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Annabel L. Kim. *Cacaphonies: The Excremental Canon of French Literature*. UP of Minnesota, 2022.

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Annabel L. Kim. *Cacaphonies: The Excremental Canon of French Literature*. UP of Minnesota, 2022.

Abstract

Review of Annabel L. Kim. *Cacaphonies: The Excremental Canon of French Literature*. UP of Minnesota, 2022. 288 pp.

Keywords

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Annabel L. Kim. *Cacaphonies: The Excremental Canon of French Literature*. UP of Minnesota, 2022. 288 pp.

“The time is ripe for a fecal awakening in French studies,” writes Annabel L. Kim in *Cacaphonies* (2). Provocative and irreverent, *Cacaphonies* invites its readers to look for fecal matter in twentieth- and twenty-first century French literature and to listen to what it says. In her introduction, she offers a thorough analysis of the history of the representation of shit in French literature from the medieval period to the early modern period. Earlier stagings of the excremental include medieval fabliaux, François Rabelais’s *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*, and Marquis de Sade’s *Cent vingt journées de Sodome (The 120 Days of Sodom)*. In the nineteenth century, for instance, in the works of Balzac, Zola and Flaubert, shit is used as a metaphor to describe “what is base, abject, worthy of our disdain and disgust” or what is “not us, not of us” (23). Twentieth-century theorists such as Georges Bataille, Sigmund Freud, and Julia Kristeva engage with the excremental, but according to Kim, shit as matter that comes out of the anus is either surprisingly absent, or shit is sublimated, and read as a symbol. As a corrective to these sanitized and abstract readings of shit, Kim argues for the necessity of foregrounding the materiality of shit and finding fecal matter in modern and contemporary French literature.

Unlike critics who have tended to focus not on the fecal dimension, Kim proposes to read the works of Louis Ferdinand Céline, Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Genet, Marguerite Duras, Romain Gary, Anne Garréta and Daniel Pennac through the lens of shit in *Cacaphonies*. In three chronologically arranged sections, Kim shows that shit is present as matter, and that shit is proper to the narrative. The three sections center on the reading of shit as the site of material encounter with the body and text, and the ability of shit to renew literature, transgress boundaries and mobilize concepts. Kim begins with the modern period and pairs Céline with Beckett. Céline and Beckett are both known for their preoccupations with shit and death, and their transgressive use of language—Céline for his crass language and Beckett for his popular language. In *Mort à crédit (Death on the Installment Plan)* by Céline, a novel with plenty of sex scenes (even a canine erection) and shit scenes, Kim focuses on the aging and fecal-covered bottom narrator who remembers his childhood as one marked by shit. The materiality of shit comes across in the narrator’s description of how he smells all the time of shit, and how feces accumulate onto his bottom each day and each defecation adds to the fecal crust. In Beckett’s *Molloy* (1951), a novel filled with scatological jokes, odors, shit, and (countable) farts, Kim focuses on the flatulent narrator and how his farts and shit structure the novel. The two authors mobilize shit, death, and language to communicate the idea of mortality and the frailty of human existence.

Sartre and Genet form the next literary pair. Freedom is central to their thought. Both Sartre and Genet mobilize fecal matter to communicate the idea of freedom: existentialist freedom or “excrementalism” (107) in *L’Enfance d’un chef* (*The Childhood of a Leader*) and artistic freedom in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (*Our Lady of the Flowers*). The last literary pair, Duras and Gary, articulate an ethics of care based on wiping the bottom of the other person in their Holocaust-related narratives. In *La Douleur* (*War*), Duras tends to her then husband, a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp. She tends to his shit and wipes his bottom. Kim shows Duras’s ethics of care through her description of her husband’s feces. His shit—unrecognizable, bubbling, viscous, and slimy—not only mobilizes shit as the site of encounter between the shit and text but is also a testament to the inhumanity of the Holocaust. The shit in *La Vie Devant soi* (*The Life before Us*) by Gary is a testament to the very human relationship between Momo and his adoptive mother, Madame Rosa. At the end of the narrative, the mother has become the child and the child the mother. He takes care of her and wipes her bottom. The boy goes to the basement (which Kim likens to a dark anus) to join his deceased mother. They are surrounded by her excrement, and putrefaction has set in, and they are in shit together.

From the contemporary period, Kim includes *Dans l’béton* (*In Concrete*) by Garréta and *Journal d’un corps* (*Diary of a Body*) by Pennac. Kim shows how Garréta deploys concrete, shit (including cow dung) and language—colloquial language, unorthodox orthography and gender-indeterminate language—as weapons to contest structures of kinship and race. In *Journal d’un corps* (*Diary of a Body*), Pennac recounts the evolution of the narrator’s body from youth to death. According to Kim, Pennac’s description of the narrator’s bout of diarrhea, five pages in length, encapsulates his “excremental poetics.”

Kim argues that all the “fecal authors” in her canon make this fecal material into a literary text, and by writing about defecation, they share the experience for all, and by extension, literature. The reader is, however, still aware of the absence of the referent *shit*, despite its presence rendered possible through language. Kim asks us to rethink the word *shit* through the “fecal characters.” She argues that if everyone shits and accepts their fecality as a part of their humanity, shit would lose its negative connotation, and become a true leveler of difference. In her conclusion, Kim advocates for a “caca communism” (“caca” signifies “shit” in French) or a radical transgression of human relations that would result in equality where everyone is in shit together. Kim’s works open up a field of literary waste studies at a time when ecological questions are more important than ever. *Cacaphonies* will interest students and teachers of twentieth- and twenty-first century French literature, comparative literature, literary waste studies, and literary criticism.

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