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# Collapsing Boundaries to Expose Censorship and Expand Feminism in Virginie Despentes's *Apocalypse Baby*

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LEAH E. WILSON

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

*To start with I found this reaction so ridiculous I laughed. But I soon changed my attitude, when I realized I was being besieged from all sides on this issue alone: you're a girl, a girl, a girl.*

—*King Kong Theory*, Virginie Despentes

Virginie Despentes's *Apocalypse Baby* strikes back against the censorship that has limited the audience of her work and that she rightly decries above as based in patriarchal bias (*KKT* 111). The narrative captures the story of two female investigators, the unenthusiastic, almost comically incompetent private eye Lucie Toledo and the infamously aggressive lesbian sleuth, the Hyena, as they search for runaway rich girl Valentine Galtan (Despentes *AB* 22-28). *Apocalypse Baby* contains tropes of violence, sexuality, and female empowerment emblematic of Despentes's earlier novels. Yet, unlike much of her work, the book is translated into English, making it only the third of Despentes's expansive *oeuvre* to reach English-speaking audiences despite the accolades awarded to her writings, such as the Prix Renaudot and the Anaïs Nin Prize (Feminist Press "Virginie Despentes"). The recent English translation of a fourth title, *Bye Bye Blondie*, by the Feminist Press in 2016 indicates the rising global popularity of Despentes's work and attests to the literary merits of her writings (Feminist Press "Bye Bye Blondie"). As English translations of her novels slowly emerge, it becomes imperative to address these renditions and the ways in which Despentes crosses lines of genre, gender, and sexuality to tell a story of collective female oppression and, moreover, provides crucial feminist vision in the face of bowdlerization.

Because of the violent and sexually graphic nature of Despentes's first novel, *Baise-moi*, and its film adaption, Despentes's work carries a history of controversy, facing scrutiny from conservative and even some feminist academic audiences (Downing "*Baise-moi*..." 53). Furthermore, government

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agencies notoriously censored the movie, removing some scenes in the British version and making it the “first banned film in France in 28 years” (Forrest 62, 57). As a result of this legacy, her following work remains largely inaccessible in English, casting Despentès into the periphery of a global audience. Although only 2 to 3% of foreign language works are translated into English, which limits international readership of foreign novels in general, I assert that this statistic only furthers the significance of my argument: as a controversial female author who writes about female violence and sexuality, the censorship she encounters mutes her profoundly feminist critique of contemporary patriarchal society (Anderson).<sup>1</sup> The impact of regulation is far-reaching: even though she has continued publishing prolifically, only a few scholars, such as Natalie Edwards and Michèle Schaal, have critiqued Despentès’s works since the shock of her first opus, and still fewer critics have addressed her translated texts despite the subsequent novels’ “tamer” display of physical brutality and sexual eroticism (*KKT* 111). Indeed, Edwards is only one of two scholars to critique *Apocalypse Baby* in English, arguing that Despentès’s sixth novel demonstrates the transgressive feminism proposed in her nonfiction work, *King Kong Theory*, through its plethora of female characters and their performance of sexuality and violence (*KKT* 17-18).<sup>2</sup> Indebted to previous discussion of Despentès’s censorship highlighted by scholars such as Amy Forrest and Lisa Downing, as well as conversation about Despentès’s play with genre by critics like Shirley Ann Jordan and Nicole Fayard, my article extends the dialogue Edwards begins.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing from these foundational arguments, I bring Despentès’s critique of modern society and censorship from the margins to explore how she constructs and obliterates boundaries in *Apocalypse Baby*. As in *Baise-moi*, Despentès toys with genre, presenting the novel as a noir detective “road movie” that traverses the line into dystopian science fiction where the censorship Despentès experiences as a female author becomes an extreme reality.<sup>4</sup> I first examine how Despentès, as a Braidottian nomad, (a figure the feminist theorist defines as a “situated, postmodern, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject in general and of the feminine subject in particular” and which permits for a “creative sort of becoming: a performative metaphor that allows for other unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction of experiences and of knowledge,”) creates genre, gender, and sexuality borders only to cross them (Braidotti 4, 6). Next, I investigate how she successfully blurs the lines between homosexuality/heterosexuality and

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contend that Desportes depicts the construction of nomadic identities in which her female characters adopt positions like Monique Wittig's political lesbians as necessary for rebellion. However, after presenting Desportes's nomadic strategies that unsettle borders to allow for, as Judith Butler famously argues, "understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorization as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently," I claim that the novel's conclusion disrupts the distinction between the detectives/criminals and watched/watchers to stand as Desportes's critique of the censorship that followed *Baise-moi* and of a feminism that privileges individual progress over collective freedom (110). Thus, in *Apocalypse Baby*'s ending, sexuality and violence merge, revealing border-crossing's insufficiency if we do not communally embrace a more expansive feminism and dismantle patriarchal values that perpetuate hegemony within French literature, culture, and society.

### **Constructing Borders to Cross**

*Apocalypse Baby* features borders and boundaries to emphasize Desportes's traversing of them.<sup>5</sup> The novel itself contains multiple, predominately female characters' perspectives, with the private eye, Lucie, serving as the narrator whose account alternates with the other characters' stories, cataloguing the search for the runaway teenager, Valentine. Presenting multiple narratives to tell the story, the author makes her readers question any authority that designates a single viewpoint. As Schaal notes, Desportes characterizes her work by using "binomials" and "*focalisation multiple*" that "symbolizes Desportes's rejection of both gendered and literary univocal interpretations" (43, italics in original). Interchanging perspectives between the detectives, the people connected to Valentine, and Valentine herself, Desportes disrupts the traditional linear narrative and prevents the reader from depending on any one character's truth, destabilizing any inherent power the reader would give the narrator or other seemingly reliable characters as they cross between different characters' perspectives throughout the novel (Reyns-Chikuma 553). Additionally, each of the characters exists in the margins of society, cast there by gender, age, sexuality, class, and/or race (Edwards 20; Reyns-Chikuma 551-53). Involving a myriad of perspectives from traditionally silenced people, Desportes subverts the dominant worldview that depends on suppressing others to uphold supremacy (Edwards 12). Edwards attributes this form to Desportes's transgressive feminist mission (12); and while I agree,

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I underscore that although their particular representations are important factors for transgression, their presence, and, more particularly, the author's interjecting of these narratives at alternating geographical locations (moving from Paris to Barcelona and back to Paris for the novel's explosive ending, in which Valentine blows up herself and the Palais-Royal during an awards ceremony for the arts), stress Despentès's feminist critique of contemporary society (*AB* 322-24).

Incorporating interchanging perspectives at fluctuating locations, Despentès exaggerates her characters' (un) fixity and exhibits their subjectivity by making readers move through geographical borders. Placing her characters as migrants between frontiers, Despentès's nomadic novel is about destroying "commonsensical meanings, deconstructing established forms of consciousness" (Braidotti 15). She uses travel as the *modus operandi* for reinvention and puts her characters in unfamiliar, in-between places to "flirt with radical nonbelongings and outsidership" (Braidotti 16). Trekking beyond their typical surroundings, Despentès's characters enter nomadic states that inspire changes in identity, such as when Lucie traverses from Paris to Barcelona during the search for Valentine and begins exploring a lesbian identity (*AB* 204). Despentès forecasts Lucie's change by accentuating the impact expedition has on her physical body. As Lucie reflects, "When you get away from Paris, you realize what a grey, noisy, depressing and morbid city it is. As we sit on this café terrace, the wind on our skin hasn't the same texture" (*AB* 146). The locale change prompts Lucie to notice the wind and how it feels against her skin: while the Spanish air may or may not be different from Parisian breezes, it awakens Lucie to her body and how she perceives her surroundings (*AB* 146-47). These physical changes denote a heightened level of perception as the unfamiliar location inspires her to recall her previous locale and the consciousness she inhabited there, reflected in her memory of Paris as a bleak metropolis. Once in Barcelona, Lucie discerns her grey life in the French capital, and furthermore, she comprehends that she can move beyond this experience. Following this scene with the clamorous descriptions of Barcelona's deconstruction and reconstruction, in which Lucie notes "a whole lot of workmen, naked to the waist, attacking the façade with pneumatic drills" and that "The city has become a vast cauldron of noise. People sound their horns all the time, while gigantic machines are digging up the roads, exposing the town's entrails, taking the din to new levels," Despentès underlines that Barcelona will be a place of transformation (*AB* 146-47). Traveling with her

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characters, both Despentès and her readers enter the nomadic state and the text itself becomes a place of transit that disrupts accustomed perceptions and ways of understanding the world (Braidotti 15).

As Lucie develops awareness of her surroundings and as Barcelona destroys and rebuilds itself, readers become cognizant of Despentès's characters, their geographical locations, and their shifting identities that challenge a univocal, authoritative worldview that depends on stagnant, categorized identities to maintain hegemony. Unsettling dominant perspectives, Despentès's literature advocates a feminist mission that confronts patriarchal authority, making the silencing of her work through censorship particularly significant, as such suppression, whether through French government agencies or through lack of translation (and therefore accessibility), enacts the authority of a single perspective that stifles a multitude of voices. As Forrest argues in her article about *Baise-moi*'s film reception and censorship, "Ultimately, the media plays an intercessor role in maintaining the dominant cultural and social consensus by speaking superficially about *Baise-moi*. The narrative can potentially open up sites of negotiation for a critique of society and its inherent sexism and violence" (73). Likewise, the enduring paucity of Despentès's translated novels prevents her critique of patriarchal society from reaching a wider, global audience and preserves the dominant worldview.

Further resisting a solitary narrative, Despentès deploys multiple women's perspectives within multiple locations to build a hybrid genre that navigates between noir detective fiction, and the "road movie," blending and redefining the typically masculine categories.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Edwards identifies this categorical amalgamation as a distinctive Despentian move, calling the author's *oeuvre* "Part crime fiction, part detective novel, part road movie, part trash, part romance, part thriller" (12). The collective works "sit uncomfortably between genres and refuse any static labels or identifications," and *Apocalypse Baby* follows Despentès's tradition of blending and co-opting classically masculine genres (Edwards 12).<sup>7</sup> The novel's portrait of Lucie as a private eye whose most interesting work involves following teenagers at the request of their parents begins as a standard detective story (*AB* 8). However, with Despentès's detectives, the novel deviates from traditional hardboiled crime fiction. Lucie opens the novel with the announcement that "Once I passed thirty, the spring went out of things, the impetus that carried me along seemed to ebb away. And I know that next time I find myself on the job market, I'll be a mature woman, without any qualifications. That's why I'm

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clinging on for dear life to the work I have now” (*AB* 1). Demonstrating from the beginning of the work that the protagonist and detective is an apathetic woman who retains her job out of necessity, not out of passion or a sense of duty, Despentès deviates from the script of the determined (male) detective. Moreover, Lucie, an unremarkable woman nearing forty, continually describes herself as invisible and observes that people’s apathy towards her is her greatest asset (*AB* 15, 56-57). Her reflection that “I can’t exactly say I hate what I’m doing, but fixing little kids’ mobiles is neither glorious nor exciting” parodies the noir’s archetype of a driven (male) private investigator who restores societal order (Despentès *AB* 11; Moser 163). The author continually highlights Lucie’s lack of enthusiasm, with the Hyena noting Lucie’s indifference during their first meeting as she asks, “You don’t take a whole lot of interest in what you do, eh?” (*AB* 28). Underlining Lucie’s pathetic persona throughout the novel, Despentès draws contrast with the Hyena, who echoes other Despentian femme fatales in her violence and overt sexuality, catcalling girls as she drives and pummeling teenage boys to get information about Valentine (*AB* 52, 113-15, 119). Contrasting one woman, an apathetic, half-hearted semi-professional sleuth, to an aggressive, animalistic female detective, Despentès ruptures the stereotypically masculine genre by occupying her novel with opposing versions of archetypal characters that challenge both genre assumptions and gender stereotypes. In turn, she forces readers to examine her characters, the novel’s genre, and the ways in which they blur boundaries.<sup>8</sup>

Imparting these archetypal characters with the mission of finding Valentine, who has vanished from Lucie’s watch in Paris to find the mother who abandoned her in Barcelona, the novel traverses from detective fiction into a road movie format (*AB* 120; Reyns-Chikuma 553-55). According to scholar Timothy Corrigan, the road movie genre has several characteristics: it reacts to the destruction of the family and loss of male power, there are “events [that] act upon the characters,” the hero is easily connected with road transportation, and lastly, it is “a genre traditionally focused, almost exclusively, on men and the absence of women” (145-46, 143). Traveling by car, the detectives explore Paris neighborhoods, Lyon, and Barcelona as they search for Valentine. Encountering a variety of predominately female characters on their journey, Despentès spotlights Valentine’s lack of family. As they drive across France and into Barcelona, the detectives meet Valentine’s stepmother, Claire, who fears Valentine and thinks that life is more peaceful without her,

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and Valentine's biological mother, Vanessa, who would rather ensure her cushioned life married to an architect (who does not know she has a child) than allow Valentine to stay with her despite not seeing Valentine since her babyhood (*AB* 85, 185-87). As Jordan observes in Desportes's earlier novels, the author's female characters are not nurturing, motherly, or emotionally attached to family (117). *Apocalypse Baby* continues this trend and Desportes uses this characteristic to further unsettle the typically masculine genre. That the detectives find women of Valentine's family who prefer Valentine's absence anchors the road movie narrative as a reaction to not, as Corrigan claims, the breakdown of a family, but to relationships that never really existed at all, challenging the myth of a whole, nuclear family. Additionally, the novel dispels the notion that the genre responds to the perceived loss of male power—none of the women the detectives come across are free from masculine authority, as I will discuss in the next section—which challenges the stereotypical premise of the road movie and stresses Desportes's subversion. Employing archetypes and purposefully using a road trip to foreground a variety of women's perspectives, Desportes mingles traditionally masculine categories, as she did in *Baise-moi*, making her work, as Jordan notes, “disruptive and disturbingly blurred” (114). Blending genres and presenting her noir detective-road movie novel as decidedly female, Desportes, in the role of nomadic author, illuminates the construction of genre and gender and prepares the reader to accept investigations of other constructions, such as sexuality. As critic Lidia Curti writes, “The combination of genres is meant to demonstrate that the reader is passively ready to be introduced in any kind of narrative” (46). Incorporating multiple voices, geographical locations, and genres, Desportes depicts marginalized perspectives and rebels against dominant patriarchal worldviews. Thus, she utilizes genre, gender, and geographical borders as lines to cross, announcing her feminist critique of power structures and preparing her readers for her condemnation of patriarchal society that exploits sexuality to enforce hegemonic categories such as women/men, watched/watchers, or censored/censors.

### **Collapsing Borders: Unsettling Heterosexuality**

Blending genres and depending upon a multitude of diverse women's stories to portray Valentine's disappearance and the resulting search, Desportes constructs and collapses borders to highlight her radical message: heterosexuality entraps women, and they must transcend sexual boundaries

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to escape the oppression of their gender. Desportes presents the Hyena as Lucie's lesbian guide, an assertive, sexually-liberated woman who dresses and drives like a rock star and markedly contrasts with Lucie, who, as an over thirty-five, unmarried, underemployed, average-looking heterosexual woman, continually describes herself as invisible as if she has internalized society's perception of herself (*AB* 22, 49, 3, 57). Desportes's representation of the unmotivated Lucie follows her tradition of creating heroines from the forgettable fringes of society, and Schaal states that the author does this intentionally to exhibit how French patriarchal society financially limits women because of their gender (48-49). I extend this argument to add that Desportes associates women's paltry employment and poverty as not only a consequence of their gender, but of their heterosexuality as well, which, as French feminist theorist Monique Wittig explains, acts as a social contract that subordinates women into a position of serfdom under their male masters (34). Desportes, therefore, pairs Lucie with the Hyena, an almost clairvoyant lesbian sleuth, who can "spot those who [are] concealing something," as they encounter a myriad of demoralized heterosexual women to reveal how heterosexuality binds women to men financially and exploits them sexually (Desportes *AB* 231). Together, they meet Claire, an insecure middle-class housewife who marries into money and believes women who have orgasms during sex are lying, and Vanessa, Valentine's Algerian mother who strives to pass as a wealthy French woman by marrying affluent French men, and finally rich-girl Valentine herself, whose supposed friends rape her (*AB* 81-82, 182-87, 120-21). Through their journey, Desportes takes advantage of the characters' (and readers') nomadic state to show the pitfalls of being any woman in modern patriarchal society, but especially a heterosexual woman. Heterosexuality is integral to Western society and, consequently, "is always already there . . . sneaked into dialectal thought . . . as its main category" and so this tour through hapless heterosexuality is necessary to make its limitations visible to Lucie and readers (Wittig 43). Harnessing her position as nomadic author, Desportes accentuates heterosexuality's inherent restrictions to further expose the ways in which it confines women.

Moreover, the unveiling of heterosexuality's limitations becomes especially important as Desportes connects heterosexuality to physical and sexual violence women experience. As the Hyena tells Lucie after discovering Valentine's assault, "If all teenage girls who got themselves raped ran away there wouldn't be many left at home. When I was young, I thought being a

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lesbian was the most difficult thing in the world, but really you, the straight women, you eat shit” (Despentes *AB* 121). Stressing sexual assault’s prevalence, Despentes underlines the violence all women undergo. Yet, by depicting the Hyena as sympathetic towards heterosexual women, the author implies that, through their relationships with men, straight women are especially oppressed because heterosexuality is inherently violent for women since it confines their lives to the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality, as renowned feminist writer Adrienne Rich defines it, acts like “a pervasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness” (640). With her characterization of unhappy and assaulted straight female figures, Despentes paints heterosexuality as a violent, limiting force that binds women physically and through their consciousnesses. Therefore, she shows that embracing nomadic identities and crossing over from the heterosexual border to a homosexual frontier provides freedom for women in modern society.

Presenting women’s heterosexuality and relationships with men as toxic, Despentes makes heterosexuality’s limitations visible and offers the adoption of female homosexuality as a rebellion against patriarchal authority. For example, once Lucie and the Hyena begin their search for Valentine, the Hyena scandalizes Lucie by catcalling at teenage girls, with Lucie asking, “Don’t you think they might feel insulted getting whistled at in the street?” and to which the Hyena replies, “*Insulted?* No, they’re hets, they’re used to being treated like dogs, they think it’s normal. . . . Even If they don’t realize it, it lights up a tiny utopian candle in their poor little heads, after being smothered by heterocentrist macho awfulness” (Despentes *AB* 52, italics in original). From the beginning of their adventure, Despentes crafts her tale as not only a search for Valentine, but as an exposé of the oppression women face within compulsive heterosexuality. Through their adventure and encounters with unhappy heterosexual women, the Hyena shows Lucie (and readers) that to become liberated women—like the Hyena—women must become like Wittig’s political lesbians and break the social contract by “tearing themselves away from the heterosexual order (sic) by running away one by one” (*AB* 34). Indeed, Despentes presents women’s sexual relations with women as ideal, with even a review of the novel referring to a scene in Barcelona where multiple women engage in group sex as a “rather strenuously utopian S/M lesbian orgy” (Turner). Contrasting the “utopia” of female sexual relationships with the rather pathetic heterosexual female characters

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Lucie meets, Despentès shows Lucie's nomadic choice to pursue and enter a sexual and romantic relationship with a woman, Zoska, in Barcelona as just as momentous as discovering Valentine (*AB* 259-63). Wittig explains the significance of developing new social agreements outside of compulsive heterosexuality, clarifying that one cannot completely leave society (and thus a social contract) (45). Runaway women, or political lesbians, must overthrow the heterosexual order by creating a new community arrangement that liberates women from their subordination and grants them opportunities for freedom and happiness (Wittig 45). For Despentès, this idyllic society emerges from non-heterosexual female relationships. As the Hyena proclaims when she ascertains Lucie's first sexual interaction with Zoska, "You're living the best moment of your life. Heterosexuality is as natural as the electric fence they put round a field of cows. From now on, big girl, welcome to the wide-open spaces" (Despentès *AB* 267). Emphasizing that Lucie, who begins the novel as a woman who believes "life stopped smiling" on her as being the happiest in her life once she has experienced sex with a woman, Despentès disrupts confining "fences" that limit women through compulsory heterosexuality (*AB* 3).

Displaying female romantic relationships as ideal, the work becomes a dangerous critique of Western society's dependence on male hegemony. Exemplifying that her female characters benefit from entering sexual relationships with women by illustrating that Lucie becomes a more free and confident character after sexual intercourse with Zoska—as Lucie states, the "limits have melted"—the author offers a new frontier in which women do not need men (*AB* 262). As Edwards notes, Despentès includes multiple female characters and portrays diverse sexual relationships to reject "any approach to sexuality that concentrates upon male satisfaction and male domination" (20). I agree with Edwards, and underline that Despentès also focuses on the indefiniteness of female sexuality as a method to resist male hegemony and compulsive heterosexuality. Women can choose sexual relationships with men and/or women; they possess fluid sexual identities and can challenge their positions within heterosexual relationships and (hetero) patriarchal society. Their subordination is not fixed and they can gain autonomy by traversing imposed sexual boundaries.

Placing Lucie's sexual awakening slightly before the discovery of Valentine in Barcelona, Despentès merges a myriad of borders and further highlights the nomadic nature of genre, gender, and sexuality that underscores

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the characters' fluidity and subjectivity. As the detectives return across the Spanish-French boundary, Lucie's new relationship occupies her thoughts so completely that she ignores the freshly retrieved Valentine whom she was initially terrified of not finding (*AB* 13). Lucie perpetually looks at her phone and later, after the Palais-Royal attack, reflects "I've rerun it so many times since. It was obvious that something was wrong. . . . At the time, the only thing on my mind was that it was going to be strange finding myself on my own again. And to wonder whether Zoska would forget me at once, or start texting me" (*AB* 310, 316). That her concerns — from finding Valentine to hearing from Zoska — change with her physical location and her discovery of desire, emphasizes Despentès's characters' unfixity that reflects their nomadic position. Lucie has realized the limitations of heterosexuality and has broken from them to develop a new consciousness, one that is not fixated on her unhappiness with her position as a lowly, approaching-forty detective, but someone obsessed with their newfound passion. Exposing this fluctuation as the individuals navigate geographical borders and encounter new people, Despentès unveils how one's subjectivity shifts and stresses the tenuous nature of confining categories: a person's values, interests, and identities are always in flux as they respond to their physical and social locations.

Indeed, she depicts that although Lucie develops sexual fluidity and frees herself from the confines of heterosexuality — a heroic act the Hyena celebrates — she disregards the warning signs surrounding Valentine's return and fails to help, making her neither an aggressor nor a hero. Like Fayard notes, Despentès purposefully creates female characters who do not fit into binaries as her "protagonists transcend the dichotomy that shows women as either victims or harpies. The narratives are narratives of resistance: her female characters are both whores and Madonnas" (106). Hence, although Lucie becomes a Despentian hero through her sexual exploration and fulfills her role as the noble detective through the discovery of Valentine, she also fails the teenager, and consequently, the people Valentine's violence impacts. Focusing entirely on her own newfound freedom and discovery of desire that the development of a nomadic consciousness allows, Lucie misses any potential opportunity to liberate Valentine from an oppressive patriarchal society, muddying her status as a stereotypical sleuth-hero. With her archetypal characters who defy typical detective and road movie characteristics, Despentès shows that her characters cannot be contained within their stereotypes or within a single identity. Insisting on the impossibility of stagnant individualities, the author

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displays female characters who unsettle genre, gender, and sexuality, and disrupts other dominant assumptions: the watched can become the watchers and the censors can become the censored.

### **Explosions: Revealing Censorship, Expanding Feminism**

*Apocalypse Baby* further rebels against imposed boundaries with the novel's explosive ending that postulates a new reality in which a teenage girl commits a terrorist act, spurring the French government's use of absolute patriarchal power. Illustrating an attack executed by a girl who adopts multiple identities throughout the novel, Despentes reveals women's border crossing as insufficient as long as society "Others" its citizens to maintain supremacy and censors those who do not adhere to their position within the hegemonic order.<sup>9</sup> Valentine, the author shows us, tires of changing her identity to fit into her community (Reyns-Chikuma 557), thinking to herself: "They draw this imaginary line, and you're on one side of it and everything on the other has to be criticized and corrected. Or Eliminated. Whatever the colour of the chains, she didn't want to be bound by them" (Despentes *AB* 292). Valentine, a highly fluid character, performs new identities frequently as she shifts between different social groups, such as when she associates with the heavy metal group, Panic Up Yours, following the band obsessively, and when she becomes friends with young "pseudo-*altermondialistes*," tossing her cell phone and deleting her social media presence to impress them (*AB* 60, 113, 276, 282-3). Unlike Lucie, Valentine does not need to discover her sexuality to unbind herself from confining definitions imposed by compulsory heterosexuality. She is already nomadic, drifting between diverse factions of society to escape her bourgeois life. In many ways, Valentine represents a new generation of young women who accept the rights they have, gained through feminism, without thinking about them, much like Despentes admits of herself as a woman born post-Women's Liberation Movement (*KKT* 16).

However, that Valentine sees crossing borders as futile serves as Despentes's warning to feminists: when multiplicity fails and the younger generation feels abandoned, violence emerges (Reyns-Chikuma 557). Jordan, discussing *Baise-moi*, posits that female violence in women's novels is so rare, that even when authors, like Despentes, compose in stereotypically male genres, readers automatically question the writer's intention (125). Valentine's violence in *Apocalypse Baby* stands out especially because she commits a terrorist attack; yet, her status as a teenage girl further forces readers to interrogate

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Desportes's motive in portraying such an assault. I contend that Desportes utilizes Valentine's violence to shock readers into considering Valentine as a nomadic character who cannot fully understand her position and, as a result, cannot develop a new social contract in which she can live freely. As Braidotti writes of a potential consequence of the nomadic figuration:

there is a strong link between nomads and violence; the ruthlessness of rootless can be shocking. . . . I think it is worth emphasizing this point so as to see the political density of the figure of the nomad; in dealing with this sort of consciousness, one must also therefore confront the difficult issues of political violence, armed rebellion, destruction, and the death drive. (25)

Valentine, in her travels and shifts between identities, realizes the absurdity of the society she lives in, but never comprehends her nomadic subjectivity and she becomes self-destructive. Despite her migration between various sections of society, she fails to create a new social contract, like Lucie or the Hyena in their women-centered lives, and cannot envision a way forward for herself, her family, or her community. Thus, the teenaged girl readily befriends a nun who bestows her with a terrorist mission and Valentine reflects that, "a political movement is only valid if it causes deaths. Otherwise it's just feminism: a hobby for kept women. You need violence. Otherwise nobody listens" (Desportes *AB* 294-95, 302). Showing that Valentine believes feminism is an ineffective movement (despite benefiting from it) exposes how isolated and powerless the younger generation feels: for teenagers like Valentine, both dominating patriarchal society and feminism have left them behind. Consequently, extreme violence seems like the only way to obtain power or agency that women like Lucie find in exploring their sexuality, and Valentine willingly becomes a pawn in an international terrorist scheme (*AB* 310). Once the Hyena and Lucie come back to Paris and return Valentine to her family, Valentine implants a bomb like a "mini-vibrator or a large tampon" into her vagina, films the insertion with an iPhone, and blows up the Palais-Royal, "the seat of various bodies like the Constitutional Council, and the venue for investiture ceremonies attended by the great and the good" (*AB* 320-23). Destroying the Palais-Royal in Paris's city center, Desportes merges gender, sexuality, and violence to annihilate a symbol of French art, culture, and government.

Nonetheless, the author shows us that the attack enacted by a virulent teenager does not destroy French values — the government's reaction

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does. After people readily watch Valentine's uploaded terrorist video, the government removes it from all websites as "the first example of censorship on a planetary scale" (AB 324). The dystopian reality that follows becomes a scene from science-fiction, as Despentès blends genre still again: the government arrests citizens for acting in any way deemed threatening, like commenting appreciation for the video's online appearance (AB 327). Indeed, the Hyena disappears and Lucie becomes a suspect due to her involvement with Valentine's case and she goes into hiding. Once underground, she changes her appearance and adopts a new name, "Blanche" (AB 330-31). Displaying that the Hyena and Lucie, as Wittigian political lesbians who traverse sexual borders, are unsafe and suspect in this new reality, Despentès shows us that, in our current society, the watchers, like the detectives, can easily become the watched. As in the film *Baise-moi*, in which, Downing argues, Despentès presents violence and sex to disrupt genre expectations and "destroy[s] the naturalized relationship between the voyeur and the desired spectacle" the author employs violence through sexualized imagery to upset the readers "naturalized" acceptance that the detectives will remain in their position of power by virtue of their nomadic identities and break from heterosexual society ("French Cinema's..." 279). Indeed, Lucie, the author shows, becomes dependent on the very patriarchal system her new awareness reveals as confining.

After the terrorist attack and resulting government crackdown, the only people that can help Lucie are emblematic of heterocentric patriarchal society. Members of the tech surveillance team from her former detective agency, they are men who loathe feminism, love free market capitalism, blame liberals and immigrants for France's current political and social environment, and are, according to Martina Stemberger, "characterized as . . . politically retrograde 'avant-garde' of a technocratic, anti-democratic. . . ferociously neoliberal society" (Despentès AB 93-4; Stemberger 23). Lucie can only avoid capture from her government by allying herself with anti-feminist men, and in creating this predicament, Despentès underlines the true risk of surveillance, government control, and the patriarchal state. In fact, she never clarifies whether or not the detective agency and the tech men are associated with the government or not. Lucie trusts them out of necessity, adopts a "Blanche" (or blank) identity, and goes into hiding with Zoska, who dresses and cares for her as if she is a child (335-36). Impelling Lucie to give up her identity and her home to avoid discovery, Despentès posits an easily

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imaginable reality — under the threat of terrorism, a patriarchal government enacts its full power as a parental figure, dictating acceptable media under the guise of protecting the public's safety and wellbeing. We can all become like Valentine, who despite the choices she makes, feels censored, and like Lucie, who, although she embraces a fluid sexual identity, cannot experience her newfound autonomy in patriarchal society.

## **Conclusion**

Despentes, as she demonstrates with her depiction of genre, gender, and sexuality, unveils that borders are constructions to collapse: no person has fixity — or is safe — in a patriarchal society. Subverting confining designations and breaking from established roles does not necessarily free Despentes's characters, because they still live in a society that grants its patriarchal government supremacy. Although realizing the construction of gender and sexuality is crucial, as Butler prominently claims, in developing new, alternate subjectivities and realities, power — or the social contract — cannot be fully transcended, but must be “openly redeployed,” not only for heterosexual or LGBTQIA+ women, but for all individuals who face oppression (125). Since Western culture has yet to value women as equal to men, we all participate and encourage a community that relies on exclusion and oppression to function. In such a society, even Wittig's political lesbians risk becoming the oppressor because not all women — or other minorities — are free, and thus we still need to discover new methods to subvert and redeploy power. As Despentes writes in *King Kong Theory*, “Unless we step into the uncharted territory of the gender revolution, we know exactly where we will be regressing, an all-powerful state that infantilizes us, interferes in all our decisions for our own good and — under the pretext of protecting us — keeps us in a childish state of ignorance, fear of punishment, and exclusion” (KKT 27). With Valentine's attack, the author shows that terrorism instigates the complete takeover of the state, and that people concede their independence for safety. As our society infantilizes women and keeps them from being fully autonomous individuals, it can reduce anyone to an inferior position and make them susceptible to violence.

Through Valentine's terrorist act, the resulting police state, and Lucie's forced hiding, Despentes prophesizes that even if women destabilize boundaries of sexuality, gender, and genre, the parental government enacts its authority and takes absolute power, making such border crossing fruitless.

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Feminism's mission of blurring binaries and subverting patriarchal hegemony becomes useless if society still grants the (father) state cultural and political authority and does not address the needs or concerns of the younger generation. Anyone can become the watched, as Lucie realizes in the novel's end. In *Apocalypse Baby's* conclusion, Despentès enacts the closing of her manifesto, where she writes that "Feminism is a revolution, not a rearranged marketing strategy. . . . Feminism is a collective adventure, for women, men, and everyone else. A revolution, well under way. A worldview. A choice. It's not a matter of contrasting women's small advantages with men's small assets, but of sending the whole lot flying" (*KKT* 137). Proving that "women, men, and everyone else" face danger and censorship in her dystopia, Despentès demonstrates that, as she was watched and censored after *Baise-moi's* film release, others can easily become as watched, as policed, as infantilized (*KKT* 137). Collectively, we must embrace nomadic identities and fashion new social contracts that challenge our patriarchal societies to create more inclusive communities for everyone: otherwise, we risk the progress made by Lucie, Despentès, and feminism.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 2018, the Feminist Press will release *Pretty Things*, a translation of Virginie Despentès's 1998 novel *Les Jolies choses*. While more of Despentès's works are being translated into English, it is important to note that, thus far, presses have prioritized publishing Despentès's less controversial novels and have avoided translating her more explicit texts, such as *Les Chiennes savantes* or *Mordre au travers*. Additionally, while *Baise-moi* has been translated into English, the Feminist Press, Despentès's primary publisher in the U.S., has yet to distribute it.

<sup>2</sup> Martina Stemberger has also recently published an article in English on *Apocalypse Bébé* in which she argues that the novel is a meta-literary reflection on the intersection of new media technologies, publishing, and terrorism that challenges male authority (18-23). For a study on *King Kong Theory*, See also Nadia Louar's article in this volume, "'Deux cents mots et un gros marteau.' Virginie Despentès' Skillful Construction of an Authorial Posture'" (125-45).

<sup>3</sup> See Forrest 57-62; Downing ("*Baise-moi...*") 53; Jordan 114; and Fayard 106.

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of Despentès's intertextuality with the noir and "road movie" genres, including in *Apocalypse Bébé*, see also Downing ("*Baise-moi...*") 53; Edwards 12; Jordan 56, 113-15, 122, 126, 140; Reyns-Chikuma 553-54, 557; and Schaal 41, 42.

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<sup>5</sup> In his article on *Apocalypse Bébé*, Chris Reyns-Chikuma also posits Despentès's novel as a feminist crossing and "bridge" between a variety of boundaries, including genre, gender, social class, linguistic, and spatial borders (550-59). However, to me, *Apocalypse Baby* is not solely a form of "pop-féminisme" (Reyns-Chikuma 551). Rather, the novel echoes past and contemporary feminist discussions and theories around gender identities and heteronormativity.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that noir and detective fiction can be separated into distinct genres. As scholar Joseph Paul Moser explains, "detective and noir fiction of the 1930s to 1950s can be productively approached as complementary genres that sometimes intersect" (152). I choose to conflate the genres, emphasizing the ambiguity that is historically associated with these categories.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that Despentès's novels are the only works that co-opt the masculine road movie genre. Films like *Thelma & Louise* (1991) and *Boys on the Side* (1995) memorably feature women's road trips. Reyns-Chikuma actually likens, to a certain extent, *Apocalypse Bébé* to *Thelma & Louise* (554, 557).

<sup>8</sup> For the reversal of gender roles and genre conventions, see also Downing ("Baise-moi...") 53, 59-60, 62-64; Edwards 21; Fayard 102, 104-107, 109, 111, 113-16, 118; Forrest; Jordan 114, 122-23, 127, 129, 133, 137, 140; Reyns-Chikuma 554-56; and Schaal 39.

<sup>9</sup> In her foundational feminist text, *The Second Sex*, French feminist Simone de Beauvoir explains the process of "Othering" women, positing "she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex—absolute sex. . . He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (6). Othering women as objects, Western society also subordinates minority groups, such as Jews and people of color, to maintain white patriarchal dominance (Beauvoir 80).

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