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people in the Caribbean. For Kessler, reading this novel through a Critical Disability Studies lens helps affirm an inclusive future in which the disabled body is placed centre stage in the production of knowledge about the horrific experience of slavery.

Examining the impacts of Covid-19 on scholarship, policy making and public engagement, artistic and scholarly responses to disease and crisis, and the effects of the ongoing health crisis on postgraduate research and lifestyle, the essays in this Special Issue, like the reflexive workshop from which they derive, invite readers to interrogate the importance of studying past or fictional crises to help deal with the present one. Although it places itself under the positive signs of ‘vitality’ and ‘resilience’, this issue confronts the harrowing realities of enslavement, patriarchal oppression, homophobia and ableism, exploring the limits of wellbeing and the legitimate place of negative reactions to crises. This helps define the emerging voices in French and francophone studies through the challenges they have had to face, and to situate this new generation of voices within the scholarly community in general. The contributions in this Special Issue exemplify the thought-provoking projects in French and francophone studies which are currently under way and vital to our understanding of the many questions and strands that they explore.

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## ARTICLES

### THE PROMISE OF UTOPIA IN *VERNON SUBUTEX* BY VIRGINIE DESPENTES

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The *Vernon Subutex* trilogy (2015–17) is a sprawling, politically engaged and highly readable work by the feminist writer and filmmaker Virginie Despentes.<sup>1</sup> The trilogy begins just as the eponymous Vernon Subutex, a former record store owner, is evicted from his apartment in Paris. Alex Bleach, a successful musician who often helped Vernon make ends meet, has just died. When Vernon finds himself on the streets, he has only a few possessions to his name, including some tapes on which Alex once filmed himself talking in Vernon’s apartment. These tapes, as it turns out, are highly sought after by several interested parties; this occasions a search for Vernon that forms the bulk of the intrigue in the first volume of the trilogy. In volumes two and three, once they have found Vernon, an eclectic group of characters congregate around him: Xavier, a failed scriptwriter and social conservative; Pamela Kant, a former porn star; Olga, a fiercely left-wing homeless woman, and many more. Together, these characters organize a series of *convergences*, nights of inexplicably transformative, trance-like dancing to Vernon’s DJ sets. These nights are other-worldly and harmonious but remain vulnerable to violence: a predatory film executive named Laurent Dopalet ultimately orchestrates a mass shooting at a *convergence*, in which almost almost all the main characters are killed. Despentes

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concludes *Vernon 3* by sketching out a vision of global dystopia: music is banned and the community that had built up around Vernon is forced underground.

In this article, I argue that *Vernon* affords its readers a glimpse of utopia and insists upon the simultaneous vulnerability and viability of that vision. Although they are threatened by the many instances of conflict and violence in the trilogy, the *convergences* and the community that forms around them clearly harbour utopian promise. I take as a starting point Michel Foucault's definition of utopias as 'les emplacements qui entretiennent avec l'espace réel de la société [. . .]. C'est la société elle-même perfectionnée ou c'est l'envers de la société'.<sup>2</sup> Outside the *convergences*, Despentès paints a picture of social issues such as homelessness, *précarité*, domestic abuse, religion and pornography.<sup>3</sup> The *convergences*, however, offer a utopian counterpoint to such stratifying and divisive phenomena: during the *convergences*, characters 'qui n'ont rien à foutre ensemble [. . .] instinctivement parviennent [. . .] à s'articuler' (*Vernon 3*, p. 147). The *convergences* flatten hierarchies and enable unlikely friendships to flourish, and they give rise to a collective voice, a community that is able to 's'articuler' as one. At the *convergences*, 'le point commun entre tous ces gens qui affluent est impossible à définir' (*Vernon 2*, p. 397). Yet, as Maxime Goergen has argued, this does not matter: the definitions that otherwise structure 'l'espace réel de la société' are here both impossible and unnecessary.<sup>4</sup>

If the *convergences* are a form of utopia, then this also manifests at a bodily level. Throughout the trilogy, Vernon feels things most intensely in his body: it is the unclean feeling of his mouth that he most detests when he begins living on the streets in *Vernon 1* (*Vernon 1*, p. 353). Again, when he is recovering from the shooting at the end of *Vernon 3*, the heaviness of his tongue in his mouth disgusts him (*Vernon 3*, p. 398). At the *convergences*, in contrast, Vernon feels light: 'il était une présence légère' (*Vernon 3*, p. 182). Contentment and harmony are thus measured in embodied terms. This applies not just to Vernon, but also to the community around him: 'la sensation d'entrer dans *le corps* du groupe' is one of the things for which the *convergences* become renowned (*Vernon 3*, p. 172, emphasis added). In this formulation, the Subutex community (as it comes to be known) functions as a single *body* that occasions a particular (inexplicable, ecstatic, utopian) 'sensation' in those who enter into it. This highlights the polysemy and instability of the term *body/corps*, which might refer to a human body, an institution, a grouping, a body of water, and so on. 'Sensation', in turn, can connote both affect and texture, can be 'felt' both emotionally and physically. The *convergences* are thus described in terms of a shared, pleasurable, felt, embodied experience.

Central to the embodied experience of the *convergences* is the ecstatic dancing that Vernon's DJ sets elicit. 'C'est collectif,' this dancing, 'c'est une folie'; it is a high, but no drugs are involved (*Vernon 2*, p. 285). Olga is deeply sceptical about the other characters' impulse to dance ('danser, elle n'aime pas ça'), but in Vernon's presence she cannot resist: Olga 'exécute une étrange chorégraphie lente, mi-apache, mi-grunge. [. . .] Cette femme préhistorique [. . .] se déhanche' (*Vernon 2*, p. 368). In contrast to the disciplined, highly wrought movement that the term 'choreography' evokes, Olga dances bizarrely, instinctively and with abandon. Devoid of clear meaning, this is a wild, undisciplined, non-task-orientated form of body comportment, undertaken purely on the basis of sensation. At the end of *Vernon 3*, an omniscient narrator looks back from the future at the original *convergences* and reports that 'la pratique la plus étonnante—au sens où elle n'a aucune justification productive ou savante—reste celle de la danse' (*Vernon 3*, p. 406). In its gratuitousness, then, we can consider the dancing in *Vernon* to be in dialogue 'avec

l'espace réel de la société'—one of Foucault's conditions for utopia. The dancing is 'étonnante' because it is neither 'productive' nor 'savante'; it inverts the valorization of productivity in capitalism, and acts as a counterpoint to the commodification of the body as a source of labour. As a mode of expression, dance exists only in the moment of production, in the convergence of 'artist' and art. It cannot be consumed beyond that moment; it cannot be recuperated. The dancing in *Vernon* is both inexplicable, then, and irrecoverable. The omniscient narrator states that 'on insistera sur la parfaite gratuité de ces pratiques' (*Vernon* 3, p. 406). The dancing is perfectly gratuitous, and in its gratuitousness, it is perfect: at the *convergences*, dancing is an embodied form of utopia.

*Vernon* bears witness to the possibility of a different world, therefore, and it does so self-consciously, since Despentès's characters make explicit reference to the visionary nature of their activities. Towards the end of *Vernon* 3, Xavier—who is xenophobic and right-wing when we first meet him—addresses the Subutex community as 'altermondialistes', that is, as makers of an alternative world (*Vernon* 3, p. 355). It is also striking when Xavier (of all people) admits that:

dans un coin de sa tête, un espace dont il ne parle à personne, Xavier sent qu'il n'est pas exclu qu'un jour il puisse dire à sa fille—nous avons inventé d'autres possibilités. Des interstices. Ils sont viables. Nous avons préparé pour toi un endroit où tu pourras vivre autrement. (*Vernon* 3, p. 147)

Despentès's use of free indirect discourse makes the reader party to inner thoughts that Xavier outwardly denies. Despite his conservative instincts, the Subutex community and the *convergences* have convinced Xavier of the value of change; he recognizes the potential for 'interstices' to open up, through which the very bounds of possibility might be resignified. Echoing Xavier's reference to *altermondialisme* within the narrative of *Vernon*, Paul B. Preciado describes Despentès's work as a form of world-building: it is an 'écriture politique expérimentale qui cherche à imaginer un monde'.<sup>5</sup> In *Vernon*, then—echoing Foucault in 'Des espaces autres'—Despentès has her characters experiment with the possibility of a world where one might 'vivre autrement'.

In the alternative world of which the *convergences* offer a glimpse, queer subjects thrive. At the end of *Vernon* 2, when the *convergences* begin to attract more followers, Despentès emphasizes the queerness of the community that builds up around them. She wryly focalizes this through Vernon:

Vernon regarde autour de lui. Beaucoup de filles, peu d'hétéros. De plus en plus de grosses. Quelques hippies. Il faut croire qu'il y a un renouveau. Des pédés, des trans. Beaucoup de putes. Quelques beaux mecs. Des vieux, aussi. Tout le monde en tongs, c'est ça qui le gave dans la journée. (*Vernon* 2, p. 396)

Vernon's sarcasm (a hippie revival!) and his aversion to flip flops neutralize an image that might otherwise seem caricatured. Vernon's followers are what Jack Halberstam calls 'queer subjects', among whom Halberstam counts 'ravers, club kids, [. . .] sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed'.<sup>6</sup> Many such subjects find a home in the Subutex community: the *convergences* are a form of rave, Vernon mentions 'putes', and many of his friends are homeless or unemployed. Furthermore, just before Vernon looks around noting the hippies and the queers, he concedes that when it comes to the *convergences*, 'tout est [. . .] extrêmement complexe et hautement improbable. [Mais ça] fait partie du charme de l'entreprise' (*Vernon* 2, pp. 395–96). As readers, we are encouraged to lean in to this improbability, to allow ourselves, for the duration of the trilogy, to think beyond the bounds of what is currently possible and to imagine other ways of organizing and relating to the world.

At the end of *Vernon 3*, Despentès fast-forwards into the future and sets out the dystopian conditions that arise in the centuries following the shooting that Dopalet orchestrates: the *convergences* are banned and the Subutex community becomes a persecuted, clandestine cult. The persecution of this ‘culte Subutex’ is ultimately unsuccessful, however: according to the omniscient narrator, ‘contre toute attente, on continue de danser, dans le noir [...] au crépuscule du troisième millénaire’ (*Vernon 3*, p. 406). Dance, in this context, becomes an embodied form of protest. As Marta Segarra puts it, the clandestine Subutex groups use ‘leurs corps comme arme de résistance biopolitique contre le régime dictatorial’.<sup>7</sup> This practice of dance-as-protest exists in a liminal space between visibility and invisibility: dance is a hyper-visible medium but is mobilized here ‘dans le noir’ as a mode of subaltern, barely visible resistance. The image of bodies dancing in the shadows ‘au crépuscule du troisième millénaire’ also recalls José Esteban Muñoz’s famous formulation of queerness as ‘the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality’.<sup>8</sup> Playing with a lexicon of visibility and light, Despentès has her readers imagine the followers of the Subutex sect dancing in the fading daylight at the end of the third millennium. This is an indeterminate image—Despentès does not assure us of the dancers’ success—but it is anticipatory and illuminative, firmly angled towards future possibility. This image represents what Muñoz would call ‘a *then and there* [...], an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world’.<sup>9</sup> Xavier was right, then, to believe in the viability of the ‘autres possibilités’ opened up at the *convergences*. As *Vernon* thinks to himself at the end of *Vernon 1*: ‘Il fera beau, demain. La musique ne s’arrête pas’ (*Vernon 1*, p. 426). Despite the violence and totalitarianism at the end of *Vernon*, the trilogy is committed to a distant yet glimmering possibility of utopia.

That this possibility is distant, however, and the Subutex community threatened by dystopian forces at the end of the text, reveals the two-sided character of the utopia depicted in *Vernon*. While the *convergences* and their gratuitous dancing offer a hopeful, utopian inversion of the constraints of mainstream society, they are also deeply vulnerable to powerful societal forces, not least the money and misogynistic spite of Dopalet. Having manipulated a disaffected young woman into carrying out a mass shooting at a *convergence*, Dopalet makes a name for himself by producing a wildly successful TV series about the Subutex community. Thus, ‘Dopalet était, définitivement, adapté au monde dans lequel il vivait. Il commandait un massacre. Puis il en tirait une série’ (*Vernon 3*, p. 399). In monetizing the murders that he orchestrated, Dopalet commits the ultimate act of necropolitical, late-capitalist commodification. This is reflected in the ironic double meaning of *commander*, as both instructive and commercial: Dopalet ordered a massacre, as one might order a product, and then profited from it. The *convergences* and the community that forms around them are an inverted or perfected vision of society (as in Foucault’s definition of utopia), but nefarious powers hover around their periphery and threaten to explode them, tempering any feeling of hope that readers might glean from the trilogy.

The nefarious forces in *Vernon* reflect Despentès’s concerns about contemporary French society, and although they are epitomized in the character of Dopalet, from the very beginning of the trilogy these forces threaten to drive the Subutex community apart. As Lucey explains, ‘sexual violence, racial tensions, economic inequality, right-wing forms of populist nationalism, wild attempts by various characters to take justice into their own hands: these are the social phenomena that work against inclusive communities and produce the plot structure’ in *Vernon*.<sup>10</sup> As we have seen with regard to the dancing that takes place, freedom, unproductivity and pleasure are tenets of the *convergences-as-utopia*. Thus *Vernon* himself just wants to live an easy life, ‘sans se prendre la tête’ (*Vernon 3*, p. 35).

Yet Desportes balances this aspiration with an awareness of the corresponding burden of domestic labour that falls on women in the text—a tension or social phenomenon that works against the cohesion of the community. Pamela Kant in particular bears the brunt of the domestic labour in *Vernon*, and thinks to herself:

Tout le monde parle de magie, la magie des convergences, la magie des nuits de danse, la magie de l'entente du groupe. Mais derrière la magie il y a cette entreprise pratique et lourde. Ce boulot d'arrière-cuisine, de manches retroussées et d'huile de coude. Un boulot de meuf. Invisible et essentiel. Jamais récompensé. (*Vernon* 3, p. 177)

This injustice threatens the harmony of the group: when Vernon's friend Charles leaves a significant amount of money to the Subutex sect, Pamela is furious at those who do not want to put it to practical use and lighten the burden of work that she bears. The inheritance of Charles's wealth and the conflict over what to do with it—which brings to light pre-existing, simmering tensions—causes the community to break up, spelling the beginning of the end of the *convergences*. I concur with Lucey, then: *Vernon* 'consistently juxtaposes unpredictable aspirations toward inclusive communities [...] with tendencies that drive people apart' (like money, and the unequal distribution of labour).<sup>11</sup> The *convergences* offer a glimpse of utopia but are not straightforwardly hopeful; Desportes balances her belief in utopian alternatives with an acknowledgement of the impossibilities wrought by injustice and societal conflict.

As a trilogy, therefore, *Vernon* is two-sided: it bears witness to utopian possibility, and to conflict and failure. This brings me to Halberstam's 2011 work, *The Queer Art of Failure*. For Halberstam—who consciously riffs on Foucault's theorization of homosexuality as 'l'amitié comme mode de vie' (1981)—'queerness offers the promise of failure as a way of life'.<sup>12</sup> As Halberstam formulates it, queerness is a willingly oxymoronic 'promise of failure': queerness heralds failure, but also, always, has promise. In *Vernon*, the *convergences* are themselves a form of promising failure. They are threatened by violence and fail to eliminate the structural inequalities of mainstream society; they nonetheless promise that (queer) utopian alternatives are possible. For Desportes as for Halberstam, darkness and dysfunction might coexist with queerness and utopia. In *Vernon*, therefore, Desportes finds a middle ground between 'cynical resignation' and 'naïve optimism'.<sup>13</sup> She presents the *convergences* as a utopian project that strives to construct a radically different reality; she combines this with incisive critique and scenes of violence. Via the *convergences*, then, Desportes reconciles promise with failure, hope with disappointment, and vulnerability with resilience.

<sup>1</sup> Virginie Desportes, *Vernon Subutex*, 3 vols (Paris: Grasset, 2015–17). Hereafter the *Vernon Subutex* trilogy is referred to as *Vernon*, and the individual volumes as *Vernon 1*, *Vernon 2* and *Vernon 3*.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Des espaces autres', *Empan*, 54 (2004), 12–19 (pp. 14–15). Here, Foucault defines utopia alongside his notion of heterotopia: both exist 'en rapport avec tous les autres emplacements mais sur un mode tel qu'ils suspendent, neutralisent ou inversent, l'ensemble des rapports qui se trouvent, par eux, désignés, reflétés ou réfléchis.' Utopias are 'sans lieu réel', whereas heterotopias are real spaces.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Lucey, 'Ethnographers of Ourselves', *Public Books* (2018) <<https://www.publicbooks.org/ethnographers-of-ourselves/>> [accessed 23 August 2021] (para. 16 of 21).

<sup>4</sup> Maxime Goergen, 'Vernon Subutex et le roman "balzacien"', *Rocky Mountain Review*, 72 (2018), 165–82 (p. 177).

<sup>5</sup> Paul B. Preciado, *Un appartement sur Uranus* (Paris: Grasset, 2019), p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Marta Segarra, 'Nouvelles formes de parenté et de communauté dans *Vernon Subutex* de Virginie Desportes', in *Transgression(s) in Twenty-First-Century Women's Writing in French*, ed. by Kate Averis, Eglé Kačkutė and Catherine Mao (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2020), pp. 201–16 (pp. 213–14).

<sup>8</sup> José E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis in the original.

<sup>10</sup> Lucey, 'Ethnographers of Ourselves', para. 13 of 21.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 186; Michel Foucault, "De l'amitié comme mode de vie" (entretien avec R. de Ceccaty, J. Danet et J. Le Bitoux), *Gai pied*, 25 (1981), 38–39.

<sup>13</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art*, p. 1.

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## REFORGING IDENTITIES: DYNAMIC TRENDS OF WOMEN'S RESISTANCE IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN LITERATURE

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This paper examines the dynamic trends of women's resistance to their generally subordinate position as reflected in francophone African literature. Reflection theory will form the basis of our discussion in studying the selected works of literature. Reflection theory, which originates in the social sciences, 'perceive[s] literature as a document that records or reflects circumstances and changes within any society.'<sup>1</sup> Through this approach, which emphasizes a representation of reality through literature, we are brought closer to women's experiences in their respective milieus. Broadly speaking, irrespective of linguistic origin or of ethno-geographic and national traditions, on the African continent women's social, professional and educational experiences are limited compared to those of men. For example, in North Africa, Muslim beliefs and social traditions of the Arab world restrict women's freedom of speech and movement. In West Africa, although there is a greater variety of religious practices, women are subjugated to men and are their social inferiors. In southern Africa, despite the presence of a diverse society, sometimes influenced by European ideas (as in South Africa), historical and political circumstances have always placed men in positions of power over women.

Against this general backdrop, this paper examines literary works by a number of francophone writers (Mabanckou, Kourouma and Feki) that reveal the similarities in the situation of women across francophone Africa. More specifically, however, it also analyses the role of women in the construction of the very structures that operate to their disadvantage, and—critically—their active involvement in the dismantling of these oppressive structures. Furthermore, it highlights how literature plays a dual role—in narrating the lived experiences of women, as well as serving as a medium of enlightenment for the emancipation of women. This brings to the fore the importance of writers as sociocultural anthropologists and key agents of change in society.

### **The traditional plight of African Women: some literary examples**

African societies, in their overwhelming majority, have historically accorded women an inferior place to men. Beauvoir's perspective in *Le Deuxième sexe* (1949) is still broadly valid:

Or la femme a toujours été, sinon l'esclave de l'homme, du moins sa vassale; les deux sexes ne se sont jamais partagé le monde à égalité; et aujourd'hui encore, bien que sa condition soit en train d'évoluer, la femme est lourdement handicapée.<sup>2</sup>