

## Unbecoming Woman: The Shadow Feminism of *King Kong théorie* by Virginie

Despentes

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‘I write from the realms of the ugly, for the ugly’, states Virginie Despentes in the opening line of *King Kong théorie* (2006).<sup>1</sup> Rooted from the start in this oppositional, first-person perspective, *King Kong théorie* uses Despentes’s experience as a springboard for reflection on topics such as gender, sex work, pornography, rape and masculinity. A generically hybrid text, *King Kong théorie* provides an origin story for Despentes while making a polemical intervention into feminist discourse. The text is both intimate and revolutionary, its tone at once conversational and impassioned. *King Kong théorie* consists of seven short chapters, and all but the first are preceded by epigraphs from the work of feminist writers including Angela Davis and Simone de Beauvoir. The first epigraph is taken from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), signalling Despentes’s concern for the subject of writing: *King Kong théorie* is the product of a writerly impulse to redress the balance of literary representation, and to give voice to the *non-dit* in French public discourse.

Accordingly, *King Kong théorie* details Despentes’s experience of rape aged seventeen; the culture of silence that she subsequently faced; and her turning to sex work as a means of reclaiming bodily autonomy. Despentes’s feminist worldview is avowedly sex-positive and informed by American artists, sex workers and activists such as ‘Norma Jean Almodovar, Carol Queen, The Scarlot Harlot and Margo St. James’ (KKT, 76). For Michèle Schaal, Despentes’s work is representative of a *jeune féminisme français* that is open to anglophone influences, attuned to hybrid identities, and interested in reappropriation, performativity and sexual pleasure.<sup>2</sup> In *King Kong théorie*, Despentes thus argues for the free

exploration of desire in and through pornography, and insists that sex work, when freely chosen, is no more damaging than most other forms of labour. Desportes also uses *King Kong théorie* to provide a metatextual account of the *affaire Baise-moi* and to acknowledge the process by which she became ‘Virginie Desportes’, both a writer and a writerly construct.<sup>3</sup> She offers a quirky reading of the 2005 film *King Kong*, and in the hybrid, mythic figure of the giant ape, finds an apt metaphor for her identity as an author and as a woman who deviates from feminine norms.

In this essay, I contend that *King Kong théorie* stages a process of ‘unbecoming woman’. In her study of the ‘anti-identitarian French feminist fictions’ of Nathalie Sarraute, Monique Wittig and Anne Garréta, Annabel Kim uses the term ‘unbecoming’ to denote the process of attaining a state of ‘subjectivity without subjecthood’ (subjecthood being ‘the container in which we can be identified, interpellated, and taken up as a subject’). For Kim, then, unbecoming names a state ‘where one is fully in oneself but free, fluid, unfixed, potential’.<sup>4</sup> In *King Kong théorie*, Desportes does cultivate a sense of unfixity and potential, to which I will return. But her unbecoming is of a different character to those of Kim’s authors, who ‘forego subjecthood’ through their relationship with language, seeking freedom from the language of difference and identity.<sup>5</sup> In Desportes’s case, it is precisely through questions of identity—her authorial identity, her identification as ‘ugly’, her cross-species identification with King Kong—that her ‘unbecoming woman’ operates. This is an unravelling, but not a disavowal, of subjecthood; indeed, the formation and deformation of Desportes’s own subjecthood is so central to the text that for some critics, she ‘misjudges the universalisability of her approach’.<sup>6</sup> My use of the term ‘unbecoming’ is also a play on words: in *King Kong théorie*, Desportes engages in radically unbecoming (improper, indecent) behaviours, as well as refusing or failing to ‘become woman’ in the Beauvoirian sense.

It is this turn to refusal or failure as modes of feminist resistance that connects Desportes's work to the concepts of 'shadow feminism' and 'unbecoming' as Jack Halberstam theorizes them in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). For Halberstam, shadow feminism describes 'a feminist politics that issues not from a doing but from an undoing, not from a being or becoming women but from a refusal to be or to become woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy'.<sup>7</sup> Following Beauvoir, Wittig and others, Halberstam sees 'becoming woman' as a 'double bind' that shores up 'the dominance of man within a gender binary' (QAF, 140, 144). Halberstam then advocates anti-social forms of resistance to this 'becoming woman', including masochism and passivity. He looks to the work of Black and postcolonial feminists such as Saidiya Hartman, Jamaica Kincaid, Saba Mahmood and Gayatri Spivak for examples of thought and literature that operate 'in terms of the negation of the subject rather than her formation, the disruption of lineage rather than its continuation, the undoing of self rather than its activation' (125–26). Halberstam also considers the queer theories and historiographies of Leo Bersani, Lynda Hart and Heather Love, and the performance art of Nao Bustamante and Yoko Ono. Through radical passivity and the refusal of mastery, Halberstam argues, these shadow feminisms challenge 'the organizing logic of agency and subjectivity' and offer 'forms of liberty that are unimaginable to those who offer freedom as the freedom to become a master' (130–31, 145).

In what follows, I draw out a dialogue between *King Kong théorie* and shadow feminism, inserting Desportes into the non-linear 'genealogy' of shadow feminists that Halberstam seeks to chart (QAF, 125–26). I begin by arguing not only that Desportes positions herself as an unbecoming subject in *King Kong théorie*, but also that she confers a certain shadowy value onto conventionally 'becoming' women. I then foreground Desportes's account of her rape, and the way she tests the bounds of the sayable by also acknowledging a rape fantasy. I read the latter admission in Halberstam's terms as a

masochistic refusal of mastery; Despentes explores ‘shady, murky modes of undoing, unbecoming, and violating’ that undermine the logic of non-contradiction (QAF, 4). I then turn to Despentes’s reading of the film *King Kong*, through which she connects ‘unbecoming woman’ to an unravelling of the human subject. Here, I refer to Donna Haraway, whose cyborg theory prefigures the murky, destabilizing force of shadow feminism. In Despentes’s account of *King Kong*, I argue, the giant ape (with whom she identifies) functions as a quasi-cyborg: a shadowy, composite creature that undoes such categories as woman, man, animal and human.

### *The Realms of the Ugly*

The shadow feminism of *King Kong théorie* begins with its opening line. Recall that for Halberstam, shadow feminisms work to ‘produce a theoretical and imaginative space that is “not woman” or that can be occupied only by unbecoming women’ (QAF, 125). In *King Kong théorie*, Despentes immediately announces an unbecoming (indecent, unseemly) positionality: ‘I write from the realms of the ugly, for the ugly, the old, the bull dykes, the frigid, the unfucked, the unfuckable, the hysterics, the freaks, all those excluded from the great meat market of the ideal woman’ (KKT, 13).<sup>8</sup> *King Kong théorie* is written for, and from the perspective of, those who are ‘not woman’ ‘as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy’ (QAF, 124). The book’s politics issue from a space of refusal and an impulse to disrupt, promising to undo the fable of ‘the ideal woman’. Per Halberstam, Despentes’s mode of resistance to this fable is an embrace of failure: ‘I don’t feel remotely ashamed at not being some super-hot, ideal woman (...) The figure of the loser in the femininity contest is (...) crucial to me’ (KKT, 13–14).<sup>9</sup> Despentes proclaims the viability of her unbecoming subject position, while presenting *King Kong théorie* as a textual space for others who, like her, fail to become woman.

Yet the textual space of *King Kong théorie* is also an inclusive one. Desportes not only valorizes the negative and the masochistic but offers an acceptance—which is perhaps even more than an understanding—of a spectrum of modes of conduct. ‘I think it’s amazing that there are also women out there who love to seduce,’ she writes, ‘women determined to get hitched, women who smell of sex and others who smell of cakes freshly baked for their kids’ after-school snacks (...) I say this without a hint of irony. It just so happens that I’m not one of them’ (KKT, 13). Desportes clearly insists that she has no problem with conventionally feminine *modes de vie*, even if they do not suit her.<sup>10</sup> She also mentions having worked as a nanny: ‘I did some childcare work [and] I was never bored while I was doing it’ (68). This confounds certain readerly expectations, cutting a contrast to the abrasiveness of Desportes’s notorious debut novel, *Baise-moi* (1994). In *King Kong théorie*, Desportes exhibits a certain generosity, advocating acceptance of a spectrum of roles for women, from the housewife to the sex worker to the nanny to the mother.

However, this is not to contradict the shadow feminist positionality of the text. In some ways, it is heteronormative femininity that Desportes sees as the most masochistic, passive tendency of all: ‘pleasing men is a complex art that involves erasing everything that might make you seem powerful’ (KKT, 111).<sup>11</sup> Rather than simply bringing the negative, the marginal or the masochistic into feminist writing, Desportes goes so far as to assign shadowy value to conventional feminine modes. As the critic Lauren Elkin puts it, Desportes reveals the ‘grotesquerie’ of both ‘the girls who shave their head and the ones who wear their hair in mermaid waves, trying to be pretty’.<sup>12</sup> Desportes writes that ‘the ideal woman (...) this blissful white woman constantly being waved under our noses (...) doesn’t exist’ (KKT, 16).<sup>13</sup> If so, then we all inhabit ‘the realms of the ugly’ to some extent—even if we do not identify as ugly, even if we try and inevitably fail to live up to the feminine ideal. In other words: we are all unbecoming women of a sort. While *King Kong théorie* is a shadow

feminist text, then, it is also an inclusive one; it ‘legitimizes’ women like Despentes who find themselves outside of feminine norms, while accepting and rendering shadowy those who live within them.<sup>14</sup>

There is a worthwhile critique to be made here, that the generosity of Despentes’s shadow feminism entails a certain dilution. If unbecoming women is to some extent inevitable, then the very concept risks becoming so universal that it loses critical purchase. If even women who aspire to heteronormative ideals ‘unbecome’, then the concept takes on a certain palatability, gets bound up with the very normativity that it claims to undo. Yet, as we will see, *King Kong théorie* does away with the Aristotelian logic of non-contradiction, whereby a thing cannot be both A and not A. In its expansiveness, Despentes’s shadow feminism performs and undermines the tension between the deviant and the ordinary, proposing that the former might be found in the latter. The shadow feminism of *King Kong théorie* does not take the form of extraordinary, avant-garde unravelling—as in Ono’s ‘Cut Piece’ (1964), for example, which Halberstam analyses—but lurks in the everyday experience of ‘ordinary’ subjects. ‘The femininity game’, as Despentes puts it (KKT, 60), is quotidian and unwinnable, hence Despentes posits failure and refusal as every woman’s domain.

### *Rape: A Formative Deformation*

Central to *King Kong théorie*, and to Despentes’s expansive shadow-feminist politics of undoing and refusal, is her experience of rape aged seventeen. It is impossible, Despentes writes, to move on from such an event: ‘It is a foundation stone. Of who I am as a writer, as a woman who is no longer quite a woman. It is what simultaneously disfigures me and makes me whole [*ce qui me défigure, et ce qui me constitue*].’<sup>15</sup> In their wide-ranging volume on literary representations of rape, Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver write that ‘over and over in

the texts explored [in their study], rape exists as an absence or gap that is both product and source of textual anxiety'.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, in *King Kong théorie*, rape is a permeating presence; far from obfuscating the act of rape, or ventriloquizing misogynistic narratives of shame and blame, Desportes situates her rape at the heart of her identity and her text. As Natalie Edwards writes, *King Kong théorie* (like *Baise-moi*) offers a direct and 'sustained interrogation of the workings of rape and sexual violence within contemporary society'.<sup>17</sup> More than that, though, Desportes posits rape as foundational to the formation and disfiguration of her subjectivity, and to her identity as a writer and a gendered individual. Her assertion of not-quite-womanhood recalls Wittig, and her famous statement that 'lesbians are not women' in that they break from the 'heterosexual systems of thought' that give the term its meaning.<sup>18</sup> Desportes's partial disidentification from the category of woman is also, I argue, a form of shadow feminism since it focuses on 'the negation of the subject rather than her formation [and on] the undoing of self rather than its activation' (QAF, 126). Rape forms Desportes (*il la constitue*), but it also *deforms* her (*il la défigure*); it has a negating, undoing effect. In *King Kong théorie*, rape figures as a formative deformation.

Desportes's decision to detail her rape in *King Kong théorie* also corresponds to her drive to represent the *non-dit* in society and literature, to give voice to subjects otherwise condemned to 'silence and obscurity' (KKT, 39).<sup>19</sup> This extends to the darkest and most shadowy material: in the same chapter that deals with her rape, Desportes admits to having had a rape fantasy, and tackles the seeming contradiction that this presents. 'There's the rape fantasy,' she writes. 'A sexual fantasy. If I really want to talk about "my" rape, it's something I have to deal with' (49). Desportes allows herself—forces herself, even—to acknowledge dark drives and to embrace the ambiguous, abject recesses of her subjectivity. Describing this as 'the kind of fantasy you don't talk about', Desportes voices and thereby undermines the

assumption that ‘because I often fantasized about it, I am jointly responsible for the rape I suffered’ (50); she makes clear the difference between fantasy and consent.

Despentes also takes her rape fantasy as a cue to interrogate the conditions in which women have learned to eroticize their own submission. For Despentes, there is ‘a vivid, precise cultural trope that predisposes women to take sexual pleasure in their own powerlessness, i.e. in the superiority of the other’. ‘Women have a predisposition to masochism’, Despentes writes, which is not natural or essential but the result of ‘a particular cultural framework’ tied to ‘Judeo-Christian morality’ (KKT, 50). This admittedly vague statement echoes the earlier work of Luce Irigaray, for whom any pleasure that women take in the masculine sexual imaginary is ‘above all (...) masochistic’.<sup>20</sup> Using Halberstam, this feminine masochism, and Despentes’s acknowledgement of her own, ostensibly self-destructive desire, can be reread as shadow-feminist refusals of mastery. Halberstam explains the psychoanalytical and queer-theoretical context for this supposition, turning first to Freud, who refers to masochism as a form of femininity and a kind of flirtation with death; masochism, he says, is a byproduct of the unsuccessful repression of the death instinct. While the libido tends to ward off the death drive through a ‘will to power,’ [and] a desire for mastery (...) sometimes libidinal energies are given over to destabilization, unbecoming, and unravelling. This is what Leo Bersani refers to as ‘self-shattering,’ a shadowy sexual impulse that most people would rather deny or sublimate. If taken seriously, unbecoming may have its political equivalent in an anarchic refusal of coherence and proscriptive forms of agency. (QAF, 135–36)

In acknowledging her rape fantasy and permitting herself to have and to recognize such an abject desire (while critiquing the cultural mechanisms that produced it), Despentes can be understood as ‘taking seriously’ the disruptive potential of masochism, exploring the disorderly potentialities of ‘self-shattering’. Acknowledging the shadowy, even death driven

impulse of the rape fantasy resists narratives of both shame and liberation; it is a form of ‘unbecoming’, in Halberstam’s terms, ‘a cleaving to that which seems to shame or annihilate’ (QAF, 144). Though a seeming contradiction, then, Desportes’s admission of her rape fantasy is not a theoretical dead end, nor a misogynistic double bind. It can instead be seen as an anti-social critique—of mastery, of proscriptive understandings of desire, and of neat and moralizing narratives about rape.

Desportes’s willing acknowledgement of the seeming contradiction of her rape/rape fantasy further resonates with Halberstam’s embrace of the ‘refusal of coherence’ (QAF, 136). In the shadow-feminist genealogy that Halberstam traces, we find only ‘subjects who unravel, who refuse to cohere’ (126)—subjects who are, perhaps, wilfully contradictory. Irigaray similarly writes that when women attempt to speak using masculine language, ‘hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason’.<sup>21</sup> Yet where Irigaray seeks an alternative feminine language, Halberstam relinquishes the drive for self-expression and proposes that we refuse the very coherence to which subjects are supposed to aspire. In *King Kong théorie*, Desportes operates a similar embrace of non-coherence, stating that she feels compelled to return to the subject of rape in her work ‘to say different, *contradictory* things about it’ (KKT, 51).<sup>22</sup> How could rape, Desportes seems to ask, be accommodated in a single coherent narrative, identity or unity of being? Desportes allows her words to be contradictory and refuses the requirement for subjects to cohere intelligibly. This is also the case in Desportes’s wider oeuvre, which is littered with contradictory (and thus potentially shadow-feminist) subjects: in *Les chiennes savantes* (1996), for example, the character of Louise is a sex worker who has never had penetrative sex, who is both happy with her job and fearful of men. As Hélène Sicard-Cowan argues, Desportes celebrates ‘contradictory identities’, depicting heroines ‘who cannot be merged into unitary feminine subjects’.<sup>23</sup>

This embrace of contradiction has feminist force since it allows women to be unstraightforward, to be more than one thing at once. As Schaal argues, Despentes makes space in her feminist worldview for the multiplicity and ambiguity of the self.<sup>24</sup> Or in Halberstam's terms, she operates an unravelling of the subject: Despentes's recognition of her contradictory impulses works against the processes of repression and sublimation required to 'become woman' in a coherent, socially intelligible sense. In *King Kong théorie*, Despentes acknowledges the shadowy forces that haunt her subjectivity, and by extension allows for the possibility that its margins might be undone or redrawn. Rape figures in the text as a violent undoing and as a source of incoherence and instability; it (un)makes Despentes a 'woman who is no longer quite a woman' (KKT, 51).

### *King Kong Girl*

A further element of *King Kong théorie* through which Despentes offers a vision of unbecoming woman is her reading of Peter Jackson's 2005 film, *King Kong*. Here, Despentes connects the failure to become woman, to cohere intelligibly or to reproduce feminine norms, to an unravelling of the human subject. In Jackson's film, Despentes writes, 'there is no shot that allows us to assign a gender to the beast' (KKT, 99). Instead:

King Kong serves as a metaphor for the sexuality that existed before gender distinctions (...) King Kong is beyond female, beyond male. It exists on the cusp between man and animal, adult and child, good and evil, primitive and civilised, black and white. Hybrid, before the enforced binary. (KKT, 100)

In Despentes's telling, *King Kong* renders binary categories leaky and unstable, and refuses to cohere. This passage recalls Donna Haraway's theorization of the cyborg, a being that 'make[s] very problematic the statuses of man or woman, human, artifact, member of a race, individual entity, or body' (MH, 61).<sup>25</sup> Like Haraway's cyborg, *King Kong* defies

categorization as male, female, human, animal or differentiated adult individual. Likewise drawing on Haraway, Amaleena Damlé has described Despentés's King Kong as a 'posthuman vision of mutant, metamorphic subjectivity', a metaphor for the hybridity of the self and the body.<sup>26</sup> King Kong resists what Haraway calls the 'troubling dualisms' that have 'been persistent in Western traditions', and signals the possibility of open, 'permanently partial' identities (MH, 59, 15).

Through these Harawayan readings of *King Kong théorie*, consonances between cyborg theory and shadow feminism are revealed. The cyborg is a composite being who unravels the humanist subject, revealing its leaky borders. For Haraway, a cyborg world 'might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints' (MH, 15). Haraway notes that women experience 'contradictory social realities' (16), thus cyborg politics 'embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves' (21). Haraway's repetition of terms such as 'partial' and 'contradictory' anticipates Halberstam's emphasis on non-coherence, and the cyborg can be considered among the shadow-feminist 'subjects who unravel, who refuse to cohere' whom Halberstam analyses (QAF, 126). The threat that the cyborg poses to coherent cultural categories is, moreover, a forerunner of the murky, destabilizing impulses of shadow feminisms. Haraway notes 'the noninnocence of the category "woman"' and proposes the cyborg as a means of imagining 'quite different political possibilities and limits' (MH, 21, 65). Halberstam, in turn, advocates 'a feminist politics that issues (...) from a refusal to be or to become woman', and that promises new and 'unimaginable' forms of liberty (QAF, 124, 145).

Returning, then, to the reading of *King Kong* that Despentés provides in *King Kong théorie*, the giant ape can be understood as a shadow-feminist cyborg. King Kong is

composite, malleable and also threatening: ‘in the city, King Kong crushes everything in [their] path (...) King Kong, or the chaos that precedes gender’ (KKT, 101). King Kong’s defiance of fixed categories is a site of political potential, and has a dark, destabilizing quality; the ape signals a boundless, destructive ‘chaos’ that is both dangerous and promising. In Despentès’s telling, Skull Island (King Kong’s natural habitat) also figures as a shadowy space in which threatening, unbecoming creatures might thrive. For Despentès, Skull Island is:

teeming with creatures that are neither male nor female: repulsive centipedes with slippery thrusting tentacles that are wet and pink as women’s cunts, worms with heads like cocks that open to reveal toothed vaginas they use to bite off the heads of the guys in the camera crew... (KKT, 99)<sup>27</sup>

In this passage, sexual organs roam unattached to human bodies and become unclassifiable hybrids, disrupting gendered sexual signifiers. Worms that first appear phallic threaten to castrate the men in their paths; these creatures leak and mutate, evoking what Haraway calls ‘the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment’ (MH, 66). Like King Kong, these hybrid beings have a murky, threatening quality, particularly to those who occupy coherently gendered subject positions (they ‘bite off the heads of the *guys*’). These creatures represent what Haraway calls ‘transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities’ (MH, 14).

In *King Kong théorie*, Despentès also uses the King Kong myth to elaborate her own positionality. She implicitly places herself among the hybrid creatures of Skull Island by describing herself as ‘King Kong Girl’ and stating that, ‘as women go’, she is ‘more King Kong than Kate Moss’ (KKT, 99, 14). For Vincent Landry, therefore, the figure of King Kong provides ‘a *mise en abyme* of the construction of [Despentès’s] own identity, dramatizes the fiction that is gender assignment’.<sup>28</sup> As one of the ‘ugly ones’ and a ‘loser in

the femininity contest' (KKT, 13–14), Despentès identifies with King Kong; and 'Virginie Despentès', the (in)famous *écrivaine*, is perhaps just as much the product of popular myth-making as is the giant ape. King Kong, then, becomes a metaphor not only 'for the sexuality that existed before gender distinctions', but for Despentès's own identity, 'as a writer, as a woman who is no longer quite a woman' (KKT, 100, 51). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of the literary field, Nadia Louar reads *King Kong théorie* as an exposition of Despentès's authorial posture: for Louar, Despentès 'has created herself as an author out of a biographical focus on her life as a sex worker and rape survivor'.<sup>29</sup> To this I would add that Despentès implicitly assumes a hybrid, posthumanist authorial posture by aligning herself with King Kong. 'King Kong Girl' is a composite subject who offers not only an unbecoming of the feminine but—like King Kong—a scrambling of the lines between woman, man, animal and human.

### *Coda*

'If we refuse to become women,' Halberstam asks, 'what happens to feminism?' (QAF, 126). In *King Kong théorie*, feminism becomes a site of ambiguity and possibility. Despentès writes as someone who fails at 'the femininity game', who embraces dark and contradictory drives, and whose rape was both disfiguring and formative (KKT, 60). She envisions worlds teeming with unbecoming creatures who mutate and unravel, harbouring both threatening and utopian potentiality. Perhaps unexpectedly, she confers masochistic value onto conventionally feminine modes, balancing the critical negativity of her text with inclusivity. Despentès's own identity—as 'King Kong Girl' and a not-quite-woman—is also central to the unbecoming that she stages in *King Kong théorie*. Despentès presents an undoing, but not a doing away with, the self.

Other critics have considered the limitations of this emphasis on Despentés's individual subjecthood. Lili Owen Rowlands provides a much-needed analysis of the racial politics of *King Kong théorie*, arguing that Despentés's allegorical use of King Kong—who is described as 'black and hairy', 'on the cusp between man and animal (...) primitive and civilised' (KKT, 99, 100)—invokes a racist imaginary and reproduces 'the image of Kong as a sexual-racial other' on which the original myth relies.<sup>30</sup> Owen Rowlands connects this problematic to Despentés's reliance on her first-person perspective: 'in making her own self-transformation the blueprint for her theory, [Despentés] overlooks how her own situatedness is insulated from other forms of alterity' and 'misjudges the universalisability of her approach'.<sup>31</sup> 'King Kong Girl' is not, then, a universally desirable figure of identification. As Malini Johar Schueller argues, the adoption of hybrid cyborg identities—while doing away with traditional notions of difference—can serve to defuse the theoretical imperative to interrogate 'whiteness and white feminist social location'.<sup>32</sup> In *King Kong théorie*, Despentés's reading of *King Kong* sharply unravels gender and species difference, yet she risks occluding the logic of racial alterity and its boundedness to the King Kong myth.

The shadow feminism of *King Kong théorie* maps on, therefore, to broader tensions across and within queer and feminist thought. This includes the tendency (common to white feminist and French Republican discourse) to flatten certain axes of differentiation in the process of forcing individual needs and experiences into line with collective political imperatives. The hybrid form of Despentés's text performs this tension between the individual and the universal, in its slippage between memoir and manifesto. Furthermore, *King Kong théorie* stages a clash between the negative, anti-representational politics of shadow feminism, and the desire to claim some form of agency and subjectivity. While Despentés's account of her rape/rape fantasy bears witness to an undoing of the subject, *King Kong théorie* simultaneously centres an affirmation of Despentés's own unbecoming

subjecthood. *King Kong théorie* refuses and, indeed, fails to resolve such tensions. Identity figures in the text as mutable and non-binary, and as a site of undoing and refusal, yet it is indispensable to Despentes's feminism and to the conception and execution of her text.

In this reading of *King Kong théorie* as fraught, contested and as shadow feminist, I am reminded finally of Benjamin Noys's proposition that negativity, antagonism and contradiction remain invigorating forces in continental theory.<sup>33</sup> Despentes concludes *King Kong théorie* with a violent but future-orientated call to arms: 'feminism is a revolution (...) it's about blowing the whole fucking thing sky high. (...) so long, girls, may the road ahead be better...' (KKT, 126–27). Where Despentes explores shadowy forms of masochism, undoing and violation (or in this instance, blowing things up), this is in the interest of building something 'better'. Negativity here becomes a precondition for the emergence of a revolutionary subjectivity, for the rearticulation of feminist agency. Another tension of sorts arises, then, between the anti-social character of unbecoming woman and the affirmational, revolutionary tenor of Despentes's text. Yet Despentes straddles such ostensibly opposed conceptual tendencies, staying with trouble and non-coherence. She reveals the potentiality of the shadowy and insists on the viability (and indeed, ubiquity) of unbecoming subjects of feminism.

<sup>1</sup> Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory*, translated by Frank Wynne (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020), 13, hereafter KKT.

<sup>2</sup> Michèle Schaal, 'Virginie Despentes or a French Third Wave of Feminism?' in *Cherchez la femme: Women and Values in the Francophone World*, edited by Erika Fülöp and Adrienne Angelo (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 39–55 (39–41).

<sup>3</sup> The *affaire Baise-moi* refers to the controversy surrounding Despentes's first novel and its adaptation into a film in 2000, directed by Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi. For a full explanation, see Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 164.

<sup>4</sup> Annabel L. Kim, *Unbecoming Language: Anti-Identitarian French Feminist Fictions* (Columbus, O.H.: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 5–6.

<sup>5</sup> 31.

<sup>6</sup> Lili Owen Rowlands, *A Different Subject: Autotheory in Contemporary French Self-writing* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2022), 108.

<sup>7</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 124, hereafter QAF.

<sup>8</sup> Translation modified.

<sup>9</sup> Translation modified.

<sup>10</sup> What she does have a problem with is patriarchal hypocrisy and bad faith: 'The kinds of jobs done by less well-heeled women and the pitiful wages they receive in exchange for their time are of no interest to anyone (...) selling sex, on the other hand, is everyone's business, and "respectable" women have to have their say in the matter' (KKT, 55).

<sup>11</sup> Translation modified.

<sup>12</sup> Lauren Elkin, 'For the Ugly Ones: The Spiky Feminist Anger of Virginie Despentes', *The Paris Review* (2018). <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/09/05/for-the-ugly-ones-the-spiky-feminist-anger-of-virginie-despentes/>, consulted 6 April 2022, 12.05 pm.

<sup>13</sup> Translation modified.

<sup>14</sup> With thanks to Siobhán McIlvanney for unlocking this line of argument.

<sup>15</sup> KKT, 51; Virginie Despentes, *King Kong théorie* (Paris: Grasset, 2006), 53.

<sup>16</sup> Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver, *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3; also cited in Natalie Edwards, 'Rape and Repetition: Virginie Despentes and The Rewriting of Trauma' in *The Unspeakable: Representations of Trauma in Francophone Literature and Art*, edited by Amy Hubbell and Névine El Nossery (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 211–229 (212).

<sup>17</sup> Edwards, 'Rape and Repetition', 226.

- <sup>18</sup> Monique Wittig, 'The Straight Mind', *Feminist Issues* 1:1 (1980), 103–111 (110).
- <sup>19</sup> Translation modified.
- <sup>20</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 25.
- <sup>21</sup> 29.
- <sup>22</sup> Emphasis added.
- <sup>23</sup> H  l  ne Sicard-Cowan, 'Le f  minisme de Virginie Despentes    l'  tude dans le roman *Baise-moi*', *Women in French Studies* 16:1 (2008), 64–72 (70, 64), my translation.
- <sup>24</sup> Schaal, 'Virginie Despentes or a French Third Wave', 43, 40.
- <sup>25</sup> Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 61, hereafter MH.
- <sup>26</sup> Amaleena Daml  , 'The Mutant Metamorphic Subject: Femininity and Embodiment in Virginie Despentes's *King Kong th  orie*' in *Experiment and Experience: Women's Writing in France, 2000–2010*, edited by Gill Rye and Amaleena Daml   (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), 13–28 (26).
- <sup>27</sup> Translation modified. Daml   also offers a compelling reading of this passage, connecting it to the posthuman feminism of Haraway and Rosi Braidotti; see Daml  , 'The Mutant Metamorphic Subject', 25–26.
- <sup>28</sup> Vincent Landry, 'Virginie Despentes et l'autofiction th  orique :   tude de *King Kong th  orie*', *Revue PolitiQueer* 1 (2014), 50–69 (62), my translation.
- <sup>29</sup> Nadia Louar, "'Deux cents mots et un gros marteau.'" Virginie Despentes's Skillful Construction of an Authorial Posture', *Rocky Mountain Review* 72:1 (2018), 125–145 (126).
- <sup>30</sup> Owen Rowlands, *A Different Subject*, 107; see also 106–108.
- <sup>31</sup> 109, 108.
- <sup>32</sup> Malini Johar Schueller, 'Analogy and (White) Feminist Theory: Thinking Race and the Color of the Cyborg Body', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31:1 (2005), 63–92 (82).
- <sup>33</sup> Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).