May 68 and French Literary Production: A Periodization of Modern Revolutionary Writing in the Works of Conrad Detrez, Monique Wittig, and Jean Genet

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A PERIODIZATION OF MODERN REVOLUTIONARY
WRITING IN THE WORKS OF
CONRAD DETREZ, MONIQUE WITTIG, AND JEAN GENET

By

Arthur F. Tang

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the requirements for the degree of
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This study proposes a renewed consideration of May 68 French literary production through a periodization of Modern Revolutionary Writing. The doxa advanced by the critical literature suggests the revolutionary dimensions of May 68 failed to impact substantively on cultural production in France. In the writings of Conrad Detrez, Monique Wittig, and Jean Genet, a different conclusion is reached through textual analyses of structural synchronicity and ad rem narrative interactions with the historic marker. Rethinking and critically revisiting several interpretations of the relation between France’s May 68 “revolution” and literary and cultural production, the texts at stake are read as poetical narratives resignifying the very notion of revolutionary writing as they are implicitly related to a foundational palimpsest in which the “rupture” provoked by the May 68 events plays an essential role.

Central to this critical rethinking is the dialectical “translatability” (in Benjamin’s sense) of a political, social and sexual revolution into literary wording, poetics, narration and rhetoric. Specifically, the inter-semiotic translation of the mediation of sexuality and the body is analyzed through the lens of gender and queer studies, identifying and exploring the untranslatable “supplement” the operation supposes. Providing a substructure of cohesiveness and intertextuality among seemingly disparate literary
works, Modern Revolutionary Writing fills a lacuna in the continual evolution of French literary criticism.
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I would like to express my appreciation to the following individuals for their contribution to this dissertation: Didier Eribon, Tierno Monénembo, Namascar Shaktini, and Gloria Steinem, for sharing their time and expertise with me in a series of rich and rewarding exchanges.

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Dr. David Ellison, for ensuring my critical discussion of literary texts remained balanced and grounded in close readings unencumbered by abstraction.

Dr. Ralph Heyndels, my mentor, whose faith in me never ebbed, and whose openness and contribution to my interpretation of a significant body of literature guided and assured the success of this project.

This dissertation is dedicated to

Jacqueline Karrh, my alpha and omega.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

A set of new socio-political conditions brings about the rise of a literary trend, not directly however, but translated into the internal tasks and problems of literature itself, and indeed the trend only arises when that translation actually takes place.

Kazimierz Wyka

In May 1968, a series of student protests in France rapidly escalated into the biggest strike and the largest mass movement in French history. Protesting capitalism, American imperialism, and the conservatism of Gaullism, nine million people stopped working and daily life in France ground to a halt. And yet, the immediate upshot of the short-lived historical syncope—that explosion of cultural politics, direct democracy, and street carnivalesque¹ known as May 68—was a massive electoral victory and consolidation of power for the conservative forces represented by President de Gaulle and the constitution of 1958, while today the “official” memory of May 68 is that of a mellow youth uprising stripped of its revolutionary fervor, often serving a cultural and political agenda antithetical to the movement’s aspirations (Groppo 30). What, then, are some of the sociopolitical and cultural implications that can be recovered from the palliation of what is considered to be the most important event to take place in France since the Second World War?² Why yet another review of May 68 and, more specifically, the

¹ In Rabelais and His World, Mikhail Bakhtin posits a carnivalesque narrative mode in literature which parallels the overturning of pieties, social mores, and ready-made truths during the carnival season. Given Fredric Jameson’s characterization of May 68 as a “festival” (“Periodizing” 192) and Maurice Blanchot’s assessment of it as the moment whereby “une communication explosive” occurred in a non-hierarchical atmosphere allowing each individual—regardless of class, age, gender, or cultural background—to transcend established social conventions (Communauté 52), Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque seems appropriate in this descriptive context of May 68.

² In his discussion of May 68, Peter Starr states, “No single series of events looms larger on the cultural landscape of the Fifth Republic” (3), and Robert Frank points out the fact that “[d]e nombreux
literature produced in its wake, an additional exploration of questions and polemics so often probed over the course of the past 40 years? After all, any critical consideration of the event is more often than not dismissed by pundits as an exercise in futility—the proverbial beating of the dead horse. However, despite Raoul Vaneigem’s recent assertion, for example, that “les commémorations [de Mai 68] ne font jamais que célébrer un cadavre” (172), or Jean-Claude Montel’s conclusion that “[é]crire sur Mai près de quarante ans après alors que des centaines de livres et des milliers de témoignages ont été produits peut sembler vain et inutile” (246), as well as Margaret Atack’s qualification of the event as “analytically unfathomable” (“Edgar Morin” 296), an ever-evolving horizon of inquiry challenges such reductions by probing the legacy of conflicting assessments left by individuals who participated in and commented on the momentous occasion. Such contradictions proliferate in the debates between those who seek to recover a past—their own and others’—a past they view to have been distorted, even hijacked, during the Giscard and Mitterrand years, and those who have assumed the mantle of self-proclaimed de facto spokespersons for all things related to May 68 (Ross, May 18). It is my claim that these latter individuals who have dominated the discussion since the 1970s, specifically known as the New Philosophers, have succeeded in effacing much of the revolutionary potentiality engendered by May 68, thereby contributing to a general sondages, des années 70 à nos jours, montrent régulièrement que l’opinion en France considère 1968 comme l’événement français le plus important depuis la Seconde Guerre mondiale” (21).

3 Raoul Vaneigem suggests, “The commemorations [of May 68] never serve any purpose other than to celebrate a cadaver” (172), and Jean-Claude Montel reasons that “to write about May after nearly forty years when hundreds of books and thousands of testimonials have been produced may seem vain and useless” (172). My translation. All subsequent translations into English are my own unless otherwise indicated.

4 By no means do I attribute the enervation of the revolutionary legacy of May 68 solely to the New Philosophers. Additional considerations must be factored into the historical account. As Bruno
reticence among academic critics to recognize any substantive changes in the literature produced in France subsequent to the watershed year.

Contrary to the assessments of Patrick Combes, Alain Finkielkraut, Kristin Ross, and Margaret Atack, for example, I contend that a number of French writers\(^5\) did engage in a strategic and intimate dialogue with the revolutionary dimensions of May 68, setting

Groppo convincingly argues, for example, numerous and often competing “groupuscules” (discrete groups of people united by a particular cause or vision) came onto the scene as a result of May 68, but they were never able to recapture or harness the pervasive revolutionary élan that united the striking masses (29-30). The antihierarchical Maoist group, Vive la Révolution is an excellent example of how a revolutionary groupuscule can splinter into subgroups. Michael Scott Christofferson suggests that the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF) and the gay rights group Front des Homosexuels Révolutionnaires (FHAR) were direct offshoots of Vive la Révolution (48). Namascar Shaktini, however, remembers the events differently, having been directly involved in them. She shared with me her recollection of the sequence of events, which clarifies Christofferson’s assertion: “[Christofferson] is partly right. In January 1970, Monique Wittig and I went in her deux chevaux to visit a couple of informal meetings of a small group of women in Vive la Révolution, trying to get them to organize against the sexism of the radical militant males. Prior to this time (when I appeared on the scene) Monique, her sister, Antoine Fouquet, Susanne Finn, and about a dozen other women had been meeting in private apartments, raising their consciousness, discussing radical leftist theory. In May 1970 this group, led by Monique Wittig, organized the first action of the MLF at Vincennes. There may have been some women from VLR who joined us there that day; I didn’t know all of the eighteen. After that, the movement grew and was joined by women of many other ‘tendances,’ including those who had been ‘militantes’ in various ‘maoist’ groups including VLR. There was always tension over the ‘primary contradiction.’ Christine Delphy wrote her early analysis of the ‘principal enemy’ answering those who thought the Marxist revolution would automatically liberate women, and that feminism was just a bourgeois phenomenon. As for homosexuality, it did not exist in China, according to certain ‘maoist’ spokesmen for the correct line in Paris. Christofferson is also partly wrong. The MLF and the FHAR did not emerge from VLR. Some people from VLR no doubt joined these movements, however. Another ‘maoist’ group was La Cause du Peuple. There was also a Marxist-Leninist group and one who identified with Trotsky. There were anarchists. All of these militants tended to be suspicious of feminism and homosexuality as belonging to the bourgeois as opposed to the working class (as if working class people existed in a vacuum outside of sexism and homophobia)” (“On Revolution”). These scenarios are borne out by the following observation made by Michel Foucault during an interview with Duccio Trombadori: “[…] in France, somewhat absurdly, the May experience was overshadowed by the phenomenon of splinter groups, by the fragmentation of Marxism into small bodies of doctrine that pronounced excommunication upon one another” (“Remarks”141). In other words, as various groupuscules jockeyed for primacy on the revolutionary stage, the dynamic of internal contradiction and frequent auto-extinction defined the norm in post-May 68 revolutionary discourse—a dynamic far too pervasive to quantify in the present discussion. As such, I have chosen to direct my argument toward the New Philosophers in response to their campaign to discredit the May 68 legacy—an ongoing effort that has enjoyed remarkable success over the past four decades.

\(^5\) In order to delimit the scope of my investigation, I have chosen to employ the term “French writers” because the specific focus of the present study is on three writers who lived and wrote in what is often referred to as “L’Hexagone,” or France. Whereas Conrad Detrez was born and raised in Belgium, he eventually lived in Paris and became a French citizen and therefore is included in my analysis of writers operating within L’Hexagone.
apart their work as a unique and important body of writing. In concert with the zeitgeist of the May 68 era, these writers elaborate a play of continuity and discontinuity with the status quo, articulated and brought to the fore in their work through a dialectical confrontation between key micropolitical projects and grand narratives related to their respective political and social causes. In the literary and theoretical works of Conrad Detrez, Monique Wittig, and Jean Genet, in particular, we observe a revolt—orchestrated through a rigorous unveiling and ultimate subversion of brasílidade, the “Straight Mind,” and “Orientalism,” respectively—against the grand narratives that perpetuate

6 Peter Starr associates what he calls micropolitical projects with the numerous political concerns and struggles that directly followed May 68, such as, among others, the nascent Mouvement de libération des femmes, the anti-psychiatry movement, and the gay rights movement. Jean Lyotard bases his definition of Postmodernism on the notion that postmodernist thought critiques, questions, and deconstructs the grand (meta) narratives that function as epistemological anchors in Western society. Instead of grand narratives, which seek to explain totalizing thought, Lyotard calls for a series of mini-narratives that are provisional, contingent, and relative. Lyotard thereby provides us with an argument for the postmodern breakdown or fragmentation of beliefs and values as opposed to, for example, Jürgen Habermas who proposes a society unified under a grand narrative characterized by his theory of Communicative Reason (which is distinguished from the rationalist tradition in that it posits the site of rationality to be rooted in the structures of interpersonal linguistic exchange and communication as opposed to the cosmos or the knowing subject). In Lyotard’s *La Condition postmoderne*, chapters 9 and 10 present the bulk of his argument related to narratives and the legitimation of knowledge.

7 Brazilian nationalists forged and propagated the myth of brasílidade in order to convince the world that Brazil enjoyed an all-inclusive national identity which promoted the idea of a racially harmonious national family. For the French (as well as for many other people who had regular contact with Brazil), the notion of brasílidade morphed into a unique ideological imaginary construction upon which various writers projected their own sociopolitical, geographical, and often erotic notions mediated through a French lens. We see evidence of this dynamic throughout the writings of, among others, Simone de Beauvoir and Blaise Cendrars.

8 For Wittig, heterosexuality is a regime of oppression perpetuated by a socially constructed perception of a natural division between the sexes. Such a division, according to Wittig, facilitates the oppression and exploitation of not only women, but of any other member of society who is not white, heterosexual, and male, thereby fueling and perpetuating what Wittig calls (in an ironic appropriation of Lévi-Strauss’s *La Pensée sauvage*) “the straight mind.”

9 Edward Said theorizes Orientalism by describing and critiquing what he perceives to be the false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the East. In *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Gayatri Spivak argues that Said’s analysis “was not a study of marginality, not even of marginalization. It was the study of the construction of an object, for investigation and control” (56). By presenting colonial discourse as an object of study, Said opens the door to a whole new area of analysis whereby the marginal can speak, be spoken, and even be spoken for.
dominant modes of thinking. In order to establish my own position amidst these different projects and how they resonate with May 68, I will trace the revolutionary dimensions of such confrontations in Detrez’s *L’herbe à brûler*, Wittig’s *Les guérillères*, and Genet’s *Un Captif amoureux*. A critical consideration of these works grounded in a New Historicist perspective\(^\text{10}\) will guide me in theorizing what I call *Modern Revolutionary Writing* as a heretofore unrecognized periodization attributable to French literature produced in reaction to and in dialogue with what Robert Frank calls “*l’esprit 68,*” or the “spirit of 68” (19).

The theorizing of a literary periodization never comes about in a vacuum due to inescapable considerations of intertextuality.\(^\text{11}\) For example, the well-trodden topus of Edenic desire traverses much of Modern Revolutionary Writing which, nevertheless, resists conflation with established modes of “emancipatory” and “utopian” discourse. To be sure, literary works dating as far back as Christine de Pizan’s *Livre de la cité des dames* of 1405 serve as important contributions to utopian and emancipatory writing and enjoy pride of place among the canons of French literature,\(^\text{12}\) yet Modern Revolutionary Writing differs on both thematic and structural levels as a site of contestation with events and ramifications specific to May 68. If utopian reverie comprises an important

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\(^{10}\) The New Historicist approach to literary criticism, according to M.H. Abrams, allows us “to conceive of a literary text as ‘situated’ within the institutions, social practices, and discourses that constitute the overall culture of a particular time and place, and with which the literary text interacts as both a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes” (183). More on New Historicism follows in the present chapter.

\(^{11}\) I defer to critic William Irwin’s broad definition of the term ‘intertextuality’ in this instance. He states: “[Intertextuality] has come to have almost as many meanings as users, from those faithful to Kristeva’s original vision to those who simply use it as a stylish way of talking about allusion and influence” (228).

\(^{12}\) In *The Woman of Reason*, Karen Green demonstrates what she considers to be Christine de Pizan’s articulation of a feminist humanism functioning as a utopian alternative to the limiting dualisms of masculinist humanism.
underlying thematic in Modern Revolutionary Writing, it is because the related narrative internalizes what Bruno Groppo calls “une forte tension utopique” (28) animating the May 68 phenomenon. A crucial contextualization of this tension is offered in Régis Debray’s 1967 *Révolution dans la révolution? et autres essais*, where the Cuban Foco theory asserts itself against both the Leninist conception of party practice as well as the practical experience of the Chinese revolution under Mao.

Debray’s text shows that the *foco* strategy of the mobile guerilla base is distinct from both the traditional model of class struggle involving an essentially urban proletariat rising up against a bourgeois ruling class and the Chinese experience of a mass peasant uprising born in the countryside. The *foco* revolution is conceptualized as being neither “in” nor “of” country or city; rather, it is located in what Fredric Jameson calls “that third or non-place […] in which the guerilla band moves in perpetual displacement” (“Periodizing” 202). The concept of a newly emergent revolutionary space situated outside the “real” political social and geographical world of country and city—and of the historical social classes—may be designated as a properly “utopian” place and operates as the *locus summus* of revolutionary activity in May 68 literary production. As such, Modern Revolutionary Writing not only belies Mark Poster’s assertion that “the future appears no longer a subject for the utopian imagination” in post World War II French literary production (530-31), but it also provides a conduit through which the revolutionary scope of the historic moment continues to resonate. In sum, the utopian ideal remains an important topos in Modern Revolutionary Writing, re-signified and perpetually renewed by its delocalization to both a perfect place as well as to a non-place whose very outcome is far from assured.
The utopian thematic, spanning centuries of French literary production, culminates in Modern Revolutionary Writing in an aporetic “Nonsuch Place,” to borrow from Tudor terminology to designate a site of fantastical magnificence and potentiality. Whereas aporia is generally associated with doubt and irresolvable internal contradiction, it operates as an important affirmative dimension to Modern Revolutionary Writing in a dynamic Ralph Heyndels terms a “positive negativity or a negative positivity” (“Political”). What Heyndels refers to is reflected in Marguerite Duras’ *Le Camion* of 1977. In this work, notions of borders and zones are distanced and rendered indiscernable, situated somewhere between reality and its undefined epiphenomenon. When the female protagonist in *Le Camion* states, “Que le monde aille à sa perte, c’est la seule politique” (73-74), she is re-articulating on a micro level a certain Marxist internationalist discourse which considers nations to be nothing more than bourgeois constructs to be eliminated in an international class struggle waged by the working class against the ruling one. On a macro level, however, she is positing the imminent collapse of the world, whereby “all that can be embraced is that which can never be grasped, namely the unknowable, the utopian, empty future; hence all positively identified collectivities (bound together by a common narrative, projecting a common goal) are to be rejected” (Crowley 237). This vision however results in two sites of political aporia: First, no matter how much one self-identifies as an “internationalist,” the specter of one’s national identity persists, if only in traces or as history (Hayes 10). In other words, it is an illusory dream to hope that national differences will wither away in a world without borders. Secondly, how can a universal push toward the rejection of all positively identified collectivities (bound together by a common narrative, projecting a common goal) be achieved in a world without borders.

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13 Marxists who reject identificatory labels based on national citizenship often refer to themselves as “internationalists” (Hayes 10).
identified collectivities be coterminous when the two terms cancel each other out by
definition? Duras offers a way out of the dilemma by positing a collectivity formed on
the *impossible* basis of the gesture of shared refusal, namely one whose members are
“seuls et ensemble à la fois” (qtd. in Crowley 237). To be clear, a world without borders,
filled with masses of people stripped of individual identities, is not the utopia Duras
envisions. Instead, as Maurice Blanchot had done ten years earlier,\(^\text{14}\) she invokes an
“irreducible community”:

> Rien ne nous lie que le refus. Dévoyés de la société de classe, mais en vie,
inclassables mais incassables, nous refusons. Nous poussons le refus jusqu’à refuser
nous intégrer (sic) dans les formations politiques qui se réclament de refuser ce que
nous refusons. (‘Ecrit’ 77)

The notion of *perdition*, alluded to by the woman in *Le Camion*, is thus grounded in a
radical form of collectivity defined by a universal refusal of all common (i.e., grand)
narratives. This vision has often been interpreted to reflect resignation, exasperation
and despair. In a 1983 interview with Dominique Noguez, however, Duras offers a corrective
to this error, stating: “La perdition n’est pas la mort. C’est un brassement de population.
C’est un même magma, c’est retourner à l’origine des choses. […] La perte du monde,
c’est que le monde se répande, c’est que l’égalité se répande, que le sort commun
devienne vraiment commun” (112). Duras views this aporetic *perdition* as an affirming,
constructive world vision even if it is, in the end, impossible. As an important rhetorical
*locus communis* in Modern Revolutionary Writing, political aporia translates the
reformulation of the revolutionary dream into new possibilities.

My dissertation is inspired by the peculiar fact that French writers operating
within this revolutionary framework have yet to be discussed in such terms; in fact, their

\(^{14}\) My discussion of Blanchot follows further in this chapter.
work tends to be pigeonholed into discrete categories (e.g. Wittig’s and Genet’s writing, which is often considered emblematic of radical lesbianism and subversive homoerotic literature, respectively) or neglected altogether (e.g. Detrez’s work, which has received scant critical attention). Either way, the revolutionary implications of May 68 in French literature continue to be occluded by critical literature on both sides of the Atlantic. If critics have failed to problematize the different ways in which May 68 functions as an important text—a palimpsest—that constitutes a revolutionary ethos in French literary production, it is hardly an isolated omission. During a 1981 roundtable discussion about May 68, for example, Alain Finkielkraut characterizes literary aesthetic value associated with what he calls “la pensée des années soixante” as “rien d’autre qu’un préjugé [où] la littérarité d’un roman policier est égale à celle d’un roman de Flaubert” (Ferry, Mai 68).

I find Finkielkraut’s assertion problematic for several reasons: a) it ignores the revolutionary dimensions of post-May 68 writing, b) it reduces the literary production to one genre (i.e., the detective novel), c) it posits the existence of a sole aesthetic value (“la valeur esthétique”), and d) it is confined to one type of thinking in the context of a single framework (i.e., “la pensée des années soixante”). In the same discussion, Finkielkraut qualifies the aesthetic value of post-May 68 literature as “une espèce de surinvestissement idéologique d’une culture au détriment d’une autre” (68).

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15 I attribute the notion of May 68 as a sort of palimpsestic text to Margaret Atack, who offers a rather poetic assessment of the ways in which “May is shadowed by itself as text; as utopian discourse.” Atack argues that “May is at one and the same time a text of now and of the future; from whichever angle one approaches it, the vision of May is a double vision” (May 2).

16 Finkielkraut argues that the aesthetic value inherent to “the 1960’s way of thinking” is “nothing more than a prejudice whereby the literariness of a detective novel is equal to that of a novel by Flaubert.”

17 The aesthetic value in post-May literature is, according to Finkielkraut, “a type of ideological overinvestment of one culture to the detriment of another.”
type of aesthetic value necessitates the weakening or effacement of another is never explained by Finkielkraut; indeed, such a restrictive premise defies the broader understanding of May 68 as an event that “swept away categorical territories” (Ross, *May 7*).

In *La littérature et le mouvement de Mai 68: Écriture, mythes, critique, écrivains 1968-1981*, Patrick Combes offers a more expansive assessment of French literature produced after May 68. In this work published in 1984, however, Combes asserts that May 68 not only failed to result in any new literary forms but also fell short of generating any meaningful context of revolution in the literature produced in the wake of the events. He states:

La littérature profite parfois aux révolutions—l'inverse est rarement vrai. […]. Mai n'est pas un mouvement révolutionnaire qui suscite une autre, une ‘nouvelle littérature.’ […]. En tant qu'événement historique, Mai échoue à générer, c'est évident, après son repli, stase immédiate, une production littéraire qui soit arme, prolongement militant. […]. Pas de ‘style de Mai’ donc; les formes romanesques ne sortent pas modifiées du conflit et ne peuvent l'être […]. (252-53)

Combes bolsters his argument by pointing out the fact that in the vast bibliography of analyses of May 68, “il n'existe rien sur la littérature; aucun titre ne traite exclusivement du fait littéraire” (11). Fifteen years later, Margaret Atack fills the bibliographical void Combes refers to by publishing *May 68 in French Fiction and Film*. In this critical survey

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18 Combes writes: “Literature often benefits revolutions—the opposite is rarely true. […]. May is not a revolutionary movement that gives rise to another, to a ‘new literature.’ […]. As a historical event, it is obvious that May failed to generate, after it receded…upon its immediate end…a literary production that functions as a weapon or militant extension. No ‘May 68 style,’ then; the standard form of the novel was not modified by the conflict nor could it have been […].” (252-53). Edgar Morin offers support for Combes’ assessment by adding: “May was lived so poetically, so mythically and so realistically at the same time that a total consumption of imaginary forces occurred from which no new literature could spring.” (cited in Combes 252).

19 Combes adds: “In the vast bibliography of analyses of May 68, there exists nothing on literature…not a single title that exclusively considers the literary occurrence.” (11)
covering a wide range of cultural production, Atack offers an appraisal of post-May 68 French cinema, imagery, and fiction by treating questions of alienation, ennui, and representation, yet she never addresses the question of revolution in the context of literary, cinematic, or aesthetic production.

More recently, in an analysis of thirty years of ideological discourse about May 68, Kristin Ross defends what she considers to be a disconnect between the events of May 68 and the literature subsequently produced. Ross states: “In the realm of high-cultural production in France—especially literature—May has made little impact, either thematically or formally” (May 14). Not only does Ross share Combes’ assessment of May 68 literary production, but she also echoes Finkielkraut’s preoccupation with “the recurrent use of the detective trope or genre by writers concerned with the 1960s […]” (May 146). Ross suggests the detective novel plays this key role because the legacy of May 68 has been “lost or concealed, perhaps even confiscated,” and this “crime” consists of having one group (i.e., the New Philosophers) supplant and override the mass movement (147). In other words, a comprehensive and enduring prise de parole has occurred which “allows the hygiene of the contemporary national fiction, the present social order, to prevail,” and it is the detective genre that uncovers what has been lost, or names the criminals or forces responsible for the concealment (146-47). In this way, Ross advances an interesting theory as to how and why the detective novel functions as a prominent genre for literary representations of the May 68 legacy, yet she elides what I consider to be the most important and under-analyzed question: What of the revolutionary ethos of May 68 literary production?
On a broader scale, this question remains unaddressed in two of the most authoritative anthologies on French literature produced in the past twenty years. In *A New Anthology of French Literature* edited by Denis Hollier, approximately fifteen references to May 68 appear in the index. These references, however, are devoid of critical discussion of the event in a literary context (although Foucault and Deleuze are discussed briefly in terms of epistemological shifts in philosophy). Similarly, in the more recently published *A Short History of French Literature* edited by Sarah Kay, Terence Cave, and Malcolm Bowie, four brief references to May 68 appear in a purely historical context (it should be noted, however, that a passing association is made between the slogans of May 68 and the word games that characterize Michel Leiris’ *La Règle du jeu*). In sum, neither anthology broaches the question of revolution and literary production in the context of May 68.

To correct what I perceive to be a pervasive oversight in the doxa advanced by the critical literature, I will use May 68 as a historical anchor not only for methodological reasons, but also because the May 68 events signify a pivotal instance whereby, as Edgar Morin observes: “Rien n’a changé. Tout a changé” (*Brèche* 153).20 One thing that has incontestably changed over the course of the twentieth century is the concept of revolution, which has atrophied into a state of aphasia in academic and mainstream discussion since May 68 transpired. This phenomenon follows what Martin Jay calls a “pattern of deradicalization which succeeds every period of revolutionary enthusiasm”

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20 Morin writes: “L’ambiguïté de mai se poursuit au-delà de mai, dans la décennie 70. Rien n’a changé. Tout a changé. Tout est comme avant, rien n’est comme avant.” “The ambiguity of May continues beyond May, into the 70s. Nothing changed. Everything changed. Everything is as it was before, nothing is as it was.” Morin’s observation echoes Walter Benjamin’s conceptualization of the “explosive” convergence of past and future in the presence of the now.
However, I submit that any such deradicalization takes time to occur; therefore, the window of opportunity for Modern Revolutionary Writing to flourish reveals itself to be dynamic, relatively short-lived, and specific to the May 68 context. In other words, the exceptional confluence of events that gave rise to Modern Revolutionary Writing has passed, but the revolutionary dimension to the literature that came out of the events merits renewed consideration.

In response to my query as to whether or not any embers of revolutionary ethos survive in francophone literature forty-five years after May 68, Guinean novelist and playwright, Tierno Monénembo—himself no stranger to revolution in light of his experience under the Sékou Touré regime in the early 1970s—offers the following metaphorical reflection: “Est-ce que la thématique révolutionnaire est usée de nos jours? Oui, comme un levier de vitesse qui a trop servi.” Monénembo thus concurs with my observation that revolution is presently not a central theme or constitutive element in contemporary francophone writing. The focus of my dissertation is therefore on French literature produced during the brief period spanning 1968 and 1986 (starting with the year during which Wittig wrote *Les guérillères* and ending with the posthumous publication of Genet’s *Un Captif amoureux*). These parameters, however, are in no way intended to limit Modern Revolutionary Writing to a fixed timeline; rather, they should be used as guideposts for exploring what I consider to be rich, overlooked paths of inquiry which deserve to be problematized.

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21 When I asked novelist and dramatist, Tierno Monénembo, about the absence of revolution in current francophone literature, he replied, “Is the revolutionary thematic exhausted? Yes, like an overused clutch.”
Theoretical Approach to the Periodization of Modern Revolutionary Writing

Le stéréotype, c’est le prêt-à-porter de l’esprit. En effet, notre esprit est meublé de représentations collectives à travers lesquelles nous appréhendons la réalité quotidienne et faisons signifier le monde.

Ruth Amossy

The task of theorizing any periodization in literature must be approached with defined parameters. One must contend with, for example, how best to determine a timeframe based on meaningful events as opposed to the meaningless march of time, or how to resist folding chronological periods into literary topoi which results in homogenizing intellectual history or affirming a specific teleology of history. Because it is possible to trace the origins of May 68 to any number of points in history depending upon the orientation of one’s analysis, I choose to employ as a chronological baseline the years 1965 to 1977, which obviously differs from the parameters I have chosen for my literary analyses. That the two periods do not neatly overlap has no bearing on the questions I am setting out to explore. I begin with 1965 because a marked resurgence of leftist activism occurs during that year. This resurgence—which Pascal Ory and Jean-François Sirinelli call the “first cracks” in the Gaullist fortress (212)—is engendered in large part by the American bombings in North Vietnam, resulting in the reawakening of a moribund French Left. Michael Scott Christofferson explains the significance of this reawakening to the events of 1968:

There was, of course, one important exception to the political lassitude of the French intellectual Left before 1968: their mobilization against the American war in Vietnam beginning with its escalation in early 1965. This time, unlike during the French Indochinese War or the Algerian war, French intellectuals rallied unambiguously and in large numbers against the war and in doing so were largely in tune with the French press,

22 In Penser la Révolution française, for example, François Furet traces what he calls the totalitarian dimensions of May 68 to the French Revolution of 1789.
political elites, and public opinion. [...]. The 1965-68 campaign against the Vietnam War contributed, especially in the younger generation, to a radicalization of intellectual politics leading up to 1968 by inflating rhetoric [...] by mobilizing individuals into groups in demonstrations, petition campaigns, and reflection on politics. (50)

The “radicalization of intellectual politics” engenders tremendous interest in tiers-mondisme, or third worldism, whereby young French revolutionaries, intellectuals, and students look to the libertarian struggles of developing nations for models of revolutionism untainted by the blandishments of capitalist society (Starr 3). I will discuss the different ways in which tiers-mondisme serves as a foundational thematic in Modern Revolutionary Writing, operating as a powerful critique of the geo-political policies of the French nation. The other end of my chronological baseline brings us to 1977, which marks the moment at which Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann are catapulted to international fame as representatives of the New Philosophers on the French television show Apostrophes, thus securing a bully pulpit from which the New Philosophers would be able to steer intellectual, philosophical, cultural, and political discourse.

The position from which one theorizes a literary periodization is also of paramount importance, for it invariably determines the parameters which will define the periodization vis-à-vis the subjective voice, the literary aspect (i.e., the poetics to be considered), chronology, geopolitical phenomena which may or may not be considered pertinent, how the writers are situated, etc. Because we find ourselves in a globalizing academy, as Gayatri Spivak points out in Outside in the Teaching Machine, we are more often than not rethinking a period from a specific vantage in order to retell a story that may be about how the present relates to the past in question (23-24). In order to shine light on such connections, my argument will privilege the voices of traditionally
marginalized subjects whose very awareness of being relegated to the periphery becomes of interest to the “center.” Thanks to, among others, Jean-Paul Sartre, Henri Lefebvre, Herbert Marcuse, and Michel Foucault, the revolutionary field has been evacuated of the old guard comprised of intellectuals speaking for the masses, opening the way to an array of historically discounted agents such as women, homosexuals, ethnic minorities, immigrants, and students. It is May 68 that gives voice to these new agents of counter-culture revolution—heralding the explosion in Modern Revolutionary Writing of micropolitical projects which call into question, defy, and collapse timeworn meta-narratives of the past. In Knowledge/Power, Foucault argues against such global, totalitarian theories, privileging “an autonomous, uncentralised kind of theoretical production, one […] whose validity is not dependent on the approval of the established régimes of thought” (81).

In addition to Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, whose postmodernist outlook is characterized by an attitude of incredulity towards meta-narratives, will serve as a source for the theoretical grounding of my critical approach. In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard bases his argument on the notion that postmodernist thinking critiques, questions, and deconstructs meta-narratives that function as epistemological anchors in Western society.23 Instead of meta-narratives, Lyotard calls for a series of mini-narratives that are provisional, contingent, and relative in order to provide us with an argument for the postmodern breakdown or fragmentation of established beliefs and values. Lyotard describes the postmodern condition as a questioning of meta-narratives and their reliance on forms of transcendent and universal truth:

23 Examples of meta-narratives include nationalism, science, and religion, among many others.
En simplifiant à l’extrême, on tient pour ‘postmoderne’ l’incréduilité à l’égard des métarécits. Celle-ci est sans doute un effet du progrès; mais ce progrès à son tour la suppose. À la désuétude du dispositif métanarratif de légitimation correspond notamment la crise de la philosophie métaphysique, et celle de l’institution universitaire qui dépendait d’elle. La fonction narrative perd ses fonccteurs, le grand héros, les grands périls, les grands périples et le grand but. Elle se disperse en d’éléments langagiers narratifs, mais aussi dénotatifs, prescriptifs, descriptifs, etc. [...] (7-8)\(^24\)

Lyotard’s skepticism replaces meta-narratives with a focus on specific local contexts as well as the diversity of human experience. He posits an irreducible plurality of language games, each with its own local rules, legitimation, and practices in order to answer his own query: “Où peut résider la legitimité, après les métarécits?” (8). Postmodernism by definition must call into question notions of “legitimacy” in order to refine our sensibility to differences and reinforce our capacity to confront the incommensurable (Condition 8-9). This new perspective calls for the existence of what Michael A. Peters terms a “multiplicity of theoretical standpoints” rather than grand, all-encompassing theories (7). The work of Detrez, Wittig, and Genet is emblematic of the ways in which writers operate from different theoretical positions to subvert and de-legitimize the “functors” of meta-narrative functions.

In addition to Lyotard’s argument, a postcolonial perspective of the different ways in which received ideas and stereotypes allow us both to apprehend reality and to signify it will serve as an underlying theoretical touchstone. In particular, Homi Bhabha’s study of colonial stereotypes exposes a fundamental paradox related to the ways in which

\(^{24}\) Lyotard provides the following summary of the postmodern dynamic: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define ‘postmodern’ as incredulity toward meta-narratives. This incredulity is without doubt a product of progress in the sciences, but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the meta-narrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements, but also denotative elements, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on [...]”
stereotypes operate through an intrinsic “fetischistic nature,” which results in the perpetuation and propagation of received ideas:

The stereotype…is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is already ‘in place’ and already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated…as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual licence of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved. (“Cultures” 66)

The important duplexity Bhabha brings to light reveals how the lack of a definitive anchoring in truth need not represent a weakness or second-guessing of the stereotype’s “validity” as an assigned identity. A high degree of iterativity suffices to turn a nondemonstrable statement into a memorable formula that parades as truth and common sense, hence the enduring propagation of received ideas (Rosello 37). Ruth Amossy in turn argues from a materialist perspective that stereotypes, as a wholly modern phenomenon, serve as instruments of analysis for the social sciences (11). She demonstrates how the veracity of meta-narratives is solidified by the transference, application, and interpretation of stereotypes into important realms of scientific inquiry. Most pertinent to Modern Revolutionary Writing, Amossy exposes the danger of complaisance, which can result from the mere denouncing and calling into question of collective representations. In other words, being conscious of the “hows andwhys” of what constitutes the doxa is but a preliminary step toward transcending the epistemological limitations that result from the noncritical assimilation of received ideas. In order to avoid repeatedly falling into the pitfall of reformulating stereotypes, Amossy argues, we must engage in a perpetual movement of transgression and deconstruction of

25 Amossy takes great measures to distinguish between the stereotype as trope which has existed for centuries and the modern phenomenon of the stereotype as a powerful tool of societal “leveling” made possible by mass automatisation and standardization.
them (15). My reflections on the work of Detrez, Wittig, and Genet will highlight the ways in which perpetual movement—be it kindled by cycles of transgression, fragmentation, deconstruction, or delocalization comprising the very narrative construction of the text—brings to the fore the precept of permanent revolution as a foundational characteristic of Modern Revolutionary Writing, thereby breathing new life into Trotsky’s theoretical model.

Throughout my discussion of L’herbe à brûler, I employ, among others, Mireille Rosello’s theoretical approach of “declining the stereotype” in order to demonstrate the ways in which Detrez enters the dangerous terrain of challenging stereotypes by perpetuating the very terms he seeks to transcend and subvert. In my investigation of Wittig’s Les guérillères, I defer more to the author’s own theoretical essays compiled in The Straight Mind. Wittig’s thinking as a radical material feminist resonates with the events of May 68 and provides a crucial and innovative theoretical approach to discussing the revolutionary dimensions of her writing in that context. For Genet’s Un Captif amoureux, I expand the traditional socio-political and geographic parameters of Edward Saïd’s well-known conceptualization of Orientalism. It is important to note that the most important thematic element interconnecting the work of these authors is the specificity of the May 68 revolution grounded in the resignifying of subjective desire as it relates to political and social engagement. After all, lest we forget, the initial rumblings of discontent which were to escalate into the strikes and protests of May 68 were sparked by sexual matters,26 as traditional values clashed across the generational gap with the

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26 The same month students on the new campus at Nanterre began protesting the ban of male visitors to the women’s dormitories, thus lighting the spark that would ignite May 68, a parallel narrative occurred in the United States with the “LeClair Affair,” whereby Linda LeClair, a Barnard college co-ed, was disciplined for living off-campus with her boyfriend. The LeClair Affair received national attention in
demands of young people for sexual autonomy (Marshall 4). Each writer of Modern Revolutionary Writing thus creates his or her own “space” of discourse in which the erotic and the political interact in a corrective push against a Marxist ideology whose “silence on ‘sexuality’ is related to [a] privileged gender and sexual position” (Seidman 167).

As we shall see, Detrez, Wittig, and Genet approach (erotic/sexual) identity as multiple, unstable, and wholly defiant of heteronormative forces of marginalization, with each writer doing so in a distinctive way. If Wittig approaches the question from the position of the “sujet théorique,” for example, Detrez’s and Genet’s point of departure is the “sujet désirant.” In this way, their writing—and by extension Modern Revolutionary Writing—heralds the queering of grand narratives grounded in the exclusion of the Other as a social and organizing principle. On the level of poetics, their work signals a radical departure from established literary modes, whereby, for instance, the revindication of the subjective voice sets their work very much outside the French nouveau roman. Also, ascendant theoretical initiatives on the political landscape, such as the deconstruction and subversion of linguistic hegemony as it relates to race, sexual orientation, and gender, as well as the perpetual delocalization inherent to the 1968 revolutionary push to “invent a new society” (“Great” 28), are incorporated into the very structure of the works, thus re-signified—in a spirit of irony and derision—into something wholly unique to the revolutionary dimensions of l’esprit 68.

the United States, sharing with Charles de Gaulle extensive coverage in the May 31, 1968 issue of LIFE. This article on de Gaulle was titled “The Great Mal de Tête,” with the sub-headline “New Political Beings: Intellectual Terrorists” (“Great” 22).

27 The notion that May 68 occurred without warning is debunked by Bruno Groppo, who meticulously maps out preceding sites of contestation and revolt among students which occurred in West Germany, Italy, the United States, and the Netherlands. The ‘Provo’ movement in the Netherlands is of
The term “Modern,” as I apply it to this literary periodization, is admittedly fraught with ambiguity. My discussion therefore stems from the premise that much scholarly debate continues over definitions of terms related to modernity, postmodernity, modernism, late modernism, and post modernism. To clarify these terms as they relate to my dissertation, I defer to related definitions provided in Lawrence Cahoone’s *From Modernism to Postmodernism* and Tyrus Miller’s *Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars*. Cahoone’s overview is straightforward and offers clarity of definition. For example, he defines modernity in terms of changes in material production dating back to the sixteenth century and the ways in which these changes resulted in rapidly evolving social and economic conditions. These conditions were reflected, and to some extent enabled, by superstructural phenomena such as the Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis upon individualism, literacy, and the patriarchal nuclear family, and the Enlightenment, with its emphasis upon rationality, faith in human progress, the development of the scientific method, etc. (17-18). The era of postmodernity, Cahoone continues, can be dated from 1945 and would include as part of the shift from modernity the wave of anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Asia after World War II (45). This important observation establishes colonialism as a key feature of modernity, which Detrez, Wittig, and Genet rigorously problematize. The end of the Second World War also marks an ideological watershed as it became harder than ever to defend the assumptions of modernity and modernism after the Holocaust, of which the horrific efficiency depended upon modern technologies (i.e., Taylorism and Fordism) as well as

particular interest due to “l’esprit d’ironie et de dérision” (Groppo 20) which defines the overall mood of the movement and reminds us once again of Bakhtin’s *carnivalesque*. Irony and derision operate as powerful rhetorical devices in Modern Revolutionary Writing.
tragically distorted applications of modernist assumptions about the “perfectability” of the human race (i.e., eugenics based on Darwinism).

Cahoone goes on to clarify the term modernism as an intellectual and artistic movement that developed in conjunction with, and eventually in opposition to, fully developed modernity. If modernist artists and intellectuals rejected the banality and alienated quality of life in industrial capitalism, they responded to it by retreating into a nostalgia for pre-capitalist organic social order (T. S. Eliot), by embracing fascist leaders and ideologies (Gertrude Stein’s support of Marshal Pétain, Ezra Pound’s infatuation with Mussolini, etc.), by seeking refuge in radical and sometimes anti-social individualism (Hemingway, J. D. Salinger, etc.) or in agrarian populism (John Crowe Ransom and the agrarian “fugitives” of the 1930’s, etc.) (93-94). High modernist art, on the other hand, often features fragmentation and disruption at the level of form (e.g. James Joyce), though it generally attempts to recuperate a sense of order and faith in universal values at the level of content or overall effect. In this way, Cahoone concludes, the high modernists attempted to reconcile with the grand narratives, the absolute “truths” and values, of the western tradition (99). Whereas the writing of Detrez, Wittig, and Genet can certainly be situated with James Joyce’s vis-à-vis what Cahoone calls the “fragmentation and disruption at the level of form,” it runs counter to the high modernist concern with validating notions of absolute truth. If the high modernists experimented with abstract representation and formal fragmentation as a way of resisting the degradation of social life in industrial capitalism, postmodernists have embraced this condition, ostensibly rejecting the grand narratives and values for parodies of the classics and exalting popular or “low” culture at the expense of traditional high culture (Cahoone
According to Cahoone, then, postmodernism is characterized by highly self-conscious uses of strategies like parody and pastiche to undermine a sense of order and timeless, universal truth. In doing so, it demonstrates that “appearance” or “representation” are all there is to what the modernists would call “reality,” and that there are in fact many plural “realities” rather than a universal one. Wittig’s work in particular offers a masterful example of such pastiche through a reworking of the mighty patriarchal epic poem as epitomized by Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*.

Any attempt to situate Modern Revolutionary Writing along these definitions and parameters leads us into the perennial slippage of what Tyrus Miller calls the “no-man’s land between the camps of modernist and postmodernist fiction” (12). To illustrate the difference between modernism and postmodernism, Miller adapts architectural historian Charles Jencks’ characterization of the terms to a literary perspective. Jencks posits the notion that in architecture, late modern is “pragmatic and technocratic in its social ideology and from about 1960 takes many of the stylistic ideas and values of modernism to an extreme in order to resuscitate a dull (or clichéd) language” (9). Postmodernism, Jencks then argues, is “pluralist and populist in its ethos, intentionally addressing different ‘taste cultures’ from the general public to elite, knowledgeable constituencies, capable of appreciating inside jokes and learned references” (9). Miller in turn elaborates an analogous difference in a literary context, characterizing postmodern writers as “believ[ing] that all stances are unstable and insincere, and therefore irony, parody and humor are the only positions which cannot be overturned by critique or later events” (13). Late modern writing, on the other hand, is characterized by Miller as representing a “deauthenticated world in which subject and object and character and setting are weakly
counterposed or even partly intermingled” (62). The dynamic of instability in late modern and postmodern writing obviously undermines any attempt to establish sharp distinctions between the two, further complicating the task of aligning Modern Revolutionary Writing with a specific period or movement.

In *Un Captif amoureux*, Genet’s narrative of his peregrinations alongside the Palestinian and Black Panther revolutionaries is characterized by temporal shifts, overlapping and interchanging scenarios, meandering ruminations, morphing personages and dissipating bodies: it is fragmentation in all its psychic and mystical potentiality, and it demonstrates a particularly remarkable example of the late modern “deauthenticated world” posited by Miller. This aspect of Genet’s last work functions as a reaction to the rich selfhood that modernism suggests and a resistance to high modernism’s “desire to restore significance to a broken world” (Miller 11). According to Miller, late modernism, also “loosens the modernist dominance of form and allows a more fluid, dialogic relationship with the immediate historical context [and] [abandons] the modernist gold standard: form as the universal currency in which aesthetic value could be measured” (31). In *Lire Genet*, Mairéad Hanrahan shines light on the ways in which Genet “s’appuie sur la réalité, mais sans faire sienne la position (classique) qui voit la validation de l’écriture dans la référence réaliste—selon laquelle l’écriture aurait besoin d’une validation externe” (19). Hanrahan’s observation neatly sums up Genet’s transcendence of modernist concerns for both purity of form and fidelity of representation; instead, in a wholly late modernist manner Genet confronts the historical moment by creating a profusion of fragmented images through a poetry and language charged by muted yet ever-present eroticism.
There is no mistaking the fact that *Un Captif amoureux* is as much about language as it is about revolutionary struggle, and Genet’s literary engagement with the historical moment is rendered more potent through what Cahoone defines as a postmodernist pastiche of journalistic writing intermittently adopted in Genet’s last published work. I do not mean to suggest Genet assumes *à la lettre* a journalistic mode of writing in *Un Captif amoureux*, although he offers many instances of hyper-detailed expository prose (Soueif xi). Instead, he elaborates subtleties of experience shaded by conflicting, fragmented responses—nuances impossible to convey in print media—in what may be viewed as a derisive pastiche of journalism, which is, as Jarrod Hayes points out, “[…] often considered among the most referential genres of writing, the most realist” (33). Furthermore, allusions to the importance (and mistrust) of journalism are woven throughout the narrative of *Un Captif amoureux*, as seen in the following passage concerning Yasser Arafat and his premonition of waning media interest in the Palestinian cause:


In order to thwart the publicitary abandonment of the Palestinians foretold by Arafat, Genet deploys a “poetics of the image,” which, he suggests, is “the only message from the past that manage[s] to get itself projected into the present” (qtd. in Soueif xvi). If Genet enters into direct dialogical engagement with the historical moment in a late
modernist manner, he also embraces a postmodern fragmentation of the image and, therefore, the subject. He accomplishes this in the language of his enemy, always located at what Hanrahan calls “la jonction du lisible et de l’illisible,” grounded in an alliance between “un extrême classicisime avec une extrême modernité” (11). All of this is to say that *Un Captif amoureux* is emblematic of the ways in which works situated within Modern Revolutionary Writing resist definitive categorization within the concatenation of terms related to modernist movements in literature.

The exercise of clarifying terms ostensibly permits us to trace the evolution of artistic and intellectual movements in our experience—to establish boundaries between them as well as character traits inherent to each. However, no amount of cataloguing will permit a clear-cut assignment for Modern Revolutionary Writing—and nor should it. As my textual analyses of Detrez’s, Wittig’s, and Genet’s writing will show, a degree of overlapping occurs between structural and narrative forms, guaranteeing a constant trespassing of dynamically stylized poetics into the ever-fluid boundaries of Miller’s “no-man’s land.” Perhaps, then, the best tactical course of action is to defer to the Derridean notion of *sous rature* when referring to the literary periodization in question. I propose, therefore, *Late* Modern Revolutionary Writing as a working qualification, with the understanding that the designation under erasure will, even in its absence, guide my discussion in a palimsestic way.

It is important to point out that my analysis of the ways in which French writers operate within the periodization should in no way preclude academic critics from commenting on their work outside the framework of Modern Revolutionary Writing. To the contrary, my desire is to expand discursive and critical possibilities related to literary
production in the context of revolution. As such, it is my hope that the periodization I propose will not only result in renewed considerations of the literature produced in dialogue with May 68 but also advance the discussion beyond the foreclosing cycle of critical commentary discussed earlier. Perhaps it will even open the path toward expanded cultural and socio-political considerations of the May 68 phenomenon, which continues to resonate today despite Patrick Combes’ assessment of it as “la fin d’une époque; celle où l’événement politique, historique, pouvait susciter une littérature nouvelle, à caractère militant—ou seulement même son espoir” (212).

New Philosophers, Disparate Assessments, and the Enigma of May 68

Les idéologies des uns, les préjugés des autres, masquent le visage du sphinx qui arrive dans les brouillards.

Edgar Morin

If the events of May 68 failed to result in full-scale revolution in France, Robert Frank’s qualification of l’esprit 68 provides a useful assessment of the ways in which different arenas of contestation have transformed systems of representation in the aftermath of the historic marker. Frank explains:

Il existe un ‘esprit 68’ qu’on ne peut réduire à la ‘pensée 68’ anti-humaniste, [. . .]. La question de ‘l’imprégnation’, au moins partielle, de la société par les idées et les pratiques nouvelles implique qu’il y a ‘acculturation’ ou construction d’une culture caractéristique des ‘années 68’. C’est une culture qui s’installe dans les temps, une culture que l’on entend ici au sens global du terme, c’est-à-dire l’ensemble des comportements collectifs, des systèmes de représentations et des valeurs de la société. Les contre-cultures pourtant minoritaires et les nouvelles pratiques culturelles de la jeunesse contestataire ont été des éléments moteur du changement, et c’est finalement la culture de toute la société

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28 Combes asserts that May 68 marks “the end of an epoch: when the political, historical event could give rise to a new literature of militant nature—or only just its hope.”
Frank argues, rightfully so in my assessment, that one cannot reduce l’esprit 68 to “la pensée 68 anti-humaniste,” or the “anti-humanist 68 manner of thinking.” He thus establishes an important counter to reductive assessments of May 68 as advanced by, among others, New Philosophers André Glucksmann, Luc Ferry, Alain Renaut, and Gilles Lipovetsky. In the estimation of these latter named individuals, May becomes a prefiguration of the possessive individualism of the 1980s, a “purely ludic instance of self-expression” (Ross, May 100) whereby, in a specific indictment against several prominent intellectuals associated with “la pensée 68,” Ferry and Renaut use their widely disseminated book titled La Pensée 68: Essais sur l’anti-humanisme contemporain to brand Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida (progenitors of the “end of philosophy”), along with Michel Foucault (epigone of the calamitous Nietzsche), and Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Lacan (whose desiring machines and psycho-linguistic structures leave the human subject helpless and alone), as enemies of humanism to be ultimately linked with the ‘barbarie’ of fascist and Stalinist totalitarianism (Ferry, Pensée 4-12, 40-51 passim). In fact, the bulk of La pensée 68 is devoted to a stringent critique of structuralist and

29 Frank writes: “There exists a ‘spirit of 68’ that one cannot reduce to an anti-humanist ‘68 way thinking.’ [. . .]. The question of ‘impregnation,’ or at least partial impregnation, of society by new ideas and practices implies there is an ‘acculturation’ or construction of a culture characteristic of the ‘68 years.’ It is a culture that takes its place in the times, a culture meant here in a global sense of the term, which is to say the whole of collective behaviors, of systems of representations and of values in society. The counter-cultures, whereas in the minority, and the new cultural practices of the contesting youth operated as the engine for change, and it is in the end the whole of society’s culture that comes out transformed with, among other things, a different rapport with the past, present, and future.”

30 Over the years, the New Philosophers have reasonably insisted that there are important differences in their views which should preclude their being lumped together. I respect their concern regarding this matter and have chosen to focus on Glucksmann, Ferry, Renaut, and Lipovetsky because they share the following argument which is pertinent to the present discussion: Marxism is a dangerous totalitarian system of thought whose specter lingers as a result of the May 68 legacy.
post-structuralist thinkers, whom Ferry and Renaut view as the *porte-paroles* of value relativism then attributed to French philosophical and intellectual movements by the New Philosophers. In this way, Ferry and Renaut marginalize key figures of a dwindling pantheon of French intellectuals—regardless of whether or not they had any direct connection to the events of May 68\(^{31}\)—by associating them with anti-humanist revolutionary fervor conflated with fascist and totalitarian world views and aspirations.

The insinuation of the word totalitarianism into the debate may be attributed to fellow New Philosopher, André Glucksmann, who revives the term first developed in the immediate post-war period (Lecourt 52).\(^{32}\) In his book titled *Les Maîtres penseurs*, Glucksmann links the horrors of the twentieth century to the philosophical heritage of those he calls the “master thinkers” (i.e., Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche, among others), whose role was to dream up the new social order engendered by modern revolutions. As Dominque Lecourt points out, Glucksmann “falsely and disingenuously” attributes to Hegel the quote “to conceive is to dominate” (*Mediocracy* 180) in order to support his argument that the totalizing theories of the “master thinkers” lend ideological justification to the modern state and all its crimes—from the gulag to the Holocaust. Such black and white terms, bolstered by the “revelations” of Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*,\(^{33}\) affirm Glucksmann’s assertion that Marxism “ne produit pas seulement des paradoxes

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31 Foucault, for example, was not even in France during the May 68 period.

32 The concept of totalitarianism was nothing new, of course, and it was freely employed by both the Left and the Right against each other. Charles de Gaulle, for example, invoked the threat of totalitarian communism in his radio address dating from May 30, 1968. Jean-Marie Domenach, on the other hand, argued that “[American society] is perhaps the most totalitarian in the world” when he described American consumerism and culture as a virus spreading across the globe (cited in Richard F. Kuisel’s *Seducing the French*, p. 83).

33 Despite the fact that the New Philosophers claim to have learned of the Stalinist camps from the 1974 translation of Solzhenitsyn’s book, the existence of the camps had been well documented in France as early as 1936 (Ross, *May* 170-71).
scientifiques, mais des camps de concentration” (Cuisinière 63) in the eyes of a public coming to terms with the revival of Cold War tensions and the disillusionment of hopes raised by the events of May 68. Thus occurs what I consider to be the most significant re-framing of the debate between the New Philosophers and their erstwhile fellow-travelers of the intellectual Establishment of the Left: by shifting the focus from the traditional paradigm which pits well-defined political camps against each other (i.e., Right versus Left) to the basic formula of totalitarianism versus freedom, the New Philosophers masterfully consolidate their appeal across the political spectrum. In the words of historian Emmanuel Le Roy-Ladurie: “It seems that the opposition between totalitarianism and freedom was ultimately more important than the old left-right opposition” (qtd. in Lecourt 68).

The effort put forth by Ferry, Renaut, and Glucksmann to discredit the intellectual driving forces behind May 68 is bolstered by Lipovetsky’s critique of the less celebrated protesters comprised of students and workers. According to Lipovetsky, the striking masses were motivated by another dimension of la pensée 68, which he characterized in terms of “le culte narcissique de l’Ego,” “la désaffection pour les questions politiques” (“Changer” 99) and “le règne de l’image et de la séduction des grandes figures mythiques de ces années” (L’ère 14). In the context of Lipovetsky’s narrow characterization of what constitutes la pensée 68, the strikers are defined as self-absorbed, puerile, and politically naïve adherents to a form of mass brainwashing (i.e., “le règne de l’image”). Whereas Lipovetsky may be correct about the young protesters and strikers being seduced by romanticized images of Castro, Guevara, Mao, and Ho Chi Minh (i.e., “les grandes figures mythiques de ces années”), he conflates their infatuation with a general
disaffection for politics. I believe the opposite to be the case, for these revolutionary figures represented symbolic hope and intellectual value for the strikers who were protesting what they perceived to be a dysfunctional Old World order constructed around the binarism of American imperialism and Soviet expansionism.

This world order, mired in Cold War ideology, is defined by a hierarchical system of three discrete yet interacting groupings of nations whereby the two dominant imperialist states, the United States and the Soviet Union, comprise the “first world.” The “second world” encompasses the other imperialist states in their spheres of influence, and the “third world” consists of the non-imperialist countries. Both the first and the second world orders exploit the third, but the first world is the most aggressive and powerful force in the hierarchy. The concept of hegemony as advanced by Antonio Gramsci exposes the ways in which the workers in the first and second world are actively involved in sustaining and expanding their respective nations’ imperialist aspirations in a phenomenon that forestalls socialist revolution. The people of the third world, the theory goes, are free of such self-defeating interests in the prevailing circumstances. Hence revolution is most likely to appear in third world countries, which again will weaken the imperialist aspirations of first and second world nations. This new focus of attention marks the transition from a geopolitical perspective characterized by a bipolarized world order to what Robert Frank calls an emerging “multi-polar world” in which the two superpowers must accommodate a growing chorus of nations and the alternative political realities they make possible (34).

To be sure, the young protesters of May were not only aware of the socio-political thinking advanced by the leaders of third world revolutionary efforts, but they were
politically charged by them as well. For example, if we consider, as Ross suggests, the different sites and discourses that allowed the geography of the international struggles between the “North/South axis” to become transposed onto the daily itineraries of students in Paris, a clearer picture develops of the process by which political theorists from South America, Africa, and Asia gained voice among the May protesters (Ross, *May 82*). Along with the Communist Party bookstore on the Rue Racine, François Maspero’s *La Joie de Lire* on the rue Saint-Séverin served as a cultural and political refuge for revolutionary *habitués* during the 1960s (Storti, *Chagrin* 70). It was largely because of Maspero’s bookstore and his publishing house known as Éditions Maspero, along with the editorial direction of *Les Temps Modernes* and *Le Monde Diplomatique*, that an important *gauchiste* phenomenon became abundantly clear: political and social theory was no longer being generated from Europe but from the third world (Ross, *May 84*). For the young students in Paris, Guevara, Mao, Fanon (whose seminal *Les damnés de la terre* with its preface by Sartre was first published by Maspero), and others had become the source of political and theoretical inspiration and, more importantly, of information to counter the controlled news stories disseminated by the bourgeois media (Ross, *May 85*). The general news media operated as a catalyst for the radicalization of the young students not only in France, but in other countries as well. Images of the Vietnam War coupled with news coverage of, among others, the growing unrest in American ghettos and on American campuses soured what had historically been a positive image of the United States and cemented the intellectual bond between French

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34 “North/South axis” is a useful euphemism that reflects the dismantling of European empires and an exploded world where Europe is no longer the center and the West/East axis cedes, at least symbolically, to a North/South paradigm.
students and third world visionaries (Groppo 28). Contrary to Lipovetsky’s assessment of the protesters’ “disaffection for political matters,” it seems clear to me that the strikers possessed a broadly informed political understanding of a world structure which offered too few options. Bruno Groppo describes this important facet of the May 68 dynamic in the following terms:

L’un des aspects les plus originaux du mouvement de 1968 à l’échelle internationale fut son refus de se situer dans le cadre de la logique des blocs, c’est-à-dire de considérer que l’opposition fondamentale au niveau mondial était celle entre deux systèmes, capitaliste et communiste, représentés respectivement par les États-Unis et l’URSS. S’il rejetait le premier, ce n’était pas pour accepter le second, qui n’était, à ses yeux, qu’une autre forme de domination bureaucratique. L’idéal du mouvement était une tension révolutionnaire permanente. (“Mai 68” 27).

Groppo’s assessment is echoed by Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, who attributes to the strikers “un nouvel espace de lutte qui remet en cause la partition du monde en deux blocs” (Années 28).

What, then, was to be gained by the New Philosophers’ push to discredit the legacy of those who participated in May, and how did they manage to do it so successfully in the general media? The effort to alienate established figures in the intellectual community is part and parcel of what Heyndels calls the systematic “scotomising of enmity,” whereby one endeavors to definitively vanquish all opposition in the realm of public speech, which, in the absence of any superior authority, can operate

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35 Groppo writes: “One of the most original aspects of the 1968 movement on the international level was the refusal to situate itself in the logic of blocks…that is to say, to consider that the fundamental opposition on a global scale was between two systems, capitalist and communist, represented by the United States and the USSR respectively. If the movement rejected the first, it was not in order to accept the second, which, in the eyes of the movement, was just another form of bureaucratic domination. The ideal of the movement was of permanent revolutionary tension.”

36 Dreyfus-Armand credits the strikers with “a new space of battle that calls into question the dividing of the world into two blocks.”
as both “the matrix and the guarantor of the validity, or of the acceptability, of the social, political, and ethical enunciations positioned at the horizon of its principle of truth” (“Public” 76). This process began surreptitiously; few realized in the mid 1970s that the intellectual authority of the “soixante-huitards” (or May 68ers, as they are often called) and the memory of May were the target of liquidation by the New Philosophers. After all, May 68 played a crucial role in the narrative of the New Philosophers’ own militant past, for which they increasingly displayed public acts of contrition. This, in turn, ensured their moral authority and legitimized their role as social analysts who had come to understand the naiveté of their ancien militant trespassings in order to embrace their newfound brand of ethical conservatism. Once the New Philosophers convinced the public of their sincerity vis-à-vis their confessed political errors of the past, they strategically ensconced themselves at the head of various radio and media organs in order to delegitimize any critics of their discourse (Ross, May 172). The degree of success enjoyed by this group of young intellectuals was nothing less than astounding, as the following September 12, 1977 article from Time Magazine attests:

> It is probably the liveliest intellectual hubbub to hit Paris since the early 1950s, when Existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre startled other leftist intellectuals by defending Stalin’s ironfisted regime, in spite of its excesses. This time the furor revolves around a group of young intellectuals, most of them lapsed Marxists, who are now attacking Marxism as an evil, obsolete ideology that leads inevitably to totalitarianism. The ‘New Philosophers,’ as they are known, have become overnight celebrities—featured on magazine covers and on TV talk shows. [...] The group’s most publicized—and most pessimistic—member is Bernard-Henri Lévy, 28, a long-tressed editor at the Paris publishing house of Grasset who coined the term New Philosophers. (“The New Philosophers”)

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Kristin Ross points out the fact that in some cases, notably that of Bernard-Henri Lévy, “[t]he errors had first to be invented in order to be confessed” (Ross, May 170).
The reference to the New Philosophers’ appearances on magazine covers is noteworthy considering *Time Magazine*’s issue from the preceding week. The cover of the September 5, 1977 edition features a painting of Karl Marx with bold red wording superimposed over his face that reads: “Marx is Dead,” accompanied by the subheading: “France’s New Philosophers Speak Out.” Also noteworthy is the reference to Lévy’s long hair, which evokes a dynamic new avatar of Che Guevara—duly stripped of all Marxist baggage. Such media coverage, coupled with the help of well-connected backers\(^\text{38}\) and the securing of key positions in publishing houses, guarantied staying power for the New Philosophers.

What followed was a whitewashing and collective packaging of the different socio-political and historical impetuses that gave rise to May 68. Interest in third worldism and the attendant sins of the French nation as put into relief by the post-colonial era, the critique of age-old social, familial, and administrative hierarchies, the eschewing of consumerism, and the protesting of American imperialism were all tidily conflated into one side of a Manichean equation opposing “barbarism” and “culture.” The success of efforts to discredit ideology linked to third-world antecedents is particularly striking when we consider how pervasive such attitudes are in the thinking of leading academics who share little if any intellectual kinship with the New Philosophers. Fredric Jameson, most notably, marks the “end of the 1960s” at around 1972-74 due to a “return to a more internal politics” in the first world of the late 1960s as well as the “exhausted ideology of cultural nationalism” which has its origins in third world models of revolutionary theory.

\(^{38}\) In 1977 and 1978, for instance, the French *Magazine littéraire* shines light on the powerful support provided to the New Philosophers by Maurice Clavel, a reactionary Christian writer and broadcaster who made no secret of his hatred of Marxism.
Jameson also argues that an “increasing articulation into relatively distinct ideological positions” within the women’s movement of the early 1970s results in the abandonment of the movement’s ideology rooted in third world inspiration (ibid). Jameson’s effort to assign an “end” to the 1960s based on what he perceives to be a flagging interest in tiers-mondisme strikes me as incongruous in light of the growing interest in neo-colonialism taking place in academia at the time. His assessment also fails to consider the fact that third worldism functions as a key topos in literature produced well after his imposed timeframe spanning 1972-74. In other words, where Jameson observes an enervation of third world models of revolutionary theory, I perceive a dynamic transference and re-articulation of it in literary production.

In what can be used to counter his own assessment of the waning influence of tiers-mondisme, Jameson also traces the ways in which the Sartrean paradigm of the Look and the struggle for recognition between individual subjects are appropriated for the model of political struggle as advanced by Frantz Fanon in The Wretched of the Earth of 1961. In this enormously influential work, Fanon relates his vision of the struggle between Colonizer and Colonized, whereby the objectifying reversal of the Look is apocalyptically rewritten as the act of redemptive violence of Slave and Master, the moment in which, in fear and the anxiety of death, the hierarchical positions of Self and Other (i.e., Center and Margin) are forcibly reversed, and in which the subservient consciousness of the Colonized achieves collective identity and self-affirmation in the face of the colonizers in abject flight (Jameson, “Periodizing” 187-88). Here Fanon lays the blueprint for what would become an entire theory of cultural revolution through the collective reeducation (or what would semantically evolve into consciousness raising) of
oppressed peoples. Suddenly, cultural revolution as a strategy for breaking the habits of subalternity and obedience (which become internalized as a kind of second nature in a dynamic not entirely dissimilar to the Stockholm Syndrome) progresses into an explosive and, contrary to Jameson’s assertion, enduring political ideology. We will see how this political ideology serves as the theoretical point of departure for much of Wittig’s thinking and fictional writing.

But let us turn to Fanon’s vision of cultural revolution in the context of Pascal Bruckner, who provides what is perhaps the most stringent condemnation of third worldism in *Le sanglot de l’homme blanc* (*Tears of the White Man* as translated by William Beer and here cited). Bruckner lambasts Western intellectuals’ and leftists’ attitudes toward the third world as being characterized by paternalism, guilt, and hypocrisy. Specifically, Bruckner extols the virtues and exceptionalism of Western cultural traditions while condemning others who characterize Western nations as exploiters and developing nations as exploited. He states, “If the peoples of the third world are to become themselves, they must become more Western… [Europe] is the only culture that has been capable of seeing itself through others’ eyes (even though its perceptions may be mistaken). Because there has been no doubt about its identity, it has been able to grant a great deal to other cultures” (142-43). Bruckner’s Europe serves as an ideological foil for the third world and assumes the role of cultural, economic, and moral edifier, thereby justifying the New Philosophers’ call for a renewed ethnocentrism—a return to European values which would pit the West against any “Other.” We will see how the idea of Europe as an edifying force is ironically appropriated and employed as a recurring topos in Detrez’s writing.
A crucial step to this line of thinking follows whereby the “Other” is conflated with the role of “barbarian,” characterized in Lévy’s widely circulated book titled *La barbarie à visage humain* of 1977. Lévy’s work, along with a host of others by Alain Finkielkraut (*La défaite de la Pensée*), André Glucksmann (*La bêtise*), and Michel Henry (*La barbarie*), calls for Europe to return to its traditions and to its “essence.” As a unified force, these are the voices that were to constitute the platform of the new media intellectuals known as the New Philosophers who—mirroring the neo-conservative movement of the United States—would concern themselves with what Guy Hocquenghem refers to as a “moralisme guerrier,” or “warrior moralism.” The Western values of the New Philosophers would be advanced according to what Hocquenghem calls “le fantasme militariste, l’appel aux valeurs viriles et le sacré psychanalytique de la Loi du Père” (*Lettre* 16). In other words, to the Western intellectual must fall the self-appointed task of safeguarding the values and interests of the developed nations of the West regardless of the costs to peripheral and underdeveloped countries. In order to realize the mission, intellectuals who harbor any nostalgia or critical acclaim for May 68 must be discredited. These intellectuals, among whom Foucault and Blanchot must be counted, are viewed with anathema by the New Philosophers because they relinquished the traditional authority enjoyed by French intellectuals in order to “give voice” to the disenfranchised (Ross, *May* 175). It was this perceived abandonment of the

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39 Numerous examples support Hocquenghem’s claim, such as a 1985 petition signed by Glucksmann and Lévy which encouraged Ronald Reagan to continue US support of the Contra cause in Nicaragua, or Lévy’s ongoing efforts to convince the United States to engage against Iran in 2011.

40 Here we are reminded of Foucault’s GIP, or *Groupe d’information sur les prisons*, which allowed Foucault to use his celebrity as an intellectual to draw unprecedented attention to incarcerated individuals and their concerns, just as Pierre Bourdieu’s support of the striking miners in 1995 gave voice to the workers, among other examples.
intellectual’s primacy which led to the New Philosophers’ efforts to reestablish the pre-
May 68 status for such pundits. According to Ross:

[…] the New Philosophers would come crowding after 1975; the intellectual or philosopher reborn as unified subject […], endowed with authority—in fact, endowed with even more authority than they once could have claimed: the authority of being the makers of history and seismologists of the future. (May 176)

The success of their efforts is made evident by an ever-growing and persistent involvement in important political decisions and interventions. As recently as March 31, 2011 on CNN’s “In the Arena,” for instance, Lévy boasts to Eliot Spitzer of his success in convincing President Sarkozy to intervene in Libya on behalf of that nation’s rebels.

In contrast to the New Philosophers’ mission to advance their agenda from a unified position of authority, Frank offers a nuanced understanding of the different ways in which politics and culture potentially operate through a chorus of diverse voices (i.e., “les contre-cultures pourtant minoritaires et les nouvelles pratiques culturelles de la jeunesse contestataire”) which function as new culture specific to the multi-faceted year(s) of 1968—a culture comprised of systems of representation which may or may not operate in harmony, yet which we are able to locate as converging on and stemming from May of that year. Most significantly, Frank lays an important contextual foundation vis-à-
vis the different ways in which post-68 society—in France and beyond—functions in dialogue with the past, present, and future by virtue of the fact that l’esprit 68 had woven itself into the fabric of les temps or, literally, the times. We bear witness to the veracity of Frank’s assertion through the myriad ways in which the writing of Detrez, Wittig, and Genet continues to resonate with the reading public—a consideration to be explored in the following chapters.
With each ten year anniversary marking the events of May 68, a proliferation of related debate occurs—manifested in the writings, public appearances on television, and political campaigns of various self-proclaimed intellectuals and political aspirants—which serves as a signpost of the ideological metamorphoses of the *esprit du temps*. Conflicting assessments of the events began in real time, however, and can be traced to the very days during which the May 68 strikes were unfolding. An *aperçu* of some of these earliest perspectives is of interest, for it will shine light on disparate accounts of what happened and will permit us to revisit a pivotal moment before one side of the debate took a firm, revisionist hold of the French nation’s imaginary at the expense of the other.

In 1968, Raymond Aron published *La Révolution introuvable*, compiling a series of interviews he granted to Alain Duhamel which appeared in *Le Figaro* during the months of May and June of that year. Aron’s reason for publishing the collection of interviews is made clear from the author’s opening comment: “Pour prévenir la croissance d'une mythologie dont les effets seraient désastreux, pour éviter la sacralisation de ces journées agitées et importantes” (2). Any hope of sustaining the revolutionary fervor sparked by the striking masses is foreclosed upon by relegating the entire movement to the realm of myth and to the youthful romanticizing of political realities, whereby Aron censures the striking students for accepting and amplifying anti-Americanism while naively embracing the “mob passions” of the third world, the outlook

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41 Michelle Zancarini-Fournel’s *Le Moment 68 : une histoire contestée* (Paris : Seuil 2008) offers one of the most comprehensive assessments to date of the ever-changing intellectual landscape of what Zancarini-Fournel calls “l’histoire de l’histoire de la révolte étudiante et ouvrière qui a cette propriété particulière d’en dire encore beaucoup sur notre présent” (18).

42 Aron’s stated goal is “To prevent the spread of a mythology whose effects would be disastrous, to avoid the sacralization of these tumultuous and important days.”
of the guerilla, and the pure violence and anarchy of an undefined Utopia (Révolution 141). As Aron’s comments illustrate, proscribing assessments of May 68 transcend political allegiances and are scarcely limited to adherents of the political right. After all, Aron qualified his own political orientation as that of a pre-Marxist left of high liberalism. Irrespective of political leanings, differing assessments of the events were immediately published by gauchiste Edgar Morin who, having replaced Henri Lefebvre at the University of Nanterre, was ideally situated to observe firsthand the student revolts emerging in Paris and was therefore able to challenge the content of Aron’s interviews.

In May 1968, Morin wrote a series of articles for Le Monde in which he followed and supported the student protests. He then published in the same newspaper a second series of articles titled “La Révolution sans visage,” in which he presciently anticipated the growth of analyses related to May 68 over the years to come (“Il nous faudra des années et des années pour comprendre ce qui s’est passé”), and whereby he associated with the largest of the French confederations of trade unions, the Confédération générale du travail (CGT), the task of maintaining “une conscience révolutionnaire mythifiée” (33).

An advocate of European political Liberalism, Aron was strongly opposed to the ascendant communist version of Marxism that appealed to so many of his intellectual peers after World War II. His seminal work, titled The Opium of the Intellectuals, represents a central text in the literature of anticommunism (Price, “Shame” 22) in which, as Stanley Hoffman points out, Aron “denounced […] the entire French intellectual tradition” and the French writers who “again and again commit themselves to causes without any serious analysis of reality or regard for consequences” (9). Aron’s critique of the French left resulted in his ostracization by other intellectuals, most notably his old friend, Jean-Paul Sartre. Aron would later conclude that “[i]ntellectuals…seek neither to understand the world nor to change it, but to denounce it” (Aron, Committed 158).

Referring to May 68, Morin predicts “it will take years and years for us to comprehend what has transpired.”

Morin’s statement concerning the CGT went to press just one week after the trade union’s irreparable fall from grace in the eyes of the far-left as a result of George Séguy’s acquiescence to the concessionary Grenelle Accord. Séguy, the CGT’s leader, negotiated the accord with Prime Minister
These articles were followed by Morin’s *Mai 68: La brèche*, co-authored with Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, in which the Student Commune is credited with bringing to light the imperative of acting “in and against” existing societal structures. Morin’s observation is based on the ever-mounting tensions between the students and the university system:

Pour les uns et pour les autres s’affirme l’idée que l’Université est à la fois le bastion le plus fort de la société bourgeoise (elle en forme les cadres) et son maillon le plus faible, puisque les étudiants y sont en majorité et peuvent y répandre l’esprit de révolution. Que ce soit pour porter les plus grands coups à cette citadelle de la bourgeoisie ou au contraire pour la transformer de fond en comble, il faut agir *dans et contre* la structure universitaire. (*La brèche* 16)\(^{46}\)

The need for students to work from the inside of the university structure in order to effect change may seem somewhat obvious to those of us benefitting from forty-five years of hindsight; however, when considered in the context of May 68, the tactic assumes a broader, more universal application and shifts from a priori rebellion, unprecedented and therefore untested in the confines of the French university apparatus, to a posteriori cardinal rule of “contestation” against society at large. As the May 68 events were unfolding, it was Maurice Blanchot who provided a powerful rallying cry for an expanded arena of contestation from within:

Georges Pompidou, who was accompanied at the negotiating table by another future president, Jacques Chirac. In the eyes of the CGT’s competing trade union, the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT), the Grenelle Accord represented an unforgivable compromise with bourgeois leadership and therefore a betrayal of the revolution.

\(^{46}\) Morin explains the significance of the student presence within the University structure and the attendant power and responsibility it affords them: “For some as well as others, there is affirmation of the understanding that the University system represents both the strongest bastion of the bourgeois society (it is where the bourgeois society's framework is formed) as well as the weakest chain link in its armor, for the students are a majority there and are in the position to spread the spirit of revolution. Whether it be to realize the greatest blows against this citadel or to transform it from top to bottom, it is necessary to act *in* and *against* the university structure.”
The term contestation thus operates as a keyword of the period that subtends much of the radical critique of the established order in a revolutionary framework (Dreyfus-Armand, Les années 29-30). Let us recall Frank’s previously mentioned notion of “les nouvelles pratiques culturelles de la jeunesse contestataire.” In this sense, contestation connotes the act of subversion more than protest because it focuses on cultural practices, ranging from self-imposed marginalization to outright retreat from society in the form of communal living, from avant-garde expression to all-out rejection of established societal norms manifested in various modes of counter-culture expression.

In his 1972 work titled Counterrevolution and Revolt, Herbert Marcuse provides an important contextualization of subversion (i.e., “revolutionary force”) as it relates to the destabilization of systems from within:

Distinction must be made between violence and revolutionary force. In the counterrevolutionary situation of today, violence is the weapon of the Establishment; it operates everywhere, in the institutions and organizations, in work and fun, on the streets and highways, and in the air. […] Revolutionary force would be the action of masses or classes capable of subverting the established system […]. This force must be controlled and contained by the movement itself. Action directed toward vague, general, intangible targets is senseless. (53)
Marcuse not only emphasizes the necessity of contestation/subversion in order to destabilize different sites of power within the Establishment, but he also displaces the task of doing so from the proletariat class to other segments of society (i.e., the masses).

Observations concerning the praxis of contestation will be central to my discussion of Modern Revolutionary Writing, but let us turn for a moment to Morin’s characterization of May 68 as “l’événement-sphinx,” which sets the tone for his theoretical discussion of the polysemous and enigmatic nature of the event. In this instance, Morin qualifies May 68 as being “multifactorisé, multirelationné” (“L’événement” 178) and likened to “un rameau de Salzbourg où viennent s’opérer de multiples cristallisations” (173). Significantly, in qualifying the “revolutionary conscience” as mythicized and associating May 68 with the Sphinx, Morin adroitly appropriates and renders effete Aron’s efforts to neutralize the significance of the events by relegating the whole to the realm of the fantastic. Such debates between prominent intellectuals only increased in the months following the strike, resulting in an exponential proliferation of related publications showcasing dueling assessments. In their review of the main lines of analysis of May 68 to have emerged by 1970, Philippe Bénéton and Jean Touchard note the existence of no fewer than 120 books on the subject, all published within a year and a half after the events (23).

Today the debate continues with renewed vigor marked by each ten year anniversary. Recently, some have spoken of the May “revolt” or, in even more prosaic terms, the May “events,” or even “the revolution that was not a revolution.” For example, the title of a May 10, 2008 New York Times article by Peter Steinfels reads: “Paris, May

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68: The revolution that never was,” and in another article published by the same newspaper, Steven Erlanger writes, “The fierce debate about what happened 40 years ago is very French. There is even a fight about labels—the right calls it ‘the events,’ while the left calls it ‘the movement’” (“Barricades”). If we consider the use of irony as suggested by its original Greek meaning of “dissimulation, pretended ignorance” (Wheale 45), we bear witness to semantic manipulation operating as a powerful rhetorical device where May 68 is concerned. In avoiding precise terminology, those who dominate political discourse are able to obfuscate the significance of any given event, thereby allaying potential malaise or second guessing among the general population. During the Algerian War for Independence (1954-1962) and for several years thereafter, for instance, French politicians and media figures avoided using the word “guerre,” preferring instead the benign circumlocution of “événements d’Algérie” (Frank, “Introduction” 14-15). When referring to the invasion of Nanjing and the raping, pillaging, and murder inflicted upon the city’s inhabitants, the Japanese continue to gloss over their acts of aggression by using words such as “battle” (connoting a sense of mutual engagement) and mild euphemisms such as “occupation” (Chang 208). And when the United States invaded Granada under President Reagan, the event was benignly referred to by the American government and media as “a landing” (Ford 14).

This type of meiotic sanitization is readily received by the masses and proves effective in mollifying public opinion, but it can also put into relief the very thing it seeks to understate when considered critically through the prism of irony. The fact that the

48 The fact that this editorial columnist uses both the full date as opposed to the abbreviated date of May 68 as well as a lower case ‘r’ in the word revolution further divests, along with the article’s title, the historical moment of any revolutionary signification.
French government and media refused to refer to the Algerian War of Independence as a
war resulted in deeper wounds and an enduring stain on the French nation’s soul, and
among the Chinese much rancor and distrust toward Japan still exist today because the
brutality inflicted upon the citizens of Nanjing remains relegated to the realm of the
unspoken in both Japanese history books and political speeches (Chang 223).

Evidence of similar semantic manipulation regarding May 68 is apparent forty-
five years after the fact. Hegel tells us the owl of Minerva spreads its wings at dusk, an
observation echoed by Eric Hobsbawm’s reminder that “[m]ost human beings operate
like historians: they only recognize the nature of their experience in retrospect” (247).
However, when it comes to May 68, temporal and analytical distance fails to guarantee
constancy of our understanding of related events. After all, Aron’s own stringent
assessment of May 68 softened over the years, just as some of the most passionate
participants in the strikes (i.e., the New Philosophers) would come to condemn the
events.

Efforts to qualify May 68 continue to fuel a seemingly endless cycle of debate and
may therefore seem as “irrational” and as “insaisissable” as ever. Let us consider, for
example, the dynamic proposed by Aron whereby the historian constructs an object (in
this case “the May events”) that is so heterogeneous that any related problematic or

49 For more on the evolution of Aron’s thinking regarding May 68, see chapter 3 of Serge Audier’s
La pensée anti-68: Essai sur une restauration intellectuelle. Paris : La Découverte, 2008, as well as Aron’s
interview on Apostrophe which aired on September 23, 1983 and during which Aron refers to May 68 as
“merveilleux” and “une révolution carnavale.”

50 Aron is quoted in Kristin Ross’ May ‘68 as stating, “Je ne connais pas d’episode de l’histoire de
France qui me donne au même degré le sentiment de l’irrationnel” (1).

51 “Insaisissable”—elusive or beyond one’s grasp—is the frequently cited description of the May
68 events from Charles de Gaulle’s May 24 public address of that same year.
analysis changes according to the elements of the very object under consideration (Mémoires 481). May 68 is in keeping with what Aron calls a “container” category—a category which is so broad and full of contradictory elements that it is difficult to reach any consensus regarding the matter. How easy it becomes, therefore, to co-opt specific elements of May 68 in order to construct one’s own political instrumentalisation and narrative. During his presidential campaign speech of 2007, for example, Nicolas Sarkozy opened a frontal attack on the ideas and inheritors of May 68 by associating them with anarchy, moral relativism, and the destruction of social and patriotic values. This heritage, the presidential candidate vowed, “must be liquidated.”

Sarkozy proceeded to link the mini-riot in Paris’s Gare du Nord to the May 68 strike by accusing the left of “systematically tak[ing] the side of thugs, troublemakers and fraudsters against the police” (Samuel, The Telegraph). And again during Sarkozy’s presidential campaign, André Glucksmann—one of the front-line participants in the 1968 student strikes—was publicly denounced by former fellow-travelers Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Alain Geismar for disavowing May 68 and for being an ideologue of the Sarkozian neo-conservative movement. One year later in 2008, however, the same Cohn-Bendit continued to stoke the debate by publishing a book with the incendiary title Forget 68. In 1979, Bernard-Henri Lévy simply closes the chapter on the entire political dimension of May 68 by stating, “Si j’étais encyclopédiste, je rêverais d’écrire dans un dictionnaire pour l’an

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52 During his 2007 speech at Bercy, Sarkozy expressed his desire to “liquider l’héritage de Mai 68” which has led, he added, to “le relativisme intellectuel et moral” (Le Monde “La Pensée anti-Mai 68 s’épuise”).
2000: “Socialisme: n.m., genre culturel, né à Paris en 1848, mort à Paris en 1968” (Barbarie 11).53

In sum, consensus regarding the implications and legacy of May 68 remains nothing less than fluid, justifying French historian Georges Mink’s recent conclusion: “Événement déjà éloigné, l’année 1968 aurait dû être définitivement ‘refroidie’, rangée parmi les objets d’observation des sciences sociales. Il n’en est, pourtant, rien” (13).54 Mink is correct: in defiance of ongoing efforts to “liquidate” the May 68 heritage, the mere evocation of the event continues to carry astounding weight:

Pour un Français, 1968 évoque immédiatement les événements de mai: un automatisme linguistique associe l’année et le mois, et l’on dit couramment, et instinctivement, ‘mai 68’ comme si ces deux éléments ne faisaient en réalité qu’un seul mot. À elle seule, cette habitude linguistique montre que l’événement est inscrit en profondeur dans la mémoire collective française, où il occupe une place si importante qu’il finit par obscurcir les autres événements de la période de l’après-guerre. (Groppo 15)55

Forgetting, just as much as remembering, is made possible by such “automatisme linguistique,” yet despite dissonant critical assessments of May 68 or the discursive tricks often employed to frame the debate, one thematic arc persistently declines the revolutionary dimension of the May 68 narrative: When discussing the word “révolution” in the immediate context, for example, Robert Frank surmises: “[Ce terme] aujourd’hui

53 Lévy writes: “If I were an encyclopedist, I would dream of writing in the dictionary of the year 2000: ‘Socialism, n., cultural style, born in Paris in 1848, died in Paris in 1968’.”

54 Mink writes: “Being a distant event, the year 1968 definitely should have ‘cooled’ by now and should have been shelved among the objects of observation of the social sciences. That, however, has not been the case. And not only in France.”

55 Groppo argues that the legacy of May 68 is ingrained in the French collective memory on a deeply psycho-linguistic level: “For a French person, 1968 immediately evokes the May events: a linguistic automatism links the year and the month, and one states fluently and instinctively ‘May 68’ as if these two elements actually comprised one word. This linguistic tendency alone shows that the event is profoundly inscribed in the French collective memory, where it occupies a place so important that it obscures all other post-World War II events.”
parait donner une image partiale ou partielle de la réalité de la contestation” (15), 56 while Parham Shahrjerdi suggests that Maurice Blanchot’s use of the term “révolution” is “peut-être trop fort, du moins, nous semble-t-il, dans l’après-coup” (293). Shahrjerdi further explains that when alluding to May 68, “tour à tour, on l’appellera la ‘révolte’ ou le ‘mouvement’ de Mai 68. Peu importe le nom” (293), 57 echoing almost verbatim Steven Erlanger’s previously mentioned claim cited from The New York Times. However, if Frank’s characterization of the revolutionary dynamic proves the rule rather than the exception when it comes to critical analyses related to May 68, we are just as able to reverse the premise of his assertion by arguing that it is not the use of the word “revolution” that results in a biased and partial understanding of May 68 contestation; rather, it is the concerted effort to eliminate the term from the discussion that engenders such misapprehension. And we are equally able to argue that Shahrjerdi’s assertion illustrates the way in which pundits whitewash the entire revolutionary dimension of May 68 by relegating it to the realm of the exaggerated (“trop fort”) while foreclosing on any potential challenge to their appropriation of the discourse (“peu importe le nom”).

Such efforts to extirpate the word “revolution” from the dialogue bring us back to the question of meiotic sanitization and why it has become so important for those who dominate the stage to frame the discussion in such terms. After all, if we consider basic definitions of words related to “revolution” from The American College Dictionary, it becomes clear that even if May 68 did not result in the overthrow of the French

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56 When discussing the term “revolution” in the context of May 68, Frank says, “[this term] today seems to give a biased or partial image of the reality of contestation.”

57 Shahrjerdi suggests the term “revolution” is “perhaps too strong, or at least it seems so in retrospect,” and that when discussing May 68, “bit by bit, it will be referred to as ‘the revolt’ or ‘the movement’ of May 68. Whatever it is called scarcely matters.”
government, the related contestation was of a revolutionary nature. The dictionary offers the following definitions relevant to the present point: Revolution: 2) a complete or marked change in something. And Revolutionary: 2) subversive to an established procedure, principles, etc. Perhaps the one point of agreement shared by even the most disparate assessments of May 68 is the fact that the strikers were seeking to realize a change of paradigm in traditional hierarchies in government, education, and society in general. Whether they acknowledged it or not at the time, they were doing so through an exploration of new, more expansive forms of expression. Maurice Blanchot provides the following assessment of such efforts, supporting my assertion that May 68 contestation was demonstrably infused with revolutionary aspirations:

Contrairement aux “révolutions traditionnelles”, il ne s’agissait pas de seulement prendre le pouvoir pour le remplacer par un autre, ni de prendre la Bastille, le Palais d’hiver, l’Élysée ou l’Assemblée nationale, objectifs sans importance, et pas même de renverser un ancien monde, mais de laisser se manifester, en dehors de tout intérêt utilitaire, une possibilité d’être ensemble qui rendait à tous le droit à l’égalité dans la fraternité par la liberté de parole qui soulevait chacun. Chacun avait quelque chose à dire, parfois à écrire (sur les murs) ; quoi donc? cela importait peu. Le Dire primait le dit. La poésie était quotidienne. La communication ‘spontanée’, en ce sens qu’elle paraissait sans retenue, n’était rien d’autre que la communication avec elle-même, transparente, immanente, malgré les combats, débats, controverses, où l’intelligence calculatrice s’exprimait moins que l’effervescence presque pure (en tout cas, sans mépris, sans hauteur ni bassesse), — c’est pourquoi on pouvait pressentir que, l’autorité renversée ou plutôt négligée, se déclarait une manière encore jamais vécue de communisme que nulle idéologie n’était à même de récupérer ou de revendiquer. (Communauté 52-53)\(^{58}\)

\(^{58}\) Blanchot states, “Unlike ‘traditional revolutions,’ it was not about merely taking away the seat of power in order to replace it with another, nor was it about storming the Bastille, the Winter Palace, the Élysée, or the National Assembly…unimportant objectives…and it was not even about overturning an old world order, but rather allowing to manifest, beyond all utilitarian interest, the possibility of being together, which afforded everyone the right to equality in a fraternal setting through a freedom of expression that elated everyone. Everybody had something to say, sometimes to write (on the walls); what exactly? It scarcely mattered. Saying it was more important than what was said. Poetry was a daily occurrence. “Spontaneous” communication, in the sense that it seemed unfettered, was really nothing more than communication with itself, transparent, immanent, despite the struggles, debates, controversies, where calculated intelligence found expression less than the almost pure effervescence (in all cases without
Blanchot deems this newfound freedom of expression to be the operative site of “non-traditional” revolutionary change, whereby established social hierarchies are abolished (“le droit à l’égalité dans la fraternité par la liberté de parole…”), as is the traditional imperative of showing deference to the voice of the Intellectual (“l’intelligence calculatrice s’exprimait moins que l’effervescence presque pure”). As Jean-Pierre Bouyxou and Pierre Delannoy conclude in the Paris Match issue marking the forty year anniversary of May 68, “[après Mai 68] plus jamais on ne verra d’ouvrier soulevant sa casquette au passage du patron” (65). Suddenly, the dictionary’s definition of “revolutionary” (i.e., “subversive to established procedure, principles, etc.”) asserts itself in Blanchot’s account. By “neglecting” authority, the May 68 protesters realize a unique experience of “communisme,” a change of paradigm which, by virtue of its organic evolution, goes beyond the traditional definitions of the term “revolution,” yet which remains revolutionary by definition. Perhaps, therefore, the focus of both scholarly as well as popular efforts to establish May 68 as a failed or successful revolution ought to be shifted to the more fundamental question of whether or not May 68 was revolutionary tout court.

Where, then, does this ongoing debate in semantics leave us forty-five years after the historic events of May 68? Whence the divergent positions taken by one-time fellow-travelers, and what relevance does it all have to Modern Revolutionary Writing? Reaching consensus regarding such questions is unlikely and, in my estimation, contempt, with neither haughtiness nor baseness), — it is why we could sense that, with authority overthrown or rather neglected, a never-before experienced form of communism was breaking out which no ideology was up to the task of co-opting or claiming.”

59 In using the term “organic,” I defer to Blanchot’s qualification of May 68 as being “en dehors de tout intérêt utilitaire” as well as “sans projet, sans conjuration” (Communauté 52).
undesirable—for a univocal narrative would only function as a normative exercise antithetical to Blanchot’s characterization of May 68 as the embodiment of “explosive communication.” Hence the strategic appeal of a New Historicist critical approach which allows for a discovery process that, by Steven Greenblatt’s definition, involves a degree of subjectivity. According to Greenblatt, the role of the New Historicist is “more cultural or anthropological” and must remain “conscious of its own status as interpretation and intent upon understanding literature as part of a system of signs that constitutes a given culture” (13). With this perspective in mind we are able to move toward a contextualization of the relationship between the works of Wittig, Detrez, and Genet and the thinking of Marxist critics, as well as the attendant implications specific to Modern Revolutionary Writing vis-à-vis questions of literary poetics and the role literature plays not only in reflecting society but in changing it as well.

New Revolutionary Subjects and the Role of Literature in the Evolving Marxian Social Project

_All modern writers are indebted to Marx, even if they do not know it._

_Karl Popper_

Whether one accepts or rejects Karl Marx’s social analysis, his thinking cannot be ignored when discussing twentieth century French culture in general and French literary production in particular. To be sure, the power of Marx’s ideas has changed the way we look at the world, and it ineluctably frames French philosophical, socio-political, theoretical, and cultural debate. The critical foundation for theorizing Modern Revolutionary Writing as a literary periodization therefore begins with Georg Lukács, one of Marxism’s most important aesthetic critics, whose thinking expands the concept of production to modern cultural life by bringing to the fore crucial debates surrounding the
uneasy marriage of modernism and Marxism in the context of the dynamic role literature assumes in society.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Lukács’ thinking, for Western Marxism is generally taken to begin with his work and the legacy of his early reflections on art and literature can be traced through generations of critics on both sides of the Atlantic. If traditional Marxism considers the ideologies of culture (i.e., art, politics, religion, education, etc.) as by-products determined by the economic base, Western Marxism focuses on the Marxian superstructure as it relates to commodity fetishism on consciousness and the fragmented and reified nature of human experience under capitalism. According to Lukács:

[T]he problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them. (History 83)

In this instance, the focus of traditional Marxism is redirected from the primacy of economic analysis (i.e., “must not be considered in isolation”) to more philosophical and abstract considerations of culture in order to arrive at a dialectical materialist understanding of human history in the framework of a dynamic totality. Here Lukács frames the notion of totality (i.e., “society in all its aspects”) as a concept encompassing the objective and subjective processes whereby an entity, composed of a multiplicity of parts, constitutes itself as a totality—either a thing-in-itself or a thing-for-itself. Put more succinctly, Lukács further posits, “The category of totality […] determines not only the object of knowledge but also the subject” (History 28) and is, as a result, “[t]he bearer of the principle of revolution in science” (History 27). If the dialectical materialist method
advanced by Marx aims at understanding society as a whole (i.e., the object of knowledge as well as the subject), then the proletariat is “at one and the same time the product of the permanent crisis in capitalism and the instrument of those tendencies which drive capitalism towards crisis” (*History* 40). Lukács thus focuses on the proletariat’s struggle for freedom in terms of the dialectical unity of theory and practice as opposed to relying on and waiting for the inevitable revolution theorized by many leaders of the Comintern. For Lukács—at least in his early years of writing—world revolution is contingent, not inevitable, and Marxism is an instrument, not a prediction of it. Exposing the fragmented and reified nature of human experience in order to raise the consciousness of the proletariat masses would therefore necessitate “both an artistic and an intellectual dimension” (“Realism” 39).

Beginning with his magnum opus *History and Class Consciousness* of 1923, Lukács lays the foundation for what would ultimately evolve by the 1960s into a focus on authorial responsibility and the relationship between theory and practice, refined definitions of class consciousness, and the importance of dialectical materialism to society’s investigation of ‘false consciousness’ as “an aspect of the historical totality and as a stage in the historical process” (*History* 50). In other words, Lukács unmoors the traditional bourgeois understanding of class consciousness located in the empirical individual of history (‘individual’ here can refer to an individual man, class, or people) and in his empirically given (and hence psychological or mass-psychological) consciousness (*History* 50). In doing so, he reminds us that the premise of dialectical materialism is “not men’s consciousness that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness. Only when the core
of existence stands revealed as a social process can existence be seen as the product, albeit the hitherto unconscious product, of human activity” (History 18). In line with Marx’s thinking, he criticizes the individualist bourgeois philosophy of the subject founded on the voluntary and conscious social being, and against this ideology he asserts the primacy of social relations: existence—and thus the world—is the product of human activity. But this can only be seen if the preponderance of social process over individual consciousness, which is but the effect of ideological mystification, is accepted. This is not to suggest Lukács restrains human liberty on behalf of some kind of sociological determinism; to the contrary, this production of existence comes to define the possibility of praxis in his argument.

What concerns Modern Revolutionary Writing in this stage of the discussion centers on the dynamic of revolution residing in the relationship between theory and practice as well as how the thinking of intellectuals (and of writers) relates to class struggle if theory is not to lag behind history? By returning to this intrinsic premise of Marxian thinking, which he deems neglected or forgotten by contemporary leaders and policy makers, Lukács critiques Engels (for failing to address the dialectical relation between subject and object in the historical process), Kant (for conceptualizing the individual as the exterior, universal and contemplating subject separated from the object of contemplation), as well as Hegel (for theorizing an idealist system devoid of ethics in which the subject chooses to reflect on the world as opposed to changing it). Not surprisingly, Lukács’ History and Class Consciousness engendered widespread censure from rising stars in the Comintern, most notably Abram Deborin and Lásló Rudas (a co-
advisor with Lukács on ideological matters under the Hungarian revolutionary leader, Béla Kun\(^{61}\), who attacked his hegelo-marxist thinking for being dangerously idealistic. The recently published manuscript, *Tailism and Dialectics*,\(^{62}\) serves as a sort of Apology of *History and Class Consciousness* in which Lukács denounces the attempts by Rudas and Deborin to transform Marxism into a “science” in the positivist, bourgeois sense (*Tailism* 50). Lukács responds to Deborin’s attempts to return historical materialism to a bourgeois sociology founded on trans-historical laws that exclude all human activity, as well as to Rudas’ claims to a “scientific” observation of the objective, law-bound course of history, whereby one can “anticipate” revolutionary developments (*Tailism* 150-58). Both regard as worthy of scientific investigation only what is free of any participation on the part of the historical subject, and both reject, in the name of this “Marxist” (in fact, positivist) science any attempt to accord “an active and positive role to a subjective moment in history” (*Tailism* 135-36). This war against subjectivism is anathema to Lukács, for it negates the importance for man, by dint of rising to the ethical imperative of doing so,\(^{63}\) to “become conscious of himself as a social being, as simultaneously the subject and object of the socio-historical process” (*History* 19).

Lukács’ perspective advances a more humanitarian approach to class struggle in contrast to the authoritarian, bureaucratic, and mechanistic model offered by the Soviet

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61 For a fascinating account of the ideological apparatuses implemented in pre-revolutionary Hungary under Kun, refer to Rudolph Tőkés’ *Béla Kun and the Soviet Hungarian Republic: The Origins and Role of the Communist Party of Hungary in the Revolutions of 1918-1919*.

62 The original document titled *Chvostismus und Dialektik* dates from 1925 or 1926 and was discovered in the former archives of the Lenin Institute in the 1990s. It was translated into English and published by Verso in 2000.

63 Lukács’ earlier publication, *Tactics and Ethics: Political Writings 1919-1929*, addresses the individual’s conscience and sense of responsibility (i.e., the ethical imperative to act) vis-à-vis his action or inaction toward changing the world’s destiny.
Union, and the literary trend of realism and the literary genre of the novel are, he argues, the surest means through which to reflect dialectical materialist class tensions. According to his essay titled “Realism in the Balance,” the progressive tendencies of history are revealed in the realist novel through a portrayal of the totality of social relations. Here he argues: “If a writer strives to represent reality as it truly is, i.e., if he is an authentic realist, then the question of totality plays a decisive role” (39-40). Lukács’ concept of “totality,” eventually to be appropriated and willfully conflated with the terminological bludgeon “totalitarianism” by the New Philosophers in their critique of Marxism, is, I believe, safeguarded from such arrogation by the following qualifications of the term as it pertains to literary production, first published in “Art and the Objective Truth” and the “Preface” of Writer and Critic, respectively:

The illusion in art, the aesthetic illusion, depends [...] on the self-containment we have examined in the work of art and on the fact that the work of art in its totality reflects the full process of life and does not represent in its details reflections of particular phenomena of life on which they are modeled. (Writer 40-41)

Lukács elaborates on Lenin’s assertion that “Art does not demand recognition as a reality,” which serves as the basis of the former’s efforts to define his own Marxist brand of realism from the naturalism of Émile Zola and others in the nineteenth century. For Lukács, the detailed particularism of the photographic-like accuracy in literature as advanced by Zola has no meaningful role in realism. Again in “Art and the Objective Truth,” he specifically states: “The objectivity of the artistic reflection depends on the correct reflection of the totality. The artistic correctness of a detail thus has nothing to do with whether the detail corresponds to any similar detail in reality” (Writer 42-43).
In the preface written for *Writer and Critic*, Lukács further explains why realism provides the sole means of reflecting the totality of life necessary to our understanding of “the way in which reactionary ideas infiltrate our minds” and how we must “achieve a critical distance from such prejudices” (“Realism” 37):

I sought, […], to revive the realist tradition of richness in content and form and to combat the barren schematism of the official literature not only in regard to its technique and its artistic approach but also in regard to its fundamental principles regarding the representation of people and life and to open the way through my criticism to a new great literature capable of encompassing life in the age of socialism. (“Preface,” *Writer* 8)

This conceptualization of how realism functions as an all-encompassing reflection of social reality becomes problematic once we begin to question not only the meaning of terms he frequently employs, such as “reality,” “rightful,” “truth,” etc., but also the limits of what constitutes the “total life context” (“Realism” 36). In other words, we are left with the unanswered and unanswerable questions of just how all-encompassing Lukács believes the realist novel is in its reflection of “objective reality” (“Realism” 33). And what of the myriad subjects (i.e., women, homosexuals, ethnic minorities, children, etc.) of this objective reality who are more often than not excluded in the realist portrayal of the “highly complex mediations in all their unity and diversity” (“Realism” 43)?

It is here that we touch upon the crux of the debate between Lukács and fellow Marxist critics which most concerns Modern Revolutionary Writing. The conflict centers on Lukács’ essay, “The Greatness and the Decline of Expressionism” dating from 1934, in which he exalts the work of the realist tradition in literature and art while condemning the work of the expressionists. The polemic that ensued between Lukács and other prominent Marxist critics is rich and complex in its reflections upon, among others, irrationalism in representation as it relates to fascism, Lukács’ characterization of
expressionism as being mired in elitism and cultural nihilism, and his opponents’ defense of the expressionist movement’s latent humanism and the interest shown by its exponents in popular, traditional forms of art and decoration (Jameson, “Aesthetics” 13). To be sure, this well-documented conflict between Lukács and his peers provides some of the most revealing episodes in modern German letters (Jameson, “Aesthetics” 9), and it resonates in the expository reflections of subsequent literary critics such as Lucien Goldmann. However, it also exposes an inherent weakness in Lukács’ overall critical approach. Few will dissent, I suspect, from Ernst Bloch’s characterization of Lukács’ modus operandi whereby he constructs an ideal type of the ideological substrate of the works in question and then judges them collectively through the prism of his own politico-ideological positions (Bloch, “Discussing Expressionism” 18-19).

Perhaps the most obvious flaw in Lukács’ critical approach—the Gordian knot he seems unable to sever—lies in his own assertion that “the emergence of all […] literary schools can be explained in terms of the economy, the social structure and the class struggles of the age […]” (“Realism” 45), for he dismisses the literary trends that succeeded realism by attempting to impose the realist tradition on socio-economic dynamics that are radically different from those that existed during the realist period. What of, therefore, the social structures and the class struggles of subsequent historical periods? How can the diverse chorus of voices that comprise such an integral part of the May 68 legacy ever hope to find a place in Lukács’ conceptualization of a literary history

64 Lukács’ critical influence is reflected throughout Goldmann’s efforts to tie the novel to the rise of the bourgeois culture and the spread of the capitalist economic system.

65 Over the course of his long career, Lukács never abandoned his commitment to the realist movement, but he did come to acknowledge the limitations of his earlier methodology—perhaps most notably in his ruminations incorporated in the 1962 preface to The Theory of the Novel.
“composed of an ordered and univocal past whose meaning and value [a]re fixed by the wider history that determine[s] it” (“Realism” 13)? Such impasses, along with the conflations and reductions attendant to Lukács’ blanket rejection of aesthetic forms deviating from the realist tradition in general and the genre of the novel in particular, mark the point of departure for the debate over the historical implications of modernism and the role of the individual in the scheme of totality.

Lukács is but one of the first to think about the individual in relation to totality in a Marxist literary context. For him, the “monotony” and “one-dimensionality” (“Realism” 43) of modernist aesthetics result in the writer’s inability to “penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society” (“Realism” 38). He further argues that only in the work of the realist writer are we able to “observe the whole surface of life in all its essential determinants, and not just a subjectively perceived moment isolated from the totality” (“Realism” 39). Lukács’ understanding of the mechanisms by which the realist novel “mirrors objective reality” (“Realism” 43) relies upon an expansive, diachronic reflection of “the total life context” (“Realism” 36), and it clearly assigns a degree of authorial responsibility to the realist writer. The nature of this assignment, however, will serve as the target of Walter Benjamin’s critical response to Lukács’ line of thinking.

If Lukács stresses the importance of a diachronic, all-encompassing description of the totality of the societal process and believes only a portrayal of this totality allows art

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66 Along with Bloch, Bertolt Brecht is one of many to point out the narrow range of literature upon which Lukács’ theory is constructed, which results in an overwhelming preoccupation with the novel to the exclusion of, for example, poetry and drama. These omitted genres are, of course, those in which Brecht himself excels. (Jameson, “Afterword” 63)
to reflect class antagonisms in order to reveal the progressive tendencies of history, Benjamin proceeds from a different perspective. Benjamin views his own investigations as a kind of synchronic drilling, or plumbing the depths. Recalling a conversation with Bertolt Brecht, he writes: “I [told] Brecht that penetrating into depth is my way of travelling to the antipodes” (Understanding 110). In other words, if Lukács constructs his totality horizontally, Benjamin chooses vertical coordinates in order “to make the continuum of history explode” (Understanding 88). Accordingly, the intellectual, as historical materialist, should reveal the significance of the present historical instant by analyzing the “explosive” convergence of past and future in the presence of the now in order to effect real transformative change. To plumb the depths allows for an exploration of dynamic interrelations, and to focus on fragments permits the historical materialist to connect them to the broader social reality. Benjamin posits the social fabric as a complex weave necessitating a move beyond the stagnant Lukácsian approach to art and literature based on depictions of the social reality of class antagonisms. In direct contrast to Lukács, he posits a “dialectical treatment” to the question of how a work of art or literature “must be inserted into the context of living social relations” precisely because “the rigid, isolated object (work, novel, book) is of no use whatsoever” (Understanding 87).

In order to progress beyond Lukács, literature must therefore be analyzed in terms of its technique and position within the creative production relations of a given era. If Lukács rejects modernist trends in defiance of an ever-evolving landscape of artistic production, Benjamin embraces the need to “rethink the notions of literary forms or genres […] [in order] to find forms appropriate to the literary energy of our time”
Most significantly perhaps, he observes the fact that “we are in the midst of a vast process in which literary forms are being melted down, a process in which many of the contrasts in terms of which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance” (Understanding 89). Perhaps for the first time we see in full light the implications of Brecht’s theory of Verfremdungseffekt, whereby it is considered anathema for a writer to simply employ a creative system in order to produce objects to be placed on display for others to interpret as they please. The stakes have perhaps never been higher when it comes to questions of poetics because the creative system must include both the object and a description of the system used to produce it. Only in this way will a viewer see the uniqueness of the author’s system and find inspiration to develop his or her own system for authorship. Asserting this premise, Benjamin states: “The best tendency is wrong if it does not prescribe the attitude with which it ought to be pursued,” for “today this is more than ever an essential demand: A writer who does not teach other writers teaches nobody” (Understanding 98). Here Benjamin throws the gauntlet before writers by prescribing their work serve as a model for others in order to enlist more “collaborators” in the revolutionary effort (Understanding 98). Throughout the arguments advanced by Lukács, Brecht, and Benjamin, the role of the author is defined as political and didactic in a revolutionary framework, the parameters of which, however, remain fixed within the context of proletarian struggle.

Brecht’s “estrangement” or “alienation” effect in epic theater is, as Benjamin explains, “not so much to develop action as to represent conditions. But ‘represent’ does not here signify ‘reproduce’ in the sense used by theoreticians of Naturalism. Rather, the first point at issue is to uncover those conditions. […] This uncovering (making strange, or alienating) of conditions is brought about by the process being interrupted” (Understanding 18, 100). We will see how Wittig’s Les guérillères incorporates and puts into practice Brecht’s estrangement effect.
Returning to the question of the role of the historical subject, Jean-Paul Sartre analyzes in *Critique de la raison dialectique* the existential question of individual freedom in a Marxist society mechanistically advancing toward the inevitable revolutionary project. If Sartre emphasizes time and again his belief that man is condemned to freedom and is therefore constantly *becoming*, the notion of a deterministic class struggle which might engulf or serialize in a bureaucratic manner the very individuals who march toward revolution is problematic at best. How, for instance, can one’s individual freedom be realized when the person is but a part of a teleological whole? Such are the questions that drive Sartre’s quest for social justice through the advancement of liberal and humanist values and lead him to theorize the democratic “*groupe-en-fusion*” as a union of individuals united without hierarchy for a common purpose.\(^{68}\) However, as with Lukács, misgivings continue to plague Sartre about the inherent determinism in the Marxian dialectic which is too often reduced to binarisms (such as capital versus labor, etc.). This dynamic is further problematized by the complexity and transience of the ways in which individuals interact dialectically with each other as well as with the collective. In other words, the newly elevated role of the individual in relation to the totality of society is neither perfunctory nor preordained in Sartre’s de-Stalinized brand of Marxism-infused-with-existentialism, for it is the actions of individuals that must determine the direction of the totality in a revolutionary context.

\(^{68}\) In *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Sartre cites the crowd that stormed the Bastille on July 14, 1789 as an example, and in *Situations III* he refers to the French resistance fighters as a functioning “*group in fusion*” as well: “Il n'est pas d'armée au monde où l'on trouve pareille égalité de risque pour le soldat et le généralissime. Et c'est pourquoi la Résistance fut une démocratie véritable: pour le soldat comme pour le chef, même danger, même responsabilité, même absolue liberté dans la discipline” (13).
Building upon Sartre’s theorization of the individual situated with the “groupe-en-fusion,” others call for a new left based on workers’ councils. In particular, Edgar Morin, Roland Barthes, and other founding members of the journal *Arguments* advance the theme of council socialism, or *autogestion*. These councils are based on the notion of non-hierarchical intellectual sociability, the input of diverse perspectives, and a Western Marxist orientation (Christofferson 46). In Wittig’s *Les guérillères*, we will see how autogestion plays a prominent role in the context of social liberation for the new revolutionary subject. Wittig’s work mobilizes the Western Marxist understanding of a society in which the center shifts from the economic structure to the political and cultural superstructure, thereby allowing for new conceptualizations of alienation engendered by a growing breadth of autogestion-defined councils. Michael Scott Christofferson elaborates:

> The concept of alienation offer[s] Left intellectuals a solution to the multiple dilemmas of their politics. It allow[s] them to locate a new revolutionary subject whose goals coincid[e] with those of their emerging new revolutionary project. Alienation in production, that is, lack of control over the process and the ends of production, [takes] the place of exploitation as the root of working-class militancy. […]. Taken in the broad sense, alienation, understood as alienation by capitalist social structures, [can] apply to everyone. […]. As a consequence, key sectors outside of the working class, like the student population, could also be agents of revolution. (47)

Christofferson’s observations delve far into the intricacies of the different arguments pertaining to questions of alienation and are beyond the ken of the present discussion, yet the overall consensus he traces throughout his discussion arrives at one conclusion pertinent to Modern Revolutionary Writing: revolutionary struggle is no longer dependent on the proletariat class. Plenty of testimony supports Christofferson’s assessment. In 1967, for instance, Henri Lefebvre—the most prolific of the French
Marxist intellectuals⁶⁹—asserts that the working class is no longer revolutionary and posits a new paradigm characterized by different agents of revolutionary change (Poster, *Existential* 245). Reflecting on May 68, Fredric Jameson also remarks that “a whole explosion of extraparliamentary formations of all ideological complexions, the so-called ‘groupuscules,’ offers the promise of a new kind of politics equally ‘liberated’ from the traditional class categories” (“Periodizing” 182). Characterizations of a “new kind of politics” lead to a rethinking of who might qualify as new agents of revolution in the evolving conceptual framework.

As far as literary production in a revolutionary context is concerned, Herbert Marcuse concretizes the understanding that the drive toward revolutionary change will be fueled by a range of interests beyond and often independent of the proletariat class. Expanding on Antonio Gramsci’s model of hegemony and counter-hegemony, Marcuse analyzes social and cultural forces of domination and shines light on alternative counter-hegemonic sites of resistance and struggle through a Marxist aesthetic lens. *In Counterrevolution and Revolt*, he discusses the dynamic whereby the adaptability of the capitalist-consumer system successfully converts “the entire individual-body and mind-into an instrument, or even part of an instrument: active or passive, productive or receptive, in working time and free time,” all for service of the system (14). In other words, the proletariat no longer exists as the negation of the capitalist system, but rather, as an absorbed part of it through commodity accumulation.

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⁶⁹ Radical Philosophy published an obituary for Henri Lefebvre which states in part: “[T]he most prolific of French Marxist intellectuals died during the night of 28–29 June 1991. During his long career, Lefebvre’s work has gone in and out of fashion several times, and has influenced the development not only of philosophy but also of sociology, geography, political science and literary criticism” (*Radical Philosophy* Spring 1991).
Whereas Marcuse exalts Lukács, Brecht, and Benjamin for their contribution to the discussion of a “proletarian literature” and its potential role in the revolutionary dream, he also uses what he perceives to be the inherent flaw in their debate as the springboard for his own theoretical argument. The conclusion reached by his predecessors, he observes, is rooted in their understanding of a proletarian worldview characterized by:

[…] a historical stage where the position of the proletariat alone renders possible insight into the totality of the social process and into the necessity and direction of radical change (i.e., into the “truth”). Only a proletarian literature can fulfill the progressive function of art and develop a revolutionary consciousness: indispensable weapon in the class struggle. (*Counterrevolution* 122-23)

Marcuse critiques such restrictive parameters by advancing a radically different understanding of what constitutes revolutionary consciousness in the context of the capitalist-consumer system:

If the term is to designate *revolutionary* consciousness (latent or actual), then it is today certainly not distinctively or even predominantly ‘proletarian’—not only because the revolution against global monopoly capitalism is more and other than a proletarian revolution, but also because its conditions, prospects, and goals cannot be adequately formulated in terms of a proletarian revolution. And if this revolution is to be (in whatever form) present in a goal of literature, such literature could not be typically proletarian. (*Counterrevolution* 123-24)

This perspective clearly allows for a broader definition of what might constitute literature operating as a catalyst for revolution. The need to resist conflating such “revolutionary literature” with what Marcuse calls “affirmative art” (i.e., agitprop representations in the form of proletariat or commodity/bourgeois art and literature) is of paramount importance to the overall argument of *Counterrevolution and Revolt*. To avoid being co-opted, literature must negate the immediate—the society from which it springs—by
transforming atomized individuals, attributes, etc., to the universal (124). This transcendent dynamic renders literature incapable of affirming a society, except perhaps for the possibility of a theorized utopian society free of class division, and defines as its primary task the emancipation (i.e., the raising) of consciousness. Without it, Marcuse argues, “all emancipation of the senses, all radical activism, remains blind, self-defeating” (*Counterrevolution* 132). In the following chapters, I will discuss the ways in which the dialectic of the universal and the particular is problematized by Detrez, Wittig, and Genet in what constitutes both the rich diversity as well as the fundamental unity of Modern Revolutionary Writing.
Chapter 2

CONRAD DETREZ AND BRASILIDADE: SUBVERTING THE GRAND NARRATIVE OF NATIONALISM IN MODERN REVOLUTIONARY WRITING

Brasilidade and Redefining the Franco-Brazilian Hegemonic Power Structure

_Va au Brésil, c’est l’Empire de l’Imaginaire!_ Roger Bastide

For five hundred years an ever-evolving reciprocal imaginary of the nation-state has defined the exceptional bond between France and Brazil and has served to consolidate the grand narrative of nationalism for both nations.\(^{70}\) If the ebb and flow of this dynamic has evolved in organic ways as Gilbert Duran suggests (7),\(^{71}\) it may be attributed to the fact that France and Brazil share a history unburdened by tensions resulting from the forced marriage of colonialism (Levine, _History_ 59). Instead, vicissitudes in the political and economic climates in both Western Europe and the New World have molded the relationship between the two nations in a free union, whereby shifting gazes—and therefore evolving images—are exchanged in what François Hartog metaphorically refers to as “[un] jeu de miroirs déformants dans la connaissance réciproque” (42). The perpetuation of this exchange has been facilitated by the social construction of _brasilidade_, or brazilianness, resulting in a reinforcing of

\(^{70}\) I am amalgamating the basic premises regarding the nation as a socially constructed community as advanced by Benedict Anderson and Philip E. Wegner in the context of Jean-François Lyotard’s conceptualization of the grand narrative.

\(^{71}\) In his preface to Mario Carelli’s _Cultures Croisées_, Gilbert Durand describes “le flux et le reflux de la croisée des cultures” between Brazil and France as being “presque biologiques” (7).
stereotypes that belie sweeping changes in geo-political environments over the course of the twentieth century. I will expound in this chapter on the pivotal moment whereby these stereotypes are re-signified in the writing of Conrad Detrez, whose work represents a “key element in the transition from one continent to the other in the 1968 period” (Bosteels) and marks a paradigm shift in the treatment of tiers-mondisme inherent to Modern Revolutionary Writing.

As a Belgium national who lived in Brazil for several years and ultimately became a French citizen, Detrez writes from a complex perspective of the ways in which developing nations in general and Brazil in particular are apprehended and signified in French literature. His writing is filtered through a franco-cultural lens obliquely informed by a legacy of French history and politics yet directly impacted upon by the author’s own experience in a revolutionary Brazil asserting itself against the tutelage of a decaying and wearisome Europe. This dynamic is characterized by an innovative deconstruction and reconstitution of brasilidade, which sets Detrez’s literary universe apart from that of more renowned figures in the world of French cultural production who turned to Brazil for inspiration, such as Marcel Camus and Simone de Beauvoir, among others. It is important to keep in mind however that no evidence has surfaced in my research to indicate that Detrez or anyone else discussed here knowingly operates within

72 I am grateful to Bruno Bosteels of Cornell University for an inspiring exchange which led me to consider Detrez in the context of his being a member of the community of French writers while remaining “extrinsic” to it. Professor Bosteels explains, “Detrez is not simply an outsider looking in. As a Belgian he is also an outsider in France…And as a fellow Belgian I would argue that this has profound consequences for the ways in which he interprets the situation in Latin America, which makes 1968 in Paris pale in comparison” (Bosteels).

73 Denis Rolland provides one of the most comprehensive materialist analyses of the flagging influence of French culture on Brazilian thinking in the post World War II era. Rolland characterizes the post-war perception of France among Brazilian intellectuals as that of “une puissance battue, déchue”—devoid of economic ties and, therefore, of any important political message to convey (“L’instrumentalisation” 106).
the conceptual framework of *brasilidade*. In fact, I have never encountered an instance in which the word *brasilidade* is employed in the writing, interviews, or memoirs of these individuals. Nevertheless, the absence of any specific allusion to the term only reinforces the dynamic by which foundational elements operate in surreptitious ways in what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as the “transcendent and universal truth” characterizing grand-narratives. In other words, the very strength and efficacy of *brasilidade* as a filter of signification is affirmed precisely because the term remains unspoken by these individuals even as it subtends the conceptual framework of their work as it pertains to Brazil.

Whereas the departure from established representations of Brazil characterizes the entire corpus of Detrez’s writing, it is most poignantly and comprehensively demonstrated in his novel *L’herbe à brûler*, which garnered the Prix Renaudot in 1978. As the third component in the trilogy Detrez frequently refers to as his “*autobiographie hallucinée*,” *L’herbe à brûler* functions as an intricate *récit initiatique*—a bildungsroman—structured around his personal history in Belgium, Brazil, Uruguay, and France during the time leading up to and overlapping the events of May 68. In this ambiguous work of autobiography and fiction, which prefigures what Serge Dubrovsky would coin “autofiction” (Lefere 472), constitutive elements of *brasilidade* are refracted through a prism of complex narrative registers and perspectives as opposed to the traditional, Eurocentric representations of Brazil that characterize Camus’ *Orfeu do Carnaval* and Beauvoir’s *La force des choses*. As a result, Detrez mobilizes what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “polyphony”74 by giving center stage to a multiplicity of newly unleashed

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74 In his work on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin introduces his understanding of the term “polyphony,” whereby an author gives voice to characters who are ideologically different from himself as opposed to
voices of Brazilian society. This frequently discordant chorus serves to problematize the meta-narrative of nationalism by redefining the hegemonic power structure of the centuries-old relationship between France and Brazil.

**Situating Detrez with May 68 and Evolving Franco-Brazilian Relations**

A contextualization of Detrez’s biographical background is necessary to any discussion of the ways in which his work has impacted on how *tiers-mondisme* and Brazil are signified in French cultural production. If details of Detrez’s life and work remain unknown to much of the public, it is due to the fact that related information is rarely found on library shelves, and the critical commentary on his writing and biographical and bibliographical histories is limited to a handful of articles. Indeed, not a single book has been published on his life or work. Bearing in mind the fact that many facets of Detrez’s personal history are conveyed in his writing and will be brought to light in my critical exploration of his work, the following *aperçu* will focus on the particulars of his biography which are most pertinent to my discussion.

characters who reinforce the author’s views. Tolstoy, Bakhtin argues, is the prime example of a monologic author, whose characters ultimately embrace the author’s own views even if they experience detours along the way. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, was the first author to achieve full creation of characters whose consciousnesses were distinctively different from his own and remained so. Bakhtin coined this dynamic “polyphony.” (*Problems* 20)

75 I defer to Michel Foucault’s understanding of what it means to problematize an object. He states: “Problematization doesn’t mean the representation of a pre-existent object, nor the creation through discourse of an object that doesn’t exist. It’s the set of discursive or nondiscursive practices that makes something enter into the play of the true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether under the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.).” (*Foucault Live* 296)

76 A laconic assessment of the dearth of commentary related to Detrez’s writing is expressed by Bruno Bosteels, who writes: “I have never found any significant criticism on his work” (Bosteels). Nevertheless, two exceptions to be noted are the Espace Nord edition of Detrez’s novel titled *Ludo* (Brussels: Labor, 1988), in which a thoughtful preface is provided by Jacques Bauduin, and the poetic commemoration of Detrez’s life written by William Cliff (Paris: LeDilettante, 1990).
The trans-cultural dimension to Detrez’s work can be traced to the author’s upbringing in the Belgium province of Liège followed by his experience in Brazil from 1962 to 1967, during which time he was introduced to the thinking of key revolutionary Brazilian writers whose work he would translate into French. While teaching French literature at the University of Rio de Janeiro, Detrez became clandestinely engaged in the guerilla struggle against the military dictatorship which took power in 1964. His assimilation into a wide breadth of Brazilian society, facilitated by the dual identity he assumed, is reflected through the breadth of voices that populate his literary universe.

Before departing Liège for Brazil, Detrez became aware of mounting tensions between young Brazilian seminarians and their European counterparts concerning the different ways in which they perceived their respective roles on the world stage. The disillusionment harbored by many Brazilians toward Europe in general and France specifically—as well as the reticence of the latter to recognize the underlying reasons for it—recurs as an important topos in Detrez’s writing. This cynicism is illustrated in the pivotal moment during which Conrad Dupont, the main protagonist of *L’herbe à brûler*, experiences a life-altering political and cultural awakening as the result of an encounter with Rodrigo, a fellow seminarian from Brazil. In a blurring of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrative voices, made possible by the dissolution of the main protagonist’s subjective identity upon his death (13), the reader is told that “[l]’Europe pour lui (Rodrigo), c’était le paradis du savoir, le contact avec la philosophie, les grands

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77 These works include *Les Pâtres de la nuit*, by Jorge Amado (Paris: Stock, 1970), *Révolution dans la paix* by Dom Helder Câmara (Paris: Seuil, 1970), and *Mon pays en croix* by Antonio Callado (Paris: Seuil 1971). Most significant of his efforts to introduce the writing of Brazilian revolutionaries to the French public is his publication titled *Pour la libération du Brésil*, a translation of Carlos Marighella’s theory of urban guerilla tactics (Paris: Seuil, 1970). This translation was banned by the French Minister of the Interior but was eventually published by Seuil in 1970 after numerous prominent editors signed a petition in a show of solidarity protesting the act of censorship.
esprits; c’était la civilization” (64). From this perspective, Europe emblematizes for Rodrigo the requisite horizon for attaining full educational and social awakening, with French culture dominating the mediating landscape: “Il voulait absolument la connaître. Il avait donc étudié d’arrache-pied et, avant d’arriver, il lisait déjà des livres en français […] et avait même rédigé, toujours dans ma langue, une méditation de trois pages, en vers, sur la mort supposée chrétienne de Victor Hugo” (64). The assessment of Europe as the beacon of culture, the center of philosophy, and the producer of great minds is filtered through an unequivocally French cultural lens (i.e., the reading of French books, the essay on Victor Hugo’s death) and is projected onto Rodrigo in a dynamic Henri Coudreau calls “la féconde infiltration de la race et du génie pour créer une France équinoxiale […] magnifique dans le milieu amazonien” (qtd. in Carelli 112).

Coudreau’s vision of colonizing Brazil through cultural imperialism is an explicit goal of many French writers, ethnologists and intellectuals. Blaise Cendrars, for example, expresses the need to “semer en bonnes terres” (Cendrars 1: 78) while referring to Brazil as “une utopialand, un pays qui n’appartient à personne” (Cendrars 8: 173), and Abel Bonnard imperiously writes in Océan et Brésil “[Les Brésiliens] nous montrent les trésors de leur sol et nous demandent ceux de notre culture. Cela rappelle la franchise et la naïveté des anciens échanges: ils nous offrent des papillons et nous demandent des idées” (74). Reflecting upon the influence of French culture on Brazilian society during the first quarter of the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss notes: “[S]a domination […] [fut] assurée” (18). And as late as 1955 the notion of Gallic ascendancy is perpetuated by Lucien Lefebvre who declares: “L’homme très intelligent, très cultivé, en Amérique, à quoi aspirait-il? Non pas à être Brésilien, mais à être, au Brésil, le représentant de la plus
haute et de la plus fine culture intellectuelle” (204-05). Perhaps Mario Carelli offers the most succinct appraisal of the dynamic of cultural imperialism as it relates to France and Brazil. He states, “Chacun a trouvé dans ce continent ce qu’il était venu y chercher” (197). 78

Of course, the phenomenon of cultural imperialism goes beyond the mere imposition of one culture over another. As Antonio Gramsci’s reflections on hegemony show, a degree of complicity whereby a “consensus culture” leads people of the oppressed class to identify their own good with that of the dominant class is a requisite element in the dynamic. This premise is supported by Peruvian Minister to Belgium Francisco García Calderón’s affirmation of the preponderance of Gallic culture in Latin America:


History also lends credence to Gramsci’s line of thinking, for Brazilian intellectuals and political leaders have looked to French cultural models at the exclusion of Spanish and Portuguese ones since at least the mid-nineteenth century (McGuiness 87). Up to that point, Portugal maintained primacy despite Spanish and Dutch interventions during the first part of the seventeenth century, and in the last half of the twentieth century the United States dominated the stage. However, France has enjoyed the most enduring

78 Carelli states, “Each person found there what he came to seek.”
influence over the intellectual, philosophical, and political cultural models adopted by Brazil. Edward A. Riedinger concurs:

France singularly influenced the concentrated development of modernism in Brazil. The ideological axis for the abolition of slavery and the establishment of the Republic originated from French positivism. Marc Ferrez inaugurated Brazilian photography. Machado de Assis founded the Brazilian Academy of Letters, modeling it on the French institution, replicating even the uniforms of “les immortels.” Le Corbusier was the key mentor of Oscar Niemeyer. […]. Rio de Janeiro’s Municipal Theater [is] modeled on the Opéra de Paris. In the last half of the twentieth century, the French role in Brazil has considerably declined. […]. Nevertheless, due to the country’s long interest and historic cultural role in Brazil, modern French academic study of Brazil, which extends from the 1930s to the present, has been considerable, significant, and grown. (441-42)

The enervation of France’s cultural ascendancy over Brazil is generally attributed to the former being eclipsed by the United States. According to Caetano Veloso, the sway of French influence was on the decline after the Second World War because “[Brazilians] wanted to oppose to it American culture” (63). If an enduring—albeit diminishing—deference to French culture served as a tool with which to resist the waxing influence of the American consumerist society, it was kept in check by the Tropicália art movement in Brazil. This movement, Veloso states, “must be seen as a natural reaction to the old pro-French cultural orientation, [and it] embodied an impulse that had been evolving slowly and anxiously in the Brazilian spirit, leading to a tender concern for constructing a sense of our own worth” (63). This “anti-French gesture” is, Veloso continues, rooted in “criticizing that culture or identifying with it, or criticizing it by means of itself” (63). Veloso’s assessment of the shifting cultural gaze between Brazil and France reflects both the dynamic cycle of ebb and flow in the history shared by the two nations as well as the
mounting tensions resulting from the Brazilians’ effort to construct an autonomous cultural and national identity.

The notion of shifting cultural gazes in the context of the Brazilian people’s desire to forge their own identity is brought to light in Veloso’s account of his own reaction to the May 68 revolution in Paris. As the events in Paris were unfolding, Veloso’s producer, Guilherme Araújo, shared with him a photograph in the magazine Manchete which showed a graffiti-covered wall near the Sorbonne. The words “Défense d’interdire” (“Prohibiting is Prohibited”) dominated the photograph and resonated with Araújo, who asked Veloso to set them to music. Veloso initially resisted the request, stating: “I did not want our movement [Tropicália] to be confused with the Paris movement, any more than I wanted Brazil confused with the world outside” (186). Veloso’s desire to create an autonomous cultural identity was, he would eventually realize, an aporetic dream.

Over the course of 1967 and during the early months of 1968, demonstrations against the dictatorship of Castelo Branco’s successor, Artur da Costa e Silva, intensified, compelling Veloso to accept the fact that no cultural movement is created in a vacuum. “The demonstrations increased,” Veloso explains, “and student leaders appeared in the headlines. Of course May 1968 in France was a media event, and the Brazilian movement benefited from it” (199). Veloso’s ultimate embracing of the May 68 revolution occurred when armed police aggressively routed students during a protest in Rio against the Costa e Silva dictatorship. His recollection of the incident merits extensive mention:

I yelled furiously, but no soldier even came close enough to hear what I was saying. I ended up returning home, still scolding passersby as everyone dispersed and the tanks collected their prisoners. When I read those commentaries alleging the narcissism of the protests in France that May—that the demonstrators were more theatrical than political—it occurred to me that I had been right after all to accept Guilherme’s
invitation to make a song out of ‘it is forbidden to forbid.’ Now amid this strange descent into the streets, I was conscious of having enacted something—a serious and extravagant performance by the light of the sun, an improvisation of political theater, a poem in action. I was a tropicalista, free of ties to traditional politics, and therefore I could react against oppression and narrowness according to my own creativity. Narcissus? I did feel myself at that moment above Chico Buarque or Edu Lobo, or any of my colleagues thought to be great and profound. (201)

Veloso’s reaction to the demonstration reflects the protean nature of Hartog’s “play of mirrors.” It shines light, for example, on the powerful way in which the events of May 68 had been immediately co-opted and re-written so as to reduce the revolution to a narcissistic stage act stripped of its political underpinnings. Veloso, in turn, masterfully appropriates this watered-down narrative and re-signifies it to mark his hypostasis as a tropicalista—an artist-combatant in the struggle against small-mindedness, subjugation, reactionism, and fear. Veloso also seizes upon the negative characterization of the French strikers as narcissists (here we recall Lipovetsky’s reference to the protesting masses as the “culte narcissique de l’Ego” discussed in my Introduction) and inverts the terms by celebrating his elevated self-image as a political being. Finally, the characterization of police as “tanks” operates as a powerful anthropomorphic metonymical reduction of the repressive state apparatus, heralding the ever-growing preponderance of law enforcement in post-May 68 literature.

In L’herbe à brûler a similar play of mirrors, mobilized by an engaged process of successive redescriptions of the world, is revealed through shifting narrative registers ranging from the third-person omniscient to first-person and third-person narrations. For example, Rodrigo’s formation in Brazil—related through a lengthy third-person

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79 See Kristin Ross’ May 68 and Its Afterlives for a thoughtful consideration of the increased occurrence of tropes involving law enforcement in literature related to May 68, also mentioned in my Introduction.
omniscient narrative perspective—reflects the success of France’s campaign of cultural colonization both abroad as well as on the European continent. This success is made evident through a pivotal moment of meta-awareness during which Conrad gives voice to his realization that history is often appropriated and rewritten to serve a specific teleology. Referring to Rodrigo’s essay on “la mort supposée chrétienne de Victor Hugo” (64), the third-person omniscient voice of Conrad homes in on the conflicting accounts of Hugo’s well publicized rejection of the Church and the constructed characterization of the writer’s death as a Christian event.80

Despite this subtle calling into question of ecclesiastic revisionism spanning two continents, Conrad remains caught in the interstices of his upbringing as an unquestioning subject of a franco-Catholic environment and his awakening as an independent thinker. In his description of Rodrigo’s efforts to “know Europe,” for example, he employs adverbs such as “donc,” “déjà,” and “mème” to affirm the understanding that French culture is the sine qua non for the young Brazilian to attain intellectual and cultural fulfillment. According to Conrad’s assessment, Rodrigo must adhere to this course in order to be deemed “apte à faire le voyage” (64) by his Brazilian professors and the local bishop who, the reader discerns, act as official arbiters of what Denis Rolland calls the “modèle universaliste” (“L’instrumentalisation” 118), against which the Brazilian national identity (i.e., brasilidade) is measured.

A pivotal moment of clarity also leads Conrad to view his own identity as the product of an imposed corpus of knowledge constructed upon a foundation of French culture and history that supersedes his cultural and familial heritage rooted in the

80 The famous anecdote comes to mind whereby a census-taker asks Hugo if he is Catholic, to which he replies, “No. I am a free thinker.”
Belgium provinces: “[L’]Europe pour moi, […] c’était les croisades, les rois de France, la vie des saints. Ce que je connaissais: le village, le bourg de Saint-Rémy, appartenaient à un autre monde et ce monde n’avait aucun rapport avec celui de mes lectures” (64). This flash of meta-awareness, inserted between lengthy ruminations over Rodrigo’s formation, is put into relief by Conrad’s abrupt shift from the third-person omniscient narrative mode to a first-person narrative perspective. This sudden transition echoes a nearly identical preceding narrative instance whereby the third-person omniscient narrative perspective, conveying a stereotyping discourse privileging a French cultural formation over a Brazilian one, is also interrupted by Conrad’s lapsing into first-person narrative mode: “[Rodrigo] lisait déjà des livres en français. Il avait même rédigé, toujours dans ma langue, une méditation […]” (64; my emphasis). The use of the first-person possessive adjective in this instance demonstrates what Mireille Rosello calls the iterative force of the stereotype which travels from mouth to mouth like a parasite (35), thereby asserting in this case the primacy of the French language over Rodrigo’s native Portuguese.

If the diegesis guiding this exchange between Conrad and Rodrigo is characterized by the omniscient narrative point of view rapidly ceding to and alternating between the first and third person perspectives, it does so to highlight the precariousness of the grand narrative of nationalism in which France represents the pinnacle in the educational and social formation of young minds. As per the omniscient narrative perspective, only the best and brightest of the young Brazilian seminarians can aspire to escape the fate of being assigned to local dioceses by qualifying for the most highly coveted assignments in Europe: “Ceux qui veulent poursuivre leurs études partent ensuite pour les villes de Récife, de Bahia, de Rio, ou alors, s’ils sont premiers de classe,
l’évêque les dirige vers l’Europe” (64). The passage goes on to elevate France to the fore of Rodrigo’s desires and aspirations in the conspicuous absence of the young Brazilian’s own voice—the exclusion of which evokes both Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of the subaltern’s inability to speak due to marginalization81 as well as Homi Bhabha’s observations regarding the subaltern vis-à-vis social power relations.

Bhabha discusses power relations in terms of the subaltern, whose presence is “crucial to the self-definition of the majority group [and whose] subaltern minority groups [are] also in a position to subvert the authority of those who [have] hegemonic power” (“Unsatisfied” 193). Rodrigo’s role as a sort of subaltern tabula rasa in need of the edifying effects of a French education reaffirms for the majority group (i.e., the French) its primacy in the hierarchy of cultural hegemony. Conversely, the second half of Bhabha’s assertion, whereby the subaltern subverts the power structure, gains purchase in Rodrigo’s reply to Conrad:

Si j’étais resté dans mon trou j’aurais vécu frustré, malade d’un grand rêve irréalisé. Maintenant que je suis là je me sens également frustré. Ton Europe, elle n’a rien à voir avec mon rêve, elle est presque bête, et gâtée, trop gâtée, elle n’invente plus rien, elle passe son temps à se diviser sur des trucs accessoires. (64).

In this instance, Rodrigo speaks in the first-person only after a lengthy passage in which Conrad, from a third-person omniscient perspective, assumes the role of porte-parole for the young Brazilian in order to assert a sense of authoritative, albeit illusory, reliability.

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81 Spivak establishes well defined parameters as to what constitutes subaltern status (see Leon de Kock’s “Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa.” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature.* 23(3) 1992: 29-47). I choose to focus on her specific qualification of the subaltern as one who lives outside hegemonic discourse.

82 Rodrigo says to Conrad, “Had I stayed in my hole I would have been frustrated, sick over an unrealized dream. Now that I am here, I feel equally frustrated. Your Europe, it has nothing to do with my dream, it’s almost stupid, and spoiled, too spoiled, it no longer invents anything, it spends its time arguing over incidental matters.”
In Rodrigo’s retort, however, the personification (“trop gâtée, elle n’invente plus rien”) and the objectification (“Ton Europe”) of Europe result in a definitive rejection of the cultural imperialism prescribed by the majority group. Europe is thus thrown back in the face of Conrad, who is reduced by the gaze of his Brazilian friend to an unmoored vessel stripped of its epistemological anchors.

Deferring once again to Spivak’s terminology, we witness a fully realized instance of dialogical utterance (i.e., the transaction between Self and Other, speaker and listener), whereby the subaltern’s query: “L’Europe de Jeanne d’Arc, c’est l’Europe d’hier. Où vis-tu donc et à quelle époque, hein?” (65) compels Conrad to once again concede the fact that his entire universe has been fabricated in the same manner as Rodrigo’s. He contemplates: “Rodrigo avait sans doute raison: on m’avait fait vivre dans la Rome des papes, la Belgique de Charles Quint, le Paris de saint Thomas. Comme lui, exactement comme lui, là-bas, dans son trou d’Amérique du Sud” (65). The mechanical aspect of this highly organized project of cultural construction is masterfully put into relief by a telescopic narrowing of geographic and historical points of reference, beginning with the broadest context (“la Rome des papes,” or the Holy Roman Empire), progressing to the national level (“la Belgique de Charles Quint”), and culminating with the epicenter of intellectual pursuit (“le Paris de saint Thomas”). Additionally, increasingly specific allusions to key historical figures shine light on the synthetic and restrictive scope of the grand narrative of nationalism: i.e., the popes, who enjoyed supreme rule for centuries over vast territories extending far beyond Rome, and Charles V, who is recognized as a leading defender of the Catholic faith against a growing league of Protestant followers in the Netherlands, and finally Saint Thomas Aquinas, whose
masterwork, *Summa Theologiae*, represents the summit of medieval scholasticism and remains one of the most influential documents of medieval theology put forth by an individual.

Despite what may seem to be an inexorable induction into the matrix of French cultural imperialism, an awareness of alternative paths subtends the developmental journeys of the characters inhabiting Detrez’s initiation story. Contrasts between static and dynamic figures are therefore sharpened. If, for example, Conrad is initially unable to break from the limits of his understanding of the world, his friend Rodrigo rapidly abandons his own epistemological touchstones. The abovementioned discussion between the two seminarians confounds and frustrates Conrad, who abruptly forecloses on and abandons his companion’s line of thinking: “D’ici là je ne l’écouterai plus. J’ai tourné les talons, l’ai laissé poursuivre tout seul son chemin. J’ai gagné par une autre rue la Faculté” (65). Rodrigo, the dynamic “Other” from the exotic Third World, forges his own path while Conrad, static construct of a decaying Europe, retreats to the safe and familiar womb of his schoolhouse where affirmation of his understanding of the world order is assured.

Such is the autofictional characterization of Detrez’s political awakening during his early years at the seminary, when he befriends students from various third world countries, becomes politically engaged, and departs for Brazil under the aegis of the Catholic Church.\(^3\) While participating in the revolutionary struggle against the military

\(^3\) An important aspect of *brasilidade* as a cultural strategy was the effort to unify national values through a universally shared moral code. According to Bartolomé Bennassar and Richard Marin, a primary ambition of Vargas’ *Estado Novo* was to “unifier la culture populaire autour de valeurs nationales, de la ‘moraliser’ et d’en ‘élever’ le niveau” (358). To ensure the cooperation of the Catholic Church in this endeavor, Vargas reversed many of the provisions of the 1891 constitution that separated church and state (Levine, *History* 103). The ensuing rapprochement between the Brazilian government and the Vatican led to an increased presence in Brazil of European representatives of the clergy, of which Detrez may be
dictatorship in the mid 1960s, Detrez is captured, tortured, and expelled from the country by the Brazilian authorities, at which point he relocates to Paris in time to participate in the events of May 68. Because Detrez’s work is produced in the wake of his experience both in revolutionary Brazil and in Paris of May 68, it is exceptionally situated in relation to Modern Revolutionary Writing. From a New Historicist perspective, Detrez’s work functions as an expressive act embedded in a network of material practices very different from that of preceding French writers, artists, and filmmakers, resulting in expanded possibilities for a dramatic departure from existing representations of the Brazilian nation and its people.

*Brasilidade: A Project of Social Construction toward Nationhood*

*Brasilidade* is more than a prosopopoeia used to represent the Brazilian people in different discursive registers; rather, it is the result of a methodically crafted cultural, educational, and promotional campaign instigated by Getúlio Vargas in an effort to consolidate power and to inaugurate a cultural renewal in Brazil aimed at promoting the government’s interests at home and abroad. At the height of Vargas’ authoritarian *Estado Novo*, an essay was published by the Department of Press and Propaganda in which well-known painter and acting director of the National Museum of Fine Arts, Oswaldo Teixeira, acclaims Vargas to be a peer of Cósimo de Médici, the wealthy fifteenth-counted. The groundwork for the strengthening of these ties was laid by the promotion of what Denis Rolland calls “les deux messianismes” of republicanism and Catholicism during World War I (“L’instrumentalisation” 108), which privileged an eschatological dimension to the French Republic in order to bolster the support of the Brazilian nation to the Allied cause. The strategic appointment of devout Catholic Paul Claudel as ministre plénipotentiaire to Rio served to consolidate a resurgence of francophile enthusiasm among the Brazilian elite and military while appealing to the general Catholic population, thereby facilitating Vargas’ efforts to construct a unified national identity around shared values.
eighteenth-century banker who helped make Florence into the political and cultural epicenter of the Italian Renaissance (Williams 13). Crediting the Revolution of 1930 and the Vargas administration with rescuing Brazilian society from a descent into “cultural confusion” and political disorder, Teixeira writes:

Gêulio Vargas is the only President who has confronted the full range of problems facing Brazil with a clear, optimistic, and brilliant vision, guided by tranquility, and equilibrium, and the truest principles of Brazilianness [com os mais sadios princípios de brasilidade]. (qtd. in Williams 13)

Francisco Campos, the author of the constitution of November 15, 1937, further venerates Vargas by comparing him to Cardinal Richelieu:

[Q]uando se dedicava à obra de transformar a França em Nação, [o Richelieu] foi advertido por um amigo de que se impopularizava. ‘Quand on fait un grand pais, on ne regarde point des cotés,’ respondeu. Assim, o nosso grande Presidente, como arquiteto da Nação, não olha para os lados” (qtd. in Williams 247).

[W]hen dedicating himself to the task of transforming France into a Nation, [Richelieu] was warned by a friend that he was becoming unpopular, to which he replied ‘Quand on fait un grand pais, on ne regarde point des cotés.’ Similarly, our great President, as architect of the Nation, refuses to look to the sides.

The success of the campaign to elevate Vargas to larger-than-life proportions would require the illusion of security, trust, and unity among the people. To this end, Brazilian nationalists would construct an all-inclusive national identity promoting the myth of a racially harmonious Brazilian national family cared for and guided by benevolent paternalism—which Vargas was all too happy to embody.84 Vargas’ propaganda machine compelled Brazilians to identify with this national family above all other possible

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84 See Robert Levine’s Father of the Poor? Vargas and His Era. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998 for an in depth analysis of the ways in which Vargas endeared himself to ordinary Brazilian citizens who, despite the fact that Vargas promised much and delivered little, idolized him.
communities based on, among others, race, region, and gender (Bennassar and Marin 357). In the process, nationalists created a powerful narrative which marginalized any prospect of identity politics for decades. The paramount mission of the propagandists was, according to Bryan McCann, “to create a commonly understood collection of qualities which would distinguish Brazilians from citizens of Argentina, Portugal, and the United States—to name three populations whom Brazilians felt it was important to define themselves against” (7). In sum, encouraging cultural or ethnic heterogeneity was proscribed in the Brazil of Vargas’ Estado Novo.

In addition to the usual apparatus of authoritarianism, such as censorship, the suspension of habeas corpus, and the curtailment of state autonomy, motivational rhetoric operated as a potent tool of the propagandists in their drive toward realizing a “common bond of citizenship” (Levine, History 105). The creators of the Estado Novo made no effort to conceal this strategy of creating a nation based on a socially constructed community. Francisco Campos observes:

A pátria não é, porém, apenas uma dádiva do céu. Os homens constróem a sua pátria como os pássaros o seu ninho, os termitas as suas cidades de mistérios e de silêncio, os rios o seu curso e o coral os seus arquipélagos de sonho. Cada uma dessas construções representa esforço, trabalho, sacrifício, tenacidade na luta, obstinação no instinto ou na vontade […]. Esta a advertência é a lição do nosso tempo: as pátrias estão em perigo. A hora não é das dissenções, das agitações das discórdias internas. […]. À sombra dessa Bandeira, cada brasileiro é um soldado e, seja qual for o seu ofício ou a sua profissão, a sua alma há de ser uma alma de soldado, pronta a atender, disposta a obedecer, preparada para a privação e para o sacrifício. (256-57)

The homeland is not […] just a gift from the sky. Men construct their native country as birds their nests, as termites their colonies of mysteries and silence, as rivers their course, and coral its archipelagos of dreams. Each of these constructions represents effort, work, sacrifice, tenacity in face of struggle, obstinacy of instinct or of desire […]. This warning is the
lesson of our time: nations are in danger. This is not the moment for
dissentation, for agitation, for internal discord. [...] In the shadow of this
Flag, each Brazilian is a soldier, and, whatever his office or his profession
may be, his soul must be the soul of a soldier, ready to serve, eager to
obey, prepared for privation and sacrifice.

In what amounts to an unabashed call to military duty, Campos evokes feelings of
national unity by touching upon a breadth of imagery ranging from nation building (“men
construct”), to the abundant natural wonders of the Brazilian lands (“rivers forging their
course”), to the arcane (“cities of mysteries and silence” and “archipelagos of dreams”),
and to the patriotic (“In the shadow of this Flag”). Uniting otherwise disparate segments
of the population is the understanding that tenacity, obedience, and privation would be
required of all citizens in order to realize a united citizenry. This conceptual construction
of brasilidade would touch upon every realm of the arts, facilitating the propagation of
enduring stereotypes of Brazil and its people as one of the nation’s most potent cultural
exports.

**Brasilidade in French Cultural Production**

The theoretical tactic of “declining the stereotype” as elaborated by Mireille
Rosello provides a framework to discuss the ways in which brasilidade is signified
through the French cultural lens. Rosello builds upon Ruth Amossy’s excellent
contribution to the analysis of the function of stereotypes in power relations as well as the
different ways in which received ideas, stereotypes, and clichés operate as powerful
rhetorical tropes in literature. As did Gramsci before her, Amossy considers the
correlative aspects of domination and subordination in relation to the creation of socio-
political hierarchies, yet she focuses her analysis on the circular process by which “la
minorité opprimée accepte l’image défavorable que lui renvoie l’idéologie dominante au
point d’y conformer ses comportements” (Idées 44). Amossy therefore traces the ways in
which minority groups (a more expansive approach than Gramsci’s focus on the
proletariat) internalize and ultimately conform to the stereotypes assigned to them by the
dominant culture. Rosello in turn studies the strategies of specific minority groups who
confront, reappropriate, and resignify stereotypes.

In order to assess such strategies effectively, Rosello argues, it is necessary to
employ the tactic of “declining,” or “paying attention to the formal characteristics of the
stereotype so as to control its devastating ideological power” (11). This requisite meta-
awareness must resist the danger of complaisance, which Rosello defines as “the mere
denouncing and calling into question of collective representations” (12). In other words,
we must remain vigilant about the fact that such representations are “highly dangerous
rhetorical tools” which should be treated “like bottles of poison in a kitchen cabinet”
(34). Confronting and employing—or, rather, deploying—stereotypes can therefore be a
salutary exercise as long as we remain at the level of meta-discourse about stereotypical
language. In addition to operating in the realm of meta-discourse, it is necessary to
anchor stereotypes in their own changing historical contexts (33). Finally, Rosello argues,
when assessing the ways in which existing stereotypes are confronted and subverted, it is
important to seek a perpetual movement of transgression and deconstruction of them
through “ironic repetitions, carefully framed quotations, distortions and puns, linguistic
alterations, double-entendres and self-deprecating humor” (11). Detrez’s writing operates
as a laboratory for this precise type of transgression and re-signification, effectively
declining the very stereotypes perpetuated by the representation of *brasilidade* in the work of his peers.

As discussed earlier, the cultural identity of one nation is often nourished on that of another in a symbiotic dynamic. Representations of Brazil in French aesthetics may therefore be understood to function more as a reflection of changes in French culture than they portray the actual realities of life in the South American nation. In the following works, I will trace the evolutionary arc of the treatment of *brasilidade* in French aesthetics in order to put into relief the flagging ascendancy France has long exercised over Brazil and the critical moment at which the hegemonic power structure existing between the two nations is shifted. Beginning with Marcel Camus’ 1959 film *Orfeu do Carnaval*, followed by Simone de Beauvoir’s 1963 literary narrative of the time she spent with Jean-Paul Sartre in Brazil titled *La force des choses*, and culminating in Detrez’s *L’herbe à brûler* of 1978, I will consider the aesthetic processes through which the role of Brazil evolves from subaltern nation, functioning as a site of intellectual, artistic, and philosophical colonization by France, into a site of inspiration for social revolution. In tracing this evolution, I will use as a recurring touchstone the conceptualization and representation of the cityscape—a central point of reference in all three works—and the ways in which it is utilized as a topos to signify *brasilidade*. Metonymical reductions of the urban landscape have long functioned as an important rhetorical trope to signify the “essence” of a particular people or nation. Countless writers and artists, for example, have used the Statue of Liberty to represent America as the embodiment of justice and opportunity, and the Eiffel Tower has long signified France’s role as cultural leader in

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85 Among the countless representations of the Statue of Liberty in literature, popular culture, propaganda, etc., two examples stand out in my mind: The fanciful conversation between “Mrs. Liberty”
the avant-garde movement. Such representations demand scrutiny, however, if we wish to critically assess the genealogy and implications of stereotypes as they relate to the perpetuation—and ultimate subversion—of systems of cultural hegemony.

In each of the following works, brasilidade serves as an ideological imaginary construction through which Camus, Beauvoir, and Detrez project their own sociopolitical and often erotic notions onto the characters inhabiting their respective fictional universes. When contrasting the works of Beauvoir and Camus with Detrez’s, it becomes clear the former two highlight and reinforce the broad strokes of brasilidade while Detrez’s novel transgresses and re-signifies such representations. In a manner very different from Detrez, both Beauvoir and Camus signify brasilidade through an illusory reification of Rio de Janeiro which results in a formulaic metonymical reduction of the city to the sites most prominently inhabiting the French imaginary, such as the boardwalks of Copacabana and the hillside favelas. Privileging universally recognized sites of the cityscape in this way results in an effacement of social divisions rooted in economic and racial inequalities, thereby affirming the success of Vargas’ cultural campaign in disseminating the image of a cohesive people.

As we consider the evolutionary arc that characterizes representations of brasilidade in these works, tensions between Brazilian and French cultural communities rise to the fore. As previously discussed in the reference to Caetano Veloso, the hierarchy of cultural hegemony enjoyed by France over Brazil is rooted in a long history of complicity on behalf of the Brazilian people who nevertheless maintain a critical

and the statue of Diana in Madison Square Garden in O. Henry’s short story “The Lady Higher Up,” and the devastating depiction of the statue’s arm jutting from her grave in the sand, representing both the destruction as well as the hope of restoring humanity in the post-apocalyptic world of the Planet of the Apes.
awareness of their role in the quid pro quo. This complicity is reflected in the words of João da Ega, the conflicted protagonist of Eça de Queirós’ Os Maias from 1888:

Aqui importa-se tudo. Leis, idéias, filosofias, teorias, assuntos, estéticas, ciências, estilo, indústrias, modas, maneiras, pilhérias, tudo nos vem em caixotes pelo paquete. A civilização custa-nos caríssima com os direitos da alfândega: e é em segunda mão, não foi feita para nós, fica-nos curta nas mangas. (76)

Everything is imported here. Laws, ideas, philosophies, theories, topics of discussion, aesthetics, sciences, styles, industries, fashions, humor, everything comes to us neatly packaged by ship. Civilization is extremely expensive due to customs laws: and it is all second-hand, it was not made for us…it is too short in the sleeves.

João da Ega’s description of how civilization may be fabricated as a sort of “prêt-à-porter,” one-size-fits-all costume reflects the ways in which the dominant culture ignores any (sartorial) anomalies that may result from a “poor fit” suffered by the minority culture. Roberto Schwarz echoes this observation: “Since the last century Brazilians have had the sense of living among ideas and institutions copied from abroad that do not reflect local reality” (Misplaced 9). This dynamic results in the consolidation of the grand narrative of nationalism for both cultures, albeit in very different ways: one entity cultivates a positive image of itself as the standard bearer of “high” culture while the other internalizes it, bearing a heightened sense of inferiority.

By the time Camus’ Orfeu do Carnaval opened in the cinemas in 1959, Brazilian writers and artists had already begun to look with an increasingly skeptical eye to France for cultural inspiration while simultaneously rejecting stereotypes used by the French to represent Brazil. Such stereotypes abound in Camus’ film, beginning with the opening scene, dominated by bursts of music and dance overtaking the languid inhabitants of a hillside favela. The indolent, intellectually incurious and good-natured “Other” is
immediately established by Camus’ direction, bringing to mind similar images gracing
the Banania breakfast boxes in France dating from the same period. The Banania images
represent a long series of exaggerated caricatures of Senegalese men and women as well
as photo advertisement campaigns depicting young dark-skinned children grinning
broadly as the breakfast drink forms a white moustache over their upper lip. Only a few
years before Orfeu do Carnaval’s release, the decades-old ad campaign for Banania
prompted Frantz Fanon to make the observation that the “minority Other” appears not
only as an object but as “an object in the midst of other objects” (109). The inhabitants of
Camus’ favela may be viewed in a similar manner if we consider the bucolic setting,
graced with a panoramic view of Pão de Açúcar and Guanabara Bay, which surrounds
them. The reified inhabitants of the favela are superimposed upon a reified postcard-like
landscape (i.e., objects in the midst of other objects), resulting in some of the most iconic
images in the history of cinematography. Another dimension to the facile stereotype of
the Brazilian is of a more erotic nature, brought to light by Camus’ whitewashing of the
abject poverty in which many inhabitants of the favelas live. In this instance, the very
struggle for survival is transformed into a ritual of frivolous blandishment whereby pretty
denizens of the favela pay their grocery tabs with a kiss to an avuncular shopkeeper’s
cheek.

Of course, stereotypes of Brazil and its people extend far beyond representations
rooted in frivolity and exotic allure. Because the aesthetic, social, and practical theory of
Le Corbusier was embraced by many leading Brazilian architects of the mid-twentieth
century (Riedinger 442), the architectural dimension of the cityscape is frequently
employed to reflect France’s ascendancy over Brazil as a source of modernist inspiration.
A striking example of this dynamic is conveyed by Camus through an aerial perspective of Eurydice who, newly arrived in Rio de Janeiro, finds herself hopelessly disoriented among soaring minimalist edifices. Her disorientation is aggravated by the dramatic angles of menacing shadows, cast by looming buildings surrounding her like impassive sentinels. Resembling a cornered mouse, Eurydice darts about the empty square in a display of bewilderment and ineptitude as Camus’ camera scans the façades of newly constructed modernist high rises…utterly devoid of sentimental bourgeois adornment and evoking the soullessness of the modernist cityscape of Italian Futurist art. The stereotype of the beautiful, “exotic innocent,” hopelessly disoriented in the face of modernity resonated well with the community of international audiences, yet it was received by Brazilian viewers with disapprobation.

From the opening scene of Camus’ Orfeu do Carnaval, the discursive register employed functions as yet another dimension of Rosello’s “declining” of the stereotype. In this instance, I refer to the dynamic of the “reluctant guest.” According to Rosello, when the reluctant guest is confronted with a stereotype, an “invitation to belong, to be welcomed by a supposedly unanimous community” (11) is extended. In the presence of the stereotype, Rosello states, “[we] are asked implicitly or explicitly to approve, to agree, to nod, and to feel understood and properly positioned as a legitimate member of a group whose identity is well defined and legitimately celebrated” (11). The fact that Camus’ film garnered international accolades (the film was awarded the coveted Palme d’Or in the 1959 Cannes Film Festival as well as the American Oscar and the Golden Globe Award in 1960) certainly situates it within a unanimous community whose identity is legitimately celebrated. It also serves to consolidate the identity of a “well defined”
The stereotypes represented in Camus’ film serve as a foil in tandem with other established representations uniting the French community, such as those employed by the Banania advertisement campaign.

The process of consolidating a specific cultural identity through a play of mirrors offset by the image of the “Other” is rooted in a long history of producing and classifying knowledge, as Stuart Hall points out:

The emergence of modern societies was marked by the birth of a new intellectual and cognitive world, which gradually emerged with the Reformation, the Renaissance, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. This shift in Europe’s intellectual and moral universe was dramatic, and as constitutive for the formation of modern societies as early capitalism or the rise of the nation-state. […] Modern social analysis […] emphasizes the construction of cultural and social identities as part of the formation process. By this we mean the construction of a sense of belonging which draws people together into an “imagined community” and the construction of symbolic boundaries which define who does not belong or is excluded from it. For many centuries, being “Christian” or “Catholic” was the only common identity shared by the peoples of Western Europe. “European” was an identity which only slowly emerged. So the formation of modern societies in Europe had to include the construction of the language, the images, and symbols which defined these societies as “communities” and set them apart, in their represented differences, from others. (Modernity 8-9)

Hall’s observation explains how nations consolidate cultural identities in a unilateral fashion of exclusion; however, if the French are able to employ stereotypes of Brazil and its people in order to refine their own “imagined” national identity based on “who does not belong or is excluded from it,” what is to impede the Brazilians from appropriating and re-signifying these very same stereotypes in an effort to do the same?

The stereotype of the folkloric favela—a patriarchal dream world devoid of trial and tribulation, filled with beautiful fair-skinned women of mixed race who, rhythmically carrying jugs of water up a serpentine hillside as they sway their hips in hypnotic unison,
navigate between indolent dark-skinned men lounging about, smoking cigarettes and playing stringed instruments—engendered derisive reactions among Brazilian audiences.

Veloso explains:

I laughed along with the entire audience and together we were shamed by the shameless lack of authenticity the French filmmaker had permitted himself for the sake of creating a fascinating piece of eroticism. [...] It is well known that Vinicius de Moraes, the author of the play on which the film is based, left the theater irate, during a screening organized by the producers before the opening. The fascination, nevertheless, worked with foreigners: the film seemed (to people of the most widely diverse cultural backgrounds) not only a moving modern and popular version of the Greek myth but also the revelation of the paradisiacal country in which it was staged. [...] Even today there is no end to the narratives about foreigners (first-rate novelists, French sociologists, [...]) discovering Brazil, all touched by the Marcel Camus’ unforgettable film. [...] In the meantime, the Tropicalista critical revision of the film would concern itself after all with a deepening study of the gaze of the foreigner upon us—and the subtleties of love and war with exoticism. (159-60)

Veloso’s assessment contrasts the “shame” inflicted upon the Brazilian public with the “fascination” and “revelation” enjoyed by the foreign audiences upon viewing Camus’ film—a dichotomy which is intensified by the iteration of endless narratives among “people of the most widely diverse cultural backgrounds.” We are reminded of João da Ega’s ad rem metaphor of the ill-fitting costume.

A practical application of Rosello’s strategy for declining the stereotype occurs in the tropicalista critical revision of Moraes’ play which appropriates and re-signifies the stereotypes iterated by Camus’ earlier interpretation. It would also, as Veloso points out, “concern itself [...] with a deepening study of the gaze of the foreigner [...]—and the subtleties of love and war with exoticism” (160), thus adhering to Rosello’s emphasis on paying attention to the formal characteristics of stereotypes in order to control their ideological power. Just as one might carefully use a dangerous poison for salutary
reasons (Rosello 34), the *tropicalistas* reappropriate the stereotypes that inhabit Camus’ folkloric *favela*. In the gritty *tropicalista* interpretation, the idle men lying about the favela are transformed into violent gun-wielding gang members obsessed with consolidating their control over a terrorized community. In Camus’ version of Moraes’ play, the bucolic and homogeneous nature of the favela is threatened by a mysterious, costumed figure from the outside...a malevolent *deus ex machina* whose provenance and identity are never revealed. The *tropicalista* interpretation, however, subverts the stereotype of an Edenic third-world hamlet by re-signifying Camus’ personification of evil as an integral part of the community. In this disordered universe, orderly Apollo succumbs to turbulent Dionysius, violence stokes passion, love comingles with despair, and trust clashes with betrayal. The characters inhabiting this universe are conflicted, complex individuals confronted with an endless cycle of disorienting challenges, evoking the original Greek myth with greater fidelity than Camus’ interpretation.

Simone de Beauvoir’s narrative of her time spent in Brazil with Jean-Paul Sartre also employs stereotypes rooted in characteristics of *brasilidade*, yet her account spans regions of the country beyond the geographic focus of Camus’ film. Beauvoir’s experience in Brazil must be understood in the context of the Algerian War of Independence as well as Fidel Castro’s takeover of Cuba. During the late 1950s, Beauvoir and Sartre experienced a period of lassitude engendered by their advancing ages as well as the ostracism they experienced due to their outspoken criticism of the French government’s opposition to Algerian independence (Beauvoir 316). In 1960, however, the two found renewed vigor in the wake of Fidel Castro’s takeover of Cuba and embarked on a visit to the island, prompting Sartre to publish a series of laudatory articles
titled *Ouragan sur le sucre*. This visit to Cuba in turn motivated Sartre and Beauvoir to travel to Brazil in order to witness firsthand the “winds of Castroism” as they spread over the third world nations of the Americas. Beauvoir explains:

Notre visite à La Havane nous avait donné de nouvelles raisons d’aller au Brésil. L’avenir de l’île se jouait en grande partie en Amérique latine où des courants castristes se dessinaient. […]. Nous avons vu une révolution triomphante. Pour comprendre le Tiers Monde, il nous était nécessaire de connaître un pays sous-développé, semi-colonisé, où les forces révolutionnaires étaient encore, pour longtemps peut-être, enchaînées. Les Brésiliens que nous rencontrâmes convainquirent Sartre qu’en combattant, dans leurs pays, la propagande de Malraux, il servirait efficacement l’Algérie et la gauche française. (317)

The reasons Beauvoir cites for visiting Brazil revolve around assessing the potential spread of socialist revolution as well as countering any lingering effects from André Malraux’s propaganda tour of the previous year. During the time of Castro’s ascension to power, France was experiencing increasing alienation among third world nations due to a legacy of colonial war in Indochina and ongoing engagement in Algeria. In response to this alienation, Charles de Gaulle’s Minister of Cultural Affairs, André Malraux, toured Brazil and other developing nations in 1959 in a government sponsored campaign to rehabilitate France’s reputation (Lacouture 173). Another reason for which Beauvoir and Sartre viewed their visit to Brazil as an important mission is due to Jorge Amado, who entreated the couple to visit his country so they could “interact with young progressives and air their support for Algerian independence” (Rowley 292). The account of the visit comprises a sixty page digression in Beauvoir’s five-hundred page novel *La force des choses*.

Beauvoir introduces the narrative of her time in Brazil by justifying the detour to her readers: “On me reprochera sans doute de briser la ligne de mon récit,” she argues,
“[m]ais le Brésil est un pays si attachant et si mal connu en France que je regretterais de ne pas faire partager intégralement à mes lecteurs l’expérience que j’en ai eu: ceux que ce reportage ennuiera pourront toujours le sauter” (317). Beauvoir qualifies her account of Brazil as “reportage” in the sense of a journalist covering news, leading the reader to anticipate an objective assessment of Brazil and its people. What follows, however, resembles a travel log comprised of formulaic topoi which demonstrate the iterativity of stereotypes rooted in the conceptual framework of *brasilidade*.

The overlapping of Beauvoir’s descriptions of Rio de Janeiro may be attributed to a recurring focus on dining out, frequenting popular streets and neighborhoods, conveying the beauty of the natural sites, and enumerating the long list of encounters with individuals who, Beauvoir observes, each “s’exprimait couramment [en français] comme la plupart des Brésiliens que nous rencontrâmes” (346). It is important to note that at the time of Beauvoir’s visit, only educated Brazilians of a certain class spoke French (Veloso 170); it is therefore reasonable to conclude from Beauvoir’s own observation that she and Sartre traveled among elite circles of Brazilian society over the course of their visit. In fact, Beauvoir’s narrative resembles the journal of a privileged tourist whose peregrination across Brazil is chronicled in terms of the country’s natural beauty and culinary delights, of which the following passage is emblematic:

[Nous visitâmes] la corniche sauvage qui prolonge les plages; sur les flancs de la *Tijuca*, haute de mille mètres, la forêt touffue et puissante qui occupe aujourd’hui la place de plantations de café exténuées. […] Le soir nous dînions sur une des terrasses de *L’Atlantica*, attentifs au scintillement des lumières, au murmure des vagues, à la tiède et humide caresse de l’air. Nous déjeunions souvent dans des churrascarias. (344)

Beauvoir’s descriptions of Rio reinforce stereotypes of the city as a beautiful and exotic haven even when she attempts to describe less alluring sites. Looking toward the
**favelas** populating the hillsides, for example, she remarks, “à distance, perchés sur les plus hauts sommets, dominant la cité et l’océan, certains de ces quartiers ont l’air de villages heureux” (342; my emphasis). Beauvoir’s characterization of the **favelas** as “happy villages” is curious in light of her conversation with Vinicius de Moraes, during which the playwright shared the reasons for his displeasure with Camus for propagating an image of Brazil that is “facile et mensongère” (348). To contrast Beauvoir’s “happy villages” with the following description of the **favelas** offered by Detrez is instructional:


This **favela**, populated by the discarded corpses of the elderly, aborted fetuses, dead rats, and piles of rubbish, is what Rosello calls the deconstructive distortion (11)—the hyperbolic transgressin—of Beauvoir’s sanitized stereotype. That Beauvoir herself iterates reductive and facile representations of Brazil demonstrates her inability or unwillingness to advance the discursive status quo, thereby perpetuating the cycle of what Rosello refers to as the “freezing [...] of the production of the text” (Rosello 23).

The iterativity of other well-worn topoi, such as the myth of a racially harmonious Brazil propagated by the campaign of **brasilidade**, occurs throughout Beauvoir’s narrative. Upon her arrival with Sartre at the property of a wealthy ranch owner, for example, she states, “Les Brésiliens [...] ignorent la morgue; maîtres et domestiques
vivent, superficiellement, sur un pied d’égalité; à Itabuna, quand le gérant nous a offert un verre, le chauffeur qui nous conduisait a bu au salon avec nous” (351). Beauvoir employs language (e.g., “maîtres”) that might be extracted directly from Gilberto Freyre’s *Casa Grande e Senzala* (English: *The Masters and the Slaves*), and her summary of race relations in Brazil echoes with only slight deviation Freyre’s own. She observes: “Jusqu’à un certain point […], les Brésiliens refusent le racisme. […]. La ségrégation est économique” (351). The debate over whether or not Brazil has transcended, internalized, rejected, or come to deny racism as part of its national discourse is beyond the scope of the present discussion. Boris Fausto, however, touches on a provocative and pertinent dimension to the question:

The problem of racial discrimination [in Brazil] is complicated. Discrimination is evident in educational and work opportunities, and there have been few advances in this area. This is strange given that Brazil is a country where blacks and mulattos constitute a significant part of the population. Among the reasons why there has been little progress in reducing racial discrimination is the fact that sizable sectors of the population deny that it exists […]. Even talking about it openly is considered in some conservative circles as indulgence in sheer fantasy. (336-37)

Of course, the denial of race-related tensions pre-dates the social construction of *brasilidade*. Numerous references to racial harmony in Brazil can be found in writings dating from the nineteenth century, such as Maurice Ternaux-Compans’ journal from the time he served as French diplomat to Brazil in the late 1800s (Carelli, *Cultures* 88). However, efforts to gloss over such tensions were to gain purchase over the decades following full emancipation in Brazil, ultimately evolving into a full-fledged, government-sponsored campaign as a defining component of *brasilidade*. 
The greatest contributing factor to the myth of racial democracy is often attributed to the work of Gilberto Freyre who, in the 1920s, had studied sociology under Franz Boas at Columbia University. Upon Freyre’s return to Brazil in the years leading up to Vargas’ Estado Novo, he would publish analyses of what he considered to be the benign ways in which masters treated slaves before emancipation in Brazil.\footnote{Brazil was the last nation of the Americas to fully abolish slavery through the \textit{Lei Áurea} of 1888.} Freyre’s understanding of the master/slave relationship characterized what he called a “Tropical China,” or a unified society with a promising economic future that lacked racial discrimination (Levine, \textit{History} 101). This line of argument, to be adopted by propagandists of the Estado Novo, was crucial to the dimension of brasilidade that prescribed a racially harmonious society. As Robert Levine concludes, “[b]y arguing that all races are equal but that each one had its own place in the social hierarchy, Freyre offered a way to preserve the status quo, whereby discrimination in Brazil was seen as based on class and income, not biology” (\textit{History} 101). Levine’s observation puts into relief the obvious parallels between Beauvoir’s assertion and Freyre’s theoretical premise.

Another important dimension to the ways in which brasilidade is signified in French cultural production resides in the persistent projection of the erotic gaze, as seen in Beauvoir’s description of Sartre’s reaction to a young Bossa Nova dancer during an evening shared with Jorge Amado and Vinicius de Moraes: “Il regardait avec agrément le plaisant visage, le généreux modelé d’une femme, et il se trouvait en train de lorgner une fillette de treize ans!” (348). Beauvoir’s account reflects titillation on her behalf at the mere sight of Sartre ogling the young dancer. The erotic charge, experienced by Sartre first and followed by Beauvoir, illustrates Rosello’s theory of iterativity, and it merely
continues the long history of well-documented instances of the erotic objectification of Brazilians by European observers. For example, much of Abel Bonnard’s writing from the 1920s is characterized by a metaphorical blending of Brazilian women with the country’s natural beauty:

Des lianes reliaient les arbres, pendaient de chaque branche, et semblaient dessiner partout des caresses. Parfois cette nature délègue vers le promeneur une femme qui la représente. Je me rappelle deux jeunes filles [qui] avaient cette peau presque orangée que donne un certain mélange de sangs ; il est impossible de rendre le charme de fleur sous-marine que prend, sur un pareil fond, la bouche fardée et épanouie. (58)

Bonnard’s reductive objectification of the women is executed by metaphorically conflating them with anthropomorphically eroticized creepers (“des lianes […] semblaient dessiner partout des caresses”) presented to the (male) stroller as the embodiment of nature (“cette nature délègue vers le promeneur une femme qui la représente”). The women are then metonymically morphed into a blossoming mouth covered in make-up (“bouche fardée et épanouie”). Henry Vallotton’s narrative of his time spent in Rio before the Second World War provides another example of how Brazilian women and the country’s fauna and flora are often conflated:

[J’ai été] subjugué à Rio par la grâce exquise, le teint éclatant, et le corps parfait des Brésiliennes, les plus belles orchidées de leur pays. Ces corps qui ont tous les degrés de cuisson de poteries ne restent pas simplement étendus, le soir les femmes se métamorphosent en papillons égarés au bord de la mer, papillons plus redoutables que les libellules. (71-72)

The lyrical aspect of such reductions proves popular with the French public of the first half of the twentieth-century (Carelli, Théry, and Zantman 27) even if it assumes a mawkish tone with today’s reader. However, these examples illustrate the occurrence of the internalization by francophone writers of Francisco Campos’ previously cited conflation of nature and citizens in the social construction of brasilidade. This type of
erotic objectification is facilitated by what Edward Saïd, Jonathan Dollimore, and Jarrod Hayes all describe in varying degrees as “sexual tourism.” In *Orientalism*, Saïd discusses the ways in which the colonization of the “Orient” has provided “a convenient vacation spot for Western tourists […] [and] a playground for the relief of tensions engendered by Western sexual normativity” (23). Dollimore places Saïd’s observations in the context of homophobia in Western culture and analyzes the ways in which homosexuals have been “sexually exiled from the repressiveness of the[ir] home culture,” leading them to “embrace both cultural and racial difference” (250). Hayes in turn discusses this dynamic in a literary context, which he terms “homo sexual tourism” (29). We will see how Hayes’ conceptualization of homo sexual tourism opens new dimensions to textual analyses of Detrez’s and Genet’s writing.

Returning to the matter of Beauvoir’s narrative: If I have focused on the perpetuation of established stereotypes of *brasilidade* in her writing, I should also point out a prescient observation made by the author which heralds one of the most important defining characteristics of Modern Revolutionary Writing. As discussed in my Introduction, the French gaze cast upon third world nations undergoes a critical shift whereby revolution is no longer the exclusive purvey of the European proletariat. After an extended period of reflection on the implications of Algerian independence, Beauvoir not only passes the torch of revolution to the nations of the *tiers-monde*, but she also calls into question the viability of France’s existence as a democracy: “Donc, je le répète, cette indépendance est certaine. Ce qui ne l’est pas, c’est l’avenir de la démocratie en France” (364). Despite what I perceive to be the inability of Beauvoir to advance beyond
established stereotypes and reified representations of Brazil and its people, I find her assessment of the shifting winds of revolution discerning.

If Beauvoir leaves something to be desired when it comes to casting a critical eye over the political and social institutions of the various places she visited, the historical context in which she iterates established stereotypes might shine light on her motivation for doing so. After the Second World War, Beauvoir, like Sartre, drifted further to the Left as she embraced communism while amplifying her critique of the United States and France. Accompanied by Sartre, she travelled to numerous communist countries including China, where the couple spent two months in 1955 as honored guests under the Chinese program of "waishi," the official State program overseeing the policies intended to influence and control foreign perceptions of China. Beauvoir and Sartre were shown various sites of interest concerning tourism, development in infrastructure, as well as “projects aimed at integrating women into the workforce, and [the ways in which] the revolution had successfully achieved women’s liberation” (Dooling 34). This visit was an important public relations coup for the Chinese government, for it lent weight to its efforts to appeal to left-leaning academics and labor leaders in France as well as to activists in other Western nations. In Anne-Marie Brady’s exploration of China’s policy of "waishi" during the Cold War, an insightful assessment of Beauvoir and Sartre’s experience with Chairman Mao is presented in the chapter titled “Political Tourism.” Brady’s analysis leaves little doubt that, whether one considers Beauvoir’s scathing criticism of the United States (Amérique au jour le jour of 1948) or her effusive praise of communist China (La Longue marche of 1957), her travel narratives must be approached with a cautious eye.
Skepticism about the accuracy of Beauvoir’s account is fueled by a letter written to Nelson Algren in which Beauvoir alludes to the urgent need to write of her recent trip to China in order to earn money (Brady 95). Under pressure to publish what would become *La Longue marche*, Beauvoir confesses to Algren that she is resigned to the fact that the project “would be filled with lies about things I did not see” (qtd. in Brady 95). The narrative of her time in China, characterized by an unusual degree of hyperbole, is filled with praise for the communist regime, lending credence to accusations that Beauvoir “turned a blind eye to the problems of the communist revolution […] or was simply naive enough to believe that the entire country was as well off as what she saw on her official visit” (Scholz 14). To paraphrase Mario Carelli, Beauvoir discovered in each place she visited what she wanted to find there (*Cultures* 197).

Detrez, on the other hand, is a vocal critic of intellectuals who, from the comfort of their flats in the Latin Quarter and Montparnasse, disseminate what he perceives to be distorted accounts of third world nations. In an interview with the Belgium literary review, *La Lanterne*, he refers to the satirical “settling of accounts” with the “*gauche mondaine*” that peppers his works of fiction. He states, “Mon gros règlement de compte est avec la gauche mondaine. […]. [J]e me moque des touristes politiques qui sortent de Paris pour aller voir les pays du tiers monde, un peu comme on va voir une espèce animale nouvelle au jardin zoologique” (42). The critical distance that Detrez maintains

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87 Detrez’s allusion to viewing animals in a zoo evokes the lavish display of the mock Brazilian villages built in Rouen in the mid sixteenth-century, constructed for the entertainment of Henri II and Catherine de Medici. For this particular display, Brazilian flora and fauna were imported, and typical Amerindian dwellings were built and populated by 50 original Tabbagerres and Toupinaboux people as well as about 250 French dressed as “natives” (Cook 350).
toward the “gauche mondaine” in Paris is rooted in his life experience and the ways in which it informs his writing. During another interview with La Libre Belgique, he states:

Aujourd’hui, je découvre que les expériences que j’ai pu faire m’ont préparé à la vie littéraire. Les écrivains devraient vivre avant d’écrire, sinon je ne vois pas bien ce qu’ils auraient à dire. J’ai vécu intensément sur le plan de la religion, de la politique et de l’amour, et souvent dans des situations conflictuelles. C’est pourquoi ce sont les trois thèmes privilégiés de mes livres. J’ai donc transformé en succès littéraires mes échecs existentiels ; c’est la volonté de créer qui m’a tenu debout dans les années de désarroi à mon retour du Brésil. (23)

With Detrez, then, the inspiration for his writing is drawn from his personal experience...“son vécu”... among the revolutionaries of the Third World. His creative and intellectual journey is fueled by an ongoing pursuit for new experiences, yet this quest is invariably frustrated by imprisonment, exile, and terminal illness. Hence Detrez’s continual return to a literary universe in which his (auto)fictional avatar, freed of material and temporal constraints, engages in a perpetual quest for his proper “ailleurs.”

**Detrez, brasilidade, and Modern Revolutionary Writing**

The literary universe of L’herbe à brûler is situated within Modern Revolutionary Writing through the author’s lived experience in revolutionary Brazil and in Paris of May 68. Reminiscent of Voltaire’s Candide, Detrez’s novel functions as a bildungsroman in the form of a modern day odyssey in which the enthusiastic and naïve protagonist, Conrad Dupont, embarks on a quest for self-actualization in a revolutionary world very different from his own.88 Throughout the narrative, stereotypes rooted in the cultural model of brasilidade are, in Mireille Rosello’s terms, “declined” by the author in a

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88 I defer to Dr. Carl Rogers’ understanding of self-actualization, which he describes as “the curative force in psychotherapy—man's tendency to actualize himself, to become his potentialities...to express and activate all the capacities of the organism” (350-51).
critical challenge to politically naïve fictions of Brazil. As a result, Detrez’s novel re-signifies the Edenic stereotype of a tropical paradise instilled with inter-racial harmony into a dystopia characterized by the revolutionary fervor of a population asserting itself against military dictatorship. Revolution is brought to the fore as Detrez privileges diverse quarters of Rio’s urban sprawl, bridging cultural gaps between the reader and previously unseen—and unheard—segments of Brazilian society. The mutual gaze between France and Brazil thus shifts, and the grand narrative of nationalism is redefined for both nations.

The third world country depicted in *L’herbe à brûler* is that of a gritty Brazil marked by social conflict, misery, humor, and passion. Except for very few references to the beach, Detrez refrains from taking the reader beyond the city streets or the confines of the *favelas*. Nature is marginalized and functions as a metaphorical trope providing brightly delineated contrasts between dynamic revolutionary fervor and static disengagement. If Rio is represented through the teeming sites of its cityscape, moribund Belgium and France are characterized by oppressive weather and rapacious plant life which assume larger than life proportions in the form of raging floods, menacing skies, and the unchecked proliferation of vegetation. The *supplanting* of the Old World serves as a powerful and multifaceted metaphor for the way in which the *tiers-monde* assumes the mantle of revolutionary change. The following description of Conrad’s return to Belgium illustrates the complexity of the trope in *L’Herbe à brûler*:

Un buisson d’asparaguses pendait entre la porte et les planches de la garde-robe. Les feuilles de la fougère enserraient la cruche du lavabo, les racines débordant du pot prolongeaient dans le bassin. Les cactus avaient grandi jusqu’à mi-fenêtre et les tiges de lierre s’étaient enroulées autour des pieds du lit. Pour fermer le meuble ou lever la cruche il m’aurait fallu élaguer, tailler, arracher des dizaines de stipes, éclaircir ou déraciner de multiples
pousses. La maîtrise de cette végétation exigeait des forces que je ne possédais plus. (12)

The metaphor of all-consuming flora is characterized by dichotomy: it signifies both Europe’s obsolescence on the revolutionary stage as well as the indomitable force of nature over man. As such, it serves as a foil to society’s material struggles and puts into relief the precariousness of the revolutionary dream. In the wake of losing friends and loved ones to the revolutionary cause, after being stripped of his freedom and tortured by the military police, and upon completing the long trek from Rio to the small town of his birth, Conrad arrives home too emotionally and physically enervated to challenge the vitality of the encroaching plants. The aporetic sense of resignation he feels toward the project of mass revolution is transcended only by his solitary death, over which he maintains a state of meta-awareness and from which point the narrative of the novel begins.

In contrast to the Old World, Brazil is characterized by a dynamism which reflects Detrez’s deference to Carlos Marighella and his theory of the urban guerilla in post-foco revolution. Marighella, a leading revolutionary figure in Latin America, is credited with founding the Aliança Libertadora Nacional in an effort to unite disparate revolutionary factions operating in Brazil during the 1960s. His affiliation with the MR-8 (Movimento Revolucionário 8 de Outubro), which organized the kidnapping of the American ambassador to Brazil in 1969, is also well documented. In 1967, Detrez would translate into French Marighella’s theoretical treatise titled Pour la libération du Brésil in which the foco theory of revolution as advanced by Che Guevara and Régis Debray is adapted to circumstances more in line with the composition of Brazil’s topography and

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89 The highly acclaimed movie Four Days in September is based upon this incident.
demographics. Where Guevara and Debray argue that popular forces can defeat the army, that they must create rather than await the conditions for revolution, and that the countryside is the proper venue for uprising in Latin America, Marighella insists the conditions for revolution must first be advanced by urban guerrillas in what he calls “prolonged popular war” characterized by quick, explosive urban campaigns (qtd. in Connable and Libicki 8). According to Marighella, the goal of a sporadic and relentless blitzkrieg campaign in the urban centers is “to wear out, demoralize and distract the enemy forces, permitting the emergence and survival of rural guerrilla warfare, which is destined to play the decisive role in the revolutionary war” (“Characteristics”).

If we recall Rosello’s framework for assessing ways in which existing stereotypes are declined through hyperbole, distortions, and self-deprecating humor (11), the parodic lens through which Marighella’s theory of post-foco is signified in the following passage offers an important corrective to the cliché of the happy-go-lucky Brazilian. Here Conrad describes the role of more seasoned guerrilla fighters as opposed to his status as a neophyte combatant:

C’est leur force, les guérilleros se fondent aux passants, à la pluie, aux kiosques, aux mannequins dans les vitrines, aux rayons du soleil qui tombent sur l’asphalte et le toit des voitures. Il y en a qui se métamorphosent en poubelles (ils attaquent les éboueurs au moment où ces derniers se disposent à les vider, les guérilleros s’emparent des camions), […]. Moi, je tire mal, j’ai essayé, je tremble et manque la cible. J’accomplirai seulement des tâches politiques, […]. Je circulerais d’une ville à l’autre et porteray des messages. Avec mon air d’étranger, de touriste, je suis la personne indiquée pour servir d’agent de liaison. (157)

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90 In his article “Nassérisme, castrisme, guerre populaire,” published in the September 1969 edition of *Esprit*, Detrez assesses the prospects for revolution in diverse Latin American nations. Detrez also discusses in this article Marighella’s work in the context of focused insurrection against strategic military and commercial interests in the urban setting.
The humorous image of the urban fighter disguised as a trash can lying in wait prompts a chuckle with the reader, as does the hyperbolic description of him alternately blending with the rays of the sun and the rainfall. The revolutionary is, nonetheless, a violent combatant who retains only enough of the facile characterization of the cheerfully indolent Brazilian to “decline” the stereotype. He also assumes larger than life dimensions as a foil to Conrad who, still alien to the ways of Brazil, is just learning to navigate the unfamiliar waters of erotic and political liberation.

Privileging the cityscape operates on another important level by re-signifying the May 68 narrative in relation to the political and artistic movement of the Situationist International. In their libertarian quest for a better world organized along radically different lines, the Situationists undertook the mission of “setting autonomous people loose in the world” (Knabb 179) in order to construct favorable environments, or “situations.” These situations would position man to reject consumerist ideology which has alienated him from his true (human) desires. Gerd-Rainer Horn elaborates on the peripatetic role of individuals who, collaborating in a communal effort, seek to counter the alienating effects of modern consumerist ideology in this context:

[Situationists’] efforts were primarily geared towards the artistic and creative sphere. Given their conviction that all the elements needed for a free life are already at hand, both culturally and technologically speaking, [and that] they have merely to be modified as to their meanings, and organized differently, Situationists began literally to roam the cities they inhabited in the search for hidden meanings and landmarks on the way to (re)discover the possibilities of non-alienated life. Many of their literary meanderings should be read as poetic blueprints in their search for revolutionary strategies. (10; my emphasis)

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91 The ideology of consumerist society is defined by Guy Debord as: “[T]he abstract will to universality and the illusion thereof [which is] legitimated in modern society by universal abstraction and by the effective dictatorship of illusion.” (55)
I believe Conrad’s “roaming” of Brazilian cities reflects this same need to “construct situations” in order to oppose the restrictive ideology that alienates him from himself.\(^92\)

Much of Conrad’s struggle against normative forces is conveyed through a recurring psychic split exacerbated by religion and revolution. In this context, Hayes’ articulation of what constitutes homo sexual tourism is germane with the caveat that an important modification should be made to it. Much of Hayes’ discussion of homo sexual tourism centers around the Western tourist’s desire to “engage in homo sex without threatening his heterosexuality or compulsory heterosexuality in general” (31). Hayes further argues that “hetero-colonialism” can even “contribut[e] to the consolidation of compulsory heterosexuality” (32). In Conrad’s case, however, the act of sex is only partly framed in the context of a hetero/homo sex binary as it relates to compulsory heterosexuality. On the one hand, it is grounded in the realm of the spiritual, whereby the very act of sex—whether it be heterosexual or homosexual—equates to moral turpitude and ensures alienation from the Church if pursued outside of marriage. As Conrad ponders his dual mission of spreading the Gospel and recruiting “des compagnons pour [la] Ligue” (104), he agonizes over the risks he takes by having sex with dona Josefa: “Encore quelques nuits [avec elle] et mes projets, ma vocation, mes rêves seraient morts, ma mission se trouverait enterrée” (105). In this instance, Conrad’s upbringing in the

\(^92\) Horn’s characterization of literary meanderings as poetic blueprints for revolutionary strategies situates Detrez’s writing squarely within the realm of Modern Revolutionary Writing as it relates to the Situationists’ specificity to May 68 discourse. Kristin Ross points out that, before his death, Guy Debord was given to making increasingly megalomaniacal pronouncements about his role in the May 68 insurrection, speaking, for example, of “‘the grave responsibility that has often been attributed to me for the origins, or even the command, of the May 68 revolt,’ and, finally, ‘admitting to being the one who chose the time and direction of the attack’” (May 193-94). Regardless of Debord’s assessment of his own involvement in May 68, it is clear that his 1967 Société du spectacle and the journal he collaborated on, Internationale Situationniste (published between 1958 and 1969) contributed to the intellectual task of desacralizing bourgeois consumer society throughout the 1960s (Ross, May 194) which fueled much of the May 68 dialogue.
Church operates as the matricial site of spiritual regulation for his super-ego. On the other hand, his sexuality is very much grounded in the hetero-homo sex binary as it relates to his revolutionary aspirations, for the society of revolutionaries is just as hetero-normative as the Old World he left behind:

Je vivais depuis trois mois dans une solitude qui, le soir, faisait sourdre en moi le sentiment de l’échec, du malheur, une solitude qui me tenait, dans mon lit, un langage de mort. Je voyais à l’ex-Grand-Hôtel des militants couler la main dans les cheveux des militantes. Ils les caressaient, bavardaient avec elles, entre deux bécots, des moyens de développer une stratégie nouvelle, d’inventer des techniques de guérilla accordées au contenu de la Plate-forme. Ils se levaient, décidaient de poursuivre le débat à huis clos dans leurs chambres. Je me retirais dans la mienne et je ne dormais pas. [...]. Je me sentais rejetté. (144)

For Conrad, sexual contact means much more than a fleeting moment of pleasure: it is communication, participation in humanity itself, a way of ordering the chaotic. Without sexual contact, existence is reduced to nothing more than “un langage de mort”—an aporetic dilemma from which Conrad’s super-ego is unable to deliver him.\(^{93}\) The only escape is to evolve into what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call a “desiring machine,” whereby every machine is a machine connected to another…and another…and so forth. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire should not be viewed in terms of Freudian lack; rather, it must be understood in terms of production or, more specifically, in terms of desiring production in the social field, hence the metaphoric reference to the machine. These machines always function in relation to the machines to which they are connected.

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\(^{93}\) It should be noted, as Seidman points out, that for all their aspiration to theorize the human as social—and to sketch the contours of modernity—classical Marxist sociologists and indeed Marx himself fail to offer any accounts of the making of modern bodies and sexualities. Therefore, just as the bourgeoisie assert the naturalness of class inequality and of their rule, individuals whose social identity is that of male and heterosexual do not question the naturalness of a male-dominated, normatively heterosexual social order (Seidman 167). This manner of apprehending social order is sustained by an implicit policy similar to the American military’s policy of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. At the time Detrez was writing, Party members who failed to adhere to heteronormative standards were marginalized, as was the case with Guy Hocquenghem who was expelled from the French Communist Party for being gay.
They are pure concatenate multiplicity. Understood in this way, Conrad’s desire, whether it be politically charged (such as his efforts to organize labor protests in Volta Redonda) or sexually charged (such as his cruising public parks for anonymous sex), opens the door to the possibility of another society and another humanity—a new, unavowable community of desiring machines united by what Maurice Blanchot calls “contestation” (*Communauté* 16).

In *La Communauté inavouable*, Blanchot traces the outlines of a community which cannot be circumscribed or conserved and in which the Hegelian understanding of recognition between two conscious beings is called into question. Hegel tells us when two abstract consciousnesses meet, each has a choice between ignoring the other, thus resulting in the failure of self-consciousness to form, or confronting the other as a mirror-self to be dominated. The two conscious beings coming together are described in the following terms:

On approaching the other it has lost its own self, since it finds itself as another being; secondly, it has thereby sublated that other, for this primitive consciousness does not regard the other as essentially real but sees its own self in the other. (*Phenomenology* 111)

The master/slave struggle theorized by Hegel results in an ongoing dialectic of control, sublation, and ultimate resolution whereby the differences between master and slave are dissolved. In the event the slave dies, abstract negation occurs and the achievement of self-consciousness goes unrealized. Blanchot’s understanding however is based on a communal dynamic whereby two conscious beings are dependent upon an ongoing process of negation and contestation in order for them to be by dint of the very privation that makes them conscious of the impossibility of existing autonomously. Blanchot explains:
Crucial differences exist between Hegel’s and Blanchot’s arguments. Unlike the master/slave dialectic, Blanchot’s principle is based upon persistent confrontation and negation in order for either being to become a conscious being (“cette privation qui le rend conscient”) as a result of experiencing himself as an always prior exteriority. Additionally, Blanchot understands the meeting of conscious beings to be devoid of hierarchy and sustained by a generative cycle of composing and decomposing of them.

Conrad’s quest for self-actualization (or what we might call self-consciousness in this instance) can be understood in terms of Blanchot’s argument with a slight modification to the “principe d’incomplétude.” Blanchot agrees with Georges Bataille’s assertion that “[à] la base de chaque être, il existe un principe d’insuffisance,” to which the former adds,

L’être, insuffisant, ne cherche pas à s’associer à un autre pour former une substance d’intégrité. La conscience de l’insuffisance vient de sa propre mise en question, laquelle a besoin de l’autre ou d’un pair pour être effectuée. Seul, l’être se ferme, s’endort et se tranquillise. (15-16; my emphasis)

If, as Blanchot states, one enters a sleep-like state or shuts down as a result of being alone, the possibility of achieving self-consciousness is foreclosed upon. Yet, Conrad presents an interesting paradox for Blanchot’s theory, for he is psychically conflicted between the desires of the flesh and the spirit and is therefore made aware by two internal
sites of contestation of the privation that makes him conscious of not being himself. This awareness results in an alternating cycle of composing and decomposing of the two “pairs” (i.e., peers) which constitute Conrad as a conscious being. In other words, his own conflicted selves serve to mobilize the “principe d’incomplétude.” This dynamic of “contestation” is reflected in the literary aspect of the novel’s structure through ongoing transitions between the homodiegetic narrative voice of Conrad’s physical self and the extradiegetic narrative voice of his soul. The recurring phenomenon of psychic split in Conrad’s evolving consciousness is therefore symptomatic of his alienation from himself.

He refers to this divide in the following terms:

Un siècle plus tôt, me dis-je, j’avais mangé, dormi, prié […]. Depuis lors, j’avais vécu d’autres vies, appris des choses neuves et bouleversantes. J’avais lu des livres interdits et connu des amours plus décisives que celles qui, […], me faisaient veiller à genoux au pied de mon lit et au nom desquelles je châtiais mon corps. Un jeune homme était mort en moi, qui naturellement n’avait pas survécu à son Dieu ; un autre jeune homme était né. (159)

The “autre jeune homme” to whom Conrad refers has supplanted his former self (159) and wishes to “établir le ciel sur la terre” (159). In this mission he is “porté par une force aussi puissante que l’ancienne mais plus vraie, palpable et mesurable, une force née des humains et organisée dans le monde par des dizaines de milliers de camarades” (159). Such are the residual utopic aspirations of the May 68 narrative, which are closely echoed by Edgar Morin’s unwavering belief in “la possibilité d’une autre société et d’une autre humanité” (qtd. in Blanchot, Communauté 10). However, the driving forces behind this mission, “born of men and organized in the world by tens of thousands of comrades,” presage Blanchot’s admonition regarding the dangers of totalitarianism whereby the
individual is sublated into the masses and “chaque membre du groupe remet sa liberté ou même sa conscience à une Tête […]” (Communauté 18).

Blanchot offers a stringent critique of the risks by which subjectivity is swept under the carpet in the theory and praxis of both Soviet and Western Marxism. When La Communauté inavouable was published in 1983, post-modernists had already been questioning the notion of objective truth for many years. After the Second World War, new theories gradually developed out of phenomenology and Saussurian structural linguistics, coalescing into what we discordantly call postmodernism and post-structuralism today. Initially, postmodernists were accused by critics of an undue privileging of subjectivity over objectivity and authority, which led to the charge of relativism against them in the wake of May 68 (see Introduction). According to Alain Finkielkraut, “No transcendent or traditional authority, and not even a plain majoritarian one, can shape the preferences of your postmodern man or regulate his behavior” (116). The “transcendent authority” to which Finkielkraut refers qualifies as anything called a “grand narrative” in postmodern circles. Approaching the question from a different angle than Finkielkraut, Blanchot understands these grand narratives—among which Marxism must certainly be counted—to eradicate differences by imposing a lifeless uniformity (Communauté 17-18). However, the palliation of the subject is counteracted in Modern Revolutionary Writing as a result of the postmodern deconstruction of grand narratives. Because the promiscuity of postmodern deconstruction inevitably encompasses the grand narrative of the Subject itself, Detrez and others operating within the periodization of Modern Revolutionary Writing are able to write from radically new stylistic voices which privilege the subject over the collective.
The cycle of inner conflict which inhabits Conrad, reflected in the very poetics of the narrative, can be thought of as an engine that propels him through his journey of revelation and self-discovery. Guided by increasingly obsolete road markers of his youth, Conrad must cast aside epistemological moorings in order to navigate the new world in an odyssey defined by constant destruction and renewal. This cycle is suggested by the metaphoric title of the book, *L’herbe à brûler* (translated into English as *A Weed for Burning*), which evokes both the image of burning grass continually renewing itself in the wake of purifying immolation as well as the burning bush from Exodus through which God reveals Himself to Moses. Both metaphors suggest renewal and revelation reflected in the rejection of old beliefs and the attendant metamorphosis into a new being. This metaphor of regeneration is privileged from the opening moment of the narrative when the liminal space between life and death is blurred for the protagonist:

> Quand mon âme a quitté mon corps elle a d’abord volé vers le fuchsia sur la sellette près du lit. De nombreuses plantes décoraient ma chambre. [...]. Certaines fleurissaient. Mais c’est sur le fuchsia que mon âme a préféré se poser. La plante lui paraissait gaie avec ses clochettes pourpres et roses. Elle était aussi la plus rapprochée de mon corps et il lui en coûtait, à mon âme, de s’en séparer après tant d’années d’amour et de disputes, tant de luttes et de réconciliations. [...]. Perchée sur son fuchsia, mon âme, qui ne voyait plus rien, s’est mise à penser. (11-13)

Conrad’s physical death does not mark the end of his existence; rather, it allows for the transfer of his subjective voice from his body to his soul, initiating the cycle of regeneration and peregrination which characterizes the structure of the narrative.

On a level of literary poetics, the cyclic composition of *L’herbe à brûler* is triggered by the narrative’s beginning *in medias res* with Conrad’s homodiegetic account of his own death and immediately transitioning into the heterodiegetic analeptic narrative by his soul. In the last paragraph of the novel, the heterodiegetic voice subtly reverts to
the homodiegetic, retriggering the narrative succession. This structural cycle complements the thematic cycle of regeneration in a dynamic analogous to that of perpetual revolution. The mechanism whereby the structural and thematic aspects of the narrative operate in concert is a unifying characteristic of Modern Revolutionary Writing, which we will see again in Wittig’s *Les guérillères* and Genet’s *Un Captif amoureux*. Peter Steiner’s *précis* of the Formalists’ analogy between biology and literary theory provides the frame of reference for my observation:

> Just as each individual organism shares certain features with other organisms of its type, and species that resemble each other belong to the same genus, the individual work is similar to other works of its form and homologous literary forms belong to the same genre. (19)

Another convention of Modern Revolutionary Writing is the motif of “delocalisation.” According to Pierre Mertens, the most interesting literature of European writers reflects the fact that “l’Européen est celui qui part” (45). In Modern Revolutionary Writing the perpetual quest for utopia, be it in the form of intentional communities or spontaneous communities of contestation, is sought in an elsewhere beyond the constraints of the Old World, and, like a boomerang, this expedition occurs in a constant movement of return to renew itself in what Blanchot calls the “présence innocente” (*Communauté* 54) of May 68 discourse. Of this “présence” Blanchot writes,

> C’était là, c’est encore là l’*ambiguïté* de la présence—entendue comme utopie immédiatement réalisée—, par conséquent sans avenir, par conséquent sans présent : en suspens comme pour ouvrir le temps à un au-delà de ses déterminations usuelles. (*Communauté* 54)

Conrad’s quest is driven by his own alienation from himself rooted in his psychic split, resulting in a journey through dystopic cycles of chaos toward an elsewhere closely resembling Blanchot’s “*ambiguïté* de la présence.” This chaos is usually characterized by
rhetorical tropes associated with an apocalyptic style of writing, such as hyperbole and frenetic profusions of contradictory sensations which confound the senses and propel Conrad “par un zèle qui déjà s’apparentait au goût du danger” (106). The lure of danger sets in motion Conrad’s gradual dissolution rooted in the conflict between his body and soul, evoking Nietzsche’s discussion of the Greek Tragedy in which the protagonist struggles to make (Apollonian) order of his chaotic and unjust (Dionysian) fate only to die unfulfilled in the end. The clashing between Conrad’s desperate, ordered self and his Jungian shadow aspect culminates during the carnival season in Rio:

The carnival atmosphere results in “désordre” for Conrad, translated into a rapid succession of images strung together in a winding sentence resembling a serpent slithering across the page, riddled with the letter ‘S’ in its confusion of plurality, propelled by descriptions of the funneled crowd forging its course like a powerful river, and ending in the metamorphosis of the dancing masses into coiling snakes. The biblical topos of the Tree of Knowledge with its ophidian menace is re-signified as the lure of an idealized “truth” of Brazil which leaves Conrad forever changed: “Les gens ne mentaient
Ceding to the dangers of excess, Conrad enters a critical phase of his sexual evolution marked by a final, apocalyptic battle between his body and soul. The apotheosis of his sexual awakening during carnival is described in terms of abandon, which brings to light Richard G. Parker’s observations of a “homoculture” unique within a Brazilian context. Parker considers a sexual culture by focusing on the symbolic dimensions of human experience. From this perspective we view carnival as a protean, transgressive, transformational, atemporal, ludic, and erotic departure from every other place governed by time and normativity. Carnival therefore embodies that elusive elsewhere, that “ambiguïté de la présence” again defined by Blanchot as being “en suspens comme pour ouvrir le temps à un au-delà de ses déterminations usuelles.” It is a time and a space where (sexual) freedom is possible through “brincadeira,” or fun and games (Parker 140). During carnival, Parker points out, “you stop being the master of your body. The mass becomes master” (144). Conrad thus attains sexual self-actualization in the uniquely Brazilian homocultural context of carnival, whereby he “become[s] his potentialities” (Rogers 351) in a defining moment of intimacy with his revolutionary comrade, Fernando:

Et la folie m’a gagné. Je me suis jeté au cou de mon camarade, j’ai pressé mes lèvres contre les siennes. […]. Nous sommes tombés à genoux l’un devant l’autre, toujours enlacés, mouillés baignant dans sa puissante odeur de nègre, et on s’est regardé. Une sensation inconnue, un bien-être, un bonheur indicible s’est installé en moi. (122)

In this unique instance in the narrative, Conrad experiences a happy mingling—the striking of a major chord—of all the dynamic sites of his passions: his commitment to
revolution (embodied in his “camarade”), his fascination with the tropical third world “Other” (signified by the “odeur de nègre”), his homosexuality, and his spirituality (described as a “bonheur indicible”). The whole of Conrad’s psyche, structured by the oscillation between the desire for plenitude and the recognition of difference, lack, and cultural convention, momentarily breaks from the Oedipal Symbolic. Made whole in this hypostatic union, he transcends...for a fleeting moment...the order of culture, language, and exchange in which difference and absence must be recognized.

This transcendence is of course brief, and Conrad’s drive toward sexual self-actualization renews itself through what Brazilians call “saudades.” Impossible to translate into a single lexeme, saudades encompasses longing, pleasure, pain, nostalgia, joy, melancholy, and loss. It is yearning in all its facets. Conrad’s apprehension of sex is therefore characterized by ambivalence, alternating between disillusionment and blissful delirium. Whereas the loss of his virginity to an older woman entails a rude introduction to sex for the dejected novice (“Tel fut mon dépucelage: un coït turbulent, […], un mauvais moment” (105), Conrad confesses), the Freudian pleasure principle inexorably drives him to pursue repeated engagement with others. This psychic imperative disrupts the coherence of Conrad’s ego by shattering, opposing, resisting, and compromising the logic of the reality principle which is, in the end, grounded in terms of the father, the family, the nation, and all the other institutions of society that regulate the super-ego (Laplanche 212). Conrad is thereby caught in the interstices of what Freud sees as two forces, the pleasure principle and the reality principle, which act concurrently in the psyche, warring with each other.
It is important to note that the space between pleasure and pain—the site of *saudades*—in Conrad’s sexual encounters has little to do with his sexual orientation; rather, it is defined more by the dueling forces of his body and soul. For Conrad, each sexual encounter signals an enervation of his commitment to the Church and results in renewed chaotic struggle—illustrated in his experience with Dona Josefa:

[Dona Josefa] voulait devenir prêtre. Son sexe l’interdisait et elle avait rêvé d’épouser un prêtre. Comme l’Église s’y opposait elle s’était rabattue sur un demi-curé. Elle réalisait ainsi une partie de son vœu mais moi, je trahissais le mien. Mon âme détestait ce que mon corps aimait et pour l’empêcher d’aimer il fallait partir. (105)

Irony resides in the fact that Dona Josefa’s greatest desire is to serve the Church as a priest, yet because she is disallowed from becoming or marrying a man of the cloth she resorts to seducing one in order to realize a “portion” of her vow. Conrad, however, is conflicted by the contrary belief that succumbing to desires of the flesh will result in alienation from the Church. The only way for his soul to tame these desires, he concludes, is to flee toward the unknown. Conrad’s sexual experiences—chaotic maelstroms of inverted roles, twisted logic, and mercurial personalities—are dystopic in themselves and are emblematic of the tortuous road he must travel during his metamorphosis from naïve cleric to atheistic revolutionary—a road on which battle is waged between the faces of his psychic split, ending in the perseverance of one at the apocalyptic expense of the other.

Conrad’s struggle within his own conflicted self mirrors the age-old question of how oppression, persecution, and torture can coexist with a Christian God of love, hope, and justice. Historically, Christianity is replete with voices declaring victory in the midst of oppression. One only has to peruse *Fox’s Book of Martyrs* to see the long list of
sufferers who testify to God’s power even in the most severe circumstances. In the historical context of Modern Revolutionary Writing, new life is breathed into this question, exemplified in the differing views of Albert Camus and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

If, as Camus argues, God either does not exist or He is indifferent to the horrors of our age, Solzhenitsyn posits the notion that the experience of injustice and oppression can lead man to appreciate truth, and with truth comes a more orthodox Christian view of life. In *L’Homme révolté*, Camus asserts, “Une injustice demeure collée à toute souffrance, même la plus méritée aux yeux des hommes” (379), bringing to the fore questions of divine indifference and whether or not man is free if he has a master. For Camus, there is less a problem of freedom than a problem of evil in the presence of God. In other words, either man is not free and God is responsible for evil, or man is free (and responsible) and God is not all-powerful. In Camus’ “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Edipus illustrates the latter view by clinging to absurdist optimism and banishing from his world a god who embraces futile suffering. Meursault does the same in *The Stranger* as he contemplates the benign indifference of the universe and apprehends what he understands to be truth in the abandonment of hope. For Camus, the great twin beacons of twentieth century hope, Christianity and communism, are hollow: “Depuis vingt siècles, la somme totale du mal n’a pas diminué dans le monde. Aucune parousie, ni divine ni révolutionnaire, ne s’est accomplie” (*L’Homme* 379), and man’s only recourse is to rebel by accepting a “happy” state of no hope.

Solzhenitsyn offers a different assessment of how man might come to terms with suffering and injustice. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, he tells the story of Boris Kornfeld, a
Communist with a Jewish background who embraces Christianity in the Gulag. As Kornfeld ruminates over the injustices in his life, he observes:

And on the whole, do you know, I have become convinced that there is no punishment that comes to us in this life on earth which is undeserved. Superficially it can have nothing to do with what we are guilty of in actual fact, but if you go over your life with a fine-tooth comb and ponder it deeply, you will always be able to hunt down that transgression of yours for which you have now received this blow. (612)

Solzhenitsyn interprets Kornfeld’s words to mean that evil passes through every man’s heart and is the root cause of punishment and suffering. This “blow” is of man’s doing and therefore necessitates a need for salvation. Solzhenitsyn internalizes Kornfeld’s words, expressing his epiphany in the following poem:

Not with good judgment not with desire
Are my life’s twists and turns illumined.
But with the even glow of the Higher Meaning
Which became apparent to me only later on.
And now with measuring cup returned to me,
   Scooping up the living water,
God of the Universe! I believe again!
Though I renounced You, You were with me! (614-15)

For Solzhenitsyn, God is not the author of injustice and outrage here but the one who can lead man to develop character in spite of it. Solzhenitsyn is a moralist for whom Good and Evil are mutually exclusive, and compassion for others partly comes from realizing that everyone shares moral weaknesses. Rather than rejecting divinity as Camus’ rebel does, Solzhenitsyn’s observation reconciles the question of how oppression can coexist with a Christian God of hope and justice. Conrad’s internal struggles echo much of this argument, for he is oppressed and tortured by a Catholic faith that condemns who he is. Like Meursault in his reclusion and the detainees of the Gulag, Conrad is a prisoner of a
constructed past which demands either submission to a condemning God or rebellion, the latter ultimately proving to be an intrinsic dimension to his revolutionary journey.

The decisive struggle between Conrad’s opposing psychic forces occurs as a result of his union with Fernando, who is also deeply religious and conflicted. Once the carnival season ends, Fernando and Conrad’s physical relationship falls into an intensifying cycle of self-loathing, passion, and remorse, leaving Conrad to internalize his saudades—ultimately drawing from it in order to fuel his revolutionary aspirations:

Fernando m’a frôlé, j’ai serré sa main, on s’est emparé l’un de l’autre, s’est embrassé aussi passionnément que la veille. Debout contre le mur du sanctuaire, les jambes tremblant, on a fait l’amour. J’ai regardé mon camarade, il a craché sur le sol, dégorgeant, disait-il, nos baisers, m’a traité de putain. Nous étions redevenus ennemis. La prière et le sperme, le sang, la douleur, […], les disputes et les mots d’amour puis ses confessions, ces pénitences, ces saintes communions et de nouveau le péché, l’étreinte, les larmes, les excréments. […]. Fernando discourrait sur les incohérences de notre vie et jurait choisir une fois pour toutes la religion. […]. Je le retrouvais assis sur mon lit. Je me couchais, il tombait sur moi. (124-25)

The sequence of conflict where guilt, happiness, sperm, and prayer comingle in the “incoherence of life” results in a chaotic existential itinerary requiring Conrad to repeatedly choose between extreme choices: priesthood or revolution, chastity or unbridled sexuality, etc. In the end, love proves elusive to Conrad who, like Albert Camus’ Byronic hero, turns to frenetic action in order to “feel himself live.” Camus explains:

Le héraos byronien, incapable d’amour, ou capable seulement d’un amour impossible, souffre de spleen. Il est seul, languide, sa condition l’épuise. S’il veut se sentir vivre, il faut que ce soit dans la terrible exaltation d’une action brève et dévorante. Aimer ce que jamais on ne verra deux fois, c’est d’aimer dans la flamme et le cri pour s’abîmer ensuite. On ne vit plus que dans et par l’instant, pour ‘cette union courte mais vivante d’un cœur tourmenté uni à la tourmente’ (Lermontov). (L’homme 73)
In a similar manner, Conrad’s existential struggle is characterized by a Promethean revolution (in the sense of orbital or elliptical movement) of fleeting passion, pleasure and plain, soaring and plummeting. Converting his saudades into a “terrible exaltation” of action, Conrad breaks the cycle of battle waged between his body and soul, turning his back to the Church and plunging into subversion (127). “L’action,” he explains, “m’avai[t] par étapes dépossédé de mon passé, arraché à l’empire des lois et mis hors d’elles, avait fait de mon propre nom mon ennemi” (176). Conrad is thus divested of the trappings of his constructed past: language, religion, name, citizenship, and even age. He has been extricated from the “empire of laws”—a subtle critique of France’s long history of cultural imperialism and outdated, staid laws. The metamorphosis is complete when Conrad receives his “baptême politique,” signified by yet another constructed identity as Brazilian revolutionary named Dominguès (176). The fact that Conrad undergoes a “political baptism” while assuming the name Dominguès suggests—with noted sarcasm—a less than subtle dismissal of the Church. The most fundamental of sacraments is divested of its metaphysical substance and the surname Dominguès (the patronymic form of the given name “Domingo” from the Latin “Dominicus,” or “belonging to the Lord”) is appropriated by an atheist. As with the disciples of the French Revolution, Conrad’s new identity as an agent of political insurrection is born of the destruction of his previously affirmed State and Church. The cycle of destruction and regeneration is once again triggered as his new identity supplants the old.

94 It is interesting to note that the preponderance of France’s historical reputation as the paradigmatic “land of law” is so great that it is even reflected in the Chinese translation of that country’s name: “fǎ guó (法国)”…or “Country of Law.”
It is noteworthy that the literary aspect of the passive voice describes Conrad’s metamorphosis in the passage. This creates a fascinating contrast with the word “action,” which is the grammatical subject of the sentence. It is, after all, Conrad who chooses to act—Conrad whose action effects the changes, yet it is Conrad who is relegated to the status of direct object. These ruminations are at the level of meta-discourse, disengaging the protagonist from his former self yet not quite allowing him to inhabit his new being.

Breathing fresh affirmation into Rimbaud’s “Je est un autre” and, incidentally, echoing Monique Wittig’s exercise in gender eradication in language in L’Opoponax, Conrad resorts to referring to himself with the pronoun “on” as he negotiates the interstices of two identities: “Ballotté entre deux moi, divisé comme entre deux sexes opposés, on sent devenir dingue” (177). The reference to Conrad being divided between sexes not only echoes Wittig’s discussion of gender as a constructed identity but heralds by many years the contesting of the categorization of gender and sexuality associated with Queer Theory. This liminal space between identities is a familiar home to Conrad Detrez, whose proper subjectivity evolves through a series of intermediaries: the son of a Walloon mother and a Flemish father, the bilingual boy from Liège caught in the language wars of Belgium, the adolescent tormented by his budding sexuality under the objurgating eye of the Church, the young adventurer turned French citizen yet who remains a tiers-mondiste by conviction, the professor, the writer, the diplomat.

The exercise of situating L’herbe à brûler with the periodization of Modern Revolutionary Writing demonstrates how the problematic of May 68 serves as a

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95 Teresa de Lauretis is generally credited with coining the phrase “Queer Theory” during a working conference on lesbian and gay sexualities held at the University of Santa Cruz in February, 1990. (Halperin, “Normalizing” 339)
palimpsest for the entire narrative. However, this is not to say that May 68 informs Modern Revolutionary Writing in a cause and effect manner; rather, it is interpreted and re-signified by the writers operating within the periodization and therefore has a generative presence in the literature. In a conversation between Rodrigo and Conrad, for example, the former expresses impatience and derision for what he perceives to be trifling points of contention driving political discourse in France:

[C]hez nous, en Amérique du Sud on se bat pour des questions décisives: pour le pain, pour la terre…Ici, faire de la politique, c’est se disputer entre université, hôpitaux et maternités catholiques et non catholiques. Chez nous, c’est se battre pour en avoir, et pour en avoir il faut faire la révolution. (83)

Rodrigo’s trivialization of the grievances expressed by the striking students and workers of May 68 elicits dismay in Conrad: “C’est la première fois que j’entends dire une chose pareille,” to which Rodrigo replies, “C’est également la première fois que tu sors du milieu des curés […] et la première fois que tu aproches des étudiants” (83). Conrad fails to grasp Rodrigo’s pointed criticism, instead asking if the revolution will be a communist one, to which Rodrigo impatiently retorts, “La révolution, c’est tout!” (83). This exchange must be read as more than a mere critique of the grievances driving the May 68 movement or of the myopic world view of the French. It also serves to put into relief the traditional understanding of revolution which characterizes the political struggles of South America and the different revolutionary aspirations that characterize the May 68 movement. In the end, it does not matter what type of revolution transpires as long as revolution is realized.

Upon his return from Brazil, Conrad arrives in Paris just before the revolutionary events of May, apprehending the French capital through the eyes of a foreigner: “Je
m’était trop laissé devenir brésilien,” he observes (197). Significantly, the first observation he makes upon his arrival concerns the weather: “Il neigeait sur Paris. C’était surprenant, j’avais oublié que la neige existait” (197). With Brazil far behind, nature reclaims a prominent role in the narrative, yet it is no longer the destructive force associated with the Old World. Instead, the falling snow signifies a salutary and hopeful agent of change for the protagonist, who muses: “Les flocons s’infilaient, telle une lumière, entre les tuiles, dans les rainures des toits, les lézardes des murs. […] Un soleil de neige, immense et tamisé, […] me donnait envie de rester dans cette ville. J’y suis resté” (197). The Old World is thus interpreted by Conrad as “un nouveau pays” (196), renewed through his optimism for revolutionary change beyond the conventional stricture of Marxist exigencies.

“La France s’ennuie.” Such is the assessment of the way things were in France in the weeks leading up to the May 68 revolution. This assertion by Pierre Viansson-Ponté, headlined in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, was only partly correct: the French were bored, but they were bored to the point of rebellion. The Establishment order was too oppressive for the post World War II youths, as reflected in Conrad’s description of Paris during the May 68 events: “Chacun se sentait devenu son seul maître de soi. Caporaux, préfets, surveillants, petits et grands chefs, y compris celui de l’État, s’étaient éclipsés. Paris s’émerveillait de lui-même, la France s’amusait” (212). The Hegelian master/slave hierarchy is destabilized even after the guardians of the “survivances de l’ordre ancien” retake control and “les gens qui s’étaient divertis n’eurent plus dès lors le droit que de s’en souvenir.” (Detrez, *L’Herbe* 213). As Conrad wryly points out, however, if Gallic nationalism is to survive the incursion the whole of its foundation must be buttressed,
necessitating a purging of the undesirable “exotics” responsible for fomenting the insurrection:

Les ministres du chef aussitôt se concertèrent. Celui qui administrerait la routine intérieure la rétablirait en un temps record et avec une grande fermeté. […] Il s’était juré de chasser les fauteurs de ces divertissements exotiques et sauvages et même pires : antinationaux. Il les renverrait chez eux puisque, par définition, ils étaient, ne pouvaient être que des étrangers, les plus turbulents d’entre eux, décida-t-il, provenant d’Amérique du Sud. (213)

The exotic “Other” from the recesses of the Third World is thus made scapegoat, tidily expunging from the grand narrative of French nationalism all record of Gallic citizens engaging in what Charles de Gaulle termed “la chienlit.” The end of the “fêtes,” Conrad laments, is marked by the reinstalling of the “chefs du savoir,” henceforth charged with propagating the “official” narrative of the May 68 events (213). Detrez’s allusion to these so-called keepers of knowledge reminds the reader that the “prise de parole” by the New Philosophers did not occur organically; rather, it was a calculated political maneuver.

Detrez’s work demonstrates the different ways in which brasilidade has been signified to not only uphold a certain ideal of Brazil, but also to reaffirm the image of France as a preeminent First World nation. However, Detrez’s particular treatment of brasilidade functions as an important post-modern site of subversion of the grand narratives of nationalism, religion, and revolution itself. As did Candide two hundred years earlier, Conrad unmasks and rejects the Institutions of theology, government, and philosophy, only to resign himself to the fact that the most he can do is “cultivate his own garden.” As with all Modern Revolutionary Writing, Detrez’s work shines light on the dynamic and contrived properties of grand narratives, thereby inviting a critical probing and across-the-board rethinking of related terms.
Chapter 3

MONIQUE WITTIG: DE-CONSTRUCTING THE STRAIGHT MIND
IN MODERN REVOLUTIONARY WRITING

Wittig, May 68, and New Discourse(s)

After forty-five years, May 68 continues to suggest the primacy of social and cultural revolution—of the need to change individuals, social relations, and culture as a prelude to political and systematic transformation. In this context, the work of Monique Wittig and others operating within the periodization of Modern Revolutionary Writing signals an unprecedented analysis of the ways in which power is exercised with its specificity and tactics, thereby unmasking the totalizing domination of the system that must itself be laid bare if meaningful change is to take place. “This task could only begin,” Michel Foucault affirms, “after 1968” (Power 116). The individual sites of resistance and action, unique to each dynamic contributor to Modern Revolutionary Writing, is based on what Foucault calls the “fight located in the fine meshes of the web of power” (Power 116). Of all the grand narratives mobilized by this web, Wittig is most intent on unmasking and problematizing what she calls the heterosexual regime of the “Straight Mind,” of which the most egregious offense has been the linguistic appropriation of the universal by man. Given the breadth of thinking and representation signified through the filter of heteropatriarchy—encompassing the whole of linguistic langue and parole—Wittig’s critique of the Straight Mind invites interesting parallels with Adorno’s deliberations on the aporia of post-Shoah art. Not unlike the Holocaust—a

96 The term “heteropatriarchy” suggests a more precise theoretical valence than “heterosexual” in discussing heteronormative dynamics in terms of patriarchy. I therefore prefer to employ the term “heteropatriarchy” in most cases.
crime against humanity of an unfathomable scale—the millennia-old marginalization, subjugation, and, yes, extermination of women as a result of the masculine prerogative poses significant challenges to anyone attempting to quantify and qualify the crime. And let us be clear about the terms employed by Wittig regarding this matter. She states in *The Straight Mind*:

One must understand that men are not born with a faculty for the universal and that women are not reduced at birth to the particular. The universal has been, and is continually, at every moment, appropriated by men. It does not happen, it must be done. It is an act, a *criminal* act, perpetrated by one class against another. It is an act carried out at the level of concepts, philosophy, politics. (34, my emphasis)

For both Adorno and Wittig, the representation of such crimes in art and literature has been characterized by aporetic irresolvable impasses at the level of language. In other words, the scope of the respective crimes is so great as to challenge human conceptualization—and therefore articulation—of the offenses. To work through this challenge, Wittig embarks in fiction and theory on a trans-historical and trans-cultural engagement with sites and root sources of heteropatriarchal oppression.

The similarities between Adorno and Wittig likely end here, for where Adorno observes in the Shoah the obliteration of the very concept of an autonomous subject, Wittig raises from the ashes of patriarchy’s scorched earth policy toward women a theorized subject of a cognitive practice eccentric to heteropatriarchy. Significantly, the aporetic mission of liberating language beyond gender oppression is proactively and provocatively enacted by Wittig without the imperative that one must believe in the actual success of her undertaking. Wittig’s goal, therefore, is oriented not toward some utopia, but rather toward an unprecedented consciousness raising vis-à-vis language and the Lacanian symbolic order, the importance of which can be measured by Gloria
Steinem’s observation: “I always felt Wittig spoke from a conceptual level when it came to gender oppression in language, and from an American feminist perspective, what she had to say about it was revolutionary” (Interview).

For this mission, new forms and organizations of radical social transformation had to be theorized and asserted—not to formulate a global systematic theory maintaining everything in place through perpetual substitution, but rather to analyze and destroy the very mechanisms of power that sustain this particular grand narrative. Such is the task accomplished in the fictional universe of *Les guérillères*, where discursive sites and myths of androcentric culture are poetically disassembled and reformed. In this work, narrative and theory intimately intertwine as Wittig apprehends struggle and its forms, objectives, and means of processes in terms of logic free of the sterilizing and iterative constraints of the dialectical binarism. *Les guérillères* thus operates as a Trojan Horse of revolutionary change on theoretical and imaginative levels—a sort of war machine whose goal is, as Wittig puts it, “to pulverize the old forms and formal conventions […] [and to] sap and blow out the ground where it [is] planted” (*Straight* 69).

The corpus of Wittig’s œuvre represents a rare mingling of theory, fiction, and commitment to civil protest, the evolution of which is informed by her extensive engagement with past and present texts and sites of discourse. Cutting across standard categories of literary movements, Wittig’s fiction presents a confluence of sometimes contradictory trends ranging from Simone de Beauvoir’s conception of personally committed literature to Nathalie Sarraute’s *nouveau roman* exercises in ethereal, disembodied explorations of psychological interaction through language (Hewitt 134). In both her theory and fiction, Wittig undertakes a postmodern feminist reworking of the
cultural heritage of Western heteropatriarchy by calling upon a wide breadth of discursive and rhetorical traditions. This task is made uniquely possible by the May 68 turn in French theory which postulates an epochal *coupure*—a break with the established doxa and episteme—accompanied by models of new postmodern theory and politics resulting from the liberation of French intellectuals from the moral burden of communist ideology weighing so heavily on them since the Second World War.

The implications of May 68 to the development of French theory must be considered in the historical context of what looked like a worldwide revolutionary movement at the time. Nations as diverse as Japan, Mexico, Italy, Czechoslovakia, and Vietnam were all experiencing the winds of revolution to varying degrees, and the explosion of the events in Paris seemingly confirmed that the status quo was under significant attack and that the continuum of domination would soon rupture (Kellner, Foreword xvii). In France, differences between the Old Left and the New Left evolved to the point of irreconcilability, with the alienation between the two aggravated by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the Algerian War for Independence, the Vietnam War, 

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97 I choose to qualify Wittig’s work as postmodernist with the caveat that the term remains problematic. Putting aside the grand debate between Habermas and Lyotard in which postmodernism is valorized in very different ways and from opposing theoretical perspectives, I defer to Andreas Huyssen’s assessment of postmodernism as “search[ing] for a viable modern tradition apart […] from the canon of traditional modernism” (qtd. in Weir 195) and to David Weir’s discussion of the ways in which the postmodernist detachment of cultural forms from their historical roots allows for radically new interpretations of the forms (195). Wittig’s work certainly operates within the parameters suggested by Huyssen and Weir even though much of her theoretical argument and literary experimentation in form stems from a late modernist perspective.

98 Bruno Groppo describes the international implications of May 68 in the following terms: “Evénement exceptionnel dans une année qui le fut tout autant même au-delà des frontières françaises, mai 68 nous apparaît ainsi sous une double lumière: d’une part, comme un phénomène spécifique français, qui n’a pas eu d’équivalent ailleurs et qui ne peut s’expliquer que dans le contexte de la société française de l’époque; de l’autre, comme un moment, certes particulièrement important et significatif, d’un phénomène plus large, c’est-à-dire d’une vague internationale de protestation politique et sociale. Il s’inscrit donc dans un contexte à la fois national et international” (16).
and the identity crises plaguing social democracy and communism (Horn 134). May 68 therefore asserts itself as an interstitial matrix of revolutionary change provoked at once by the guardians of the old socialist tradition and the harbingers of a new kind of opposition. Among the politicized French activists coming of age in the 1960s, these schisms contributed to the loss of faith in social democracy as a vehicle for political change.\textsuperscript{99} When it was decided by the \textit{soixante-huitards} that the system of domination consisting of the Gaullist order in France, the communist parties, the model of Soviet Marxism, and the imperialist brand of American consumerism was bankrupt and incapable of promoting genuine social and political revolution, opposition from the margins of society rose to the fore in a plethora of new social movements (Kellner, Foreword xviii).

This opposition would give rise to expanded and diversified models of theoretical discourse, resulting in the occasional epiphany among established intellectuals of the old guard. Upon joining the \textit{Mouvement de libération des femmes} (MLF) founded by Wittig and several other feminist activists in 1970, for example, Simone de Beauvoir explains the evolution in her thinking regarding the role of feminists and why she had eschewed the term: “[In 1949] I said that I was not a feminist because I believed that the problems of women would resolve themselves automatically in the context of socialist development” (qtd. in Schwarzer 78).\textsuperscript{100} This realization, combined with her “appreciation of the radical post-1968 materialist feminist orientation” of the early MLF,

\textsuperscript{99} In the run-up to May 68, France had experienced the almost total disappearance of social democracy as an electoral force (Horn 163).

\textsuperscript{100} See my Introduction for more on what Christine Delphy calls the “principal enemy,” i.e., the pervasive understanding that Marxist revolution would automatically resolve sites of social tension between the sexes, races, etc.
eventually led Beauvoir to self-identify as a feminist (Tidd 77). Beauvoir’s attitude is illustrative of the post-May 68 realization that socialist revolution could no longer be viewed as a historical imperative and that it would in any case fail to resolve social inequities rooted in, among other things, sexism. Alternative voices from the margins, until then excluded from the field of political analysis, would inexorably take center stage once traditional Western Marxist and phenomenological forms of analysis were transcended (Foucault, *Power* 116). In Modern Revolutionary Writing, for example, the conventional focus on the constituent individual and the play of superstructures and infrastructures—which had always resulted in a glossing over of the understanding of the constitution of the subject within a historical framework (Wittig, *Straight* 17 and Foucault, *Power* 117)—cedes to a chorus of marginalized voices in a dynamic Michel de Certeau calls “la prise de parole.” Similarly, a proliferation of new sites of discourse and a penchant for pluralism and deliberation engender a “process of democratization of debate” characteristic of the May 68 narrative (Horn 162), of which Wittig’s *Les guérillères* is emblematic.

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101 Beauvoir’s involvement as founding editor-in-chief of the 1977 review *Questions Féministes* demonstrates her commitment to the advancement of radical feminist discourse in France. However, it also led to the schism between Wittig and other radical political lesbians who were ostracized and eventually pushed out of “mainstream” feminist discourse over disagreements about the relationship among lesbianism, heterosexuality, and feminism.

102 Michel de Certeau describes this dynamic in the following terms: “Something happened to us. Something began to stir in us. Emerging from who knows where, […], becoming ours but no longer being the muffled noise of our solitude, voices that had never been heard began to change us. […] From this something unheard of was produced: we began to speak. It seemed as if it were the first time. From everywhere emerged the treasures, either aslumber or tacit, of forever unspoken experiences. At the same time that previously self-assured discourses faded away and the ‘authorities’ were reduced to silence, from existences melted and suddenly awoke into a prolific morning.” (qtd. in Horn 217)
When it comes to language, the overriding mission of Wittig’s work as a feminist theorist and as a writer of fiction is to universalize each point of view through a total “renversement” of the symbolic order (Wittig, Straight 75). To this end, the feminist manifesto “For a Women’s Liberation Movement,” which Wittig wrote and distributed at the first action of what was to be called in France the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (Shaktini, On Monique 16), challenges the prerogative of the white male point of view as the universal center of this symbolic order:

Like racism, sexism is so well implanted in the ruling class ideology that only a radical seizing of power can destroy it—a political takeover to represent, in our turn, our interest as being the universal interest. That is necessary for the first phase, the end goal of all seizure of power by the people being an abolition of domination in general. Our interest is that of the people. We are the people. (qtd. in Shaktini, On Monique 22).

Like other political and theoretical debate surrounding the May 68 period, Wittig’s line of thinking—or plan of attack—responds to Karl Marx on several levels. In her Introduction to On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays, Namascar Shaktini provides a useful outline of this strategy as it relates to a Marxist materialist perspective: Wittig first refutes Marx’s claim in the German Ideology that the family structure, along with the attendant sexual division of labor, is “natural.” She then

103 As previously mentioned, serious discussion of politics, philosophy, and theory in France is almost always filtered through a Marxian lens in the years surrounding May 68. In the context of feminist discourse, Namascar Shaktini explains: “In France, where intellectuals knew Marxist theory and people were more politicized than in the United States, the ‘woman question’ couldn’t be dealt with as an ahistorical single issue. To introduce it into the movement of 1970, it had to be integrated by a historical, theoretical analysis that took as its point of departure Marxist assumptions. Wittig did this.” (On Monique, 16)
counters Frederick Engel’s assertion that “man is the bourgeois, woman is the proletarian” by arguing that unlike the proletarian, women are not free to sell their labor on the market because their principal responsibility is domestic work and child-rearing. Finally, Wittig builds upon Simone de Beauvoir’s challenge to essentialist notions of “Woman” by arguing women are a political class rather than a natural one (Shaktini, Introduction 1-6). In the present discussion I will expound upon this overview as it relates to specific aspects of Wittig’s theory and to the mechanisms and tasks of the narrative aspects of Les guérillères. My approach will consider Wittig’s theoretical essays compiled in The Straight Mind in tandem with Les guérillères as texts that concern political practices of freedom and human association in the specific context of May 68.

A New Historicist approach to Wittig’s theory and fiction calls for an understanding of the institutions and social practices to which her work responds. In the domains of the economy, family, and rules of society, discrimination against women remains broadly inscribed into French law of the 1960s: the coveted Certificat d’Aptitude Professionnelle, which confirms completion of professional training required for job advancement in many fields, is reserved for men, and the overall disparity in salary between men and women hovers at 36 percent—a discrepancy which is curiously augmented in the wake of the Grenelle Accords of May 68 (Shaktini, On Monique 29). Until 1965, French women are denied the right to work outside the home unless they have a husband’s permission, and they have no legal control over their reproductive lives. In a larger historical context, French women receive the right to vote only after World War II,104 and Swiss women not until 1971. Such is the heteropatriarchal landscape in

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104 Under Charles de Gaulle’s provisional government, women received the right to participate in elections in 1944, but they did not have the opportunity to exercise their vote until the following year.
which Wittig operates as a theorist and writer. Considering the prevalence of Marxist discourse in this context, it is small wonder she engages with Marx’s notion of overturning old forms of society in order to assert a new set of interests in a revolutionary movement toward universalism. To this point, Marx argues:

> [E]very class which is struggling for mastery, even when its domination, as is the case with the proletariat, postulates the abolition of the old form of society in its entirety and of domination itself, must first conquer for itself political power in order to represent its interest in turn as the general interest, which is the first moment it is forced to do.” (54)

This statement by Marx is the foundational point of departure for Wittig’s argument. However, she diverges from and builds upon Marx’s understanding of the main conflict of interest as being between the (male) proletariat and the (male) capitalist by conceptualizing an unprecedented theoretical space that establishes women as a class in the overall formulation.

This reconceptualization must be prosecuted at the epistemological level—a mission made possible by new, radical theoretical perspectives and by literature, Wittig’s chosen site of action residing within the Marxian superstructure. On the role of literature, she states:

> [T]here is room for so-called minority writers to enter the privileged (battle) field of literature, where attempts at constitution of the subject confront each other. […]. Since Proust, the subject has never been the same, for throughout Remembrance of Things Past he made the ‘homosexual’ the axis of categorization from which to universalize. The minority subject is not self-centered as is the straight subject. Its extension into space could be described as being like Pascal’s circle, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. […]. [W]hen the text is read, [a constant shifting] produces an effect comparable to what I call an out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye perception; the text works through fracturing. Word by word, the text bears the mark of ‘estrangement’ […]". (Straight 61-62)
For Wittig, a materialist, an epistemological revolution is necessary to universalize the particular, to destabilize the very touchstones around which human knowledge is constructed: mere consciousness of oppression is not enough to combat oppression.105

The revolution Wittig theorizes will take place only if it is an epistemological one, necessitating a “whole conceptual reevaluation of the social world, its whole reorganization with new concepts, from the point of view of oppression” (Wittig, Straight 18). The force of Wittig’s work stems from the way she reimagines, fragments, and blasts open discursive traditions from a lesbian point of view. This conceptual reevaluation can only begin once it is understood that the minority subject is always displaced by the straight subject from the foundational discursive center (“The minority subject is not self-centered”). For Wittig, literature is the hallowed arena of combat where whole epistemologies can be displaced, unsettled, and shattered (“the text works through fracturing”) so as to mobilize a re-questioning of methods, limits, origins, and nature of human knowledge itself.

As Wittig explains, her goal of universalizing the particular draws inspiration from Marx and Proust; such efforts are therefore not new per se. However, what sets her work apart from that of her predecessors and allows it to be situated with Modern Revolutionary Writing is an evolving arsenal of revolutionary tactics in literary

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105 In “One Is Not Born a Woman,” Wittig elaborates on the notion that acknowledging oppression is but the first step to asserting oneself against it as a subject. She argues, “For once one has acknowledged oppression, one needs to know and experience the fact that one can constitute oneself as a subject (as opposed to as an object of oppression), that one can become someone in spite of oppression, that one has one’s identity. There is no possible fight for someone deprived of an identity, no internal motivation for fighting, since although I can fight only with others, first I fight for myself” (Straight 16). By affirming new horizons for identity formation within an alienated language and from the position of subjugated knowledges, Wittig’s literary attack on androcentric discourse is a sine qua non—a fundamental point of departure—from which to engage in this struggle.
production which did not exist in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wittig alludes to one of the most important of these tactics by mentioning “estrangement”—a direct reference to Bertolt Brecht’s theory of *Verfremdungseffekt*. According to Brecht, this technique seeks to:

>[C]ommunicat[e] in a dialectical, non-illusionist and non-linear manner, declaring its own artifice as it hope[s] also to reveal the workings of ideology. […]. Alienating an event or character means first of all stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them. (qtd. in Brooker 191)

To foster a sense of critical distancing, the technique of Brecht’s “Epic Theatre” employs tactics such as the direct intervention of actors in the dialogue, exotic settings, harsh lighting, songs that comment on or contradict the action, members of the cast mingling with the audience, and informational placards, among others. For Brecht, this new “epic” style exposes the internal tasks of production in order to promote an alternative to the “tenets of Aristotelian drama [which] necessitat[e] the plotting of the hero into situations where he [reveals] his innermost being” (Brooker 187). Similar to a building constructed with its pipes and foundations exposed as alien yet privileged components to its overall functionality and aesthetics, Brecht’s dramas are turned inside out to demonstrate the impermanence of both subjective identity (i.e., “innermost being”) and language, resulting in an exercise of destabilization which Wittig readily adapts to her writing.

Exposing *à la* Brecht the very mechanisms that allow the Straight Mind to operate—mechanisms so ancient they are no longer visible to the naked eye—Wittig

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106 Since the term *Verfremdungseffekt* was first introduced to English speaking audiences it has posed problems for translators. Some choose to retain the German word, whereas Fredric Jameson refers to the theory as the V-effekt (which he describes as being “an estrangement which asks to be further estranged […] [which] must take off from the numbness and familiarity of everyday life […]”) (*Brecht* 84). I will use “alienation” and “estrangement” interchangeably with the caveat that these terms may remain problematic.
provokes a critical distancing or alienation from a priori understandings of the grand narrative as a natural ordering of society. Instead, this alienation shows how “straight society is based on the necessity of the different/other at every level [and how] it cannot work economically, symbolically, linguistically, or politically without this concept” (Straight 28-29). The necessity of the different/other is, according to Wittig, an ontological one for the whole conglomerate of sciences and disciplines of the Straight Mind” (Straight 29). Today we see evidence of the “science” of the Straight Mind in political debates taking place everyday across the globe, especially in light of polemics over issues surrounding same-sex marriage, adoption by same-sex couples or by single heterosexuals who do not “fit” the heteronormative dictate that children should be raised by a father and a mother, and women’s access to contraception. Thirty-four years after Wittig premonitorily implicates psychoanalysis as an official “science” of validation for the social contract of heterosexuality, Dany Nobus observes the ways in which the same dynamic continues to frame public policy debates:

Emboldened by Jacques Lacan’s emphasis on the Name-of-the-Father as the stabilizing principle of the symbolic order, psychoanalysts in Europe have recently resurrected this theme in order to take issue with explicit changes in public policy making and more insidious modifications in social living conditions. In arguing for the maintenance of the symbolic father function, against alternative kinship patterns, psychoanalysts have thereby echoed the voices of neo-conservative, right-wing ideologists in

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107 In 1977 Roland Barthes echoes Wittig’s argument by linking psychoanalysis to the heteronormative qualification of the married couple as the sole legitimate foundation for love. Barthes observes, “Il y a une normalité du sentiment amoureux dans la psychanalyse qui est en fait la revendication du couple, du couple marié même” (“Entretien” 403).

108 I am grateful to Didier Eribon for bringing to my attention the fact that Wittig should be acknowledged as one of the first theorists to implicate psychoanalysis as a site of heteronormative discourse. He observes: “La manière dont Wittig établit un lien direct entre le contrat psychanalytique et le contrat hétérosexuel me semble à la fois exemplaire et prémonitoire” (“A Propos”).
their campaign for the restoration of the nuclear family. (“Symptoms” 182) Nobus’ observations is testament to the fait accompli of the New Philosophers who, as a 1977 article from The Economist points out, advanced (to the glee of Giscard d’Estaing and the government majority in France) the notion of “the master,’ which stands for power, the system, the state—and by logical extension, the world” (54). Like the Lacanian nom-du-Père, there is no escaping the symbolic master of the New Philosophers.

Irony, hyperbole, and derision comprise an important part of the rhetorical arsenal Wittig uses to expose the mechanisms of power mobilizing the Straight Mind. These specific tropes reflect the subversive rhetorical valence of May 68 discourse as it was adopted from the Dutch Provo Movement. The impact of the Provos on the creative forces behind the May 68 revolution cannot be overstated. Founded by Robert Jasper Grootveld in May 1965, the Provos sought to incite violent responses from authorities using non-violent bait through the “encounter of art and politics” (Watson 5). Combining non-violence with hyperbole, irony and absurd humor to provoke the authorities, the Provos exerted a tremendous influence on youth movements across national borders. The tenets of the Provo Movement were further imparted to the striking soixante-huitards

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109 Dany Nobus, professor of psychology and psychoanalysis at Brunel University, has written extensively on the different ways in which Lacanian psychoanalysis influences political and social policy throughout Europe.

110 In the foreword to his The Revolution of Everyday Life, Raoul Vaneigem recounts the course of events leading to the dissemination of the Provo Movement’s “mission statement” in France: This statement, a polemical treatise initially rejected by the Gallimard publishing house, was featured in the literary supplement of Le Figaro in an article decrying the Provos’ influence in Amsterdam. This critique generated a firestorm among young readers in Paris, leading Gallimard editor Raymond Queneau to reconsider the statement for publication (Vaneigem, Revolution 14), thus ensuring broad dissemination of the Provos’ theories and techniques among the French public.
by Dutch activists who made their way to Paris in the early days of the May 68 strikes (Groppo 20). In his *Nous l’avons tant aimée, la révolution*, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the quintessential student revolutionary of May 68, devotes an entire chapter to the Provos and their influence on the students involved in the May 68 strikes (49-58). The rich significance of the Provo Movement to May 68 is located in what Gerd-Rainer Horn calls “the spiritual and organizational bridge—that missing link—between the countercultural and the openly political phase of the 1960s (42). The Provos personified the creative unity of art and politics, which allows us to pinpoint “the moment when the combined forces of these cultural and generational revolts turned into an openly political revolt” (Horn 42). The mixing of art and politics is nothing new, of course. Brecht’s epic theater deals explicitly and didactically with political revolution too, yet the Provo Movement brings a wide breadth of art, street theater, and cultural experimentation into the service of the progressive cause of the baby boomer generation in a specifically irreverent and ludic fashion. In *Les guérillères*, Wittig combines irony, humor, and irreverence with the Brechtian tactic of estrangement in order to lay bare the very practice of discursive production as well as the instability inherent to identity and language.

The use of irony has resulted in misreadings of Wittig’s work. In her derisive opposition to structuralist thinking, for example, Wittig calls into question notions of universal patterns in (discursive) systems of organization, of signifying systems having no origin, of our inhabiting a pre-existing structure of *langue* which permits us to engage in *parole*, and of “language speaking us.” Because structuralist thinking escapes the control of consciousness, Wittig understands it to be a normative discourse of political oppression which transcends culture and forecloses the possibility of human agency.
Unlike structuralist thinkers, the *guérillères* trace diachronic accounts of change and development in discourse, necessitating a resurrection of the author, reader, and history. Wittig employs Brecht’s estrangement effect to blast apart the entire structuralist theory of language in order to allow for an alternative discursive cosmic bang to take place. Of course, this theoretical and figurative tactic has resulted in accusations of Wittig being a humanist, a throwback to the dead-end logic of Enlightenment thinkers. Judith Butler, for example, failed to capture the ironic dimension to Wittig’s work by endowing Wittig’s lesbian with strong Cartesian connotations as a “cognitive subject”:

> In her defense of the ‘cognitive subject,’ Wittig appears to have no metaphysical quarrel with hegemonic modes of signification or representation; indeed, the subject, with its attribute of self-determination, appears to be the rehabilitation of the agent of existential choice under the name of the lesbian. (*Gender* 19)

And Rosi Braidotti argues that Wittig, along with other “anti-sexual difference feminists,” advances the argument for a “beyond gender” or “post-gender” subjectivity in order to revive the “metaphysics of the eternal feminine” (“Feminism” 53). Braidotti goes as far as to qualify Wittig as “a humanist who is still caught in the metaphysics of substance” (*Metamorphoses* 102). Whereas Butler subsequently corrected her misreading of Wittig’s work, her initial assessment, along with that of others, failed to recognize irony as a privileged tool of estrangement in Wittig’s creative process. They also ignored the conceptual inventiveness and radical import of Wittig’s theory inscribed in *Les guérillères*, where the lesbian concept—as subject of a cognitive practice that enables the reconceptualization of the social and of knowledge itself from a position eccentric to heteropatriarchy—is figured in the practice of writing as consciousness of contradiction (*Lauretis* 57).
The dynamic of estrangement in *Les guérillères* is bolstered by the structural revolutions comprising the narrative, which are reinforced by the recurring appearance of large circles dividing the text. The reader is initiated into a non-linear, atemporal, dissonant journey which defines the factious and turbulent universe inhabited by the warriors. Abandoning prescribed systems of order plays an important part in the process of breaking from the past and also mirrors the organic fluidity of the May 68 revolution. The revolutionary force of the May strikers is often characterized by the rule of helter skelter due in part to the fact that a universal list of specific demands has never been produced, and no individual is known to have been appointed Director of events.\textsuperscript{111} The mainstream of the student movement is understood to have rejected the entire political/electoral strategy of the official parties of the left, while the communists identified the socialist strategy with a program of extensive nationalization, which the students in turn viewed to be a dangerous reinforcement of the bureaucratic state and corporate apparatus (Feenberg and Freedman, 148). In sum, alliances between the May 68 strikers must be viewed as problematic if not self-canceling. However, the absence of a global (i.e., normative) consensus also seems to have paved the way for a more expansive and organic movement, made evident by the graffitied slogan “Nous continuons la lutte!” appearing throughout the May 68 revolution at diverse sites ranging from factories to schools (Feenberg and Freedman, 166).

The *guérillères* appropriate and reinterpret this organic aspect of the May 68 movement from a perspective independent of heteropatriarchy. They do so by promoting

\textsuperscript{111} Whereas Daniel Cohn-Bendit is the most widely recognized of the speakers and agitators of the May 68 strikes, many others, such as Jacques Sauvageot and Alain Geismar, were engaged to a comparable degree. They were, however, equally dismissed by the labor syndicates. The point is no individual can claim the mantle of “leader” of the May 68 revolution.
the recurring catchphrase “Tout Geste Renversement” (205) and by emulating the pêle-mêle thrusts of crowds of all-female protesters from the past. Images of such crowds are admired by the warriors in faded, archived photographs of marches reminiscent of the mass gatherings of May 68:

Les manifestantes avancent en tenant toutes un livre dans une main levée,
Leur foule compacte déferle sur la place, rapide quoique sans violence,
portée par le mouvement interne qui lui impose sa masse. […] Malgré les perturbations que les mouvements particuliers font subir à l’ordre général, il n’y a pas de piétinements, il n’y a pas de cris […]. (53)

Over chaos reigns calm as the androcentric narrative of May 68 is turned inside-out, assigning universal ownership of the event to the guérillères. In yet another ironic representation of an important dimension of May 68, the all-women protesters hold high their individual books—evoking Chairman Mao’s Little Red Book read by so many student strikers—buoyantly progressing toward an uncertain yet promising future. The constant thrust of displacement is written into and propels the structural and thematic revolutionary movement of the narrative. Perpetual “delocalization” toward an elusive utopia—a benchmark topos in Modern Revolutionary Writing—makes subjecthood eccentric to the universe of heteropatriarchy possible.

Let us reflect for a moment on May 68 as a personal touchstone for Wittig, who actively participated in the revolution (Shaktini, On Monique 7) and saw her translation of Herbert Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man published just as the May events exploded onto the scene.112 Even though the May 68 revolution is not mentioned *per se* in *Les

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112 The assertion that Marcuse’s work is part of the root cause of the student strikes in Paris has been traced by Kristin Ross to Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut’s *La Pensée 68*. In their assessment, Ross shows, the common link established between the writings of Marcuse and the May events is based upon “the most vague chronological ‘simultaneity’” (*May 191*). In fact, Daniel Cohn-Bendit is quoted as saying, “People wanted to blame Marcuse as our mentor: that’s a joke. Not one of us had read Marcuse” (Ross, *May 191*). However, Wittig’s translation of Marcuse’s book would enjoy tremendous popularity in Paris...
guérillères, it serves as an ever-present palimpsest to the narrative. However, the absence of direct reference to the May events does not equate to a “travail du deuil” for what is frequently considered a failed revolution. If there is a veil of mourning enshrouding Wittig’s warriors, it serves to remind them of the solidarity and suffering through which they will emerge as subjects of freedom (Butler, Precarious 110). Capable, fierce, and determined, the warriors of Les guérillères are in no need of May 68 as a blueprint for bolstering their revolutionary aspirations. The historic marker resides—silently efficient—in the realm of paralepsis, under erasure as a dynamic point of reference.

The rhetorical trope of the paralepsis also allows for a critical rehabilitation of the ways in which women have been broadly written out of the May 68 narrative. Much of the lore of May 68 revolves around the notion of shared discourse untethered from hierarchical divisions of age, gender, profession, etc. Yet the general post-revolutionary account rewrites an important facet of this narrative pertaining to women. Gerd-Rainer Horn explains:

Much has been written about the persistence of male chauvinism within the French Left. And it is clearly symptomatic of this particular facet of gender relations that not a single internationally known spokesperson or ‘leader’ of the 1968 movement was a woman. By contrast, pictorial evidence is overwhelming that activists in faculties and streets were to an equal extent represented by both sexes. (217-18)

Horn’s assessment is borne out by Namascar Shaktini’s personal recollection of the day she and seventeen other women, including Monique Wittig, organized the first French demonstration about women’s oppression at the new leftist campus of the University of Vincennes:

after May, selling 350,000 copies in June and July of 1968, 500 of which were sold each day at the Drugstore Saint-Germain alone (Ross, May 193).
At first, we were greeted by about two hundred males chanting à poil à poil! (strip, strip!). And we had great difficulty getting the crowd of young men to leave so we could meet with women students. The idea of women meeting without men was new in France. Finally, after much loud discussion where we were often shouted down, a tall black activist stood up and said he supported our attempts to meet among ourselves, and when he walked out, most of the other men followed. But a handful of white male leftists refused to leave, insisting on giving unsolicited advice about our liberation as we were trying to meet with the small number of women students attending. [...] At this first demonstration at Vincennes, the nous of Wittig’s text became in reality a political subject. [We] activists were photographed at the May 1970 demonstration at Vincennes. (“Introduction” 15-16)

I would like to situate the last lines of Horn’s and Shaktini’s accounts with a quote apocryphally attributed to Winston Churchill: “History is written by the victors.” In deferring to victors as triumphant in their proper self-elevation, historicism’s view of the past often revolves around their narrative as enduring fact. According to Walter Benjamin, however, it is possible to correct, redeem and rehabilitate such assessments through a historical materialist consideration.113

Photographic documentation of the role of women in history, to which both Horn and Shaktini allude, is an important counter to the androcentric writing out of women from the narrative of revolution. It is not surprising therefore that the occurrence of photographic evidence of women participating in different acts of resistance and subversion is iterated throughout Les guérillères. In faded and crumpled photographs of the distant past, the warriors study images of women striking against factories (52), engaging in mass protests (53), and marching in victory bands (58). For the warriors, photography is a privileged site of documentation that belies the “truth” of patriarchal

113 Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” published in On the Concept of History informs much of my discussion as it relates to historical materialism.
history and unconceals—à la Heidegger, no doubt—the bias of historicism which views history from the fixed position of the present.

Returning to the question of identity and “truth,” related notions of stability are challenged in the years surrounding May 68 in a critical rehabilitation reflected throughout Modern Revolutionary Writing. Just three years before the 1969 publication of *Les guérillères*, Jacques Derrida’s ground-breaking paper at Johns Hopkins University titled “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” ushers in the era of what American critics call post-structuralism. What Derrida proposes in this critique of structuralism is an unprecedented state of meta-awareness concerning the *structurality* in language itself, whereby we understand “there [i]s no center, that the center [can]not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center ha[s] no natural site, that it [i]s not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions [come] into play” (*Writing* 197). This “deconstruction” of the center results in a world where “the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (*Writing* 197). The door is thus thrown open for an epistemological revolution in the way we apprehend and signify meaning—a phenomenon fully seized upon by the warriors in *Les guérillères*:

> Les déambulations sont cycliques et circulaires. Quels que soient les itinéraires, quels que soient les points de départ qu’elles choisissent, elles aboutissent à la même place. […] Le système est clos. […] Il est en même temps illimité, la juxtaposition des cercles qui vont s’élargissant figure toutes les révolutions possibles. C’est virtuellement la sphère infinie dont le centre est partout, la circonférence nulle part. (97)

This passage evokes both the Pascalian circle as well as the Derridean postulation that “there is no outside-text” (“Il n’y a pas de hors-texte”). The warriors of *Les guérillères* find themselves in a closed system without limit—like language, a constant movement of
differences and *différances* (“toutes les révolutions possibles”) in which there is no stable point (“le centre est partout, la circonférence nulle part”). With this realization come instability, ambiguity, and unlimited possibilities.

Derrida’s poststructuralist theory of deconstruction also reveals the ways in which the binary functions in relative and privative terms, defining the valued term exclusively through negation and opposition to the subordinate term. Wittig attacks this conceptual system from two angles: First, she de-*constructs* established notions of identity to illustrate the ambiguities and inconsistencies inherent to the binary, thereby exposing the instability of the categories of opposition upon which psychoanalysts, linguists, and anthropologists depend in order to reason and apprehend meaning. Secondly, she dialecticizes the very dialectic which traps the conflictual terms in a perpetual “revolutionary” movement of substitution. To dialecticize the dialectic, Wittig explains, is “to questio[n] it in relation to its terms or opposition as principles and also its functioning” (*Straight* 52); this meta-interrogation will invariably lead to the broader query: “[W]hat will […] happen to the question of humanness once all categories of others will be transferred onto the side of the One, of Being, of the Subject” (*Straight* 53). Wittig compels us to ponder what will change (in terms of politics, language, philosophy, etc.) when the terms have been shifted from one side of the binary. After all, if the Other substitutes itself for the One, will it not continue to keep under its control groups of oppressed people who would in turn become the Other of the ex-others, become by then the One, only to repeat the process ad infinitum (Wittig, *Straight* 53)?

It is with this specific point that Wittig takes greatest issue with proponents of identity politics. These individuals, she argues, seek “salvation […] in a tremendous
exaltation of what they call alterity under all of its forms: Jewish, Black, Red, Yellow, Female, Homosexual, Crazy” (Straight 56). To subscribe to identity politics is to perpetually reside in the “continuum [of] their reality, a continuum where abstraction is imposed upon materiality and […] shape[s] the body as well as the mind of those it oppresses” (Straight 58). The only way out of this cycle is to be found in the level of philosophy—in the abstract. Wittig explains:

For abstractly, in the order of reasoning, in the order of possibility and potentiality, in philosophy, the Other cannot essentially be different from the One, it is the Same, along the lines of what Voltaire called the Sameness (la “Mêmeté,” a neologism he coined [yet which was] never used in French). No thought of the Other or Thought of Difference should be possible for us, for ‘nothing human is alien’ to the One or to the Other. (Straight 56)

Voltaire’s notion of “mêmeté” is incorporated into the narrative and structural aspects of Les guérillères on a range of levels. The series of poems, for example, are interrupted by recurring lists of women’s names reflecting a breadth of nationalities from various periods throughout history. Adopted from literary, mythological, and historical figures, these names stand alone, freed of the patriarchal stamp of the surname, and equally privileged without title or hierarchy as particular sites of subjectivity signifying the universal Elles. On the level of poetics, the recurring lists of names have an incantatory effect similar to a ritual recitation or an oral delivery by a bard, functioning as another instance of mise-en-abîme: an epic within an epic (Ostrovsky, Constant 39).

In the following passage, characterized by a mingling of sarcasm with exceptional poetic beauty, Wittig incorporates Voltaire’s notion of mêmeté into an instance of didactic instruction for the warriors:

Hélène Myre passe entre les groupes avec des plateaux transparents. Des voix, des murmures sont perçus. [...] Hélène Myre […] présente en
passant des verres de sirop diversément colorés. On lui demande quel est le liquide bleu ou rouge, il est répondu que le liquide est le même quelle que soit sa couleur, sirupeux et sucré, les doigts qui s’y trempent sont poisseux et teints. A ce propos quelqu’une dit plaisamment, dis-moi quelle est ta couleur et je te dirai qui tu es. Des branches des arbres tombent des étoiles filantes qui passent du bleu au rouge à l’orange et s’éteignent brusquement. (77-78)

The concept of different colored liquids, each in its own glass and interspersed on transparent trays, functions as a captivating instance of personification whereby the transparent tray might be interpreted as the soul of humanity and each glass of colored liquid a body it inhabits. The image of sticky fingers dipping into sweet liquid evokes the vagina and the universal sameness of its “liquid” (i.e., what Wittig would later call “cyprine” in *Le Corps lesbien* in reference to the vaginal fluid generated by the female body as a result of sexual stimulation). Upon apprehending the universality—the *mêmeté*—uniting them, the warriors embrace a common humanity that transcends considerations of ethnicity, nationality, etc. In an inverted interpretation of the famous rallying cry of solidarity from May 68, “We are all German Jews; we are all foreigners,” one warrior sarcastically lapses into the old way of clinging to notions of alterity, calling attention to the fatuousness of such views: “Tell me which color is yours and I’ll tell you who you are.” This moment of utopic enlightenment arouses nature to respond in uncanny and celebratory ways with shooting stars darting from the trees.

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114 Wittig’s writing always works at the material level of language, and a few of her neologisms have resulted in changes in the French lexicon. Namascar Shaktini puts into context the important implications of Wittig’s neologism *cyprine* to both English and French: “Cyprine currently has no English equivalent. According to the *Grand Robert*, ‘cyprine’ (classified as ‘didactique’) entered the French language during the 1970s. The word is attributed to Monique Wittig: ‘Une agitation trouble l’écoulement de la cyprine eau fluide transparente.’ […] David Le Vay, the English translator [of *Les guérillères* and *Le Corps lesbian*], had recourse to words such as juice to translate the poetic French ‘cyprine,’ derived from Aphrodite’s surname. (*Semence*, of course, has an English equivalent: semen) I propose that we bring ‘cyprine’ into the English language” (“Introduction” 5).
If the important role irony plays in Wittig’s work is overlooked, her disapprobation of identity politics may seem at odds with her conceptualization of the lesbian identity. However, Wittig expressly inscribes lesbian identity permanently, ironically, and efficiently to symbolize the criticism of a totalizing feminist identity (Bourcier, “Wittig” 195). As Marie-Hélène Bourcier explains, “Irony enables [Wittig] to create a productive imbalance in relation to lesbian identity. […] Open[ing] a lesbian identity space by making the lesbian a radical site of de-nomination and dis-identification […] [is] a paradoxical gesture that can be useful for many identity politics […]” (“Wittig” 195). What Bourcier is getting at boils down to Wittig’s efforts to put (hetero)feminism and its fixed identity in crisis, for in the years following 1968 the focus of second-wave feminism in France was based on the point of view of heterosexual white, middle-class women. In valorizing difference which neglects variations of sexual identity as well as class and race between women, the notion of an all-encompassing identity of “Woman” as emancipating subject of sexual politics merely functions as another normatizing system of categorization (Bourcier, “Wittig” 196). With the advent of Wittig’s lesbian, French feminists were compelled to reconsider the gender and sex paradigm constituting their theoretical foundations.

The foreclosing cycle of alterity inherent to the dialectical binarism is attacked by Wittig from both philosophical and imaginative points of departure. As such, she theorizes from a poststructuralist de-constructive, materialist feminist position in her critique of heteropatriarchy and the role it plays in perpetuating political categories of

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115 In her Inessential Women, Elizabeth V. Spelman critiques Occidental feminists for generalizing from a white, middle-class experience, thus perpetuating the notion of an essential sameness among women. Similarly, bell hook’s Ain’t I a Woman is deeply critical of what hook calls the racism inherent in the thought of many white feminists who fail to address issues of race and class.
oppression through the *Straight Mind*. I emphasize the term “de-constructive” when speaking of Wittig’s work, for in advancing what she calls a radical lesbian concept, she theorizes the destabilization and ultimate destruction of the categories of gender and sex while calling into question and *expanding* the ways we apprehend these same terms. Like revolution, Wittig’s theory is both destructive and generative.

As far as notions of “truth” and the fixity of identity are concerned, Michel Foucault offers the following assessment of the hold totalitarian theories exert over us despite critical challenges to them. Ten years after Derrida’s famous critique of structuralism at Johns Hopkins University, Foucault observes:

For the last ten or fifteen years, [an] immense and proliferating criticizability of things, institutions, practices, and discourses [has occurred]; a sort of general feeling that the ground was crumbling beneath our feet, especially in places where it seemed most familiar, most solid, and closest [nearest] to us, to our bodies, to our everyday gestures. But alongside this crumbling and the astonishing efficacy of discontinuous, particular, and local critiques, the facts were also revealing something that could not, perhaps, have been foreseen from the outset: what might be called the inhibiting effect of totalitarian theories, or at least—what I mean is—all encompassing and global theories. Not that all-encompassing and global theories haven’t, in fairly constant fashion provided—and don’t continue to provide—tools that can be used at the local level; Marxism and psychoanalysis are living proof that they can. But they have, I think, provided tools to be used at the local level only when, and this is the real point, the theoretical unity of their discourse is, so to speak, suspended, or at least cut up, ripped up, torn to shreds, turned inside out, displaced, caricatured, dramatized, theatricalized, and so on. (“Society” 6)

Foucault argues (in a manner not dissimilar to Mireille Rosello in her discussion of declining the stereotype) that swimming in the waters of established discourse is a productive—indeed necessary—exercise as long as we handle with caution the theoretical unity of the discursive targets we have in our sights. Again, this boils down to
an exercise in meta-awareness, what Wittig calls “consciousness of oppression” (Shaktini, On Monique 4) as it relates to her opposition to the Straight Mind.

Foucault also articulates the ways in which post-structuralism has put on trial the whole of Enlightenment’s assumptions—notions of disembodied reason producing objective and accurate accounts of the world, of man’s common capacity to reason uniting him in human universality, of knowledge developing and flowing independently of power—are all blasted apart by the extinction of the Cartesian being. For Foucault, the subject who engages in disembodied knowledge gathering must be called into question as much as the discursive sites of knowledge he seeks to apprehend. The question of the subject must be attended to by creating a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subject (Foucault, “Subject” 4). This task closely mirrors Wittig’s own, although I suspect she would revise Foucault’s statement to “human beings are made objects.”

An additional comment by Foucault allows us to situate the work of Wittig within the periodization of Modern Revolutionary Writing. In relation to what he terms the insurrection of “subjugated knowledges” rooted in local critiques, Foucault states:

[…] the essentially local character of the critique […] indicates something of a sort of autonomous and noncentralized theoretical production, or in other words a theoretical production that does not need a visa from some common regime to establish its validity. […]. What has been happening for some time now […] is what we might call ‘returns of knowledge’ that makes this local critique possible. What I mean by ‘returns of knowledge’ is […] that beneath this whole thematic, through it and even within it, we have seen what might be called the insurrection of subjugated knowledges. When I say ‘subjugated knowledges,’ […] I am referring to historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or systematizations. Subjugated knowledges are, then, blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and the systemic ensembles, but were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their
existence by using, obviously enough, the tools of scholarship. ("Society" 6-7)

Foucault’s evaluation offers an important contextualization of the ways in which Les guérillères brings to the fore sites of “subjugated knowledges” by de-constructing heteropatriarchal discourse, which is of course part and parcel of the “functional coherences” or “systematizations” Foucault mentions. In yet another constructive by-product of Wittig’s de-constructive exercises, lost, untold, forgotten, and repressed histories from a gynocentric perspective are played off against the unitary theoretical instance of the Straight Mind, viewed by Wittig as a totalizing filterer of (non-legitimized) discourses organized into a hierarchy of “true” knowledge (Foucault, “Society” 9).

Foucault tells us that non-legitimized knowledge, or differential knowledge, owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it ("Society" 82). Opposition and contrast are therefore indispensable to eliciting the reappearance or resurfacing of discarded history. Five years before Derrida’s Glas thematically and structurally puts into dialogue readings of Hegel’s philosophical works with Jean Genet’s autobiographical writing, Wittig’s initial drafts of Les guérillères are structured in such a way that patriarchal sites of “knowledge,” ranging from Mao to Freud, are displayed on the right page in opposition to various “subjugated knowledges” prominently featured on the verso. Wittig explains:

A book is made of two sides, the page on the right and the page on the left that can be in a dialectical relation. In this case, the fold of the book, to the extent that it unites them, serves as a dialectical copula. The page on the left became for me the page where my own text could develop, and the page on the right became the page of history. Thus, each page had to be written in parallel but at the same time, each in conflict with the other on either side of the fold. ("Some Remarks" 39)
Not without irony, Wittig usurps for her own text the privileged position of the One in the Aristotelian binary while relegating heteropatriarchal history to the position of the Other. The end effect would be for the reader to pass from one language to another, from one referential universe to the other, as each page resignifies, retranslates, and reveals the arbitrariness of the “functional coherence” of the Straight Mind.

The representation of “disqualified knowledges” asserting themselves against “true” bodies of knowledge is a recurring topos in Les guérillères, as seen in the following passage—so richly emblematic of the Foucauldian genealogical project—in which stories from the Bible and patriarchal mythology are appropriated and rewritten:

Dans la légende de Sophie Ménade, il est question d’un verger planté d’arbres de toutes les couleurs. Une femme nue y marche. Son beau corps est noir et brillant. Ses cheveux sont des serpents fins et mobiles qui produisent une musique à chacun de ses mouvements. C’est la chevelure conseillère. On l’appelle ainsi parce qu’elle communique par la bouche de ses cent mille serpents avec la femme porteuse de la chevelure. Orphée, le serpent préféré de la femme qui marche dans le jardin, sans cesse lui conseille de manger du fruit de l’arbre du milieu du jardin. La femme goûte du fruit de chacun des arbres en demandant à Orphée le serpent comment reconnaître le bon. Il lui est répondu qu’il est étincelant, qu’à le regarder simplement on a la joie au cœur. Ou bien il lui est répondu que, dès qu’elle aura mangé le fruit, sa taille développera, elle grandira, ses pieds ne quitteront pas le sol tandis que son front touchera les étoiles. Et lui, Orphée et les cent mille serpents de sa chevelure s’étendront de part et d’autre de son visage, ils lui feront une couronne brillante, ses yeux deviendront pâles comme de s’lunes, elle aura la connaissance. [...] Sophie Ménade dit que la femme du verger aura la vraie connaissance du mythe solaire que tous les textes ont à dessein obscurci. [...]. Elles, à ces paroles, se mettent à danser, en frappant la terre de leurs pieds. Elles commencent une danse circulaire, en battant des mains, en faisant entendre un chant dont il ne sort pas une phrase logique. (72-73)

In this particular prose poem, several canonical tales are related and interwoven through a non-patriarchal lens: the myths of Medusa and Orpheus are conflated with the story of Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the topos of forbidden knowledge is re-written to signify
the eclipsing of patriarchy’s solar myths by the disqualified knowledge of moon religions ("her eyes will become pale like moons…she will have the true knowledge of the solar myth that all the books have deliberately obfuscated"). The occidental image of Eve is re-signified though a photographic-like negative of an intellectually curious and confident individual unashamed of her naked, glistening black skin. This figure is the reflective opposite of the meek and gullible Eve, the inferior Jungian anima plucked from the ribs of the white male, stupefied and humiliated by her desire to taste the knowledge denied her by patriarchy.

Each movement of the thousand serpents produces hypnotic music evoking Orpheus, himself transformed into the favored of all snakes, directing his mistress toward the garden’s Derridean center. The quest for new sites of knowledge beyond the bounds of patriarchal dictate is suggested at every level of the poem. The very name of the storyteller, Sophie Ménade, is replete with layers of signification, ranging from “sophia,” the Greek word for wisdom, to Maenads, companions to the wine-god Dionysus in his orgiastic wanderings. Sophie-Ménade thus signifies the comingling of newly legitimized knowledge with unbridled abandon made possible by the liberation from patriarchal thralldom. At the thought of such freedom, the warriors dance in a circular movement, intoning sounds which are incomprehensible in their newness. As these seemingly disparate canonical stories are interwoven and re-signified, time and location collapse, resulting in an explosion of the spatial and temporal continuum upon which patriarchy is ordered.

To attack the solemnity of histories, Foucault tells us it is necessary to break “from the great stories of continuity” (*Language* 152). Similarly, Walter Benjamin
defines revolution as a “tiger’s leap into the past” whereby the historian must “explode
the continuum of history” (*Concept* 12-13). He also states that “thinking involves not
only the movement of thoughts but also their zero-hour” (*Concept* 15). Wittig in turn
argues: “the symbolic order partakes of the same reality as the political and economic
order, [and] [t]here is a continuum in their reality” (*Straight* 58). In *Les guérillères*, the
whole of the established chronological continuum ordained by heteropatriarchy is
subverted by a “restarting” of time—a return to Benjamin’s “zero hour.” This materialist
approach is the only way to account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, and
domains of objects without having to make reference to a subject which is either
transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout
the course of history (Foucault, *Power* 117). To achieve this, Wittig rubs history against
the grains and blasts open the historical framework in which “heterosexuality is always
already there in all our mental categories” (*Straight* 43). Heterosexuality has indeed
already been there in our founding myths, religions, and authoritative (i.e.,
authoritarian) domains of science. In order to break from the mental categories
perpetuated by these discursive sites, the utopian narrative of *Les guérillères* occupies
alternative temporal and spatial points of reference in what constitutes “worlds of
possibility.”

As the tale of Sophie Ménade shows, a degree of (Derridean) *play* triggers a
shifting in time, space, and discursive registers, dislodging epistemological moorings by
calling into question “true” bodies of knowlede. Another instance of such play occurs
when the warriors destroy every type of material device linked to their past enslavement.
These objects—comprised of typewriters, irons, sewing machines, and countless other
items associated with traditional gender-based tasks—are reviled and cursed upon, shattered, and tossed into an ever-growing pile of rubbish. These tools represent the labor the guérillères were forced to contribute toward the creation of what Benjamin calls the “cultural treasures” of history’s victors. These treasures are splendid in their beauty, yet they only exist because of the “great geniuses who created [them] [and the toil of] the nameless drudgery of [their] contemporaries” (Benjamin, Concept 17). The rising mountain of the warriors’ discarded items bears an uncanny resemblance to Benjamin’s metaphor for progress in which he invokes Paul Klee’s Angelus Novus:

A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Concept 18)

Benjamin’s materialist positionality refuses to see history as a series of isolated events and allows him to see the vast array of cultural treasures from a perspective opposite that of Klee’s angel. Like Benjamin, Wittig considers things in their concatenation—in their movement through history—in order to unmask the genuine etiology of events. According to this perspective, only a dialectical materialist approach is able to reveal the toil and anguish that go into the making of cultural treasures. The guérillères construct a great monument from the trappings of their enslavement in remembrance of the suffering they endured over eons of patriarchal control. In doing so, they explode the androcentric narrative of history and commence a new one from point zero. The desecration of
material artifacts by the *guérillères* also represents an imaginative interpretation of the May 68 critique of consumerist society and the normative forces it exerts on the construction of social identity (see Introduction for my discussion on Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*).

Wittig is not the first to question fixed or essentialist notions of identity. However, what sets her apart from other feminists of the period is her theory—founded upon the latest models of material and radical feminist concepts such as the idea of “classes of sex”—which calls into question a fundamental point that had yet to be disputed by feminists: heterosexuality as a political regime as opposed to a classification of sexuality. Until then, feminism had considered the “patriarchy” an ideological system based on the domination of the class of men over the class of women (Turcotte viii-ix). But the categories themselves, “man” and “woman,” had not actually been questioned in the context of a binary constituted of unstable identitary elements. The innovation of Wittig’s work is rooted in this radical line of thinking made possible by the Derridean unmooring of the center of the symbolic order. What follows is a total conceptual revolution which allows for the creation of new modes of thinking through the destruction of existing categories—hence, once again, the de-constructive or generative dynamic of Wittig’s theory.

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116 More than any other feminist writer, Simone de Beauvoir heralded the groundbreaking theory concerning gender, subjectivity, and the overall condition of women. In her work titled *Le Deuxième Sexe* of 1949, Beauvoir distinguishes between sex and gender years before anyone else would (*Deuxième* II, 13). Her famous declaration, “On ne naît pas femme, on le devient” continues to resonate with theorists such as Judith Butler, who further clarifies the distinction in her article “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*.” Butler states that “sex is understood to be invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form that body acquires, the variable modes of that body’s acculturation” (35).
Wittig’s lesbian concept takes on its full theoretical valence in relation to the binary of man/woman. Similar to a contravariant functor in a mathematical equation, the term lesbian problematizes the terms “man” and “woman” because the latter two cannot exist without each other, yet the term lesbian exists by and for “woman” only. The introduction of the third theoretical term alters the conceptual system by irrevocably problematizing the dialectical foundation of heteropatriarchal identity. However, Wittig’s work is not about replacing the category of “woman” with “lesbian,” but about allowing lesbians to make use of their strategic position to flee from and ultimately destroy the heterosexual political and economic system (Turcotte x). Wittig provides crucial clarification of relevant terms:

Lesbianism is the only concept which I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, [...], a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or stay heterosexual. We are escapees from our class in the same way as the American runaway slaves were when escaping slavery and becoming free. For this is an absolute necessity: our survival demands that we contribute all our strength to the destruction of the class of women within which men appropriate women. This can be accomplished by the destruction of heterosexuality as a social system which is based on the oppression of women by men and which produces the doctrine of the difference between sexes to justify this oppression. (Straight 20; my emphasis)

Wittig’s political project should not be interpreted as a rote exercise of deconstruction meant to decenter the subject in yet another cycle of substitution; rather, it seeks to create an awareness of the objective and discursive conditions for freedom. Herein lies the crux of her de-constructive revolutionary mission: an awareness of possibilities of freedom can only come about through a project of aletheia,117 or rigorous “unconcealing” of the

117 Heidegger’s definition of aletheia evolved over time. However, an important dimension to his understanding of how an ontological “world” is disclosed—in which things are made intelligible as part of
specificity and tactics that allow for power to be exercised in oppressive ways. Wittig exposes the intricacies and hidden mechanisms of the normative conglomerate of sciences and disciplines that make possible the social system of the Straight Mind. This system, she argues, “cannot conceive of a culture, a society where heterosexuality would not order not only all human relationships but also its very production of concepts and all the processes which escape consciousness as well” (Straight 28). The broader challenge for Wittig is to advance the conception of a culture that is cognizant of, free of, and beyond the constitutive terms of the system—a culture made possible by the literary universes she creates.

Theory and reasoned argument are not enough to realize a goal of this scale. As Linda M. G. Zerilli observes, “To engage sexual difference as a question and condition of meaning, understanding, and action rather than truth or knowledge, […] is to engage not only one’s cognitive abilities but one’s capacity for imagination” (“Monique” 92). In Les guérillères imagination and theory unite as a powerful offensive to the heteropatriarchal prerogative, with battles waged in the warriors’ cognitive field of memory. In one instance, an amnesiatic warrior, stultified by eons of androcentric epistemology, is exhorted by a fellow combatant to remember pre-patriarchal times: “Tu dis qu’il n’y a pas de mots pour décrire ce temps, tu dis qu’il n’existe pas. Mais souviens-toi. Fais un

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a holistically structured background of meaning—centers on the concept of unconcealedness (cf. “Clarification and Transformation” in Parmenides). Most pertinent to the present discussion is Heidegger’s idea of deception, subterfuge, and treachery. For the Greeks, he argues, deception leads one to deviate from the “right way.” This right way leads to the unconcealed, whereas the off-way shows what may not be present on the right way, thus exchanging what is concealed by not being on the right way for the unconcealedness of something else (41). In other words, what hides also reveals. In a similar exercise, Wittig elucidates the ways in which the deceptive underpinning of the Straight Mind (i.e., the “off-way”) conceals the discursive and ideological mechanisms that make it possible to suppress subjugated knowledges that “deviate” from heteropatriarchal normativity. The very unconcealedness of these mechanisms leads to alternative revelations which help to disclose the ontological world.
effort pour te souvenir. Ou, à défaut, invente” (127). Wittig’s privileging of the imagination situates *Les guérillères* with May 68, itself “a revolution which contains revolutions ruled only by the imagination” (Freenberg and Freedman 38).

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*Les guérillères: A Revolutionary Exercise in Literary Form*

_Elles disent qu’elles partent de zéro._
_Elles disent que c’est un nouveau monde qui commence._

*Monique Wittig, Les guérillères*

I have thus far situated Wittig’s work with Modern Revolutionary Writing in three ways related to her interpretation of the revolutionary zeitgeist of May 68: through convergent and divergent sites of theoretical discourse, through the exceptional privileging of the imagination, and through the subversive reworking of literary tropes and topoi. From the perspective of literary poetics, another important consideration is the functionality of form used to turn a literary work into a “war machine.” Important literary works, according to Wittig, are like the Trojan Horse *at the time* they are produced: constructed of new forms in hostile territory, they first appear strange, nonconforming, unassimilable, yet they are ultimately adopted, only to betray old forms by working like a mine to blast them out (*Straight* 68-69). The consideration of the functionality of form is a foundational characteristic of modernism,\(^{118}\) and Wittig’s focus on the mechanics and

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\(^{118}\) Modernist considerations of form and functionality are dramatically brought to the fore in architecture. As a reaction against Cartesian geometric purity and balance meant to reflect a man-centered, orderly universe, XIXth century modernist architecture reflects the “devolution” of such Enlightenment-ordered schemes into the steel and glass formalism of function. Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* is one of the most captivating considerations of the role architectural form plays in the making and telling of society’s story. The “phantasmagoric” reflection of the people of Paris is captured and signified by the glass and steel walls of the XIXth century arcade, and the very form of the structure gives rise to and defines the consumerist society. Benjamin’s project reflects on the ways in which, during the XIXth century, the arcades served as a matrix for society’s unconscious fantasias, which rose to the psychic surface as dandies, prostitutes, socialites and workers intermingled in a decidedly unordered, non-Cartesian dance of “chaos.” The radical departure from the ordered architectural forms of the Enlightenment allowed
transformational efficacy of form firmly situates her writing in the modernist tradition on this level. However, Wittig’s writing is also very much a part of the postmodern development in literature vis-à-vis the ways in which she detaches cultural forms from their historical roots to make possible the free interpretation of those forms into new contexts (Weir 195). In other words, Wittig’s work is emblematic of the slippage that defies efforts to pigeonhole Modern Revolutionary Writing within defined definitions of modernism and postmodernism. With this caveat, my discussion now turns to the radical innovations in the mechanical aspects of Wittig’s work.

In Les guérillères, the protagonists known as Elles engage in a series of consciousness raising activities defined by non-hierarchical pluralism and deliberation. This process of democratization of debate provides discursive opportunities for the universalizing of the particular in an unprecedented literary exercise. I qualify Wittig’s endeavor as unprecedented because she is among the first to seize the opportunity presented by the anti-authoritarian discourse of May 68 to harness a diverse chorus of marginalized voices in order to re-signify them as powerful universalized subjects. This type of exercise did not happen, for instance, after the French Revolution despite the fact that women engaged in anti-authoritarian discourse throughout the Reign of Terror.\textsuperscript{119} The

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\textsuperscript{119} Hannah Arendt describes the momentary esprit de corps enjoyed by the citizens of Paris after 1789 in the following terms: “An enormous appetite for debate, for instruction, for mutual enlightenment and exchange of opinion, even if all these were to remain without immediate consequence on those in power, developed in the sections and societies” (On Revolution 246). Whereas women and some male supporters banded together during the French Revolution in an effort to effect positive change for women (women earned the right to receive inheritances and to sue for divorce, for example), the voice of dissent faded after Constance Pipelet offered her post-revolution assessment of the political and social condition of women in France (for a useful overview of proto-feminist discourse related to the French Revolution, see the chapter titled “Women and the Revolution” on the George Mason University web site Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution).
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protagonists of *Les guérillères* delight in detaching from historical roots, assuming, and re-signifying identities of prominent thinkers associated with both the French Revolution (“Olympe” 151, “Flora” 189) and May 68 (“Françoise Barthes” 104, “Philomèle Sarte” 75); in doing so, they manifest a subjective consciousness of belonging to a history and culture at once rooted in revolution yet also free of temporal constraints.

This awareness transforms the warriors into a “nouvelle espèce qui cherche un nouveau langage” (189) as they explore discursive possibilities through “active dialogism.” According to Bakhtin, active dialogism not only allows for infinite renewals of discursive meaning, but by definition eliminates any possibility for fixity in meaning:

> There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and boundless future). Even *past* meanings, that is those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) —they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). (*Speech Genres* 170)

The warriors strategically re-signify instances of “authoritative” dialogue from across the ages. Their consciousness takes form through polemical debates with powerful keepers of the patriarchal gates, which in turn transforms the warriors into expert combatants on the rhetorical level. For example, in response to Freud’s concept of the feminine libido being a “dark, unknowable continent,” they declare, “Elles ne disent pas que les vulves sont comme les soleils noirs dans la nuit éclatant” (81), to Lévi-Strauss they chide, “Il écrit que tu es monnaie d’échange, que tu es signe d’échange. Il écrit, troc, troc, possession acquisition des femmes et des marchandises. Mieux vaut pour toi compter tes tripes au soleil et râler, frappée de mort que de vivre une vie que quiconque peut s’approprier”
(166-67), and against Lacan’s logic they reason, “Elles n’utilisent pas pour parler de leurs sexes des hyperboles des métaphores” (93). Here, the warriors paraphrase words in such a way that two distinct perspectives or linguistic awarenesses are evident, resulting in what Bakhtin might refer to as a double-voiced utterance or dialogic. This dialogical engagement with key sites of patriarchal discourse (psychoanalysis and anthropology, in these cases) exposes the synthetic binary terms of hierarchical structures which perpetuate discursive violence; the bursting open of such structures impedes the perpetuation and replication of “History” by foreclosing on the reversal or substitution of its terms.

If Wittig focuses much of her attention on problematizing the oppositional quality of binarisms, it is because metaphysical dualism operates as a powerful guarantor of heteropatriarchy. Dating as far back as Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Wittig observes, “we owe to the Pythagorean school the division in the process of thought and therefore in the thought of Being. Then, instead of thinking in terms of unity, philosophers introduced duality in thought, in the process of reasoning” (*Straight* 49). To illustrate the point, let us consider a few of the binaries that occur in the form of a Pythagorean table of opposites in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*:

- One Many
- Same Different
- Male Female
- Right Left
- Limited Unlimited
- Rest Motion
- Straight Bent
- Light Dark
- Good Bad
- Square Oblong
The first pair of opposites, One/Many, establishes the fundamental principle of all things reflected in the Greek term *peiros* (‘limited’) and *apeiros* (‘unlimited’) (Genova 42-43), and these conceptual tools of division are turned into a means of creating metaphysical and moral differentiation in Being by Aristotle (Wittig, *Straight* 50). The terms become unquestionably abstract and axiological: the members on one side are “good,” and on the other “bad.” Furthermore, the “good” terms are characterized by definiteness of nature and structure, while the bad are indefinite, sprawling, and inchoate. In a complete departure from the context of monism as it was advanced in pre-Socratic Greece, this moral valorization of *male-defined* over *female-based* elements persists in the popular and intellectual imaginations of the West and is reinforced in the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan.

The Lacanian notion of the phallus as transcendental signifier in the symbolic order would not be possible without the dialectical field created by Plato and Aristotle, whereby the “male” is privileged with the “One,” the “light,” and the “good.” The male thus becomes, as Wittig points out, “the absolute being nondivided, divinity itself” which has since never been dislodged from his dominant position (*Straight* 51). Even at the apogee of the May 68 uprising, when the striking students were asserting themselves most aggressively against the established order of things, the Lacanian *nom du père* tenaciously clung to its prerogative power, personified by Lacan himself who retorted to a group of heckling students, “L’aspiration révolutionnaire, ça n’a qu’une chance, c’est d’aboutir, toujours, au discours du maître […]. Ce à quoi vous aspirez comme révolutionnaires, c’est à un maître. Vous l’aurez” (*Séminaire* 239-40). Lacan’s engagement with the students reveals both his inability to apprehend the possibility of a
system of ordering free of a (masculine) master as well as his unwillingness to accept that the long period during which “the ‘left’ intellectual spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice” (Foucault, *Power* 126) had come to an end. Let us compare Lacan to the “master” described by one warrior to another in *Les guérillères*:

> Elles disent, malédiction, c’est par la ruse qu’il t’a chassée du paradis de la terre, en rampant il s’est insinué auprès de toi, il t’a dérobée la passion de te connaître [...]. Il t’a faite esclave par la ruse, toi qui as été grande forte vaillante. Il t’a dérobé ton savoir, il a fermé ta mémoire à ce que tu as été, il a fait de toi celle qui n’est pas celle qui ne parle pas celle qui ne possède pas qui n’écrit pas. (158-59)

One might easily interpret this to be a caricature of Lacan, the universal master of truth, the creator of structures put in minds and made to appear natural, the robber of the Other’s speech, of her knowledge, and of her memory. In this instance, he is conflated—and not without irony—with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the personification of Satan himself, thereby elevated to superior rank among all other guardians of the Straight Mind.

The warriors of *Les guérillères* strive to remember how heteropatriarchal discourse came to dominate. In derisive and parodical terms, the fatuousness inherent to the “old system” of thinking and communication is discussed by the warriors in the following passage:

> Elles ne disent pas que les vulves dans leurs formes elliptiques sont à comparer aux soleils, aux planètes, aux galaxies inombrables. Elles ne disent pas que les mouvements giratoires sont comme les vulves. Elles ne disent pas que les vulves sont des formes premières qui comme telles décrivent le monde dans tout son espace, dans tout son mouvement. Elles ne créent pas dans leurs discours des figures conventionnelles à partir de ces symboles. (86)
The hyperbolic tone of the passage reduces the notion of the phallus as a transcendental signifier to a comical level: determined not to privilege the vulva as another “primary form” through which to “describe the world in all its space and movement,” the guérillères choose to remain free of language grounded in “conventional” symbols. The literary aspect of the passage is of particular interest as Wittig incorporates a sequence of illocutionary speech acts in the syntactic negative. The phrases beginning with “Elles ne disent pas” convey the inverse of the Austinian speech act, whereby the notion that “by saying something, we do something” is turned on its head, paradoxically resulting in the same dynamic of changing reality in accordance with the proposition of the declaration. By subverting linguistic codes, the guérillères dispossess man in general and Lacan in particular of control over the abstract, philosophical, and political discourses that give shape to the social body.

The recurring use of the negative “Elles ne disent pas” also functions as a critique of structuralism by escaping and foreclosing on the “universal” patriarchal system of langue (see Introduction for my discussion on “meiotic sanitization” of language). Once again employing irony as a rhetorical trope in Les guérillères, Wittig resignifies this violence through the exaggerated measures required of the warriors in order to advance new epistemological strategies and modes of subjectivization:

Elles disent qu’elles ont appris à compter sur leurs propres forces. Elles disent qu’elles savent ce qu’ensemble elles signifient. Elles disent, que celles qui revendiquent un langage nouveau apprennent d’abord la violence. Elles disent que celles qui veulent transformer le monde s’emparent avant tout des fusils. (120)

The hyperbolic image of language being re-appropriated and reorganized at the end of a rifle barrel reflects but one dimension of the warriors’ inchoate strategy for “transforming
the world.” In addition to physical warfare, the warriors seize language by speaking in the affirmative and by referencing ancient “feminaries” which extol their proper history, accomplishments, and bodies. Just as the warriors’ faded photographs were shown to do, these feminaries counter patriarchy’s androcentric appropriation of history by providing the warriors with “un fil conducteur pour lire un ensemble de légendes qu’elles ont trouvées” (61).

The allusion to feminaries is in fact Wittig’s ironic rewriting of the “ovularies” or “feminaries” that proliferated in the wake of May 68. In Les guérillères, however, once the feminaries are read, the warriors burn them in order to avoid replicating the discursive violence caused by the exclusionary mechanisms of heteropatriarchal discourse. The destruction of the feminaries also represents a symbolic break from the artificial continuity of patriarchal history. The stories conveyed in the feminaries, many of which are taken directly from canonical sites of patriarchal discourse, consist of received knowledge which has lost meaning to the warriors. The doxa of the patriarchal past must therefore be re-conceived and rewritten, or simply dismissed. For example, Hegel’s owl of Minerva, the ornithic keeper of patriarchal knowledge, has been relegated to the fogs of Lethe and derisively reduced to a “customary joke” by the warriors. Divested of all archetypes, memories, and doctrine, the bird is re-assigned to the goddess of love and re-signified as the labia of the vulva:

A propos des féminaires elles disent par exemple qu’elles ont oublié le sens d’une de leurs plaisanteries rituelles. Il s’agit de la phrase, c’est vers

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120 Feminaries became popular not only in post-May 68 France, but in other countries as well. As Sara Evans points out, “The feminist movement sought to create vehicles for public discussion that were controlled by women, created by women, and used by women. It was in this environment of putting feminism into print that women in Chapel Hill and Durham, North Carolina, in 1969, began to publish the Research Triangle Women’s Liberation Newsletter, later known as the Feminary” (“Feminary”).
le soir que l’oiseau de Vénus prend son vol. Il est écrit que les lèvres des vulves ont été comparées à des ailes d’oiseau, d’où le nom d’oiseau de Vénus qui leur a été donné. […] Cependant, c’est vers le soir que l’oiseau de Vénus prend son vol, elles disent qu’elles ne savent pas ce que ça veut dire. (60)

The tale of Jason and the Golden Fleece is equally baffling to the warriors, who remark: “La toison d’or est une des appellations qui a été donnée aux poils qui recouvrent le pubis. Quant aux quêtes des toisons d’or auxquelles certains mythes des temps anciens font allusion, elles disent qu’elles en savent peu de choses” (60-61). The pattern emerges: each feminary reduces important sites of patriarchal discourse to the anatomical site of the vulva: the Holy Grail (62), the eye of the Cyclops (15), and the lucky horseshoe of folklore are all rewritten to signify “une représentation vulvaire [qui ressemble aux] figures désignées sur les parois des grottes paléolithiques” (61). The hyperbolic exhortation of the metonymy which denies the whole by privileging the parts is abandoned with the destroyed feminaries, signifying the rejection of both the entire Lacanian symbolic system structured around the fragmented body as well as the particular brand of feminist discourse represented by proponents of écriture féminine.

The act of reading and burning the feminaries reveals the project of subjectivization to be in processu throughout the narrative, moving in tandem with the overall revolutionary cycle of the epic. Advancing beyond the feminaries, the warriors create a new project called “great register”:

Le grand registre est posé sur la table ouvert. A tout moment, l’une d’entre elles s’en approche et y écrit quelque chose. Il est difficile de le compulsier parce qu’il est rarement disponible. Même alors, il est inutile de l’ouvrir à la première page et d’y chercher un ordre de succession. […]. Les écritures si diverses qu’elles soient ont toutes un caractère commun. Il ne se passe pas de moment sans que l’une d’elles s’en approche pour y inscrire quelque chose. Ou alors c’est une lecture à haute voix d’un passage quelconque à laquelle il est procédé. (74-75)
If, as Leah D. Hewitt points out, “[i]dentity as process is a creative fiction that engenders and is engendered by discourse” (138), the entire canon of patriarchal history must be subverted in order for the guérillères to find their subjective voice in their own sites of discourse. The introduction of the great register marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of the warriors as speakers and knowers of their own histories, allowing them to cease being consumers of orthodoxy and to become creators of their own texts. In another instance of mise-en-abîme, both the great register and Les guérillères are characterized by the absence of a determinate succession of narrative order. The two texts reflect upon each other in a mirror-like fashion, rendering the linear progression of reading obsolete.

As mentioned, the narrative aspect of Les guérillères is comprised of fragments (discrete poems) contained in a fluid sequence of three revolutionary (or elliptical) movements, each separated by a thick black circle in the center of a white page. The very construction of this narrative system is shown in a Brechtian fashion to be bound (i.e., “contained”) by the recurring circles. Wittig explains, “The first circle corresponds to the emergence out of the labyrinth, out of the old culture; the second gives the manner of functioning of the text; the third is that of action, of overthrow, of the epic poem” (“Some Remarks” 41) — structural and thematic movements which evoke the three divisions of Dante’s journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise. Wittig’s brief synopsis of the thematic divisions bears out the observation: the emergence from the old culture is the utopic dream of universality and shared humanity, the functioning of the text is similar to purgatory where the warriors busy themselves purifying and cleansing their history, language, and universe of the vestiges of heteropatriarchy, and the vicious battle of revolution is hell-like. The Divine Comedy, one of the greatest epic poems known,
operates as a template to Wittig’s narrative on the level of structure and genre. However, Wittig subverts the linear progression of Dante the Pilgrim’s journey by constructing a flexible chronological ordering made possible by the revolutionary movement of the text’s structure. The cycle of poems comprising the narrative must be read from the end to the beginning (Wittig, “Some Remarks” 41) if one seeks an elliptical ordering of events; if read in this direction, the first section takes place after the last section, bringing the novel around full circle. However, I believe the narrative may also be approached from the beginning of the cycle of poems, or it may start at any point between: the circularity of the system invites unlimited access. Wittig’s goal to “make elles come as a shock to the reader” (“Some Remarks” 41) is not diminished by divergent approaches to the text. To the contrary, I believe individualized approaches to the text enhance the “disorientation” she seeks to provoke. In a broader context, the functionality of the narrative’s form embodies the notion of “le combat infini,” or Trotsky’s perpetual revolution, thereby countering the pundits’ “official” narrative of May 68 as a failed revolution.

In *The Straight Mind*, published twenty-three years after *Les guérillères*, Wittig elaborates on many of the questions touched upon in the fictional universe of the warriors. First and foremost, she identifies proponents of psychoanalysis as powerful *agents provocateurs* of the grand narrative of the Straight Mind:

> Who gave the psychoanalysts their knowledge? […]. In my opinion, there is no doubt that Lacan found in the Unconscious the structures he said he found there, since he had previously put them there. […]. [Psychoanalytic]

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121 This is not to say of course that Dante the Pilgrim’s journey is strictly linear. After all, he returns to Earth at the end of his peregrinations, and he is fully cognizant of the need to put his soul in circular harmony with the celestial spheres. The process of spiritual transformation for him is, however, strictly linear and must be tended to along the procession of his journey.
discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms. [...] Our refusal of the totalizing interpretation of psychoanalysis makes the theoreticians say that we neglect the symbolic dimension. (23-25)\textsuperscript{122}

Wittig’s critics are incorrect to assume she neglects the symbolic dimension: On the contrary, she takes persistent aim at exposing the power it wields. The Lacanian phallus of the symbolic order is thus rewritten and subverted through the warriors’ rejection of the metonymical reduction of the human body and the attendant fragmentation of society which, “naturally,” favors the One over the Other:

Elles disent qu’elles doivent rompre le dernier lien qui les rattache à une culture morte. Elles disent que tout symbole qui exalte le corps fragmenté est temporaire, doit disparaître. Jadis il en a été ainsi. Elles, corps intégrés premiers principaux, s’avancent en marchant ensemble dans un autre monde. (102)

Significantly, the guérillères do not speak of a new world. Instead, they envision an alternative world in which their bodies are integrated fully and in which people advance into the future, as a united human race. This is significant for two reasons: As previously discussed, the idea of creating a new world by usurping male hegemony and installing a feminocracy in its stead is anathema to Wittig. Though Les guérillères is replete with stories of conquest of men, the warriors only resort to violence in order to liberate themselves from patriarchal colonization of their bodies and minds. Incorporating violence with intellectual strikes against heteropatriarchy in her fiction, Wittig mounts an effective defense against the double-edged sword of physical aggression and misogynistic discourse.

\textsuperscript{122} Twelve years after Wittig first asserts: “In my opinion, there is no doubt that Lacan found in the Unconscious the structures he said he found there, since he had previously put them there” (Straight 23), Pierre Bourdieu offers a strikingly similar (if not more deferential) observation: “On peut se demander si le psychanalyste [i.e., Lacan] ne puise pas sans le savoir dans les régions impensées de son inconscient les instruments de pensée qu’il emploie pour penser l’inconscient” (“Domination” 4).
Another Brechtian tactic of alienation, whereby the reader is interpellated by a declaration of war appearing on the first page, suggests the continuation of unresolved business related to the May 68 revolution. This declaration—the first hint of the chaotic universe of the guérillères—harks back to the warning over the door of Dante’s Inferno: “Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch’entrate!” (“Abandon all hope ye who enter here!”). The words are written in bold capital letters occupying a full page, the back side of which is dominated by the first of three large, dark circles already discussed. The form of the circle is visible through the page and resembles a palimpsestic aegis over which the pronouncement is inscribed. The circle evokes several images ranging from the warrior’s shield, to the closed system of language, to the vulva. It also suggests the first of the three sites of Dante’s journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise, which parallel the evolutionary stages of the guérillères’ process of subjectivization.

The declaration of war is written in the form of a poem, the privileged literary complement to the epic. From the opening cycle of passages, the gauntlet is thrown down as the guérillères announce the overtaking of patriarchy’s most formidable literary genre: “ESPACEMENTS DORÉS LACUNES ILS SONT VUS LES DÉSERTS VERTS ON LES RÊVE ON LES PARLERA,” “MORTES,” “RÉVOLUTIONS,” “RENVERSEMENT” (7). This declaration of war, rising from the interstitial spaces of the unconscious (“on les rêve”), signals the discursive appropriation of patriarchy’s purview of space and time (“on les parlera”). This jarring induction into the text engenders a feeling of estrangement and positions the reader as both witness to and participant in the action. The narrative incites overthrow, subversion, and the ultimate

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123 I am referring to canto III, lines 7-9 of Dante’s Inferno.
destabilization of the patriarchal order as new discursive subjects are born: “LES PHÉNIX CÉLIBATAIRES ET DORÉS LIBRES ON ENTEND LEURS AILES DÉPLOYÉES” (7). The image of the phoenix taking flight suggests renewal in the face of destruction, the cyclical pattern of death and rebirth, and the eschatological transactions of language formation: “Elles disent qu’il n’y a pas de réalité avant que les mots les règles les règlements lui aient donné forme” (192). Destroying a symbolic system which never had a basis in reality to begin with, the warriors create a new discursive space, evoking the remaining two lines of Dante’s tercet: “Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create se non eterne, e io eterno duro” (“Before me things created were none, save things eternal, and eternal I endure”).

Similar to the proliferation of graffiti during May 68, bold messages are interspersed throughout the text of Les guérillères. The following passage is interpolated between a series of poems, boldly displayed like a Brechtian placard exposing the mechanics of the process of creation, unmasked by the structure, placement, and sense of the words:

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LACUNES LACUNES LACUNES
CONTRE TEXTES CONTRE SENS
CE QUI EST À ÉCRIRE VIOLENCE
HORS TEXTE
DANS UNE AUTRE ÉCRITURE
PRESSANT MENAÇANT
MARGES ESPACES INTERVALLES
SANS RELACHE
GESTE RENVERSEMENT. (205)
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The driving force behind this process is disruptive (“lacunes”), disorienting (“contre sens”), iconoclastic (“contre textes”), and violent. The discourse created by the guérillères is like no other ever known. It amplifies the Derridean critique of the
determinateness of logocentrism while threatening to overthrow the phallocentric prism through which it is signified. It is a whole other discursive system, fundamentally threatening (“pressant menaçant”) to the patriarchal symbolic order. It is the discursive cosmic bang previously alluded to—the embodiment of chaos, unstoppable revolution: “sans relâche geste renversement.”

On the level of poetics, this interruption in the cycle of poems triggers an unusual and complicated operation whereby paratext functions as mise-en-abîme. According to Gérard Genette, the paratext can be more than a title, an introduction, or a dedication accompanying the main text. It can also serve as a threshold, “a zone between text and off-text...not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (Paratexts 1). The large print words break from the poetic register to shock the reader, calling for a more pertinent reading of the overall text while shining light on the strategy of the mechanisms of creation of new discourse (“UNE AUTRE ÉCRITURE”). Bearing witness to the chaos of creation, the reader is confronted with a dynamic instance of mise-en-abîme—described by André Gide as the embedding of the narrative (i.e., the paratext in this instance) in the larger whole, which results in the reader apprehending the very form and meaning of the whole through its resemblance to it (Journal 29-30). By strategically placing this paratext between two poems, Wittig succeeds in creating what Gide calls “an even more exact mise-en-abîme,” one that mirrors “the device of heraldry that consists in setting in the escutcheon a smaller one ‘en abyme,’ at the heart-point” (Journal 30). This paratext-as-mise-en-abîme provokes alienating and didactic effects in Brechtian terms, which bring to
light the instability and unreliability of language as well as the possibilities of language creation.

For Wittig, “language is to be used as a raw material by a writer, just as clay is at the disposal of any sculptor” (Straight 71). With this understanding, the importance of neologisms in the function of the narrative’s overall form becomes clear, beginning with the very title Les guérillères. Reordering the discursive function of gender subverts patriarchal hierarchies and reflects the May 68 leveling of social strata: from the outset, the word “guérillères” announces the protagonists inhabiting this literary universe are not the guerriers of the Chanson de Roland but a newly conceptualized warrior designated by the neologism that combines the word guérrière (the feminine form of guerrier) with guerilla. This particular neologism operates as a vehicle for re-animating the petrified topoi and forms of patriarchal literature and lore (Ostrovsky, “Gender” 119).

Further transmutations of gender are rooted in the reworking of the male universal third subject plural pronoun in French: “ils,” or “they” in English. In its stead, Wittig employs the third person plural form of the feminine “elles,” affecting both the genre and gender paradigm. The grammatical imperative whereby the masculine bears the universal point of view is overturned by employing the feminine third person plural pronoun. This subversion is not designed to create a new “subject,” let alone a hegemonic one, but a strategic enunciative position that exposes the exclusion of women in language (Zerilli “Monique” 106). By combining the feminine gender and the universal voice—two existing concepts which are normally not associated with each other—Wittig incorporates the grammatical function of gender into an innovative model of Brechtian distanciation.
The universal pronoun “elles” is a radical reworking of the gender paradigm which unsettles the reader to the point of disorientation. David Le Vay’s English translation of the *Les guérillères*, for instance, refers to “Elles” as “the Women,” which defeats Wittig’s entire exercise by substituting one hegemonic subject with another. Instead, the pronoun must be viewed as a linguistic assault on the masculine collective through a protean resignifying of “they.” This new gender paradigm demonstrates the fact that the third person plural feminine pronoun is rarely used in French and does not even exist in English in the universal sense (Wittig, “Some Remarks” 40). That the masculine overrides the feminine in both English and Latin-based languages proves gender in language is rooted in notions of “fictive sex” marked by social convention, resulting in “language cast[ing] sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it” (*Straight* 78). As women are marked by gender in language, so are they marked in the social world—always particular, never universal. Universalizing the point of view of a group “condemned to being particular, relegated in language to a subhuman category” (Wittig, *Straight* 82) is the primary mission of *Les guérillères* as a literary war machine.

To develop such a radically different point of view, the interplay of the subjects and their relationship to reality becomes central in the narrative structure. In the first two parts of the text, for example, the pronouns “il” and *ils* do not appear. The absence of the two most commonly utilized third person pronouns in French is disorienting for both male and female readers. The consistent use of the rarest of French pronouns, “elles,” constitutes a further assault on the reader, which is compounded by the fact its use dictates the form of the book (Wittig, *Straight* 84-85). In this way, Wittig succeeds in
alienating or, as she puts it, in creating a shock “in the hope that this elles could situate the reader in a space beyond the categories of sex for the duration of the book” (“Some Remarks” 41). Wittig elaborates:

Although the theme of the text was total war, led by elles on ils, in order for this new person to take effect, two-thirds of the text had to be totally inhabited, haunted, by elles. Word by word, elles establishes itself as a sovereign subject. Only then could il(s), they-he, appear, reduced and truncated out of language. This elles in order to become real also imposed an epic form, where it is not only the complete subject of the world but its conqueror. (Straight 85)

In liberating language from Lacanian phallocentrism, Wittig constructs an alternative system of meaning exchange. This is a task for which little precedent exists beyond Wittig’s own experiment with universalizing the particular in grammar in her 1964 novel L’opoponax. If these waters are uncharted, it is undoubtedly due to the fact that “[t]he universal has been, and is continually, at every moment, appropriated by men” (Wittig, Straight 80), so nothing seems out of the ordinary. As Elizabeth Grosz explains, “The phallus is the valorized signifier around which both men and women define themselves as complementary and even supplementary subjects” (116), thereby reinforcing a seemingly naturalized male dominance. This dominance goes unnoticed, Wittig counters, until one understands that “men are not born with a faculty for the universal and […] women are not reduced at birth to the particular. It does not happen by magic. It must be done. It is an act, a criminal act, perpetrated by one class against another” (Straight 80). Wittig’s mimetic and subversive strategy undermines the dominant culture’s hold on literature and language itself, and reveals that, because language belongs to no one, its repetitions and re-workings are capable of creating new meanings and new subjects beyond the binary of gender.
The Revolutionary Legacy of *Les guérillères*

Just as the dynamic of *tiers-mondisme* has been expurgated from the “official” memory of May 68 by the New Philosophers,¹²⁴ so too has the story of young feminists. Echoing this narrative, both historian Robert Frank (Introduction 16) and academic critic Kristen Ross (*May* 156) postulate gender is absent as a site of tension during the revolutionary events of May 68. Philosopher and sociologist Geneviève Fraisse argues the opposite case (“Solitude” 49). Given the contradictory nature of related narratives and the fact that no historian can ever have the final word, I submit that Wittig’s work “brushes history against the grain” by recuperating French radical feminism as it relates to and interprets the revolutionary dimensions of May 68. Wittig’s materialist approach runs counter to the prevailing structuralist wave of the period by privileging the dialectical tension of past and future in the present, and her efforts to repair the fractured, split, and divided subject places her at odds with many poststructuralists with whom she is associated. Where they see such fissures and fractures as the stuff of liberation, Wittig sees the residue of oppression. Like so many involved in the May 68 revolution, Wittig understands the importance of group efforts and collective projects beyond the isolation of the self. The ethos of unity out of otherwise discrete parts and persons is re-signified throughout the bildungsroman of collective identities in *Les guérillères*: from the student-worker action committees reflected in the daily activities of the warriors, to their coming

¹²⁴ During the filmic “trial” of May 68 titled *Le procès de mai*, Bernard Kouchner advances a co-opted narrative which calls for a universal lack of awareness among the May 68 student protesters vis-à-vis the Third World: “[We students] were navel-gazing, we forgot the outside world, we didn’t see what was happening in the outside world, we were folded in on ourselves” (qtd. in Ross, *May* 156).
together en masse to sing the *Internationale*, to their celebratory rituals of shared drugs and alcohol, the specter of May 68 haunts the literary universe of the *guérillères*.

Additionally, *Les guérillères* translates into the tasks and problems of its own narrative much of the socio-political landscape of May 68. The text operates as a literary war machine through which the revolutionary overthrow of the male prerogative brings us full circle to Marx’s ruminations on the minority overthrow of old forms of society in order to assert its interests from a universal perspective. From this comes the functionality of the form of the narrative, its *gesta*, whereby the revolutionary or elliptical form operates as its very *modus operandi*. What Wittig accomplishes however is more subtle than revolutionary overthrow, for the universalizing of the minority perspective results in a new enunciative position as opposed to a new subject (Shaktini, Preface xii). And Wittig’s war machine transforms, transmutates, and transfigures literature into a disruption of the heteropatriarchal social contract instead of destroying existing canons of patriarchal discourse. Ever generative, her writing creates a revolutionary space for social and political relationships unconstrained by the hierarchical categories of sex—something that seemed unreal before May 68.\(^{125}\) By way of ingenium, Wittig *unconceals* not identities assigned by “wisdom,” practice, or what Bourdieu calls the disposition of *habitus*, but instead similarities in us all.

\(^{125}\) Kristin Ross asserts there is no evidence that gender was a conscious or explicit concern of May 68 (*May 155*).
Chapter 4

JEAN GENET: *UN CAPTIF AMOUREUX*
BEYOND THE LIMITS OF ORIENTALISM

**The Ethics of Betrayal**

_They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented._
_Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte_

I open this chapter with an epitaph taken from Karl Marx, to which Edward Saïd refers throughout his seminal work *Orientalism*. Marx’s assertion is of course pertinent to Saïd’s argument that Orientalism, as a conglomerate theorization of the Occident’s superiority over the “Orient,” is governed by the perceived truism that “if the Orient could speak for itself, it would” (*Orientalism* 21). Saïd’s theory is instructive beyond the historical and geographical scope of the binary which defines the Occident in relation to the “Orient,” for it shows that when one is denied the chance to speak his piece, he will assert himself in resolute, creative, and often violent ways in order to make himself heard. “The subaltern can speak,” Saïd argues, “as the history of liberation movements in the twentieth century eloquently attests” (*Orientalism* 335). An important part of this history relates to the revolutionary movements of the Palestinians and the American Black Panthers. As I continue my discussion of the dialectics of the universal and the particular in the context of May 68 and Modern Revolutionary Writing, I turn to *Un Captif amoureux*, Jean Genet’s posthumously published memoir of his political activism alongside the Palestinian fedayeen and the Black Panthers. In this rich work of prose, characterized by what René de Ceccatty calls “une sorte de métaphysique négative de l’écriture et même de la perception du réel” (“Rêve” 5), Genet moves fluidly between political deduction and poetic meditation as he recounts three stories: his own, that of the
Palestinians in Jordan and Lebanon, and that of the Black Panthers in the United States. Throughout, Genet articulates the subjectification of disenfranchised and pathologized peoples and brings to light a shared humanity that transcends synthetic historico-geopolitical limits. In this discussion of Genet’s last project, I will utilize the broad outlines of Saïd’s conceptual model of cultural hegemony to explore the historical and discursive forces that instigate collective sites of agency unique to the May 68 phenomenon. Despite the fact that *Un Captif amoureux* was published nearly twenty years after the fact, the specter of May 68 inhabits the whole of its literary universe and serves as a recurring touchstone for the remainder of Genet’s literary and political engagement; it is, as Albert Dichy affirms, “le point de départ de son itinéraire politique” (335).

None of this is to say that revolution and political engagement as a generative dynamic of Genet’s writing was sparked in a vacuum in the wake of May 68. After all, revolution serves as the entire backdrop for *Le Balcon* and *Les Paravents*. If these earlier works lack the poetic rumination on revolution found in *Un Captif amoureux*, they function as an exacting critique of the politics of hypocrisy rooted in notions of fixed identities and of the depraved limits of humanity’s potentiality as embodied in colonialism. It should therefore be recognized that, despite the prevailing doxa (which the writer himself enjoyed propagating), Genet’s political engagement on a literary level

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126 It is often said that Genet remained resolutely apolitical until May 68. In a recently published anthology on the modern novel, for instance, the entry for Jean Genet describes the writer’s political journey in the following manner: “Throughout his life, Genet tried to separate the sacred sphere of poetic creation from the profane world of politics. He stuck to his apolitical stance until May 68, when he was gradually drawn into the French political scene. […] If, before the 1970s, Genet had conceived of literature as a purely aesthetic exercise, devoid of ideological and political import, he ultimately acknowledged the close links between literature and politics. In October 1970, he declared in *Le Monde*: ‘Literature, as I practiced it formerly, was gratuitous. Today, it is in the service of a cause. It is against America.’” (Sollars 298).
started early in his life, with revolution serving as an intermittent topos in his writing. As far back as his 1947 novel, *Pompes funèbres*, Genet demonstrates a paradoxical level of political engagement through which he constructs a collective subject position that is at once very fictional yet nevertheless significant. In this work, a probing occurs of a moral dilemma whereby the narrator loves somebody (French resistance fighter Jean Décarin) who sacrifices his life defending something the narrator deems reprehensible (the French nation) at the hands of a member of the very militia which the narrator admires for the brutal retribution it inflicts in his stead upon the French (bourgeois) nation. This moral dilemma serves as the backdrop to yet another, even more urgent crisis in the narrator’s political engagement, located in the nexus of his love for and betrayal of the very community he creates. From *Pompes funèbres*:

J’aime les miliciens. [...] Le recrutement s’en fit surtout parmi les voyous, puisqu’il fallait oser braver le mépris de l’opinion générale qu’un bourgeois eut craint, risquer d’être descendu la nuit dans une rue solitaire, mais ce qui nous attirait surtout c’est qu’on y était armé. Ainsi j’eus, pendant trois ans, le bonheur délicat de voir la France terrorisée par des gosses de seize à vingt ans […]. J’aimais ces gosses dont la dureté se foutait des déboires d’une nation […]. J’étais heureux de voir la France terrorisée par des enfants en armes, mais je l’étais bien plus quand ces enfants étaient des voleurs, des gouapes. Si j’eusse été plus jeune, je me faisais milicien. Je caressais les plus beaux, et secrètement je les reconnaissais comme mes envoyés, délégués parmi les bourgeois pour exécuter les crimes que la prudence m’interdisait de commettre moi-même. (80-81)

In this passage, Genet paints a portrait of virile militiamen in brilliantly homoerotic hues tinted with titillating thuggishness: “dureté,” “armé,” “gouape,” “oser,” “braver,” “risquer,” “voyou.” What would otherwise amount to a roaming band of hyper sexually-charged thugs is however elevated by the narrator to the status of a purposeful—and cherished—community. This is a special community for which he assumes responsibility (“je les reconnaissais comme mes envoyés, délégués…”), for which he feels solicitous
(“ces gosses,” “ces enfants,” “je caressais les plus beaux”), and to which he would have belonged in another time (“[s]i j’eusse été plus jeune, je me faisais milicien”). Despite these overtures, however, the narrator rescinds full commitment to the very community he lovingly constructs. This betrayal is assured through his “bonheur délicat,” his “secret” recognition of the thugs as proxies set loose to do his dirty work, and “une prudence” which forbids him to “exécuter les crimes” himself. The expression of such reticence might lead the reader to deduce Genet’s betrayal of this community is prompted by cowardice. Indeed it is not; rather, it is a budding demonstration of what Ralph Heyndels defines as the “morale politique” residing in Genet’s writing—a uniquely Genetian brand of ethics which culminates in *Un Captif amoureux* as the defining dimension to his political engagement.

This précis of Genet’s early work as it pertains to revolution and the writer’s political engagement is meant to corroborate Marie Redonnet’s observation that Genet’s “engagement politique […] se situe dans la continuité de son œuvre, qui y conduisait” (229). What marks *Un Captif amoureux* within this continuity in general and within Modern Revolutionary Writing in particular is the way in which Genet resignifies subjective desire as linked to the political and social engagement and eroticism that made possible the May 68 phenomenon. In resignifying subjective desire, Genet establishes a reflexive and operational “space” of discourse located at the confluence of three axes comprised of the ethical, the political, and the erotic (Heyndels, “Image” 69)—an enunciative space in which the Black Panthers and the Palestinian fedayeen forge communities whose advent is so urgent that their instauration reveals itself to be

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127 The term “morale politique” as it relates to Genet is analyzed in Heyndel’s “Nuit politique du désir”—discussed below.
impossible, unable to be conserved, and fraught with the potential perils of total communion as envisioned by Maurice Blanchot. The aporia posed by such communities is however a site of affirmation for Genet’s favorite, most ethical “vice”: betrayal. For, in Genet’s *morale politique*, betrayal allows for the salutary assertion of individualism against the collective—even a collective one might like to submit to and serve (White, *Genet* 105). This ethical posture, Heyndels clarifies, depends upon a dialectically negative performative attitude—“une véritable pensée politique en creux”—which eschews “l’obédience sinistre et les régulations abstraites et réifiées ‘du’ politique, en ce qu’elle est fissurée du dedans par ce que Genet appelle […] ‘la blessure secrète où tout homme vient se réfugier si l’on attente à son orgueil, quand on le blesse’” (“Image” 77).

It operates outside of time and space: “Elle n’est ‘à jour’ avec aucun calendrier programmatique” (Heyndels, “”Nuit” 117). It is engendered and signified within what Heyndels terms Genet’s “nuit politique du désir” (ibid), the whole of which hinges on the very act of betrayal which “n’entretient de complicité avec aucune société […], ne relève d’aucune normativité, ni d’aucun ordonnancement idéologique qui l’asservirait au principe d’identité” (Heyndels, “Nuit” 116). It is the political act of betrayal that subtends the whole of Genet’s discourse—a transcendant betrayal articulated, as the author himself makes clear, “dans le vide et dans le noir”—“en dehors de tout” (qtd. in Heyndels “Nuit” 116).

The reflexive and operational space of discourse mentioned above allows Moubarak—the erotically charged political agent of change in *Un Captif amoureux*—to

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128 In “Nuit Politique du Désir: L’engagement amoureux de Jean Genet,” Heyndels posits the term “nuit politique du désir” as the matricial site of the crucial “imbrication du sujet éthique et du sujet désirant,” whereby—in the black of the night—individual desire surpasses itself in the universality of “le tout homme” to resurge in “la lumière propre de son irradiation nocturne.”
speak from within the community of Oriental subalterns he has helped forge. What he articulates, for example, by dancing nearly naked to the music of the Rolling Stones and driving away in his Toyota, belies the notion of the Orient as a mere backwater…” a place isolated from the mainstream of European progress in the sciences, arts, and commerce” (Saïd, Orientalism 206). Yet, what of the Black Panthers? What of their ability to speak as “subalterns” who have been pathologized, marginalized, and objectified through what Frieda Ekotto calls their “blackness?” Why probe the relevance of Saïd’s theory of Orientalism to this isolated revolutionary movement in the United States which seemingly has nothing to do with the Orient? Over the course of my research related to Un Captif amoureux, I was struck by the imbalance between abundant critical commentary on Genet and the Palestinians as opposed to relatively sparse observations related to the Black Panthers. Basma El Omari’s “‘La dernière image du monde’ ou l’écriture de Jean Genet sur les Palestiniens,” published in a 2001 edition of Études françaises, is illustrative of much of the criticism I encountered. The first paragraph of El Omari’s discussion begins with a characterization of Genet’s book as “la rédaction de son dernier livre, Un Captif amoureux, ou le récit de l’histoire palestinienne” (129). In other words, no mention is made of the Black Panther narrative. This is understandable, perhaps, in light of the fact that Genet himself characterizes his last book as “ma révolution palestinienne récitée dans l’ordre que j’ai choisi” (Captif 504), or that in her thoughtful introduction to the English translation of Un Captif amoureux (Prisoner of Love), Ahdaf Soueif focuses solely on the Palestinian context of the narrative by offering a cursory, parenthetical reference to the Black Panther movement, relegating it to near
footnote status. Soueif laconically states, “This is a book about the Palestinian revolution (with some pages about the Black Panther movement)” (xv).

Gravitating toward the margins of the text—or rather toward the parts of the text that have been marginalized—I prefer to expound on Genet’s account of the time he spent among members of the Black Panther Party in tandem with his ruminations on the Palestinian revolutionaries. I find more needs to be said about these so-called “some pages” of Genet’s last published work as they relate to the whole of it. From a literary perspective, after all, the narrative pertaining to the Panthers is an integral part of the juxtaposed inter-cutting of Palestinian-related elements, chronologies, and locations that, as Barbara Bray puts it, result in a “deliberately subversive style […] raised […] to a level of anarchy unusual even for Genet” (xix). From a historical perspective, the Black Panther Party, as the sole black organization in the entire history of black struggle against slavery and oppression in the United States to promote a revolutionary agenda, is a progressive political movement emblematic of the global revolutionary dynamic of the 1968 zeitgeist. And from a theoretical consideration, blacks in America (as well as in virtually all “terres colonisées”) have been defined in socio-political and historical discourse by their “blackness,” thus facilitating the pathologization and categorization of them into “radically disembodied” objects of discrimination (Ekotto 99). Genet appropriates and resignifies this very mechanism of effacing the flesh and the bones, yet *Un Captif amoureux* is an exercise not in cataloguing but in exploding reification, and always in the service of symbolic and spectral representation: “[…] la réalité est-elle cette totalité de signes noirs?” (11). To discuss the theoretical implications of “blackness” in terms of Orientalism is merely to expand the discursive possibilities set forth in Frieda
Ekotto’s “What Is the Color of Blackness?” In this essay, Ekotto considers Genet’s play *Les Nègres* in terms of an ontological quest of how “blackness” has become “a real, living thing on its own within European ideology, social theory, and historical consciousness” (99), the objectification of which facilitates the marginalization of blacks in the colonial context. Throughout her discussion of *Les Nègres*, Ekotto convincingly supports her call for Genet to be reread and recast as a “négritude partisan” (ibid) in terms of critical race theory. Maintaining as a theoretical touchstone Ekotto’s elucidation on “blackness” as a matricial site of race, racism, tension, and hatred that concretizes the literal function of Blacks in confrontation with Whites (102), the focus of my discussion expands to Genet’s discursive treatment of both the Black Panthers and the Palestinian fedayeen and the ways in which it disturbs and transcends the mechanisms of the grand narrative of Orientalist discourse. In *Un Captif amoureux*, this Orientalist discourse encompasses not only matters of race, but of geography and culture as well.

That Genet’s discussion of the Black Panthers occupies a minority percentage of the overall page count of *Un Captif amoureux* does not diminish the vital role the narrative plays in his literary project. In a 1986 review of Genet’s last book, published in *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, René de Ceccatty demonstrates an early and exceptional appreciation of the intrinsic importance of the role played by the Black Panthers in relation to that of the Palestinian fedayeen. He states:

> Le sujet apparemment politique est […] double: d’une part les Black Panthers et d’autre part les feddayin. [Genet] les traite de deux façons différentes: parce que ces deux expériences n’ont pas été déterminantes de la même manière sur un besoin d’écrire, parce que les Black Panthers étaient des sortes de doublures qui annonçaient les acteurs véritables. (“Rêve” 5)
The Black Panthers and the fedayeen are then two (inseparable) facets of a political subject, providing what Ceccatty calls “une nourriture idéale” (ibid) upon which Genet’s narrative feeds. However, I part with Ceccatty’s characterization of Genet’s treatment of the two revolutionary groups as being executed in “deux façons différentes,” for the narrative of the two is consistently fluid and is characterized by interwoven instances of both contrast and unity—what Heyndels refers to as a “homologie structurale” between the two (“Noirs” 329). In this way, Genet’s last work resists the possibility of a linear or binary approach to its reading, ingeniously disrupting the positions of reader and writer in the text and forestalling what Jacques Derrida refers to in Glas as “la maîtrise de son [Genet’s] texte” (229).

In addition to being among the first to recognize the importance of the Black Panthers to Genet’s last narrative in totum, Ceccatty leads the pack in drawing attention to the theatrical dimension of the Panther Movement. Whereas Ceccatty’s review discusses this theatricality as it relates to the Black Panthers per se, I believe it must also be applied to the Palestinian fedayeen as well as to the text itself. The following passage from Un Captif amoureux demonstrates how this theatricality is adopted by Genet as both a thematic and structural underpinning to the whole of the work:

C’est presque certain, les Panthères venaient de vaincre et par un moyen qui paraît dérisoire: par le secours de soieries, de velours, de cheveux sauvages, d’images qui ont métamorphosé le Noir et l’ont changé. Cette méthode—pour le moment—était celle des combats classiques, des luttes inter-nations, des libérations nationales et peut-être des luttes des classes. — C’était du théâtre? (141)

Here Genet equates the method of combat used by the Black Panthers to that employed in great, classical struggles for national liberation, yet he stops short of fully endorsing it as a class-based struggle (“peut-être des luttes des classes”) despite his avowed admiration
for the Panthers expressed in these very terms.\textsuperscript{129} The slippage between all-out affirmation and nuanced skepticism over whether or not the Panthers’ revolutionary movement can be viewed in terms of class-based struggle functions as a rhetorical operation located in what Heyndels earlier referred to as “\textit{en creux}.” For, as Redonnet points out, “Leur combat n’est pas seulement un combat antiraciste. C’est un combat politique de classe qui peut rallier tous les opprimés, quelles que soient leur race, leur langue et leur nation” (228, my emphasis). Genet’s modulated intimation of the “possibility” of such terms puts into relief the potential for universalizing the Panthers’ very particular push for subjectification. The potential for such an outcome exists, but it is far from assured. In rejecting confederacy with an unstable identitary principle whose fundamental premise he supports, Genet mobilizes an exemplary act of betrayal characteristic of his “morale politique.”

The protracted allusion to the theatrical dimension of the Panthers (“le secours de soieries, de velours, de cheveux sauvages, d’images […]”) displaces the revolutionaries as the ostensible subject of the passage, establishing instead the dynamic of \textit{travestissement} as the foremost matter at hand. As narrator, then, Genet assumes the role of \textit{maître des illusions}, guiding our focus toward the Panthers’ status as victors in the revolutionary struggle, only to throw glittering dust in our eyes in a syntactic act of prestidigitation made possible by the verbs “paraître,” “métamorphoser,” and “changer” working in synchrony with the adverbial and adjectival qualifications “presque,” “dérision,” “pour le moment,” and “peut-être.” The passage thus queries the reader as to the aporetic limits of the Panthers’ revolutionary program in terms of the real or the

\footnote{\textsuperscript{129} Edmund White states that on an intellectual plane, Genet “respected the Panthers because they had a Marxist, class analysis of oppression and not just a racial analysis” (\textit{Genet} 523).}
imaginary. The query itself is ultimately rendered rhetorical, however—betrayed by its own elliptical valence brought full circle by Genet’s asking: “C’était du théâtre?” Here, then, Genet shows himself fully engaged in what Heyndels calls a performative attitude “[qui] se réalise sur le mode de l’action imaginaire et ‘réelle’” (“Nuit” 117)—a negative dialectical performance devoid of any attempt to reform, transform or even replace the ignominy of the social world, but rather to destroy it by shattering it into millions of fragmented images.

In the following reflection, we return to the scene of Moubarak’s dance, at which point the bravado of the “Orientals” dominates center stage. Let us note how the imagery serves as a rhetorical segue into the author’s recurring poetic musings on black Americans:

[…] je regardais sans être vu. Pieds nus, n’ayant gardé que son pantalon, Moubarak dansait et il n’aurait pas dû en avoir honte car il dansait, bien, mêlant les gestes du rock à ceux des danses soudanaises, et le vieux Noir, tête crépue un peu blanche, sans le regarder, raclait une inexistante guitare, gardant toujours sa main droite à l’endroit où l’on gratte les cordes et la gauche allant et venant sur un manche imaginaire. — Superbe! Sans dire mot, Moubarak remit son tricot de corps, sa chemise, ses chaussures à semelles souples, il chancela, faillit tomber ou me tuer ; il remonta dans la Toyota avec son copain près de lui ; ils partirent, le pot d’échappement me lâchant à la figure une épaisse noire fumée et un bruit qui se voulait outrageant. Je crois qu’il ne me pardonnera pas de l’avoir surpris, dansant en Afrique. Moi-même, irrité par une fuite si brusque, je lui gardai un peu de rancune qui se manifesta par ma remarque: “je vais imiter Moubarak”.

La musique des Rolling Stones était réelle mais la guitare non, et son absence me rendit le souvenir de la partie de cartes avec des non-cartes, et tout, me parut de plus en plus décousu.

Les Noirs en Amérique blanche sont les signes qui écrivent l’histoire; sur la page blanche ils sont l’encre qui lui donne le sens. (349-50)

This extended citation operates as a key site of interplay between the frontiers separating the “real” and the “imaginary,” “Orientals” and American blacks, permanence and flight, belonging and exclusion. Throughout the passage, divisions are broken down, resulting in
a quintessential *mise-en-abîme* through which, like a hall of mirrors, the endless concatenation of images rips reality apart at the seams (“et tout, me parut de plus en plus découssé”). The actors on the stage perform their discrete roles while the narrator assumes an external and transcendant vantage, “watching without being seen.” Shirtless Moubarak, whose blackness is, significantly, alluded to by Genet in a previous sentence, acts as the (homo)erotically charged embodiment of the interstitial potentiality between the Occident and the Orient, made possible by the marrying of rock and roll with Sudanese dancing. His companion strums a non-existant guitar while looking away in detachment. The seemingly disparate individuals are united by the music of the Rolling Stones, which, in a narrative nod to Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of music, conveys the only aspect of the performance that is “real.” The presence of the moment is broken by the abrupt departure of Moubarak and his companion in their old Toyota. Whatever role Genet may aspire to play in this performance, it will not be one characterized by inclusion. Instead, he is relegated to the role of “Other” whose intrusive gaze is broken by Moubarak’s stumbling or, as Genet intuits, Moubarak’s attempt to kill him. Left alone on the stage, Genet’s only hope to transcend his positionality as an outsider—to consummate what Heyndels so aptly terms “le saut du désir”130—is to assume the identity of Moubarak through imitation (“[J]e vais imiter Moubarak”). In his alienation—his Kristeuan state of abjection—Genet “*se fait son théâtre* [comme on dit: se faire son cinéma] dans lequel *il est l’objet du désir d’en être le sujet*” (Heyndels, “Point”). Genet’s posture toward Moubarak stems from the writer’s desire to arrogate the point of view of

130 In “Ce point fixe qui se nomma peut-être l’amour,” Ralph Heyndels defines this *saut du désir* in the following terms: “dans et par le désir, un passage qui mène au-delà de celui-ci, tout en le maintenant, mais différé, difracte” (“Point”).
“toute figure, tout corps du réprouvé” which, in his mind, functions as “un vivier de signes” (ibid) in which he is both “capté” and “capturé”—ineluctably rendered “un captif amoureux.” This desire for transference, at once paradoxically stymied yet also made possible by the theatrical travestissement, is an immutable touchstone for Genet: it is, as Heyndels rightfully concludes, “[l]e point fixe” (ibid) of his œuvre. In this passage, the requisite travestissement is complete with Genet’s pale pink skin colored black by the burst of the Toyota’s exhaust—in an image of assured self-parody, Genet sees himself sitting alone, dwarfed in the vast desert, reduced to an abandoned, out of place facsimile of Al Jolson, waiting to play his scene as the consummate “objet du désir d’en être le sujet.” This chain of indentitary substitution is made possible only by the fluidity of roles inherent to “l’expérience théâtrale,” bringing a specifically Genetian dimension to the timeless lines from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.

In *Un Captif amoureux*, however, it is not just man who “plays many parts.” Space, time, presence, and the very narrative structure of the text have their fluid assignments as well. In the above passage, for example, might we not consider the play between the “real” and the “imaginary” as but another facet of the tension between “presence” and “absence”? Is the non-existant guitar not real simply because it is absent? Genet himself invites this reflection by employing the words “real” and “absence” in the same sentence. The slippage between the terms functions as a structural, rhetorical segue into the poetic metaphor of American blacks as the ink of the white page of American history. The presence of the black ink is necessary to the blank page, yet the ink itself
only exists because of absence. As Ceccatty points out, “[…] c’est dans leur absence, dans leur mort, que les Noirs (victimes de leur combat) sont plus réels” (“Rêve” 5). Like mercury pressed under a finger, the terms elude fixity. I will revisit this recurring metaphor later in this chapter.

The Power of the Image

In his review of Un Captif amoureux, René de Ceccatty suggests Genet “rapporte plusieurs anecdotes sur les Black Panthers, mais sur un mode presque toujours symbolique” (“Rêve” 5). Such anecdotes signified on the symbolic level certainly proliferate in Genet’s narrative, yet they often interweave with sobering musings grounded in reflections couched in “real” terms. In one of the first instances of discussing the Black Panther Movement, for example, Genet writes:

[Le mouvement des Panthères] ne fut jamais un mouvement populaire. Il faisait appel au sacrifice total, à l’usage des armes, à l’invention verbale, à l’injure qui cravache la gueule du Blanc. La violence il ne pouvait l’avoir qu’en la nourrissant des misères du ghetto. Sa grande liberté intérieure était possible par la guerre que lui faisaient la police, l’administration, la population blanche et une partie de la bourgeoisie noire. (82)

Much of the Panthers’ appeal to Genet stems from the fact that they engaged in real, life threatening battles. As Redonnet points out, “À la différence des étudiants de mai 68, les Panthers risquent réellement la mort. Leur combat ne se fait pas seulement avec des images. Il se fait aussi avec des armes pour changer réellement leur vie infâme et pour sortir de l’enfer des ghettos et des prisons” (227). Redonnet brings together two key dimensions to revolutionary struggle as they pertain to Genet’s narrative. Alluding to the power of both the image as well as weapons, she homes in on the symbolic power of the former and the very “real” power of the latter. Genet goes further, of course, by
amalgamating the two into an all-powerful juggernaut made possible only through poetry.

As a poet, Genet seizes upon the power of the image whose awesome potential exploded before his eyes when, during the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, two black American athletes raised their fists in a show of solidarity, displaying before the entire world the might of Black Power. At this moment, Genet is said to have understood how the image can be used as “une arme pour changer la réalité, non pour l’irréaliser” (Redonnet 227).

The power of the image has always impacted on the ways Genet apprehends and reacts to the world in literary terms. The scene of the 1964 suicide of Abdallah Bentaga, for instance, inflicted a psychic blow to Genet from which he would not recover for several years and which resulted in a prolonged cessation of literary output on his part. Upon entering his dead lover’s room, Genet was confronted with the following image:

When the police knocked down the door they were overwhelmed by the stench. Blood had flowed everywhere in the room. The body was surrounded by Genet’s books and Sartre’s *Saint Genet*, read and re-read and carefully annotated—books that Abdallah had ignored when he lived happily with Genet. The pages were soaked in blood. (White, *Genet* 472)

No stage could have offered a more grotesque setting, subjecting Genet to the very betrayal he so meticulously administered throughout his life. Entering the scene as a spectator, yet implicated in the plot by the artifacts of his Œuvre ritualistically transformed into metaphysical realia by the blood of his neglected lover, Genet is betrayed by his own “écriture mensongère” (Redonnet 249). Throughout his literary production, Genet both disrobed and cross-dressed himself in an effort to “[s]’arranger[r] pour ne pas être trop endommagé” (Genet, *Ennemi* 22). In other words, we might view Genet’s writing as a sort of magical aegis, protecting him in his role of “spontané
simulateur” (Ceccatty, “Spectre” 33). This time, however, in Abdallah’s greatest hour of need for the intimacy of Genet’s presence, the only trace of the writer to be found is in Genet’s own masterfully crafted dissimulation. Genet’s ethics of betrayal thus doubles back like a wrathful boomerang intent on settling a score with the writer. The betrayal is made even more unbearable by the fact that Abdallah also turned to Sartre’s lengthy existential psychoanalysis of Genet, a problematic work which subjected the writer to the disciplinary effects of exposure and interpretation. In this tragic instance, the simulacrum which had always served as Genet’s protective proxy contravened its own purpose. Perhaps as much as the site of Abdallah’s lifeless body, the concretization of Genet’s own ethics of betrayal comprised the image which would prompt the writer to destroy his manuscripts and to vow never to write again—for a time.

It was during a visit to Chicago for the 1968 Democratic Convention that Genet “felt alive again” (White, Genet 506). This time, according to Roger Blin, “It was like a sexual rejuvenation [for Genet]. Black Power, Black virility, the colour black; they exert an erotic attraction over him. Together with the constant pressure of death” (qtd. in White, Genet 506). The Black Panthers held a particularly powerful hold over Genet due to their ability to unite their community and to transform their image through poetry (Redonnet 228). Like Genet, who used his power as a poet to corrupt the language of his

131 Genet’s malaise with Sartre’s disquisition is well documented. In an interview with Madeleine Gobeil, for example, he describes his reaction to it in the following terms: “[J’ai ressenti] une espèce de dégoût—parce que je me suis vu nu et dénudé par quelqu’un d’autre que moi. Dans tous mes livres, je me mets nu et en même temps je me travestis par des mots, des choix, des attitudes, par la féerie” (Ennemi 22). Throughout his life Genet resisted being “canonized” by the gatekeepers of legitimating genres of “high” literature, which is exactly what Sartre accomplished in writing Saint Genet, comédien et martyr. In Sartre’s assessment, Genet’s palatability as an author depended upon Sartre’s success in constructing a coherent narrative about all that was “dubious” about Genet’s life in terms of his redeeming search for existential freedom through writing. Genet’s feeling of betrayal was twofold: He felt “stripped” without offering his consent, and he felt used as a tool in Sartre’s quest for elaborating a working universal theory of existential freedom. As Genet laconically observed, “Je suis l’illustration d’une de ses théories de la liberté” (Ennemi 21).
enemy, the Black Panthers were imbued with a “don poétique” (ibid), which they used to signify their hatred of white society by defying its standards of language and comportment. The image of the great afro, of the black cock pulsating with revolutionary dynamism, of “la communauté noire [avec sa] légère insolence, [son] sourire amusé sur elle-même” (Redonnet 228), are the result of a beauty previously unknown to Genet—a new form of revolutionary combat, both poetic and erotic. This new aesthetic, which has the potential to unite all réprouvés in what Didier Eribon calls “[une] isotopie sociale des exclusions” (Morale 31), supplants the image of the dead aerialist Abdallah, instilling vigor and purpose in Genet during his final years.

‘Le Tout Homme’ and New Sites of Desire

Non, cette nation-là ne peut être la mienne.
Guy Hocquenghem La Beauté du Métis

Roger Blin’s observation regarding Genet’s attraction to the color black reflects a critical facet of Genet’s desire to reject the whole of “la communauté blanche.” Genet’s disdain for the white, Christian, imperialist, and highly normative society which had condemned him to a lifetime of abjection fueled by alienation and humiliation parallels in many ways what self-professed “francophobe” Guy Hocquenghem articulates in his eponymous La Beauté du métis: Réflexions d’un francophobe. In this polemical work published in 1979, Hocquenghem subjects his native country to a critique and condemnation of key matrices of cultural and political identity that comprise French nationalism. This lengthy essay seeks to discredit virtually all cultural sites of French

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132 I qualify this particular work as polemical in light of Hocquenghem’s antagonistic posture toward the French. For instance, he uniformly refers to “la France” by employing a lower case “f,” and he frequently interpellates the reader with questions such as: “N’êtes-vous jamais gênés d’être français?” (136).
patrimony—ranging from the nation’s language to its literature and to its reputation on the world stage—in order to shine light on what Hocquenghem considers to be a dangerous chauvinism rooted in xenophobia. Hocquenghem’s work is pertinent to Genet in its elucidation of the ways in which the latter is inexorably caught up in the very matrix of cultural identity from which he seeks to extricate himself. As Hocquenghem argues throughout his essay, Genet is “susceptible de participer au grand complot des Autres” due to his “tendresse pour l’étranger” (135). In other words, despite Genet’s abhorrence for the French nation in particular and for white Occidental culture in general, his very existence as a criminal, homosexual, “lover” of Nazis, Arabs, and black revolutionaries is seized upon by the French and assigned blame for “la foi en France [qui] craque de toutes parts” (136). Around Genet and all other “réprouvés,” then, a consolidation of French nationalist identity occurs by dint of the constructed “Other.” For Genet, one way out of this aporetic cycle is through “la reconnaissance du genre humain [à travers] l’universalité du ‘tout homme’” (Heyndels, “Nuit” 119).

The previously discussed matter of betrayal as it relates to Genet’s “nuit politique du désir” is but one facet of the writer’s “morale politique.” The other critical dimension lies in the “imbrication du sujet éthique et du sujet désirant” (Heyndels, “Nuit” 119) which, as Jarrod Hayes points out in *Queer Nations*, is at the crux of “the basis for not only political action but also an interrogation of [Genet’s] own subjectivity” (44). In this brief yet thoughtful rumination on Genet’s role as a “sexual tourist” in Orientalist terms, Hayes seeks to articulate the writer’s erotic attachment to the Other—a key aspect of the Genetian “saut du désir” previously alluded to—as a demonstration of how the universal model of subjectivity has been constructed as a white category and how a challenge to the
white monopoly on subject positions that authorize a speaking voice is possible. I find Hayes’ line of reasoning unproblematic until he aligns himself with Kobena Mercer’s assessment that Genet’s political solidarity with the Black Panthers leads “to a radically different subject-position which does not attempt to master or assimilate difference, but speaks from a position of equality as part of a shared struggle to decolonize inherited models of subjectivity” (qtd. in Hayes, 44). To explain why I find Hayes’ argument unsatisfying, I turn to an earlier, foundational analysis of the political potentiality of desire, articulated in Guy Hocquenghem’s 1972 book, *Le Désir homosexuel*.

In this important work, Hocquenghem delves into the realm of theory to examine the broad terms of social ideology related to homosexuality. As it pertains to Genet, Hocquenghem’s discussion expounds on the concept of desire in terms of revolution. Throughout his critique of Freudian, Lacanian, and structuralist modes of analysis, Hocquenghem hits the proverbial nail on the head concerning the joint operation of the erotic and the political as it relates to a Genetian ethics. According to Hocquenghem, homosexual desire is but one type of desire that can create a “faillle” in the otherwise impenetrable chainmail of the “prolétariat viril, bourru et roulant des épaules” (*Désir* 104). As such, the “polyvocité du désir” (*Désir* 13)—and by extension pleasure—proves capable of upsetting the symbolic order. From the margins (“par la bande”), desire gnaws away at the edges of a reactionary revolutionary order founded on strict adherence to a rigid division between the public and the private. Hocquenghem engages in a play on words to suggest that getting a hard on (“bander”) penetrates this division, just as the margin (“la bande”) is the site of action from which desire invades and displaces the center, until “il n’y a plus de centre du tout” (105). The result is, as Didier Eribon points
out, “le corps revendiqué qui annule le corps soumis à l’ordre social, et permet à une nouvelle subjectivité d’émerger” (Morale 113). To ground Hocquenghem’s observations in the previously mentioned axis of the erotic, political, and ethical, a return to my initial discussion of Hegel’s idealistic dialectic of human history will be useful.133

In broad terms, Hegel posits desire as the means by which human consciousness or self-consciousness emerges and develops in relation to another desiring subject. However, this union, based on a relation of mutual recognition, is unstable due to the conflict between each entity’s wish for self-sufficiency and the need for one to be recognized and reflected by the other. A solution is for one of the consciousnesses to be recognized without having to recognize in return—what we might consider a struggle for status which forms the basis of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. In Hegel, then, desire is at the root of revealing consciousness, with the Other or difference assimilated to identity. I part from Hayes’ reasoning in that I believe Genet relinquishes the desire to be recognized by the other within this Hegelian dialectic. In other words, Genet’s hatred of his own whiteness (and all the attendant baggage) compels him to eschew any dynamic which might lead to his being recognized or reflected in the other. In strictly Hegelian terms, and contrary to Hayes’ assertion, therefore, Genet does not seek equality; rather, he submits to the role of slave in the dialectic. This willful submission is made evident in the anecdote of Genet’s encounter with Décimo, recounted in Eribon’s Une morale du minoritaire:

En cette période de son existence, Genet est hanté par ‘la pensée du suicide’ […]. Genet n’a plus ‘assez de vigueur’ pour entreprendre l’œuvre qu’il projette, […]. Il songe à la mort. C’est à ce moment qu’il rencontre Décimo, […]. Genet s’aperçoit vite qu’il est littéralement ‘aimanté’ par la beauté

133 See Chapter II, section E: Detrez, brasilidade, and Modern Revolutionary Writing.
du jeune homme et surtout obsédé par l’image qu’il se fait de lui: ‘Avant de le connaître, j’avais voulu me suicider. Mais sa présence, puis son image en moi, puis son destin possible à partir non de lui mais de cette image, me comblèrent.’ (305)

At the nadir of his life experience, as he wrestles with depression, an all-consuming lack of motivation, and a desire to commit suicide (which, incidentally, he attempted to prosecute but failed), Genet finds salvation in an unexpected “saut du désir.” This encounter permits Genet to internalize the Other (‘son image en moi’) and to cede to him the very locus occupied by white Occidental prerogative. Expressed in Hocquenghem’s terms, the act of getting a hard on (“bander”) allows Genet to cleave the artificially drawn frontiers between normative and liberated desire, to draw forth the Oriental Other from the margins (“les bandes”), and to disrupt the symbolic center in a radically subversive way. This exercise demonstrates at once the ethical gesture of freeing the Other from the margins, the political act made possible by the “dynamique hégélienne invertie”\(^ {134} \) whereby the white Occidental hetero-masculine prerogative is betrayed, and the erotic charge that makes it all possible.

Of course, Genet cannot always circumvent the rules of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. There are after all moments in which he finds himself stripped bare by the probing, recognizing eye of the Other. Yet, at least in the following instance, the writer derives satisfaction in the very betrayal of his desire to avoid such recognition. In this passage taken from *Un Captif amoureux*, Genet finds deliverance (and redemption) from his whiteness through Moubarak’s impersonation of him:

—Maintenant je vais imiter Jean m’imitant.

\(^ {134} \) The French word “inverti” should be understood here in its full semantic valence to mean both reversed and homosexual.
Se voir dans la glace n’est rien quand on a compris que la gauche est à la droite, mais se voir là, sous les arbres et sans miroir, mobile, parlant, si cruellement décrit par la voix, les gestes des bras, des jambes, du cou, du corps entier, la position des pieds d’un Soudanais que tout le monde sauf moi éclata de rire, et, ce qui me fut très dur, il me sembla d’un rire un peu complaisant. Sauf moi, j’eus trop d’admiration. [...]. Grâce à lui je fus devant moi le personnage gigantesque découpé sur un ciel presque noir; descendant au loin et cependant tout proche, un peu voûté par la fatigue de l’âge, de l’escalade, par la descente, de colline en colline, marche à ma mesure devenue fabuleuse, collines aussi hautes que les nuages au-dessus de Naplouse, boitant donc vers la fin du jour et cette claudication était outrée, simplifiée et pourtant fidèle à ma démarche habituelle. Je compris que je me regardais pour la première fois, non dans un miroir appelé psyché, mais selon un œil ou des yeux qui m’avaient découvert, [...]. Chacun m’avait donc vu et restitué. C’est plus tard que je sus ce qu’il entrait comme cruauté dans cette courte saynète. (348-49)

This performance is apprehended by Genet as a sacred ritual by which he is cleansed of his whiteness. As he witnesses himself limping toward the end of his day like an actor in the Sphinx’s riddle—his mortality laid bare—Genet is elevated to the realm of myth (“marche à ma mesure devenue fabuleuse”).135 His apotheosis is ensured as a new, mosaic being reconstituted by a plurality of eyes. It is a solemn and painful ceremony: solemnity marked by Genet’s silent admiration contrasted with the patronizing laughter of the spectators; pain marked by each derisive inflection of tone, each peal of irreverent laughter—“très dur.”

The role of (erotic) desire shows itself to be precarious in the Genetian “saut du désir;” therefore, any globalizing or restrictive characterizations of the dynamic would prove counterproductive. Throughout Un Captif amoureux, after all, desire strategically operates in diffuse, fragmented, and polyvalent ways. It functions as a protean arm in the battle against normatising forces, which Hocquenghem characterizes as “ce découpage

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135 It is unfortunate that Barbara Bray’s otherwise admirable translation of this highly complex text by Genet elides the entire mythical dimension to this passage by eliminating the reference to “[Genet’s] mesure devenue fabuleuse” (Prisoner 244).
abstrait du désir qui permet de régenter même ceux qui échappent; cette mise dans la loi de ce qui est hors la loi” (Désir 13). In Genet’s last narrative, desire mysteriously transcends the constraints of this normatising law, as Subha Xavier so eloquently attests: “[...] le jeu du désir [...] s’étend interminablement sur les pages du roman, qui se dit et se redit dans la poésie du texte et qui emprunte les voies cabalistiques de l’énigme, du fantasme et du mythe” (116). To be sure, desire is elevated in Un Captif amoureux to an undefinable, almost metaphysical matter, of which, to cite Hocquenghem once again, “[p]ersonne n’éliminera la polyvocité” (Désir 13). Desire therefore cannot be reduced to mere homosexual attraction (although there is of course plenty of this in Genet’s last work); rather, it must be understood in transcendant terms of “la reconnaissance du genre humain,” or what Genet terms “le tout homme” (Heyndels, “Nuit” 119).

The concept of “le tout homme” places into intimate dialogue Genet’s last work with his meditations on Rembrandt and Giacometti. In these earlier writings, Genet tells two versions of the same anecdote in which he experiences an epiphany—a “sudden intuition”—about the equiprimordiality of singularity and multiplicity.136 This anecdote, in which the writer apprehends for the first time the “douloureux sentiment” that “l’être humain serait ramené à ce qu’il a de plus irréductible: sa solitude d’être exactement equivalent à tout autre” (“Atelier” 25), marks Genet’s transcendence of “la fausse immédiateté première de la beauté” (Heyndels, “Image” 73). This transcendence is to have a massive impact on the way in which the writer comes to apprehend revolutionary struggle, as Robert F. Aldrich notes:

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136 See Heyndel’s “Image, imaginaire, imaginal” for a foundational discussion of the role art plays in conveying Genet’s articulation of the singular vis-à-vis community and the universal in Un Captif amoureux.
Abjuring sexual lust for a higher appreciation of physical beauty, in an almost Socratic fashion, Genet thereby makes the revolution itself—even more than the revolutionaries—the object of desire and commitment, and thereby, by his engagement with the Algerians and Palestinians, develops a theory fusing the personal and the political: the ‘ultimate seduction.’ (360)

Base aesthetics are swept away, supplanted by the realization that any object and any body is worthy of being the subject of art, a lesson Genet internalizes when Giacometti says to him: “Comme vous êtes beau! […] Comme tout le monde, hein? Ni plus, ni moins” (“Ce qui est resté” (21).

The implication of this interplay between art and the articulation of the singular in terms of the universal is encapsulated within Genet’s assertion “Chacun est l’autre et les autres,” articulated in “Ce qui est resté d’un Rembrandt déchiré en petits carrés réguliers, et foutu aux chiottes” (26). As if it were a fragment of the whole of Genet’s last work, this is a strange and unusual statement which inducts us into the realm of a highly abstract philosophical proposal grounded in an equally abstract notion of aesthetics. Considering Genet’s statement on a purely syntactical level, we begin with a thought of singularity—of the particular—in terms of “chacun.” Here we are confronted with notions of finitude, historicity: a discrete ingredient in what is generally called the public. Then, we transition toward a thought of multiplicity or, rather, a sociality that is more than what we understand as the public. Yet, this notion of multiplicity goes much further in Genet’s work, toward a sort of immanence which refuses to establish or sustain reified subjectivity. Ultimately, this transcendence leads to a kind of historiographical habitus which embraces history in the very art of disappearance: “Ce que l’on appelle la réalité s’efface toujours, pour Genet, au profit de son spectre qui est l’art […]” (Ceccatty, “Spectre” 31). For, Genet, art, revolution, and poetry are all grounded in the affirmation
of a new, ephemeral beauty “si vive qu’elle découvrait immédiatement ce qui la mettait en accord avec toutes les beautés du monde s’arrachant à la honte” (“Quatre Heures,” in Ennemi 261). This beauty disappears in its transcendence of what is merely apprehended by the human eye, to be found instead in the sublime realms of dignity and violence.\textsuperscript{137}

In this new beauty, Genet embraces a sort of queering of his own homo-erotic desire in its transcendence toward new, unexpected and transitory sites of love. The Palestinian women in particular prove an irresistible magnet for the writer:

[...] je compris assez vite la vie très menue des Palestiniennes dans les camps. Composée des mêmes points de broderie des vieilles robes, la mémoire ancienne des Palestiniennes est un assemblage de mémoires minimales et momentanées mises bout à bout afin de savoir qu’il faut acheter du fil, coudre trois boutons, reprimer un fond de culotte, retourner chez le marchand pour un peu de sel, et le temps qu’il faut pour tenir la bride dans l’épaisseur de l’oubli aux misères passées ou ajouter aux souvenirs indispensables, au sel, au fil, aux boutons, la mémoire des morts, des combattants, les œufs, le thé, quelle vie interrompue! Et en plus rester très noble d’attitude dans le veuvage au milieu de treize enfants. (Captif 376-77)

Bearing each new day among the rubble of the past, with death and misery internalized to the point of perfunctoriness…such is the ascetic path to subjectification traveled by these Palestinian women. Their unbearable memories, composed of interchanged threads of past suffering, bind the seams of a common, shared garb of an inalienable nature which all the women inhabit, rendering their community more beautiful through magical mechanisms akin to Mauss’ total prestation. Within the timelessness of their “vie ininterrompue” resides the multiplicity Genet refers to when he states, “Chacun est l’autre et les autres,” for there is no finitude, no “chacun” to be found here, but rather a serendipitous stop along a succession of “sauts du désir” made newly possible. Through

\textsuperscript{137} Genet speaks of violence in very specific terms, to be discussed later in this chapter.
art, then, Genet comes to know what he describes as a certain “sensibilité devant la poussière, devant des choses comme ça” (Ennemi 220), which allows him to cast aside inutile notions of beauty in order to recast them “sur un autre mode poétique” (Heyndels, “Image” 76). Through this poetic lens, binary divisions between the particular and the universal crumble, and space, time, geography, gender and nationality lose their obstructive power over desire.

**The Oriental Panther**

The collapse of artificially determined frontiers allows us to approach Edward Saïd’s theory of Orientalism from a more expansive consideration. I therefore posit the Black Panther Party as an anti-imperial community operating and residing outside the defined territory of the “Orient,” yet which nevertheless serves as a constructed foil to Occidental identity. In this context, it is necessary to view the Black Panthers not only as a political organization but as a community as well: the Panthers’ Community Services Initiatives affected many levels of care for black communities across the United States, ranging from free breakfast programs for children to legal aid and education (Abron 182). Their efforts proved to be a direct affront both to the values espoused by white America and to the ghettoization of black Americans, occasionally contributing to effecting change in policy on both state and federal levels. As Genet points out in an interview

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138 Such initiatives are too numerous to detail in the present discussion. However, Stanford University’s on-line project, The Black Panther Party Research Project, provides a comprehensive list of the Black Panther Community Programs. Stanford’s project is an ever-growing academic site designed to provide information for individuals seeking primary and secondary sources about the Black Panther Party. It has proved invaluable to my research on the Panthers’ history, providing me with a rich bibliography of related material.

139 It should be noted that the Black Panthers opposed working “within the system” (i.e., petitioning Congress, meeting with legislators, etc.) as they viewed such activities as collaborating with the
with Juan Goytisolo, the Panthers are of interest to him because “ils luttent contre les formes de vie aliénantes destinées à conforter la suprématie blanche, occidentale et chrétienne” (qtd. in Neutres 47). Genet’s assessment of the Panthers’ struggle against Occidental supremacy re-orient the Orientalist gaze, extending Saïd’s theoretical approach across cultural and geographical contexts, both in terms of the agency constructing this gaze as well as the ways in which its subject/object responds to it.

I caution against any conflation of the Black Panther Party with the Palestinian fedayeen, even if Genet himself draws direct correlations between them. Genet associates the two groups, for example, through oppressive discourse (“The Black Panthers and the Palestinians...all have fought windmills: windmills of racist language and the fear that follows it” (qtd. in Laroche 119)), through issues of territory: “La terre manque aux Noirs comme elle manque aux Palestiniens” (Captif 118), and through a reflexive characterization of the entities as “deux nations spoliées, dépouillées de leur identité par l’impérialisme” (qtd. in Neutres 235). Such points of commonality serve to bolster my argument that Orientalism can be applied as a theoretical tool beyond the parameters initially posited by Saïd. To explore beyond these parameters, I will trace in Un Captif amoureux the discursive sites of power made possible by the mechanisms of oppression as well as the ways in which the Black Panther narrative unabashedly blends desire and enemy. In a letter to Genet, George Jackson equates such endeavors with “teaching, like Bill Cosby, the creed of slavery by performing a new take on the old negro servant” (Ennemi 115). Much of the Panthers’ success on effecting policy changes stemmed from shaming the government and inciting black and white Americans to take action against government inaction. The Party’s official newspaper, The Black Panther, routinely published news stories covering events related to police brutality as well as the government’s concerted efforts to perpetuate poverty and deprivation in black communities. The entire April 27, 1969 edition of the newspaper, for example, was devoted to the breakfast program for children, providing statements on the motivations behind the program, interviews with children and families benefiting from it, and photo-documented reports of breakfasts being broken up by law enforcement in Des Moines and other cities.
politics in a move that, according to Jérôme Neutres, may ring false today but is wholly characteristic of the 1960s (16). Throughout my discussion, I will refer to Genet’s narrative of the Palestinian revolutionaries to illuminate points of contrast and comparison. I will also elide parts of Saïd’s historical and geographical considerations of what constitutes the “Orient” and instead focus on what mobilizes Orientalism as a discursive and institutionally sanctioned channel through which one culture “gain[s] in strength and identity by setting itself off against another as a sort of surrogate” (Orientalism 3).

As a theory, Orientalism brings to light how central societal interests of the Occident—including but not limited to judiciary, educational, penal and economic institutions—come together to reshape and exercise authority over the Orient in order to shore up and sustain (in the sense of nourishing) the grand narrative of nationalism (Orientalism 3). In Un Captif amoureux, Genet shows this dynamic to be rooted in institutional power by revealing the ways in which cultural and discursive sites of knowledge pathologize, systematically catalogue, and contain not only “Orientals,” but black Americans as well. Like the Palestinian refugees dispossessed of their land, for instance, American blacks have been forced into the restrictive zones of the ghetto. This act of containment serves economic as well as strategic purposes of “self-preservation” for the white America identity:

La terre manque aux Noirs comme elle manque aux Palestiniens. Les deux situations—Noirs américains et Palestiniens—ne sont pas les mêmes en tout point, mais en cela que les uns et les autres sont sans terre. Proprement martyrisés, à partir de quel territoire vont-ils préparer la révolte? Le ghetto, mais ils ne peuvent ni s’y retrancher—il faudrait des remparts, […]—ni s’en arracher pour mener une guerre sur le territoire blanc: tout le territoire d’Amérique est aux Américains blancs. (Captif 142)
African Americans are thus thrust into rigid socio-economic hierarchies, physically marginalized into poverty-stricken ghettos, inferior schools, separate dining and washroom facilities, and, of course, the prison system. As long as black Americans are “kept in their place,” so goes Genet’s Zola-esque accusation of the United States being a racist regime (*Ennemi* 58), white Americans are free to consolidate their national grand narrative based on notions of “Manifest Destiny” and “American Exceptionalism,” to view themselves as the product of “the greatest experiment in democracy,” as “self-made successes,” and as “good Christians.” The tenacity of this grand narrative is made evident on news cycles even today, as politicians proffer platitudes and jingoisms affirming America’s status as the “World’s Greatest Nation” despite a plethora of statistical evidence to the contrary.\(^{140}\)

The intermingling of the Black Panther narrative with that of the Palestinians brings to light diverse sites of institutional power which sustain the grand narratives of both American nationalism and Occidental prerogative. The might of the two is such that both the Panthers and the Palestinians bear the weight of the knowledge that, despite all the successes and failures in their revolutionary efforts, their stories will remain untold by the powerful media networks in the service of the institutions of power. As Genet points out:

> Il faudrait accepter que ceux que vous nommez terroristes sachent eux-mêmes, sans qu’il soit besoin de les en prévenir, qu’ils ne seront, leur personne physique et leurs idées, que de brefs éclairs sur un monde aux élégances épaisses. Fulgurant, Saint-Juste savait sa fulgurence, les Panthères Noires leur brilliance et leur disparition, [...] ; les feddayin sont\(^{140}\)

\(^{140}\) Examples of political pundits and aspirants perpetuating the grand narrative of American nationalism are legion. On January 29, 2012, for example, Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, is quoted as saying, “Instead of turning America and transforming us into something we wouldn’t recognize, it’s time to return America to the principles that made us the greatest nation on earth” (Man).
aussi des balles traçantes, sachant que leur trace s’efface en un clin d’œil.
(296-97).

The mechanisms of Occidental (a term which clearly encompasses the United States) power operate against the Palestinians and the Black Panthers with equal ease and in similar ways; they invite an expansive application of Orientalism as a theoretical tool, pushing it beyond the limits of the Orient in a project Saïd apparently anticipated:

Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or—as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory—taken over. The point is that the very designation of something as Oriental involved an already pronounced evaluative judgment […]. Since the Oriental was a member of a subject race, he had to be subjected […]. The locus classicus for such judgment and action is to be found in Gustave Le Bon’s *Les Lois psychologiques de l’évolution des peuples*. (Orientalism 207)

Saïd refers to Gustave Le Bon’s work as an exemplary model of how the mediated production of cultural texts drives the discursive mechanisms of Orientalism. Le Bon is best remembered for his understanding of social action or “crowd psychology,” yet he also expounded theories of, among others, national traits, racial superiority, and psychological control of the masses through propaganda. His work generated tremendous interest and enjoyed broad dissemination, ensuring professional accolades as well as institutional support from the Third Republic (Barrows 98). Le Bon’s research on race, broadly influenced by theories of social Darwinism, was translated into several languages, and there is evidence that the fascist theories of leadership which emerged during the 1920s owed much to his theory of crowd psychology (Barrows 112). Not surprisingly, Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* drew in part on the propaganda techniques proposed in Le Bon’s writings, and Mussolini purportedly kept a translated copy of *La Psychologie des foules* by his bedside (Barrows 113). Clearly, Le Bon’s research in racial
classification offered a powerful tool for pathologizing people and was, as Saïd suggests, a requisite first step for the marginalization of the “Other” on a massive scale. The practical success of such measures is brought to light by Genet’s reflections on his own educational formation as a young boy in the French public school system:

[... ] quand j’allais à l’école, donc de six ans jusqu’à douze ou treize ans, l’Orient, donc l’Islam, m’a toujours été présenté dans les écoles françaises—je pense que c’est la même chose dans les écoles autrichiennes, au moins à cause des Turcs—l’Islam m’a toujours été présenté comme l’ombre porté de la chrétienté. Je vivais, moi, petit Français, dans la lumière. Tout ce qui était musulman était dans l’ombre. Et dans l’ombre que je faisais à l’Islam depuis les croisades. (Ennemi 281)

Genet implicates himself (“l’ombre que je faisais à l’Islam”) in the marginalization of the “Other,” thereby illustrating how individuals are inexorably inducted into the mechanisms of Orientalism over the course of their social construction. He also makes an important reference to the same dynamic taking place in Austria. Historical and socio-economic factors may vary from country to country (post WWII Germany, for example, brought workers from Turkey in order to address labor shortages, exacerbated by the subsequent erection of the Berlin Wall), but the systemic operational mechanisms of Orientalism remain constant and, therefore, iterative. Guy Hocquenghem’s assessment of the teleological role of history in subject formation echoes closely Genet’s reflections:

Nous, Français, sommes nés aveugles dans le monde clos d’un pays sans rencontres, sans métissages. Notre blancheur, notre fadeur, notre maladresse de naissance sont l’œuvre de l’Histoire. [...] Aveugle et sourd, on tâte dans un monde bien plus vaste qu’on ne l’avait fait croire. (Beauté 9)

Hocquenghem shines light on yet another mechanism of Orientalist “containment”: the dynamic of “out of sight, out of mind” whereby the French, according to his narrative, objectify the Oriental by the very act of ignoring him. Even if the Oriental succeeds in
trespassing within the Gallic “monde clos,” the rapid proliferation of ghetto communities will ensure his continued invisibility.

Beyond the historico-geopolitical parameters pertaining to the Orient, therefore, these mechanisms of Orientalism can be understood to reduce other groups of subjugated people to monolithic, subordinate and ahistorical categories as well. As New Historicist interpretations are subjectively filtered through one’s own set of historically conditioned viewpoints, I would like to point out the fact that, not dissimilar to Genet’s educational formation vis-à-vis the Orientalist image taught in French schools, the education I received as a young student in the United States relegated African Americans (“Negros” in the vernacular of the era) to the shadows, tracing their ancestry to “savages” from disparate, nomadic tribes in Africa who ultimately benefitted from the Christian indoctrination and civil order “imparted” to them by the white colonizers of America. The historical details related to the forced labor upon which the United States was built, the cruel and methodical ways in which black Americans were silenced in the post-Emancipation electoral process (a phenomenon which, incidentally, is experiencing a dynamic rebirth in American politics today), and the legally and socially sanctioned ostracization to which they were subjected, were simply not discussed during my formative years as a student. In my personal experience, the details and implications of slavery were whitewashed in the school curriculum: slavery was instead characterized as a difficult yet small price for Africans to pay for admission into the Great Society. Such problematic constructions, inhabiting the imaginary well beyond one’s formation in the educational system, are perpetuated through the iteration of stereotypes in literature, visual images in popular culture, and the physical ghettoization of subjected
communities, among others. These constructions are, I believe, problematized by Genet as much in his narrative of the Black Panthers as they are in his narrative of the Palestinians.

The reductive act of cataloguing and marginalizing groups of people always operates as a reflexive process by which the One defines its own culture, sense of dominance, and “natural” identity in relation to the constructed, subordinate Other (Saïd, *Orientalism* 206). Seen in this light, the mechanisms that make possible the Orientalist construction of identity go beyond the dynamic binary of Occident/Orient. Again, Saïd appears to anticipate such implications to his theory:

> The construction of identity [...] involves the construction of opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us.’ Each age and society re-creates its ‘Others.’ Far from a static thing then, the identity of self or of ‘other’ is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies. (Saïd, *Orientalism* 332; my emphasis)

My desire to visit the portion of Genet’s narrative concerning the Black Panthers through an expanded application of Saïd’s theoretical lens is not mere vagary; the fact that the narratives of Genet’s time spent among the Palestinians and among the Black Panthers are intimately interwoven in one book invites the operation. As Jérôme Neutres points out, “Le monde est dans ce texte une ‘page blanche,’ où les ‘signes noirs’ qui la rendent ‘lisible’ sont la lutte des Palestiniens et des Noirs américains, avant-garde de la révolte annoncée de tous les peuples sans terre, sans avenir, immigrés, colonisés, nomades” (18). The Palestinians and the Panthers are both integral parts of the “*routes du sud,*” as Neutres so aptly characterizes the cultural and geographical paths explored over the course of the writer’s lifelong peregrinations. In a letter to his friend, Ann Bloch, Genet
transcends the geographical bounds of Saïd’s theory by uniting seemingly disparate geographical coordinates, ranging from the African “Orient” to the Americas. Of his desire to abandon moribund Europe, which he had grown to despise, Genet tells Bloch of his plans to explore what he fluidly calls the “South”: “Je vais partir dans quelques jours. Pour quel Sud sableux, pour quel Tombouctou vide de mystère […] je descends avec regret vers les Algéries, Niger, Congo, et puis les Amériques” (qtd. in Neutres 26).

In *Genet sur les routes du sud*, Neutres offers a rigorous analysis of Genet’s Black Panther narrative, yet his discussion tends to focus on the ways in which Genet seeks to see himself through the objects of his (erotic) gaze. According to Neutres, Genet’s self-description as “Le Noir aux couleurs blanches et roses” would be, if we are to read Genet à la lettre, “l’image que l’écrivain projette de lui dans ses textes. Conséquence littéraire de cette identification du narrateur avec l’objet de son récit” (128). Neutres’ assessment is borne out by numerous instances in *Un Captif amoureux* whereby Genet self-identifies with members of the Black Panther Party and the Palestinian fedayeen, of which his account of meeting David Hilliard is but one example: “Témoin privilégié d’un mystère, je n’appartenais plus à la carté des Blancs. […], je descendis très à mon aise, dans le monde obscur” (354). In the Black Panthers, Neutres concludes, “Genet […] rencontre une sorte d’alter ego” (48). However, as thoughtful as his analysis is of Genet’s Black Panther narrative, Neutres stops short of exploring the dynamic role played by the literary aspect of Genet’s last book. His discussion tends to rely on linear narrative while suppressing the role of spatial and temporal “hiccups” and digressions that characterize the delocalizing aspect of *Un Captif amoureux*. Excluded as well are Genet’s observations of the mechanisms of power that allow for the pathologization and
marginalization of black Americans and the specific ways in which the Black Panthers counter this “désespoir [qui] nappe tout le people noir” (Captif 354). In other words, elided is that part of Genet’s narrative and literary project which calls attention to the abjection inflicted upon black Americans and the unique ways in which the Black Panthers respond to it in their effort to universalize the needs, voices, and rights to freedom of subaltern minority communities.

Judith Butler provides an additional theoretical springboard for my discussion. Butler theorizes the ways in which contingent forms of agency arise in abject communities denied subjecthood and forced to live “unlivable” lives (Bodies xi). Even though Butler’s overall theory focuses on gendered behavior as a “performance” imposed upon the subject by normative heterosexuality, her specific theory of abjection bears on alternative coordinates of social difference by exploring forms of abjection linked to, among others, colonialism and racialization. Butler offers what she herself calls “a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts” (“Performative” 270). Her theory questions to what extent our acts are determined for us by our place within language and convention. Identity itself, she argues, is an illusion retroactively created by our performances: “In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief” (“Performative” 271). This belief is grounded in notions of stable identities and gender differences compelled “by social sanction and taboo,” so that our belief in “natural” behavior is really the result of coercions (ibid). A particular effect of such coercions is the
creation of that which cannot be articulated, “a domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies” (Bodies xi) that, through abjection by the “normal” subject, helps the “other” subject constitute itself. For Butler, this zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will in fact “constitute that site of dreaded identification against, which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life” (Bodies 3). Because this process of subjectification is not natural, Butler uses the abjected domain to question and “rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility” (Bodies 3). By unmasking the artificial and performative dimensions of gender identity, she troubles the definition of gender and challenges our notions of fixed identity. All of this takes us back to Genet’s narrative of the Black Panthers, which brings to light the historical and socio-political forces that disenfranchised and objectified black Americans, relegating them to the ghetto-matrixes of abjection while serving to bolster the grand narrative of nationalism for white America. Embodying much of the social, cultural, and revolutionary identitary radicalism emblematic of the May 68 zeitgeist, Genet’s account of the Black Panthers bears witness to the emergence of collective forms of agency from within the very institutions and discourses that would deny subjecthood to the subaltern.

May 68, Genet, and Panther Revolution

One of the finest accounts of the historical details of Genet’s engagement with the Black Panthers is provided by Edmund White in his 1993 book, Genet: A Biography. I refer to White’s work for much of my discussion of the general historical context of Genet’s time spent among the Black Panthers, how he came to join that particular field of action, and
what the ramifications of their shared experiences were vis-à-vis international awareness brought to the movement’s cause. I also turn to an article written by Robert Sandarg, published in the *Journal of Black Studies* in 1986. In “Jean Genet and the Black Panther Party,” Sandarg delves into the day to day intricacies of the challenges faced by the Black Panther Party and the ways in which Genet was instrumental in bringing to light and countering the systemic and institutional causes of them.

Genet’s engagement with the Black Panthers dates to 1970 when he was contacted in Paris by two representatives of the International Section of the Black Panther Party. The International Section was founded in Algeria with the express goal of fostering coalitions with socialist movements in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe. At that time, Genet stated he was impressed by the fact that the Panthers had a Marxist, class analysis of oppression and that, unlike other Black groups who defined their oppression in terms of race, they were willing to link up with leftist causes all over the world (White, *Genet* 523). The international dimension to the Black Panther Party’s organization is frequently elided by historians, yet it reflects an important aspect of Genet’s substantial engagement with the movement. For over two months, he traveled among the Panthers throughout the United States, giving lectures on their behalf at over fifteen universities (White, *Genet* 533). During a period of crisis in which the entire Party was under siege by law enforcement and the FBI, every leading Panther except David Hilliard was in prison. Genet’s high profile in academic and literary circles allowed him to assist the Panthers in reaching beyond their base in urban black ghettos for assistance. Along with several Hollywood celebrities, such as Dalton Trumbo, Donald Sutherland, and Jane Fonda, Genet’s presence as a white, high profile international figure was of paramount
importance to the Panthers’ efforts to recruit white, middle-class, and student support to combat the racist criminal justice system (White, Genet 531). Sandarg suggests Genet’s repeated public accusations of government-sponsored racism even helped touch America’s conscience and contributed to favorable trial outcomes for some of the Panther members (271). Shortly after Genet’s rapid departure from the United States in order to avoid a summons to appear before immigration authorities for illegally entering the country, George Jackson was murdered in the San Quentin prison. This incident prompted Genet to make numerous statements about Jackson’s death on French radio, in the French print media, and in demonstrations before the end of 1971 (White, Genet 563-64). In the wake of the schism between Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver which precipitated the demise of the Black Panther Party as it was known at the time, Genet lost touch with internal Party affairs but remained in contact with his friends David Hilliard and Angela Davis. The book he promised them he would write on the “American Black nation” would ultimately become part of *Un Captif amoureux*.¹⁴¹

This last work by Genet is a strange and unusual text in which delocalization, so important to the May 68 post-structural legacy of deconstructing the fixity of identities and grand narratives, operates as a rhetorical trope on both structural as well as thematic levels. Neither the Black Panthers nor the Palestinians escape the relentless fragmenting and displacement exacted by the narrative; the whole of May 68 is equally implicated in the discursive cycle of displacement. After a lengthy reflection on Tunisia’s “selling out”

¹⁴¹ In a letter to Marianne de Pury, Genet discusses at length the reasons for which he chose to side with Huey Newton in his fall-out with Eldridge Cleaver. Genet also refers to the book he promised David Hilliard he would write on the American Black nation. (qtd. in White 562). True to the spirit of May 68 which resulted in intellectuals stepping aside in order to give voice to the marginalized, Genet originally envisioned this book to be a series of essays authored primarily by members of the Black Panther Party which he would edit (White 544).
to commercial and Western interests, for instance, Genet’s narrative leaps through time and space to bring the reader to the site of May 68:

C’était à ce point que je voyais la Tunisie s’amenuiser: toute de glaise le jour, elle était tournée et vendue sous forme d’amphores de terre cuite aux filles de Norvège. Elle finira par disparaître, me dis-je, cette Tunisie.

Quelques semaines plus tard, vers le milieu de mai 68, je retrouvai les mêmes plaquettes de poèmes en arabe, mais sans enluminures, à la gloire de Fatah dans la cour de la Sorbonne à Paris, le stand en était, je crois, près de Mao; en août l’Union soviétique écourta le Printemps de Prague. (32)

In this overlapping of narrative events, the reader is abruptly uprooted from the commercial stalls inundating Tunisian sidewalks to the courtyard of the Sorbonne. Here, Tunisia is metonymically reduced to cheap simulacrum destined for the swank dwellings of Western tourists, thereby feeding the nation’s own demise. At the Sorbonne, banners adorned with poems written to the glory of Fatah ensure a similar dissolution through the reification of the Palestinian revolutionary movement. The young activists manning the stands are, the narrator ironically observes, in good company—situated near the Maoists whose revolutionary aspirations are destined to end in aporetic self-enervation and dissolution just as the Palestinians’ assuredly will. The inevitable failure of revolution, fueled by the hubris of overly reified movements, is exemplified by the Soviet quelling of political liberalization in Czechoslovakia. In this passage, successive displacement appears to put into relief the inefficacy of revolutionary movements, articulating Genet’s apparent betrayal of such causes. Yet, if we approach the passage from a slightly different angle, might we not discern an urgent (and loving) warning to revolutionaries about the perils of self-aggrandizement and reification?

Admonition is woven throughout the narrative, assuming the role of itinerant literary meme:
Significantly, these ruminations over the reasons for which the Black Panther Party failed are directed to a young fedayee named Khaleb Abou Khaleb who, before retiring by the light of the evening campfire, dreamily asks Genet how the Black Panthers fought: “Comment combattaient les Black Panthers?”(72). The abrupt narrative shift reveals the reputation of the Black Panther Party to be a global one, having travelled to the far reaches of Jordan into the clandestine camps of the Palestinian revolutionaries. The message conveyed by Genet to the young fedayee is a didactic one: The main object of revolution is the liberation of man, tout court—and not to succumb to the trappings attendant to the momentum of the movement’s own power. Symbols and bravado serve their purpose in the push for revolution, but they must not become reified or made permanent. Once an official flag is hoisted, Genet reasons, it at once exalts people and restricts them, resulting in “une théâtralité qui châtre, qui fait mourir” (Ennemi 154)—the quintessential aporia of failed revolution.

Arguably, Genet’s involvement with the Black Panthers coincides directly with the politicization he undergoes during the May 68 revolution in Paris. General consensus marks May 68 as the generative instance of Genet’s “direct” engagement with politics, made evident by his first political treatise titled “Les Maîtresses de Lénine” (Ennemi iv). In this brief essay, Genet responds to several attacks against Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the de facto leader of the student branch of the May 68 movement, which call into question the
student’s German and Jewish background.\textsuperscript{142} Efforts to discredit Cohn-Bendit went so far as to advance self-contradicting theories of his being a hired agent provocateur for the CIA. Genet’s essay acerbically ridicules and debunks the attacks by reminding the public of similar efforts to defame Lenin in the earlier years of the twentieth century. Two aspects of Genet’s defense of Cohn-Bendit are particularly salient to the present discussion: a) Genet inextricably weds seduction and intelligence as key ingredients of attraction: “Je ne veux pas analyser le pouvoir d’attraction de Cohn-Bendit […] ni savoir s’il est fait de séduction ou d’intelligence—personnellement, je crois que les deux sont étroitement mêlés et je ne pense pas qu’il faille d’en désoler” (Ennemi 30) and b) even before May 68 “officially” ended, Genet presciently recognized the implications of the phenomenon, characterizing it as “un mouvement […] en voie de détruire, en tout cas de secouer, l’appareil bourgeois et, grâce à lui, le voyageur qui traverse Paris connaît la douceur et l’élégance d’une ville qui se révolte” (Ennemi 31). Gentleness and elegance are two adjectives Genet frequently returns to in his descriptions of revolution in general and the Black Panthers in particular. Before I turn to this important part of my discussion, however, I would like to point out an additional point of interest in Genet’s homage to Cohn-Bendit: Genet asks who, henceforth, is Cohn-Bendit to be? The answer to his own question paints the student protester as “[p]lus personne et tout le monde, cet Ariel s’évapore mais il devient l’idée de liberté […]” (Ennemi 31). Genet’s observation at once acknowledges the universalization of the previously marginalized student voice as

\textsuperscript{142} As Albert Dichy points out, numerous articles appeared throughout the month of May which referred to Cohn-Bendit as “l’anarchiste allemand” (penned by George Marchais, representative of the French Communist Party Bureau, in L’Humanité of May 3, 1968) with “des origines juives” (written by an unsigned author in Minute, number 318 pp. 4-5). (Ennemi 336)
embodied in Cohn-Bendit ("no longer anyone and everyone") as well as his ability to foil, just as Prospero’s pixie in *The Tempest*, attempts to undermine the student agitators.

For Genet, the contestation fomented by the striking students and workers represents a life-altering opportunity to participate in the destruction—albeit temporary—of the French nation he despised:

> En mai 68, je m’apercevais que j’étais tout à fait, et sans le rechercher, du côté des contestataires étudiants et ouvriers. En mai, la France que j’ai tant haïe n’existait plus, mais seulement, pendant un mois, un monde soudain libéré du nationalisme, un monde souriant, d’une extrême élégance, si vous voulez. Et mai a été saccagé par le retour en force du gaullisme et de la réaction. Je peux donc dire qu’en juin 68, ma tristesse et ma colère me firent comprendre que dorénavant je n’aurais de cesse que se retrouve, en France ou ailleurs, l’esprit de mai à Paris. Or, si je vous indique une disposition très subjective de ma personne, c’est afin de vous faire mieux comprendre à quel point je me trouve proche maintenant des Black Panthers. À l’échelle des États-Unis, peut-être à une dimension encore plus grande, c’est ce parti, c’est ce mouvement révolutionnaire qui est le plus capable de provoquer, quand il réussira, une explosion de joie et de libération, en quelque sorte déjà préfigurée par mai en France. (*Ennemi* 41-42)

This excerpt, culled from Genet’s essay titled “Il me paraît indécent de parler de moi” (reproduced in *L’Ennemi déclaré*), is one of the most elaborate explanations offered by Genet of what May 68 represents to him and how the historic event impacted on his affective ties, political commitments,143 travels, and quest for those “routes du sud.” As Genet states, his sadness and rage over the post-May 68 Gaullist consolidation of power triggered in him a determination to seek the “spirit of Paris’ May” anywhere he could.

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143 Often Genet’s affective ties would overlap with his political commitments. The camaraderie and shared interests in the prison system in France brought Genet and Michel Foucault together on many occasions, yet their relationship—both personal and professional vis-à-vis political activism—became strained over the former’s support of the Palestinians and the latter’s pro-Israel stand (White 569). Eventually, the two would part ways entirely upon Genet’s *rapprochement* with the communist party (*Ennemi* 361). Genet’s long ties to Jean-Paul Sartre also came to an end due to the latter’s refusal to speak in support of immigrant causes. Genet holds no punches in his criticism of Sartre’s silence, which Genet equates to complicity: “Evidemment, les intellectuels […] en refusant de hurler avec les opprimés, ils hurlent avec les loups” (*Ennemi* 122).
This continuous quest feeds the specter of May throughout *Un Captif amoureux* and reinforces the sense of delocalization, translated into the internal tasks and problems of the narrative itself.

Genet’s peripatetic existence in the wake of the post-May 68 consolidation of Gaullist power invokes Judith Butler’s observations concerning mourning. If, as Genet states, he felt rage and sadness as a result of France’s reversion to a heightened form of reactionary power, could an element of grief rooted in Freudian personal attachment not also come into play? Could it not explain, at least in part, the impetus for Genet’s drive to seek “Paris’ May” elsewhere? When considering the recurring nostalgic and reverent allusions to May 68 in *Un Captif amoureux*, it is not unreasonable to perceive bereavement as a lingering effect of the lost promise of the French May revolution. Is it not possible, then, that Genet himself is unprepared or unwilling to abandon what might be considered his proper grand narrative of revolution? May 68 serves after all as a privileged locus for Genet—a recurring touchstone for deciphering and navigating unfamiliar terrain, for ordering and explaining knowledge and experience. Upon meeting two young, enigmatic Frenchmen in the remote Palestinian camp of Wahdat, for example, Genet attempts to divine the reasons for their presence:

[J]e me demandais par quel goût d’une aventure pareille ils avaient traversé tant de pays? L’enchantement du Moyen-Orient, par exemple ‘dans l’Orient désert’, ‘l’orient de cette perle’, la maison de Loti à ‘Lorient’, mais aucune raison pareille ne semblait les avoir obligés à partir vers l’est, à refaire les voyages de Marco Polo. Un coup de tête fut-il la cause mystérieuse que le bang primordial dont on ne sait rien de ce qui le provoqua, pas même s’il eut lieu, d’ailleurs le coup, initial s’il fut, ne pouvait pas avoir eu de précédent, le voyage des deux Guy n’avait *que* des précédents. Après mai 68, étaient-ils partis pour Katmandou et avaient-ils découvert sur leur chemin les camps palestiniens? (*Captif* 231)
He considers in a wryly hyperbolic manner the possible reasons for which two young Parisians, both named Guy, might leave the comfort of their bourgeois existence (“Bien sûr ils étaient de Paris, sans l’accent faubourien”) to plant themselves in such rugged, alien, and dangerous surroundings. Ruling out the exotic lure of Pierre Loti’s “Lorient” as well as the unknowable forces of the “Big Bang,” Genet pinpoints May 68 as the only possible catalyst (“que des précédents”) for their desire to be there. The two Guys, exceptional specimens of what Genet calls the “écho d’une générosité née au bord de la Seine” (Captif 232), are products of the transformative moment of “mai 68 et sa découverte des peuples exploités, mais surtout exotiques” (Captif 232). In Genet’s assessment, the young Frenchmen embody the good and the hope born in Paris during that singular month.

Yet, however much May 68 might serve to orient Genet, it also seems to engender a sense of abandonment and loss for him. It was, after all, a unique moment in time now past, to be forever associated in Genet’s mind with an unprecedented clarity—“mai 68 et sa découverte des peuples exploités, mais surtout exotiques” (Captif 232). In the following description of his relationship with the Black Panthers, he embraces his abandonment, laying bare his orphan-like existence and basking in the maternal warmth extended to him by the Panthers:

[Les Panthères noires avaient, au lieu d’un enfant, découvert un vieillard abandonné, et ce vieillard était un Blanc. Puéril dans tous les domaines, [...]. Je réalisais là probablement un très vieux rêve enfantin, où des étrangers—mais au fond plus semblables à moi que mes compatriotes—m’ouvriraient à une vie nouvelle. Cet état d’enfance, et presque d’innocence m’avait été imposé par la douceur des Panthères, [...]. Or, déjà vieillard, redevenir un enfant adopté, était très agréable [...]. (Captif 138)
Genet relishes the realization of a long-buried childhood dream in which he is to be rescued from an orphan’s plight by kind and kindred people. The child-Genet is keenly aware of his status as “Other” in the eyes of his French compatriots, and his return to innocence is a gift bestowed upon him by the Panthers, opening the path to “une vie nouvelle.” May 68 thus shows its bifidal aspect to Genet: as both harbinger of hope as well as instigator of the stirrings of childhood innocence, of the guileless hope of finding an affective home. Genet’s pull into the Panthers’ magnetic field reflects Butler’s understanding that grief and the attendant sense of vulnerability can be turned into a positive community-building experience. There is, after all, a performative dimension to melancholia tied into the psychic pain and self-disregard that it generates. Melancholia, Butler argues, motivates forms of collective cultural creativity which seek to “act out” and “work through” the state of melancholia through performance. Among the Panthers, Genet finds the conditions for collective cultural creativity based on what Butler calls the “interrelationship” with others:

The quick move to action is a way of foreclosing grief, refusing it, and even as it anaesthetizes one’s own pain and sense of loss, it comes, in time, to anaesthetize us to the losses that we inflict upon others. I think that an entirely different politics would emerge if a community could learn to abide with its losses and its vulnerability. It would know better what its ties to other people are. It would know how radically dependent it is on its interrelationship with others. [...] I think we would be able to understand something about the general state of fragility and physical vulnerability that people—as humans—live in. Our increased attunement to that could only make us more humane. (Precarious 117)

Of course, Genet’s precipitous participation in the Black Panthers’ revolutionary project might be interpreted as answering Butler’s claim that action, retaliation, and

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144 The narrative of Genet’s departure from Paris the day after he was contacted by the Black Panthers, his crossing the Canadian border into the US, and his whirlwind lecture tour could certainly be interpreted as what Butler calls a “quick move to action.”
violence serve to foreclose grief and to “anaesthetize one’s own pain and sense of loss.” It can just as easily be interpreted as reflecting his desire to assume his loss and vulnerability and to cultivate “interrelationships” with the Black Panthers. On this level, Genet conveys an additional longing for community in the sense of what Maurice Blanchot proposes in Une communauté inavouable. Genet’s rememoration of his time among the Panthers is characterized by a profound nostalgia and affection, undoubtedly fueled by the fact that the Panther Movement ultimately succumbed to insurmountable setbacks (“les échecs”) and fatal schisms (Captif 140-41). In Un Captif amoureux as well as in L’ennemi déclaré, the Black Panther narrative is characterized by what Blanchot calls “la hantise,” which is engendered by the desire of a community that is realized only upon its very disappearance, and to which an individual will accede only by renouncing it for the very impossibility that defines it. As is often the case with Genet, his actions and narrative are characterized by ambiguity, yet the element of mourning in the wake of May 68 is present in either interpretation.

If grief propels Genet’s perpetual delocalization, it also leads him to the Black Panther Party, which, as he puts it, represents the greatest hope of realizing a poetic revolution characterized by the joy and liberation prefigured in May 68 (Ennemi 42). The poetic specter of the May 68 revolution, engrained in Genet’s thinking, inhabits his writing: “[...] vers le milieu de mai 68, je retrouvai les mêmes plaquettes de poèmes en arabe, mais sans enluminures, à la gloire de Fatah dans la cours de la Sorbonne à Paris” (Captif 32). To speak of the “émotion poétique” (Ennemi 45), of the “double combat, poétique et révolutionnaire” which characterizes the revolutionary tactic of the Black Panther movement, Genet expresses the need for a “vocabulaire neuf” (Ennemi
As a writer, Genet jealously guards his role as poet *par excellence*, eschewing, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre’s posture as grand philosopher—as “maître à penser d’une très pittoresque bande déjà débandée” (White, *Genet* 274 and *Ennemi* 122). All of this is to suggest, undoubtedly, that philosophy lends itself less ably than poetry to the cause of revolution. Philosophy also proves inadequate for Genet as he ponders the passage of time and the inevitability of growing old. Instead, he turns to poetry:

> Le souvenir arrive par ‘éclats d’image’, et l’homme qui écrit ce livre voit sa propre image, très loin, dans les très petites mensurations d’un nain devenant de plus en plus difficile à reconnaître, puisque toujours plus âgé. Cette dernière phrase n’est pas une plainte, elle essaie de donner l’idée de la vieillesse et la forme qu’y prend la poésie […]. (*Captif* 192)

In this instance of *mise-en-abîme*, Genet obliquely situates himself with the reader by assuming the role of “the man who writes this book.” His reflections on growing old home in on the impact distance and the passage of time bear on the form poetry takes in his work. Genet’s optic is filtered through a decidedly poetic lens, for, as Didier Eribon points out, he views poetry as the transformative matrix that makes possible “le travail que l’on fait sur soi pour être ce que l’on est” (*Morale* 23). Here, Eribon brings to light the important dimension of ascesis (i.e., “le travail”) in the poetic process of subjectification, which I will discuss in the following section.

There is of course the ever-present concupiscent dimension to Genet’s literary project, hence the interplay of the “double combat” of poetry and revolution (*Ennemi* 46) with a dose of highly charged homo-eroticism in his Black Panther narrative. This tactic however goes far beyond what Annie Cohen-Solal and other critics might have to say about Genet’s perceived sexual proclivity for the Panthers’ theatricalized virility. Instead, it operates as a powerful site of “performative exhibitionism” (Eribon, *Morale* 40) — a
key mechanism of subjectification for the members of the Black Panther Movement, to which I now turn.

**Black Panthers, Black Cocks**

Le Black Panthers Party n’était pas un organisme isolé, mais une des pointes des révolutionnaires. S’il se distinguait en Amérique blanche, c’est par son épiderme noir, ses cheveux crépelés et, malgré une sorte d’uniforme exigeant la veste de cuir noir, une très extravagante mais élégante façon de se vêtir: […] les jambes prises dans des pantalons de velours ou de satin bleus, roses, dorés, coupés de façon à mettre sous les yeux du plus myope une virilité lourde. (Genet, *Captif* 351)

In this brief description of the revolutionary dimension of the Black Panther Party, Genet demonstrates a May 68 re-articulation of the subject by exploding the world of dialectics beyond simplistic dualities. The contrast Genet draws is not only one between white man/black man, but also between white America/black cock. Here Genet addresses the very ontology of representation by simultaneously subverting the traditional mimetic system of reference grounded in the binary of One/Other and by introducing the notion of “performativity” into the equation. In this way, identity becomes grounded in performative behavior, challenging logocentric and essentialist understandings of what constitutes the subject.

In prosecuting this shift, Genet appropriates white America’s reductive characterizations of the black man as a well-endowed, simple-minded, intemperate “Other” occupying the fringes of society, and re-signifies them into audacious, theatrical, erotic parodies. Much like the Barcelonian drag queens in Genet’s *Journal du voleur* who, in a public gesture of defiance embodied in the performative ritual of eulogizing of a urinal corroded by the endless stream of sailors’ urine and cum, rise against their
persecution and ghettoization (72-73), so too the Black Panthers emerge from the shadows to seek light, to cast off shame in exchange for pride…to move through their abjection. The Panthers reject the branded mark seared into their flesh by what Sartre calls the “instant fatal” (Saint Genet: comédien 9), whereby an individual is indelibly injured for the first time by the categorization of what he or she is in the eyes of society (in this context it is important to recall Pierre Bourdieu’s explanation of the etymology of the word “category,” which derives from the Greek catègorein, meaning “to accuse publicly” (qtd. in Eribon, Morale 79)). The result is a new persona which the Black Panther revolutionary assumes in order to blast open stereotypes in an exaggerated and “in your face” military tactic, thereby highlighting the performative dimension of his existence, his determination to escape representation, and the erotic dimension of his proper ascesis.145 This heightened Brechtian theatricality, signified by outrageous costumes designed to dramatize ubiquitous enormous penis stage props, invades the imaginary in titillating and startling ways.

Extending as far back as the depictions of thieves and pimps in his first novel, Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs of 1943, the revered cock is a constant and privileged trope in Genet’s writing, functioning as an ever-evolving site of highly charged homoerotic energy. However, as it occurs in the midst of the memoir of his activism among the Black Panthers, I perceive this particular trope to signify a uniquely Genetian take on the racist commonplace that allows for a black man to be metonymically replaced by his penis. In other words, contrary to the assessments of, among others, Annie Cohen-Solal, I do not

145 According to Foucault, to whom I defer in my discussion of ascesis, once “le corps et ses plaisirs” are employed as a “contre-attaque” against society, ascesis becomes irrevocably grounded in the sexual (Volonté 208).
see Genet’s descriptions of the Black Panthers as mere apolitical reflections of homosexual desire. Cohen-Solal’s literary review of *Un Captif amoureux*, appearing in the May 1986 edition of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, focuses on what she calls Genet’s “inversion des valeurs” made evident in her eyes by the author’s frequent references to the sublime beauty of young Palestinian and Black Panther revolutionaries. Cohen-Solal’s review reduces Genet’s last book to “un regard qui laisse de côté tout à la fois argumentation, idéologie, stratégie politique et projet social. Un regard qui détecte la face esthétique, la puissance poétique des jeunes fedayins; jamais le sens de leur combat” (“Captif”). It is a facile interpretation that suggests Genet overlooks the political significance of the Black Panther Party. In the series of political essays and speeches that he wrote during and after the time he spent among the Panthers, Genet demonstrates a clear understanding of the type of Marxist vision the Panthers espoused, of their community service programs, and of their day to day struggles with local police, the FBI, etc.146 In an interview with Hubert Fichte, Genet puts to rest any doubt of his commitment to the cause of the Black Panthers or of the gravity of their revolutionary mission. He also carefully disengages the highly charged eroticism he attaches to the Black Panthers from a much more profound sentiment he has for them:

*Ce que [les Panthères] me demandaient était vraiment très, très pénible ; je continuais à prendre du nembutal puisqu’il fallait dormir. C’était des gars de dix-huit à vingt-cinq ans […] . David avait vingt-huit ans, avec une activité extraordinaire. Ils me réveillaient à deux heures du matin, il fallait que je vienne tenir une conférence de presse, à deux heures du matin et que je sois en état de répondre. Je vous assure que je ne pensais pas à faire l’amour. Et puis, un autre phénomène, c’est que je ne faisais pas de distinction entre les Panthers, je les aimais tous, je n’étais pas attiré par un

146 Most of these essays and speeches are compiled in *L’Ennemi déclaré* and are accompanied by invaluable annotations by Albert Dichy.

Genet’s insistence on the fact that he was never interested in seducing members of the Black Panther Party is corroborated by the fact that his involvement with them came at a time in his life which he himself characterized as “la fin de [sa] vie sexuelle” (*Ennemi* 174). If Cohen-Solal and others fail to apprehend raw sexual energy as a revolutionary tactic in Genet’s last book, they also overlook the fact that, as Eribon points out, “c’est le plaisir qui annihile l’oppression” (*Morale* 113).

If the bond Genet shares with the Black Panthers is dramatized in hyper-charged homo-erotic descriptions, it serves to shock and to make evident both the iterativity of stereotypes and the power eroticism wields in subverting them. In other words, the recurring trope of the imposing, powerful, and unavoidable black dick is a rhetorical weapon. Not only does Genet home in on the endlessly iterated stereotype of the black male in white America, but he throws it back in the face of the very people who propagate it. Genet delights in poking the bear, iterating in a most subversive manner what Mireille Rosello calls a “nondemonstrable statement” (37) by simultaneously *putting into relief* evidence corroborating the stereotype (“corduroy slacks cut to place under the most myopic gaze a heavy manhood”) while—by logical extension of the binary which is grounded in contrast and difference—ridiculing white American men for being endowed in quite the opposite manner. The bold privileging of the black man’s sexual organ also subversively rewrites of Lacanian phallogocentrism whereby, as in Wittig’s *Les guérillères*, the synthetic designation of the white, heterosexual male phallus as universal signifier in the symbolic system is shown to be arbitrary, patently ridiculous, and—as opposed to the great black cock—woefully inadequate. The white man is thus
out-cocked and displaced from the center of the symbolic order in exemplary Genetian fashion.

Of course the black cock is not the only privileged site of subversion for the Black Panthers. Their determination to escape the representation imposed upon them by white America is characterized by a range of visual, affective, and linguistic tactics which, however effective they may be in the short term, prove problematic in Genet’s final assessment. Adopting standard “Panther” types of hair, clothing, handshakes, and slogans (such as “All Power to the People” and “Black is Beautiful”), for example, at once exalts and eclipses the Movement’s revolutionary aspirations (Captif 74). As is reflected in his description of the Black Panthers to the young fedayee by the campfire, Genet’s overall narrative presents them less as a viable political movement than as an imposing visual presence—a potent, stylistic challenge to white America: “[L]eur mouvement, plus révolte poétique et jouée que volonté d’un changement radical, était un rêve flottant sur l’activité des Blancs” (Captif 248). Still, Genet reads in the Panthers’ regalia a semiotics of sexual aggression interpreted through metaphors steeped in eroticism: “Les Panthères portaient en riant, sur leur tête un sexe velu, serré” (Captif 359).

To be certain, the Black Panthers use their eroticism and physical appearance as weapons to show white America their numbers are legion, that they will no longer be ruled by fear, and that the ghettos can no longer contain them: “Que l’absence et l’invisibilité des noirs que nous disons morts soient bien comprises: elles demeurent activité ou plutôt radioactivité” (358). Emerging from the ghettos, which operate as sites of imperial exploitation as well as anti-imperial solidarity (Baldwin 298), the Black Panthers take form: “Le spontanée simulateur, son abjection le hisse peut-être à un
The wild, uncontrolled “pubic hairs” extending from the heads of the black soldiers announce their occupation of spaces previously denied them: the subway, the office building, and the elevator…diverse sites of the white man’s realm suddenly become encampments filled with armies of Black Panthers. The great afro would become a global symbol of Black Power, as is evident even today in Brazil where the English words “Black Power” are used to designate the afro hair style. As the Panther warriors rise up from their abjection and assert themselves in bold new ways, the profusion of “Black Pantherism” ensures their subjectification. True to Butler’s theory, “[d]e leurs misères ils ont fait une richesse” (Captif 81).

To conclude this discussion of the black cock as rhetorical trope, it must be acknowledged that, to be fair, Genet has a long history of depicting men—black, white, and otherwise—as incarnations of an unadulterated masculinity metonymically reduced to giant penises. However, his specific use of the Black Panthers to signify the apotheosis of erotic, revolutionary masculinity relies on a conscious exploitation and subversion of racist discourse that stereotypes black men as being violent, sexually fierce, and uncivilized. Genet’s writerly ability to evoke and re-signify erotically charged racist discourse is, I believe, unquestionably emblematic of the affective pull it exerts on his representations of racial stereotypes. Referring back to Mireille Rosello’s analogy of
“handling” stereotypes just as we do poison in the medicine cabinet, I would submit that Genet’s narrative of the Black Panthers—peppered as it is with references to black male sexuality—serves two purposes beyond whatever voyeuristic or fantasy-laden reductions some might seek to subject it: as already discussed, I perceive the persistent privileging of the Black Panther cock as an effective way of problematizing and subverting the binary of white man/black man, resulting in the emasculation of the phallus as universal signifier in the symbolic system and the attendant displacement of the white man from the privileged center of it. A second, less obvious observation stems from Genet’s reflections on why sexual images of the Black Panthers keep flooding his own mind:

Encore au début de 70, le Parti avait souplesse et raideur qui évoquaient un sexe mâle—aux éléctions ils préféraient son érection. Si les images sexuelles reviennent, c’est qu’elles s’imposent, et que la signification sexuelle du Parti—érectile—paraît assez évidente. Ce n’est pas qu’il ait été composé d’hommes jeunes, baiseurs qui déchargeaient avec leurs femmes aussi bien le jour que la nuit, c’est plutôt que, même si elles paraissaient sommaires, les idées étaient autant de viols gaillards mettant à mal une très vieille, déteinte, effacée mais tenace morale victorienne. (Captif 425)

Genet posits something he perhaps sees as self-evident: that the Black Panther Party’s semiotic power resides in sexual and, specifically, erectile signification. Panther politics are to be seen as more than a mere display of black male sexual prowess, but rather as a hyper-representation of black cock in the symbolic realm of images and ideas. Not only do the Panthers’ huge penises menace, but so do their afros, outrageous clothing, and stylized speech in a nexus of cultural signs designed to display anti-imperial solidarity. Their strut is erect and proud; their afros are electric pubic hairs that invade white physical space, and their ideas are filled with “viols gaillards” (lusty rapes) of white Victorian morality. Language is expressly made arcane and relentlessly filtered through a
black perspective (“Rien ne sera dit s’il n’est passé par le noir”). No longer will blacks cast their eyes to the ground as they cross paths with whites. Now, along with Tommy Smith and John Carlos of the 1968 Olympics, they stand tall, raising their fists in a show of Black Power.

Subjectification through Violence, Ascesis, Poetry, and Perpetual (R)evolution

The Black Panther Movement is characterized by Genet as being “pathétique et joyeux” while calling for “le sacrifice total [et] l’usage des armes” (Captif 82). In contrasting the Black Panthers’ good-humored ways with their penchant for aggression, Genet evokes both the ludic and the violent dimensions of May 68. Much has been written about the “spontaneous” and “festive” dynamic of the May events; much less has been said about the other half of the story. As Kristin Ross points out:

‘No one died in ’68.’ This much-repeated phrase is, in fact, false. But its reiteration must be read as a symptom of an attempt to lend a good-natured, bon enfant, almost misty quality to the insurrection and its participants—both the militants and the State. (12)

The violent state repression that brought an end to the May-June events has been whitewashed, accompanied by a temporal reduction of the events to “May” despite the fact that strikes continued for weeks afterward across France, and leftist insurgency continued well into the early 1970s. The field of action is also reduced to Paris and, more specifically, to the peripheral neighborhoods surrounding the Sorbonne. In other words, the narrative has been “contained” by pundits and historians who have, as Ross points out, “abdicated their responsibilities and left this event […] open to a high degree of instrumentalisation” (5). In Genet’s Black Panther narrative, I interpret the Panthers’
aggressiveness to serve as a foil to the teleological rewriting of May 68 advanced by, among others, the New Philosophers (see Introduction).

Genet’s observations may also be interpreted as an additional manifestation of what Butler calls a contingent form of agency, arising in abject communities denied subjecthood and forced to live “unlivable” lives (Bodies xi). According to Genet’s account, the Black Panthers internalize the oppression, ghettoization, and humiliation inflicted upon black Americans, channeling it into violent expressions of agency: “La violence il ne pouvait l’avoir qu’en la nourrissant des misères du ghetto. Sa grande liberté intérieure était possible par la guerre que lui faisaient la police, l’administration, la population blanche et une partie de la bourgeoisie noire” (82). In this single observation, Genet shines light on the breadth of mechanisms of institutional power that, just as Saïd posits, operate to catalogue, pathologize, and physically contain the subaltern. The mechanisms are so pervasive that even middle class black Americans—whom George Jackson and others refer to as “Uncle Toms” (Ennemi 115)—join the ranks of the oppressors. One of the most potent sites of institutional power to facilitate the task of “containing” is the penal system, which imposes on prisoners what Genet calls a “condition d’humilié” (Ennemi 27). The word “humilié” in French bears several meanings, such as “humbled,” “abased,” “chagrined,” and “humiliated.” Whatever the translation, the “condition humilié” can be generative. To illustrate the point, Genet associates imprisoned Panther George Jackson with the Marquis de Sade and Antonin Artaud for having a shared sense of justice in their ideas and visions (Ennemi 64-65). This sense of justice, born out of the “peine monstrueuse” of being denied liberty,

\[147\] Sade and Artaud were imprisoned in the Bastille and interned at the asylum of Rodez, respectively.
provokes intense physical, emotional, and spiritual ascesis in an individual, demanding “de son esprit et de son corps un travail à la fois délicat et brutal” (Ennemi 65). In Un captif amoureux, this ascesis plays a crucial role in the subjectification of oppressed people subjected to confinement. Here, significantly, Genet carefully teases out the difference between “liberté en liberté” and “liberté dans la contrainte” (356). Where the former is given, the second is wrested from the confined individual who, denied liberty, must dig deep within himself to seize it through “une ascèse éreintante” (an “exhausting asceticism”). Translated to the broader question of racial oppression in the United States, the ghettos to which American blacks are relegated serve as similar matricial sites of incarceration that allow for the cultivation of “une liberté érigée qui se confond avec la fierté” (Captif 356).

Returning to the question of violence as it relates to the Black Panthers in Genet’s narrative: a clarification of lexical terms is in order. According to Genet, there is a critical distinction to be made between violence and brutality. Violence, he reasons, can be benign, salutary, and wholly warranted. If, for example, a mother insists her child practice his ABCs instead of playing as he would prefer, she is performing an act of violence on the child. Brutality, on the other hand, is rooted in unjustified aggression. Genet reduces the terms to a Manichean contrast between the “brutalité des Israéliens” and the “violence des Palestiniens, qui est bonne” (Ennemi 284). As far as the Black Panther Movement is concerned, he argues, violence is not only warranted, but it serves as a virtuous path toward subjectification:

Les Noirs étaient vus, plus du tout comme soumis, comme hommes dont on défend les droits, mais comme attaquants acharnés, soudains, imprévisibles, et enfin dévoués jusqu’à la mort à leur engagement qui se confondait avec la défense du peuple noir. (Captif 75)
Violence is merely a complementary facet of the Panthers’ revolutionary mission, which Genet characterizes as elegant, a bit naïve, and “plus révolte poétique et jouée que volonté d’un changement radical” (248).

Genet’s appreciation for the poetic dimension to the Panthers’ revolutionary mission goes beyond his literary approach to apprehending revolution. I believe it speaks to the larger political question of what Genet thinks of and expects from revolution itself. If Genet repeatedly refers to the revolutionary engagement of the Black Panthers and the Palestinians as being “un poème” (358) and “une fiction,” respectively (248), it’s not to disparage their movements. After all, the success of the Black Panthers’ mission was, Genet points out, realized on the semiotic level of representation and signification through “la parade” as “une opération subversive dans les consciences” (Captif 142). He clearly states that, whereas the Panthers’ revolutionary battle to eradicate white America’s imperialism and fascism may have failed (while incurring significant collateral damage and sacrifice on behalf of the Panther warriors), the Panthers won the battle to effect change within the black community through poetry:

Les Panthères allaient donc dans la folie, soit vers la métamorphose de la communauté noire, soit dans la mort ou en prison. Le résultat de l’entreprise fut tout cela, mais c’est la métamorphose qui l’emporta, de loin, sur le reste, et c’est pour ça qu’on peut dire que les Panthères ont vaincu grâce à la poésie. (143; my emphasis)

Genet’s regard for the poetic dimension of revolution is, I believe, intrinsically tied to his desire for perpetual revolution. Trotsky advocated perpetual revolution for a variety of reasons, ranging from his desire to see communism spread on a global scale, to avoid the ossification and corruption of overly bureaucratized communist regimes, and undoubtedly—and I use the phrase again—“to poke the bear” known as Stalin. Genet, on
the other hand, claims to regard revolution from a purely selfish perspective—as being the indispensable condition for his ability to contest. True revolution, he says, demands submission and conformity (“adhésion”) to a movement, which he is not willing to give. Furthermore, true revolution, such as the one fomented by Mao in China, seeks to change the world, and for Genet changing the world threatens to deprive the world of sites of contestation:

La situation actuelle, les régimes actuels me permettent la révolte, amis la révolution ne me permettrait probablement pas la révolte, c’est-à-dire la révolte individuelle. Mais ce régime me permet la révolte individuelle. Je peux être contre lui. Mais, s’il s’agissait d’une véritable révolution, je ne pourrais pas être contre. Il y aurait adhésion, et l’homme que je suis n’est pas un homme d’adhésion, c’est un homme de révolte. Mon point de vue est très égoïste. Je voudrais que le monde, mais faites bien attention à la façon dont je le dis, je voudrais que le monde ne change pas pour me permettre d’être contre le monde. (Ennemi 156)

If Genet requires perpetual revolution in order to engage in individual revolt, and if he has an intolerable aversion to adhering to revolutionary doctrine, how then is he able to engage with the Black Panthers and the Palestinians in their respective revolutionary endeavors? This question leads to another instance of contradiction in Genet’s personal narrative. Yet, perhaps it is possible to reconcile the contradiction through the lens of poetry, which, Genet tells us, exceptionally defines the Black Panther and Palestinian revolutionary movements (Ennemi 46). Among these movements, Genet experiences “Une espèce de liberté” (Ennemi 282). For the self-appointed iconoclastic poet par excellence (White, Genet 274), then, poetry trumps the risk of doctrinaire submission.

The question of individual revolt resurrects the much-discussed debate between Sartre and Camus over questions of revolution, revolt, totalitarianism, and the attendant risks of reducing art and literature to agitprop. Despite a personal aversion to Camus,
Genet appears to agree with his assessment that individual revolt is a necessary measure for each person to take in order to destabilize—to trouble—oppressive political regimes. In a 1983 interview for the German *Die Zeit*, he states:

> Je connais mal Camus. Parce que l’homme m’agaçait. Je le connaissais…très moralisateur, celui-là! Non, je pense que même, si le monde est partagé entre deux grandes puissances—vous faites allusion aux États-Unis et à l’Union Soviétique—, la révolte de chaque homme est nécessaire. On accomplit des petites révoltes quotidiennes. Dès qu’on met un tout petit désordre, autrement dit dès qu’on fait son propre ordre singulier, individuel, on accomplit une révolte. (*Ennemi* 281)

Of course, revolution serves to create disorder as well. In this light, revolution and individual revolt share the common goal of “troubling the system.” The crucial difference—the existential and ethical difference—is clearly stated by Genet: “[F]rom the moment an individual creates his proper, singular, individual order of things, he accomplishes a revolt.” Where revolution inducts, consumes, absorbs, and swallows the individual by demanding “adhésion” to the movement, revolt allows for subjectification through personal freedom.

**Troubling the Grand Narrative of Nationalism**

How do acts of oppression perpetrated against African Americans help to consolidate the grand narrative of national identity for white America? How, too, does Saïd’s theory of Orientalism actually translate to this specific dynamic? Orientalism is a potent theoretical touchstone for conceptualizing beyond local situations, elucidating broader dynamics of authority and subjection, presenting an understanding that might travel from one situation to another, and weaving theory with the praxis of delocalization. The fact that Saïd’s argument is constructed upon the premise of the binary of
Occident/Orient is not an impediment to iterativity. If reified, after all, theory becomes mechanistic, hermetic, and dogmatic; it loses its fluidity and transdisciplinarity. From this perspective, theoretical work should in the broadest sense be open to translation. The desire to approach Saïd’s theory from a more expansive perspective stems from my encounter with an exemplary Genetian paradox: how to go about discussing subjectification, racialization, pathologization, colonization, etc., in terms of two very different revolutionary movements which are intrinsically bound in a complex interweaving narrative. The sheer breadth of geographies, cultures, and colonial histories falling within the purview of Saïd’s theory of Orientalism invites relocation—or dislocation—and actuates an extraterritorial articulation of the alternative “emergent” moments of social identification and cultural enunciation articulated in Genet’s Black Panther narrative. The result is a breaching or displacement of the original paradigms established by Saïd as the local or specific is articulated into a generalizing discourse. The outcome is my own translation of Orientalism, grounded in the postulation that the mechanisms of power that mobilize the theory are based in knowledge and are, therefore, iterative. Regardless how the geopolitical focus of Orientalism may shift, Saïd’s assertion that “Orientalism respond[s] more to the culture that produce[s] it than to its putative subject” (Orientalism 22) remains constant in my analysis.

Frantz Fanon once exhorted anti-colonialists “to detect and eradicate” the toxic remains of imperialism littering both the colonized’s mind and the land advocates’ struggle against the colonization of both psychic and physical territories (Damnés 239). Fanon’s description of this “double consciousness” evokes W.E.B. Du Bois’ earlier analysis of the black American who is plagued by “this sense of always looking at
[him]self through the eyes of others, of measuring [his] soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (2). The notion of psychic “déchirement” in the colonized is also elaborated by Albert Memmi in his 1957 *Portrait du colonisé, Portrait du colonisateur*. In this now classic study, Memmi argues that the psychic ripping apart of the colonized (“le déchirement essential du colonisé” 124) is potentially dangerous as long as the colonized individual fails to engage in a fundamental transformation of his colonized consciousness. In other words, revolting against the external manifestations of imperial rule without addressing the more pressing matter of one’s consciousness merely results in perpetuating the relational cycle between colonizer and colonized (Memmi 153). While none of these authors discusses the racially divided psyche of colonialism and racism with reference to Orientalism *per se*, their common accounts of incorporative identifications that result in racially divided psyches are bound up in what Saïd calls the “disposition of power and powerlessness in each society” (*Orientalism* 332).

The dynamic of psychic “déchirement” is illustrated in Genet’s Black Panther narrative by David Hilliard, who explains to Genet that the reason he prefers not to visit Stony Brook University is because: “Il y a encore trop d’arbres.”—“There are still too many trees” (*Captif* 81). Genet reflects on the implications of Hilliard’s reasoning: through Genet’s white man’s optic, he initially failed to apprehend how a scenic drive to the north shore of Long Island could evoke such terror in the young black man. In a handful of words, Hilliard metonymically condenses the long and terrifying history of lynching to the linguistic sign of the tree. In Saussurian terms, this sign stems from two disparate synchronic systems, each generating the same signifier yet radically different signifieds. Where Genet’s synchronic system brings to mind “une fête de feuillage,
d’oiseaux, de nids, de cœurs gravés et de noms entrelacés,” Hilliard’s evokes a gallow
(Captif 81). Genet identifies this moment as an epiphany, whereby Hilliard extends to
him the gift (“le don”) of peering into the “psychisme parcouru de hantises” which, as
Genet laments, white people will never know (81).148 Like the Palestinians and all the
others who fall within the realm of the Orient, black Americans have been systematically
colonized both physically and psychically, resulting in the Panthers’ greatest challenge
and greatest success: the metamorphosis of black consciousness (Captif 34).

In Un Captif amoureux, Genet elaborates a literary interpretation of Saïd’s
postulation that the “Orient help[s] to define Europe” (Orientalism 1) by bringing to light
the role subalterns play in the “writing” of white History. As a result of Genet’s
metaphorical conflation of Palestinians and American blacks with the typeface imprinted
on otherwise blank white pages, black Americans are brought into the theoretical arena as
equally important players in the construction of the grand narrative of white/Occidental
nationalism:

La page qui fut d’abord blanche, est maintenant parcourue du haut en bas
de minuscules signes noirs, les lettres, les mots, les virgules, les points
d’exclamation, et c’est grâce à eux qu’on dit que cette page est lisible.
Cependant à une sorte d’inquiétude dans l’esprit, à ce haut-le-cœur très
proche de la nausée, au flottement qui me fait hésiter à écrire...la réalité
est-elle cette totalité des signes noirs? (Captif 11)

In questioning reality as it relates to the “totality of black signs” (i.e., African Americans
and Palestinians), Genet provokes a reconsideration of the binary term Occident/Orient.
The foundation is thus laid for the account of “other” histories—the histories of

148 Genet’s assertion that white people could never know the psychic imprint left by the “hantises”
of lynchings is belied by at least one exception: Lewis Allan, a white Jewish schoolteacher from New York
City, had authored forty years earlier Strange Fruit, one of the most important and powerful poems to
recognize the horrors of lynching. The poem was of course translated to song by Billie Holiday in 1939.
Palestinians and black Americans, which have been absorbed into white man’s history (i.e., Occidental History). Further into the narrative of *Un Captif amoureux*, black Americans displace the Palestinians to become the sole actors in the recurring metaphor of black ink writing white man’s history:

Les Noirs en Amérique blanche sont les signes qui écrivent l’histoire; sur la page blanche ils sont l’encre qui lui donne un sens. [...] [Mais] un mouvement rugueux et noir—sévère quand il faut, cherchait à comprendre ce monde—refusé aussi—afin d’en établir un autre—voilà la négation transformée et contredite par la volupté d’être—le Black Panthers Party en face de cette précipitation dans le néant, s’arc-boutait et par tous les moyens, en donnant mais délibérément sa vie s’il le fallait, se dressait autour de lui ce nécessaire pour donner forme au peuple noir. Si les hippies couverts de fleurs et d’ornements incertains, s’enfonçaient, se défonçaient ou s’enlisaient les Panthères refusaient le monde blanc. Ils bâtiront le people noir sur l’Amérique blanche qui se fendait—avec sa police, ses Églises, ses maquereaux, ses magistrats—mais déjà la luxuriance couvrait les hippies, céréales qui craquellent le bloc américain. Les Panthères eurent des fusils, et en un point encore imprécis, rejoignirent les hippies: la haine de cet Enfer. (350-51)

The grand narrative of American nationalism, written on the blank pages of white History with the “ink” of black Americans, is shown by Genet to be imperiled by the crumbling of its own foundation. As the hippies—disillusioned youthful inheritors of the great “white dream”—turn to drugs and self-destructive behavior, the Black Panthers arm themselves against a white America whose mechanisms of oppressive power—the judges, the Churches, the pimps and the police—are unraveling. As the blacks rise up in their abjection, bearing arms against their oppressors, the stability of the White order becomes irrevocably thrown off kilter.

Knowledge of subject races facilitates the management of them, and knowledge is coterminous with power as the two terms relate to discourse, as Foucault’s extensive writings show. And more power requires more knowledge, and so on, in an increasingly
dynamic dialectic of information and control. To bolster its power structure, Saïd illustrates the ways in which the West exploits its superior economic, military, and organizational might to consolidate control over the Orient through media, scientific research, and literature, among other sites of knowledge. The goal is to produce a discursive narrative of the Orient as a different but thoroughly organized world with its own cultural and epistemological boundaries and principles of coherence. In this way, it can be dominated through the power exercised through knowledge, the knowledge generated through power, and so forth. The dynamics of these mechanisms are similar to those that allow for a parallel narrative of black Americans. These mechanisms also depend upon a social order that presupposes a fixed system of referents, codes of behavior, respected hierarchies, homogeneity, and static norms of being. The “self” is “disciplined” (apprivoisé) by such order, woven into the intricate web of power, and filtered through a shared language which at once produces and reinforces “truth” and meaning.

Discursive representations of black men in the United States have served to pathologize them as indolent, simple-minded and, paradoxically, at once over-sexed and emasculated. So pervasive was the denial of the patriarchal privilege to black men that some scholars of black history, such as Rolland Murray, argue that the reclamation of such prerogatives actually animated Black Power movements (Living 98). The 1965 Moynihan Report, titled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” represents what was considered to be the most authoritative assessment of the black family in America at that time. Black women in the mid 1960s found employment more readily than black men, according to the report, and often assumed the role of family bread
winner. The black man, defined by his relation to the “matriarchal” structure of the black family and to his dependence on white society, became pathologically reduced to an effete, needy, and incompetent deadbeat—radically disembodied in his “blackness” (Ekotto 99).

Huey Newton addresses this very type of pathologization in his 1967 essay, “Fear and Doubt,” in which he argues the black man “finds himself void of those things that bring respect and a feeling of worthiness, including material possessions, marketable skills, a job, and the ability to provide for and protect his family” (79). The question of black male disenfranchisement was a deeply felt problem that mobilized the founding of the Black Panther Party. A cursory survey of the autobiographies by male members of the movement shows their stories to take the form of politicized bildungsromans in which the narrators accede to their own form of patriarchal maturity by forging a masculinized community through militant activism. According to David Hilliard, the masculine prerogative represents a primary measure of Black Panther success: “[W]e have become the standard for black manhood, making guys feel like they’re no longer less than men […]” (161). In Genet’s Black Panther narrative, the pathologized effete, helpless, and over-sexed black man is turned into his inverse, becoming the armed, hyper-virile male—offering a new take on Frantz Fanon’s assessment: “[Q]uand on s’abandonne au mouvement des images, on n’aperçoit plus le nègre, mais un membre; le nègre est éclipsé. Il est fait membre. Il est pénis” (Peau 137). The Black Panther asserts himself


150 In the chapter of Peau noire, masques blancs titled “Le Nègre et la psychopathologie,” Fanon discusses at length the systematic pathologization of the black man as being simple-minded, bête, and over-
against the social and physical bounds forced upon him: he leaves the ghetto; he imposes himself on white man’s space; and he appropriates his language: “Vous nous entendrez comme nous voulons être entendus. […] […] la langue américaine comme nous l’avons arrangée, autant pour jouer que pour vous emmerder. Rien ne sera dit s’il ne passe par le noir” (Captif 360). The Panthers convert the most abject racist stereotypes of black masculinity into raw power and cultural resistance. Asserting himself in such unprecedented, theatrical, and performative ways, the black man—the colonized subaltern—realizes his own subjectification and turns Marx on his head, debunking the axiom: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.”

**Escaping Representation through Perpetual (R)evolution**

*La démarche de Genet peut être décrite comme la recherche d’une identification positionnelle avec les parias et les abjectés. Et la cohérence qui relie la série de ses différentes identifications est, chez lui aussi, stratégique.*

*Didier Eribon, Une morale du minoritaire*

Genet’s penchant for obfuscation whenever queried about his politics, work, or personal history is well documented (Plunka 15). This “delocalizing” auto-narrative has as much to do, I suspect, with his aversion to the fixity of things as it does with his desire to, as Edmund White puts it, “throw the curious off his track, leaving himself free to modify his life in artful, gratuitous ways” (Preface xviii). Perhaps both deductions go hand in hand, for is it not apparent that, as the above cited epitaph of Didier Eribon’s observation suggests, Genet’s deliberate hop scotching operates as a tactical maneuver to resist representation—much as the Panthers’ performative theatricality did? Genet’s protean ways also provide a layer of protection against what he calls the inherent sexed in European literature, medical treatises, etc. A key element to this pathologization is the metonymical reduction of the black man to his “sword” or his penis. (137)
“betrayal” in communication, whereby—in an observation echoing Derrida’s assessment that “through its incorporation in language, truth is guarded and put in danger” (qtd in Lawlor 119)—Genet muses: “Je ne suis vrai qu’avec moi-même. Dès que je parle, je suis trahi par la situation. Je suis trahi par celui qui m’écoute, tout simplement à cause de la communication” (Ennemie 283). The present discussion examines the ways in which Genet’s aversion to the ordering of things is translated into the literary poetics of Un Captif amoureux, whereby the lack of temporal, spatial, and narrative fixity reflects the writer’s professed desire for perpetual revolution, signified as it is in his ongoing quest to locate “Paris’ May” wherever it might reside.

In an interview with Nigel Williams, Genet is asked, “Imaginons que nous rencontrions l’écrivain Jean Genet lui-même. Est-ce que le vrai Genet que nous rencontrons?” to which Genet responds, “Est-ce qu’il y a un faux qui circule? Est-ce qu’il y a un faux Genet à travers le monde? Est-ce que je suis le vrai? Vous me demandez si je suis le vrai. Où est le faux alors? Peut-être après tout suis-je un imposteur qui n’a jamais écrit de livre. Peut-être suis-je un faux Genet, comme vous dites” (Ennemi 302). Genet obviously enjoys toying with those who seek to pigeonhole him into definitive categories. To be sure, he never hesitates to show his aversion to such tactics, as demonstrated in his retort to Williams later in the same interview, “Vous continuez à m’interroger exactement comme le voleur que j’étais il y a trente ans était interrogé par des policiers, par une escouade de policiers” (305). Here Genet demonstrates a clear understanding and appreciation for the utility of manipulating literary conventions of self-representation. Be they rooted in forgetfulness, artfulness, or a genuine evolution in thinking, his contradictions are to be shone brightly upon in order to avoid the pitfalls of reification.
Like the Black Panthers, Genet engages in the praxis of performativity (often through a discursive sheltering form of drag, in his specific case), demonstrating the ways in which contradiction can be tantamount to subversion.

The tendency to whitewash sites of contradiction in Genet’s literary and political expression remains pervasive in politicized cultural criticism, allowing for his work to be co-opted by a range of social movements and identity categories. In her 1969 feminist classic, *Sexual Politics*, for example, Kate Millet argues that Genet, along with D.H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer, and Henry Miller, perpetuates a misogyny rooted in “sexual dominion [that is] the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concepts of power” (25). However, feminist writer Hélène Cixous praises his idiosyncratic contribution to *écriture féminine* (“Laugh” 282). Overlooking Genet’s clearly articulated position regarding his disinterest in any revolutionary movement once it becomes “institutionalized” (*Ennemi* 282), Edward Saïd alludes to his “unquestioned solidarity” to the anti-colonial revolutionary movement envisioned by Frantz Fanon:

Genet made the step, crossed the legal borders, that very few white men or women ever attempted. He traversed the space from the metropolitan center to the colony; his unquestioned solidarity was with the very same oppressed identified and so passionately analyzed by Fanon. ("Jean Genet" 239).

Categorizing Genet in such ways brings a rhetorical utility to a leftist-oriented critique just as much as it serves to rally adherents of the opposite end of the political spectrum. In the works of, for example, Ivan Jablonka and Eric Marty, Genet is summarily dismissed as an anti-Semitic fascist sympathizer (*Les vérités* and *Bref*, respectively). The critical commentary on gay relationality in his work is equally rife with contradiction. Where Leo Bersani characterizes Genet’s depictions of anal sex as the mythical symbol
of the “antirelationality inherent to all homoness” (10), Didier Eribon understands Genet’s work to have followed a trajectory from shame and isolation to gay pride and community (*Morale* 101). In this light, Genet is at once uniter of homosexuals, divider of homosexuals, whipping post for neo-conservatives, patron saint of the revolutionary left, solitary thief basking in existential inauthenticity, self-actualized writer extraordinaire, masculinist contributor to misogynist writing, and the lone male paradigm in the realm of *écriture féminine*. In sum, Genet escapes representation—just as he would have it. I revisit the epitaph with which I opened this discussion by expanding Eribon’s excellent summary of the motivating forces behind Genet’s perpetual “movement”:

La démarche de Genet peut être décrite comme la recherche d’une identification positionnelle avec les parias et les abjectés. Et la cohérence qui relie la série de ses différentes identifications est, chez lui aussi, stratégique: il s’agit partout et toujours, que ce soit avec les travestis de Barcelone, les Black Panthers ou les Palestiniens, de lutter contre les forces de l’oppression, contre ce qu’il appelle ‘le Pouvoir’, avec un P majuscule. (*Morale* 323)

Wearing so many hats presents its obvious risks, for it often leads to Genet being *situated* within sites of identitary analysis as opposed to focusing on the ways in which he inspires expansive considerations of crossing identity categories. In *Un Captif amoureux*, however, the strategic tactic of shifting positions, of interweaving narratives, and of the absence of temporal and spatial fixity compel each reader to approach the text from a unique perspective. Fixed representation therefore remains elusive, further thwarted by an unavoidable crisscrossing of multiple identitary sites.

Over the course of Genet’s 600 page book, the Black Panthers weave in and out of the complex narrative at precisely five brief points. Another six or seven references are made to the Panthers within the Palestinian narrative. In total, a mere thirty pages or so
are devoted to the Black Panther narrative. Yet, their presence plays an indispensable role in Genet’s account. Without the Black Panther narrative, there could be no ink to write the grand narrative of white America’s nationalism, and the universality of the sites of Palestinian revolutionary struggle—for land, food, nation, history, and identity—would remain particular to the Palestinians. The Panther narrative universalizes the particular and brings to light the iterativity of the mechanisms of power—of the cultural hegemony Saïd discusses in Orientalism—which allow one people to oppress another. As Davarian Baldwin writes, the Panthers harnessed their “blackness” and created “an imagined community of blackness, an anticolonial solidarity, that could speak to the everyday experiences of the urbanizing globally oppressed” (“298”; my emphasis). Perpetual revolution, perpetual delocalization, perpetual quest for Paris’ May—of which the lack of fixity operates as the only “point fixe” in Genet’s last book—are forever kept in motion by the author’s closing sentence: “Cette dernière page de mon livre est transparente” (611).
This movement will go on because it doesn’t depend on structure or organization but just what is in people themselves. It’s like striking a hammer on the anvil, it rings forever. It’s like infinity.

Eugene McCarthy, August 1968

The voyage is over, the travel begins.
Georg Lukács, Theory of the Novel

While May 68 fell short of realizing immediate political change favoring the revolutionary politics of the Left, both its advances and its failures have resulted in long-term repercussions in the broadest cultural sense. If any related measure of success can be quantified forty-five years after the fact, it is likely to be located in the numerous sites—the “communities”—whose inception can be traced to the May 68 ethos, among which Monique Wittig’s MLF, Michel Foucault’s GIP, and Guy Hocquenghem’s FHAR must be counted. These communities, some extant and others obsolete, have operated on the level of praxis and theory as sites of resistance to trouble the normative forces of a wide range of grand narratives. Throughout my dissertation I have shown how Modern Revolutionary Writing demonstrates the translation of these sites of resistance to the battlefield of literature.

That perceived failures—les échecs—of the May 68 phenomenon contribute as much as related gains to the generative legacy of revolutionary discourse is a benchmark thematic of Modern Revolutionary Writing. Among the most important of these salutary “échecs” is that of political aporia as it relates to the fading specter of the Marxist revolutionary dream. However affirmative the dynamic of political aporia may be,
however, it sometimes operates as a double-edged sword. As I pointed out earlier, the *doxa* advanced by the New Philosophers and their epigones has relegated the May 68 legacy of revolutionary discourse to the realm of “disqualified knowledges.”

Even self-identified progressives among academic critics have succumbed to a sort of complementary aphasia when discussing the revolutionary implications of May 68 in literary terms. The task I have undertaken in my dissertation is to engage in a corrective genealogical study, or what Foucault terms a “rediscovery of struggles and the raw memory of fights” (*Society* 8), with the goal of demonstrating how insoluble contradictions can prove affirmative in the revolutionary discourse of Modern Revolutionary Writing.

As an affirmative dynamic, aporia in this context can be traced to the Western Marxist examination of the effects of the superstructure on a consumerist society and the ways in which the attendant stabilization of contemporary capitalism necessitates new strategies for political change, models for political emancipation, and agencies of political transformation. This focus on the superstructure more than troubles the orthodox Marxist anticipation of class revolution as a historical imperative, resulting in what Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko describes as “broken hope” (qtd. in Kaiser 256). Broken hope and aporia are but two faces of the same coin serving as a consolidating force for a new array of avatars of revolution. As Bob Dylan points out, “[W]hat unites

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151 Michel Foucault defines disqualified knowledges as “the coupling together of the scholarly knowledge and knowledges that were disqualified by the hierarchy of erudition and sciences […]” (*Society* 8).

152 Foucault’s definition of genealogy is that it is the “form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history” (*Power* 117).
people is broken hope; broken hope unites people rather than hope because broken hope people have experienced, and hope they haven’t really experienced” (ibid). The writers engaged in Modern Revolutionary Writing must therefore be viewed as a community of diverse operatives—“seuls et ensemble à la fois,” to once again quote Marguerite Duras (Crowley 237). Operating in the interstices of two Foucauldian epistemes and a zone of Derridean hauntology, the writers revolt—in the etymological sense of the Latin revolvere meaning to “turn”—against the hope of realizing Marxist revolution to face the possibilities of new revolutionary potentialities. This interstitial zone is an extension of May 68, the original site of battle described by Daniel Cohen Bendit in the following terms:

[May] 68 was, indeed, a rebellion joining two eras. It cracked the yoke of conservatism and totalitarian thought, enabling the desire for personal and collective autonomy and freedom to express itself. From the cultural point of view, we won. (“Elusive”).

In response to Daniel Singer’s assessment that “the impact [of May 68] on literary expression remains to be seen” (261), it is my hope this dissertation will generate expanded consideration of the myriad ways in which revolution is signified in the pages of Modern Revolutionary Writing. Saint-Juste’s 1789 theory of the revolutionary “public moment” (Esprit 20), for example, asserts itself anew in May 68 literary production—where ambitious goals formulated in absolute revolutionary terms of the 1960s evolve into more modest but realizable objectives still capable of perpetually decentering the

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153 I thank David Ellison for bringing this important etymological consideration to my attention.

154 During the time of the French Revolution, Louis Antoine de Saint-Just observes the defining characteristic of revolution is not that it is mightier than the State, but that it abruptly calls the existing society into question in the minds of the masses, thereby pressing them into action. In these terms, a revolution may be defined as an attempt by the masses to influence the resolution of an immediate social crisis (by violent or coercive means) in order to establish a community on new terms. Saint-Just refers to this as “the public moment,” whereby the social contract is reviewed and reconstituted through action.
normatising effects of grand narratives. Resignified as such in Modern Revolutionary Writing, Saint-Juste’s timeless observation reminds us that protest and resistance are themselves manifestations of something deeper, of what Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau refer to as “agonistic pluralism”—whereby to avow the constancy of challenge is “to affirm reality of perpetual contest, even within an ordered setting, and to identify the affirmative dimension of contestation” (Honig 15). In the context of May 68, does this agonism not serve to unveil the cancer concealed by the glitter of imperialist capitalist society, to translate into action the yearning for an alternate path toward an ever-elusive “ailleurs”? Is it not this struggle for deeper cultural change—and the cycle of transitive displacement that results from the perpetual quest for it—to which Sartre refers when crediting May 68 for “expand[ing] the field of the possible” (Situations III 127)? Modern Revolutionary Writing also expands the field of the possible by attenuating what Kristin Ross considers an imperative for those engaged in French cultural studies “to seek post-May 68 sites of resistance in culture imported from the United States and England” (May 13). As my dissertation shows, May 68 literary production proves fecund and more than capable of holding its own against American and British cultural sites of resistance. Perhaps too, finally, Modern Revolutionary Writing might entice the battle-scarred “héros révolutionnaires” of today’s francophone literature—those who, as Tierno Monénembo observes, “ont trop souvent été les victimes des régimes ‘révolutionnaires’ et en sont fatigués” (“Révolution”)—to revisit the literature produced in dialogue with May 68…to find there a revitalized source of rich intertextual promise.
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