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## **Sexual-textual erotics in *Après l'amour* by Agnes Vannouvong**

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### **Abstract:**

*Après l'amour*, Agnès Vannouvong's first novel, gained critical attention when it was published in 2013 as much for its literary qualities as for the erotic nature of its prose. An exploration of female love and doubly so because the novel treats love between women, *Après l'amour* is a text haunted by the inter-textual presence of Marguerite Duras, Monique Wittig and Violette Leduc and which tells the tale of a young Parisian lesbian on the rebound at the end of a long relationship. Taking as its starting point formulations on the erotic by Marguerite Duras and Audrey Lorde, this article proposes to discuss the relationship between desire, the erotic and artistic creation at work in Vannouvong's text. It will consider what it means to write a Don Juan-esque lesbian narrative, set in a capital city (over) synonymous with the romantic and the sensual – an eroticized topography *par excellence* - at a time when the very codes of amorous encounters are experiencing a radical transformation, shifting from the physical desire and sexual attraction underpinning nineteenth and twentieth century conceptions of romantic love to the disembodied textual interaction of the Internet. Are the "true feelings" of the erotic to be opposed the simulacrum of pornography as Lorde suggests? Are we now living in a time that is quite literally "after love", where we are condemned to look back with nostalgia on the age of authentic emotions, just as the narrator in the novel looks back with longing and regret on her past relationship with Paola? Is there not always an element of fiction, of illusion, of fabrication in every amorous relationship? How may this phenomenon be said to inform the process of literary creation?

**Key words:** Erotics, female homosexuality, Agnès Vannouvong, Marguerite Duras, Eva Illouz, Violette Leduc, Audrey Lorde, Monique Wittig.

### **Resumen:**

*Après l'amour* (2013), primera novela de Agnès Vannouvong, llamó la atención de la crítica desde su publicación, tanto por sus cualidades literarias como por la naturaleza erótica de su prosa. Exploración del amor en femenino, ya que se trata de amor entre mujeres, en el relato, que cuenta el desenfreno sexual de una joven lesbiana parisina tras una ruptura amorosa, resuenan ecos de Monique Wittig, Violette Leduc y Marguerite Duras. Partiendo de las formulaciones de lo erótico de esta última y de Marguerite Duras y Audre Lorde, nuestro trabajo reflexiona acerca de la relación entre deseo, erotismo y creación estética en la novela de Vannouvong. ¿Cómo escribir un relato donjuanesco en la ciudad romántica, libertina por excelencia, en la era digital, en un momento en el que los códigos del encuentro amoroso se hallan en plena mutación y en el que asistimos a una transformación de las costumbres (del deseo físico y de la atracción sexual característicos del amor romántico de los siglos XIX y XX a la interacción textual desencarnada en internet? ¿Deberíamos, siguiendo a Audre Lorde, oponer los «verdaderos sentimientos» de lo erótico al simulacro pornográfico? ¿Es la nuestra una época que se encuentra literalmente «después del amor», que nos condena a lamentar un tiempo de emociones auténticas —a imagen de la narradora que contempla con nostalgia su relación con Paola, su único y verdadero amor? ¿Acaso no hay siempre una parte de ficción, de ilusión, de construcción en toda relación amorosa? ¿Existen los «verdaderos sentimientos» o son, ellos también, una quimera necesaria para la creación literaria?

**Palabras clave:** Erotismo, homosexualidad femenina, Agnès Vannouvong, Marguerite Duras, Eva Illouz, Violette Leduc, Audre Lorde, Monique Wittig.

### **Introduction**

*Après l'amour* (“After Love”), a novel centring on the painful aftermath of a lesbian relationship caused a certain sensation among Paris’s generally male-dominated and hetero-normative literary circles when it was published in 2013. Not simply because of its subject matter, but also on account of the graphically erotic nature of much of its narrative: “a women’s viewpoint [on sex] is rarer. There is still an enormous taboo around that, and an even greater one around female homosexuality” remarked one female journalist, about the novel.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, women’s erotic fiction and lesbian novels by women have until recently remained rare in France (Waleti-Walters, 2000: 5; Destais, 2014: 21), and even now tend to be confined to lesbian and gay publishing houses only (Cairns, 2002: 89). Agnes Vannouvong’s first novel on the other hand was published by the

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<sup>1</sup> “Le point de vue des femmes est plus rare. Il y a un tabou encore énorme et encore plus fort sur l’homosexualité féminine”. Christine Bravo, *C’est au programme*, TV talk show, France 2 Télévision, 01/10/ 2013. My translation.

renowned literary publishing house Mercure de France<sup>2</sup> and attracted the attention of the mainstream cultural media, garnering enthusiastic reviews in *L'Express*, *Le Monde des livres*, *Madame Figaro* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* to name but a few.<sup>3</sup> *Après l'amour* takes the reader to bourgeois bohemian Paris where the unnamed narrator, who writes for a scholarly art history journal, is on the rebound after her long-term actress lover Paola left her for a lady butcher. In a sometime confessional, sometime self-mocking mode, the narrator revisits this and other past stories of love, which are at once extolled as ideals and undercut, as the possibility of genuine recollection is called into question. These reflective, and by moments lyrical, chapters in the novel cast a nostalgic backward glance towards the relationship with Paola, and beyond her, to the narrator's mother, her first lost love object, and Laos, the narrator's birthplace, itself metaphorically linked to the maternal. A concurrent and opposite narrative thrust is interspersed with other chapters that relate the protagonist's new singleton life as a self-confessed "sexual predator" combing Paris in search of passion. These often brief encounters seem to be dictated by the principles of the marketplace where the virtual encounter of an online dating site leads on to a predominantly carnal liaison—a pattern that, in the image of a frenzied shopper in quest of retail therapy, is repeated with seemingly insatiable voracity.

The following article will consider what it means to write a sexually explicit lesbian narrative, set in a capital city (over) synonymous with the romantic and the sensual—an eroticized topography par excellence—at a time when the very codes of amorous encounters are experiencing, in the words of sociologist Eva Illouz, "a radical departure from the culture of love and romanticism which characterised much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries". It is a shift that takes us from the sexual attraction of romantic love to the "disembodied textual interaction" of the Internet (Illouz, 2007: 90)—"fibre optic connections" as Vannouvong's Don Juan-in-petticoats heroine calls the potential liaisons she scans on online dating sites.<sup>4</sup> Yet if Illouz's "radical departure" suggests an irrevocable change in the nature of intimate relations, the author of *Après l'amour* is more nuanced: eschewing linear, chronological form, the narrative structure of the novel sets up a tension inviting the critical comparison of past and present. In looking back, the narrative affords the protagonist moments of sentimental reverie, but the "scripted" nature of such emotions is also underlined. Conversely, Internet dating sites and S/M performance, may be salvaged as moments of creative potential: in this way, Vannouvong would seem to be engaging in contemporary theoretical debates that challenge the traditional opposition between the pornographic and the erotic (Cairns, 2002: 89; Destais, 2014: 10). Another question raised by

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<sup>2</sup> Mercure de France have published Marguerite Duras, Eugene Ionesco, Henri Michaux and Paul Léautaud among others.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.mercuredefrance.fr/livre-Après\\_l\\_amour-2224-1-1-0-1.html](http://www.mercuredefrance.fr/livre-Après_l_amour-2224-1-1-0-1.html) Accessed: 22.11.2015.

<sup>4</sup> "Ces connexions en fibre optique"; "une Dom Juan en jupon" (16, 161). This and all subsequent translations of the novel are my own.

*Après l'amour*, which has also proved popular among male readers,<sup>5</sup> is the extent to which lesbian fiction may express sexual desire without opening up the feminine erotic to appropriation by the mainstream. "Must lesbian writers find their own language?" American scholar Cynthia Duncan recently asked in an article on contemporary lesbian fiction in Mexico (2011: 82). In this respect too, *Après l'amour* resists easy categorisation: while the Don Juan in petticoats narrator slips effortlessly into the man's role, camping the heterosexual paradigm, the novel is also informed by a legacy of more experimental, separatist lesbian and women's writing in its exploration of sexual-textual erotics.

### **On the erotic**

Writing within the context of 1980s lesbian feminism, African-American poet Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" defined the erotic in terms of a rich, suppressed emotional potential "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognised feeling". She called for women, and the female artist in particular, to reclaim the erotic as a vital source of power and creativity from the distortions imposed on it by "western society" (Lorde, 1984: 53). The erotic, she argued, had been "vilified, abused and devalued" by misogynist culture:

The erotic has often been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling (54)

In a compelling if sweeping binary move, Lorde set up a clear opposition between genuine emotion on the one hand,—the truly erotic—,and commodified "plasticized sensations",—the pornographic—, on the other. The legacy of the Platonic conception of Eros is clear here: the erotic, though it may be inspired by a beloved, also leads, to something far greater: beauty, the divine or, as here, "power and information". But the sexual desire and pleasure commonly associated with modern-day definitions of the erotic (Destais, 2014: 14) also inform Lorde's understanding of the term. Indeed, later in the same article, the writer underscores the parallel she sees between the creative act and the erotics of physical desire: "there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into the sunlight against the body of a woman I love" (58).

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<sup>5</sup> Conversation with the author, August 2014.

For the French novelist Marguerite Duras, an acknowledged inspiration for *Après l'amour*, the erotic functions similarly as a motor for aesthetic expression. In a passage cited by Vannouvong in relation to her novel,<sup>6</sup> Duras states: "it's not sex [...]—washed-out sensuality—I'm interested in, but what lies at the origin of the erotic, desire. What can't be and perhaps shouldn't be satisfied by sex [...]. One always writes as one desires" (Duras, 2014: 134).<sup>7</sup> Again valorising a noble vision of Eros against its vulgar derivatives, Duras privileges the evocation rather than the consummation of desire. From its twenty-first century viewpoint, *Après l'amour*, it will be argued, both takes up and complicates Lorde's and Duras's formulations on the erotic.

Like Lorde, Vannounvong's novel reclaims the power of the Sapphic erotic, revisiting a palimpsest of lesbian intertexts. Like Lorde and Duras, the novel explores the relationship between desire as a creative impulse and the writerly quest to retrieve this "true feeling" which refuses to be assuaged by the merely sexual—what Duras dismisses as humdrum, "washed-out sensuality". But *Après l'amour* it is also a novel knowingly written within our current consumerist context of increasingly "scripted" emotions. "I wouldn't be surprised if one day I were awarded a medal for virtual liaisons, top prize for postmodern love in the Internet age" the narrator ironizes.<sup>8</sup> Is it still possible, asks *Après l'amour*, to get beyond "plasticized sensations", the twenty-first century simulacrum of love and access the erotic? Or are we now living in a time that is quite literally "after love", where we are condemned to look back with nostalgia on an age that valued true feeling, Illouz's "culture of love and romanticism", just as the narrator in the novel looks back with longing and regret on her past relationship with Paola, all too conscious of the inevitable fraudulence of recollections and the inaccessibility of her beloved in language?

Paola is not a passing body but a place of anchorage [...] I've erased the gestures from my mind, but sometimes it all comes flooding back. Can you recall all the details? How do we fabricate memories? I'd like to run away from this absence, Paola, and bury myself in the id that exists before words. I'd like to escape.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> At a reading of her work at the University of Franche-Comté, Vannouvong acknowledged the importance of Leduc's and Duras's legacy in her writing. "Rencontre avec l'écrivaine Agnès Vannouvong" at the Centre de Recherches Interculturelles et Transdisciplinaires, Université de Franche Comté, Besançon, France, 27/11/2014.

<sup>7</sup> "Ce n'est pas le sexe [...] une espèce de décoloration sensuelle qui m'intéresse. C'est ce qui se trouve à l'origine de l'érotisme, le désir. Ce qu'on ne peut, peut-être qu'on ne doit pas, apaiser avec le sexe [...] on désire comme on écrit, toujours."

<sup>8</sup> "Je ne serais pas étonnée de remporter le prix des amours post-modernes à l'ère d'internet, la médaille des relations virtuelles" (155).

<sup>9</sup> "Paola n'est pas un corps de passage, mais un lieu d'ancrage. ... J'ai effacé les gestes, mais parfois tout revient. La mémoire peut-elle retrouver tous les détails ? Comment fabrique-t-on les souvenirs ? J'aimerais fuir l'absence, Paola, m'enfuir dans le ça d'avant les mots, je voudrais m'échapper." (101).

As in the novels of loss discussed elsewhere by American feminist scholar Carolyn Allen, the narrator here “engage[s] in *fictions* of memory even as [she] suffer[s] the consequences of such fiction” (Allen 1996: 17). “When you’re connected to another soul for ten years, you’ve got time to invent a common narrative” concedes the narrator of *Après l’amour*.<sup>10</sup> Fraudulent, chimeric and doomed to failure this exercise in remembering may be, but as Duras reminds us, this paradoxical dyad of pleasure and despair is also the ineluctable *sine qua non* of artistic creation: “we always write on love’s dead body” (Duras, 1980: 67).<sup>11</sup> For Freud, too, love always implies loving a lost object: “the enormous power the beloved seems to exert on the lover can in part be explained by the love object having been invested with the mystique of all the lost objects from the past”<sup>12</sup>; according to Kristeva, it is the first woeful quest for lost love, that of a child separated from his or her mother, which itself engenders language and creative expression: “if no writing exists that is not amorous, nor does an imagination exist that is not [...] melancholic” (1988: 13). Or as Vannouvong’s narrator puts it, “I’m floating in a melancholy landscape which is fertile yet tainted with death.”<sup>13</sup>

*Après l’amour*, however explores not only the suffering of the jilted lover but also the phenomenon of Internet dating which requires not writing *after* the experience of love, but writing as the initial overture to a possible *future* encounter— as the narrator herself recognises when she logs on one evening at midnight:

Some relationships seem to have been written out prior to any physical relations. It’s all down to the love applicants’ photos and what they type in on the keyboard. In a realm where words rule, the female advertising executive and the literary woman stand an excellent chance. I’ve changed my profile photo three times. First I chose a portrait of me with shorter hair. No luck. Then a photo of me at South Beach wearing shades, my hair flying to the wind. Failed again. Last try, a black and white photo I took at home in the corner between the mirror and the settee, Woody Allen style and the messages have been flooding in.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “Quand on est connectée à une âme, pendant dix ans, on a le temps d’inventer une histoire commune” (47).

<sup>11</sup> “Ainsi écrit-on toujours [...] sur le corps mort de l’amour”. Marguerite Duras, 1980, 67. Vannouvong herself cited this quotation in relation to her writing. Cf. “Rencontre avec l’écrivaine Agnès Vannouvong”, supra n. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Person, 1988: 43. Quoted in Illouz, 2007:102.

<sup>13</sup> “Je flotte dans un paysage mélancolique de fertilité et de mort” (68).

<sup>14</sup> “Certaines relations semblent s’écrire avant la relation physique. Tout se joue au bout du clavier et sur la photo des postulantes à l’amour. Dans un royaume où les mots sont rois, la publicitaire ou la femme de lettres a toutes ses chances. J’ai changé trois fois ma photo de profil. Je choisis d’abord un portrait avec des cheveux plus courts. Aucun succès. Puis une photo où je suis à South Beach, lunettes noires, cheveux au vent. Deuxième échec. Enfin, une photo en noir et blanc, prise chez moi, à l’angle du miroir et du canapé. Façon Woody Allen. Avalanche de messages” (25).

For Illouz, too, “the Internet imagination is triggered by two sets of texts, the photo and the profile, and by the knowledge of the other person that is verbal and rational [...] based on categories and cognitions, not in the senses”. But the Internet erotic is “the outcome of one’s own projection”, a process of self-(re)invention, akin, one might argue, to that of the process of fiction writing. Indeed, as Illouz reminds us, “the most successful people on the net are those who distinguish themselves by their linguistic originality” (2014: 104, 83). It is precisely, then, the disembodied nature of Internet exchange, where language takes the place of physical presence, that invites comparison with the creative act.

A chapter in *Après l’amour* recounting a lesbian S/M performance on the banks of the Seine establishes a parallel between transgressive sexuality and aesthetic practice which further complicates Lorde’s easy condemnation of an *ars erotica* that generates “sensation without feeling”: “somasochism [...] requires a writer’s intuition” comments Vannouvong’s narrator, before going on to admire the “daring” scenario and the “impossibly beautiful”<sup>15</sup> staging.

### **Sapphic Palimpsests**

Anchoring its action in the French capital, which the narrator-on-the-rebound frenetically roams from date to date, *Après l’amour* recalls and reclaims Paris as privileged textual space of the lesbian erotic. On one level the capital seems to embody Paola, the lost beloved: “no need [...] to go looking, the whole city bears traces of her.”<sup>16</sup> But Left Bank Paris and the Odeon theatre, Châtelet, the Belle Epoque city with its plush Opera House and theatres also offer narrative décors for the protagonist-seductress’ new encounters. If “eroticized topographies [...] can be found everywhere” and large cities are privileged spaces of illicit sexualities and nonconformist gender practices (Johnston & Longhurst, 2010: 3, 80), turn-of-the twentieth century Paris is arguably an example par excellence of the phenomenon—an over-determined Sapphic topos.

As feminist scholar Jennifer Waelti-Walters has noted in her history of the representation of lesbians in French literature, by 1900, “socio-pathological lesbians” had become a common feature of the capital’s “naughty” novels. Building on the nineteenth-century male-authored prototypes created by Diderot, Balzac, Gautier and later Baudelaire, lesbianism featured in Belle Epoque fiction “as the last and most titillating characteristic on a list of women’s weaknesses flaws and vices”. It was these novels, some of which were translated, that helped create “the perception that Paris was [...] for women, a place of immoral freedom” (2000: 3, 4) — a perception that encouraged many women to move to the capital from abroad. To the informed reader, Belle Epoque Paris conjures up the early twentieth-century Anglo-American expatriate literary scene, now noted for its many bi- and lesbian practitioners, participants and

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<sup>15</sup> “Le sadomasochisme est une pratique intellectuelle qui requiert un sens de l’écriture”; “le scénario est audacieux, la beauté de la scène, irréaliste.” (52-3)

<sup>16</sup> “Inutile [...] d’aller à sa rencontre, la ville entière porte des traces d’elle” (73).

“midwives,”<sup>17</sup> as well as the French Colette (1873-1954), whose essay-memoire on her Parisian years *Le pur et l'impur* (1932) stands as one of the earliest examples of frank narrative commentary on homosexuality in France.<sup>18</sup>

But the novel is also haunted by another part-time Parisian, Violette Leduc (1907-1972), the “first [French] lesbian writer writing as a lesbian” (Marks, 1979: 374) to give explicit (if metaphorically encoded) love-making between women a central place in her work, as she intimately relates the power of the word and the pleasures of the female body:

The hand was wandering through whispering snow-capped bushes, over the last frosts on the meadows, over the first buds as they swelled into fullness. The springtime that had been crying its impatience with the voice of tiny birds under my skin was now curving and swelling into flower. [...] She was kissing what she had caressed and then, light as a feather duster, she had begun to flick, to brush the wrong way all that it had smoothed before. The sea monster in my entrails quivered (Leduc, 1964: 93, Coleman, 1965, 84).<sup>19</sup>

This heady combination of sensual lyricism and brazen candour is echoed in *Après l'amour*, notably as the narrator evokes and addresses her lost and longed-for first passion, Paola:

Desire is coursing through my body, you envelop me and soon you're inside. You sigh, your sex is awash, electrified, orgasms rhythm our magic circle. Your flesh tears under my fingers. I know that sweet way you're looking at me, how you want to come under my tongue as it opens onto your skin's hidden pores. Like a blind woman searching an invisible trace, a furrow, a beauty spot, so I caress a young scar with my fingertips. The space around us is suffused with the sound of our breath.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Renée Vivien, Romaine Brooks, Nathalie Clifford Barney, Dolly Wilde, H.D., Janet Flanner to name but a few. See Shari Benstock 1987, and Gillian Hanscombe, 1987, for a discussion of women's role in this period.

<sup>18</sup> Together with Proust's *Sodome et Gormorrhe* (1922) and André Gide's *Corydon* (1924).

<sup>19</sup> “La main se promenait sur le babil des buissons blancs, sur les derniers frimas des prairies, sur l'empois des premiers bourgeons. Le printemps qui avait pépié d'impatience dans ma peau éclatait en lignes, en courbes, en rondeurs.[...] Elle embrassait ce qu'elle avait caressé puis, de sa main légère, elle ébouriffait, époussetait avec le plumeau de la perversité. La pieuvre dans mes entrailles frémissait”. Leduc, 1964, 93.

<sup>20</sup> “Dans mon corps rôde le désir, tu m'enveloppes et bientôt entres en moi. Tu soupîres, le sexe en nage électrique, les orgasmes scandent notre cercle magique. Ta chair se déchire sous mes doigts. Je reconnais ce regard doux planté dans mes yeux, l'envie de jouir sous ma langue, ouverte aux pores secrets de ta peau. Comme une aveugle à la recherche d'une trace invisible, un sillon, un grain de beauté, je caresse du bout des doigts une jeune cicatrice. Les souffles saturent l'espace sonore” (149). At a reading of



Richly inter-textual in its references to the scars and torn flesh of an imperfect and/or ravaged body, the passage also recalls Monique Wittig's *Le corps lesbien* (*The Lesbian Body*), itself inspired by Sappho:

At this point I invoke your help m/y incomparable Sappho, give m/e by thousands the fingers that allay the wounds, give m/e the lips, the tongue, the saliva which draw on into the slow sweet poisoned country from which one cannot return... I discover that your skin can be lifted layer by layer, I pull, it lifts off, it coils above your knees, I pull, starting at the labia. (Wittig, 1973, Levay, 1975: 16-17)<sup>21</sup>

The extract from *Après l'amour* is striking not only because of its sensuality, which jettisons the visual ("like a blind woman") in favour of the less commonplace senses of touch, sound and taste, but also on account of its direct and insistent carnality. Likewise, the loss of Paola is experienced not only textually, as a narrative to be erased, but also bodily, as a fatal sapping of the narrator's physical vitality. Observing her former lover on the arm of another the narrator laments, "my body demands the same caresses. My body is weak. I'm going brain dead. I want to rub out your trace and the memories I have of you, Paola."<sup>22</sup> Physical separation from Paola is experienced as extreme physical pain, an violent assault on the self: "I wonder which body parts hurt most when they're pulled off. Arms, hands, ovaries, shoulders or the heart?"<sup>23</sup> The news that Paola has bought a property in the country with her partner, a plan previously shared with the narrator, is again, expressed in starkly corporeal terms: "Jacques hands me over my instruments of torture. Over lunch, he tells me that Paola and her new companion have bought a house in Normandy [...] Second stab, it was something we'd planned together."<sup>24</sup>

### **Cold intimacies?**

For Eva Illouz, it is physicality like this that has traditionally characterized genuine sentiment:

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her work at the University of Franche-Comté, Vannouvong acknowledged the importance of Leduc's legacy in her writing. Cf. supra n. 4.

<sup>21</sup> "A ce point-là j/e t'appelle à m/on aide Sappho m/on incomparable, donne m/oi les doigts par milliers qui adoucissent les plaies, donne m/oi les lèvres, la langue la salive qui attire dans le lent le doux l'empoisonné pays d'où l'on ne peut pas revenir [...] J/e découvre que ta peau peut être enlevée délicatement pellicule par pellicule, j/e tire, elle se relève, elle s'enroule par-dessus tes genoux, à partir des nymphes je tire." Wittig, 1973 : 8-9.

<sup>22</sup> "Mon corps réclame les mêmes caresses. Mon corps se dévitalise. Je suis en mort cérébrale. Je veux effacer tes empreintes, la mémoire que j'ai de toi, Paola" (73)

<sup>23</sup> "Je me demande quelle partie du corps est la plus douloureuse quand on vous l'arrache. Le bras, la main, l'ovaire, l'épaule, le coeur?" (88)

<sup>24</sup> "Jacques me livre les instruments de ma torture. Lors d'un déjeuner, il m'apprend que Paola et sa nouvelle campagne ont acheté une maison en Normandie [...] Deuxième coup de poignard, c'était vieux projet commun." (123)

Emotions in general and romantic love in particular are grounded in the body. Sweaty palms, quickening heart, reddening cheeks, shaking hands, clasped fists, tears, stuttering, these are only some of the examples of the ways in which the body is deeply involved in the experience of emotions, and of love in particular (Illouz, 2007: 75)

Just as for Lorde, the “true feelings” evinced by the erotic stand as the converse of the commodified pornographic,<sup>25</sup> so here, the physical reality of authentic emotions seem to be being set up in diametric opposition to the virtual world of online dating: “If that is the case, and if Internet annuls or brackets the body, how then can it shape, if at all, emotions?” questions Illouz. But the sociologist goes on, revising her argument, to ask “more exactly, how technology rearticulate[s] corporeality and emotions”. For Illouz, we are witnessing a profound change in the way relationships are being formed, with physicality and feelings functioning in new and startling configurations, though not ones that simply replace the authentic by the fake: “Internet imagination is [...] not opposed to reality”. The reality of “fibre-optic” dating is, however, radically different from the traditional romantic encounter, not least, as suggested above, because it relies on “text-based cognitive knowledge” rather than physical intuition, and is “prospective” rather than “retrospective” (2007,106). Such phenomena, it seems to me, inform *Après l’amour* at various levels, most obviously on the level of narrative thematic, as the heroine ironizes her initiation to the lesbian chat sites:

One evening when I’m feeling a bit jet-lagged I decide to go online, to a site that a couple of friends have recommended. I’m wary, because Jane and Anne are virtuoso singletons. They spend their evenings chatting with girls and never fuck. I’m laughing away behind the screen. I reply to one ad. The website looks like a Technicolor supermarket. Fresh market. Fresh food. You can find everything here. My friend Jane has warned me. The photos line up. Some faces are impossibly beautiful, others incredibly ugly. Sometimes they’re both.”<sup>26</sup>

Viewed from behind her sceptical barrier of detachment (“behind the screen”), the passage stresses the futility and the artifice of the

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<sup>25</sup> As is evidenced by the etymology of the Greek “pornographos”: “graphos” (writing) and “porné” (female commodity).

<sup>26</sup> “Un soir, un peu jetlaguée, je me connecte. Je vais sur un site de rencontres que deux amies me recommandent. Je me méfie considérablement, car Jane et Anne sont célibataires, niveau avancé. Elles passent leur soirée à chater avec les filles et ne baisent jamais. Je me gausse, derrière l’écran. Je réponds à une annonce. Le website ressemble à un supermarché technicolor. *Fresh market. Fresh food.* On trouve de tout. Mon amie Jane m’a prévenue. Les photos s’alignent. Des photos d’une beauté irréelle ou d’une grande laideur. Parfois, les deux.” (16).

exercise (“spend their evenings [...] never fuck”, “Technicolor”). Food, traditionally a metaphor for desire and arousal, and a common element in the textual representation of the erotic,<sup>27</sup> is present, but in a debased, commodified form (“Fresh market. Fresh food”): the internaut’s appetite is whetted, but she is assimilated to a consumer shopping for sensual pleasures and emotional satisfaction. The paradigms of the amorous encounter have shifted. Whereas traditional romantic love, as Illouz argues “has been characterized by an ideology of spontaneity [...] the idea of love as an unexpected epiphany erupting in one’s life against will and reason” (2007: 90), based on a principle of uniqueness— the quest for “the one”, online, here it is the liberal ideology of the market place (underscored by Vannouvong’s supermarket analogy) that dictates behaviour:

The idea that the romantic encounter should be the result of the best possible choice. That is, the virtual encounter is literally organized within the structure of the market. Internet dating has introduced [...] the principles of mass consumption based on an economy of abundance, endless choice, efficiency, rationalization, selective targeting and standardization. (2007: 79,90)

“Shopping” as efficiently as possible, the narrator of *Après l’amour* similarly “rationaliz[es]” her possible dates as one might products: “I’m struck by the variety of faces and looks that I mentally identify by family” she notes, “lesbian with highlights à la Justin Bieber, lipstick lesbians, baby dykes, diesel dykes, trans dykes.”<sup>28</sup> And as with other forms of consumption, even with “selective targeting” the commodities fail to live up to expectations, the sales pitch profile turns out to be an illusion: “what was I to expect?” she asks after meeting her first date for real in the Marais, Paris’s gay district: “The Italian girl is deadly boring. She talks about her job. It’s never ending — even if it’s a worthy cause, helping suicidal young girls, rape victims, drug addicts and juvenile delinquents.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “There has always been a relationship, in the literature of love, between eating and sex. Appetite, or desire, is present; indeed a desire to possess the body of another is termed ‘carnal’ desire, from the Latin *carne* meaning meat. Both involve physical processes: the sight of a feast may please, and appetite is subsequently aroused through smell and touch. The consumption of the feast gives further sensory pleasures. Finally appetite or desire is satisfied.” Mary Ward, 2009: 35. Vannouvong parodies the classic figure of carnal desire in her grotesque portrait of the young female butcher who seduces Paola, “her complexion reddened by the animal flesh she cuts up in the early hours of the morning” (“le teint rougi par les chairs animales découpées au petit matin”, [13]).

<sup>28</sup> “Sur les photos, je suis saisie par la diversité des visages et des looks que j’identifie mentalement par famille : lesbienne à mèche, façon Justine Bieber, lesbiennes *lipsticks*, *baby dyke*, *butch trans*” (18).

<sup>29</sup> “A quoi devais-je m’attendre ? L’italienne est triste à mourir. Elle me parle de son métier. C’est interminable. Sa mission est pourtant noble, aider les jeunes filles suicidaires, violées, droguées et délinquantes junior” (17).

In this “economy of abundance” the dates themselves are interchangeable, each encounter overlaid with a “standardiz[ed]” script redolent of a hackneyed, high-end commercial or vapid love song lyrics:

It's impossible to resist. We kiss. French kisses. Our gaze intensifies. Lips are licked. She looks at me with amusement. Her eyes are blue. Our hands waver, then our bodies reel. Time has been extended. We're no longer in Paris. It's an apartment in Berlin, London or Lisbon. I'm in a bed, almost naked and about to climax. So is she. I already want to see her again. [...] We're two strangers.<sup>30</sup>

Like a global brand with branches in every European capital, so the encounter could be taking place in “Berlin, London or Lisbon”. The scene is intimate, explicit even, yet the lovers remain atomized and anonymous (“we're two strangers”). Endless choice devalues the supply, as the protagonist remarks of another liaison, where, once again, sensual clichés fill the emotional void: “strangely enough, I've never recovered the pleasure I felt the first time we met, so I force myself to think of something attractive—a pretty dish of strawberries, an erotic scene between two dizzyingly beautiful girls, nice legs.”<sup>31</sup> The principles of mass consumption dictate the parameters of the narrator's affairs as the rationalized and disembodied textual interaction of the initial online encounter is supplanted by the purely physical; the protagonist's urgent, pithy utterances—a succession of prosaic phrases without verbs—underscore her psychological and intellectual disengagement:

I sleep with girls, I fuck all night, faces—anyone's—, just bodies. Physical presence. Smells—not always delicate ones—, fingers in my sex and wandering hands, different voices.  
“What do you do on Saturday nights?”  
“I'm a sexual predator.”<sup>32</sup>

As the novel progresses, the reader witnesses the commodification process being gradually internalized by the narrator to the degree that she

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<sup>30</sup> “Il est absolument impossible de résister. On s'embrasse. La langue dans la bouche. Le regard qui s'agrippe. Les lèvres léchées. Le rire dans le regard. Le bleu des yeux. Les mains suspendues. Les corps chavirent. Le temps s'est tiré. Nous ne sommes plus à Paris. C'est un appartement à Berlin, à Londres à Lisbonne. Je suis dans un lit. Presque nue. Au bord de la jouissance. Elle aussi. Déjà, j'ai envie de la revoir. [...] Nous sommes deux étrangères. Seuls nos peaux et nos corps parlent.” (27)

<sup>31</sup> “Bizarrement, je ne parviens plus à retrouver le plaisir de la première fois. Alors je m'efforce de penser à des choses agréables. Un joli plateau de fraises, une scène érotique entre deux filles à la beauté chavirante, de jolies jambes” (56).

<sup>32</sup> “Je couche avec des filles, des nuits de baise, des visages, n'importe qui, juste des corps. De la présence à l'état de la chair. Des parfums, pas toujours délicats, des doigts dans mon sexe et mes mains qui flottent, des timbres de voix différents.

‘Votre activité de samedi soir?’

‘Prédatrice sexuelle’”(126).

scripts all her liaisons, online or not, with the same vocabulary of sensual props and *mises en scène*, a cultural over-determination of Paris as the capital not only of risqué same-sex love, but also of luxury consumption which is itself eroticized.<sup>33</sup> The virtual disembodied space of an online dating page leads to descriptions of a disarmingly concrete physicality that are nevertheless underscored by a sense of artifice. Encounters are formatted and choreographed: often stereotyped physical appearance<sup>34</sup>, classy outfits, theatre rendezvous (“I adore these places of performance”<sup>35</sup>), antipasti (“in my imagination, antipasti speak the language of love”<sup>36</sup>) and copious breakfasts after a night of lovemaking, and so forth. Little surprise then, that Heloise, the woman who most faithfully echoes this *modus operandi* proves the most successful and long lasting of the narrator’s partners.

“Since everything’s closed, and it’s dark, I suggest we go to a hotel” she says.

“It all depends on the hotel.”

“You’ll see.” [...]

I love the boldness of her initiative because I’m crazy about hotels. I love the luxury, the anonymity, the staff dressed up to the nines, the sheets, the bathrobe, the white slippers, the beauty products and the copious breakfast.<sup>37</sup>

The opulent setting of the rendezvous, a ritzy hotel at the Place de la Concorde, a stone’s throw from the designer boutiques of the Rue Saint Honoré and the jeweller’s of the Place Vendome, seems to arouse the narrator all the more, as if the lavish surroundings themselves confer their own erotic power on the ensuing night of passion (“I love the luxury”). This is confirmed in the lovers’ next date that begins in another sumptuous locale, the extravagant Belle Époque Athénée theatre. Here the dizzying emotions enkindled in the narrator are expressed, not in terms of bodily sensations as with Paola, but materially, in the theatre’s plush interior (“lights, golden chandeliers, red velvet. I love getting lost in theatres”<sup>38</sup>).

After the play she takes me to a seafood restaurant in the Opera district. She works for a multinational

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<sup>33</sup> “The everyday act of wandering streets—shopping [...] meeting and dating has a long history and reflects the role of capitalism in producing new spaces of consumption” (Johnston & Longhurst, 2010: 79).

<sup>34</sup> As Illouz notes, “the most successful people on the net are those who distinguish themselves by linguistic originality and physical conventionality” (Illouz, 2007, 83).

<sup>35</sup> “J’adore ces lieux de représentation” (173).

<sup>36</sup> “Dans mon imaginaire, les antipastis parlent la langue de l’amour” (161).

<sup>37</sup> “—Puisque tout est fermé, puisqu’il fait nuit, je suggère d’aller à l’hôtel, dit-elle.

—Tout dépend de l’hôtel.

—Tu vas voir. [...]

J’aime l’audace de son initiative, car j’ai la folie des hôtels. J’aime le luxe, l’anonymat, les employées tirées à quatre épingles, les draps, le peignoir, les chaussons blancs, les produits de beauté, le petit déjeuner copieux”

<sup>38</sup> “Lumière, lustres dorés, velours rouges. J’adore me perdre dans les théâtres”(173).

based in a sixteenth-century town house a couple of streets away. She's wearing a black cashmere sweater that you want to stroke. [...] Heloise delights me. All the conditions for seduction are there—the lighting, the cuisine, and the red lamp on the table. After dinner she leads me to an adjoining room and undresses me. At last I can touch her clothing. I caress the ribbons before I get to her small, naked breasts. [...] A waitress walks by. She stares at us languorously. Héloïse orders two brandies. She could almost fuck me on the side table. Our images are reflected in the mirrored doors [...] Who would have guessed that a luxury brothel like this existed in the heart of Paris?<sup>39</sup>

When the corporeal is finally evoked, it is Héloïse's luxurious cashmere knitwear—her costume one might say—which seems to hold the narrator in its sway (“at last I can touch her clothing”) as they move on to the sultrier stage provided by a high-class bordello, a venue which further underscores the sex-money dyad that fires the narrator's desire and where feminine sexuality is linked to forbidden pleasure. And if the reflection of the image of the protagonists in the mirrored doors further gestures to the scene's pornographic credentials, it also underscores the superficiality of a liaison where appearance is all.

Another meeting with the ironically named Juliette, also seems to tick all the narrator-director's lesbian-chic<sup>40</sup> boxes, not least of all the prospective candidate's fashion plate looks. In “How could you not like her? Velvety eyes, a dark look framed by a broad stroke of kohl, hair perfectly blow-dried, soft skin there just above the eyelid. Totally adorable, I'm telling you.”<sup>41</sup> The narrator arranges an evening at the Odeon, the prestigious Parisian theatre for a high-brow performance starring a fêted French actor:

“Do you like the theatre? I've two seats for *Philoctète* at the Odeon. Terzieff is amazing apparently”  
It's a perfect choice. I see her walking up the rue de l'Odeon with short hair. She comes up to me, she's

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<sup>39</sup> “Après la pièce elle m'emmène dans un restaurant de fruits de mer, à Opéra. Elle travaille dans un grand groupe, à deux rues, dans un hôtel particulier du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Elle porte un cachemire noir qui donne envie de caresser la matière. [...] Héloïse me ravit. Toutes les conditions de séduction sont réunies. L'éclairage, les mets, la lampe rouge sur la table. Après dîner, elle me conduit dans un salon attenant, elle me déshabille. Je peux enfin toucher la matière de son vêtement. Je caresse les rubans avant d'atteindre les seins nus, petits. [...] Une serveuse passe. Elle nous fixe, languide. Héloïse commande deux cognacs. Elle est sur le point de me baiser sur le guéridon. Nos images se reflètent dans les portes miroirs [...]. Comment soupçonner l'existence de ce bordel de luxe pour femmes, au cœur de Paris?” (173-174).

<sup>40</sup> A term cultural theorists coined in the 1990s to describe popular fascination with lesbians in the media and the use of lesbian “style” as a fashion trend and marketing tool.

<sup>41</sup> “Comment ne pas l'adorer? Yeux de velours, regard sombre relevé d'un trait épais, brushing impeccable, peau délicate, là, juste au-dessus de la paupière. Une vraie biche, je vous dis” (117).

lightly made up and her mouth is wonderful. She's elegance incarnate in a svelte body.<sup>42</sup>

The ensuing night of insatiable passion is crowned by a prodigious session of luxury shopping. As if commodity-led desire can only be sealed by further libidinally invested purchases, the narrator rushes out to the capital's oldest patisserie to quell her voracious appetite. This time though, the "assembly line" mode of sexual consumption (Illouz, 2007: 91) begins to pall, an awareness of ludicrous futility of it all kicks in; this is heightened for the reader by the narrative hyperbole:

Juliette pours me a brandy. She kisses me, I lose it, pull down her pants and dive in. She moans, holds me by the nape of the neck and whispers in my ears, she's soaking. Our pleasure surges at the slightest caress. She wraps herself around me, asks me to come to down on her again, it's never enough. I look at her sleeping. Juliette, you and your pleasure! The sun's already up, I put my clothes back on and go out into the dry, bountiful sun. I'm delirious with happiness at Stohrer's and leave the patisserie with a whole host of rolls, croissants, chocolate and savoury tartlets. I buy a basket of red fruit at a greengrocer's stall and a bunch of roses from the florist's. Suddenly, I realise that my actions are repeating themselves and that the situations are identical. I meet, I fuck and I have breakfast. Two or three weeks max. I'm overwhelmed by a sense of absurdity. I haven't felt grounded since Paola. I give my shopping to a homeless person in the street. I am not in love.<sup>43</sup>

### **Coda: nostalgia for pre-capitalist innocence?**

These interchangeable vignettes are interspersed with a concurrent and opposite narrative thrust, as the narrator recalls and revisits her earlier past loves. Rather than anticipating the next "prey" to be seduced, the next encounter to be scripted, these reflective, chapters in

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<sup>42</sup> "— Vous aimez le théâtre ? J'ai deux places pour *Philotète* à l'Odéon. Terzieff est, paraît-il éblouissant. » Le choix est parfait. Je la voit monter la rue de l'Odéon, les cheveux courts. Elle s'approche, légèrement maquillée, la bouche superbe. Elle incarne l'élégance absolue dans un corps svelte." (118).

<sup>43</sup> ... Juliette me sert un verre de cognac. Elle m'embrasse, je m'affole, je baise sa culotte, je m'engouffre, elle gémit, me tient la nuque, souffle dans mes oreilles, elle est trempée. Nos jouissances se découpent à la moindre caresse. Elle m'enlace, me demande de la lécher, encore, ce n'est jamais assez. Je la regarde dormir. Juliette, ta jouissance. Le soleil est déjà là. Je me rhabille, je sors, sous un soleil sec, généreux. Chez Stohrer, je délire de bonheur. J'emporte un myriade de petits pains, des croissants, du chocolat, des tartes salées. Chez le marchand de quatre saisons, j'achète une panier de fruits rouges. Chez le fleuriste, je prends un bouquet de roses. Soudain, j'ai conscience que mes gestes se répètent. Que les situations sont identiques. Rencontrer, baiser, petit-déjeuner. Pendant deux, trois semaines au maximum. Un sentiment d'absurdité m'accable. Depuis Paola, je ne parviens à me fixer, j'offre mes courses à un SDF dans la rue. Je ne suis pas amoureuse (119).

the novel, return to the narrator's relationship with Paola, to her mother, her first lost love object and the narrator's birthplace Laos which is metaphorically aligned with the maternal. In what strikes as a purposefully ambiguous move, these passages both set up and extol these pasts as ideals (the candour and easy complicity of young love, the pre-capitalist innocence of Laos, a matriarchal society) just as they undercut them. The impossibility of returning from literal or symbolic exile, and of retrieving the lost object of love, be it a native land or one's beloved is underlined: "There is another form of exile, a figurative one— interior exile, the exile of solitude or unhappy love. We may spend a lifetime searching for its traces, but we get lost in a palace of mirrors, a castle of images, every one of them a wounded region."<sup>44</sup> One such image is that of the narrator and Paola's college years:

I had met Paola at the Arts Faculty at Bordeaux. We were free. We were twenty years old. It was a beautiful idyll. We made love on the campus lawns, in the library and on the lecture hall steps. We kissed at the supermarket, and promised to love each other till the end of time. Naïve naiads we were. How could we know that love doesn't last forever like it does in Hollywood? We had seen *Thelma and Louise* at the cinema, but that didn't mean we fantasized about having a car accident. What we wanted was to love each other until we retired. We'd often arrive late at uni, with our hair damp and smelling of the same shampoo. Our bodies, equipped with imaginary compasses, would find each other quite naturally after class.<sup>45</sup>

Using a deceptively simple oral style and quotidian or clichéd references from the student lexicon and mind-set ("library", "lecture hall", "supermarket", "*Thelma and Louise*", "Hollywood") the passage creates an impression of natural insouciance and sated desire. Mythological and biblical allusions suggest an all-female world,<sup>46</sup> a prelapsarian idyll in an Eden of unbridled plenitude and unabashed pleasure where the narrator and Paola form two halves of a Platonic whole ("same shampoo",

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<sup>44</sup> "Mais il est aussi un autre exil, figuré. Un exil intérieur, celui de la solitude, de l'amour non heureux. On passé parfois sa vie and rechercher ses traces. Mais on se perd dans un château de miroirs, un palais d'images qui sont autant de terres blessés" (74).

<sup>45</sup> "J'avais rencontrée Paola à la faculté des lettres, à Bordeaux. Nous étions libres. Nous avions vingt ans. L'idylle était belle. On faisait l'amour sur la pelouse du campus, à la bibliothèque. Nos corps munis d'une boussole imaginaire, se trouvaient naturellement après les cours (13)., dans les amphithéâtres. On s'embrassait au supermarché, on échangeait des promesses d'éternité. Naïves, les naïades. Comment pouvons-nous savoir que l'amour ne dure pas toute la vie, façon Hollywood? On avait vu *Thelma et Louise* au cinéma. Pour autant, les accidents de voiture ne nous faisaient pas fantasmer. Nous, on voudrait s'aimer jusqu'à la retraite. On arrivait souvent en retard à la fac, les cheveux mouillés, traînant la même odeur de shampooing. Nos corps, munis d'une boussole imaginaire se retrouvaient naturellement après les cours " (13).

<sup>46</sup> Naiads supposedly drowned young men who became enamoured with them.



“imaginary compass”). At the same time however, this “idyll[ic]” vision comes across as trite and saccharine. The lovers identify with *Thelma and Louise*, but not with the film’s tragic dénouement, as the narrative voice ironically notes; the aspiration to “love each other until [they] retire” further underscores further a certain puerility that seems to characterise their liaison.

Another chapter which returns to the narrator’s Laotian roots, seems to be offering an alternative to Lorde’s commodified, “plasticized sensation” that passes for the erotic in western society. The parallel between the spatial exile of political asylum and the emotional exile of the jilted lover is made explicit: both are lost objects of love: “there is geographical exile [...] But there is also another figurative exile. An interior exile, the exile of solitude and unhappy love.”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the “journey back” offers the promise of something more real and more authentic:

My mother grew up in Vientiane. Her family, who were poor, grew rice in the countryside. On special occasions they killed a chicken. Otherwise they ate fish from the Mekong River together with rice and aromatic herbs. They didn’t have any money. No bank account, nothing.<sup>48</sup>

Standing in stark counterpoint to the frenetic materialism of post-millennial consumerist culture observed by Illouz, and into whose sway the narrator finds herself irresistibly drawn, Laos embodies pre-capitalist innocence, a world untainted by money. Moreover, as the narrator notes, the country is a woman-identified space, very much a *motherland*, both literally and symbolically: “Laotian society is matriarchal. Sometimes mothers refuse to allow the father to exercise parental authority [...] The hills resemble a womb-like landscape [...] The dense, thick forest lets no light pass.”<sup>49</sup> In more ways than one then, this richly sensual passage engages with Lorde’s formulations on the erotic: the urge to recover and give expression to a powerful and “deeply female [...] plane”, which, unlike the pornographic with which the erotic is commonly associated, claims no links with the commercial and the patriarchal. Nevertheless, the narrator stresses the chimeric nature of any attempt to access the one’s maternal origins, where, in a Kristevan move, words are proffered and the imagination invoked to fill the void: her mother is a “fictional heroine” just

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<sup>47</sup> “Il y a l’exil géographique [...] Mais il est aussi un autre exil, figuré, celui de la solitude de l’amour non heureux” (74).

<sup>48</sup> “Ma mère vit son enfance à Vientiane. Sa famille, pauvre, cultive le riz à la campagne. Les jours de fête, ils tuent un poulet. Ils se nourrissent de poissons du Mékong, accompagnés de riz et d’herbes aromatiques. Ils n’ont pas d’argent. Pas de compte en banque. Rien” (75).

<sup>49</sup> “La société laotienne est matriarcale. Parfois, les mères refusent que le père exerce l’autorité parentale.”; “Les collines ressemblent à un paysage matriciel, la brume fait des ronds, comme un soufflé blanc, en hiver” (75,76).

as Laotian society is “just stories passed down from generation to generation [...] fictions.”<sup>50</sup>

### Conclusion

This article has explored configurations of the erotic in Agnès Vannouvong's first novel *Après l'amour*. It has argued that the novel is significant firstly for bringing lesbian erotic fiction back into the mainstream of the French literary landscape. *Après l'amour* is important too because it questions the status of the erotic in an increasingly consumerist Internet age which has significantly transformed the codes of desire and seduction. Online dating sites, which the newly-celibate narrator experiences for the first time in the opening chapters of the novel, are held up as a metaphor for the standardization and commodification of sexual relations, while the narrative's Paris backdrop enables the author not only to underscore the scripted nature of liaisons in a city synonymous with glamour and sensuality, but also to establish a parallel between frenzied material, and libidinal, gratification.

In counterpoint, the novel looks back, not without a certain melancholy, to a halcyon period when genuine emotion seemed possible (the time of Paola, the narrator's former lover) and human relations were not beholden to the dictates of the marketplace (matriarchal Laos, the narrator's birthplace). The writing in these sections is informed by a rich palimpsest of intertextual references that affiliate the novel to a legacy of lesbian erotic writing (Leduc, Sappho, Wittig) and Belle Epoque Paris as a privileged space of the Sapphic literary scene. *Après l'amour* may be contrasted with those theories on lesbian sexuality that would oppose fake commodification (pornography) and genuine emotion (the erotic). The novel's twin narrative strands rather hold these apparently contradictory positions in a state of unresolved tension that resists neat, systematic closure. Likewise the novel refutes the very possibility of inhabiting a sexual-textual “elsewhere” that evades mainstream patriarchal representations of lesbian desire and remains untainted by eroticized consumer culture: “place and sexuality are mutually constituted” (Johnston and Longhurst, 2010: 3).

Moreover the novel recognizes that desire, which is seen as prefiguring and firing the erotic, is by definition both thwarted and yet crucially, intimately, linked to the creative process. Indeed because the erotic creates an illusion of filling the void of the absent loved one, it is always already based on some form of fabrication.

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<sup>50</sup> “Ma mère est une héroïne de fiction”; “Juste des récits, transmis de génération en génération [...]. Des fictions” (74,75).

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