

Détruire dit-Duras

A Thesis

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By William Nolan Artz, Jr.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

## DÉTRUIRE DIT-DURAS

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Marguerite Duras has an influence on this thesis, more specifically, the novel and film *Détruire dit-elle*. It is in *Détruire* where Duras argues one needs to destroy all, and not only rebuild, but one should rebuild a society from ground zero of writing. This is not a thesis on Duras; it is through Marguerite Duras that this thesis will form ideas on works of Patti Smith, Édouard Louis, and Ocean Vuong. The texts of these authors connect back through Duras, and build on Duras along the lines of a Durassian concept of Writing and Writer. What is writing? What does one want from a literary enterprise?

This approach offers constant questioning, in new novel ways, through queering texts. Under the lens of Queer Theory I will be queering Duras to queer literature rendering a transdisciplinary way to literature.

Signature of Investigator William N. Artz, Jr. Date December 06, 2021

## Dedications

I dedicate this thesis to the following people, without whom I would have never arrived at this point in furthering my educational pursuits and academic career:

My Mother, Dr. H. Irene Scimeca, D.D.S., and my Father, W. Nolan Artz both of whom are always in my heart;

Dr. Lynn W. Winget, Ph.D. a true academician that always believed in me;

Dr. Niall Shanks, Ph.D. an analytic philosopher of science that taught me more about French philosophy, and Queer Theory than the French;

And the very much living Dr. Curtis D. Proctor, Ph.D. without whom . . .

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I am truly humbled by the level of assistance and friendships I have made during my tenure at Millersville University of Pennsylvania.

Any remaining errata and lacunae in this thesis are clearly my own.

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## Chapter One

### Marguerite Duras: Back to Basics

Is this just an introduction to Duras? Is this just a thesis on Duras? This thesis will not be an endless and pointless ontological search surrounding Duras. In any writing on Marguerite Duras, there are going to be levels of complexity on the Durassian idea(1) of Writer and of Writing that are unclassifiable at best. My writing inspiration is the voice of Marguerite Duras. At first blush my thesis appears both odd, and simplistic; to avoid this I will ask several basic questions, and then discuss Marguerite Duras via Durassian voice. What is a Durassian voice?

Throughout this thesis I will be investigating the following questions: What is Writer? What is Writing? What is Literature? What do we want from Literature? I believe, like Marguerite Duras in *Détruire dit-elle*, one must return to the very basics and build anew. The reason, thus, for the aforementioned questions, and this focus on Marguerite Duras.

It is through the unique style of the Durassian text that it will be possible to research all of these questions through philosophical concepts and concepts of literature to arrive at a needed level of knowledge acquisition. It is not an applied enterprise, as I am not considering direct therapeutic uses of the literary enterprise. It is my goal in this thesis to strive for answers through a philosophical transdisciplinary approach. The goal is the way in which one asks particular questions; not specific [hard-and-fast] answers as in formal mathematical formulæ. This thesis is neither creating a myth surrounding Marguerite Duras, nor succumbing to a deification of Duras and her œuvre. Duras is simply a foundation on which I am constructing my ideas.

As I have already noted this is not, specifically, a thesis on Marguerite Duras; it is through Marguerite Duras that I will also be considering specific works of other authors: Patti Smith's *Devotion*; Édouard Louis's *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*, *L'histoire de la violence*,

*Qui a tué mon père*, *Combats et métamorphoses d'une femme*, and more specifically *Changer : Méthode*;<sup>1</sup> Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. The texts of these authors connect back through Duras, and lend themselves to a level of literary analysis that leads to the Aristotelian perspective of *εὐδαιμονία* [eudemonia] living a full, meaningful, well-lived life.<sup>2</sup> It is a way of beginning to queer literature, and this thesis will investigate the merits and need of so doing.

A constant and purposeful questioning, in Durassian new novel ways, through queering texts, and through the idea of going beyond a heteronormative complacency that allows us to draw unique understandings of the need for literature and its properties to better apprehend the traumas in which we find ourselves experiencing some 20 years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A text is more than simply words on a page; it has a necessity of which we are in desperate need.

Who is Marguerite Duras? Gilles Philippe, a preeminent Duras scholar, states it best, “Pour certains, ce n'est qu'un visage; pour d'autres, ce n'est qu'une voix. Pour beaucoup, ce n'est qu'un titre . . .” (Préface ix). “For some, it's nothing but a face; for others, it's nothing but a

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<sup>1</sup> Édouard Louis is linked with the couple Didier Éribon and Geoffroy de Lagasnerie; aside from their friendship they work collaboratively on their own literary and academic projects. During the 1980s when Éribon was a reporter for *Le Monde*, Éribon had several occasions when he talked with Duras, and worked with Duras. Laure Adler briefly mentions Didier Éribon in her biography on Duras. Two notable works are Didier Éribon's *Retour à Reims*, and Geoffroy de Lagasnerie's *La dernière leçon de Michel Foucault*.

<sup>2</sup> Eudemonia is often translated into English as ‘happiness,’ and ‘bonheur’ in French. In the Greek of Aristotle it means, in English, living a full, meaningful whole and complete life.

voice. For many, it's nothing but a title . . ." [WNA translation]. Gilles Philippe is the lead editor of the four-volume collection *Marguerite Duras Œuvres complètes*, published by Gallimard in the edition Bibliothèque de la Pléiade: The works in this collection are exhaustively researched with extensive annotations included; a number of historical ancillary materials are collected around each text to aid in further investigation and analysis. I would argue given the background of Gilles Philippe, Gilles Philippe knows Duras.<sup>3</sup> There are any number of reasons I decided to write this thesis on a foundation of Marguerite Duras from scholarly interest to personal affordance. When I was a freshman in college, as an advanced student in French, the first thing in French I studied, at university, was the Alain Resnais film *Hiroshima mon amour* with text and screenplay by Marguerite Duras.<sup>4</sup> Every time I am in Paris I go to the cimetière Montparnasse and I visit the graves of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, then end up in front of Marguerite Duras, and admire the detritus left by Durassian adherents that surrounds the grave of Duras. The great linguist and semiotician Umberto Eco in his work *Come si fa una tesi di laurea: Le materie umanistiche* on writing a thesis in the humanities argues one needs to find a topic that will be of great intrigue, and become a part of one's life.<sup>5</sup> If not, Eco explains, one

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<sup>3</sup> Gilles Philippe curated and archived the Duras collection at Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC) close to Caen, France in the Normandy region. The archives are housed in the Abbaye d'Ardenne in the town Saint-Germain-la-Blance-Herbe.

<sup>4</sup> This was the only cinematographic collaboration Duras did; all of the other Duras films were written, directed, and produced by Marguerite Duras.

<sup>5</sup> Thesis in Italian, as in French, is equivalent to a doctoral dissertation in English. The main ideas of Eco apply at all graduate levels, however.

needs to find either something else to study, or something else to do period. Marguerite Duras is my obsession, Marguerite Duras is the foundation upon which I have built an academic research regimen. I am not a Duras scholar, and I am not sure that there is anyone that could specifically be called a Duras scholar. There are academicians that study Duras, but one of the intrigues in studying Duras, is that Duras is elusive. Given the nature of the Durassian *œuvre*, the Durassian focus on Writing and Writer is certainly unique and impossible to categorize.

In this introduction to Marguerite Duras I will give a few basic biographical facts needed for the narrative of this thesis. Marguerite Germaine Marie Donnadiou [Marguerite Duras]<sup>6</sup> was born on 14 April 1914 in Giadinh [a town in what is now Vietnam], and Marguerite Duras died 3 March 1996 in her Left Bank Parisian apartment at 5, rue Saint-Benoît. There are two recent major biographical works about Duras that are key: Laure Adler's *Marguerite Duras*; Jean Vallier's monumental two-volume *C'était Marguerite Duras*.

As for theory, this thesis will include foundational ideas of Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Hélène Cixous, and Susan Sontag. I also use Peter Khost's work *Rhetor Response*, a succinct and precise work on affordance theory; a work covering the idea of multimodality, which is key in any basic and introductory understanding of Marguerite Duras. Duras must be understood, studied, analyzed on many different levels, and across various modalities. Duras is Writer, Duras is Playwright, Duras is Cinematographer. This theoretical interlude is demonstrative of the need for Marguerite Duras as a means of explication.

Duras's work features a profound use of emotive states, i.e., emotions. These qualia evoke sounds, regards, aurality, mood, voice, silence; the list is expansive and more detailed than

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<sup>6</sup> I will discuss the name change from Donnadiou to Duras later in this thesis.

affect. Those various qualia are indeed foundational to Duras *qua* Duras. Maurice Blanchot writes in *L'espace littéraire*, once we [*qua* Orpheus] look back at our [Eurydice – our one true love] it is with that untrusting gaze of Orpheus that Writing begins, that moment our true love vanishes forever. The trail is evident and clear, the gaze not at all. Writing, according to Blanchot, starts with the gaze of Orpheus. “Pour écrire, il faut déjà écrire” (Blanchot 232). “To write, it is already necessary to write [to be writing]” [WNA translation]. Writing is a lonely enterprise, it is meant to be done in an absolute Durassian solitude.

Khost's Barthesian epigraph to *Rhetor Response*, *in toto*:

Has it ever happened, as you were reading a book, that you kept stopping as you read, not because you weren't interested, but because you were: because of a flow of ideas, stimuli, associations? In a word, haven't you ever happened to read while looking up from your book? - Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Khost 3)

A key idea about the process of both language and reading from the French philosopher/literary theorist/structuralist/semiotician Roland Barthes. Even though there is an intrinsic connection within [en deçà] literature of Reader/Writer, for the purposes of this particular thesis, I will mainly focus on Durassian Writing, and the Durassian technê of Writing.<sup>7</sup> Some of these ideas will appear to be familiar given previous Durassian studies, but these are all (re)current themes worth (re)stating, and (re)shaping given the work of Duras (Artz). The way in which Duras Writes is key, in that Duras focuses more on the power of a Word. For Duras a sentence is

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<sup>7</sup> The idea of [en deçà] is in opposition to the [au-delà], i.e., outside/beyond. These are, in French, literary/metaphorical terms, and terms that Roland Barthes uses to his great advantage in trying to get at meaning and truth in Writing.

formed around a specific Word. Duras continues to write even when looking around the place where writing happens. There are Durassian silences full of meaning and approaches to philosophical truth. In an interview with Michelle Porte *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* Duras starts off talking about her house in Neauphle-le-Château [département des Yvelines]

Je pourrais parler des heures de cette maison, du jardin. Je connais tout, je connais la place des anciennes portes, tout, les murs de l'étang, toutes les plantes, la place de toutes les plantes, même les plantes sauvages je connais la place, tout. (Duras vol. III, 177)

I could [be able to] talk for hours about this house, the garden. I know everything, I know the place of all the old [past] doors, I know the walls of the pond, all the plants, the place of all the plants, even the wild plants I know the place, all. [WNA translation]

Duras wrote in this house; Duras filmed *Natalie Granger* in this house; the house was a literary catalyst for Duras. Even when Duras was not looking down at written pages, when Duras was in that house Duras was always Writing and Creating. Duras claimed all of her female characters were embedded in the walls of the house. As Duras tells Michelle Porte “[t]outes les femmes de mes livres ont habité cette maison, toutes” (Duras vol. III, 181). “all the women in my books have lived in this house, all [of them]” [WNA translation]. Duras continues “[e]lles sont incrustées dans la pièce, comme insérées dans les murs, dans les choses de la pièce” (Duras vol. III, 182). “they [Durassian female characters] are inlaid in the [bed] room, they are inserted/stuck in the walls, in everything in the room” [WNA translation]. Duras is quite specific in stating that only her female characters, not any of the men, are a part of the house. Does that statement alone make Duras a feminist? If it does then it is by *divine fiat*, and the reason one needs to know Duras, to understand Duras. There is a difficulty in trying to grasp Duras and Durassian works at

face-value. To either read, or watch a work in the Durassian enterprise is to realize that it is not just a passive endeavor.

On what is Durassian Writing based? What is Durassian Writing? Of what is Writing built according to Duras? This is both a thesis that is a writing exercise, and equally an excursus. A thesis-length essay, that is a means of an ultimate assessment and progression for this program. An excursus, in that it should give further detail as to the study on Marguerite Duras *qua* Writer, and that given output, i.e., Writing. It is, therefore, an exercise that has a two-fold purpose; it is about a specific topic, around which the “I” *qua* researcher, must argue, both objectively and subjectively. More than any of this, however, this thesis is about Writing and Writer more broadly.

It is a commonly held notion to approach Duras one needs to know Duras; as trite as that may appear at first it is certainly a necessity. It is, therefore, my intention to briefly introduce Marguerite Duras to more easily understand Duras in the context of 20<sup>th</sup>-century French literary history. What if the question about Writing is considered from the French perspective of Écrivain(e)/Écriture? What makes this study Durassian? This is an historical perspective, and that is part of the Writing process, the technê. In *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* Barthes argues, “[l]a diversité des langages fonctionne donc comme une Nécessité, et c’est pour cela qu’elle fonde un tragique” (59). “Diversity of languages functions, thus/therefore, like a Necessity, it’s for that [reason] it [the diversity/a Necessity] founds a tragic [tragedy] [WNA translation]. Working with a text from Barthes does not come without its complexities and confusions. There is some ambiguity as to what the pronoun “elle” refers, as both “diversité” and “nécessité” are feminine; the only difference is “diversité” is used as a concept here, and used with the definite article. Whereas “nécessité” is also a concept, but here a noun, with the indefinite article. I use Barthes,

though obtuse, as a means of demonstration to evoke the focus on an Occidental understanding of Writing, and in essence, Literature. The main point, without some sort of detailed focus on language, is it possible to look at the concept of Writing? This thesis is, more specifically, an investigation of Writing through comparisons in both French and English literature. This specificity is needed to avoid making assumptions, about a given culture, which is, by its very nature non-evidence based, hence anathema in many disciplines in the academy, a notion about which one needs be concerned, even [especially] in rhetorical studies AND literary analyses. To be more specific I am not concerned with the subdiscipline of Social Work known as Bibliotherapy. In a theoretical framework the notion of Bibliotherapy, *qua* literary analysis, has little substance to offer this thesis as it now stands. This notion also applies to both qualitative and quantitative studies in the subfield Discourse Analysis; within the academic discipline English.

Henri Michaux, sets the proverbial stage for the successful completion of this thesis: “Qui cache son fou meurt sans voix” (Mourier-Casile 161). “Who hides one’s crazy dies without voice” [WNA translation]. The voice of Duras is the voice of Duras; an important concept not to forget. This is something that is as literal, as it is figurative in hearing; reading; watching Marguerite Duras. The sound of Duras speaking [the voice of Duras], is as important as the [written] voice Duras uses in Durassian texts. To hear Duras, is to affront Duras, knowingly. One has to know Duras, to study Duras. What Duras did was not performative, *per se*, and a key reason why Duras should only ever be truly understood in French, i.e., read in French, listened to in French, seen in French. Duras herself was an inculcation of herself in Durassian texts. As the writer Dominique Noguez stated Duras was “un personnage de ses propres fictions” (*Le Monde* le 27 juillet 2012). Duras was “a character of her own fictions” [WNA translation]. Translation,

though key and foundational, is not of my present concern, but would certainly be needed in a more detailed investigation. Suffice it to argue, at this point, there is a lyricism in Duras, there are silences in Duras, there IS Duras, and one is unable to translate that in any meaningful and robust way. Écrire/Écriture/Écrivain(e) encompasses so much more, than mere words, and that is the point, especially for a Writer like Marguerite Duras. Writing is a way in which, one who truly Writes, must lead/drag along their solitary lives. A Writing life, lived in parallel to the vulgar expression of “real” life, whatever that may mean.<sup>8</sup>

Bernard Pivot, the host of the televised literary program *Apostrophes*, on 28 September 1984, interviewed Marguerite Duras in a live on-air, one-on-one format, episode.<sup>9</sup> It was an interview that became iconic the day after its initial broadcast, because Marguerite Duras had not – at the time – given any type of interview in about ten years. What was even more notable, Duras was the only guest, and the program lasted some ten minutes over the allotted time. It was an important moment in the literary history of twentieth-century France, and in the *œuvre* of Duras. Jérôme Lindon, the chief editor and director of the publishing house Minuit, claimed “L’effet d’*Apostrophes* fut foudroyant . . . [i]l avait été précédé par un tir de barrage de la presse écrite qui, unanimement, reconnaissait le livre comme un événement,” “The effect of

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<sup>8</sup> In the true sense of the word, i.e., common, a derivative of the Latin term *vulgate*.

<sup>9</sup> *Apostrophes* was a literary program that lasted some 15 years, and amounted to some 724 episodes, consisting of prominent literary figures to those involved in politics and writing. It was broadcast every Friday night at 9:30 p.m., from 1975 through 1990, and was always live. This program consistently had a viewing audience of over 400,000 each week; the Duras interview brought that total to three million. This interview took place just after *L’Amant* was first released.

*Apostrophes* was overwhelming . . . it was preceded by journalists of the written press, uniquely, recognizing the book as an event” [WNA translation] as quoted in Laure Adler’s biography *Marguerite Duras*, from an interview Adler did with Lindon (787). It is notable [remarkable] Marguerite Duras published many of her works with Minuit. Duras published *L’Amant* with Minuit, and it was the work for which Duras was awarded the 1984 Prix Goncourt.<sup>10</sup> Again, the voice of Duras is the voice of Duras. As Mourier-Casile begins her review of Duras on *Apostrophes*, she claims:

Il y a la voix. D’abord. Oui, bon, je sais : << Ah ! la voix de Duras . . . >> (161)

There is the voice. Firstly [it is difficult to render “d’abord” in English, it is as much performative, as it is textual/literal/written]. Yes, good, I know : “Ah ! the voice of Duras.” [WNA translation]

It is difficult to explicate the verve, and profound depth of these words.

The interview was a Durassian text, a text of Duras by Duras. It truly is not possible to over-stress that this episode of *Apostrophes* was foundational in the last decade in the [Writing] life of Marguerite Duras. For the purposes of this thesis, however, this is where Duras made mention, on national television, that she, Marguerite Duras, did not think [Jean-Paul] Sartre was a Writer. Duras called Sartre a moralist, and was depreciative in her tone, and in following up,

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<sup>10</sup> The Goncourt literary prize is the most prestigious literary prize in France. That Duras won it in 1984 was bittersweet as Duras should have won the prize in 1950 for *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*. The 1950 Goncourt prize was awarded to Paul Colin for *Les Jeux sauvages*. The main reason Duras lost that year was the fact that, at the time, Duras was a member of the PCF [Partie Communiste Française]. Duras talks about this fact in the interview with Pivot.

that what she was saying – about Sartre – was not a value judgment. Pivot was talking with Duras about her style and form; Duras reminded Pivot that she had actually given [renseignements]<sup>11</sup> on Writing, literally had given ideas and information about Writing.

In 1964, Jean-Paul Sartre was selected to receive The Nobel Prize in Literature, for his contributions to philosophy AND literature. Though he declined the prize, reasons for which are not relevant to this particular thesis, the Nobel committee considered Sartre a pre-eminent writer. Sartre even wrote specifically about Literature and Writing; how was it possible then, some 20 years later, Marguerite Duras could argue that Sartre was not a Writer, even though Duras was still unable to define what Writing actually was? Duras would often evoke, that she once thought she knew what Writing was; in all actuality she claimed she did not. Duras would argue, and continued to argue – until her death – she [Duras] did not know what Writing was. For a French Writer to always argue this, especially a Writer who had been Writing since 1943, to continually contend that she did not know what Writing actually was, was both important and problematic. It was quintessentially emblematic of Duras.<sup>12</sup>

The Durassian style is quick, precise, just [equitable/exact], something that Pivot understood, and about which Duras talked at length. The style of Duras is asyndetic, in that, it is not connected by conjunctions, but comprised of meaningful silences and lacunae. Duras is famous for Writing in a way to convey ideas quickly. It is Writing that goes beyond Alain

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<sup>11</sup> This word has a lot of philosophical baggage as the word is usually glossed in English as “informations [*sic*].” It has the sense of being about teaching, i.e. teachings about some thing.

<sup>12</sup> In due course, what Duras meant in saying Sartre was not a Writer will certainly need further elucidation.

Robbe-Grillet's concept of nouveau roman. Duras did not figure into either a specific literary group, or a specific literary school. Duras was classified in the area of modernity, only because journalists and literary critics did not know how else to describe the works of Duras, and how to describe Marguerite Duras. The work of Duras was like Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman* ideas, but Duras was never an adherent of Robbe-Grillet. Duras was Writer AND Playwright AND Cinematographer in and of herself *qua* Marguerite Duras. There are multiple pages devoted to Alain Robbe-Grillet in the biography of Duras by Laure Adler, and the biography of Duras by Jean Vallier as well. Yet it is Gilles Philippe's "Préface" to the four-volume *Marguerite Duras Œuvres complètes* that I find most beneficial in discussing Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras. Philippe makes a reference to an interview Duras did in *Le Monde* with Thérèse de Saint-Phalle, who asked Duras "[v]ous ne pouvez donc pas vous réclamer du nouveau roman?" and Duras responded "Non, en tant qu'il se donne comme un ordre. Le nouveau roman est perclus de consignes, alors que la seule consigne d'un écrivain serait de n'en avoir aucune. Aucune autre que la sienne, j'entends" (*Le Monde* le 20 janvier 1962). "You therefore could not claim the [tenets] of the nouveau roman?" and Duras responded "No, while it gives itself like an order [command]. The nouveau roman is crippled by instructions [is locked down], such that the only instruction of a writer would be to have none. None other than that of his own, I hear [told][mean]. [WNA translation]. Alain Robbe-Grillet wanted to claim that Marguerite Duras was indeed one of his followers, but Duras was always adamant in what she thought of the nouveau roman, and of Alain Robbe-Grillet. Marguerite Duras never needed the support of Robbe-Grillet; Duras was quite productive in her exclusivity. Duras needed the exclusivity and solitude in which to Write.

Duras talking about not knowing what Writing actually is; is it literary; is it philosophic

deserves further treatment. Not philosophic in the sense of Sartre, but in the sense of Duras. It was notable that Duras, at the apex of her career as Writer, would always maintain the question about Writing: What is Writing? Duras would always claim that she did not know. Again, how could a Writer of this caliber and import make such a statement, yet at the same time, argue what a Writer was not: Jean-Paul Sartre.

Sartre did not know of what pure writing – Writing with an upper-case ‘W’ in English – was comprised. Though Duras still claimed not to know what Writing really was either, for Duras it was “a funny thing, writing” (Duras vol. III, 1542). True writing, what Duras understands as pure writing is something a Writer is unable to escape; one is unable to extract one’s self from Writing. As odd as this sounds, it is Duras. At the beginning of the interview with Pivot, Duras says the following:

C’est un peu gênant. Ça a duré dix ans le silence autour de moi. Il y a un réflexe de suite qui se produit. (qtd. in Laure Adler’s *Marguerite Duras 787* – quote taken from the transcription of the actual interview with Bernard Pivot and Marguerite Duras)

It’s a bit embarrassing/awkward. This has lasted ten years, the silence about [surrounding] me [a silence around which I am in the midst]. There is a reflex that follows, which takes place. [WNA translation]

What is remarkable [noteworthy] here, is again, Duras talking in round numbers, everything is always ten years, that goes outside of Writing. Duras spent ten years doing mostly theatre, and then ten years doing mostly film, until she went back to what she was supposed to be doing, and that was writing texts. Like with Barthes there are oddities and confusions occurring, as is the case chez Duras. Yet more evidence – why one needs to know Duras, to study Duras: To understand [read] her voice in words, and to hear her voice.

Some Durassian scholars understand the work of Duras to have a level of notable philosophical intrigue. It is key to continually (re)search the idea of Writer, a way of doing a continuing study of a complex enterprise. It is akin to a philosopher always looking for answers to theories of truth. There is no definitive answer; the answer lies in the investigation.

It is important to always note Duras does not proclaim some authoritative notion about Writing. What Duras does *not* claim is a definitive answer to the question about Writing. Duras would never make any grand and universal claims either about Writing, or about Literature. This is one of the main reasons why I find it hard to argue the claim that what Duras was doing was nothing but a performance, it was – yet again – not performative. As Judith Butler argues about performativity

. . . reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the “integrity” of the subject . . . acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.

(Butler *Gender Trouble* 185-186)

As Duras is a central part of her texts; is an inculcation of her texts; Duras is not performative in the Durassian literary enterprise. This was also the reason for so much vitriol against Duras, if Duras was really *Écrivaine*, then how is it possible for her not to have any notion about the Writing enterprise? Durassian silences are not performative, because it is demonstrative of parts of a text where words did not serve Duras. Those silences, however, are ever present and

necessary [needed]. The poet Edward Field in his work *The Man Who Would Marry Susan Sontag* understands this idea in discussing the poetry of Frank O'Hara. "When you are unified, I felt, you don't question your poems, you just write them. *Because they are you*. You write out of what you are. You write what you are. And what Frank [O'Hara] wrote was entirely *him*" (Field 79).<sup>13</sup> Had Duras been performative Duras would of adhered to some literary school like the nouveau roman, or even French feminism. Duras did not like Sartre, and even though she wrote for the *Libération*, the paper founded by Sartre, Duras never liked Sartre, and never hid that fact. Duras did not need Sartre the way Simone de Beauvoir needed Sartre. Duras was Duras in that Duras was the Durassian text. It is not possible to say Duras just played a Writer on TV, or in interviews and on radio programs. It was like with Duras and film. Duras did what Duras wanted to do. Duras was well served through her collaboration with Alain Resnais. I just do not understand Duras to be performative as argued by Judith Butler.<sup>14</sup>

As opposed to giving a specific definition of Writing what Duras did was demonstrative of her penchant toward philosophy. Writing is so fundamental, so basic, so elemental, that one must always question and search anew of what this enterprise Writing is comprised. It is a question that is "au-delà," a French word that is usually translated as "beyond," in English, but is

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<sup>13</sup> The emphasis was in Edward Field's text, the emphasis is not my own.

<sup>14</sup> The idea of Judith Butler's performativity will be further explored. Is performativity an issue for writers who change their name? That is certainly the case with both Marguerite Duras (née Donnadiou) and Édouard Louis (né Eddy Bellegueule). Those name changes erased [masked] a painful past. An important issue that should not be overlooked [effaced] with the transgender community.

really a beyond-ness, an idea/notion that is not attainable. A profoundness that could be considered a philosophy of language.

In her denial of knowledge about Writing Duras was refusing to claim any type of authority. What is Writing? It truly means so much more in claiming that one is not really sure, than arguing for a specific definition of Writing, and the act of Writing.

For Duras, there is an ever exhaustive (re)search for what Writing is actually comprised, there is this beyond-ness. Such that Duras knows what a Writer is not, a Writer is confronted/affronted/blinded by words, and in discussing style, Marguerite Duras always talks about how words actually move through her. Duras is less concerned about structure/syntax/grammar than she is about actual words: There is the word, and the sentence then builds itself around that word by the Writer. In doing this a Writer neither worries about style, audience, nor even the way so-called rhetorical devices are used to serve as means of inspiration. Duras expresses all of these ideas during the interview with Bernard Pivot.

Toward the end of the interview Bernard Pivot asks Duras why she drinks :

Pivot: Pourquoi buvez-vous? Why do you drink?

Duras: On boit parce que Dieu n'existe pas. One drinks because God does not exist.<sup>15</sup>

This was iconic, this is monumental. On national television, a close friend of the President of the French Republic François Mitterrand, admitted that she [a woman] was an alcoholic, to the point she had been hospitalized, was something of profound importance. It is not performative Duras,

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<sup>15</sup> This quote is in French, as well, it is a key element in the life of Duras. There is an *ethos* here, in that Duras is making reference to God, an idea/example of Occidental thought. This quote is a WNA transcription from the video of the interview, and WNA translation.

it IS Duras. Duras did not drink during the time in which she wrote *L'Amant*, and after as well. The detoxification had an impact on the Writing that Marguerite Duras did until 3 March 1996; the day Duras died.

What about Yann Andréa? Yann Andréa (né Lemée) spent the last 16 years of Duras's life with Duras, and Duras made Yann Andréa her literary executor. Duras made Yann Lemée change his name to Yann Andréa [Steiner], because Duras turned Andréa into one of the many characters in her later works. Yann Andréa wrote several works, but most importantly *M.D.*, which was about Duras and her alcoholism, including the subsequent detoxification. One of the other important works Andréa wrote was *Cet amour-là* about Andréa's relationship with Duras. In 2001 it was famously made into a movie, of the same title *Cet amour-là*, that featured the great and accomplished actress Jeanne Moreau who played [was] Marguerite Duras. Yann Andréa died 10 July 2014.<sup>16</sup>

There is, paradoxically, as much importance in Durassian silences, as there is in Durassian Writing. There is a blurring between the written and the spoken word. There is, in French, a difference between written [literary] French, and oral [spoken] French.<sup>17</sup> For Duras a Writer does not need to exploit these differences, the Word makes the decision.

Duras claims to have thought she had known what Writing was, but she did not really

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<sup>16</sup> The relationship Andréa has with Duras is extensively covered in both biographies of Laure Adler, and Jean Vallier. To contend their relationship is complicated is an understatement by orders of magnitude.

<sup>17</sup> A difference between the simple past [passé simple] a literary tense, and the composted past [passé composé] used in spoken French.

know of what Writing was comprised. For Duras literature is scandalous, and there is a sensuousness to Duras that should not be overlooked. Duras was her text: Duras would often claim that there were no stories of her life, that everything chez Duras is fictive. The text was Duras herself.

In this thesis it is difficult to give a full understanding of Duras on Writing; to study Duras, is to realize that one never really knows Duras, Duras is too multi-faceted to ever fully and completely understand Duras. What is Duras? An idea that is as elusive as Durassian Writer. One needs to know Duras to study Duras. The more one studies Duras, the more this statement always takes on a new and different clarity.

According to Duras something happens if one is a Writer, when one affronts words. Is that desire? Is desire a link to rhetoric and the Aristotelian notion of desire as a means of persuasion. To what is desire, in this context, linked? Is it nothing more than the desire to be Writer and Write? The philosopher Alain Badiou argues in *Pornographie du temps présent*

De quoi s'agit-il, dans ce désir qui fait problème? Eh bien, en politique, c'est un désir de révolution, qui ferait advenir l'égalité réelle de l'humanité tout entière; en poésie, un désir de sublime, par quoi une langue particulière, travaillée dans ses profondeurs, se hisserait au niveau d'une limpidité . . . (20-21)

On what does it act, this desire that is [considered] a problem? Well, in politics [the body politick], it is a desire to revolution, that will cause to arrive the real equality of all humanity [in toto]; in poetry, a sublime desire, by which a particular language, worked in its depths, would climb to a level of limpidity [clarity] . . . [WNA translation]

Is this not what Duras is doing with Writing? There is a desire to Write, and Write in a space that is not accessible to anyone but Writer. This is a central idea for Duras, and one that is

foundational and needed. Given this idea Roland Barthes argued the following:

5. Savoir qu'on n'écrit pas pour l'autre, savoir que ces choses que je vais écrire ne me feront jamais aimer de qui j'aime, savoir que l'écriture ne compense rien, ne sublime rien, qu'elle est précisément *là où tu n'es pas* – c'est le commencement de l'écriture.

(Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* 132)<sup>18</sup>

5. To know that one does not write for the other, to know that these things that I am going to write will never make me loved by the one I love, to know that writing has no recompense, [is not] sublime, *that it is precisely there, where you are not* – it's the beginning of writing. [WNA translation]

There is this base idea of Writing where no one else is, there is a “place” where YOU are not. Duras, during the interview with Bernard Pivot, says that writing is a funny [odd] thing. That statement is from 1984, but it is possible to add that it was a notion on which Duras built her entire Writing career from 1943 through 1996.

This was an introduction to Marguerite Duras, and the complexities to be found therein. Who was Marguerite Duras? What was Marguerite Duras? How was Marguerite Duras? Marguerite Duras was, is, and will forever be *Writer, par excellence*. This thesis based on Marguerite Duras, is the culmination of second-level graduate study, investigation, argument, bafflement, misunderstanding, illumination. It was clear, from the beginning, that this would be a

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<sup>18</sup> Enumeration, as used by Barthes, is never accidental. This citation is from a section on “Inexprimable amour,” (“Inexpressible love”) [WNA translation] What kind of love? It is not something that one could answer, simply. An interesting investigation, however, that goes outside the bounds of this thesis.

quagmire, and a maelstrom of some density, by orders of magnitude. Like any good philosophic examination, however, the answers are within the asking of the questions. Yet, this is not an exercise, exclusively, on Durassian philosophy. It is any number of things, akin to a notion Michel Foucault gave in a 1982 interview at the University of Vermont. The interviewer, Rux Martin, asked Foucault about all of the categories used when someone tries to give Foucault an identity, e.g, Marxist, Structuralist, Historian, and so on. Foucault responded, “I don’t feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am” (Martin 9). As it is, in essence ironic, with Duras. Duras is Duras. It really is no more complicated than one would assume; a study of Duras is not founded on any obtuse mathematical formulæ. My approach is transdisciplinary in nature, and a way of having a fresh understanding through the history of ideas, intellectual history, philosophy, philology, sociology, pedagogy, digital pedagogy. It is a holistic approach to the way, in essence, Duras understood the Durassian *œuvre*.

The thoughts and arguments herein, on the French writer, Marguerite Duras, are no different than if I were giving these ideas and notions to a group of Duras scholars. As the meaning of Duras, is not the same understanding for those who study Duras, and for those who only experience the literary aspects of Duras. An affordance aspect to Durassian scholarship is always reflected by those who write about Duras, and those who knew Duras AND write about Duras.

### **WNA Translation and Francophone Turn**

It is my contention that Queer Theory is based in French philosophy, and French literary theory. The texts that I use of Duras and Édouard Louis I am using the French texts, and then supplying my own translations. It has always been to my mind that a literal translation is more correct than a translation freely using poetic license in rendering a text in a different language,

and the role of translator. As Jacques Derrida explains in “Des Tours de Babel” “[l]a traduction n’a pas pour destination essentielle de *communiquer*. Pas plus que l’original . . .” (221). “A translation does not have an ultimate destination *to communicate*. Not more than the original . . . [WNA translation]. This is an idea that I find many translators forget in over-translating a text. The texts of Marguerite Duras are relatively easy to translate into English, for example, but the silences and cultural aspects are difficult to put into words. In work I have done on Haitian author Marie Vieux-Chauvet translation is an extensive problem. Derrida argues that

On ne devrait jamais passer sous silence la question de la langue dans laquelle se pose la question de la langue et se traduit un discours sur la traduction. (210)

One should never pass [under] in silence the question of a tongue in which asks [of itself] the question of the tongue and translates itself in a discourse on translation.

[WNA translation]

There is the question of translation and Vieux-Chauvet, and part of it is translation at times tends to be reductive, the other element is not capturing the power of the original text. In the French version of the section “Colère,” the description of the Gorilla raping Rose is much more pejorative in the way the Gorilla responds to Rose when he is first raping her. He is using, in French, the second-person pronoun singular *tu* [informal] form of dialogue, and not the second-person pronoun plural *vous* [formal] form; mean, evil, nasty power [a performance] is difficult to convey in English. Is it possible to do? With a given level of poetic license yes of course, but at what point is the translator writing over Vieux-Chauvet. I will not discuss specific issues of translation theory; translation theory goes far afield of this thesis. To argue the text is more powerful and revolutionary in French, i.e. the target language, goes without a specific

discussion. Though there is a level of diminutive sarcasm in French that one truly is unable to render in a language as bland as English.

The Francophone Turn is important to remember that this Francophonie is all in front of a Durassian backdrop. My obsession with French Literature, French Philosophy, and French Literary Theory is demonstrative of the need for French in this thesis.

In the second chapter I am going to be investigating how the work of Duras, be that what it may, influences Édouard Louis, Ocean Vuong, and Patti Smith. Included with this I will be considering Duras via multimodality, followed by a brief interlude about *autofiction*, and ways in which *autofiction* needs to be addressed. It should be noted there will be specific Durassian works on which I will be focusing. Marguerite Duras published between 1943 and 1996, the complete works of Duras is extensive even if one just limits one's study from the 1958 publication of *Moderato cantabile*. With a brief interlude to the 1950 work *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*.

Chapter three will be based on the work of Duras and Queer Theory. What is Queer Theory? I will discuss queering the Durassian lens, and how that is possible, and what it exactly means. The way in which one understands Queer Theory will obviously influence queering literature, and all that entails. As this is not a thesis about Duras; it is not a thesis just on Queer Theory either. I want to use the depth and force of Queer Theory to discuss these authors, I will not get mired in arguments about what Queer Theory was, is, and should be. I do not investigate how Queer Theory acts on particular arguments, but rather how Queer Theory enhances the way in which one is analyzing a text that is not influenced by heteronormativity.

The conclusion of this thesis is a (re)commencement with ideas about what it truly means to queer literature. Nothing more than a section about queering Duras. Queer literature is a mode

of survival; a mode of hope. For those of us in the Queer Community it is a means of progress; a way of constantly moving forward. It is a way of not always being pushed to the margins; a way of going beyond many essentialist notions, and many false dichotomies. I also give fairly specific ideas about further research based on this thesis. I give ideas how this thesis has fit into my overall research regimen, and how I might use it in other aspects that should also give others ideas for expanding research on the authors covered in this thesis.

It is worth remembering, at this point, it is not my intention to create either dichotomies, or any type of essentialist notions in my arguments. I do discuss Occident obviously, but from an historical perspective in the history of ideas it is whence many of these thoughts come.

Jean Vallier ends the preface to the two-volume work on Duras with the question

La vérité de Marguerite Duras ? Ne cherchez pas plus loin, elle est tout entière dans son œuvre. Mon souhait le plus cher est que cette biographie puisse servir de fil d'Ariane pour aller, avec elle, derrière le miroir. (10)

The truth about Marguerite Duras? Do not look any further, she is entirely in her œuvre.

My most dear [profound] wish is that this biography is able to serve as the thread of Ariadne [breadcrumb trail] to go, with her, behind the mirror. [WNA translation]

Both Jean Vallier and Dominique Noguez argue for the same conclusion in that Duras is Durassian texts. Duras is an inculcation of her texts. It is that main reason I always contend one must know Duras to know Duras. Vallier and Noguez were acquainted with Marguerite Duras during her lifetime, but Vallier and Noguez also know the Durassian œuvre, and are able to draw conclusions from that knowledge about Duras. Durassian influences are vital; Durassian influences are foundational; Durassian influences are unique and revolutionary.

## Chapter Two

### Durassian Influences

The French philosopher Alain Badiou in *Métaphysique du bonheur réel* examines several words from nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud's poem "Démocratie." Rimbaud uses the words "les révoltes logiques," "logical revolts," and those words sum up of what a study on Marguerite Duras is founded: *Logical revolts*. Writing, as argued by Duras, consists of what could be demarcated as *logical revolts*. Writing is generally understood as logical, but the Durassian text, *qua* Duras, is in revolt to that so-called logic. An investigation involving Marguerite Duras, however, will have apparent and necessary overlaps; overlaps that are impossible to avoid. I also investigate three other Durassian-like writers: Édouard Louis, Ocean Vuong, and Patti Smith. It is through Duras that I arrive at new understandings of Louis, Vuong, and Smith. I examine the following questions: What is Writer? What is Writing? What is Literature? What do we want from Literature? Duras, in a June 1969 documentary produced during the filming of *Détruire dit-elle* by Jean-Claude Bergeret, states the notion of what *logical revolts* could implicate:

Je suis pour qu'on ferme toutes les facultés, toutes les universités, toutes les écoles, profondément. Qu'on recommence tout. C'est l'esprit profond de *Détruire dit-elle*, de mon livre, le départ à zéro. Je suis pour qu'on oublie l'histoire, l'histoire de la France, l'histoire du monde. Complètement. Qu'il n'y ait plus aucune mémoire de ce qui a été vécu, c'est-à-dire de l'intolérable, sur tous les fronts, sur tous les points. Tout casser. Bon, dans *Détruire*, j'essaie de situer le changement de l'homme, enfin le stade révolutionnaire au niveau de la vie intérieure. Je crois que si on fait pas ce pas qui est

intérieur, si l'homme ne change pas dans sa solitude, rien n'est possible, toutes les révolutions seront truquées. Ça, je le crois profondément. (Duras vol. II, 1166)

I am profoundly for closing all the [university-level] colleges, all the universities, all the schools. That we begin everything new. It is the profound spirit of *Détruire dit-elle*, of my book, the leaving [starting point] from zero. I am for forgetting history, the history of France, the history of the world. Completely. That there is no [more] memory of that which was lived [through], that is to say the intolerable, on all the fronts, on all the points. Break everything. So, in *Détruire*, I try to situate the change of man, hence the revolutionary stage at the interior level [the level of one's self] of life. I think that if we do not make this step about [of] interior life, if man does not change his solitude, nothing is possible, all the revolutions will be rigged. All this I profoundly believe.

[WNA translation]

I agree with what Marguerite Duras talks about in this interview: One must return to the very basics and build anew by destroying all (Duras vol. II, 1166). A ground-zero of the humanistic enterprise that goes beyond Barthesian ideas about ground-zero of Writing. This is in essence a liminal space in that Duras understands everyone would be starting from the same place. As Victor Turner claims that “neophytes . . . their malleability . . . their reduction to a uniform condition [is a sign] of the process whereby they are ground down to be fashioned anew . . . endowed with additional powers to cope with their new station in life” (Turner 238). Does this refashioning make a Writer, a Writer as understood by Duras? Duras is talking in the interview of reforming the very essence of a lost society; a society that has lost its way. Is that also the job of Writer? Is that a notion of the literary enterprise? Moving society in an ontological and philosophical direction that leads to metaphysics: A literal societal *tabula rasa*. Is the notion of

logic in revolt by the way in which logic is understood? What is logic(al)? With a societal blank slate would it be possible to revolt against logic? Is that the only way in which to have such revolts? Duras would agree.

*Détruire* is one of the first works Duras did that journalists and literary critics considered political. It is key to remember that the text was published in 1969, just after the 1968 student riots and revolts in France. And as Jean Vallier claims Duras

tent[e] d'exprimer par le film [et le roman] l'essentiel de ses préoccupations esthétiques, morales ou politiques – les trois ne sachant être dissociées, un point sur lequel elle insistera fréquemment dans ses multiples interviews. (1184)

attempts to express by the film [and the novel] the essential of her esthetics, moralist or political preoccupations – the three not able to be separated, a point about which Duras insisted on frequently in multiple interviews. [WNA translation]

The film and novel *Détruire* are inextricably wed, as are the political aspects therein. That idea of *Détruire* being political is part and parcel to the Durassian enterprise, and Duras makes that point in granted interviews. The historical aspects are an intrinsic foundational part of *Détruire*, and the Durassian *œuvre* post-*Moderato cantabile* published in 1958 – the point at which Duras *qua* Duras developed. It was from *Moderato cantabile* that the voice of Duras was developed and flourished: Logical revolts. Though there are writing aspects of Duras in the novels that were considered more traditional like *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*. With *Moderato cantabile* and after Duras worried less about style than she had heretofore, but Durassian writing was always Durassian writing from 1943 through 1996 – the professional writing career of Marguerite Duras.

The quote from Duras's *Détruire* interview is, also, foundational because of its currency, and the Durassian ideal. It was Duras that thought everything should start again from ground zero. Duras had indicated that was why Duras wrote *Détruire*, and the reason I found the work notable. Do these notions apply to the current political situation in France and the United States of America? What about the international response to SARS-Cov-2? Where did *Détruire* lead Duras? The opening lines of *Détruire*

Temps couvert.

Les baies sont fermées.

Du côté de la salle à manger où il se trouve, on ne peut pas voir le parc.

Elle, oui, elle voit, elle regarde. Sa table touche le rebord des baies. (Duras vol. II, 1095)

Cloudy weather.

The windows are shut.

Next to the dining room where he finds himself, one is not able to see the park.

She, yes, she sees, she watches [looks]. Her table touches the rim of the windows.

[WNA translation]

Is this quintessential Duras? There is as an otherworldliness in Duras that is aside from Duras being purposely opaque. *Détruire* is a difficult text, but one of great intrigue and denouement. Stein, Max Thor and Alissa Thor, Élisabeth Alione and Bernard Alione the main characters are all asides. Even when Stein and Max Thor are discussing writing, and the superfluous nature of novel. Max Thor to Stein: "Et vous? Êtes-vous un écrivain?" Stein: "Je suis en passe de le devenir." "And you? Are you a writer?" Stein: "I am in the process/supposed to become one." Stein wonders why Max Thor ask him the question, and Max Thor responds "A votre acharnement à poser des questions. Pour n'arriver nulle part" (Duras vol. II, 1100). "Your

relentlessness to ask questions. To arrive at nowhere [at nothing]” [WNA translation]. Is this an example of a logical revolt? Does Writer need to arrive/to be at a specific space/place to Write? This is Duras actively looking at the technê of writing and the theory of Writing and Writer.

There is also an existential element to *Détruire* as it takes place within an enclosed space [un huis clos], the hotel enclosed by a parc [grounds] all enclosed by a forest. It is an enclosed perimeter, and something for which Duras was known. *Détruire* is an arduous task in either reading, or watching as nothing happens other than Alissa Thor discussing with Élisabeth Alione, Élisabeth Alione’s still birth several months back, the reason why Élisabeth is at the hotel, and Élisabeth’s love affair with the young doctor. The main action of the film is nothing more than this dialogue. Duras wanted to keep working on *Détruire*, and that is the reason Duras gave for making a film of the text. The film was a way of continuing to work with the text, and the film Duras wanted to make of her own text. Duras says “[c]’est un livre que je connais très mal. Je l’ai écrit très vite . . . j’ai eu envie de le connaître mieux . . . [c]’est pour ça que je l’ai filmé” (Duras vol. II, 1165). “It’s a book that I do not know well [*Détruire*]. I wrote it very quickly . . . I wanted to know it better . . . and it is for that reason that I filmed it” [WNA translation]. The film is true to the text as Duras understood, and a reason why Duras did her own films as it was a study of a given text. Duras was not interested in commercial aspects of her films, as Duras was more concerned about the textual authenticity of her films. Durassian films and Durassian texts were never passive; they entailed study from both Reader and Spectator. Duras was intent in making her texts something in which she had an interest and need as Writer. When Duras stopped Writing everyday Duras argued it was something important that had happened. In an interview with Michelle Porte, Duras discusses what occurred when Duras did not write each day “. . . j’ai cessé d’écrire tous les jours” (Duras vol. III, 181). “. . . I stopped

writing every day” [WNA translation]. Is the Writing of the Writer only Writing if it is not a passive text? Does a Writer need to rework a text through other media either like film, or like a play for the theatre?

It is worth remembering and taking note of an observation from William van Wert in an article on Duras’s cinema<sup>1</sup>

Duras is a committed artist who disdains works of art and who has minimal confidence in the impact of an art work upon an audience: thus, her [Duras’s] formalism. And for someone who is a novelist with a poet’s ear for music, she is incredibly silent.

(van Wert 23)

Duras has a level of musicality and resonance as does Patti Smith from Smith’s days as a Rock singer, and Smith’s marriage to Fred Sonic Smith. As Patti Smith claims in *M Train* “[m]y yearning for him [Fred Sonic Smith] permeated everything – my poems, my songs, my heart” (10). Fred Sonic Smith died 4 November 1994. A searching for the past, as did Duras, through the process of Writing is a catalyst, a past that is used by Smith, Louis, and Vuong. There is always the need to look at the Writing process and what it entails, and the way in which Writing evolves. Is writing nothing more than an introspection that becomes a text? Therein lies the problem in trying to determine what Writing is and of what makes a text textual.

What about *L’Amant*? A text written some 15 years after *Détruire*. There is a narrator, and is that what Writing needs? This text is also based on photographs. Does a photograph render Writing, Writing as argued by Marguerite Duras? Is a photography needed for a Writer to be a Writer? These are logical revolts in that Duras argues what Writing is NOT, yet also claims to have the ability to discern what Writing is; Writing and Writer both. Again, a Writer for Duras

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<sup>1</sup> Though this article is from 1979 it is both foundational and clarifying, hence.

is a Writer only through struggling with words by implication a philosopher, like Sartre for example, does not struggle with words like a Writer.

*L'Amant:*

Un jour, j'étais âgée déjà, dans le hall d'un lieu public, un homme est venu vers moi. Il s'est fait connaître et il m'a dit : « Je vous connais depuis toujours. Tout le monde dit que vous étiez belle lorsque vous étiez jeune, je suis venu pour vous dire que pour moi je vous trouve plus belle maintenant que lorsque vous étiez jeune, j'aimais moins votre visage de jeune femme que celui que vous avez maintenant, dévasté. »

(Duras vol. III, 1455)

One day, I was already old, in the hall of a public place, a man comes toward me. He introduced himself and he said to me: "I've known you forever. Everyone says you were very beautiful when you were young, I have come to tell you that for me I find you prettier now than when you were young, I like less your face as a young girl, than that which you have now, devastated [destroyed]." [WNA translation]

The opening words [paragraph] of *L'Amant*, when Duras was at the true apex of her Writing career. A beginning that is both classic and iconic, an example of what Writer ought be. Though prose, this text is both lyric and poetic, truly only a work Marguerite Duras could have written. In the first version of the manuscript of *L'Amant*, Duras claims this man was, "[the] brother of Jacques Prévert, in the hallways of [a] television [station]."

There is a notable fact not to be overlooked: *L'Amant* was supposed to have been called *La photographie absolue*; *L'Amant* not only became a successful text for Duras in terms of sales,

Duras also won the Prix Goncourt in 1984 for *L'Amant*.<sup>2</sup> From the transcript of the interview Duras did with Bernard Pivot on *Apostrophes*, Duras says “[l]e livre s’appelait avant *La Photographie absolue*, il m’a été commandé ce livre, attention, et cette photographie absolue n’avait pas été prise . . .” (Duras vol. III, 1536). “The book was called before *Absolute Photography*, it was asked of me to do it this book, take note, and this absolute photography was not taken” [WNA translation]. It was the idea of *La Photographie absolue* that became *L'Amant*.

A recent text of Édouard Louis’s [April 2021] *Combats et métamorphoses d’une femme* was also based on a photograph, and in reading the first bit one would think it a text of Duras.

Louis begins the work with the following:

Tout a commencé par une photo. Je ne savais pas que cette image existait et je la possédais – qui me l’a donnée, et quand? (9)

It all started with a photo. I did not know that this image existed and that I had it – who gave it to me, and when? [WNA translation]

Aside from Louis using the composed past, as opposed to the literary simple past, the fact that a photograph is the foundation on which this text is written is notable [remarkable]. The way in which Louis writes about the photograph is Durassian. *Combats . . .* could be a Durassian text.

Both works of Duras and Louis are collections of photographs composed as writings about [based on] photographs. Why? Is Writing about a photograph better understood? Susan Sontag notes in her essay “On Photography”

Photographs, which fiddle with the scale of the world , themselves get reduced, blown up, cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out. They age, plagued by the usual ills of paper

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<sup>2</sup> Please refer to fn. 10 in Chapter One, page 10.

objects; they disappear; they become valuable, and get bought and sold; they are reproduced. Photographs, which package the world, seem to invite packaging. They are stuck in albums, framed and set on tables, tacked on walls, projected as slides.

Newspapers and magazines feature them; cops alphabetize them; museums exhibit them; publishers compile them. (Sontag 530)

Is Writing about a photograph of greater worth/more valid than photography in and of itself?

Marguerite Duras, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag never clearly demarcate what a photograph and a Writer ought do/be. Ocean Vuong writes about how certain rooms are “silent as a photograph” (197); Patti Smith in *Devotion* is walking through Paris, and Smith arrives at rue Visconti. “I had so thrilled at my first sight of it [rue Visconti] that I ran the length and jumped in the air. My sister took a picture and in it I see myself, forever frozen in air full of joy” (23).

Where does a photograph belong in the literary enterprise? Does a photograph belong in the literary enterprise period? A photograph is a catalyst to the Writing process as demonstrative of Duras, Louis, Smith, and Vuong. Photography is an affordance more than a biographical stance/outlook/remembrance, but does it lead to that special place where Writing exists? The place a Writer needs in order to Write.

### **Narration/Multimodality – What Is Writer?**

The idea of a Durassian Writer, and more broadly Writer, forms the foundation of this thesis. 1958 was a turning point in understanding Duras as the Writer Duras became known to be. In a 1972 interview with Germaine Brée, Duras claims

[f]or a long time, I held for the absolute noncommitment of the writer; now I hold that it is madness and a lie to say that the writer is not committed. A writer commits himself

from the very moment he picks up the pen. Revolutionary demands and literary demands are one and the same. (421)

It is important to say a few concrete words about Germaine Brée, to give some idea why Marguerite Duras would have agreed to do an interview with Brée. When considering Brée, Brée is remembered as follows:

If French literature and culture and the French language became, indisputably, *the* foreign culture, *the* foreign language, and *the* foreign literature of choice in American colleges and universities it is largely due to . . . Germaine Brée. (Bishop 276)

Brée was prolific and did studies on André Gide, Guillaume Apollinaire, Marcel Proust, and Marguerite Duras to name but a few.

Brée found Duras not only intriguing and mysterious, but claimed the following about Duras:

With the possible exception of Proust, no contemporary writer has so intricately woven together life and writing, offering her life “to be read,” as Mary Lydon has put it, in a gesture that confirms the etymology of the word “legenda.” (Brée 8)

The reason Marguerite Duras always claimed to be in all of her works, not in an autobiographical sense *qua* autobiography, but in the sense of that constant revolutionary odyssey of trying to find Writer and Writing be those what they may.

This Barthesian quote is a repetition, but of use here as well. Barthes argues the following:

5. Savoir qu'on n'écrit pas pour l'autre, savoir que ces choses que je vais écrire ne me feront jamais aimer de qui j'aime, savoir que l'écriture ne compense rien, ne sublime rien, qu'elle est précisément *là où tu n'es pas* – c'est le commencement de l'écriture.

(Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* 132)

5. To know that one does not write for the other, to know that these things that I am going to write will never make me loved by the one I love, to know that writing has no recompense, [is not] sublime, *that it is precisely there, where you are not* – it's the beginning of writing. (Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* 132) [WNA translation]

Writing is a lonely enterprise that requires solitude; Writing requires to be separated from a great love interest – that gaze of Orpheus. This leads to an idea Patti Smith writes in her work

*Devotion*

Why is one compelled to write? To set oneself apart, cocooned, rapt in solitude, despite the wants of others. Virginia Woolf had her room. Proust his shuttered windows.

*Marguerite Duras her muted house.* Dylan Thomas his modest shed. All seeking an emptiness to imbue with words. The words that will penetrate virgin territory, crack unclaimed combinations, articulate the infinite. (87) [WNA emphasis]

Patti Smith continues her search for the reason why she [Patti Smith] Writes, and in *Devotion* ends with the following question:

Why do I write? My finger, as a stylus, traces the question in the blank air. A familiar riddle posed since youth, withdrawing from play, comrades in the valley of love, guided with words, a beat outside.

Why do we write? A chorus erupts.

Because we cannot [sic.] simply live. (93)

Patti Smith has, like Duras, a profound interest in the notion of Writer, and is always searching after what and how Writer is.

Before going to the next section of this chapter I want to use an example of Patti Smith's

written as a blog post for *Paris Review* in 2018 on Jean Genet's *Journal du voleur*, a Gallimard publication famously introduced by Jean-Paul Sartre. Patti Smith had gotten the Bernard Frechtman translation in 1968, and took it back to the apartment that Smith was sharing with [the photographer] Robert Mapplethorpe at the time. As Smith writes

[f]or myself, every page was a miracle, and for Robert, a portal into a world he was clandestinely drawn and would eventually immortalize through the image. Artists pillage. A piece of writing, a musical phrase, a statue first regarded with pleasure until the moment – when seized, as Proust accounts, by a powerful joy – he casts off all pretenses of adoration and executes a work of his own. Genet's poetry drew me to write; his imagery drew Robert to the camera. (Smith *Paris Review*)

This is what Writer does. A point Bernard Pivot discusses with Duras during the *Apostrophes* interview. Pivot talks about the older brother of Duras “. . .votre frère aîné ? Alors là un voyou de famille, un fouiller d'armoire, un assassin sans armes . . .” (Duras vol. III, 1539). “. . . your oldest brother? So, a family thug, one who rummages through an armoire, an assassin without [fire] arms . . .” [WNA translation]. Pivot goes on to argue, with Duras, that Writers are like those that rummage through armoires. In this instance there is a direct parallel with the ideas Patti Smith discusses about Genet that relates directly to Marguerite Duras.

In an article on Duras and Writing, Carol Murphy indicates “. . . le thème de l'écriture est une constante de la production romanesque de [Duras]” (105). “. . . the theme of Writing is a constant in the literary-novel production of [Duras]” [WNA translation]. That foundational notion of Writing is ever present in all aspects of the Durassian literary enterprise. Duras did also argue/claim/evoke what Writing was not; Sartre was not a Writer, Sartre was a moralist and philosopher more than Sartre was a Writer of literature according to Duras. Duras knew what

Writer was not more so than what Writer was? An obvious question to pose given the continued discussions about Sartre and Duras.

### **Autofiction**

The term *autofiction* was developed by the Russian writer Serge Doubrovsky who created the term in a work *Fils*, published in 1977. The Duras scholar Sylvie Loignon goes on to explain there is a tension between autobiography and fiction that exists (Duras vol. III, 1853). It is that tension at issue. Is there a need for that tension in a text? *Autofiction* is a term used in literary analyses in French, and it truly serves no purpose. Author Dominique Noguez argues the following about the term *autofiction* and Duras:

Il n'y a pas d'être plus fictif ou fictionnel qu'elle . . . [à] l'époque, on n'utilisait pas cette horrible mot, dont je ne vois toujours pas l'utilité aujourd'hui. Dans un texte, dès qu'il y a une goutte de fiction, on est dans la fiction, un point c'est tout, "auto" ou pas. Il n'y a pas lieu de créer un concept spécial pour les fictions qui seraient plus autobiographiques que la moyenne. (*Le Monde* le 27 juillet 2012)

There is no being more fictive or fictional than her [Duras]. Once there is a drop of fiction in a text, we are in fiction no matter what it is. [WNA translation]

This literary idea, especially in France, that haunted the work of Duras, and continues to divert having a fuller understanding of Duras. It is not clear the thread on which one pulls in a given text that is either autobiographical, or not, and why does it even matter?

Even though these works are either listed as novels, or considered novels; readers still want to find some bit of autobiography in those texts. Why? Riki Wilchins in *Queer Theory, Gender Theory*, makes the following key point:

For Derrida, the tradition of Western thought from Plato on down is dominated by an essentially dishonest quest of what is universal and certain. We seek these transcendent truths because we demand some sort of “superhard” knowledge that is always reliable, always true. We want it to rescue us from the void, from the unknown. (42)

Do readers need to have some of sort of firm holding/footing with autobiographical bits and pieces in a novel in order to get at the novel? Why? Genre is a way for publishers to classify works in a capitalistic society. Even if one were to argue that some thread is autobiographical does that idea alone offer a better understanding of the text as a whole? The notion of an autobiographical text is meaningless, and does no work toward a better understanding of the purpose of a fictional text.

The texts from which I am working are works of fiction, i.e. Duras, Louis, Vuong, Patti Smith. Without going into a long discussion about identity suffice it to argue that a Writer weaves characters into a story: Hence a work of fiction. Dialogue in the text, it is in a sense by *divine fiat* a work of fiction. Yet, it is still a good story, that could be considered therapeutic in any sense. Over categorizing texts, again, is only a convenience for publishers and very much a capitalistic need that detracts from literature as a whole.

Janice Morgan, in an article on *L'Amant*, argues it is a “darkly-candid autobiographical book about her [Duras] adolescence in Indochina during the late 1920s” (271). This quote in and of itself would be problematic, but Morgan further along in the article correctly claims “though Duras pursues the past with relentless candor, it would be naive to conclude that she [Duras] is writing the book merely to settle accounts or . . . she [Duras] is uncovering the past in an effort to reveal all” (272). Though this article is a bit dated, the ideas still have an important currency.

The main problem with the concept of autofiction, however, is that it tends to make literature and author into some sort of myth fetish of the Foucauldian idea of “author-function,” and the way one tends to make authors and their œuvre hagiographical. What does it matter? As Foucault explains in “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?”

[j]e n’ai pas dit que je les réduisais à une fonction, j’analysais la fonction à l’intérieur de laquelle quelque chose comme un auteur pouvait exister. Je n’ai pas fait ici l’analyse du sujet, j’ai fait l’analyse de l’auteur . . . Il n’y a pas de sujet absolu. (818)

I did not say that I only reduced everything to a function, I analyzed the function at the interior of which something like an author could [possibly] exist. I did not do an analysis here of the subject, I did an analysis of the author . . . There is not a subject that is absolute [a universal]. [WNA translation]

This is Foucault justifying his questioning the function of author, and what one actually wants from Literature. This connects with notion of genre in that one wants a foothold to argue if a text is either valid or not? Foucault’s main points are about the type of questions being asked about a text. Questions that are both more expansive and complex than Who is the Author? The type of questions for which Foucault is arguing:

« Quels sont les modes d’existence de ce discours ? D’où a-t-il été tenu, comment peut-il circuler, et qui peut se l’approprier ? Quels sont les emplacements qui y sont ménagés pour des sujets possibles ? Qui peut remplir ces diverses fonctions de sujet ? » Et, derrière toutes ces questions, on n’entendrait guère que le bruit d’une indifférence :  
« Qu’importe qui parle. » (812)

“What are the modes of existence of this discourse? From where was it taken, how was it able to circulate [be passed along], and who is able to appropriate it? Who is able to

complete [fill up] these diverse functions of subject?” And, behind all of these questions, one barely hears the only noise of indifference: “What does it matter who talks.”

[WNA translation]

What is autobiographical fiction? The questions of Foucault demonstrates a more robust understanding of the literary enterprise. It is a way of going beyond heteronormativity and the need of useless dichotomies. There is no definitive answer in terms of giving a definition of *autofiction*. It is possible to rely on the remembrances of things past without a specific notion of fiction AND autobiography somehow linked.<sup>3</sup> To quote Riki Wilchins, again, “Derrida pointed out that Western thought has always overvalued or *privileged* language – so much so that we mistake language for the Real. What is named is real, and what is not has no existence” (Wilchins 38).<sup>4</sup> In the interview with Pivot and Duras

[Pivot]: Quels sont les . . . qu’est-ce qu’il y a . . . en dehors du plaisir?

[Duras] : Vous savez, quand les choses ne sont pas dites, n’ont pas été dites de ma part, elles ont été pensées clairement après . . . (Duras vol. III, 1536)

[Pivot] : What are the . . . what is there . . . outside pleasure ?

[Duras]: You know, when the things are not said, have not been said by me, they have been thought about clearly after . . . [WNA translation]

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<sup>3</sup> Is this a way of thinking about Marcel Proust? [*vide.*] Antoine Compagnon’s lectures on Proust at Collège de France – Compagnon’s lectures are videocast, and are available free-of-charge through the Collège website <http://college-de-france.fr>.

<sup>4</sup> The emphasis is from Wilchins.

## Novel/Film/Theatre

Marguerite Duras is multimodal in the literary enterprise that is Marguerite Duras. In an interview Michelle Porte did with Marguerite Duras for a two-part series called *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* Porte began the interview by asking:

Marguerite Duras, vous avez écrit : « Je fais des films pour occuper mon temps. Si j'avais la force de rien faire, je ne ferais rien. C'est parce que je n'ai pas la force de ne m'occuper à rien que je fais des films. Pour aucune autre raison. C'est là le plus vrai de tout ce que je peux dire sur mon entreprise. » (Duras vol. III, 181)

Marguerite Duras, you have written: "I make films to fill my time. If I had the force to not do anything, I would do nothing. It is because I do not have the force to do nothing that I make films. It is not for any other reason. There, that is as truthful as I am able to be about my [own] enterprise." [WNA translation]

Part of the Durassian allure and legacy was not only that which appeared on the blank page. Duras wrote novels, did film, and theatre. But as I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis Duras involved any number of qualia within the Durassian œuvre. Duras is multimodal *par excellence*; Duras encompasses the word multimodal as it applies to literary analysis. But the concept of the word *multimodal* is as pertinent to Patti Smith, Édouard Louis, Ocean Vuong as it is in discussing Duras. As evoked by Duras

*Détruire dit-elle*, ce n'est pas tout à fait un roman. C'est un texte qui est à lire, à filmer, à jouer, ou à jeter, voilà, comme on veut. C'est un livre que je connais très mal. Je l'ai écrit très vite. Je connais bien mieux mes autres livres que ce livre-là. J'ai eu envie de le connaître mieux. C'est pour ça que l'ai filmé. (Duras vol. II, 1165)

*Détruire dit-elle* is not completely a novel. It is a text to be read, to be filmed, to be played, or to be thrown, as one wants. It is a book that I do not know well. I wrote it very fast. I know my other books well, better than this one. I wanted to know it better. That is why I filmed it. [WNA translation]

The idea of multimodality leads to the concept of autofiction, and myriad problems therein. The writer Dominique Noguez argues in an interview in *Le Monde* that Duras had become “rapidement elle-même un personnage de ses propres fictions” (*Le Monde* le 27 juillet 2012). “rapidly herself a personage of her own fiction” [WNA translation].

It is difficult to decide what aspect of the Durassian corpus to use. There are multiple texts of Édouard Louis that I will consider. With both Patti Smith and Ocean Vuong I am only focusing on one specific work.

Multimodality and Duras is a necessary vital way of considering the œuvre of Duras as a whole. As Germaine Brée noted in an article on the writings of Duras the following:

Duras is a woman who for over half a century has fearlessly experimented with the potentialities and constraints of the media, evolving new mobile combinations that can disassemble or interweave features of film, soundtrack and image, music, narrative, theatre, photography – putting their sometimes shared components to work: rhythm, color, sound. (Brée/Duras 13)

The writings and notes alone chez Duras is massive, Duras kept copious notes, and many of the female Durassian characters lived, Duras claimed, in the walls of her house in Neauphle-le-Château. Duras filmed several of her cinematographic endeavors in Neauphle, and in the mirrors of Neauphle, and the silences are broken by actual children playing in a playground across the street from the house in Neauphle.

The text of Édouard Louis:

*« Si ce texte était un texte de théâtre, c'est avec ces mots-là qu'il faudrait commencer : Un père et un fils sont à quelques mètres l'un de l'autre dans un grand espace, vaste et vide. Cet espace pourrait être un champ de blé, une usine désaffectée et déserte, le gymnase plastifié d'une école. Peut-être qu'il neige. Peut-être que la neige les recouvre petit à petit jusqu'à les faire disparaître. Le père et le fils ne se regardent presque jamais. Seul le fils parle, les premières phrases qu'il dit sont lues sur une feuille de papier ou un écran, il essaye de s'adresser à son père mais on ne sait pas pourquoi c'est comme si le père ne pouvait pas l'entendre. Ils sont près l'un de l'autre mais ils ne se trouvent pas. Parfois leurs peaux se touchent, ils entrent en contact mais même là, même dans ces moments-là ils restent absents l'un de l'autre. Le fait que seul le fils parle et seulement lui est une chose violente pour eux deux : le père est privé de la possibilité de raconter sa propre vie et le fils voudrait une réponse qu'il n'obtiendra jamais. » (Louis 9-10)*

*“If this text was a theatrical text, it is with these words here that it would be necessary to begin: A father and a son are (just) several meters from each other in a large space, vast and empty. This space could be a wheat field, an abandoned and deserted factory, a (plasticized) (primary) school gym. Maybe it is snowing. Maybe the snow covers them, little-by-little, making them disappear. The father and the son never look at each other. Only the son speaks, the first sentences that he says are read on a piece of paper or a screen, he tries to address himself to his father but we do not know why as if the father is not able to hear him. They are close to each other (in proximity) but they do not find themselves. Occasionally their skin touches, they are in contact but even there, even in these very moments they stay absent from one another. The fact that only the son talks*

*and only he is a violent thing for the two of them: the father is kept from the possibility of telling (on) his own about his life and the son would like an answer that he will never obtain.*” [WNA translation]

Édouard Louis, like Duras, is able to change a text into a play, as the text evolves. The work that Édouard Louis developed with the great German director Thomas Ostermeier *Au cœur de la violence* adapted for the stage based on the Louis novel *Histoire de la violence*. Though a collaboration there is no discernable line of demarcation between what was the Writer Édouard Louis, and the Writing of Ostermeier, i.e. Ostermeier’s contribution. Ostermeier also assisted Louis with putting *Qui a tué mon père* on stage, and Brigitte Salino in a review of the play in *Le Monde* argues “Ni l’un ni l’autre ne s’y retrouvent” (*Le Monde* le 11 septembre 2020). “Not one or the other is able to be found [in the play]” [WNA translation]. There is a uniqueness to Louis as there is with Duras. Despite one wanting to lump all these Writers into specific niches doing so draws away from the power and force of the actual text.

The need for multimodality to render a different perspective of a given text into a new art form, be that what it may. The silences in Duras, and how those silences are ever present in her work is of great importance and intrigue. The way, also, Duras breaks those silences with something that interrupts those silences, and the musicality and lyricism as well.

Silences are important for Duras. Why is it necessary in Literature for a reader to think there is a “true” event that needs to be stated for a story to have merit? It is necessary and important to ask questions that are philosophically interesting and of literary value. These are the questions to be asked of merit and worth: What is fiction? Of what is the literary enterprise comprised? There are logical revolts with which to contend. It matters how the literary enterprise is defined. Marguerite Duras, Ocean Vuong, Patti Smith and Édouard Louis all have narrators in

their various stories. Even if a narrator is from a first-person perspective, it is still from the perspective of narrator. Is the notion of globalism too applied? In the context of this thesis it is what it ought be. The questions asked have led here, and have supplied ways of better understanding these authors who have built works on a Durassian foundation. A foundation that is not saintly, but concrete such that Writer is producing actual Writing [technê and praxis].

When one thinks of the Greek *θεραπεία* [therapia] and French *thérapie* it gives a perspective of living a full, meaningful, well-lived life, i.e. *εὐδαιμονία* [eudemonia]. There is the idea of Bibliotherapy that could be discussed in both a subjective and objective manner. Bibliotherapy could be understood from both a practical and theoretical study as well. What is it we want from Literature? What purpose do we want Literature to serve? Words that tell some sort of story, and serve a purpose. I am, at this point, looking outside the idea of any genre. A way to go beyond genre, be that what it may. Is it possible, however, to go beyond the applied aspects of bibliotherapy? I have added this idea of bibliotherapy simply as another means of considering literature. What I had discussed in the beginning was simply an indication that I had turned my main focus away from bibliotherapy in order to more fully understand and appreciate Francophone literature, given my interest in Duras.

The idea of globalism is indeed global, and not a colonialist/imperialist perspective of globalism within the confines of Occidental notions, ignoring the rest of the World. The notion of universalism does not follow from the idea of globalism. Globalism does not lead to binary thinking, as does the idea of universalism.

Roland Barthes explains the following in *Le plaisir du texte* :

« *Texte* veut dire *Tissu* ; mais alors que jusqu'ici on a toujours pris ce tissu pour un produit, un voile tout fait, derrière lequel se tient, plus ou moins caché, le sens (la vérité),

nous accentuons maintenant, dans le tissu, l'idée générative que le texte se fait, se travaille à travers un entrelacs perpétuel ; perdu dans ce tissu – cette texture – le sujet s'y défait, telle une araignée qui se dissoudrait elle-même dans les sécrétions constructives de sa toile. Si nous aimions les néologismes, pourrions définir la théorie du texte comme une *hyphologie* (hyphos, c'est le tissu et la toile d'araignée). » (Barthes vol. IV, 259)

“Text means *Tissue* [woven fabric]; but as we have always taken [understood] this tissue for a product, a veil already made, behind which, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we emphasize now, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked on [out] in a continual interweaving; lost in this tissue – this texture – the subject comes undone, such as a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. If we liked neologisms, we could define the theory of the text like a *hyphology* (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider's web). [WNA translation]

There is an interview with Ocean Vuong in the *Paris Review* called “Survival as a Creative Force,” and that is such a powerful title. Are these ideas, of Vuong's, logical revolts too? In the “Acknowledgements” section of Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* Vuong thanks Marguerite Duras for her work that he leaned on during the writing of his novel (Vuong “Acknowledgements”).

This is an excellent segue into the notion of Queer Theory: how silences exist, and the importance of words in a sentence, and what those silences say and do, and in queering a text. Is Queer Theory a means of addressing the marginalized as a way to move them from the marginalia? Is this where ideas of Marxism are of use as well?

## Chapter Three

### Queering the Durassian Lens

Queer Theory is a way for Writer, to better augment Writing with a level of inclusivity that goes beyond dichotomous thinking and allows for a unique set of questions to be used in an analysis of certain texts. Looking at Duras through Durassian Marxism can lead to understanding Duras from a Queer perspective, other than understanding Duras as possibly being homophobic. There is a space in which Duras Writes, and it is necessary to justify that space and contextualize that space with the Written text of Duras. It is within that special Writing space that Duras is Writing. A space Writer must find to be understood as *écrivain(e)*.

Why is Queer Theory needed? What does Queer Theory add to Writing? What does Queer Theory add to Writer? What does Queer Theory add to Literature? In the first few sentences of Paule Constant's *Un monde à l'usage des Demoiselles* there is the notion of how patriarchy has been a limitation to women:

Le monde fait injure aux femmes. Dans les livres, les hommes leur ont déclaré la guerre.

La tête un peu renversée sur le dossier de sa chaise, la jeune femme sent la tristesse lui prendre le cœur, lorsqu'un rayon de soleil lui fait lever les yeux. (Constant 11)

The world injures women. In the books, men have declared war on them [women]. The head just a bit laid back on the back of her chair, the young woman feels sadness take hold of [her] heart, when a ray of sunshine makes her lift her eyes. [WNA translation]

This is an essentialist debate, and only deals with issues of heteronormative patriarchal society writ large. The idea of patriarchy destroying women in literature – injuring women – is a key point. I do not, however, agree Paule Constant is asking the right questions in getting out [outside] of heteronormative patriarchal thinking and analysis: This notion creates a false

dichotomy, important as it appears. This is an idea of Hélène Cixous – patriarchal binary thought – a concept explained by Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics* where Moi notes, according to Cixous, “binary oppositions are heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system” (102). The notions of Cixous, as highlighted by Moi, could be thought of as the quintessential idea of going beyond heteronormative patriarchy. Moi continues with ideas influenced by Cixous’s research “[E]ach opposition can be analyzed as a hierarchy where the ‘feminine’ side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance” (102). How to get beyond dichotomous analysis and thinking? Is it only through and with Queer Theory that it is possible to go beyond a certain heteronormative point.

As Riki Wilchins in *Queer Theory, Gender Theory* claims:

Feminist theory gave us feminism, and gay theory helped give us gay rights. But unless we bring gender theory out of the ivory towers and put it to work in the streets, we may be witnessing the birth of a major philosophical movement that succeeds in politicizing practically everything but produces practically nothing in the way of organized, systemic social change. And that would be a pity. (106)

Wilchins published this work in 2004, and though politically it is a bit dated, the argument is not. The Queer Community has become a proverbial bowling pin not only in the politics of Occident; globally the fight for Queer rights is in a precarious situation. It is indeed a pity, and a way of normalizing and assimilating the Queer Community into the failed capitalistic system. Wilchins also Terry Eagleton in *Why Marx Was Right* aptly argues “Marxism is a critique of capitalism . . . the most searching, rigorous, comprehensive critique of its kind ever to be launched” (2). Eagleton goes on to claim that Marxism “. . . has transformed large sectors of the globe[,]” and “as long as capitalism is still in business, Marxism must be as well” (2). How is it possible to

move from marginalia to something more central and foundational? I relate this back to Duras through the ideas of Durassian Marxism, and the ideas of Duras as a reflecting non-Stalinist communism and the importance of the proletariat. In an interview with Germaine Brée, Duras says “I think that intellectually in all its rigorous demands has gone down into the proletariat” (Brée/Duras 421).

What is Queer Theory? How does the notion of Queer Theory *qua* Queer Theory work through Writing and Literature? How do the works of Patti Smith, Ocean Vuong, and Édouard Louis fit in with the notion of Queer Theory? The context of Duras and Queer Theory must be put in perspective; the work of Duras queers the literary space of those who are marginalized and deemed to be outside of what is considered heteronormative and patriarchal space. Duras is falsely overcategorized, and it leads to misunderstandings about Duras. It is necessary to try to get at Duras via Queer Theory for a more robust understanding of Duras. It is a mistake to try and box in Duras, as one needs to go beyond those cubby holes through Queer Theory. It is a way of representing Duras as Stephen Guy-Bray argues, that renders Queer Theory as a way of “queer representation.” Queer Theory is a dynamic process, Queer Theory is not static. The discussion should not be the way in which Queer Theory acts on a text, but rather how does Queer Theory enhance a text, and how does Queer Theory enable readers to ask substantive questions about a text not just about Queer Theory?

Marguerite Duras was born in Indochina, and was always against the idea of French colonialism. There is even more of a connection Duras has with Ocean Vuong, aside from just the writing aspects of Duras. It is not something about which one should ignore. Duras was a Marxist, and never shied away from the truth of explicating aspects of France, and how very racist the French were. What happens when the colonists leave? What happens when the

colonists try and forget, cover-up, efface your existence? Where does one start to rebuild when everything, including one's history, has been destroyed? Similar questions can be considered about the Queer Community in the 1980s. It was a community decimated. In considering a transdisciplinary approach it is necessary to remember certain historical aspects within Literature and Writing to make sure the correct questions are being asked in analyses.

During this crucial period of the 1980s, Marguerite Duras took part in an exclusive interview with a writer from the French gay magazine *Le Gai Pied* in which she identified as an outsider hiding in her own country. The full interview was reprinted on a French gay media site Yagg.com.<sup>1</sup> *Le Gai Pied* was the first gay "mass-market . . . publication to be sold at newsstands in France" (Halperin 371) and started by the gay journalist Guy Hocquenghem. I add this background because the interview with Marguerite Duras was important, and odd at best. Rolland Thélou did the interview with Duras, and from the beginning it led to intriguing questions.

The first aspect of note is the tutoiement i.e., second-person pronoun singular *tu* form in French is informal; *vous* is the second-person plural form and a formal usage unless there is a plural context. The question is, however, was Thélou doing this out of a sense of equality? It is not clear, and Duras never remarks about in the interview.

Part of an ending question Thélou asks is certainly worth considering. Thélou nous présente la question suivante : « . . . n'y a-t-il pas dans cette démarche une sensibilité qui nous trouble, qui interroge notre identité » (Thélou/Duras *Le Gai Pied*) ? Thélou asks us the following question ". . . isn't it the case that in these steps that is a sensibility that troubles us, that questions [challenges] our identity" [WNA translation]? Duras starts with "[j]'ai pendant longtemps été tenue de vivre

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<sup>1</sup> The web site Komitid.com took over Yagg.com

dans la semi-clandestinité [sic.] dans mon propre pays” (Thélu/Duras *Le Gai Pied*). I have had to for a long-time live sort of hidden in my own country” [WNA translation]. The following question and answer are the focus of the interview:

Thélu : On dit quelquefois que tu te moques des pédés ?

Duras : Ce n’est pas sans être vrai. Je me moque de tout ce qui réclame d’un séparatisme ou d’une définition d’ordre sociologique. Je me moque aussi des écoles, des idéologies, des morales. Mais de quelqu’un jamais, jamais je ne me moque de quelqu’un.

(Thélu/Duras *Le Gai Pied*)

Thélu : One says that sometimes you mock the fags?

Duras: It is not without being true. I mock all those who claim separatism or of a definition of a sociological order. I mock schools, ideologies, and morals. But of someone never, never do I mock someone [personally]. [WNA translation]

Given these glimpses into her opinions, how should one interpret Duras on homosexuality? Is it even possible to give concrete and meaningful ideas on Duras as homosexuality? Does it matter?

No matter what opinion Duras has of homosexuals, male homosexuals have had a [morbid] fascination with Duras, continue to have a fascination with Duras, and I would argue will continue to be intrigued by Marguerite Duras.

In a series of articles on Duras and interviews given by Duras in *Marguerite Duras à Montréal* Suzanne Lamy explains the essence of Duras, and meaning/goal:

L’œuvre de Duras ne cesse pas de produire des ondes concentriques : la part active, infinie jetée au lecteur est bien trop belle pour ne pas être saisie au vol. Elliptique, intense, polyphonique, elle nous interpelle au plus près du désir, là où l’équilibre perdu,

la plaie ouverte jusqu'au cri, entre l'insensé et le silence, il ne reste plus que cela :  
essayer d'écrire. (Lamy 13)

The work of Duras does not stop producing concentric waves: the active part, infinite  
thrown to the reader is too beautiful not to be awed [taken up] by the flight. Elliptical,  
intense, polyphonic [many voices], she [Duras] challenges us almost to desire, there  
where lost equilibrium, the wound opened to the point of [crying/yelling] pain, between  
foolishness and silence, there is nothing left but this: to try to write. [WNA translation]

This is the idea that Duras is Writing in a special place, and that from what Duras Writes the  
Reader is able to do nothing more than try to Write. How does this special place connect to  
homosexuality? Is it through polyphony?

### **Queer Theory/Textual Queering**

I am only interested in discussing the theoretical framework of the notions encompassing  
and surrounding Queer Theory. I am not concerned with arguing about terms and vocabulary of  
Queer Theory. I am only interested in Queer Theory as it applies to Duras, Édouard Louis,  
Ocean Vuong, and Patti Smith. I understand Queer Theory as a way of looking at those  
marginalized and their political, revolutionary, sexual façon d'être, a modus operandi of sorts.

In a recent work *Queer Theory Now* both Hannah McCann and Whitney Morgan  
demarcate Queer Theory as an amalgam of various studies. As they indicate Queer Theory is  
comprised of: Trans activism and theory; Gay and Lesbian Studies; Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual  
activism; Postmodernism; Poststructuralism; Lesbian Feminism; Lesbian of Colour [sic.] theory  
and activism (7). This is not a direct quote, but a way of rendering a graphic into words. Queer  
Theory is a way of continually engaging all aspects of a so-called Queer Community without  
specifically forgetting any given entity. This notion of Queer Theory as an amalgamation also

continues with ideas about multimodality. In both conceptions, the idea of multiple representations, rather than a dichotomy, consist of Queering the Lens.

Is there a more direct link with Louis and Vuong as their texts have a clear (homo)sexual aspect? This is a common misconception with a cursory understanding of Queer Theory. Duras has that in a sense with the notion of incest, and the love affair in *L'Amant* between the young girl, and the Chinese bachelor. There is a level of colonialism, and an illicit love affair as in *Hiroshima mon amour*. A rite of passage, a passage that has several meanings in *L'Amant*. How does this apply to Queer Theory?

### **What Do We Want from Literature?**

Literature [the text] – the critique of said text – is not a passive enterprise. There is no essentialist debate to have, and there are no dichotomies with which to deal. There are certainly many notions about literature, and what it is even from Duras, and others I am studying in this thesis. Duras says “[il y a le scandale] . . . qui est celui de la littérature. Je crois que la littérature est scandaleuse, parce qu’elle est rare et qu’elle rend les gens fous” (Ecrire 6). “There is the scandal . . . that is that of literature. I think [am of the opinion] that literature is scandalous, because it [literature] is rare and it makes people crazy/foolish” [WNA translation]. A recent past president of the Modern Language Association Simon Gikandi writes “When the right to have rights is under siege around the world, literature and language are once again summoned to the frontlines.” Why am I discussing the question of Literature in the section on Queering Duras?

It is through something as revolutionary as Literature that ideas/concepts/notions of heteronormativity take root. There is an essentialism, and much an idea of dominance as well. As Édouard Louis aptly claims in *Combats* . . . that Literature was to be the following:

On m'a dit que la littérature ne devait jamais tenter d'expliquer, seulement illustrer la réalité, et j'écris pour expliquer et comprendre sa vie.

On m'a dit que la littérature ne devait jamais se répéter et je veux écrire que la même histoire, encore et encore, y revenir jusqu'à ce qu'elle laisse apercevoir des fragments de sa vérité, *y creuser un trou après l'autre jusqu'au moment où ce qui se cache derrière commencera à suinter.*

On m'a dit que la littérature ne devait jamais ressembler à un étalage de sentiments et je n'écris que pour faire jaillir des sentiments que le corps ne sait pas exprimer.

On m'a dit que la littérature ne devait jamais ressembler à un manifeste politique et déjà j'aiguise chacune de mes phrases comme on aiguiserait la lame d'un couteau.

Parce que je le sais maintenant, ils ont construit ce qu'ils appellent littérature contre les vies et les corps comme le sien. Parce que je sais désormais qu'écrire sur elle, et écrire sur sa vie, c'est écrire contre littérature. (19-20)

One told me [it was told me] that literature should never attempt to explain [explicate], only to illustrate reality, and I write to explain and to understand her life.

One told me [it was told me] that literature should never repeat itself and I want to only write the same story, again and again, go back there until that it leaves fragments to be apperceived of her truth, *there to dig hole after hole until the moment where what hides itself behind will begin to ooze [forth].*

One told me [it was told me] that literature should never resemble [show] a display of sentiments [emotions] and I only write to gush forth sentiments [emotions] that the body does not know how to express.

One told me [it was told me] that literature should never resemble [show] a political manifestation [rally/ideas] and already I sharpen each [one] of my sentences like one would sharpen the blade of a knife.

Because I know it now, they have constructed [built] what they call [name] literature against the lives and the bodies like yours. Because I know however that to write on [about] her, and to write her life, it's to write against literature. [WNA translation]

This is a long quote, but an important quote with a great deal of force only to end that what he is writing is against literature. Is that not what we get from Duras? Is that the scandalous notion of literature, as explicated by Duras? It is notable that Louis is using the image of sharpening his sentences as one would sharpen the blade of a knife. Why? Is this a way of rendering a text neutral through cutting off the phallogentric normativity of what the Literature of the Other is? As Julia Kristeva in "Revolution in Poetic Language" aptly claims "[c]astration puts the finish[ing] touches on the process of separation that posits the subject as signifiable . . . separate, always confronted by an other: *imago* in the mirror (signified) and the semiotic process" (101).

Ocean Vuong's narrator discusses what Writing is and means. Vuong argues

In a previous draft of this letter, one I've since deleted, I told you how I became to be a writer. How I, the first in our family to go to college, squandered it on a degree in English. How I fled my shitty high school to spend days in New York lost in library stacks, reading obscure texts by dead people, most of whom never dreamed a face like mine floating over their sentences – and least of all that those sentences would save me. But none of that matters now. What matters is that all of it, even if I didn't know it then, brought me here, to this page, to tell you everything you'll never know. (Vuong 15)

It is interesting that for Vuong this central idea is based on a now deleted letter.

It is through Queering texts one is able to ascertain the foundational need to do so. Let us remember

[i]mpressive displays of rhetoric and linguistic force are a good way to seem important and invite a particular admiration, but they tend to silence dissent and discourage deeper modes of engagement. (Wilson 83)

Duras did not overthink either Writing, or the Writing process – technê – Duras just wrote. The main focus of this study has been a way of taking gander at the Durassian laboratory of Writing: The Written text. One of the last texts that Duras Wrote, published in 1993, where Duras did her own corrections was *Écrire*. This is Duras just a few years before her death, and it is key for any Writer to remember

Écrire à côté de ce qui précède l'écrit c'est toujours le gâcher. Et il faut cependant accepter ça : gâcher le ratage c'est revenir vers un autre livre, vers un autre possible de ce même livre. (Duras vol. IV, 853)

To write next to that which proceeds the written is always a way of spoiling it. And it is, however, necessary to accept that: spoil the failure it's to go back towards another book, towards another possible [way] of this same book. [WNA translation]

Duras from the beginning to the end always experimented with language and with Writing. That is one of the key ideals of Duras, Duras stressed over words and NOT style; that is the reason I always like Duras especially when I was studying in France, because Duras showed that it was possible for anyone to write Duras was surprised that more people did not write. Duras is multimodal as is Patti Smith, as is Ocean Vuong, and as is Édouard Louis.

## (Re)Commencement

An ending that is really a beginning. An idea that is reborn; a concept that is reborn. Is it even possible to talk of an Otherness and Literature? It must be the case to break free from binary thinking and Writing. Writer and Writing and Literature should have a fluidity that allows for a reworking from Reader/Writer.

As this thesis was not just about Marguerite Duras, this conclusion is not just a conclusion. There is no ending, but a continuation as is the writing process. In discussing the final resting place of Marguerite Duras in the cemetery Montparnasse, Jean Vallier ends *C'était Marguerite Duras* with an 1872 poem of Arthur Rimbaud *Éternité*

*Elle est retrouvée*

*Quoi ? L'Éternité.*

*C'est la mer allée*

*Avec le soleil.*

Arthur Rimbaud

Maybe this should have only been a thesis on Duras. It is my profound and humble hope, however, that my thoughts and ideas about Édouard Louis, Ocean Vuong, and Patti Smith have shown the literary need [writ large] of these Writers.

« La vérité de Marguerite Duras ? Ne cherchez pas plus loin, elle est tout entière dans son œuvre » (Vallier 10). This, this is Marguerite Duras. In the same vein I would argue this is Édouard Louis, Ocean Vuong, and Patti Smith. Aside from a new and more profound understanding of Marguerite Duras's œuvre; my approach to the work of Patti Smith, Ocean Vuong, and Édouard Louis has broadened and been reshaped. It is through Marguerite Duras that I have arrived at new ideas of the aforementioned Writers.

The end goal of this thesis has never been to either look for, or find definitive answers to any of the philosophical questions about the literary enterprise. I hope the reader is able to understand and ascertain a new appreciation for the following: What is Writer? What is Writing? What is Literature? What do we want from Literature? Not an endless and fruitless ontological rabbit hole into which it might be possible to fall.

Marguerite Duras is still relevant today, at the writing of this thesis, two decades in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, C.E. Duras is as influential as she every was, and outside the halls of academia. The popular French literary magazine *LIRE* did an entire issue dedicated to Marguerite Duras dated December 2020/January 2021. The newspaper *Le Monde* published a 2021 edition of its Hors-Série on Marguerite Duras “Une Vie, Une Œuvre,” and “Marguerite Duras – La voix et la passion” with a publication date of February, 2021.

It has not been my intent to try and normalize that which might be considered unpleasant; notions and ideas that many try sweeping under the proverbial rug. That has not been my goal at all in this thesis. It has not been all encompassing, yet there are directions for further research on Duras.

D. J. Moores in his article “Literature and Happiness” in the journal *Philosophy and Literature* claims

If literature does represent the full range of human experience, then it seems reasonable to suggest the need to reassess the discipline’s reluctance to critically discuss the inspiring, the happy, the joyful, and other forms of positivity. (276)

It is the case that “literature does represent the full range of human experience,” it was the goal for Duras in always looking at écrivain(e) and the technê of l’écriture. What does Writing do for us? This is also the main idea behind Édouard Louis, Ocean Vuong, and certainly

Patti Smith and her many acts as artist, as did Duras. There are times we are silenced by events beyond our control, and it is in those silences we must strive to go further and go beyond perceived failures. Always look for that other book; that other Writing there where we are yet to go. L'avenir – je vous remercie M. Derrida.

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