Dangerous and Endangered: Female Bodies in Contemporary French Studies

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INTRODUCTION

Literary Encounters of Sexual Difference

The Dangerous/Endangered Paradigm

In the novels studied in this dissertation, *Standard* by Nina Bouraoui (2014), *Sitt Marie Rose* by Etel Adnan (1977), and *La répudiée* (2010) by Eliette Abécassis, the physical and mental violence inflicted upon the dangerous female body results in a sex that itself is paradoxically in danger/endangered: when female bodies are categorized as dangerous, the threat that they represent requires mastering. What does it mean to be dangerous? Originating in the thirteenth century, the word "dangerous" signified a person who was difficult, arrogant, or severe.[1] This adjective stems from the twelfth-century Old French noun *dangier*, which indicated "*domination, empire; être à la merci de quelqu'un*."[2] Though this meaning is counterintuitive to the modern era, "dangerous" denoted a sense of risk or peril as a result of being in the control of someone or something else. "Danger," then, comes to us from a feeling of being dominated. We feel vulnerable and threatened when at the mercy of someone else. Thus, this sentiment can interrupt our tranquility, disturb our existence, and threaten established orders. When identified as dangerous to the phallocentric[3] social order, the characters I examine in this project are put "in danger," in perilous situations where their lives are at risk, or are "endangered" by being reduced to the male gaze[4] and expected to conform to societal norms of dangerous, seductive femininity.

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[1] "Dangerous, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2017. Web. 9 August 2017.
[2] "Danger." *Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales*. 2012.
[3] "Phallocentric" means to be centered around the phallus, which in psychoanalysis represents the locus of power around which society is organized. The term was coined by Freudian psychoanalyst Ernest Jones. "phallocentric, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2017. Web. 9 August 2017.
[4] The concept of the "male gaze" is most widely connected to film critic Laura Mulvey, who used the term in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Mulvey uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to claim that mainstream film has "coded the erotic into the language of the dominant phallocentric order," in which the female becomes an erotic object for the male viewer, with films thus expecting a passive female response to an active male gaze that "projects its phantasy onto the female figure" (835-8).

"Dangerous and Endangered: Female Bodies in Contemporary French Studies" examines how female bodies disturb the borders of male characters' identities, and illuminates how such representations place these female characters in danger in various contexts: a contemporary Parisian suburb, the postcolonial intra-state war of Lebanon, and an ultra-orthodox Jewish community in Israel. The female characters under study in this dissertation challenge rigid, patriarchal[5] conceptualizations of sexual difference, constructs which I examine through the lens of Hélène Cixous's essays and interviews on sexual difference from 1975 to 2015. While woman as a danger to patriarchy is not a new idea, few works have examined the explicit connection between the danger women pose and the danger to which they are subject.

Throughout, this dissertation asks how national, racial and religious differences map onto sexual difference. In the first chapter I question the role of race and colonial ideology in "dangerous" desire in film, commercial advertisement, and in Nina Bouraoui's *Standard*; in the second chapter, I explore the influence of religious identity and colonial history on gendered hierarchies in a nation previously under French control; and in the third chapter I examine the ways in which female minds are excluded from knowledge-making in religious orthodoxy because of their attachment to the physical female body.

Because I will be examining the psychic construct of identity, psychoanalysis presents itself as an indispensable tool to address the fear of the encroachment of the other on the self's body or identity. Psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan are foundational to the

[5] In an entry in the *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women*, Ara Wilson outlines "patriarchy" as an institution, system, or organization of society that perpetuates "male dominance and female subordination as systemic, political, and self-reproducing" (Wilson 1494). Tracing the evolution and complication of the term, Wilson adds that "heteropatriarchy" highlights the "heterosexual character of gender and sexual oppression," and corresponds to notions of compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity (1495). The analysis of "patriarchy" today must take into consideration "specific social and cultural forms of male domination" that are "inextricable from economic and gender oppression by colonialist, nationalist, and capitalist regimes" (1495). For instance, Devi's residence in northern India places her within a caste system in a country formerly under the colonial influence of the British; thus her story must be examined through the lens of gendered caste oppression.

thinking of the French intellectual history of sexual difference and theorizing of psychic constructions of identity; however, Julia Kristeva's elaboration of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis through her theorization of the borders of identity through the abject[6] better lends itself to my analysis. The Freudian castration complex and the Lacanian mirror stage conceptualize borders of the "self" that exclude others during subject formation. By contrast, Kristeva's account of "abjection" (*Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, 1980) further analyzes the social *rejection* of elements that challenge one's subjectivity. Consequently, the process of abjection recognizes how female bodies, when they are considered as border-crossers of identity, threaten the limits of the "self" and are consequently subject to various forms of rejection and harm.

The creative energy in Cixous's writings allows for a reimagining of sexual difference as understood in psychoanalysis, even as she uses the concepts of the ego and the unconscious to fuel her work on alterity. In this dissertation, I look to the potential of literature to critique dangerous/endangered female bodies as products of sexual difference. While the novels under study address vastly different narratives about sexual relations, each furthers the exploration of the dangerous/endangered paradigm through the myth of Medusa. I use the Roman account of the Medusa myth, and Cixous's rewriting of it, to demonstrate how these narratives foster a shift in perspective from the male gaze to a female point of view. This shift sheds light on resilient female figures who respond differently to destructive ideas surrounding sexual difference. This analysis reflects scholar of francophone literature Metka Zupančič's claim that the rewriting of oppressive myths bestows a restorative potential to literature:

> la littérature peut être utilisée comme espace privilégiée de l'activité mentale, émotive, spirituelle des femmes, non seulement pour prendre le pouls de la conscience collective

[6] I will later explore this concept in further detail in chapter (82-84), and chapter two (141-7).

d'une époque particulière, voire la nôtre, mais pour aider à la restructurer, à générer des formes nouvelles aptes à influencer de nouvelles relations, surtout entre hommes et femmes. (*Les écrivaines contemporaines et les mythes* 57)

Zupančič thus fashions literature as a "*remembrement*" or "re-membering" that mends what has been torn apart—socially, psychologically, and symbolically (*Les écrivaines contemporaines* 60). These myths and "fables" teach us about cultural fears, values and beliefs that can be critically examined through the study of literature. When rewritten, they can also have a therapeutic effect. Thus it is through the literary encounter that, with Cixous's Medusa as my guide, I will discuss the phenomenon of mythical sexual difference, and how this has generated the dangerous/endangered paradigm in the novels I study.

Cixous's conceptualization of sexual difference as a process of personal and social exchange has great inclusive potential. I use her poetic theorization of this movement as the lens through which I examine various narratives that both exemplify and critique the tension caused by sexual difference. Though I only consider a selection of Cixous's texts, I insist on the poetic and queer nature of her theoretical work, which productively displaces meanings of "woman" and "feminine" in the stories of the characters I consider. The novels that I will examine all depict toxic relationships between male and female characters, in cultures that posit a hierarchical and untraversable limit between male and female. In this context, Cixous's critiquing and unsettling of sexual difference is pivotal to understanding both the danger that the female characters pose within their heteropatriarchal settings, and the ways in which they disturb reductive notions of sexual difference. Cixous's acceptance of sexual difference-as-movement does not engender a fear of the other, because difference is no longer reduced to anatomy, which has been so deeply coded and hierarchized. Rather, it suggests the negotiation of energy, which

requires acknowledging one's porosity, the ways in which "me" and "my sexuality" engage with and respond to surrounding elements. Such a porosity is characteristic of the literary female figures studied in my dissertation. That this is the sexual difference that Cixous's Medusa has embodied since 1975 further justifies her presence among these pages: "Elle, l'arrivante de toujours, elle ne reste pas, elle va partout, elle échange, … Elle entre, elle entre elle moi et toi entre l'autre moi où l'un est toujours infiniment plus d'un et plus que moi, sans craindre atteindre jamais une limite: jouisseuse de notre devenance" ("Le rire de la Méduse" 53-4).

A Case Study

In 1963, Phoolan Devi was born into a *dalit*[7] family living in a small region in northern India. At eleven years old, she was married to a widower three times her age in exchange for a cow; after one year, she left her husband.[8] Her family reacted by demanding she commit suicide, as the young woman had disgraced her family by abandoning her marriage. She did not. In 1979, a gang of dacoits[9] took up camp at a nearby riverbank. The gang came and retrieved Devi from her family's home and took her out to a ravine (accounts vary under what conditions she was taken). Devi was tortured for three days by the gang leader, Babu Gujar, until the second-in-command, Vikram Mallah, shot and killed Gujar. Phoolan became the new gang leader's lover and news spread of her revenge; this was a rare story of a low-caste woman who regained her honor and became a dacoit.

[7] The *dalit* are the outcast of India, those who are considered to be "untouchable." Though the Indian government has attempted to make reforms to discrimination based on caste, the ideology still strongly informs social relations.
[8] Mary Anne Weaver's article in *The Atlantic*, "India's Bandit Queen: A saga of revenge—and the making of a legend of 'the real India'" (1996), provides a thorough account of Devi's life until 1996. My narration here relies msinly on her documentation, interviews and research.
[9] a band of armed robbers

Together, Mallah and Devi led the dacoit gang for the next year in the badlands of northern India. One evening in August of 1980, Devi's lover was shot by two upper-caste dacoit brothers who had recently rejoined the gang in pursuit of caste revenge against Mallah; Vikram Mallah was a lower-caste man who had murdered Babu Gujar, a member of a higher caste. The two dacoit brothers kidnapped Devi and sent her on a boat to a neighboring village, Behmai. Over the following weeks, a group of men (the Thakur) that included the two dacoit brothers repeatedly gang-raped her. When they finally released her, Devi formed her own dacoit gang and ultimately sought revenge during what is known today as the 1981 Saint Valentine's Day Massacre. On that day, Devi and her gang radically challenged the power of the Thakur men who had violently assaulted her. When the villagers refused to turn over the two brothers who murdered Mallah and initiated her torture, the gang ordered that thirty men be shot; twenty-two of them died. As reporter Mary Anne Weaver remarks: "It was the largest dacoit massacre since the founding of modern India. And it was triply shocking: because of its scale, because it was led by a woman, and because a woman of lower caste murdered men of a vastly higher one."[10] In spite of the extreme violence that she enacted in response to the horrors to which she was subject, at the site of her surrender Devi bowed to the images of Gandhi, a symbol of nonviolent civil disobedience, and of the warrior goddess Durga, who combats forces that threaten peace. This gesture suggests the mixed sources of inspiration for her life choices.

Devi was released from prison in 1994, longer than the terms she had originally negotiated, and was pardoned by the chief minister of the city of Uttar Pardesh, who, like Devi, was of a lower caste. As part of a government attempt to involve lower-caste members of the population in politics, Devi was appointed to Parliament. On July 25th, 2001, she was shot by

[10] Weaver "India's Bandit Queen" (1996).

four men outside of her home in New Delhi (Jenson 199). Having risen to power as a low-caste female member of society multiple times in her life—first as the leader of a gang, and again as a political leader in Parliament—Devi reached a realm of influence that was reserved for higher-caste males. Because she was considered a danger to patriarchal identity, which relies on gendered and caste oppression, her life was put at risk. While Devi's story is singular, she is far from the first woman whose access to political power has been challenged and considered menacing to the social order. In 2016, the "Dangerous Women Project," advanced by the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh, recognized the phenomenon of mainstream media labeling women who gained access to positions of power as dangerous. Soliciting contributions from scholars and artists to expound on whom they consider dangerous women and why, the project noted references to the Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, as "The most dangerous woman in Britain," alongside Shami Chakrabarti, director of a human rights campaign and non-profit leader in the UK, also labeled a "dangerous" woman by the media. My work is perplexed by such name-calling, and examines encounters of sexual difference in francophone literature to question the ways in which women are portrayed as dangerous and how this categorization, paradoxically, places them in danger.

The legend of Phoolan Devi as a dangerous woman has evolved through her own multiple recountings, and also through the creative work her life has inspired. In 1983, the French writer and playwright Hélène Cixous read about Devi's story in a *fait divers* in the newspaper (Jenson 198). In her research, Cixous encountered facts about Devi's surrender to the police after two years in hiding, a surrender which was the result of a yearlong negotiation with a local official. Devi included a number of specifications in the negotiations: her fellow gang members would not be executed, they would be released from prison after eight years, her

father's land would be returned, and her brother would be given a job in government (Jenson 202). Inspired by Devi's story, Cixous composed a play based on the events. The play, *La prise de l'école de Madhubaï*, and was performed in 1983 and published in 1984. In it, Cixous adds the detail that the heroine, Sakundeva, also negotiated for the founding of a school, an addition that perhaps coincided with Cixous's own feminist agenda. As the play's translator Deborah Jenson notes, this was "not a prominent detail in accounts of the surrender, although it was consistent with Phoolan's later political goals" (Jenson 202). While this detail is fictional, it is illustrative of public perceptions of Devi. She would come to serve as a symbol of women's rights and untouchables, and has become a legend around the world, including in India. As a politician in the last part of her life, long after the publication of Cixous's play, Devi fought for women's rights, an end to child marriage, and the well-being of lower castes.

The rhetoric Devi used to argue for equality is inseparable from the bodily harm her activities placed her in. Asserting her fascination with women who challenge structures of power, Cixous foresaw in 1976 that in her next play, "woman will be not so much a voice in dialogue with the Father[11] (as it was in *Dora*) but a 'stage-body [that] will not hesitate to come up close, close enough to be in danger—of life. A body in labour'" (qtd. in Jenson 198). Taking the words out of my mouth, Jenson remarks: "The heroine of the play, Sakundeva, was based on a living Indian woman bandit, Phoolan Devi, and there was no question but that Phoolan Devi was 'close enough to be in danger: of life,' in her status as a living, endangered, and dangerous woman" (Jenson 198). Cixous extensively researched the facts surrounding Devi's surrender and past experiences. Later, in an interview with American feminist theorists Alice Jardine and Anne Menke, Cixous remarks on her interest in Devi's story: "I called the heroine of *La Prise de*

[11] Cixous is referring to psychoanalysis's account of subject formation, in which the "Father" imposes the language and law of society on the child.

l'école de Madhubaï Sakundeva when in reality Phoolan Devi was the queen of the Dacoits—she was an untouchable but was called queen by her band" (*Shifting Scenes* 49). As with her interest in Medusa, Cixous noticed a legendary story in which a woman or feminine figure was considered as abject, rejected by society for a host of reasons. As shown through her rewriting of the Medusa myth and refashioning of Devi's story, Cixous creates and is inspired by female characters who live in a male-dominated environment in order to, as she states in the play's *L'Avant scène*, open up "the chance to escape from the terms that have been 'so implacably programmed by the great social machines'" (Cixous qtd. in Jenson 203).

For the purposes of my dissertation, the play's value lies in highlighting the dangerous/endangered paradigm that emerges when women acquire forms of power in patriarchal society, of which India is one example: when judged as dangerous by society, female figures are also subject to dangers.[12] Because of Cixous's attention to and unsettling of "sexual difference," or what differentiates the "sexes,"[13] Cixous and her reimagining of the Medusa myth will serve as a thread throughout this dissertation. I take note of the dangerous/endangered paradigm in a strand of literature written in French, while also considering how the female characters under study pose a challenge to this phenomenon.

[12] Cixous's attention to global stories of legendary women have, however, been subject to criticism. In their analyses of *La prise de l'école de Madhubai*, while literary scholar and Cixous critic Verena Conley notes the play as imbued with values that are ignored in the "West" (*Hélène Cixous* 90-1), Morag Shiach, scholar of Cultural History, draws attention to the danger of using a situation in the "East" as a critique of the Western world (*Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* 122-3). While this demonstrates that Cixous is vulnerable to critique in her attempts to embark upon what Conley names "cultural pluralism," which for Cixous, involves distancing herself from her own identity as a playwright and author, the play cannot be completely discounted.
[13] Though, feminist and queer theories deeply disturb this notion of "sexual difference," which I will explore in my theoretical apparatus.

Theoretical Background and Interventions

Francophone Studies

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of my study and the variety of contexts in which these novels unfold, my dissertation intervenes in multiple fields, including francophone studies, feminist theory, queer theory, and the intellectual history of sexual difference. Because of the vastly different backgrounds of the three primary novels of study, my analysis pays particular attention to the impact of different layers of identity that render their oppression and forms of resistance and resilience unique. My dissertation takes inspiration from scholar of critical race theory Kimberlé Crenshaw, who analyzes identities such as race not as discrete entities but as intersecting or overlapping parts.[14] While my work does not contribute to the political action that Crenshaw calls for in seeking social justice, I do examine the ways in which we might leave "home,"—a process which Crenshaw articulates as temporarily stepping outside of the social identity in which we feel comfortable—in order to simultaneously create alliances and better understand differences among individuals. Primarily, I examine the ways in which we can productively leave "home" through literary encounters.

A product of my education in French Studies, with a focus on French literature of the 20th century, this dissertation contributes to the field of francophone studies. While "francophone" has historically denoted literatures written in French outside of France, many francophone writers avoid placing themselves under this label because of the way it denotes a secondary body of literature and naturalizes a separation between literature produced within and outside of the Hexagon's borders. As scholar of Francophone African and Caribbean Studies and Gender Studies Régine Michelle Jean-Charles argues,[15] the revision of francophone studies is

[14] Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Difference Between Race and Sex" (1989), "Mapping the Margins" (1991).
[15] *Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Imaginar*y (2014).

demonstrated by the *Manifeste du 44: Pour une littérature francophone mondiale*, signed in 2007 by authors such as Maryse Condé, JMG Le Clézio, and Wajdi Mouawad. This manifesto calls for the end of "francophonie" and birth of "une littérature-monde en français": "le centre n'est plus le centre" (*Manifest du 44* qtd. in Jean-Charles 6).[16] Lebanese-American author, artist, and poet Etel Adnan, who has written widely in both French and English, and whose work I study in my second chapter, has shared similar criticism:

> the situation in France for Arabs who write in French is, to say the least, very ambiguous. They are called "francophone," a terminology which smacks of colonialism. It is a new category created by the French to separate literature into one which is "native" and one of the "foreigners." ("Privates Syntheses, Multiple Identities" 61)

Adnan, in this 1998 interview, adds that there is a collection of foreign-born authors and poets, such as Apollinaire, Samuel Beckett, Ionesco, and Tristan Tzara, who are considered "French authors" while others, such as Georges Schehadeh, Amin Maalouf and Aimé Césaire are "francophone." She criticizes this dichotomy as a political tool that discriminates against languages and cultures, particularly those from the Middle East and Africa. While this separation of "French" and "francophone" may be more of a division affected by the American university system, I am nonetheless attentive to the politics behind the French/francophone binary.

In light of such criticism, I study a range of narratives which were authored by French and non-French citizens, most of whom came from immigrant families. I refer to this body of texts as "literature written in French," while my use of "francophone" signifies the entire French-speaking (and -writing) world. The *Manifeste*'s call for a "world literature" also speaks to the increasingly porous borders of bodies of literature as a result of globalization and virtual

[16] For the full text of the manifesto, see "Pour une 'littérature monde' en français," *Lemonde.fr*. The signed declaration was published in book form in 2007 under the same name with Gallimard as its publisher.

documentation, to which my dissertation bears witness. I often refer to American theorists and writers who have analyzed the intersections of desire, identity, sex, and race in ways that help clarify my study of oppressive constructions of sexual difference. Moreover, as I will explore further, "sexual difference" has been crafted through a French-American dialogue, and thus requires attentiveness to the volleys of discourse.

Sexual Difference, Cixous, Medusa

Cixous's infamous "Le rire de la Méduse" provides the initial inspiration for the present study of dangerous and endangered female bodies, as it represents textually, through its pronoun play and future conjugations, the evolution of the constant "becoming" and "arriving" that Cixous believes is inherent to bodies. Consequently, the Medusa who embodies Cixous's *difference sexuelle* appears very queer,[17] especially when read alongside her more recent essays on this topic. The 1975 essay's republication in 2010, and the existence of a subsequent collection of critical essays on "Le rire" printed in 2015, testify to its standing as a generative work for academics and artists around the world. And yet, while "Le rire" is widely studied in American classrooms, much less serious research is committed to the study of Cixous's *différence sexuelle* which has its roots in this essay. In this section, I would like to give a limited review of the notion of "sexual difference" within American discourse and highlight the absence of Cixous in these discussions, particularly in the diverse field of queer theory, along with the ways in which I see her contributing to it. These contributions are pivotal to my discussion of dangerous and endangered bodies: while I describe the abjection of the female and the feminine in psychic constructions of masculinity, I also address the ways in which female characters

[17] Queer, for me, denotes a challenge to normative structures of sexual representation. In my dissertation, it represents a rupture to the male/female dichotomy.

disturb, or “queer,” oppressive structures of sexual difference. While I will not be extensively taking up the views presented here in the body of my work, a brief presentation of sexual difference will help to explore some of my key terms. It will also justify my use of Cixous’s texts as a lens through which to analyze sexual opposition in the novels of study through the Medusa myth and Cixous’s rewriting of it. Indeed, given the amount of discussion in the last three decades surrounding sex, gender, and sexuality’s influence on subjectivity, now may be the best time yet to (re)read Cixous’s writings on sexual difference.

Paradoxically, this detour through conceptualizations of sexual difference demonstrates its instability, or in other words, the impossibility of pinning down any defined difference between the sexes. In *Le grand théâtre du genre: identités, sexualités et féminisme en Amérique* (2013), Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, scholar of gender studies and professor at the *Centre d’études féminines et d’études de genre* in Paris,[18] articulates theories of sex, gender, sexuality, and sexual difference as part of a decades-long exchange between France and the US. Berger dedicates one of her chapters to sexual difference, tracing its meaning through the theories of French intellectuals Freud, Cixous, and Derrida, and through American scholars Judith Butler and Gayle Rubin. Berger asserts the instability of sexual difference in discourse: “À la fois disponible et imprenable, il ne nous lègue pas une doctrine ou une idéologie, mais une injonction à garder ouverts, et à continuer à ‘interpréter activement,’ le sens ou plutôt les sens de son héritage” (177).[19]

While the French term *sexe* was used in the eighteenth century to designate the female sex, “sexual” acquired its modern meaning in the nineteenth century; however, while *sex*, *sexual*,

[18] This Center was founded by Cixous in 1974 as part of the experimental university of Vincennes in Paris. Today, it continues to serve as France’s only Women’s and Gender Studies program.
[19] Berger cites the interview between Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Échographies de la télévision*, Galilée, 1996 (34).

and *sexuality* existed in both the English and French lexicons before the twentieth century, they took on new meanings starting with the era of Freudian psychoanalysis, which was popularized in France through Freud's successor, Jacques Lacan (Berger 158). Psychoanalysis accounts for sexual difference through its explanation of how women and men come into social existence through family and language. The father of psychoanalysis, Freud, sparked much controversy when he estimated that the male and female arrive at subjectivity through the castration complex, in which the male child experiences a castration threat while the female child is overwhelmed with penis envy. While such theorization seems reductive, Freud was not asserting that all individuals pass through this system, but that Western society places these constraints on all individuals. Freud's theories proffered that anatomy does not guarantee a person's gender or sexuality; he suggests that individuals who do not conform to the linear trajectory of "sex," "gender," and "sexuality"[20] may experience certain hardships in life given societal expectations.

After Freud, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan emphasized the importance of language in the process of subject formation by theorizing the Symbolic Order, which, to borrow Butler's explanation in *Gender Trouble* (1990), is "the ideal and universal set of cultural laws that govern kinship and signification and, within the terms of psychoanalytic structuralism, govern the production of sexual difference" (102 note 27). Following the Imaginary, entrance into the Symbolic, through which "I" come into meaning through language and cultural laws, coincides with the castration complex, which creates sexual difference and divides the world into "male" and "female."

[20] Here, "sex" denotes anatomy, "gender" manifests through social and cultural signifiers (such as "blue" being related to "masculine," and "pink" to "feminine") that influence how an individual presents themselves in society, and "sexuality" represents one's sexual object choice. However, these terms have been deeply troubled through the field of feminist and queer theory; to provide one example, Judith Butler has claimed that both "sex" and "gender" are social constructs that support a heteronormative system in an effort to destabilize sex as a "natural," static concept (*Gender Trouble*, 1990; *Bodies that Matter*, 1993).

While feminists have critiqued both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis as phallocentric, they have also recognized the productive potential of these theories' claims: in her critique of mainstream cinema's perpetuation of the male gaze, film critic Laura Mulvey attests that "psychoanalytic theory as it now stands can at least advance our understanding of the status quo, of the patriarchal order in which we are caught" (834). As Butler notes, several French intellectuals critiqued the Lacanian Symbolic by proposing a different relationship to the Phallus, or by removing that symbol of governance altogether and rethinking a deployment of language that does not require the exclusion of the other. Examples include Kristeva's *sémiotique*, Luce Irigaray's *imaginaire féminin* and Cixous's *écriture féminine* (*Gender Trouble* 102 note 27). [21]

Further unsettling sexual difference as situated between two bodies of opposite sex, Gayle Salamon's more recent publication, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (2010), extends Butler's argument that the "body matters" by reclaiming the skin and the body as sources of knowledge in themselves that disturb the relationships between the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality.[22] In chapters five and six of *Assuming a Body*, Salamon engages sexual difference in the work of Luce Irigaray, a differentialist philosopher and

[21] Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (1974), *Polylogue* (1977); Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (1974), *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977); Cixous "Le rire de la Méduse" (1975), "Sorties" (1975). Numerous other feminists have taken up psychoanalysis as a critical tool for analyzing oppression, including Jacqueline Rose (*Sexuality and the Field of Vision*, 1986), Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell (*Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne,* 1982). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler uses Lacan to provide an account of heteronormativity in society as well as in feminism, thus also ultimately finding in psychoanalysis a productive tool with which to analyze societal oppression surrounding sexual difference. In 1994, Elizabeth Grosz publishes *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* in which she critiques the dualist subject of the mind/body divide, which psychoanalysis, however, does not assume; for Grosz, body is not a natural fact but "volatile." Grosz's study echoes that psychoanalysis's account of sexual difference is culturally constructed rather than biologically imposed: "The notions of phallic and castrated are not simply superimposed on pre-given bodies…[r]ather, the attribution of phallic or castrated to sexually different bodies is an internal condition of the ways those bodies are lived and given meaning right from the start with or without the child's knowledge or compliance" (58).

[22] In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler establishes "sex" itself as a socially constructed category. Consequently, normative ideals of "sex" mandate cultural systems of bodily value which lead to abjection. Butler unsettles the meaning of the bodily "matter" of sex, in order to critique systems of value in which bodies "matter" to varying degrees based on the Western ideologies that engender systemic discrimination.

psychoanalyst who posits sexual difference as an irreducible difference between the two sexes, male and female. Salamon rightly critiques this view; however, she also notes that what is useful and even crucial in the work of Irigaray is that she insists on “locating difference at the heart of relation” (142). In other words, having to negotiate with sexual difference and all that maps onto it is an inevitable and constant experience in the creation and evolution of one’s subjectivity. However, Salamon critiques the location of Irigaray’s difference, which is found

> always *over there*, in that other who is a perpetual mystery to me and never reachable or knowable. …This impossibility of any true encounter with sexual difference, the assertion that it may be proximate to me but can never be known or understood, renders my sexual being closed and isolated away from difference, even as I endeavor to engage with it…It is imperative to consider the ways in which this difference does not reside only in the contrast between male and female, where these are both understood as immutable designations. (143-5)

By asserting that Irigaray has misplaced sexual difference as located in the “other” sex that is not “mine,” Salamon problematizes “sex” as the placeholder of sexual difference. She asks a key question at the conclusion of the next chapter: “Is it possible to think sexual difference as something that need not be located at the level of sex at all?” (168). For Salamon, by unsettling sexual difference as the crux of social tensions between “male” and “female,” one becomes more inclusive of bodies that transition between those categories or identify with neither. Indeed, locating sexual difference between myself and the other sex makes a true encounter with sexual difference impossible and “renders my sexual being closed and isolated away from difference, even as I endeavor to engage with it” (143).

We should not misunderstand Salamon's central claim; there are indeed differences between all bodies, sexualities, and sexes. Acknowledging the irreducibility of "you" to "me" is foundational in pursuing relationships not based on domination. Yet she insists that sexual difference should not be concretized between "man" and "woman." The transgendered body helps to understand the possibility of traversing these categories and of knocking down this concrete barrier. If sexual difference is released from the male/female, masculine/feminine binary, this allows for the multiplication of possible sexual experiences, and for the self to be imbued with the difference that is inherent to the human body. Here, I think, is the larger question that Salamon poses: what would happen if we came to understand sex outside of a binary system that depends on the "felt sense" of the body?[23]

Cixous helps to further imagine this "liberation" of sexual difference through writing. Positing sexual difference as something to be read and not seen, Cixous rejects "sexual difference" as located in one region of the body (as it has often been reduced to reproductive organs), or a space between "two" sexes; rather sexual difference suggests movement:

> (La 'D.S.' — n'est pas une région, ni une chose, ni un espace précis entre deux, elle est le mouvement même, le réfléchissement, le Se, la déesse négative sans négativité, l'insaisissable qui me touche, qui venant du plus proche me donne par éclairs à moi-même l'impossible moi – autre, fait surgir le tu-que-je-suis, au contact de l'autre.) ("Contes" 56)

In this excerpt from a talk given in 1990, which was performed as a "duet" with Jacques Derrida and published in essay form in 1994, the concept of sexual difference as existing only on the

[23] Salamon develops her notion of the "felt sense" through phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty's "flesh" in his theorization of bodily schema and psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu's skin ego.

level of sex is called into question (Berger 162).[24] For Cixous, this "Lecture de la différence sexuelle" presents sexual difference as both "a fact of language and an effect of discourse" and thus it is mutable (Berger 162). While Cixous is not specifically pointing to the transgendered body explored in Salamon's project, her emphasis on sexual difference as movement stimulates the imagination regarding sexes, genders, and sexualities that "are differently lived" (Salamon 168). "Male" and "female" exist and produce differences; however, sexual difference is not located *only* between them, but also within the self which evolves in response to exchanges of energy, to drives within one's body and environment. Though these ideas might come across as utopian or overly poetic, neither Cixous nor Salamon are proposing non-discursive bodily materiality; one is always forced to reckon with the pressures and exchanges of socio-political forces that mandate such categories. And yet, sexual difference that is not rooted within two sexes has the political, destabilizing potential to anticipate fluid identities—identities that are read and interpreted rather than preordained, in the critical effort to allow others to present themselves as they are rather than be judged against binary systems.

While her conceptualization of sexual difference has productive potential for queer theory, Cixous perhaps has not figured as part of this American discourse because of the tendency to theorize her philosophical, poetic writing, which reduces its liberating effect. It is thanks to her position as a writer that she rethinks the location of sexual difference and imbues it with multiplicity, but it is also because of this that she is excluded from dialoguing with contemporary theorists of gender studies. Cixous herself is skeptical of "theory": "la théorie

[24] French philosopher Jacques Derrida's deconstruction project has long been in dialogue with Cixous's own writing, which defies any delimited genre. Entire books have been dedicated to the spoken and written conversation between these two thinkers, which went on for more than thirty years. For more reading on their intellectual exchanges, consult: Segarra, *L'événement comme écriture: Cixous et Derrida se lisant* (2005), Derrida's work on Cixous's writing, including *Genèses, généaologies, genres et le genies* (2003) and his introduction to *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (1994), Cixous's books dedicated to Derrida, *Insister: à Jacques Derrida* (2006) and *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en jeune saint juif* (2001), as well as their co-authored work, *Voiles* (1998).

entraîne une discontinuité, une coupure, tout ce qui est le contraire de la vie. Je ne suis pas en train de jeter l'anathème sur toute théorie. Elle est indispensable, parfois, pour faire un progrès mais seule, elle est fausse. Je m'y résouds comme à un secours dangereux" (*Photos de racines* 14). Cixous seems to suggest that life cannot be reduced to theory and cannot be squarely framed within one mode of thought; however, as "Le rire de la Méduse" proves, engagement with theory can be necessary when critically analyzing and combatting forms of oppression. In a conversation between literary scholar Mireille Calle-Gruber and Cixous, Calle-Gruber explains that the "theory" they are referring to is the "north-American situation" that reduces Cixous to "feminist theory," and excludes her fiction and plays: "Certains se méprennent; le considèrent comme un traitement théorique alors que c'est un traitement poétique: sans arrêt la pratique fictionnelle. C'est dans la même pâte langagière, de la même plume, que poésie et réflexion philosophique tressent un texte." However, because of the interest in Cixous's notions of sexual differences and economies, numerous scholars have outlined what could be loosely defined as a "theory,"—one that, because it is based on Cixous's fiction, plays, and poetic prose, mostly evades the reductive theorization against which Calle Gruber warns.[25]

Cixous's earlier writings on sexual difference were situated in the historical moment of differentialist feminism in France in the 1970s and 80s. While there are some dated aspects of these texts, they also possess much potential in rethinking sexual difference today alongside her more contemporary work. It is perhaps because of the more outdated aspects of her work, which address sexual opposition through the masculine/feminine binary and *l'écriture féminine*, that

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[25] Blyth and Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory* (2004); Bray; *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (2003); Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (1996); Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (1984). While Bray reads a variety of texts through Cixous's writing on sexual difference up until 2004 and quickly touches on Cixous's relevance to queer theory, she does not detail a "philosophy" of sexual difference with queer leanings based on Cixous's writings on sexual difference, which blossoms in her later essays and interviews.

Cixous has been given less attention in "queer" discourse.[26] While Cixous employed the terms "masculine" and "feminine" to denote two different economies in the twentieth century, an evolution in her more recent writing demonstrates a distancing from these descriptors.[27] These economies are disconnected from anatomy and do not correspond to "male" and "female," but rather denote different relationships to desire.[28] While Cixous "poetically conceptualized a feminine economy in texts such as "Le rire de la Méduse" (1975), "Sorties" (1975), "Le sexe ou la tête?" (1976), and "La venue à l'écriture" (1977), this economy also imbues much of her dramatic and fictional work.[29]

And yet one must ask, does speaking in terms of "masculine" and "feminine" place these terms in a binary? Does projecting a "feminine" desire circle back to an economy of sameness that disables difference by prioritizing a single standard?[30] As promising as the Cixousian feminine economy is, it seems as if something is lost in furthering this parlance. That is, to continue to posit the "feminine" as an alternative to the "masculine" suggests a "feminine"

[26] For instance, Cixous is merely footnoted in Butler's work (*Gender Trouble* 102). In Grosz's eighth chapter of *Volatile Bodies*, "Sexual Difference," the critic opens with a quote from Cixous's "Le Rire de la Méduse," however she does not analyze the citation nor reintroduce Cixous's work on sexual difference anywhere within this chapter. This is disappointing as Grosz announces the potential for a feminist revisioning of the female body as positivity, which serves as a focal point for Cixous's work. In a very different study, Nina Cornyetz uses Kristevan psychoanalysis to study "dangerous women" in the work of three Japanese writers; like Grosz, Cornyetz cites Cixous as a source of inspiration whose work decenters male desire, but Cixous's work is not incorporated into the body of Cornyetz's analysis (*Dangerous Women, Deadly Words: Phallic Fantasy and Modernity in Three Japanese Writers,* 1999).

[27] In the 1970s, Cixous repurposed the Freudian term "(libidinal) economy," which suggests an energy that determines how a subject interacts with others, by creating a "masculine" and "feminine" economy. The "masculine" economy operated through the fear of loss (castration) and responded with the desire to possess in the self-serving drive to preserve the ego. In contrast, the "feminine" economy inspired and nurtured difference.

[28] Cixous does refer to "*l'homme classique*" in "Le sexe ou la tête" (11). Conley has also noted the slippage and inconsistency in terminology in Cixous's use of "woman" and "feminine" (*Writing the Feminine* 60). In a more recent study of Cixous's work (*Hélène Cixous: Live Theory*, 2004), Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers keenly note that this language play demonstrates both Cixous's situation in 1970s polemics of sexual difference as well as her ambivalence toward meaning, a characteristic of her entire *œuvre* that renders "masculine" and "feminine" very fluid concepts (24).

[29] For a more in depth study of the "feminine economy" throughout Cixous's corpus, see Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (1996) and Conley *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (1984).

[30] Ellen Armour, scholar of religion, poses this same question in relation to Irigaray's proposal of a female deity as the foundation of female subjectivity (132).

superiority and limits options for "masculine" representation, even while Cixous opens these economies to any body—men, too, can enact the feminine economy. As Shiach makes clear in her introductory study of Cixous's writings (*Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing*, 1991), it is difficult to describe "the other side," or the "feminine," without making it a mirror of what already exists (33). Shiach elaborates that Cixous's fear of creating a dogma around the "masculine" and the "feminine" led to a preference for poetically inscribing the movement of sexual difference.

My dissertation entertains the potential in the Cixousian feminine economy, which I explore more in depth in the first two chapters, as a critique of sexual opposition between male/female and masculine/feminine. Ultimately, however, I distance my analysis from this terminology. In these chapters, I sparingly use these adjectives, but within specific contexts in which I refer to the psychic construction of masculinity and femininity. Moreover, as is common in Cixous's practice of displacing meaning to make room for future resignification, she, too imagined different conceptions of "masculinity" through the *masculin futur* in 1975 ("Sorties" 153-4), and rarely employs these terms in the twenty-first century. Though the "*masculin*" appears in her 2006 essay, "Nous en somme," it is no longer critiqued as appropriative force.

Seeing Medusa through a Literary Perspective

> On most images of the goddess [Athena], at the very centre of her body armour, fixed onto her breastplate, is the image of a female head, with writhing snakes for hair. This is the head of Medusa, one of three mythical sisters known as the Gorgons, and it was one of the most potent ancient symbols of male mastery of the dangers that the very possibility of female power represented…This is the classic myth in which the dominance of the male is violently reasserted against the illegitimate power of the woman. And Western literature, culture and art have repeatedly returned to it in those terms
>
> - Beard, "Women in Power" (9-11)

In a recent article on the contentious relationship between women and power, English scholar and classicist Mary Beard highlights the legendary mythical figure of the Medusa and the dangers she represents as the embodiment of women's illegitimate authority. Beard's analysis

claims that Greek and Roman myth serve as the roots of women's displacement from power in Western societies. Medusa, then, comes to represent the noxious results of sexual difference, which are implicated in colonial desires and fear of the "other" in Western and non-Western imaginaries. And while Beard asks how we might be able to "resituate women on the side of power" who refuse to be "packaged into the male template," I look to literature to identify problematic sexual relations that engender the dangerous/endangered paradigm, and to imagine alternative scenarios.

Articulating the potential in literature, in a little-known essay, existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir remarks literature as a place of intersubjectivity:

> Pour moi, [la littérature] s'agit d'une activité qui est exercée par des hommes, pour des hommes, en vue de leur dévoiler le monde, ce dévoilement étant une action. …Et c'est ça le miracle de la littérature et qui la distingue de l'information: c'est qu'une vérité autre devient mienne sans cesser d'être un autre. J'abdique mon 'je' en faveur de celui qui parle; et pourtant je reste moi-même. ("Que peut la littérature" 335, 337).

Setting aside Beauvoir's reference to "man," which is characteristic of the French language as well as her universalist standpoint, Beauvoir responds to the question "what can literature do?" by insisting on its miraculous transportive qualities. Through literature, the reader is offered the opportunity to consider another's personal truth, and by seeing through the writer's "eyes," to cross borders which in day-to-day life are impermeable.

Further testifying to this effect of literature, Nobel-Prize-winning American novelist Toni Morrison states that "My work [as a writer] requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world.…For [other authors], as for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself

intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*" (4). It is because of this potential in writing—as a becoming or moving toward the other, a place of meeting, and a place to imagine change—that American feminist literary critic Robin Truth Goodman asserts its crucial role in the development of feminist thinking: "Literature is the place where such eruptions of incoherence open narratives up to noise and illogic, exhibiting the processes of social becoming that exist inside narrative forms" (3). In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Morrison argues for literature as "space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest" (3). Morrison's project is to unveil the creation of "American Africanism" in the American white imaginary[31], which, she elaborates, imagined the Africanist presence as a figure of death and hell in American writing of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At times touching on the colonialist imagination that Morrison explores, my dissertation notes the figuration of female bodies as dangerous objects of desire and of death in late twentieth and twenty-first centuries in relationships of sexual difference. This examination of Medusa through the literary lens attenuates her petrifying gaze, inviting a meditation on her social construction and evolution.

Chapter Breakdown

The books and theoretical apparatuses that I have chosen for this dissertation were introduced to me through graduate courses in French Feminisms (Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller) and in Women's and Gender Studies (Ellen Armour; Nancy Chick). The literary works stood out to me not only for their daring and sometimes fragmentary narrative style, but because they deeply question identity. Most notably, they also illuminate the multifaceted nature of the

[31] The "imaginary" relies on the use of images for psychological development. This concept is central to the Lacanian mirror stage, which theorizes the child's ego as developed through their reflection in a mirror. This mirror can be the physical object, as well as the eyes of the other, the movie screen, and so on.

dangerous/endangered paradigm, through which desire, danger, and alterity are intimately interwoven. *Standard* (2014), authored by Nina Bouraoui, tells the story of Bruno, an *antihéro*, who obsesses over a woman, Marlène, from his teenage years whom he reencounters later in life. He obsesses endlessly over her as a dangerous and sexy woman who seductively menaces his imaginary, a framing of her which places Marlène's agency and ability to represent her own self-image in danger. In *Sitt Marie Rose* (1977), Etel Adnan's only novel, the character of Marie-Rose traverses religious, territorial, and gendered boundaries. As a Christian activist for the Palestinian cause during the incredibly violent Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), Marie-Rose poses a danger to a group of militiamen who are fighting to create a modern, Christian Lebanon. Finally, *La répudiée* (2000), authored by Eliette Abécassis, reflects on the life of the main character, Rachel, and her marriage to Nathan, in the context of a Hasidic neighborhood in Israel. Her seductive body and inability to produce a child place the community's identity in danger, as they expect numerous offspring to further their religious cause and bring on the coming of the Messiah.

The authors on whom I focus in this dissertation demonstrate the diversity of francophone studies. Nina Bouraoui, Etel Adnan, and Eliette Abécassis all come from families who immigrated to France or another francophone country. Perhaps as a result of their personal backgrounds, they treat themes such as religious exile and discrimination, colonial legacies, and queer identities, all of which tie into sexual oppression and repression. These authors' biographies and prose testify to the post-1970s literary movements that interrogate gendered identity, patriarchal nationalism, and postcolonial environments.

Nina Bouraoui was born to a French mother and an Algerian father in France in 1967 (five years after the Algerian independence), spent much of her young adult life in Algeria, and

also spent time in Switzerland and the United Arab Emirates. Known by critics as a francophone Algerian writer and an author of lesbian/queer literature, she has been awarded numerous literary prizes. However, very few critics have studied *Standard* (2014), with which I engage in my first chapter. Etel Adnan, the author of *Sitt Marie Rose* (1977), discussed in my second chapter, was born in Beirut in 1925 to a Syrian Muslim father, a former officer of the Ottoman army, and a Greek Christian mother from Smyrna, speaking Greek, Turkish, French, and Arabic. Adnan attended a French Catholic school, a testament to the French colonial legacy in Lebanon, and also studied philosophy at the Sorbonne; she returned to Paris in exile from the Lebanese Civil War in the late 1970s. Eliette Abécassis was born in France into a family of Sephardic Jewish Moroccan immigrants. After having taught philosophy for three years at Université de Caen, she began writing full time in a series of genres, including novels, children's books, essays and film scripts. Her biographical information sheds light on her literary interests, which I bring to light in my study of *La répudiée* (2000): maternity, Judaism, and immigrant identities in France. Hélène Cixous, who serves as the glue of my dissertation, was born in Oran, Algeria in 1937 and grew up under the anti-Semitic Vichy regime in Algeria. At various moments in her childhood, she experienced religious discrimination, was forbidden to go to school, and experienced the death of her father to tuberculosis. All of these events had a profound impact on her writing and vision of alterity.

Chapter 1: "Female Sexualities: The Deadly Medusa"

In Chapter One, I take a broad look at the depiction of female bodies in contemporary film and advertisements, and in Bouraoui's novel *Standard*. In this chapter, I explore the Cixousian Medusa and writings on sexual difference in order to focus in on the portrayal of

female bodies as dangerous and endangered—which I often describe as decapitated[32]—within some strands of French and American visual and literary media. The opening chapter analyzes contemporary manifestations of Medusa and the multifaceted nature of her myth, as she represents not only an object of desire, but also a castration threat, abject body, and agent of death. Through the films and advertisement images presented in this small study, a variety of media to which I was exposed while living in France in 2015-16, I consider how women's bodies are presented as dangerously sexy but also deadly, and operate as sexualized, racialized, and commercialized objects of desire. While Nina Bouraoui's *Standard* is narrated through the male gaze,[33] I suggest that this narrative presents literature as a more feminist space through which to reclaim the Medusa.

Chapter 2: "Dangerous Touching: Etel Adnan's* Sitt Marie Rose*"

The second chapter furthers the analysis of the male perception of dangerous women. Marie-Rose's political transgression of gendered space in *Sitt Marie Rose* (1977) causes her to be perceived as a beautiful and dangerous Medusa by the *chabab*, a group of Christian militiamen who capture Marie-Rose and threaten her with death. Through Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*, I consider the etymology of "Medusa" as a dangerous, sovereign, thinking agent within the context of the Lebanese Civil War. Though I sometimes refer to Marie-Rose as the main character, seven different characters narrate the novel in the first person, therefore troubling traditional narrative and the ability to arrive at a univocal account of this war.

[32] This is in reference to Cixous's essay, "Le sexe ou la tête?" (1976), which I will explore further in the first chapter. This essay shifts the point of view from the male's castration threat to the female's fear of decapitation, which suggests the elimination of women's opportunity to think for themselves.

[33] In Bouraoui's novel, the literary depiction of this gaze is also associated with desire for the "primitive" other as form of escapism from a monotonous lifestyle in a poverty-ridden southeastern Paris suburb.

Through Frantz Fanon's theorization of colonial neurosis and the epidermalization of inferiority in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) and *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), I analyze the *chabab*'s desire, and especially that of their leader, Mounir, to create a Christian, modernized Lebanon as a result of seeing themselves through the eyes of their former colonizer, France. The *chabab*'s body image, inspired partly by Lebanon's French colonial past, is constructed through lexical fields of film and vision in the novel, which result in the elimination of representations of alterity that do not reflect their image. In contrast, through Cixous's essays on sexual difference, I describe Marie-Rose's "poetic deployment of touch" as an attempt to revive the bleeding body of Lebanon, sick from colonial disease, sectarian politics, and religious tensions. Marie-Rose's questioning of divisive identity politics and attention to the Lebanese "body" provide a sharp contrast to the *chabab*'s economy, which reduces the other to the self via domination and annihilation. Such antiauthoritarian ideas, embodied by Marie-Rose, are perceived as a deeply dangerous feminine disruption in a sectarian, phallocentric society so reliant on borders. Consequently, as a beautiful and "modern" woman who poses a threat to stable Lebanese masculinist identity, Marie-Rose becomes a body in danger who pays for her dangerous ideas with her life.

Chapter 3: "The Dangers of a Barren Body: Reproductive Futurism and Rearticulating the Divine in Eliette Abécassis's* La répudiée*"

My final chapter studies Eliette Abécassis's *La répudiée* (2010), which is set in the Hasidic neighborhood of Mea Shearim in Jerusalem. The main character, Rachel, narrates a story of repudiation. According to the religious law, *halakhah*, under which she lives, a husband has the right to divorce his wife if they do not have children after ten years of marriage. Rachel has failed to become pregnant throughout an otherwise happy marriage; her beauty coupled with

unfulfilled religious duties of childbearing lead to her repudiation and death. Consequently, Rachel represents another Medusa figure who possesses the ability to paralyze the men around her, as her body places her husband's intellectual and spiritual capacities at risk. Furthermore, Rachel's perceived barren body poses a danger to the identity of Mea Shearim, which depends on the procreation of children to hasten the arrival of the Messiah, a belief system which I critique through Lee Edelman's notion of "reproductive futurism" in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). Using a feminist theoretical framework, I examine the ways in which Rachel is symbolically identified as a threat to sectarian identity as a non-pregnant, menstruating body; as a result, she is endangered, as the female figure is again relegated to the realm of abjection for damaging relations of sexual difference.

Throughout the novel, Rachel's representation of the sacred differs from that of her supposed spiritual companions. She asserts her own profound mystic practice by locating the "divine" within the love that she shares with her husband Nathan. To further locate Rachel's "divine" within human relationships, I rely on Cixous's secularized notion of the *juifemme*—a woman who rewrites sacred texts, conceives of a God detached from dogmatic religion, and locates the divine within the other and the self.

Like *Sitt Marie Rose*, the novel ends in the death of the female protagonist. However, the ambiguous terms on which Rachel ends her life leaves her circumstances open to interpretation. In the chant-like poetic speech that closes the novel, I read Rachel's reflection as an ecstatic meditation that transports her to transcendental realms, bringing us back to Medusa through the practice of *med*itation. In the conclusion of my dissertation, I reflect once again on literary encounters of sexual difference and the potential for art to provide more accepting and critical

considerations of alterity in order to unsettle the dangerous/endangered paradigm. This study ends with a reconsideration of the relationship between the feminine, danger and death.

CHAPTER 1

Female Sexualities: The Deadly Medusa

> C'est bien la légende sous sa forme partisane qui jette un sort, c'est bien la légende qui dit que la femme va dévorer l'homme qu'il faut dénoncer, qu'il faut déconstruire. Ce que demande là notre petite sirène, c'est: déconstruis, mon amour, et ne crois pas que je vais te dévorer.
> - Hélène Cixous, "Poétique de la différence sexuelle" 25

The mythical Medusa has long traversed literature as one of the earliest symbols of deadly female seduction. According to the Greek myth, Medusa was originally a beautiful blonde maiden. A priestess of Athena, she was punished by the goddess for breaking a vow of celibacy; Athena turned her into a frightfully ugly snake-haired creature cursed with the power to kill anyone upon whom she cast her gaze. This figure of dangerous female subjectivity lives on in popular culture, that "repository of ancient and contemporary mythic and folkloric images and narratives, personalities, icons, and archetypes" (Caputi 4). Medusa's trace, present through representations of the dangerous female within and beyond popular culture, suggests the continued fear and fascination of a female power capable of seducing and destroying. And while some authors and filmmakers have sought to co-opt this figure of power for feminist aims, others have struggled against it, attempting to undo the powerful mythic connection between female sexuality and fear, danger, and death.

This chapter argues that the myth of women as dangerous remains strong in contemporary cultures of both France and the United States and often carries noxious messages that, in various ways, place these women in danger. Recent depictions of Hillary Clinton as a beheaded Medusa during the 2016 presidential election, with Donald Trump masquerading as Perseus, substantiate the observation that women with power present a societal danger and are destined to be decapitated by a male hero—an observation that the renowned French author

Hélène Cixous made in her earlier essays on sexual difference in the 1970s.[34] Following the multifacetedness of Medusa's dangerous nature, this chapter examines the perpetuation of the Medusan myth through profiles of dangerous women: as representations of desirable objects of eroticism whose seductive capacities corrupt the social order; castration threats who usurp male power and dominance; "abject" bodies[35] who menace the boundary between self and other; and agents of death who threaten male subjectivity. As shown in Medusa's story, I aim to highlight the interconnected nature of these portrayals of danger as perceived through the male gaze. Furthermore, this chapter emphasizes that because Medusa is portrayed as a dangerous body she also comes to be an endangered body. That is, dangerous bodies are themselves often subject to physical danger, such as rape, as well as dangers more psychological in nature that accompany the misrepresentation or homogenization of thoughts and desires.

The analysis of recent literature and films in this chapter relies heavily on Cixous's analysis as she uses the mode of writing to move past the economy of decapitation that eliminates the frightful other. Previous scholars, notably Metka Zupančič in *Hélène Cixous: texture mythique et alchimique* (2007), have identified the myths present in Cixous's works and the ways in which she rewrites and transforms myths as a form of questioning the self and of ideologies surrounding the sexual body.[36] However, fewer scholars highlight the pertinence of Cixous's work in larger cultural contexts such as the societal obsession with dangerous women. Furthermore, my evaluation of Cixous's role as "dangerous" writer and intellectual provides a glimpse of how patriarchal society responds to "real-life" Medusas, as her writing has been

[34] For more information on the Clinton images and their connection to the Medusa myth, see "The Original 'Nasty Woman'" authored by literary scholar Elizabeth Johnston in a November 2016 edition of *The Atlantic*.
[35] I utilize French writer and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's theorization of the abject, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.
[36] Susan Sellers, another long-time reader of Cixous, has also discussed the role of myth in Cixous's *Livre de Promethea*; see Chapter 2 in *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2001).

deemed subversive because of its difficulty and its female perspective. Cixous's deployment of Medusa for feminist aims is fundamental to the goals of this chapter, which are as follows: to examine various profiles of dangerous women as seductive, threatening, and endangered; to utilize French intellectual history of *différences sexuelles* in order to understand the prevalence of these profiles and to question feminist adoptions of "dangerous women" that operate through the male gaze; and, finally, to further destabilize the relationship between the "feminine," danger, and death and to identify the commodification of this relationship in contemporary film, advertisement, and literature.[37] Ultimately, I propose that literature might offer more opportunities for a feminist revival of the Medusa than some visual medias.

Contemporary examples of the Medusa as a figure of the masculine imaginary depict dangerous female sexualities as a narcissistic mirror of the male gaze, one that suggests both fascination with and fear of mortality that is intimately tied with female bodies. I demonstrate this relationship through the films *Elle* (2016) and *Teeth* (2007), as well as in contemporary fashion advertisements over the last two decades in France and the United States. My study of films and advertising draws the conclusion that dangerous bodies exist as sexualized, racialized, and consumerized fetishes that maintain a status quo based on a heterosexual economy where the male gaze reigns over and symbolically decapitates the female. Moreover, not only does the performance of the seductive femme fatale confirm hegemonic white male desire, particularly in the visual realm through media such as advertisements and film but the absence of certain bodies from such media suggests other types of danger. The presence of these bodies threatens the survival of that media itself, based on the satisfaction of imagined consumers, and the desire of

[37] Cixous officially begins to pluralize "sexual difference" as "*différences sexuelles*" after the publication of "Nous en somme" (2006). My spelling of Cixousian "sexual difference(s)" will correlate to the form used within the publication to which I refer.

certain bodies depends upon the abjection or transgressive desire of others. In the last part of the chapter, I transition to the literary study of Nina Bouraoui's novel *Standard* (2014), a story that is narrated through the "male gaze" which I use to continue teasing out how desire for the dangerous female body depends on a correlated desire for and fear of death and the primitive other. While the story engages a male point of view through its middle-aged, middle class narrator, the literary realm allows for a variance from the films and the stagnant advertisement images that cater to desire sparked by the visual. Rather, *Standard*'s narrator ultimately arrives toward an understanding of his growing desire for Marlène, as she refuses "decapitation" by verbally redressing his imagination of her seductive, dangerous sexuality.

To flesh out the "dangerous and endangered" construct and lay the foundation for the comparisons between the mythical Medusa and manifestations of "contemporary Medusas," I will take time to further rehearse the history of the mythical Medusa. The legendary figure of Medusa provides a particularly rich example of the persistent relationship between danger and female bodies, as her transformation from beautiful, seductive woman to ugly, petrifying Other exposes connections between beauty and mortality, sex and sin. In the original form of the myth, Medusa's dangerous beauty led to a fatal seduction, for both herself and for others. Medusa was one of three Gorgon sisters who were transformed into monsters. Yet, unlike her siblings, Medusa was mortal. After she was accused of sexual relations with Poseidon in the temple of Athena, the goddess cursed Medusa with a head of snakes and a gaze that would petrify anyone who looked her in the eyes (Garber and Vickers 2). This transformation was effected through a shift from Medusa as object to be looked at and desired, to the one who looks and holds power as she could enact death through her eyes. She thus acquired a "dangerous" subjectivity

representative of the terrifying difference that she embodied. However, some accounts, including Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, claim that Medusa was raped:

> She was at one time very beautiful,
> the hope of many suitors all contending,
> and her outstanding feature was her hair
> (this I have learned from one who saw her then).
> But it is said that Neptune ravished her,
> and in the temple of Minerva, where
> Jove's daughter turned away from the outrage
> and chastely hid her eyes behind her aegis.
> So that this action should not go unpunished,
> she turned the Gorgon's hair into foul snakes;
> and she, to overwhelm her foes with terror,
> bears on her breast the serpents she created. (Book IV, 1082-1093)[38]

A footnote to these verses details that "[o]thers said that Medusa yielded without a struggle, turning Minerva and her wrath against her" (116). While accounts of the Medusa myth oscillate between the scene in Athena's temple as being one of rape or volition, the reference to her rape demonstrates early connections between female culpability for sexual acts. Furthermore, if beauty is potentially dangerous because it leads to male temptation and a disturbance of the social order, then this account of Medusa being "ravished" further testifies to the link between dangerous and endangered bodies that I stress in the present project. Consequently, this chapter has recourse to the Ovidian version of the myth in which Medusa is raped, as it stresses the link

[38] As Ovid was a Roman poet, he recorded the names used in the Roman version of the myth. Poseidon is represented as Neptune while Athena becomes Minerva. Interestingly, Medusa keeps her name.

between the body that is dangerous and the danger to which it may be consequently subject: not only does her beauty signify a danger that leads to sexual violence, but her dangerous gaze ultimately leads to her decapitation and death.

The Medusa figure and Cixous's feminist revision of the myth represents the Medusan danger as multivalent: she is dangerous and thus seductive, evoking the infamous femme fatale profile, and also dangerous because she poses a real threat to life or subjectivity. The relationship between male fear and desire is not lost on Cixous: "Ils disent qu'il y a deux irreprésentables: la mort et le sexe féminin. Car ils ont besoin que la féminité soit associée à la mort; ils bandent par trouille ! pour eux-mêmes ! ils ont besoin d'avoir peur de nous" ("Le rire" 47).[39] The transformation from sexually attractive body to menacing monster reflects a shift in male desire: at first a beautiful body to be possessed and controlled, the deflowered Medusa is punished for engaging in a nonconsensual sexual act in Athena's temple by endowing her with a real power over life and death. In her monstrous form, a desire to conquer displaces the (also possessive) desire to copulate.

Initially, Medusa's beauty poses a threat to the societal order because her latent eroticism tempts male onlookers, as is made clear through the necessity to punish Medusa rather than the divine male Poseidon. Transmogrified into an ugly creature with a petrifying gaze, Medusa comes to represent a castration threat as the holder of power over life and death. As Hal Foster highlights, when Perseus slays her there are two important moments in the apotropaic transformation of "the Medusan gaze into the Athenan shield": the arresting of Medusa's gaze when Perseus captures her image in the mirror of the shield, and the ability of Medusa's gaze to arrest the viewer after Medusa's head is affixed to Athena's shield (182). In the former, Perseus

[39] I will quote from the original publication of Cixous's essay in 1975, and not the 2010 republication.

captures her gaze and escapes being captured by it, and in the latter, Medusa's evil eye, is used to ward off and capture others. Foster applies Lacanian psychoanalysis to the Medusa myth in order to claim that the gaze can be violent and threatening as the other's regard operates a power over "you," as the "self" is an entity that psychoanalysis, and the larger context of poststructuralism, claims to be an imagined unit of un-fractured subjectivity. In all of her states of existence—as beautiful mortal, deadly monster, and defeated body—Medusa has the power to lure the male gaze and it is the patriarchal responsibility of Perseus not to be eliminated by it and to even appropriate it for his own use (Foster 189).

If being beautiful and possessing an imagined power over the other presents a danger, Medusa's petrifying gaze also represents an agent of death. The psychoanalytic concept of the "abject" becomes relevant when considering the rejection of the female, as witnessed through Perseus's slaying of Medusa. Feeling the need to conquer Medusa in order to reacquire his sense of power, which is represented by the "phallus" in psychoanalytic interpretation, Medusa symbolizes the rejected "not-I" who threatens Perseus's imagination of his "self" as a being endowed with power over his female counterpart. In her study of the evolution of Medusa in Western culture and feminist reclamations of the myth, Susan R. Bowers notes that "[w]hat Medusa has represented to women is an image of the hatred and fear of female power that, as long as women themselves could not claim that power, allowed the 'best' poetry to be, as Poe claimed, about the death of beautiful women" (234). Bowers's assertion points again to the destiny of the dangerous, powerful female as endangered and decapitated body. If Medusa cannot or does not speak for herself, she is decapitated. And even when she does, as demonstrated by the depictions of Hillary Clinton, the threat of decapitation remains.

To clarify what "decapitation" suggests in this project, I will briefly refer to a textual dialogue between Sigmund Freud and Hélène Cixous. In the Freudian psychoanalytic interpretation of the myth,[40] Medusa's petrifying eyes and snake-like hair provoke a castration threat; however, Hélène Cixous's "Le rire de la Méduse" (1975) has long been considered a force of resistance to this image cast by the masculine imaginary—the psychoanalytic term that encompasses the production of images linked to one's fantasies of the self and desire for others. As Marta Segarra, editor of a recently published collection of Cixous's texts and excerpts translated into English (*The Portable Cixous*, 2010), identifies, "Le rire" attacks two myths produced by masculine fears: the female sex as a representation of death (a response to Freud's claim that female sexuality was an unrepresentable enigma) and the femme fatale (20). Recognizing cultural responses to these castration threats, in the essay "Le sexe ou la tête?" (1976), Cixous puts forth that women who are both beautiful and wise are on the road to death—or rather, decapitation. In "Le sexe ou la tête?," Cixous furthers her meditations on "Le rire," published one year before, by introducing the capacity to decapitate thinking female subjects as fuelled by "masculinité," or the masculine economy[41]:

> Il s'agira de soumettre le désordre féminin, son rire, son incapacité à prendre au sérieux les coups de tambour à la menace de décapitation. Si l'homme fonctionne à la menace de castration, si la masculinité est ordonnée dans la culture comme menacée de castration, eh bien on peut dire que le coup… la répercussion de cette menace de castration sur la

[40] See "Medusa's Head" (1922).
[41] By "masculine economy" (*économie masculine*), Cixous refers to the drive to possess the other. She repurposes the Freudian term "(libidinal) economy," which suggests an energy that determines how a subject interacts with others, similar to a drive.

femme, c'est sa prolongation en tant que décapitation, en tant qu'exécution de la femme, en tant que perte de la tête. ("Le sexe ou la tête" 6)[42]

"Le sexe ou la tête?" shifts the focus from the male castration threat to a female anxiety of decapitation that renders women submissive to the phallocentric[43] order (Eilberg-Schwartz 6-7). Cixous does not make direct mention of Medusa in this essay, and instead provides further examples of decapitation through the stories of the female warriors under the rule of Sun Tsé, Sleeping Beauty, and the Oedipal sphinx. For Cixous, these represent attempts to decapitate women by removing their mental faculties and putting them in spaces of silence and non-knowing. By silencing the opposition, one "practices the verification of virility" and reinforces their own beliefs through the creation of what she calls the *empire du propre*, or Empire of the Proper (or the Selfsame) where "proper" denotes self, propriety, homogeneity, and order (11). As Katerine Gagnon and Evelyne Ledoux-Beaugrand analyze in their essay on the Medusa ("Parler avec la Méduse," 2014), the Medusan femme fatale resides in the imaginary because that is where she remains powerless and silent: "Lui faire très littéralement perdre la tête, c'est nécessairement renforcer cette vision du féminin et faire obstacle à son envers que serait une Méduse douée de parole, capable de nous dire ce qu'elle voit, ressent et désir[e]" (13).

Both "Le rire de la Méduse" and "Le sexe ou la tête?" insist that one need not read the Medusa story through male fears and desires. By recalling and rewriting mythical women and femmes fatales, such as the siren in this chapter's epigraph, Cixous's other essays "Sorties" (1975), "Contes de la différence sexuelle" (1994), "Poétique de la différence sexuelle" (1994),

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[42] In alignment with the 8th edition of the MLA Handbook, I do not mark ellipses with brackets; thus, any ellipses within citations are my own unless noted otherwise.

[43] Phallocentric suggests centered around the phallus, or the symbol of male dominance and authority, and consequently, desire ("phallocentric, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2016. Web. 18 November 2016).

and “Nous en somme” (2006), attempt to displace the fear of the other so deeply instilled in these cultural stories. Cixous’s essays, then, push against the force of the “Empire of the Proper” that decapitates the other by recognizing “I as other,” which Cixous scholar Peggy Kamuf recognizes as a focus on life that begins with her earliest writings on sexual difference and runs throughout her *oeuvre*: “To receive the other’s trace in and as oneself, to affirm ‘I is another’ with the poet Rimbaud (one of her heroes), this passive ability or passive force is how Cixous in 1975 spoke of femininity” (139). My study tracks Cixous’s focus from the “feminine” to her larger project of the valuation of “life” in my eventual ponderings of moving beyond the construct of dangerous and endangered female bodies.

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A recent release in French cinema intimates the survival of the femme fatale in French popular culture. Released during the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, the movie *Elle* begins with a black screen and the sounds of moans, groans, and screams.[44] The black screen that starts the film renders the beginning ambiguous, leaving the audience to wonder if the images will unveil a scene of sexual violence or consensual passion. After the curtains are pulled back, the audience is exposed to a violent rape scene in which Michèle is being assaulted by a man wearing a ski mask. In the remainder of this psychological thriller, Michèle Leblanc, the main character, tries to discover the identity of her rapist. As the CEO of a video game company and an attractive, wealthy, divorced, single woman, Michèle has a commanding and aggressive nature that manifests in both her work life and in a series of promiscuous sexual encounters. In a scene where Michele is sitting on the couch and reflecting on her recent sexual trauma, her ex-husband, Richard, insists: “la plus dangereuse, Michèle, c’est tout de même toi,” suggesting that Michèle

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[44] Directed by professor Paul Verhoeven, the film is based on a novel written by Philippe Djian, *Oh…* that was published in 2012.

may very well be more of a threat than her assailant. In a twisted echo of Richard's comment, Patrick, who is both Michèle's neighbor and rapist, responds to her question "Pourquoi vous avez fait ça?" ("ça" referring to the rape) with "C'était nécessaire." The viewer is left to assume that the aggressor sees it as his duty to punish this seductive, sexually deviant woman. After being subject to two violent sexual assaults by the same man, film reviews claim that Michèle begins a plot of revenge through fatal temptation. She voluntarily sleeps with her rapist a third time and then lures him into her home for a fourth encounter, where he arrives to meet Michèle's son who ends up killing his mother's aggressor. Though the murder is staged as an unplanned event, the film also hints that, like Medusa as well as the mythical siren, Michèle uses her talent for seduction to lure Patrick into danger.

A salient connection between Michèle, Medusa, and the siren, manifests in their ability to bring death upon those around them. While Medusa was the only Gorgon subject to mortality and endowed with the power to kill, the siren brings death to those who cross her path and fall prey to her seductive voice.[45] This attribute also bears semblance to the biblical Eve, whose inability to resist temptation spawned "the fall of the human race into sin" and thus gifted humans with mortality.[46] In the film, because Patrick falls into the trap of Michèle's temptation (which she did not initially solicit), he will suffer the mortality that this Medusan figure has brought upon him. Not only does Michèle scheme the eventual murder of her rapist, but she also inspires the death of her nymphomaniac mother, who dies of shock after Michèle scoffs at her engagement to a young, attractive man whom Michèle believes is using her for money. As if this

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[45] Associated with mermaids, serpents, or birds, the siren traversed literature as one of the earliest symbols of deadly female seduction, particularly after the input of Western moralists (Leclercq-Marx 57). The siren served as "deadly temptress" in literature as far back as the *Odyssey* in the eighth century B.C.E. and continued to be active in medieval literature (e.g. *Le Roman de la Rose*, 1366).

[46] Tertullian declared Eve as responsible for the human race's fall from grace. See Mary Donna Spivey Ellington's entry "Eve" in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia* (2006).

is not enough, Michèle also brings on the death of her father, an assassin who hangs himself in his jail cell after finding out that his daughter was to pay him a visit.

The film clearly partakes in myths of female sexuality as terrifying and fatal. Surprisingly, some members of the French press have argued that *Elle* challenges gender roles (*Les Inrockuptibles*, *Le Monde*) because Michèle "turns the tables" by voluntarily sleeping with her assailant after two masked assaults, and by stalking him and getting her revenge (at the hands of her son). However, internationally recognized American womanist, writer, and civil rights activist Audre Lorde provides an apt critique of these "feminist" readings of the film. In her assessment of the treatment of difference, Lorde exposes that using the "master's tools" to dismantle the "master's house" will only further perpetuate the system of oppression: "[The master's tools] may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" ("The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" 112; 1984).[47] Thus, does endowing a woman with traditionally "masculine" traits of greed, violence, and dominance lead to sexual equality or female empowerment? *Les Inrockuptibles*' article on the film, "*Elle*: Huppert se déchaîne chez Verhoeven," asserts that *Elle* does in fact put men and women on equal footing:

> Jamais non plus, il ne se fait porteur d'un discours insupportable, hélas bien connu, qui prétend que toutes les femmes rêvent secrètement d'être violées. Bien au contraire, et c'est en cela qu'il est universel et dépasse la simple description de deux singularités extrêmes, *Elle* met à égalité hommes et femmes, nous dit qu'il n'y a pas une seule forme de sexualité féminine ou de sexualité masculine. (Morain)

[47] Though Lorde was addressing the treatment of racial and sexual differences in academic circles, her statement rings true in a multitude of other contexts.

Similarly, the novel on which the film is based was praised as feminist because of the portrayal of its female narrator as without morals or "feminine" emotions: "zéro sentimentalisme, aucune autovictimisation, pas de dépendance vis-à-vis des hommes, pas de sentiment maternel aveuglant, etc. Une femme libre, donc politiquement incorrecte" (Kaprièlian). This illustrates a problem of incorrectly labelling as feminist any representation that depicts women as powerful or as aggressors instead of victims. In such portrayals, the submissive female is exchanged for the dangerous, aggressive vamp, both of which are inventions of the male gaze that reverberate in the figure of Medusa.

Contrary to opinions in the media, I argue that the film steers away from sexual equality on many accounts, as it bestows the female character with a "phallic" power that excites the fear of castration. Michèle's character in *Elle* perpetuates the idea that a "femininity" that challenges gender roles is one that falls in line with hegemonic masculinity in white, bourgeois French society. She further aligns herself with "masculine" forms of power through her role as CEO of a video game company, suggesting that she has pushed beyond the sexism and misogynistic rhetoric in gaming circles.[48] Moreover, the incorporation of extreme sexual violence toward women in the games produced by Michèle's company further secures this female CEO within the realm of a "masculine" authority that is aggressive and dominant. And yet, Michèle's adoption of these values causes her simultaneously to embody a "femininity" that is dangerous to men because she has power associated with hegemonic masculinity, which exacerbates anxieties surrounding castration and leads to her rape. The perpetuation of the hyper-sexualized female body, and the expectation that women must adopt values traditionally associated with normative

[48] For further information on sexism in the gaming industry, see Consalvo, "Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture" (2012) and Wingfield "Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats in 'GamerGate' Campaign" (2014).

masculinity[49] (e.g. dominance, aggression, greed) in order to survive and succeed, can hardly be categorized as advantageous for sexual equality.

The figure of the Medusa, like Michèle's character, represents both female culpability and punishment for sexual activity. The film's sequence of events demonstrates that rape is sometimes used as a form of punishment delivered by the male that marks woman as an other who is too seductive for her own good. Furthermore, *Elle*'s eroticization of rape renders sexual violence a fascinating spectacle, following in the footsteps of recent advertisements that glamorize sexual violence.[50] It is possible to imagine feminist renditions of Eve or the siren, yet Michèle's role in *Elle* does not provide us with such an opportunity, and instead perpetuates myths of dangerous women from Western history and threatens the progress toward sexual equality.

As sexual violence continues to be primarily, though not exclusively, a "woman's issue," the Medusa myth remains a story worth examining. In an interesting cultural contrast, Medusa herself appears as a subtext in the American film *Teeth* (2007), in which Dawn, a young Christian high-schooler and chastity advocate, "discovers" her sexuality after a series of disturbing sexual encounters. Early in the film, Dawn finds herself alone in a lakeside grotto with a young man, Tobey, to whom she is sexually attracted. During this temptation scene, Dawn struggles to maintain her "purity" until Tobey renders her unconscious by slamming her head against the cave wall; he then proceeds to rape her. After Dawn awakens from her stupor, she subconsciously bites off Tobey's penis; Tobey ultimately dies of shock and drowns in the lake. Dawn soon after realizes that she has "vagina dentata," and continues to find herself in sexual

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[49] See R.W. Connell *Masculinities* (2005) and Connell and Messerschmidt "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept" (Dec. 2005; 846).
[50] See Pietrucci, Vientiane and Vincent, *Contre les publicités sexistes* (2012; 77-84).

encounters where she uses this "adaptation" as a tool of vengeance against those who take advantage of her.

Apparently inspired by a course that the film's director, Mitchell Lichtenstein, took with feminist and social critic Camille Paglia, Lichtenstein claims that his goal was to parody the vagina as a consumptive, castrating organ in the cultural unconscious.[51] As with the film *Elle*, critics and audience members have claimed this film as feminist. The film certainly critiques the abuse of the female body as an object of desire and perhaps empowers female sexuality by providing Dawn with an avenue to discover and to defend her body. And yet, the film's depiction of female sexuality limits heterosexual encounters to a violent exchange. Furthermore, while the men onscreen are excited at the idea of deflowering or taming Dawn's body, so too, potentially, are heterosexual male viewers who "stiffen" from the visual stimulation of the dangerous, and raped, female body embedded in scenes of sexual violence. As in Freud's interpretation of the Medusa, the stiffening provides a sense of reaffirmation of masculinity, as it "offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis" (Freud qtd. in Garber and Vickers 85). If Dawn represents a modern version of the raped Medusa who is transformed into a life-threatening creature, it follows that Perseus's attempt to conquer her will result in her decapitation. At risk of such symbolic decapitation, Dawn does not appropriate her own sexuality but continues to embody the dangerous, deadly woman, fashioned by the male gaze, in order to engage in sex. In this context, there is a delicate compromise between critiquing a cultural myth and perpetuating the fear of castration that imagines the vagina as beyond the "natural" or understandable, and to some audience members, "empowered."

[51] See Harmanci, "Horror Comedy, 'Teeth,' based on 'vagina dentata' myth" (2008).

Teeth which was filmed in the United States, presents a female body who is dangerous only after she is raped. This dangerous body is a result of exterior elements (a nearby chemical plant), nodding to vagina dentata as a characteristic attributed to her by the masculine imaginary rather than something she naturally possesses, and is used as a method of protection against sexual violence. In contrast, Michèle in *Elle* has a dangerous personality before her rape and is considered even more dangerous after her rape because of her, so the critics say, twisted sexual desires and active pursuit for revenge. Notably, Hollywood refused to film *Elle* because the plot was too politically incorrect for American audiences. Both films suggest that women must be sexually "dangerous," or capable of enacting some form of physical violence on their partner, in order to operate in sexual exchanges in these contexts. However, though these films' messages are not necessarily espoused by American and French cultures, they do seem to suggest that while the American audience can tolerate witnessing rape and root for dangerous sexualities if it keeps women safe, keeping in mind the fantastical setting that assures the impossibility of this "self defense," the French public, perhaps more open to discussions of female sex and sexualities, might delight in the main character's assumption of a female sexuality that chases danger.

The Creation of a Myth: Sexual Difference

The representation of women as dangerous stems from the masculine imaginary's invention of "sexual difference," which carries a distinct history in French intellectual writing. While the difference between "man" and "woman" has been a topic of literary debate for centuries, the concept of *différence sexuelle* in French intellectual history took a unique course during the twentieth century after the arrival of psychoanalysis. Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, scholar of French literature and gender studies, gives a thorough account of the evolution of the

différence sexuelle in her chapter "Les fins d'un idiome ou la différence sexuelle en traduction" (2013), in which she attributes the initial theoretical conceptualization of sexual difference to the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. According to Berger, Freud's label "Sexuelle Differenzen" strays from biological reductionism and instead denotes the variety of sexual behaviors and orientations, whose roots Freud attempted to trace by examining the overlaps between biology and psychology. Berger explains that :

> comme le savent ceux qui ont lu Freud, ce dernier conçoit le "*Geschlecht*" ou la "*Unterschied der Geschlechter*" (qu'on traduit en français et en anglais par "différence sexuelle"), non pas comme l'ensemble des différences anatomiques entre mâle et femelle, mais comme la manifestation de positions inconscientes différenciées chez les sujets humains, qui conduisent ceux-ci à privilégier telle ou telle voie dans la vie sociale et la vie érotique. La notion psychanalytique de "différence sexuelle" ne renvoie donc pas, on l'a assez dit, à quelque essentialisme naturalisant ou "biologique."…la différence entre femme et homme, ou plutôt entre féminine et masculin n'est pas donnée; on ne naît pas femme – ou plutôt "*weibliche*" –, on le devient. Freud le dit et cherche à le démontrer avant Simone de Beauvoir. (*Le théâtre du genre* 160-161)

While Freud recognized that sexual difference is culturally constructed rather than biologically imposed, many feminists have critiqued Freud's own imposition of a sexual hierarchy in his psychoanalytic theories, as the Oedipus and castration complexes require the young girl to develop by identifying with the male perspective.[52] It is this male orientation of psychoanalysis that reveals the larger forces at work in Western culture that subjugate the female and the

[52] In *Volatile Bodies* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz references the following feminist critiques of Freud's Oedipus and castration complexes: Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction* (1982); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (1974) and *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977); Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French* Feminists (1989).

feminine. As Ellen Armour notes in her examination of psychoanalysis (within a larger study of deconstruction's potential to amend the lack of attention to racial difference in feminist theology): "Freud and psychoanalysis…are *symptomatic* of th[e] larger problem of our cultural grammar. They are helpful in that they offer powerful descriptions of the status quo for women. Most important, Freud opens the door to this other realm of forces not subject to our control but at work in us nonetheless" (118). Recognizing the influence of larger social forces, Freud's castration threat places men in a state of "possession" or "having," and therefore recognizes the construction of the female body as lacking, but does not go beyond this recognition to new proposals or resolutions. Consequently, while Freudian psychoanalysis provides a useful theoretical apparatus, as noted in Grosz's *Volatile Bodies*, it risks trapping social relations in the domination of the phallus (57).

In opposition to Freudian theorization of woman as lack, and Jacques Lacan's later theorization of woman's pleasure as "beyond," Cixous's writing on sexual difference in the mid-1970s was revolutionary in part because it decentered male desire and perspective.[53] As religious scholar Eilberg-Schwarz astutely notes in the introduction to *Off With Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, Cixous's writing shifts the focus from the male's castration threat to the female's decapitation anxiety (7-8). This decapitation, or erasure of the feminine, was highlighted by French intellectuals (such as Cixous, but also Christine Delphy, Colette Guillaumin, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray[54]) who began to theorize the "female" and the "feminine" in order to extract them from phallogocentric language. While Jacques

[53] See Freud "Infantile Sexuality" (61) and Lacan, "Dieu et la jouissance de ~~La~~ femme," *Séminaire XX: Encore* (61-71), Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell's discussion of the essay in *Feminine Sexuality* (137-8), and Elizabeth Grosz's critique in *Volatile Bodies* (60).
[54] For a more complete list of differentialist feminists and a general background on feminisms in France, see Debrauwere-Miller, "Parcours historique des féminismes intellectuels en France depuis Beauvoir" (2013).

Derrida coined "phallogocentrism"[55] to denote the predominance of men as carriers of *logos* (reason) within Western philosophy and the corresponding subordination of women, French feminists and scholars of the 1970s and 80s furthered the use of this term:

> … différence entre le féminin et le masculin (qui ne se confondent pas avec la femme et l'homme), dévalorisation et occultation du féminin par le masculin. Ces analyses théoriques, en créant le terme 'phallogocentrisme' par condensation, ont voulu mettre en lumière le fait que l'ordre existant est dominé par le masculin. Dans ce contexte, la femme, le 'sémiotique,' comme l'appelle Julia Kristeva, le féminin, la femellétude – quel que soit le nom qu'on lui donne – sont refoulés et ne se manifestent que par l'absence. La femme est donc différente, ou, ce qui revient au même, *morte ou aliénée* dans le phallogocentrisme. (Sarde 524, my emphasis)

Feminist critic and writer Michèle Sarde provides a perceptive evaluation of women's intellectual and political movements in France and points to the process of decapitation that Cixous exposes through references to "death" and "alienation." In other words, phallogocentrism erases difference, in this case represented by "women" or the "feminine," in order to enforce "sameness" (or the Empire of the Proper), or a homogeneous worldview. By alienating (or silencing) and subordinating *le féminin* in language and in society, *le masculin* decapitates its other. The erasure of the feminine represents a suppression of a way of thinking that coincides with the suppression of female bodies. However, when differentialist feminism was en vogue in the 1970s, women's needs in the liberation movements diverged widely; the women at the forefront of feminist movements who were increasingly dangerous to patriarchal power also at

[55] Phallogocentrism denotes Western metaphysics as centered on logic that privileges consciousness, selfhood, and rational thought. Derrida's original reference can be found in: "Le facteur de la vérité," *Poétique: Revue de theorie et d'analyse littéraires*, vol. 12, 1975.

times concurrently endangered the plurality of "women." While differentialism, which emerged in the 1970s as the second wave of French feminism, emphasized the difference in nature between men and women, the "third wave" of the 1990s worked toward recognizing a multiculturalism that demanded acknowledgement of multiple identities neglected by previous discussions of feminisms.[56] In the twenty-first century, feminist critics are beginning to theorize a potential fourth wave; and yet, throughout these sequential waves, which perhaps cannot be so clearly distinguished and categorized, the erasure or subjugation of diversions from the (hegemonic) masculine norm was perpetually—and continues to be—at stake.

Not easily situated within a "wave" of feminism, Cixous's efforts to unsettle oppressive structures can be traced throughout her careers as both writer and professor. When Cixous published her first essays on sex and gender in the mid-1970s, she had already been hard at work dismantling sexual inequality within the French university system. In 1968, she co-founded the experimental university of Vincennes (which soon after became the Université de Paris VIII), an institution that became a place for radical political thought in France at a time when student revolts were intensifying. As a professor and writer, Cixous tied her work at the university to her revolutionary thought as a "theorist" of sexual difference. In 1974, Cixous created the first gender studies doctoral program in Europe, *Le Centre d'études féminines et d'études de genre*, which the French government shut down in 1980 thus illustrating the hostility toward the critique of established institutions (though it was later reopened and continues to be in operation today).

[56] While "third wave" is a term more often used to describe stages of American feminisms, scholar of French and francophone literature Michèle Schaal highlights in "Virginie Despentes or a French Third Wave of Feminism?" (2011) that post-second wave feminisms in France worked to deconstruct the universal Western white woman by emphasizing intersectionality (40). See also Debrauwere-Miller's "Parcours historique des féminismes intellectuels en France depuis Beauvoir" for further characteristics of French feminism's third wave (especially 37-42).

In the following year, “Le rire de la Méduse” was published as a piece within a special issue of the journal *L’Arc* on Simone de Beauvoir.

Cixous’s analysis of gender differed greatly from that of earlier feminists. Her text strayed from de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe* because it acknowledged existence as not uniquely intellectual, but also heavily influenced by the corporeal: “[Cixous] est pleinement consciente d’une existence qui est chair et matière, corps et sensation, et le revendique comme manière première, inaliénable, d’être au monde” (Reid 28).[57] In the article “En corps, brèves observations sur le manifeste d’Hélène Cixous” (2013), Martine Reid, literary scholar at the Université de Lille-III, notes that “Le rire” envisions a new future for a “feminine” writing that incorporates the body and disrupts hierarchy, yet it is also inscribed within a history of texts that address the condition of being a woman and mother (Reid 29).[58] These texts, as well as others such as Annie Leclerc’s *Parole de femme* (1974), which represents the birth of the differentialist feminism movement in France, inspired Cixous to author “Le rire de la Méduse” as a “manifesto” that reclaimed a relationship with the body and took pleasure in the non-hierarchical differences between bodies.

According to Reid, the lack of attention that French intellectuals gave to “Le rire” is in part a result of their rejection of feminism in the university and elsewhere, making the essay dangerous material (26). Not only were Cixous’s efforts to expand what qualifies as an important field of study considered overly ambitious, but she had also been considered dangerous because of her keen intellect. In a 1982 publication of *Le Figaro*, a popular news source in France, a male journalist harped on her challenging style: “j’ai été, je le confesse, proprement infoutu de

[57] Though, scholars have increasingly paid attention to the prominence of corporeality in Beauvoirian philosophy; see: Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*” (1986); Simons, *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir* (1996); Fishwick and, *The Body in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir* (2002).
[58] Reid lists Françoise de Graffigny, Félicité de Genlis, Claire de Duras and Colette as examples.

découvrir où *diable* madame Cixous voulait en venir, ni même ce qu'elle envisageait d'exprimer…Madame Cixous n'en avait elle-même aucune idée" (Ragueneau, my emphasis). In an interview the year before, Cixous had already recognized the media's disapproval of her writing. When asked by the journal *Libération* (December 22, 1981) why she was poorly received by the media, Cixous responded that she represents what is "indigestible" for the mass media and that this sends a message to all women to remain silent. In other words, her nontraditional form of writing threatened the structure created by white male predecessors.

In a 2014 spotlight on Cixous's work in *Le magazine littéraire*, journalist Anne Diatkine noted that while Cixous has received various awards for her literature, she was paradoxically not well known in France: "Plus qu'aucune autre intellectuelle, Hélène Cixous est associée à une image menaçante, celle de la femme qui aurait 'trop' de savoirs, trop d'intelligence, et dont les textes seraient difficiles d'accès, la polysémie et les jeux sur les sons faisant peur. La misogynie à son encontre est sans doute plus vive qu'à l'égard d'une autre" (550). As the author of the newly born Medusa, Cixous recognizes that these criticisms are simply the projected fears of her readers: "La difficulté des textes est reprochée également à Derrida mais surmontée, car il est une personnalité masculine…Les présupposés sur ma personne ne disent rien de moi, mais beaucoup sur ceux qui les projettent" (550). Cixous's own experience as a "dangerous" writer sheds light on how society treats "real-life" Medusas who acquire a penetrating gaze. And yet, such attempts at symbolic decapitation only further motivate the poetic writer to combat sexual politics surrounding the Medusa and her kinswomen: "Je suis, d'une certaine manière, née politique, et même c'est pour des raisons politiques que j'ai commencé à écrire *de la poésie* comme réponse au drame politique" ("Guardian of Language").

Sexual inequalities inspired the majority of Cixous's earliest publications in France. In "Sorties," a chapter within *La jeune née* (1975) co-authored with Catherine Clément, Cixous exposes the marginalization of women through language that associates female bodies with images of darkness, confusion, and the supernatural:

> … elle est dans l'ombre. Dans l'ombre qu'il jette sur elle ; qu'elle est
>
> Nuit pour son jour, c'est ainsi que c'est fantasmé depuis toujours. Noire pour sa blancheur. ("Sorties" 123)

In this quote, the lack of punctuation after the first line suggests that she, "*elle*," is projected into emptiness. Invisible, she transforms into the cast shadow, "*l'ombre*," that haunts and confuses the male, who represents the "light" of reason. Consequently, the female symbolizes the capitalized noun "Nuit," which signifies death, fear, mystery, and the unknown. She is different *from* man, who is oppositely connected to life and knowledge, rendering language phallogocentric. Like the Medusa, these binaries—male/female, day/night, white/black—have roots in Greek mythology, which establishes a relationship between death and the feminine. The Greeks conceived of "Death" as a figure among the gods who gave birth to the daughter of "Night," whose own children brought hardship upon mankind: "Les enfants de Nuit, au contraire des dieux qui semblent n'exister que pour eux-mêmes, ont été mis au monde pour que la peine hante la cité des hommes" (Kahn-Lyotard and Loraux, qtd. in Bompard-Porte et al. 51).[59] This association establishes femininity as menacing to the life of man, while the men who encounter and defeat deathly female goddesses or monsters are heroic, as seen in depictions of Perseus and Heracles (Bompard-Porte et al 51).

[59] In this passage, the authors are citing Laurence Kahn-Lyotard and Nicole Loraux from their entry "Mort" in *Dictionnaire des mythologies* (ed. Yves Bonnefoy, Flammarion, 1981).

Realizing the persistence of such myths so heavily influential to ideas of sexual difference, Cixous continuously touches on the hierarchal male/female binary within Greek mythology. For instance, the siren is present in "Le rire de la Méduse" (1975) and "Sorties" (1976), as well as her seminar on sexual difference (1992-1993). In "Le rire," she describes the castrating siren and Medusa as creations of the masculine imaginary: "Est-ce que le pire, ce ne serait pas, ce n'est pas, en vérité, que la femme n'est pas castrée, qu'il lui suffit de ne plus écouter les sirènes (car les sirènes, c'étaient des hommes) pour que l'histoire change de sens ? Il suffit qu'on regarde la méduse en face pour la voir : et elle n'est pas mortelle. Elle est belle et elle rit" ("Le rire" 47). Rather than looking Medusa, or the siren, square in the eyes, "l'homme" looks into a narcissistic mirror that reflects his own fears. By not allowing her to speak for or present her own sense of self, her interlocutor executes a decapitation. Cixous returns to the relegation of the "decapitated" feminine in her seminar on sexual difference through the siren in Classical writing:

> Toutes les légendes, tous les récits concernant les sirènes, sont de l'ordre du on-dit, de l'ordre de la rumeur. …Mais il faut se le dire, c'est très important, et là on rejoint une mythologie immense qui a des millénaires, finalement personne n'a jamais vu les sirènes en réalité exécuter ces actes dont d'une certaine manière on les accuse.…La dimension imaginaire légendaire des sirènes est particulièrement intense…on leur attribue une apparence physique, une visibilité très variable. Ce que je peux dire, pour faire semblant de conclure, c'est que sur les sirènes on ne saura jamais la vérité, on ne l'a jamais su, tout ce que l'on sait c'est que dans l'espace où elles passent sans être jamais véritablement perceptibles, il y a quand même une odeur de tragédie, une forme de désespoir, quelque

> chose est manqué, et ce qui est manqué, c'est ce à quoi tous nous aspirons, la vraie rencontre. ("Poétique" 17-18, author's emphasis)

Instead of articulating one or the other sex as a "lack," Cixous argues that what is *lost* is the "real" encounter between two subjects. Like that of Medusa, the siren's beauty is tragic as it bestows an early death to all parties: the siren is metaphorically decapitated because she is unable to see or speak for herself. Embedded in this passage is a lexical field of imagery, and yet Cixous displaces the importance of the optical by writing of the "odor" of tragedy and the "hope" or "breath" (*aspirer* can be translated as both) of true encounters. "Breath" seems to be relevant here, where acknowledgement of the other as irreducibly different, rather than as a reflection of the self's preformed images, *breathes* life into the other. To the contrary, in this imaginary space through which the sirens pass, these mythological figures get stuck in this depiction as seductive women who lure men into danger.

By enlivening and revising myths and fairy tales not only in her writing on sexual differences, but also in her fiction[60], Cixous highlights that these stories, though engraved in the cultural unconscious, can be rewritten. In her references to the siren, the dangerous female body emerges as a cultural invention open to interpretation that "passes" through "space" of imagination. While the masculine imaginary affixes a static meaning to the female, Cixous rewrites this myth so as to set it free and allow it to continue its journey through space as an uncodable body, "on ne saura jamais la vérité." This poetic liberation of the female body manifests through much of Cixous's writing on sexual difference, including an essay published in 1994, "Contes de la différence sexuelle." In "Contes," writing serves as a space to oppose hierarchical institutions by uncovering difference rather than locking it into static definitions.

[60] See, for instance, *Homère est morte* (2014), which is a fictional account of the death of her mother. The title draws parallels between Cixous's mother and the epic poet Homer who gave birth to the epic genre.

Such normative definitions, French intellectual historian Michel Foucault argues, came into effect through the proliferation of discourse surrounding sexuality (*Histoire de la sexualité: Volume I*, 1976). For Cixous, to describe, "décrire," sex is a man's project where "man" is not a suggestion of the biological male sex but rather the patriarchal figure that symbolizes law and imposes hierarchy ("Contes" 42). In this sense, to "décrire" is to "dé-écrire," where "dé" refers to the cessation of writing after one has arrived at a defined, settled account of the differences between the sexes, which runs contrary to the type of poetic, disturbing writing that Cixous practices.

The use of "*contes*" ("tales") in the essay's title again refers to an imaginary adventure that does not cement one defining truth of sexual difference, but instead hints at an interpretation that cannot be verified. Consequently, "Contes de la différence sexuelle" establishes sexual difference not as something that *is*, but as movement:

> (La 'D.S.' — n'est pas une région, ni une chose, ni un espace précis entre deux, elle est le mouvement même, le réfléchissement, le Se, la déesse négative sans négativité, l'insaisissable qui me touche, qui venant du plus proche me donne par éclairs à moi-même l'impossible moi – autre, fait surgir le tu-que-je-suis, au contact de l'autre.) ("Contes" 56)

This quote, set off in parentheses, appears as an aside to reinforce the importance of proximity that stimulates the movement of (sexual) difference: "(C'est d'ailleurs dans la proximité, je l'ai dit, que se dessinent de manière fine et nette les reliefs de la différence)." For Cixous, sexual difference can never be "known," but can only be experienced within the region of proximity that ignites a shared space between "you" and "me," evoking a common humanity through the expression "tu-que-je-suis." What is more, because the self is made up of others, sexual

difference not only exists between two people but also within one. And thus, Cixousian sexual difference, presented as a *déesse* that echoes the Medusa figure, is indefinable and unquantifiable; it is a: "D.S. qui passe et qui déstabilise les assignations en passant" (Berger 163). D.S., or *différence sexuelle*, that passes, that continually moves from one point to another, denies a static "nature" of sex and instead provokes reflection; we will never know the siren, the Medusa, or what sexual difference *is*. Thus D.S. = Se, the reflexive personal pronoun in French unconnected to gender or number that constantly changes depending on whom the pronoun references. Berger calls this movement, or passage, of one toward the other as "(tres)passing."[61] This playful term suggests both (1) the possibility of passage between sexual differences, and (2) trespassing as the negative, violent type of imposition one can have on the other that results from the desire to know or define how they sexually embody.

In a further attempt to confess the impossibility of articulating sexual difference, in 2006 Cixous authored the essay "Nous en somme." In this text, the sexed body loses its fixed state as Cixous poses the question, "do I create or am I created?" In Sarah Crevier Goulet's shrewd analysis of this essay, she claims that Cixous performs a "*méta-morphose*," a process through which one body converts to another (human, vegetal, animal). The possibility to think and write different forms of being occurs through a "*découpage*" of letters that places the body in a space of liminality: "L'œuvre de Cixous où 'défilent et se défilent' tant d'incarnations, tant de déclinaisons, tant de déguisements pour la même personne donne à penser le corps non seulement dans ses variations mais aussi dans son inachèvement, son incomplétude" (Crevier

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[61] Berger uses this playful term in the English translation of her work (*The Queer Turn in Feminism* 115-6). The original French refers to "(tres)passing" as "quand le passage n'a pas lieu": "[La différence sexuelle chez Cixous] a par contre beaucoup à voir avec certains mécanismes psychiques étudiés par la psychanalyse tels que la formation du moi, les différentes modalités du rapport à l'autre, l'amour ou inversement, quand le passage n'a pas lieu, l'hostilité" (163).

Goulet 327). Thus, the title plays with the verb "to be" — dropping the "s" in "nous *sommes*," the text suggests that we *are* not, but rather are "en somme," a sum of multiple parts; we are, in *other* words, in a field of wordplay that permits the "I" to change form and experience otherness. Thus, sexual difference(s), pluralized in this essay, also exist as movement within the self, as "I" am made up of so many "you's."

In her theorization of sexual difference, Cixous dissociates the female from fear/death/danger and instead envisions a "feminine" economy that breathes life into relations. It is important to note, however, that Cixous's wordplay in "Nous en somme," in addition to her call for *écriture féminine* in "Le rire de la Méduse," does not reduce the "feminine" to the female. While Cixous has been criticized for reducing "female" and "femininity" to an essence, as literary and film scholar Katherine Binhammer, among others, has pointed out, this argument is based on confusion, mainly among Anglo-American scholars, around Cixous's use of these terms: "Cixous' reception by Anglo-American feminists indicates the problem of 'woman' in philosophical discourse in general, of the relationship between 'woman' in language and the historical bodies of women" (Binhammer 67).[62] The misunderstanding occurs in the use of "woman" in French intellectual discussions of sexual difference as a profile constituted through language rather than a material body. As Binhammer points out, feminist scholars Toril Moi (*Sexual/Textual Politics*, 1985) and Ann Rosalind Jones ("Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Ecriture Féminine," 1981) claim Cixous's writing of the body to be essentialist, yet such claims are erroneous: They collapse the "feminine" (gender) into the "female" (sex) in Cixous' work, while the work itself evades this reduction by presenting a "feminine libidinal economy" that can be enlivened by any sex. Thus, Cixous reads and writes

[62] For other defenses against Cixous's essentialism, see Blyth and Sellers (24), Bray (28-42, 56-9), Conley (*Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, especially chapter 3 and *Hélène Cixous*, chapter 3), Shiach (chapter 1), among others.

the female and the feminine as “cultural inscriptions” rather than “anatomical bodies” (Binhammer 72).

However, if gendered terms such as “feminine” and “female” further complicate the issue because of their historical saturation, why use them at all? By referring to various interviews with Cixous, Binhammer argues that it is precisely because these words are so embedded in (Western) history and culture that we cannot simply set them aside, but must wrangle with them and continue to produce new possibilities for meaning. And yet, because Cixous’s use of “woman” refers at various times to language exclusively, to the material body, or to both, Binhammer suggests examining this use of “woman” as a metonymy instead of a metaphor. While employing the “metaphor” of “feminine” (gender/writing effect) for “female” (body) suggests literal substitution and excludes the occasional application of “feminine” to material bodies (making Cixous’ writing vulnerable to narrow-minded accusations of essentialism), the use of metonymy allows for a space of contiguity (closeness, but not necessarily substitution), further distancing Cixous’s use of female and feminine from essentialist critique.

Medusa: from Femme Fatale to Queer Body

Crowned with venomous serpents and endowed with a fatal gaze, the monstrous Medusa stands out as an intriguing figure in mythology and world history. She has survived the centuries as a symbol of seduction and power, as muse, feminist and castration threat. As Garber and Vickers note in their study of Medusa, “[t]he most canonical writers (Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Shelley) have invoked her story and sung both her praise and her blame” (1). While the narrative’s progression from seduction to punishment and death is significant in itself, the details carry further symbolic resonance. As scholar of Hinduism and mythology Wendy Doniger suggests in her contributing chapter to *Off With Her Head!*, Greeks associated

eyes with the symbolic representation of male genitalia; thus Medusa's transformation afforded her a phallic power. This androcentric Greek association corresponds with the Freudian notion of "upward displacement," in which the lower regions of the body are substituted for the head. Freud's interpretation of "Medusa's Head," written in 1922 and posthumously published in 1940, demonstrates the androcentric lens of upward displacement:

> To decapitate = to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother. The hair upon Medusa's head is frequently represented in works of art in the form of snakes, and these once again are derived from the castration complex. It is a remarkable fact that, however frightening they may be in themselves, they nevertheless serve actually as a mitigation of the horror, for they replace the penis, the absence of which is the cause of the horror. This is a confirmation of the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration.
>
> The sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone. Observe that we have here once again the same origin from the castration complex and the same transformation of affect! For becoming stiff means an erection. Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact. (qtd. in Garber and Vickers 84-5)

According to Freud, Medusa's head frightens men because it represents the possibility of castration; but when Perseus "stiffens" at the sight of her, his "erection" reminds him that he is

still in possession of his penis-phallus (representing male anatomy and a symbol of power). By decapitating Medusa, Perseus symbolically castrates her by removing her power in order to maintain his own "phallus" as a symbol of heroic power. And yet, as literary critic Neil Hurtz reminds us in his interpretation of the myth (Garber and Vickers 177), the serpents also represent pubic hair, indicating that Medusa's head dually symbolizes vulva and penis. However, psychoanalyst Sarah Piazza remarks that Medusa's "pubic" hair suggests a relationship between female sexuality, disgust, and shame: "Les poils nous dégoûtent parce qu'ils représentent la sexualité féminine dans ce qu'elle a d'incontrôlé et donc de dangereux. L'épilation, c'est un moyen de la domestiquer" (qtd. in de Foucher, "La guerre du poil"). The need to domesticate female sexuality through the acts of shaving or stiffening suggests that mythology and social constructs of sexual difference continue to heavily influence the fear of and desire for the image of the femme fatale.

Cixous appropriately critiques the fear of castration in "Le sexe ou la tête?" as a masculine fear of being *ex*-propriated and deprived of a privilege seen as natural or deserved. And she reinterprets the myth of the Medusa by placing emphasis on the female fear of decapitation, absent in the films *Elle* and *Teeth* and in Freudian discourse. More importantly, however, Cixous proposes a new option for sexual relations. In place of the masculine desire to take from others based on a fear of loss, in "Le sexe ou la tête?" and "Le rire de la Méduse," she imagines a "feminine" desire that does not reduce the Other to the "self" to create an *empire du propre*, but rather indulges in *Amour Autre*, or an opening up to "otherness." Cixous rewrites the Medusa as an embodiment of a feminine economy that experiences a *jouissance,* or intense intellectual and physical pleasure, that results from this interaction with alterity.

After the 2010 republication of "Le rire de la Méduse," Cixous has remained concerned with perceptions of alterity, while employing modern parlance to reintroduce Medusa as a queer body who does not correspond to established conceptions of sexuality, gender or difference. While the term "queer" has historical connotations of homosexuality or strangeness, it has come to represent a body of theory that delinearizes relationships between sex, gender, and sexuality and to consider how other layers of identity, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, religion, ability, age, and class, map onto the former concepts. However, Judith Butler, whose work has been very influential in queery theory, recognizes, "queer" will never have a stable meaning and shall continue to be refashioned with each new reading. In her essay "Critically Queer," Butler announces that: "If the term 'queer' is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" (*Bodies that Matter* 173).

In the introduction to *Le rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* (2010), Cixous deploys her own use of queer: "La Muse de la littérature. Une *queer*. D'autres disent la *queen des queers*. La littérature comme telle est *queer*. Dis-je. Extranaturelle, dit le narrateur" ("Un effet d'épine rose" 32-33). And yet, in another interview five years later, she also points to the term's ephemeral nature, claiming that another word may very well replace it in the coming decades ("Méduse en Sorbonne" 144). While this adopted vocabulary suggests an evolution in Cixous's thought, it also proposes that through writing we can imagine "sexual difference" as a notion, embodied by her very own Medusa, that is constantly in flux. Cixous emphasizes the potential to play with sexual difference in writing, as she suggests the possibility of literature to be "queer," which

might suggest "deviant" given her synonym *torsion*, or "extranaturel," that which leaves and calls into question the realm of the "natural."

Expanding upon "queer literature," in a 2015 interview published within a collection of critical essays examining "Le rire de la Méduse," Cixous says: "Méduse a toujours déjà été *queer comme la littérature*. *Queer*, c'est *torsion*, c'est *twist*. Eh bien, la Méduse, son emblème, sa chevelure, *est* une touffe de torsions. La torsion est la signature; il s'agit de produire des entorses, de ne pas aller en ligne droite" ("Méduse en Sorbonne" 144-145). In these passages, "queer" denotes something that shifts boundaries and challenges social expectations, opening up possibilities for literature as well as for sexual difference(s). Such "queerness" was deeply embedded even in the nascent stages of the Cixousian Medusa: "Nous re-penserons la femme depuis toutes les formes et tous les temps de son corps" ("Le rire" 44).

Despite the queering of sex and gender roles and the acquisition of women's rights in France and elsewhere over the last few decades, Cixous and fellow author Annie Leclerc raise concerns about the future for female bodies and the re-situation of men and women within a system of hierarchical sexual difference in their twenty-first century reflections on previous publications. Frustrated with the universalist feminism pioneered by Simone de Beauvoir that sought to arrive at sexual equality through an erasure of difference, the author of *Parole de femme* (1974), Annie Leclerc, called for women's voices to talk about the ways in which women might be different from men, or different from what men have imagined them to be. Republished in 2001, Leclerc's updated preface states that her goal in writing this essay during a period of intense feminist militantism in France was to protect and perpetuate life, meaning a halt in domination—or, a fight to the death (*lutte à mort*)—as the ultimate measure of success. In her 2001 preface, a quarter of a century after the initial publication of *Parole de femme*, Leclerc

states that, in some respects, the social situation has become more grave and that if she were to rewrite the book, she would not change anything: "Ce qui inquiétait hier effraie aujourd'hui pour de bon" (11-12). While many women—though certainly not all—around the globe may have more access to employment, self-expression, and an autonomous lifestyle, Leclerc points to a lack of substantial change in women's access to their own bodies.

Cixous expresses a similar sentiment in her preface to the 2010 edition of *Le rire de la Méduse et autres ironies*, in which she transcribes a conversation with her Medusa:

> Elle pose sa couronne, s'assied, rose, et puis : où sont les femmes aujourd'hui ? dis-je. – En 2003, je suis née et j'ai vécu en Corée, on arrivait en 1970, dit la couronnée. Tout de suite après, ce sont des latinas qui m'ont appelée, et ces jours-ci je vis en Californie. C'est l'Heure de la Méduse entre les Amériques. Je n'arrête pas de galoper les airs d'Asie. Et en France, c'est comment ? – Je crains qu'il faille que tu reviennes voler devant ma fenêtre, dis-je. Ce temps-ci l'air est plein d'algues, on étouffe et ne rit pas beaucoup. ("Un effet d'épine rose" 33)

While the author mourns the absence of her Medusa in France, she recognizes her liveliness in other regions. No longer endowed with a crown of snakes symbolizing the powerful phallus or frightening pubic hair, the modern Medusa's new "signature" and pinkness of skin suggest a fresh image. Instead of the Medusa as a femme fatale linked with the kingdom of death, Medusa is a female body in movement who gallops, flies, births and lives. Cixous references the original version of "Le rire" when she asks the Medusa to reclaim her flight, or *vol*, through which she disoriented space and disrupted property:

> *Voler*, c'est le geste de la femme, voler dans la langue, la faire voler. … la femme tient de l'oiseau et du voleur comme le voleur tient de la femme et de l'oiseau: illes passent, illes

> filent, illes jouissent de brouiller l'ordre de l'espace, de le désorienter, de changer de place les meubles, les choses, les valeurs, de faire des casses, de vider les structures, de chambouler le propre. …
>
> Qui n'a pas brouillé, tourné en dérision, la barre de séparation, inscrit avec son corps le différentiel, perforé le système des couples et oppositions, foutu par terre d'une transgression le successif, l'enchaîné, le mur de la circonfusion ? ("Le rire" 49).

Connected to the bird and the thief, the action "*voler*" takes what belongs to the *logos* of Western history not to appropriate it as her/their own, but to expose it, agitate it, and reorder it; to infuse it with air and defy gravity in order to take flight: "faire sauter la loi en l'air, à tordre la 'vérité' de rire" ("Le rire" 49). In this distortion of traditional reason and writing, Cixous's use of "illes"—a fusion and pluralization of the French "il" and "elle"—represents a blending of the thief, the woman, and the bird who come together to make new meaning. This neologism breaks open the *circonfusion* of circular, repetitive navigation to "queer" the male/female binary. Rather than use distinctions between the contaminated and the pure, the ugly and the beautiful, the passive and the active, the feminine and the masculine, Cixous has Medusa forge a new being that cannot neatly fit within categories. This use of "illes" further exemplifies Medusa's queerness and also sheds light on the tension between disturbing identity while drawing attention to it: while she unsettles sexual difference between "male" and "female," she also draws attention to the specific oppression of female bodies within a certain historical moment.

The currents of poetic and political disruption within these terms that explore sexual difference exemplify the disruptive flight of the *vol* that Cixous claims is missing in France when she asks Medusa to come back and fly by her window. The demand for Medusa's return suggests a disappointment with the transcription of sexual difference as factual (biological), as there is an

absence of laughter that troubles absolute truth. Instead, algae clog the air; language play and questioning of the natural order are exchanged for a slow, sludgy, regression towards fear unbroken by laughter.

Recent publications and events in France work toward proving Cixous's hypothesis of a regression in the multiplication of differences and real political equalities. In *Beauté fatale* (2012), journalist and essayist Mona Chollet performs a sociological study of beauty in contemporary France and claims that traditions of seduction "à la Française" keep women in social and intellectual subordination to men and point to a growing indifference toward the progression of women's rights (Chollet 9). In France, Chollet argues that the need to appear "feminine" represents a national value: "la femme Française est un trésor national, quasiment une marque déposée" (10). As Martine Reid highlights in "En-corps, brèves observations sur le manifeste d'Hélène Cixous" (2013), "Le rire" encouraged bodies to break free from the imprisonment of difference between the sexes by "varying the contours of [or 'queering'] sexual difference until the distinctions that have revealed themselves to be extraordinarily destructive disappear" (Reid 24). And yet, the lack of the "laughter" once inspired by the Cixousian Medusa, in France and elsewhere, predicts a return to the repression of the body that Cixous had worked to rehabilitate and a (re)securing of female bodies within an ancient myth. The next section examines which bodies are most often depicted as dangerous and seductive in visual culture and asserts that the consumption of certain bodies through the media labels other bodies, rendered invisible, as dangerous on a more profound level.

Modern Myth: Contemporary Examples of Dangerous Women

"Il y aurait de quoi faire éclater de rire la moitié du monde, si ça ne continuait pas."
- "Le rire de la Méduse 47

The perception of women as dangerous has long served as pretext for their mistreatment. In *Femme = Danger? Pour en finir avec le mythe de la femme dangereuse*, published in 2007, social scientist Gonzague de Sallmard highlights contemporary iterations of the mythical dangerous woman: the feminist, the single woman, the female politician. However, he concedes at the close of the study that "'la femme dangereuse' est en train de se lézarder" (212); misogyny is coming to a halt, and today's women will not allow for a return to obscurantism (213). And yet, rather than disappearing, the "danger" that female bodies represent has evolved into a multi-pronged issue; these bodies are seen not simply as a threat, but as objects of desire who either affirm or call into question dominant masculine identity. Contemporary images of dangerous women in Western media depict devilish femmes fatales endowed with uncontrollable sexuality, but also suggest that such a sexuality endows women with (limited) power over men. This false sense of empowerment has leaked into some currents of "feminism" in both the United States and France that adopt being "dangerous" as an answer to issues of sexual violence, as seen in reactions to the films *Elle* and *Teeth*. In her recent album *Dangerous Woman*, American pop artist Ariana Grande takes on this identity, and has been praised as a feminist for doing so. Yet, instead of focusing on her own body, her songs fixate on the body of the male, who doesn't "need [my] permission" to engage in sexual activity. The song that serves as the album's namesake boasts of a natural female "dangerousness": "Somethin' 'bout you makes me feel like a dangerous woman/ Makes me wanna do things that I shouldn't/… it's only nature, I live for danger." While Grande feigns the femme fatale who is dangerous to men, by engaging in "things that [she] shouldn't," in reality she poses a potential danger to herself and conveys a cliché desire

for the forbidden. This desire once again raises concerns about societal perception of sexual equality and the characteristics women must adopt to obtain it.

The recent tendency in popular culture to present women as "dangerous" is even more popular in the visual realm, as confirmed by the films *Elle* (2016) and *Teeth* (2007), as well as another recent release in French cinema, *La Forêt de Quinconces* (2016). Like *Elle*, *La Forêt* (dir. Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet) was released at the Cannes Film Festival within the "special screenings" category. The film features a 20-something, heterosexual couple who goes through a dramatic break-up. After experiencing heartbreak, the male lead, Paul, swears that he will never love again: "je promets de vous haïr, femme." Following this promise, he rebounds with a charming young woman named Camille, who, unbeknownst to him, casts a spell that forbids Paul to leave their relationship unless he spills her blood. While casting the spell, she confesses that she is "la pire des chimères," "un serpent," thus mirroring Michèle and Dawn's characters, whose sexualities are empowered through dangerous adaptation or mutation. Camille's role as chimera, a fire-breathing female monster with a lion's head, goat's body and serpent's tail, places her within the category of non-human whose youth and sex drive are fatal, like the Medusa or siren. Thus, while de Sallmard in *Danger = Femme ?* provides enlightening research on female sexualities as dangerous, he is misguided in claiming that the trope is disappearing.

This depiction of dangerous female sexuality is also present in commercial advertisement in both France and the United States. Below are three contemporary French advertisements from Badoit, Mauboussin, and Givenchy. All three models engage in a specular exchange with the viewer; and yet, unlike Medusa, who is dangerous because of her active, penetrating look, these gazes and bodies are fixed, immobile in the advertisement's frame as they wait to be brought to life by the viewer's imagination. Their mostly absent bodies further stimulate the imagination,

while the styling of the female head in these images suggests a Freudian upward displacement and castration threat. Each model dons Medusa's wavy, snake-like hair, which, if we read through a Freudian lens, both excites and mitigates the horror of the castration threat. The female viewer might identify with such images and seek empowerment by mirroring them. And yet, as Cixous suggests, the female viewer might also suffer from a decapitation anxiety, as the silent females in these images are held captive by and exist *for* the viewer.

Figure 1: Badoit (2015)

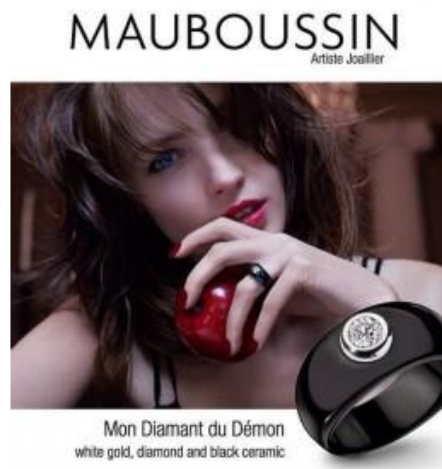

Figure 2: Mauboussin (2016)

Figure 3: Givenchy (2016)

The details of posture, styling and photography in these advertisements provide clues to their ideological function. While some female onlookers might admire such models as "beautiful" and "empowered," we must ask what such images are suggesting about women's bodies and sexualities. In line with traditional Western representations of female bodies, each ad conflates female sexuality with the devil, and consequently, with sin: the Badoit girl is *diablement pétillante*, devilishly sparkly or bubbly, and associated with the activity of consumption, while her seductive eyes, open lips and biting on the "straw" suggest another activity. The Mauboussin model also bares her teeth, favoring an Eve who is already wed to the devil and on the verge of eating the apple from the tree of knowledge. The dark shadowing on and around the model's body in the Givenchy ad for the perfume "ange ou démon" suggests that she might be more devil than angel and leaves parts of the body unseen to engage the viewer's imagination.

But what lies beneath the more obvious markings in these images? In her chapter "Femme Noire," scholar of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Jane Caputi lays bare the underlying markers of "blackness" and "darkness" in the femme fatale profile in popular film and television:

> It is the hidden, background presence of the woman/lesbian of color that gives the foregrounded white woman much of her 'voice,' her power, strength and resonance—even as this very potency is made monstrous. No matter how insistently white and heterosexual the classic femme fatale may appear, it is the mythic dark woman/lesbian whose potencies — deepened through her distance from and disloyalty to white heterosexist patriarchy — energize her. (53)

Similar to the images above, all of Givenchy's advertisements for the "ange ou démon" perfume feature slim, white, blonde or brunette women. This suggests that the desirable body, the tragic beauty capable of seduction, manipulation, and pleasure, is a white body. And yet the woman in the Givenchy advertisement is draped in black, thus engaging in a figurative use of the color. The juxtaposition of color is also present in Mauboussin's ad, prominently featuring a black ring and the slogan "Mon diamant de l'ange ou du démon," thus placing good/evil within a white/black dichotomy.

How does blackness amplify the dangerous element of these bodies? While the figurative presence of black makes itself apparent in the advertisements above, the models' skin color suggests a racial absence. In her chapter "Comment peut-on ne pas être blanche?" in *Beauté fatale* (2012), Mona Chollet argues that the luxury beauty market values and searches for whiteness, blondeness, thinness, and youth, and that this ideal penetrates the rest of the market. Chollet notes Alek Wek, a Sudanese-British model, as one of the only models with dark skin, and yet recognizes that Wek is never photographed as a "normal" woman but rather is exoticized or estheticized through contrast between her skin and the clothes she wears (189) — or does not wear, as evidenced in the photograph below taken by Nick Knight. Consequently, blackness suggests (and perhaps monetizes) a contrast in values to those of whiteness and purity, as seen in the Givenchy and Mauboussin advertisements. As Caputi reminds us, such color politics are a colonialist legacy:

> Much of the standard imagery associated with the white femme fatale actually is rooted in colonialist and racist projections about the woman of color. The very characteristics that make the white woman 'bad' or 'noir' are those qualities that according to a

racist/sexist viewpoint are especially endemic in women of color: primitive emotions and lusts, violence, sexual aggression, masculinity, lesbian tendencies… and so on. (52)[63]

The colonial production of the lascivious black woman thus serves to keep the white woman "pure" and to project her as playfully dangerous, but not *as* dangerous as the female body of color. That such an ideology can permeate an entire society is not missed by Martinique-born psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon who remarks how cultural productions can inject a society's worldview into the individual, and this worldview is always racialized (*Peau noire, masques blancs* 159).

Figure 4: Wek photographed for *Elle, US* (1997)

Figure 5: Wek and Galliano photographed by Nick Knight for Dior (2000)

In the above photographs of Alex Wek for *Elle* and Dior, the black female body seems to be re-situated within a symbolic field of slavery and animal-like desire. On the left, the photo's

[63] Caputi gives several cinematic examples to support her claim, including *Basic Instinct* directed by Paul Verhoeven (who also directed *Elle*): "In *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), the room in which the first homicide takes place is decorated with African art and statues of jungle beasts with bared fangs. Before we meet the killer—the thin, white, blond, upper-class Catherine (Sharon Stone)—the policemen at the murder scene joke that the 240-pound maid (racist-misogynist code for a woman of color) 'did it'" (52).

white background emphasizes the sharp, phallic protrusions of Wek's serpentine tongue, recalling the coiling serpents that crown Medusa's head, and sparkly devil horns. On the right, the two models are drenched in sweat while Wek wears a Dior chain around her arm that recalls a slave-like bondage between master and servant. The rope bound around their waists, of which the lighter-skinned male in the photo clearly has control as he thumbs its edge, enforces this slave/master relationship. In contrast, Wek's arms are up, leaving her sweat-drenched body exposed to the viewer. In this photo, she, too, is decapitated as her head leans back, hidden behind that of her male counterpart. If one makes a connection between Wek and the colonial representation of black women as "primitive," the photo might suggest a need for her to be controlled by her white male counterpart; and yet, Wek may also represent an agential, empowered, and desirous body, who nevertheless risks being oversexualized and viewed as a provocative body to be controlled and subdued.

In a discussion of the absence of black models in high fashion—particularly in the fashion scenes of Milan and Paris—Chollet consults Rokhaya Diallo, a French-Senegalese journalist, writer, filmmaker and activist, to highlight that Wek is often subject to an aesthetic that contrasts her skin and lighter clothing or decor. Diallo urges that such advertisements attach blackness to a "natural" animalistic desire: "Ces plastiques perçues comme très 'africaines' permettent donc à la mode et aux marques de créer un espace exotique au milieu de la norme blanche et blonde, ce qui laisse libre cours à l'imaginaire qui est associé aux femmes noires: la nature brute et sauvage et un certain primitivisme associé à l'animalité" (Diallo qtd. in Chollet 189). Furthermore, the extremely low percentage of non-white models compared to white models

sends the message that showcasing women of color is dangerous to the success of the fashion industry.[64]

Diallo's observations, along with Chollet's, suggest that black models who do succeed risk being subject to colonial ideology that links blackness and primitivism. In her infamous essay "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance" (1992), feminist theorist and activist bell hooks brings attention to the continued "association of blackness with rampant sexuality and irrationality, with decadence and corruption with disease and death," thus suggesting that the "primitive" continues to pervade our psyches (hooks 374).[65] Reiterating the necessity to analyze how race maps onto desire, in *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012), Sharon P. Holland, scholar of African American Studies, critiques the decoupling of race and desire in contemporary theorizations of the erotic. Claiming that the erotic has become a celebration of autonomous potential of desire, particularly in the realm of queer theory, Holland impresses upon her readers that "there is no 'raceless' course of desire" and rather there is a "practiced nature of quotidian racism and … these practices shape what we know of as 'desire'" (43).[66] In a discussion of the roles of "history" and "power" in experiences of the erotic, Holland puts forth that we should avoid always looking at black female sexuality through historical violence, and poses the question: "If we tie the black female body to the inevitability of slavery's abusive sexual terrain so that every time we think of enslaved black women and sex we think pain, not pleasure, then

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[64] In their analysis of 899 runway shows and 8,832 model appearances in New York, London, Paris, and Milan, The Fashion Spot recorded that 74.6% of models cast were white, while 25.4% were women of color. These numbers demonstrate a rise in comparison to previous years, though they also leave much room for improvement in regard to diversity on the runway. For more information on the study and affiliated reportage, see Tai, "Report."
[65] This is a quote from Marianna Torgovnick's essay *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* (U Chicago Press, 1990) that hooks critiques, as Torgovnick claims that "our culture" rejects such associations.
[66] It is important to note that while Holland recognizes how globalization "has resulted in a proliferation of 'racisms,'" she specifically addresses black bodies in her study and claims that "the psychic life of racism can best be read in the context of the United States in the space where black and white intersect, where the outer limit of doing and being are exercised and felt by those who seek to negotiate their place at the 'American' table" (8).

we also fail to acknowledge our own *intellectual* responsibility to take seriously how the transatlantic trade altered the very shape of sexuality in the Americas for *everyone*" (56). Framed within Holland's call to examine all aspects of such an "erotic" exchange, it is important to question how models, such as Alex Wek in the images above, incite *and* experience feelings of desire that interplay with violence and danger. Thus, the image of Wek posing with John Galliano for Dior could also be read as an empowering choice to pursue pleasure within the progressive context of an interracial couple; indeed, other photos in the shoot depict Wek hovering over Galliano, further depicting Wek as an empowered woman. Moreover, in an interview fourteen years later with the shoot's photographer Nick Knight, Wek articulates how comfortable she was posing for these images, and that Knight was able to "bring out the woman" in her ("Subjective" 2014). And yet, does depicting black women in this way give way to a multiplication of empowerment and desires, or resituate us within the masculine economy and the colonial, primitive desire to see hypersexualized black women? Perhaps the answer depends on who is doing the looking.

Through the lens of bell hooks's essay "Eating the Other," which claims that "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" has led to a commodification of Otherness, such depictions tend to represent a desirous consumption when examined through the eyes of white culture:

> Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.…The 'real fun' is to be had by bringing to the surface all those 'nasty' unconscious fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy. (366)

hooks's commentary suggests that the dangerous femme fatale in such advertisements spotlights white consumers' desires to eroticize and consume, or "eat," the unknown that is represented

through both figurative and racialized "blackness." Yet, hooks also questions "[w]hether or not the desire for contact with the Other, for connection rooted in the longing for pleasure, can act as a critical invention challenging and subverting racist domination, inviting and enabling critical resistance" (367). At the time of publication, she claims such an exchange as "an unrealized political possibility."

In this essay bell hooks draws a connection between danger and the insatiable, pleasure-seeking desire to come in contact with the unknown. "It is precisely that longing for *the* pleasure that has led the white west to sustain a romantic fantasy of the 'primitive' and the concrete search for a real primitive paradise, whether that location be a country or a body, a dark continent or dark flesh, perceived as the perfect embodiment of that possibility" (370). Recognizing the colonial fantasy of the primitive, hooks remarks a widespread desire for danger that operates through feeling on the edge, or feeling on *one's* edge, in order to experience pleasure:

> It is this charge, generated by the tension between pleasure and danger, death and desire, that [Michel] Foucault evokes when he speaks of that *complete total pleasure* that is related to death. Though Foucault is speaking as an individual, his words resonate in a culture affected by anhedonia.…In the United States, where our senses are daily assaulted and bombarded to such an extent that an emotional numbness sets in, it may take being 'on the edge' for individuals to feel intensely. (hooks 377)[67]

[67] hooks's discussion in this section of "Eating the Other" addresses the position of young black men in the American rap industry: "Constructing the black male body as site of pleasure and power, rap and the dances associated with it suggest vibrancy, intensity, and an unsurpassed joy in living. It may very well be that living on the edge, so close to the possibility of being 'exterminated' (which is how many young black males feel) heightens one's ability to risk and make one's pleasure more intense. It is this charge, generated by the tension between pleasure and danger, death and desire, that Foucault evokes when he speaks of that *complete total pleasure* that is related to death" (377). The quote that hooks references comes from an interview that Foucault gave in 1982 (see "The Minimalist Self," *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, p. 12).

As hooks reveals, the shock of danger incites a pleasure that allows the pleasure-seeker to be "more alive" and to surpass "the cultural anhedonia." Though hooks speaks to the American cultural tendency to depict "young black men as both dangerous and desirable," her words resonate with my project's assessment of dangerous and endangered female bodies. Referring back to the image of Wek above, some viewers may very well feel invited to fulfill a fantasy of "eating the Other" without having to face an actual encounter.

Nearly two decades before hooks's foundational essay "Eating the Other" (1992), Cixous also critiqued the link between blackness, both figurative and racial, and danger by placing a parallel between the colonial desire to conquer territory and the male desire to possess the unknown feminine sex:

> On peut leur apprendre, dès qu'elles commencent à parler, en même temps que leur nom, que leur région est noire, parce que tu es Afrique, tu es noire. Ton continent est noir. Le noir est dangereux. Dans le noir tu ne vois rien, tu as peur. Ne bouge pas car tu risques de tomber. Surtout ne va pas dans la forêt. Et l'horreur du noir, nous l'avons intériorisée. ("Le rire" 41)

In a critique of Freud's statement made in 1926 that female sexuality is a black continent[68], Cixous draws parallels between the oppression of "dangerous" female bodies and of the "dark continent" of Africa.[69] Elaborating on Freud's original metaphor for adult female sexuality as a "dark continent," literary theorist and critic Ranjana Khanna proclaims that Freud's comment feminizes Africa's mysteriousness.[70] Khanna keenly elaborates that Freud projects "his lack of knowledge about women onto his theory of them," thus drawing a relationship between

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[68] See Freud's essay *La question de l'analyse profane* (36).
[69] Marta Segarra traces Freud's statement back to Napoleon, who categorized Africa as "the dark continent" to be penetrated and pacified (*The Portable Cixous* 20).
[70] See Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (2003).

psychoanalysis and colonial exploration in which the Other exists in a new-found or unknown space and that encounters with racial or sexual difference are established against "the *sameness* of the self" (50-3, author's emphasis).

Cixous's critique is likely formed by her own experience as a woman in France, and a French Jew living in an anti-Semitic Algeria under the Vichy regime. As Ian Blyth reiterates, "Freud manages to roll colonialism and patriarchy into one — as a woman, Jewish, and 'French Algerian', Cixous is adversely affected by this in a number of ways" (26). In the passage above from "Le rire," Cixous criticizes sexual and racial colonization and the "dark" unknown used to characterize these groups. Rewriting the myth of the femme fatale, Cixous plays with the metaphor of blackness and, perhaps unknowingly, echoes the 1960s American slogan "Black is Beautiful" that spread to the South African anti-apartheid movement: "Nous sommes noires et nous sommes belles" (42). Khanna's reminder that Medusa has "tribal routes"[71] further establishes a link between the Africa that Cixous addresses in "Le rire de la Méduse" and the figure of Medusa herself in the cultural imaginary. Indeed, the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (c. 90-30 B.C.E.) who recorded a book of universal history (*Bibliotheca historica*) remarks a relationship between Medusa and the Amazons in Africa—both are destroyed by male gods who feared female governance (Garber and Vickers, 29)—, while the Roman poet Lucan (c. 39-65) locates Medusa's residence in "the far west of Africa" and claims (along with Ovid) that the drops of blood from Medusa's decapitated head rendered Libyan soil poisonous.[72]

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The overlaps in these theorizations of danger, desire, the primitive, and the female seems to suggest that danger, which in the context of my study is experienced through the threat of

[71] *Dark Continents* (48).
[72] For the full excerpts from these texts, see "Diodorus Siculus" (Garber and Vickers 26-29) and "Lucan" (40-42).

death[73], ignites a desire that shocks the senses, or allows for a "limit experience." Foucault and Cixous agree that limit experiences afford the opportunity to go beyond the self (Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault," 40; Cixous, *Poétique de la différence sexuelle*, 26). Foucault articulates such experiences as escapes from pure subjectivity and sameness. Similarly, Cixous calls attention to a limit experience's ability to bring the subject into a state of "in-between-ness." Based on these theorizations, one could argue that the images in the advertisements above are seductive because they invite the viewer to a false limit experience through the body of the femme fatale; though their attire and gaze might suggest a deathly desire that will transport the viewer to another realm, in reality, this idealization of the feminine merely reverts back to "sameness" because it is a homogenization of desires produced by the colonial, patriarchal imaginary.

As I will examine in the next section, in Nina Bouraoui's novel *Standard*, the imagined femme fatale is the channel through which the main character attempts to affirm his identity and confront death and danger. *Standard*, published in 2014, reveals the unconscious desires of an ordinary, middle-aged man, Bruno Kerjen, who lives in a Parisian suburb. The story is narrated from an omniscient point of view and portrays the antihero's fixation on Marlène, a woman from his past. This fixation serves as a means to escape the monotony of his life, and thus, recalling the profile of the castrating Medusa, the dangerous female body represents a false limit experience for Bruno, an attempt to "wrench the subject from itself" (Foucault "Entretien" 43, my translation). In the analysis that follows, I examine Bruno's unconscious abjection and fear of female bodies to argue that Marlène's character demonstrates the survival of Medusa as a cultural figure: the representation of a castrating yet desirable female sexuality that relies on

[73] By "death," I mean a threat to either one's body or identity, as considered through the lens of psychoanalysis.

colonial ideology and concomitantly endangers the female character by threatening her symbolic decapitation, while ultimately causing psychological harm to Bruno as well.

Marlène as Medusa: Nina Bouraoui's *Standard*

The novel *Standard* uses a relationship between an obsessive, isolated man and the woman he lusts after to explore issues of gender and subjectivity. Until the publication of *Standard*, Bouraoui had written almost solely within the genre of autofiction (fictionalized autobiography). Her previous works recount an adolescence spent in Algeria and experiences of lesbian sexuality.[74] While *Standard* veers from the genre of autofiction, it maintains the themes of exclusion and identity from Bouraoui's earlier novels. Notably, literary critics have drawn parallels between Bouraoui's and Cixous's novels as both writers grew up in Algeria, where their multiple strands of subjugated identity—religious, sexual, national—led to a feeling of "betweenness" and an inassimilable alterity within the community or the family unit (Panaïté 796-7).

In *Standard*, alterity is again relegated to the male/female binary in its depiction of male objectification of women, and how this is symptomatic of greater pathologies. The novel tells the story of Bruno Kerjen, whose job at an electric company and lack of meaningful relationships leave him unstimulated and in a perpetual state of solitude. This "standard" character feeds into his feelings of numbness and indifference by avoiding physical and emotional encounters. Throughout the novel, Bruno repeatedly confesses his disgust with the corporeal (and other organic material): "Il éprouvait un dégoût pour ce qui venait de la terre, que l'industrie n'avait pas transformé" (58). To satisfy his sexual desires, he becomes dependent on phone sex. This

[74] See *Garçon manqué* (2000) and *Mes mauvaises pensées* (2005) among others.

sexual exchange allows him to rely completely on his imagination to create the bodies with which he wishes to sexually engage:

> Il aimait le sexe, les seins, les fesses des femmes, indifférent au reste et même à la beauté: un trou restait un trou, il ne pensait qu'à cela, à le remplir, à se vider, puis à raccrocher. Il n'aimait les femmes que pour son plaisir, et elles devaient se tenir éloignées, faire semblant de gémir à l'autre bout du combiné, dans une chambre qu'il imaginait close et drapée de velours, tout en sachant que les professionnelles du *hard-telling* se tenaient sur des plates-formes à l'exemple des commerciaux, des techniciens des grandes enseignes ou des opérateurs téléphoniques…. (*Standard* 60-1)

During his phone calls to the porn hotline, Bruno imagines the body while the "voice" on the receiver feeds his fantasy; consequently, women's bodies become merely objects of his imagination and sexual desire. "Les femmes" are symbolically decapitated as they are reduced to "le sexe," "les seins," "les fesses," "un trou," while "la tête" is absent in this narcissistic configuration of the female body. Bruno's interactions are strangely reminiscent of Ovid's narrative poem *Metamorphoses*, in which Pygmalion, a sculptor, falls in love with one of his ivory sculptures after having renounced women due to their proclivity for prostitution. Pygmalion's love for his statues, as well as Bruno's desire to hear a woman's voice but be nowhere near her body, suggests a narcissistic lust for the inert image in which the creator of the woman—man—has full control.[75]

Bruno's discomfort with proximity to "real" female bodies seems to derive from his relationship with his mother, whose touch and smell trigger feelings of disgust:

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[75] For a relevant study of Pygmalion, see Giorgio Agamben's "Narcissus and Pygmalion" in *Stanzas* (1993).

> Bruno Kerjen n'avait plus de geste tendre envers sa mère, d'une certaine façon elle le dégoûtait, son odeur surtout qui selon lui réunissait l'odeur de toutes les femmes, redoutant de sentir son corps contre le sien…C'était ce qui dégoûtait Bruno chez elle, ses façons de trancher la viande, le cou des poulets, la peau du lapin, et l'odeur aussi, d'oignon, d'ail, d'échalotes, sur ses mains qu'elle passait sur son visage à lui et qui lui faisait penser à l'odeur du sexe des femmes. (34, 45)

Kristeva's "abject" elucidates Bruno's rejection of his mother and corresponding fear of female bodies and odors. The abject has proved to be a concept useful for examining how the masculine imaginary has transformed the female into a phobic object. While Kristeva theorized abjection in her 1980 publication, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, it has been consistently applied to literary and cultural analyses for the last several decades, with particular attention to monsters, maternity, and female bodies. Notably, Judith Butler furthered the concept of abjection in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1999) by using it to identify abject bodies and genders, those outside of heteronormative identities, in Western culture; Barbara Creed used the concept to analyze filmic depictions of women in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*.[76] While Butler has criticized Kristeva's notion of the abject because of its production of the maternal body as transcendental of cultural construction (*Gender Trouble*, 109), the mother-as-abject sheds light on Bruno's process of subject-formation in this context.

While Freud theorized that the female body instigates the castration threat in the male psyche, the fear of *Standard*'s main character transforms into a rejection, or abjection of something that is in complete opposition to his own identity. The abject disturbs the borders of identity, as it defines the limit between "self" and "not self," thus posing a danger to whole,

[76] Like Butler's texts, *The Monstrous-Feminine* has gone through multiple reprintings; Creed's book was published in 1993 and based on an essay published in 1986.

stable identity. For this reason, Bruno struggles with confrontations with his mother, and with female bodies in general. By engaging in virtual sex and avoiding physical encounters, Bruno represses his castration threat and consequential fear of women: "à part lui personne ne devait toucher à sa queue, c'était le seul truc qui lui appartenait, c'était dingue de penser ça mais il le pensait vraiment, après tout c'était sa seule source de plaisir" (133).

And yet, this antihero recognizes that this pursuit of sexual pleasure papers over a deeper longing:

> Le bonheur se plaçait ailleurs, à l'intérieur de soi en premier puis dans quelque chose de magique auquel il n'avait pas accès. Il manquait de clé, s'en voulait de cela, buvant pour recouvrir le ravin qui le menaçait. Il avait besoin d'entendre une femme au téléphone …qui permettait quelques minutes de plaisir confidentiel, jamais honteux, car oui, une fois de plus, sa bite lui appartenait. (136)

On the surface, the phone calls to the porn hotline satisfy a sexual drive, yet, in reality, they represent a slippage of desire from the "originary object" of desire, which French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan articulates as the Real, or inarticulable, insatiable desire.[77] In other words, hearing the "voice" or imagining dangerous female bodies, or in the words of Bruno "les vraies femmes…les vamps" (133), merely covers a deeper lack that Bruno attempts to retrieve and satisfy. Therefore, as Bruno rejects the mother/woman/body as abject in order to safeguard his own subjectivity, he also grapples with the insatiable lack, the Real, or, in Bruno's own words, the "ravine" through his desire for an "imaginary" woman.

While most of the novel is spent in Bruno's thoughts, the prolonged narration of his desire for imagined female bodies, along with the book's front cover, suggest that this novel is

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[77] See Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre XI, Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (1973).

actually about Marlène. In her analysis of *Standard's* book jacket, scholar of French literature Pamela Pears remarks that the image chosen to represent the book displays "a woman's crossed, bare legs, underneath a short skirt. She has no face. There is evidence of a man at her feet, but we only see his arms, which are covered by a long-sleeved shirt. […This photograph] toys with the idea that the book will be about this other faceless, sexualized woman" (140-1).

Figure 6: Removable jacket of Bouraoui's *Standard* © Tendance floue

Like the Medusa, this femme fatale is decapitated, mirroring the male character's view of her body. Fulfilling the photo's foreshadowing, it is not until the final pages of the text that the reader is no longer isolated in Bruno's thoughts of Marlène. The novel ends with Marlène's speech as she forces Bruno to recognize her own desires, echoing the quote on the book jacket's photograph: "Marlène était plus forte que lui, plus forte que tous les hommes" (*Standard* band).

The reader is first introduced to Marlène in a flashback to Bruno's high school years at the beginning of the novel. Bruno finds Marlène seductive, and yet, because he does not attract her attention in return, he begins to mistrust her: "Marlène était un volcan…il s'était fait la promesse de s'en méfier, promesse, il le savait, qui serait difficile à tenir, 'c'est le diable cette nana, c'est un putain de diable en personne'" (*Standard* 23). Unrequited love is met with

mistrust. This presupposes that women are always expected to be responsive to male erotic attention and that to do otherwise is abnormal. Because Marlene does not respond appropriately, Bruno's imaginary creates a causal relationship between her ability to seduce and her embodiment of evil; a "volcano," her sexuality represents imminent danger to onlookers. Because of the impression that she leaves on him, Marlène continues to reside in Bruno's mind after the two leave high school: "Il ne l'avait pas oubliée. Elle était différente, elle avait marqué son esprit…Marlène incarnait encore ses rêves, son désir, lui qui se sentait desséché, éteint de l'intérieur" (*Standard* 50). Marlène *incarnates* his dreams and desires, and yet it is not Marlène who is the active, embodying subject, but Bruno's mind that "gives flesh" and form to the body of Marlène's, who becomes an object of his desire.

The spiral of danger and desire that Marlène embodies in Bruno's mind correlates to his construction of what "woman" should be. After feeling disgusted by an offer for oral sex from a "dirty kid" at a train station, Bruno lets his thoughts drift to the ideal sexualized woman:

> il préférait les femmes, les vraies femmes, pas les vieilles mais les vamps, qu'il s'imaginait derrière le téléphone, assises sur un canapé en cuire, en déshabillé rouge ou rose, les jambes écartées, toutes à l'écoute de son désir, distribuant les ordres qu'il exécutait sans broncher, soumis, plein, complètement fou d'envie. Alors une pauvre gosse qui racolait dans la rue, c'était juste ridicule, et pas pour lui. Il avait peut-être peur des femmes, ne les approchait pas en vrai mais il s'en faisait une idée précise: elles devaient être dominantes, sadiques, propres, sévères, sans tabou. Ces femmes n'existaient pas dans la vraie vie, il le savait, ce qui le consolait aussi. Mieux valait rester seul plutôt que de se taper une mégère dont les doigts sentaient la bouffe et les oignons. (*Standard* 132-3)

“Real” women for Bruno are the vamps who sexually attract and exploit men, while all other women are stripped of sexuality. He craves a plastic, shameless Jezebel whose uncontrollable desire will ignite his own. And yet, Bruno confesses that he does not believe these women exist in real life; the confusion between his idealization of “real” women and “real” life only leads to sustained dissatisfaction and an absence of physical contact, which in turn fuels his imagination.

Bruno’s imagination is even further ignited when he learns from his best friend, Gilles, that Marlène has moved back to their hometown of Saint-Malo:

> ‘OK, alors j’avance dans le troquet, je fonce au bar, je vois une meuf de dos, assise sur un tabouret avec des putains de cheveux noirs qui faisaient comme une putain de danse sur ses épaules, tu sais, Bruno, la danse du serpent qui rend dingue tous les mecs à cause de la rencontre de deux textures différentes: le cheveu et la peau … Ouais elle s’est teint les cheveux, finito le blond platine mais je peux dire que ça lui va bien le noir ça fait ressortir ses putains d’yeux bleus c’est un truc de dingue, le serpent, je te dis, le serpent, j’étais comme un fou. (148)

Gilles’s discourse bears an uncanny resemblance to the figure of the Medusa. Like Perseus, he approaches her from the back as he observes her serpentine hair, which causes a Freudian stiffening. Marlène’s penetrating blue eyes and the entrancing dance of her dark, snake-like hair both frighten and excite. These markers render Marlène the promiscuous woman who has incarnated Bruno’s desires. The excitement that Marlène stimulates in both Bruno and Gilles derives in part from her transition from being blonde to having black hair, further marking her body with traditional associations of the femme fatale and recalling bell hooks’s suggestion that the “consumption” of the primitive Other provides an opportunity for white men (and women) to experience heightened excitement. The “primitive” serves as a point of attraction for both Gilles

and Bruno, further proved by Gilles's desire to escape to Brazil, where he dreams of meeting exotic, large-breasted women. Moreover, both Bruno and Gilles suffer from the type of "cultural anhedonia" (that hooks highlights), which results from their monotonous jobs and lack of investment in relationships or community.

As Pamela Pears notes, Bruno's behavior is a result of his sociocultural environment and participation in a "consumer society" (Pears 143). This is demonstrated throughout the text in his consumer-like approach to sex. Both the desire to "eat the other" through an appropriation ignited by desire, as described by hooks, and Bruno's attempt to purchase Marlène's body and attention secure Bruno within his role as consumer. Bruno repeatedly tries to buy Marlène drinks and meals, and lends her money (much more than he can afford) with the expectation that she will have sex with him in return. The desire to own or to consume creates further parallels with Cixous's description of masculine desire in "Le rire de la Méduse," which emphasizes a fear of loss:

> La façon qu'a l'homme de sortir de lui-même dans celle qu'il prend non pour l'autre mais pour sienne, le prive, le sait-il, de son propre territoire corporel. A se confondre avec son pénis et à se jeter à l'assaut, on comprend qu'il ait le ressentiment et la crainte d'être 'pris' par la femme, d'être en elle perdu, absorbé, ou seul. (40 note 1)

To momentarily escape the self by investing in one's preconceived image of the other violates not only the "object" of desire, but also keeps them from any semblance of authentic interaction with the other.

Bruno's attitude toward women reflects such deep-seated psychological issues. In an interview with Linda Belhaoues, Bouraoui presents Bruno's situation as an example of the "*noirceur de l'être humain*." Through a psychoanalytic lens, the fragile identity fashioned by

one's own unconscious drives and desires clouds how we see others and limits our relationships. In *Standard*, this *noirceur* harms the perpetrator, not just the people he objectifies: It is the "tragic human destiny of mortality" that leads to feelings of emptiness and a loss of liberty (Bouraoui, qtd. in Belhaoues). Bruno's malaise results in part from his overinvestment in the death drive (*Thanatos*) that Freud defines in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) as an opposition to the life instinct (*Eros*) that spurs sex, creativity, and love. While the death drive can result in self-mutilation as a result of pent up energy, Bruno's death drive manifests through his consistent reflection on death. Bruno's father is portrayed in the text as a representation of the superego (in Freudian theory) who structures Bruno's social standards. While the death of his father provides a sense of excitement and relief, Bruno's realization that he, too, will die effaces his sense of liberty: "la mort était une confrontation de plus à laquelle il ne pouvait échapper…et enfin sa propre mort qui ne lui apparaissait pas comme une délivrance car il fallait aussi y penser, la préparer, la payer" (*Standard* 39-40). Later in the novel, death appears again as a growing black stain on the ceiling of Bruno's apartment. The stain serves as a reminder of the mortality-inspired *ennui* that leaks into his life. He escapes full confrontation with this melancholy by dreaming of Marlène: "aucune histoire ne le ferait autant jouir que le danger qu'annonçait en secret Marlène, aucune, c'était la vraie vie, le risque, la chute, la fin de tout" (*Standard* 198). Through this focus on risk and danger, he stimulates himself through the danger/desire trap delineated by bell hooks.

The image of Marlène in Bruno's mind serves to cover over a greater longing (the Lacanian real, or the *ravin*). This slippage momentarily extracts him from his general melancholia about liberty-effacing death. Throughout the novel, Bruno preoccupies himself with concern over teleological experiences leading toward death: his work at Supelec, his lack of

concern about what he eats, his refusal of human contact, and his dislike for plants, all point to a discomfort with biological processes and death**,** “son putain de destin” (*Standard* 194). Bruno’s sentiments echo Freud’s statement that “the aim of all life is death” (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 32). According to Freud, the death drive represents the desire of an organism to die on its own terms; it might repeat an unpleasant thought or act in order to confront, or master, death as an inevitable terminus of human life. Humans can establish a path toward their own eventual inorganic chemistry by choosing to wrestle with negative thoughts or traumatic memories, as a kind of simulated confrontation with death itself.

If the death drive represents an effort to master the inevitability of death and to take control over one’s evolution toward dissolution, then Bruno’s obsession with Marlène as a dangerous woman represents an effort to confront and master death, that inorganic state that looms over his life and prevents him from advancing at work and forming relationships (Bruno’s dislike for organic material suggests a stronger affiliation with the inorganic). Female bodies, both Marlène’s and those of others that Bruno idealizes and fears, personify danger and death within his imaginary.

> Il avait peur de Marlène comme il avait eu peur de toutes les femmes, c’était ça son problème, les femmes, le corps des femmes, la voix des femmes, l’odeur des femmes, le secret des femmes, le sexe des femmes, le désir des femmes qu’il n’avait jamais senti sur lui, ou détecté et l’amour des femmes qu’il ne connaissait pas…. C’était Marlène le danger, une saloperie de danger, pas sa vie à Vitry, son travail chez Supelec. (208, 250)

By envisioning Marlène’s body as a threshold through which to access the danger of death, he commits violence not only to Marlène as a subjective being but also to himself, as his quest for an identity affirmed by the dangerous other is insatiable. Bouraoui herself recognizes this

connection between fear and violence against others. In a response to one critic's comment on the difficulty of the book, she explains that "c'est un livre sur la peur et la frustration: deux origines de la violence" (Bouraoui qtd. in Pears 144-5).

In the last pages of the novel, Bruno takes steps toward the idea of loving Marlène and envisioning her as subject rather than reducing her to a seductive, dangerous body. He takes an interest in fitness (a sign of investment in health and life), engages in lengthy phone calls with Marlène, and takes time off work. Unfortunately, Bruno ultimately prioritizes his own pleasure and misses his chance to experience love. At the close of the novel, we are left with the words of Marlène as she denounces Bruno's inability to open up to another person and leave his own narcissistic realm of the imaginary:

> Pourquoi tu baisses tout le temps les yeux, hein, pourquoi ? Emmuré, c'est ça, t'es emmuré. Et tu sais pourquoi, Bruno ? Pourquoi tu ne parles plus ? Je vais te le dire avant de foutre le camp. T'es prêt ? Je vais te le dire, et tu vas ouvrir en grand tes oreilles et ne jamais oublier mes mots pour la suite de ta vie: t'as aucune réponse à rien, Bruno, parce que tu m'as prise pour une pute. (284)

He refuses to look her in the eyes, afraid of being petrified by her tragic beauty; consequently, he makes of himself a prisoner of his own imaginary as he attempts to "conquer" the body over which he has obsessed. And yet, in these last words of the novel, Marlène breaks free from the Medusan constraints that Bruno has placed on her. As the novel's modern Medusa, Marlène ultimately lifts the obstacle of silence and forces Bruno to realize the rupture between Marlène as an object of his imagination and Marlène as a speaking subject.

The potential to overcome the death drive, hinted at by the novel, has also been discussed in psychoanalytic theory. In her most recent seminars, Julia Kristeva criticizes Freud's emphasis

on *Thanatos* as a lack of investment in *l'amour maternel* that gives prominence to the processes of birth, renewal, and loving the other as self ("Besoin de croire," 2016). Instead of labeling the death drive and being bound by it, as a reading of Freud might suggest, Kristeva offers psychoanalysis as the opportunity for *renaissance*, or rebirth, that allows its patients to recognize and reflect on these drives and instincts that influence the (sub)conscious. The power of recognition of one's own psychological suffering can open up a space for empathy and tenderness toward others, and displaces the teleological focus on death by emphasizing birth, or the entrance into life, and even contemplating death itself as crossing over into another form of life (as suggest many of Cixous's more recent works that treat the passage from life to death). Kristeva claims, however, that there is little place for this type of relationship with others within the current social contract. This seems true in Bruno's case, as he displays traces of a desire to open up to others, yet this is a pleasure that never fully realizes. And yet, *Standard* works toward a recognition (or an assertion, in Marlène's case) of the common humanity that they share. In line with Kristeva's *renaissance*, hooks's description of consumptive intimacy, and Cixous's rewriting of the disruptive queer/feminine/Other Medusa who laughs—as Medusa recognizes common humanity even in its darkest moments—the novel both identifies the desire to define, possess, and consume others, while also providing glimpses of a society that does not yoke female bodies to danger, desire, and death in social contracts of sexual difference.

Giving the female protagonist the last word illustrates an evolution from the book's jacket to Marlène's explosion of speech on the last page—from dangerous and endangered decapitated Medusa to a female character with agency over her own desires, image, and body. Though the novel ends in the rupture of the relationship, this break illustrates Marlène's disruption of an oppressive imaginary. The split also leaves this reader with a glimmer of hope

that Bruno will awaken from his stupor and that Marlène will find someone who appreciates her for more than her physical appearance. In light of this evolution, *Standard* challenges the sexual equality presented in films such as *Elle* and *Teeth* that perform noxious male fantasies of women. Instead, the novel offers a more "feminist" or "progressive" ending in its arrival at a recognition, rather than consumption, of the other. Furthermore, the literary medium of this feminist Medusa is significant in that it indicates that literature may be a more productive mode for undermining the male gaze that is so present in the visual realm. It is possible that writing proposes a higher potential for imagining a Medusa that veers from sexist and racist ideologies that have dominated our perception of her.

Transitioning Remarks

This chapter has evaluated the Medusa as a dangerous and endangered figure in which some strands of contemporary Western cultures remains largely invested. I have relied on psychoanalysis to articulate how cultural constructions of sexual difference have resulted in the creation of a Medusa molded to patriarchal purposes, while looking to literary productions of the myth to imagine feminist alternatives. In the next chapter, I will further explore the role of sight and imagery in the creation of patriarchal identity and its contingent dangerous female bodies within the setting of the Lebanese Civil War of the late twentieth century. The following analysis will continue to tease out connections between the Cixousian Medusa and female protagonists of contemporary francophone literature.

CHAPTER 2

Dangerous Touching: Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*

> Marie-Rose leur fait peur. … elle avance sur le terrain de leur imagination comme un océan déchaîné. Elle réveille dans leur mémoire la plus ancienne des litanies d'imprécations.
> - Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie Rose* 76

In an investigation of Medusa in Greek mythology, the authors of *Or Méduse médite…* unveil the Gorgon's danger as a result of her intelligence.[78] Through an etymological study, the authors note the connection between the Greek form of Medusa (*Μέδουσα*) and the present participle of the verb *médo*, which signifies "to measure, to reign, to think about."[79] As Jay Dolmage observes in his analysis of *mêtis* in rhetoric, the name Medusa also has a specific relationship to the female sex through its linguistic association with the goddess Metis: "The link between Metis and Medusa is first of all etymological: *Mêtis*, the Sanskrit word *medha*, the Egyptian word *met*, and Medusa all share the same root, and all denote female intelligence and wisdom" (14). Saturated in the lexical field of thought and sovereignty, Greek mythology imagined intelligent, powerful goddesses—and mortals—as dangerous. The previous chapter discussed the way Medusa's seductive body and petrifying gaze caused her to embody danger and bring death upon her onlookers; here, we will see how this layer of intelligence complicates her perilous nature.

As Hélène Cixous remarks in her twenty-first century reflection on "Le rire de la Méduse," Medusa's willful sovereignty and ability to "see" lands her on the chopping block:

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[78] See Bompard-Porte et al. *Or Méduse médite…vagabondages parmi la mythologie grecque: les femmes, l'intelligence, les monstres*, 2013.

[79] The Oxford English Dictionary's entry on "Medusa, n." confirms this etymology (*OED Online*). Cixous also notes the rich linguistic associations with Medusa, as highlighted in her reference to Emile Benveniste's *Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes: 2:* "Vous trouverez … un chapitre sur M-E-D, sur *med*, et sur la notion de mesure comme quasi-synonyme de la justice. Méduse, ce serait justement 'faire la mesure', 'trouver la bonne mesure'. Nous devons à la mythologie des sagesses infinies" ("Méduse en Sorbonne" 142).

> Mais qui menace-t-elle ? Elle menace ceux qui craignent sa sagesse, sa capacité de méditation, sa capacité de pensée, sa capacité de modération, et sa façon de voir au fond de l'âme de l'autre. Parce que la Méduse a le regard perçant. Qu'est-ce qu'il se passe ? Eh bien, la scène la plus banale, que nous voyons se renouveler en permanence : une femme belle *et* sage est une femme condamnée à mort.…Jadis comme aujourd'hui, tous ces ressentiments se rassemblent autour du personnage de la Méduse. ("Méduse en Sorbonne" 143)[80]

Here, Cixous expands the meaning of Medusa's gaze. Not only does the beautiful Medusa have eyes that captivate, but her ability to perceive and meditate upon the other is frightening for those who require affirmation of their own preformed ideals. As Verena Conley notes in her study of Cixous as cultural theorist,[81] in Cixous's texts on sexual difference, "[m]asculine narcissism and the male need for recognition relates woman to death" (*Hélène Cixous*, 31). As my project strives to demonstrate, the desire for normative male spectators to depict and see Medusa's decapitation results from a response to her interruption of masculine intelligibility, or *interpellation masculine*, [82] in which one asks questions with preformulated answers in mind. When a woman interrupts this form of questioning, she risks being subsumed into the dangerous/endangered paradigm.

In this chapter's epigraph, Lebanese-American author and artist Etel Adnan makes a similar point. Adnan's novel *Sitt Marie Rose* was published in 1977, making it contemporary with Cixous's earlier work. The main character of Adnan's novel, Marie-Rose, frightens a group

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[80] This was a remark Cixous made in an interview with Frédéric Regard that concluded the *Le rire de la Méduse: regards critiques* collection (2015).
[81] Conley recognizes the contradictory nature of attributing the title of "cultural theorist" to Cixous. However, by situating Cixous's work in its time and place, Conley pursues her project to address "broad issues of cultural exchange through the medium of writing" in Cixous's work (xiii).
[82] See "Le sexe ou la tête?" (1976) and "Sorties" (1975).

of Christian militiamen, the *chabab*[83], because she challenges their imagined identity as masculinist warriors fighting what they believe to be a religious war. The tensions in the novel are based on the real assassination of a Syrian woman who advocated for the Palestinian cause during the Lebanese Civil War. The war lasted fifteen years, from 1975 to 1990, and resulted in over 100,000 fatalities and the exiling of over 80,000 people. Adnan composed and published *Sitt Marie Rose* in the early stages of the war, during the siege of the Palestinian camp of Tel al-Zaatar in the summer of 1976 (Accad 64). The novel depicts the way a group of men violently defend perceived boundaries between themselves and the other groups that populate Lebanon. In true events, as in Adnan's fictionalized account of Marie Rose Boulous's murder, the war was fueled by deeply sectarian values that separated Muslims, Christians, and Druze, Lebanese and Palestinians, men and women, all of whom cohabitated within the European-created borders of Lebanon.

In this chapter, I will argue that *Sitt Marie Rose* stands as a critique of the gendered identities that perpetuated the Lebanese Civil War through a selection of texts authored by Cixous and Frantz Fanon. Cixous and Fanon remark how sexual and racial differences—both differences that are constructed visually—effect the psyches and bodies of those perceived as "different," subjugated, or colonized. However, their ideas on how to liberate oneself from this psychic subjugation are quite different; while Fanon calls for a disalienation of the Black man and a violent revolution of colonized peoples[84], Cixous underlines writing as the channel through which women can reclaim pleasure and explore their own subjectivities, which, nevertheless, is a

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[83] "Shabab," spelled *chabab* in French, is an Arabic word that denotes youth and leadership. In the context of Adnan's novel, the militiamen's youthfulness translates to a narcissistic naïveté that evolves into a destructive force that perpetuates the civil war. As Accad notes in her study of Adnan's novel, "[t]he male youth in Lebanon have not learned to curb their aggression. They are bored, and they are fascinated with death. Driving their cars like masters of the roads, showing off to prove their 'superiority,' boasting about their driving in very immature ways, those boys learn to kill, destroy, torture, dismember, and burn without remorse in the war" (70).
[84] He outlines these projects in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952 and *Les damnés de la terre*, 1961.

process that does not exclude violence. Both goals, however, are predicated on a deeper empathy for the other that overcomes prejudice.[85] Through Frantz Fanon's theorization of colonial neurosis and the epidermalization of inferiority in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) and *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), I will analyze the *chabab*'s desire, and especially that of their leader, Mounir, to create a Christian, modernized Lebanon as a result of seeing themselves through the eyes of their former colonizer, France. It is worth noting that while Fanon has been criticized for his perceived misogyny, a stance that might place him in contradiction to my analysis, Fanon did in fact advocate for sexual equality. In *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* (1998), Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting, scholar of African American and Diaspora Studies, highlights Fanon's "*pro*feminist consciousness" through close readings of his and his critics' works (3). However, to further examine how sexualized difference plays a role in the creation of Lebanese nationalism in the novel, I rely on Cixous's essays.

While scholars have identified Adnan's attention to the sexual hierarchy underscoring the civil war, I argue that the novel's critique of female subordination goes deeper than merely arguing for equality. Adnan ultimately questions both the language that places "masculine" and "feminine" in a binary and the identification of speaking up "for" others as a feminine value. Ultimately, I claim that the novel's troubling of identity, along with what I will describe as Marie-Rose's "poetic deployment of touch," seeks to revive the bleeding body of Lebanon, sick from colonial disease and sectarian politics, rather than further lacerating its constitutive members. Marie-Rose's questioning of divisive identity politics and attention to the Lebanese

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[85] Any similitude found in Cixous's and Fanon's writings may be traced to their exposure to colonial environments. In his book *Out of Africa: Post-Structuralism's Colonial Roots* (2010), Pal Ahluwalia locates similarities in a number of authors and philosophers, including Cixous and Fanon who lived or worked in Algeria. Ahluwalia's overall claim is that poststructuralist thought is indebted to postcolonialism. For a deeper analysis on the presence of Algeria in Cixous's writings, see Weltman-Aron *Algerian Imprints: Ethical Space in the Work of Assia Djebar and Hélène Cixous* (2015).

"body" provides a sharp contrast to the *chabab*'s economy that reduces the other to the self via domination and annihilation. Such antiauthoritarian ideas, embodied by Marie-Rose, were perceived as a deeply dangerous feminine disruption in a sectarian, phallocentric society so reliant on borders. Consequently, as a beautiful and "modern" woman who poses a threat to stable Lebanese masculinist identity, Marie-Rose becomes a body in danger.

Pivotal to understanding the text's critique of gendered identity will be the novel's unraveling of the privilege of sight, a privilege that subjugates the body, especially the colonial, feminine body.[86] As demonstrated through lexical fields of vision in the novel, the *chabab*'s ego invests, first and foremost, in reflections of a body image: a psychic projection of the appearance of one's body, that is constantly armed with artillery. This inorganic material serving as a bodily appendage is a manifestation of an attempted escape from the corporeal. The *chabab*'s self-image ignores touch and emotion, correlates of the "bodily," in order to survive and win a war that they are fighting in the name of the Christian religion. The pleasure that the *chabab* derive from their body image results in what Cixous terms an *empire du propre*, or Empire of the Selfsame, that effaces alterity in order to emerge as the dominant element. As Lebanese francophone scholar and writer Evelyne Accad argues, this masculinist identity quest for Lebanese nationalism involves the repression, if not erasure, of what is deemed "feminine" and thus other in Lebanese society, and a corresponding valuation of colonial, masculinist values of conquest, domination, and fighting (30). In the novel, the *chabab* eliminate anything that encumbers their textual field of vision, which constitutes a range of sight that includes their

[86] This is not to say that sight is always a subjugating force or to place it in opposition to other senses. For instance, bell hooks argues that looks can be empowering modes of transgression for marginalized populations: "The 'gaze' has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally" ("The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" 116). More specifically, hooks posits that in film (she is examining the function of the gaze in cinema) black women do not identify with the white women on screen and instead develop an oppositional gaze critical of dominant ways of looking that exclude black femaleness.

image of a patriarchal Lebanese identity. Thus sight becomes a way to identify and distance oneself from alterity. Conversely, both Marie-Rose and the nameless female narrator invest in other "sensual" ways of connecting with others that do not rely solely on the visual. At the closing of *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), Fanon recognizes the sense of touch as a channel through which to reveal oneself to the other in a quest for a new, anti-racist humanism: "Pourquoi tout simplement ne pas essayer de toucher l'autre, de sentir l'autre, de me révéler l'autre?" (229).[87]

Cixous's writings, however, are more deeply invested in the necessary dialogue of touch in human relations. I will use Cixous's essays on sexual difference, including "Le sexe ou la tête?" (1976), "Contes de la différence" (1994), and "Nous en somme" (2006), to demonstrate how such sensual relations can produce an affirmation of difference.[88] I posit that this affirmation is nurtured by an attentiveness to others' flesh and a listening to others that implies being *with* them, a nearness to other bodies—recalling again the sensation of touch—that works against speaking *for* others. This proximity suggests that one does not act in possession of the other by speaking *for* them, or removing their ability to speak for themselves (in contrast to the *chabab*'s repeated action of *égorger*, or slitting the other's throat). Instead, one serves as a present, meditative listener and internalizes the other's words, allowing the various forms of touch to take place that this process may incite: from the other's mouth to my ear, and into my body through potential reactions that give way to glandular, muscular, and mental changes, and

[87] Fanon refers to "senses" and "tactility" elsewhere. While the scholar who introduces *Peau noire, masques blancs* recalls a letter from Fanon that detailed his desire to "toucher affectivement [s]on lecteur… c'est-à-dire irrationnellement, presque sensuellement" (15-6), Fanon himself later refers to a desire to touch the Black man's misery: "Je me suis attaché dans cette étude à toucher la misère du Noir. Tactilement et affectivement" (97). This points to Fanon's agenda to connect the psyche *and* body in his study of the effects of French colonization in Algeria and the Caribbean.

[88] It is perhaps important to note again that Cixous's theorization of sexual difference often occurred in dialogue with Jacques Derrida. See "Je t'" (107-131) in *L'événement comme écriture: Derrida et Cixous se lisant* for an analysis of the influence of these scholar's exchange on Cixous's essay "Nous en somme."

so on.[89] Finally, the "sensual" affirmation of difference also manifests through an acknowledgement of movement. Such movement represents the brushing up against concepts and bodies that causes identity to shift. The porousness of one's identity, making it susceptible to movement, allows for the constant creation of new meaning and the disruption of language, as suggested by the novel's closing mention of "la danse des Signes." Ultimately, while Marie-Rose's dangerous resistance to the nationalist, sexist agenda espoused by the *chabab* places her in danger, her transgressions inspire an understanding, or affirmation, of difference.

Cixous's rewriting of the Medusa as well as her career-long treatment of the body and touch, provide an apt critical framework for the study of *Sitt Marie Rose*. Literary scholars have noted, however, that Cixous's essays do not claim to propose a philosophy or a theory, but function rather as poetic writing that incorporates various "languages," including philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literature, in addition to a number of spoken languages, such as French, German, Arabic, Spanish, and Portuguese.[90] Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers posit *écriture féminine* as a concept with potential theoretical applications. Similarly, I will propose Cixous's writings on the body, sexual difference, and the "feminine" as a lens through which to analyze Marie-Rose as dangerous and endangered because of her character's drive to unsettle destructive forms of identity.

The concern of Cixous's theoretical work are deeply entwined with those of the novel. The metaphor of war present in Cixous's "Le sexe ou la tête?" communicates an urgency that resonates in Adnan's text, generating a particularly ripe field of intertextuality between the two

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[89] In *Tactile Poetics* (2015), writer and literary critic Sarah Jackson points to this relation between touch and emotion in a reference to Ashley Montagu's *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin* (1971): "Although touch itself is not an emotion, its sensory elements induce those neural, glandular, muscular, and mental changes which in combination we call an emotion" (Montagu ctd. in Jackson 65).
[90] See Nadine Sautel's interview with Cixous "L'amour est peur" (66) and Calle-Gruber *Hélène Cixous, photos de racines*, especially "Entre tiens" (11-121) and "Albums et legends" (177-207); also, Blyth and Sellers (especially 18-19, 67).

works. Both of these writers experiment with new literary forms and challenge social norms in an effort to avoid reproducing the destructive effects of war that annihilate groups existing outside the *empire*. As Bhakti Shringarpure notes in her study of *Sitt Marie Rose*, women are often particularly affected by civil and intra-state wars of postcolonial nation-states. She highlights this disproportionate harm in a discussion of writers' critiques of the exclusion of women's involvement in anti-colonial movements, arguing that this exclusion leads these groups to prioritize ideas of masculinist nationalism.[91] If these texts by Adnan and Cixous continue to be relevant, it is because individual and national identity quests too often continue to hinge on the exclusion of what is considered to be "feminine" within societies that hold strong to the masculine/feminine binary. And yet, the landscape of war, which is present in both texts, provides a disruptive space in which established ideas around possession, gender, and desire are brought into question.

By choosing to highlight the particular experience of *Sitt*, or Miss, Marie Rose, Adnan foreshadows the text's critique of the war as fundamentally gendered. The novel's story unfolds in two stages: *Temps 1*: un million d'oiseaux, and *Temps II:* Marie-Rose. In *Temps I*, the narrator foregrounds Marie-Rose's story by recounting the tensions leading up to the war. The narrator opens with Mounir's obsession over making a film that would document the sublime, "primitive" lands (and workers) of Syria, where the *chabab* go on occasional hunts. That Mounir wanted to tell a filmic story of Muslim Syrian workers who experience a revelation upon their arrival in Beirut forefronts the *chabab*'s Maronite ideology, to which they will hold strong throughout the civil war: this group believes that a modern Christian Lebanon with European ties holds the most promise for the nation's future. *Temps II* unfolds through stories told by seven voices belonging

[91] See Shringarpure, "Wartime Transgressions" (2015).

to characters who are differently implicated in the Lebanese conflict: the narrator, Marie-Rose, a group of deaf-mute students who live in the Christian neighborhood (whose teacher is Marie-Rose), various members of the *chabab*—Mounir, Tony, and Fouad—and Bouna Lias, a Christian priest who acts on behalf of the Maronite militiamen. The novel witnesses the events of the civil war as a form of narrative crisis. The different voices that occupy first-person narratives in the novel demonstrate the confusion surrounding the events of the civil war and the inability to tell its full story, while also denying any one voice the possession of sole authority (Foster 61, Amireh 258). Through these different agents, we observe the capture, questioning, and assassination of Marie-Rose, whose dangerous ideas of coalition in a sectarian society place her body in danger.

Because the *chabab* construct an identity in opposition to the Palestinian Muslim and all values they deem as "feminine," Marie-Rose is conceived as a threat to stable Christian Lebanese identity. Ultimately, she is assassinated for the way that she crosses borders of masculine intelligibility. Not only does she defy the requirements to stay within the bounds of traditional "feminine" identity in Lebanon by acting as a political advocate for Palestinian rights, but she also sleeps and falls in love with a member of the Palestinian camp. All these actions create friction with the *chabab*'s nationalist goals. Instead of representing the traditional Lebanese mother or wife who confers power on men[92], a role whose constricting nature some of the voices in the novel critique, Marie-Rose embodies a *mêtis* Medusa whose intelligence is too powerful for her assigned social role. In a wartime situation in which the *chabab* have

[92] While Accad critiques mothers', and women's, affirmation of men in Lebanese communities (see 29, 65), she asserts that mothers are also victims of patriarchal-tribal society as they channel their need for power into their sons (66).

established themselves as sovereign power, Marie-Rose pays for her dangerous ideas with her life.

Marie-Rose's dangerousness as a woman whose perceived modern appearance is rooted in her eyes recalls Cixous's remark that "une femme belle et sage est une femme condamnée à mort" ("Méduse en Sorbonne" 143). For Mounir, who idolizes Western ways of life, Marie-Rose's blue eyes represent a superior form of beauty. When the *chabab* capture her, Mounir, their leader, reflects back on his affection for Marie-Rose as a high school student:

> Elle est devant moi aussi belle que jadis, quand nous avions l'un et l'autre seize ans, au lycée mixte de Beyrouth. Elle a trente-deux ans maintenant et se tient comme une reine. Je jure qu'elle est belle … Je la croyais digne de moi puisqu'elle avait les yeux bleus. Tu ressembles aux filles dans le cinéma, lui disais-je. Tu es moderne. (*Sitt Marie Rose* 43-4)

As Olivia Harrison recognizes in her analysis of the novel, given the "religious indoctrination of the militiamen in Catholic schools," it is "no accident that the same Mounir who fell in love with Marie-Rose for her blue eyes and Western ways feels compelled to eliminate her as soon as she compromises his self-orientalizing identity: he has internalized the spirit of the Crusades instilled in the 'protected' Christian minorities of the Levant through colonial hegemony" (7). Thus, by regarding the Palestinian as an enemy, Mounir reinforces colonial divisions that constitute him as an "oriental" subject in the eye of the colonizer. Having grown up in a Lebanon recently released from French mandate, victorious images of Christian warriors, European domination, and powerful, "modern" militaries inform Mounir's identity. While Marie-Rose's blue eyes superficially align with Mounir's desire for a "modern European" identity (*Sitt Marie Rose* 11), her border-crossing represents an intolerable questioning of his subjectivity. By being an active Christian, Lebanese woman who daily traverses the line that separates Muslim and Christian,

Lebanese and Palestinian, masculine and feminine spaces, she poses a challenge to the *chabab*'s nationalist, religious goals. When Marie-Rose's piercing blue eyes do not serve as a mirror that shows Mounir what he wants to see, her ability to "see" becomes the inspiration for her decapitation.

Before fully analyzing of the novel, which considers the struggle between the Palestinians and the *chabab* as well as the fragility of the militiamen's masculinist identity within the fractured Lebanese nation, I will briefly review the causes and outcomes of the Lebanese Civil War. Politics in Lebanon have long been contentious and violent, with an extensive history of European interference. The modern state of Lebanon was created as a result of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916[93]; prior to this arrangement between France and England, Beirut had become a meeting point between Europe and the Arab world as the Ottoman Empire underwent a process of reform and modernization in efforts to survive (Traboulsi 52).[94] Consequently, Beirut, particularly the Maronite Christians of Mount Lebanon, became increasingly pro-Western, spawning further conflict between the Maronite Christian and Druze populations.[95] These two groups were already separated by religion and class, as European

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[93] The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a secret arrangement between Great Britain and France, with the assent of imperial Russia, that disintegrated the Ottoman Empire. British and French officials Mark Sykes and François George-Picot negotiated this agreement that divided the territories of modern-day Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey between the two European nations; Russia received control over Istanbul, the Turkish Straits, and Armenia ("Sykes-Picot Agreement." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 31 May 2016).

[94] This era is known as the *Tanzimat* period, which lasted from 1839 until 1876.

[95] Maronites are the largest Christian denomination in Lebanon. The religion was founded in the late 4th century based on the teachings of St. Maron, a Syrian hermit, and St. John Maron, patriarch of Antioch. In later centuries, the Maronites lived under the Ottoman Turks in geographic isolation and received protection from France. However, in the nineteenth century, the Ottoman government created tension between the Maronites and the Druzes, a nearby religious community who cohabitated Mount Lebanon. This conflict resulted in the Maronite massacre of 1860. In 1920, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Maronites became a self-ruling entity under French protection. Today, the Lebanese government comprises of a coalition between Muslim, Druze, and Christian parties ("Maronite church." *Britannica Online Academic Edition*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 12 Aug. 2010). The Druze religion is a small monotheistic sect, practiced mainly within the boundaries of Lebanon. The origins of the Druze faith have been traced back to Egypt in the tenth and eleventh centuries when a group pronounced the eccentric Fatimid caliph, al-Hakim, a divine figure. Religious conversion is not permitted within this secretive Druze religion, and exogamous relationships are strongly discouraged ("Druze." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 10 Mar. 2016).

powers had consistently provided political support to the Maronite population. France's assistance to Lebanon's Christian population can be traced back until at least 1860, when Napoleon III sent military presence to bolster a Christian victory after the region's unsuccessful move to partition itself and quell tension. As a result, the French received credit for mediating the war and guiding a Christian governor to power within this province (Badrawi 439).

The growth of Protestant and Lazarite schools in the Levant in the mid- to late nineteenth century led to increasing European influence in this area (Traboulsi 56-60); however, the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 firmly secured French authority in Lebanon after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In the aftermath of this agreement, Lebanon was placed under French mandate in 1920 when the Allied Supreme Council gave France control of Mount Lebanon and Greater Syria. The purpose of doing so was to strengthen the political position and economic success of Mount Lebanon's pro-French Maronite Christian community. Under the "French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon," France imposed boundaries upon the country, and gave to Mount Lebanon the neighboring areas of Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon, Tyre, and the Bekaa plain, which were populated mainly by Muslims. Accordingly, the creation of "Greater Lebanon" significantly increased the Muslim population of an area mainly populated by Maronite Christians and Druze, thus laying the groundwork for sectarian tensions among the populations of the new nation (Kaufman 109). As Sami Ofeish and Sabah Ghandour note in their study of *Sitt Marie Rose*, the creation of the new state caused a socioeconomic divide between Mount Lebanon, which had access to more services and employment, and the interior coastal region, which had less access to services, power, and resources. Ofeish and Ghandour point to the French colonizers' exaggeration of the Lebanese sectarian system and preferential treatment of the Christian population as a way to facilitate their own goals (128).

French colonization of Lebanon had a unique dimension in that there was a religious affiliation between colonizer and colonized. As Asher Kaufman, specialist in the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli conflict, notes, "French officials, from 1860-1920 and beyond, cultivated the idea that the Maronites were as close as one could get in the Orient to a civilized and noble culture" (27). Lebanon aligned with French colonial aspirations in the Middle East economically and politically, while the shared Christian religion buffered their moral missions as well: "For the French, colonizing was not only an economic and political enterprise, it was a *mission civilisatrice*, a mission to civilize" (Kaufman 28). Though the Maronites, not to speak of the country's non-Christian population, were not treated as equal, they were seen as a special case given that the colonized population did not represent a complete negation of values, as Fanon illuminates in his first chapter of *Les Damnés de la terre* (45). And yet, Fanon's religious analysis rings true in the Lebanese context, as the Christian church did represent a bastion for European values: "L'Église aux colonies est une Église de Blancs, une église d'étrangers. Elle n'appelle pas l'homme colonisé dans la voie de Dieu mais bien dans la voie du Blanc, dans la voie du maître, dans la voie de l'oppresseur" (*Les Damnés* 46). Applying Fanon's projections in the "Mésaventures de la conscience nationale," the third chapter of his infamous *Les Damnés de la terre*, to the growth and domination of the Christian bourgeoisie in Lebanon, Ofeish and Ghandour note that the Maronite elite of the 1970s depicted enemy groups "along the dichotomies of civilized/less civilized, Christian/Muslim, Lebanese/Arab, and Western/Arab, respectively" (128). This binary ultimately perpetuated colonial violence and depreciated non-Christian Arab culture.

France's imperialist Fourth Republic prolonged colonial withdrawal from the region, resulting in bloodshed and growing tension between France and Levant governments.

However, following a growth of nationalist opposition and increasing British power in the area, France was forced to evacuate and abandon their mandate over Lebanon (Thomas 89-90). On November 22, 1943, in the midst of World War II, Lebanon was given independence. Over the next several decades, however, it would maintain its fractured state as a result of the increasing number of Palestinian refugees and growing socioeconomic divide. Because of the political support received from France, Christians maintained power: the president was to be Maronite, the Prime Minister Sunni Muslim, and Speaker of the Parliament Shi'a Muslim. In the following decades, Christians also largely dominated the business sector, while Muslims made up the workforce, leading to further class division based on religion (Traboulsi 163). Concurrently, the British mandate over Palestine from 1922 to 1948 led to the UN Partitional Plan for Palestine, which divided Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. The resultant civil war in Palestine and the Israeli declaration of Independence in May 1948 caused a major displacement of Palestinian refugees into Lebanon and a greater increase in its Muslim population. Crises in following decades continued to force Palestinians into refugee status within Lebanese borders. In 1967, Israel seized control of the West Bank in the "Six Day War," causing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to flee their homes. Three years later, in 1970, the Black September crisis—a conflict between the Palestinian Labor Organization in Jordan and Jordanian Armed Forces—once again forced Palestinians to cross over into Lebanon. Over time, the Palestinian presence in Lebanon came to be considered a threat to Christian traditionalists. Their presence led to a loss of land, increased risk of potential attacks from their enemy, Israel, and ramped up Palestinian involvement in local Lebanese politics. In his evaluation of "The Palestinian Factor in the Lebanese Civil War" published in 1978, just a few years after the civil war had broken out, Michael C. Hudson identified

conflicts between the Lebanese and Palestinians that inevitably led to friction between these two groups: "Both Lebanese and Palestinians were inescapably involved in at least three ongoing struggles: (1) the struggle for hegemony in Lebanon; (2) the struggle for hegemony in the Arab world, and (3) the Arab-Israeli conflict" (261).[96]

As Lebanon became the seat of conflict among Syrian, Israeli, and Palestinian forces in the late twentieth century during the Arab-Israeli war, the Palestinian presence in Lebanon further contributed to the forming of factions. In 1975, the Maronites and Palestinians entered into major conflict over the military activities of the Palestine Liberation Organization. This conflict in turn attracted further involvement of Israel and Syria on Lebanese land (Traboulsi 188). Two oppositional parties emerged from this conflict: the Lebanese Front, composed of the Phalange party (Maronite Christians and their allies, and also known as the *Kata'ib* party), and the Lebanese National Movement, made up of members of nationalist and progressive movements who fought on the side of Palestinians. As the Phalanges represented a Western, Christian force, the Palestinians garnered support from the Lebanese, including Sunnis, Shi'a and Greek Orthodox, as well as students and intelligentsia—including Adnan—who advocated for an Arab identity in Lebanon, who also empathized with the Palestinians' terrible living conditions (Hudson 264-5, Accad 74). Eventually, the Palestinian-Lebanese clash evolved into a religious conflict between Lebanese groups over national identity. Though, as Hudson makes clear, "a cascade of tensions" led to the war, including socioeconomic conflicts, intra-elite authority conflicts within Lebanese government, and national identity conflicts between pan-Arabists, Palestinians, and Lebanese Maronite nationalists (270). The complicated state of affairs made dialogues for peace in Lebanon nearly impossible and led to a devastating civil war that lasted

[96] See Hudson's article for further discussion of the Lebanese-Palestinian conflict, as well as Chamie, "The Lebanese Civil War: An Investigation into the Causes" (183).

from 1975 to 1990. As a result of this turmoil, the nation continues to experience political instability in the twenty-first century.[97]

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As a journalist and poet, Adnan bore witness to the events surrounding the Civil War both at home in Lebanon and from a distance. After growing up in Beirut, Adnan moved to Paris to study philosophy, after which she returned to Beirut until the war forced her into exile. In 1977, after hearing about the death of Marie Rose Boulous, Adnan composed the novel based on this woman's life, completing it in less than a month. At the time of publication, the depiction of the Maronite Phalanges, or the *Kata'ib* party, in *Sitt Marie Rose* was so controversial that the novel was banned in Lebanon. Furthermore, the novel's empathy toward Palestinians was abominable to the *Kata'ib* party, whose propaganda labeled the Palestinians a "virus" to be wiped out (Hudson 276). *Orient Le Jour*, the journal for which Adnan wrote at the time, reprimanded the author for having spoken her mind on the effects of Lebanese sectarianism (McCann-Baker 117).

However, given its potential interest to an international audience, the novel was published in French and immediately translated into English for American readers. Because of its second layer of implicit criticism—of French religious schools in Lebanon—it met greater immediate success in the US than in France (McCann-Baker118). *Sitt Marie Rose* was ultimately translated into several languages, including English, Italian, Arabic, Dutch, German, and Urdu. Now labeled as an "underground classic," the text has resonated with readers worldwide, as it sheds light on Lebanese history and as well as nationalist identity quests and the subordination of

[97] See Muhanna, "Is Lebanon's New Electoral System a Path Out of Sectarianism?" (2017).

women across the globe.

The novel's contentious reception highlights similarities between the two female writers discussed in this chapter. Both Cixous and Adnan were drawn to writing as a cause of social change. Setting the stage for her essays on *différence sexuelle*, in the late 1960s and early 70s Cixous labored to found the Université de Vincennes alongside other scholars such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, as well as to pioneer the first "gender studies" (or *études féminines et études de genre*) program in Europe. In the same decades, Adnan was working as a journalist for *Orient Le Jour* and writing poetry in Lebanon. During these early periods of their careers, both Adnan and Cixous worked within urgent historical contexts. The civil unrest in France during "May 1968," a result of mass protests for the rights of students and factory workers, reflected Lebanon's student revolts of the late 60s and early 70s that called for reforms to the university system.[98] The protests in France affected individuals' lives more than large-scale political change (Duchen 6); similarly, the resistance in Lebanon brought little political evolution and mostly added to the nation's turmoil (Traboulsi 186).

As both Adnan and Cixous experienced the effects of colonization and resultant wars of independence and civil unrest, the subordination of peoples based on religion, sex, race, and nationality are recurrent tropes throughout their texts. Interestingly, Cixous references Lebanon in at least two of her works, making it apparent that she was aware of the nation's tension in the late twentieth century: "A quoi elle pense ouvrant l'œil droit ? — A Beyrouth.…Je ne veux pas penser à Beyrouth en me réveillant.…Mais Promethea se réveille au Liban.…Je me demande : serais-je jalouse de Beyrouth ?" (*Livre de Promethea* 182). In this conversation between lovers, "Promethea" contemplates the thoughts of "H," who seems preoccupied with the violence

[98] See Traboulsi for more discussion of the student revolts in Lebanon (particularly 170-1).

unraveling in Beirut in the 1980s.[99]

These authors' personal experiences of war, as well as their family backgrounds, shed light on how "betweenness," which signifies being between genders, nationalities, languages, and religions, informs their views of identity formation. Adnan was born in Beirut in 1925 to a Syrian Muslim father, a former officer of the Ottoman army, and a Greek Christian mother from Smyrna, speaking Greek, Turkish, French, and Arabic. Cixous grew up in a similarly diverse environment. Born in Algeria to Jewish parents, a German mother and a father of Spanish origins, Cixous spoke French while being surrounded by German and Arabic. Through close readings of *Les Rêveries d'une femme sauvage* and "Mon algériance," Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller, scholar of contemporary Jewish Studies and feminist theory, discusses Cixous's absence of national roots as a result of her Algerian experience. In her essay "Le 'Malgérien' d'Hélène Cixous," Debrauwere-Miller traces Cixous's loss of her father and lack of a sense of "belonging" to Algeria as the gateway to the erasure of labels that would define and limit her identity. Debrauwere-Miller exposes Cixous's father as a metonymic figure for Algeria; the tuberculosis that brought on his death mirrored the sickness infecting the country of Algeria, an anti-Semitic, French-occupied territory inhabited by an equally rejected Arabic population. Ultimately, Debrauwere-Miller makes clear that Cixous's absence of roots leads to a discovery of "home" within the body itself. Cixous finds a home within her wandering body that is perpetually "passante" and "arrivante." It is precisely these experiences of rejection, due to the Holocaust and Vichy regime, that sparked a questioning of the need for labels while recognizing their

[99] Cixous returns to Lebanon in a stream-of-conscious style prose in *Siguë: Vieilles femmes en fleurs* (2008): "Je veux peindre la chanson de son silence lorsqu'elle suit des yeux la vie, cette lutte constante depuis son lit anciennement lit de sa mère, pour se nourrir et se défendre et rester en groupe c'est terrible ce qui se passe au Liban quand je pense un si beau pays ils ont réussi à le bousiller avec leurs guerres quand elle pense les animaux surtout les bergers" (*Ciguë* 154). In this autobiographical account of her mother's aging body, Cixous writes about her bedridden mother; however, the "bed" might also serve as a metaphor for Lebanon, who is in constant struggle within the borders formerly occupied by its "mother" (*la* France) as colonizing force.

everlasting trace. Similarly, the kaleidoscope of religions, languages, cultures and travels of Adnan's life gave birth to her sense of identity as multiple and evolving: "I got used to standing between situations, to being a bit marginal and still a native, to getting acquainted with notions of truth which were relative and changed like the hours of the days and the passing of seasons" ("Growing up" 11). These authors' poetic, meditative abilities to perceive and critique the fear of alterity, which sometimes manifests as the female in their works, allows for the following study of Marie-Rose as a dangerous and endangered Medusa within the context of the Lebanese Civil War.

Gendered Warfare in *Sitt Marie Rose*

Previous essays have highlighted the gendered tension that underlies the violence of the Lebanese Civil War and drawn attention to the ways in which *Sitt Marie Rose* problematizes the concept of gendered spaces.[100] Hailed as a text that bears witness to the tangled layers of the Lebanese identity quest, it has also been praised for its depiction of the patriarchal and colonial influences that formed the country and how they continued to play out during wartime in divisions of gender, class, and religion.[101] While Evelyne Accad has argued that *Sitt Marie Rose* is primarily a feminist text that exposes sexual hierarchy as the roots of war, some have questioned this label and emphasize the novel's critique of all forms of violence.[102] Within these appraisals of Adnan's novel, there is an uncertainty as to what constitutes a "feminist" text and

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[100] The following essays treat the notion of space in *Sitt Marie Rose*: Foster, "Circles of Oppression, Circles of Repression: Etel Adnan's Sitt Marie Rose"; Cassidy "'Love Is a Supreme Violence': The Deconstruction of Gendered Space in Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie-Rose*."

[101] See, for example, Harrison, "Resistances of Literature: Strategies of Narrative Affiliation in Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*"; Ghandour and Ofeish, "Transgressive Subjects: Gender, War, and Colonialism in Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*"; Harb, "Love, Transgression, and Femihumanism in *Sitt Marie Rose,*" Mejcher-Atassi, "Breaking the Silence: Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose* and *The Arab Apocalypse*."

[102] See Amireh, "Bearing Witness: The Politics of Form in Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*" (261), and Fernea, "The Case of Sitt Marie Rose: An Ethnographic Novel from the Modern Middle East" (155, 163).

about the reasoning behind focusing primarily on "women," when clearly many bodies and living things are disadvantaged by the ravages of the war.[103] Through my textual analysis of the lexical fields of sight and touch in the novel, I will argue that the intertextuality between *Sitt Marie Rose* and a selection of Cixous's essays demonstrate a concurrent questioning of identity labels (such as male/female, masculine/feminine) and a demand for the security of all bodies with differing identities, a value which I maintain as central to feminism (as well as queer theory). Furthermore, while I align myself with readings of *Sitt Marie Rose* as a novel that disturbs gendered spaces (Foster, Cassidy, Ghandour and Ofeish, Harb), my analysis further examines the psychological battle that the *chabab* experience: the *chabab* attempt a severance between mind and body, while Marie-Rose's "healing touch" strives to maintain the integrity of the Lebanese "body" and its multiple components.

My study of the political dimension of language in Adnan's novel draws inspiration from Cixous's insistence on the connection between language and politics: "une réflexion politique ne peut pas se dispenser d'une réflexion sur le langage, d'un travail sur la langue" ("Le sexe ou la tête" 7). In her study of the presence of politics and conflict in Cixous's writing, Brigitte Weltman-Aron contends that Cixous's poetic writing "does not dismiss the political, but remarks that poetry, or fiction, is particularly attuned to, and equipped to convey the nodes of resistance of the political to the univocal. …Cixous entrusts the poetic with the possible advent of the unthought, of another politics, another ethics" (106).[104] Taking this poetic stance to the political does not exclude the importance of other political acts (i.e., demonstrations), but emphasizes the potential to protest simplistic, systematic thinking through literature. "Le sexe ou la tête?" serves

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[103] Some have also argued that denouncing violence against *any* body is a feminist value (see, for instance, Sirène Harb's essay on Evelyne Accad's "femihumanism" in its application to *Sitt Marie Rose*) and Accad's chapter "Etel Adnan: Courage, Engagement, and Self-Sacrifice."
[104] See *Algerian Imprints: Ethical Space in the Work of Assia Djebar and Hélène Cixous* (2015).

as a critique of such systematic processing, where Cixous performs a critique of the "couple": two elements in language that exist within a hierarchical relationship in which one element suppresses and erases the other in order to emerge as dominant: "Le couple en tant que lieu, espace de la guerre … l'opposition classique, duelle, hiérarchisée" (7). This couple represents a component of the *empire du propre*, which Cixous discusses in both *La jeune née* (1975) and "Le sexe ou la tête" (1976). In her analysis of Cixous's writing on the "feminine," Conley claims that this *empire* is an "attack on Hegelian desire of recognition," in which "singularity can posit itself as such only in death" (*Writing the Feminine* 51, 88). In other words, the *empire* effaces that which is in opposition to its identity in order to maintain its integrity:

> L'empire du propre au sens de l'établissement général culturel, hétéro-social où règne l'homme en tant que propre: propre, vous pouvez l'opposer à non-propre, vous pouvez aussi l'opposer à sale, comme on oppose noir et blanc, etc.…L'empire du propre, la culture fonctionne à l'appropriation qui est articulée, agie par la crainte de l'homme classique, de se voir exproprié, de se voir privé de…son refus d'être privé, d'être en état de séparation, sa peur de perdre l'attribut, laquelle a comme réponse l'Histoire dans sa totalité. Il faut que tout revienne au masculin. ("Le sexe ou la tête" 11)

In this essay, Cixous identifies "l'homme classique" as representative of the masculine economy, which creates an *empire* by suppressing the feminine economy. In this destructive couple, the "homme classique" decapitates its opponents in order to sever the symbolic resting place of the other's mind and "practice the verification of virility" by reinforcing their own beliefs, which Cixous recognizes as a response to the "man's" fear of being taken from. In the chapter "L'Experience vécue du Noir" of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Fanon contrasts his desire to find common humanity to the white man's ravenous desire to appropriate everything around him:

"J'épouse le monde! Je suis le monde ! Le Blanc n'a jamais compris cette substitution magique. Le Blanc veut le monde; il le veut pour lui tout seul. Il se découvre le maître prédestiné de ce monde. Il l'asservit. Il s'établit entre le monde et lui un rapport appropriatif" (135). While Fanon recognizes that not every white man will identify with the colonizing force that he describes in his analysis (33-34), Cixous, too, does not reduce "l'homme classique" to every man, or even to the male anatomy, as she recognizes that women can also perpetuate the masculine economy. As Conley reinforces, "Attacked are only *certain* men—white, phallocentric, expansionist—whose ideology hides a hatred of women. The text [*La jeune née*] welcomes others who dare to open themselves to sexual uncertainties, or who dare to identify with women" (*Hélène Cixous* 37). The colonial drive for appropriation that Fanon identifies, and at which Cixous hints in her reference to "l'homme classique," exacerbated the noxious sexual hierarchy in Lebanon that demanded women be silent, docile, and obedient.

Within the context of the Lebanon of Adnan's novel, such a "masculine" drive is represented by those that try to render the "heterosocial" fabric a homogenous entity. This seems to be the goal of the *chabab*, a fact which becomes increasingly from the words of the narrator, who locates fear within the psyches, and the skin, of the militiamen. As Cixous forecasts, the "propre" is opposed to what is "sale" as announced by the *chabab*'s labeling of Marie-Rose as "putain" because she has slept with a member of the opposing camp, a Palestinian, rendering her body a dirty, border-crossing element.[105]

Conversely, in Cixous's essay, the feminine represents an economy, irreducible to bodily anatomy, that affirms difference and approaches the other without a need to possess. As Susan

[105] In the words of Tony, a member of the Maronite clan: "Mais quand des putains se mêlent de la guerre, il y a de quoi être dégoûté" (*Sitt Marie Rose* 69).

Sellers notes in an annotation to Cixous's essay "Extrême fidelité"[106] in *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (2001),

> Cixous explains that she employs the terms masculine and feminine to distinguish between two different 'economies' or modes of behavior. Whilst these economies are not dependent on anatomical sex, and can be found in varying degrees according to how the individual has negotiated their experience, Cixous suggests that women, because of the position women have been assigned within the socio-symbolic scheme, are potentially closer to a feminine economy than men. (131)

Conley has also noted the slippage and inconsistency in terminology in Cixous's use of "woman" and "feminine" (*Writing the Feminine* 60). In a more recent study of Cixous's work (*Hélène Cixous: Live Theory*, 2004), Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers keenly note that this language play demonstrates both Cixous's situation in 1970s polemics of sexual difference as well as her ambivalence toward meaning, a characteristic of her entire *œuvre* that renders "masculine" and "feminine" very fluid concepts (24). In the body of her essay, "Extrême fidelité," Cixous puts forth the notion that "masculine" and "feminine" connote different relationships to "pleasure" and "spending," making them modes of expenditure connected to bodily drives. Having read previous twentieth century theories that excluded the female,[107] Cixous articulates a feminine economy that serves as an alternative.

In Adnan's novel, the language that creates the destructive hierarchical coupling of the "masculine" and the "feminine" elucidates the silencing, or decapitation, not just of women but

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[106] This essay was first given as a lecture in Paris in 1984. Susan Sellers translated the text into English as "Extreme Fidelity" and published it in *Writing Differences: Readings Form the Seminar of Hélène Cixous* (1988). The essay reappears in *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (2001).

[107] Conley notes Karl Marx's economic model, Freudian drives, and George Bataille's theory of spending and loss as examples (*Hélène Cixous* 32, 39).

of what the *chabab* deem as “feminine”—connoting both the female body and the Cixousian “feminine economy” that affirms alterity. This violent silencing serves as a political move toward sovereignty. The Arabic term *chabab* denotes a group of strong, young, muscular men who boast of their power and success (Ghandour 164). The story’s narrator reinforces this meaning, as she describes them as a “clan de garçons. Ils ont un besoin constant de se trouver seuls. Ils vivent en fonction de leur vanité. … Ils paradent comme des paons sauvages” (*Sitt Marie Rose* 49). Their isolation feeds their narcissism and affirms a masculine subjectivity established in opposition to women’s place in society.

During the civil war, gendering oneself as a man meant becoming a militiaman and rendering women inferior: “Guns in hand, boys become men” (Haugbolle 120). Consequently, the *chabab* confirm their masculinity through the use of arms: “In the Middle East, the meaning and importance given to a military weapon and to the sexual weapon are equal. Man uses his penis the way he uses his gun: to conquer, control and possess” (Accad 31). This masculinist identity, adopted by the *chabab* in the novel, echoes the Cixousian masculine economy, which finds metaphors in war, combat, and strategy, as it calculates its way to victory via appropriation: “L’homme c’est la stratégie, c’est le calcul” (“Le sexe ou la tête” 9). Because “life costs,” this mode of economy takes from others via decapitation in order to come out positive (10). To enter into this masculine Symbolic, or language, one must take part in a debasement of the feminine; as Cixous notes, in such constructions of identity, one side of the “couple” is in danger of erasure and must die in order for the other to survive (7).

The *chabab* fashion themselves as superior to women through the lexical field of vision and presence, as evidenced through the medium of film and the *chabab*’s imagination of their own bodies in *Temps I* before the war. In the first pages of the novel, the nameless female

narrator describes Mounir's desire to make a film. While Mounir wants the narrator's assistance, he makes it clear that he will be in charge of the filmmaking: "Toi tu fais le texte, moi je fais le film" (*Sitt Marie Rose* 15). This line foreshadowing the novel's spotlight on women's deployment of language and men's desire for representation in a visual realm that eclipses verbal dialogue. In *Temps I*, the narrator also recounts viewings of the *chabab*'s hunting forays in Syria and Turkey, placing more focus on the narcissism invested in their body images. In this section of Adnan's novel, I interpret film as a metaphor for the Lacanian mirror, the psychoanalytic stage of identity formation that occurs when the child sees its reflection and begins to visualize its own identity, giving birth to the ego. In his study of *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space, and Subjectivity*, scholar of human geography Steve Pile notes the visual nature of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity: "Lacan's narrative is organized around a presumption about the primacy of a visual regime: that the child's relationship within itself, to itself and within its world is constituted through its particular, even peculiar, understanding of … the spatial composition of what it sees" (126). The mirror continues to play a role throughout the subject's life as it facilitates the projection of a body image, or the way subjects imagine themselves interacting with others and the world. And yet, as Lacan explains, this body image is fragmented:

> le *stade du miroir* est un drame dont la poussée interne se précipite de l'insuffisance à l'anticipation,—et qui pour le sujet, pris au leurre de l'identification spatiale, machine les fantasmes qui se succèdent d'un image morcelée du corps à une forme que nous appellerons orthopédique de sa totalité,—à l'armure enfin assumée d'une identité aliénante, qui va marquer de sa structure rigide tout son développement mental. ("Le stade du miroir" 3)

Within her study of transgender identity formation in psychoanalysis in *Assuming a Body*, Gayle Salamon acknowledges misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) as foundational to the creation of the Lacanian bodily ego: when a subject looks in the mirror, they understand the image they see as a contribution to a whole, absolute identity that creates an ideal subject, which founds the ego. Salamon proposes that this creates "identity-at-a-distance" because that image will always be external to the subject due to its localization in the visual register (23). The *chabab*, however, do not capture this distance, and verbalize their identities in terms of absolutes, as Fouad articulates: "Moi, je leur dis: je suis l'ordre absolu. Je suis le pouvoir absolu. Je suis l'efficacité absolue. J'ai réduit toutes les vérités à la notion de vie et de mort" (*Sitt Marie Rose* 47).

This misrecognition plays out in the novel's opening scene, in which men and women sit in Mounir's living room, watching what is unfolding onscreen. The short film shows the men during a hunting expedition, filmed with a Super 8 camera that recorded sound and color. This is advanced technology for 1970s Lebanon, reminding us of Mounir's economic status as a bourgeois Maronite. While watching one of their films, the narrator describes the following:

> Tout à coup on entend une musique des Pink Floyd. Saccadée. Au rythme de cette musique saccadée tombent les oiseaux. Le montage est parfait. Tony tire. Un oiseau tombe. Pierre tire. Un oiseau tombe. Mounir tire. Un oiseau tombe. Tous leurs visages sont épanouis.…Avant c'étaient les Européens qui avaient les gueules que nous voyons sur l'écran et qui allaient chasser en Syrie, en Irak, ou ailleurs…maintenant ce sont les Libanais, chrétiens et modernisés avec cet attirail touristico-militaire partout où ils veulent. Et qui prennent avec eux une caméra et qui filment leurs exploits, comme ils se filment eux-mêmes…Le film se termine sur une image de voitures pleines de plumes

> d'oiseaux recouvrant des corps troués et affaissés. Dans cette chasse-là la Volkswagen a aussi remplacé les chiens, étant absolument tout-terrain. (*Sitt Marie Rose* 10-11)

In the above extract from *Sitt Marie Rose*, the camera lens acts as the Lacanian mirror that reflects the group of modern Lebanese hunters, their machinery, and their dead and dying prey. The short, staccato syntax also conveys a lack of reflection, a thoughtless, machine-like propulsion of action that leaves verbal negotiation to the wayside. The amount of time that Mounir spends obsessing over his film and watching his groups' hunting excursions suggests an overly narcissistic investment in his own flesh that refuses to recognize how others, both the Europeans and his fellow Lebanese and Palestinian neighbors, shape that image. These men have fallen into the trap of misrecognition of the self as a fixed image alienated from others. Consequently, the subject adopts an "I" and a corresponding body image filled with narcissistic desire. Within this theory of psychoanalytic subjectivity, the (male) child distinguishes himself from the mother who holds the child up to the mirror. Marie-Rose recognizes the child-mother attachment as a debilitating relationship in Lebanese society:

> Vous vous aimez vous-mêmes, vous recherchez votre propre image dans vos attachements, vos passions se retournent toujours sur vous.…Moi je sais qu'il n'y a d'amour vrai que pour celui qui est Etranger. Quand vous aurez coupé les cordons ombilicaux qui vous relient entre vous vous deviendrez enfin des hommes et la vie parmi vous aura un sens. (*Sitt Marie Rose* 100-101)

The boys' narcissism fed by the Lebanese mother leads to the suppression of their mortality, which is further enabled by attachment to inorganic materials as observed in the military apparel, guns, and German cars (objects which have replaced dogs because their animal bodies are not capable of crossing the sorts of terrain that the *chabab* explore). This machinery endows them

with a power to kill other bodies and experience pleasure in the taking of the other's life. As I will argue, masculinist narcissism in the novel, encouraged by the Lebanese mother and the social environment of the time, causes great bodily harm to the city. Adnan makes this point in a reflection on the novel: "I think my book is about the moral and physical death of a city. It will take a long time to feel innocent in Beirut."[108]

It is between *Temps I* and *II* that this group transitions from an identity as hunters to that of warriors who calculate their way to success by eliminating their adversaries. Moving from the realm of film to the battlefield, the titles of these two sections depict an evolution in the *chabab*'s prey, from *un million d'oiseaux* to Marie-Rose. In this second part of the novel, the Phalangists assert themselves as professional assassins. As Madeline Cassidy notes in her study of the novel, "the young hunters turned Phalangist militiamen hear, but do not listen. For them, talk is cheap. The only real currency is power. They think of the female only as not male: femininity denotes a void" (285). In neither Tony nor Fouad's contributions to the novel do these characters enter into verbal dialogue; they are uniquely invested in the narcissistic realm of the Lacanian imaginary. Consequently, the *je* in Fouad's previous confession ("je suis l'ordre absolu. Je suis le pouvoir absolu. Je suis l'efficacité absolue," 47) avoids the self-division, or self-estrangement, that occurs in subject formation. Refusing to acknowledge how others inform his identity, Fouad invests in a "self" that recognizes only his filiative ties with other Christian Lebanese men to erect an *empire du propre.*[109] When Fouad claims that he reduces everything to the "couple" of life/death, in the context of Marie Rose's capture, he announces that he has reduced women to a

[108] This quote is taken from Evelyne Accad's chapter on *Sitt Marie Rose* in *Sexuality and War* (64; 1990). Accad borrows the original quote from Pierce, "Outside the Tribe" (51).
[109] Olivia Harrison delineates the risks of creating filiative ties, as defined by Edward Said, in the context of the civil war in "Resistances of Literature: Strategies of Narrative Affiliation in Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*" (2009).

place of lack, to a symbolic death or decapitation, which, in the case of Marie-Rose, results in a physical death.

It is through Mounir that we begin to understand how the former French colonial presence in Lebanon complicates the construction of the masculinist, modern Christian identity that the *chabab* seek in the novel. Through territorial, religious, and cultural colonization, Western values were, as Fanon estimates, projected onto Lebanese bodies. Because of the large number of Christian French educational institutions that remained in Lebanon after the French Mandate, the "modern West" became a model of inspiration to several generations of Maronite Christians. This influence is evident in a scene in which the character of Mounir envisions himself as European in a conversation with the novel's narrator: "Mais quand nous sommes arrivés chez eux nous étions les premiers Européens qu'ils avaient jamais vus. Pardon, je veux dire, Libanais," which the narrator translates as "les premiers modernisés" (*Sitt Marie Rose* 13). Reflecting on their childhood, Marie-Rose recalls the annual reenactment of the Crusades led by French priests, a performance that fuses Christianity with battle in the minds of young adults. In a flashback, Marie-Rose criticizes this ideology: "C'est ainsi qu'ils se sont habitués à rêver d'un christianisme casqué, botté, et monté sur un cheval, avançant dans un cliquetis d'armes et transperçant les fantassins musulmans comme autant de saint Georges faisant du dragon" (57).[110] The mention of Saint George reflects the Christian presence of France, who fashioned themselves as savior figures amidst the fall of the Ottoman Empire and partition of the Middle East. While the Europeans never kept their promise to bring national peace, the *chabab* of *Sitt*

[110] According to the legend recorded by the Coptic church, Saint George rescued a Libyan king's daughter who was to be part of a ritual sacrifice to a dragon that haunted a nearby lake. When Saint George saw the princess standing by the lake, he injured the dragon and was able to bring it to a state of obedience. When the dragon followed Saint George and the princess to her town, he beheaded the dragon and the townspeople converted to Christianity (Riches 11).

Marie Rose still idealize Europeans and their Christian faith as forces of war that conquer in order to prosper and persevere. These young men associated Christianity with power attained through violence, an ideal which, as adults, they incorporate into their body image—they are bodies with guns, hunters who use machines to kill as they please.

Through his accounts of the colonized psyche in *Peau noire, masques blancs* and *Les damnés de la terre*, Fanon's work helps to complicate the creation of the "self" proposed in the Lacanian image of the mirror, which I employ in this chapter. Colonization, according to Fanon, resulted in the colonized population's absorption of the self-destructive values of the colonizers. Notably, Fanon's description of this process of psychic injection draws a direct connection between the psychic state and embodiment, an observation that is pertinent to my examination of the *chabab*'s psyche and its repression of the corporeal. Drawing from *Les damnés de la terre*, philosopher Kelly Oliver highlights the fact that for Fanon, the colonizers' white values and abjected fears act as "dangerous [and infectious] foreign bodies" injected into the skin of the colonized (51). Through this projection, affect (i.e., anger and shame) are transferred from colonizer to colonized, leading to the epidermalization of racist ideology. As Fanon emphasizes, when those external values seep into the emotional state of the colonized, they in turn direct anger toward themselves or others in the form of tribal or gang wars:

> La tension musculaire du colonisé se libère périodiquement dans des explosions sanguinaires: luttes tribales, luttes de çofs, luttes entre individus.…Les luttes tribales ne font que perpétuer de vieilles rancunes enfoncées dans les mémoires. En se lançant à muscles perdus dans ses vengeances, le colonisé tente de se persuader que le colonialisme n'existe pas, que tout se passe comme avant…Autodestruction collective très concrète

> dans les luttes tribales, telle est donc l'une des voies par où se libère la tension musculaire du colonisé. (*Les Damnés de la terre* 55)

The transfer of affect sickens the colonized population, as it leads to the interiorization of inferiority and a constant struggle for colonizer's approval and subject position, resulting in the construction of what Oliver calls a "cruel superego" (51). Fanon's description of colonial muscular tension rings true in *Sitt Marie Rose*, even though the novel depicts a decolonized Lebanon. As Fanon demonstrates further in *Les Damnés de la terre*, cycles of violence will continue if the decolonized nation does not abandon colonial paradigms.

In one key scene, *Sitt Marie Rose*'s omniscient narrator speaks in a Fanonian key, reading Marie-Rose's mind as she reflects on the violence and libidinal excitement leading up to the moments of her murder: "elle voyait [les *chabab*] là, assis devant elle, si calme, qu'elle devinait que le survoltage vécu par tout un pays les avait atteints, abattus, terrassés comme un muscle raide et apparemment inerte" (81). The "muscular tension" that Fanon describes has exploded into such horrific levels of violence in the Lebanese Civil War that a moment of hazy calm ensues before the *chabab* make their next move. Again like Fanon, the narrator of *Sitt Marie Rose* brings attention to the *chabab*'s skin as a placeholder for memory and ideology: "C'est leur chair qui intéresse. Il y a des millénaires d'atavismes à l'intérieur de leurs corps qu'il faut faire éclater au grand jour ou examiner au microscope" (*Sitt Marie Rose* 49). Here, the narrator further remarks how the psyche plays out into bodily affect, and suggests that ancestral tribalism, exacerbated by influence of colonial Europe and conflicts in neighboring Middle Eastern countries, is an issue deeply embedded issue in the bodies, minds, and communities of Lebanon.

Recognizing the psychic aspects of oppression and violence is also a priority in Kelly Oliver's study *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Theory of Oppression* (2004).

If I give preference to Oliver's reading of Fanon, it is because her project finds relevance in the argument of my chapter, as she aims to paint a picture of the self as "thoroughly social" through the field of psychoanalysis by developing "a theory of subjectivity that is relational but not fundamentally antagonistic" (Oliver xvii). Her insistence on the relationship between psyche and body in Fanon's work and her consideration of the effects of oppression on the unconscious as a social function aligns with my project in this chapter. I argue that the *chabab*'s forceful struggle to assert their superiority rends the Lebanese social fabric and engages them in a subjectivity cut off from their surroundings. At the same time, I pursue the claim that Marie-Rose serves the dangerous role of catalyst for the realization that a constellation of members constitutes the Lebanese body. Putting Fanon further in line with my analysis, Alice Cherki, Algerian psychoanalyst the author of the introduction to the 2002 republication of *Les Damnés de la terre,* declares that part of the contemporary relevance of Fanon's study is that he tried to put in place a new construction of knowledge: one that introduced "the body, language, and alterity as the necessary subjective experience in the construction of the political future," which echoes psychoanalysis (*Les Damnés* 15, my translation).

While Fanon derived his theories from observations of the colonization of African and Caribbean territories to claim race as a byproduct of colonization, his thought can be extrapolated to other colonial relations.[111] I have already established that the case of French colonization of Lebanon was unique in the religious affiliation between colonizer and colonized, (or at least the bourgeoisie of colonized Lebanon), a similarity which initially minimized tension. However, colonization did create a tighter link between religion and class. Thus, although race

[111] Fanon himself notes this in his first chapter of *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*: "Nous rappelons encore une fois que les conclusions auxquelles nous aboutirons valent pour les Antilles françaises; nous n'ignorons pas toutefois que ces mêmes comportements se retrouvent au sein de toute race ayant été colonisée" (44).

certainly played a role in French-Lebanese colonial relations, for the Lebanon of *Sitt Marie Rose*, colonization resulted in the growth of nationalism and stirred false dreams of a Lebanon united under the flag of Christianity, while also creating a further class divide. The economic effect of decolonization continued the separation into what Fanon calls a "Manichean society," in which the elite are separated from the masses in the same way that the colonizers are distinguished from the colonized.[112]

Colonization's secretion of nationalism manifests most strongly through the character of Mounir, who sees Lebanon as a modern, Christian state with ties to Europe. Through his own narration, as well as that of Marie-Rose and the female narrator who describe him, Mounir displays a deep desire to identify with Europe (i.e. France) and a concurrent abjection of the Orient. In a flashback, Marie-Rose recounts how Mounir differentiated himself from his friends through his appreciation for the Asian continent. As might be expected, his friends' influence ultimately overcomes him. He begins to ridicule artistic productions of the region, which Marie-Rose credits to the ideologies spread by the French religious educational institutions: "Il est vrai qu'ils étaient tous élèves des Pères Jésuites qui les avaient orientés vers Paris et les querelles des rois de France" (57). This sheds light on the *chabab*'s rejection of the Palestinians, who represented a deeper link with the Orient (Ofeish and Ghandour 17).

Fanon's description of the colonial disease as a blood that runs from body to body, which attacks the bodily schema—or sense of self in the world[113]—of the colonized, rings true in the narrator's personification of the city as suffering body in the novel. The *chabab*'s actions, as well as those of the Palestinians, continually torture and dismember the body of Lebanon through their tribal violence:

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[112] See *Les damnés de la terre* (44) and *Peau noire, masques blancs* (60) for Fanon's use of this phrase.
[113] See *Peau noire, masques blancs* (119-120).

> Les corps aussi éclatent, comme la haine. Comme des citrons pressés jusqu'à l'éclatement. … [Beyrouth] a ramassé les us et coutumes, les tares et les vengeances, la cupidité, la débauche du monde entier, dans son propre ventre. Et maintenant elle a vomi et ses vomissures remplissent chacun de ses espaces. (*Sitt Marie Rose* 27, 29)

The violence against individual bodies contributes to the depiction of the city of Beirut as a self-destructive body. Instead of thriving as a cultural center and meeting point between the European and former Ottoman Empire, the patriarchal, sectarian social structure exacerbated by colonization resulted in an explosion of violence. As the narrator makes clear, for the *chabab*, this war is an internal identity quest that intends to erase all from sight that does not correspond to their nationalist vision:

> D'ailleurs cette guerre civile est un laser qui a atteint le centre de leur identité. C'est une explosion nucléaire venue non d'une bombe, non de l'extérieur, mais du centre de la mémoire de leur race. Plus ils se rapprochent du paroxysme de la violence, plus ils semblent se réaliser.…Ils aiment la destruction parce que c'est un processus de dépouillement. Ils croient ainsi s'acheminer vers la vérité. Tout ce qui bouche l'horizon les encombre. Hélas, même les arbres. Ils abattent pour voir plus loin, c'est-à-dire pour regarder le rien. Ils utilisent leur corps comme s'il était une arme faite de fer. (*Sitt Marie Rose* 50)

Refusing to touch the bodies of others, the *chabab* eliminate them in order to preserve their vision of a European-ized body image. As Fanon insists, the injection of European values infect individual and collective bodies; by the process of *dépouillement*, literally removing the skin of those whose bodies do not correspond to the European epidermis, the *chabab* believe they are getting closer to their "true" identity. Instead of truth, in the narrator's reflection above, the

landscape serves as a metaphor for the *phantasm* of their identity. By razing the earth, they reduce everything in their vision to what they desire to see.

As feminized, weaker members, the narrator remarks how women represent a particular target within this diseased body:

> C'est la ville en tant que grand être qui souffre, trop folle et trop survoltée, et qui maintenant est matée, éventrée, violée, comme ces filles que les diverses milices ont violées, à trente et à quarante, qui sont folles dans les asiles, et que les familles, méditerranéennes jusqu'au bout, cachent au lieu de soigner… mais comment soigner la mémoire ? Cette ville, comme ces filles, a été violée. (30)

In a conversation with Mounir, Marie-Rose further exposes the corporeal harm done to the Palestinians and the collective body of Lebanon:

> Ces gens-là tentent de casser vos valeurs et, ce faisant, ils sont en train de se faire casser la gueule. Ils sont en train de se faire égorger par les vôtres et vos sinistres alliés. Pour vous libérer ! Il y a des nœuds à desserrer. Des abcès à vider.…Vous êtes en train de les égorger, je répète, de les égorger, et j'entends leurs râles. Leur sang vous remplit la bouche. (67)

Through their warfare, the militiamen violate both the bodies of women and the collective body of the city. They allow no one to speak: throats are slit, mouths are filled with blood, the city and its women are raped, abscesses inflate with infected tissue. Their diseased ideology, filled with atavisms and patriarchal, colonial values, seeps into the body of Lebanon and its women.[114]

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[114] It is worth noting again that Fanon, though accused of misogyny, emphasized the necessity for men and women to be on equal footing in order to create a healthy, successful nation. As Sharpley-Whiting notes, "Fanon was equally critical of the 'pitfalls of national consciousness,' which included a cautionary note on 'the dangers of perpetuating the feudal tradition which holds sacred the superiority of the masculine element over the feminine' (*The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 202)" (21). However, Sharpley-Whiting acknowledges some truth in critiques of Fanon's work as homophobic and heterosexist (x). Fanon has also been critiqued for his comparisons between anti-

Having never cultivated a "Lebanese" identity, the sectarian groups that inhabit this postcolonial state engage in warfare rather than dialogue in order to establish a sovereign group and ultimately a homogenous Lebanese "*propre*" body. Engaging in a fantasy of a self that removes members of this body, the Phalanges—and the Palestinians, as the narrator is more apt to recognize than Marie-Rose—have wounded the city and its nation. In this identity quest, the *chabab* leave no room for speech, and engage solely in the visual realm of the imaginary. This repression of language suggests a symbolic decapitation—and literal murder—of their opponents in order to eliminate other possibilities of expression.

Marie-Rose and the female narrator reveal the psychically fragmented nature of the *chabab*'s body image, which, though recognized through the Lacanian mirror stage, is given added nuanced in Fanon's account of the colonized psyche. Through their body image, the *chabab* recognize their individuality and superiority as guiding lights for the future of Lebanon. Moving beyond the narcissistic desire to reduce others to the image of the self, Marie-Rose refuses to affirm the *chabab*'s masculinist identity, and recognizes existence as necessarily and deeply relational. While the narrators' sections of the novel perform a psychic analysis of the *chabab* and the Lebanese identity quest, Marie-Rose's speech and actions protest the silence surrounding the causes of this war that intensifies the rigidly sectarian nature of their society. Through the deployment of—often poetic—language, Marie-Rose and the narrator animate bodies by investing in touch. These characters in the novel act in tandem: while the narrator articulates the illusions surrounding identity as entrenched in the skin, Marie-Rose reaches out to touch, both literally and figuratively, disenfranchised members of the community in effort to animate the collective, wounded body of Lebanon.

Semitism and colonialism; for further reading on Fanon's comparisons between colonization and Nazism, see Casteel, *Calypso Jews: Jewishness in the Caribbean Literary Imagination* (2016), especially Part II, "Holocausts."

Healing Touch: Marie-Rose and the Lebanese Body

The subversive nature of touch between different bodies is crucial to both Cixous's and Adnan's analysis of oppression. Through Cixous's writing on touch and the way it enlivens differences within and between bodies, I will analyze the ways in which Marie-Rose deploys touch in opposition to the *chabab*'s *empire du propre* that effaces the other. I reference Verena Conley's readings of Cixous above those of other critics because of Conley's continuously perceptive reading of "touch" in Cixous's work from the 1980s to today.[115] In a recent essay, Conley recognizes that "[o]ver the last half-century, the critique of sight in French theory has led to a renewed attention to touch" ("Making Sense" 79).[116] Placing touch in historical context, Conley associates it with a return to the body and an engagement with the unconscious, and highlights the way Cixous "continually affirms the necessity of appealing to the senses by writing from the body" (80). In "Le sexe ou la tête," an essay not referenced by Conley, Cixous affirms the importance of skin and tactility, particularly in what she calls a "feminine text":

> Il y a du tact dans le texte féminin, du toucher et ce toucher passe par l'oreille. Ecrire au féminin, c'est faire passer ce qui est coupé par le symbolique c'est-à-dire la voix de la mère, c'est faire passer ce qu'il y a de plus archaïque. La force la plus archaïque qui affecte un corps et qui est ce qui entre par l'oreille et qui atteint au plus intime. Ce toucher le plus intérieur fait toujours écho dans un texte de femme. (14)

In this critique of the cultural occlusion of the mother (in contrast to theories of subjectivity such as Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis), Cixous posits the mother's voice as the agent of

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[115] See *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (1984), *Hélène Cixous* (1992), and "Making Sense from Singular and Collective Touches" (2011).

[116] In *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (1993), Martin Jay studies a vast array of twentieth century French writers and philosophers to arrive at the larger claim that there has been a "palpable loss of confidence in 'the noblest of senses'" (347). Thus, Cixous may be characteristic of what Jay characterizes as a "French antiocularcentric discourse" of the twentieth century.

touch.[117] This touching is thus both a physical sensation and emotional affect. It follows that Cixous's quote above suggests that texts have the ability to touch their readers in a variety of ways. This vocal, "maternal" touch materializes in ways that writer and literary critic Sarah Jackson points out in a reference to Ashley Montagu's *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin* (1971): "Although touch itself is not an emotion, its sensory elements induce those neural, glandular, muscular, and mental changes which in combination we call an emotion" (Montagu ctd. in Jackson 65).

Cixous's writing shows that the effects of touch can also operate in the opposite direction. Something that touches us emotionally can also give rise to physical reactions, an idea that Cixous suggests when she writes that voice (spoken, written, imagined) can access the most "internal touch." Twenty years after "Le sexe," in "Contes de la difference sexuelle" (1994), Cixous articulates "sex" not as vagina, penis, or other genitalia, but as tactile interiority that unites "touch" and affect:

> Qu'est-ce qu'il y a pour nous [les femmes], pour ma part ? Si tant est que je sois une femme, ce que j'éprouve à écrire, à lire, c'est qu'il y a *de l'intérieur*. Pas d'organe. Mais la terre, qui tremble. La nuit qui halète. Si je travaille au corps et texte, je travaille (de) l'intérieur. Mais 'mon sexe', c'est cette terre intérieure à l'écoute de laquelle nous sommes. S'il y a organe, c'est l'organe deviné senti qui fait fonction du sexe, qui est *le cœur*. Mais, comme je l'ai dit ailleurs, le cœur est l'organe de jouissance le plus mystérieux, il est le sexe sublime commun aux deux 'sexes.'…Parce que le corps-qui-jouit, le sexe, n'est pas seulement dans le corps, mais dans le monde cardiaque…dans la musique qui est le chant de la chair. (50-2)

[117] The Cixousian "mother" references the more general silencing of "woman" in Western society as well as the rejection of the "other" during ego formation (Blyth and Sellers 22).

By identifying sex as the heart, Cixous does not claim that women have more access to emotion than men, or vice versa; rather, she abstracts the notion of physical sex in order to identify sexual difference as something to be felt, experienced, and interpreted not via sight but through an attentive interest, or love, toward the other.[118] Moreover, the human sex is displaced from genitalia to distribute libidinal feeling through the entire body; if the "sex" is the "music that is the song of the skin," we could read this as the heartbeat that enlivens the epidermis. Cixous poetically notes the ways that the fluttering touch of the heart enlivens skin, and how all of these bodily processes can be considered "sexes."

This type of "love" is better understood in conjunction with a more recent essay "Nous en somme" (2006). For Cixous, figurative and physical touches are an integral part of the process of reading differences. In the narration of an interaction with her cat, she again imagines sexual differences aroused not by anatomy differentiated by vision, but by the desire to listen to the other that is accessed through love:

> Donc souplesse infinie des différences sexuelles qui ne se laissent pas commander par l'objectivité anatomique ou biologique. Il s'agit d'amour—pas seulement d'anatomie ni d'espèce, ni d'hormones ni de gènes, il s'agit de lecture.
>
> Qu'est-ce que donc l'amour ? Ce serait une surintelligence un désir de l'autre, désir du bonheur de l'autre capable d'inventer des passages, des signes, des langages, une surintelligence, indépendante des codes d'espèces, d'acquis culturels,
>
> Je dis *l'amour*, un amour de jouissance sans violence sans rapport de force, une bienveillance, une bienjouissance, un caresser fait d'attention, d'écoute, un abordement,

[118] In an interview with literary scholar Mireille Calle-Gruber, Cixous returns to the idea of the heart as the human sex (*Photos de racines* 40).

> un effleurement, un lire le regard de l'autre avec le regard qui bénit. ("Nous en somme" 105)

Imagining interactions with the other outside of a system that codes bodies into categories, Cixous abstracts sexual difference*s*, now officially pluralized, in order to recognize the polysexuality of the self. Polysexuality, in the context of this passage, expresses the different senses that enliven *jouissance*. She recognizes this polysexuality, in part, by noting how we act differently around different beings (as she does with her cat and her cat with her; the mention of the animal further displaces what we might consider a "sexual" exchange), but also because the "moi" is informed by others, by the unconscious, by dreamlife. All of these influences create the "nous que je suis en somme" (109). As Calle-Gruber notes, in Cixous's text "I" experiences multiple births through its others and the way they touch "me" (*Du café à l'éternité* 26). Hence when Cixous sets up "un caresser fait d'attention, d'écoute" as a metaphor for love, the attentive caress responds to and vitalizes the "heart sex" that is "à l'écoute de laquelle nous sommes," as "nous" is always changing moment by moment.

Later in "Contes," twelve years prior to "Nous en somme," Cixous again draws attention to the experience of pleasure with the other (and perhaps the other-within-the-self) that functions out of "sight." If "Nous en somme" posits a reading that bestows blessings and prosperity upon the other, "un lire le regard de l'autre avec le regard qui bénit," the following passage in "Contes" imagines an interaction where the gaze plays no role at all:

> Mais il y a un endroit dans la pensée où l'apparence cesse. Il fait trop noir et trop éblouissant pour lire. On ne (se) voit plus au grand jouir, on jouit. *Où la chair sait autrement*, où elle pense sans mots … *Où elle ne voit plus rien à lire*. Seulement à jouir. Où l'on s'entend sans mots. (67, emphasis added)

If the passage from “Nous en somme” offers a non-possessive reading of the other, in this venturing into the night in “Contes,” reading of words and of bodies is not a possibility. In this figurative interaction, Cixous completely displaces the visual; one does not see oneself through the other’s regard or try to read the other. Those involved in the exchange are invested in undecidable sexual difference and the skin is personified as an agent of communication and pleasure, or *jouissance*. Given the lexical relationship between *jouissance* and “joy,” the following conclusion to feminist literary critic Abigail Bray’s study of Cixousian sexual differences seems appropriate: “Joy is alien to structures, it dissolves identities, subverts hierarchies” (200). Bray cites a passage from another of Cixous’s essays, stating that there is a fear of reaching joy because it brings us to such a level of exultation that it takes us to our edge.[119] The skin, then becomes an agent of unknowing that plays with the borders of the self, a touching that brings ecstatic joy and dissolves hierarchies.

Though this exchange certainly has utopian resonance, Cixous’s emphasis on the moment in her writing denotes that such joy is inevitably fleeting. A scene from *Sitt Marie Rose* exemplifies the potential within such a momentary exchange. In the following, the narrator recalls an encounter between Marie-Rose and the Palestinian who will become her lover. The two meet at the funeral of a militant poet, a death that suggests the elimination of artistic creation and poetic language in a war where dialogue serves no role:

> Au cours de la nuit, il ne lui a pas dit ‘tu es mon épouse’ ou ‘tu es la mère de mes enfants.’ Il n’a pas eu à se projeter mentalement un film pornographique vu au cours d’un voyage au Danemark, pour pouvoir la posséder avec plaisir, il a tout simplement eu envie

[119] Bray cites the English translation of Cixous’s essay “The Last Painting or the Portrait of God” in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (1991).

> d'être tout à fait avec elle, et elle, avec lui. Quand il lui a dit 'je crois que je t'aime', elle a su que c'était vrai et, dans le noir, a gardé les yeux fermés. (79-80)

Far from the visual dimension of the *chabab* who experience pleasure by identifying difference and eliminating it, Marie-Rose and her partner access *jouissance* by touching in the dark. Read symbolically, their bodies lying in the night conveys a blurriness that does not dress the human body with cultural expectations and assumptions. As Cixous states in an interview with Calle-Gruber in *Photos de racines*, published the same year as "Contes de la différence sexuelle" (1994), for her, the symbolic night is the time of least resistance, when reason does not impose a single interpretation (115). In Marie-Rose's interaction with her lover, the words "I think I love you" have the potential to signify this type of Cixousian love that is a well-wishing, non-possessive being-with-the-other that refuses to employ patriarchal, colonial reason, to reduce the Palestinian body to an infection of the Lebanese nation, or to the female body to a silent mother to masculinist narcissism.

This conversation of touch, however, should not downplay or displace the potential of sight. According to Conley, Cixous engages with the senses by closing her eyes and focusing on touch. And yet, as Conley emphasizes, Cixous also refers to the eyes as agents of the caress: "Les yeux sont les mains les plus puissantes les plus délicates, elles touchent impondérablement le là-bas" ("Conversation avec l'âne. Ecrire Aveugle" 82-3). In this visual caress, the eyes serve as the first point of contact, one that leads to a reading, rather than a possession and definition, of the other.[120] In the novel, Marie-Rose uses her eyes as "hands that caress" to recognize and tend to the physical and emotional distance between the Palestinian refugees and the Lebanese:

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[120] This statement is in some ways reminiscent of Emmanuel Levinas's theorization of the caress. In Martin Jay's study of Levinas in "The Ethics of Blindness and the Postmodern Sublime Levinas and Lyotard" (1994), the author underlines "care for the Other" in Levinas's philosophy "meant refusing to turn him or her into an object of visual knowledge or aesthetic contemplation" (326). For Levinas, while sight creates distance, touch implies proximity; the

> Pour les Palestiniens, aussi, au début, nous étions des étrangères. Mais nous les avons apprivoisés et nous allions chez eux comme pour un voyage, un ailleurs, *leur monde et le nôtre se côtoyant et ne se touchant pas.* … Dans les yeux *on lisait* des idées fixes. Sur les bouches *on récoltait* des rengaines ou des impatiences. (*Sitt Marie Rose* 61, emphasis added)

Their worlds were rubbing shoulders but not touching. To touch, Marie-Rose and her fellow advocates open up paths of communication by reading the Palestinians' expressions, allowing them to articulate their own differences, and reaching out to create coalitions. Such touch inevitably results in alteration. To protect against appropriation of the other or self-sacrifice, Cixous warns against violent touch that incorporates the other: "As soon as you simply touch the other, you alter the other and you are altered by the other, an alteration that may be positive or negative. It is negative if there is compromise, if you are incorporated by the other, etc." (Cixous qtd. in Conley, *Writing the Feminine* 136). By reaching out to touch, literally and figuratively, the Palestinian community, Marie-Rose arrives at a point of familial contact without erasing their differences: "Je ne considère pas le Palestinien comme un ennemi. Il appartient à la même mémoire ancestrale que le parti des chrétiens. Nous sommes vraiment frères" (64). Thus, while she finds union between herself and the Palestinian through an ancestral past, and in their common humanity, her use of the label "Palestinian" also acknowledges the historical specificities attached to this group of people and how it might differ from her own Christian Lebanese upbringing.

Levinasian caress, "the most benign mode of touching" (Jay 326), does not take possession of what it holds, and does not know what it seeks, thus allowing for the "otherness" of the other. Though productive for theories of subjectivity and even feminist thought, feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray has critiqued the lack of reciprocity in the Levinasian "caress," which reduces "woman" to a stagnant, passive object (see *Ethique de la difference sexuelle,* 1984 and *Etre deux*, 1997). For Levinas's philosophy on sight, touch, and the caress, see *Totalité et infini* (1961).

Marie-Rose's communicative touch also animates the skin as connective tissue. In a high-stakes conversation with the Christian priest, Bouna Lias, Marie-Rose uses some of her last words to remark on the familial nature of the Palestinians and Lebanese in the transition from the Ottoman Empire's dissolution to European control. But she also recognizes their common human bond: "Comment vous faire prendre du recul, vous faire comprendre qu'ils ne sont pas vos ennemis mais nos frères dans la chair et l'Histoire?" (99). For Marie-Rose, recognizing this relationality and connectivity is what will afford Lebanon a future.

In spite of her life being at risk, through her actions and words, Marie-Rose refuses to affirm a masculinist identity and instead enacts the Cixousian feminine economy: "Je représente l'amour, les voies nouvelles, l'inconnu, l'aventure. Depuis dix mille ans, dans cette partie du monde, nous sommes restés tribaux, tribaux, tribaux" (*Sitt Marie Rose* 67). In contrast to the sectarian nation of Lebanon, Marie-Rose sees her "self" as open and unbordered. While tribal affiliations can call up positive connotations of kinship and community, the tribalism that Marie-Rose identifies in the Middle East denies one's capacity to love the Other. The tribalist notion of an "inside" and an outside" is a mentality at the intersection of European modernization and Arab nationalism (Foster 66)—one that, as Adnan herself notes, leads to "total eradication of the enemy" (qtd. in Accad 64). Marie-Rose conceives of *je* in a more inclusive way than the tribal mentality of the *chabab*, acknowledging her "self" as a porous space influenced by others. This porousness, however, does not cancel out her ability to speak to her unique existence as a *je* within a population with which she has much in common: "Je suis la mère de trois enfants. J'ai quitté mon mari. Je vis avec un jeune Palestinien qui en ce moment est en danger. J'ai défendu la cause palestinienne avant de le connaître. Je défends une culture commune, une histoire commune, la leur et la nôtre" (*Sitt Marie Rose* 65-66). These coexisting compositions of the "I"

are necessary if one is to concurrently imagine the connected nature of all human beings and demand the specific recognition of marginalized subjects in a given society.

In the same way that Marie-Rose does not privilege "I" above other subjects, the novel's narrative structure does not privilege one narrative over others, but rather lets individuals speak for themselves and demonstrates the differing experiences of the war. With its various first-person narrations, *Sitt Marie Rose* stands as a collective production that bears witness to how the war touches each subject differently. The novel's discordant chorus of voices convey how each of these individuals were touched by the war, and how they—at times violently—touch one another, denying a cohesive narrative and the representation of one voice for "the people."

Marie-Rose's investment in touch questions divisive identitarian politics and attempts to cast light upon the illusion of the *chabab*'s *empire du propre*. The militiamen perceive non-sectarian human relations as a dangerous disruption of a phallocentric society reliant on borders. Consequently, as a beautiful and "modern" woman who poses a threat to stable Lebanese masculinist identity, Marie-Rose becomes a body in danger. Tony makes the reader aware of this in one of his short contributions to the novel:

> Elle ne devrait pas ouvrir la bouche. [Mounir] n'est pas là pour l'écouter.…C'est peine perdue que de chercher à récupérer une femme qui se prend au sérieux. Elle n'avait qu'à ne pas avoir pour ami un Palestinien. Elle aurait pu trouver mieux comme amant. Si elle avait été ma sœur voici longtemps que je l'aurais tuée. Ma sœur est très bien. C'est autre chose. Elle ne sort jamais sans être accompagnée de ma mère. Quand on lui parle elle baisse les yeux. Mais quand des putains se mêlent de la guerre, il y a de quoi être dégoûté. (69)

By calling Marie-Rose a whore, Tony criticizes Marie-Rose for transgressing the "endogamous order" by choosing a Palestinian partner. As Olivia Harrison calls to attention: "Marie-Rose's transgression of domestic borders is also sexual: by sleeping with the so-called enemy, she subverts the laws of endogamy that make the regulated exchange of female bodies a condition for the integrity of home and or the foreignness of the other" (5). Not a real woman like Tony's mother or sister, Marie-Rose is a whore whose body is suppressed in order for their nationalist quest to succeed. By wishing away her ability to talk, to open her mouth—"Elle ne devrait pas ouvrir la bouche"—Tony incapacitates Marie-Rose's body and closes himself off to the possibility of touch.

As an outspoken Medusa figure, Marie-Rose is dangerous and endangered. Her attention to the porousness of human skin questions the *chabab*'s body image in a frightening way: "Marie-Rose leur fait peur.…elle avance sur le terrain de leur imagination comme un océan déchaîné. Elle réveille dans leur mémoire la plus ancienne des litanies d'imprécations" (76). The narrator announces that these men, who have established themselves as sovereign power, consequently take Marie-Rose's life into their own hands:

> Alors, quand l'impossible mutation a lieu, quand par exemple quelqu'un comme Marie-Rose sort du cours ordinaire des choses, le corps social affolé dégage ses anticorps dans un mécanisme aveugle et automatique pour résorber, tuer, et digérer la cellule dans laquelle le vouloir vivre de la liberté est parvenu à se manifester. (84)

This statement that transitions to the final section of the novel displays an ailing Lebanon whose antibodies mechanically react to the alien substance that calls into question the fantasized unity of the self. And yet, for this "mutation" to be resorbed, killed, and digested does not suggest an elimination or disappearance of the alien substance, but rather its prolonged residence in the

body. As fear-inspiring abject, Marie-Rose does not disappear but is incorporated into the *chabab*'s psyche. That is to say, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Marie-Rose becomes the phobic object, the "not-I" that the *chabab* need in order to construct their own non-ambiguous identity.

Marie-Rose as Dangerous and Endangered: Exorcising the Abject

As Moroccan author and psychoanalyst Jalil Bennani remarks in the introduction to the collection of *Désirs et sexualités: d'une culture à l'autre, d'une langue à l'autre* (2012), the female as a threat to masculinity is a widespread trope that extends beyond Arab-Islamic cultures. "Les peurs des femmes, les menaces imaginaires qu'elles constituent contre la virilité, tout en étant accentuées dans la plupart des pays musulmans, sont loin d'être spécifiques à ces pays" (11). As the collection notes, it is through the examination of particular cultural and historical factors that one can understand the subconscious ideologies underpinning sexual difference and identity.

The novel's narrator observes that by simply embodying a female presence, Marie-Rose is received as a threat:

> … [Marie-Rose] croyait que les femmes étaient à l'abri des répressions parce que les gouvernements considéraient les luttes politiques comme uniquement intermasculines. En fait, avec l'accès des femmes à certains pouvoirs, même secondaires, on commençait à les surveiller de près et peut-être avec encore plus de hargne. Toute action féminine même bénéfique et apparemment non politisée est considérée comme une rébellion dans un monde où la femme est asservie depuis des siècles. Marie-Rose provoquait donc la risée et la haine bien avant le jour fatidique de son arrestation. (*Sitt Marie Rose* 107)

As with Medusa, Marie-Rose's beautiful face and sovereign mind creates fear and ultimately leads to corporal punishment. Cixous elaborates on this hatred of the female as dependent on fear: "un rapport de haine alimentée par la peur de la mort: la femme, pour l'homme, c'est la mort. C'est vraiment la menace de castration sous sa forme la plus efficace: avoir à donner, c'est vraiment déjà être en chemin vers la mort" ("Le sexe ou la tête" 10). Invested in an economy that thrives off exchange and appropriation, the *chabab* fear that female presence might spur a shift in power or result in a loss, or death, of the self. In this *harb al-akharin*, a war of Others,[121] Marie-Rose becomes an element that must be erased because she crosses borders and does not support the *chabab*'s vision of Lebanese identity.

The process of identity formation and exclusion in the *chabab*'s exchange with Marie-Rose is clarified through the psychoanalytic lens of Kristeva's "abject." Based on Kristeva's theorization, the abject is not subject or object, but a thing rejected by the body as "not-I." The "I" rejects the abject because it threatens disunification of the self, challenging the fragile borders of one's identity that separate it from what it is not (*Pouvoirs de l'horreur* 9). Within her analysis the abject of horror films, Barbara Creed notes that "the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his or her proper place in relation to the [Lacanian] symbolic" (40). In other words, to adopt subjectivity and become "I," one must define what is "not-I." The division between self and abject relies on a clean barrier between two, and when this border comes into question, the "I" might experience a fear of potential disappearance or death, because the porousness of one's body and mind threaten total disintegration. However, this attempt to create subjectivity is bound to fail. Instead of a true

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[121] This is a term used by Sune Haugbolle in the article "The (Little) Militia Man: Memory and Militarized Masculinity in Lebanon" (2012), which discusses the role of masculinity in militia members who participated in the civil war.

rejection, the subject does not disengage itself from the abject but, by defining oneself in contrast to it, incorporates the abject into the self's identity. As long as this fear of the abject is maintained, one is at permanent risk of being harassed by this boundary-threatening "external" force.

By disrespecting their "sovereign" law, Marie-Rose already toes the boundary that separates abject from self. The female protagonist dangerously crosses both the external boundary separating Christian and Palestinian communities and the internal boundaries of gender (Foster 61). For Tony, as well as the other *chabab* in the novel, this border-crossing arouses a fear-inspired violence:

> Elle est chrétienne, elle est passée au camp musulman. Elle est libanaise, elle est passée au camp palestinien. Il n'y a pas de problème. Nous devons la supprimer comme tout autre ennemi.…Et quoi qu'on dise, la volonté du groupe est souveraine. Nous sommes les jeunes gens du quartier chrétien et notre milice est en guerre contre les Palestiniens. Ils sont musulmans.…Il faut les supprimer. Cette femme, c'est une chienne. Mounir n'a pas à la regarder comme on regarde un être ordinaire. (*Sitt Marie Rose* 46)

The repetition of the verb *être* in this passage signifies the fixed identities that Tony imagines as dividing Lebanon into sectarian groups. As Kristeva announces, such disrespect for concrete borders leads into the realm of the abject: "Ce n'est donc 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, le mixte" (*Pouvoirs* 12).

In her study of the sexual politics in the Lebanese Civil War, though not referring specifically to the abject, Evelyne Accad notes the causal relationship between fear and aggression: "Boys and men are encouraged to become more fierce, more aggressive when they

feel fear. Fear in men is channeled into aggression, in women into submission, for such behaviors are necessary to maintain patriarchal authoritarianism" (Reardon ctd. in Accad 33).[122] This connection between fear and destructive masculinity is clarified through the abject, where there exists a close relationship between lack, aggression and fear. Kristeva outlines this connection through Freud's example of Little Hans[123]: "'J'ai peur des chevaux, j'ai peur d'être mordu.' La peur est l'agressivité qui doit me protéger d'une cause ou d'un autre, encore non localisable, sont projetées et me reviennent du dehors: 'je suis menacé'" (*Pouvoirs* 50). Through the act of sublimation, or the displacement of one's aggressive energies toward more socially acceptable emotions, such as fear, the subject ensures that it is no longer "I" who acts, but the other/abject who acts on their aggression toward "me." This aggressive reaction maintains the hallucination that they are under attack by the abject, and thus do not have to recognize the phobia that they themselves have created. In the Lebanese context, *Sitt Marie Rose* concedes by describing the causal relationship between fear and violence in war: "C'est la peur, non l'amour, qui est ici la grande génératrice de toutes les actions" (*Sitt Marie Rose* 75).

Kristeva explains that within this hallucinatory metaphor, the phobic object—in this case, Marie-Rose—is a substitution for the primary object of fear: the loss of identity, or death of the self. To compose a sense of identity, the *chabab* place themselves in opposition to the poor, the disabled, Muslims, Palestinians, and women, onto whom the *chabab*'s primary object of fear is displaced. "I" will only exist if "I" have the abject to oppose: "Je n'éprouve de l'abjection que si un Autre s'est planté en lieu et place de ce qui sera 'moi.' Non pas un autre auquel je m'identifie ni que j'incorpore, mais un Autre qui me précède et me possède, et par cette possession me fait être" (*Pouvoirs* 18). This fear that the Other might possess me or become part of me results both

[122] See Reardon, *Sexism and the War System*, 38-39.
[123] For Freud's original publication, see "Analysis of Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy" (1905).

in the affirmation of one's identity and the false illusion of boundaries. In the context of Marie-Rose, this phobia erupts in the defilement of the abject.

Because of the horrifying threat of self-disintegration, castration, and loss of ego that she represents to the *chabab*, Marie-Rose is dehumanized before she is quartered at the hands of these men. As a site of impurity and sin, Marie-Rose comes to represent a body without a soul, which for Bouna Lias, the representative of religious Law, means no longer being one of "our own": "Arrête Marie-Rose, tu es impudique et sacrilège. Tu baignes tout entière dans la folie ! Oui Seigneur, que votre volonté soit faite.…Elle n'a plus de visage.…Elle ne relève plus de la nôtre" (102-3). Bouna Lias's declaration of Marie-Rose as faceless suggests that she is non-human, a representation of evil who must be countered with the force of God and exorcised in order to reconstruct the boundaries between good and evil, masculine symbolic and feminine negativity. And yet, as Kristeva reveals in her analysis of the cadaver, it is through the loss of her body to death that Marie-Rose most fully embodies the abject:

> Le cadavre (*cadere*, tomber), ce qui a irrémédiablement chuté, cloaque et mort, bouleverse plus violemment encore l'identité de celui qui s'y confronte comme un hasard fragile et fallacieux.…le déchet comme le cadavre m'*indiquent* ce que j'écarte en permanence pour vivre.…Ces déchets chutent pour que je vive…Si l'ordure signifie l'autre côté de la limite, où je ne suis pas et qui me permet d'être, le cadavre, le plus écœurant des déchets, est une limite qui a tout envahi.…Le cadavre – vu sans Dieu et hors de la science — est le comble de l'abjection. Il est la mort infestant la vie.…Etrangeté imaginaire et menace réelle, il nous appelle et finit par nous engloutir. (*Pouvoirs* 11-12)

Marie-Rose's death allows the *chabab* to continue to exist and fight for their version of Lebanese nationalism by eliminating her godless body via exorcism, and thus defiling their abject. And yet, the narrator unveils that they are not satisfied with merely taking life from their opponents:

> Et si au-delà de la mort ils s'acharnent à mutiler les cadavres c'est pour amenuiser encore plus le corps de l'ennemi et effacer si possible le fait même qu'il ait pu exister, l'existence de l'ennemi étant une sorte de sacrilège qui exige une purification également monstrueuse. (74)
>
> Ils ont laissé sur ce sol un amas de membres disloqués de ce qui fut une pécheresse. (103).

As Bouna Lias indicates in the second excerpt, by reducing her body to a pile of limbs, the *chabab* have attempted to eliminate any trace of Marie-Rose's transgressive body in order to edge closer to a holy victory.

Yet, their attempts to erase the Other become futile, as this "not-I" lives on within the unconscious constructs of their identity, the limits of which prove to be factitious. It is precisely because the *chabab* define themselves in opposition to Marie-Rose that she is permanently incorporated into their identity. Kristeva describes this desire to create a whole subject concretely separated from others as a fantasy; the abject lives within and without oneself because, in one's efforts to reject it, the abject perseveres within the subject's mind as it continues to protect itself from danger:

> Frontière sans doute, l'abjection est surtout ambiguïté. Parce que, tout en démarquant, elle ne détache pas radicalement le sujet de ce qui le menace – au contraire, elle l'avoue en perpétuel danger. Mais aussi parce que l'abjection elle-même est un mixte de

jugement et d'affect, de condamnation et d'effusion, de signes et de pulsions. (*Pouvoirs* 17)

In the moments before her death, Marie-Rose passionately criticizes this identity quest that feeds off of death. When she learns that the *chabab* have arranged to trade her captivity for that of her lover, she explodes in emotion: "Vous allez toucher à cet homme ? Assassins !…Mercenaires, vous tous ! Ces cadavres qui font partie de votre sol, vous allez les respirer dans chaque bouffée d'air, vous allez les manger dans vos fruits, les boire dans vos rivières, les retrouver dans vos lits, reconnaître leurs traits sur le visage de vos enfants" (96). These cadavers will not disappear, but instead their bodies will infuse spaces of everyday life and be psychically incorporated as abject into the *chabab*'s identity, calling into question the boundaries between life and death, between "I" and "not-I," that the *chabab* so desperately seek to construct.

Though abjection, as Kristeva writes it, is productive for the psychoanalytic study of phobia and subject formation, the female-as-abject needs to be problematized. While Kristeva outlines how and why these bodies have been subjugated, there is no explanation for why the feminine as counter-identity to the masculine is misguided. In her study "The Abject Borders of the Body Image" (1999), Gail Weiss critiques the theorization of the abject taken up by Kristeva, and subsequently Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz[124]: "In their descriptions of the abject in identity formation, Grosz, Kristeva, and Butler all leave us with an unlivable problem" (49). Similarly, in her essay on the depiction of the female in horror films, Creed concludes that the feminine constructed as monstrous within "patriarchal discourse…reveals a great deal about male desires and fears, but tells us nothing about feminine desire in relation to the horrific" (65).

[124] See Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (1989) and Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (1993).

As Creed highlights, there are few accounts of how women relate and react to the construction of the abject, particularly when it deals with the female body.

The lack of a stance on women's oppression in Kristeva's abject seems to be complacent with the decapitation of the female and the feminine economy that Cixous theorizes in "Le sexe ou la tête." Rather than resisting the decapitation of the female or the feminine, her delineation of the process of abjection merely nods at its existence. However, in a recent essay, Maria Margaroni, scholar of literary theory and feminist thought, highlights the thread of "decapitation as women's fate" throughout Kristeva's fiction.[125] Margaroni claims that Kristeva's female figures escape decapitation by assuming a phallic position with a sense of irony. Thus, these female characters adopt a "position of freedom, critique, and resistance" in order to thrive within their worlds of fiction, which function around the phallic economy (110).

Cixous's work goes further than Kristeva's in critiquing and offering an alternative to this process, rather than simply suggesting its existence. Cixous's essay "Le sexe ou la tête" asks readers to recognize the othering process and surpass the abjection that often takes place during subject formation. Though Cixous describes the masculine economy and the ways in which it decapitates the female and the feminine economy, she also imagines forms of resistance to this fight to the death that go beyond submission to the cultural unconscious: "Il faudrait imaginer d'abord une résistance au désir masculin qui conduit la femme à la position de l'hystérique ou de l'absente. Il faudrait imaginer d'abord qu'elle s'arrête de soutenir avec son corps ce que j'appelle l'*empire du propre*" (11, emphasis added). Examined through this call, the *chabab*'s attempt at exorcism fails. By choosing to die in place of her Palestinian lover, Marie-Rose lives out her values of non-exchange. Through this decision, she places importance on the creation of

[125] See "Decapitation Impossible: The Hundred Heads of Julia Kristeva" (2015).

coalitions with others rather than the survival of the self, thus prioritizing difference as the real source of life. For her, this affirmation of life is only possible through death.

La Danse des Signes

Marie-Rose's coalition-forming causes her to embody the Cixousian "couple," as her actions obscure the borders between societal separations of and hierarchies between man and woman, Lebanese and Palestinian, Christian and Muslim. In "La venue à l'écriture," coauthored with Madeleine Gagnon and Annie Leclerc and published the same year as Adnan's novel (1977), Cixous grieves over what happens to bodies that represent both sides of the couple:

> J'ai été tous les couples entre lesquels se jetaient les abîmes, ou plutôt j'étais cette chair à deux corps que la jalousie du monde cherche à démembrer, contre laquelle s'acharne la sale alliance des rois, lois, moi hargneux, familles, complices, relais, représentants de l'Empire du Propre, du Pire en Pire de la Propriété, porte-parole du 'tu es (ce qui est) à Moi' … j'ai été le couple coupé, haché, condamné dans sa chair parce qu'il vient de trouver le secret de la jouissance, parce qu'en son corps Eros marie masculin et féminin. ("La venue" 31-32)

In this passage, Cixous poetically reflects on her own coming-into-meaning in French society. Both a French citizen and a Jewish woman from Algeria, she was born into an identity comprised of dueling components none of which belonged to the "masculine" world of writing. The "Empire of the Selfsame" discouraged Cixous from writing, from producing text and meaning, primarily because of her female identity. In the passage, Cixous relays an experience of silencing that is specific to her but with which other women may also identify.

The character Marie-Rose similarly copes with experiences that are both historically specific, and common to women with hybrid identities constructed as abject by the dominant

culture. Marie-Rose represents the "chair à deux corps," a woman who transgresses "feminine" space and a Christian who refuses to stay in her camp. The world around her attempts to separate her into neatly categorized identities, yet she responds by recognizing the self as inherently plural and in some ways unknown: "Je représente l'amour, les voies nouvelles, l'inconnu, l'aventure" (*Sitt Marie Rose* 67).[126] Lebanese sectarian politics forbids the growth of skin that touches multiple identities, turning those who embrace such hybridity into figures of rebellion and danger.

Such tension within societal constructions of "the couple" reappears in a short story that Adnan co-authored with the poet Alain Gorius[127], *Sur la haute tour elle était nue* (2008), published more than thirty years after *Sitt Marie Rose*. In this case, the "couple" represents the hierarchal binary man/woman. *Sur la haute* unfolds in a medieval, fairy tale-like setting in which people live in the outskirts of a forest. Deep in the forest there is a castle that houses a *cavalière,* (a female knight). This figure terrifies the population living near the forest; once in a blue moon she angrily rides her horse through their settlement and ravages the land with a pack of wild dogs. The story is narrated by a man reflecting on an unplanned journey through the castle, to which a nymph had lured him. The narrator pauses at the highest point of the castle tower when he meets *la cavalière*:

> [elle] m'appela, me prit par la poignée, m'attira à son coté. La vieille qui s'était vite éclipsée revint pour me dénuder ; allongé près de celle qui me faisait l'offrande de son silence, longtemps, jusqu'à la nuit, je demeurai immobile, parmi les plumes et le duvet

[126] In some ways resonating with Marie-Rose's articulation, Adnan articulated her own gender identity as non-binary and indefinable: "Being dressed as a boy made me feel very happy. I felt special: no other girls that I knew ever dressed like that. … In fact it must have reinforced my identity of being neither just a girl, nor a boy, but a special being with the magical attributes of both" ("Growing up" 9).

[127] Gorius is a poet, author, and artist who lived in Casablanca before moving to Paris, where he manages Éditions Al Manar, a publisher of Mediterranean literature with a concentration on authors from the Arab world.

qui volaient tout autour de nous, agités par le courant d'air venant de la croisée restée ouverte.

Elle s'endormit enfin. Je me levai, partis ; je n'ai compris que bien plus tard, … je ne le comprends qu'aujourd'hui, alors que la mort agite vers moi son épieu sanglant : j'avais laissé là, sur la haute tour du château de l'Escalette, le moment de paix, d'accord avec le monde qui nous avait été donné à vivre en partage. Montant à cru la jument noire qui m'attendait dans l'enceinte, je franchie la fausse-braie et me fondis dans la campagne obscure sur laquelle s'ameutaient, déjà distincts, les grondements d'un autre orage. (26-7)

In the preface to this short story, Lebanese writer, poet, and diplomat Salah Stétié calls the work an exercise in psychoanalysis through poetry (10). Indeed, this dreamlike state filled with feathers and gusts of air suggests the space of the Lacanian imaginary where the male narrator and female cavalier lay side-by-side, *dénudés*, stripped bare of connotation and expectation. The narrator names this the "moment of peace, of accord within the world that had been given to us to live in together." And yet, he eventually arises from this bed and leaves, stirring the discontent of the *cavalière*, who is left to believe that she has been misunderstood and abandoned. Unlike in the Sleeping Beauty story in which the prince comes to awaken the princess, this version asks the man to lay down his imagined preconceptions, to unknow, so that the man and woman can find each other, in the words of *Sitt Marie Rose*'s narrator, in "the silence of the night."

The male narrator of *Sur la haute tour elle était nue* arrives at this realization in his dying moments, when the boundaries of his "self" approach disintegration. Similarly, in a conversation with Mounir, Marie-Rose claims that death itself can becomes a challenge to group control as it may call one's identity into question (65). This understanding of death sheds light on Marie-Rose's articulation of death as singular: "La mort n'est jamais au pluriel. N'exagérons pas sa

victoire. … Il n'y a pas de millions de morts. Il arrive des millions de fois que quelqu'un meure" (*Sitt Marie Rose* 92). What resonates in all of these statements is the ways in which death brings attention to regions of intersubjectivity in life. When the self is on the brink of collapse, the possibility of recognizing relationality is most accessible.

In both *Sur la haute tour* and in *Sitt Marie Rose*, existence is deeply relational. The *chair*, or fleshiness, of the body is not only something that all beings share; rather, one's flesh or appearance, arouses certain reactions from others, which in turn inform the ways in which we define ourselves and imagine our bodies. When Cixous claims that "[i]l y a du tact, dans le texte féminin, du toucher et ce toucher passe par l'oreille" ("Le sexe ou la tête" 14), there seems to be a suggestion that the "feminine text" recognizes the touch that the body shares with others and experiences within itself. This sort of touch suggests nearness to other beings that does not rely on possession to become familiar with that other, but rather, as evoked in Cixous's quote, a speaking and listening to and with the other.[128] In her analysis of the same quote from "Le sexe ou la tête," Abigail Bray questions if reclaiming the lost "voice" of the archaic mother, perhaps resonating in the "ear" of Cixous's words above, is a form of "mystical biological essentialism" (28). And yet, as Bray recognizes, the "feminine text" is not reduced to female anatomy, but rather enlivens the "feminine economy" that diverges from the subordination and decapitation of the Other/female.[129] In other words, through the imagination of *écriture féminine*, which is fueled

[128] This theorization of touch resonates with Luce Irigaray's feminist philosophy that emphasizes an intimacy achieved through the nearness of bodies rather than appropriation of the other (see *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, especially the chapter that shares the book's name and "Quand nos lèvres se parlent").

[129] In her thorough introduction to the *Hélène Cixous Reader* (1994), Susan Sellers reminds readers of Cixous's readings of "feminine" economy and writing: "[f]or Cixous such a writing is feminine in two senses. First while Cixous suggests that feminine writing is potentially the province of both sexes, she believes women are currently closer to a feminine economy than men. As a result she sees in women's writing the potential to circumvent and reformulate existing structures through the inclusion of other experience. … Second, since a feminine subject position refuses to appropriate or annihilate the others difference in order to construct the self in a (masculine) position of mastery, Cixous suggests that a feminine writing will bring into existence alternative forms of relation,

by the *économie féminine*, "Cixous is attempting to forge a new language which communicates the space between language and the body, a space of the (m)other" (Bray 37). Thus, when Cixous asserts that the "feminine text" is tactile and that its touch passes through the ear, she brings attention to the ways in which we can listen and be sensitive to the body.

Yet, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, we must ask: is it still productive to label texts, economies, or pleasures as "feminine?" In these excerpts from a 1984 interview with Conley, Cixous professes that it would be nice if in place of "masculine" and "feminine" one could use color adjectives. However,

> these are linguistic words that do not take into account the reality of exchange.…When I am obligated to theorize…I find myself back in the trap of words.…We are in a historical, political situation which we must take into account.…the economy said to be feminine…is more livable in women than in men. Why? Because it is an economy which is socially dangerous in our times. (*Writing the Feminine* 133)

She continues that if men take up this sort of exchange, then they are immediately punished because they are not called upon to participate in society in the ways they desire to. While the "political situation" has changed somewhat between 1984 and today, this statement has clear application to the Lebanese Civil War in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

I contend that reading this text through a queer lens offers further liberation from the masculine/feminine binary. Cixous's theorization of the "feminine economy" in "Le sexe ou la tête" serves the purpose of disturbing what is "known" about the other; in this sense, the feminine economy approaches what is now recognized as queer. To offer a sense of queer, I will borrow from *Animacies*, where Mel Chen defines "queer" as "exceptions to the conventional

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perception and expression" (30). Therefore, feminine writing is driven by an economy that does not appropriate the other for one's benefit and rather engages in a different relationship to *jouissance* than its "masculine" counterpart.

ordering of sex, reproduction, and intimacy" (11). Other scholars of queer theory, such as Lee Edelman, have suggested that queerness entails a disruption of social organizations, of which identity is a product, and of any guaranteed future.[130] While the queering of sexual difference(s) in some of Cixous's texts may not seem immediately apparent, her reference to queerness in recent interviews sheds light on this potential reading:

> *Queer* c'est ça, c'est cette façon fluide, flexible, de tordre, de tisser, de tresser, de dénouer, de courber ce qui voudrait être tout droit ou raide … 'la Justice,' comme le dit le français. De faire trembler les lignes. De faire virevolter le fantasme de virilité. De donner le vertige au *straight*. ("Méduse en Sorbonne" 145)

For Cixous, the nominative queer denotes what is in perpetual movement, a movement that is connected to Medusa's laugh that disturbs meaning, as well as the jellyfish (the two being united in French through the noun "*méduse*") that glides through water and has no fixed shape but uses its fluidity to survive. In line with this statement, Sarah-Anaïs Crevier Goulet's analysis of "Nous en somme" proposes that *différences sexuelles* include—indeed, *must* include—a range of bodies: "Ainsi que [Cixous] le fait dans toute son œuvre, il faudrait penser tous les corps possibles, animaux, machines, toutes les modalités possibles dont l'autre prend forme en soi, toutes les façons dont tout un chacun peut être l'autre, cet autre qu'on ne cesse jamais de rencontrer et qui ne cesse de transformer" (326). The necessary evolution and movement of bodies, and the way they are written and thought about, constitute the "queerness" in Cixous's feminine economy and writing.

While in "Le sexe ou la tête" Cixous identifies the feminine economy as an alternative to the masculine economy, she hopes for movement within the masculine and thus does not define a

[130] Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2007).

"feminine" that depends on the permanent exclusion of what may become "masculine."[131] Along with Adnan's novel, Cixous's writing of *différences sexuelles*—and increasingly so in her twenty-first century publications[132]—works toward a displacement of the masculine/feminine binary through more fluid notions of the self. Such movement or fluidity represents another type of touching—a brushing up against concepts and bodies that causes identity to shift. The porousness of one's identity makes it susceptible to movement and allows for the constant creation of new meaning, as suggested by the novel's closing mention of "la danse des Signes" (which I will explore momentarily).

This perpetually moving, disruptive language occurs throughout *Sitt Marie Rose*. The final chapter provides such an example, where the narrator imagines the interaction between Marie-Rose and the *chabab* as an unfortunate meeting between jackal and hen, falcon and gazelle (105-7). The narrator's reference to Marie-Rose as a bird unites human and animal as living beings, both of which are vulnerable to predators:

> Ces quatre hommes acharnés sur un oiseau de passage.…Elle était, ils se le sont admis, une proie de valeur.…Elle était femme, et femme impudente, et passée à l'ennemi, et se mêlant d'événement politiques, leur chasse gardée d'habitude. Il fallait qu'eux, les *chabab,* ramènent les femmes à l'ordre, dans cet Orient à la fois nomade et immobile. Du côté palestinien on a perpétré des crimes similaires. L'enjeu est différent, le comportement le même. (*Sitt Marie Rose* 106)

In a Cixousian sense, Marie-Rose was a bird in flight, *en vol*, that disrupted language to create a new system of meaning (*Le rire* 49). As woman, bird, gazelle, Christian, Lebanese, and teacher

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[131] As evidenced by dreaming of a *masculin futur* in "Sorties" (153-5) and her call for *écriture masculine* in "Le rire de la Méduse" (40 note 1).
[132] See, for instance, "Nous en somme" (2006).

of deaf-mute students, the fictional character of Marie-Rose embodies shifting identities. The imagination of movement that touches both language and bodies agitates the binaries considered in this chapter, all of which map onto sexual difference(s): sexe/tête, body/mind, touch/sight, woman/man, Lebanese/Palestinian, Western/Lebanese. In this chapter, while the "feminine" has been used to rehabilitate the leftmost terms of these binaries, the promise in these texts lies in their ability to also productively disturb the "feminine" and to further de-code sexual difference(s). Marie-Rose engages this type of disturbing movement in a conversation with Mounir, in which she tries to convince him of the futility of a war fought to defend boundaries:

> La morale est une violence. Une violence invisible au début. L'amour est la violence suprême cachée dans la nuit de nos atomes. Quand un ruisseau coule vers le fleuve c'est de l'amour et c'est de la violence. Quand un nuage se perd dans le ciel c'est un mariage. Quand les racines d'un arbre fendent la résistance du roc, c'est le mouvement de la vie. Quand la mer arrive et se retire pour recommencer à nouveau, c'est le processus de l'Histoire. Quand l'homme et la femme se retrouvent dans le silence de la nuit c'est le début de la fin du pouvoir de la tribu, et la mort elle-même devient un défi à l'emprise du groupe. (*Sitt Marie Rose* 65)

This passage moves: it flows, bends, comes, goes. This movement is effected by a loving touch that is nonetheless potentially violent because it questions the boundaries of the "self."[133] The passage above creates a type of synesthesia, in which each element touches and animates another (the stream toward the river, the cloud into the sky, the tree's roots against the rock, the waves against the shore, woman alongside man). "Love" (the type Cixous references in "Nous en somme") leads the self out of its boundaries as the contact between the two alters the identity of

[133] In "Poétique de la différence sexuelle" (1994), Cixous describes love and death as two limit experiences that take the subject outside of the "self" (26).

both. By drawing parallels between all these movements, Marie-Rose does not erase “self,” but questions the rigid boundaries that engender hatred based on nationality, sex, or religion, while highlighting the shifting of identity that occurs when one is in communication with the world.

Madeline Cassidy argues that Marie-Rose’s love acts as a healing violence, the “supreme violence” that allows beings to coexist within the universe by dissolving borders. Cassidy claims that the healing violence of Marie-Rose’s words comprise the significance of Adnan’s novel. I would contend that Marie-Rose’s death is of equal importance, as it represents a resistance to complacency in the dominant economy of exchange. Rather than a time for mourning, the narrator portrays Marie-Rose’s death as cause for celebration:

> Qu’on le veuille ou non, une mise à mort est toujours une célébration. C’est la danse des Signes et leur stabilisation dans la Mort, c’est la montée en flèche de silence sans pardon, c’est l’éclatement de l‘absolu noir parmi nous. Que faire dans cette contre-fête sinon danser ? Les sourds-muets se lèvent et, soutenus par les rythmes transmis à leurs corps la terre martelée à nouveau par les bombes, ils se mettent à danser. (111)

Toward the end of “Le sexe ou la tête” Cixous urges that a “feminine” text is a text “sans fin”: “Ce sont des textes qui travaillent sur le commencement, et non pas sur l’origine” (14). These final words of *Sitt Marie Rose* render the story endless, offering no clear resolution to the war—only an encroaching darkness that erases known fact and surrenders to the unknown.

This final scene takes place in the classroom, where Marie-Rose had been the teacher of a group of Christian deaf-mute students. Her assassination unfolds before the eyes of her students, who respond to this horror through dance. No longer able to sign with Marie-Rose, and unable to verbally communicate with the *chababs* or fully understand their actions, the students enter into a mystic-like dance that animates their bodies.

While dance as an embodied art form is important to many cultures, it has a particular significance in Islamic culture. In *Le corps oriental* (2002), Moroccan literary critic, novel, and playwright Abdelkebir Khatibi writes that "la danse est une transfiguration de l'éphémère qui dissipe l'énergie du corps. La danse mystique élève cette dissipation jusqu'au vertige, et ce vertige a une vertu thérapeutique" (102). As an example, Khatibi references the dance of the Mevlevis, or dervishes, who turn toward the face of God through a meditative reenactment of death.[134] Through this lens, the students' dance becomes a therapeutic act that lovingly reaches inward toward the unknown in a geographical space where their bodies, threatened by warfare, have been marginalized.

As a physical, wordless reaction to events that defy easy articulation, dance is comparable to laughter. Similar to the deaf-mute students' dance, generated by the bomb's setting in motion of earthly vibrations, Medusa's laugh is a movement of explosion in response to confusion: "C'est l'éclat, c'est l'effusion, c'est un certain humour" ("Le sexe ou la tête" 15). Laughter is a trembling that disturbs the *empire du propre*, and this embodied communication demands that attention be given to a range of identities. In his study of the ways that *mêtis*—which denotes hybridity, but also, as we have seen, female wisdom—helps us think about the body, Jay Dolmage argues that "[t]he body, alternately beautiful and monstrous, normal and abnormal, alive with significance and engorged and muted, gains power from this dynamism. What we need to flee from, following Medusa, are the appeals to certainty and sameness, whether rhetorical, historical, or corporeal" (Dolmage 18). If the female—or *mêtis*—body is

[134] The mystic poet Rumi started the dance of the whirling dervishes in Islamic tradition. Historically, it has been primarily practiced by Sufi Muslims in Turkey in an attempt to abandon the ego and focus on God. For more information, see Friedlander, *The Whirling Dervishes: being an account of the Sufi order known as the Mevlevis and its founder the poet and mystic Mevlana Jalalu'ddin Rumi* (1992). It is important to note that dance is not characteristic only of Islamic tradition, as transfiguration and the mystical values sometimes attached to dance goes beyond any one tradition.

sometimes considered dangerous to patriarchal identity, and consequently endangered, then the explosions of laughter, of dance, of crossing over and over the borders of identity, are nothing short of a productive confusion that queers sexual expectations and explodes the fear of female-as-death in contexts like the patriarchal nationalism of the Lebanese Civil War.

When questioned on the relation between the political and the poetic, Cixous responds that the political question is always there when she writes, though she privileges the poetic (and recognizes her privilege in being able to do so; *Writing the Feminine* 139-40) as a place of solace and imagination. *Sitt Marie Rose* also provides such a place of political poetics. The novel's poetic language of touch problematizes tribal identities. It strives to revive the bleeding body of Lebanon, sick from colonial disease and sectarian politics, rather than further lacerate its constitutive members in an attempt to make them conform to an ideal image. Both Marie-Rose's life, and the ways in which her death animates her and others' lives through the affirmation of difference, moves toward healing this sickness and re-membering the body of Beirut. That death animates life may ring as paradoxical. However, as Shringparure notes in her study of the novel, Marie-Rose provides an example of the female body as an agent of resistance and autonomy, demonstrating how "war can breathe transformative energy into women" (38). Willing to die for her beliefs, Marie-Rose sends the message to her children, neighbors, and readers of her life, that the threat of decapitation will not render the Medusa silent.

Transitioning Remarks

Marie-Rose's story underscores how women deemed dangerous to postcolonial, patriarchal identity formation are placed in psychological and corporeal danger. Because of her *mêtis* intelligence and will to reach out and "touch" the other, Marie-Rose is abjected and murdered at the hands of her male counterparts. The following chapter returns to the idea of

dangerous female sexuality explored in the first chapter, while further examining how opposing patriarchal goals for nationalism or religion places female bodies in danger. It argues that a key aspect of the Medusa is the resilience she displays in these moments of peril.

CHAPTER 3

The Dangers of a Barren Body: Reproductive Futurism and Rearticulating the Divine in Eliette Abécassis's *La répudiée*

"Car l'homme a été créé à l'image de Dieu, c'est-à-dire qu'il est mâle et femelle. C'est pourquoi le mariage est un commandement divin…C'est par le mariage que l'homme peut parvenir à la complétude et à l'au-delà qui permettent d'engendrer le Messie. Toi, Nathan, et toi, Rachel, nous attendons de vous que vous ayez une nombreuse progéniture, aussi nombreuse que les étoiles du ciel."
- Abécassis, *La répudiée* 13

"Dieu est le nom de tout ce qui n'a pas encore été dit."
- Cixous, "Conversation avec l'âne" 101

The preceding chapter discussed Marie-Rose as a sovereign, intelligent Medusa figure whose discerning eye—and touch—posed a threat to her male counterparts. Sight served as a motif throughout *Sitt Marie Rose*; the gaze acted as an instrument of transgression and mediated the types of bodies that were projected or erased based on the Lebanese militiamen's desires. While the gaze of the female characters within the context of my project has represented a form of transgression, the male gaze has served to discipline that transgression. It has identified these rebellious female characters as dangerous others, a recognition which paradoxically places them in a state of danger. In the previous narratives under study, the characters who did not affirm masculine identity by reciprocating male desires were marked with death or danger, and consequently the lives and autonomy of their female counterparts were threatened.

In Eliette Abécassis's *La répudiée* (2000), similarly, the eyes act as vehicles for desire and the mediation of sexual relations. It tells the story of Rachel, a young woman who lives in Mea Shearim, one of the oldest and most insular quarters in Jerusalem, where men commit themselves to religious scholarship while women remain mainly in the private sphere and are shielded from seeing and being seen in public. Consequently, in this fictional context, Rachel's gaze serves as a transgression of sexist religious discourse. Rather than use her sight to identify and eradicate alterity that does not confirm a dominant identity, the novel's narrator and main

character awakens a non-possessive sexual desire through her un-diverted eyes. Imbuing the gaze with more significance, a study of Hebrew terminology and Biblical scripture also figures "sight" as the channel through which one symbolically "sees" or imagines the other. Once again, sight is connected to ways of knowing; as I will explore, contemporary feminist readings of the Torah contend that the inability to "see" fully another person translates to the inability to ever completely know the other, a realization that discourages Jews from exclusionary and oppressive practices.

In the novel, the character of Rachel resides in a Hasidic Israeli community, Mea Shearim, where men and women are forbidden to look each other in the eyes unless the visual exchange unfolds between a married couple in the safety of their home. Though Abécassis composes a fictional account of the Jewish quarter of Mea Shearim in Jerusalem, her narrative is based on personal observations within the contemporary site of this neighborhood. In order to write *La répudiée*, Abécassis took up residence in Mea Shearim for six months to transcribe the daily life and practices of this community, a form of close observation that allowed her novel to provide a realistic view into the lives of this group of Hasidim (Sullaper). The people of Mea Shearim live under a unique doctrine that differentiates itself from more well-known strands of contemporary Jewish traditions. The Hasidic movement was founded in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe by Israel Baal Chem Tov and came about during a period of reform that resulted in a return to Jewish mysticism of the thirteenth century. The Hasidim (which in Hebrew means "pious ones") adopted the *Kabbalah* as the primary source of inspiration for their religious doctrines and practices. Though the Kabbalah was not "mystical" at its genesis, it has come to be known as a group of esoteric texts that radically diverged from the Rabbinic tradition and medieval Jewish philosophy, which adopted a more "rational" approach to the Torah and its

surrounding texts.[135] This return to mysticism represents, in part, an appeal to humans' access to divine presence. Rather than portray God as a uniquely unknowable and unified entity, the Kabbalah and its Hasidic followers emphasize the potential for individual communion with God. Hartley Lachter, professor of Jewish Studies, notes in his introduction to *Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah: New Insights and Scholarship* (2011) that "the Hasidic movement, as it came to be called, emphasized a democratic religious ideal wherein spiritual achievement is attainable through sincerity, piety, and joyful worship" (12). Thus, the Hasidic movement stressed direct, personal access to God, rather than the unknowable, ineffable, uniform God emphasized in the Rabbinic tradition. The mystic conceptualization of God came about through the readings and writings of the *Zohar*, which constitutes the central book of the Kabbalah and was written by Moses de Leon of Castille, Spain around 1286. As Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller, scholar of contemporary Jewish studies, highlights in a study of representation of the Zohar in Edmond Jabès's writing, these texts poeticize "the epiphany of a personalised God in its immediate experience with the divine" ("Tree of Consciousness" 389). Zoharian mystics entertained dual dimensions of God that are nevertheless inextricably intertwined. While *En-Sof* represents the hidden, unknowable dimension of God, there also exists the "revealed" side of God who is unveiled through the *sefirot* (*Envisager Dieu* 41, Schäfer 4). The emphasis on one's ability to

[135]For clarification purposes, I provide further commentary here on the religious texts referenced in this chapter. The Torah is comprised of the Five Books of Moses, the *Pentateuch*, but as Debrauwere-Miller notes in her glossary of *Envisager Dieu avec Edmond Jabès* (2007), it can also refer to the entire twenty-four books of the Bible. The Talmud is the written form of oral law that complements the Torah; it contains laws and decisions relating to civil and religious legislation (*Mishnah*) and commentary on those laws (*Gemara*), and was composed between 380 and 500 CE. Kabbalah, which translates from Hebrew as "that which is received," consists of texts authored between the Talmudic period and the contemporary period (1st century BCE to the 19th century). Though the body of texts were not mystical in nature at their genesis, the Kabbalah came to represent a mystical collection of thought around the 13th century. The Zohar represents the major literary work that comprises the Spanish Kabbalah written at the end of the 13th century. The text is attributed to Moses ben Chem Tov de Léon and includes commentary on the Five Books of Moses of the Torah. As noted, in this chapter I rely largely on Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller's glossary of important terms in Jewish traditions (see *Envisager Dieu avec Edmond Jabès* 295-302).

develop a personal connection with God comes to light through the *sefirot*, a conceptualization of the divine that originated with the *Bahir*,[136] a text that describes ten complementary and intertwined masculine and feminine elements. The *sefirot* represent a divine presence that is in intimate contact with the earthly realms[137]:

> L'homme participe de la vie de la divinité car sa conscience influe sur la conscience divine. Ainsi, la connaissance de Dieu se concrétise par l'intelligence et l'intuition de celui qui perçoit. Elle repose sur la subjectivité de l'observant. Mais la personnalité de Dieu peut être sujette à la déstabilisation déclenchée par les actions humaines (*Envisager Dieu* 47).

Through the conceptualization of the *sefirot*, man animates God by locating the divine within his innermost realms of consciousness. Notably, it is the "feminine" aspect of the *sefirot*, the *Shekhinah*, who is referred to as "divine presence" and "dwelling," represents the presence of God in the world among humans (Schäfer 4, Lachter 3-4). It is through the *Shekhinah* that the relationship between the upper and lower realms remains in harmonious communion.

Today, the Hasidim constitute a diverse group of sects and consider the Kabbalah to be one of their main sources of spiritual study. While they all observe Orthodox Jewish law, their customs and beliefs differ, as do their *rebbe*.[138] Established in 1874, the neighborhood of Mea Shearim, which means "a hundred gates" in Hebrew, serves as the "historic heart of Hasidism" (Gutwirth 85). In a 2005 study of "The Roots of Meah Shearim," Leah Abramowitz identifies a plethora of Jewish groups within the quarter: "Today, one finds Chassidim in the neighborhood

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[136] The Bahir is an early text of the Zohar written in Provence in the late twelfth century (Schäfer 118-9). For more information on the Bahir, see Schäfer's "Introduction" as well as chapters 6 and 10.

[137] For more information on the *sefirot* and Shekhinah, see Debrauwere-Miller "Tree of Consciousness: The 'Shekhinah' in Edmond Jabès' 'Yaël'" (2003); Debrauwere-Miller *Envisager Dieu avec Edmond Jabès* (2007), especially pages 31-49; Schäfer (2002); Abrams (2006).

[138] The rebbe serves as religious leader of a Hasidic sect.

aligned with groups such as Gur, Belz, Viznitz, Munkatch, Satmar, Breslov, Slonim, Karlin, Boyan and Chabad, as well as *Mitnagdim* such as Kamenitzers, Briskers and Yekkim. There are also enclaves of Sephardim. Most of these groups have their own schools, *shtieblach* (small synagogues), *yeshivot*[139] and social services" (64). The city's "recent Hasidic dynasty" is Toldot Ahronot, which was founded by Aron Roth (1894-1947), and which constitutes a prominent presence in the city (Gutwirth 85-7). Today, inhabitants of Mea Shearim number around 20,000 and profess strict adherence to Orthodox Jewish law, to the point of segregation from unlike communities. The quarter's insularity and conservatism have been remarked internationally, as it has become an increasingly popular tourist site. Mea Shearim has also attracted international attention as a result of their attacks on individual Israel Defense Forces by extremist members of the community. While the neighborhood was not fervently anti-Zionist at its origins, the recent attacks reflect an objection to the secular orientation of Zionism, which arose in Mea Shearim after World War I. At this time there was a large influx of Hungarian immigrants who were followers of Rav Diskin, who opposed secularism and Zionsim.[140] For the most "pious" of Mea Shearim, only God can bring about the real Israel.[141]

And yet, while the Hasidim, through their study of the Kabbalah, expounded on the potential to establish access to the divine through the penetration of one's intramental realms through meditative, transcendental prayer (an ecstasy attainable through *devekut*, or attachment to God), women were excluded from this practice. Though women have married into the Jewish mystical tradition and led spiritual lives, little to nothing has been recorded that shares their experiences and insights. Jewish women's mystical engagement or prophetic spirituality was

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[139] A Jewish institution in which students study traditional religious texts
[140] Fraser, "For Haredi Jews Secular Zionism Remains a Religious Heresy" *The Guardian* (May 2016); Abramowitz, "The Roots of Meah Shearim" (2005).
[141] Fraser

often censured and suppressed, as religious study and celebration were reserved for men. Israeli-born scholar of Jewish History, Ada Rapoport-Albert argues that the Hasidim became even more dogmatic in their exclusion of women as a reaction to Sabbateanism (1666-1816). This movement proclaimed Sabbatai Zevi as the Jewish Messiah and recognized women as religious leaders and practitioners, a decision that the Hassidim deemed as heretical.[142] Accordingly, Marcin Wodzinski, Polish scholar of Jewish studies, puts forth the incisive argument that sectarian membership in the Hasidim is not extended to women; they are often referred to as "the wife of a *hasid*," rather than being Hasidim themselves, and do not participate in prayer practices and pilgrimages to the *tzaddik*'s[143] court, both of which often signify membership of the Hasidic community (403-5). Wodzinski goes on to argue that while women were expected to conform to Hasidic customs, this was often to preserve the spiritual lives of the men who had to follow strict rules regarding food and sex (427). The dearth of information on women's prayer practices, and the absence of specific prayer composed for women of Hasidic families, underlines misogynistic attitudes embedded in this religious ideology. While Wodzinski comments that Hasidic sects have recently begun to incorporate activities and education for women, Abécassis's novel shows little hope of the inclusion of women in the extremely marginalized and separatist community of Mea Shearim.

In the literary and real-life Mea Shearim, men are obligated to study religious texts, while women's *mitzvoth*[144] is to stay at home and raise children. Such is the case for Rachel, the main character of *La répudiée*. Married at the young age of sixteen, as typical of their tradition, Rachel

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[142] See Rapoport-Albert, *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi: 1666-1816* (2011). Consult the introduction and conclusion for her commentary on the relationship between Sabbateanism and Hasidism.
[143] A tzaddik, "a just and righteous man," plays a similar role to the hasidic rebbe (Rabinowicz xvii). These individuals serve as religious mentors who occupy superior roles in Hasidism.
[144] religious commandment

is required to tend to the household in order to support her husband's religious studies; more importantly, she is also expected to give birth to a child within ten years of marriage in accordance with Genesis 1:28, "Be fertile and increase." To this exhortation the halakhic statement on procreation in Mishnah *Yevamot* 6:6 adds the following: "If he married a woman and lived with her ten years and she bore no child, it is not permitted to abstain…The duty to be fruitful falls on the man but not on the woman." Though Rachel and her husband Nathan do not bear children, it is not because she is barren, as her community assumes. After a forbidden visit to the gynecologist, Rachel discovers that Nathan is actually the one who is sterile. That Rachel does not confess this to her husband sheds light on her sacrifice: she is painstakingly repudiated so that he can remain in good standing within the community. Yet, as I will explore in later sections, her sacrifice also has mystical implications.

My exploration throughout this chapter will pursue the following line of thought: Rachel's perceived barren body poses a danger to the identity of Mea Shearim, which depends on the procreation of children to hasten the arrival of the Messiah, and thus their eternal access to the (patriarchal) divine. As Julia Kristeva suggests, the abjected must go through a stage of defilement; once Rachel is symbolically identified as a threat to sectarian identity, she is endangered. Her body becomes a metaphor for sickness that poisons Mea Shearim, and as a result, she is divorced and repudiated in order for the community to maintain their sense of purity and communion with God. And yet, throughout the novel, Rachel's representation of the sacred differs from that of her supposed spiritual companions. She asserts her own profound mystic practice by locating the "divine" within the love that she shares with her husband Nathan. This love creates not a child, but a *troisième corps* (space of interrelation between two that obscures the limits of the self). To articulate Rachel's conceptualization of the divine, given that the

Hasidim do not entertain women's pursuit of mystical spirituality and divine interactions, I rely on Cixous's secularized notion of the *juifemme*—a woman who rewrites sacred texts, conceives of a God detached from dogmatic religion, and locates the divine within the other and the self. Furthermore, for Cixous, the inability to know and define the self and other parallels the ineffability of God, a concept which I will explore in relation to Rachel.[145] I interpret the end of Rachel's story, and her life, as a transcendence and annihilation of the self through Jewish mystical descriptions of ecstatic *devekut*, or attachment to God, an attachment which renders her more in touch with God than her male counterparts. Throughout, while maintaining a feminist lens, I will "queer" this conversation by drawing attention to Rachel's disinvestment in the future of this Hasidic community through Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).

The fictional community of Mea Shearim in *La répudiée* views Rachel's character as dangerous because she inhibits access to the patriarchal divine, a sacred space which relies on procreation for survival. The future of Mea Shearim, and ultimately its access to the divine via the return of the Messiah, hinges on the image of the (Hasidic) child, a statement that I will examine through the concept of "reproductive futurism" in queer theorist Lee Edelman's *No Future*. Rachel's menace to Mea Shearim is twofold: She represents a body conducive to male desire who places her husband's intellectual and spiritual capacities at risk, and concurrently symbolizes an abject, barren body that threatens the future of the community at large. Because Rachel cannot produce the child upon which the community's promise of futurity (i.e., eternal salvation and return of the Messiah) rests, she receives the blame for her childless marriage

[145] Cixous's "God" will be formulated through excerpts from the following texts: "La venue à l'écriture" (1977), "Le dernier tableau ou le portrait de Dieu" (written 1983, published 1986), and "Conversation avec l'âne. Ecrire aveugle" (1997, 2006).

under her the communal observance of *halakhah*, religious law.[146] Though religious law identifies man as at fault for a childless marriage (which oddly excludes women from the reproductive process), in reality it is the woman who is scorned. Rachel becomes subject to social dangers and is ultimately repudiated from her marriage because she embodies a danger to the community's future. In her state of danger, she enacts agency by not standing for the *future* forecasted by her Mea Shearim at the novel's end.

Porous Female Bodies

Under Hasidic law, women do not look men in the eyes in an effort to maintain the separation of the sexes and thus suppress sexual urges: "Nos yeux qui se baissent dès qu'ils croisent un regard ont tant lu et ils savent que notre vie est ailleurs" (*La répudiée* 9). In strict observance of *halakhah*, the residents of Mea Shearim undergo sexual segregation in order to abide by the regulations for *tzniut*, or modesty. In contemporary Haredi communities,[147] followers largely observe *tzniut* through the style of clothing they wear, though the rule extends to the amount of time allowed in the presence of the other sex as well as to what thoughts they can entertain about them. While Rachel complies with such regulations, at home she unleashes her gaze: "Parfois je l'observe si avidement qu'il tressaille. Je le regarde. Je me scrute dans son regard" (18). Again drawing attention to the destructive or paralyzing nature of the female gaze, which acts as a channel for her dangerous sexuality, Rachel's ability to give pause to her male counterparts renders her another Medusan figure.

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[146] *Halakhah* represents Jewish law that details the practice and study of rules, customs, and observances imposed on Jews. The Hasidim interpret the *halakhah* "not as a supreme end in itself but as a means to an end, that of attachment to God in love and fear" (*The Encyclopedia of Hasidism* 169). Under the *halakhah*, the Hasidim are expected to progress in spiritual study and practice of the law and emphasize mystical fervor and interpretation.
[147] "Haredi" signifies a member of an Orthodox Jewish sect. The Hasidim, or "Ultra-Orthdox," are a sub-sect of Haredi Judaism.

While laws regarding *tzniut* apply to both sexes, the focus often falls on the need for women's bodies to be covered so as not to distract (obligatorily heterosexual) men from spiritual study.[148] The eye must remain partially blind in order to avoid temptation. In the context of Orthodox communities like Mea Shearim, seeing certain parts of a woman's body or hearing women sing constitute exposure to *ervah*—nakedness—which demonstrates a vulnerability that can give way to improper sexual arousal outside of, and even within, the marital bond. Rachel in *La répudiée* recites this connection between sight and sin in a reflection on her own desire: "L'œil voit, puis le cœur désire et enfin le corps pèche" (64). Such thinking justifies covering of the female body (married women wear veils, while all women wear long sleeves, ankle-length skirts, and tights), which once again finds correlation with the Roman account of Medusa: unveiled to the eyes of the lustful Poseidon, the beautiful maiden is violated because the male cannot control his sexual urges, a causal chain which implies female culpability for the sinful sexual act. Medusa is punished for this sexual encounter by being transformed into a petrifying, hideous adulteress; Rachel is repudiated from a marriage that is damaged by her tempting beauty and "barren" body.

However, other readings of *tzniut*, or modesty, steer away from this condemnation of sinful desire originating in the female body. Delphine Horvilleur, who is currently the third female rabbi in France, recently participated in a presentation in which she criticized the objectification of women and subjugation of female bodies promoted by some Orthodox interpretations of religious law.[149] Horvilleur speaks about the slippage in meaning of *tzniut* (in Judaism as well as in other communities' interpretations of "modesty"), which has come to

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[148] The marginalization of female and non-heterosexual Orthodox Jews are of increasing academic interest in the twenty-first century; see, for example, *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (2003) and the forthcoming *Hasidic Studies: Essays in History and Gender* (2017).
[149] "Voiler et dévoiler: la pudeur dans le judaïsme," Akadem (2016).

specifically target the female body as a "little more naked," or more *ervah*, than man's body. She addresses this in a book-length study of female modesty in Judaism: "[La pudeur] fait du corps de la femme tout entier un tabou, tel un sexe à cacher en permanence dans l'espace public. Chaque femme, réduite au statut d'être sans visage, c'est-à-dire sans individualité, n'a plus à exprimer que sa nature sexuée" (*En tenue d'Ève* 12; 2013). In her 2016 presentation, Horvilleur elaborates that this nakedness results from the understanding of the female sex as more fallible and exposed to exterior forces. Thus *tzniut* combats this vulnerability to the exterior, which Horvilleur calls porosity, by covering the body and shielding the mind. Horvilleur exposes this ideology as a fear of the group's porosity. In other words, the presence of another group or idea threatens the adulteration of their community; because the female sex is more "porous," or vulnerable to external influence, she compromises male spiritual focus and fervor and poses a threat to the community.

Horvilleur criticizes the traditionalist reading of *tzniut* by claiming that the concept does not pertain solely, or mostly, to female bodies. Proposing an alternative reading of the term, Horvilleur asserts that *tzniut* applies to everyone and suggests a hiding or extracting from view that points to the human inability to ever fully "see" or understand the other. The rabbi stresses that more effort needs to be made to reanalyze religious texts—across traditions—in order to create more inclusive practices:

> Voilà pourquoi il est urgent que des voix religieuses de toutes les traditions revisitent aujourd'hui la notion de pudeur au cœur des textes sacrés. La pudeur ne peut consister en un voilement obsessionnel du corps de l'autre. Il s'agit plutôt d'accepter qu'aucun être ne soit entièrement visible dans sa nudité. Aucun être n'a fini de se dévoiler. (*En tenue d'Ève* 13)

Horvilleur displaces the physical applications of *tzniut* that pertain to dress in order to highlight its symbolism. Like God, and perhaps through the recognition of the divine existent with humans, no human being will ever be fully "revealed" or known. Horvilleur's statement reverberates with Cixous's conclusion to "Le rire de la Méduse" in 1975: "Je suis pour toi ce que tu veux que je sois au moment où tu me regardes telle que tu ne m'as encore jamais vue: à chaque instant" ("Le rire" 54). Like Horvilleur, Cixous interprets seeing as a channel of knowing and emphasizes that we must see the other anew in every moment. Consequently, through the recognition of one's partial and ever-changing view, the eye no longer colonizes the other's body.

Such probing and rethinking of religious texts crosses into the territory of Cixous's neologism: the *juifemme*. While Cixous comes from a Jewish family, she never claimed a "Jewish" identity. Debrauwere-Miller calls attention to Cixous's rejection of the "Jewish" label, while elaborating on how Cixous paradoxically bestows a new meaning on what it means to be Jewish in the traditional sense.[150] As Debrauwere-Miller highlights, if Cixous has rejected Jewish identity, it is because women traditionally have been placed outside of established, patriarchal Judaism, and even more so in Orthodox environments:

> Reine dans la demeure, la femme [juive] assure la prospérité des siens mais sacrifie la sienne. Et cette lourde besogne n'est, en fait, qu'un palliatif pour prévenir l'anathème qui pèse inéluctablement sur la femme-'pécheresse' car elle serait à l'origine, selon certaines interprétations bibliques, de la rupture de l'ordre édénique. ("Hélène Cixous, la passante de l'histoire" 104)

[150] "Hélène Cixous: la passante de l'histoire" *Dalhouse French Studies* (2008).

Through careful readings of Cixous's references to Jewish identities in her writing and interviews, Debrauwere-Miller articulates Cixous's rewriting of the "Law" of religion into a "religion of the heart," which parallels the religious commandment that Jews reread and reinterpret, and thus personalize, religious texts. Consequently, Cixous's critical study of text, tradition, and the meaning of Jewish identity paradoxically introduces a (ruptured) Jewish tradition that permeates her work: "S'il n'y a pas de transmission à proprement parler de 'l'idée juive,' sous entendant une idéologie figée empiriquement, elle traverse l'œuvre de Cixous, malgré elle" (105). Yet Debrauwere-Miller clarifies that rather than perpetuating the collective memory of the Jewish people through transmission, Cixous is translating "la femme juive" who must invent herself and write her own story (107-9). In a number of Cixous's texts (including "La venue à l'écriture," 1977, and "Sorties," 1975), Cixous also employs the term *juifemme* to signify her double oppression as a Jew in anti-Semitic Vichy Algeria and as a woman in France; more importantly, *juifemme* comes to represent a person on a spiritual journey who questions and rewrites "sacred" patriarchal texts.[151] The necessity to question and to create meaning implicit in Cixous's *juifemme* is an experience with which any woman can identify, as it relates to the common experience of sexed oppression under phallogocentrism ("Hélène Cixous, la passante de l'histoire" 108).

As inviting as this call to re-writing sounds, Cixous recognizes that society does not provide the *juifemme* easy access to the destabilizing and embodied relationship to writing and textual study that she advocates ("La venue" 21). While Cixous in 1976 noted the difficulty women face in being respected as writers and intellectuals, Horvilleur echoed this sentiment

[151] As noted in Debrauwere-Miller's "Hélène Cixous: A Sojourn without Place" *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* (2007).

forty years later, in an interview in which she reflects on her own Talmudic studies in Paris in the late 1990s when women were not accepted into rabbinic study:

> C'était stupéfiant. La preuve que l'érudition féminine reste quelque chose d'extrêmement subversif dans les religions. Une femme qui pense, qui a accès au savoir, a potentiellement accès au pouvoir. C'est une question politique. Alors on les tient à distance des textes.…C'est le même discours dans toutes les religions: on encense le féminin pour mieux enfermer la femme dans le rôle d'épousailles et de maternité. ("On renvoie toujours la femme à son utérus")

In this incendiary remark, Horvilleur highlights the paradox of dangerous and endangered female bodies. In a multitude of religious discourses, "on encense le féminin," meaning that women are highly praised for their maternal and spousal roles but also "set on fire"—defined by the men around them, and thus given little room to create individual meaning for themselves. Dangerous to patriarchal religious discourses, "women" are defined, while their own potential to create meaning is in danger, their creativity and intellectuality are symbolically engulfed in flames.

Horvilleur's criticism remains pertinent. A 2016 decree given by the New York-based Satmar sect of Hasidim banned Satmar girls and married women from pursuing higher degrees, which they claim is against the Torah: "It is dangerous. Girls who will not abide will be forced to leave our school. Also, we will not give any jobs or teaching position in the school to girls who've been to college or have a degree. We have to keep our school safe and we can't allow any secular influences in our holy environment."[152] The Satmar exert a large influence in the Mea Shearim district of Jerusalem, making this claim relevant to the study of Rachel's character (Gutwirth 48). It appears that the sense of encroaching external influence is rendering some

[152] "'Dangerous': Ultra-Orthodox Jewish sect bans women from attending college" *NYTimes* (Aug. 25, 2016).

Hasidic sects even more insular and conservative as they attempt to preserve their heritage. Like the Medusa, women in these sects are pigeonholed into the role of the eternal feminine: as passive, erotic, maternal bodies, they symbolize the sanctity of motherhood and conflation of woman and womb, as well as the potential to create and destroy.

The distancing of women from religious texts is a principle of Hasidic communities, where only men take up study of the Torah and Talmud, and women remain in the private sphere to care for the home and the children. Such is the case for Rachel in *La répudiée*. While her relatively pious presence in Mea Shearim does not suggest active resistance to religion, her personal understanding of the divine and its relationship to coupledom veers away from the community's reading of *halakhah*: "J'aurais tant aimé lui donner un enfant…Les années passent et, pour moi, c'est comme au début de notre mariage, lorsque je pensais tant à lui que je laissais brûler la nourriture que j'avais préparée" (48). While Rachel would like to satisfy his religious need by bearing a child, her desire to remain with Nathan is not motivated by procreation but by sexual and spiritual companionship within their couple. A few lines later, Rachel adds: "Et on dit que, si la femme allume les bougies du chabbath, c'est pour apporter la lumière dans le cœur de l'histoire" (49). By displacing the primordial need for Hasidic women to be mothers, Rachel shines light on the beauty of coupledom rooted in love. Though Rachel does not blatantly resist religious laws, her body poses a danger to her community; as a result, her reputation within Mea Shearim, as well as her sanity and her life, are in danger.

In my conclusion, I return to Horvilleur's reading of *tzniut* to highlight the ways in which Rachel's abjection rests on an oppressive ideology.[153] In contrast with those around her, Rachel's engagement with modesty in human relationships is more in line with Horvilleur's reading,

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[153] For more discussion on the abject, see the previous sections in which I developed this concept: chapter one pages (82-4), chapter two (141-7).

which asks followers to walk humbly in the knowledge that one can never fully see or know the other. Exploring the intertextual porosity between Horvilleur's interpretation of *tzniut* and the representation of "God" in Cixous's texts from the 1970s to the 1990s, I argue that Rachel experiences the couple—herself and her husband, Nathan—as a manifestation of divine love. In the chapter's closing, I will consider how Rachel's death at the end of the novel represents an agential surrender to divine love that keeps the other alive in death.

While Rachel's story may appear extreme as it occurs in a relatively small, marginal community, *La répudiée* reflects the growing pattern of the relegation of women to a limited and domesticated role. As Horvilleur brings to light in her book, "plusieurs événement semblent dessiner une tendance à l'œuvre dans le monde religieux ultraorthodoxe: l'exclusion croissante des femmes de nombreux espaces publics.…En image ou en chair et en os, les femmes s'éclipsent, invitées à s'éloigner pour ne pas gêner les hommes" (*En tenue d'Ève* 16-17). Horvilleur's statement foreshadows Rachel's predicament in Mea Shearim. At the same time, this narrative reflects a growing counter tradition of women, of *juifemmes*, who are making a place for themselves in even the most conservative religious discourse.

Immanence and Male Desire

A writer of Moroccan-Jewish descent, Abécassis was born in Strasbourg, France in 1969.[154] The function of the female in Judaism within and outside of the Hexagon is a recurrent subject in Eliette Abécassis's writing, as observed in several of her works (*Sépharade,* 2009; *Et te voici permise à tout homme*, 2011; *Alyah*, 2015). Her attention to the social pressures and

[154] Abécassis co-wrote the film *Kadosh* (1999) with Amos Gitai before she published *La Répudiée* in 2000, which Albin Michel has recently republished (2015). The novel's plot is loosely based on the main events of the film. *La répudiée* got much praise; notably, Abécassis won the *Prix des écrivains croyants* in 2001 for the book, a prize that aims to bring monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) into dialogue with one another. *La répudiée* was also a finalist for the *Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie Française* and the *Prix Fémina*.

myths surrounding maternity can be found in her other works as well, including *Un heureux événement* (2005). In narrating Rachel's life and death, the novel *La répudiée* follows the author's line of interest in both Judaism and maternity. If women's narratives from such ultra-orthodox communities are rarely told, especially those of resistant or mystical women, Abécassis provides the rare opportunity to encounter such a story by writing them into existence.

The novel begins when Rachel is twenty-six, ten years after she married her husband, Nathan. At the novel's opening, we are introduced to the main character through flashbacks of her own life and that of Naomi, her younger sister. In contrast with the other arranged marriages in Mea Shearim, Rachel claims that she felt an immediate physical and emotional bond with Nathan:

> Ici, chez nous, on ne se marie pas par amour. On se marie grâce à l'entremetteur. L'amour vient après les années de vie partagée, les enfants et tout le quotidien qui tisse des liens entre les êtres. C'est pourquoi je n'avais jamais vu mon mari avant notre mariage. Mais lorsque je l'ai aperçu, sous la tente blanche des mariés, le sol a tremblé sous me pieds, j'ai été saisie. Je ne savais si c'était la peur ou l'émotion. Après j'ai compris: l'amour pour moi fut le premier-né" (*La répudiée* 10)

In the tenth year of her marriage to Nathan, Rachel painfully recalls these details as the couple's struggle to bear children has delegitimized their sex life. According to the *halakhah* under which Rachel and Nathan live, the husband has a right to divorce his wife if they do not produce a child within the first decade of their union. This law also states that only men are legally obligated to produce children, as women's role in reproduction is viewed as secondary. To preserve his relationship with God, the male is obligated to enter into a "fruitful" relationship. Though Nathan is at first resistant to the idea of divorce because of their profound attachment, he eventually

succumbs to the weight of this commandment. After witnessing the ceremony of Nathan's new marriage, Rachel enters a *mikvah*, a bath used as ritual purification after a menstrual cycle, and dies soon after: "unie à mon Aimé, dans son sein, ainsi je meurs d'amour ainsi je meurs" (125). The novel's ending seems purposefully ambiguous. Does Rachel commit suicide in perhaps the ultimate act of resistance to her community, whose Biblical texts forbid such an act? Does she die of a body stricken with pain and remorse? Does she enter into a deep state of self-annihilating meditation in the chant-like prayer that ends the novel? The poetic ending prohibits the reader from arriving at any quick conclusions.

The sexual dystopia that leads to Rachel's death in the novel is founded on religious beliefs that subordinate the female by reducing her to a bodiliness that must remain hidden. Through their interpretation of the Torah, the Mea Shearim of Abécassis's novel sanction the female body as an object of desire that could consume the male if not carefully contained. Within a study of contemporary images of Jewish women, Riv-Ellen Prell, anthropologist and scholar of Jewish and Sexuality Studies, highlights that desire and power are linked by the biblical and rabbinic traditions: "Women are ruled by men because of their desire, and men's desire constantly threatens their religious lives, resulting in a view of women as possessing a power frequently beyond their control" (Prell 329). Consequently, numerous limits are placed around women's (and men's) bodies that vary depending on the sect and often include modest dress, women's absence from the public sphere, and *mechitza*, or physical partition that separates men and women during religious ceremonies and celebrations.[155] On several occasions in the novel, Rachel's body compromises the integrity of her marriage as well as Nathan's spiritual study. In an intimate scene, Nathan whispers to Rachel: "Parfois, cela me perturbe que tu sois si belle. Je

[155] Justification for the partition is given in Sukkah 51b, 52a.

n'arrive pas à me concentrer sur mes pages d'étude" (48). Later he confesses, "Depuis dix ans, c'est comme si j'avais négligé l'étude. Avant que je ne t'épouse, j'étais remarqué par mes maîtres. J'avais développé ma mémoire… Maintenant, ce n'est plus pareil. J'ai l'impression d'avoir régressé" (73). Again recalling the mythical Medusa, Rachel receives the blame for distracting her male counterpart and impeding his success.

The novel provides numerous examples of women's "suppressed powers." Relating back to the concept of women as more *ervah* (naked), Rachel points out that female voices are silenced and their hair is covered because these are physical representations of female seduction: "Nous, les femmes, nous ne chantons pas en public, car la voix est comme les cheveux: un instrument de séduction pour l'homme" (30). The inescapable trace of the ancient eternal feminine appears again here, where women's siren song seduces and deceives. It is not only the voice that appeals to the opposite sex; Rachel reveals that a married woman's locks must remain hidden from male onlookers: "Lorsque j'étais petite, mes longs cheveux noirs tombaient en boucles comme ses papillotes. Lorsque je me suis mariée, je me suis mise à porter un foulard. Les femmes mariées ne doivent pas plaire à d'autres hommes que leur mari. C'est pourquoi elles ne montrent pas leurs cheveux et s'habillent avec modestie" (Abécassis 18-9). Rachel's curls resemble Medusa's serpentine hair, which, paired with her gaze, symbolize women's seductive power as a castration threat. Delphine Horvilleur explains that the veil in Jewish tradition marks a married man's property in order to domesticate women and the desire that they arouse (*En tenue d'Ève* 28). In her seminar on sexual difference, Cixous also discusses hair as a seductive object within both religious and secular literature:

> …le thème de la chevelure, c'est le thème le plus ancien, c'est le thème de la Bible, on sait très bien qu'il y a quelque chose dans les cheveux, pour les hommes et pour les

femmes. Je pourrais donner mille réponses, mais ce n'est pas la peine: il y a dans les cheveux du mystère et de l'attrait. Et parce qu'il y a de l'attrait, de l'amour et de la mort. ("Poétique de la différence sexuelle" 5)

Embedded in a reading of Brazilian author Clarice Lispector's *An Apprenticeship: or, the Book of Delights* (1986), Cixous expounds on a passage that treats the main character's hair with the above statement. An ancient trope with biblical roots, hair is endowed with sexual meaning. Because of the drive to define and possess that can surround sexuality, especially in the context of religious discourses, this leads to the "death," decapitation, or incensing of the female. As is demonstrated through Rachel's reflections and Cixous's observation, there exists a trajectory from female corporeality—hair, voice, skin—to temptation (the superficial love that Cixous addresses above) to death.

Because of Mea Shearim's rigid understanding of sexual difference, Rachel, along with the other women of Mea Shearim, is secured within the hierarchical divisions male/female, mind/body that prizes the spiritual, intellectual male and binds the female to her terrestrial body. In her 1973 critique of the "peripheral" status of women in Judaism, feminist theologian and scholar of Jewish studies Rachel Adler addresses the "woman problem" in the *halakhah*. Her general statements pertaining to "women" in Judaism, with its wide variety of practices, thus seem to be purposefully wide-reaching. They recall Cixous's "Rire," as she picks up on large trends pertaining to gender issues in Judaism during the "personal is political" women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s in the United States. To explain the history behind the view of women as physical, non-transcendental beings in some Orthodox Jewish traditions, Adler writes that:

> The Talmudic sages viewed the female mind as frivolous and the female sexual appetite as insatiable.[156] Unless strictly guarded and given plenty of busywork, all women were potential adulteresses.[157] In the Jewish view, all physical objects and experiences are capable of being infused with spiritual purpose; yet it is equally true that the physical, unredeemed by spiritual use, is a threat. It is therefore easy to see how women came to be regarded as semi-demonic in both Talmud and Kabbalah. Her sexuality presented a temptation, or perhaps a threat which came to be hedged ever more thickly by law and custom.[158] (80-1)

Recalling intellectual historian and theorist Michel Foucault's thesis in *Histoire de la sexualité: la volonté de savoir* (1976), though sexuality may seem like a religious taboo, the desire of those who wish to establish norms results in a proliferation—rather than a repression—of discourse that in turn creates the concept of "sexuality." The desire to know and to define "sexuality" created an over-theorization of female bodies that categorized them, as Adler and Prell make clear, as hypersexual, untrustworthy and thus fear-inspiring because their sexuality challenges the heterosexual male's spiritual advancement.

In the social context of contemporary Hasidim, the need to "guard" women—and men from women—is reflected in the rules surrounding what societal functions women could perform. This hierarchized binary makes itself clear from the beginning of *La répudiée*. During a celebratory scene that follows Rachel and Nathan's wedding ceremony, Rachel recounts witnessing the mystical experience of dance that can only be enjoyed by men:

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[156] Steeped in citations, Adler provides the following biblical justification for her statements, which I will reiterate through footnotes: Kiddushin 80b, "The rational faculty of women weights lightly upon them." See also Sotah 20a.
[157] Mishnah Ketubot 5:5
[158] Adler states: "This is the context in which one may understand the statement of the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, 'A man should be careful not to walk between two women, two dogs, or two swine.' Ganzfried, Rabbi Solomon, Code of Jewish Law I, trans. Hyman E. Golden, 2nd ed., New York: 1961, p. 7."

> Une barrière de bois sépare les hommes des femmes. Nous sommes derrière, pressées les unes contre les autres, nous observons les hommes. Nous ne dansons pas. Je voyais leurs visages, j'entendais les cris des danses, et l'inquiétude et la joie qu'ils exprimaient.…et moi je regardais, et je ne pouvais détacher mes yeux du danseur ivre, du danseur fou: Nathan, mon mari, les yeux fermés, pris par la danse, ébloui par la Présence, et moi je le regardais, et j'étais là, à suivre chacun de ses mouvements, à respirer chacune de ses respirations, à haleter par ses souffles, à épouser le rythme de son corps. (14-15)

While Rachel is reduced to physicality in the private sphere, in the public practice of dance she is denied any presence whatsoever; her body represents not only a temptation, but an immanence unworthy of participating in celebratory rituals. Rachel sees, hears, looks, but experiences limited free movement of her own body: she is a mere observer, an invisible form behind a wooden wall. This separating barrier, the *mehitza*, made of wood—a natural substance—becomes a metaphor for "natural" separation of the sexes. As Hasidic thought considers dance to be a therapeutic expression of joy (*simha*) inherent to days of celebration, and a channel through which to worship and pray to God, by denying Rachel the embodiment of dance, it also forbids her access to the patriarchal divine, or even joy. As Tzvi M. Rabinowicz notes in his commentary on dance, such movement represents a celebration of learning and Hasidic identity; conversely, women's participation in this ritual represents a de-sanctification: "hasidic dance rings and processionals are no social diversion, but a form of prayer. As such, neither mixed dancing nor mixed praying is permitted, since it is said in Orthodox Jewish Law that men and women shall neither rejoice nor mourn together" (*The Encyclopedia of Hasidism* 80). Later, Rabinowicz identifies women's nature as being "all glorious within" (541). Bound "in" the body and "in" the home, this statement suggests that women represent not only a temptation, but a

reminder to men of immanent bodiliness; in their journey upward towards transcendence, women metaphorically bring men back down to earthly realms of desire and distraction. Yet, exploring their own bodies apart from women, they are able to partake in embodied experience in a way that unites them to God. Unable to move on her own, Rachel lives through the body of her husband, following his every move in order to experience her own corporeality, and her version of the divine. While Nathan is overwhelmed by the Presence of God, Rachel marries the rhythm of his body and recognizes early on in their relationship the mystical porosity of her subjectivity.

Because the patriarchal regime in this context restricts female bodies to physicality, women are reduced to child bearers and handlers of physical possessions in the private sphere. Adler scrutinizes the physicality of women's existence within Orthodox Judaism in her proclamation:

> It was perhaps, most damaging that the woman's meager *mitzvoth* are, for the most part, closely connected to some physical goal or object. A woman's whole life revolved around physical objects and physical experiences – cooking, cleaning, childbearing, meeting the physical needs of children. (80)

In *La répudiée*, Rachel's role is not to develop her own creative and intellectual faculties but to provide support to her husband and future offspring. This *mitzvah* reflects the previous scene of dance, which demonstrates a division between women's physicality (*gashmiut*) and men's spirituality (*ruchniut*).[159] In a conversation with Rachel, Nathan recites the Rav's (the rebbe of Mea Shearim) words regarding the future of their religion and its connection to women's role:

> Le seul but de la vie d'une fille d'Israël est de porter des enfants juifs et de permettre à son mari d'étudier. L'homme a été créé par Dieu pour étudier, alors que l'intelligence de

[159] Adler identifies this division in her article (81).

> la femme lui est donnée pour participer indirectement à la vie de la Torah en préparant à manger, en nettoyant sa maison et, surtout, en élevant les enfants. Quelle autre joie y a-t-il pour une femme ? Les enfants, c'est notre force. (*La répudiée* 80)

The rebbe attaches a singular purpose to the "women of Israel." A woman's sole value in life is attached to her ability to carry a child. She is an empty vessel until filled by her husband, and thereafter her offspring. Consequently, not only is Rachel prohibited the joys of dance and of textual study, but she is also forbidden the pleasure of a life in which she creates her own value.

"Reproductive Futurism"[160] and the Patriarchal Divine

When the Rav outlines the community's commandments in conversations with Nathan, he reveals that children represent their strength and access to the Messiah, or the divine. Their marital relationship displeases God not only because Rachel apparently cannot have children (even though it is Nathan who is sterile), but also because they give in to bodily pleasures, a form of temptation and sin, when they are quite sure that their union is sterile. The fictional community of Mea Shearim in *La répudiée* envisions Rachel as dangerous because she inhibits access to the divine, a sacred space that rests on the idea of "reproductive futurism" for survival:

> Car l'homme a été créé à l'image de Dieu, c'est-à-dire qu'il est mâle et femelle. C'est pourquoi le mariage est un commandement divin…C'est par le mariage que l'homme peut parvenir à la complétude et à l'au-delà qui permettent d'engendrer le Messie. Toi, Nathan, et toi, Rachel, nous attendons de vous que vous ayez une nombreuse progéniture, aussi nombreuse que les étoiles du ciel. (13)

During their wedding ceremony, the rebbe announces that marriage bridges man and woman to the divine, but only if that union generates—preferably numerous—offspring. Marriage allows

[160] Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).

man to be “complete” and leads to the conception (*engendrer*) of the Messiah, through the proliferation of children. Notably, it is not so much the physical child that is important to this community but the values that this “Child” comes to represent. Ten years later, the male religious leaders of Mea Shearim weigh on Nathan and Rachel’s marriage, sending constant reminders of the childlessness that renders their marriage unjust in the eyes of God. This pressure is reflected in a conversation between Nathan and the Rav:

> Les enfants c’est notre force. C’est comme ça que nous les vaincrons. – Qui ? ai-je demandé. – Les autres, les impies, les hérétiques qui gouvernent ce pays. Nos enfants, c’est notre avenir, c’est l’avenir de notre judaïsme. Tu comprends, eux, ils n’ont pas d’enfants. C’est grâce à nos enfants que l’avenir nous appartient. – Et pour cela il faut que je me sacrifie, que tu te sacrifies ? ai-je demandé. – Oui. Nous faisons partie de cette lutte, de ce combat pour la sainteté. (80)

By claiming that their heretical opponents do not have children, the Rav points to a lack of emphasis on childbirth in secular communities, which results in a lack of cohesiveness, and future, of the community. In contrast, the promised children of Mea Shearim *are* the future of their Judaism. However, the rebbe does not refer to just any secular community. Located in the middle of Israel, this sect of anti-Zionist Hasidim opposes the creation of Israel as a secular state. Only God can create Israel under the guise of religion, and this will only take place if the numbers of the Hasidim increase so that they can create their own future—a future that belongs to them, to their superior Judaism. The Hasidim are called to offer some form of sacrifice, which in Nathan’s case is Rachel. However, the history of marginalization and genocide of Jewish people complicates this battle, as the Hasidim see themselves as holding tight to an identity that

others have attempted to wrest from them for centuries. This fight for survival will only end in death; a battle of identities always results in loss.

Though they may seem like strange bedfellows, in the following analysis, I will utilize the lenses of feminist and queer theory in order to examine the identity crisis that the Hasidim face and the way it affects Rachel's life and death. Through the interweaving of literature, psychoanalysis, and religion, I identify connections between Mea Shearim and contemporary concerns in Western discourse, ultimately proposing that Rachel's experience of being reduced to maternity is not just an issue in this isolated Hasidic community. While Edelman's *No Future* allows for a critique of the investment of the Hasidim in the "Child" as the vehicle to prosperity and identity, feminist philosophers Penelope Deutscher and Elisabeth Badinter allow me to examine women's, and particularly Rachel's, place in this projected "future."

Instead of expecting social continuity to guarantee a certain society's values, Edelman argues that we are better off queering this trajectory by disturbing social organization and not projecting any certain future at all. But this does not consider the feminist implications for women, or for the character of Rachel in the present study. Edelman puts forth that the guarantee of certain futurity is reflected through the image of the "Child."[161] Using Lacanian psychoanalysis, Edelman paints the picture of a Child that embodies the values of groups who adopt a "fight for the future": a notional freedom, a collective future that secures the survival of the social, and a fetishistic fixation on heteronormativity (11-16).[162] Edelman plays with the

[161] My reference to Edelman's work will focus less on the queer resistance to combat reproductive futurism and more on the ways in which the Child provides false assurance for a collective future.
[162] In an attempt to shake up the "absolute privilege of heteronormativity," Edelman's argument seems particularly radical for how the general public has understood and might come to imagine homosexuality. Instead of the homosexual as continual representation of the "meaningless circulation and repetition of the [death] drive" that threatens the existence of the human race (39), in Edelman's projection for queer theory, the queer body (of thought) might come to present the non-promise of futurity, or rather might *not* come to present at all, but rather stop signifying any stable identity.

Freudian death drive to propose the following: if the death drive disturbs the ability to know and survive as our "selves," then the queer represents a disturbance of the social organization and the self's investment in such organizations (18). Those *not* fighting for the children—the queer—represent the place of the social order's death drive in that they refuse to posit a secure, single, stable future. Rachel does not represent a queer in this sense, since she desires a child but cannot have one; furthermore, Edelman's argument finds obstacles in consideration of marginalized populations, including that of the Jewish community.[163] However, because their marriage's sterility falls on her, the religious leaders of Mea Shearim see Rachel as an abject disturbance to the social order that disturbs their identity as their religious selves, thus stirring up the "death drive," which results in abjection of female bodies. Fundamentally, the absence of Child in Rachel's marriage signifies the absence of the divine to which her body impedes access.

La répudiée demonstrates the ways in which female bodies are reduced to their wombs. While this problematic phenomenon is extremely present in the community of Mea Shearim, there are traces of it elsewhere. Feminist philosopher Penelope Deutscher touches on this reductive view of women in *Foucault's Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason* (2017). Filling the gap in Edelman's claims, Deutscher reveals how the "mother" and "father" are differently implicated in the image of the Child. Commenting on the value of the maternal body as a vehicle for children, Deutscher notes that pregnant women are over- or undervalued depending on their identities: "In short, the making and disparagement of the queer negativity that interconnects with fetishes of the anticipated Child also interconnects with that of the Pregnant Woman in expressions of national, familial, and individualized reproductive futurism"

[163] As Jack Halberstam remarked at a 2007 *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* discussion, "for some queers, particularly for queers of color, hope is not something one can afford to lose and for them giving up on futurity is not an option." (qtd. in Bliss 85).

(50). Deutscher proposes that the contours of the imaginary Mother complement the imaginary Child, and that this idealized "Mother" is often associated with ideals of preservation, continuity, futurity, growth, flourishing (45, 51). Certainly, the Hasidic mother of Mea Shearim is attached to these values, as their religious leader professes that the only aim of a Hasidic Jewish woman's life is to engender future generations.

Focusing on women's issues in the Western world, Elisabeth Badinter claims that maternity has been situated at the heart of women's destiny. Though her focus does not directly touch on Rachel's environment, Badinter's claim picks up on issues that Rachel's character also faces within different geographic and cultural borders: a judgment, and potential societal rejection that bears on women's decision whether or not to mother. In *Le conflit: la femme et la mère* (2010), Badinter uses quantitative and qualitative analysis to show that, in spite of the uptick in naturalist discourse that emphasizes maternal instinct, the desire to have a child is neither constant nor universal (20). Maternity, she argues, is not women's only mode of self-affirmation, and the desire to have a child can come into conflict with other priorities. However, societal pressures can discourage women from diverging from the norm (23-4). And yet, if these statements ring true in some milieus of some Western countries, Badinter perhaps makes too wide a generalization in her statements regarding the evolution (or regression) in discourse surrounding maternity.[164] Nevertheless, Badinter's critique of the trend in certain cultures for the baby to take over the parents' lives finds relevance in the analysis of Rachel's character. Noting magazines and studies that laud breastfeeding, "co-sleeping," and the renouncement of sexuality, the author laments the mother's potential loss of sexuality: "La mère efface alors l'amoureuse et

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[164] For instance, Cécile Accilien asserts that maternity is still a primary mode of affirmation for some women in Francophone Caribbean and African cultures (57). Yet, as Accilien recognizes, these values also result in viewing barren bodies as shameful, as they children are linked to the fate of the nation; such is Rachel's case. See, "Marriage and Motherhood" in *Rethinking Marriage in Francophone African and Caribbean Literature* (2008).

met le couple en danger" (157). However, in a society in which women have no choice as to whether or not they want to have children, and are not merely social outcasts but obstacles to divine presence if they do not, Rachel can hardly weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the impact of a baby on their coupledom. Instead, Rachel gets blamed for their childless marriage and ends up as a repudiated divorcée. However, Rachel does hint at an ambivalence toward having children within the novel: "Je ne brûle pas d'avoir un enfant; je brûle de le faire" (*La répudiée* 71). Surreptitiously transgressive of the community's demand on women's bodies as their reproductive force, Rachel desires to experience pleasure apart from maternity, an illegitimate pleasure in light of her community's demand for the goal of marital sex to be pregnancy.

Notably, Abécassis returns to the noxious myths surrounding maternity in her book *Un heureux événement* (2005), in which Barbara, a feminist graduate student writing her doctoral thesis in philosophy, realizes that she is pregnant and undergoes an identity crisis. Badinter praises this novel as it speaks to the difficulties of maternity, which is rarely represented in literature. Though the main character, Barbara, romanticizes what maternity will be like before she gives birth, after delivery she laments her loss of freedom: "Faire un enfant est à la portée de tous, et pourtant peu de futurs parents connaissent la vérité, *c'est la fin de la vie*" (Abécassis qtd. in Badinter 25-6). While the narrator eventually assimilates into her maternal role, *le couple* ends up disintegrating:

> Depuis que j'ai un bébé, je n'ai plus de vie de couple, je ne dors plus, je ne me lave plus les cheveux, je ne lis plus, je ne vois plus d'amis. Je suis devenue une mère, soit. Mais je ne savais pas qu'il fallait abdiquer tous les autres rôles, qu'il fallait renoncer à sa sexualité, à la séduction, au travail, au sport, à son corps, à son esprit. J'ignorais qu'il

> fallait renoncer à la vie....Tous les regards convergèrent vers moi comme si j'étais une meurtrière, *ou pire une mère indigne*. (*Un heureux événement* 78–9)

No longer a lover in the eyes of her partner, and partnered with a man who does not play a parental role, Barbara finds that her maternity obfuscates her sexual life. Barbara relates to her body as a hole, emptiness, nothingness: "Je n'étais plus qu'un *creux*, un *vide*, un néant. Désormais, j'étais mère" (52-3). As Katarina Carlshamre notes, "The mother is described as being nothing but a container for the child's life" (117). Merely a vessel for the child, Barbara resembles Rachel, who questions the usefulness of her "earthly envelope," her body, if it is not able to be enlivened and fulfilled by sexual desire: "Pourquoi ces os et ces nerfs, s'ils ne servent à rien? Je ne brûle pas d'avoir un enfant ; je brûle de le faire. Cette enveloppe terrestre, si elle n'est qu'un habit qu'il faut enlever une fois la nuit tombée, est maudite. Mon front, mes mains, mes pieds, tout mon corps le veut" (71). Not only does her barren, menstruating body symbolize the abject, but her bodily desire is also suppressed and abjected as a result of her marriage's sterility. As Debrauwere-Miller notes in her recapitulation of French feminisms since the mid-twentieth century, "Les débats cinglants que déclenche Badinter sur la maternité nous ramène finalement aux véhémentes confrontations des années 70-80 comme si la condition des femmes stagnait depuis vingt ans" ("Parcours" 41). Thus there is a layer of commonality between the worlds of Rachel and Barbara as female characters who, though to vastly different degrees, are subject to patriarchal discourse about a woman's right to control her reproductive system and to act on their desires.

Because she is a woman who does not enjoy motherhood, Barbara claims that society looks at her as if she is a murderer. While Badinter highlights how society castigates women who do not prioritize having children, Deutscher directly comments on the ways in which the

maternal body that does not fulfill its role is also associated with death: “As [Edelman] notes, reproductive futurism…names agents of death and pursues, indirectly or directly, strategies of death” (63). Female bodies that serve as obstacles to reproductive futurism, the pursuit of a future for a certain identity by making a better world “for the children,” thus become dangerous to the social order and in turn undergo abjection. Within the study of biopolitics, Deutscher proposes that “[t]he attribution to some women of conducts of procreation deemed irresponsible and antilife becomes the pretext for harms to which women are subject. (Simply put, women are subject to new forms of harm insofar as they are associated with new forms of *doing* harm)” (98). In other words, in the realm of reproduction, which endows women with a power over life and death, women are subject to being portrayed as dangerous, and consequently put in danger. In the fictional community of Mea Shearim Rachel represents a victim of such discourse. As she discovers through an anonymous note, “[u]ne femme sans enfant, dit-elle, c’est comme si elle était morte” (60). Because Rachel’s physical *mitzvoth* is not redeemed by the spiritual commandment to bear children, she is “walled out,” or abjected, by her community as the embodiment of antilife. This symbolic antilife takes physical form through Rachel’s menstrual blood, which morphs into a malady that represents the absence of child and spurs Rachel’s self-abjection: “Il me semble que j’expie quelque chose. Je souffre, je vomis, je traîne par terre, je cogne ma tête contre les murs. Toute la journée, je reste couchée. Nathan a trouvé un nom pour les jours impurs. Il me demande quand sera finie ‘ma maladie.’ Il n’a pas tort. L’impureté mensuelle, c’est la maladie de la femme stérile” (42). As abject, Rachel’s body symbolizes—not a source of creation or communication with God, like that of her husband—but an abject sickness.

One’s refusal to touch, to know, to meld with the abject creates a superficial border between “self” and “other.” This is precisely the case within the Mea Shearim of *La répudiée*, where women’s menstruating bodies are considered base: “Et ces lois pendant les menstruations à cause desquelles on nous traite comme des pestiférée ! On n’a pas le droit d’être touchées. Tout ce qu’on touche devient impur. On ne peut même pas tendre un verre à un homme. Tu crois que c’est écrit dans le Talmud tout ça ?” (60-1). These are the words of Rachel’s sister, Naomi, who rejects the way her community marginalizes menstruating women and picks up on a long-standing attitude toward repulsive female biological processes. In the first century CE, Pliny the Elder’s account of menstruation concretizes it as dangerous and diseased: “Mais difficilement trouvera-t-on rien qui soit aussi malfaisant que le sang menstruel. Une femme qui a ses règles fait aigrir le vin doux par son approche, en les touchant frappe de stérilité les céréales, de mort les greffes, brûle les plantes des jardins” (Livre VII). Insisting on the absurdity and misogyny in this marginalizing discourse surrounding the process of menstruation, Naomi demands a re-examination of religious texts.

As it stands, menstruation settles sexual difference into a binary within the literary account of Mea Shearim. For Rachel specifically, her monthly cycle comes to represent a punishment for her unfruitful marriage. Kristeva’s insight into the abjection of menstruation is also key here, as this release of blood comes from the body itself, not from the external world:

> L’excrément et ses équivalents (pourriture, infection, maladie, cadavre, etc.) représentent le danger venu de l’extérieur de l’identité: le moi menacé par du non-moi, la société menacée par son dehors, la vie par la mort. Le sang menstruel, au contraire, représente le danger venant de l’intérieur de l’identité (sociale ou sexuelle); il menace le rapport entre

les sexes dans un ensemble social et, par intériorisation, l'identité de chaque sexe face à la différence sexuelle. (*Pouvoirs* 86)

Rachel's menstruation transmutes into a poison that causes her body to undergo a complete disconnect from the masculine spiritual realm and become marked as that of a barren female. A physical manifestation of sexual difference, Rachel's menses result in the rupture of her marriage, as her female biological processes symbolize what is keeping the couple away from holiness. In light of the rebbe's declaration that each Hasid must make sacrifices in order to win the struggle over Israel, it is clear that Rachel becomes Nathan's sacrifice. And yet, this sacrifice, unbeknownst to Nathan, occurs on Rachel's terms.

After a long period of barren sexual activity, Nathan slowly starts to reject Rachel's body, including her gaze, which symbolizes a channel of desire: "Depuis ce chabbath, Nathan est distrait. Depuis ce Kippour, il élude mes questions, fuit mon regard. Lorsque je lui demande la raison de son trouble, il ne répond pas. Lorsque je prends sa main dans la mienne, il la retire" (53). The only thing a woman's body can do is produce a child, and when it does not perform this vital capacity it is abandoned. Though pleasure is permitted and even encouraged within the context of the marriage bed, procreation reigns as the priority of physical relations:

> De mes yeux il s'absente. Des mes questions il s'absente. De ma couche il s'absente. Il dit que nous n'avons pas le droit. Il dit que c'est inscrit dans le texte, que le but de l'amour physique est la procréation. Mais dans le texte, il est inscrit que le mari a le devoir de satisfaire sa femme. Et qu'elle a le droit d'exiger le divorce s'il ne la satisfait pas. (71)

Yet the community only enforces patriarchal aims rather than the satisfaction of women's desire. According to Kristeva's theorization of the abject, religious law often functions based on

exclusion—and abjection—of certain foods or lifestyles. Those who do not respect religious law are impure and must undergo a process of purification. It is Rachel's eventual divorce that brings her to this non-threatening state that maintains the purity of the community. By casting her out, the community perpetuates the fight for the Child, through which man will be united with the Messiah once the Hasidim overtake Israel as a religious state that is pleasing to their God.

Because Rachel's body impedes religious knowledge and advancement, Nathan bars himself from her. Rather than resting in the knowledge that he can never fully "see" or know her (as Horvilleur suggests), under the influence of the religious leaders of Mea Shearim, Nathan labels Rachel as unfruitful and repudiates her as his wife. And yet, when Rachel breaks the religious law of the elders by visiting the gynecologist and disobeying regulations surrounding modesty (*tzniut*), she discovers that she is actually not sterile; Nathan is the one who cannot produce children. This raises a question mark about Mea Shearim's ideology of reproduction and the idolization of the Hasidic Child and its fantasized Mother. Nathan's sterility also further establishes that one can never fully know oneself, just as one can never fully know the other. Understanding this creates the possibility of a more poetic understanding of *tzniut* that does not reduce the other to one's supposed knowledge of them.

Death and Divine Love[165]

Rachel's state as dangerous and endangered results in her repudiation, which I read as an abjection. In spite of this challenge to her faith, Rachel continues to revere the divine, signaling a continued alliance to God. To what God does Rachel turn in this time of duress? If in some ways, she has been excluded from the Hasidic sect—by being a woman who does not participate, or

[165] I borrow the term "divine love" from Sal Renshaw's *The Subject of Love: Hélène Cixous and the Feminine Divine* (2009).

does so minimally, in prayer and pilgrimage,[166] and by being in a childless marriage—the character of Rachel nevertheless creates her own sense of spirituality that runs concurrently with tenants of Jewish mysticism and its conceptualization of God, or the divine realms. The mysticism on which the Hasidic movement was founded and to which it holds true maintains that anyone can access God, and in fact, through the intricate system of the *sefirot*,[167] it is within the human self that the divine unfolds, as it necessitates human partners to realize "divine individuation."[168] Because women are given little space in Hasidic religious texts, I will turn briefly to Cixous's location of "God" through her writing in order to articulate Rachel's personalized concept of the divine, of God, as existent within relationships of love. Though this God is secularized, Cixous's texts, as demonstrated earlier through Debrauwere-Miller's study of the *juifemme*, are undoubtedly informed by Cixous's Jewish background. [169] Thus Cixous writes an *other* Bible in which she recreates the notion of the divine as non-patriarchal.[170] For Cixous, God lives within the self and the other and represents the element of the unknown: "Dieu est tout ce qui n'a pas encore été dit" ("Conversation" 101). As Cixous demonstrates, if the patriarchal God excludes or belittles women's spiritual practice, women must write or create their own deity.[171] It is indeed through the love that she generates with Nathan by upholding the commandment of *tzniut* which professes that one can never fully "see" the other that Rachel finds the "*présence divine*." To access such divine presence, as Cixous and Horvilleur illuminate,

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[166] Wodzinski "Women and Hasidism: A 'Non-Sectarian' Perspective" (2013).
[167] The conceptulalization of the divine realm through a system of ten "emanations" or "knots" that have both feminine and masculine elements. See pages 161-2 for further explanation.
[168] Debrauwere-Miller, "Tree of Consciousness" (401).
[169] "Hélène Cixous: la passante de l'histoire" (2008).
[170] I borrow the term "*other* Bible" from Irving Goh, scholar of contemporary French thought, who claims that though Cixous's texts are "without religion and without religion's God," sbe composes an *other* Bible by rewriting Biblical stories from non-patriarchal points of view ("The Passion According to Cixous" 2011).
[171] Amy Hollywood emphasizes this in her chapter "Cixous and Clément: Mysticism, Death and Desire" (150-2; 2003).

a subject must recognize their partial vision as well as the porosity of the self. At the closing of *La répudiée*, through her intense awareness of this God, *devekut*, Rachel enters into a state of meditative ecstasy at the end of the novel, which results in her death. While I frame her death as a form of resistance to the community, it also signifies Rachel's status as a female mystic who might be more in touch with "God" than those around her. Such a figure can arrive at a liberating *jouissance* through engagement with the divine outside of the study of traditional, patriarchal religious texts, from which she is excluded.

To provide a framework for Rachel's "God," I will take a quick detour through the presence of the divine in some of Cixous's writings. While Cixous's references to "God" in the 1970s and 80s point to a deity who is within the self and can be recreated through writing, her later texts further suggest a God that is present within the other.[172] Echoing Horvilleur's statement, "Aucun être n'a fini de se dévoiler,"[173] for Cixous, writing serves as a way to explore the unknown—more particularly, the self, which can never be fully discovered:

> Quand j'aurai fini d'écrire, quand j'aurai cent dix ans, tout ce que j'aurai fait aura été d'essayer de faire le portrait de Dieu. Du Dieu. De ce qui nous échappe et nous émerveille. De ce que nous ne connaissons pas, mais que nous sentons. De ce qui nous fait vivre. Je veux dire notre propre divinité, maladroite, tordue, palpitante, notre mystère à nous qui sommes les seigneurs de cette terre, et qui ne le savons pas,…Nous qui sommes des brins de soleil, des gouttes d'océan, des atomes du dieu et qui si souvent l'oublions, ou l'ignorons, et alors nous nous prenons pour des employés. ("Le dernier tableau ou le portrait de Dieu" 199-200)

[172] "La venue à l'écriture" (1975); "Le dernier tableau ou le portrait de Dieu" (1983); "Conversation avec l'âne" (1996; 2003).
[173] *En tenue d'Ève* 13.

Cixous claims to want to make the portrait of God, which is paradoxical. We, as humans, cannot see the face of God. Rather than nail down fine details of facial expression or appearance, Cixous attempts to interpret the mystical traits and characteristic expressions of "God." Ultimately, she aligns divinity with what escapes understanding, what makes us marvel, what we feel. This poetic abstraction of God recognizes the divinity in humans, who are not always sensitive to the wonder of bodies and the surrounding world, and how both are inextricably intertwined; instead, Cixous professes that humans often ignore this inner divine and instead "work" as servants for another God without having the sensibility to pay attention to the unfolding of the divine in the instant, the changes in bodies and environments that evoke wonder. Reading this passage of "Le dernier tableau," scholar of Christian Studies Amy Hollywood claims that such "attempts to render the instant" through writing serve themselves as "moments of attention" (150). Like God, the self will be incessantly in the process of revelation, and must be examined anew with the passing of every moment. This conception of the divine aligns with Cixous's reference to *différence sexuelle* as a *déesse* (in "Contes de la différence sexuelle"), which asserts sexual difference, and human bodies, as something in constant movement and that can never be seen or known.

Appealing to her Jewish roots, Cixous insists that this process of revelation involves incessant questioning. Cixous points to another conceptualization of God in a 2003 interview, which took place in conjunction with the publication of *L'amour du loup et autres remords* (2003), a book which reprinted Cixous's "Conversation avec l'âne." This book, she claims, is addressed to God:

> A Dieu ! Mais j'ai beau adorer la Bible et trouver magnifique la commémoration des rites juifs transmis par ma grand-mère maternelle, je suis un peu athée, comme toute ma

> famille. Pour moi il y a 'Ceux' que j'appelle Dieu (d'anciens morts, ou ceux des vivants qui m'entraînent 'au-delà') et 'ce' que j'appelle Dieu (par exemple le public du théâtre, dont je vois le visage). ("L'Amour est peur" 66)

Literary scholar Irving Goh claims that the "God" in Cixous's works in the 1990s has nothing to do with the religious God, but with "you," a you whom Goh defines as an un-possessable, animal other (1066-8).[174] Cixous indeed strays from religion, but as she notes above, she has not completely left it behind; rather, she criticizes dogmatic religion that excludes women, and she reconceptualizes the divine. Based on her profession of faith above, God exists within those who take her "au-delà," or beyond, through the experience of death; those who have passed away force her to fathom the unfathomable realms of (after)life. God also manifests in what she cannot see or is not supposed to see; for instance, the faces of the audience in the theater, who perhaps reveal to her something new about herself or her dramatic creation. Ultimately, "God" represents the realm of the unknown and of possibility; a malleable term, "God" acts as a word for what has not been known or said: "Dieu est le nom de tout ce qui n'a pas encore été dit" ("Conversation" 101).

In the following account of coupledom and exchange between two, though Cixous does not directly reference God, the materialization of a "third body" generated between two bodies shines light on the meaning of "au-delà." We could read this term as a result of an interaction with God that leads one beyond the limits of the self, which is porous:

> …il nous vient un *Troisième Corps*, une troisième vue, et nos autres oreilles, — entre nos deux corps notre troisième corps surgit, vole et va voir plus haut le sommet des choses…mais pour s'écrire le troisième corps il faut que l'extérieur entre et que

[174] Goh proposes that the "divine" in Cixous's "Conversation avec l'âne" (1996) actually adopts an animal point of view that does not require "post-Fall human sense of shame" that results in sexual differentiation.

l'intérieur s'ouvre. Si tu me bouches les oreilles, si tu fermes mon corps à la musique extérieure-intérieure, si tu barres le chant, alors tout est silence, l'amour s'essouffle. ("La Venue" 52)

This idea of turning the outside in and the inside out defies the logic of the abject, which requires borders to constitute subjectivity. Instead, to enter into communication with others and to reach the "*sommet des choses*," the hardened, dividing exterior must fall to give space to difference and thus to love. Working with this idea of porosity in Cixous's texts which focus on the "feminine," scholar of feminist philosophies and theologies Sal Renshaw turns to Cixousian sexual difference[175] to problematize and imagine a "divine love." According to Renshaw, divine love is accessible through the enactment of the feminine economy, which calls for a relationship with the self that is porous in that it is willing to surrender (but not sacrifice) the self, and that recognizes its relationality to others. While the masculine demonstrates a return to the self, the feminine engages in movement toward the other (125). For Renshaw, the subject who, moved by the masculine economy, aspires to unity, barred from the other, is attached to the possession of knowledge, which implies a certain relationship to desire and to futurity. This articulation the conceptualization of the divine within a desire-driven economic exchange is primordial for understanding Rachel and Nathan's differing attitudes toward divinity. However, while Renshaw articulates the "feminine" relationship to subjectivity as the pathway to such divine love, I will distance my argument from this terminology.

In contrast to Cixous's "au-delà" cited above, Mea Shearim, imagines the "beyond" is attained through marriage, which makes man and woman complete and beckons the coming of the Messiah, Rachel's vision of the "beyond" corresponds more with Cixous's *troisième corps*.

[175] mainly within the texts "Sorties" (1976) and *Livre de Promethea* (1984)

Rachel does not see the coming of the Messiah, or the Child, as the motivation or validation of a relationship, but rather recognizes the process of joining with the other and contemplating the porosity of subjectivity as a manifestation of the divine in itself. As Renshaw suggests in her study, "[i]n context of divine (generous, abundant) love, boundaries of self/other are not so much dissolved as exceeded" (194).

This imagination of divine love as *troisième corps* is what Abécassis's protagonist envisions as her matrimonial fruit. Yet, for her marriage to reach legitimacy, Nathan insists on the need for a physical child: "[le Rav] a dit que l'homme et la femme font œuvre de création ensemble, qu'ils ont le divin pouvoir de créer une nouvelle vie, elle-même appelée à créer de nouvelles vies, et ainsi de suite pour l'éternité. C'est ce divin pouvoir qui fonde le mariage" (67). Rachel recognizes Nathan and the Rav's definition of "new life" as limited and proposes their love, a theoretical child of its own and "third body" produced by their couple, as the crux of their union: "Le divin pouvoir, n'est-ce pas la relation que nous avons, toi et moi? Quel est le sens de toutes nos lois si ce n'est pas notre couple, toi et moi?" (67). Due to the religious pressure of the rebbe, Nathan eventually sees the law of repudiation as binding and immutable. On the contrary, Rachel reimagines the divine as existing between "you and me," which gives flesh and blood to the Word of the religious texts. Despite their intoxicating love, because Rachel's body impedes religious knowledge and advancement, Nathan bars himself from her. Rather than resting in the knowledge that he can never fully "see" or know her (as Horvilleur suggests), under the influence of the religious leaders of Mea Shearim, Nathan labels Rachel as unfruitful and repudiates her as his wife.

The way Nathan and the male members of his community "see" and "know" Rachel runs in contrast with Cixous's estimation of God as the unrevealed, and to Rabbi Horvilleur's

exploration of *tzniut* through the principle of blurred or partial vision. At the end of her presentation "Voiler et dévoiler: la pudeur dans le judaïsme" (2016), Horvilleur clarifies what *tzniut* actually suggests: no one should imagine that they can see all of the other, and each one of us must recognize our worldview as hindered. As Horvilleur elaborates, to see or imagine all of the other is a form of violence. To the contrary, our hindered "view" is partial, and our consciousness of alterity must manifest through *not* claiming ourselves as owner of the other and accepting that we do *not* see all of God or of the other. As Horvilleur points out, Micah in the Torah (6:8) commands followers to "walk in 'modesty,'" or to walk humbly with the Eternal. In Cixous's chapter "Conversation avec l'âne: Écrire aveugle" in which she revisits the story of Abraham climbing the mountain with a donkey, Cixous adopts this partial worldview: one which distances itself from the elucidating and defining light of religious reason, creating what Goh articulates as an *other* Bible. Seeing in the light of day inhibits writing, as seeing all of the other impedes non-violent relations. In "Conversation" and elsewhere, Cixous instead prefers the figurative time of night, which blurs knowledge and de-possesses the subject of what they think they know. When Cixous confesses that "J'écris la nuit. J'écris; la Nuit. La Nuit est une si grande déité" ("Conversation avec l'âne" 80), she figures a blurred vision that smudges the lines of religious reason and asks us to imagine other relations, bodies, and economies. Indeed, Night acts as its own deity, suggesting that divinity manifests in not claiming full sight (i.e. knowledge) of the other.

The warning against clinging to knowledge finds resonance in Jewish mysticism, and particularly in the Zohar. Debrauwere-Miller calls to attention to this dynamic in her analysis of the presence of *Shekhinah* in the literary works of Edmond Jabès: "According to the Zohar, the prohibition of eating from the *Tree of Knowledge* translates into the prohibition against cleaving

to *Shekhinah* with the intention of destroying the divine union" between the feminine element and masculine elements of the *sefirot*, which respectively correspond to the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life ("The Tree of Consciousness" 400). In other words, man must not cling too tightly to the Tree of Knowledge out of a desire for absolute understanding, or he risks bringing the divine and earthly realms into chaos (402). Yet the character of Nathan in *La répudiée* seeks to "know" God better and pursues this knowledge by sacrificing Rachel, whom he ultimately delimits as ungodly. While he refuses to adopt the partial vision (Horvilleur) or partial blindness (Cixous) that allows for ethical relationships, Rachel continues to recognize the divine in the self's porosity enacted by imagining both self and other as not fully seeable. This porosity, I will argue, ultimately serves as a source of *jouissance*.

Recognizing that her marriage has come to an end, Rachel finds herself in a time of "Night" in which the boundaries of her "self" are questioned as she blurs the line between life and death:

> j'aspire à la mort et la mort m'aspire … seule la mort peut égaler notre extase et notre extase fut forte comme la mort, …
>
> j'avance dans le noir, je viens *vers* toi,
>
> … je suis *près de* toi, nous sommes ensemble pour toujours, ainsi s'est écoulée ma vie, blanche comme les voiles du mariage, comme le bassin de pluie, le corps qui enveloppe mon corps, unie à mon Aimé, dans son sein, ainsi je meurs d'amour ainsi je meurs. (124-25, my emphasis)

If Rachel as dangerous, barren body has impeded access to the patriarchal divine, in this closing passage she approaches her own version of the divine, which is the connection between bodies, between entities, united here with the "Beloved." As she breathes in death, Rachel sees herself as

coming *toward* her love. What does this love represent? Nathan, God, or both? The capitalization of "Aimé" confounds these figures. She is *near to* him, a nearness that implies an intimacy or a touching that distances itself from fully seeing, knowing, defining the other. At the close of the novel, no longer married to Nathan, Rachel enters into a form of meditative *devekut* and clings to God, so much so that there is an ecstatic annihilation of the self: "seule la mort peut égaler notre extase et notre extase fut forte comme la mort" (124). In an explanation of *devekut* within the context of Jewish mysticism, David R. Blumenthal describes this type of prayer as a state of mind that recognizes all of reality as God: "Devekut, then, is the adhering to God that is so intense as to be an annihilation of self into God. It is a dying of the self to an everlasting life" (129).[176] And while God is all around us, Blumenthal explains that residing in a "self-oriented mode" keeps us from seeing this (129). He elaborates: "In a basic way, this was the secret of Hasidism: through intramental focusing of consciousness (*kavvana*[177]), even the simple person achieved an intense awareness of God, and forever after that person tried to recreate that moment" (137). While Talmudic rabbis interpreted this "clinging" as fidelity to the Torah and considered its study accessible only to the greatest of saints, Nahminides[178] extended this practice to common folk; thus, in Hasidism, even the "average Jew" can access this communion with God.[179] This "constant being with God" can manifest in the "ecstatic state produced by such communion.[180] One may experience burning enthusiasm during prayer, *hitlahavut*, in which the soul of the worshipper reaches out to God; however, in *ecstatic* prayer, "the worshipper's corporeal nature is stripped off, as the Hasidic masters put it—*hitpashtut hagashmiyut*"

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[176] Blumenthal locates the origin of *devekut* in the following verses: "And you who adhere to the Lord, your God, you are living this day" (Deut. 4:4), "to go in all His ways and to adhere to him" (Deut. 11:22, also 30:20), and "Him shall you worship and to Him shall you adhere" (Deut. 13:5).
[177] purifying, religious intentions
[178] A Spanish rabbi, scholar, and kabbalist (1194-1270)
[179] Rabinowicz, *The Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 88.
[180] Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion,* 122-3.

(Rabinowicz 100, Jacobs 141). In the chant-like poetic prayer that ends the novel, approaching her state of ecstasy, of *jouissance*, Rachel pronounces: “Que je brûle, que le feu de l’autel m’emporte” (La répudiée 124-5). Rachel surpasses the flame, *hitlahavut*, of burning enthusiasm during prayer. The text ends after Rachel proclaims that she is united to her Beloved, in his breast, where she dies of love: “le corps qui enveloppe mon corps, unie à mon Aimé, dans son sein, ainsi je meurs d’amour ainsi je meurs” (125), suggesting a transcendence of self into the realms of ecstasy. In life and death, Rachel’s spirit exalts in the experience of love, which for this character is a poetic, ecstatic limit-experience that resembles death.

In a move toward blinding darkness, *le noir*, Rachel renounces her understanding of worldly conditions and denounces her existence as reduced to the womb. She will not participate in a future that excludes women and their varying manifestations of the divine; for her, in Mea Shearim, there is *no future*. Edelman’s *No Future* again becomes relevant here: Rachel literally eliminates herself by clinging to ideals of “God,” of divine love, so furiously that she enters into an ecstatic state and experiences "a dying of the self to an everlasting life” (Blumenthal 129). In an act of resistance, Rachel will not stand for the future of a community that abjects certain representations of divinity and refuses love not represented in the form of the Child. It is through death that Rachel takes on agency, as her passing signifies a departure from a world where she is abjected from her community. Moreover, this death acts as a purification that washes away her repudiation. This purifying state is reinforced through the symbolism of "profound waters" and the "veil (*châle*) of prayer" that absorb Rachel as she is reaching transcendence, recalling her *mikvah* ritual: “je plonge dans le bassin d’eau froide, tête comprise: c’est une naissance” (*La répudiée* 124, 42).

In her final moments before slipping away, Rachel considers death as an extension of life, and even *constitutive of* life. She compares the pleasures of her marriage with the pleasures she might experience in death, the only state of being where she can continue to experience *jouissance* through divine love. Indeed, Rachel's joy, or *jouissance*, does not rest in the image of the Child, as it does for the patriarchal divine, but in divine love generated from a partially blind, porous self that leads to limit experiences.

Rachel as "*Juifemme*"[181]

By considering Rachel's situation and the options available to her to seek freedom within a space that affords women little independence, we can see her death as a form of resistance to her community's narrow views of relationships, sexuality, and women's rights. More often, however, she affects a female form of resilience: one that is not rooted in the heroic, self-sufficient individual, but that withstands hardship to fill a desire for divine interpersonal relationships. Rachel as a *juifemme* creates her own God, makes a place for herself in religious discourse and begins to reimagine sacred patriarchal social structures.

Both Rachel and her younger sister Naomi exemplify *juifemmes* through their inventive spirituality and questioning of religious texts. Naomi falls in love with Yacov, a man who has left their sect in order to pursue his spirituality elsewhere. She repeatedly brings sexist religious dogma into question, and even tries to evade her own marriage by running away to meet Yacov; when her betrothed sees her coming home late at night, he yells: "Tu sais ce qu'on fait aux femmes adultères? … Tu le sais? Espèce de prostituée! … Elle le regardait sans peur. – Je le jure devant Dieu, je vais te tuer!" (106). Another Medusa, Naomi is threatened with death for suspected promiscuity. This young female character stands her ground and fearlessly returns his

[181] This is a neologism created by Cixous; for further explanation, see pages 171-1 of this chapter.

gaze; she is firm in her belief that she, not her religion or those who claim to be its leaders, can dictate her sexuality and the trajectory of her life.

As demonstrated in the scene between Rachel and Yossef, her betrothed, dogmatic religious discourse does not always welcome such “deviance.” Debrauwere-Miller notes that though women are held responsible for the first *mitzva*, demanding procreation, they are excluded from the 613 others that ask followers to write their own “Sefer Thora” the handwritten copy of the Torah destined for public reading in the synagogue (“Hélène Cixous: la passante de l’histoire” 103). Quoting Cixous, Debrauwere-Miller adds: “Ecrire était réservé aux élites. Cela devait se passer dans un espace inaccessible aux petits, aux humbles aux femmes. Dans l’intimité d’un sacré”[182] (104). Cixous insists that women must push past societal obstacles to enter the world of writing. Thus the task that Cixous assigns to the *juifemme*: invent herself (108-9). In another study of Cixous’s references to writing and religion, Amy Hollywood notes the division between hysteria (which she refers to as mysticism) and religion; while religion is rigid, dogmatic, impenetrable, hysteria represents explosive and excessive desire that has been repressed. The *juifemme*, then, must write herself into the world of religion, steeped in the male-dominated tradition of writing and study, to disrupt misogynistic values. Perhaps Rachel comes to represent the disruptive mystic that Hollywood estimates in Cixous’s religious references.

While Rachel dies at the end, one might assume that the text allows a happier ending for her sister Naomi, who eventually leaves Mea Shearim in order to be with her lover. Leaving the community, however, is not an easy escape. Real accounts of women who have abandoned Hasidic communities attest to the feelings of guilt and depression they experience for having left behind family members after being severely mistreated by their community. Esti Weinstein’s

[182] “La venue,” 1977 (21).

story offers one such example, as she committed suicide after having left her Gur Hasidic community in Israel seven years prior.[183] After having experienced significant sexual abuse and inhumane treatment by the men in her community, she decided to leave her husband and seven daughters.

And yet, many members of these religious societies continue to believe that all women are content with their position in the social sphere. In an entry titled "Women" in *The Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, Rabbi Tzvi M. Rabinowicz speaks to this:

> The new rapidly expanding Jewish feminist movement or Jewish liberalism has so far not touched the hasidic community. Hasidic women do not regard themselves as second-class citizens. The fact that they cannot constitute a *minyan*[184], be called up to the Torah, or write or authorize a divorce, as well as the fact that they are shut off from the source of power and decision making does not worry them in the least. (540).

Rabbi Rabinowicz speaks *for* women when he states that women are happy with their condition. This is precisely what Rabbi Horvilleur criticizes in her reading of *tzniut* when she claims that women should not blindly follow a religious doctrine from which they have historically been excluded. Religious leaders, Horvilleur protests, have spoken about women as objects *of* discussion instead of *to* women. Though Rabinowicz's *Encyclopia* was published decades ago, according to women's testimonies from Hasidic communities, little has changed in their views of women's *mitzvoth*. Once again, women and their bodies are presented as dangerous to patriarchal social structures, and consequently their access to jouissance, both physical and intellectual, is imperiled. And while these sects may be growing ever more hermetic, there is a fervent

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[183] For more information, see the following articles: Winer, "Before suicide, woman penned book about her ordeals in ultra-Orthodox world"; Ettinger, "Ex-Haredi Woman, Whose 'Suicide Book' Roiled Gur Hasidim, Buried in Two-part Funeral"; Rosner, "After Hasidic Suicide, Israel looks itself in the mirror."

[184] the basic unit of Jewish community

counteractive force, even in some ultra-Orthodox quarters of Israel, fighting to include women's voices and spiritual practices.[185]

A recent real-life incident presents another glimmer of hope for communities embedded in strict ideology surrounding sexual hierarchy. Recently, at the age of 21 Abby Stein (formerly Yisroel Stein) decided to leave her Hasidic Gur quarter in Brooklyn, NY in order to emerge as the first openly transgender individual from an Ultra-Orthodox Hasidic Jewish community. Having been assigned male at birth but identified as a girl throughout her life, Stein faced barriers such as being forced to get married and have a child. But after researching gender issues online in secret, she ultimately joined Footsteps, an organization based in New York City that helps individuals who wish to leave the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. Footsteps guided her transition into the secular world, where she eventually became a social activist and student at Columbia University. It was through readings of the Kabbalah that Stein realized the fluidity of gender and bodies.[186] Stein represents yet another *juifemme* who reimagines sacred patriarchal social structures from within religion in order to make Hasidic communities, as well as other conservative religious circles, more open, less dangerous places to live.

Transitioning Remarks

Marginalized by the dangerous/endangered paradigm in which her community places her, Rachel responds by investing in a divine that is imbued with love and bodily pleasure, even when that pleasure ultimately ends in the limit experience of death. Rachel's meditative prayer that ends the novel and results in ecstatic transcendence demonstrates yet another facet of the Medusa: *med*itation. This capacity of the Medusa to focus, contemplate, and dream will be further fleshed

[185] Frayer, "Women's Rights Become a Battle ground for Israel's Ultra-Orthodox Jews," *NPR,* 2016.
[186] Clark, "A Voice for Transgender Chasidic Jews," *Jewish Week*, 2017.

out in the conclusion, which will question the ways in which Medusa and the literary characters of this project are implicated in the life/death binary, in which death represents the shattering of identity (ego effacement) as well as physical demise.

CONCLUSION

Meditating on the Medusa

> Not only is there a war between people, but this war is produced by sexual difference. And not just by sexual difference. By the wiles, paradoxes, and surprises that sexual difference reserves for us. This is why the man-woman conflict is insufficient for me, in my time, in my place. It *is* a question of sexual difference, only sexual difference isn't what we think it is. It's both tortuous and complicated. There is sexual difference and there is what it becomes in its appearances and distributions in each of us…strangely enough we are still today at a clear-cut difference, we continue to say man and woman even though it doesn't work. We are not made to reveal to what extent we are complex.
>
> - Cixous, "The School of the Dead" 50

Cixous read these words as part of a lecture on writing at the University of California Irvine in 1990.[187] In this epigraph, the author questions the ways that society labels "man" and "woman" and remarks on the contradictory, ensnaring nature of sexual difference. If Cixous has served as the anchor of my project, it is perhaps because the evolution of her writing on sexual difference, sometimes contradictory in its slippage of meaning,[188] echoes my own tension surrounding the necessary and problematic nature of identity labels. While the dangerous/endangered female characters that I have studied result from societal fabrication of "women," there is a concomitant need to deeply disturb these gendered subjects and also to "name" the specific issues that they encounter based on the places in society that they have been assigned. For instance, Rachel's character in *La répudiée* suffers from her community's construction of "woman," a category that Rachel disrupts by crossing into gendered spaces from which women are forbidden, such as experiences of bodily desire and ecstatic meditation. These actions both open up the category of "woman" and question the need for such a label. Rachel does not dissociate with the category of "woman," but subliminally challenges this reductive

[187] The lecture was delivered and published in English (*Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 1993).

[188] By slippage of meaning, I am referring to her use of "woman," "feminine," "man," "masculine," and the ways in which these signifiers sometimes refer to anatomical bodies and sometimes do not, allowing her simultaneously to critique and deconstruct the man/woman binary.

category. The sexual difference that separates her from her husband, Nathan, is the man/woman divide that pins her as "dangerous,"[189] but if we listen to Cixous's proposal, imagining this difference as "movement" and "exchange" might loosen the hierarchical binary that makes Rachel a dangerous and endangered Medusa.

In this lecture, Cixous confesses that she avoids "using the second person to evade the difficulty of speaking either in the masculine or feminine," but also notes that "[i]n order to defend women we are obliged to speak in the feminist terms of 'man' and 'woman'" (51-2). These segments both acknowledge the feminist (political) need for naming and question the man/woman binary as reductive nomenclature. Ultimately, Cixous designates literature as the place to explore such contentious limits of identity.[190] In 2013, Cixous writes again about the purpose of literature in *Ayaï ! Le cri de la literature*. This time, there is no "masculine" or "feminine," or "man" or "woman." Literature becomes a space of renewal: "Ça ne pense qu'à ça, la littérature: à remuer les cendres, à refaire avec des mots des phrases inouïes, à ressusciter, à ranimer les feux. Cri et feu" (12). Thus, for Cixous, literature is a space in which life proliferates as it animates ashes and engenders new forms of language and thought. Cixous's Medusa has both demonstrated and exploded the dangerous/endangered paradigm; her textual body opens subjectivity to a multitude of uncoded sexual anatomies and pleasures in order to nourish life and halt the relegation of women and the feminine to spaces of death.

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[189] In my third chapter, I analyze Rachel as a representation of danger because of her seductive body that distracts men from spiritual practice and because she (supposedly) cannot have children, which threatens the prosperity of her community.

[190] Bray makes a similar remark in response to this passage in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*: "In order to fight against oppression on a political level, it is necessary to limit a thinking through sexual difference, to arrive at a point of meaning or closure in order to strategically oppose political violence even while the closing off of signification even for strategic purposes is itself a form of violence. The only resolution of this ethical dilemma lies in the future resignifications of sexual difference and an increased political awareness of their complexity. For Cixous this can only be achieved by thinking through sexual difference, through a writing that moves beyond the limits of phallocentrism" (49).

If the "man-woman conflict" is not "sufficient" for Cixous, it is because sexual difference lies beyond the essentialist, biological binaries of man/woman. Rather, sexual difference relates to a struggle of desire, energy, libido, and economies irreducible to sex. In this epigraph, alongside her most recent essays on sexual difference,[191] such difference refers to the ways in which one relates to others, but also remarks on the change inherent to bodies that evolve with the passing of moments that unfold through daily encounters, dreams, and fantasies. This amounts to a conceptualization of sexual difference that is much more complicated than the man/woman division perpetuated in most Western societies. Citing Cixous's 2010 introduction to *Le rire de la Méduse et autres ironies*, literary scholar Weltman-Aron clarifies that there is neither one (male) nor two (male or female) options for embodying as a sexual being, but many: "il n'est question ni de l'Un ni du Deux, mais de 'l'être à plus d'une sexualité'" ("Il y a de la difference" 77). Breaking down the man/woman binary, the sexual difference explored in Cixous's texts, from 1975 to 2015, recognizes the multiplicity that makes up each individual body.

As demonstrated in the epigraph, in an effort to avoid dogmatism that can result from rigid, concrete categories, Cixous explores sexual difference through poetic language: "Only poetically and in the imaginary can we approach these places of fire" (Cixous, "The School" 53). Poetic language represents ambiguity and instability of meaning that moves toward these "places of fire," where static concepts are set ablaze. When emerged in the text, the reader and writer have the opportunity step out of their own life and into that of another. Because such acts are impossible to perform in real life, Cixous proposes such transmogrification in writing. This type of poetic writing, which presents a continuity within her writing from "Le rire de la Méduse"

[191] I am thinking particularly of "Nous en somme," 2006.

(1975) to *Ayaï* (2013) and beyond, generates unimagined structures within the phallocentric economy and taps into the unconscious, which is made more apparent when we learn that the second part of Cixous's lecture at UC-Irvine is titled "The School of Dreams." Though Morag Shiach finds this poetic nature to feel at times like "swimming through cultural mud," and "arrives at tentative propositions and ambiguous conclusions," both the dilemma and inspiring nature of Cixous's work is that there is no clear answer to the problems that sexual difference instigates (9, 15). Indeed, as Blyth and Sellers call to attention, Cixous's poetic writing refuses to reach a solution and differentiates itself from "standard philosophical discourse...the practice of working 'on what escapes,' is something that 'can only be done poetically'" (Cixous qtd. in Blyth and Sellers 68).[192] Thus, through the practice of (poetic) writing, Cixous unsettles sexual difference by emphasizing its inability to be pinned down by rational discourse.

Cixous's poetics, however, have been criticized for their lack of political potential. Robert con Davis asserts that even in her attempt to lessen or even disarm "the patriarchal dimension of modern culture," Cixous's work "falls short of having political significance" because she neglects to examine the socio-political foundations of oppositional theory (165). In other words, the lack of explicit, critical examination of socio-political oppression renders her texts politically insignificant. And yet, as Anu Aneja poignantly notes in her chapter accounting for the critiques of Cixous's "feminine" and the problematics of her Medusa:

> The objection that Cixous ignores political realities has been made by Gayatri Spivak, Domna Stanton, and Hélène Wenzel, among others, while Ann Rosalind Jones and Toril Moi complain that Cixous uses a select and privileged discourse which does not speak to

[192] Blyth and Sellers cite this line from Cixous, *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva* (1991; 92).

all women…However, to accuse Cixous of being completely apolitical would be like saying that the poetic does not interrupt or interact with the political. (64)

Indeed, Cixous operates a poetic resistance to normative, hierarchical classifications and modes of thinking that lead to oppression.[193] Furthermore, to demand a writer or artist to critically examine socio-political oppression, while of immeasurable importance, devalues the potential of introspection and investigation of the subconscious that are pillars of Cixous's work. It is important to recall that Cixous is above all a writer, not a theorist. Spivak herself, whom Aneja references above, announces the necessity to read Cixous as a writer in her revised essay on "French feminism." More than ten years after publishing her initial criticism of "French Feminism in an International Frame" (1981), Spivak names Cixous's Medusa as an agent of "pluralization, [of] alteration" who, as an embodiment of Cixous's maternal metaphor, is capable of "self*less* love." Remarking on the real and challenging responsibility associated with such an action and the question of agency as "subversive plurality," Spivak affirms that the values embodied by the Cixousian Medusa are rare in metropolitan feminism yet requirements for decolonized feminism (70).[194]

While she avows that her "work on the ego" consisted of an early phase of her work in relation to *écriture féminine*, Cixous has remained concerned with the fragility of identity and how this can lead to the effacement of alterity. Several of the scholars who have worked

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[193] For scholars who declare and expand upon the political significance of Cixous's texts, see, for instance, Susan Sellers's "Writing Woman: Hélène Cixous' political 'sexts'" (1986), Verena Conley's *Hélène Cixous* (1992), Weltman-Aron's *Algerian Imprints* (2015), and Birgit Kaiser's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (2017).

[194] Spivak underscores that while French feminism cannot be the only link between "First- and Third-World Women," denying any population access to such texts that have been labeled as "white feminist texts" represents another form of ideology and oppression. Spivak announces that the "hardest lesson is the impossible intimacy of the ethical," that encourages an intimacy with authors who may have been tied to "the violent struggle of (de)colonization" ("French Feminism Revisited" 81). And yet, as more recent studies note, Cixous's identity as a French Jewish woman in colonial Algeria make it difficult to mark her as a "cosmopolitan" feminist (see the work of Debrauwere-Miller and Weltman-Aron, among others).

extensively on Cixous's writing have identified an evolution from the focus on the "masculine/feminine" couple to larger issues of erasure and oppression, such as the threat of homogenization and the preservation of cultural pluralism.[195] And yet, as Cixous remarks, the shift in focus from women and the feminine "toward others" has not been contingent on the exclusion of women. Reasserting her concern for the disruption of sexual difference and women's exploration of their diverse and multiple bodies, Cixous's introduction to the 2010 republication of *Le rire de la Méduse* and her interview in the 2015 collection of critical essays on Medusa echo the messages of her earlier texts that treated female subjectivity and the silencing of women's voices. Indeed, the tone in "Un effet d'épine rose" that introduces the collection *Le rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* takes on a more apprehensive tone than the 1975 "manifesto."

Reimagining Dangerous Women

The relationship between the poetic and the political has been at stake in this project, in which I have attempted to tease out the contemporary relevance and political undertones present in Cixous's poetic writing on sexual difference through the figure of the Medusa. Fundamentally, I have illustrated how sexual differences inscribed in cultural and literary texts have created "dangerous and endangered" female bodies. I do not wish to make sweeping generalizations of female bodies everywhere as "dangerous" and "endangered," yet I do assert that the commonalities between the narratives in my project illuminate a strand of francophone literature that finds relevance in the perils that Medusa faces. *Standard*, *Sitt Marie Rose*, and *La répudiée* share the common ground of communities rooted in heteropatriarchy.[196] The female characters of

[195] Including the studies authored by Verena Conley, Abigail Bray, Ian Blyth, Susan Sellers, and Morag Shiach.
[196] This term denotes a socio-political system in which men and heterosexuality have hegemonic power over women and other sexual orientations.

these novels must establish identities within and against their common, yet disparate, backdrops: a postcolonial nation in the Middle East, where the effects of (de)colonization led to a spike in violent masculinity and the exclusion of women from nation-making; an impoverished, modern-day Parisian suburb where seductive female bodies serve as an escape from a monotonous lifestyle; and an Orthodox Jewish community in which women are reduced to their uteruses and excluded from knowledge-making. Regardless of the drastic changes in context, from a modern-day Parisian suburb in *Standard*, to the 1970s Lebanon of *Sitt Marie Rose*, to the undated (but assumedly contemporary) community of Mea Shearim in *La répudiée*, women's perceived transgression of gender expectations within heterosexual relationships—amorous or otherwise—continuously bring these women into dangerous territory.

While my goal in highlighting the stories of these female characters has been to foreground their relationship to the nearly three-thousand-year-old myth of the Medusa in some concrete ways by examining how male gazes depict women as dangerous and endangered others, ultimately, this project also examines how these female characters complicate sexual difference and disturb heteropatriarchy. In this project, disturbance has come to represent the creative energy that can result from oppression. Such is the essence of Medusa's laughter, which productively disrupts systems of meaning. In a study of the role of laughter within gender studies, Birgit Kaiser asserts that "Medusa becomes the emblem of a laughter that intends to shatter the entire system of cultural representation and the symbolic-social order that has colonized women's desire for too long" (150). Accordingly, the female characters within the novels of study—Marlène, Marie-Rose, and Rachel—act upon their desires in spite of the danger they arouse and, as a result, productively throw reductive visions of sexual difference into turmoil.

My analysis of the "danger" that these bodies present has had recourse to Freudian, Lacanian, and Kristevan psychoanalysis and how feminist and postcolonial perspectives have questioned and enriched these foundational psychoanalytic texts. In these studies, women have been characterized as literal and symbolic agents of "death" to masculine subjectivity. Consequently, they threaten fragmentation of self, nation, religion, and are thus excluded from discourse—silenced and figuratively decapitated. Speaking to the idea of death as a threatening fragmentation of the human ego, Cixous subverts the psychoanalytic lens and proposes that there is something to be gained from death:

> In what is often inadmissible, contrary, terribly dangerous, and risks turning into complacency—which is the worst of all crimes: it originates here. We are the ones who make of death something mortal and negative. Yes, it is mortal, it is bad, but it is also good; this depends on us…I am verging on the form of murder, as soon as I forget to unceasingly recognize the other's difference. ("The School of the Dead" 13)

In this statement, Cixous reflects more on the Western cultural fear of death, and less on religious communities (such as that of Rachel's Mea Shearim in *La répudiée*) that view death as a bridge to the divine afterlife. Yet, Cixous's articulation of "death" also serves as a synonym for the ego, and consequently touches more populations than first estimated. Fundamentally, Cixous disturbs the life/death binary by examining the potential "productive" consequences of death from a variety of angles. She recognizes the "bad" manifestations of death, which result from political oppression, social aggressions, and unexpected sicknesses. For instance, in this lecture she reflects on her father's death, which has had a heavy impact on her writing, but also remarks, hesitantly, that she may have never become a writer if he had lived.

In her reference to “death,” Cixous is not talking about suicide or a real murder of human bodies. Rather, she illustrates how, by what Gayatri Spivak might call “speaking for the other,” the writer kills their writing subject, or the interlocutor decapitates their partner. For instance, the facile division of the traditional gender binary man/woman, Cixous notes, often “produces death between individuals” (“The School” 49). In a more productive imagination of “death,” Cixous proposes writing as a space to shed or explore such nominations and experience a theoretical “death,” or “ego effacement,”[197] in order to imagine subjectivity differently. In this lecture, Cixous impresses on her audience the relationship between death and writing: “Writing is learning to die. It’s learning not to be afraid, in other words, to live at the extremity of life, which is what the dead, death, give us” (“The School” 10). As Susan Sellers notes in her reading of the lecture, “Death is fundamental: the writer must learn how to die in order to give birth” (104). Thus, in writing, a symbolic death—or ego effacement, however momentary— can also result in the generation of life.

Despite one’s honest efforts to experience death in writing in order to bring life to the other, literary scholar Eilene Hoft-March recognizes the potential danger in posing the death of self in service of the other: “The other as represented in the self’s writing is always at risk of disappearance; the other’s death is always implicit in writing…she [the author, and the author as Cixous] can never quite achieve her ethical ambitions for her relationships with others” (48). As she confesses in more places than one, Cixous herself is aware of the potential failures of ego effacement and mishandling of difference within the self and other: “je ne peux que m’imaginer ‘être à la place de,’ et c’est un parcours hasardeux: se porter avec audacieuse délicatesse vers *là où tu es seul*” (“L’Amour est peur” 66); “Toujours le texte s’écrit sous la douce contrainte de

[197] She uses this term in a 1988 interview with Alice Jardine and Anne Menke, which I think clarifies what she names as “death” in her lecture (“Exploding the Issue” 236).

l'amour. Mon seul tourment, ma seule crainte, c'est de ne pas écrire aussi haut que l'Autre, mon seul chagrin c'est de ne pas écrire aussi beau que l'Amour" ("La venue à l'écriture" 48). Written, or spoken (the first was said in an interview), twenty-six years apart (between 2003 and 1977), both suggest a torment or violence related to the death or erasure of the other that can happen in written representation. And yet, the occlusion of such a textual encounter presents even greater consequences:

> Nor must we forget that any nation with indifference in its soul, which allows its moral standards to slip, has the potential to become as vile as apartheid Africa. It has already happened to us. Today, as in the past, a writer can say that memory is horribly fragile, that we must continually resuscitate it, teach the same story and the same lessons to every generation, even year by year. We always need memory, and a mirror to reflect it back to us. We always need to listen to the other, whether he is a close or a distant neighbour. … It is such a small thing to do, not necessarily to write about, but, with one's skin, with one's heart, each according to their means, to approach another's suffering, not to ignore it, and to do one's best to bear witness to it. To write poetically is to come close to others precisely where they are the most alive, most mortal, closest to death. For me, a text has no urgency unless it is agonizing. Unless it rips open the heart. Unless it pushes us beyond ourselves. (*White Ink* 89-91)

While writing poetically may obscure—ethically or unethically—the division between self and other, but also bears potential to generate the empathy necessary to understand suffering when it is not imposed on one's own body.

Taking Cixous's cue to rewrite the myth of Medusa by imagining productive relationships between female bodies, danger, and death, I propose that the female characters in

the novels studied here perhaps have a closer relationship to this type of "death," or ego effacement, that Cixous addresses than their literary male counterparts. Marked with death, these characters ultimately pose a challenge to the life/death binary: Marlène explodes Bruno's imagination of her as instigator of death and thus demands the right to live a life not commanded by his gaze; Marie-Rose dies for her beliefs in order to save her lover's life and to stand for the pluralization of Lebanese identity; Rachel crosses over into physical death as a way to extend "life" through an embodiment of the divine. Branded as deadly figures, these women meditate on the edges of identity and give death a new, and potentially productive, meaning. Forced to examine the borders of their own identities and how they touch others, this violent marginalization instigates the ability to perceive their existence as deeply intertwined with others, and, ultimately, gauge the necessity to posing a "danger" to hierarchical, oppressive binary systems.[198]

Medusa Meditates

Cixous claims that we only need to look at the Medusa straight on to see her; she is beautiful and she is laughing: "Il suffit qu'on regarde la Méduse en face pour la voir: et elle n'est pas mortelle. Elle est belle et elle rit" ("Le rire" 47). Complicating this claim, Teresa de Lauretis, Italian author and specialist in the History of Consciousness, contends that one's "real, historical, and material" situation influences the subconscious and blurs the way we see "the other," making that eye contact more complicated than Cixous's words suggest at first glance (de

[198] This contemplation might be enriched and complicated by Grace Jantzen's Jantzen's argument in *Foundations of Violence: Death and the Displacement of Beauty* (2004), where she claims that fear of the female, maternal body masks a fear of death, as women are frequently the catalyst of men's mortality (17). In this work, Jantzen envisions how we might veer from "death, violence, [and] mastery", which is the "story of Western culture" to an opening up of spaces for beauty, desire, and a focus on natality instead of death: "To be born is to be embodied […which] contrast[s] with mortality […that brings about] male rationality and female bodiliness" (36, 91).

Lauretis qtd. in Garber and Vickers 199).[199] And yet, a rigorous reading of Cixous deconstructs the way we "see" others and demands critical examination of the desires and histories that influence our "sight." I would like to close with an analysis of a contemporary artist who recomposes the Medusa myth and illustrates her continued relevance to tensions of sexual difference, and who gestures toward the ways in which other differences, such as race, map onto sexual difference. By examining this contemporary artist's work alongside Cixous's Medusa, I reiterate the potential poetic deployment of "sight" as a way to, not colonize or possess the other, but to metaphorically touch the other (with "eyes that caress," as Cixous says[200]) by asking the viewer to adopt the critical modes of sight that Cixous and Lauretis emphasize. Moreover, through the artist's use of blackness, his exhibit also examines the relationship between feminine figures (mythological and otherwise), race, and death, which coincides with my proposal that the female characters of the novels studied in this project unsettle the life/death binary. This meditation on Medusa will continue to parse out the political role of art and the artist, as well as the relation of symbolic and literal death, as identified in Cixous's work, to sexual difference.

American artist Mark Bradford recently represented the United States at the Venice Biennale in May 2017. His exhibit, "Tomorrow is Another Day," takes up the space of a large pavilion that holds several galleries, many of which play on mythological themes. When introducing his work, Bradford spoke about how he was raised around black women in his mother's hair salon, and stated that their expressions of frustration illustrated sources of strength.[201] Like Cixous's statement highlighting Medusa's subversive laughter, Bradford saw

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[199] Notably, de Lauretis is often credited with having coined the term "queer theory." Though, as Alice Echols notes, de Lauretis utilized the term provocatively within a critique of the lack of attention to lesbian studies in the field of queer studies (Echols 16).
[200] This is a quote from her essay "Conversation avec l'âne. Ecrire aveugle" (2003; 82-3).
[201] Bradford, Mark. *Tomorrow is Another Day*. July 15, 2017. I would like to thank Lucy Mensah, art curator at the Detroit Institute of Arts, for sharing pertinent anecdotes from Bradford's presentation of his exhibit.

the ways these women translated outside oppressive forces into productive anger in order to disrupt systems of meaning and inspire change. A reporter's mention that Bradford sometimes refers to his pavilion as "The White House" sheds light on the temporal scope of his work, which links ancient Greek and Roman myth to the contemporary American socio-political landscape. A poem, written by the artist, welcomes visitors to his exhibit. According to a representative of the pavilion, the poem engraved at the entrance "provides a key to the pavilion's narrative" (Douglas). Titled "Hephaestus," the piece narrates his own interaction with the Medusa:

> I mean nobody likes to admit it —
> Somebody threw me out of my house
> They told me
> They told me it was my mama
> But let me tell you somethin'
> The hands dragging me to the cliff
> (And I kept my eyes wide open)
> Were not the hands of my mother.
>
> When I got up
> My foot was broken.
>
> Limping through the ruins of a
> Burned-out promise
> There stood Medusa
> Mad as hell
> I looked her dead in the eye
> And knew her.
> She hid me inside her crown
> I was quiet, I was safe
> Watching
> Watching her turn men to stone
>
> But in a windless calm
> Black shades
> Hidin' money-makin' cargo
> Stole me out to sea
> In the belly of a great dark boat.
> Let me out, let me out
> Damn! I should have gotten out at the last light.
>
> A stone man can't hear.

The lust of these men would only be
Satisfied by black gold and the new world.

But when you ask me,
All I remember is walking
All I remember is falling.[202]

The son of Hera and Zeus, Hephaestus is the Greek god of blacksmiths, artisans, metallurgy, fire, and volcanoes. As the only god with deformities, Hephaestus was banished from the heavens. And yet, instead of blaming his mother for his abjection, the poet-artist attributes his rejection to another force. Bradford's Hephaestus further diverts from Greek tradition in his encounter with Medusa. In the Greek myth, Hephaestus fashioned the sword with which Perseus slayed Medusa. Bradford occludes Hephaestus's complicity in Medusa's decapitation. Instead, he narrates the story of their personal exchange. The female "monster" spares him from her petrifying gaze and hides him in her "crown" of serpents. The mention of her "crown" draws parallels to Cixous's reflection on the Medusa,[203] a term which signifies that Medusa's appearance as dreadful or beautiful depends on who is doing the looking; for Bradford's Hephaestus, Medusa is an unsung queen, not a scorned and fatal Gorgon. Nevertheless, Medusa continues to turn other men to stone, suggesting that she only petrifies those who expect to be petrified. These "stone men," fearful of Medusa, are further characterized as they seem to be the captain of the ship in which this black artist-as-Hephaestus is hidden. Bradford's use of "stone man" finds echoes in Cixous's use of *l'homme classique*,[204] both of which symbolize the white male expansionist full of the desire to possess and conquer: "The lust of these men would only be / Satisfied by black gold

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[202] The poem was transcribed in *Artnet News*: Douglas, "U.S. Pavilion Features Mark Bradford's First Poem."
[203] "Elle pose sa couronne" ("Un effet d'épine rose" 33).
[204] "L'empire du propre, la culture fonctionne à l'appropriation qui est articulée, agie par la crainte de *l'homme classique*, de se voir exproprié, de se voir privé de… son refus d'être privé, d'être en état de séparation, sa peur de perdre l'attribut, laquelle a comme réponse l'Histoire dans sa totalité. Il faut que tout revienne au masculin" ("Le sexe ou la tête" 11, emphasis added).

and the new world," points to the commodification of black bodies and the desire to exploit the resources of American land. Where Cixous remarks the colonization of female bodies (by psychoanalysis and the "men" of History) and likens it to colonial expansion into and the apartheid within Africa in "Le rire," Bradford draws a parallel between Hephaestus's rejection from the heavens and the forced African diaspora executed by the American institution of slavery.

Though de Lauretis awakens Cixous's claim to the ways in which the unconscious skews our view of others, Bradford's poem demonstrates an examination of the unconscious—both his own and that of the larger American cultural unconscious—to relate his experience to that of another. Bradford's Medusa is angry about the judgment and subjugation that sexual difference has brought upon her, a struggle to which the artist-as-Hephaestus can relate. The claim that he "knew her" stirs up suspicion in light of the danger in "knowing" the other that my project has underlined in its examination of Cixous's sexual difference. Yet, rather than signifying a possession, Hephaestus's assertion forms a bridge between his experience as a rejected deity and Medusa's repudiation as abject female.

The artist's engagement with mythology, and its ability to generate both universal and personal meaning, expands to other components of his exhibit. Placed in the center of one of the galleries inside the pavilion, Bradford's "Medusa" is made of thick, black paper rolls that resemble Medusa's serpentine locks. Three paintings adorn the walls around "Medusa," each of which is titled "Siren," apparently dedicated to important women in the artist's life, including his mother (Goldstein). Christopher Bedford, (the director of the Baltimore Museum of Art who nominated Bradford for the position), reads the gallery as an "homage to the black women who were the ballast of Mark's life in the beauty salons before he could stand on his own two feet"

(Finkel). Editor-in-chief of *Artnet News*, Andrew Goldstein reports that "[t]he notion of what it means to navigate as an outsider, as a gay black man in America, is the central conceit for Bradford's pavilion." During his presentation of the exhibit, Bradford specifically cited the inspiration he drew from his relationship with the black women around him during his time at the salon. He felt their similar struggles fostered a bond: his race and sexuality caused his marginalization, while the challenges they faced as black women were a result of analogous racial and sexual oppression.

While reading these pieces against Bradford's biography add personal and contemporary layers to the marginalization that Bradford represents through a host of persecuted mythological figures, the sculpture and paintings also speak for themselves. The "Medusa" sculpture stands several feet tall and appears very heavy, as if weighed down by outside forces.[205] Bradford's Medusa may be enraged and fatigued, but she refuses to be fully flattened by others' torments and expectations. She is riddled with brilliance. Standing in the center of the room, she represents a focal point that demands and arrests the viewer's gaze. And yet, rather than debilitating the viewer, this artistic interpretation of myths inextricably related to sexual difference invites passersby to *med*itate. Fulfilling the ever-rich etymology of Medusa, Cixous reminds her readers that the Gorgon is also associated with the ability to concentrate:

> Elle est le *med* dont nous nous servons tous les jours, la racine du *medical*…Il faut quand même savoir que la Méduse n'est pas un poison, qu'elle est au contraire ce qui peut être

[205] See images of the exhibit at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/27/arts/design/mark-bradford-venice-biennale.html?mcubz=1&_r=0, Accessed 20, Aug 2017.

le médicament suprême, pas seulement celui qui est le médicament de la pensée, c'est-à-dire, la *méditation*. ("Méduse en Sorbonne" 143)[206]

Bradford's gallery takes inspiration from what some Western societies associate with the primitive, feminine, unknown territory—reminiscent of Freud's statement regarding the "dark continent" of female sexuality, which Cixous and, more recently, Ranjana Khanna have associated with colonial exploration of Africa—in order to reconstruct these associations. Ultimately, these pieces submerge viewers in dark tones as a meditation on blackness. Indeed, the rhythms of the dotted white lines that stride across the black backdrop of the "sirens" resemble a breath or heartbeat that have a meditative, oceanic quality. While this gallery does have a racially charged message, the colors also resonate in Greek mythology, in which Death is named the daughter of Night, which represents a menacing femininity that brings misfortune to mankind (*Or méduse médite* 51).[207] The ancient Greeks believed only women could handle childbirth and death (52). Through the lens of Greek mythology, this gallery creates a night-like scene to foster reflection on the relationships between Medusa, death, night, and femininity. In his own interpretation of this gallery, Bradford expresses that "everything is underneath" in the siren paintings, while the Medusa represents an "externalized rage" (Finkel). The sirens invite introspection. The Medusa loses her petrifying gaze. These sirens are not trying to seduce the passerby into a fatal embrace, and the Medusa is not an agent of frightening paralysis. Wronged by others, the Medusa and her surrounding Sirens are not horrifying, as Perseus or the "stone men" around them might expect, but are bold, beautiful, and powerful. Both feminine figures

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[206] The authors of *Or Méduse médite…* (2013) also highlight the Medusa's ability to meditate, to exercise the mind in thought, reflection, or contemplation, and note the ways in which this skill becomes connected with ruse in Greek mythology (see particularly their fourth chapter, "Femme intelligentes, femmes dangereuses").

[207] In their discussion of the role of the Greek conception of "Mort" and "Nuit," the authors cite Laurence Kahn-Lyotard and Nicole Loraux from their entry "Mort" in *Dictionnaire des mythologies* (1981).

engage viewers in a meditation on the discomfort, struggle, and resilience within the artistic subjects, as well as within the viewer themselves.

While this gallery expresses a sense of heavy stillness and bound anger, the poem at the pavilion's entrance, inscribed in all caps, communicates a sense of urgency. Bradford's poem is framed in concrete on a building in Jeffersonian-style architecture that recalls the history of slavery in America. The juxtaposition between the poem's modern language and the pavilion's dated architecture exposes a certain regard toward difference that has been engraved in a number of cultural heritages that can and needs to be rewritten in order to reflect the current situation, which Bradford identifies as "urgent" (Finkel). Together, the sculpture, poem, and paintings, along with the other works in his exhibit (such as the rotunda in Bradford's pavilion, which highlights the exploitation of people subject to the American prison system), communicate different volumes of frustration with the experience of marginalization, particularly within Bradford's home country. As *New York Times* reporter Jori Finkel notes in reference to the first room of the pavilion, "Mr. Bradford, who talks about feeling 'pushed out' by his own country these days, says he first felt a profound sense of 'expulsion' when the AIDS crisis hit hard with painful deaths, compounded by government indifference." Noting the current American government's indifference to LGBTQIA youth, Bradford remarks a repetitive marginalization that he also felt in his own life and, based on his naming of her as one of the "Sirens," in that of his mother's as a black woman in the United States. Commenting on the current American political situation, Bradford stated that he "felt like a lot of the progress we've made to be inclusive, to make sure young little trans kids are safe, was gone in the blink of an eye…Making this body of work became very, very emotional for me. I felt I was making it in a house that was burning" (Finkel). Indeed, this political attitude that Bradford evokes is reflected in the

circulation of visual images of Trump and Clinton as Perseus and decapitated Medusa, which provide noxious depictions of sexual difference. In a recent article, Jacqueline Rose labels this insulting attitude toward certain sexes or sexual orientation as a way to reinstate binary sexual difference; for many, this is:

> a small price to pay for doing away with any possible confusion about sexual identity, for allowing us to hold on to that illusion that, deep in our sexual being where nothing in fact can be certain, we all know unequivocally who and what we are.…a type of marching order, a way of pinning down, with no room for dissent or struggle, the sacred, absolute difference between women and men.[208]

Relating back to Bradford's exhibit, the artist surrounded the Jeffersonian pavilion with pure dirt, an intentional decision made to evoke an apocalyptic setting; Bradford welcomed that visitors threw litter around the pavilion, representing another subversive, if unintended, resistance to such cultural forms of marginalization.[209]

Art, as a space for disruptive laughter and meditation, provides a counterpoint to this disappointing environment of sexual oppression. Bradford's art and its poetic exposure of political urgencies dialogues in interesting ways with Cixous's Medusa as well as her reflections on art, which have become a recurrent subject within her writing. In a chapter on the relationship between poetry and painting in the collection *Peinetures: Écrits sur l'art* (2010), Cixous writes that the paintings that most affect her represent "dissident acts" that serve as "violent operations" (14). Playing with the etymology of the French *opération*, Cixous links the word to *opus, oeuvre,* and *manoeuvre*, to propose that such an operation can be violent: "une forme de violence qui n'a

[208] Rose, "Donald Trump's Victory is a Disaster for Modern Masculinity," 15 Nov. 2016.
[209] Bradford, Mark. *Tomorrow is Another Day*. July 15, 2017. I would like to thank Lucy Mensah, art curator at the Detroit Institute of Arts, for sharing pertinent anecdotes from Bradford's presentation of his exhibit.

pas nécessairement comme but la destruction: une violence qui serait en même temps productive ou qui pourrait être curative" (15). Bradford's pavilion, and particularly his "Medusa" and her surrounding "Sirens," seem to represent such a productive and curative violence. The anger and violence that inspired these works ultimately translate to a communal reflection on suffering, empathy, stagnancy, and the potential for socio-political change.

While art has the ability to "touch" its viewers in its capacity to engage emotional and affective response, the artist also has the ability to touch their larger communities. Demonstrating this potential, Bradford finds grave importance in having a socially active role as an artist. Not only did he found the "Art+Practice" project that works with teenagers in foster care to provide services such as job preparation and finding housing, but he has also partnered with a prison initiative in Venice, where the Biennale is located, to help inmates build job skills. He also helped establish a women-run shop in Venice, which sells goods such as handbags and soaps. Commenting on his political involvement, Bradford insists that his "interest in politics and communities" exists "under the umbrella of being an artist" (qtd. in Goldstein). The universal power of art serves as the connecting tissue, which the artist has the capacity to animate. In her examination of the activation of "touch" in different art forms within the domain of francophone studies, Verena Conley notes that:

> [b]ooks and films are made from what Cixous calls *stigmata*—points of contact where artists and their 'subjects' have been touched—at the intersection of singular and collective sensations…Words touch human beings in different ways, depending on singular and cultural differences. Of importance is the translation of emotion and the relaying of words or images—a singular and a collective shibboleth—that will create resistances or open passages. ("Making Sense" 85-6)

Through his pavilion and social efforts connected to art making, Bradford demonstrates such potential for enacting and creating such *stigmata* and how art can generate individual introspection, an internal touching, and intersecting touches between communities.

Such metaphorical touch engages in a non-possessive human connection that does not "eat the other," to which bell hooks draws attention, as a result of the "stone man's lust" or avarice that "eats away [at the other] like rust" (Cixous, "Poétique" 63, my translation). Rather than a possession or consumption of the other who is seen as a threat or fragmentation, texts, including written and visual art, provide an opportunity to pause, to stand in the moment, which can be articulated as a momentary death or "ego effacement," and to med-itate upon the Medusan other. The novels and narratives of sexual differences, the representations of *déesses*, in this project, then, not only illustrate a common trend of depicting female bodies as dangerous, endangered, and disruptive, but their stories also serve as, perhaps violent and therapeutic, artistic spaces in which readers can meditate on the fables of sexual difference and the necessity of posing a danger to such systems of meaning.

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