In the last few decades, women writers of French expression have been crossing boundaries, producing literatures that include explicit representations of rape and sexual or domestic violence in their fictions. In contemporary francophone fiction, writers such as Leïla Marouane, Anne Hébert, Gisèle Pineau, and Déwé Gorodé have audaciously included scenes of sexual violence that force the reader to think critically about the implications of reading rape.

For teachers of French and francophone literature, especially those of literature written by women, this sort of boundary-crossing might provoke anxiety when considering whether to include these works in course syllabi. Yet these works are indisputably crucial, as they unveil hard truths not only about real-world social issues, but they can also teach students how to read destabilizing works that resist definitive morals, textual structures, and closure.

In this paper, I will discuss methods for teaching narratives of gendered violence in upper-level literature courses on women writers of French expression. Reading narratives of violence can help students to recognize that there are not always black-and-white answers to complex problems. This paper will consider how teaching (and reading) in these interstices can provide space for nuanced interpretive approaches to contemporary women’s literature of French expression.