parle, qu'il voie autrement les choses ?

AE : Peut-être tout cela à la fois, ou plutôt successivement. Dans un premier temps, peut-être la volonté *d'entrer par une effraction violente chez le lecteur*, pour que, dans un deuxième temps, il se pose des questions, se retourne sur lui-même²⁵⁸ (my emphasis)

The evocation of violence here is striking. This perhaps uncharacteristically antagonistic statement marks a turning of the tables. Not only may a reader feel as if they are entering

²⁵⁴ Aubonnet, Brigitte, 'Annie Ernaux', *Encre vagabondes* < <http://www.encre-vagabondes.com/rencontre/ernaux.htm> > [last accessed June 2022]

²⁵⁵ Boehringer, Monika, 'Écrire le dedans et le dehors : dialogue transatlantique avec Annie Ernaux', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 47 (1999) pp165-70, p166

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p167

²⁵⁷ Ernaux and Rérolle

²⁵⁸ Day, Lorraine, 'Entraîner les lecteurs dans l'effacement du réel': Interview with Annie Ernaux', *Romance Studies*, 23:3 (2005), pp223-236, p229

Ernaux's world through her texts, but in reading them will perhaps feel their own world violently infiltrated. In this assertion, the writer also reveals an awareness of the potential in her texts for inspiring a jarring discomfort or distaste in her readers. She demonstrates, furthermore, an awareness of a presumed bourgeois readership and an accompanying attentiveness to distance that evokes an adversarial feeling of *us vs. them*, of *me vs. you*.

Touret, too, flags the importance of keeping this awareness of writer-reader distancing in mind. Further still, she stresses the classed quality of the cultivation of this kind of relationship:

[Ernaux] choisit la distance, à la fois la mesurant et la comblant. La littérature comme expérience et connaissance de la place et du déplacement social requiert une figuration des lieux sous le double signe de l'attachement et l'étrangeté. C'est cette expérience qui est formulée au moment où « elle » a quitté son milieu d'origine.²⁵⁹

In keeping with the recurring tension of the 'entre deux' that haunts Ernauxian texts and criticism alike (her writing has been identified as one that is 'une écriture de l'entre-deux',²⁶⁰ 'prise dans une tension'²⁶¹ that is inevitable given her writerly position as 'transfuge de classe',²⁶² 'dans un entre-deux social et culturel'²⁶³), her readers are suspended, positioned, penetrated, and looked at in this spatial imaginary *et réciproquement* in a kind of two-way panopticon. Ernaux agrees with Michèle Bacholle on this point:

AE : [...] j'expose tout au regard de tout le monde...

MB : Et vous regardez tout le monde aussi.

AE : Et je regarde tout le monde aussi.²⁶⁴

This space of fruitful relations between reader and writer is thus one that is infused with questions of class. Ernaux's 'je' is, as we have seen, unavoidably 'traversé par [...] l'inégalité

²⁵⁹ Touret, *op. cit.* p116

²⁶⁰ Huguéy-Leger, *Entre Conformisme et subversion*, p33

²⁶¹ Ernaux, *Retour à Yvetot*, p31

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p29 for just one example of Ernaux's employment of this term

²⁶³ Huguéy-Leger, *op. cit.* p35

²⁶⁴ Bacholle, *op. cit.* p146-147

sociale et culturelle'.²⁶⁵ Her cultivation of writer-reader distance is, by her own admittance, linked to her own navigation of social power relations: 'moi, narratrice, j'appartiens par ma culture au monde dominant, mais par mes origines au monde dominé. J'écrivais dans cette distance-là et en même temps je voulais imposer au lecteur une distance'.²⁶⁶ The inhabiting, the claiming, the using and the occupying of (writerly) space are felt as a class issue and her texts all share a sustained interest in the classed body-in-space, in the ways in which the classed, gendered body is shaped by and comes up against spaces and places. In conversation with Monika Boehringer, Ernaux hints at the subtle centrality of this preoccupation to her writerly impetus:

C'est la différence de classe sociale sensible dans le corps féminin qui m'a le plus intéressé, je crois. (Je dis « je crois » parce que ce ne sont pas des choses auxquelles je pense en écrivant.)²⁶⁷

Although apparently not something that she consciously weaves into her narratives, Ernaux's telling of classed and gendered stories nevertheless takes its roots in the physical. Her spatial imaginary is the stage upon which the tensions of existences 'wrought along class lines',²⁶⁸ of lives implicated in the violent crossing of boundaries between one class and another, are performed.

In the following analysis I examine the spatial imaginary and sense of physicality outlined above and its implications for Ernaux's writerly handling of sex and class. I do so firstly by exploring the writing of class in *Mémoire de fille*. Through analysing the dynamics of access and exclusion in the spaces of early socialisation and sexual initiation and trauma, I pay particular attention to the bedroom spaces that are depicted (and, indeed, that resurface throughout Ernaux's oeuvre). In this text, the narrator details a hitherto omitted period of the writer's young adult life: the summer of 1958 spent working as a *monitrice* at a holiday camp or *colonie*, her first excursion alone away from her family home in Yvetot. Throughout the course of the narrative, readers follow the young Annie D in her navigations of the *colonie*'s overwhelming and alien socialscape. We learn, crucially, of Annie D's traumatic first sexual experience at the forceful hands of an older *moniteur-chef*. The trauma of this social and sexual initiation is written retrospectively from the perspective of the young woman who

²⁶⁵ Aubonnet, *op. cit.*

²⁶⁶ Bacholle, *op. cit.* p145

²⁶⁷ Boehringer, *op. cit.* p165

²⁶⁸ Butler, Judith, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p179

possesses none of the controlled performances or manipulations of coded behaviour later honed by the adult author. The narrator traces the reverberating impacts of this dual trauma through the following years spent attending a lycée in Rouen and as an *au pair* in London. Examining in close detail the bedrooms at the *colonie* and at the *lycée* in Rouen, my analysis suggests that we might read the textual (and, elsewhere, visual) representations of these spaces as Ernaux's literary *point de départ* for her fascination with the *chambre*-space, its curation and its symbolic power. I examine *Mémoire de fille's* (bed)rooms, expose the pertinent, classed questions of access and exclusion that they raise and in doing so highlight this text as particularly revealing in terms of the emergence of class identity consciousness in Ernaux's writing.

The second half of this chapter moves to a consideration of *Se perdre*. The diaristic sister text to Ernaux's *Passion simple*, this relatively lengthy work is made up of private journal entries that detail an intimate and intense love affair with a married man. Although written fifteen years earlier, in this text the narrator repeatedly draws parallels between the lived experiences and spaces of her obsessive affair and the early sexual trauma later revealed in *Mémoire de fille*. My analysis explores this apparent continuity, unpacks the retriggering of these early wounds and investigates the narrator's attentiveness to both her and her lover's class identities. A more complicated, ambivalent web of power dynamics characterises the sexual dynamics in *Se perdre* and the feelings of exclusion and alienation that circle back are experienced from – and written by – the adult perspective of a *transfuge de classe*. Through the writing of the sexual relationship, the narrator courts class shame and explores her identity as classed subject. Across both of these texts I examine rhythmic choices, repetition and dynamics of positioning and screening in order to highlight the ways in which Ernaux's narrators, and perhaps her readers, are suspended in fluctuating, anxious spaces of class awareness that are rendered all the more difficult and painful by their entanglement with the intimacy of sexual encounter.

The final section will briefly discuss *L'Usage de la photo* and *Le jeune homme*. The former is a co-authored phototext wherein Ernaux and a lover, Marc Marie, provide written accompaniment to photographs documenting the aftermath of their sexual encounters, taken at various times and locations. Although it has not previously been afforded critical attention in terms of class, here I underscore its fascinating implications for the questions of respectability, sexual autonomy and class consciousness considered in this chapter. *Le jeune*

homme is Ernaux's most recently published text. As touched upon in this chapter's opening pages, this very short work is illuminating in several respects. Most notable here, however, are its revealing meditations on the narrator's relationship to sex and class. *Le jeune homme* outlines how a trail of classed signifiers and levels of awareness remain with Ernaux throughout all her sexual encounters. In this text, the lover definitively becomes the classed subject against which the narrator measures the social distance that the 'fille scandaleuse' has travelled in her journey from one class to another. In reading across these four texts, my analysis pushes understanding of space, sex and class in Ernaux beyond explorations of memory or transgressions of the public/private binary divide.²⁶⁹ I propose a consideration of the kaleidoscopic, Ernauxian writerly space as a complex and tension-riddled site of emotional engagement and class awareness. Through the spaces of convergence between class and sex, I argue, we can trace through Ernaux's oeuvre an experimentation with and exposition of classed identity.

1.2 'Malheur et [...] métamorphose'²⁷⁰: The Construction of Class Consciousness in *Mémoire de fille*

My analysis first addresses one of Ernaux's most recent and necessarily least studied texts, *Mémoire de fille*. Although explorations of ideas about complicity and colonialisation (Lindsay (2019)) and of themes of time and memory (Kawakami (2019)) have recently been published, there remains the question of class and of what *Mémoire de fille*, the so-called 'pièce précieuse manquante de son œuvre',²⁷¹ can illuminate in terms of class experience and expression. *Mémoire de fille* is arguably the text which most plainly demonstrates the spatial imaginary of writing and of readerly positioning that I have outlined. The readerly experience is one of a lens zooming in and out as Ernaux deftly shifts between narrative frames. One minute we are sat with the present-day writer, looking over her shoulder in the 'real' time of writing. In the next, we find ourselves transported back half a century, shadowing 'la fille de 58' as she moves around the dormitories of the *colonie*. The particular prevalence of writerly framing and self-conscious construction in this text make it a veritable treasure trove for all in the Venn diagram of Ernaux fans, scholars and critics. This is something recognised by Kawakami. 'The meta-narrative sections', she writes, compared with those of Ernaux's earlier texts, 'are much more present and substantial' and 'contain longer and more generous discussions of her

²⁶⁹ As particularly fascinatingly explored in Tierney, Robin 'Lived Experience at the Level of the Body': Annie Ernaux's "Journaux Extêmes", *SubStance*, 35:3, 111: *The French Novel Now* (2006), pp113-130

²⁷⁰ Ernaux, Annie, *Mémoire de fille* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016), p82

²⁷¹ Houot, *op. cit.*

writing strategies'²⁷². In this text Ernaux adopts this particularly generous writerly position and is much more 'explicit – even theoretical – [...] about her auto-ethnographical methods'.²⁷³

My focus here, however, centres around the very evident and class-inflected question of access (and the restriction thereof) that these various layers of distancing, positioning and screening raise. I analyse how the 'tensions' of classed existence and working-class adolescence are narrated and performed through the spaces that the young Annie D encounters and I examine the various anxieties engendered by the struggle to inhabit, claim and navigate them. Intense preoccupations with questions of containment and transgression, with questions of inside and outside, and with the struggle to claim space run through *Mémoire de fille*. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the descriptions of the bedroom spaces, of the various *chambres* that the protagonist inhabits or visits. The intimate space of the bedroom constitutes the collision point of myriad social factors. It is a space that houses the intimate, the private and the sexual (the marital bed, the *boudoir*); the innocent and the early social (bedtime stories, *go to your room!*) as well as a space marked, most crucially, by gender and class (the struggle for *a room of one's own*, both literally and figuratively). Interestingly, in *Mémoire de fille*, Ernaux reprises a very specific and metaphorical image of *chambres* that she earlier outlines in *Les Années*. In the latter (and elsewhere²⁷⁴), the writer evokes Dorothea Tanning's 1942 self-portrait, *Birthday*:

Elle se retourne souvent sur des images de quand elle était seule, elle se voit dans [...] des chambres qu'elle a occupées – à Rouen dans un foyer de jeunes filles, à Finchley au pair, à Rome en vacances dans une pension rue Servio Tullio. Il lui semble que ce sont ses moi qui continuent d'exister là [...] Dans un tableau de Dorothea Tanning qu'elle a vu il y a trois ans dans une exposition à Paris, on voyait une femme à la poitrine nue et, derrière elle, une enfilade de portes entrebâillées. Elle pense que ce tableau représente sa vie²⁷⁵

The spatialised memory of a succession of bedrooms is similarly expressed yet perhaps less romantically envisaged in *Mémoire de fille*. Here Ernaux hopes that the act of writing might actually throw open these 'portes entrebâillées' and provide unbridled access to her past self (or selves) of 1958. In this text she expresses a desire that writing would give 'un accès à cet

²⁷² Kawakami, *op. cit.* p253

²⁷³ *Loc. cit.*

²⁷⁴ For example, Ernaux, Annie, «*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*» in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp605-656, p627

²⁷⁵ Ernaux, Annie, *Les Années in Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp925-1085, p988

été-là aussi simple et direct que de passer d'une pièce à l'autre'²⁷⁶ (a desire that is, as further explored by Kawakami,²⁷⁷ perhaps doomed to be only partially successful and never completely realised). This surrealist image that Ernaux paints provides not only a fascinating springboard for our discussion here, but also a stark contrast to the very intentional restriction of access and ejection from space that Annie D finds herself subjected to in *Mémoire de fille*, as well as the class-based, spatial anxiety that she feels surrounding the spaces and places therein. What interests me in the following analysis is how class relations are described, performed and emotionally engaged with in these spaces.

First and foremost, this spatial anxiety is foregrounded through a nervousness about the outside world, the *dehors*. *Mémoire de fille*, as previously mentioned, details a period of time in the young Annie D's life when she spends a summer working at a *colonie*. This is a time, crucially, when she is able to fly the family nest for the first time: 'c'est la première fois qu'elle quitte ses parents' and, as she self-disparagingly continues, 'elle n'est jamais sortie de son trou' (p25), her little bedroom in the bustling *café-épicerie* in Yvetot. The young woman's anxiety around the *dehors* – and, perhaps, the *hors norme* – is foregrounded as an inherited trait, a product of her working-class, provincial roots: 'enfant unique, couvée [...] le dehors [...] est objet de crainte (pour son père) et de suspicion (pour sa mère)' (p26). Nevertheless, reminiscent of Steedman's 'telling by tension', this *frisson* of fear is one that is twinned with a *frisson* of excitement, a burning desire to leave and to escape the spatial, social and maternal confines of Yvetot. Of the moment when her mother takes her to the train station in Rouen Ernaux writes: 'je sais ce que ressent cette fille à ce moment précis, je connais son désir, le seul qui est en elle: que sa mère déguerpisse et qu'elle reprenne le train en sens inverse' (p24). A list of Annie D's more general adolescent desires follows shortly after: '*partir* d'Yvetot, *échapper* au regard de sa mère [...] *fréquenter* des cafés d'étudiants [...] *entrer* dans un monde inconnu' (p28) (my emphasis), a list metered out by verbs of motion that convey her yearning for flight and freedom of movement. Her arrival at the *colonie* thus marks a huge moment of liberation: 'je la vois arrivant à la colonie comme une pouliche échappée de l'enclos' (p29). This image captures perfectly the double-edged nature of this *frisson*. The 'pouliche échappée' conjures up a climactic feeling of emancipation and yet with it a sense of unbridled, untamed wildness and danger. The continuation of this quotation only confirms this anxious ambivalence: 'seule et libre pour la première fois, un peu craintive' (p29). The

²⁷⁶ Ernaux, *Mémoire de fille*, p17. All subsequent references to this text, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis through to the end of this section on p62.

²⁷⁷ Kawakami, *op. cit.* p261

choice of the word 'pouliche' also suggests a youthful, small-town naiveté that adds to the heavy sense of foreboding characterising the opening section of the text. On the stage that Ernaux sets for *Mémoire de fille*, the innocent hopefulness of the young woman, who writes to her friends in a tone described as 'vibrant, exalté' (p32), is consistently offset by an ominous insistence on her obliviousness to events about to unfold. Ernaux stresses Annie D's 'désir, sa folie, son idiotie' (pp16-17) and, upon arrival at the *colonie*, reiterates her 'ignorance de ce qui sera pour toujours derrière elle dans trois jours' (p25).

Ernaux not only conveys this anxiety through use of imagery and language, but also imparts it to her readership via pacing and rhythmic choices. Ernaux holds her readers alongside the ghostly figure of Annie D at the door of the *colonie*. A full ten pages pass between her arrival ('je la vois arrivant à la colonie' (p29)) and the eventual crossing of the threshold. The writer keeps us in this frozen, uncertain position, continually tantalising us with reminders of Annie's (and our) imminent entry into a world and a space much anticipated but entirely unknown. Across these ten pages the narrator zooms in and out of the narrative frame, painting a fuller picture of the young Annie D by weaving in excerpts from her diaries and letters, and through exploration of her present-day desires and fears. Constant, punctuating reminders such as 'je n'ai pas encore franchi le porche de la colonie' (p30) and 'voilà la fille qui va entrer à la colonie' (p33) create a sense of a delaying of the inevitable (we may note how the varied uses here of past and future tenses add to this feeling of time stretching out). This suspension of the reader in an anticipatory position means that we may share in the young Annie's anxiety when, eventually, the threshold is crossed and 'cette fois, elle est entrée' (p38).

Class-born anxieties surround not only Annie's entry into the space of the *colonie* (or, if we will, the entry into the *dehors* of the unknown), but also her inhabiting and claiming of space once there. How intimidated and dwarfed she feels is instantly made evident through the language used to describe the setting: 'monumental', 'long', 'immenses', 'd'une hauteur [...] vertigineuse' (p38). Immediately after the evocation of this dizzying image, the narrator stresses the relative ease and confidence with which her peers (all students 'des lycées et des Écoles normales d'instituteurs' whilst 'elle est la seule à venir d'une institution religieuse' (p39)) approach and navigate the space of the *colonie*: 'toutes se comportent avec aisance et détermination' (p39). Her roommate Jeannie 'a déjà pris le lit près de la fenêtre, installé ses affaires dans la moitié du placard' (p39). Shackled by an intense sense of class alienation and

inferiority, Annie cannot occupy the (albeit shared) space in the same way: 'il lui semble que l'espace de la chambre appartient plus à sa coturne qu'à elle'(p39).

This anxiety around the claiming of space, around 'being-in-space' is carried through into Annie D's navigations of the spaces of sex (the dynamics of these sexual encounters themselves and how they illuminate questions of class form the analytical focus in the following pages). Her first sexual experience with a holiday camp *moniteur-chef*, referred to throughout *Mémoire de fille* simply as H (a euphemistic gesture readers may have come to recognise as recurrent in Ernausian texts) is the much anticipated, yet ultimately traumatic, crux of the novel. There is much material for critical examination in this scene (not least the troubling absence of explicit consent²⁷⁸ and perceived agency) but here I propose a spatial analysis of this scene considered in terms of entrapment. The very location in which this encounter takes place – 'dans sa chambre à elle' (p43) (a space that, as we know, Annie feels no claim over nor ownership of) – is already one steeped in anxiety. Ernaux's play here, once again, with rhythm may draw the reader into this experience and into this nervous, powerless space. The passage detailing H and Annie D's first night together features uncharacteristically (in the context of the rest of the text) short sentences that naturally increase a readerly tempo: 'il chuchote, on sort? Elle dit oui [...] Il fait froid', 'Il force. Elle a mal [...] Elle crie [...] Elle a froid' (p43). The repetition of 'froid' here adds an additional element of cyclicity and only adds to the sense of dizzying entrapment. As readers we are carried along with the rhythm of the passage as Annie is swept along in the acts she so barely understands.

In contrast to the entrapment and containment evoked here in her *own* space, H's bedroom is a space from which she is repeatedly shut out or rejected. She is consistently ridiculed by the other girls at the *colonie*, and when one particularly cruel trick is played, the *moniteur-chef* looks on silently and self-assuredly, keeper of his own castle: 'H, massif, immobile à la porte de sa chambre, observant et souriant avec une indulgence d'aîné responsable' (p51). Annie's attempts to seek comfort with him are similarly coldly rejected: 'elle va pour se jeter dans ses bras. Il les garde le long de son corps [...] Il se détourne et rentrer dans sa chambre' (p51). Later in the text, a broken promise of an early morning visit from H prompts Annie to investigate. What follows is an acutely symbolic scene that once again reiterates these classed questions of access and exclusion:

²⁷⁸ The topic of consent has gained significant and widespread traction in recent years with the increased visibility afforded to movements such as #metoo and #balancetonporc and, notably, with the publication of Vanessa Springora's *Le Consentement* in 2020.

À l'aube, comme il ne vient pas, elle va cogner à sa porte. C'est le silence. Elle pense qu'il dort encore. Elle y retourne plusieurs fois [...] La dernière, après avoir frappé elle a essayé d'ouvrir. Le verrou était mis. Elle a regardé par le trou de la serrure. Il était juste dans son champ, de dos en pyjama, en train de s'étirer. Il n'a pas ouvert (p73)

Annie D's formative sexual experiences in the *colonie* are intensely bound up with a heavy sense of class shame, a shame rooted in naiveté and nervousness, in 'méconnaissance des garçons' (p48) and 'innocence'. I use inverted commas here as, without wishing to diminish or dismiss the impact of the traumatic events outlined in *Mémoire de fille*, readers may find themselves questioning the limits or validity of this professed innocence. This being said, the predication of the experiences described on a power imbalance (*moniteur-chef* vs. *monitrice*, the age gap, etc.) and on H's bemused condescension ('elle lui offre du chocolat [...] rapporté de l'épicerie, il s'en amuse, quand tu seras payée achète plutôt du whisky!' (p44)), nevertheless deepen the association of this romantic rejection with class shame. As we have seen, the spaces and places in which these experiences take place are imbued with traces of this early coming-into-awareness of the unwritten rules of class and sex. The spatial senses of entrapment and exclusion that Ernaux employs to tell this hitherto untold story in Annie's life culminate in the eventual rejection of her application to work at the *colonie* for a second year. The young girl had naively imagined that, having followed her 'véritable programme de perfection', seeking 'des transformations corporelles' and 'l'acquisition de savoirs destinés à combler [son] retard social et [son] ignorance' (pp97-98), she would be able to return to the *colonie*, wow her peers and rekindle her passion with H. Of receiving the fateful letter, she writes:

J'avais peut-être déjà anticipé le refus qu'elle contenait, dont j'ai oublié les termes, et qui a confirmé brutalement ma certitude : Annie Duchesne était indésirable à la colonie [...] on ne voulait plus, à aucun prix et au plus haut niveau, entendre parler de cette fille (p108)

The triply emphasised sense of rejection ('ne [...] plus, à aucun prix et au plus haut niveau'), only compounded by the almost aggressively dissociative 'cette fille', denotes an assumed rearticulation of the terms of the official letter and underlines the waves of pain and shame it caused – and perhaps continues to cause – Annie D. Further toggling between the notions of

access and exclusion, Ernaux ties off this damning expression of ostracism with a redoubling of the entrapment felt at the *colonie*: 'la honte était ineffaçable, *enclose dans les murs de la colonie*' (p108) (my emphasis).

While Annie D's shame remains tauntingly under lock and key, the psychological turmoil of the summer of '58 lives on. In the following months described, Annie enrolls at a *lycée* in Rouen where she is assigned her own bedroom in the convent, a second room for analysis here. Sadly, what should for the young girl be a new chance, a new start, and, crucially, a new space to claim, becomes nothing more than a space of despair. Ernaux devotes four full pages of *Mémoire de fille* to describing a tiny photograph of Annie's *chambre-box* in Rouen, a photograph that can be found in the *Photojournal* in her 2011 anthology, *Écrire la vie*. Although the photograph itself is not provided in *Mémoire de fille*, the obsessively minute detail with which it is described (self-confessedly 'avec une loupe' (p82)) means the reader may not be able to help but 'see' the scene.²⁷⁹ Ernaux runs through the seemingly unremarkable features. A couple of books lay open on a small desk, above it a summer dress hangs, and, partially obscured on either side of the frame, a door with a glass panel and a bed with a metal frame. However, with closer reading, this passage of ekphrasis – and this particular bedroom space – once again raise and reiterate classed questions of access, exclusion and privacy.

The door to the room, first and foremost, features a glass panel 'dans le haut qui permet de voir à l'intérieur depuis le couloir' (p80). The one-sided terms with which this 'viewing window' is described (presumably this is also a panel through which one might look *out* into the corridor from *inside*) evokes the feeling of a cell and introduces an oppressive sense of surveillance and lack of privacy. This issue of privacy and of claim over space continues to resurface throughout the passage as Ernaux's writerly magnifying glass spans the scene, picking out signs of the room's previous iterations and of grime left by former occupants: 'le bouton électrique en métal [...] à l'extrémité d'un câble noir descendant le long de l'encadrement de la porte, bouton qui en a remplacé un autre, dont il reste la marque plus haut' (p82). Similarly, Ernaux describes how the intense beam of light in the photograph '[fait] ressortir les traces sombre de crasse au-dessus de la poignée ainsi que la marque laissée par l'enlèvement de ce qui semble avoir été un verrou' (p80). Mere pages apart, the absent

²⁷⁹ Ernaux employs a heavy use of ekphrasis in her works. Here a sort of 'triple vision' of the room is offered – the photo itself, its featuring in her 'Photojournal' and the descriptive passage in question – reaffirming the necessity to pore over, take closer and repeated looks at the minutiae of the everyday in the quest to understand social class and identity.

'verrou' of the box room in Ernemont echoes the prohibitive 'verrou' on H's bedroom door at the *colonie*, underlining further this classed and gendered disparity of access to and claim over space (private or otherwise).

Zooming out and away from the finer details, a summer dress that hangs in the centre of the frame undoubtedly constitutes the main compositional focus of the image. It is pretty and flouncy with 'une grande ampleur de la jupe' (p80) and provides the only personalising aspect of the space. In keeping with the initial investigatory precision of this passage, Ernaux at first describes the dress in flat, unadorned detail:

il y a une robe d'été, sans manche, qui pend le long de la cloison. Elle est accrochée par les ouvertures des bras à deux boules blanches émaillées servant de patères. C'est une robe imprimée de motifs chamarrés, fleurs ou arabesques, froncée à la taille avec de nombreux plis (p80)

However, as we read on, it becomes clear that the dress has greater significance and carries deeper symbolism than were it a simple fact of the photograph. In stark contrast to the language used above, on the following page we read a much stranger and more metaphorical description: 'cette robe vide, sur laquelle les boules des patères font penser à d'énormes yeux blancs d'aveugle, a quelque chose d'étrange – une sorte de créature sans tête' (p81). The dress here becomes a sort of uncanny, haunting spectre whose 'eyes' (though blind) look back into the room, look back at the camera lens and intensify once again a sense of surveillance and of lack of privacy.

In the continued description of the small writing desk over which this strange, headless creature ominously hangs we learn of – as is customary in Ernaux texts (and, as Kawakami notes,²⁸⁰ in none more so than in *Mémoire de fille*) – the quite self-conscious *construction* of the piece (here, the photograph). She writes: 'je me souviens avoir transporté la table de dessous la fenêtre où elle était placée habituellement pour l'accoler au lit et qu'elle figure ainsi sur la photo' (p81). Likewise, when we read of the dress that 'elle a quelque chose de luxueux sur le dénuement ambiant' (p81), we might begin to wonder just how much 'set dressing' went into the making of this photograph.²⁸¹ Although the narrator claims not to

²⁸⁰ See pp52-53 of this thesis.

²⁸¹ The notion of 'set-dressing' sits nicely in relation to Ernaux and her corpus. Beyond her continued use of (quite clearly) staged photographs (Ernaux, Annie, and Marie, Marc, *L'Usage de la photo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005)) the arguably autofictional thrust to her work means the reader digests the scenes with a proverbial pinch of salt, i.e. an awareness of their possible construction.

understand or remember the motivation behind the capturing of this image, she does offer one speculative explanation:

Peut-être voulais-je garder la trace d'un malheur et d'une métamorphose qui, aujourd'hui, me paraissent symbolisés par les deux objets au centre de la photo : la robe, qui était celle que j'avais le plus portée à la colonie l'été avant, et la table où j'avais passé tant d'heures à travailler la philosophie (p82)

Beyond the evident indications of femininity and sexuality evoked by the dress, it is worth noting, too, the importance of clothing more broadly as a marker of class, an indicator of taste and wealth and thus central in the surface judgements of classed bodies. Both the dress and the writing desk here convey a sense of (uneasy) sexual and social transformation and aspiration. Indeed, the heavy symbolic weight of the 'deux objets au centre de la photo' is not lost on *Mémoire de fille's* narrator. Nor, perhaps, was it lost on Annie D herself when she curated and captured the photo in June 1959. Either way, the spectral presence of the traumatic and humiliating experiences at the *colonie* – embodied in the dress (and compounded by its exuberant prettiness and dramatic skirt) – lives on in Ernemont. The space of the *chambre-box* and, in turn, the text, are imbued with that same shame and malaise, 'd'un malheur et d'une métamorphose'.

Widening our focus further and beyond the room itself, Annie D's experience in Rouen is one of isolation where class differences are striking and thus once more at the forefront of the eighteen-year-old's mind. With a similar innocence and ignorance of unspoken social structures to that displayed at the *colonie*, Annie D clumsily navigates her way around this new social and physical space. On her first day and upon her mother's departure, Annie's obliviousness to social norms means that:

elle toque à la porte du box voisin, dit avec entrain à la petite brune frisée qui a ouvert et la regarde, surprise et gênée: « Bonjour! Je m'appelle Annie, et toi ? » Ce sera le seul échange parce que sa voisine est apprentie coiffeuse et que « les filles de la coiffure » [...] et celles qui vont au lycée ou à la fac se côtoient sans se parler, mangent à des tables séparées au réfectoire (p84)

Here Ernaux, once again, reprises a spatial image of the frustrated or failed exchange in the doorway to convey a sense of class anxiousness, to illustrate Annie D's lack of class awareness and to show how this affects her movement through and claiming of space. Furthermore, in Ernemont as at the *colonie*, the (however unsuccessful) navigation of this new space is complicated and intensified by an oscillating tension with a stifling feeling of entrapment or containment: 'elle se sent immergée dans une atmosphère de supériorité impalpable qui l'intimide' (p86). It is accompanied, too, by an isolating sense of exclusion:

Elle est spectatrice des autres, de leur légèreté et leur naturel à déclarer « dans Bergson on trouve » et « l'an prochain je fais Sciences-Po » [...] Etrangère, comme le roman de Camus qu'elle lit en octobre. Lourde et poisseuse au milieu des filles en blouse rose, de leur innocence bien éduquée et de leurs sexes décents (p86)

The young Annie D finds the physical and social space of the convent in Rouen no easier to navigate than that of the *colonie* and finds herself, once again, 'sur les bords' (p65). As the accompanying text to this bedroom photograph in her *Photojournal* in *Écrire la vie* attests, 'moi j'étais en dehors de tout'.²⁸² The excerpts Ernaux chooses to lift from her *journal intime* for this *Photojournal* are replete with sorrow. She associates Rouen with a 'douleur perpétuelle'²⁸³ and twice repeats the phrase 'l'horreur de vivre': 'Ernemont [...] je prononce ce mot avec étonnement, si beau, si aristocratique et pour moi synonyme de l'horreur de vivre [...] Toute la tristesse jamais effacée de 58, l'horreur de vivre'.²⁸⁴ (We may note, also, the alignment of the very bourgeois term 'aristocratique' with this sorrow). The bedroom space at Ernemont is, undoubtedly, infused with an intense isolation and sadness. More importantly for our purposes here, however, it also symbolises a catastrophic colliding and realisation of two axes of oppression and struggle: class- and sex-based shame and unease. Ernaux writes:

Tout l'après-midi je relis *Le Deuxième sexe*. Progressivement, je me suis ressentie redevenir l'être de 1959, lisant à Ernemont cet incroyable livre, entourée de sa vérité pour moi accablante [...] Si je résume: j'avais grandi sans honte sociale, sans honte sexuelle, l'une et l'autre me sont tombées dessus. La deuxième l'été 58. La double aliénation, où je puise tout ce que j'écris²⁸⁵

²⁸² Ernaux, *Écrire la vie*, p44

²⁸³ Ibid., p45

²⁸⁴ Ibid., pp44-45

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p44

This double alienation finds its culmination in the *chambre-box* at Ernemont, and its symbolisation in the two main features of the photograph: the dress, an ominous reminder of the sexual shame of the colonie; and the table, a space of hope of social ascension and betterment. Or, indeed, to reprise a quotation used earlier: ‘la robe, qui était celle que j’avais le plus portée à la colonie l’été avant, et la table où j’avais passé tant d’heures à travailler la philosophie’ (p82).

As my analysis has shown, Ernaux uses the *chambre*-spaces of *Mémoire de fille* to map out, to anchor and to perform the class-based anxieties of a young *transfuge de classe*. Annie D’s clumsy navigation of these spaces and her traumatic first sexual experiences highlight classed issues surrounding place and belonging, and access and exclusion. Some nevertheless might argue that the space of the text *itself* does allow for a certain amount of peace-making. Writing may provide a place to recreate and unpack these tensions and anxieties, while allowing for the construction of an imagined space of freedom. This potential peace-making is predicated on a retrospective, writerly defiance of inflexible, exclusionary inside/outside dynamics, creating a sort of Tanning-esque literary dreamscape of open doors. In the closing pages of *Mémoire de fille*, the narrator details a final pilgrimage to S and to the *colonie* in 1962:

au fond je revenais non pas pour que les lieux de 58 me « disent quelque chose » mais pour que, moi, je dise aux murs gris de la bâtisse du XVII^e siècle, à la petite fenêtre de ma chambre en haut de la façade, sous le toit, que je n’avais plus rien à voir avec la fille de 58 (p149)

The project of writing and returning²⁸⁶ to (both physically and in the imagined space of the text) the ‘scene of the crime’ might mean that, according to Kawakami, ‘[Ernaux’s] past self is freed, allowed to leave the building in which she has been imprisoned for the past fifty years’.²⁸⁷ More sceptical than Kawakami of the text’s therapeutic qualities, I suggest that a close textual examination of the dynamics of access and exclusion nonetheless reveals the construction of an anxious, adolescent class consciousness. The young Annie D’s peers become the others against which she jarringly registers her classed difference. The spaces she inhabits and within which she experiences these social and sexual encounters become the repositories of painful, formative memories. The text, particularly through the bedroom

²⁸⁶ A cyclical gesture that forms the focus of McIlvanney’s *The Return to Origins*.

²⁸⁷ Kawakami, *op. cit.* p257

spaces narrated, conveys the convergence of social and sexual shame. In an extract from her *journal intime* selected for *Écrire la vie's Photojournal*, we learn that Ernaux once feared she might never find the words to write the summer of '58. She imagined that it might ultimately take a more visual form, 'plutôt dans une suite d'images'.²⁸⁸ My analysis here has shown the illuminating conclusions that can be drawn about class performance and expression when we consider the finished textual product – *Mémoire de fille* – as, instead, *une suite de chambres*.

1.3 'La même tristesse [...] les mêmes attentes, les mêmes désirs'?²⁸⁹: The Re-opening of Class Wounds in *Se perdre*

In the following section I depart from Kawakami's above optimism. Through close textual examination of *Se perdre*, I suggest that, to a certain extent, the wounds²⁹⁰ inflicted in 1958 persist. In this text, allusions to that fateful (and, prior to 2016, unwritten) summer of '58 are rife.²⁹¹ The narrator even goes as far as to suggest that the relationship in *Se perdre* stokes up 'la même tristesse qu'à l'adolescence [...] Les mêmes attentes, les mêmes désirs'.²⁹² As she later speculates, 'pourquoi, chaque fois, je suis sûre que c'est fini, qu'il n'appellera plus ? *Quelle peur ancienne ?*' (p727) (my emphasis). My analysis examines this apparent continuity and traces the resurgence of this 'peur ancienne'. Investigating the hitherto unexplored textuality between *Mémoire de fille* and *Se perdre*, I outline linguistic and rhythmic echoes between the texts, as well as more overt moments of connection. Through my analysis I also unearth, however, a concurrent sense of ambivalence. Thirty years later in lived time yet fifteen years earlier in the chronology of writing, *Se perdre* is narrated from the necessarily very different perspective of a more educated and sexually experienced adult *transfuge de classe*. I suggest that the writing of the affair allows the author to re-interrogate her classed identity, as well as her relationship to it. The analysis in the following pages highlights how the early coming-into-awareness of class and sexuality expressed in *Mémoire de fille* create a class awareness that endures, though evolves, into adulthood and through Ernaux's narration of sex. Read in this way, it becomes clear that the anticipation, hope, desire, and fear of rejection which might ordinarily be features of a romantic passion are, in the case of *Se perdre*, intensified and complicated by questions of social class.

²⁸⁸ Ernaux, *Écrire la vie*, p45

²⁸⁹ Ernaux, *Se perdre*, p861

²⁹⁰ The pervasiveness of ideas around scars/staining in Ernaux's writing has long been acknowledged by the author herself, as well as examined in critical writings. See, for example, Miller (1999), Ernaux (2005), Tierney (2006), Jordan (2007)

²⁹¹ Allusions to this shame-laden period, furthermore, appear repeatedly in Ernaux's *L'Atelier noir* (Paris: Éditions des Busclats, 2011) – 'la honte de 58' (p121), 'honte de 58' (p140), '58 [...] lié à la honte sexuelle, sociale' (p167), '« 58 » me taraude' (p167) – further emphasising the previously-unspeakable trauma of this time and its enduring significance.

²⁹² Ernaux, *Se perdre*, p861. All subsequent references to this text, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis through to the end of this section on p71.

Se perdre is a text consumed and constituted by passionate obsession. As Ernaux writes in the work's sister text, *Passion simple*, 'à partir du mois de septembre l'année dernière, je n'ai plus rien fait d'autre qu'attendre un homme'.²⁹³ The anticipation of his arrival becomes a debilitating fixation and, further still, the validation of her desirability that contact with him brings becomes the only means of abating an unbearable, almost dehumanising numbness: 'attendre l'appel, la voix, qui dit aussitôt que *j'existe*, que je suis désirée' (p727) (my emphasis). *Se perdre*'s narrator repeatedly identifies a similarity in the emotional turmoil of her time at the *colonie* with the turbulent highs and lows of her affair with S.. Therein she identifies that same sense of alienation,²⁹⁴ that same sense of misery and exclusion. Echoing the above quotation from *Passion simple*, in *Se perdre* we read: 'en 58, j'ai attendu absurdement C. G.' (p811) (C. G. here being another, similarly obfuscated term for H). The emptiness and rejection evoked by the ultimate unavailability of S., by the apparent lack of reciprocity in their relationship, is, we are constantly reminded, 'comme autrefois en 58' (p812). The same is true of the overwhelming yearning for the male figure's presence: 'ce matin, j'avais envie de le voir d'une façon désespérée, comme C. G. en 58' (p789). Beyond this drawing of explicit comparison, there are, furthermore, less direct though no less significant parallels in the language employed in the two texts.

Firstly, in my analysis of *Mémoire de fille* I noted the self-disparaging tone of the phrase, 'elle n'est jamais sortie de son trou'.²⁹⁵ This dejected metaphor is repeated continually in *Se perdre*: 'je suis dans un trou' (p737), 'je suis dans un trou' (p766), the narrator persistently laments. She writes elsewhere, 'le fait qu'il n'ait pas appelé jeudi, c'est la mort, le trou' (p821). One journal entry reads:

Nuit (et soirée) atroce. Impossible de dormir. Être dans un trou, c'est-à-dire conscience de ne pas être du tout aimée, et peut-être lâchée, conscience de la douleur que cela représentera, représente déjà (p759)

The insistence on the time spent in this state, in this 'trou', conveyed in both the expansion of the time frame (*nuit* but also *soirée*) and in the use of tense (*représentera*, *représente déjà*), serves to add depth to the despair and to emphasise its permanence.

²⁹³ Ernaux, Annie, *Passion simple* in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp657-696, p660

²⁹⁴ The word 'aliénation' is used often in this text (see for instance p732 and p872)

²⁹⁵ Ernaux, *Mémoire de fille*, p25

Although the evocation of the 'trou' in *Mémoire de fille* denotes a sheltered, provincial, working-class upbringing, and in *Se perdre* suggests a slump into inescapable depression, both uses carry a sense of entrapment and stagnation, and communicate feelings of unworthiness rooted in early class-based trauma. So strong is the association between these two dark periods of her life that even the sound of S. approaching in his car conjures up that same chaste, naïve *frisson*: 'la voiture qui arrivera...Chaque fois, comme si j'allais être dépucelée de nouveau' (p733).

The heavily symbolic and devastatingly poignant broken promise at the *colonie* (H's failure to visit Annie D in her shared *chambre* to say goodbye), is evoked twice in the intimate writings that make up *Se perdre*. The narrator writes:

Comme cela ressemble à 58, revoir C. G. une fois, et finalement, il n'était pas venu me dire adieu dans ma chambre où je l'ai attendu jusqu'à l'aube – je vais être dans cet état de délabrement (p827)

Similarly, and even more emphatically expressed through italics, we read 'je n'ai jamais revu C. G., *qui n'est pas venu me dire au revoir*, en 58, comme il me l'avait promis' (p824). The repeated evocation of this scene aligns with the Ernausian gesture of cyclical returning identified and explored by McIlvanney.²⁹⁶ The repetition also serves to underscore the significance of this event, perhaps deepening our readerly understanding of its continued impact. Furthermore, the elliptical introduction of this scene fifteen years before its eventual detailing in *Mémoire de fille* might have had the tantalising effect of drawing the reader's attention. Ultimately, however, this repetition makes it clear that the spectres of shame and of self-denigration inherited and intensified in the summer of '58 linger on into the lived time of the affair in *Se perdre*. Perhaps most revealing in this regard is the journal entry that reads:

Silence, toujours. Je me sens si mal que je cherche à me souvenir de moments semblables, et c'est 58 [...] Savoir qu'il suffirait d'un appel [...] pour que j'aie le goût de vivre. Si on lit ce journal un jour, on verra que c'était exact « l'aliénation dans l'œuvre d'Annie Ernaux », et pas seulement dans l'œuvre, plus encore dans la vie (p732)

²⁹⁶ McIlvanney, *op. cit.*

Senses of alienation and exclusion resurface once more here. Feelings of being shut out, of being and *feeling* outside, are sustained in *Se perdre* as they are in *Mémoire de fille*. The exclusion symbolised by the box room in Ernemont ('moi j'étais en dehors de tout'²⁹⁷) is similarly felt during the year-long affair with S.. Even the sights and sounds of the everyday *va-et-vient* of her Parisian suburb are enough to trigger this sense of alienation: 'douleur de voir passer les voitures, ou d'entendre seulement leur bruit. Toutes me renvoient à l'image de la liberté, du plaisir, dont je suis exclue' (pp779-780). As Thomas has noted, the tone of this text is intensely melancholic.²⁹⁸ Absolute isolation and unbridgeable distance haunt the narrator. She writes, 'moi seule le sais, que je ne suis plus dans leur monde' (p835). Here, she is doubly alone. She is excluded from 'leur monde' but also alone in the knowledge of her isolation. Indeed, as she later expresses, 'c'est comme si j'étais complètement hors du monde' (p862).

In this text, class and sexuality collide in the figure of S.. Not only does he represent sexual satisfaction (Ernaux dedicates much of the text to detailing the minutiae of his body, of the acts they engage in), but he is also continually aligned with markers and dynamics of class. Throughout *Se perdre*, the narrator builds a picture of her lover as aspirational and in possession of a taste for 'finer things'. Although it may share with *Passion simple* an 'ostensible lack of interest in social class',²⁹⁹ further examination of the text reveals the frequency with which the figure of S. is described in relation to material indicators of class. As McIlvanney has noted, the fact that the lover depicted in *Passion simple* (and, necessarily, in *Se perdre*) is Russian complicates the web of relations between him and narrator, and the text features an 'exoticisation of the Other, in which manifestations of class are rendered more palatable by being read as evidence of national differences'.³⁰⁰ McIlvanney's evocation of palatability here is fascinating, and speaks to ideas of taste explored in this analysis and throughout this thesis. Readers might, indeed, receive S.'s ostentation as 'tasteless'. We learn that he 'aime les grosses voitures, le luxe, les relations, très peu intellectuel' (p706). What is more, in *Passion simple*, the narrator tells us that 'il aimait les costumes Saint-Laurent, les cravates Cerruti et les grosses voitures. Il conduisait vite [...] entièrement livré à la sensation d'être libre, bien habillé, en situation dominante'.³⁰¹ This language is reprised several times in *Se perdre*:

²⁹⁷ Ernaux, *Écrire la vie*, p44

²⁹⁸ Thomas, Lyn, 'À la recherche du moi perdu: memory and mourning in the work of Annie Ernaux', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 8:2 (Summer 2008), pp95-112, p98

²⁹⁹ McIlvanney, *op. cit.* p77

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p76

³⁰¹ Ernaux, *Passion simple*, p668

Il représente la part de moi-même la plus « parvenue », la plus adolescente aussi. Peu intellectuel, aimant les grosses voitures, la musique en roulant, « paraître », il est « cet homme de ma jeunesse » (p707)

Once again, the link between this affair and her adolescence is reiterated and we encounter evidence that this relationship provides some sort of reckoning with a past self: he is 'cet homme de [sa] jeunesse'. For the infatuated narrator, S. may represent an earlier incarnation of herself, an incarnation before university education, before the desire to become a writer had been conceived of, let alone realised. Elsewhere she identifies her passionate dedication to him as 'un attachement fou pour quelqu'un d'arriviste' (p797). As such, she forgives and is perhaps even attracted to the fact that he is 'peu intellectuel' and more preoccupied with the status afforded by flashy cars. As McIlvanney suggests of *Passion simple*, 'it could be argued that it is the very similarity of their origins which attracts the narrator to A'³⁰² ('A' being the acronym used to refer to the lover in this text). In this way we might consider the ways in which the lover engenders a certain kind of classed 'homecoming'. The intimacy of sex stokes up deeply-rooted feeling and provokes a return to an earlier class awareness.

This early class awareness is one that is unyielding and never quite left in the past. Indeed, S. embodies the part of her *present* self that is 'la plus « parvenue »'. Years later in *Le vrai lieu*, Ernaux employs this very language in reference to herself. Here, in the writer's discussion of the places she has lived, the movement from a bustling, working-class household to a spacious and silent house in the suburbs is explicitly flagged as representing having '[« accompli »], la trajectoire d'une transfuge de classe'.³⁰³ And yet Ernaux is conscious that her house in Cergy is not pretty, 'plutôt de « mauvais gout »' and thus 'sans doute celle d'un parvenu'³⁰⁴ (my emphasis). These very negative judgements mark instances of self-denigration and intense vulnerability. In these moments the narrator exposes herself as traversed by class- and taste-based judgements originally formed in one class setting, and now inflected by the inhabiting of another. The use of quotation marks throughout these moments is also interesting to note: '« parvenue »', '« paraître »', '« accompli »', '« mauvais gout »'. The narrator appears to be signalling a parroting or parody of societal judgements, judgements which she perhaps does not perceive as her own. She is acutely aware of her own classed history. Later in *Se perdre* we read:

³⁰² McIlvanney, *op. cit.* p78

³⁰³ Ernaux, *Le vrai lieu*, p23

³⁰⁴ *Loc. cit.*

Il énumère: sa chemise Saint-Laurent, son veston Saint-Laurent, la cravate Cerruti, le pantalon Ted Lapidus. Le goût de luxe [...] Comment, moi, l'ancienne adolescente mal fringuée, brulant de désir pour les robes des filles riches, pourrais-je le lui reprocher (p715)

As the narrator reflects in *Passion simple*:

Peut-être, avais-je plaisir à retrouver en A. la partie la plus « parvenue » de moi-même : j'avais été une adolescente avide de robes, de disques et de voyages, privée de ces biens parmi des camarades qui les avaient³⁰⁵

There is a pleasure in finding this shared ground, in reconnecting with this adolescent state of yearning and material aspiration. In *Passion simple*, the narrator reveals that 'les seuls moments heureux en dehors de sa présence étaient ceux où [elle] achetait de nouvelles robes, des boucles d'oreilles [...] et les essayai[t] [...] devant la glace'.³⁰⁶ Once again we encounter evidence of the enmeshing of class and sex in Ernaux's writing. The donning of markers of both desirability and luxury to appeal to the lover's tastes and, interestingly, the reflection of the self wearing these items, is a source of happiness and pleasure. Returning to *Passion simple*'s diaristic counterpart, *Se perdre*'s narrator speaks of a desire to note 'les détails pensés, prévus, de chacune [des] rencontres: [...] la robe qu['elle] portai[t] [...] le lieu [...] où [elle se] trouvai[t] quand il arrivait' (p810). The spectre of the 'robe' and the importance of the 'lieu' evoked in *Mémoire de fille* surface once more. In her attentiveness to these details, Ernaux reiterates her writerly infusion of taste, class and sexuality. In the figure of S. it may be argued that the grown up Annie finds a fellow *transfuge de classe*, someone who can relate to the yearning for the material markers of social climbing so jarringly felt and laboriously expressed in *Mémoire de fille*. Her desire is in part fuelled by the ways in which he reminds her of her own early desires. The narrator derives pleasure from indulging in and reconnecting with an earlier mode of self.

That said, the dynamics in this love affair are undoubtedly more complicated and less starkly imbalanced than the traumatic first experiences of *Mémoire de fille*. In *Se perdre*, the

³⁰⁵ Ernaux, *Passion simple*, p668

³⁰⁶ Ibid., p664

relationship is complicated by the pair's national difference and age gap, by social position and marital status. A sense of tension flows through the text between sexual and material pleasure, and the anxiety engendered in being at the mercy of his presence/absence. A tension appears to resurface, too, between past and present selves. Old wounds opened afresh, markers of class once more become imbricated with questions of sexuality, and desire and class are written through the spaces of sex. McIlvanney's evaluation of *Passion simple* remains true of *Se perdre*:

Rather than signal a break with the past, the passion described in the work serves to reinforce links with her childhood by enhancing the narrator's understanding of it [...] [the text] represents a return to origins, a reiteration of, not a dissociation from, the formative influences of childhood³⁰⁷

In its echoing of the foundational experiences at the *colonie*, the text demonstrates both an endurance and an evolution of class consciousness. In its journal form, *Se perdre* presents a (perhaps necessarily) more raw expression of retriggered class wounds than *Passion simple*. Through the love affair the narrator, and perhaps in turn her readers, are drawn into a space of heightened, multidirectional class awareness.

Another facet of class awareness worth noting is the text's courting of 'tastelessness'. In a gesture transgressive of notions of propriety, the narrator grants public access to her private journal. She exposes the intimate details of sexual desires and acts, and reveals a materialism that readers may find indecorous. Given her social ascension as a *transfuge de classe*, this gesture of courting 'tastelessness' is a luxury that she can now afford. Despite the presence of the anxious spectres of the past, unlike her younger counterpart in *Mémoire de fille*, the mature narrator in *Se perdre* and *Passion simple* alike is now 'well-versed in the art of feminine seduction'³⁰⁸ as well as in adherence to bourgeois codes and class performance. As Ladimer writes of *Passion simple*, the writer appears 'well aware that she has arrived at a social situation that enables her to live out her pleasure'.³⁰⁹ Further still, she can write and publish this pleasure, thus redoubling the sense of risk and transgression. Such transgression inspires in the narrator an irresolute relationship to shame. In her analysis of *Passion simple*, McIlvanney notes³¹⁰ the text's ambivalence in this regard. Although the narrator claims to feel

³⁰⁷ McIlvanney, *op. cit.* p78

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p80

³⁰⁹ Ladimer, *op. cit.* p64

³¹⁰ McIlvanney, *op. cit.* pp78-79

'aucune honte à noter ces choses',³¹¹ mere pages later we read: 'je regarde les pages écrites avec étonnement et une sorte de honte'.³¹² Furthermore, she expresses awareness of potential readerly reproach and confesses feeling 'l'angoisse de donner [le texte] à lire aux autres'.³¹³

The text is, indeed, infused with shame and ambivalence even in its very title. The fear of losing (and desire to lose) oneself is sex- and class-inflected in *Se perdre* and the narrator repeatedly evokes feelings of identity in dissolution. This is presented variably as pleasurable and painful. As Thomas persuasively suggests of the self-in-sex in this text:

The heightened sense of self inspired by the experience of sexual desire, and most tellingly of being desired, is built on fragile ground, and it is perhaps not surprising that it is simultaneously experienced as loss of that very same self.³¹⁴

The same, I argue, can be applied to class desire and class identity. Throughout the text, the narrating self delights in or despairs at dissolving into bodily, material pleasure of her youth and drifting from the cerebral realm of her adult years ('je suis incapable de faire quoi que ce soit de créatif' (p723), 'je suis dans un état psychologiquement comateux' (p767)). She is absorbed into the painful memories of her past and loses any tangible sense of her present. She is, as expressed in *Passion simple*, 'obsédée par A. [...] possédée par l'image de A.'.³¹⁵ Her life, and, in turn, the text(s), '[take] on an eternally cyclical quality, revolving around the presence or absence of her lover'.³¹⁶ She is consumed by the obsessive, oscillating waiting that characterises her experience of the affair. It both defines and overrides her life and sense of self, and its devastating effects are continually, forcefully described: 'je suis *tourmentée* par l'attente, la possible désillusion de ne pas le voir de ces deux jours me *ravage*' (p744) (my emphasis). As with the anticipation and longing conveyed in *Mémoire de fille*, *Se perdre's* narrator – and consequently, perhaps, its readers – are plunged into an anxious, adolescent headspace, feverishly expectant, locked in a state of waiting, and feeling completely disempowered to act, something that is even conveyed in the self-effacement inherent in the text's title. To reiterate a passage quoted earlier: 'attendre l'appel, la voix, qui dit aussitôt que *j'existe*, que je suis désirée. Pourquoi, chaque fois, je suis sûre que c'est fini, qu'il n'appellera plus? *Quelle peur ancienne?*' (p727) (my emphasis). The resurgence of this 'peur ancienne'

³¹¹ Ernaux, *Passion simple*, p672

³¹² Ibid., p683

³¹³ *Loc. cit.*

³¹⁴ Thomas, *À la recherche du moi perdu*, p98

³¹⁵ Ernaux, *Passion simple*, p675

³¹⁶ McIlvanney, *op. cit.* p80

only further intensifies the slippage of time. Class wounds, doubts and insecurities are aligned with and stoked up by the intimacy of sex in the affair, further signalling a sense of continuity. *Se perdre* is, indeed, punctuated by incessant evocations of time, of the past, present and future, and their dizzying, devastating slippage: ‘chaque jour, il faut que je réinvente mon emploi du temps, que je me persuade à écrire. *L’avenir ne signifie plus*’ (p862) (my emphasis). This sense of emptiness and stagnation is so intense that ‘le temps a presque fini de passer’ (p771). Elsewhere we read: ‘les matins noirs: une journée à faire que vivre seulement. Il fait encore nuit. Des centaines et des centaines de matins comme celui-là, avant et devant moi’ (p733). Here – though figuratively – morning and night collapse in on each other, at the same time as they stretch out infinitely and in multiple directions. As the narrator later tells us, ‘jamais le temps n’a été aussi lent et sans avenir en même temps’ (p835). Time itself has become a source of overwhelming alienation, isolation and confusion: ‘le présent est si fort, si haletant, que l’avenir et le passé me semblent à des années-lumière’ (p724). Whilst here the present is felt as overpoweringly ‘fort’, in *Passion simple* we read the following lamentation:

Quand j’allais dans la cuisine chercher des glaçons, je levais les yeux vers la pendule accrochée au-dessus de la porte, « plus que deux heures », « une heure », ou « dans une heure je serai là et il sera reparti ». Je me demandais avec stupeur : « *Où est le présent ?* »³¹⁷

In *Se perdre*, too, the narrator ‘[vit] dans la stupeur’ (p781). We are repeatedly reminded of her numb, zombie-esque state: ‘je vis sans vivre’ (p774), ‘je vis dans une douleur anesthésiée’ (p784). She is insubstantial, ‘flottante [...] incapable de penser clairement’ (p790), yet tethered and inescapably grounded, resembling ‘une pierre, incapable de bouger’ (p799). The loss of self engendered by the love affair in *Se perdre* mirrors the evacuation of self felt after the formative sexual experiences with H in *Mémoire de fille*: ‘il n’y pas de pensée en elle [...] Elle est *perdue*, une fille de chiffon’³¹⁸ (my emphasis).

Class consciousness and its imbrication with sex endures in this text. Despite the very different circumstances of each work, the youthful state of anxiety and stagnation narrated in *Mémoire de fille* is seemingly retriggered in the complicated power dynamics and frustrated yearnings of the relationship recorded in *Se perdre*. The text’s intense interiority and diaristic

³¹⁷ Ernaux, *Passion simple*, p662

³¹⁸ Ernaux, *Mémoire de fille*, pp51-52

form compounds the feeling that the narrating self is one that is trapped in tension, suspended in a place of anxiety and anticipation. That said, the presence/absence of the lover in *Se perdre* simultaneously creates a pleasurable and desirable kind of classed homecoming, a reckoning or reunion with an earlier class position. Although the spectres of the past and its 'peur ancienne' persist, the text is nonetheless employed as an ambivalent, at times almost masochistic stage upon which classed identity is played out.

1.4 'Le moyen d'une révélation'³¹⁹: The Instrumentalisation of Sex in *L'Usage de la photo* and *Le jeune homme*

Before bringing this chapter to a conclusion, I wish to briefly discuss two further texts in the trajectory of Ernaux's writing of class via sex, *L'Usage de la photo* and *Le jeune homme*. In *L'Usage de la photo*, we encounter a resurgence of Ernaux's fascination with the exposition of intimate spaces. This phototext is structured around textual and visual representations of the disarray left behind after sex. Ernaux and her lover and co-author, Marc Marie, provide written accompaniments to photographs taken in the immediate aftermath of their lovemaking. Some shots are taken from bizarre, secretive angles from underneath bedframes and focus on abandoned shoes.³²⁰ Others are taken down the sides of furniture, capturing piles of wrinkled clothing.³²¹ Much has been made of this text in critical writings,³²² but in the context of the present study, I include discussion of *L'Usage de la photo* for what it can illuminate in terms of dynamics of class and expressions of classed identity in Ernaux's writing.

All the text's carefully composed and selected images convey a deliberately provocative and evocative sense of peeking through the keyhole. The access to her space and her sexuality that the writer grants her readers here is deeply transgressive in both gender and class terms. Jordan acknowledges the discomfort provoked in the viewing of these photos, and notices how such intimate snapshots inspire questions such as:

What is a famous author doing in letting us see discarded garments and domestic disarray which should strictly remain off-limits to strangers? [...] are we not shamed/stained by our voyeuristic interest in these scenes?³²³

³¹⁹ Ernaux and Marie, *L'Usage de la photo*, p88

³²⁰ Ibid., p166

³²¹ Ibid., p176

³²² See, for example, Jordan (2007)

³²³ Jordan, Shirley, 'Improper Exposure: "L'Usage de la photo" by Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 7.2 (2007), pp123-141, p130

Her study examines how the text explores 'sexuality, gender, class, shame and staining with a disorientating visual display that both invites and defies shame'.³²⁴ For Jordan, the reader-cum-voyeur becomes embroiled in the text's shame. This is a shame born, in part, from abjection.³²⁵ *L'Usage de la photo* may sit uncomfortably with readers in its insistence on making public scenes suggesting domestic privacy and bodily intimacy. Ernaux and Marie's images draw attention to that which bourgeois codes of propriety and discretion require remain hidden. Although devoid of human subjects, they suggest corporeality in their implication of sex and sexuality, their depiction of food and food waste, and display of used, crumpled linens and worn socks. Ernaux once again infuses her text with class awareness in her courting of tastelessness. Ideas of staining³²⁶ in her works are rooted in both class and sexuality. As confirmed in my earlier analysis of *Mémoire de fille*, Ernaux is a writer "stained' by class' and 'imbued with a culpable sexuality'³²⁷ forged in youth. In *L'Usage de la photo*, literal and figurative sexual 'staining' is explored as pleasurable and empowering, as a means through which to preserve or mark her humanity in light of the illness she is fighting.

Despite their abject transgression, the scenes presented in *L'Usage de la photo* are also infused with class in their clear – and, perhaps, intentional – sense of bourgeois curation. Although shown in black and white,³²⁸ the clothes and soft furnishings appear to be of attractively high quality. Many of the photographs suggest luxury in their setting. They contain suggestions of the lushly erotic, as well as displays of the bourgeois impetus to order and cleanliness. Seemingly insignificant details of the images – pristine carpets marked by the passage of a vacuum cleaner, careful arrangements of the accoutrements of breakfast rituals, the soft haze cast by the voile curtains of a balcony window – contribute to a heavy aura of the bourgeois and set up an uneasy juxtaposition between curation and disorder. When, in the text, the writer explicitly acknowledges the unreliable nature of photographs ('les photos mentent, toujours'³²⁹), she invites her readers to look beyond and call into question the apparently random disarray. The images are self-consciously constructed and self-consciously classed. Each photograph, as Jordan suggests, imbricates 'imperatives of concealment and discretion [...] with imperatives to display'.³³⁰

³²⁴ Ibid., p131

³²⁵ See pp20-21 of this thesis for discussion of the abject via Douglas and Kristeva.

³²⁶ For further discussion of notions of staining in Ernaux, see Miller (1999), Thomas (2006) and Jordan (2007).

³²⁷ Jordan, *Improper Exposure*, p131

³²⁸ In the collection Folio, Gallimard (2006) edition, at least.

³²⁹ Ernaux and Marie, *L'Usage de la photo*, p182

³³⁰ Jordan, *Improper Exposure*, p131

Furthermore, the spaces exposed in these photos are quite clearly spaces that are infused with personal power. The text that accompanies the images paints a picture of a woman who is as in charge of her own sexuality as she is the lens of the camera: 'c'est moi qui prends la photo, la manipulation, le réglage du zoom est une excitation particulière'.³³¹ As with *Se perdre*, in *L'Usage de la photo*, transgression is a bourgeois, luxury gesture that the writer is now in a place to be able to explore. The presentation of the *chambre* spaces in this text could not be further from that of the shared bedroom of the *colonie* or the *chambre-box* in Rouen in *Mémoire de fille*. The spaces of *L'Usage de la photo* are owned and directed, and here it is the author/narrator who grants access rights. The spectre of shame that haunts the 'la fille de '58' is challenged in the text's unapologetic displays and the text stages a continual tension between orderliness and disarray, between shame and pride, and between curation and abandon. As sociologist Simon Gunn has written, 'self-control and the appearance of command have represented some of the most fundamental components of class'.³³² It is through the co-mingling of norms and transgressions in this text that Ernaux explores her class identity. As she reflects: 'tout homme avec qui j'ai eu une histoire me semble avoir été le moyen d'une révélation, différente à chaque fois'.³³³ I suggest that these revelations are, in part, class-based. In *L'Usage de la photo*, Ernaux exploits the interspace between abandon and control, courts shame and instrumentalises sex in order to explore class identity.

Le jeune homme, the writer's most recently published text, also focuses on a sexual relationship. As I suggested in the opening of this chapter, it provides a particularly illuminating key for understanding Ernaux's writing of class identity. Throughout the text's mere forty pages, she maintains her customary acute attentiveness to manifestations of class. Like the lover in *Se perdre* and *Passion simple*, the *jeune homme* provides something of a classed 'homecoming'. The young man is much younger than the narrator.³³⁴ The lover is a working-class student from Rouen, a town in which (as established in *Mémoire de fille* and beyond) Ernaux spent much of her own youth. He is an admirer of the narrator's literary work, having written to her several times expressing a desire to meet. The narrator, attentive to his working-class habits and assumptions, lists the ways in which he is careful with money ('il n'achetait que les produits les moins chers [...] allait jusqu'à Monoprix acheter sa baguette

³³¹ Ernaux and Marie, *L'Usage de la photo*, p123

³³² Gunn, Simon, 'Translating Bourdieu: cultural capital and the English middle class in historical perspective', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 56:1 (2005), pp49-64, p61

³³³ Ernaux and Marie, *L'Usage de la photo*, p88

³³⁴ Although the text was published in the year of the author's 82nd birthday, the affair depicted took place when she was in her late fifties (between 1998 and 2000).

de pain parce qu'elle coûtait cinquante centimes moins cher qu'à la boulangerie voisine'³³⁵), and notes his cultural preferences ('il jouait au Loto sportif [...] il regardait *Téléfoot*'³³⁶). She observes, too, his use of language: 'il disait « stop » ou « c'est bon » à la place de « merci » quand je le servais à table. Il m'appelait « la meuf », « la reum »'.³³⁷ There is something affirming yet troubling in rediscovering through him the gestures of her own working-class youth:

s'essuyer la bouche avec un morceau de pain [...] [poser] le doigt sur son verre pour que je ne lui verse pas davantage de vin [...] couper ses spaghettis, détailler une pomme en petits morceaux piqués ensuite au bout du couteau, autant de gestes oubliés que je retrouvais en lui³³⁸

It is through the noticing of these manifestations of class, furthermore, that the young lover becomes the classed subject against which the narrator registers the social distance she has travelled. As she reveals:

Il y a trente ans, je me serais détournée de lui. Je ne voulais pas alors retrouver dans un garçon les signes de mon origine populaire, tout ce que je trouvais « plouc » et que je savais avoir été en moi [...] Que je m'aperçoive de ces signes – et peut-être [...] que j'y sois indifférente – était une preuve que je n'étais plus dans le même monde que lui. Avec mon mari, autrefois, je me sentais une fille du peuple, avec lui j'étais une bourge³³⁹

Given Ernaux's proclivity for cyclicity, it is unsurprising that this earlier preference was established fifty years before the publication of this text by the narrator in *Les Armoires vides*: 'je cherche en eux le signe qu'ils n'appartiennent pas à mon milieu'.³⁴⁰ Although at one time repellent, the recognition of the more provincial traits of her youth in others is something that is not only satisfying and comforting, but also allows for a sense of superiority. We see the resurgence, as in *Se perdre*, of quotation marks to mimic negative societal judgements. Once again, the lover becomes the means of exploring class identity and making sense of the uneasy movement from one class to another.

³³⁵ Ernaux, *Le jeune homme*, p18

³³⁶ Ibid., pp18-19

³³⁷ Ibid., p19

³³⁸ Ibid., pp20-21

³³⁹ *Loc. cit.*

³⁴⁰ Ernaux, Annie, *Les Armoires vides* in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp103-210, p176

Whilst the narrator draws attention to this evolution, she simultaneously insists on a sense of continuity and cyclicity. Stripped of the luxury suggested in the images in *L'Usage de la photo*, in *Le jeune homme* we read:

Les phares projetaient des lueurs sur les murs de la chambre, à travers les hautes fenêtres sans voilages. Il me semblait que je ne m'étais jamais levée d'un lit, le même depuis mes dix-huit ans, mais dans des lieux différents, avec des hommes différents et indiscernables les uns des autres³⁴¹

Although, as highlighted in the analysis throughout this chapter, each affair that she engages in is lived and written very differently, something about the presence of the *jeune homme* and about being immersed in his world, gives the narrator a feeling of utter continuity. It is as if the Tanning-esque dreamscape of endless rooms through which she has imagined her life has concertinaed in on itself. Their relationship also engenders a sense of cyclicity, and we see a return to the motif of the 'bedroom': 'l'amour sur le matelas par terre dans la chambre glaciale, la dînette sur un coin de table [...] me donnaient un sentiment de répétition',³⁴² 'le présent n'était pour moi qu'un passé dupliqué'.³⁴³

The tone of this short text could not be further from the anxious ignorance of *Mémoire de fille*, the lamentation of *Se perdre*, nor, indeed, from the oscillating tensions of *L'Usage de la photo*. *Le jeune homme* is triumphant. In terms of class and gender identity, the narrator has arrived a place in her romantic life where the tables have been turned. As she writes: 'j'étais en position dominante et j'utilisais les armes d'une domination dont, toutefois, je connaissais la fragilité dans une relation amoureuse'.³⁴⁴ In the continuation of her trajectory as *transfuge de classe*, it is now the narrator who has become the inductor into bourgeois culture: 'à plus d'un égard – de la littérature, du théâtre, des usages bourgeois – j'étais son initiatrice'.³⁴⁵ She is maternal with him in this regard, and yet feels like a child: 'il était le porteur de la mémoire de mon premier monde [...] J'avais de nouveau dix, quinze ans [...] Il était le passé incorporé'.³⁴⁶ The tensions found in Ernaux's previous texts are dissipated in *Le jeune homme*, and her classed identities appear more fully integrated. The young lover allows her an access to the past for which she has previously expressed longing. With him, she '[parcourait] tous

³⁴¹ Ernaux, *Le jeune homme*, p14

³⁴² Ibid., p22

³⁴³ Ibid., p25

³⁴⁴ Ibid., p24

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p25

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p21

les âges de la vie, [sa] vie'.³⁴⁷ The text thus provides a sort of global retrospective of her written life in class- and sex-based terms.

Although the sense of tension on behalf of the narrator is diminished in *Le jeune homme*, it is nevertheless a text that may sit uncomfortably with readers for its overtones of (class) exploitation. The narrator acknowledges that, at times, she treats or approaches her young lover with 'cruauté' or 'duplicité'³⁴⁸. Furthermore, there are moments where the narrative slips into classed judgements which feel cruel and one-sided, and where one imagines the young lover is unaware of his subjection to such assessment. Through this relationship, she lives out her classed power, rather than her relative lack of it, and instrumentalises sex not only for physical pleasure, but also in order to measure and confirm the social distance she has travelled as a *transfuge de classe*. In *Le jeune homme*, Ernaux is brought back materially to the gestures, habits, lifestyle and language of the familiar working-class culture of her past life and uses this in order to confirm her transcendence. She slips comfortably back into this world, knowing now (as she did not in youth) that she is not trapped there. Her position as the elder and more culturally dominant half of the couple means that she can proudly loop back to and don the epithet of the 'fille scandaleuse'. In situating herself in classed terms in relation to her lover, yet another 'homme de [sa] jeunesse', the narrator courts this memory and this signifier on her own terms. After the productive experimentation with shame in her earlier works, *Le jeune homme* is a text entirely liberated from it. Writing of the looks they receive when out as a couple, Ernaux declares: 'il me semblait être à nouveau la même fille scandaleuse. Mais, cette fois, sans la moindre honte, avec un sentiment de victoire'.³⁴⁹

1.5 Conclusion

In *Mémoire de fille*, Ernaux writes that 'entre la chambre de S et la chambre de l'avorteuse rue Cardinet il y a une absolue continuité'.³⁵⁰ In following the continuous thread of sex that runs through her oeuvre, this chapter has examined the trajectory of a *transfuge de classe*, considering the ways in which the writer situates herself in classed terms through the sexual relationships she so frequently writes about. It is through the writing of the spaces and dynamics of sex that Ernaux's narrators demonstrate the endurance of formative social and sexual experiences. Class permeates the shared bedroom at the *colonie* in *Mémoire de fille* and

³⁴⁷ Ernaux, *Le jeune homme*, p21

³⁴⁸ Ibid., p25

³⁴⁹ Ibid., p31

³⁵⁰ Ernaux, *Mémoire de fille*, p79

is ingrained in the physical and psychological spaces of *Se perdre*'s all-consuming love affair. It percolates throughout the spaces of sex depicted in *L'Usage de la photo* and those described in *Le jeune homme*. Reminiscent of Tanning's *Birthday*, Ernaux readers may share in the sensation that 'toutes ces chambres [sont] imbriquées les unes dans les autres'³⁵¹ in a kind of literary infinity mirror whereby impressions of the past are continually reflected in the present.

Although separated by time (in terms of publication dates and events narrated), a reading across these texts evinces not only the endurance and evolution of class consciousness in Ernaux's works, but also its presence and influence in texts that may initially seem less conspicuously shot through with class concerns. Whilst these texts share a commonality in that the sexual encounters they portray conjoin the class the narrator has left and the one she has joined, in each work this manifests in different ways and to different degrees. Throughout this chapter and across Ernaux's oeuvre, I have traced manifestations of power and dynamics of access and exclusion, as well as tensions between the painful and the pleasurable. A trajectory in the writing of sex and a productive play with levels of access accompanies the writer's journey as a *transfuge de classe*. In *Mémoire de fille*, the narrator has no access to the bourgeois world, and writes and performs her experience of social and sexual exclusion. In *Se perdre*, the class wounds and retriggered feelings of exclusion complicate and intensify the fears and desires experienced in the obsessive love affair. They allow the narrator to re-evaluate her relationship to her past but also to court shame. A productive play with shame also features in *L'Usage de la photo*. The images in this text constitute a reiterated transgressive gesture that grants public access to a bourgeois world, and invites consideration of classed tensions between order and disorder. In *Le jeune homme*, the narrator gains effortless access to her past, classed self and the lover here finally symbolises 'le passé incorporé'.³⁵²

In the narrating of sex across Ernaux's writing, there are threads of continuity and cyclicity, but there is nevertheless a distinct evolution in terms of class consciousness. In *Mémoire de fille*, the young Annie feels acutely a sense of being a classed subject. In *Se perdre* and *L'Usage de la photo*, we see an adult Annie playing out a newfound bourgeois identity through the writing of sex. In *Le jeune homme*, the focus shifts to the other and the lover

³⁵¹ Ernaux, *Se perdre*, p748

³⁵² Ernaux, *Le jeune homme*, p21

becomes the classed subject against which she measures the social distance travelled. If, as suggested earlier in this chapter, Ernaux's writing self, and her texts, are open spaces to be traversed, it is in part through the writing of the spaces of sex and of interaction with others (here, male lovers) that Ernaux comes to know her (classed) self and explore her class identity.

Chapter 2. 'Allusive mais constante'³⁵³: Unearthing Class in Christine Angot's *Une semaine de vacances* and *L'Inceste*

Throughout her extensive corpus, Christine Angot sustains a continued preoccupation with power relations. The relationships laid bare in her texts – be they mother-daughter, father-daughter or lover-lover – stage various negotiations and navigations of dominance and submission. Such a preoccupation has been recognised by Angot scholars. Gill Rye, for example, explores power in Angot's works through the prism of the love story. She suggests of the tempestuous love affairs that feature in *Pourquoi le Brésil ?* and *L'Inceste* alike that they serve 'to explore the power relations involved in love relationships in which fascination, domination, coercion and consensuality play their part'.³⁵⁴ These ideas concerning dominance and coercion bleed beyond love relationships, beyond these two particular texts and appear to taint the entire corpus and every interaction therewithin. Shirley Jordan provides a more global recognition of this aspect of Angot's writing, identifying how the "Angot phenomenon" is [...] shot through with a complex tracery of power relations'.³⁵⁵ These relations – identified elsewhere by Jordan as 'uneasy'³⁵⁶ – weave an intricate, unsettling and fluctuating web.

Explorations of power are central to Angot's writerly project, although not necessarily obviously so. Power, Jordan tells us, 'is subtly located'.³⁵⁷ This subtlety goes some way, perhaps, in accounting for the curious neglect of one particular strand of this complicated power web: that of social class. Indeed, unlike the case of Annie Ernaux, the texts of Angot (with the exception of *Un amour impossible*) contain few direct meditations on social class difference. Ernaux's texts are brimming with frequently reprised ruminations on the question of class, and on the ways in which the various anxieties engendered in her working-class childhood shaped and continue to shape the woman and the writer she has become. Ernaux positions her texts firmly in their fundamental, class-rooted framing and identifies herself proudly and defiantly as a *transfuge de classe*. With regard to Angot, however, as this chapter explores, class is as insidiously buried in her writing as it is in the social fabric and surfaces

³⁵³ Bourmeau, Sylvain 'Christine Angot : « L'Inceste est une affaire sociale », *Libération* (2012) <https://www.liberation.fr/livres/2012/09/03/l-inceste-est-une-affaire-sociale_843627/> [last accessed June 2022]

³⁵⁴ Rye, Gill, *L'histoire d'amour chez Christine Angot: romance or betrayal?* [Unpublished paper presented at 'Diversity and Difference in France and the Francophone World' conference, 20th-21st century French and Francophone Studies International Colloquium, April 1-3 2004, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida (Panel: Gender/Genre Difference and the Love Story)] <<https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/345/>> [last accessed June 2022]

³⁵⁵ Jordan, Shirley, 'Reconfiguring the Public and the Private: Intimacy, Exposure and Vulnerability in Christine Angot's *Rendez-vous*', *French Cultural Studies*, 18:2 (2007), pp201-218, p204

³⁵⁶ Jordan, Shirley, 'Autofiction, Ethics and Consent: Christine Angot's *Les Petits*', *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine* (2012) <<http://www.revue-critique-de-fiction-francaise-contemporaine.org/rcffc/article/view/fix04.01/624>> [last accessed June 2022]

³⁵⁷ Jordan, *Reconfiguring the Public and the Private*, p213

more quietly, in more obscured ways. The process of disentangling questions of social class in the works of Angot is thus more complicated and requires finely-tuned attention.

Despite the relative lack of explicit discussion of class within Angot's texts, it is indisputable that social class is present. Outside of her texts, the writer talks about class more openly and directly. The thematic importance of class in her works comes through frequently in interviews with the writer as well as in numerous articles in the press.³⁵⁸ Journalists and reviewers, the writer herself and her readership all recognise that 'le sujet majeur du rejet social, des différences de classe [est] souvent abordé dans ses fictions'.³⁵⁹ The fact that academic criticism addressing and exploring Angot's texts has neglected the question of class is thus rendered all the more strange and surprising (this disregard for issues of social class can indeed be observed more generally in academia, as outlined in the introduction to this thesis). Angot's texts themselves are not only shot through with class-based preoccupations and anxieties³⁶⁰ but should also be read in the context of the writer's rebellious reputation for disrupting the tastes of the bourgeois literary establishment. Both inside and outside her texts, Angot positions herself firmly in opposition to, and seeks to disturb, the parameters of class-based propriety. Natalie Edwards, in her investigation into shame in the works of Angot and Annie Ernaux, notes how the former has

become notorious for her deliberately outrageous media persona; she is known for her caustic comments on national television, her vitriolic responses to her critics, and her abrasive personality. In her literary output, this author plays very deliberately with socially codified ideas of shame [...] recounting her sexuality and her heterosexual, homosexual, and incestuous sex acts in detail³⁶¹

Angot consistently and consciously upsets societal expectations of writerly, intellectual conduct. Wilfully unabashed and polemical, both in and about her texts, the author is, at

³⁵⁸ Devarrieux, Claire, review of *Un amour impossible* for *Libération* (2015) No longer available online <https://www.liberation.fr/cahier-ete-2015/2015/08/14/christine-angot_1363547/> [last accessed June 2020]; Tanette, Sylvie, 'Je rêvais de faire un livre qui dirait ce que c'est, avoir une mère', *Onlalu* (2015) <<https://www.onlalu.com/christine-angot-sylvie-tanette-amour-impossible-15090/>> [last accessed June 2022]; Birnbaum, Jean, 'Christine Angot : « Il n'y a pas de vérité hors de la littérature »', *Le Monde* (2015) <https://www.lemonde.fr/festival/article/2015/09/08/christine-angot-il-n-y-a-pas-de-verite-hors-de-la-litterature_4737433_4415198.html> [last accessed June 2022]; Richard, Francis, 'Un amour impossible, de Christine Angot', *Contrepoints* (2015) <<https://www.contrepoints.org/2015/09/14/221686-un-amour-impossible-de-christine-angot>> [last accessed June 2022]

³⁵⁹ Ferniot, Christine, 'Christine Angot ou l'amer maternel', *L'Express* (2015) <https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/christine-angot-ou-l-amer-maternel_1708448.html> [last accessed June 2022]

³⁶⁰ Seen, for instance – and, for now, glancingly – in *L'Inceste* in the oscillating, nervous vitriol that 'Christine' the narrator aims at the nuclear, middle-class family unit of the 'legitimate' Angots.

³⁶¹ Edwards, Natalie, "Écrire pour ne plus avoir honte": Christine Angot's and Annie Ernaux's Shameless Bodies' in *The Female Face of Shame*, ed. Moran, Patricia and Johnson, Erica (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p62

mildest, 'implacable'.³⁶² For some, and at worst, she constitutes a revolting 'blot on the world of French letters'.³⁶³ Over the years she has become known for her very public arguments,³⁶⁴ controversial comments,³⁶⁵ and for her insistence on incorporating real people in her texts (the publication of *Les Petits* even led to an accusation of *atteinte à la vie privée* and resulted in a court case³⁶⁶). Even the briefest of scrolls, through the YouTube comments left under the trailer for the 2018 film adaptation of *Un amour impossible*³⁶⁷ evinces the deeply contentious stir that the writer continues to make in the literary establishment and beyond. In short, Angot troubles in a way quite different to that of Ernaux.

'Objectionable to some readers, pleasurable to others',³⁶⁸ Angot's rebellion and hostility have, unsurprisingly, garnered her much critical attention and polarised critics. As Rye has observed, her texts '[elicit] strong reactions [...] accusations of narcissism and lack of literariness'³⁶⁹ as well as, conversely, expressions of admiration for her innovation, particularly, says Rye, in terms of her subtle, thought-provoking 'play between autobiography, fiction and performance'.³⁷⁰ That said, Angot's 'play' with notions of social class, the 'performance' of class-informed violence that her texts stage, and the autobiographical facts of the writer's class-inflected upbringing, all remain curiously unaddressed in academic criticism. Instead, critical writings have focused more heavily on issues pertaining to shame, doubt and authenticity (Sadoux (2002), Edwards (2013), Rye (2004), amongst others) and have increasingly centred around that arguably most identifiable of Angot's tropes, that of incest. Edwards noted in 2013 that 'Ruth Cruickshank has written of how the incest has been obfuscated by critics of Angot's work, possibly due to the scandal surrounding the author, and obviously due to the taboo of discussing incest'.³⁷¹ Several critics have now directly or

³⁶² Ferniot, *op. cit.*

³⁶³ Jordan, *Autofiction, Ethics and Consent*

³⁶⁴ For example, with Sandrine Rousseau (*Franceinfo*, "'On n'est pas couché' : l'altercation entre Sandrine Rousseau et Christine Angot en six actes' (2017) <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/medias/on-n-est-pas-couche-l-altercation-entre-sandrine-rousseau-et-christine-angot-en-six-actes_2399596.html> [last accessed June 2022]) and Virginie Calmels (Geffray, Emilie, 'C à vous : Virginie Calmels revient sur son échange avec Christine Angot dans ONPC', *Le Figaro* (2018) <https://tvmag.lefigaro.fr/programme-tv/c-a-vous-virginie-calmels-revient-sur-son-echange-avec-christine-angot-dans-onpc_5b0725ca-2698-11e8-a155-9eab006934e7/> [last accessed June 2022])

³⁶⁵ For example, her comments on slavery for which she later apologised (*Franceinfo*, 'Christine Angot fait polémique après ses propos sur l'esclavage', (2019) <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/medias/video-christine-angot-fait-polemique-apres-ses-propos-sur-l-esclavage_3472739.html> [last accessed June 2022])

³⁶⁶ Edwards, Natalie, 'Autofiction and the Law: Legal Scandals in Contemporary French Literature', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 22:1 (2018), pp6-14

³⁶⁷ For example, 'd'après un roman de Christine Angot'... BOYCOTT !!!', "'d'après un roman de Christine Angot" Et bien, tout est dit je crois...', 'Manque plus que l'inceste pour vomir le film autant que le livre. Les névrosés comme Angot et BHL gouvernement et produisent des œuvres [...] c'est dire comme la France va mal...', 'Je n'aime pas du tout le personnage public (voire je le déteste) mais un jour par curiosité j'ai ouvert un de ses bouquins et j'ai trouvé que c'était vraiment bien écrit, une vraie profondeur, un vrai style incarné, rare de nos jours' (*FilmsActu*, 'UN AMOUR IMPOSSIBLE Bande Annonce (2018) Virginie Efira', online video, Youtube (24th August 2018) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LH8hqtfe6Q>> [last accessed October 2020])

³⁶⁸ Jordan, Shirley, 'Overstepping the Boundaries: Sexual Awakening, Trauma and Writing in Annie Ernaux's *Memoire de fille* and Christine Angot's *Une semaine de vacances*', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 59:3 (2019), pp5-18, p13

³⁶⁹ Rye, Gill, 'In Uncertain Terms: Mothering without Guilt in Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Mal de mer* and Christine Angot's *Léonore, toujours*', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 45:1 (2005), pp5-15, p6

³⁷⁰ *Loc. cit.*

³⁷¹ Edwards, *Écrire pour ne plus avoir honte*, p66

indirectly answered this call and Angot criticism is today replete with explorations of trauma and incest (Ledoux-Beaugrand (2003), Rye (2004), Cruickshank (2009), Lafontaine (2018), Jordan (2019)). With this chapter, I posit that the question of social class – implicated as it is in the incest that features in Angot’s texts, and absent as it is from critical writings – has been even further ‘obfuscated’ and neglected than the incest narrative. As such, this chapter constitutes a timely consideration of class in Angot and an invitation to reflect upon the implications and inner workings of class dynamics in two of her texts in particular, *Une semaine de vacances* and *L’Inceste*.

2.1 ‘« Inceste » et « domination »’³⁷²: Disentangling Incest and Class

Une semaine de vacances and *L’Inceste* both feature incest as their central theme. In the first, the incestuous subject matter is felt in its full immediacy. As the unwavering present tense holds us in the excruciating action, the text spans a week of supposed holiday between a young daughter and her father that, in reality, is nothing more than a predatory pretence for incestuous rape and exploitation. *Une semaine de vacances* opens onto a jarringly and deeply unsettling scene where, in the holiday home’s toilet, the father feeds the daughter pieces of ham from his erect penis. The incestuous sex is ‘front and centre’ from the outset, and its shock value is surely redoubled by the fact that readers are at first unaware of the pair’s familial connection. From this scene onwards the text propels us through an unrelenting and painstaking hundred-page account of the abuse inflicted by the father. *L’Inceste*, however, is unrelenting in differing ways. Here, the immediacy of the embodied experience of incest is replaced by a chaotic, spiralling display of its reverberating after-effects. The text winds tortuously through an extended emotional crisis triggered by the breakdown of a relationship between the narrator and her lover, Marie-Christine, when the latter decides to spend Christmas with her (middle-class) family (rather than with ‘Christine’ and her daughter). The emotional distress this triggers in the narrator leads to an unravelling of her past as flashbacks of the incestuous abuse that she suffered and frantic searches of psychoanalytic dictionaries pierce and disrupt the narrative.

Both of these texts deal glaringly, agonisingly with incest but they are also, as I explore in the following analysis, texts through which issues of social class seep particularly insidiously. Indeed, one possible reason for Angot scholars’ overlooking of the question of class lies in its intense and unsettling imbrication *with* the incest trope. The incest that

³⁷² Birnbaum, *op. cit.*

features in Angot's works is, in fact, predicated on class difference and on differing claims to legitimacy. The narrator's father's sustained, silent abuse is reliant on the maintained separation of two worlds, one containing the affluent, middle-class and nuclear family unit (his 'legitimate' children and their worldly mother) and the other, his 'illegitimate' daughter, 'Christine' and her mother (a mere *dactylo* deemed, as readers learn in *Un amour impossible*, insufficiently bourgeois for marriage material). Writing for *L'Express* in 2015, Christine Ferniot writes of this particular text that with it Angot paints a portrait 'd'une société de compétition où les perdants sont toujours les mêmes'.³⁷³ The writer herself has noted the centrality of social class to her writerly project. In an interview with Sylvie Tanette for *onlalu*, she confirmed that, in *Un amour impossible*, 'la différence de classe est au cœur de [l']histoire'.³⁷⁴ With this chapter, I argue that this assertion applies more broadly to Angot's work as a whole. In turning once more to journalistic articles and interviews, we encounter further attestations to this inextricable, originary link between the author's handling of incest and class. Of *Un amour impossible*'s adolescent narrator, Angot has stated that:

elle se dit que son propre sentiment d'exil s'explique par le fait qu'elle est aussi issue de cet homme-là, de ce milieu-là. Vous savez, c'est très fort la fascination sociale [...] *Sans fascination sociale, vous ne pourriez pas humilier les gens, vous n'auriez pas de prise*³⁷⁵ (my emphasis)

In 'Christine's case this *fascination sociale*, as I shall go on to explore in this chapter, stems from the dazzling manifestations of the father's cultural capital. As the narrator confirms in *L'Inceste*: 'je trouvais qu'il était intelligent, intéressant, d'une culture tellement au-dessus de la moyenne, tellement exceptionnelle [...] Lui, il connaissait trente langues, il était élégant'.³⁷⁶ 'La politesse, l'absence totale de fautes de français, l'accent dans les autres langues parfait',³⁷⁷ all form part of the father figure's charm and capital. He employs his alluring elegance and intelligence as manipulative weapons noticeably and repeatedly in Angot's texts. Later, in *Un amour impossible*, the effects of these weapons are raised to a level of conscious analysis. As the narrator of this text spells out in conversation with her mother:

³⁷³ Ferniot, *op. cit.*

³⁷⁴ Tanette, *op. cit.*

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁶ Angot, Christine, *L'Inceste* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1999), p148

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p185

Il a ignoré l'interdit fondamental pour les ascendants d'avoir des relations sexuelles avec leurs enfants [...] Il était au-dessus de ça, au-dessus de toi, de nous, et des règles sociales d'une manière générale. Y compris de la règle sociale fondamentale, donc très très au-dessus. Ne pas reconnaître un interdit qui s'applique à tous, c'est la distinction suprême. Tu comprends ! Quelle classe !³⁷⁸

Similarly and more plainly put by Claire Devarrieux in her review of *Un amour impossible* for *Libération*:

L'inceste est *le moyen par lequel* le représentant d'une classe sociale supérieure signale qu'il est au-dessus des lois, et l'instrument par lequel il est signifié à la classe inférieure qu'elle restera à sa place³⁷⁹ (my emphasis)

The incestuous abuse that constitutes the so-called 'fil rouge'³⁸⁰ of Angot's oeuvre is made possible by – at the same time that it confirms, perpetuates and intensifies – class difference and separation. The wide-ranging applicability of this dynamic is confirmed in the narrator's long explanation to her mother in *Un amour impossible*'s closing sections:

Vous pouviez avoir une relation, mais à condition de respecter certaines règles, qui garantissaient que tu n'infiltrerais pas son monde. Qu'il y aurait des limites. La séparation de vos deux mondes devait être établie, et la supériorité du sien devait être maintenue, bien au-dessus [...] C'est pas une histoire privée ça tu comprends. C'est pas un arrangement personnel, c'est un arrangement social, auquel tout le monde participe, y compris toi. C'est l'histoire du rejet social³⁸¹

Although *Un amour impossible* is certainly the Angot text where considerations on class are most clearly, didactically present, discussions of *Une semaine de vacances* also substantiate this connection between social subjugation and incest. For example, in an interview with Sylvain Bourmeau, the writer has acknowledged how:

³⁷⁸ Angot, Christine, *Un amour impossible* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015), p210

³⁷⁹ Devarrieux, *op. cit.*

³⁸⁰ Forcolin, Francesca, 'Christine Angot: le désir d'indigner le lecteur : La société violée par l'(auto)fiction', *Carnets, Première Série - 3 Numéro Spécial* (2011), pp51-61, p53

³⁸¹ Angot, *Un amour impossible*, p205

il paraît clair dans ce livre que cette question de la transgression incestueuse s'accompagne d'une aisance à humilier ceux que l'on entend tenir en dessous de soi [...] Certains ont une capacité plus grande à humilier les autres³⁸² (my emphasis)

However, one of the most poignant and interesting confirmations of the pervasive, fundamental importance of the concomitant issues of incest and class in Angot can be found in a 2015 interview with the writer conducted by Jean Birnbaum:

L'Inceste, ce serait la déclaration. Mais ça ne suffit pas de déclarer. Il faut définir. Qu'est-ce qu'on y connaît aux mots ? *Une semaine de vacances*, c'est la définition. Tout le livre n'est qu'une définition du mot « inceste », et « domination ». Ensuite, il faut dire ce que les uns et les autres ont fait, le père a fait ça, la mère a fait ça, comment la société s'est disposée autour, avec *Un amour impossible*, on a l'explication³⁸³ (my emphasis)

This trio of iconic texts from Angot's corpus, then, seeks to declare, define and explain the twinned issues of incest and class-based *domination*. This study strategically looks at the textualisation and inscription of class, rather than its description. Interested in that which *makes up* class consciousness, this chapter focuses specifically on the 'déclaration' and 'définition' offered by *L'Inceste* and *Une semaine de vacances* respectively. Both of these texts are (perhaps necessarily) more immersive and raw in their handling of incest and domination than their explicatory counterpart (the *explication* offered by *Un amour impossible*). Both feature a privileging of lived experience and both, perhaps now unsurprisingly, are yet to be analysed fully along class lines. Angot has described *Une semaine de vacances* in the following forceful terms:

on est dans quelqu'un en train d'être tué. C'est ça que j'essayais d'écrire, c'est comment quelqu'un qui est en train d'être tué se sent. J'ai compris en écrivant ce livre pourquoi ça s'appelait crime, ce truc-là. Il y a tout un tas de mots comme ça, tout un tas de mots qui existent et dont on pense que ce sont des formes vides, mais non. J'ai voulu montrer *de quoi c'était plein*³⁸⁴ (my emphasis)

³⁸² Bourmeau, *op. cit.*

³⁸³ Birnbaum, *op. cit.*

³⁸⁴ Bourmeau, *op. cit.*

In line with this sense of excavation, in this chapter I unpack these two texts in order to lay bare the fundamental, constitutive element of social class consciousness (as we have ascertained, part of what these incestuous texts are made up of is class-based humiliation and domination). Following the theoretical framing proposed in my introductory chapter, I examine the ways in which Angot's narratives express class-based anxiety through what Carolyn Steedman might call 'telling by tension'³⁸⁵ (tension with the 'central' story of the bourgeois ideal) and in turn suspend narrator and reader alike in an acute awareness of class .

The analytical lenses deployed in chapter 1 – those of the spatial notions of access and exclusion – are pertinent, too, for Angot. As I explore in further detail, ideas of access are explored and problematised in Angot's writing just as much as in Ernaux's, albeit differently. We might consider, for instance, how the horrific ease with which her father invades her body is offset against the access that he – and his higher social status – affords her to fancy restaurants and the 'education' that he provides on the codes and etiquettes of bourgeois culture. 'Christine's' eventual rejection from the space of the holiday home in *Une semaine de vacances* when she fails to comply with or understand these codes (to take, here, just one example) signals a concurrent sense of exclusion that is only compounded by the repeated, maintained separation between 'Christine' and her father's 'real', legitimate, middle-class family. Angot, like Ernaux, constructs class-inflected narratives, in part, via an oscillation between access and exclusion. With this chapter, however, I introduce a third conceptual lens: that of intrusion. The following section outlines the various nuances and considerations of ideas of intrusion that my analysis applies.

2.2 Angot's 'web of [...] violations'³⁸⁶: Mapping Intrusion

Ideas of intrusion are fundamental to Angot's corpus and, indeed, to contemporary life writing more broadly. These ideas, furthermore, can be thought through not only in terms of a text's subject matter, but can also be understood – and perhaps particularly in the case of Angot – as an integral dimension of the reading experience. In her *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives*, Jordan touches upon the ways in which the flagrantly upfront, often taboo themes espoused by Angot and her contemporaries – incest, (sexual) abuse, violence, grief, mental and physical illness – may stage a continual intrusion upon the reader. Indeed, '*écriture intime* and *autofiction* [...] [*invite*] (controlled)

³⁸⁵ Steedman, Carolyn, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p22

³⁸⁶ Jordan, *Reconfiguring the Public and the Private*, p215

intrusion'³⁸⁷ (my emphasis). Our unrelenting exposure in these texts to the intimate details of such typically private intimate experiences may often be felt as a (sometimes violent) intrusion. Jordan explores this particularly lucidly in her appraisal of intimacy and vulnerability in Angot's *Rendez-vous*. She notes how, more broadly, 'recent essays on intimacy stress its discomforts and alienations, focusing on problems of getting too close, of pushing under the skin, of *intruding and being intruded upon*'³⁸⁸ (my emphasis). The essays here referenced by Jordan³⁸⁹ explore, with reference to Jean-Luc Nancy's *L'Intrus* (2000), 'how the bodily and/or cultural self is intimately constructed through the other's intrusion'³⁹⁰. In Nancy's pertinently named and autobiographically inflected text, interactions between life writing and matters of intrusion are made particularly evident as, in writing his experience of a heart transplant, he grapples to 'account for the intrusion at the heart of intimacy'³⁹¹. We may thus more broadly understand intimate texts, a category under which life-writing and autofiction undoubtedly fall, as inherently intrusive. As Nancy writes, 'accueillir l'étranger, il faut bien que ce soit aussi éprouver son intrusion'³⁹². In the case of Angot, *Une semaine de vacances* with its 'unbearably immersive present'³⁹³, is perhaps the most jarring example of this double-edged invitation of intimacy. Jordan points out that the intrusion in this text is twofold:

Demanding texts such as these can impose themselves in antagonistic ways, leading us to speak of the 'burden' of intimacy, and introducing a blurry, *two-way intrusion*: is it the authors who are intruding into the lives of readers rather than the other way round?³⁹⁴ (my emphasis)

In her comparative study of Ernaux and Angot, Edwards stresses the potential violence of this intrusive reader-writer pact when she writes:

In a similar way to Ernaux, therefore, Angot plays very deliberately with behaviors, feelings, and impulses designated as shameful by society, listing a range of shameful acts [...] that almost form *an assault on the reader*³⁹⁵ (my emphasis)

³⁸⁷ Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), p26

³⁸⁸ Ibid., p203

³⁸⁹ Namely Arnould-Bloomfield and Pucci (2004)

³⁹⁰ Arnould-Bloomfield, Elisabeth and Pucci, Suzanne R., 'Esthetics of Intimacy, Esthétiques de l'intime: Introduction', *L'Esprit créateur*, 44:1 (2004) pp3-8, p4

³⁹¹ Adamek, Philip M., 'The Intimacy of Jean-Luc Nancy's *L'Intrus*', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 2:3 (2002), pp189-201, p191

³⁹² Nancy, Jean-Luc, *L'Intrus* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), p12

³⁹³ Jordan, *Overstepping the Boundaries*, p6

³⁹⁴ Jordan, *Reconfiguring the Public and the Private*, p204

³⁹⁵ Edwards, *Écrire pour ne plus avoir honte*, p66

This sense of discomfiting intrusion on readers is only intensified by Angot's now-infamous insistence on incorporating real people, real events and real life into her narratives. This writer who 'relentlessly exposes herself'³⁹⁶ is also tenacious in her exposing of others, with or without their consent.³⁹⁷ At times, the reader might feel uncomfortably complicit in Angot's unremitting divulgence of the most intimate details of the lives and experiences of herself and others. Indeed, Angot 'implicates'³⁹⁸ her readers in shame, intrudes on them 'by insisting that we read as intruders'.³⁹⁹ Intrusion, then, can be thought of as part of the fundamental thrust behind Angot's writerly project, and further contextualised as characteristic of contemporary women's writing more broadly.

A second sense of intrusion – and an arguably more specifically 'Angotian' intrusion – resurfaces throughout her corpus in the repeated incestuous rape that she endures and the invasion of her body that recurs throughout. Although, as I have mentioned, incest bleeds into and contaminates each and every Angot text, this specific understanding of intrusion is particularly prevalent in *Une semaine de vacances* and *L'Inceste*, where the incestuous abuse not only taints the narrative but constitutes its central focus. The latter, furthermore, clearly demonstrates a third facet of intrusion to be explored in this chapter, that of an intrusive, self-policing narrative voice. The readerly flow of *L'Inceste* is repeatedly disrupted as the narrator constantly interrupts the narrative with her intrusive thoughts, and with apparent attempts to regulate, correct and apologise for her writing (for both its expression ('je vais essayer d'être polie'⁴⁰⁰) and its upsetting subject matter ('je suis désolée qu'il faille parler de tout ça. Désolée'⁴⁰¹)). The repeated intrusion of this regulatory voice into the narrative, and its implications for our understanding of Angot's handling of class, are also explored in this chapter.

Critics who have discussed her work's intrusive qualities (Jordan (2007), Edwards (2013)) have not tended to consider how this disruption extends across and performs class boundaries, forming part of a critique of social class. With the following analysis, I proffer a

³⁹⁶ Sadoux, Marion, 'Christine Angot's Autofictions: literature and/or reality?' in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New writing, new literatures in the 1990s*, ed. Rye, Gill and Worton, Michael (Manchester University Press, 2002), p179

³⁹⁷ For further discussion of this (and various legal proceedings), see Edwards, Natalie, 'Autofiction in the Dock: The Case of Christine Angot' in *Protean Selves: First-Person Voices in Twenty-First-Century French and Francophone Narratives*, ed. Angelo, Adrienne and Fulop, Erika (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) and Edwards, *Autofiction and the Law*

³⁹⁸ Edwards, *Écrire pour ne plus avoir honte*, p70

³⁹⁹ Jordan, *Reconfiguring the Public and the Private*, p212

⁴⁰⁰ Angot, *L'Inceste*, p90

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p149

new reading of intrusion in Angot and examine how a sustained tension between ideas of access, exclusion and intrusion engenders a sense of anxious class consciousness, as well as demonstrating the violence, not only of incestuous abuse, but also of class oppression. In interview, Angot herself has suggested that her writing stages a performance of power dynamics via a fluctuating play with positioning:

Il y a deux positions pour entrer dans les choses qui ont à voir avec l'inceste, celle de l'enfant, de la douceur, et aussi celle de l'agresseur. Il y a les deux dans mon écriture.⁴⁰²

Thought through the analytical lenses of access, exclusion and intrusion, this chapter explores the ways in which *Une semaine de vacances* and *L'Inceste* perform something similar in terms of class. In line with Jordan's suggestion that, 'Angot explores taking a kind of power, through writing 'Christine's vulnerability, in vigorous reaction against incest's cult of secrecy',⁴⁰³ I propose that Angot's intrusive texts and narratives stage a reclaiming of the abusive 'intrusion' suffered at the hands of her father. Indeed, as *L'Inceste's* narrator tells us 'moi j'ai le dessus sur l'inceste. Le pouvoir, le pénis sadique, ça y est, grâce au stylo dans ma main'.⁴⁰⁴ Further still, however, I argue that her texts can be read as critiques of – as well as textual attempts at defying – the exclusion and separation inherent to the perpetuation of bourgeois norms and to the maintenance of 'social order' and class difference.

Both *Une semaine de vacances* and *L'Inceste* bring incest glaringly to the fore. As such, both are extraordinarily raw and difficult reads. As previously touched upon, the former is an unrelenting third-person account of repeated sexual abuse spanning a week the young girl spent away with her father, ostensibly *en vacances*. Devoid of Angot's usual interruptive, metatextual reflections, this text offers neither comment nor condemnation. Distressingly immersive, painstakingly detailed, and offering no readerly respite, *Une semaine de vacances* feels far longer than its mere hundred pages. There are no direct reflections on class dynamics within the texts, such as those offered in the concluding pages of *Un amour impossible*. Angot herself has said in interview that social class surfaces in this work 'd'une manière allusive mais constante'.⁴⁰⁵ Indeed, as Jordan notes in her exploration of sexual awakening and trauma in *Une semaine de vacances*: 'the text affords *glimpses* of how the father seeks to educate and

⁴⁰² Lindon, Mathieu, 'Trois, deux, un ... Angot!', *Libération* (1999) <https://next.liberation.fr/livres/1999/08/26/trois-deux-un-angot_280656> [last accessed June 2022]

⁴⁰³ Jordan, *Reconfiguring the Public and the Private*, p214

⁴⁰⁴ Angot, *L'Inceste*, p153

⁴⁰⁵ Bourmeau, *op. cit.*

socialize his daughter outside the bedroom, directing and validating her behaviour and taste according to his more privileged norms'⁴⁰⁶ (my emphasis). She identifies, too, the text's 'insistence on the father's moulding and penetrating of his daughter not just as the satisfaction of his sexual desire but as a still more insidiously formative process'.⁴⁰⁷ Jordan stops short, however, of a detailed analysis of the working of social class in the text. The following analysis fully unpacks these insidious 'glimpses' and constitutes the first thorough exploration of class dynamics in *Une semaine de vacances*.

With this chapter I also offer the first dedicated investigation into social class in *L'Inceste*. If class surfaces in *Une semaine de vacances* 'd'une manière allusive mais constante', it features, I argue, as a more dizzyingly frantic preoccupation in *L'Inceste*. Although, as Philippe Forest has suggested, 'l'un des romans est comme l'envers de l'autre, le second retournant le premier [...] afin de mieux faire voir la matière même dont celui-ci était fait',⁴⁰⁸ the texts are vastly different. Both concern the incestuous abuse that Angot suffered at the hands of her father, but where *Une semaine de vacances* is harrowing in its unwaveringly present-tense depiction of abuse, *L'Inceste* is uncomfortable in its chaotic and nonlinear portrayal of its aftershocks. Particularly obsessively concerned with questions of legitimacy and illegitimacy, this text communicates class in more direct ways. Through the narrator's encounters with 'legitimate', nuclear, bourgeois family units, a class gulf is repeatedly opened up and simultaneously highlighted. *L'Inceste* exposes the pain of an unsuccessful relationship, of rejection, of relationships post-trauma and of relationships, most crucially, stretched across class lines. The text reads like an exploration of the lasting trauma of incest, but also one that consistently encounters and flags the question of class. Through my analysis, I map how – chronologically speaking – the devastating effects of the abuse suffered in *Une semaine de vacances* live on in *L'Inceste*. I analyse the ways in which 'Christine' revisits, reframes and grapples to write this trauma. I highlight, like Angot, 'de quoi c'était plein'⁴⁰⁹ and explore what it reveals in terms of social class consciousness.

2.3 'Implicite mais terriblement insistante'⁴¹⁰: Tracing Class Power in *Une semaine de vacances*

⁴⁰⁶ Jordan, *Overstepping the Boundaries*, p10

⁴⁰⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁰⁸ Forest, Philippe, 'Implacable. « Une semaine de vacances », de Christine Angot', *Le Monde* (2012)

<https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2012/08/31/christine-angot-implacable_1753050_3260.html> [last accessed June 2022]

⁴⁰⁹ Bourmeau, *op. cit.*

⁴¹⁰ Le Wita, Béatrix, *Ni vue, ni connue : Approche ethnographique de la culture bourgeoise* (Paris : MSH, 1995) [Kindle ebook]

In Angot's *Une semaine de vacances*, the young protagonist's traumatic first sexual experiences coincide with a disorientating encounter with bourgeois societal norms and an unsettling confrontation with class difference and violence. In this text, the interweaving of class and sexual abuse is especially inextricable. Devoid of overt commentary or reflection, and lacking any of the anxious, metatextual introspection that readers may have come to expect from Angot, this text is an unrelenting account of incestuous, father-daughter sexual abuse. This abuse is predicated on and facilitated by class disparity, and the twinned issues of social class and sexual abuse culminate in this text in the figure of the monstrous (and bourgeois) abuser: the father.

Like the figure of H at the *colonie* in Ernaux's *Mémoire de fille*, the father in *Une semaine de vacances* holds all the governing power and wields all the control over who gains access (to certain spaces, cultural knowledge, etc.) and who gets excluded. Fathers have traditionally been understood as guardians of bourgeois order. Indeed, being a 'bon père de famille'⁴¹¹ is a prerequisite of middle-class society and, as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, socioeconomic statistics have historically been gathered purely through the lens of the patriarch's profession. As Angot says of *Une semaine de vacances* in her interview with Bourmeau, the father figure 'refuse de la *faire entrer* dans sa catégorie sociale'⁴¹² (my emphasis). Although presented without comment by a daughter-narrator who has not yet elaborated the critical framework to do anything other than note them, in this text the father's age, authority and elevated social status are consistently and conspicuously made evident. Littered amongst the protracted descriptions of abuse and painful instances of misogyny are details which repeatedly flag his middle-classness.

Before I go on to examine these, it is worth discussing briefly the kinds of details that stand out as classed and why. Béatrix Le Wita's text *Ni vue ni connue : Approche ethnographique de la culture bourgeoise* is useful here. First and foremost, it is helpful for the ways in which it engages with and demonstrates Bourdieu's ideas concerning cultural capital. Both Le Wita and Bourdieu recognise bourgeois power as constituted via various forms and perpetuations of economic and cultural capital. Le Wita makes this distinction clearly in her ethnography:

⁴¹¹ Le Wita, *op. cit.*

⁴¹² Bourmeau, *op. cit.*

Certes l'intimité familiale, la présence des générations, les facilités d'accès aux règles sociales toujours explicitées, l'amplitude des réseaux de parenté, l'aisance matérielle de ces familles engendrent un sentiment de sécurité [...] Mais ces garanties essentielles ne sont pas suffisantes. Il faut encore apprendre à maîtriser et intérioriser des normes contraignantes⁴¹³

Although maintenance of wealth and adherence to the 'right' social circles are important factors in the continuation of the closed circuit of bourgeois culture, neither is enough without mastery of the system of codes, rituals and gestures that distinguish 'high society'. These classifying codes – as also delineated by Bourdieu – both apply to and are expressed through language (adoption of the 'correct' tones, accent(s) and terminology); the body (how it should hold itself, move, present itself (for example via clothes (knowledge of where to shop, what and who to wear)); and a certain idea of culture (understanding of the 'right' pastimes to engage in, books to read, and restaurants, theatres and galleries to visit). One example Le Wita uses repeatedly to illustrate these 'normes contraignantes' is the acquisition of 'good' table manners (something which will become more pertinent as I go on to analyse the dynamics of certain restaurant scenes in *Une semaine de vacances*). Bourdieu identified how knowledge of these codes and systems is passed down and perpetuated from generation to generation as bourgeois parents induct their children into their cultural worlds. As Beverley Skeggs has noted, Bourdieu 'sees the family as a fiction and a social artefact, [an] illusion [...] produced and reproduced [...] [and] a central site of normalization and naturalization'.⁴¹⁴ Le Wita, too, recognises the importance of instilling these rules in childhood and identifies how this perpetuation feeds into their naturalisation and ritualisation: 'la vie quotidienne est faite d'une succession d'actes, de gestes, d'habitudes suffisamment codifiées pour être qualifiées de rituelles'.⁴¹⁵ As she deduces:

Trois éléments semblent pouvoir rendre compte de cette culture bourgeoise : l'art du détail, le contrôle de soi ou l'intériorité maîtrisée, la ritualisation du quotidien constitutive du passage de la sphère privée à la sphère publique⁴¹⁶

⁴¹³ Le Wita, *op. cit.*

⁴¹⁴ Skeggs, Beverley, 'Context and Background: Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of class, gender and sexuality' in *Feminism After Bourdieu*, ed. Adkins, Lisa and Skeggs, Beverley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p21

⁴¹⁵ Le Wita, *op. cit.*

⁴¹⁶ Le Wita, *op. cit.*

These three elements align with the definitions of class outlined thus far in this study. The first, *l'art du détail*, reiterates an awareness that even the seemingly most insignificant aspects of manner, behaviour, language, dress and taste hold the power to convey class belonging and require vigilant monitoring. The second speaks of the bourgeois necessity for masterful self-control and strictly maintained propriety. To revisit a Gunn quotation referenced earlier, 'self-control and the appearance of command [represent] some of the most fundamental components of class'.⁴¹⁷ In the third of Le Wita's identified elements, we recognise Bourdieusian ideas relating to *habitus*, to the preservation and sustained repetition of specific daily rituals inherent to the reiterative performance of class. In their examination of Bourdieu's *habitus*, Butler, as seen earlier in this thesis, stresses the importance of the 'embodied rituals of everydayness by which a given culture produces'⁴¹⁸ itself.

Ideas of self-control and of negotiations of the public and private are particularly pertinent to Angot's handling of class, and to her writing style and public persona more broadly (particularly, I suggest later in this chapter, with regards to *L'Inceste*). Indeed, in addition to her engagement with Bourdieu and ideas concerning cultural capital, Le Wita's ethnography is apposite to this thesis, and particularly to this chapter, in several ways. She highlights – as I do in this thesis – the insidious nature of class consciousness, revealing at the beginning of her study that she was 'dans un état de tension permanente' as the 'supériorité' of her interviewees 'plan[ait] de manière implicite mais terriblement insistante'.⁴¹⁹ Interestingly, Le Wita's text shares in common with Angot's a sense of an imbalanced distribution of power. Studying a sector of society which is powerful and to which she does not belong, Le Wita looks at bourgeois culture 'from below'. As such, *Ni vue ni connue* deviates from more habitual ethnographic inquiries wherein the researcher conducts fieldwork with and within less advantaged communities. Le Wita's text also shares with *Une semaine de vacances* a certain immersive quality. The ethnographer draws her research from participant observation, within the heart of the bourgeois home rather than from a distance. Angot constructs her text with a strangely similar ethnographic feel, building from documentary-like detail and thick description. In her *Acte biographique*, Angot identified an element of naturalism in her writing project, stating that 'la littérature a un intérêt et une portée scientifiques [...] l'écrivain est un scientifique dont le microscope est sa propre sensibilité, son

⁴¹⁷ Gunn, Simon, 'Translating Bourdieu: cultural capital and the English middle class in historical perspective', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 56:1 (2005), pp49-64, p61

⁴¹⁸ Butler, Judith, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), p152

⁴¹⁹ Le Wita, *op. cit.*

propre système de perception'.⁴²⁰ *Une semaine de vacances*' mode of neutral expression is jarring and disconcerting. The quasi-scientific notation of incest throughout the text is perhaps startling to the reader. As the following analysis makes clear, it is through tracing these moments of ethnographic perception that class in Angot's text can be unearthed.

Le Wita recognises that the idea of class is slippery and inherently difficult to excavate: bourgeois culture, 'en construction permanente [...] se régénère sans cesse, échappant alors [...] à toute définition'.⁴²¹ Bourgeois culture is, as we have seen, forged and sustained through precise and perpetuated codes, gestures and rituals. However, it is also enforced, Le Wita argues, via negotiations of proximity and distance: 'l'éducation bourgeoise repose [...] sur une tension et une contrainte permanentes, minutieusement contrebalancées par des aires de liberté'.⁴²² This chimes strongly with the ideas of access and exclusion, and of separation and intrusion that I am using here to understand Angot's texts. Le Wita recognises the importance of space and movement, and employs her ethnographic method to unpack the minutiae of these dynamics: 'c'est ainsi que pour rendre compte de cette culture bourgeoise, il a fallu s'habituer à capter le mouvement, à jouer des contradictions [...] à *déceler le détail*'⁴²³ (my emphasis). My analysis employs a similarly detailed sensitivity, and explores the ways in which the father's language, mannerisms and tastes make of him a grim case study for this kind of embodied middle-class capital. As Le Wita posits: 'toute la personne bourgeoise, de son air aux inflexions de sa voix, est [...] imprégnée des valeurs et schèmes culturels de son groupe'.⁴²⁴

In *Une semaine de vacances*, one such marker of the father's cultural capital is his clothes which, as we learn from following the focus of the daughter's ethnographic gaze, are branded and neatly kept. A listing of wardrobe contents reveals 'un pantalon Lacoste à carreaux [...] des chaussettes enroulées sur elles-mêmes [...] des slips blancs, posés à côté'.⁴²⁵ His bourgeois tastes and interests are flagged in his choice of reading material ('des Guide Michelin, trois Guide Verts [...] le Guide Rouge [...] qui lui permettra pendant leur séjour de ne pas entrer dans n'importe quelle gargote'⁴²⁶ (pp19-20)) as well as in his ritualistic reading of

⁴²⁰ Angot, Christine 'Acte biographique' in *Je & moi*, ed. Forest Philippe, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, 598 (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp31-40, p35

⁴²¹ Le Wita, *op. cit.*

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Angot, Christine, *Une semaine de vacances* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), p19. All subsequent references to this text, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis through to the end of this section on p107.

⁴²⁶ The choice to write 'n'importe quelle gargote' rather than '*ce que le père appelle* n'importe quelle gargote' demonstrates an unquestioning parroting (or, perhaps, parodying) of the father's value system.

Le Monde.⁴²⁷ He is framed as knowledgeable and well-educated, having published in a journal titled *Vie et Langage*.⁴²⁸ The father figure of *Une semaine de vacances* moves through the world with an entitled ease. His position as bourgeois intellectual, as well as depraved abuser, affirms him as perverse initiator into the realms of both class and sex. For the young girl, he opens access to (or rather, forces access into) these worlds hitherto unknown. He inflicts a perverse sexual education as he directs his daughter through various positions ('il lui précise qu'on appelle ça un 69' (p26)), darkly intensified by chilling refrains of: 'il lui dit qu'elle ne s'inquiète pas, qu'elle va comprendre, qu'il va lui expliquer' (p20). A parallel bourgeois education is revealed, for instance, in their visits to bookshops:

Quand il l'emmène dans les librairies, elle est fière de faire partie des gens qui y sont, mais elle ne sait pas quoi regarder ni comment se comporter. Elle est là, elle le regarde lui, elle cherche quelle attitude adopter [...] elle regarde surtout ce qu'il fait lui, comment il fait (p22)

Indeed, as Jordan notes: 'the text speaks to us of the impact on the subject made by a 'higher' authority and focuses on how the girl is perpetually assessed and condemned or praised'.⁴²⁹

In his manner, his behaviour and his knowledge the father holds the keys and codes to a middle-class way of life. These classed reference points, although presented without comment or value judgement on the part of the narrator, are not innocent details. Not only are they nestled amongst and offset against descriptions of sexual abuse, but they are also laced with information subtly but unmistakably designed to evoke readerly disgust. The narrative positions him as arrogant and self-important (keeping, we learn, several copies of his published article to hand 'dans le coffre de la voiture' (p57)). He conducts himself with a smug haughtiness and an imperious superiority, as continually revealed in his comments about others and his interactions with hospitality staff. We learn, for example, that in his much-talked-about article he wrote '« les incorrigibles de l'ORTF [...] ne voient pas plus loin que l'ombre portée par la tour Eiffel »' (p84). With the waiters and waitresses of the various restaurant scenes that pepper the narrative, the father is cruelly condescending:

⁴²⁷ In *L'Inceste*, Angot elaborates further on this: 'Il lisait la presse. Tous les jours, il fallait trouver *Le Monde*. Tous les jours. Il le lisait tous les jours. Il me conseillait de faire la même chose. [...] Les discussions intéressantes étaient épuisantes. Chez moi, c'était un monde totalement différent' (Angot (1999) p166) (emphasis in original)

⁴²⁸ The title of this journal deepens the father's wielding of power as the evocation of *langage* signals his mastery, highlighting the gap between his loquaciousness and her silence.

⁴²⁹ Jordan, *Overstepping the Boundaries*, p10

le serveur leur recommande la tarte aux myrtilles ou le sorbet de cassis. Il lui fait répéter sa phrase. Dit qu'il n'a pas compris de quel parfum il s'agit. Le serveur répète que c'est un sorbet au cassis. Il ne comprend toujours pas. Le serveur répète plus distinctement, plus fort. Il reprend « ah, au cassi ». Sans prononcer le s final. Une fois le serveur parti, il lui dit à elle qu'il n'a jamais compris pourquoi les gens prononçaient cassis au lieu de cassi (p59)

Over another meal, a similar pedantism surfaces when the young girl is ordering. She

hésite. Relit la carte. Demande ce qu'ils appellent des asperges à la Watteau. Elle prononce Vateau. La femme repart, une fois la commande notée. Il l'informe alors qu'on prononce Ouatteau, qu'en français le W se prononce oueu, sauf pour les mots d'origine allemande, que le commun des mortels [...] ne réfléchit pas plus loin que le bout de son nez (p56)

The reader will perhaps be repulsed by every fresh detail that is revealed about the father as he wields his intellectual power. Although he provides access to bookshops and fancy restaurants, it is always an access laced with belittlement and offset against a profound and disturbing hypocrisy. The access he affords is countered, too, by the sense of exclusion that he – and their *vacances* – maintain. Other fleeting encounters in the bourgeois space of the restaurant highlight this juxtaposition. For example, we learn that 'il y a une table avec le père, la mère, et un jeune enfant' (p58). This child, flanked by their nuclear parental unit, is depicted as 'très à l'aise malgré son âge' (p58). Although younger than the text's absent protagonist, this child already functions with ease in a world in which they are wholly and more naturally accepted. A sense of compounded exclusion is conveyed here via this subtle detail. A further small detail later on in the text signals that the father has arranged these nefarious *vacances* close to an area 'où il passait ses vacances quand il était petit [...] les endroits, en pleine garrigue, où il restait des heures à rêvasser' (p63). This curious parallel once again highlights class difference, and emphasises the young protagonist's exclusion from a certain type of *vacances*, a certain world. The idyllic picture that is painted of the father's childhood speaks of a freedom entirely absent from the pages of *Une semaine de vacances*. His carefree hours spent daydreaming in the untamed countryside could not be further from the incestuous ensnarement in which he traps his daughter, referring to it as a 'holiday', yet dictating and directing her every move.

Another such parallel resurfaces in the father's repeated, disconcerting insistence on what he refers to as a 'union profonde' between himself and his daughter: 'il lui demande si elle sent l'union profonde qu'il y a entre eux à cet instant. Comme s'ils étaient *une seule et même personne*' (p52) (my emphasis). On the next page he reiterates 'qu'ils sont pareils. Forment *une seule et même personne*' (p53) (my emphasis) and later in the text we encounter this particularly interesting scene:

Il [...] lui présente [sa main] paume à plat, doigts serrés. Comme contre un mur invisible. Lui dit de poser la sienne dessus. Ils sont paume contre paume. La sienne à lui est plus grande. Mais la forme, identique. Ils ont exactement les mêmes mains. Les mêmes pieds aussi. (p76)

Interspersed amongst the text's unremitting details of sexual abuse, these insistences on the pair's inherited, physical similarities intensify further the unsettling undercurrent of incest. The recurrence of these utterances also suggests a sense of manipulative grooming, that the father is attempting to condition his daughter, feign closeness and thus 'legitimise' his abusive relationship to her. (His conditioning aligns, too, with the insidious naturalisation of matters of taste and class). The reprise of the phrase 'seule et même personne' in particular enacts a complete annexing of the young girl's agency and autonomy (a discussion of notions of passivity and agency will be developed in the following pages). Furthermore, these instances once again underline a sense of exclusion and class disparity. Although this is not the father's intention, in drawing these comparisons and identifying their similarities, their differences (the gender, age and class imbalances) are simultaneously and necessarily highlighted. Physically similar though their hands may be, in these moments we cannot help but be reminded that these are hands with very different means of access, bound by very different sets of social constraints. We cannot help but be reminded, in short, of the 'mur invisible' that stands unwaveringly between them and their respective social worlds.

As we have seen, the father figure of *Une semaine de vacances* holds all of the gatekeeping power in terms of access to – and exclusion from – a middle-class world. The sense of exclusion that the text thus conveys crescendos through the narrative and culminates in the young girl's cruel and sudden rejection by the father, her subsequent abrupt expulsion from the holiday and from the space of the holiday home. Towards the end of the text, the

young protagonist interrupts the oral sex she has been asked to perform, because she feels compelled to share with her father the details of a troubling dream she had the night before. What follows is a chastising barrage:

il lui dit qu'ils retournent tout de suite chercher ses affaires dans la maison [...] qu'il la reconduit à la gare pour qu'elle prenne un train et rentre chez elle [...] il ne parle plus. Elle le supplie de ne pas faire ça [...] Il lui dit qu'il est énervé, qu'elle a été odieuse, qu'elle n'a aucun tact [...] qu'il préfère être seul, plutôt qu'avec quelqu'un qui manque à ce point-là de délicatesse, lui raconte un rêve insultant (pp92-93)

The subject of the dream is never revealed to us as readers (and we may wonder whether the 'crime' was, in fact, more the interruption of the sex act), but the father's preoccupation with 'tact' and 'délicatesse' aligns this episode once again with ideas of class and class violence as he weaponises his bourgeois principles. The irony of his making a plea for 'délicatesse' in this particular context is perhaps not lost on the reader. The introduction that he affords to classy restaurants, to rolling countryside, and to the language and behaviours of 'polite' society is instantly revoked, and the text closes with the lingering image of the young girl, alone and hungry, waiting for her train home. The access to bourgeois tastes and practices that the father provides is thus consistently offset against his parallel ability to snatch it away, either by passing (aggressive) judgement indicating the daughter's failure to conform, or by literally expelling her from his world. Although these details are presented without comment, a sense of class critique is underlined in this oscillation between access and exclusion and the text thus sheds light on the hypocrisy, power imbalances and double standards that can be masked by a bourgeois façade of taste and propriety.

That said, *Une semaine de vacances'* strongest and most damning indication of bourgeois hypocrisy is undoubtedly conveyed by the incessant incestuous abuse described. It would indeed be remiss for a discussion of access in this text to neglect to mention its most striking and obvious manifestation: the unbridled, 'entitled' access the father claims as he plunders his daughter's body. Our readerly noses are ground into the horrifying details as he assaults and rapes her. Consequently, a protracted sense of invasion and intrusion pervades the narrative. Indeed, the father's very presence in the daughter's life can be understood as an infraction. As one review of *Un amour impossible* suggests: '*Un amour impossible* est donc celui [...] d'une mère et d'une fille, qui formaient toutes les deux le socle d'une vie heureuse, avant

l'irruption d'un père dans cet univers parfait'.⁴³⁰ While I do not propose in this chapter to detail the specifics of the abuse that the father inflicts, it is certainly worth considering how this sense of intrusion – of forced access – enacts a *dominé/dominant* configuration along classed lines.

Une semaine de vacances is a text saturated with repeated, invasive exploitation, as even the smallest details of Angot's writing attest. We encounter the verb 'enfonce' in the text in a seemingly never-ending echo : 'il enfonce le bout de son sexe' (p35), 'il s'enfonce et il jouit' (p35), 'l'enfonce à l'intérieur' (p46), 'puis le renfonce' (p47), 'il enfonce son doigt dans son vagin' (p47), 'il sort les quatre doigts qu'il avait enfoncés' (p70), 'pendant qu'il commence à s'enfoncer' (p82). The almost-as-frequent recurrence of the verb 'introduire' – 'introduit un doigt' (p46), 'puis l'introduit dans sa bouche à lui' (p47), 'introduit son index à l'intérieur de son vagin' (pp61-62), 'il retire son doigt [...] pour en introduire deux' (p62), 'il commence à introduire son gland' (p72) – once again subtly yet firmly aligns the sexual abuse (this vile and violating 'introduction' into the adult world of sex) with the 'introduction' that the father is providing– or, indeed, forcing – to a more middle-class milieu. In her article examining *Une semaine de vacances* and its exposition of early sexual awakening and trauma, Jordan notices Angot's insistence 'on the daughter's plasticity, on her body and, implicitly, her mind too, as so much modelling paste'.⁴³¹ The quotation Jordan chooses to demonstrate this constitutes one of many examples pertaining to a sense of not only plasticity, but also of submission and lack of agency:

il saisit ses seins [...] libère le sein, le reprend, s'amuse de sa matière mobile, de son élasticité, sa main semble avoir le pouvoir d'en modifier le dessin [...] comme s'il jouait avec une balle de pâte à modeler (pp76-77)

Further reading of the text reveals similar passages that emphasise the young girl's passive plasticity:

il est toujours penché en avant, en train, soit de soupeser le sein qu'il a dans la main, et qu'il fait sauter, dans le creux de sa paume, comme une boule de pâte qui ne collerait pas aux mains, comme s'il faisait légèrement sauter les seins à l'intérieur, comme des

⁴³⁰ Ferniot, *op. cit.*

⁴³¹ Jordan, *Overstepping the Boundaries*, p11

balles de tennis, ou de jonglage, ou comme des melons, l'été, comme le font les gens au marché pour choisir celui qu'ils vont prendre (p14)

il soupèse un sein, puis l'autre, les deux alternativement, les faisant sauter dans sa main, comme on soupèserait une pelote de laine, pour en éprouver la rondeur, puis, enfonçant les doigts dans l'écheveau lui-même (pp14-15)

il enfonce ses doigts dans la chair malléable, qui se déforme sans résistance, selon la pression qu'il y met, et les zones que ses mains choisissent de faire jouer, puis pressent, font trembloter, rendant les contours du globe, le galbe, la ligne, aussi incertains que des petits dômes de gelée renversés, de flan, de gâteau à peine cuit. Il soupèse, soulève, malaxe, puis tire un peu dessus (p15)

The daughter is entirely stripped of agency in these accumulating, inanimate metaphors whereby her body is likened variably to food, to material and to play things. The metaphors chosen are thoroughly devoid of sexuality, infused with an uneasy domesticity and spiked with a queasily infantile quality. In particular, the emphasis on passivity inherent to the uncomfortably fleshy and commodifying evocation of food further underscores the power imbalance at play. Close attention, once again, to the verbs in these passages is also revealing in this regard. The descriptions above all hang on a frame of repeated, controlling verbs: 'enfoncer' but also 'soupeser', 'presser', 'soulever' and 'malaxer'. Juxtaposed with the young girl's apparent complete passivity ('sans résistance'), these, too, sustain the dynamic of *dominé* vs. *dominant* and deepen the sense of invasion and intrusion.

The sense of passivity and lack of agency that are in evidence, as well as ideas of access and intrusion, are also emphasised in *Une semaine de vacances* through physicality and positioning. Angot demonstrates a particularly acute attentiveness to physicality in this text, painstakingly describing every instruction the father gives the daughter and each position he dictates. This minute detail is part and parcel of the pared-back style and ethnographic notation of the narrative, as well as being in keeping with the direct nature of Angot's writings (and of this text in particular). The often hyper-technical nature of these details – not just 'doigts' but 'les jointures de ses phalanges' (p14), not just 'joues' but 'les maxillaires, là où l'articulation est sollicitée' (p10) – convey a sense of authenticity perhaps particularly important and prevalent in trauma testimonies. Upon closer examination, however, Angot's

detailing of the positional specifics of the abuse further evidences its imbrication with class. A sense of constraint continually builds in these passages:

Quant au bout de ses doigts, il est replié, et en fonction de ses mouvements à lui, qui ne sont ni fixes ni déterminés mais dépendants de ce que ses mains veulent caresser et comment, les jointures de ses phalanges à elle peuvent se cogner à la dureté du rabat, à cette limite, le heurter légèrement, à peine, tout au moins tant que lui est penché en avant (pp13-14)

Here a parallel is neatly drawn between the father's invasive, freely roaming fingers and the hands of the daughter, painfully trapped, 'fixes' and 'déterminés'. A passage later in the text further develops this sense of entrapment:

Il ouvre les deux portières de la voiture d'un même coté [...] du côté du mur contre lequel la voiture est garée. Il lui dit de s'accroupir entre elles pour le finir [...] Elle se baisse, et un genou en terre, plie le deuxième, et se place au niveau de son bassin, entre les deux pans de son manteau, qu'il tient ouvert de chaque côté de son visage, pour compléter l'effet cabine déjà offert par les portes grandes ouvertes (p40)

The young girl is here quite literally boxed in as the father builds a 'cabine' around her,⁴³² and her lowered position once again suggests a sense of submission. Elsewhere we encounter more degrading positioning:

elle se place comme il le demande, perpendiculaire au lit, et parallèle à la fenêtre, la tête en direction du mur, elle est à quatre pattes, les fesses face à la porte de la chambre, si quelqu'un ouvrait ce serait la première chose que la personne verrait (p51)

In this quotation the discomfort intensifies as our own readerly gaze is implied and implicated in the present-tense immediacy of the scene: we are, after all, the 'quelqu'un' who has opened the book. Confronted by our status as intruders upon this shameful scene of invasive abuse, we might identify this gesture as symptomatic of what Jordan calls the text's 'blurry, two-way

⁴³² I go on to develop this idea of veiling, screening and concealment – and its implications in terms of class – in the following pages.

intrusion'.⁴³³ This passage, furthermore, contains two of many references to the holiday home's windows, doors and garden. Other examples include :

il lui dit de rester comme elle est, à plat ventre, la tête en direction de la fenêtre (p79)

il lui dit de se retourner. De s'asseoir à califourchon sur lui, mais à l'envers, de l'autre côté, la tête vers le pied du lit, en direction de la fenêtre (p77)

il lui dit que oui c'est ça. Que sa tête doit se trouver dans la direction du jardin, qu'elle pourra même regarder le paysage' (p21)

Across these three brief quotations the father's dictatorial nature is highlighted ('il lui dit' is, indeed, a construction that reverberates throughout *Une semaine de vacances*) and his cruelty underscored. The repeated references to windows and the father's demands that his daughter position herself facing the outside world allude to an unreachable freedom and nod once more to ideas of the gaze and of access and exclusion. The final suggestion 'qu'elle pourra même regarder le paysage', is particularly jarring and cruel, in that he invites her to gaze at a landscape which his abuse prohibits her from going out and enjoying.

In this text, space, and the using of that space, are completely dictated by the father's terms, while the young girl's personal space is subject to constant invasion: 'quelques heures plus tard, dans le milieu de la nuit, il pousse la porte de sa chambre, s'assoit sur le rebord de son lit, il caresse sa joue' (p60). The daughter's entrapment and constraint are repeatedly offset against the father's freedom of movement, and this juxtaposition also extends to language. The daughter's voice is entirely and intentionally absent from *Une semaine de vacances* and this is one of the factors that makes its indictment of incest so powerful. Angot has addressed this in interview, stating:

quand j'ai eu à vivre cette chose-là, quand je l'ai rencontrée, et que j'avais treize ans, je n'ai pas pu parler. Je ne vois pas par quelle fiction mensongère j'aurais pu faire dire «je» au personnage de mon livre⁴³⁴

⁴³³ Jordan, *Overstepping the Boundaries*, p5. An examination of this multidirectional intrusion will be developed in subsequent pages.

⁴³⁴ Bourmeau, *op. cit.*

One notable passage from the text reveals further this inability to speak:

avant de lui répondre, pour ne pas faire de faute de français, elle fait sa phrase dans sa tête. Mais au moment de se lancer pour la formuler, elle bute. Tout est à recommencer. Elle marque des pauses, elle hésite, elle reprend plusieurs fois le début, parce que l'enchaînement ne va pas, l'expression n'est pas fluide. Le rythme est heurté, haché, imprécis. Elle ne sait plus où elle en est, elle s'emmêle, la phrase devient de plus en plus incompréhensible [...] Il écoute ce qu'elle dit. Puis lui répond, dans la foulée, avec une phrase d'une fluidité totale, transparente, comme s'il la sortait cristalline directement de sa pensée (pp41-42)

The daughter is already aware – though the narrator does not delineate it in these terms – of the ways in which her speech and manner of expression open her up to classed judgement. Paralysed by this knowledge and desperate to impress, her tongue remains frustratingly tied and his reply ('d'une fluidité totale' and (ironically) 'transparente') further solidifies this freedom/constraint dichotomy.⁴³⁵

Une semaine de vacances is a suffocating read. The daughter's voice is conspicuously, stiflingly absent. As Jordan has noted of the text, 'the daughter – and after her the mature author – vacates the subject position (hence the ironic 'vacances' of Angot's title)'.⁴³⁶ Peripheral appearances from others encountered in restaurants and out in the countryside only serve to illustrate further the daughter's isolation and the father's tyrannical self-importance. The text's intensely claustrophobic feel makes of it an effective and unsparing abuse narrative, but also communicates a stifling and alienating sense of class, mimicking the unquestioning submission, both in sexual and social terms, that the father is endeavouring to inculcate. *Une semaine de vacances* thus performs the naturalisation of class power and sexual entitlement. We encounter another instance that demonstrates this clearly when the father and his daughter are out walking in the woods:

il en profite pour lui parler de sa démarche. Il ne l'aime pas. Ce n'est pas la démarche de quelqu'un de fier. Il la regarde. Lui demande de se tenir droite. De se redresser encore un peu, de rejeter les épaules en arrière, avancer, non pas comme une petite

⁴³⁵ Several of Angot's other narrators (namely, as this chapter goes on to explore, the narrator in *L'Inceste*) turn this 'total fluidity' on its head, transforming it into an untamed, stream-of-consciousness style and employing it against the polished, bourgeois façade in a gesture of writerly revenge and defiance.

⁴³⁶ Jordan, *Overstepping the Boundaries*, p12

timide, mais sûre d'elle. Il lui dit de recommencer, dans l'autre sens, devant lui, avec de l'assurance, puis de revenir vers lui, encore. Dès qu'elle arrive à son niveau, il corrige la position de ses épaules. Il lui dit que quand elle marche il faut qu'elle pense à sa démarche (p44)

The scene described is one that is both class- and gender-inflected: we imagine well-to-do young women in finishing schools, pacing gracefully in their vintage frocks with books balanced atop their heads. Once again, class is woven inextricably into the narrative as the parallels between this passage and those where the father degradingly dictates sex positions for his daughter to adopt stage an interweaving of class oppression through the theme of incest. Here he is also dictatorial ('lui demande', 'il lui dit', 'il corrige') and the repetitive nature of the activity echoes queasily the *va-et-vient* of the sex acts he inflicts ('encore', 'recommencer, dans l'autre sens', 'encore').

A sense of intrusion is also conveyed in the text via form. In addition to these passages where class and sex are subtly woven, Angot at times sets up more stark and direct juxtapositions. The narrative is repeatedly, abruptly interrupted, as the text's 'mobile, camera-like gaze',⁴³⁷ without warning nor pattern, shifts away from the abuse and swings suddenly to focus on details of the environment. For example:

Il sourit, parce qu'elle vient de lui demander comment est fait un sexe d'homme à l'état de repos puisque, à part le sien, elle n'en jamais vu, et que le sien est toujours en érection. Il rit. Puis il dit que beaucoup de femmes aimeraient bien pouvoir en dire autant. Qu'elle a beaucoup de chance. Au plafond pend un lustre en cuivre. Dont les quatre branches portent chacune une ampoule en forme de bougie (p66)

«Dis c'est bon papa. » Il pousse ses doigts, comme s'il ignorait la limite de ses propres phalanges, affole le rythme. « Dis-le. Dis-le s'il te plait. Dis-le-moi. Dis-le. » Il retire ses deux doigts, et rentre, avec un de plus, il en met trois, puis quatre. Les clapotis ont cessé. À droite du lit, son sac de voyage à lui est posé contre le mur. C'est un sac de taille moyenne, en grosse toile écru, avec deux baguettes en bois [...] et une poignée en cuir naturel (pp69-70)

⁴³⁷ Jordan, *Overstepping the Boundaries*, p13

Ensuite ils ont roulé dans la vallée, avec l'adagio d'Albinoni en fond sonore. Il lui a dit comment on appelait les deux versants d'une montagne, en les désignant, de chaque cote de la route. Puis il a détaché son pantalon (p24)

It is not unusual in narratives of trauma to encounter seemingly banal descriptions as what victims often notice in the midst of abuse is the everyday. In conversation with Christiane Alberti, Marie-Hélène Brousse and Jacques-Alain Miller, and when questioned about *Une semaine de vacances*' cinematic detail, Angot has explained that:

Dans *Une semaine de vacances*, la situation c'est une jeune fille en train de se faire supprimer. Comment voulez-vous penser quand on est en train de vous supprimer ? [...] vous ne faites pas rien, vous avez une activité intérieure, verbale, et donc des images. Vous regardez et vous voyez des choses. Vos yeux enregistrent⁴³⁸

In this text, however, an attentive reader will perhaps notice how the daughter's ethnographic gaze, Angot's intersplicing of the details of the environment with the sexual activity, are heavily laced with class awareness. The holiday home's 'lustre en cuivre', the father's weekend bag with its genuine leather details and his taste for classical music all paint a distinctly middle-class picture, one that becomes implicitly critiqued as Angot continually aligns it with the incestuous abuse. The reader is repeatedly buffeted from one scene to another, and these jolting juxtapositions work to convey some of the confusion and disconcertment undoubtedly experienced by the young protagonist. Furthermore, the juxtaposition itself arguably performs part of the intrusion of the text, as the abrupt and unsettling imbrication of middle-class culture and values with the sexual violence enacts an intrusion on the (perhaps assumed bourgeois) reader. (We may be reminded here once more of Jordan's 'blurry, two-way intrusion'⁴³⁹). A particularly acute example of this kind of direct juxtaposition can be traced along Angot's repeated use of the word *plier*. We encounter one of the first examples of this when the father

éjacule dans sa bouche, et remonte dans la voiture, après lui avoir donné son mouchoir bien plié pour s'essuyer. *Plié, repassé, et brodé*. Il lui demande si elle aime le goût de sperme (pp40-41) (my emphasis)

⁴³⁸ Angot, Christine, 'Je veux dire la vie', *La Cause du Désir*, 86:1 (2014) pp140-146, p140

⁴³⁹ Jordan, *Reconfiguring the Public and the Private*, p204

Here, once again, the reader's potential revulsion at the events described is offset against and exacerbated by the insertion of an intensely classed but fleetingly raised image. The handkerchief – folded neatly and well-cared-for – carries with it connotations of affluence, propriety and domestic labour. Its *broderie*, furthermore, implies taste and inheritance, and a readerly imagination might picture ornate monograms. Above all, the handkerchief's use in concealing the bodily realities of the abuse speaks to bourgeois norms around cleanliness and discretion, privacy and secrecy. In her *Ni vue ni connue*, Le Wita delves into the *behind closed doors* of French middle-class society and notes the importance of strictly regulating this public/private divide, identifying this as one of three core pillars of bourgeois culture as referenced earlier ('l'art du détail, *le contrôle de soi* [...] la ritualisation du quotidien'⁴⁴⁰ (my emphasis)). Secrecy and concealment are, of course, particularly pertinent to the incest narrative, but it is also interesting to note just how often this concealing comes under the guise of bourgeois respectability.

Throughout the text, we encounter further examples of this alignment of concealment and apparent bourgeois respectability hinged on the word *plier*. This is particularly evident when paying close attention, once more, to scenes in restaurants:

le maître d'hôtel approche une petite table de la leur [...] il dépose les crêpes, fait couler dessus un jus d'orange [...] les plie en quatre (p38)

[le père] [...] prend le journal plié en quatre sur sa serviette de table [...] le déplie (p57)

elle déplie sa serviette sur ses genoux (p57)

il tend le bras pour récupérer *Le Monde* plié en quatre dans la poche extérieure (p56)

il replie son journal, et déplie sa serviette (p58)

The carefully prepared *crêpes* suggest fine dining and invoke the spectacle of class performance (they are served tableside as the whole restaurant looks on: 'tout le restaurant les regarde, en souriant' (p38)). Like the handkerchief, the serviette carries with it connotations of concealment and cleanliness, propriety and 'good' manners. The newspaper

⁴⁴⁰ Le Wita, *op. cit.*

that the father so religiously reads indicates his erudition and knowledge of current affairs. (It is interesting to note how the second meaning of *plier* – *to make yield to*⁴⁴¹ – implies, too, this earlier-identified sense of plasticity and imbalanced power dynamics). Pushing this idea of concealment even further, Angot increasingly describes this ritualistically folded and refolded newspaper as a *paravent*, meaning *screen* but also – crucially and revealingly – a *veneer* or *façade*. This metaphorical image is built incrementally: ‘il [...] prend le journal [...] le déplie, entièrement, et disparaît derrière le paravent formé par la une et la dernière’ (p57), ‘il [...] déplie la double page qui cache son visage’ (p85) until finally, simply, ‘il déplie le paravent’⁴⁴² (p91). This subtle detail exposes how the father uses the *veneer* of his class position to not only abuse (*plier*) but also to mask this abuse in public (via the *paravent*) in ironic compliance with bourgeois norms of propriety and taste. In turn, Angot thus invites her readers to consider more broadly what lies behind the ‘vener’ of the net curtain, that which might be in some sense *ni vue ni connue*. Her narrator writes of the restaurants’ bourgeois patrons: ‘ils ne peuvent pas savoir, quand ils la voient face à ces deux pages noires dépliées, qu’il vient de la regarder des heures avec des yeux exorbités’ (p58). *Une semaine de vacances* is a powerful abuse testimony, and part of its power lies in the ways in which readers are perhaps compelled to examine their own ogling gaze. An examination of this text via ideas of access, exclusion and intrusion, exposes how the incestuous abuse described is continually imbued with class consciousness and with class-based oppression and violence. Angot nestles indicators of class throughout this traumatic text and in doing so heightens the senses of class disparity and bourgeois duplicity. In these fleeting acts of noticing, these revealing moments of almost-ethnographic detail (of environment, clothes, food, reading materials, etc.) we perceive the inception of class consciousness. The text’s power dynamics, as well as dynamics of positionality and screening, reveal a latent critique of bourgeois hypocrisy. Angot not only exposes the violence inherent to incestuous sexual exploitation, but simultaneously unveils a concurrent and insidious class violence.

2.4 ‘Depuis toujours’⁴⁴³: The Endurance of Class Consciousness in *L’Inceste*

If *Une semaine de vacances* ‘affords glimpses’⁴⁴⁴ of the ways in which class interacts with the incest trope and underpins Angot’s oeuvre, *L’Inceste* arguably offers a much clearer view. Although, once again, not its central preoccupation, in this text class is communicated and

⁴⁴¹ Or, further and more grimly still, in ballet terminology: *to bend at the knee*.

⁴⁴² Here we might also think about the ‘effet cabine’ of the father’s car doors or recall the confessional where he ‘lui dit de venir s’agenouiller entre ses jambes, d’ouvrir son pantalon et de le sucer un peu. Il caresse ses seins, derrière le rideau tiré’ (my emphasis).

⁴⁴³ Angot, *L’Inceste*, p104. All subsequent references to this text, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis through to the end of this section on p119.

⁴⁴⁴ Jordan, *Overstepping the Boundaries*, p10

explored in more direct and explicit ways. Both novels constitute distinctly different textual angles on the enduring problem of incest as well as, I contend, on the lasting effects of class oppression and violence. In this section, I analyse class as expressed in *L'Inceste* through the lenses of exclusion and family, and intrusion and voice.

In *Une semaine de vacances*, as we have seen, the first-person position is notably and intentionally vacated. The young victim's absent voice, and the persistently present-tense narrative are devices that convey with great power the immediacy of her traumatic experiences. This uneasy, stifling silence contrasts strikingly with the reading experience of *L'Inceste*. Here the text's claustrophobic quality stems instead from its unrelenting, neurotic interiority. Whilst in *Une semaine de vacances* the reiterated incestuous trauma renders the young narrator mute, in *L'Inceste*, the narrative voice is dialled up to a juddering howl as the internal monologue spirals through a directly expressed emotional crisis and grapples with the trauma's aftereffects. To revisit a quotation referenced earlier, we might remember that Angot in interview has identified this text as a 'déclaration' (*L'Inceste*, ce serait la déclaration [...] *Une semaine de vacances*, c'est la définition'⁴⁴⁵ etc.). Given its status as a declaration, the text's vocal quality is perhaps unsurprising. The directness of the text, including the more overt ways that it engages with questions of class, stems undoubtedly in part from its unremitting first-person perspective. Indeed, *L'Inceste* is a prominent example of Angot's style as characterised by Marion Sadoux, featuring 'a directness, a sense of urgency and a corporeal vocality'.⁴⁴⁶ Francesca Forcolin,⁴⁴⁷ too, identifies that 'l'écriture angotienne [est] haletante, saccadée, orale [...] la syntaxe est hachée et décousue'.⁴⁴⁸ In this text, the stumbling, repetitive and, at times, 'hysterical' voice which seemed to impede the daughter as she attempted to communicate with and impress the father in *Une semaine de vacances* is transformed into a trademark writing style. The stuttering narrative of *L'Inceste* is a voice forged by abuse; it is not an elegant, bourgeois form of expression, and therefore certainly not what her father would judge to be of merit. Undoubtedly one of Angot's most widely known texts, *L'Inceste*, jerkily follows the breakdown of the narrator's turbulent (first homosexual) relationship with a (manifestly middle-class) woman named Marie-Christine. Redolent of 'an unending, disorientating relay'⁴⁴⁹ and characterised by an 'effervescent acidity',⁴⁵⁰ this text oscillates

⁴⁴⁵ Birnbaum, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴⁶ Sadoux, *op. cit.*, p173

⁴⁴⁷ It is worth noting that Sadoux (*op. cit.*) and Forcolin (*op. cit.*) are here both writing before the publication of *Une semaine de vacances* in 2012 with all its suffocating voicelessness and more ethnographic, unadorned prose.

⁴⁴⁸ Forcolin, *op. cit.*, p56

⁴⁴⁹ Jordan, *Autofiction, Ethics and Consents*

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

particularly dizzyingly between past and present as the narrator grapples to account for and understand her apparent madness and the dysfunction of her relationship(s). One moment we are immersed in the immediacy of her current emotions and the next we are plunged into the darkest corners of her traumatic past. *L’Inceste*, 1 suggests, is particularly ‘meander[ing]’⁴⁵¹ and an especially acute example of Angot’s ‘stream-of-consciousness’⁴⁵² style. This reading feels something of an understatement. More accurate, I suggest, is Jordan’s description of Angot’s narrative voice as an ‘anxiously uncontrollable first-person rush [...] that loops back on itself, borders on neurosis, evades containment and strays unfettered into areas of consciousness and imagination that are deeply transgressive’⁴⁵³ is particularly fitting with regard to this text. Incorporating passages of fervent self-reflection and quotes from psychoanalytic dictionaries, the narrative weaves frenetically through the relationship’s unravelling and the narrator’s subsequent protracted emotional crisis. *L’Inceste*, then, is differently impactful and differently uncomfortable to *Une semaine de vacances*. Accordingly, the text conveys its class critique in differing ways. Addressing Angot’s writing more broadly, Forcolin writes that:

Le lecteur est obligé de faire sortir le sens de l’œuvre, de comprendre la démarche du texte et ses significations, et la difficulté réside dans le manque d’une linéarité et de cohérence textuelle, mais aussi – et surtout – dans la confrontation à la société⁴⁵⁴

The following analysis unpacks some of this textual confrontation, and examines the ways in which notions of exclusion and intrusion play out in *L’Inceste* in order to further illuminate Angot’s writerly handling of class.

I begin with an exploration of how the writer explicitly highlights the bourgeois status of Marie-Christine through sustained and explicit emphasis on the meanings and practices of family. Very early on we learn that ‘ils sont médecins de père en fils dans sa famille’ (p27). One of hundreds of phone calls to Marie-Christine or her family leads to a brief but revealing encounter with a housekeeper:

je suis tombée sur la femme de ménage [...] pas deux heures par semaine, la journée entière tous les jours, elle s’occupe de tout, le ménage, le linge, les courses, la bouffe, le

⁴⁵¹ Edwards, *Écrire pour ne plus avoir honte*, p63

⁴⁵² Jordan, *Reconfiguring the Public and the Private*, p205

⁴⁵³ Jordan, *Overstepping the Boundaries*, p13

⁴⁵⁴ Forcolin, *op. cit.*, p58

soir quand elle rentre, NC se met les pieds sous la table, la bonne est là, et pour le reste, la secrétaire est là (p102)

All of these details, including the countless references to the family's spacious home and to Nadine (Marie-Christine's cousin, often referred to as NC) and her luxurious dinner parties, paint a distinctly middle-class picture, a dynamic and world from which the narrator feels painfully excluded and inherently separate. As she laments, '[Marie-Christine] était dans un camp, moi dans l'autre' (p104). An aching sense of exclusion pervades this text, and can be traced along a comparison of two poignant refrains in particular. The first is a recurring passage wherein the narrator describes her dream life with Marie-Christine:

Je rêve: Nous avons une maison. Nous la partageons. Nous l'aimons, toutes les deux. Nous choisissons des choses que nous aimons. Léonore est là. Personne ne peut rien trouver à redire (p23)

j'étais prête à prendre une maison avec elle. Avec une grande terrasse un jardin ce serait l'idéal. Pouvoir sortir, aller, venir, dehors, être à l'extérieur [...] Je rêve: Nous avons une maison. Nous la partageons. Nous l'aimons, toutes les deux. Nous choisissons des choses que nous aimons. Léonore est là. Personne ne peut rien trouver à redire (pp53-54)

The image developed here is one of domestic bliss and harmony. A longing for unity and connection comes across in the repeated, collective 'nous' and is amplified against the text's intense interiority. A yearning for security and freedom is also suggested: 'nous avons une maison [...] nous choisissons des choses que nous aimons'. However, the signalling of its status as 'rêve' each time reminds us up front of the class difference and trauma that keep this idyll from 'Christine's reach.

The second refrain recurs more frequently. It describes and reprises the terms of Marie-Christine's familial duties, duties that lead to the decision to spend Christmas apart and that ultimately drive an irreparable wedge between the narrator and her lover:

famille, obligation, devoir, filleuls, cousine, *depuis toujours* (p104)

Sa cousine va venir c'est super, comme ç'a *toujours* été, c'est un *rite*, c'est *immémorial*, ça va se faire, de nouveau, dans quelques semaines, *depuis toujours*' (p109)

un *rite immémorial* qui se pratique *depuis toujours* avec des gens qui l'ont aidée qu'elle ne peut pas abandonner. Par fidélité, oui, par devoir, oui. Oui. C'est sa famille, elle a une famille, oui (p110) (my emphases)

The overriding feeling of this second recurring passage is one of permanence, stability and reliability. The mantra 'depuis toujours' comes circling back each time, its repetition suggesting something chant- or hymn-like. We may note, also, how the varied use of tenses (future and past) work to create this sense of constancy and perpetuity. The tone of these small passages is didactic and authoritative, perhaps arguably in a parodic and derisive way as the narrator is presumably parroting Marie-Christine's words. The tone is also affirmative, particularly through the repeated 'oui'. We do not hear the narrator's protestations that put Marie-Christine in the position of having to defend and explain herself and thus read into the text the missing accusations and questions. The use of the word 'rite' is interesting here, as the language chimes strongly with Le Wita's ethnography of bourgeois culture. In *Ni vue, ni connue*, she confirms the importance of closely guarded and fiercely perpetuated daily rituals and annual traditions in the codification and sanctification of middle-class culture. Mirroring Angot's 'comme ç'a toujours été', she writes:

Le « ça se fait » de la bourgeoisie, à l'égal du « ça s'est toujours fait » de la tradition signifie l'aménagement d'un espace culturel autour de pratiques qu'il faut en permanence contrôler⁴⁵⁵

Le Wita also stresses Bourdieu's association of this notion of a 'rite' with ideas of exclusion and separation. She quotes from his *Ce que parler veut dire*:

[Le rite sert] à séparer non pas ceux qui l'ont subi de ceux qui ne l'ont pas subi, mais bien plutôt de ceux qui ne le subissent en aucune façon et de cette manière instituer des différences durables entre ceux que le rite concerne et ceux qui ne le concernent pas⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵⁵ Le Wita, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

Consideration of Bourdieu and Le Wita here embeds this second refrain even further in these ideas of gate-kept, immutable tradition and closed community. Later in *L'Inceste*, as the narrator's distress escalates and the narrative becomes more frenetic, we encounter another repetitive phrase:

non, Noël, je vais le passer avec mes filleuls, ma famille, c'est normal, tout le monde, Noël c'est la famille, c'est normal, tout le monde le comprend, tout le monde me comprend (p155)

Here, the recurrent affirmation that 'c'est normal' and evocation of 'tout le monde' confirms the narrator's separation not just from Marie-Christine's family, but her exclusion from the bourgeois family unit more broadly. Revisiting the first refrain, however, we see that it is consistently flagged, as I have mentioned, as a dream, marking up front its impossibility and intangibility. The more tender, plaintive tone of this yearning passage, its persistent present tense and acknowledgement of the potentiality for ridicule or judgement ('personne ne peut rien trouver à redire') stand it in stark, insecure contrast. *L'Inceste* is a text replete with echo and repetition, and yet these two refrains stand out particularly strongly. They exemplify a sense of separation and communicate repeatedly the feelings of precarity and exclusion that the narrator feels. As she laments: 'je ne veux pas que la famille légitime l'emporte sur la famille bancaire' (p146). It is clear that the meaning of 'family' in this text is not consistent across class boundaries.

Marie-Christine's is not the only middle-class family mentioned in *L'Inceste* and not the only one from which 'Christine' is painfully, conspicuously excluded. The stability afforded by Marie-Christine's bourgeois family dynamic could not be further removed from the narrator's uncertain, peripheral position in the 'legitimate' Angot family (as Angot spells out in *Un amour impossible*, after her mother became pregnant, 'Christine's father refused to marry 'down' and went on to have his 'real', middle-class, nuclear family). This dynamic of familial exclusion also underpins *Une semaine de vacances*, where the young girl has to go on holiday separately to her father's 'real' bourgeois family. The father is interested in the physical signs of family belonging (their identical hands and feet) but at the same time rejects her as his child (in sexually abusing her). This 'family' holiday that is not a family holiday persistently reminds the young girl, and perhaps Angot's readers, that she is excluded from the 'legitimate' family. This undoubtedly plays into and underlies the sense of rejection the narrator feels on account

of Marie-Christine's fidelity to her family in *L'Inceste*, as the trauma of class-based exclusion replays itself. In this text, as in *Une semaine de vacances*, the father's middle-class status is pointedly flagged. So, too, is his cold indifference towards his eldest daughter:

A dix-huit ans, il a arrêté de m'écrire et d'envoyer de l'argent à ma mère, parce que légalement rien ne pouvait plus l'y obliger si ma mère avait intenté une action. Elle ne l'aurait pas de toute façon (p152)

Later in the text, a flashback reveals an incident at a 'Codec' supermarket that highlights with particular violence 'Christine's exclusion from the 'legitimate' Angot unit. During this episode, the narrator and her then-partner Claude are sent by the father to a local supermarket to buy groceries. They are told: 'vous ferez mettre sur le compte de Angot [...] Il suffit donc à la caisse en arrivant de dire, c'est sur le compte Angot? Oui, c'est ça (p158). Once there and attempting to check out, however, a devastatingly humiliating scene ensues when an acquaintance of the family does not recognise 'Christine' as one of the Angot children and interferes:

elle répond qu'elle connaît très bien Elisabeth et très bien aussi les enfants, que je ne suis, elle le regrette, ni Philippe ni Mouchi, qu'elle les connaît, il se trouve qu'elle les connaît, il se trouve que je n'ai pas de chance [...] et que je ne vais pas pouvoir avec mon petit copain gruger les Angot comme ça. Il se trouve qu'elle est là. Que non. Je ne vais pas pouvoir (pp159-160)

The middle-class woman intrudes on the scene, acting as regulator and gatekeeper of the bourgeois family. The fact that this woman is an apparent clone of Elisabeth (the father's wife), manifesting taste and culture, and demonstrating mastery of bourgeois codes, only further compounds the narrator's difference and exclusion:

une amie d'Elisabeth, une bourge comme elle, joueuse de tennis, comme elle, surement, une femme de profession libérable ou d'intellectuel travaillant dans les organisations internationales, comme elle, s'interpose (comme elle), et dit (comme elle): « mais vous ne faites pas partie de la famille, qui êtes-vous? » (p159)

Here again one might argue that a scathing tone resurfaces, as the almost comical repetition of 'il se trouve' and 'comme elle' conveys mockery. However, the repetition also arguably carries

a dizzying quality, as if the casual cruelty of the scene is on replay in the narrator's mind. Either way, the repeated inscription of bourgeois family units throughout the text serves to further reiterate 'Christine's exclusion and, indeed, paint her as an infraction. The young couple flee the scene like lawbreakers, and the narrator reflects:

J'ai vingt-huit ans, personne ne sait dans la ville qu'il a un enfant, en plus des deux autres, un enfant de plus, une fille plus grande, que c'est moi, et que j'ai fini par m'appeler Angot comme lui (p160)

'Christine' may share her father's name, but she is fundamentally excluded from sharing in the bourgeois family dynamic. The arbitrary nature of this maintained separation between classed worlds is poignantly highlighted in an earlier reflection on names: 'ma mère voulait m'appeler Marie-Christine [...] J'aurais dû moi aussi m'appeler Marie-Christine, dans une de ces familles, qui jetait l'argent par les fenêtres, que la bonne ramassait au pied des vignes' (p49). As befits the timelessness of the bourgeois family unit identified earlier (*immémorial*, « ça s'est toujours fait »), 'Christine' cannot enter this dynamic belatedly. Another shift to the conditional perfect much later in the text confirms this, as we learn of the abusive father that:

il me dit « tu es belle, très belle, tu pourras prétendre à de très beaux hommes ». Un tel cadeau, une telle possibilité [...] mais « tu *aurais pu* prétendre » serait plus approprié maintenant. Car je me rends compte que, même si *j'aurais pu*, c'est terminé (p184) (emphasis in original text)

The scars of incest- and class-based trauma endure, marking and maintaining the firm separation between classed worlds.

My analysis moves now to a consideration of intrusion in *L'Inceste*. What does Angot's intentionally intrusive and antagonising writerly mode reveal in this text about class? In keeping with the chaotic cadence of the text, the sense of exclusion that is built up is continuously offset against a concurrent sense of intrusion. Indeed, speaking broadly, Angot is an intrusive writer. The antagonism and vitriol that are so often part and parcel of her texts and her media persona have set her apart as an especially disruptive force in the literary world. As previously suggested, the hostility of her writing may, at times, 'almost form an

assault'⁴⁵⁷ on the reader. We might consider, too, how Angot's 'improper' voice is perhaps unsettling and intrusive for the reader in its disturbing of established boundaries as she consistently frustrates expectations of genre. Angot's boundary bending has been well explored by critics. Forcolin has pointed out how the writer pushes beyond received ideas about intimate writings: 'Angot met en scène son corps, le sexe, avec un exhibitionnisme qui va au-delà de l'écriture intime, où le lecteur n'est plus un confident – comme dans l'autobiographie classique – mais devient souvent un voyeur'.⁴⁵⁸ Sadoux situates the writer in a tradition of 'fragmentation' and 'discontinuity'⁴⁵⁹ that she argues is predominant in contemporary autobiographical writings by women. Rye, however, identifies and marks out a 'particular Angotian space [...] in the uncertain interstices of genre'.⁴⁶⁰ The writer, she says, 'is both working on and pushing against the very boundaries of genre'.⁴⁶¹ Indeed:

one of the principal effects of Angot's writing, as it operates in the interstices of genres and at and on their borders, is uncertainty, undecidability, to the extent that the reader can never know what exactly it is that s/he is reading⁴⁶²

Angot's oeuvre is steeped in a disruption and uncertainty of which *L'Inceste* is perhaps one of the most striking examples. As the reader follows the text's narrator jerkily into the most painful recesses of her mind and past, obsessive and anxious preoccupations come circling back like intrusive thoughts bubbling over. With a staccato rhythm, *L'Inceste*'s narrator jumps from one thought to another and from one flashback into the next. Whilst a similarly disjointed feel characterises *Une semaine de vacances*, there the erratic narrative stages a vacated first person perspective as the young girl is being abused. It enacts the dissociation often identified by victims and, as I have argued, reveals the insidious class violence that underpins 'Christine's' story. In *L'Inceste*, by contrast, the sporadic jumpiness of the narrative conveys in full force her descent into despair as the adult narrator grapples with the persisting trauma. Upon closer inspection, however, the intrusive, fragmented narrative voice also carries classed implications.

Yet another striking refrain can be identified in this text in the policing, 'classifying' insistence on the narrator's part that she will try to be 'polite'. As 'Christine' spirals, she

⁴⁵⁷ Edwards, *Écrire pour ne plus avoir honte*, p66

⁴⁵⁸ Forcolin, *op. cit.*, p58

⁴⁵⁹ Sadoux, *op. cit.*, p178

⁴⁶⁰ Rye, *L'histoire d'amour chez Christine Angot*

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

seemingly cannot shake the dogmas of bourgeois society and constantly tells her readers: 'je vais essayer d'être polie' (p90):

entrer là-dedans, remuer tout ça? Qu'est-ce que ça apporte? Est-ce que ça rendra le livre plus intéressant? Non [...] Et ce n'est pas très poli surtout (p143)

je vais me calmer. Je suis quelqu'un de poli (p156)

As we read further, we learn that this compulsion to self-regulate and the preoccupation with politeness (undoubtedly gender- as well as class-inflected) are instilled by the abusive father: 'quand on rencontre quelqu'un, il dit bonjour clairement. C'est poli. Ça se fait. Il le fait. Il faut que je le fasse aussi. Il faut que je sois polie' (p182). The text's customary repetition resurfaces here, mimicking the insidious nature of classed social conditioning. This repetition, coupled with the punchy syntax of the passage, creates a feeling of barked out orders or perhaps of children learning by rote. The alignment of the father figure with this policing is further ratified when his name is verbalised to explain 'Christine's haughtiness: 'on m'a parlé en anglais, j'ai fait mon Pierre Angot « I'm not english nor american »' (p177) (my emphasis). So significant is the father's drilling of these various rules of *politesse* that Angot affords it a dedicated subsection, *La politesse*:

Tu aurais dû passer cette femme. On ne dit pas par contre mais en revanche. On n'oublie pas la négation. À la campagne on dit bonjour aux gens qu'on rencontre. Il était incollable sur les règles de politesse, sur les règles grammaticales, dans toutes les langues, sur les règles de prononciation, sur les usages. Il avait beaucoup de connaissances. On avait l'impression que, dans certains domaines, il connaissait tout [...] quand on se promène au sommet d'une montagne, quand on rencontre quelqu'un qu'on ne connaît pas, on lui dit bonjour (pp188-189)

The father weaponises his class privilege and higher authority even further through these notions of propriety and politeness, through the naturalising of these 'rules'. One of the text's many flashbacks details an episode whereby the narrator accidentally locks herself and her father out of a holiday home (the home which, as we know from *Une semaine de vacances* was the setting for a period of protracted abuse). The result is that the pair must spend part of the

day searching for a locksmith, and what ensues is a tirade of furious berating from the father that spans three pages:

c'est une règle de politesse élémentaire. Je suis étonné que tu ne la connaisses pas [...] cette règle de politesse [...] La loi de l'hôte et de l'invité, il est incollable [...] c'est toujours, toujours, toujours, toujours, le propriétaire, l'occupant qui le fait, ça, fermer la porte de chez lui. Tu ne devais pas le faire. Je ne comprends pas que tu ne connaisses pas cette règle de politesse, là, de base, élémentaire (pp171-172)

The *serrure* incident is revisited elsewhere in Angot's oeuvre,⁴⁶³ and the repeated rearticulation of this episode sets it apart as particularly, poignantly momentous in 'Christine's' life.⁴⁶⁴ The repetition also serves, yet again, to mirror the hammering home of these rules, here more direct and wrathful than insidious. Ideas concerning the 'natural' and necessary timelessness of bourgeois culture and its 'rules' re-emerge in the repetition of 'toujours' here. Angot's shift to the direct address of the second-person singular evinces her writing's vocal quality, but also mimics the father's chastising and implicates and positions the reader in it. We are drawn uncomfortably into the conflict, invited to occupy the space of the young girl, and, as a result, feel more fully and directly the effect of the vilifying words.

Interestingly, Le Wita's ethnography of bourgeois culture stresses the significance of this idea of *politesse* as one of the regulating principles of middle-class society:

la politesse, pierre angulaire des comportements bourgeois, en est une et pas des moindres. Le salut, la manière de se présenter, l'à-propos des remerciements, l'expression des sentiments forment un concentré de culture où se régulent la proximité et la distance que l'on doit entretenir avec l'autre⁴⁶⁵

Le Wita's words here echo those in the father's rant. Notably, she also acknowledges the importance of maintained and controlled separation ('la proximité et la distance') between classed worlds and between (classed) self and other. Any deviation from these principles of *politesse* is a possible infraction and the policing voice that reverberates through the text and intrudes on the narrative mirrors the perpetuation of these oppressive 'rules'. So instilled

⁴⁶³ See, for instance, Angot, *Un amour impossible*, p149

⁴⁶⁴ The importance of this scene is further flagged in *L'inceste* through the use of a dedicated subheading: 'La serrure' (p169)

⁴⁶⁵ Le Wita, *op. cit.*

from the outside is this regulating voice that it is even at times framed as involuntary or disembodied, engendering a sense of dissociation: '*je me revois lui expliquer la hiérarchie. Un homme c'est mieux qu'une femme [...] Un médecin c'est mieux qu'un ouvrier, un Blanc c'est mieux qu'un Noir*' (p34) (my emphasis). Similarly, in *Un amour impossible* we read of the narrator's relationship with her mother that: 'si elle faisait une faute de grammaire, je pinçais ma bouche, et mon corps se raidissait sur ma chaise. Si elle en faisait une deuxième, sur un ton coupant je la corrigeais'.⁴⁶⁶ The power of these rigid, regulating principles is underlined as her impulsive pedantism and patronisation are seemingly somewhat intrusive to the narrator herself. The effect conveyed might be understood as reflective of the navigating of identity as a *transfuge de classe*, of a self caught between classed currents. Here, Angot traces the internalisation of bourgeois norms and, to a certain extent, weaponises them.

L'Inceste is an intensely, often uncomfortably self-conscious text, and, furthering this preoccupation with *politesse*, the narrator constantly intrudes upon her own narrative flow with more general attempts to regulate, correct and apologise for her writing. For example,

je ponctue mes phrases d'une façon inhabituelle, je vais tenter d'arrêter [...] ma ponctuation, il faut que je m'en défasse, que j'en prenne une plus courante, plus naturelle, que les gens aient moins d'efforts à faire (p94)

fermons la parenthèse, il ne faut plus laisser le lecteur en rade (p102)

j'essaie d'être logique, simple, et de me faire comprendre par le maximum de gens (p145)

je suis désolée de vous parler de tout ça, j'aimerais tellement pouvoir vous parler d'autre chose [...] je suis désolée qu'il faille parler de tout ça. Désolée (p149)

There is a sense here of authorial splitting; a tearing between positions as a writer. The above quotations demonstrate how class-based tensions play out on so many different levels in *L'Inceste*. So strong is the narrator's self-policing that at points some words are literally censored from the page and the reader encounters blank spaces (p22, p80). The despair conveyed in this text is redoubled by this obsessive conviction that: 'il faut que ce soit précis,

⁴⁶⁶ Angot, *Un amour impossible*, p142

clair, net, et ordonné' (p115). The father's prescriptions and proscriptions are here so internalised that they come to govern her very writing style, a style that stages conflict between conformity and disruption.

Self-awareness and clarity of expression are also identified by Le Wita as intrinsic to bourgeois social and cultural codes. She writes: 'savoir rédiger, c'est savoir se présenter et se faire comprendre. Cet exercice est vécu comme une règle de politesse'.⁴⁶⁷ This is something of which the fixatedly apologetic narrator of *L'Inceste* is all too aware. As she explains: 'écrire n'est pas choisir son récit. Mais plutôt le prendre, dans ses bras, et le mettre tranquillement sur la page, le plus tranquillement possible, le plus tel quel possible' (p153). Although there is a suggestion here of writing's therapeutic properties (the reader might envisage an upset child taken soothingly into a guardian's arms before being tucked into bed), *L'Inceste* is a text that is far from *tranquille*. Despite (and in part because of) the narrator's fixation on policing, the result is, as I have outlined, a dizzying text that pinballs the reader jerkily through emotional crises and traumatic flashbacks. As she obsesses ad nauseam, even 'Christine's' apologising becomes too much and perhaps constitutes a disruption of readerly expectations of a text's traditional flow. A sense of intrusion is thus also figured through *débordement* as Angot – and the textual construct of 'Christine' – are consistently considered 'too much'. Both are compulsively inappropriate. As we have seen, Jordan has written of how Angot's narrative voice 'evades containment and strays unfettered into areas [...] that are deeply transgressive'.⁴⁶⁸ In *L'Inceste*, 'Christine's' dinner party conversation of choice is also revealing in this regard:

on était invitées à diner, je l'avais dit, j'avais été obligé de le dire aux gens « il y a une image que je n'arrive pas à effacer. – Mais quoi? Quoi, quoi, quoi? – Il y avait un chien mort sur le bord de la route quand on est arrivées [...] on avait parlé d'autre chose (p79)

Later in the text, in the passages of frantic, exploratory self-diagnosis, the narrator admits: 'je n'ai pas d'amnésie, je souffrirais plutôt, si ça existe, de mnésie excessive, trop forte' (p146). If Ernaux envisages her life (in writing) as a series of half-opened doors in a Tanning-esque dreamscape, then Angot's telling of her life story in *L'Inceste* might be imagined in the

⁴⁶⁷ Le Wita, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶⁸ Jordan, *Overstepping the Boundaries*, p13

constant, oscillating chaos of a nightmarish funhouse. She is a writer who is constantly overflowing, overstepping and overstating. Whether all her fretfulness around *politesse* and the text's reception is ironic or parodic, feigned or genuine – or indeed, as is likely, a combination thereof – it constitutes a hyperbolic performance of bourgeois concerns that may strike the reader. *L'Inceste's* narrator impulsively, incessantly insists that we heed the *chien mort*: here, the interlinked traumas of incest and class-based oppression.

2.5 Conclusion

Angot's intrusive texts and narratives can be read as reclamations of the abusive 'intrusion' suffered at the hands of her father. As the narrator explains in *L'Inceste*, 'moi j'ai le dessus sur l'inceste. Le pouvoir [...] grâce au stylo dans ma main'.⁴⁶⁹ Her texts can also, as I have argued, be understood as writerly attempts to defy the exclusion and separation inherent to bourgeois norms and class difference. In *Une semaine de vacances* and *L'Inceste*, with all their staging of the dynamics of access, exclusion and intrusion, Angot disrupts and challenges the perpetuation of bourgeois rituals, traditions and values. Analysis of these texts, their discomforts, and their haunting repetition reveals a writerly desire to destabilise the absolutes imposed by the abusive father and by a classed society more broadly. Both of these works constitute textual reclaimings of incest but they are, at the same time, expressions of class defiance. As I have proposed, though an underexplored area of her writing, class consciousness and critique underpin the incest trope and permeate Angot's entire oeuvre, whether manifesting as an obsessive fixation or building 'd'une manière allusive mais constante'.⁴⁷⁰

In *Une semaine de vacances*, the father figure serves as a monstrous case study of bourgeois hypocrisy. Details that evince his middle-class status are invariably aligned with examples of his cruel condescension or interspliced with descriptions of the hideous abuse he inflicts. He is the authoritative gatekeeper around whom ideas of access, exclusion and intrusion pivot. Intrusion is enacted in the traumatic incestuous rape, and this is offset against the access that he provides to the fancy restaurants and book shops that the pair frequent. Moments of comparison between the father and daughter underline the disparity in their claims to class and power, as do the instances where the young girl's passivity and lack of agency are stressed. A sense of entrapment builds in the text via unequal dynamics of

⁴⁶⁹ Angot, *L'Inceste*, p153

⁴⁷⁰ Bourmeau, *op. cit.*

positionality and varying abilities to speak. We read as the father dictates the daughter's tastes, movements and positions according to not only his perverse whims but also his middle-class norms. He provides – and readily snatches away – a two-fold induction into the adult world of sex and into the bourgeois world of 'high society'. The intersplicing and layering of details pertaining to this dual 'education' in a jarringly ethnographic mode in turn may intrude upon the reader, producing and performing a sustained tension between access and exclusion that disrupts received ideas and constructs a class critique.

If *Une semaine de vacances* provides a *définition* of domination, *L'Inceste* – as we have seen – is its howling *déclaration*.⁴⁷¹ Chaotic and vocal, the pain of class separation and exclusion caterwauls through its pages. Reverberating refrains circle in and out of readerly focus, mimicking the insidious nature of class codification and segregation. The wounds of incest- and class-based violence are made fresh in *L'Inceste* as the narrator obsessively revisits and reprises its traumas. A frenetic, intruding voice repeatedly interrupts the reader's flow with 'classifying' insistences that the narrator will try to be coherent and palatable, so much so that this voice itself becomes part of the text's vitriol. Throughout the text, Angot exploits language as a classed tool. In incorporating stylistic 'errors' she defies the father figure's directives on 'proper' expression (clarity, fluidity, precision) and develops that defiance into a deliberately transgressive writerly voice. In characteristic Angot style,⁴⁷² the writer turns this potentially parodic preoccupation with *politesse* back onto her readership in moments of direct confrontation:

Parce que toujours, vous, vous public, vous critique, en général, ne pouvez jamais vous empêcher d'écrire le monde en plus-moins, positif-négatif, bon-méchant, bonbon-fiel, intelligent-con, homme-femme, blanc-noir. Moi je réponds, je vous le dis bien *en face*, je vais vous répondre quelque chose : Soyez poli⁴⁷³ (my emphasis)

As mentioned previously, in her exploration of intimacy and vulnerability in Angot's *Rendez-vous*, Jordan puts forward that 'it is possible to suggest that Angot explores taking a kind of power, through writing 'Christine''s vulnerability, in vigorous reaction against incest's cult of secrecy'.⁴⁷⁴ I suggest that a similar sense of empowerment surfaces in Angot's less shocking

⁴⁷¹ Birnbaum, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷² Sadoux, discussing Angot's antagonism, has stated that 'this writer who relentlessly exposes herself to her reader [...] is also a writer who repeatedly asks to be left alone and not to be judged while claiming not to be understood and not wanting to be understood' (*op. cit.*, 179)

⁴⁷³ Angot, *L'Inceste*, p157

⁴⁷⁴ Jordan, *Reconfiguring the Public and the Private*, p214

but no less powerful writing of class. Class and incest, further still, are inextricable. As the author writes about incestuous abuse she is also, of necessity, writing about class oppression and dominance precisely because of the ways in which the father's incest is organised and carried out. Through her writing and staging of class, Angot exposes the insidious quality of class violence, nods to the arbitrariness of class separation and reveals the hypocrisy that can be thinly but deftly veiled by a bourgeois façade.

Chapter 3. 'Prolotte de la féminité'⁴⁷⁵: Reading Class Through Feminine Performance in Virginie Despentes' *Baise-moi* and *Vernon Subutex*

As countless articles, interviews and critical writings attest, in her texts, films and various artistic pursuits, Virginie Despentes maintains a characteristic concern with class-based precarity and exclusion. In her introduction to a 2018 journal special issue on Despentes, Michèle Schaal outlines how the writer 'has tackled a wide range of social issues over the past twenty years', including 'classism [...] contemporary class inequalities and *précarité*'.⁴⁷⁶ Despentes' preoccupation with this 'wide range' of injustices goes some way towards explaining why her work is often written and spoken about more broadly than in straight classed terms. It is indeed, as I have made clear in this thesis, difficult to extricate class from other axes of identity and identity struggle; class is to be understood in an intersectional perspective. As Despentes explains in an interview with Marianne Costa, she sees 'la condition féminine liée à la classe et à l'appartenance raciale'⁴⁷⁷ (though it is, of course, the first of these intersectional links that forms the central focus of this study). Despentes is outspoken in her articulation of intersectionality and translates this openly and proudly into her work, notably in *King Kong Théorie* where she explicitly acknowledges an indebtedness to Black feminists such as Angela Davis.⁴⁷⁸ Her texts explore, expose and are drawn from 'la réalité des individus en difficulté, des exclus [...] ceux qui se trouvent en marge de la société',⁴⁷⁹ although her works depict with particularly 'raw veracity the lives of *women* who are marginalised'⁴⁸⁰ (my emphasis). It is this terrain of intersection between class and femininity that will be excavated in the following investigation. Despentes is a writer 'intent on exploring boundaries and borders, exclusion and marginality, abjection and revulsion'⁴⁸¹ and these notions, heavily infused with issues of space and taste, also shape the ways in which I approach my analysis. When describing Despentes' style, Elisa Bricco underscores the writer's 'manière directe de traiter les formes de vie et des sujets inconfortables, de mettre le doigt dans les plaies de la société contemporaine'.⁴⁸² Indeed, one of these wounds is class inequality and oppression.

⁴⁷⁵ Despentes, Virginie, *King Kong Théorie* (Paris : Grasset, 2006), p10

⁴⁷⁶ Schaal, Michèle, 'Introduction to Special Issue on Virginie Despentes. From Margins to Center (?)', *Rocky Mountain Review*, 72:1 (2018), pp14-35, p17

⁴⁷⁷ Costa, Marianne, 'Despentes: anarcho-féministe', *Le Magazine* (2007) <<http://www.lemagazine.info/?Despentes-anarcho-feministe>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁴⁷⁸ Despentes, *King Kong Théorie*, p31, pp138-139, p144

⁴⁷⁹ Bricco, Elisa, 'Considérations sur *Vernon Subutex* de Virginie Despentes : « formes de vie », implication et engagement oblique', *COntEXTES*, 22 (2019) <<https://journals.openedition.org/contextes/7087>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁴⁸⁰ Jordan, Shirley, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), p140

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p113

⁴⁸² Bricco, *op. cit.*

Although existing criticism recognises the centrality of social issues pertaining to marginalisation in Despentés' works, the following chapter constitutes the first dedicated study of the all-pervasive question of class. My analysis makes newly clear, specifically through the double lens of class and femininity, the ways in which Despentés pursues 'l'écriture comme réappropriation de la marginalité'.⁴⁸³ As she declares in her auto-theoretical text, *King Kong Théorie*, 'c'est en tant que prolote de la féminité que je parle, que j'ai parlé hier et que je recommence aujourd'hui'.⁴⁸⁴ This reclaiming and feminising of the term *prolo* (an abbreviation of *prolétaire*) signals a strong sense of (female) community and class-based belonging. The spanning tenses ('j'ai parlé hier et [...] je recommence aujourd'hui') indicate the depth and endurance of Despentés' affiliation with working-class womanhood. In proudly adopting the appellation of 'prolotte de la féminité' the writer highlights and claims this crucial converging space between class and gender. Her textual play at this intersection forms the core nexus not only of the following analysis but also of her work more broadly. As with Ernaux and Angot, Despentés' texts are written from and expose this overlapping space of co-influence between gender and class. Despite all the ways in which her writerly project differs from that of the authors explored in chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis (notably that it is not life-writing), I argue that Despentés' writing nonetheless stages class performances and creates immersive texts that are informed by personal, painful lived experience, and that may be read as such: there are perhaps few readers of Despentés' work who are unaware of the closeness of her fictional world to her own lived experience. Through examining the exaggerated performances of femininity and class in *Baise-moi* and *Vernon Subutex*, I expose class as foundationally important in Despentés' texts. I argue that a class consciousness permeates and evolves through her oeuvre, from its very beginnings through to its most recent manifestations.

3.1 'Rebelle, trash, punk'⁴⁸⁵: Despentés' Writerly Style and its Provenance in Performance

In the following section, I outline the formative influences that have shaped Despentés' approach. I explore her style's infusion of musicality and embracing of a punk aesthetic as well as its incorporation of personal life experience, all of which attest to its class inflection and contribute to a heavy aura of the performative. Both within and around her works,

⁴⁸³ Sauzon, Virginie, 'La déviance en réseau : Grisélidis Réal, Virginie Despentés et le féminisme pragmatique', *TRANS*-, 13 (2012) <<https://journals.openedition.org/trans/550>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁴⁸⁴ V. Despentés, *King Kong Théorie*, p10

⁴⁸⁵ Sabatier, Benoît, 'Virginie Despentés : « Je suis surprise par l'égoïsme de notre génération »', *Technikart* (2019) <<https://www.technikart.com/virginie-despentés-feministe-punk/>> [last accessed June 2022]

Despentes is preoccupied with performances of social class. First and foremost, I begin with a turn to Despentes' background in music. In 1990, three years before the publication of her first hit novel *Baise-moi*, Despentes recorded an album of feminist punk rap, *Fear of a Female Planet*, with her band, Straight Royeur. Although he explores the importance of punk music more generally to her writerly project, in his article 'The Novelist as DJ', Colin Nettelbeck somewhat dismisses 'Despentes's personal musical activity [as] not particularly remarkable'.⁴⁸⁶ I disagree with this statement, and suggest that it is, in fact, remarkable in its continuity with the class-based oeuvre to come. The political thrust of the writer's early music continues to resurface in her work, manifesting particularly in her texts' performativity (of class) and in their stylistic and linguistic properties. This unexplored music, I suggest, prefigures strikingly the kind of thematic interests that the writer continues to embrace and the performativity that continues to characterise her work.

The record constitutes a cacophonous whirlwind that feels like a musical manifestation of – and precursor to – the gritty feminist anger that drives Despentes' writings (as she writes in *King Kong Théorie*, 'je ne suis pas douce je ne suis pas aimable je ne suis pas une bourge'⁴⁸⁷). It gives form to an unbridled anger that rages like wildfire and needs to find multiple kinds of expression, spilling over from music, to text, to film and beyond. Straight Royeur's sound and Despentes' lyrics⁴⁸⁸ evince a rawness of energy that will characterise her protagonists and be channelled into her writing in later years. In addition to thematic resonances, *Fear of a Female Planet* heralds an appetite for noisiness and discordance and a proclivity for disruption and vulgarity evidenced throughout Despentes' work. Ideas of excess, dissonance and distaste – themselves bound tightly with issues of class – feature heavily in the analysis throughout this chapter.

Although critics, scholars and journalists alike have overlooked this admittedly obscure LP, the briefest of glances at its riotous lyrics evinces a very early devotion to exposing – and creating art from – society's most neglected, abused and 'distasteful' margins. A recognisably Despentian urban landscape emerges in *Les Pentes* (*Fear of a Female Planet*'s second track and also the area of the city from which the writer famously draws her *nom de plume*). The lyrics rattle through an extended description of an urban environment:

⁴⁸⁶ Nettelbeck, Colin, 'The Novelist as DJ: *Vernon Subutex* and The Music of Our Times', *Rocky Mountain Review*, 72:1, *Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* (2018), pp183-202, p184

⁴⁸⁷ V. Despentes, *King Kong Théorie*, p131

⁴⁸⁸ In a 2018 interview, Despentes confirmed herself as the band's lyricist (Bourgeois-Muller, Thomas and Durget, Emmanuel, 'Virginie Despentes : « Booba n'est pas assez pris au sérieux comme auteur »' *Le Point* (2018) <https://www.lepoint.fr/culture/virginie-despentes-la-musique-m-a-plus-aidee-que-la-litterature-08-09-2018-2249589_3.php> [last accessed June 2022])

Le long des pentes prises d'assaut
Font le spectacle font le show arnaquent et bluffent et trichent et s'observent parient et
touchent à l'essentiel ! [...]
Plus loin les tagueurs brûlent les murs
De leur nom [...]
À côté des slogans chelous des affiches décollées
Déchirées de la montée Saint Sé⁴⁸⁹

'Toutes les stars du quartier' – 'les punks', 'Ganja people', 'les [...] skaters' 'la racaille' – feature in this musical tribute to the 'ballet discret, chassé-croisé, commerce tout au fond des allées'.⁴⁹⁰ An impassioned critique of gentrification and exclusionary urban planning forms the song's final verse:

Costard people plein de projets verraient bien le quartier en grand supermarché
Rachètent pour rénover expulsent pour installer des bureaux des parking des
immeubles grand standing
C'est tant pis pour ceux qui aimaient à vivre ici
Tous les paumés qui pour une fois se sentaient quelque part chez soi
Nique ta race c'est ma place⁴⁹¹

Issues of class converge with notions of place and belonging in these lyrics, where in the strongest possible differentiating terms ('nique ta race') the band distance themselves from the flashy property developers who invade the area and instead align themselves with 'tous les paumés' 'qui aimaient à vivre ici'. The epithet given to the 'costard people' demonstrates an awareness of class and its markers, and the insistence on their propensity for eviction (*expulser*) resonates with the ideas of access and exclusion applied throughout this thesis. As these lyrics demonstrate, the presence and performance of class in Despentés' work is not only indisputable, but traceable even in its most embryonic beginnings. Despentés has sustained a dedication to expressing class dynamics from this album to her first novel, *Baise-moi*, and through her most recent *Vernon Subutex* trilogy.

⁴⁸⁹ Despentés, Virginie and Zina, Cara, *Fear of a Female Planet* [Vinyl] (Lyon: Dangerhouse Skylab, 1993)

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

Both *Baise-moi* and *Vernon Subutex* feature a deep-rooted connection to music and performance. The first work typifies, in textual form, the noisiness and rawness mentioned earlier and constitutes the writer's first explosive foray onto the literary scene. In this high-powered, genre-bending text, Desportes incorporates several excerpts from punk lyrics that give the narrative a 'strong sense of sound track'.⁴⁹² *Baise-moi* follows the murderous and vengeful rampage of two young women, Manu, a porn actress, and Nadine, a sex worker and 'reject from the white middle class'.⁴⁹³ The text garnered much attention – both positive and negative – for its unapologetic portrayal of female-perpetrated violence. Following a vicious sexual assault on Manu, the two downtrodden protagonists cross paths in a chance meeting that quickly gathers pace in a gun-wielding, pleasure-driven flight of revenge. *Baise-moi* is characterised by its cinematic aesthetic, as well as its hyperbolic performances of class dynamics, of pornography, and of violence and murder. It is a text that was 'embraced by a generation which cut its teeth with Kurt Cobain and which would identify with expressions of exclusion in Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine*'⁴⁹⁴ and one that, to this day, maintains an almost cult-like status.

Desportes' most recent trilogy, however, marked an eruption into the mainstream. Following the publication of *Vernon Subutex*'s first volume in 2015 the writer became a member of the Académie Goncourt (2016-2020) and the text's English version (translated by Frank Wynne) was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize in 2018. Compared with *Baise-moi*'s rapid and fiery prose, the pace of this recent work is slowed and its scope Desportes' broadest to date. The panoramic and polyphonic narrative slides from one perspective into another and, though the story is focalised through several characters, all of its voices orbit around its eponymous main character. The triptych follows the descent into homelessness and poverty of Vernon Subutex, a former record shop owner (we see, once again, a fundamental infusion with music) whose business and way of life become obsolete with the dawn of the twenty-first century. If the lyrics of *Les Pentes* depict a snapshot of urban life in the early 1990s, Desportes' *Vernon Subutex* trilogy constitutes a vast mural of the contemporary. In the first volume in particular, the reader is plunged into a sense of precariousness, following Vernon as he pinballs around Paris staying with old friends and former girlfriends. It is along this narrative thread that Desportes constructs what has been

⁴⁹² Jordan, *op. cit.* p116-117

⁴⁹³ Fayard, Nicole, 'The Rebellious Body as Parody: *Baise-moi* by Virginie Desportes', *French Studies*, 60:1 (2006) pp63-77, p65

⁴⁹⁴ Jordan, *op. cit.* p115

referred to as a 'livre-patchwork qui [traverse] toutes les classes sociales'.⁴⁹⁵ Building in this way 'une formidable cartographie de la société française contemporaine',⁴⁹⁶ Despentès immerses her readers within the recognisable class, gender and sexuality dynamics of the contemporary landscape. I continue this study using the framing employed in chapters 1 and 2. Drawing on Despentès' very first text and her most recent, I demonstrate the consistent presence and progressive nuancing of class consciousness within her oeuvre.

Despentès' authorial persona and writing style have undoubtedly evolved over the years, and she has been open about the ways in which her sobriety, her maturity, her sexuality and, of course, her success have shaped not only the texts she writes, but the spaces she moves in.⁴⁹⁷ We might consider her, like Ernaux, a sort of literary *transfuge de classe*. Although their paths and experiences have been very different, and although they differ in age and in style, both writers are open about the kind of upward mobility engendered by their increasingly widespread acclaim. That said, Despentès continues not simply to tackle issues of inequality and exclusion, but to repeatedly place them at the centre of her narratives. As Schaal suggested following the widespread success of the *Vernon Subutex* trilogy, 'while [Despentès] may be on the verge of canonization, marginalization – whether gendered, sexual, racial, religious, literary, artistic, or class-based – remains at the heart of her aesthetics and authorial politics'.⁴⁹⁸ It remains at the heart, indeed, of who she is as a writer. As Despentès sees it, just because her milieu has changed, 'ça ne veut pas dire que c'est devenu "chez [elle]"'.⁴⁹⁹ For Despentès as for Ernaux, there remains a deep-rooted sense of alienation in moving in these once unfamiliar circles. All three writers examined in this thesis have disturbed the bourgeois world of literature in their own way, both by their writing and, in the case of Angot and Despentès, by their writing persona. Indeed, at various earlier points in her career, Despentès has been seen by some as an intruder in the literary sphere. The writer has spoken of having experienced:

beaucoup de mépris [...] La plupart des écrivains n'avaient pas l'habitude de voir débarquer une personne comme moi. Je crois qu'ils ne savaient même pas que ça existait. Sérieux... Au début, ils ont cru que j'étais forcément une imposture et que je

⁴⁹⁵ Kapriélian, Nelly, '[Nos années 2010] 2015, Naissance de Vernon Subutex : Despentès raconte', *Les Inrockuptibles* (2015) < <https://www.lesinrocks.com/livres/dans-vernon-subutex-virginie-despentès-cartographie-la-société-102778-01-02-2015/> > [last accessed June 2022]

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Taddei, Frédéric, 'Virginie Despentès: "J'aime bien voir des petites culottes dans les films"', *GQ* (2015) < <https://www.gqmagazine.fr/pop-culture/interview/articles/virginie-despentès-jaime-bien-voir-des-petites-culottes-dans-les-films/23533> > [last accessed June 2022]

⁴⁹⁸ Schaal, *Introduction to Special Issue on Virginie Despentès*, p16

⁴⁹⁹ Taddei, *op. cit.*

prêtais mon visage à une autre femme, type " bac + 7 ". Une personne qui n'avait pas été à l'école ne pouvait pas s'attaquer à l'écriture, et à tous ces jeux abstraits'.⁵⁰⁰

Despentes differs in this respect from Ernaux with her academic success and university career. However, what they do share in common (and, indeed, with Angot), is a clear insistence on how their social, cultural and economic backgrounds (in Bourdieu's language, their *habitus*) and life experience inform their writerly projects. When asked in a 2008 interview about the importance of distinguishing herself as 'prolotte de la féminité', Despentes responded:

je me situe par rapport à un pouvoir effectivement dominant [...] c'est important de préciser d'où je viens, c'est à dire ni des classes aisées ni de l'université, parce qu'en général les femmes qui prennent la parole féministe sont des femmes qui viennent d'un milieu social bien particulier, la haute bourgeoisie, et qui ont une formation scolaire bien particulière, l'université⁵⁰¹

She thus sees her writing project as part of a wider reclamation of a co-opted feminism, as an amplification of voices typically side-lined and dismissed. As with Angot and Ernaux (although in very different ways), the author's methods and motivations for writing are shaped within a nexus of class belonging and exclusion and born from class-based anger. Despentes 'écrit comme elle vit'.⁵⁰² As Shirley Jordan has outlined:

the innumerable press articles which construct Despentes' persona detail a range of real-life experiences which serve as credentials for her fiction. She is variously described as 'ex-zonarde', 'ex-punk', 'ex-Rmiste', 'ex-prostituée', 'ex-droguée', 'ex-peep-show dancer', 'ex-hôtesse salon de massage' and ex-worker for Minitel rose⁵⁰³

The repetition of 'ex-' here is interesting. Although objectively true, such insistence is designed to render the writer more acceptable and construct her as 'reformed'. All of these class-inflected identities and experiences bleed into her work and reveal themselves in her

⁵⁰⁰ Tallon, Jean-Louis, 'Entretien avec Virginie Despentes', *HorsPress* (2002) <<https://erato.pagesperso-orange.fr/horspress/despente.htm>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁵⁰¹ Arbizu, Susana and Belin, Henri, 'King Kong Théorie : Entretien avec Virginie Despentes', *Mauvaiseherbe's Weblog* (2008) <<https://mauvaiseherbe.wordpress.com/2008/09/11/king-kong-theorie-entretien-avec-virginie-despentes/>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁵⁰² Gilles, Médioni, 'Despentes abrupte!', *L'Express* (1996) <https://www.lexpress.fr/informations/despentes-abrupte_613620.html> [last accessed June 2022]

⁵⁰³ Jordan, *op. cit.* pp142-143

characters. In an interview in 2002 with Jean-Louis Tallon,⁵⁰⁴ Despentès highlighted how her style is intrinsically linked to the experiences and environments that have shaped her, both as a woman and a writer:

Je ne peux pas écrire autrement [...] Mon style me correspond tout à fait. Il me ressemble et me permet de raconter facilement mes histoires. Chose que je ne pourrais pas faire si j'épurais ou si j'essayais d'être plus " clean ". D'autres écrivains le font très bien. Et puis, je n'ai pas suffisamment de bases classiques [...] C'est naturel chez moi. Je ne me pose pas la question. Je suis comme ça. Je suis pas restée assez longtemps à l'école pour écrire " comme il faut " ...⁵⁰⁵

Her style and her chosen lexis are not only 'naturel' and intensely personal, they also suggest a sense of allegiance or community. In a way quite unlike Angot and Ernaux,⁵⁰⁶ Despentès' incorporation of slang and popular spoken language is key to her construction of class-inflected texts. Chris Reyns-Chikuma identifies in her writings a 'usage des langues populaires [...] [qui donne] la parole à ceux qui parlent ces sociolectes'.⁵⁰⁷ Her style reflects the kind of French spoken by the majority rather than the privileged few. As the writer herself has expressed, 'on est plus nombreux à parler comme moi que comme [mes critiques]'.⁵⁰⁸ Bricco writes of Despentès' 'style très personnel [...] une langue très orale parsemée d'expressions vulgaires, de tournures argotiques et familières, de verlan. La syntaxe est simple et le rythme de la narration, très vif'.⁵⁰⁹ This strong sense of rhythm and performance in Despentès' texts has been noted by critics. Some have spoken about her works as having soundtracks.⁵¹⁰ Others have pointed out that her writing demonstrates an almost rap-like flow ('[elle] a du flow',⁵¹¹ 'le style déclamatoire d'une rappeuse'⁵¹²). Indeed, Lauren Elkin has said of *King Kong Théorie* that 'there's something aggressively incantatory about it, a kind of battle-rap

⁵⁰⁴ This interview is particularly revealing in terms of the class expectations of the literary establishment at the time (and perhaps – although hopefully to a lesser extent – to this day). Tallon asks uncomfortable questions and plainly evinces some of the *mépris* the writer experienced at the beginning of her career. It often feels as if Despentès is being called upon to justify herself and her texts ('On a parfois l'impression, en lisant votre roman, que vous pourriez écrire un livre de bon ton', 'Quand vous utilisez des termes tels que " foutre ", " putain ", " chianté "... est-ce pour choquer [...] ou par simple jeu ?') (Tallon, *op. cit.*)

⁵⁰⁵ Tallon, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰⁶ Though Ernaux's *écriture plate* is self-confessedly class-based, it is also shot through with ethnographic consideration and motivation, a desire to deliver 'truth'. This unadorned style is, like with Despentès, a language she says comes to her naturally. Ernaux's stylistic strategy, however, is born from a wish to reject the overly literary, a decision driven by awareness of class belonging and of the traditional exclusion of what is working-class from literature.

⁵⁰⁷ Reyns-Chikuma, Chris, 'Traversées des Genres avec Frictions et Fusions dans *Apocalypse Bébé* de Virginie Despentès', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 17:5 (2013) pp550-559, p553

⁵⁰⁸ Jordan (*op. cit.*, pp117) quotes from an article with Despentès no longer available online.

⁵⁰⁹ Bricco, *op. cit.*

⁵¹⁰ See Jordan (*op. cit.*) and Achour, Mouloud, 'Le Gros Journal avec Virginie Despentès et Sofiane, le bitume avec une plume, 29/05 - CANAL+', online video recording, Youtube (30th May 2017) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Qvjp1xY3iQ&t=553s>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁵¹¹ Achour, *op. cit.*

⁵¹² Arbizu and Belin, *op. cit.*

braggadocio'⁵¹³ (*braggadocio* being a technique used by MCs to boast or brag). Throughout her career, Desportes has repeatedly described her style as constitutively inflected by punk, rock and rap. Indeed, she pursues 'le rap et le punk appliqué au livre'.⁵¹⁴ Returning to *Fear of a Female Planet*, the strong link between this early musical endeavour and her subsequent turn to novels is made particularly explicit in an interview for *Le Point* in 2018. Desportes here speaks directly about her experiences with Straight Royeur. She reveals that *Baise-moi* was written immediately after the band parted ways. When asked about whether her experience as a lyricist and rapper informed her writing ('ça servit [...] un peu comme matrice pour *Baise-moi*, pour trouver une musique avec les mots ?'⁵¹⁵), Desportes gives the following revealing response:

À fond, le fait d'avoir écrit du rap, des chansons [...] oui à fond parce que c'est comme ça que j'ai commencé à écrire mais aussi le fait d'avoir écouté autant de rock français, punk français aussi parce que c'est une école très particulière d'un français très efficace [...] *Baise-moi* est vraiment né de ça directement [...] j'appartiens à la famille des auteurs qui ont un rythme, qui cherchent un rythme⁵¹⁶

Here Desportes delineates her writing's profound musical inflection particularly explicitly. Her punk education (here and elsewhere the author uses language pertaining to schooling, such as 'le punk est une bonne école'⁵¹⁷) informed the 'efficient', rhythmic kind of French she employs. Particularly pertinent for the current enquiry, however, are the ways in which this infusion of punk is political and, specifically, laced with class awareness. Indeed, the writer repeatedly defines her punk rock training as distinctly and pointedly separate from the kind of high-culture education more often seen in literary circles. Evidence of the importance that Desportes accords to this distinction can be traced across the decades and as recently as in a 2020 interview with Helene Hegemann:

I don't think of the straight bourgeoisie as my first readers. If I'm writing a book or directing a movie, I think of people who would understand where I take things from –

⁵¹³ Elkin, Lauren, "Trash, Rock, Destroy: Is Virginie Desportes the French writer America needs?", *Harper's Magazine* (2019) <<https://harpers.org/archive/2019/12/trash-rock-destroy-virginie-desportes-vernon-subutex-baise-moi/>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁵¹⁴ Fayard, *op. cit.*, p65 (Fayard quotes here an article on Desportes no longer available online).

⁵¹⁵ Bourgeois-Muller and Durget, *op. cit.*

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁷ Arbizu and Belin, *op. cit.*

and where I'm trying to take them. I think of people who have a punk rock background, who have had life experiences outside of university⁵¹⁸

Schaal explores Despentès' allegiance to punk rock and its political signification in her chapter on the writer's use of violence when she writes, 'l'écrivaine poursuit la contestation punk [qui est] fortement ancrée à gauche ou dans les milieux précaires'.⁵¹⁹ As Tom Armbrecht confirms, Despentès employs the language of punk 'pour articuler l'importance d'une révolte sociale'.⁵²⁰ The punk rock thrust that the writer continues to embrace is thus enmeshed with issues of class and exclusion in the intersecting web of artistic and political factors that inform and shape her texts and her subversive, trash aesthetic of distaste.⁵²¹

I move now to examine more closely the infusion of real-life experience across Despentès' oeuvre. As we have already noted, the writer 'écrit comme elle vit'.⁵²² Her life experiences feed in and through her texts. Although Despentès differs from the other two writers studied in this thesis in that her texts are not overtly or self-professedly autobiographical or autofictional, many critics have nevertheless identified therein a sense of authorial slippage. Jordan pinpoints in Despentès' work a 'complex entanglement between [...] real and fictitious dimensions'.⁵²³ In her analysis of *Baise-moi*, she notes how this entanglement is reflected in the author's language: 'vibrantly *argotique* [...] it is an image-laden oral style and the fact that it is used by protagonists and extra-diegetic narrator alike suggests a *seamless bond between text and author*'⁵²⁴ (my emphasis). Similarly, in a recent interview with Despentès, Nina Herzog observed that 'Despentès's style is rooted in [...] truths'.⁵²⁵ These are truths, Despentès herself acknowledges, that are not universal. Once more demonstrating her awareness of the complex intersectional web that makes up identity formation, Despentès notes the limitations of her fiction and the extent of her privilege:

⁵¹⁸ Hegemann, Helene, 'Virginie Despentès: Hates People, Loves Dogs', *032c* (2020) <<https://032c.com/magazine/virginie-despentès-hates>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁵¹⁹ Schaal, Michèle, 'Une nécessaire rébellion féministe : de la violence au féminin chez Virginie Despentès' in *Rebelles et criminelles chez les écrivaines d'expression française*, ed. Chevillot, Frédérique and Trout Hall, Colette (Leiden: Rodopi, 2013), p276

⁵²⁰ Armbrecht, Tom, 'Comment y faire face: La parole faite chair de Virginie Despentès', *Mosaic*, 50:2 (2017), pp83-96, p89

⁵²¹ Jordan (2002) has explored questions of taste in relation to the feminist potentiality of Despentès' *Baise-moi*.

⁵²² Gilles, *op. cit.*

⁵²³ Jordan, *op. cit.*, p126

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, p117

⁵²⁵ Herzog, Nina, 'Community as Protagonist: Talking with Virginie Despentès', *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2021) <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/community-as-protagonist-talking-with-virginie-despentès/>> [last accessed June 2022]

j'ai conscience d'avoir écrit un livre de "petite blanche". J'aurais aimé faire quelque chose de plus universel, mais je me suis rendu compte que pour bâtir une pensée, le mieux était de commencer par *parler de soi*⁵²⁶ (my emphasis)

She continues to write from and about the self and demonstrates a 'personal affiliation with her marginal and lawless protagonists'.⁵²⁷ We might think, in particular, of the creeping similarities between the construction of the character of Nadine in *Baise-moi* and the autobiographical presentation of self that is given in *King Kong Théorie*. Although the creation of Nadine predates the publication of *King Kong Théorie*, her character nonetheless echoes – sometimes almost directly – the views expressed in this autotheoretical text on, for example, prostitution. For Nadine, 'ça lui va bien ce métier. Surtout quand le moment vient de claquer la thune [...] croiser des femmes qui choisissent leurs amants, celles qu'on baise gratuitement'.⁵²⁸ Despentès expresses similar feelings in her autotheoretical text: 'je regardais les femmes plus vieilles que moi, toute une vie à bosser comme ça [...] Mois après mois, je comprenais dans le détail ce que ça voulait dire, une vie d'honnête travailleuse'.⁵²⁹ Both Despentès' and Nadine's narrative voices express a kindly contempt for their clients and push back against the normalised narrative of pity and distaste constructed around and about those in the sex industry. They share physical similarities too: both are well-built, somewhat imposing women and both don 'uniforms' to do their work.⁵³⁰ Furthermore, as becomes evident reading the two texts side by side, there are many similarities between the gang rape suffered by Manu and Karla in *Baise-moi* and Despentès' testimony of her own traumatic experience of gang rape in *King Kong Théorie*. Indeed, Despentès has drawn on this experience repeatedly throughout her career and sexual violence is a theme that resurfaces in many of her texts. Once again, Despentès' incorporation of this particularly traumatic event can be traced back beyond her writerly pursuits. Listening to Straight Royeur's cathartically noisy, *Les Loutes*, we hear rallying cries of 'toute sa haine entre tes jambes, son mépris cogne contre ton ventre'. This particularly angry rap-relay also features a parroting of the kind of victim-blaming abuse that is often cruelly thrown at survivors:

On parle de toi d'un air gêné : « Comment t'étais habillée ?
T'es sûre d'avoir assez crié ? Il faudrait rien exagérer

⁵²⁶ Costa, *op. cit.*

⁵²⁷ Louar, Nadia, "'Deux cents mots et un gros marteau.'" Virginie Despentès's Skillful Construction of an Authorial Posture', *Rocky Mountain Review*, 72:1, *Special Issue on Virginie Despentès* (2018), pp125-145, p129

⁵²⁸ Despentès, Virginie, *Baise-moi* (Paris: Grasset, 1999), p72

⁵²⁹ Despentès, *King Kong Théorie*, p61

⁵³⁰ See Despentès, *Baise-moi*, pp53-54 and Despentès, *King Kong Théorie*, p64

T'as pas l'air trop traumatisée
Dramatise pas tu marches encore.
Où sont les marques de violence ?
Où sont les marques de violence ? »⁵³¹

We might thus consider how, in a way almost reminiscent of Ernaux and Angot and other more overtly autobiographical or autofictional writers, Despentès also enacts a kind of textual revisiting and reinterpreting of trauma. There is a persistent awareness of trauma across all three authors and, as this thesis shows, in each case it is 'les marques de violence' (gender- and class-based) that shape their writing.

Threads of the self and of Despentès' own lived experience date back to this earliest artistic output, and are perceptible even in her most recent works. In the polyvocal *Vernon Subutex*, this mode of autobiographical/fictional convergence remains. When interviewing the writer about this work, Natalie Crom addressed this incorporation of self,⁵³² asking whether this trilogy might be said to be as equally infused with self as *King Kong Théorie*. Despentès replied: 'c'est plus fragmenté, mais oui, quand on a fini *Vernon Subutex*, on voit bien qui je suis, même si ce n'est absolument pas un autoportrait'.⁵³³ This idea of a fragmented infusion of self rings particularly true for the character of Olga, a quick-witted, boisterous and outspoken woman experiencing homelessness that Vernon befriends towards the end of the first volume. Asked about the construction of this chameleon narrative – and about Olga in particular – in a recent interview with Nina Herzog, Despentès 'smiled. "Olga is really the closest to me," she said. "She has my rough energy. Very direct"'.⁵³⁴ Scenes that feature the characters of Olga and Nadine form an integral part of my analytical explorations in this chapter. Given their particularly apparent autobiographical dimension and their transgressive and fascinating exemplification of issues concerning femininity and class, these two figures provide rich material for considering Despentès' expression of classed identity and conflict.

It follows from the authorial/fictional slippage in Despentès' texts, and from her use of very 'real', oral and informal language, that her work demonstrates a sociological quality and conveys a sense of realism. Journalists and critics alike recognise 'la dimension sociologique

⁵³¹ Despentès and Zina, *op. cit.*

⁵³² It is interesting to note that critics seek to make connections between Despentès and her protagonists and perhaps important to question whether this would be true of a middle-class author writing bourgeois protagonists.

⁵³³ Crom, Natalie, 'Virginie Despentès : "La société est devenue plus prude, l'atmosphère plus réactionnaire"', *Télérama* (2015) <<https://www.telerama.fr/livre/virginie-despentès,121233.php>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁵³⁴ Herzog, *op. cit.*

de ses écrits'.⁵³⁵ Despentès merges the literary and the social in her textual exposition of marginalised, precarious groups, and 's'inscrit dans la discussion contemporaine, littéraire et sociologique, de la précarisation de la société française'.⁵³⁶ As previously established, all three of the writers I examine in this thesis interface in varying ways with sociology. All three forge their classed texts and explore form along hybrid lines between realism and fiction. However, as Jordan suggests:

Despentès' kind of real, the staple material of her work [...] is extraordinarily raw. It can be ethnographically detailed and exact, evoking the texture of life on the streets or in the strip joint⁵³⁷

Further still, Jordan highlights 'the documentary precision with which Despentès evokes the texture of France's urban and suburban underworlds and margins'.⁵³⁸ We might recall here Ernaux's professed pursuit of a kind of autoethnography. Despentès employs 'une démarche [...] empirique',⁵³⁹ grounding her work in both her own lived experience and those of others. Notably, for the writing of *Vernon Subutex*, 'elle a parlé avec quelques SDF vivant dans son quartier, pour obtenir des renseignements sur leurs habitudes, les lieux qu'ils fréquentent et leurs conditions de vie'.⁵⁴⁰ Despentès' work has not only been described as sociological but also aligned with realism and naturalism. Debarati Sanyal writes eloquently of 'Despentès' unbeautiful brand of hypernaturalism [that] rejects the hypocrisy of aesthetic conventions that soar above or sterilize the messiness of the real'.⁵⁴¹ The writer has even been repeatedly likened to a Balzac or Zola of the twenty-first century.⁵⁴² Indeed, we might here be reminded of the espousal of naturalist techniques that Angot outlines in her essay, *Acte biographique*.⁵⁴³ To reprise a quotation used earlier, Angot here asserts that 'l'écrivain est un scientifique dont le microscope est sa propre sensibilité, son propre système de perception'.⁵⁴⁴

Despite this close and interactive relationship of Despentès' fictional writing with the real and with lived experience, there nevertheless remains an intense performative quality to

⁵³⁵ Sabatier, *op. cit.*

⁵³⁶ Schaal, *Une nécessaire rébellion féministe*, p267

⁵³⁷ Jordan, *op. cit.*, p113

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, p126

⁵³⁹ Bricco, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴⁰ Bricco, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴¹ Sanyal, Debarati, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), p167

⁵⁴² See, for example, Goergen, Maxime, 'Vernon Subutex et le roman « balzacien »', *Rocky Mountain Review*, 72:1, *Special Issue on Virginie Despentès* (2018), pp165-182 and Herzog, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴³ Angot, Christine, 'Acte biographique' in *Je & moi*, ed. P. Forest, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, 598 (Paris: Gallimard, 2011). (See p94 of this thesis).

⁵⁴⁴ Angot, *Acte biographique*, p35

her texts and the author maintains a clear writing persona. Discussing her craft in *King Kong Théorie*, she speaks of having ‘devenue Virginie Despentés’, a process undergone after an intermittent period of sex work (‘j’ai arrêté-repris comme ça quelque temps, puis je suis devenue Virginie Despentés’⁵⁴⁵). It is a process, furthermore, that she describes in somewhat dissociated terms, as a business to conduct or a role to play: ‘être Virginie Despentés me semble être une affaire plus intéressante à mener que n’importe quelle autre affaire’.⁵⁴⁶ Questions of performance pertain not only to this mediated, authorial construct but also to her texts themselves. Jordan explores, for instance, the cinematic qualities of her writing, particularly in the case of *Baise-moi*.⁵⁴⁷ Despentés herself has used language pertaining to performance and musicality to describe her writing methods (‘j’ai fait un premier roman un peu comme les Ramones avaient fait un premier album’,⁵⁴⁸ ‘a “live” recording followed by extensive studio re-working’⁵⁴⁹). This element of performance, as well as Despentés’ tendency towards fiction, creates a more clear-cut sense of writerly distance than that seen in the texts of Ernaux and Angot. This element of distance perhaps allows for an abating of any shame that might be felt in writing about difficult and taboo topics such as sex work, female violence and non-heteronormative gender and sexuality. Interestingly, this sense of freedom from the shackles of shame is something that Despentés also explicitly links back to her punk lineage. In *King Kong Théorie*, she writes: ‘si je ne venais pas du punk-rock, j’aurais honte de ce que je suis’.⁵⁵⁰ Her writerly style, her politics, and her class and gender identity are all bolstered and foundationally informed by punk. While the writings of Despentés, Ernaux and Angot evince varying degrees of shame, and while they greatly differ in terms of how life experience is applied, explored and engaged with, an oscillating tension between performance and autobiography nonetheless features across all three.

3.2 ‘King Kong Girl’⁵⁵¹ and Her Rebellious Femininity

I turn now to explore how, in the case of Despentés, this sense of ‘oscillating tension’ extends to various presentations and textual performances of femininity. Here, I draw from the research of sociologist Beverley Skeggs in order to further probe the inextricable relationship between femininity and class. I present the reasonings that informed my decision to analyse Despentés’ hyperbolic female protagonists, and I highlight the exaggerated class

⁵⁴⁵ Despentés, *King Kong Théorie*, p75

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., p9

⁵⁴⁷ Jordan, *op. cit.*, pp113-150

⁵⁴⁸ Crom, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴⁹ Nettelbeck, *op. cit.*, pp185-186

⁵⁵⁰ Despentés, *King Kong Théorie*, p131

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., pp112-113

performances that they stage. Through these carefully constructed protagonists who perform class identity, the writer sets up a powerful framework that draws her readers into considerations of gender, class and judgement.

Given the previously identified sociological thrust to Desportes' texts, it makes sense that the work of Skeggs (who engages closely with and applies Pierre Bourdieu's ideas in a feminist context) provides an enlightening lens through which to examine her writing of class. Skeggs investigates the intersections of class, gender politics and identity formation and, as her research shows, 'being, becoming, practising, and doing femininity are very different things for women of different classes, "races," ages, and nations'.⁵⁵² Skeggs explains

how the emergence of femininity as an ideal was produced [...] in the 18th century and [...] had an affinity with the habitus of the upper classes: of ease, restraint, calm, and luxurious decoration. It was a category of pure, white, heterosexuality, later translated into the ideal for middleclass women⁵⁵³

Gender categories were gatekept at the same time as they were generated along class lines. As such:

working-class women were not expected to inhabit femininity in the same way as middle and upper-class white women. Femininity was always something that did not designate them precisely: a sign under which they could not and did not belong⁵⁵⁴

This is something with which we might imagine Desportes, a proud 'prolotte de la féminité',⁵⁵⁵ would heavily identify. Skeggs sees the (maintenance of the) appearance of femininity as 'an investment [...] one of the forms of cultural capital to which working-class women [...] have access'⁵⁵⁶ and thus 'central to [...] attempts to secure economic and symbolic capital'.⁵⁵⁷ Within the heteropatriarchal matrix, however, Skeggs sees femininity as being able 'to operate as a very limited form of cultural capital'.⁵⁵⁸ Indeed, 'gender can be a form of cultural capital but only if it is symbolically legitimated [...] via class, as a particular version of

⁵⁵² Skeggs, Beverley, 'The Toilet Paper: Femininity, Class and Mis-recognition', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24:3/4 (2001), pp295-307, p297

⁵⁵³ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁵⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁵⁵ Desportes, *King Kong Théorie*, p10

⁵⁵⁶ Skeggs, *The Toilet Paper*, p298

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p302

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p305

middle-class moral femininity'.⁵⁵⁹ Skeggs examines 'the underpinnings of class, from which readings of the feminine cannot be divorced'.⁵⁶⁰ She recognises that 'the process of becoming and reading the feminine is a class process'⁵⁶¹ and it is clear that, like Despentès, she sees 'la condition féminine' as 'liée à la classe'.⁵⁶² Skeggs' intersectional understanding of working-class womanhood aligns with Jordan's recognition of 'the position of women like [*Baise-moi*'s] Manu as a doubly powerless under-underclass'.⁵⁶³ This inextricable reading of class through femininity is central to an understanding of Despentès' texts and characters.

Once more in a similar vein to Despentès, Skeggs' sociological writings maintain a focus on ideas of taste and excess. Working-class women are, according to Skeggs, 'read through devalued class signifiers of excess (big hair, short skirts, lots of make-up)'.⁵⁶⁴ In this way, 'class positioning is read as [...] a matter of taste'.⁵⁶⁵ Such an understanding of taste-based exclusion and separation is clearly informed by Bourdieu's ideas around distinction.⁵⁶⁶ Skeggs acknowledges the profound influence of an individual's habitus on manifestations and readings of class and gender appearance:

a refusal to play the game or the lack of knowledge to participate in middle-class taste culture is read back onto the working-class as an individualized moral fault, a pathology, a problem of bad-choice, bad culture, a failure to be enterprising or to be reflexive [...] instead of seeing this attribution of immorality to the working-class as part of a class struggle made from the relationship between people and objects, it is instead seen to be a property of the person, of the self⁵⁶⁷

Despentès, too, recognises the performative and socially-informed nature of classed femininity. In *King Kong Théorie*, she echoes Skeggs' language of 'playing the game' when she writes of her sex work that 'il suffisait de jouer le jeu. De la féminité'.⁵⁶⁸ Once again her very earliest, unexplored artistic output – Straight Royeur's *Fear of a Female Planet* – evinces an already established awareness of femininity's socially-constructed quality. In the album's

⁵⁵⁹ Skeggs, Beverley, 'Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of class, gender and sexuality' in *Feminism After Bourdieu*, ed. Adkins, Lisa and Skeggs, Beverley (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p24

⁵⁶⁰ Skeggs, *The Toilet Paper*, p305

⁵⁶¹ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁶² Costa, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶³ Jordan, *op. cit.*, p118

⁵⁶⁴ Skeggs, *The Toilet Paper*, p302

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p303

⁵⁶⁶ Bourdieu, Pierre, *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2016)

⁵⁶⁷ Skeggs, Beverley, 'Exchange, value and affect: Bourdieu and 'the self'' in *Feminism After Bourdieu*, ed. Adkins, Lisa and Skeggs, Beverley (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p91

⁵⁶⁸ Despentès, *King Kong Théorie*, p64

opening track, *We're At War*, the young singer spits out: ' ton identité reste profondément marquée par des tonnes d'idées *inculquées* avant même que tu ne saches parler !'⁵⁶⁹ (my emphasis). Close attention to Despentès' language in *King Kong Théorie* reveals the consistency of this awareness: women are '*construites* pour le bien-être d'autrui [...] *formatées* pour éviter le contact avec nos propres sauvageries'⁵⁷⁰ (my emphasis).

It is appropriate to ask at this point what characterises Despentès' construction and presentation of female characters. Ever-nestled in the 'sleazy French underworld, with its background of bars, drugs, violence, and prostitution',⁵⁷¹ Despentian women stage a brutal and unrelenting exposition of feminine, working-class experience that 'place au centre de l'action la sexualité agressive des femmes'.⁵⁷² Her characters engage angrily in the pursuit and exhibition of 'female sexual pleasure and gratuitous violence'⁵⁷³ and are firmly housed in grit and realism. They have casual sex and masturbate publicly, they kill and maim, they vomit and overeat, they drink too much and smoke too much, they scream and laugh hysterically and manically. They are, as Jordan writes, 'characterised by excess' and 'physically and socially uncontainable'.⁵⁷⁴ Similarly, Nicole Fayard recognises that, in a rebellious, transgressive rejection of 'feminine' indoctrination, 'the female body in Despentès is ruled by excess and defies traditional representations'.⁵⁷⁵ As Virginie Sauzon outlines in her article, 'Virginie Despentès et les récits de la violence', Despentès' women characters 'ne répondent décidément pas à la douceur d'une féminité passivement intériorisée dans un système hétéronormatif'.⁵⁷⁶ Where Natalie Edwards has examined 'performances of femininity'⁵⁷⁷ in Despentès' texts in relation to mobility, in this chapter I mine them for what they can reveal in class terms. My analysis explores the ways in which her texts might not only 'release women's bodies from existing representations'⁵⁷⁸ but also stage a subversive performance of class. I call for consideration of her presentation of femininity not as a pre-given, pre-determining, and static 'state' but as a 'force politique potentielle'.⁵⁷⁹ Schaal associates the exaggerated and transgressive performances of femininity in Despentès with the writer's punk politics, incorporating Butler's ideas on performativity: 'la politique des punkettes fait [...] écho à la

⁵⁶⁹ Despentès and Zina, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷⁰ Despentès, *King Kong Théorie*, p105

⁵⁷¹ Fayard, *op. cit.*, p65

⁵⁷² Louar, Nadia, 'Version femmes plurielles : relire *Baise-moi* de Virginie Despentès', *Palimpsestes*, 22 (2009), pp83-98 <<https://journals.openedition.org/palimpsestes/191?lang=fr#quotation>> [last accessed June 2022], p83

⁵⁷³ Fayard, *op. cit.*, p63

⁵⁷⁴ Jordan, *op. cit.*, p132

⁵⁷⁵ Fayard, *op. cit.*, p73

⁵⁷⁶ Sauzon, Virginie, 'Virginie Despentès et les récits de la violence sexuelle : une déconstruction littéraire et féministe des rhétoriques de la racialisation', *Genre, sexualité et société*, 7 (2012) <<https://journals.openedition.org/gss/2328>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁵⁷⁷ Edwards, Natalie, 'Mobile Women in Virginie Despentès's *Apocalypse Bébé*', *Australian journal of French studies*, 55, 1 (2018) pp6-16, p10

⁵⁷⁸ Fayard, *op. cit.*, p77

⁵⁷⁹ Sauzon, *La déviance en réseau*

performance butlérienne car [...] déconstruire la féminité prescriptive passe notamment par le port outrageux de vêtement sexualisés et un maquillage hyperbolique'.⁵⁸⁰ Maxime Goergen, too, suggests that: 'les corps, chez Despentès, sont le lieu possible de l'affirmation assumée d'un excès, d'une différence inassimilable aux discours essentialistes, excès qui défie de manière radicale les équilibres symboliques en marge desquels il s'exprime'.⁵⁸¹ It is thus undeniable that readings of Despentès' female characters, with all their feminine, bodily, often violent excess, cannot be divorced from considerations of class and attention to performance.

In line with her rebellious feminine figures, Despentès adopts a rebellious feminist stance. She expresses resistance in the face of a certain dominant, sanitised and exclusionary type of feminism: one, specifically, that is (white and) bourgeois. In *King Kong Théorie*, in a revealing chapter entitled *Coucher avec l'ennemi*, Despentès explores her own history in the sex industry and delineates how and why such work rubs so distastefully against the grain of bourgeois expectations of feminist women.⁵⁸² 'Les prostituées', she writes, 'forment l'unique prolétariat dont la condition émeut autant la bourgeoisie'.⁵⁸³ In this section, she elucidates bourgeois anxieties around the family unit so important (as we learned from our exploration of Le Wita's ethnography in chapter 2 of this thesis) to their cultural formation: 'la pute, c'est « l'asphalteuse », celle qui s'approprié la ville. Elle travaille hors le domestique et la maternité, hors la cellule familiale'.⁵⁸⁴ Indeed, 'il faut tenir la prostitution dans la honte et l'obscurité, pour protéger autant que possible la cellule familiale classique'.⁵⁸⁵ Ever-resistant to this imposed shame and obscurity, Despentès is understood as a writer who,

jugeant le féminisme traditionnel trop élitiste, bourgeois, voire réactionnaire quant à la sexualité [...] [met] l'accent [...] sur la notion d'intersectionnalité des discriminations et [revendique] la reconnaissance de la pluralité de l'expérience des femmes. Despentès insiste spécialement sur sa provenance d'un milieu ouvrier et positionne son féminisme en tant que réponse à la lutte des classes contemporaines⁵⁸⁶

This resistance to dominant, middle-class understandings of feminism partly explains why her texts have sometimes sat uncomfortably in academic circles⁵⁸⁷ and certainly why unravelling

⁵⁸⁰ Schaal, Michèle, 'Un conte de fées punk-rock féministe : 'Bye Bye Blondie' de Virginie Despentès', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 99 (2012), pp49-61, pp55-56

⁵⁸¹ Goergen, *op. cit.*, p173

⁵⁸² Something which makes the character of Nadine (a sex worker), and the scandal she causes inside and outside the text, all the more pertinent to this study.

⁵⁸³ Despentès, *King Kong Théorie*, p57

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p78

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p84

⁵⁸⁶ Schaal, *Une nécessaire rébellion féministe*, p276

⁵⁸⁷ Some critics have, for example, puzzled over the feminist validity of *Baise-moi's* somewhat unsatisfying ending.

the threads of class and gender in Desportes is such an important endeavour. Desportes herself has admitted that ‘le discours de certaines féministes libérales ou old school me fatigue ou me donne envie de hurler’.⁵⁸⁸ Asked in a 2007 interview whether she identifies with a particular feminist movement, she replies: ‘non. Je suis un électron libre, une espèce d’anarcho-féministe [...] j’ai toujours une lecture un peu marxiste de la réalité, plus intuitive que théorique’⁵⁸⁹ (my emphasis). In a more recent interview in 2020, Desportes maintains this wariness and resentment of dominant culture. Here the writer outlines how, when writing her texts, she strategically and deliberately avoids speaking to an assumed bourgeois reader. When asked whether she ever *tries* to be provocative, she brilliantly responds:

describing something as provocative is generally a bourgeois assumption. Because the bourgeoisie – in the western world at least – is convinced that it is a universal receptor. That the world is built around its views, its culture, its language. It is sincerely difficult for the bourgeoisie to imagine a cultural medium that does not address it directly. So the answer is no, I never go into something just to be provocative [...] What I do want to provoke – what I myself search for when I read or listen to artists – is a feeling of: “You are not alone. You are not crazy.”⁵⁹⁰

The following analysis emphasises how it is in her characters’ hyperbolic and transgressive performances of femininity that Desportes’ class critique can be seen most clearly. Never is this clearer than in instances of character interaction where *distinction* separates and accentuates taste and distaste. Firstly, my analysis of *Baise-moi* focuses on a generally overlooked character: Nadine’s ill-fated roommate Séverine. I demonstrate how her presentation early in the text as a silenced bourgeois regulator foregrounds ideas around class carried through the novel. I then proceed to unpack a later scene in which the chaotic protagonists, Nadine and Manu, pay an unwelcome visit to a high-class tea shop. Through examination of these scenes, the encounters that they stage and the problematisations and presentations of femininity therein, my analysis demonstrates the ways in which, throughout *Baise-moi*, class-based dynamics of space, abjection, excess and propriety are all carefully orchestrated in an immersive textual performance that may heighten readerly awareness of the question of class.

⁵⁸⁸ Arbizu and Belin, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸⁹ Costa, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹⁰ Hegemann, *op. cit.*

The section on *Vernon Subutex* centres on the trilogy's first volume, where Despentès' expansive cast of characters and their respective statuses are established and encounters between them first mapped out. Once more using Skeggs' and Despentès' own gender- and class-based ideas as framework, my analysis of this text hinges on encounters with two female characters. The first is Émilie, whom Vernon approaches for shelter after being evicted and the very first character he interacts with. An old friend who has traded her former rock-and-roll lifestyle for one that is conventionally bourgeois, Émilie, her space, and her interactions with Vernon all evince a stifling awareness of class and taste. Thereafter, in stark contrast, my analysis shifts focus to encounters with the figure of Olga, a character that Vernon befriends on the streets. Olga's buoyant excess and unashamed indecorum make of her another figure with whom confrontations highlight, and suspend the reader in, class dynamics and judgements. Through examining moments that emphasise class tension and difference and unpacking the hyperbolic performances of different modes of femininity that they stage, in the following sections I analyse the presentation of gender and class across Despentès' oeuvre and investigate the making of her immersive and foundationally class-conscious texts.

3.3 'Éléphante dégénérée dans une maison de poupée'⁵⁹¹: Class Encounters in *Baise-moi*

Although a seemingly peripheral character, the figure of Séverine is particularly pivotal⁵⁹² in understanding the intersecting mesh of gender and class in *Baise-moi*. The confrontations between Nadine and Séverine early in the narrative set the stage for the class performance played out throughout the text. Nadia Louar offers a pertinent evaluation of Séverine's character. She writes:

Séverine [...] envisage son corps comme un bien paraphernal qu'elle ne donne pas au premier venu et faisant l'objet d'une transaction bien spécifique qui pourrait se décrire ainsi : « je te donne le corps que tu veux prendre, tu me donnes le statut que je veux avoir ». À travers Séverine, se dessine brièvement l'image de la Femme avec un grand F, la femme idéale et singulière, captive des rets d'un discours androgénique⁵⁹³

It is interesting to note that Louar's language here touches on classed notions of goods, exchange and status. Although her analysis brings focus to the gendered issues at play in Séverine's presentation, it neglects to fully unpack the discourse of social class within which

⁵⁹¹ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, p179

⁵⁹² Jordan (*op. cit.*, p123) also understands the introduction and killing of Séverine as particularly pivotal, describing it as a 'threshold event' that creates in the text a slippage between realism and fantasy.

⁵⁹³ Louar, *Version femmes plurielles*

her character is also ensnared. The following exploration therefore exposes Séverine as a revealing manifestation of the text's performance of class.

Readers encounter Nadine's haughty and much-resented *coloc* twice in the narrative: first in the form of an introduction and once more only to be murdered at the hands of Nadine and written out of the story. In the first of these scenes, Séverine's voice precedes her, incensed and intrusive: she arrives home and 'hurle avant même de quitter sa veste'.⁵⁹⁴ Her unwelcome entrance heralds – and is heralded by – chastisement. Séverine has interrupted Nadine as she is watching porn, and the very first utterances of their dialogue seat this exchange firmly in the realm of (dis)taste and value judgement: 'encore en train de regarder tes saloperies [...] t'arrives pile au bon moment, le début t'aurait déroutée [...] éteins ça tout de suite, tu sais très bien que ça me dégoûte' (p11). Séverine's reprimanding intrusion/introduction, and the subsequent unfolding of the scene, situate her as bourgeois regulator. Porn is, of course, consumed and used by people from all social classes, but it is Nadine's overt and shameless enjoyment of it that disrupts the sensibilities of her flatmate. The latter's reaction immediately aligns her with a relative prudishness and reads like a harbinger of the outrage and indignance that *Baise-moi* itself – along with many of Despentés' later novels and films, with all of their espousal of the pornographic – would go on to incite. Séverine is a demanding, censorial presence ('éteins ça tout de suite [...] éteins cette télé. Tout de suite' (p11)) but this is not the only way in which she is 'classifying'. It is clear in this episode that Séverine sees the social world in black and white terms:

ce que je ne comprends pas, c'est que ce n'est pas le genre de mec à sauter sur n'importe quelle fille (p14)

elle répète avec véhémence « qu'elle n'est pas une fille comme ça ». Pour Séverine, le générique « fille comme ça » résume correctement ce qui se fait de pire dans le genre humain (p13)

With these flippant categorisations Séverine reveals her scathing judgements. These moments demonstrate that for her – as, indeed, for many – people (particularly women) are divided into firm but ultimately arbitrary groupings of 'good' and 'bad'. The fact that these

⁵⁹⁴ Despentés, *Baise-moi*, p10. All subsequent references to this text, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis through to the end of this section on p155.

generalising categories encapsulate 'correctement' signals Séverine's arrogant (and bourgeois) self-assurance. The word 'correctement' itself arguably carries classed connotations: it alludes to what is 'proper' and 'decent' as if that were a baseline shared across class divides, rather than part of a wider regulatory framework designed to exclude.

Séverine's stiff manner contrasts sharply with Nadine's much more relaxed physicality. At Nadine's teasing suggestion that her housemate might move through to the kitchen to let her masturbate in peace, 'l'autre s'immobilise [...] décontenancée' (p12). Nadine remains unconcerned, 'la regarde de côté, résignée' (p13), 's'étire' (p15). Séverine's voice is shrill and strained, and everything about her description speaks of careful yet fiercely maintained restraint. She 'évite *scrupuleusement* de regarder l'écran' (p12) (my emphasis), walks over to the bathroom mirror where she 'se traque le corps avec une *vigilance* guerrière, déterminée à se contraindre le poil et la viande aux normes saisonnières' (p12) (my emphasis). In one of her many sociological investigations into the intersections of class and gender, Skeggs reflects that 'putting make-up on in public in front of a mirror is a statement of investment in gender norms',⁵⁹⁵ and the evocation of the mirror in the narrative here – though not public – signals something similar, serving as a 'reminder of the value of feminine appearance'.⁵⁹⁶ Skeggs and Despentès recognise that only certain types of feminine appearance carry value. These are, according to Skeggs, displays of 'restraint [...] and luxurious decoration', aligned with 'pure, white, heterosexuality', presentations of the feminine that evince 'an affinity with the habitus of the upper classes'⁵⁹⁷ and 'a particular version of middle-class moral femininity'.⁵⁹⁸ When Despentès introduces the character of Séverine, she undoubtedly has this kind of classed distinction in mind. Séverine is outraged that a man she recently slept with has not called her back, and Nadine observes: 'à croire qu'elle a le con trop raffiné pour qu'on lui fasse du bien avec une queue' (p13). However, the description of Séverine's self-scrutinised body in objectifying, clinical terms ('le poil et la viande') chimes with the depiction of the pornography mere pages before (for example, when one of the actors 'écarte soigneusement les deux globes blancs de son gros cul' (p10)). This echo may suggest that, despite what Séverine might choose to believe, in essence her body does not differ from those of the porn performers who so disgust her. The hypocrisy of Séverine's judgement is underlined in another subtle linguistic parallel in this scene. Both Séverine and the adult film actor are painted as taking care in their work, in their cultivation and presentation of certain types of femininity: the

⁵⁹⁵ Skeggs, *The Toilet Paper*, p304

⁵⁹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p297

⁵⁹⁸ Skeggs, *Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of class, gender and sexuality*, p24

former 'soigne sa conversation' (p14) just as the performer 'écarte soigneusement [...] son gros cul'. Subverting the classifying, bourgeois standards of feminine respectability, Nadine hails the porn actor as a 'tour de force' (p10) but expresses nothing but contempt for Séverine. Her efforts to maintain a polished, proper façade are exposed for their emptiness and painted pathetically. Although both the porn actor and Séverine are performing, the façades they each put on are vastly different and are received very differently in society. In a way reminiscent of ideas explored in Desportes' *King Kong Théorie*, this scene highlights how the actor is financially profiting from her dialled-up femininity whilst Séverine is trapped in hers under the false pretence that she is somehow superior. One particularly cutting passage of this scene underlines the fallacy of her apparent 'superiority':

Elle aborde volontiers le thème de sa « forte personnalité ». Tout comme elle évoque facilement sa vive intelligence ou l'étendue de sa culture [...] elle soigne sa conversation. Elle l'émaille de bizarreries dûment accréditées par le milieu qu'elle fréquente. Elle se compose également une série de références culturelles qu'elle choisit comme ses accessoires vestimentaires : selon l'air du temps, avec un talent certain pour ressembler à sa voisine. Elle s'entretient donc la personnalité comme elle entretient l'épilation du maillot [...] Le but ultime étant de devenir la femme de quelqu'un et [...] elle envisage de devenir la femme de quelqu'un de bien (pp14-15)

Desportes here evokes ideas around social and cultural capital. Séverine's investment in 'intelligence' and assurance of the extent of her cultural prowess are immediately made evident. She can do and do away with cultural references, inherited by dint of the circles she frequents, as readily as she would fashion accessories. Presented through the eyes of Nadine, her behaviour is strange ('bizarreries'), empty and shallow (her cultural references and style choices change 'selon l'air du temps'). It is also incredibly dull and predictable, as suggested by the nod to her 'talent certain pour ressembler à sa voisine'. A sense of empty falsity is also stressed in this passage via, once again, an insistence on the very consciously constructed nature of the way Séverine presents herself. Close attention to the verbs Desportes chooses here reveals this : 'elle soigne', 'elle l'émaille', 'elle se compose', 'elle s'entretient'. In this introductory interaction between Nadine and Séverine, their characterisations pit different ways of performing femininity against each other.

The scathing appraisal of Séverine is, indeed, highly gendered. With its allusions to her fashion accessories, bikini line and hunt for a husband (specifically ‘quelqu’un de bien’), the vision of femininity evoked is stereotypical and clichéd. This passage may strike some readers as (overly) cruel, but it is a very certain type of pursuit of femininity that Despentès – through Nadine – is ridiculing here, and one that is undoubtedly shot through with class consciousness. One notable protestation of cruelty can be found in a 2018 article on Despentès by Lauren Elkin. Elkin acknowledges her discomfort upon reading this particular passage of *Baise-moi* and notes that it stemmed from her feeling ‘seen’. She confesses of Séverine’s presentation: ‘this is more or less the girl I was encouraged to be by the middle-class suburban milieu that produced me [...] I felt too much empathy for this girl to mock her’.⁵⁹⁹ Revealingly, Elkin notes, too, the feeling of authorial slippage conveyed in the presentation of Nadine, writing: ‘if there was a distinction to be made between Nadine’s attitude toward Séverine and Despentès’s own, it seemed negligible’.⁶⁰⁰ Whether we as readers identify more with one character or the other, their contrastive and hyperbolic portrayals provide mechanisms against which we might register our own difference and through which we are undeniably compelled to consider class. The character of Séverine possesses – or at the very least demonstrates concerted investment in – certain forms of feminine capital, forms that, as Skeggs (1997, 2001, 2005) has well explored, are inherently aligned with the middle- and upper-classes. The category of femininity has been:

developed historically in opposition to Black and working-class women, carrying with it qualities of docility and fragility, dispositions not associated with the working-class who were defined as robust, masculine, dangerous and contagious⁶⁰¹

To reiterate a quotation cited earlier, ‘being, becoming, practising, and doing femininity are very different things for women of different classes’.⁶⁰² Through this controversially sardonic evaluation, Despentès thus expresses a sharp class critique. Although the housemates each pathologise the other’s position (‘t’es vraiment malade’ (p12), Séverine tells Nadine regarding the porn she so voraciously enjoys, while ‘de l’avis de Nadine, c’est d’une véritable thérapie qu’elle la fait profiter’ (p11)), the narrative indisputably sides with Nadine. That said, the exchange is not without pity. We eventually learn of Séverine’s precarity too. She is engaged in

⁵⁹⁹ Elkin, Lauren, ‘For the Ugly Ones: The Spiky Feminist Anger of Virginie Despentès’, *The Paris Review* (2018) <<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/09/05/for-the-ugly-ones-the-spiky-feminist-anger-of-virginie-despentès/>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁰¹ Skeggs, *Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of class, gender and sexuality*, p24

⁶⁰² Skeggs, *The Toilet Paper*, p297

temporary work contracts (p75) and ‘ni l’une ni l’autre n’ont les moyens d’habiter seule’ (p15) but nevertheless Séverine is presented (in a similar manner to, as I will explore later in this chapter, *Vernon Subutex’s* Émilie) as desperately trying to embody ‘la femme idéale’,⁶⁰³ specifically, as Skeggs would add, ‘the ideal for middle-class women’.⁶⁰⁴ Over a decade later in her *King Kong Théorie*, Despentès maintains her belief in the worthlessness of such a pursuit: in any real sense the ‘ideal woman’, she confirms, ‘n’existe pas’.⁶⁰⁵ The ambivalence in the presentation of Séverine’s character perhaps reflects the pushes and pulls imposed on women, the fluctuating undercurrents at the intersections of class and gender dynamics. Although presented as dull, uptight and haughty, Despentès creates room for Séverine to be pitied. She is painted as delusional (‘elle évoque facilement sa vive intelligence ou l’étendue de sa culture. Énigme du système mental, Dieu seul sait comment elle s’est mis ça en tête’ (p14)) and neurotic, obsessing over the men she pursues (‘Séverine pose la même question tous les jours [...] tous les jours’ (p13)). The reader’s overriding impression, however, perhaps remains one of acerbic ridicule, a ridicule rooted in class consciousness and aimed at the middle- and upper-classes. As Nadine neatly, ruthlessly summarises of her housemate: ‘elle est conne, sidérante de prétention, sordide d’égoïsme et d’une écœurante banalité dans le moindre de ses propos’ (p13). The positioning of this scene at the very beginning of the novel opens the class performance and sets the tone for class contempt that Despentès maintains in this text and beyond. Indeed, these angered evocations of pretension, egotism and stupidity even echo Despentès’ critiques of those who are *dominants* seen, for instance, in her response in support of Adèle Haenel’s storming out of the Césars in 2020: ‘aucun respect pour votre mascarade de respectabilité. Votre monde est dégueulasse [...] morbide. Votre puissance est une puissance sinistre. Vous êtes une bande d’imbéciles funestes’.⁶⁰⁶

The second scene that features Séverine depicts her death at the hands of Nadine, and marks the first of the symbolic killings of middle-class figures/regulators in the text. This exchange begins similarly to the first. Nadine returns home from being with a client and ‘entend Séverine hurler avant même d’avoir refermé la porte’ (p72). This intrusive shouting and upset is, once again, specifically rooted in class-inflected notions of property and propriety (‘que tu te serves de mon whisky sans me demander, déjà ça me plait moyen. Mais tu pourrais quand même le ranger, non ?’ (p72)). A sense of prudishness is maintained.

⁶⁰³ Louar, *Version femmes plurielles*

⁶⁰⁴ Skeggs, *The Toilet Paper*, p297

⁶⁰⁵ Despentès, *King Kong Théorie*, p13

⁶⁰⁶ Despentès, Virginie, ‘Césars : « Désormais on se lève et on se barre »’, *Libération* (2020)

<https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/03/01/cesars-desormais-on-se-leve-et-on-se-barre_1780212/> [last accessed June 2022]

Although Séverine nags and shouts seemingly incessantly, she nonetheless ‘n’ose jamais demander franchement pourquoi [Nadine] se met en jupe et en talons plusieurs fois dans la semaine’ (p73). A claustrophobic atmosphere builds through the passage as, in this scene like the first, she follows Nadine around the apartment as she hounds her (‘Elle se lève et va chercher une bière. Séverine la suit à la cuisine sans s’interrompre’ (p15), ‘Nadine va dans sa chambre se changer. L’autre la suit’ (p73)). In the moments just before Nadine snaps and kills Séverine, she is evaluating her *coloc*. Séverine is pretty, Nadine deduces, and rather elegant, but only somewhat successful in achieving the polished and proper image she apparently so desperately wishes to portray. As Nadine perhaps rather snidely notes, Séverine is only ‘presque raffinée’ (p73). She ‘manque de grâce’ and, presumably due to her conservative restraint, also ‘manque d’émotions’ (p73). This evaluation of reservedness and coldness could not be further from the explosive boiling over of fiery rage that propels Nadine to suddenly strangle Séverine. As Fayard (2006) and Jordan (2004) have identified, and as I have mentioned here, this killing constitutes a symbolic overpowering of the bourgeois other. Schaal points out how, in *Baise-moi*, ‘les descriptions de signes extérieurs de richesse des victimes tels que voitures, maison ou salon de thé, révèlent le caractère social des crimes’.⁶⁰⁷ With the murder of Séverine, however, it is evocations and provocations of taste and distaste, rather than strictly material signifiers, that further laden this scene with class-inflected symbolism. A discomfiting and subversive synthesis is drawn up between death and sex⁶⁰⁸ when Nadine aligns the killing with the kind of overt sexualisation that so perturbed Séverine and her sensibilities. Whilst the former throttles her housemate she is ‘concentrée, appliquée. Quand elle baise, des fois, elle a l’impression d’être sortie d’elle-même, de s’oublier un moment [...] Ça lui fait cet effet’ (p74). Furthermore, the physical position Nadine adopts in this moment could be interpreted as sexually suggestive (‘à califourchon sur elle, Nadine la maintient au sol’ (p74) (my emphasis)) and certainly understood as a subverting of the classed power dynamics hitherto established between the pair. When Nadine returns to herself and reality kicks in, the imagined concealment of the body, introduced in the recalling of a recurrent dream, also carries classed implications:

plusieurs fois, elle a rêvé qu’elle avait un corps à cacher. Elle le découpait en morceaux et quelqu’un arrivait ; du coup, elle balançait des morceaux un peu partout et il fallait qu’elle prenne le thé avec des invités. Des membres déchirés planqués sous la

⁶⁰⁷ Schaal, *Une nécessaire rébellion féministe*, p278

⁶⁰⁸ See Louar (2009) for further examination of the sexualisation of violence in *Baise-moi*.

banquette, glissés sous les coussins. Dans ce rêve qu'elle fait souvent, il faut qu'elle fasse la conversation, comme si de rien n'était. Alors qu'un bras arraché dépasse de sous la commode (p74)

Elements of domesticity and propriety abound in this passage. The items of furniture clumsily conceal the severed limbs: 'sous la banquette [...] les coussins [...] la commode'. The scene evokes social etiquette in the drinking of tea with guests and in the imperative for ignoring one's thoughts or emotions, for making 'conversation, comme si de rien n'était'. In drawing out this symbolism, I do not, of course, wish to suggest that murder is a realm more attributed to one class over another, but rather that the recounting of this dream certainly hints at an anxiety (and, perhaps, a perverse thrill) around duping the dynamics of restraint, concealment and decorum imposed and enforced by bourgeois society.

Another layer of symbolism can be identified in the specific manner of the killing. The strangulation itself constitutes a symbolic and literal attack on the throat: the area of Séverine's body from which her near-constant (and, as I have shown, class-inflected) haranguing is produced. Moments before Nadine pounces, she wonders what Séverine might have to say about a murder committed by her friend, Francis, and bristles at the 'sales avis' (p73) she imagines she might offer (we might also note the implication of taste and cleanliness introduced by the word 'sales'). Indeed, the killing appears to have only one motivation: 'la faire taire' (p74). This scene undoubtedly inspires shock and repulsion and readers may struggle to make sense of this murder for which the stimulus seems so slight. But in elevating the scene to a symbolic level, in understanding it as an exaggerated performance, we can see how the murder thus marks a silencing of the nagging, regulating voice of (as well as an overpowering and annihilating of) the bourgeois other.

As with our first introduction to Séverine, Despentès once again introduces an ambivalent hint of pity to the scene. Nadine considers how long it might take for somebody to notice or to care that Séverine has gone missing and concludes that:

elle ne voit personne régulièrement. Ça prendra donc un certain temps avant qu'on ne force la porte [...] Nadine peut bien la laisser pourrir sur place, personne ne souffrira assez de son absence pour s'occuper de son sort (p75)

Nevertheless the allegorical assassination is achieved and the lasting impression is one of disdain. Nadine commandeers Séverine's belongings, 'prend [...] la bouteille de whisky et le chéquier de Séverine [...] enjambe le cadavre plusieurs fois' (p75). Her disregard for her roommate is certainly unnerving, but within this discomfort, I argue, we can read a subversion of the disregard so relentlessly experienced by the lower classes. In a 2015 interview for *Vice* the writer stated: 'I generalize sometimes about men [...] I don't hate them. But I like to be able to treat men like we are treated all the time'.⁶⁰⁹ We might consider, then, how Desportes stages a hyperbolic reversal of class dynamics that echoes facets of her approach to dynamics of gender. The disconcerting breeziness with which *Baise-moi's* protagonists cope with, and execute, violence is established in this scene, and the stage for the performance of class via the feminine is set.

I turn now to analyse perhaps the most significant and shocking amongst the symbolic killings in *Baise-moi*: the murder of a child one evening in a *salon de thé*. Although many of the murders depicted in this text take place in symbolic settings that evoke bourgeois life, (domestic locations, a cashpoint, an architect's meticulously decorated show home), the killing of an innocent child in the refined teashop sets it apart as an especially cruel and climactic moment. This particular murder can be most strikingly thought through in terms of gender in its marking of a clear and bloody subversion of the maternal qualities expected of women in an essentialising, heteropatriarchal society. The scene is populated almost entirely by female characters and stages various performances of femininity. Furthermore, and pertinent to the present inquiry, the 'carefully choreographed'⁶¹⁰ dynamics of the scene's unravelling merit careful consideration in class terms. Given its dramatic nature, critics have habitually mentioned this scene. They have not, however, lingered on it intensively or mined it for class signification.

Firstly, moments before they come across the tea parlour, Manu and Nadine are meandering aimlessly through the streets, and the narrative introduces the following revealing reflection: 'combien de personnes qui se promènent, comme elles, avec des sales secrets cachés sous leur manteau. De sales idées crasseuses nourries en aparté' (p178). Before the two women have even crossed the threshold, then, Desportes foregrounds and underlines the fallacy of respectability and 'polite' society. Their entrance into the refined space of the

⁶⁰⁹ Oyler, Lauren, 'Behind the Scenes With Virginie Desportes', *Vice* (2015) <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/evgg8a/behind-the-scenes-with-virginie-desportes>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁶¹⁰ Jordan, *op. cit.*, p126

salon demonstrates an abject⁶¹¹ break with these dynamics of concealment and propriety. The shifting prism of focalisation and minute attention to classed details in this scene stage a tense class performance. Manu and Nadine, in all of their overtly and gloriously provocative excess (their super short skirts, high heels and thickly applied make-up and nail polish) stand out as immediately out-of-place in the restrained opulence of the establishment. The *salon* setting is luxurious and lustrous with its ‘vitres impeccables, dorures astiquées’ (p178) and is full of expensive and overly fussy *pâtisseries*. As Despentès sets this scene we are made aware of the air of classed restraint and order, as demonstrated by its clientele and staff. The child’s grandmother is described as ‘une vieille dame modèle courant, le cheveu rare et blanc, soigneusement permanenté. Elle porte une robe stricte, dans les tons gris, col en V. Digne’ (p178). The notational short-hand allows readers to track Manu’s gaze and note the small details that her eye picks out as constitutive of bourgeois discretion. The lexis here suggests consciously maintained control and refinement (‘soigneusement’, for example, which also echoes the description given of Séverine earlier). Similarly, the description of the two *serveuses* in the scene evinces a similar care and investment in typically ‘ladylike’ respectability: ‘elles portent toutes les deux les mêmes blouses roses avec un col blanc et des chaussures basses en toile de couleur claire, sans tache et soigneusement lacées’ (p180) (here, again, we encounter this word ‘soigneusement’. We might also note the ideas of cleanliness and contamination evoked by the words ‘sans tache’). Although the waitresses are, of course, distinct in class terms from their clientele, they nonetheless participate in the implementation of class-based conduct and are expected to uphold and regulate – both personally and in the space of the *salon* – a certain level of decorum. Their immaculate clothes and sensible heels could not be further removed in style from those worn by Manu and Nadine.

As with the earlier descriptions of Séverine, the portrait painted in this scene of the aspirational bourgeois is not one that is flattering. The elderly woman is depicted as stern and miserable (‘rides profondes des narines aux commissures des lèvres, pas exactement le genre de rides qu’on attrape à trop rigoler’ (pp178-179)). The somewhat clinical description of her as ‘une vieille dame modèle courant’ (p178) suggests a dearth of personality and originality. Despentès’ heroines display a readiness to cast sweeping, generalised judgements about upper- or middle-class others. As with Nadine’s disregard for Séverine, we might interpret this as a reversal of sweeping judgements so often made ‘downwards’. This damning

⁶¹¹ Jordan (2002, 2004) has brought Douglas’ and Kristeva’s conceptualisation of the abject to *Baise-moi* in terms of traditionally non-represented bodily fluids (Manu’s menstruating and vomiting, for example). Here I suggest that we consider Manu and Nadine as abject intruders in the bourgeois space of the *salon*.

assessment implies a wider condemnation of the kinds of regulating and classifying cultural expectations that fashion these identikit women (and, indeed, those who subscribe to them). The stress placed on the steely quality of the figures encountered in this space may make the reader immediately and acutely aware of their power to judge and (potentially) reprimand: of one of the waitresses we learn that her ‘sourcils non épilés partent en « V » sur son front et lui donnent un air attentif, comme prête à gronder’ (p179).

Manu and Nadine’s messy eruption into this clean, organised and overtly ‘high society’ space provides a sharp and uncomfortable contrastive performance. They demonstrate a complete disregard for the careful poise implicitly encouraged in the *salon*. Manu delights in overindulging: ‘une dizaine de gâteaux que Manu s’enfonce dans la bouche en regardant autour d’elle’ (p178). The constant and earnest overeating in *Baise-moi*, as Jordan has pointed out, forms part of the protagonists’ characterisation of ‘bodily excess’ through which they ‘display a gloriously liberating disregard for [their] sexual appeal’.⁶¹² Furthermore, it displays a concurrent and interconnected disregard for investments in appearing ‘classy’ or ‘proper’. Manu here exhibits an abject abandonment of bourgeois rules of politeness and ‘good’ table manners: ‘quand elle mâche, on voit bien les couleurs se mélanger parce qu’elle garde la bouche grande ouverte. Appliquée à bien remplir son rôle d’éléphante dégénérée dans une maison de poupée’ (p179). This metaphor perfectly encapsulates the dynamics of disruption and reflects the tensions between order and disorder, taste and distaste, and propriety and excess, that Despentes consistently sets up and sustains in these scenes (and, indeed, in her oeuvre more broadly). The juxtaposition here hangs particularly acutely between the focus on Manu’s mouth⁶¹³ and the description of one of the waitresses’ mouths that follows shortly after. Whilst one is gaping and overspilling, the other is prim, dainty and well-defined: ‘petite bouche, fine, rose comme sa blouse. La lèvre du haut est bien dessinée, celle du bas un peu plus charnue’ (p179). In typical Despentes style, an ‘irruption of rebellious femininity’⁶¹⁴ in the form of overt sexuality swiftly changes the tone and disturbs any sense of bourgeois sensibility: ‘Nadine commente : « Elle est née pour sucer, celle-là », assez fort pour que tout le monde entende’ (p179). Nadine, like Despentes, demonstrates a conscious awareness – and subsequent subversion – of the mechanisms of class judgements and a desire to critique and refuse them. The scene is perhaps testing and uncomfortable for readers and, in this way, we are drawn into considerations of class.

⁶¹² Jordan, *op. cit.*, p133

⁶¹³ Armbrecht (*op. cit.*) has explored the attention Despentes affords to her female characters’ mouths and lips, specifically in reference to her choice of Béatrice Dalle and Emmanuelle Béart for the 2012 film adaptation of *Bye Bye Blondie*.

⁶¹⁴ Fayard, *op. cit.*, p73

Tension builds particularly nervously, slowly and tortuously in this scene, eventually explosively culminating in Nadine's seemingly snap decision to kill the young child. This tension, as I have suggested, is one that is partly formed through the scene's sustained sense of corporeal contrast between female figures, but it is also made particularly evident in the repeated evocation of the gaze. Throughout the episode, Desportes carefully traces who is looking at whom, and when and how these looks are exchanged. Skeggs recognises the importance of this kind of looking, and, drawing on Bourdieu, explores how 'corporeal assessments'⁶¹⁵ (indeed, like the bodily contrasts set up so sharply by Desportes in this scene) shape and illustrate class, and how 'taste' is read on the body. Indeed, Bourdieu theorised that the body is the most tangible manifestation of class:

Culture devenue nature, c'est-à-dire incorporée, classe faite corps, le goût contribue à faire le corps de classe [...] Il s'ensuit que le corps est l'objectivation la plus irrécusable du goût de classe, qu'il manifeste de plusieurs façons. D'abord dans ce qu'il a de plus naturel en apparence, c'est-à-dire dans les dimensions [...] et les formes [...] de sa conformation visible, où s'exprime de mille façons tout un rapport au corps, c'est-à-dire une manière de traiter le corps, de le soigner, de le nourrir, de l'entretenir, qui est révélatrice des dispositions les plus profondes de l'habitus⁶¹⁶

Skeggs explains that 'we are all part of a scopic economy of bodily capital assessment whereby [...] we enter and know our positioning in relation to others via their bodily and visual value'.⁶¹⁷ We are thus 'trapped in the scopic economy of visual evaluation [...] locked into differently valued systems of symbolic capital that attribute exchange value, enabling some bodies to be authorized and not others'.⁶¹⁸ The language of ensnarement Skeggs employs here ('trapped', 'locked') feels apt for an analysis of this scene. As soon as Manu and Nadine enter the space of the *salon de thé*, they, too, are caught up in a web of visual assessment wherein they judge and are judged. Protagonists and reader alike are thrust into the accelerating tension as the carefully narrated dynamics of looking make of the scene a kind of fictional exemplification of these ideas. The 'knowing' that Skeggs evokes here ('we enter and know our positioning') is also pertinent. Desportes demonstrates an acerbic understanding of these social undercurrents and variably suspends her characters in an awareness of judgment and

⁶¹⁵ Skeggs, *The Toilet Paper*, p303

⁶¹⁶ Bourdieu, *op. cit.*, pp632-633

⁶¹⁷ Skeggs, *The Toilet Paper*, p303

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p304

transgression. Attentiveness to the shifting gaze in this scene thus reveals further the oscillating power dynamics at play and their communicating of class.

Further examination of the gaze in this scene reveals how Manu and Nadine are immediately and implicitly read as unsavoury and excessive. In response to Manu's enthusiastic devouring of the confections, '[la] grand-mère avec son petit-fils détourne les yeux' (p178). In stark contrast, Manu's gaze suggests something more liberated, carefree and/or provocative as she stuffs her face 'en regardant autour d'elle' (p178). The older woman demonstrates a double distaste as, a short while after, 'la vieille tente de détourner l'attention du gamin qui les fixe, fasciné par Manu qui mange mal et beaucoup à la fois' (p179). Even the child is subject to and takes part in Skeggs' 'scopic economy of visual evaluation' and shows an innocent fascination with that which falls outside his presumably more respectable norm (a class-based norm instilled in him by those, like his grandmother, who (re)direct his gaze). The grandmother does not wish that her grandson witness their transgression nor their overtly sexualised presentation, and in averting his attention evinces and performs her distaste. The looking and judging of the two waitresses is also described: 'les deux vendeuses échangent un coup d'œil, irritées en même temps qu'un peu décontenancées, pas habituées à ce qu'on confonde leur boutique avec une cafétéria' (p179). Once again the classed contrast painted here is clear. Manu and Nadine have transgressed. They have disregarded and abjectly overstepped the received cultural and physical boundaries that distinguish and separate 'boutique' from 'cafétéria'. The waitresses' shared glance implies a shared social understanding, further cleaving a classed sense of 'us' and 'them'. Pivoting on the suggestion of disconcertment introduced in this quotation ('décontenancées'), the scene's tension begins to intensify here.

After a brief description of the two *vendeuses*, the narrative burrows below – or, indeed, transcends – the realm of 'scopic evaluation' and shifts to an interior view from the perspective of Nadine:

Sans qu'elle sache pourquoi, l'endroit lui remet l'inquiétude en marche. Le troisième œil s'ouvre, la mauvaise voix s'enclenche. Dans ce décor et avec ces gens, elle se sent méprisée d'office, décalée. Elle se voit par leurs yeux et elle se fait pitié (p180)

Nadine, too, is unsettled. The markers and monitors of culture and capital in this space – both the décor and the people – make her feel looked down upon and *décalée* (in both the sense of displaced and unconventional). The evocation of a ‘troisième œil’ sets up this unease as something so ingrained as to be instinctive, and the fact that she feels ‘méprisée d’office’ highlights it as automatic and informed by systemic hierarchy. In her imagined appropriation of their gaze she sees herself in her abjectness. Although Manu appears unperturbed by the stares of the bourgeois onlookers (‘Manu continue [...] ne se rend compte de rien’ (p180)), Despentès’ narrative positions the reader with Nadine who feels the full force of the effects of their damning visual judgement:

Nadine serre les dents et fixe la table. Elle ne veut pas que ça la reprenne. Elle est tapie au fond d’une cage, elle se recroqueville dans un coin, des mains aveugles et invisibles cherchent à l’agripper. Elle sent leurs mouvements dans le noir. Elle est vulnérable et pétrifiée de terreur. Il faut trancher ces bras qui lui veulent du mal. En elle, l’araignée règne et l’attend, avec une infinie patience (p180)

This very evocative and distressing presentation of spiralling anxiety may grip the reader even more tightly in the growing tension of the scene until eventually it is once again the reading of bodies which breaks the suspense: ‘du coin de l’œil, elle surveille les deux caissières, elles ont peur. Cette pensée dénoue l’oppression, par magie (p180). Nadine briefly considers that the pair may recognise her and Manu from the reports of their crime spree but concludes that no, ‘il y a quelque chose chez elle et Manu qui les inquiète. Nadine se rend compte qu’elle adore ça, la sensation de les sentir palpiter’ (p181). As my analysis has examined, this ‘something’ that disturbs the waitresses so much is, in part, class-based. Their judgement is laced with fear. Nadine revels in a feeling of shifted power dynamics, delights in this turning of the tables through abjection. She is empowered through her and Manu’s excess and infraction. This sense of empowerment continues to build as the grandmother tries to usher her grandson away. As the young child begins to protest, Nadine

pense aux gros titres [...] quand un enfant est tué. L’effet que ça fait aux gens [...] S’exclure du monde, passer le cap. Être ce qu’on a de pire. Mettre un gouffre entre elle et le reste du monde. Marquer le coup. Ils veulent quelque chose pour la première page, elle peut faire ça pour eux. Elle sort son flingue, enchaîne les gestes sans avoir à réfléchir. Respire

profondément, ne lâche plus l'enfant des yeux [...] La vieille hurle juste avant la détonation (p181)

In the scene's final moments, the gaze turns deadly and predatory. In this abhorrent act Nadine stages the ultimate disregard for everything that a woman 'should' be: passive, nurturing, protective. The scene ends when Manu and Nadine flee into a nearby side street and burst into mutual, crazed, cathartic laughter. Fayard recognises the overt symbolic social implications of this scene when she notes that the two protagonists 'draw attention to their social condition by voluntarily excluding themselves from this society, preferring self-exclusion to social elimination'.⁶¹⁹ If they are going to be made to feel like vermin, they are going to take control, reclaim a sense of autonomy and push this feeling of exclusion (from a certain space, a certain class, a certain vision of womanhood) to the extreme. This particularly bloodthirsty scene exemplifies the messy and violent disorder that many of Desportes' female characters engender and embrace. It also perhaps forms the text's most shocking and sharp-edged class critique. 'Acted out through the cathartic safety valve of the literary',⁶²⁰ the murder of the bourgeois child – and the *writing about* the murder of a (bourgeois) child – constitutes a rageful response to the dominant society's request for (gendered) propriety and decorum. This hyperbolic performance of class dynamics constitutes a provocative rejection of the imperative to uphold certain 'standards', of behaviour, of taste and in literature.

3.4 'Se [glisser] dans la peau des autres'⁶²¹: Iterations and Intersections of Class and Femininity in *Vernon Subutex 1*

In *Vernon Subutex*, two female figures, Émilie and Olga, are used to lay the foundation for the construction of the classed, capitalist world that Vernon moves through throughout the trilogy. I begin my analysis of classed femininity in this text by looking at the first of these characters. Readers are introduced to Émilie very early on in the story of Vernon's homelessness. She is the first of the old friends that he approaches when seeking shelter. A former bassist, Émilie left the world of music in order to pursue a more conventional, bourgeois life path. The discomfort and tension in her interactions with Vernon, as well as the ideas of excess and control evoked in her presentation, make her a fascinating character to analyse along class lines. As will become clear in the following pages, there are striking threads of similarity between the construction of Émilie and that of Séverine in *Baise-moi*.

⁶¹⁹ Fayard, *op. cit.*, p67

⁶²⁰ Jordan, *op. cit.*, p141

⁶²¹ Bricco, *op. cit.*

Both constitute one of the first characters encountered in their respective texts and thus both establish the tone of class critique and set the stage for class performance. *Vernon Subutex*, as many critics and readers have observed, is written in a style that has ‘un peu perdu du caractère corrosif’⁶²² of Despentès’ first works (‘has Virginie Despentès gone soft? Perhaps a little’⁶²³). It arguably makes sense that the characterisation of Émilie, crafted two decades after that of Séverine, is less acerbic. The sadness in Émilie’s presentation is less laced with cruelty and is not escalated by murder. Nevertheless, encountering Émilie in the text, the reader might be reminded of Séverine’s haughty and scrupulous edge, her devotion to convention and the strict aura of bourgeois control that she emanates.

As Émilie is introduced we are plunged into a sense of sadness and anxious tension. Shortly prior to arriving at her apartment, Vernon reflects on her qualities: ‘gentille. Peut-être trop. Pas forcément heureuse, en amour’.⁶²⁴ The reader soon learns that she is troubled and repressed. Although she is intensely angry with Vernon, she cannot bring herself to express it: ‘malgré ses deux ans d’analyse elle est toujours incapable de dire les choses comme elle les pense. Les reproches ne franchissent pas ses lèvres’ (p52). The scene, and Émilie’s tense and inhibited presentation, are also strikingly inflected with class consciousness. Tongue-tied, she performs the rituals of hosting, and in a particularly revealing passage she:

a sorti les verres, balancé des sous-bocks et rempli un bol d’amandes grillées avec des mouvements brusques, elle faisait les gestes de l’hospitalité en y mettant de la mauvaise grâce, pour que ça reste désagréable. Elle a surveillé que Vernon ne tache pas la table basse suédoise à six cents euros en solde chez Sentou. Émilie est devenue balistique sur la propreté. Avant, elle s’en foutait royalement. Aujourd’hui, elle pourrait égorger pour quelques miettes sous une table, ou des traces de calcaire sur un robinet. Il y a une contrepartie – elle éprouve un plaisir indicible quand tout est ordonné et propre (p53)

Émilie is here aligned with the proper and the domestic, and with an intense concern for cleanliness and order. Her adoption and internalisation of bourgeois attachments to propriety and property are evident in this passage from the presence of carefully placed coasters to the pointed markers of money and branding. In her passive aggressive bending of social codes,

⁶²² Bricco, *op. cit.*

⁶²³ Owen Rowland, Lili, ‘Into a Blazing Oven’, *London Review of Books*, 42:24 (2020) <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n24/lili-owen-rowlands/into-a-blazing-oven>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁶²⁴ Despentès, Virginie, *Vernon Subutex 1* (Paris: Grasset, 2015), p50. All subsequent references to this text, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis through to the end of this section on p167.

she reveals her acute awareness and mastery of them. Émilie's anger is deliberately thinly veiled. The depth of this anger is confirmed as the passage slips into (perhaps somewhat humorous) hyperbole: 'Émilie est devenue balistique sur la propreté [...] elle pourrait égorger pour quelques miette sous une table'. This exaggerated language speaks, once again, to ideas of performance, but also to feelings of repression and of a troubled inner turmoil. It suggests a frustration barely kept from overspilling and instead channelled into polite society's requirement for decorum and order. It also heightens the sharp contrast painted of chaos against order and, in turn, of Vernon's messy irruption into her immaculately kept space. As a later passage reveals, this sense of disconcerted contrast works both ways:

Son appartement [...] a changé. Elle a lu la surprise sur le visage de Vernon, quand il est entré. La surprise, et la déception. Il n'y a plus aucune affiche de concert. Avant elle les collait à même les murs, dans le salon et la chambre, la cuisine était réservée aux photos de beaux gosses. Fugazi, Joy Division, Die Trottell, Dezerter... ont cédé leur place à une photo encadrée de Frida Kahlo, et une reproduction du Caravage. Les murs sont peints en blanc. Comme chez tous les adultes de son entourage [...] Elle a passé un concours, elle travaille à l'équipement, elle a troqué son iroquoise pour un carré discret. Elle s'habille chez Zara [...] Elle se passionne pour l'huile d'olive, le thé vert, elle s'est abonnée à *Telerama* et elle parle de recettes de cuisine, au boulot, avec ses collègues (pp54-55)

As I have explored, though Despentés' work is not overtly autobiographical, there remains an elision of self and narrator that is particularly strong in this trilogy ('même si ce n'est absolument pas un autoportrait'.⁶²⁵) Such a cutting critique might lead us to ask, as Schaal does of *Apocalypse Bébé*, 'qui s'exprime réellement ici'.⁶²⁶ Whether the judgements against her are levied by Vernon and/or Despentés, Émilie's space here once again undoubtedly confirms her assimilation into a more conventionally aspirational bourgeois culture. She has neutralised her apartment, completely stripping it of markers of youthful rebellion and removing the posters of punk icons she had previously plastered all over the walls. The images she now chooses to display in her whitewashed home are altogether different (a photo of feminist artist Frida Kahlo and a Caravaggio print) and suggest an increased awareness of and taste for 'high culture' (and, of course, a desire to project and perform this awareness and

⁶²⁵ Crom, *op. cit.*

⁶²⁶ Schaal, *Une nécessaire rébellion féministe*, p272

taste). This sense of sanitisation and standardisation extends from her living space to her personal style: 'elle a troqué son iroquoise pour un carré discret'. Reminiscent of Séverine's 'talent certain pour ressembler à sa voisine'⁶²⁷ in *Baise-moi*, the narrator insists on Émilie's conformity, her manner of looking and living 'comme [...] tous les adultes de son entourage'. Markers of money and middle-class culture, once again, abound, as do references to conventions of polite conversation. The narrative point of view undoubtedly mocks the banality of bourgeois habits as we learn that her clothing preferences, eating habits and conversation topics of choice are all conventional and conformist. Émilie's aspirational efforts have nevertheless not paid off. The passage continues:

Elle est devenue ce que ses parents voulaient qu'elle devienne [...] Elle a fait tout ce que ses parents désiraient qu'elle fasse. Sauf qu'elle n'a pas eu d'enfant, alors le reste, ça ne compte pas. Aux repas de famille, elle fait tache. Ses efforts n'ont pas été récompensés (p55)

Despite her desperate attempts to cleanly and seamlessly weave herself into the fabric of middle-class life, she nevertheless 'fait tache'. The language of staining here is fascinatingly class-inflected in itself and the echoing repetition of the construction at the beginning of this quotation only compounds the sense of despondence and disappointment. For all her pursuing of (classed) convention, she cannot unentangle herself from society's expectations of her gender: that she marry well, settle down and have children. As Bricco writes, with the character of Émilie:

Despentes mène une critique évidente de la famille bourgeoise, du style de vie bourgeois et de ses dynamiques internes et extérieures : les clichés sur les études adéquates, sur les vêtements choisis et donc sur l'image publique de la personne, sur ses habitudes alimentaires, sur sa condition de femme adulte non mariée et la position en retrait qui en résulte au sein de sa famille [...] Ainsi présentée, cette femme m'apparaît comme une victime du bon ton bourgeois : elle frappe ma sensibilité de lectrice, elle requiert mon empathie⁶²⁸

⁶²⁷ Despentes, *Baise-moi*, p14

⁶²⁸ Bricco, *op. cit.*

The incremental layering of these 'dynamiques' enacts a sense of mounting pressure through a class and gender lens. Hostile at first, Émilie softens as she drinks and, as the interaction progresses, so too does the readerly position.

Throughout the episode her sadness is slowly further and further unveiled. We learn of her cruel and sexist ostracism from the male-dominated social circle of the band, of her struggles with depression. We learn that she was strung along by her lover, Jean-No, for several years and watched him marry and have children with another woman. We learn, too, of the emotional upset Vernon caused her (inadvertently, though not without cruelty and selfishness) when he failed to be there for her following Jean-No's death. Everything about her presentation paints a pitiful picture of her futile efforts to maintain strict control, order and direction. The description of her unhappy relationship with her body evokes ideas of excess, ideas shot through with gender and class considerations:

Émilie a pris – combine au juste – vingt kilos en dix ans ? [...] elle a lutté – régimes exercices thalasso massages crèmes et séances anticellulite qui coutaient une fortune et lui donnaient la sensation de passer dans un concasseur. [...] Son métabolisme, de toute évidence, était devenu incontrôlable. Elle ne se reconnaît pas dans les miroirs. Elle déborde, quoi qu'elle porte, il y a toujours un bourrelet qui déborde. C'est quand elle arrive quelque part où elle ne connaît personne qu'elle sent le mieux qu'elle a beaucoup changé. S'ils ont le choix, les gens s'adressent à n'importe qui à côté d'elle, ils évitent tout contact avec une grosse (p54)

When looking for the most overt implications for class in this description, the reader might notice once again the explicit reference to money: 'régimes exercices thalasso massages crèmes et séances anticellulite qui coutaient une fortune'. There is, furthermore, a lot at work in this passage in terms of gendered beauty ideals and societal fatphobia,⁶²⁹ two interconnected pressures of contemporary everyday life that are themselves wrapped up in considerations of class. I refer back here to Skeggs' evocations of excess in relation to the devaluing of certain types of bodies. Lauren Berlant writes persuasively about bodily excess in relation to food, class and the so-called 'obesity epidemic' in their *Cruel Optimism*. In their analysis, bodily activities that relate to pleasure and (over)indulgence ('scandals of the

⁶²⁹ Something that, as Sabrina Strings elaborates in *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), stems from and intersects with a long history of racism and classism. Lauren Berlant, too, tracks the racial implications of the 'obesity epidemic' in the United States in their *Cruel Optimism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011): 'emaciation [...] remains coded as white and weight excess coded as black' (p113).

appetite [...] food, [...] sex, smoking, shopping, and drinking’) are understood ‘as sites of moral disapprobation’.⁶³⁰ As Berlant explores, those who are deemed overweight are morally scorned and have more difficulty ‘in mobilizing bourgeois beauty norms for economic success’.⁶³¹ The description of Émilie here speaks of an internalisation of these bodily pressures and an obsessive and costly compulsion to shrink herself and conform. The cost of this obsession is more than monetary. Émilie’s loneliness is also highlighted in this passage (‘les gens [...] évitent tout contact avec une grosse’) and the air of abject sadness around her intensifies. Reading on, we learn that she

est devenue la fille qui n’a pas de copain à présenter, la meuf gentiment larguée qui vient toujours seule aux soirées du boulot, celle qui a plein de copines parce qu’elle est rassurante, d’être à ce point de la lose [...] c’est fait, elle ne recommencera pas sa jeunesse et c’est comme ça qu’elle l’aura passée, à attendre qu’un connard l’appelle ou ne l’appelle pas, mente à sa femme pour passer la voir, fasse d’elle sa meuf clando et qu’elle soit incapable d’arrêter l’engrenage (p59)

Here her life’s unravelling is unambiguously laid out. Like *Baise-moi*’s Séverine, Émilie seeks desperately to align herself with and anchor herself within a very particular middle-class vision of femininity. She is a sad character, one that is anxious and self-conscious. The sadness she is imbued with, furthermore, carries heavy class (and gender) implications.

The chapter ends on an ambivalent note when, having trimmed his hair for him, Émilie resolves to only allow Vernon to stay overnight. Some readers may rejoice in her decision to set boundaries and not bend to accommodate and nurture (as might be typically expected of a woman and, indeed, as Vernon anticipates of her (‘il a cru jusqu’au dernier moment qu’elle lui laisserait les clefs de chez elle’(p65)). Some readers may identify a certain measure of criticism of contemporary society’s tendency towards disconnectedness. Some, indeed, may see a comfortable bourgeois woman turning her back on a precarious, down-and-out friend. Whatever one’s readerly interpretation or reaction, the performance of dynamics of class via the feminine is here more ambivalent and nuanced than in *Baise-moi*. Class is undoubtedly present in the encounter with Émilie, but her depiction also incorporates other implications and axes of identity and struggle (Despentes clearly also considers not only expectations of

⁶³⁰ Berlant, *op. cit.*, p105

⁶³¹ *Ibid.*, p114

gender but mental health problems, contemporary social pressures, contemporary economics and politics, etc.). We might think of Émilie as a grown-up, more nuanced Séverine, as the textual performance of a woman determined to maintain control and do everything 'right' according to bourgeois norms. By extension we might necessarily reflect on the ways in which the twenty years between the characters' writing has matured the writer who created them. This later depiction of an encounter with a middle-class-inflected character feels more tender and sensitive. The murderous rage directed at Séverine in *Baise-moi* has dissolved/evolved and is, in the case of Émilie, replaced with a softened, perhaps more palatable pity. The portrayal is not, however, without derision. The class critique, indeed, remains firmly albeit more quietly in place. Émilie's bad luck and bourgeois pursuits have ultimately led her to this sad and lonely state. On departing, a scorned Vernon reflects: 'Émilie, ce qu'elle est devenue, c'est le truc le plus triste qu'il ait jamais connu' (p65). Whether the reader shares the protagonist's resentment or not, the sadness Émilie's characterisation conjures lingers as the (at least partly) arbitrary nature of 'success' is underlined in this thought-provoking portrait.

Turning our attention now to the conclusion of this first volume of *Vernon Subutex*, the character of Olga provides a vastly different performance of femininity. The encounter with Olga constitutes, furthermore, another fascinating, microcosmic study and performance of class, wherein expectations are frustrated and assumptions challenged. Having experienced homelessness for much longer than Vernon and being thus accustomed to the streets of Paris, the figure of Olga is first encountered when she intervenes explosively in an altercation and prevents the eponymous anti-hero from being attacked by a group of far-right thugs. She is an exciting, fiery and dynamic character that bursts into the narrative. She is also a character, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, with whom Despentès feels a personal affiliation⁶³² ('Olga is really the closest to me [...] She has my rough energy'⁶³³). Most pertinent for my analysis here, however, are the ways in which Olga serves to highlight injustice, frustrate appearances⁶³⁴ and expectations, and expose cruel and generalising class-based judgements.

The arrival of Olga enacts an abrupt shift in the narrative. She erupts onto the scene at a point when Vernon is particularly beaten. Having recently been forced to try and make it on the streets, he finds himself being hounded by a group of threatening men. Olga intervenes:

⁶³² Despentès and her creation also share, as is the case with *Baise-moi*'s Nadine, biographical similarities: they have both, for instance, worked in photography labs (see *Vernon Subutex 1* (p373) and *King Kong Théorie* (p61)).

⁶³³ Herzog, *op. cit.*

⁶³⁴ We may be reminded here of Skeggs' 'scopic economy of visual evaluation' and its limits (*The Toilet Paper*, p304)

c'est alors que surgit, dans un déluge de hurlements incompréhensibles, une géante rousse, qui avance en faisant de grands moulinets avec les bras, et les écarte en postillonnant : Allez vous faire enculer fils de putes avec vos petites bites pleines de merde, foutez-lui la paix, vous voyez pas que vous lui faites peur sales tondus de fond de chiottes ? (p364)

As we can see, Berlant's ideas around bodily excess remain pertinent to an analysis of Olga. Her physicality is large, forceful and imposing, as conveyed in the evocation of 'un déluge', 'une géante'. Arms swinging and lips spitting, she is boisterously excessive and overspilling. She defies expectations of bodily containment and propriety. Her speech, too, is unrestrained and liberally littered with expletives. She is raucous and uninhibited ('elle est déchainée' (p364)) and does not shirk away from violence: 'elle se fraye un passage avec les poings' (p364), 'la géante lui envoie un coup de pied dans le dos, elle y a mis toutes ses forces [...] la brute dégage son assaillant d'un seul coup de coude' (p365). In this introductory scene Olga may evoke in readers Despentes' notion of a 'King Kong Girl':

Les quatre gars resserrent les rangs pour lui mettre une correction finale, mais elle les surprend, une fois de plus, en frappant sa propre poitrine avec ses deux poings, tout en recommençant à hurler à pleins poumons. Difficile de savoir si elle s'inspire de Scarface ou de Tarzan, mais la prestation laisse ses adversaires pantois. On ne saurait dire ce qui les arrête – la peur la stupéfaction le dégoût le respect d'une énergie aussi exceptionnelle... elle rameute tout le quartier, quelques personnes ont ralenti pour voir ce qui se passe (pp365-366)

Introduced in *King Kong Théorie*, Despentes specifically uses this 'King Kong Girl' concept to imagine and describe an existence outside of heteronormativity and binary gender, but also engages with it more broadly to explore, symbolise and celebrate those parts of herself – and all women – that do not fit these parameters. In this theoretical text, the writer reveres 'cette créature [qui] a le sens de l'humour, et de la démonstration de puissance',⁶³⁵ laments 'son choix de l'hétérosexualité et de la vie en ville [qui] est le choix de sacrifier ce qui en elle est hirsute, puissant, ce qui en elle rit en *se frappant la poitrine*'⁶³⁶ (my emphasis). The similarities with the presentation of Olga are clear. Like Despentes, Olga is 'plutôt King Kong que Kate

⁶³⁵ Despentes, *King Kong Théorie*, p112

⁶³⁶ Ibid., p113

Moss, comme fille'.⁶³⁷ This imagining of femininity outside its received parameters (propriety, sensitivity, frailty) has pertinent class implications. In the passage quoted above, the disturbance caused by Olga's loud and violent display attracts a crowd. Passers-by stop and stare as their gaze is drawn to the spectacle of a woman disturbing the peace. The imagined range of emotions inspired in Vernon's attackers – 'la peur la stupéfaction le dégoût le respect d'une énergie aussi exceptionnelle' – signal ambivalent and undoubtedly class-based judgements. What is more, the lack of punctuation in this list conveys a fast-paced rhythm that not only mirrors the chaos of the scene but perhaps also the flurry of fluctuating reactions it may inspire in the reader.

The volcanic and disorderly introduction of the character of Olga sets up and performs class-based judgements. Throughout the course of the scene, these judgements are also frustrated and subtly critiqued. She is by no means a one-dimensional character. Such is Olga's resistance to categorisations that she is perceived by Vernon (and, in a later scene, by Xavier) as somewhat indecipherable. The judgements cast upon her by the two men are, unsurprisingly, inflected with gender and class. Vernon notes that: 'ses cheveux sont très fins, tirant sur le roux orangé, sûrement les vestiges d'une teinture, sa bouille est ronde et plate, ses yeux sont très écartés [...] Impossible de lui donner un âge' (p366). Xavier, a detestably bitter and contemptuous character, also finds Olga difficult to cleanly work out. He is alarmed to discover that the woman he meets when approaching Vernon does not square with the judgement he initially so sweepingly assigns:

De loin, Xavier aurait parié que la monstresse ne s'exprimait que par grognements. Il est surpris de ce qu'elle soit si loquace, et articulée. Elle n'est pas si bourrée qu'il l'avait cru. Le plus étonnant, c'est sa voix, qui ne va ni avec sa corpulence, ni avec son apparence. Elle a une voix à faire de la radio, une très belle voix (p390)

Classism and sexism are plainly present in this passage. Xavier's snobbish and misogynistic distaste is evident in the dehumanising language chosen ('monstresse', 'grognements'). His cruel assumptions about Olga and his expectation that she be drunk, incoherent and uneducated swiftly disintegrate. As they slowly bond over their mutual experience of grieving the loss of their dogs, Xavier decides that 'il ne peut pas l'envoyer chier [...] C'est le principe même d'avoir un chien : on parle avec des gens à qui on n'adresserait pas la parole, dans la vie

⁶³⁷ Despentès, *King Kong Théorie*, p11

normale (p390). In frustrating and dissolving class judgements, and in tenderly exposing their common ground, Despentès underlines the ultimately arbitrary nature of the factors that separate Xavier and Olga's worlds.

The figure of Olga, furthermore, also destabilises received expectations of gender. Vernon 'ne l'aurait pas cru capable de maîtriser la situation aussi longtemps' (p365) and remarks that 'la meuf n'est peut-être pas de taille à prendre quatre gamins à mains nues, mais en attendant, elle les impressionne. Il faut dire qu'elle a de la ressource' (p365). Homing in on this idea of resourcefulness, it is fascinating to note the ways in which Olga's character not only disrupts but draws upon gender stereotypes. Reminiscent of Skeggs' evaluation of femininity as, albeit limited, 'one of the forms of cultural capital to which working-class women [...] have access',⁶³⁸ Olga manipulates her presentation of femininity to attempt to obtain what she wants and needs. She cunningly uses people's expectations, fears and judgements around those experiencing homelessness to her advantage:

– Monsieur, monsieur, s'il vous plait, vous m'achetez un Coca-Cola ? Elle ajoute en touchant son ventre « c'est pour le bébé » [...] – T'es enceinte ? – Quelle horreur, non. Mais mon public aime cette idée [...] Elle hèle une passante, une élégante pressée : « Bonjour madame tu me ramènes des chips, s'il te plaît ? C'est pour le bébé. » Quand elle s'adresse aux inconnus, elle devient douce et enfantine. Vernon note que sa voix, quand elle est calme, a un grain éraillé très agréable. Elle sourit aux passants d'un air innocent en frottant son gros ventre, elle a une bille de clown, d'une rondeur lunaire (pp367-368)

Olga displays traditionally acceptable feminine qualities in this passage: maternity ('c'est pour le bébé'), softness and serenity ('douce', 'calme'), youth and innocence ('enfantine', 'innocent'). She moderates her language, and her tone shifts and softens from the abrasive aggression of her earlier 'hurlements incompréhensibles' into eloquent and polite supplication ('Monsieur, monsieur', 'bonjour madame'). There is a self-conscious element of performance to this scene and Olga demonstrates that she knows her audience ('mon public aime cette idée'). She stages a performance both of femininity and class, deliberately playing the part of the helpless and timid woman who adheres to classed rules of courtesy in order to appeal to the sensibilities of the passers-by. The sense of performance is only heightened by the stark contrast in her conduct in this scene and in her first forceful and foul-mouthed introduction. Once again, we

⁶³⁸ Skeggs, *The Toilet Paper*, p298

might be reminded of *King Kong Théorie* and of Despentés' assertion that 'il suffisait de jouer le jeu. De la féminité'.⁶³⁹ Although she is writing here about sex work and not about homelessness, the idea of using femininity as a tool still applies in that Olga also conforms in order to 'tirer profit de sa propre stigmatisation'.⁶⁴⁰

Despentés, through Olga, constructs an extremely precarious character with human complexity beyond stereotypes and stigma. Like her 'King Kong Girl', Olga 'a le sens de l'humour'.⁶⁴¹ She is a playful figure that delights and finds comedy in duping the bourgeois or moneyed other. She makes tongue-in-cheek comments that invert stereotypes: 'je viens là tous les jours – ils ont l'habitude de me ramener des trucs. Ils sont contents de rendre service. C'est des humains, quand même, tu sais' (p368). As we have already seen, she deftly plays on fears and judgements:

Elle demande à un gamin qui passe de leur ramener un paquet de Curly, le jeune l'envoie chier « t'as qu'à bosser grosse truie ». Elle lui jette un sort « pendant dix ans tu paieras pour ce que tu viens de dire » en prenant un air menaçant, elle sait qu'ils n'aiment pas ça, ils ne savent pas au juste si elle est une gitane, peut-être une sorcière très puissante. Vernon rigole (pp371-372)

In her humour and in her mobile performance of femininity, the character of Olga frustrates and refuses to give in to the demands of bourgeois society (and, perhaps, of bourgeois readers): that her outsider status render her miserable and meek. Of these societal demands Olga, once again, demonstrates her acute awareness. Her character is highly astute and, as she and Vernon spend more time together, she makes some of the most explicit comments on class in the entire novel:

Les nantis enragent parce qu'on est beaucoup trop intelligents. Ils le savent. C'est pour ça qu'ils veulent nous tuer. Quand on sera affamés déformés par les tumeurs et qu'on devra tuer pour manger, ils pourront nous regarder et se dire – voyez, nous, les riches, on est quand même plus raffinés (p376)

⁶³⁹ Despentés, *King Kong Théorie*, p64

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p83

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p112

Her comments build a contrastive picture of 'us and them' and indicate an understanding of social order and stratification built around differentiation or, as Bourdieu defined it, *distinction*. In a way reminiscent of Bourdieu's ideas, Olga's comments suggest that those in power 'classify' through distancing themselves from those in lower class positions (in this instance, from those experiencing homelessness):

Ils dorment dehors, ces trous-du-cul ? Ils nous prennent pour quoi ? de la merde, voilà la réponse. Parce qu'on est exclus du système, ils croient qu'ils peuvent débarquer et nous faire la loi. Mais on est des vrais durs, nous, pas vrai ? (p367)

Although they are excluded from the system, they nevertheless simultaneously remain part of it, in that the system is built on their subordination. As Olga later continues:

tu sais pourquoi on nous tolère encore en ville ? Ils ont arraché les bancs, ils ont aménagé les devantures de magasins pour être sûrs qu'on ne pouvait s'asseoir nulle part, mais on ne nous ramasse pas encore pour nous mettre dans des camps, et ce n'est pas parce que ça coûterait trop cher, non...c'est parce que nous, on est les repousseurs. Il faut que les gens nous voient pour qu'ils se souviennent de toujours obéir (pp372-373)⁶⁴²

Olga is yet another character that Despentes constructs at the fascinating intersection of class and gender. Her presentation performs, enacts and problematises – implicitly and explicitly – societal judgements around marginality, in and outside the text. Readers are confronted with Olga in all her messiness, her brashness, her failure (or, at times, refusal) to conform. The sad facts of her situation, though in no way diminished or escapable, are playfully offset with humour. In line with the novel's ever-shifting narrative perspective, we are encouraged to look at her through the eyes of the men she encounters – Vernon, Xavier and, later, Loïc and Noël – as well as through those of the public to whom she performs. Readers may even perceive whispers of their own judgements and reactions in these figures. But through Olga's complex performance of class and femininity we are compelled to reflect and, perhaps, to re-examine our own prejudices.

⁶⁴² The language here is provocative in itself in its evoking of the Occupation and the Holocaust ('nous ramasse [...] pour nous mettre dans des camps').

3.5 Conclusion

Using illustrative examples of writerly play with received notions of femininity, this chapter has exposed the intensive frustrations of propriety and taste that make up Despentés' texts. In her careful construction and choreographing of female characters and her focalisation of the (readerly) gaze, the writer exposes the convergence of class and gender dynamics, and stages subversive class performances. Through her writing of the feminine a critique of class endures and evolves throughout her corpus. As I have explored, Despentés' class critique has its roots in energetic and fiery musicality and performativity, and is infused with a foundational, punk politics.

A close examination of Despentés' female characters reveals that class conflict becomes crystallised in encounters with seemingly peripheral figures. In these encounters, it is the contrasts and focalisation across class lines that makes class legible. In *Baise-moi*, the character of Séverine sets the class-inflected, murderous tone that characterises the novel and that arguably culminates in the explosive, vengeful scene in the *salon de thé*. In *Vernon Subutex*, both the restraint of Émilie and the exuberance of Olga lay the foundation for the construction of the classed, capitalist world that Vernon moves in throughout the trilogy. No less powerful in their increased sensitivity and nuance, the class-inflected performances of femininity in *Vernon Subutex* demonstrate the endurance of class and gender codes into the twenty-first century. The character of Olga in particular disrupts and challenges class and gender stereotyping. She poses a challenge not only to the people (largely men) she encounters, but also, perhaps, to readers.

As my analysis has explored, through varied, exaggerated performances of femininity, Despentés exposes the pressures and cruelties of womanhood, the myriad factors that influence understandings and applications of femininity, and, crucially, the violence and injustice of classed society. In unpacking Despentés' play between different modes of femininity, this chapter has highlighted her female characters' bodies as 'symptômes et lieux de résistance'.⁶⁴³ The female body in Despentés is a site of class (and gender) performance, a site at which good taste is done away with ('on est plus dans le mauvais goût pour le mauvais goût, tu vois...'⁶⁴⁴), expectation is frustrated and systemic oppressions are revealed.

⁶⁴³ Louar, *Version femmes plurielles*, p2

⁶⁴⁴ Despentés, *Baise-moi*, p211. The 'tu vois' here further reflects the transgressive familiarity that Despentés claims in relation to her reader.

Conclusion: Revealing 'hidden injuries'⁶⁴⁵ in Classed Writings

This thesis has examined social class as a core concern throughout the writings of Annie Ernaux, Christine Angot and Virginie Despentes. I have shown that while class may, at times, manifest in obscured or oblique ways, it nevertheless remains omnipresent across their respective oeuvres. It remains, furthermore, a pervasive and pertinent issue more broadly. Focused through the specific lenses of three prominent and distinct authors, this thesis constitutes a timely response to the issue of class and, in its dialoguing with the fields of French, feminist and literary studies, a significant contribution to the study of class expression. As established in the introduction, recent global events (including the coronavirus pandemic) have held a magnifying glass to structural inequalities relating to race, gender and class. The urgency to interrogate how these structural inequalities have developed and continue to perpetuate, as well as to amplify, centre and honour diverse voices, has perhaps never been more clear. Nevertheless, as questions of intersectionality come further to the fore in both academic and popular culture, class, one of intersectionality's most central considerations, remains its most neglected. It is thus vital that we turn our collective attention to manifestations of class, including the kinds of class narratives offered by Ernaux, Angot and Despentes and analysed throughout this thesis. In the academic context, where feminist and literary studies have tended to avoid talking about class, reading from the perspective of class attends to this lack. Any analysis of these texts that precludes or glosses class risks missing much of their richness, but also, as I have argued, much of their foundational thrust and grounding. Beyond academia, Ernaux, Angot and Despentes readers viewing their texts from the perspective of class may find important and profound sources of representation and identification. Even for those who might not personally identify with the class aspect of these authors' texts, a reading of these narratives via class may provide powerful means of knowing the other, fostering understanding and compassion. It is my intention that this thesis also nurtures this sense of understanding and compassion.

During the writing of this thesis, both Ernaux and Angot have published new texts that attest to the enduring importance of class in their writing and further develop our understanding of its formative presence. As addressed earlier in this study, Ernaux's *Le jeune homme* was published in May 2022. This most recent text, albeit brief, provides a rich key for unpacking the author's writing of class and sex, and the intertwining of classed and sexual identity

⁶⁴⁵ Sennett, Richard and Cobb, Jonathan *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977)

formation. In the summer of 2021 Angot's *Le Voyage dans l'Est* provided, once more, a textual exposition of the traumas of incest. What is more, in this recent work, Angot maintains insistence on the ways in which a class façade of respectability can be exploited as a cover for abuse and harm. The imbrication of class and incest in this text is especially overt. The narrator recalls the father's response when she asks him why incest is forbidden and deemed 'dangerous' by society: 'ça n'a pas toujours été le cas. Dans certaines sociétés, très évoluées, c'était un signe de distinction, au contraire, de supériorité. C'était un privilège [...] une marque de la très haute aristocratie'.⁶⁴⁶ Angot pursues the exposition of incest as 'le pouvoir ultime du patriarcat [...] Le signe, absolu, d'un pouvoir privé [...] d'autorité'.⁶⁴⁷ The narrator's assessment of incest as 'un bannissement [...] un déclassé à l'intérieur de la famille'⁶⁴⁸ encapsulates the writer's work more broadly, and confirms, as I have argued in this thesis, that incest and class are deeply imbricated. Once more, in *Le Voyage dans l'Est*, her style is shaped by a resistance to 'le ton de la bourgeoisie qui encaisse tout'⁶⁴⁹ and she writes in defiance of bourgeois prescriptions of correctness and discretion. Finally, a new Despentès text is expected to be published in the late summer of 2022.⁶⁵⁰ In customary fashion, issues of class marginality and oppression will resurface in this upcoming work. The provocatively titled *Cher connard* is an epistolary novel whose main characters, the blurb on Grasset's dedicated webpage tells us, 'sont des transfuges de classe que la bourgeoisie n'épate guère'.⁶⁵¹ As this study has made clear, all three of these writers continually revisit class, repeating, reinforcing and expanding on their textual representations of gender and class.

Ernaux, Angot and Despentès craft classed narratives informed by lived experience. All three engage in formal experimentation. Classed stories are 'told by tension'⁶⁵² and all three seek adequate form to convey and encompass class. Their writing constitutes 'l'espace permis par l'imaginaire pour libérer une parole empêchée'.⁶⁵³ 'Through the cathartic safety valve of the literary',⁶⁵⁴ they shed light on the injustices and traumas of class-based oppression. Although the writings of all three are transgressive in differing ways, they share in this respect their drawing of readers into consideration of the lived experiences of class. In the

⁶⁴⁶ Angot, Christine, *Le Voyage dans l'Est* (Paris: Flammarion, 2021), pp58-59

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p180

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p190

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p198

⁶⁵⁰ Kapriélian, Nelly, 'Il y aura bien un nouveau Despentès à la rentrée', *Les Inrockuptibles* (2022) <<https://www.lesinrocks.com/livres/il-y-aura-bien-un-nouveau-despentès-a-la-rentree-465742-27-04-2022/>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁶⁵¹ Grasset, 'Cher Connard' (2022) <<https://www.grasset.fr/livres/cher-connard-9782246826514>> [last accessed June 2022]

⁶⁵² Steedman, Carolyn, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p22

⁶⁵³ Sauzon, Virginie, 'La déviance en réseau : Grisélidis Réal, Virginie Despentès et le féminisme pragmatique', *TRANS*, 13 (2012) <<https://journals.openedition.org/trans/550>> [last accessed June 2022]. Sauzon is talking specifically about the novel form, but here I extend the relevance of her comment to cover other kinds of self-narrative (life-writing, autofiction, etc.)

⁶⁵⁴ Jordan, Shirley, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), p141

case of each author, questions of class are necessarily shot through with myriad other factors of identity and, as I have shown, explorations of class are consistently intersectional. Common threads, nevertheless, can still be identified. Shame and pride, place and displacement, and order and disorder exist in productive oscillation across their texts. Writerly play with received ideas around femininity and masculinity, display and concealment, and taste and distaste also features. A tracing of the dynamics of positioning, both within their works and with their readers, reveals in each case that ideas about access, exclusion and intrusion remain key. For Ernaux, Angot and Despentès alike, style, subject matter, and critical and readerly reception are, as this thesis has shown, intensively informed by class concerns.

Whilst this study provides a significant contribution to the study of class expression in contemporary French women's writing, my hope is that it also inspires avenues for further research. There is scope beyond this thesis to examine other Ernaux, Angot and Despentès texts. All three of these writers are very prolific, and it would be interesting to analyse the ways in which class surfaces in their various other writings not thoroughly addressed here. Furthermore, scholars in the future may wish to take this study and expand it to include more or different authors. They may even feel inspired to take the analytical apparatus used in this thesis and apply it to forms of class expression beyond the literary, examining class consciousness as expressed in film or visual art. In terms of my own personal research trajectory, I would be very interested in exploring more fully the interactions between class and lesbian identity in contemporary French women's writing⁶⁵⁵. An investigation at the intersection of class and queerness across the works of Despentès or Angot, for example, would be fascinating.

The reading of classed texts requires a sensitivity to the many issues unpacked in this thesis. Such texts invite careful, sympathetic, and critical reading. In unearthing class and its 'hidden injuries',⁶⁵⁶ we must also bear matters of intersectionality in mind. According to Diana Coole, 'class is never an autonomous difference, in so far as it cuts across other diversities like race and gender'.⁶⁵⁷ As such, it is important to maintain particular sensitivity to those points where these differences converge and may reinforce oppression. As Diane Reay has written, 'even when class is not overt [...] it is still there as part of the implicit, taken-for-granted

⁶⁵⁵ Thus far, much has been of class and gay *male* identity in, for instance, the works of Ernaux and Louis.

⁶⁵⁶ Sennett and Cobb, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵⁷ Coole, Diana, 'Is class a difference that makes a difference?', *Radical Philosophy*, 77 (1996), pp17-25, p24

understandings [we] bring to [our] relationships with others'.⁶⁵⁸ It is these 'taken-for-granted understandings', in literature as in the social world, that must be highlighted and challenged as they translate into naturalised power dynamics. For Pierre Bourdieu, class, as conceptualised through the habitus, is 'a dynamic concept, a rich interlacing of past and present, interiorised and permeating both body and psyche'.⁶⁵⁹ In the case of Ernaux, Angot and Desportes, an interlacing of past and present, and a permeation of class, remain fundamental in their writing. In her *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, bell hooks suggest that 'in order to end oppressive class hierarchy we must think against the grain'.⁶⁶⁰ Ernaux, Angot and Desportes are all writers who continue to fashion new ways of writing 'against the grain'. In turn, we are required to read 'against the grain', to recognise our own class-based assumptions and prejudices, and to return, as they do, to interrogate the class structures and injuries that shape both identity and narrative.

⁶⁵⁸ Reay, Diane, 'Feminist Theory, Habitus, and Social Class: Disrupting Notions of Classlessness', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20:2 (1997), pp225-233, p227

⁶⁵⁹ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁶⁰ hooks, bell, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York & London, Routledge, 2000), p162

Bibliography

Primary texts

- Angot, Christine, *L'Inceste* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1999)
- Angot, Christine, *Le Voyage dans l'Est* (Paris: Flammarion, 2021)
- Angot, Christine, *Léonore, toujours* (Paris: J'ai Lu, 2016)
- Angot, Christine, *Les Petits* (Paris: Flammarion, 2011)
- Angot, Christine, *Sujet Angot* (Paris: Pocket, 1999)
- Angot, Christine, *Un amour impossible* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015)
- Angot, Christine, *Une semaine de vacances* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012)
- Despentes, Virginie, *Apocalypse bébé* (Paris: Grasset, 2010)
- Despentes, Virginie, *Baise-moi* (Paris: Grasset, 1999)
- Despentes, Virginie, *King Kong Théorie* (Paris : Grasset, 2006)
- Despentes, Virginie, *Les jolies choses* (Paris: Hachette, 2016)
- Despentes, Virginie, *Vernon Subutex 1* (Paris: Grasset, 2015)
- Despentes, Virginie, *Vernon Subutex 2* (Paris: Grasset, 2015)
- Despentes, Virginie, *Vernon Subutex 3* (Paris: Grasset, 2017)
- Despentes, Virginie and Zina, Cara, *Fear of a Female Planet* [Vinyl] (Lyon: Dangerhouse Skylab, 1993)
- Ernaux, Annie and Marie, Marc, *L'Usage de la photo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005)
- Ernaux, Annie, «*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*» in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp605-656
- Ernaux, Annie, *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977)
- Ernaux, Annie, *Journal du dehors* in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp497-552
- Ernaux, Annie, *L'Atelier noir* (Paris: Éditions des Busclats, 2011)
- Ernaux, Annie, *L'événement* in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp269-322
- Ernaux, Annie, *La femme gelée* in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp323-433
- Ernaux, Annie, *La honte* in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp211-268
- Ernaux, Annie, *La place* in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp435-496
- Ernaux, Annie, *Le jeune homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2022)
- Ernaux, Annie, *Les années* in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp925-1085
- Ernaux, Annie, *Les Armoires vides* in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp103-210
- Ernaux, Annie, *Mémoire de fille* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016)
- Ernaux, Annie, *Passion simple* in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp657-696
- Ernaux, Annie, *Regarde les lumières mon amour* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016)

Ernaux, Annie, *Retour à Yvetot* (Paris: Éditions du Mauconduit, 2013)

Ernaux, Annie, *Se perdre in Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp697-876

Secondary texts

Abbott, Pamela and Sapsford, Roger, *Women and Social Class* (London: Tavistock, 1987)

Abrams, Laura, 'Contextual Variations in Young Women's Gender Identity Negotiations',
Psychology of Women Quarterly, 27:1 (2003), pp64-74

Abrams, Laura, 'Rethinking Girls "At-Risk"', *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 6:2 (2002) pp47-64

Achour, Mouloud, 'Le Gros Journal avec Virginie Despentes et Sofiane, le bitume avec une plume, 29/05 - CANAL+', online video recording, Youtube (30th May 2017)
<[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Qv\]p1xY3iQ&t=553s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Qv]p1xY3iQ&t=553s)> [last accessed June 2022]

Adamek, Philip M., 'The Intimacy of Jean-Luc Nancy's *L'Intrus*', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 2:3 (2002), pp189-201

Adkins, Lisa and Skeggs, Beverley, *Feminism After Bourdieu* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004)

Ahmed, Sara, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014)

Alquier, Anouk, 'La Banlieue Parisienne du Dehors au Dedans : Annie Ernaux et Faïza Guène', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 15:4 (2011) pp451-458

Angot, Christine 'Acte biographique' in *Je & moi*, ed. Forest Philippe, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, 598 (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), pp31-40

Angot, Christine, 'Je veux dire la vie', *La Cause du Désir*, 86:1 (2014) pp140-146

Angot, Christine, *L'Usage de la vie* (Paris : Fayard, 1999)

Arbizu, Susana and Belin, Henri, 'King Kong Théorie : Entretien avec Virginie Despentes',
Mauvaiseherbe's Weblog (2008)

<<https://mauvaiseherbe.wordpress.com/2008/09/11/king-kong-theorie-entretien-avec-virginie-despentes/>> [last accessed June 2022]

Ambrecht, Tom, 'Comment y faire face: La parole faite chair de Virginie Despentes',
Mosaic, 50:2 (2017), pp83-96

Arnould-Bloomfield, Elisabeth and Pucci, Suzanne R., 'Esthetics of Intimacy, Esthétiques de l'intime: Introduction', *L'Esprit créateur*, 44:1 (2004) pp3-8

Aubonnet, Brigitte, 'Annie Ernaux', *Encre vagabondes*

- <<http://www.encresvagabondes.com/rencontre/ernaux.htm>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Bacholle, Michèle, 'Confessions d'une femme pudique: Annie Ernaux', *French Forum*, 28:1 (2003) pp91-109
- Bacholle, Michèle, 'Interview with Annie Ernaux: Écrire le vécu', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 2:1 (1998), pp141-151
- Bacholle, Michèle, *Annie Ernaux: De la perte au corps glorieux* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2011)
- Benstock, Shari, ed. *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1988)
- Berlant, Lauren, 'Intimacy: A Special Issue' *Critical Inquiry*, 24:2 (1998) pp281-288
- Berlant, Lauren, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011)
- Best, Francine, Blanckeman, Bruno and Dugast-Portes, Francine, ed. *Annie Ernaux: le Temps et la Mémoire* (Paris: Stock, 2014)
- Best, Victoria and Crowley, Martin, *The New Pornographies: Explicit sex in recent French fiction and film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007)
- Birnbaum, Jean, 'Christine Angot : « Il n'y a pas de vérité hors de la littérature »', *Le Monde* (2015) <https://www.lemonde.fr/festival/article/2015/09/08/christine-angot-il-n-y-a-pas-de-verite-hors-de-la-litterature_4737433_4415198.html> [last accessed June 2022]
- Blackhurst, Alice, 'Living Fictions', *Sidecar* (2022)
<<https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/living-fictions>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Boehringer, Monika, 'Écrire le dedans et le dehors : dialogue transatlantique avec Annie Ernaux', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 47 (1999) pp165-70
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *Ce que parler veut dire* (Paris: Fayard, 1982)
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 'L'illusion biographique', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 62-63 (1986) pp69-72
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *Choses dites* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1987)
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 'Effets de lieu' in *La Misère du monde*, ed. Bourdieu, Pierre (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993)
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *La domination masculine* (Paris : Seuil, 1998)
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement* [ebook] (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2016) Available at <http://www.leseditionsdeminuit.fr/livre-La_Distinction-1954-1-1-0-1.html> [last accessed August 2021]

- Bourgeois-Muller, Thomas and Durget, Emmanuel, 'Virginie Despentes : « Booba n'est pas assez pris au sérieux comme auteur »' *Le Point* (2018)
 <https://www.lepoint.fr/culture/virginie-despentes-la-musique-m-a-plus-aidee-que-la-litterature-08-09-2018-2249589_3.php> [last accessed June 2022]
- Bourmeau, Sylvain 'Christine Angot : « L'Inceste est une affaire sociale », *Libération* (2012)
 <https://www.liberation.fr/livres/2012/09/03/l-inceste-est-une-affaire-sociale_843627/> [last accessed June 2022]
- Bricco, Elisa, 'Considérations sur *Vernon Subutex* de Virginie Despentes : « formes de vie », implication et engagement oblique', *COnTEXTES*, 22 (2019)
 <<https://journals.openedition.org/contextes/7087>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Brinkema, Eugenie, *The Form of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014)
- Bromley, Roger, 'The Theme That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Class and Recent British Film' in *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. Munt, Sally (London & New York: Cassell, 2000)
- Butler, Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993)
- Butler, Judith, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997)
- Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990)
- Butler, Judith, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004)
- Carlini Versini, Dominique, '“Mais dégage!” Touch and Gendered Power Dynamics in Virginie Despentes' Novels', *Fixxion*, 21 (2020), pp42-51
- Casagrande, Léa, 'Les audiences d'“On n'est pas couché” s'écroulent. L'émission est-elle en crise?', *Les Inrockuptibles* (2017) <<https://www.lesinrocks.com/actu/les-audiences-don-nest-pas-couche-secroulent-lemission-est-elle-en-crise-152039-09-11-2017/>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Charpentier, Isabelle, 'De corps à corps: Réceptions croisées d'Annie Ernaux', *Politix. Revue des sciences sociales du politique*, 27 (1994), pp45-75
- Charpentier, Isabelle, 'La Littérature est une arme de combat : entretien du 19 avril 2002 avec Annie Ernaux', in Mauger, Gérard, *Rencontres avec Pierre Bourdieu* (Paris, Éditions du Croquant, 2005) pp159-175
- Chrisafis, Angelique, 'Virginie Despentes: 'What is going on in men's heads when women's pleasure has become a problem?', *The Guardian* (2018)

- <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/31/virginie-despentes-interview-baise-moi-vernon-subutex>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Clancy, Kim, 'Academic as Anarchist: Working-Class Lives into Middle-Class Culture' in *Class Matters: 'Working-Class' Women's Perspectives on Social Class*, ed. Mahony, Pat and Zmroczek, Catherine (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997)
- Cook, Jon, 'Culture, Class and Taste' in *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. S. R. Munt (London & New York: Cassell, 2000)
- Coole, Diana, 'Is class a difference that makes a difference?', *Radical Philosophy*, 77 (1996), pp17-25
- Costa, Marianne, 'Despentes: anarcho-féministe', *Le Magazine* (2007)
<<http://www.lemagazine.info/?Despentes-anarcho-feministe>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43:6 (1991), pp1241-1299
- Crom, Natalie, 'Virginie Despentes : "La société est devenue plus prude, l'atmosphère plus réactionnaire"', *Télérama* (2015)
<<https://www.telerama.fr/livre/virginiedespentes,121233.php>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Crowley, Patrick and Jordan Shirley, ed. *What Forms Can Do: The Work of Form in 20th- and 21st- Century French Literature and Thought* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020)
- Cruikshank, Ruth, ed. *Fin de millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- Davis, Angela, *Women, Race & Class* (London: Penguin, 2019)
- Damlé, Amaleena and Rye, Gill, ed. *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013)
- Damlé, Amaleena, *The Becoming of the Body: Contemporary Women's Writing in French* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014)
- Day, Lorraine, 'Entraîner les lecteurs dans l'effacement du réel': Interview with Annie Ernaux', *Romance Studies*, 23:3 (2005), pp223-236
- Day, Lorraine, 'Class, sexuality and subjectivity in Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides*' in *Contemporary French fiction by women: Feminist perspectives*, ed. Attack, Margaret and Powrie, Phil (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990)
- Day, Lorraine, Thomas, Lyn and Ernaux, Annie, 'Exploring the Interspace: Recent

- Dialogues around the Work of Annie Ernaux', *Feminist Review*, 74, *Fiction and Theory: Crossing Boundaries* (2003), pp98-104
- Day, Lorraine, *Writing Shame and Desire: The Work of Annie Ernaux* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007)
- De Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)
- Despentes, Virginie and Luz, *Vernon Subutex BD1* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2020)
- Despentes, Virginie, 'Césars : «Désormais on se lève et on se barre»', *Libération* (2020)
 <https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/03/01/cesars-desormais-on-se-leve-et-on-se-barre_1780212/> [last accessed June 2022]
- Devarrieux, Claire, review of *Un amour impossible* for *Libération* (2015) No longer available online <https://www.liberation.fr/cahier-ete/2015/2015/08/14/christine-angot_1363547/> [last accessed June 2020]
- Didry, Claude, 'Lire *Vernon Subutex* 1, 2 et 3 de Virginie Despentes. Compte rendu, compte tenu d'un état d'urgence', *L'Homme & la Société*, 1-2, 203-204 (2017), pp249-260
- Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London: Routledge, 2001), p115
- Downing, Lisa, 'French Cinema's New 'Sexual Revolution': Postmodern Porn and Troubled Genre', *French Cultural Studies*, 15:3 (2004) pp265-80
- Downing, Lisa, 'Re-viewing the Sexual Relation: Levinas and Film', *Film-Philosophy*, 11 (2007) pp49-65
- Dubois, Jacques, 'Christine Angot : l'enjeu du hors-jeu', *COntEXTES*, 9 (2011)
 <<https://journals.openedition.org/contextes/4789#quotation>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Edwards, Natalie and Hogarth, Christopher, ed. *This "Self" Which Is Not One: Women's Life Writing in French* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010)
- Edwards, Natalie, "'Écrire pour ne plus avoir honte": Christine Angot's and Annie Ernaux's Shameless Bodies' in *The Female Face of Shame*, ed. Moran, Patricia and Johnson, Erica (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013)
- Edwards, Natalie, 'Autofiction and the Law: Legal Scandals in Contemporary French Literature', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 22:1 (2018), pp6-14
- Edwards, Natalie, 'Autofiction in the Dock: The Case of Christine Angot' in *Protean Selves: First-Person Voices in Twenty-First-Century French and Francophone Narratives*, ed. Angelo, Adrienne and Fulop, Erika (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014)

- Edwards, Natalie, 'Mobile Women in Virginie Despentes's *Apocalypse Bébé*', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 55, 1 (2018) pp6-16
- Edy, Delphine, 'Édouard Louis et l'écriture de soi. Quand la poétique performe le réel', *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte*, 45, 3-4 (2021), pp445-479
- Einhorn, Juliette, 'ENTRETIEN. Annie Ernaux : « Je pars de moi, et je le recouvre par l'écriture »', Ouest-France (2021) <<https://www.ouest-france.fr/culture/livres/lire-magazine/annie-ernaux-je-pars-de-moi-et-je-le-recouvre-par-l-ecriture-96465a8a-4862-11ec-9fb6-7d55cb1d2c6a>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Elkin, Lauren, 'For the Ugly Ones: The Spiky Feminist Anger of Virginie Despentes', *The Paris Review* (2018) <<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/09/05/for-the-ugly-ones-the-spiky-feminist-anger-of-virginie-despentes/>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Elkin, Lauren, 'Trash, Rock, Destroy: Is Virginie Despentes the French writer America needs?', *Harper's Magazine* (2019) <<https://harpers.org/archive/2019/12/trash-rock-destroy-virginie-despentes-vernon-subutex-baise-moi/>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Eribon, Didier, *Retour à Reims* (Paris: Fayard, 2009)
- Ernaux, Annie and Rérolle, Raphaëlle, 'Écrire, écrire, pourquoi? Annie Ernaux: Entretien avec Raphaëlle Rérolle' (Paris: Éditions de la Bibliothèque publique d'information, 2011) <<http://books.openedition.org/bibpompidou/1086>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Ernaux, Annie, "'Fils de la honte'", *BibliObs* (2009) <<https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/documents/20091022.BIB4255/fils-de-la-honte-par-annie-ernaux.html>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Ernaux, Annie, *L'Écriture comme un couteau : Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet* (Paris : Éditions Stock, 2003)
- Ernaux, Annie, *Le vrai lieu : Entretiens avec Michelle Porte* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018)
- Fayard, Nicole, 'The Rebellious Body as Parody: *Baise-moi* by Virginie Despentes', *French Studies*, 60:1 (2006) pp63-77
- Ferniot, Christine, 'Christine Angot ou l'amer maternel', *L'Express* (2015) <https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/christine-angot-ou-l-amer-maternel_1708448.html> [last accessed June 2022]
- FilmsActu*, 'UN AMOUR IMPOSSIBLE Bande Annonce (2018) Virginie Efira', online video, Youtube (24th August 2018) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LH8hqytf6Q>> [last accessed October 2020]
- Forcolin, Francesca, 'Christine Angot: le désir d'indigner le lecteur : La société violée par l'(auto)fiction', *Carnets, Première Série - 3 Numéro Spécial* (2011), pp51-61

- Forest, Philippe, 'Implacable. « Une semaine de vacances », de Christine Angot', *Le Monde* (2012) <https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2012/08/31/christine-angot-implacable_1753050_3260.html> [last accessed June 2022]
- Franceinfo*, "'On n'est pas couché" : l'altercation entre Sandrine Rousseau et Christine Angot en six actes' (2017) <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/medias/on-n-est-pas-couche-l-altercation-entre-sandrine-rousseau-et-christine-angot-en-six-actes_2399596.html> [last accessed June 2022]
- Franceinfo*, 'Christine Angot fait polémique après ses propos sur l'esclavage', (2019) <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/medias/video-christine-angot-fait-polemique-apres-ses-propos-sur-l-esclavage_3472739.html> [last accessed June 2022]
- Gallie, Duncan, *Social Inequality and Class Radicalism in France and Britain* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983)
- Gear, Rachel, 'All Those Nasty Womanly Things: Women Artists, Technology and the Monstrous-feminine', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24 (2001), pp321-333
- Geffray, Emilie, 'C à vous : Virginie Calmels revient sur son échange avec Christine Angot dans ONPC', *Le Figaro* (2018) <https://tvmag.lefigaro.fr/programme-tv/c-a-vous-virginie-calmels-revient-sur-son-echange-avec-christine-angot-dans-onpc_5b0725ca-2698-11e8-a155-9eab006934e7/> [last accessed June 2022]
- Gesbert, Olivia, 'Transfuges de classe : à l'origine était... Annie Ernaux', podcast, *France Culture* (2021) <<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/la-grande-table-idees/transfuges-de-classe-a-l-origine-etait-annie-ernaux-4751566>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Gilles, Médioni, 'Despentes abrupte!', *L'Express* (1996) <https://www.lexpress.fr/informations/despentes-abrupte_613620.html> [last accessed June 2022]
- Goergen, Maxime, 'Vernon Subutex et le roman « balzacien »', *Rocky Mountain Review*, 72:1, *Special Issue on Virginie Despentes* (2018), pp165-182
- Gonzalez, Christine, 'Annie Ernaux, adolescente : l'ennui et le rêve', *Radio France* [podcast] <<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/chambre-d-ado/annie-ernaux-adolescente-l-ennui-et-le-reve-1286137>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Grasset*, 'Cher Connard' (2022) <<https://www.grasset.fr/livres/cher-connard-9782246826514>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Grosz, Elizabeth, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana

- University Press, 1994)
- Gunn, Simon, 'Translating Bourdieu: cultural capital and the English middle class in historical perspective', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 56:1 (2005), pp49-64
- Hanley, Lynsey, *Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide* (London: Penguin, 2017)
- Havercroft, Barbara, 'Dire l'indicible : trauma et honte chez Annie Ernaux', *Roman 20-50*, 40:2 (2005) pp119-132 <<https://www.cairn.info/revue-roman2050-2005-2-page-119.htm>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Havercroft, Barbara, 'Le refus du romanesque ?. Hybridité générique et écriture de l'inceste chez Christine Angot', *temps zéro*, 8 (2014) <<https://tempszero.contemporain.info/document1146>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Haylett, Chris, 'Illegitimate subjects?: Abject whites, neoliberal modernisation, and middle-class multiculturalism', *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space*, 19:3, (2001), pp351-370
- Hegemann, Helene, 'Virginie Despentes: Hates People, Loves Dogs', *032c* (2020) <<https://032c.com/magazine/virginie-despentes-hates>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Hemmens, Alastair and Williams, Russell, ed. *Autour de l'extrême littéraire* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012)
- Hemmings, Clare, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011)
- Henry-Tierney, Pauline, 'Marie Claire's Transgressive Trio: Erotic Alterity in Christine Angot, Claire Castillon, and Tatiana de Rosnay', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 59:3 (2019) pp73-85 <<https://eprints.ncl.ac.uk/249348>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Herman, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015)
- Herzog, Nina, 'Community as Protagonist: Talking with Virginie Despentes', *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2021) <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/community-as-protagonist-talking-with-virginie-despentes/>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Hill Collins, Patricia and Bilge, Sirma, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016)
- hooks, bell, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto, 1987)
- hooks, bell, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York & London, Routledge, 2000)
- Houot, Laurence, "'Mémoire de fille": Annie Ernaux livre la pièce précieuse manquante de son œuvre', *Franceinfo* (2016) <<https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/livres/roman/memoire-de-fille-annie-ernaux->

- livre-la-piece-precieuse-manquante-de-son-oeuvre_3390705.html> [last accessed June 2022]
- Hughes, Alexandra, “Moi qui ai connu l’inceste, je m’appelle Christine” [I have had an incestuous relationship and my name is Christine]: Writing Subjectivity in Christine Angot’s Incest Narratives’, *Journal of Romance Studies I*, 2.1 (2002) pp65-77
- Hughes, Edward ‘Circuits of Reappropriation: Accessing the Real in the Work of Didier Eribon’ in *What Forms Can Do: The Work of Form in 20th- and 21st- Century French Literature and Thought*, ed. Crowley, Patrick and Jordan Shirley (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020)
- Hughes, Edward, *Egalitarian Strangeness: On Class Disturbance and Levelling in Modern and Contemporary French Narrative* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021)
- Hughes, Sarah, ‘Virginie Despentes: ‘If you are a lesbian, you really are less restricted by life’, *inews* (2020) <<https://inews.co.uk/culture/books/virginie-despentes-vernon-subutex-3-man-booker-prize-lesbian-loneliness-interview-463909>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Hugueny-Leger, Élise, “En dehors de la fête’: entre présence et absence, pour une approche dialogique de l’identité dans *Les Années d’Annie Ernaux*’, *French Studies*, 66:3 (2012) pp362-375
- Hugueny-Leger, Elise, ‘Entre Conformisme et subversion: la Portée du paratexte dans l’œuvre d’Annie Ernaux’, *Romance Studies*, 26:1 (2008), pp33-42
- Hugueny-Leger, Élise, ‘État présent : Annie Ernaux’, *French Studies*, 72:2 (2018) pp256-269
- Hugueny-Leger, Élise, *Annie Ernaux, Une Poétique de la Transgression* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009)
- Jackson, Margaret, ‘Sexuality and Struggle: Feminism, Sexology and the Social Construction of Sexuality’ in Jones, Carol and Mahony, Pat, ed. *Learning Our Lines: Sexuality and Social Control in Education* (London: The Women’s Press, 1989)
- Jackson, Stevi, ‘Why a Materialist Feminism is (Still) Possible – and Necessary’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 24, 3/4 (2001), pp283-293
- Jeannelle, Jean-Louis, ‘Le procès de l’autofiction’, *Études*, 419:9 (2013) pp221-230 <<https://www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-2013-9-page-221.htm>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Jollien, Alexandre, ‘« Retour à Yvetot », d’Annie Ernaux : la chronique « livre audio » d’Alexandre Jollien’, *Le Monde* (2019) <<https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2019/07/12/retour-a-yvetot-d-annie->

- ernaux-la-chronique-livre-audio-d-alexandre-jollien_5488461_3260.html> [last accessed June 2022]
- Jones, Katie, 'Apolitical Animals? The Politics of Disgust in Novels by Monika Maron and Marie Darrieussecq', *German Life and Letters*, 64:1, (2011) pp156-168
- Jordan, Shirley, 'Autofiction, Ethics and Consent: Christine Angot's *Les Petits*', *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine* (2012) <<http://www.revue-critique-de-fixxion-francaise-contemporaine.org/rcffc/article/view/fx04.01/624>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Jordan, Shirley, 'Dans le mauvais goût pour le mauvais goût'? Pornographie, violence et sexualité féminine dans la fiction de Virginie Despentes' in *Nouvelles écrivaines: Nouvelles voix?* ed. Morello, Nathalie and Rodgers, Catherine (2002), pp121-139
- Jordan, Shirley, 'Improper Exposure: "L'Usage de la photo" by Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 7.2 (2007), pp123-141
- Jordan, Shirley, 'Overstepping the Boundaries: Sexual Awakening, Trauma and Writing in Annie Ernaux's *Memoire de fille* and Christine Angot's *Une semaine de vacances*', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 59:3 (2019), pp5-18
- Jordan, Shirley, 'Reconfiguring the Public and the Private: Intimacy, Exposure and Vulnerability in Christine Angot's *Rendez-vous*', *French Cultural Studies*, 18:2 (2007), pp201-218
- Jordan, Shirley, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004)
- Kapriélian, Nelly, '[Nos années 2010] 2015, Naissance de Vernon Subutex : Despentes raconte', *Les Inrockuptibles* (2015) <<https://www.lesinrocks.com/livres/dans-vernon-subutex-virginie-despentes-cartographie-la-societe-102778-01-02-2015/>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Kapriélian, Nelly, 'Il y aura bien un nouveau Despentes à la rentrée', *Les Inrockuptibles* (2022) <<https://www.lesinrocks.com/livres/il-y-aura-bien-un-nouveau-despentes-a-la-rentree-465742-27-04-2022/>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Kawakami, Akane, 'Annie Ernaux's 'Proof of Life': *L'Usage de la photo*', *French Studies*, 64:4 (2010), pp451-462
- Kawakami, Akane, 'Time Travelling in Ernaux's *Mémoire de fille*', *French Studies*, 73:2 (2019), pp253-265
- Kelly, Alan, 'Virginie Despentes interviewed' *3AM Magazine* (2009)

- <<https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/virginie-despentes-interviewed/>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Kemp, Simon, 'Contamination Anxiety in Annie Ernaux's Twenty-First-Century Texts', in *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature*, ed. by A. Damlé and G. Rye (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013) pp168-79
- Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Eve, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003)
- Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Eve and Frank, Adam, *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995)
- Kristeva, Julia, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur : Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980) [ebook]
- Ladimer, Bethany, 'Cracking the Codes: Social Class and Gender in Annie Ernaux', *Chimères*, 26:1 (2002), pp53-69
- Lafontaine, Marie-Pier, 'L'écriture du trauma : une actualisation au féminin de la violence passée', *Voix Plurielles*, 15 (2018), pp126-137
- Lawler, Steph, 'Disgusted Subjects: The Making of Middle-Class Identities' *The Sociological Review*, 53:3 (August 2005), pp429-446
- Lawler, Steph, 'Escape and Escapism: Representing Working-Class Women' in *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. Munt, Sally (London & New York: Cassell, 2000)
- Ledoux-Beaugrand, Évelyne, 'Tombeau pour Léonore. Inceste et filiation chez Christine Angot', *Tessera*, 35 (2003)
- Le Wita, Béatrix, *Ni vue, ni connue : Approche ethnographique de la culture bourgeoise* (Paris : MSH, 1995) [Kindle ebook]
- Lindon, Mathieu, 'Trois, deux, un ... Angot!', *Libération* (1999) <https://next.liberation.fr/livres/1999/08/26/trois-deux-un-angot_280656> [last accessed June 2022]
- Louar, Nadia, "'Deux cents mots et un gros marteau.'" Virginia Despentes's Skillful Construction of an Authorial Posture', *Rocky Mountain Review*, 72:1, *Special Issue on Virginia Despentes* (2018), pp125-145
- Louar, Nadia, 'Version femmes plurielles : relire *Baise-moi* de Virginia Despentes', *Palimpsestes*, 22 (2009), pp83-98 <<https://journals.openedition.org/palimpsestes/191?lang=fr#quotation>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Louis, Édouard, *Qui a tué mon père* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2018)

- Mahony, Pat and Zmroczek, Catherine, 'Why Class Matters' in *Class Matters: 'Working Class' Women's Perspectives on Social Class*, ed. Mahony, Pat and Zmroczek Catherine (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997)
- Marceau, Jane, *Class and Status in France: Economic Change and Social Immobility, 1945-1975* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977)
- McIlvanney, Siobhán, *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001)
- Miller, Nancy, 'Memory Stains: Annie Ernaux's Shame', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 14:1 (1999), pp38-50
- Miller, William, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997)
- Moricheau-Airaud, Bérengère, 'Les formes du paradigme social dans l'écriture d'Annie Ernaux', *RELIEF – Revue électronique de littérature française*, 13:1 (2019) pp28-41
- Mossuz-Lavau, Janine, 'De Simone de Beauvoir à Virginie Despentes: les intellectuelles et la question du genre', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 17:2 (2009), pp177-188
- Motte, Warren, 'Annie Ernaux's Understatement', *The French Review*, 69:1 (1995) pp55-67
- Munt, Sally 'Introduction' to *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. Munt, Sally (London & New York: Cassell, 2000)
- Nancy, Jean-Luc, *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Galilée, 2013)
- Nancy, Jean-Luc, *L'Intrus* (Paris: Galilée, 2000)
- NDiaye, Marie, *Autoportrait en vert* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2005)
- Nettelbeck, Colin, 'The Novelist as DJ: *Vernon Subutex* and The Music of Our Times', *Rocky Mountain Review*, 72:1, *Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* (2018), pp183-202
- Owen Rowland, Lili, 'Into a Blazing Oven', *London Review of Books*, 42:24 (2020)
<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n24/lili-owen-rowlands/into-a-blazing-oven>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Oyler, Lauren, 'Behind the Scenes With Virginie Despentes', *Vice* (2015)
<<https://www.vice.com/en/article/evgg8a/behind-the-scenes-with-virginie-despentes>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Paechter, Carrie, 'Rethinking the possibilities for hegemonic femininity: Exploring a Gramscian framework', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 68 (2018) pp121-128
- Preciado, Paul, *Testo Junkie: Sexe, drogue et biopolitique* (Paris: Grasset, 2008)
- Reader, Keith, *The Abject Object: Avatars of the Phallus in Contemporary French Theory, Literature and Film* (Leiden: Rodopi, 2006)

- Reay, Diane, 'Feminist Theory, Habitus, and Social Class: Disrupting Notions of Classlessness', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20:2 (1997), pp225-233
- Reay, Diane, 'The Double-Bind of the 'Working-Class' Feminist Academic: The Success of Failure or the Failure of Success?' in *Class Matters: 'Working-Class' Women's Perspectives on Social Class*, ed. Mahony, Pat and Zmroczek, Christine (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997)
- Reyns-Chikuma, Chris, 'Traversées des Genres avec Frictions et Fusions dans *Apocalypse Bébé* de Virginie Despentes', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 17:5 (2013) pp550-559
- Richard, Francis, 'Un amour impossible, de Christine Angot', *Contrepoints* (2015) <<https://www.contrepoints.org/2015/09/14/221686-un-amour-impossible-de-christine-angot>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Rieger-Ladich, Markus and Wortmann, Kai 'Enabling Violations: Social Class and Sexual Identity in Didier Eribon's "Returning to Reims"', *Childhood Vulnerability*, 3 (2021), pp79-92
- Robson, Kathryn, 'Spaces of Violation: Refiguring Rape' in Contemporary French Women's Fiction, *Romance Studies*, 25:1 (2007) pp57-67
- Rye, Gill, "'Il faut que le lecteur soit dans le doute": Christine Angot's Literature of Uncertainty', *Dalhousie French Studies, Hybrid voices, Hybrid Texts: Women's Writing at the Turn of the Millennium*, 68 (2004) pp117-126
- Rye, Gill, 'In Uncertain Terms: Mothering without Guilt in Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Mal de mer* and Christine Angot's *Léonore, toujours*', *L'Esprit Createur*, 45:1 (2005), pp5-15
- Rye, Gill, 'Public Places, Intimate Spaces: Christine Angot's Incest Narratives', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 93 (2010) pp63-73
- Rye, Gill, *L'histoire d'amour chez Christine Angot: romance or betrayal?* [Unpublished paper presented at 'Diversity and Difference in France and the Francophone World' conference, 20th-21st century French and Francophone Studies International Colloquium, April 1-3 2004, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida (Panel: Gender/Genre Difference and the Love Story)] <<https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/345/>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Sabatier, Benoît, 'Virginie Despentes : « Je suis surprise par l'égoïsme de notre génération »', *Technikart* (2019) <<https://www.technikart.com/virginie-despentes-feministe-punk/>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Sadoux, Marion, 'Christine Angot's Autofictions: literature and/or reality?' in *Women's Writing*

- in Contemporary France: New writing, new literatures in the 1990s*, ed. Rye, Gill and Worton, Michael (Manchester University Press, 2002)
- Sanyal, Debarati, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020)
- Sauzon, Virginie, 'La déviance en réseau : Grisélidis Réal, Virginie Despentes et le féminisme pragmatique', *TRANS-*, 13 (2012) <<https://journals.openedition.org/trans/550>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Sauzon, Virginie, 'Le rire comme enjeu féministe : une lecture de l'humour dans *Les mouflettes d'Atropos* de Chloé Delaume et *Baise-moi* de Virginie Despentes', *Recherches féministes*, 25:2 (2012), pp65-81
- Sauzon, Virginie, 'Virginie Despentes et les récits de la violence sexuelle : une déconstruction littéraire et féministe des rhétoriques de la racialisation', *Genre, sexualité et société*, 7 (2012) <<https://journals.openedition.org/gss/2328>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Sayer, Andrew, 'What Are You Worth?: Why Class is an Embarrassing Subject', *Sociological Research Online*, 7:3 (2002) <<https://www.socresonline.org.uk/7/3/sayer.html>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Schaal, Michèle, 'Introduction to Special Issue on Virginie Despentes. From Margins to Center (?)', *Rocky Mountain Review*, 72:1 (2018), pp14-35
- Schaal, Michèle, 'L'Univers affectif féminin dans *Vernon Subutex* de Virginie Despentes', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 22:4 (2018), pp475-483
- Schaal, Michèle, 'Un conte de fées punk-rock féministe : 'Bye Bye Blondie' de Virginie Despentes', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 99 (2012), pp49-61
- Schaal, Michèle, 'Une nécessaire rébellion féministe : de la violence au féminin chez Virginie Despentes' in *Rebelles et criminelles chez les écrivaines d'expression française*, ed. Chevillot, Frédérique and Trout Hall, Colette (Leiden: Rodopi, 2013)
- Seidlinger, Micheal, 'Virginie Despentes on Aging Punks, Failing Economies, and Fetishizing the Dead', *CrimeReads* (2019) <<https://crimereads.com/virginie-despentes/>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Sennett, Richard and Cobb, Jonathan *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977)
- Skeggs, Beverley, 'Context and Background: Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of class, gender and sexuality' in *Feminism After Bourdieu*, ed. Adkins, Lisa and Skeggs, Beverley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004)
- Skeggs, Beverley, 'Exchange, value and affect: Bourdieu and 'the self' in *Feminism After*

- Bourdieu, ed. Atkins, Lisa and Skeggs, Beverley (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2005)
- Skeggs, Beverley, 'Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of class, gender and sexuality' in *Feminism After Bourdieu*, ed. Atkins, Lisa and Skeggs, Beverley (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2005)
- Skeggs, Beverley, 'The Appearance of Class: Challenges in Gay Space' in *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. S. R. Munt (London & New York: Cassell, 2000)
- Skeggs, Beverley, 'The Forces That Shape Us: The Entangled Vine of Gender, Race and Class', *The Sociological Review*, 67:1 (J2019) pp28-35
- Skeggs, Beverley, 'The Toilet Paper: Femininity, Class and Mis-recognition', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24:3/4 (2001), pp295-307
- Skeggs, Beverley, 'Uneasy Alignments, Resourcing Respectable Subjectivity' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10:2 (2004) pp291-298
- Skeggs, Beverley, *Class, Self, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004)
- Skeggs, Beverley, *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: SAGE, 2002)
- Slimani, Leïla, *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014)
- Smith, Sidonie and Watson, Julia, ed. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998)
- Steedman, Carolyn, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987)
- Strings, Sabrina, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: NYU Press, 2019)
- Taddei, Frédéric, 'Virginie Despentes: "J'aime bien voir des petites culottes dans les films"', *GQ* (2015) <<https://www.gqmagazine.fr/pop-culture/interview/articles/virginie-despentes-jaime-bien-voir-des-petites-culottes-dans-les-films/23533>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Tallon, Jean-Louis, 'Entretien avec Virginie Despentes', *HorsPress* (2002) <<https://erato.pagesperso-orange.fr/horspress/despente.htm>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Tanette, Sylvie, 'Je rêvais de faire un livre qui dirait ce que c'est, avoir une mère', *Onlalu* (2015) <<https://www.onlalu.com/christine-angot-sylvie-tanette-amour-impossible-15090/>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Tanning, Dorothea, *Birthday* [Oil on canvas] (1942) Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia
- Taylor Merleau, Chloë, 'The Confessions of Annie Ernaux: Autobiography, Truth, and

- Repetition', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28:1, *Autobiography and Memoir* (Autumn, 2004), pp 65-88
- Thomas, Lyn and Webb, Emma, 'Writing from Experience: The Place of the Personal in French Feminist Writing', *Feminist Review*, 61 (Snakes and Ladders: Reviewing Feminisms at Century's End (Spring, 1999)), pp27-48
- Thomas, Lyn, 'À la recherche du moi perdu: memory and mourning in the work of Annie Ernaux', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 8:2 (Summer 2008), pp95-112
- Thomas, Lyn, 'Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness: Finding a Place in the French Feminist Canon?', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 15:2 (2006) pp159-168
- Thomas, Lyn, 'Reading and Writing with Bourdieu: Popular and Literary Intertexts in Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides*', *Institute for the Study of European Transformations*, 4 (2008) <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lyn-Thomas/publication/237229754_READING_AND_WRITING_WITH_BOURDIEU_POPULAR_AND_LITERARY_INTERTEXTS_IN_ANNIE_ERNAUX%27S_LES_ARMOIRES_VIDES/links/5532d88f0cf2f2a588b055dc/READING-AND-WRITING-WITH-BOURDIEU-POPULAR-AND-LITERARY-INTERTEXTS-IN-ANNIE-ERNAUXS-LES-ARMOIRES-VIDES.pdf> [last accessed June 2022]
- Thomas, Lyn, 'Voix Blanche?: Annie Ernaux, French Feminisms and the Challenge of Intersectionality', in Atack, Margaret, Fell, Alison, Holmes, Diana and Long, Imogen, ed. *Making Waves: French Feminisms and their Legacies 1975-2015* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019)
- Thomas, Lyn, *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and Her Audience* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999)
- Thumerel, Fabrice, ed. *Annie Ernaux; une oeuvre de l'entre-deux* (Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2004)
- Tierney, Robin, 'Lived Experience at the Level of the Body": Annie Ernaux's "Journaux Extimes"', *SubStance*, 35:3, 111: *The French Novel Now* (2006), pp113-130
- Touret, Michèle, 'Les lieux dans les romans d'Annie Ernaux ou "Sauver sa circonstance (ce qui a toujours été autour d'elle, continuellement)'" in Best, Francine, Blanckeman, Bruno and Dugast-Portes, Francine ed. *Annie Ernaux: le Temps et la Mémoire* (Stock : Paris, 2014)
- Tyler, Imogen, 'Chav Mum Chav Scum', *Feminist Media Studies*, 8:1 (2008), pp17-34
- Varela, Paula, 'Gender and class: An interview with Tithi Bhattacharya', *Labor and Society*, 22 (2019), pp99-406

- Vincent Gélinas-Lemaire, Vincent, 'The Narrative Lives of Places: Literature as an Architecture', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 22:4 (2018) pp454-462
- Weltman-Aron, Brigitte, 'L'écrire femme selon Virginie Despentès', *Mémoires du livre*, 9:2 (2018) <<https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/memoires/2018-v9-n2-memoires03728/1046985ar/>> [last accessed June 2022]
- Willging, Jennifer *Telling Anxiety: Anxious Narration in the Work of Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, Nathalie Sarraute, and Anne Hébert* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007)
- Willging, Jennifer, 'Annie Ernaux's Shameful Narration', *French Forum*, 26:1 (2001), pp83-103
- Wilson, Leah, 'Collapsing Boundaries to Expose Censorship and Expand Feminism in Virginie Despentès's *Apocalypse Baby*', *Rocky Mountain Review*, 72:1, *Special Issue on Virginie Despentès* (2018), pp146-164
- Winterson, Jeanette, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (New York: Vintage, 1991)
- Winterson, Jeanette, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (London: Vintage, 2012)