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**Crossing the boundaries of place, space and genre: *Après l'amour* by Agnès
Vannouvong**

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*Après l'amour*¹, French author and academic Agnès Vannouvong's first novel, is an autofictional narrative centring on the painful aftermath of a lesbian relationship. The novel gained critical attention when it was published in 2013, as much for its literary qualities as its frank, and often explicit, portrayal of lesbian sexuality. Appearing at a time when France was experiencing a conservative backlash against same-sex marriage legislation and just months after *La Vie d'Adèle*'s controversial Golden Palm at the Cannes film festival—it was even dubbed by one critic “La Vie d’Agnès chapitre 3” in an ironic nod to the movie² –, the novel was heralded as presaging a new visibility for lesbian narratives in mainstream culture. As television journalist Christine Bravo noted when presenting the novel on France 2's cultural review show *C'est au programme*, “le point de vue des femmes [sur le sexe] est plus rare. Il y a un tabou encore énorme et encore plus fort sur l'homosexualité féminine³.”

This comment might seem paradoxical for a country whose capital city boasts a rich literary heritage of Sapphic representation that helped create “the perception that Paris was [...] for women, a place of immoral freedom” (Waelti-Walters, 2000, 4). Yet, as Anne F. Garréta observed in 1996, France has long been marked by “a strange absence” (Garréta, 1996, 215) regarding the representation of lesbianism by lesbians themselves:

if you happen to stand at this crossroads of literature, woman and homoeroticism, negativity kicks in. [...] the locus of this category [...] is not

simply absent or non-existent or blank, but in a certain way crossed out or forbidden, off-limits. (Garréta, 1996, 221)

Also writing at the turn of the twenty-first century, Lucille Cairns' purview of post-1968 Sapphic fiction similarly concludes that not only have "lesbians in France [...] never constituted the kind of coherent public force and collective identity formed by their counterparts in the Anglo-American world" but moreover, "compared to Anglophone lesbian writing, and indeed to gay male French writing, there is certainly a dearth of French women writers who are openly gay and in whose work lesbianism occupies a central position" (Cairns, 2002, 2, 11). This state of affairs led French lesbian novelist Anne F. Garréta to speak of the category of "Gay French Women Writers" existing only "negatively", by virtue of its absence or its longed-for arrival (Garréta, 1996, 221, 117):

Everything indeed happens as if, at least in the French landscape, no field of force could be constituted around women: no lineage and no cross currents. Each instance of a gay French woman's text is a lonely instance: an author in exile, literal or figurative, pre-empting the actualization of a category and therefore of a signifying context. (Garréta, 1996, 234)

Of course there are some notable "lonely instances": one such would be *Les Amies d'Héloïse* by Hélène de Monferrand⁴, an openly "Gay French Woman Writer". This epistolary-cum-diary romance, which centres around a triad of promiscuous, guilt-free and socially integrated upper class lesbians, won the prix Goncourt's first novel award when it appeared in 1990 and gathered critical and media recognition in its wake. Other important figures include Colette (though "saved", perhaps, by her bisexual identity), Violette Leduc (championed by Beauvoir), Françoise Sagan (a lesbian writer of heterosexual romances) and Monique Wittig (an émigré to the United States). Nevertheless, it is really only since the beginning of the third millennium that "an accessible and growing corpus of female-authored French texts in which lesbianism is inscribed, assumed or made explicit" has really emerged – with "intra-female sex becom[ing] more and more explicit [...] towards the end of the decade." (Cairns, 2002, 11, 458).

According to Victoria Best and Malcolm Crowley's 2007 monograph, the twenty-first century has also witnessed the imagery and aesthetics of pornography enter mainstream French fiction.⁵ However, lesbian-authored novels with porno or

erotic strands remain relatively rare in France (Waelti-Walters, 2000, 5) and still tend – with some notable exceptions (Virginie Despentes, Nina Bouraoui) – to be confined to specialist publishing houses only (Cairns, 2002, 89). *Après l'amour* thus stands as a significant exception to this rule in that it was published by Gallimard's offshoot Mercure de France⁶ and, perhaps because of this, attracted the attention of both high-end and more popular cultural media, garnering enthusiastic reviews in *L'Express*, *Le Monde des livres*, *Madame Figaro*, *Marie-Claire*, *Le Nouvel Obs* and *Tele2* to name but a few.⁷ Lower-brow critics praised a humorous, racy and accessible novel that assimilated the lesbian narrator within a common, highly sexualized hetero-normative consumer culture:

Elle est quand même drôle, elle n'est pas du tout larmoyante, c'est assez cul je vous le dis tout de suite [...] sur le net elle cherche des coups d'une nuit exactement comme les mecs et comme les hétéros [...] on baise, on consomme comme les mecs. (*C'est au programme*, [1:03-1:07])

More erudite reviewers such as Collège de France scholar Antoine Compagnon were quick to point out the *Après l'amour* literary credentials – its witty Proustian reference and postmodern irony: “Charlus s’entichait d’un garçon boucher et Paola, [...] a convolé avec la petite bouchère du coin⁸.” The novel itself offers a meta-fictional aside that seems to validate both readings as well as hinting at its ambition to challenge the French male gay literary ascendancy, when a fictional editor for whom the narrator has been commissioned to write a history of brothels makes the following comment:

Que veux-tu, le cul se vend bien. Les histoires de gouines aussi. Comme dit Wittig, “c’est *in* d’être lesbiennes, c’est mode, c’est snob.” Bon, c’est un poil moins vendeur que les histoires phalliques à la Genet, Dustan ou Guibert; mais on va changer ça, toi et moi. (Vannouvong, 2013, 151)

In a narrative haunted by the inter-textual presence not only of Proust, but also a number of lesbian and non-lesbian identified female authors, *Après l'amour* takes the reader to bourgeois bohemian Paris, and the Marais, its LGBTQ epicentre, 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 – the clin d’œil to *À la recherche du temps perdu*. This highbrow literary legacy is combined with more popular elements of the contemporary romance and “chick lit”, its Anglo-American subgenre, as well as the more raunchy, porno-chic version, thereby juxtaposing

traditionally feminine “romantisme” and “douceur” with masculine “crudité” and “violence” as the novel’s back-cover blurb has it. Until she finds (or thinks she has found) ‘the One’, the protagonist’s singleton life is that of a self-confessed sexual predator” (Vannouvong, 2013, 126) combing Paris in search of passion, a Don Juan-in-petticoats who slips effortlessly into the ‘man’s role’, camping the male heterosexual paradigm. This leads to a series of largely short-lived sexual liaisons, seemingly dictated by the principles of the marketplace – a pattern that is in the libertine tradition but is also in the image of a frenzied shopper in quest of retail therapy and repeated with seemingly insatiable voracity. This certain, if ambiguous, fascination with contemporary high-end consumer culture suggests an affiliation with post-feminism, in that the novel is

characterised by the proliferation of media images and communication technologies and a neo-liberal, consumerist ideology that replaces collective, activist politics with more individualistic assertions of freedom [...] often directly tied to the ability to purchase. (Genz & Brabon, 2009, 8)

A concurrent and opposite narrative thrust is also introduced however, as the protagonist casts a nostalgic backward glance towards her former lover, 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 and the unworldly, offering a reflective and by moments lyrical counterpoint to the metrosexual quests that give the novel its principal energy and rhythm. Through this transnational identity quest the novel explores what Shirley Ann Jordan has termed “the overarching feature” of contemporary French women’s writing, just as it experiences the impossibility of such a project: “postmodern thought has rendered the idea of recovering a lost (pre-existent) self redundant.” (Jordan, 2004, 18-19)

Thus in a typically postfeminist “double entanglement” (McRobbie, 2009, 12) or “complicitous critique”⁹, *Après l’amour* hovers between poles, participating in mainstream consumerism and yet also standing critically outside of it, partaking of quintessentially “straight” and popular cultural forms while conjointly acknowledging its literary lesbian forbears – a non-heterosexual narrative in chick-lit clothing imbued with a more personal and alternative female and Sapphic legacy. Anchoring its action in the French capital, which the jilted narrator frenetically roams

from date to date, *Après l'amour* figures Paris as a postmodern textual space of competing and overlapping topoi and scripts: at once a global marketplace and a historical centre for Sapphic desire. Vannouvong's co-opting of the popular romance genre involves another border crossing too, as it requires her to trespass onto typically heterosexual and consensual terrain, which she queers and frustrates. The reader is denied the comfort of narrative closure, as, in a postmodern turn, the narrator finally forgoes the promise of blissful coupledness and jettisons the "classical romance script, in which solitude is finally exchanged for happiness in the arms of the one true lover." (Holmes, 2006, 89) Yet another border is breached – between high and low – as the novel's often-lofty intertexts find themselves buttressing a popular fictional plotline that "in France, even more than in other western cultures is seen as the negative shadow against which authentic literature defines itself" (Holmes, 2006, 2). *Après l'amour*, a post-love story, but also a postfeminist, postmodernist and postcolonial text, may thus be viewed as a new kind of lesbian writing, which deploys the genre-crossing tactics to voice a formerly "off-limits" Sapphic identity. How does Vannouvong achieve her aim? My analysis will begin by discussing the novel's use of the romance form and its contemporary avatar, chick-lit; I will then go on to explore the chimeric lure of consumer culture, and how the novel undercuts its appeal, before finally exploring how the narrative figures loss and offers the promise of textual compensation.

As Diana Holmes has noted, the romance novel can boast a long and successful history in France, its roots going back the medieval *roman courtois*, which lay the foundations for the French novel (the fact that "roman" became the French term for novel testifies to this joint pedigree). However it was in the Belle Époque that the genre gained widespread popularity: publishing had expanded, and with it the notion of romantic fiction as a marketing concept (Holmes, 2006, 119, 8, 23). This popular cultural form went on to gain a distinctly American twist with the arrival of the US and Canadian publishers Harlequin in the 1970s. Offering a "consistent celebration of consumer culture" (Holmes, 2006, 120) in which "romance is inseparable from an abundance of wealth and possessions" (Darbyshire, 2000, 1), Harlequin France moved upmarket in 2003 when it introduced *Red Dress Ink*, a "chick-lit" series whose heroines

are female urban-professionals (Holmes, 2006, 119). Scholar Scarlett Thomas has defined chick-lit as typically featuring

a young, female city-based protagonist who has a kooky best friend [...] romantic troubles and a desire to find the One [...] the apparently unavailable man who is good-looking, can cook and is both passionate and considerate in bed.¹⁰

Many such elements are present in *Après l'amour*, albeit it in modified form. The “kooky best friend” appears in the form of the narrator’s *confident* Jacques, a garrulous gay man, whom she turns to for advice and support in her quest for love before she finally falls for Héloïse, a lesbian motor-biking reincarnation of the ruggedly handsome seducer who also knows how to make a proper breakfast: “magnifique dans sa veste noire cintrée et sa chemise de smoking noire [...] Elle a ses petits trucs, les balades à moto, un parfum addictif, des pièges à filles.” (Vannouvong, 2013, 188, 190) Stephanie Harzewski’s cameo of chick lit also finds resonance in Vannouvong’s text:

Semiautobiographical adventures of their protagonists – typically a single, urban media professional [...] often set in the contemporary metropolis, reflect[ing its] consumerism and high-energy world [while] report[ing] on a new dating system and a shift in the climate of feminism.¹¹

Après l'amour’s heroine, who bears more than a passing resemblance to its author, pursues a lifestyle of stereotypically feminine luxury in a world that resembles a sort of Sapphic *Sex and the City* or Parisian *The L-Word* – theatre performances, cashmere sweaters, boutique hotels and choice Italian hors d’oeuvre savoured before a blazing log fire. She is also a well-versed member of the capital’s ‘culturati’, and both studies and experiences modern love first hand.

The reality of what the jilted narrator terms “fibre-optic” dating she now practices is radically different from the traditional romantic encounter and is the source of acerbic commentary as she ironizes her initiation into lesbian chat sites:

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. (Vannouvong, 2013, 16)

Viewed from behind a sceptical barrier of detachment ("derrière l'écran"), the passage knowingly foregrounds the futility and the artifice of the exercise ("passent leur soirée [...] ne baisent jamais", "technicolor"). Food, traditionally a metaphor for desire and arousal, and a common element in the textual representation of the erotic, is present, but in a debased, commodified form ("Fresh market. Fresh food"): the internet user'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. In the online quest for 'the one', it is the liberal ideology of the market place (flagged by Vannouvong's supermarket analogy) that dictates behaviour, as sociologist Eva Illouz has observed:

The idea is 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. (Illouz, 2007, 79, 90)

"Shopping" as efficiently as possible, the narrator of *Après l'amour* similarly "rationaliz[es]" her possible dates as one might products: "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*." 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 a deadening illusion: "À quoi devais-je m'attendre?" she asks after meeting her first date for real in the Marais, "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" (Vannouvong, 2013, 18, 17).

In this "economy of abundance" the dates themselves are interchangeable, each encounter overlaid with a standardized script redolent of a hackneyed, high-end commercial or vapid love song lyrics:

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. (Vannouvong, 2013, 27)

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 ("Nous sommes deux étrangères"). Endless choice devalues the supply, as the protagonist remarks of another liaison, where, "Pinterest"-style clichés fill the emotional void: "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" (Vannouvong, 2013, 56). 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:

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. (Vannouvong, 2013, 126)

As the novel progresses, the reader witnesses the commodification process being gradually internalized by the narrator who becomes increasingly complicit and decreasingly critical—to the degree that she 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 of luxury consumption which is itself eroticized—as Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst remind us, "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). The virtual, disembodied space of an online dating page leads to descriptions of a disarmingly concrete physicality that are nevertheless marked by a sense of artifice.

Encounters are formatted and choreographed: stereotyped physical appearance, classy outfits, theatre rendezvous (“J’adore ces lieux de représentation”), antipasti (“Dans mon imaginaire, les antipasti parlent la langue de l’amour”), copious breakfasts after a night of lovemaking and so forth. (Vannouvong, 2013, 173, 161)

It is no great surprise that the woman who most faithfully mirrors the narrator’s high-end tastes proves the most successful and long lasting of the narrator’s sexual partners.

– 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 tires à quatre épingles, les draps, le peignoir, les chaussons blancs, les produits de beauté, le petit déjeuner copieux. (Vannouvong, 2013, 169)

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 (“j’aime le luxe”). 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: “Lumière, lustres dorés, velours rouges. J’adore me perdre dans les théâtres.” (Vannouvong, 2013, 173)

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 XVIIe 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 coeur de Paris? (Vannouvong, 2013, 173-174).

When the corporeal is finally evoked, it is Héloïse's luxurious cashmere knitwear which seems to hold the narrator in its sway ("je peux enfin toucher la matière de son vêtement") as they move on to the sultrier stage provided by a high-class brothel, a venue which further underscores the sex-money dyad that fires the narrator's desire. 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.

These interchangeable vignettes that anticipate the next "prey" to be seduced, the next encounter to be scripted, are interspersed with a competing narrative trajectory as the narrator recalls and revisits her earlier past loves – reflective chapters that return not only to the narrator's relationship with Paola but also 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) at the same time as undercutting them. The impossibility of crossing this boundary, 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: "mais il est aussi un autre exil, figuré. Un exil intérieur, celui de la solitude, de l'amour non heureux. On passe parfois sa vie à rechercher ses traces. Mais on se perd dans un château de miroirs, un palais d'images qui sont autant de terres blessés." (Vannouvong, 2013, 74) One such image is that of the narrator and Paola's college years:

J'avais rencontrée Paola à la faculté des lettres, à Bordeaux. Nous étions libres. Nous avons vingt ans. L'idylle était belle. On faisait l'amour sur la pelouse du campus, à la bibliothèque, dans les escaliers des 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. (Vannouvong, 2013, 13)

Using a deceptively simple oral style and quotidian or clichéd references from the student lexicon and mind-set ("bibliothèque", "amphithéâtres", "supermarché", "*Thelma and Louise*", "Hollywood") the passage creates an impression of natural insouciance and sated desire. Mythological and biblical allusions suggest an all-female world¹², a pre-lapsarian idyll in an Eden of unbridled plenitude and unabashed pleasure where the narrator and Paola form two halves of a Platonic whole ("la même odeur de shampooing [...] boussole imaginaire"). At the same time however, this idyllic 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 into retirement further underscores 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 Western consumerism. 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: "Il y a l'exil géographique [...] Mais il est aussi un autre exil, figuré, celui de la solitude de l'amour non heureux" (Vannouvong, 2013, 74). Furthermore, the 'journey back' offers the illusionary promise of something more real and more authentic:

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)

Standing in stark counterpoint to the frenetic materialism of post-millennial consumerist culture into whose sway the narrator finds herself irresistibly drawn, Laos embodies pre-capitalist innocence, a world untainted by money, while references to the Mekong river hint at a Durasian female literary lineage. The country is a woman-identified space, very much a *motherland*, both literally and symbolically: "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”(Vannouvong, 2013, 75, 76). In more ways than one then, this richly sensual passage claims no links with the commercial and the patriarchal. Nevertheless, in a postmodern move, the narrator stresses the chimeric nature of any attempt to access the one’s maternal origins: her mother is “une héroïne de fiction”, just as Laotian society is “juste des récits, transmis de génération en génération [...] des fictions.” (Vannouvong, 2013, 74, 75)

Yet if the narrator of *Après l’amour* mourns the impossibility “of recovering a lost (pre-existent) self” or love, at a metafictional level, the novel suggests in that the postmodern world where the narrative—“des récits, des fictions”—holds sway, textuality, and more particularly intertextuality, can prove salutary. The narrator may be condemned to geographical or emotional exile, but *Après l’amour* takes lesbian writers and writing out of exile and makes visible their rich cultural lineage.

Left Bank Paris and the Odeon theatre, Châtelet, as well as the Belle Époque city with its plush Opera House and theatres all serve as narrative décors for the protagonist-seductress’ various encounters. Yet to the informed reader, these transhistorical Parisian locales also conjure up the early twentieth-century Anglo-American expatriate literary scene, now noted for its many bi-and lesbian practitioners, participants and ‘midwives’¹³—“before 1968 the closest thing France had come to a lesbian literary community [...] a constellation of writers gravitating around the American millionaires Natalie Clifford Barney”(Cairns, 2002, 2). Belle Époque Paris was also home to the French Colette (1873-1954), whose essay-memoir on her Parisian years *Le pur et l’impur* (1932) stands, together with Proust’s *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (1922) and André Gide’s *Corydon* (1924) as one of the earliest examples of frank narrative commentary on homosexuality in France.

In her figuring of the Sapphic erotic, Vannouvong also calls more explicitly upon a series of female-identified writers. One such is Violette Leduc (1907-1972), the “first [French] lesbian writer writing as a lesbian¹⁴” to give explicit (if metaphorically encoded) love-making between women a central place in her work, as she relates the power of the word to the pleasures of the female body:

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)

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:

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.¹⁵ (Vannouvong, 2013, 149)

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*, itself inspired by Sappho:

À 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'empoissonné 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).

But it is Hélène de Monferrand's glamorous evocation of high society sapphism *Les Amies d'Héloïse*, with which *Après l'amour* engages perhaps most fully. On a plot level, there is the obvious shared first name but also a twin narrative thrust, that of the jilted lover – the heroine in *Après l'amour* and Erika in *Les Amies d'Héloïse*. The reader may also note a striking resemblance in the taste for luxury and guilt-free promiscuity the protagonists espouse: just as cashmere functions as a synecdoche for Héloïse's high-end sensuality in *Après l'amour*, so the first Héloïse in *Les Amies d'Héloïse* admits "je ne quitte plus mes cols roulés en cachemire, portés à même le peau" (Monferrand, 1990, 168); in the image of Vannouvong's "Don Juan-in-petticoats", Erika changes lovers with such rapidity ("rotation") that she can no longer remember how many women she has slept with (Monferrand, 1990, 39). In fact, aspects of Erika can be found in not

only in the narrator of *Après l'amour*, but also the woman she falls for, the second Héloïse, to whom she bears an uncanny physical resemblance. Erika is tall, has short blond hair, long legs and big strong hands (“des cheveux vraiment blonds [...] une grande fille longiligne [...] avec de grandes mains musclées [...] et des jambes superbes” [Monferrand, 1990, 34]) whilst Vannouvong’s Héloïse is “mince, blonde, longue” with “les longs doigts musclés” (Vannouvong, 2013, 167-168).

However in the narrative dénouement the two novels differ significantly. In Monferrand’s happy-end romance, Erika is finally reunited with Héloïse her “one true lover” in a moment of sheer physical and mental harmony (“des heures ont passé, sans que nous ayons échangé une parole, ce qui était parfaitement inutile étant donné notre accord total. On peut même parler de fusion” (Monferrand, 1990, 436). Vannouvong’s narrator, however, never returns to Paola and leaves her Héloïse with the equivocal valediction: “au revoir, je veux je ne peux pas” (Vannouvong, 2013, 200) – an anti-sentimental take on her situation that is worthy of a Françoise Sagan heroine.¹⁶ With “solitude regained, emotional detachment is recovered” (Holmes, 2006, 88):

Seule, dans la ville, je suis debout, je marche, saisie par une pulsion, une puissance de vie, une joie. Peu importe le nombre, les femmes, les sexes. Je réalise que je dois me retrouver, me rencontrer de nouveau. (Vannouvong, 2013, 202)

Importantly also, Vannouvong’s is a novel, which, while it eroticizes luxury, never takes it as a natural right or privilege: both the narrator (of mixed Laotian and Thai descent), and Paola, the daughter of Portuguese immigrants are first-generation French nationals who are professionally successful, in spite of their humble origins, not thanks to an aristocratic heritage and prosperous colonial background: “Ta famille a lutté. Elle s’est exilé. Comme la mienne. Vous n’êtes plus pauvres” says the narrator of her ex-lover’s family (Vannouvong, 2013, 143). Monferrand’s right-wing pro-French-Algeria position, unequivocally championed by her protagonists in the novel is lampooned by Vannouvong in the caustic cameo of “la Versaillaise”, a self-avowed high-society “fundamentalist” Catholic the narrator meets through an online website: “Edwige ajuste son col Claudine, son pantalon en velours, boutonne son blouson vert [...] Elle serre contre elle son sac Lanvin, il ne manquerait plus qu’elle se fasse piquer dans le métro par un grand Noir” (Vannouvong, 2013, 25). Not only does *Après l'amour*

pay homage to France's lesbian literary lineage, but it also invites a critical evaluation of its forebears from a contemporary, post-colonial perspective.

This article has explored the crossing of place, space and genre in Agnès Vannouvong's first novel *Après l'amour*. It has argued that the novel is significant firstly for contributing to bringing lesbian sentimental and erotic fiction into the mainstream of the French literary landscape, borrowing as it does from more standard chick lit and porno chic genres. *Après l'amour* is important too because it also questions the status of relationships in an increasingly consumerist Internet age which has significantly transformed the codes of desire and seduction, asking finally, if we have not entered a 'post-love' era. 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 – a female Don Juan who shops till she drops for lesbian passion.

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 and Belle Epoque Paris as a privileged space of the Sapphic literary scene. Challenging the limits of genre to envision new, polysemic configurations of place and a space from which a French Sapphic cultural lineage may emerge. Not only do the novel's intertextual crossings function to defy the narrator's sense of inescapable loss, but they also inscribe the text in a broader landscape, that contributes to filling the generic void identified by Ann F. Garréta and bringing the "Gay French Woman Writer" and her text out of exile, actualizing the once-absent category and offering them a "signifying context." In so doing, Vannouvong also delivers a resolutely hybrid, twenty-first century version of the Parisian-based lesbian novel: a post-love anti-romance which transgresses boundaries as it engages with the other "posts" – feminist/ modernist/ colonial – of its time.

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NOTES

¹ Agnès Vannouvong, *Après l'amour*. Paris: Mercure de France, 2013.

² Jérôme Garcin, "La Vie d'Agnès, chapitre 3". *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 19 Sep. 2013, <https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/la-tendance-de-jerome-garcin/20130923.OBS8034/la-vie-d-agnes-chapitre-3.html> (accessed Jan. 14, 2018).

³ *C'est au programme*. France 2 Télévision, 1 Oct. 2013, [0:35-0:40], <https://agnesvannouvong.com/apres-lamour/> (accessed Jan. 14, 2018).

⁴ Hélène de Monferrand. *Les amies d'Héloïse*. Paris : Fallois, 1990.

⁵ Cf. Victoria Best and Martin Crowley. *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007.

⁶ Mercure de France has published Marguerite Duras, Eugene Ionesco, Henri Michaux and Paul Léautaud among others.

⁷ http://www.mercuredefrance.fr/livre-Après_1_amour-2224-1-1-0-1.html (accessed 22.11.2015).

⁸ Antoine Compagnon. "Mille e tre", *Le Monde des livres*, Oct. 2013, <https://agnesvannouvong.com/apres-lamour/>, (accessed Jan. 14, 2018).

⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London & New York, Routledge, 1989), p. 4. Hutcheon evokes "a strange kind of critique [...] one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyse and maybe even undermine".

¹⁰ Scarlett Thomas, "The Great Chick Lit Conspiracy", *The Independent*, 3 Aug 2002, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/the-great-chick-lit-conspiracy-172223.html>, (accessed Jan. 14, 2018).

¹¹ Stephanie Harzewski, *Chick Lit & Postfeminism* (Charlottesville & London, U of Virginia Press, 2011), introduction, <https://books.google.fr/>, (accessed Jan. 14, 2018).

¹² Naiads supposedly drowned young men who became enamoured with them.

¹³ Djuna Barnes, Nathalie Clifford Barney, Sylvia Beach, Romaine Brooks, H.D. Janet Flanner, Gertrude Stein, Renée Vivien and Dolly Wilde to name but a few.

¹⁴ Elaine Marks, "Lesbian intertextuality", in *Homosexuality and French literature*, Elaine Marks and George Stambolian eds., (Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1979), 374.

¹⁵ At a reading of her work at the Université de Franche-Comté, Vannouvong acknowledged the importance of Leduc's legacy in her writing.

¹⁶ In the words of one female protagonist: "un vrai bonheur, une fausse histoire d'amour" Françoise Sagan, *Dans un mois, dans un an*. (Paris, Julliard, 1957), 105.

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