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- 1 In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick states that: “Insofar as ignorance is ignorance of a knowledge...these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth¹.” We can understand this regimentation of the truth in our world as a direct and primary influence on cultural ignorance about the experiences of marginalized groups. In turn, such ignorance cannot be understood as an organic lack of knowledge, but as a byproduct of a created and enforced silence that refuses to give worth to existences outside the gates of what is deemed acceptable by those in power. As such, integral pieces of the humanity of these cultural outsiders are rendered effectively “unknowable,” and their experiences become illegible both to themselves and to their world: they go through things for which there is no intelligible language. In the West, women’s corporeal experiences have long been jettisoned into this abject realm of unspeakability, as patriarchal norms dictate what kind of bodies fall within the limits of speakable propriety. Perhaps one of the most taboo of such feminine existential (im)possibilities is that of abortion, through which one violently rejects her culturally sanctioned role as mother and asserts her right to an individual existence.
- 2 Annie Ernaux has done an enormous amount of work as both writer and subject (of her own writing) with respect to the visibility – and even the possibility – of abortion as a literary topos in French women’s writing. Her two pieces on the subject of abortion, *Les armoires vides* published in 1974, and *L’Événement* published in 2000, may be narratively quite divergent, but the stories their protagonists tell are painted upon almost identical backgrounds; they are both first person accounts of a college-aged woman from a working-class family who undergoes a clandestine abortion. In a sense, the works tell parallel stories, but from much different vantage points. *Les armoires vides*, Ernaux’s first

published novel, is told by Denise Lesur, who weaves the story of her clandestine abortion into a larger narrative that touches on other formative aspects of both her childhood and young adult life. The protagonist of *L'Événement* however shares her name with its author, and presents the narrative as a sort of memoir, in which she recalls the months surrounding the abortion that she had as a college student, through flashbacks and peeks into the journal that she kept at the time. The young Annie, like Denise before her, also finds herself pregnant by a disinterested university paramour, and recounts the details of her arduous journey of finding someone who would perform an abortion, of the procedure itself, and of its frankly gruesome aftermath that left her forever changed.

- 3 While one could finish *Les armoires vides* without much understanding of what a clandestine abortion entailed (and often, still does entail) on a physical level, Ernaux leaves nothing to the imagination in *L'Événement*, wherein we come quite graphically face-to-face with the mechanics of clandestine abortion, and the inhumane ways in which hospitals treated women who came seeking treatment in its aftermath. If *Les armoires vides* is about a woman who has gone through abortion – to be sure, a precarious premise for a novel at the time of its publication before the legalization of abortion in France – *L'Événement* is about abortion itself, and the effects of both unwanted pregnancy and its termination on the female body. Throughout both narratives, the epistemic double bind in which both protagonists come to find themselves with respect to the procurement of abortion becomes clear. Though each young woman of course “knows” that abortion exists as a procedure, the legal and moral codes of her culture prevent her from articulating her intent to abort to the exterior world; her body is imbued with a reality about which no one can know, and a part of her personal identity becomes inaccessible to those around her. Of course, this forced silence does not only affect the protagonists but those around them now and those who have come before them. The lack of cultural language with which to articulate their situation leaves them in a state that is not simply in-articulable, but one whose lack of representation within their worlds in turn distorts their capacity to know and understand themselves both physically and psychically. Not only are they forbidden from expressing their intentions to abort, but they find themselves seeking out an experience for which there is no prescribed and intelligible cultural narrative. The larger cultural intelligibility of abortion sends their individual self-understanding into a tailspin, as Ernaux’s young women become increasingly unable to make sense of their own bodies. The externally unknowable information that they do know about their bodies – that they are pregnant, and are determined to no longer be so – pushes them to a psychic state in which their capacity for self-understanding is increasingly diminished.
- 4 As I will detail below, abortion has, even after legalization, long lingered as an abjection on the margins of culture: not to be spoken of, and undertaken only by certain kinds of immoral women. In other words, abortion continues to be understood as a feminine anomaly undeserving of the empathy or understanding of the general public. Herein, I demonstrate the ways in which Annie Ernaux’s subjects who abort ask the reader to come to terms with their complicated reality by forcing the reader to confront both the truth of the experience through the written word, and the ways in which individuals who undergo the procedure never fit into the easy political categorizations that have long dominated cultural conversations about women who abort. As Ernaux’s narrators detail the destabilization of identity that accompanied their linguistic incapacity to express and thus fully understand their experience within the framework of their own worlds, the

reader is obliged to interpret abortion as a legitimate and real reproductive experience, within and not on the outside margins of culture.

The Unintelligible Female Body

- 5 From the start of *L'Événement*, the troubled sexual body is already at the forefront of the narrative. The introduction to what will become a narrative about abortion is an unsettling image of Proust-like reverie, in which the sentiments that the narrator feels during an upsetting visit to the doctor's office in the present day serve as the catalyst that transports her back in time to the doctors' offices that she visited in the months surrounding her search for clandestine abortion. Here at the narrative's present, she is being tested for HIV after an unprotected sexual encounter in the 1980s. Accordingly, before the narrative even delves into the account of abortion itself, the memorial association between abortion and a deadly venereal disease on the part of the narrator causes the reader to already associate the procedure of abortion with a kind of trauma. Though the narrative will certainly not go on to posit abortion as inherently traumatic, the dread and personal destabilization that the narrator feels in the HIV clinic is a precursor to the dread and destabilization of identity that will dominate her quest for abortion. Though she receives a negative test result once called back by the doctor, Annie takes care to note that when the female doctor that gives her these results enters the room, she immediately "smiles widely" at her patient – an almost indubitably intentional gesture whose purpose is to deftly soothe the clearly nervous protagonist as quickly and as smoothly as she can. She further notes that upon revealing her test results, the doctor "avait l'air joyeux et complice," underlining the intentionality of the previous gesture; the doctor is clearly on the side of her patient and does not work in opposition to her². Doctor and patient both "see" and know one another.
- 6 And though *Les armoires vides* often departs from the story of the narrator's abortion to explore other important moments in her life that influenced the creation of her personal identity, the novel begins with a description of the clandestine abortion that she underwent at the hands of a *faiseuse d'anges* – the quasi-sinister term given to (generally female) abortionists before legalization. By forcing the reader to confront the procedure from its inception, Ernaux's novel makes it all but impossible for a reader to brush off the abortion's place in Denise's own self-understanding; just as a traumatic experience later in life "sets off" the narrator's recollection of her abortion in *L'Événement*, the introductory remembrance of Denise's abortion acts as a catalyst for her to recollect the moments in her life that served in the creation of her identity as a young woman. Still, it is important to note that within this brief, introductory description of Denise's encounter with the *faiseuse d'anges*, the word "abortion," as either noun or verb, is never used as she sets the scene. *L'Événement*, which oscillates between a "present" in which abortion is legal, and the "past" in which it is not and upon which the narrator reflects, often uses the word abortion, or "avortement," but the word's apparition anywhere within Denise's narrative is scarce. As such, the reader is also already required to "interpret" the shadowed language that *Les armoires vides* uses to describe the abortion of its protagonist, and to recognize its abject referent that namelessly looms over the subsequent narrative.
- 7 If the female doctor who joyfully "grants" Annie freedom from a seropositive diagnosis is a reassuring female friend, the male doctor who she first consults in the wake of amenorrhea is a bearer of bad news. He almost immediately diagnoses the stomach

sickness that has begun to plague her as the onset of pregnancy –a horrifying and stark contrast to the immediate relief she feels in the HIV clinic. The sense of unspoken understanding between the female doctor and her patient is nowhere to be found in this interaction between a man and a woman who finds herself in a situation of which he has no understanding. When the female doctor smiles at Annie, it instills in the young woman a sense of warm “complicity” and of mutual understanding of the young woman’s condition. Conversely, the male doctor also smiles at his quite divergent diagnosis during their meeting, and follows it with the jovial observation that “les enfants de l’amour sont toujours les plus beaux,” a statement that understandably leaves her with a sense of horrified alienation³. Though of course no one desires to be seropositive, it doesn’t occur to this doctor that an unmarried college-aged woman would not be happy to learn of her pregnancy. In his world, the only knowable, viable option available to this patient is to go through with the pregnancy. Importantly, this is also her only legal option.

- 8 In her book on ethics and epistemology, philosopher Miranda Fricker defines what she calls “hermeneutic injustice,” wherein marginalized subjects experience “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource⁴”. As a result, such subjects undergo “prejudicial exclusion from participation in the spread of knowledge⁵.” During this first interaction with a medical professional during her pregnancy, it is already clear that the narrator is coming to experience such an epistemological injustice; the idea that she would be able to discuss an abortion with her doctor is, in her world, an epistemic impossibility that thus limits her ability to coherently process what her body (and her self) is going through. Abortion is not an intelligible “social experience” within her world.
- 9 Though of course both the narrator and her doctor are “aware” of abortion as a procedure that exists in the world, the “regimes of truth,” to borrow Eve Sedgwick’s epistemological term, that govern their communication prevent it from ever being formally recognized as such. As Fricker notes, “[w]hen you find yourself in a situation in which you seem to be the only one to feel the dissonance between received understanding and your own intimated sense of a given experience, it tends to knock your faith in your own ability to make sense of the world, or at least the relevant region of the world⁶.” Indeed, this rattling of identity quickly begins to shake Ernaux’s narrator, as her determination to put her body through a dangerous procedure that her world refuses to recognize as real remains unwavering.
- 10 Though at this stage in the narrative, we are only privy to the germination of such intimate dissonance, the effects of this hermeneutic injustice on the narrator’s understanding of her body and of her self will soon come to the forefront of the narrative; Annie, like Denise, is living a reality for which there are no words, and the epistemological injustice of her situation weighs deeply on her capacity to make sense of both her physical body and her psychic self. Largely then, this narrative, written so many years after its events are said to take place, and so many years after the real clandestine abortion of its own author, works both to correct the epistemological injustice that continues to push abortion into the realm of abject unspeakability, and as such to carve out a space in literature and in language for abortion narratives. To its readers then, the text implores an empathetic understanding of its narrative by which we come to terms with this abject feminine reality, and understand and situate her experience as one that is a part of both language and of culture. Our literary comprehension of the abortion of

Ernaux's protagonists facilitates, and perhaps necessitates, the corollary comprehension of abortion as a legitimate experience within the social world.

- 11 Indeed, while her body is obviously going through a very physical metamorphosis, the narrator's language also signifies the epistemological and even psychic change brought on by what is now virtually the certainty of pregnancy. Before this fateful visit to the doctor, the narrator meticulously documents the increasingly worrisome lack of stain in her underwear in a journal, and marks each passing day in her agenda with an ominous "RIEN." The feminine ritual that indicates such an intimate form of bodily knowledge, encompassed in the shedding her monthly blood, upsets the epistemic equilibrium of self-knowledge. As the lack of stain continues to haunt her, she turns to the obsession of "knowing" that her menses were not to return, and even of fearing that her mother would "know" that she was pregnant from the lack of menstrual stains in her laundry⁷. In this world, menstrual blood signifies a reassured self-knowledge and bodily normalcy, and its absence sends this intimate understanding of the body into a tailspin. Speaking of the recognition of the object in *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva writes that it is:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me⁸.

- 12 The absence of menstrual stain causes Annie to no longer totally recognize her body as her own. This physical absence would perhaps signify in an "opaque and forgotten life" wherein she may desire pregnancy, just as the words of the doctor who preemptively diagnoses her condition suggests. But in the actual world in which she finds herself, the discovery of her changing corporeal state effectively separates her from a core aspect of her self-understanding. Thinking back to the days before going to the doctor, she envisions herself – her body – sitting in cars, in the park, in cinema chairs, and realizes "une seule signification: j'étais là et je ne savais pas que j'étais en train de devenir enceinte⁹." Such a scene produces the literary sensation of a sort of out-of-body experience for the narrator, as if she is now gazing upon a now totally foreign version of her "self" that was not burdened by the alien physical presence that has burrowed inside her body and that she can now no longer deny; she reflects upon this "other" Annie and finds someone that she can no longer recognize. Not only is her body no longer entirely her own, the space within it becoming increasingly claimed by a thing whose presence she did not consent to, but its interior mechanics become a part of her she no longer controls and understands; the bodily knowledge that fueled psychic self-recognition is gone, and the narrator is no longer just "herself" – but also "something" that she does not recognize as a thing.
- 13 Determined to find a way to abort, the first person to whom she reveals her intention is a fellow student: a married man and pro-contraception (importantly within this narrative, different from pro-abortion) activist to whom she refers as "Jean T." and who is an active member of the then-nascent *Planning familial*. The narrator describes the way in which she reveals her intentions to Jean as coming "sous une forme détournée," which at first blush, perhaps points to the inherent danger of explicitly admitting to her condition out loud, especially in a public space¹⁰. But it is also a reminder of the lack of language for talking about abortion at the time: she was seeking out a quite literally unspeakable procedure that had no place within the linguistic order, and found herself attempting to

explain a condition that intrinsically could not be explained. Just as Denise's narrative begins with a description of her abortion that refuses to mention the procedure by name, this scene requires the reader to recognize the enormous disconnect between linguistic possibility and corporeal reality. Again, the continual struggle of each narrator to express herself brings us back to the hermeneutic injustice of her situation: she is living a reality that exists outside of the parameters of the social and moral boundaries of her culture.

- 14 Though sympathetic to her situation, Jean's reaction to Annie's shadowed confession is telling: "Instantanément, il lui est venu un air de curiosité et de jouissance, comme s'il me voyait les jambes écartées, le sexe offert. Peut-être trouvait-il aussi son plaisir dans la subite transformation de la bonne étudiante d'hier en fille aux abois¹¹." "Instantly," as she remarks, Annie undergoes a sort of ontological transformation in the eyes of her classmate. No longer just another person with whom he enjoys speaking, she is reduced to a sexual body whose purpose is to be devoured; indeed, he takes her to the home he shares with his wife and attempts to instigate sexual relations with her body, which, he notes, no longer runs the risk of impregnation. As Annie attempts to communicate the bodily truth of her unwanted pregnancy to those in her world, her desperate gestures are either unintelligible, in the case of her doctor, or willfully misunderstood, in the case of Jean T.

Interpreting a New Bodily Language

- 15 Ernaux frequently utilizes language or includes details that serve to question the reader's moral response to the experience described within her work: from the repeated and disgusted references to the "thing" that her narrators imagine to be growing inside of themselves, to their many admissions of sexual impropriety and contraceptive carelessness. Pascale Sardin notes that "[t]he novelist's duty, according to Ernaux's narrator, is to tell...what used to have no place in language. Her duty, or her moral responsibility is to communicate an experience which usually leaves women mute, as wars leave men 'dumb' according to Walter Benjamin¹²." Now, it is important to note that there is, of course, a sense in which abortion was a "knowable" experience that had a place in language: when she finds herself pregnant, each narrator is most obviously quite aware that the procedure exists and is at least theoretically available to her, albeit clandestinely. It is an easily verifiable fact that language to describe the procedure of abortion existed in the French language long before the 1960s¹³.
- 16 Still, it is clear in both texts that in a more politically urgent sense, the experience of abortion was an unknowable one that, as Sardin notes, had no place within language. Luce Irigaray, along with philosophers like Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, has theorized the ways in which women's experiences have been excluded from language and thus from the Symbolic Order, preventing the feminine existence from achieving cultural interpretation. She writes that "if we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, its gestures will be too few to accompany our story...Asleep again, dissatisfied, we will be turned over to the words of men – who have claimed to 'know' for a long time. But *not our body*...Let us not be ravished by their language again¹⁴." Abortion, both as a term and as a procedure, lingers outside of Symbolic Order of language. The word abortion may be littered throughout *L'Événement*, unlike the perhaps more politically fraught *Les armoires vides*, but never does it enter into any of the work's actual dialogue. Though Annie has spoken of her desire to abort to multiple people, it has *always*, up to

this point, been using shadowed language – never using the actual noun or verb that explicitly describes the act. But women had been aborting for thousands of years before Ernaux’s protagonists, or Ernaux herself, ever found herself in need of one. Surely, abortion has had some sort of place in some sort of linguistic order.

- 17 The ways in which abortion remains both expressed and totally unsaid within the narrator’s words demonstrate the epistemological constraints of the female bodily experience within her world. As such, Ernaux’s body of work is one that recognizes these culturally “unknowable” feminine realities, and forces the linguistic recognition of the experience. Indeed, the narrator in *L’Événement* echoes the words of Irigaray in her assertion that “si je ne vais pas au bout de la relation de cette expérience, je contribue à obscurcir la réalité des femmes et je me range du côté de la domination masculine du monde¹⁵.” The graphic language of text that signifies what her body went through during abortion serves to directly confront the epistemological regime of ignorance that dictated the expression of this feminine reality. Unwanted pregnancy cast her bodily self in unintelligible disarray; by putting this dislocated self into words so many years later, the writer imparts knowability to the experience for others.
- 18 Though Ernaux’s narrators (and the reader) are of course conscious that many women before them have aborted, each young woman highlights the solitude with which her situation has burdened her. For Annie, faced so far only with the sexual callousness and careless naiveté of men, it is clear that at least one aspect of the immense burden she carries is her incapacity so far to communicate her state to an Other. As such, the student of literature turns to books, hoping to find some sort of realistic, or at least coherent, description of the experience to which she might attach herself. As she notes, there is certainly no shortage of literature (or film) which makes reference to women who abort; but significantly, in her quest to locate such literature, she discovers that instead of ever describing the actual experience of abortion itself, there is “entre le moment où la fille se découvrirait enceinte et celui où elle ne l’était plus...une ellipse¹⁶.” The only descriptions of actual abortions that she is able to locate are in medical literature on the subject of “l’avortement criminel,” suggesting that what she is attempting to locate can only be articulated by measure of its criminality.
- 19 As riddled as *L’Événement* is with perilous encounters with doctors and other men for whom the narrator’s state is beyond comprehension, Denise’s journey to abort in *Les armoires vides* is decidedly internal, with little mention of the medical profession, and few admissions to the outside world of her state and intentions. Still, Denise is equally conscious of the curious solitude of her journey to do what women have been doing for ages: “Il n’y a rien pour moi là-dedans sur ma situation, pas un passage pour décrire ce que je sens maintenant...je lirais et je relirais. Les bouquins sont muets là-dessus¹⁷.” Her mostly fruitless search is only able to turn up the same sorts of ominous medical literature that Annie locates, noting that “le dictionnaire médical que j’ai emprunté à ma voisine de chambre est bourré de détails atroces, de sous-entendus sinistres¹⁸.” Accordingly, readers find themselves participating in the very consumption of that fabled and nonexistent sort of literature that both narrators so desperately seek – the tale of a woman who aborts that empathizes with the individuality of her experience, and refuses to condemn her choice. The ultimate impossibility within each narrative is rendered possible through the literary engagement with their stories, in which the historically “illegible” story of abortion is rendered comprehensible.

- 20 Here, we can turn to the work of feminist philosophers like Eve Sedgwick and Nancy Tuana concerning the epistemology of ignorance and hierarchies of truth with respect to women's bodily and sexual experiences. The story of women who undergo and survive to find personal fulfillment after abortion is a story that does not fit into the regime of legitimate reproductive experiences as defined by post-war French attitudes towards women. It is not an accident that neither narrator is able to find an empathetic or coherent description of her current state, but an active repression¹⁹. As Tuana says: "Perhaps the body speaks, but what it says requires interpretation²⁰." Likewise, the narrators' respective bodies continue to "speak" their trauma, but the truth of these bodies comes out as unintelligible both to the narrator herself and to the world around her. Ernaux is determined to interpret this unintelligible experience of unwanted pregnancy, and to make known to the world around her its existence: once indelibly put into the written word, consumed by the public and placed into libraries, abortion as an imaginable reproductive experience cannot be denied.
- 21 Indeed, though both of Ernaux's narrators speak to the solitude and self-doubt that the lack of literary resources about abortion created, Denise further solidifies the link between literature and the creation of self-identity. Alone not only in her quest for abortion, but also in her every-day life in which she struggles to fit in with her bourgeois peers, Denise speaks at multiple points in her narrative to literature's capacity to open windows to self-understanding. As a young woman who, abortive intentions aside, never feels quite right in her milieu, Denise dreams that for her, "l'auteur n'existait pas, il ne faisait que transcrire la vie de personnages réels...les livres, eux, ne me reprochent rien, la vie claire et transparente de mes héroïnes...dessinent les contours flous d'une Denise Lesur telle que je la voudrais²¹." Again, her words transport us to a meta-narrative understanding of the capacity for works about abortion to accordingly generate an empathetic vision of those who choose to undergo it. Abortion, a physical reality for both writer and narrators, will be interpreted and understood.

The Assertion of Bodily Knowledge

- 22 Finally, Annie makes it to the *faiseuse d'anges*, who performs the tubal insertion that will cause her to miscarry. Even if she will be forever changed by this personal *épreuve*, things are beginning to return to normal, for both her psychic and her physical self. When she goes to check her underwear for blood this time, she finds that it is covered with blood – finally, a signal that her body is returning to a normal and comprehensible state. While nausea has plagued her since the inception of her pregnancy, she is now overtaken with it, and vomits: an abject indication that the process of actually aborting is about to begin. The abortion itself is an abject flood of both life and death – mimicking a birth and a burial. If *Les armoires vides* is still plagued by the "ellipsis" between pregnancy and post-miscarriage about which Annie complains, *L'Événement* confronts each detail of the miscarriage that the classic tubal insertions of the *faiseuse d'anges* would cause, effectively forcing the reader to *know* abortion – certainly, not in the same fashion as those who undergo it, but in the very least in a way that refuses the perhaps squeamish ellipsis that would allow us to skirt the complicated contradictions of its reality.
- 23 The reassuring return of blood quickly becomes a disturbingly large loss of it, and she is forced back into the medical environment of the hospital. The new environment of the hospital interrupts this personal *épreuve*: "d'expérience pure de la vie et de la mort, elle

est devenue exposition et jugement²².” Still, the expulsion of the foreign “thing” inside of her has caused an apparent psychic transformation for the narrator, who is now able to speak with clarity to the truth of her experience and “cette impossibilité de dire les choses avec des mots différents...me [semble] la preuve que j’ai réellement vécu ainsi l’événement²³.” What was earlier the impossibility of speaking about her condition in “real” and tangible terms is now the impossibility of altering the memory of this real experience. These unchangeable words further act as testament to the power of literature that she was previously unable to find: with the description of this ordeal – this event, or this happening – concretely put on the page, the reality of abortion as an experience that is both possible and real within the world can no longer be denied. Pregnancy turned her body into an unintelligible entity; writing through and effectively bearing witness to the changes that her body underwent make her body human and real again. Indeed, she writes in a following parenthetical that: “ce travail secret, clandestin même. Je n’aurai plus aucun pouvoir sur mon texte qui sera exposé comme mon corps l’a été²⁴.” The body and the text become one, as the bodily experience is totally inseparable from the psychic experience: the body is the self.

- ²⁴ Likewise, Denise’s story, which began with the tubal insertion, circles back at its end to find the protagonist outside the doors of the *faiseuse d’anges*, about to undertake this test of internal strength. Though her journey may not be a linear one, and though she once again notes how alone she is as she makes her way to the door, without family or partner at her side, Denise’s narrative equally ends on a triumphant note of self-assured understanding. Certain of what she must do, she asserts that she will not remain “enceinte...ça n’aurait pas de sens. Je ne voudrais pas crever²⁵”; Denise will put her body through the pain of clandestine abortion to ensure the continued wholeness of her self.

Conclusion

- ²⁵ On abortion as a literary motif, Christine Détrez and Anne Simon remark that it is “... ainsi un motif ambivalent, parce que, socialement, il est porteur de contradictions, oscillant toujours entre officieux et officiel, privé et public, espace domestique et espace médical, silence et parole : ce sont ces contradictions que mettent en mots les auteures²⁶.”
- ²⁶ Though divergent in both form and content, Ernaux’s works on abortion serve to carve out a space for abortion within both literary and cultural language. As each text highlights the intelligibility of their narrator’s bodily experience, the reader is required to thus perform the interpretive work of situating the aborted subject within the framework of cultural intelligibility. That is to say, the literary consumption of Ernaux’s *récits* intrinsically requires the subsequent understanding of abortion as an experience within the world both representable and represented within literature. By putting the aborted body on graphic display in a totally unapologetic fashion, the author forces the reader to come to terms with abortion as a possible experience for the female body: a human body, after all, and one that does have a place within the linguistic symbolic order.

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NOTES

1. Eve Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet*. (Berkley: University of California Press, 2008), 25.
2. "had a complicit and joyous air" (All English translations of Ernaux's works are my own). Annie Ernaux. *L'Événement* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 15.
3. "children born from love are always the most beautiful." Ernaux, *L'Événement*, 21.
4. Miranda Fricker. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 154. The book is also largely dedicated to what she calls "testimonial injustice," in

which a subject is not believed when they talk about experiences that they have actually had, due to lack of social standing and as such of epistemological power. Though this sort of injustice does not play a significant part in Ernaux's narrative, I will note that it certainly plays a part in larger cultural understandings about abortion narratives and women who abort.

5. *Ibid.*, 162.

6. *Ibid.*, 163.

7. Ernaux, *L'Événement*, 18-19.

8. Julia Kristeva. "Powers of Horror" *The Portable Kristeva: Updated Edition*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 227.

9. "one thing: I was there, and I didn't know that I was in the middle of becoming pregnant." Ernaux, *L'Événement*, 18.

10. "in a convoluted way." Ernaux, *L'Événement*, 31.

11. "Instantly, an air of curiosity and pleasure came to him, as if he saw me with legs and sex opened and offered. Perhaps he also found pleasure in the sudden transformation of the good student of yesterday now with her back against the wall." Ernaux, *L'Événement*. 34

12. Pascale Sardin. "Towards an Ethics of Witness, or the Story and History of 'Une Minuscule Détresse' in Annie Ernaux's *L'Événement* and Nancy Huston's *Instruments des Ténèbres*," *French Studies* (2008), 62:3, 308.

13. According to the website of the *Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales*, the term "avortement" (or a version of it) dates back to c. 1190.

14. Irigaray, Luce, and Carolyn Burke. "When Our Lips Speak Together," *Signs* 6, no. 1 (1980): 76.

15. "if I don't go all the way in relating this experience, I contribute to the obfuscation of the reality of women, and I place myself on the side of masculine domination of the world." Ernaux, *L'Événement*, 58.

16. "between the moment when the girl finds herself pregnant and the one where she no longer is...an ellipsis." *Ibid.*, 40.

17. "There is nothing there on my situation, not a passage describing what I feel now...I would read and reread. Books are mute on the subject." Annie Ernaux. *Les armoires vides* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 3.

18. "The medical dictionary I borrowed from my roommate is filled with atrocious details, and sinister implications." *Ibid.*, 4.

19. Furthermore, it is perhaps interesting to note that both narratives are perhaps some of the first publicly "empathetic" descriptions of abortion within French culture – or at least, within the literary canon.

20. Nancy Tuana. "Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance," *Hypatia* 19.1 (2004), 219.

21. "the author didn't exist, and only transcribed the life of real characters...books never reproached me for anything, the transparent and clear life of my heroines...drew the contours of a Denise Lesur as I would like her to be." Ernaux, *Les armoires vides*, 80.

22. "from a pure experience of life and death, it became an exposition and a judgment." Ernaux, *L'Événement*, 104.

23. "this impossibility of using different words to say this...seems to me proof that I truly lived through this event as such." *Ibid.*, 105.

24. "this secret and even clandestine word. I will no longer have power over the text, which will be exposed as my body was." *Ibid.*, 106.

25. "pregnant...that wouldn't make sense. I would not like to die." Ernaux, *Les armoires vides*, 150.

26. "an ambivalent motif because, socially, it bears contradictions, always oscillating between official and unofficial, private and public, domestic space and medical space, silence and speech. It is these contradictions that authors put into words." Christine

Détrez and Anne Simon. *A leur corps défendant : les femmes à l'épreuve du nouvel ordre moral*. (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 150.

ABSTRACTS

This paper examines the motif of abortion in the works of Annie Ernaux and the ways in which the corporeal language of her narrators leads us to an empathetic understanding of abortion as a legitimate reproductive experience within the Symbolic Order of language. I argue that as her narrators seek out the procedure of abortion that is “unintelligible” within the parameters of their world, they are subject to an epistemological injustice that is corrected through the reader’s interpretation of their experience. Abortion allows Ernaux’s narrators to regain the self-understanding that pregnancy takes away.

Cet article analyse le motif d’avortement dans les œuvres d’Annie Ernaux, et les façons dont le langage corporel de ses narratrices nous amène envers une compréhension empathique de l’avortement, en tant qu’expérience légitime de reproduction dans l’Ordre Symbolique. Pendant que les narratrices tentent d’obtenir des avortements, il demeure une procédure « incompréhensible » en dedans des paramètres de leur monde ; ainsi, elles se trouvent subjuguées à une « injustice épistémologique » qui se corrige à travers l’interprétation de leur expérience de la part du lecteur. L’avortement permet aux narratrices d’Ernaux de regagner la compréhension de soi que la grossesse leur arrache.

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Holly Runde is a doctoral candidate in the Department of French at the University of Virginia. Her dissertation, entitled “The Choices of my body: towards an empathetic reading of contemporary French abortion narratives,” examines the ways in which both fictive and non-fictive works about abortion produce a nuanced, often complicated, vision of the experience of abortion that defy often-exaggerated contemporary political conceptions of the procedure. It examines the works of writers such as Annie Ernaux, Lorette Nobécourt, Marie Darrieussecq, and Linda Lê.