**The Immersive Potential of Literature and Hybrid Media in the 20th and 21st Centuries**

Women in French Postgraduate/ECR International Symposium

Symposium: Wednesday, January 12 to Friday, January 14, 2022

Keynote Speaker: Professor Diana Holmes (Leeds).

Women in French invites papers for a virtual international symposium focusing on immersion in women’s literature and hybrid media (including photo-texts, *bande dessinée*, theatre, spoken word, blogging, other internet-based media, etc.), with a focus on immersivity as both a pleasurable and productive feature. This online event welcomes presentations from postgraduate students and early career researchers working on questions of gender or feminism in French studies.

The immersive potential of literature and other media has become particularly apparent during periods of lockdown, when picking up a good book became a crucial way of escaping from the world and, conversely, of feeling more deeply connected to others while we remained physically distanced. Others, however, have simply not had time to engage with literature or other media because of increasing workloads, felt especially keenly by women across the world having to balance home-schooling, *télétravail* and domestic responsibilities. At the very least, people have had to choose between which sources to read, watch or listen, which calls into question the value of specifically immersive literatures and hybrid media. What can these works afford us in terms of pleasure, enjoyment, personal wellbeing, interpersonal connection, cultural acumen, and political awareness, particularly from a feminist perspective? What gives rise to the immersive potential of literature and hybrid media in the first place?

These questions build on a long history of efforts to bridge the divide between popular and academic reading practices; a division that is inherently gendered. France in particular fosters a literary culture preoccupied with the satisfying challenges of formalism, which is thus regarded as sophisticated and cerebral (Holmes and Looseley 2013, 6). Consequently, a literary experience that is associated with pleasure, enjoyment and immersivity is framed as a frivolous, unintelligent ‘feminine’ approach to literature (Holmes 2018). Yet, these modes of reading are arguably more culturally democratic and representative of broader societal values and interests. It is for this reason, among others, that a renewed interest in the ‘middlebrow’ has recently gained in critical momentum, a field of scholarship that places great stock in the value of immersive literatures and media.

In her recent study, *Middlebrow Matters* (2018), Diana Holmes argues that middlebrow *matters* precisely because its immersive and plot-driven narrative have the potential to ‘extend [one’s] cognitive and emotional range beyond that of direct, lived experience, enabling an experimental assent to alternative ways of seeing and reacting to the world’ (17). In this way, the immersive potential of literature, as well as other media, can allow for both personal and interpersonal transformation; immersivity can enable us to blur the boundaries between the public and the private – what Judith Butler calls a ‘threshold zone’ (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013) – and to ‘identif[y] with [an]other who is not like ourself’ (Huston 2008, 182-183). Immersivity is an exemplar of what reading fiction can achieve, which allows us to simulate other people’s experiences based on our own ‘repertoire’, ‘encyclopedia’ or ‘experiential background’ (Alderson-Day *et al* 2017, 99). This symposium therefore aims to explore the pleasurable, productive and transformative capacity of immersivity, taking into consideration contemporary concerns and applications, and to extend the study of immersive literature to a broader consideration of hybrid media.

Francophone women writers have been and remain at the forefront of such liminal and re-creative writing and expression. These authors use an immersive experience in the service of socio-political or interpersonal comment, with examples including Amélie Nothomb’s narration of eating disorders, most notably in *Biographie de la faim* (2004), Kim Thuy’s description of migration across her corpus (*Ru* 2009; *À toi* 2011; *Mãn* 2020), Annie Ernaux’s representation of an unashamedly feminine desire in her photo-text *L’Usage de la photo* (2005), co-authored with Marc Marie, and Nancy Huston’s *Le Club des miracles relatifs* (2016), which invites a visceral response to the climate emergency and the global North’s investment in fossil fuels. Other examples may relate to the ways that authors use the formally immersive aesthetic of the archive to plunge readers/viewers into a labyrinthe of material. This use of immersivity appears in Leïla Sebbar’s photo-textual series *Mes Algéries en France* (2004; 2005; 2008; 2018), in which she enacts a postcolonial return to the origins of her own and others’ identities. In a slightly different direction, an archival poetics emerges in Nathalie Léger’s trilogy of texts (*L’Exposition* 2008; *Supplément à la vie de Barbara Loden* 2012; *La Robe blanche* 2018), works which layer reflections on art to, among other things, interrogate the ways that art can assist women in understanding their own identity and in escaping the dominant and dominating power of the male gaze and other means of prescribing women’s societal roles.

We invite papers that explore literatures and hybrid media using immersivity, plot-driven narrative, realism and mimesis, or other textual modes of engaging readers to connect with broader cultural or political concerns, and in particular those that affect female-identifying readers. Papers may also focus on haptic and affective representation, as immersive experience may be said to involve the body or to appeal to the emotions and thus a lived experience of the world.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to, the following:

* Pleasures of reading/the text
* Networks and mediation
* Escapism as a theme in female authored narrative/works
* Divergence and convergence
* Feminist discourse and its relation to both marginal and popular culture
* The materiality of the book
* The marketing of immersive fiction
* Literary prizes and questions of gender and inclusivity
* Relationships between the work and the body (haptic or affective qualities)
* Political or cultural messages delivered through the immersive qualities of a work (mimesis, plot-driven narrative, etc.)
* Immersive aesthetics or poetics
* Immersion as a theme itself in immersive works (e.g. in water, the archive)

Proposals are welcome in both English and French.

Please send abstracts to wif.ecr.symposium@gmail.com by **17 September 2021.** Individual papers will be 15-minutes long. All submissions should be accompanied by a short (100-word) biography of the presenter(s). Please ensure that your abstracts and biographies are included in the same document, that the title of this document includes your name, and that you specify the time zone that you will be presenting from:

* Individual proposals should be no more than 250 words.
* Panel proposals should not exceed 1,000 words, and should include a brief description of the panel and of the individual papers included in the panel.

Please do not hesitate to send us any queries, and we hope to hear from you soon.

With best wishes from the organisers,

Pooja Booluck (British Columbia), Françoise Campbell (IMLR), Polly Galis (Bristol), Beth Kearney (Queensland) and Eric Wistrom (Wisconsin-Madison)

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