

Research Grant Proposal

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Women of the Political and Literary Avant-Garde of Interwar Paris: The Case of Colette Peignot

I. Project Summary

My research project focuses on the work of Colette Peignot or “Laure,” one of the very few women significantly involved with the activities of the political and literary avant-garde groups of interwar Paris. Peignot has become a legendary figure that has generated a diverse corpus of biographical studies and testimonial accounts. However, her own writings have failed to receive their due critical attention. I would argue that this omission stems from the problematic transmission and publication of her texts, which were re-presented through the perspective of her male literary associates and according to their agendas. The voice of Colette Peignot has not yet been evaluated on its own terms, despite evidence that potentially establishes Peignot as an innovator who worked in the company of the major intellectual figures of interwar France. In the light of the recent opening of Peignot’s documents to the public, I propose a research trip to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris to study the genealogy of Peignot’s notions of the sacred and social bond, two concepts that emerge out of her early explorations of revolutionary ideology and later sociological inquiry into the idea of the sacred in the modern world. I aim to show that Peignot’s writings on the sacred produce a vision of the social bond that becomes exemplified by the couple: a fiction of the couple becomes charged with the socio-ethical imperatives Peignot worked through in her earlier “political” writings. I contend that an analysis of this site, which represents an innovation in the debates on the sacred in Peignot’s milieu, would potentially establish Peignot’s place in the context of French intellectual history and amongst French women writers. I propose to write an article during the period of research that will be presented at an international colloquium on Colette Peignot in July 2002 in Paris, and will be published in the Revue des sciences humaines. I will also use the latter half of the summer to write a book prospectus on the representation of the couple in twentieth-century French literature and thought, which would further disseminate my arguments on the work of Colette Peignot.

II. Narrative

1. Current Situation

My research project this summer will focus on the work of Colette Peignot or “Laure,” one of the very few women significantly involved with the activities of the political and literary avant-garde groups of Paris in the period between the two World Wars (principally the late 1920’s to 1930’s). While the name of Laure surfaces in the French intellectual field alongside such celebrated figures as Georges Bataille, Boris Souvarine, and Michel Leiris, it has largely remained circumscribed to a fascinating biographical note in the margins. The writings of Peignot and her involvement in the intellectual life of the twenties and thirties have largely failed to receive serious critical attention. This omission is compelling if we consider that evidence points to Peignot’s

extensive activity in a range of groups throughout the 1930's until her death at the age of thirty-five in 1938. Surviving documents and testimony confirm that Peignot was a committed revolutionary, sojourning in the early U.S.S.R. in 1930, and participating in *Le cercle communiste démocratique* and *Contre-Attaque*; one could thus raise the question of why she has not been situated alongside her more notable friend and contemporary associated with this milieu, Simone Weil? Peignot also contributed a number of political articles under the ambiguously-gendered pseudonym Claude Araxe to the review *Le travailleur communiste syndical et coopératif*, as well as *La Critique sociale*, which she purportedly edited and financed. Moreover, Peignot's activities were not limited to these venues of oppositional leftism that successively traversed Paris. Not only was Peignot a central actor in *Acéphale*, but according to Michel Leiris, it was at her request that Bataille founded this infamous Nietzschean secret society dedicated to the search for modern forms of the sacred and community, and Bataille later proclaimed that it was Peignot's death that put an end to the society in 1938.

If Peignot's participation in the avant-garde groups of the epoch has until recently eluded serious scrutiny, the lack of attention to her writings is just as conspicuous. In a famous work on French intellectual life in the twentieth century, critic Bernard Henri-Lévy places Colette Peignot under the category of women who gained renown through a secondary role in literary life, through "living" their engagement and hence becoming an object of "myth"; according to Henri-Lévy, these women "weren't writers" (Henri-Lévy, 245). Yet Colette Peignot's writings, *Les écrits*, are a substantial volume of fragments, poems, autobiography, short stories, journaux intimes, political notes, and correspondence. These surviving texts, (many of which she had reportedly burned) privately maintained, and confided to her companion Bataille just before her death, I would like to argue, could be deemed the sole example of a woman's engagement with the issues of the early form of sociology that flourished around *Acéphale* and its sister group *Le Collège de Sociologie*, which was preoccupied with rethinking the notion of community, resulting in a highly particular conceptualization of the sacred and social exchange.

This task of evaluating the work of Colette Peignot, then, lies in the need to unravel the gender-bound constraints that determined—and silenced--her impact. While a recovery of Peignot's voice would logically begin with a renewed emphasis on the simple authority of her written texts, we stumble across a remarkable obstacle upon inquiry into this site. The transmission itself of Peignot's texts is highly problematic, if we appreciate that they were collected, annotated, prefaced, appendixed and re-presented posthumously through the male lens of Bataille, Leiris, and Colette Peignot's most impassioned reader, her nephew Jérôme Peignot. Colette Peignot's writings have been literally "written over." It could even be possible to say that Peignot's text has become a critical palimpsest. Where criticism has remained silent before Peignot's work, the legacy of the life and pathos of Peignot has been much romanticized in a slew of subsequent testimonial works: from Bernier's *L'amour de Laure*, Peignot's *Ma mère diagonale* to testaments of Bataille, Leiris, Boris Souvarine, and a fictional account of Peignot in the work of American novelist Kathy Acker. Most recently, an extensive biography of Colette Peignot has been written by Elisabeth Barillé that synthesizes the aforementioned competing biographical narratives.

Beyond the phenomenon of "biographical narrative" surrounding Colette Peignot, the prospects for critical study of her writings have just changed, however, with the Peignot estate making Colette's complete archive available to scholars (most are at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, some of Peignot's correspondence is at Harvard's Houghton Library in Cambridge, MA). The availability of Peignot's manuscripts is especially important since her work and existing writings on her life have always been

tied to other writers agendas and presented through others' visions—or even phantasms. Peignot's work can finally be presented on its own terms and be read and evaluated for its own merits. Access to the archive of Peignot's work that precedes the publication activity that arguably circumscribed her role to the periphery of her associates, I suggest, is a methodological tool that potentially will shed light not only on Peignot, but also more broadly, on the role of women in the intellectual life of interwar Paris.

2. Project plan

The success of the methodological goals of situating Colette Peignot in 1) the context of French intellectual history and 2) in the context of French women writers lies in the projects ability to probe the extent to which Peignot engages with and contributes to the major debates of her associates who include the most important thinkers of the epoch. Indeed, Peignot's intellectual itinerary crosses the paths of the Surrealists, revolutionary thinkers Jean Bernier and Boris Souvarine, the debates surrounding Alexandre Kojève's celebrated seminars on Hegel attended by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and Georges Bataille (arguably the most important event for the development of Modern French thought), and concludes with Bataille and Roger Caillois' programs of the Collège of Sociologie and Acéphale, which draw on German philosophy, French sociology, and revolutionary thought to investigate the question of what brings humans together? Importantly, these thinkers of the late 1930's—to whom I would argue Colette Peignot belongs--posit the question of the sacred and community in the modern world. This inquiry becomes especially compelling in the context of the rise of European fascism; these groups turn their reflections toward the idea of "elective communities," the possibility of a social formation that would not be determined by nation, blood, and religion. This period of rethinking the social bond—which is presented in an interdisciplinary corpus of literary and theoretical texts (Peignot's writings remarkably blend genres and disciplines)—has recently re-emerged as a point of departure for understanding the question of European identity and community. In addition, the model of the social bond from this period also bears upon the notions of friendship and the couple—which is one of its chief figures of representation in the writings of Peignot, Bataille and others. The broader context of my interest thus lies in the representation of the amorous relation and the figure of the couple in this period. Developed within the context of a rethinking of the social bond, the couple, I suggest, is charged with socio-ethical vision. For this reason, a "recovery" of Peignot, involving a study of her conception of the sacred and the social bond culminating in the representation of the couple, is essential: it is through analysis of these notions, I would contend, that one could differentiate and contrast Peignot's visions with other (male-authored) conceptions of "amatory exchange" in circulation in this milieu and thereby ascertain her originality. The consequences of this analysis would be widely significant: a study of the gender difference regarding the notions of the sacred, love and the social bond in Peignot's work would open up the possibility of tracing a genealogy from the interwar avant-gardes to recent ethical and French feminist thought, a genealogy that I take up in my book project Unity, Dissymmetry, Utopia: Visions of the Couple in Modern France.

My objective, then, is to study the evolution of the notions of the sacred and the social bond that inform the representation of the couple in the writings of Colette Peignot. In consultation with the documents in the Peignot archive, my inquiry will address the following questions:

- 1) What is the extent of Peignot's involvement with the following groups: *Clarté*, *La critique sociale*, *Le cercle communiste démocratique français*, *Le Collège de sociologie*, *Acéphale*? Which texts did she write? In her capacity as an editor, are there documents that attest to her arguments and visions?
- 2) Where does the notion of the sacred first appear in Peignot's writings? What is the context for which the text(s) on the sacred are/were written? What are the other discussions that exist on the sacred in the framework of the groups Peignot was involved in? How does Laure's sacred compare with that of Michel Leiris, Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois Simone Weil etc.?
- 3) How does Peignot's conception of the "social bond" and "community" evolve? How does her commitment to the political avant-garde inform her visions of the "social bond" and the ideal of "community?" How do the various conceptions and agendas of literary "groups" effect her definition of community?
- 4) At what point in Peignot's work does the figure of the couple and reflections on the amorous exchange appear? Does Peignot's emphasis on the couple emerge from a political impasse? Is the figure of the couple charged with the socio-ethical imperatives that governed Peignot's revolutionary agenda?

My study will thus exercise methodologies in literary and intellectual history, génétique textuelle (study of the genesis of a work), close textual analysis, and feminist and philosophical approaches to literary study to recover the unique voice of Colette Peignot. I aim to uncover Peignot's innovation: her text that narrates the search for modern topoi of the sacred. I will demonstrate that Peignot broke down the hierarchy of early sociological and anthropological discourses through a contextualization of the sacred in the realm of empirical project. In doing so, she expounds her visions of an economy of amorous exchange that negotiates the subject to other relation. Importantly, I aim to show that Peignot's sacred "couple" implicates a vision of a new order of social exchange; it is fundamentally an ethical valuation. In bringing to light the profound ethical imperatives set forth in Peignot's writings, it is possible to reassess her original contribution to the 1930's debates on the social bond. Moreover, Peignot's socio-ethically charged couple potentially contributes to recent ethical and feminist debates on the amatory exchange.

Expected Outcomes of the work

My goal for this summer is to 1) consult the Paris archive of Colette Peignot in order to produce an informed assessment of Peignot's notions of the sacred, the social bond, and the couple. This study would shed light on the innovative role played by this woman involved in the political and literary avant-garde of interwar Paris. 2) To complete a forty-minute long presentation on my study, tentatively titled "La communauté inavouable: le legs de Colette Peignot," for the colloque *Laure, maintenant*, which will be held at the Centre EDUCO, Place du Panthéon, in Paris on July 5 and 6, 2002. 3) To transform this talk into an article that is to be published in an issue of the Revue des sciences humaines that will include the acts of the colloquium. 4) The research that I conduct on Colette Peignot and interwar avant-garde thought, will put me in a position to better frame the arguments of my book project entitled Unity, Dissymmetry, Utopia: Visions of the Couple in Modern France. My final goal is to

complete a book prospectus for this work which (upon suggestion) I will submit to Stanford University Press' *Cultural Memory in the Present* series.

Links to the College and Applicants Ongoing Research

The impact of this project on my scholarship will be significant. I will have the opportunity to conduct research and present my work to specialists on the Parisian interwar avant-garde. I will be presenting my work by invitation at an international colloquium in Paris. Publication in the Revue des sciences humaines, one of the most longstanding and important French journals in the humanities, would enable my work to be disseminated to an international audience. This should help generate interest in my book project entitled Unity, Dissymmetry, Utopia: Visions of the Couple in Modern France.

On a more personal note, the opportunity to conduct research at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and have dialogues with the surviving generation of intellectuals (Faye, Jérôme Peignot) would be an invaluable and memorable learning experience for me; it would no doubt give me some unique insights that would carry over into my teaching and mentoring. Having just led a January-term course to Paris, I quickly realized how greatly my experiences with French culture—gained from research, individuals, direct knowledge of cultural institutions, etc.—impacted my effectiveness as a teacher and motivator.

Finally, **I believe that carrying out my book project on the couple would have an immense impact on my teaching at Elmhurst College.** I taught a section of French 452 in Spring 2001 entitled “The Politics of Love” which explores the subject of my book project. This class was very successful. In the department, we have discussed the possibility of offering this course as a section of World Literature which would be taught in English and would reach a broader spectrum of Elmhurst students. Since the book chapters are intricately tied in with texts studied and topics debated in class, it would be a vital means of anchoring the class, and showing students how ideas are always open to discussion and evolution.

3. Faculty Expertise

Some of my credentials that qualify me to carry out this research project are as follows:

- Ph.D. from Brown University in twentieth-century French and Francophone studies; dissertation on the representation of the couple in 20th-century French writings.
- I have published an article “The Laure-Georges Bataille Exchange: Celebrating the Dissymmetry of the Couple in Interwar French Thought” in the Cincinnati Romance Review, Volume XV (1996): 41-49. This is the first article published in English on the writings of Colette Peignot. Readers of this article have since frequently contacted me. I was solicited by leaders in the field (in France) to present a new work at the colloquium *Laure, maintenant*, in the light of posthumous texts finally made available by the Peignot estate.
- I have written significantly on the work of Georges Bataille (to whom the writings of Peignot are tied) and presented at major conferences, including a panel with leading American Bataille scholars (Michele Richman from the University of Pennsylvania and Suzanne Guerlac from Berkeley); I believe that I have been able to establish myself as a

“young” Bataille scholar in the circle of twentieth-century French studies critics and amongst specialists in Bataille coming from continental philosophy.

4. Plans for Evaluation and Dissemination

The success of this project will be determined by its 1) ability to attain new information on Colette Peignot (through researching manuscripts newly available to the public); 2) based on this information, its ability to theorize the importance of Peignot’s place in French intellectual history and in the context of French women’s writing. 3) In the context of my broader inquiry into the ethics of the couple in French literature and thought, the work I hope to accomplish on Colette Peignot will enable me to frame the interwar avant-garde’s discourses on love and community in such a way that takes into account Peignot’s “feminine” vision. This will enable me to set up a genealogy from the avant-garde (represented by Andre Breton and Georges Bataille) to recent feminist thought that has yet to be fully addressed.

Dissemination to the Elmhurst College Community: I would be pleased to present my work at a research forum, if requested. I would also be willing to give a talk on “Researching the Parisian Avant-Garde” to the students in *Alpha Mu Gamma*, the Foreign Language Honor Society. Our department has recently decided to use the honor society as a forum for introducing students to research methodology in the foreign languages. I believe that exposing students to research methodologies that involve archival research, the use of national and private libraries, the process of interviewing, research collaboration, the organization of and participation in colloquia, etc. in an international setting would be an exciting topic and invaluable opportunity for Elmhurst foreign language and literature majors.

National Dissemination: My research will result in a forty minute talk to be presented at *Laure, maintenant*, an international colloquium on Colette Peignot to be held at the Centre EDUCO at the Place du Pantheon in Paris, France on July 5 and 6, 2002. The paper I will be presenting will be published with the proceedings of the colloquium in the *Revue des sciences humaines*. It is my hope that the dissemination of my work amongst French and international specialists in the field this summer will generate interest in the broader domain of my inquiry on the representation of the couple in Post World-War I France. The book prospectus for *Unity, Dissymmetry, Utopia: Visions of the Couple in Modern France* will be submitted (upon suggestion) to Stanford University Press’ *Cultural Memory in the Present* series by mid August.

III. Time Line

If given the grant, I will not be teaching this summer. I will attend the Annual Meeting of the International Association of Philosophy and Literature in Rotterdam from June 3 – 8, where I will present a paper, and have the opportunity to make contact with French theorists that inform my work on Peignot and representations of the couple, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean-Pierre Faye, and Luce Irigaray who will be at the meeting. I plan to travel to Paris on the 9th, where I will be in contact with Faye, Michel Surya, Jean-Pierre Le Boulter, Jerome Peignot, and other scholars working on the Peignot manuscripts. Over the next three weeks, I plan to consult the archive at the Bibliothèque Nationale to research Peignot’s affiliations with the political and aesthetic avant-gardes of the 20s and

30s. I will finalize my presentation and article on Peignot (for publication in the Revue des sciences humaines) by the end of June (I will have a native French speaker assist with my revisions).

After the colloquium (5-6 July), I will undertake the second phase of my research project. I will return to Chicago, and will write a book prospectus on my study of ethical visions of the couple in 20th century France (for submission to Stanford University Press's series *Cultural Memory in the Present*). I plan to substantially revise the introductory chapter entitled "The Couple in the Recent French Imaginary" that appears in my dissertation for inclusion in the prospectus. I expect to mail out the prospectus by August 15.

IV. Budget

Travel

Roundtrip Airfare Chicago to Paris	\$850
Train fare between Rotterdam and Paris	\$150
Lodging, Meals (June 2 – July 10)	\$2000

Fees for use of Bibliotheque Nationale; registration at IAPL conference \$125

Fees for native French editor/translator \$375

Total: \$3500.00

V. Current and Previous Grants

2002, Faculty International Travel Grant, \$500.00 (For presentation at American Comparative Literature Association Conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, April, 2002 see below).

2001, Elmhurst Faculty Development Grant, \$3,500.00

VI. Publications of Past Three Years

Dissertation:

Unity, Dissymmetry, Utopia: Visions of the Couple in Modern France (May, 2001).

Articles:

"Vanguards of the Couple: Reinventions of Love from Charles Fourier to Luce Irigaray." Forthcoming in Sodalitas, (Spring, 2001).

"Erotic Phenomenology: The Rhetoric of the Image in Bataille's *Les larmes d'Eros*." Under consideration (Text and Image.)

Conferences:

"La communauté inavouable: le legs de Colette Peignot" Invited speaker at *Laure, maintenant*, International Colloquium on Colette Peignot, Centre EDUCO, Place du Panthéon, Paris, France, July 2002.

“Im-mediacy: The Global Ethics of Etel Adnan’s Icono-Poetics.” To be presented at *Intermedialities*, the 26th Annual Conference of the International Association of Philosophy and Literature at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, June, 2002.

“The Politics of Self-Translation in the Writings of Etel Adnan.” To be presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association, San Juan Puerto Rico, April 2002.

“Sovereign Beginnings: Bataille, Nancy, and the Question of Relation.” *Beginnings*, the 25th Annual Conference at the International Association for Philosophy and Literature at Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia, May, 2001.

“Apocalyptic (Re)Visions: The End of History and the Erotic Couple in Bataille’s *Le bleu du ciel*.” *Time, Memory, Text*, the Twelfth Annual Binghamton Conference on Romance Languages and Literatures, March, 2001.

“*Commune presence*: Rene Char’s Poetics of Community.” Twenty-seventh Annual Twentieth-Century Literature Conference at the University of Louisville, February, 1999.

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