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Abstract
Marie Hélène Poitras, a contemporary author from Quebec, has published several works of fiction. Her versatility has enabled her to develop an original and thoroughly literary fiction. However, her narratives have not yet, to my knowledge, received any academic attention. My article aims at reviewing the significance, and particularity, of Poitras’s oeuvre for contemporary francophone literature, especially as developed in her first two publications: Soudain le Minotaure and La Mort de Mignonne. Thematically and aesthetically, her writing borrows from international literature, as well as artistic forms as diverse as popular music and visual art. Consequently, I argue that Poitras’s first two books build on borderlessness and/or boundary crossing. The first section will be devoted to Soudain le Minotaure and will explore how Poitras crosses cultural and aesthetic borders, particularly with her protagonists’ relationship with foreign cultures and her use of synesthesia. The second part will focus on La Mort de Mignonne and its aesthetic borderlessness, especially through the use of intertextuality with fairy tales as well as fables and intermediality with popular music.

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LITERARY BORDERLESSNESS AND CROSSINGS: 
MARIE HÉLÈNE POITRAS’S EARLY FICTIONS

Michèle A. Schaal

Marie Hélène Poitras published her first novel, *Soudain le Minotaure*, in Quebec in 2002. She then went on to release an anthology of short stories, *La Mort de Mignonne et autres histoires* (2005), a book series for teenagers entitled *Rock and Rose* (2009), and a second novel, *Griffintown* (2012). Her writing also includes a number of book reviews for *Lettres Québécoises*, short stories for *Moebius*, *Zinc*, and *Cyberpresse*, and reviews of music or concerts for the online magazine *Voir*. Her work has garnered both popular and critical praise as she was awarded the Prix Anne Hébert in 2003 for *Soudain le Minotaure*. Yet, she also came under the attack of Victor Lévy-Beaulieu, along with fellow emerging writers such as Anick Fortin or Gregory Lemay. In “Nos jeunes sont si seuls au monde,” the iconic author draws a rather grim portrait of young novelists. For him, the latter’s first publications no longer tackle issues that strongly mattered to his own generation (10). Young Quebecois authors, instead, portray disintegrating families and interpersonal ties, rely too heavily on foreign influences or places, no longer play with language, and show the people of the province as “des débris d’humanité déraisonnables parce que devenus totalement déraisonnés” (10). Many have come to the defense of these young writers and Poitras herself has answered Lévy-Beaulieu in her letter “Nous ne sommes pas si seuls.” There, she reprises all his arguments to better debunk them: Lévy-Beaulieu fails to see the diversity and qualities of the chosen writers; international sources actually demonstrate how “les plus grands artistes outrepassent leurs pays d’origine [et] sont universels,” including major Quebecois literary figures such as Anne Hébert, Gabrielle Roy et Réjean Ducharme; finally, a different historical context necessarily calls for new forms of writing (“Nous ne sommes pas...”). Thus, in addition to her fiction, Poitras has also established herself as a commentator of her own work and of the shortcomings of contemporary popular and literary criticism. Indeed, Poitras has twice more responded to attacks on her work. In 2003, her Halloween tale taking place in the small-town of Rivière Bleue raised the inhabitants’ anger, especially as they considered her story to lack in realism (*MDM* 88). In *La Mort de Mignonne*, she replied to the denizens with, again, a letter where she asserted her right to embrace fiction above all in her art (88-91). Upon the publication of *Rock and Rose*, she contested the label “chick lit” applied to her series solely because of its title and female protagonists. Instead, she appealed for neutrality,
demanding “le même droit que [s]es collègues masculins . . . celui de faire de la littérature jeunesse, du feuilleton littéraire” (“Contre la chick lit”).

A prolific writer of fiction and short critical texts, Poitras undeniably incarnates a talented author in contemporary Francophone literature. However, her writing has, to my knowledge, not yet attracted academic attention. This article aims at establishing the basis for a critical approach of her oeuvre by focusing particularly on her first two publications: *Soudain le Minotaure* and *La Mort de Mignonne*. Naturally, an article may not cover the many facets of Poitras’s writing and will therefore develop one specific aspect. Lévy-Beaulieu is not entirely mistaken when claiming that young authors are inspired by foreign literatures or cultures. Critics such as Paula Ruth Gilbert in *Violence and the Female Imagination* (6), as well as Michel Biron, François Dumont, and Élisabeth Nardout-Lafarge in their *Histoire de la littérature québécoise* (533, 593), also acknowledge this trend in contemporary Quebecois literature. Poitras’s early work follows this pattern since, for example, *Soudain le Minotaure* builds on Greco-Roman mythology. National and international literature shape the narrative thematically and aesthetically as well: Poitras either borrows from Gabriel García Márquez (33, 36, 44) and Hébert (101); draws comparisons with Bret Easton Ellis (89) and Franz Kafka (128); or alludes to the Marquis de Sade (69) and Vladimir Nabokov (82). For *La Mort de Mignonne*, Poitras claims the legacy of Raymond Carver or Elizabeth Smart, of visual artist Nan Goldin, and of rock music (Péan). Consequently, I argue that Poitras’s first two publications build, both thematically and aesthetically, on a sense of borderlessness and/or boundary crossing. The first section will be devoted to *Soudain le Minotaure* and will explore how Poitras crosses cultural and aesthetic borders, particularly with her protagonists’ relationship with foreign cultures and her use of synesthesia. The second part will focus on *La Mort de Mignonne* and its aesthetic borderlessness, especially through the use of intertextuality—with fairy tales as well as fables—and intermediality with popular music.

**Cultural and Sensual Borderlessness**

Beyond international influences and intertextuality, Poitras’s work inscribes itself in an even broader movement. In *Le Roman contemporain ou la problématicité du monde*, Jean Bessière explains that the latter genre nowadays se caractérise par de nouveaux paradigmes cognitifs et anthropologiques, par une fonction de médiation explicite, qui suppose la mise en évidence de la problématicité [du] roman [contemporain]; le lecteur, de quelque langue, de quelque culture qu’il soit, peut identifier, dans le roman, tous les types et d’intentionnalités, d’“agentivités” humaines. (10)

For Bessière too, as these narratives draw from international sources and traditions, they speak to broader audiences who, in spite of cultural differences, may still identify with them; in turn, they allow for a resistance to unilateral interpretations (34, 38, 62, et passim). Poitras undeniably embraces such
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borderlessness or at least resists any sorts of limitations: she refuses to have specific grilles de lecture imposed on literature, defends its universal nature and wishes to reach the broadest audience possible (Telephone Interview with Poitras). Poitras’s cultural and aesthetic borderlessness or boundary crossing transpire most explicitly in Soudain le Minotaure. It recounts a failed rape in two distinct sections, from the first-person perspectives of both the criminal, Mino Torrès, originally from Guatemala, and Ariane, his intended victim who travels to Germany to recover from her trauma. It also allows for a borderless identification with and from readers thanks to its many international and intertextual references, as well as thanks to Poitras’s rendition of a transnational phenomenon: rape or gendered violence.

Bessière also claims that some contemporary novels feature narrators “à plusieurs incarnations” (210), just as they reveal that “l’être humain n’est pas une individualité séparée, mais un sujet qui partage une relation continue, psychique, physique avec les autres êtres humains . . . sans que son identité propre soit effacée” (224). Poitras defines her writing as an “exercice d’empathie” and, for that reason, she has thoroughly researched the experience of rape both from a victim and a perpetrator’s perspectives (Telephone Interview with Poitras). With such a technique, she echoes Bessière in two manners: her novel deeply immerses readers in two distinct personalities and perceptions of the events; yet, she also creates a profound, even if unwanted, connection between Ariane and Mino beyond the victim/perpetrator relationship. Poitras, therefore, blurs boundaries of storytelling as the two narratives and characters are intrinsically linked. In many ways, the protagonists may be interpreted as real and allegorical alter egos too: Mino considers Ariane his peer on several occasions (21, 40, 44, et passim); both provide their interpretation of the failed rape; they are, naturally, contemporary incarnations of the Minotaur myth; they may be perceived as metaphors for (a reversal) of North and South relationships; just as they may be seen as the opposite poles of gendered violence. Thus, Mino and Ariane do not only foster a possible international identification; they are themselves interdependent since both stories or characters—although physically separated in two chapters—cannot be understood one without the other.

Bessière also explains how “le roman contemporain . . . répond au constat de la dispersion des cultures et des personnes humaines” (33). Again, Soudain le Minotaure echoes this trend because of its international intertexts and also because it occurs in different countries. In her response to Lévy-Beaulieu, Poitras claims that international settings and influences actually represent a “forme d’ouverture à l’autre” (“Nous ne sommes pas”). However, through her protagonists, she also demonstrates that, when boundaries and cultures overlap, the outcome depends largely on how individuals approach this experience. This is where Mino’s and Ariane’s narratives differ. Mino’s perception of his native land and a foreign culture occur essentially through brutality and (gendered) domination. Like the Minotaur myth and Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude—the novel that marked his childhood (36), violence, especially sexual violence, shapes his life. Throughout this section, he appears a gendered disciplinarian for his sister or wife and demonstrates his bestiality through his
raping of women (13-15, 17, 19, 30, et passim). Mino travels to Quebec for two purposes: to practice French and to “flétrir une fille blanche libérée, insoumise, intellectuelle et belle” (37). Crossing borders means, for him, conquest: he looks for a new and broader territory to assert his power, considering the women of Quebec a challenge (36). He does not intend to open up or understand others. Eventually, he is arrested and this brings a new awareness of the downsides of border and cultural crossings, particularly through language. Mino had learned French with his uncle through reading the translation of Marquez’s novel. The foreign language and culture were themselves acquired through a prism of violence; just as Mino learned the sexual objectification of women through other literary texts (36). Yet, once imprisoned, he ends up in an Anglophone jail, where he feels “déraciné jusque dans [s]a langue [et] dans un hors-lieu, dans un non-pays, et de parler une langue empruntée, passe-partout” (18, 36). “Déraciné,” “hors-lieu,” “non-pays,” “passe-partout”: these mostly hyphenated words translate a sense of in-betweenness and borderlessness. Nonetheless, they do not represent a positive experience and not just solely because he is jailed. Mino’s crossing boundaries no longer represent domination, but instead linguistic confusion, as well as imprisonment and cultural isolation. Interestingly, Poitras here reverses the disorientation and powerlessness he has wanted to infuse in his victims (23, 66). For her, Mino fails his experience of border crossing because of his intention to be a predator, aggressor, and gender essentialist. He does not open up to cultural alterity but wants to conquer it through rape. One may here be tempted to accuse Poitras of using a racist and sexist stereotype with Mino: the macho and violent Latino preying on Western white women. Mino’s own words in the novel seem to justify such an interpretation (36-37, 44). Poitras’s choice of a protagonist is undeniably problematic. This section, nonetheless, could be first interpreted as a rendition of a rapist’s psyche. As mentioned above, rape is a borderless practice and—even if unequally—it affects cultures, peoples, and nations across the globe. I believe Soudain le Minotaure to be, among other possibilities, a universal tale on violence and its limitations, particularly in transnational contexts. Poitras stresses the necessity of approaching differences with open-mindedness and not with a sense of superiority or domination. The latter sense is neither culture nor nation specific but universal too.

Ariane, on the other hand, experiences boundary crossing and borderlessness as a liberation, as a way to recover from her trauma. Unlike Mino, Ariane arrives in Germany almost purposeless and unprejudiced against the country’s culture. Hence, her experience truly becomes a personal, enlightening journey and an adventure of her senses. Poitras once again establishes a connection between both protagonists since language too becomes a key aspect of Ariane’s experience. She and her Czech lover, Ihmre, do not have a common language and can only communicate “dans une langue créole oscillant entre l’anglais et l’allemand” (143). While this could be an obstacle, it becomes a common bond and shared vulnerability to build upon. It forces Ariane to focus “exclusivement sur la sonorité chantante des mots qu’il
In both passages, Poitras underlines the importance of attentiveness, opening up to otherness, and mutual exchange despite differences or lack of commonalities. The use of verbs such as “osciller,” “chanter,” and “murmurer” especially render the need for a borderless understanding through focusing on a language’s or voice’s beauty. Eventually, it is this mixture, this créole, that allows for a beneficial and respectful communication. Discovering, understanding, meeting another culture and even its most problematic aspects are key to self-understanding and healing for Poitras. This transpires principally through Ariane’s reflection on the history of Germany:

Je découvrais en Allemagne une terre contaminée qui survivait à ses clochers évanouis, à ses camps de concentration... et à un mur effondré, mal cicatrisé. J’apprenais qu’elle n’était pas seulement l’agresseur qu’on avait voulu qu’elle incarne. Elle avait aussi un côté meurtri, des plaies béantes... Affaiblie par sa puissance, elle se remettait de ses blessures d’après-guerre, encore plus forte d’avoir contemplé sa faiblesses dans le rouge des yeux. (115)

Ariane’s perception of the country could represent a mise en abyme of the novel itself; we are given to read (Germany as) both the victim and perpetrator of crimes. In this passage, Poitras juxtaposes nouns and verbs that translate both an aggressive and a vulnerable position, and almost an oxymoron in the expression “affaiblie par sa puissance.” Then, unlike Mino, Ariane attempts to understand the other culture she is exposed to through open-mindedness and reflection; it is not a territory to conquer, but to appreciate in all its complexity. In the novel, we learn that Mino’s violent attack has also left Ariane physically wounded; he has pressed her eyes so strongly that they bled and the whites remained reddened for a long period of time (100, 106, 126, 141). Poitras also crosses boundaries here as she establishes a connection, if not an identification, between Ariane and Germany. Just like the country she explores, Ariane has contemplated horror in the eyes, bears a scar and tries to come to terms with her traumatic past. Germany becomes an allegory, if not a mirror image, of her own survival, despite cultural and linguistic differences, at the end of the novel (145). Consequently, Ariane’s borderlessness and border crossing succeed because, instead of trying to subjugate another culture to her own needs, she actually opens up to and identifies with it.

Crossing borders does not solely occur thematically in Poitras’s work. In addition to an “exercice d’empathie,” she deploys an “écriture des sens” because it best renders interiority and personal impressions for her (Telephone Interview with Poitras). All her texts focus heavily on sensory experiences that help to translate the characters’ state of mind and relationship to their environment or they represent metaphors for the plots themselves. In Soudain le Minotaure, the connection between Ariane and Mino is further emphasized through similar experiences of corporeal sensitivity, namely olfactory perceptions (12, 76, 85). More significantly, Poitras makes both her characters systematically tell—or recall—life events through sequences of sensory perceptions, as, for instance, demonstrated by Mino’s recounting of his first sexual experience or Ariane’s...
consuming “ecstasy” when partaking in Berlin’s “love parade” (136-37, English in original):

[Mino:] Je savais maintenant ce qu’était une fille. Ce pouvait être un mélange de fruits sucrés, de dents pointues, de caresses fragiles, de baisers timides et de petite sœur droguée; ou encore un grand sexe troué de mou, un parfum agressant, des boucles d’oreilles qui font du bruit, du rouge à lèvres sur le sexe. (53)

[Ariane:] Nos mains recouvertes de gel se tâtaient, comme plongées dans une argile tiède en mouvement. Le goût de sirop de fruits m’éclatait dans le thorax, mes jambes étaient emportées par des rythmes électroniques, derrière mes lobes, c’était l’hiver du menthol et la musique n’en était que mieux filtrée, plus perçante. Ça sentait les fleurs, l’urine, la sueur, la barbe à papa et les hamburgers. (138)

Beyond mere sensory descriptions, Poitras employs in these two passages the literary technique of synesthesia, defined as a “liaison subjective par laquelle l’excitation d’un sens . . . fait naître des impressions d’un autre sens” (Vadé 432). Taste, touch, sight, smell, hearing: all senses participate in evoking specific episodes in the protagonists’ lives. Yet again, these memories cross all sensory borders, moving from one sense to the other, from touching to tasting, from hearing to smelling. No one sense predominates, all trigger one another and eventually come together in a synesthetic experience. By crossing sensory boundaries, Poitras transforms the act of literary recollection; more than a flashback, Poitras makes corporeal sensations the memory itself. These two synesthetic recollections also participate in her claim that her writing is an exercice d’empathie; as readers, beyond a written recollection, we can almost feel the characters’ corporeal experiences. Or as Catherine Paradis explains, for writers of her generation, Poitras summons our “sens et . . . sensibilité” (91). These excerpts also demonstrate how Mino and Ariane are intrinsically linked, including through their physical way of recollecting past events, hence echoing Bessière (224). Finally, they also show how lyrical Poitras’s descriptive passage may be; the length, pace, and synesthetic quality of the sentence translate a certain musicality.

Intertextuality and Intermediality: Going Beyond Artistic Borders

Biron, Dumont, and Nardout-Lafarge explain how short stories have acquired the status of a major literary genre in contemporary Quebecois literature since there has been an increase in their publications (591-92). Furthermore, for them, many writers rely on intertextuality and “l’imprécision des frontières génériques” (535, 552)—the latter trait representing a core element of Poitras’s generation according to Paradis (87). For Gilbert, women in particular have favored shorter texts that are themselves intermedial with brief visual art forms such as music videos (154). With La Mort de Mignonette, Poitras again echoes these trends; it comprises 12 short stories, 8 of them previously
published and reworked for the anthology. Except for its universality (i.e. it is found in various literatures across the globe), the short story genre is not in itself borderless. Still, its shortness allows for two specific forms of moving beyond or blending boundaries in Poitras’s anthology: intertextuality with fables and fairy tales, as well as intermediality with popular music, both thematically and aesthetically.

For Biron, Dumont and Nadout-Lafarge, short stories in Quebec used to be “associé[es] au recueil de contes folkloriques” (591). Interestingly, Poitras perceives herself as a storyteller, hence her insistence on having her anthology entitled “et autres histoires” because “tout le monde aime les histoires, pas forcément les nouvelles” (Telephone Interview with Poitras). Rather than an anthology of short stories, *La Mort de Mignonne* appears, indeed, more a collection of contemporary tales dealing with, for instance, the sad destiny of urban coachmen and their horses in “La Mort de Mignonne” and “Protéger Lou,” social marginality in “Ruth en Rose,” or heartbreak in “C’était salement romantique” and “Nan sans Réal.” The function of storyteller holds a significant position in Poitras’s writing since several of her characters are assimilated to storytellers, such as Mino’s uncle and Ariane in *Soudain le Minotaure* (33, 102, 108), the mayor in “Sur la tête de Johnny Cash,” and Gisèle in “Comme la renarde à trois pattes” (114, 154). In every instance, storytelling means power, especially in first person narratives or passages: the one to amaze and pass on great stories for Minos’s uncle or to (re)claim authority over the unfolding of the failed rape for Ariane (33-34; 102, 108); the ability to motivate people and win a trial for the mayor or deceit for Gisèle (111-15; 154-58). When Poitras uses a third-person perspective in *La Mort de Mignonne*, her short stories truly resemble fairy tales or folk storytelling, if not fables. The eponymous story revolves around the escape of Mignonne, a carriage horse, who freely roams the streets of Montreal at night, until her death at the break of dawn. Just as in fables, the narrative features an animal as a protagonist and though it never speaks, it seems to feel and think like a human:

Mignonne s’arrêta devant un grand pré vert, une révélation, presque un mirage: la devanture des bureaux de Postes Canada. [...] La tendresse de cette verdure bien soignée fut comme une caresse au palais. Et Mignonne de brouter ainsi durant une bonne heure avant l’arrivée, enfin, des facteurs et des camions de la poste. (13)

Readers may perceive this excerpt as a fable-like anthropomorphism since, again, they are given to read the sensory experience of a character. Poitras—just as for Mino and Ariane—makes Mignonne go through a human-like synesthetic experience: sight leads to touch and to taste. She also reproduces two additional specific conventions of fables and fairy tales. It is, first, a humorous passage with Poitras’s direct commentary “enfin,” the implication that the horse has an almost mystical vision, and the incongruity of comparing an urban lawn to a meadow. Then, it is written with the passé simple, as is typical of fairy tales and even fables. It is, however, difficult to establish whether “La Mort de Mignonne” comprises a moral. The story ends with the death of the animal and
the coachmen’s grief at this sight (16-17). Mignonne died because of her harsh life as an overworked urban carriage horse and also because, after escaping, she overindulged in food and water (11, 14, 15). An inexplicit moral could be a warning about excess or against the harsh treatment of such horses in cities, a fact alluded to in the tale and in “Protéger Lou” as well (133-34).

The anthology also has an explicit intertextuality with specific fairy tale archetypes, such as in “La Beauté de Gemma.” Since these archetypes are, to a certain extent, almost universal, their redeployment partakes too in Poitras’s borderless and boundary-overlapping aesthetics. Gemma James is an atypically beautiful and sensitive girl born on a farm. Upon being discovered by a talent scout, she briefly becomes a famous model before returning home, disgusted by the fashion industry. The opening page of the story already reminds readers of the traditional “once upon a time” expression since it sets the time and place of the story and already signals Gemma as an exceptional heroine (21). Still, it is the use of one specific archetype that makes one read the short story as a contemporary fairy tale:

In this passage, and throughout the short story, we find some of the core elements in the Cinderella tale: the heroine starts from a modest situation; she possesses an exceptional and unexpected beauty; her uniqueness triggers jealousy amongst other models in a similar fashion to Cinderella’s stepsisters (28-29); a benevolent godmother introduces her into “higher society” via the fashion world; and Gemma is rewarded with success because of her unusual beauty (28-29). Here Poitras has transposed the Cinderella story into a modern context. “La Beauté de Gemma” does not feature an explicit moral either. The final pages have Angie’s three cats—named after famous designers—devouring raw meat and Gemma’s returning home; both instances could be interpreted as a warning against the fashion industry, or a decadent urban lifestyle, or normative femininity (34). “La Beauté de Gemma” actually comprises another intertext; Poitras has rewritten Johnny Cash’s “Ballad of a Teenage Queen,” or the tale of a small-town girl turned movie star who finally gives up her career to be with the boy who loves her (Cash “Ballad...” ; Laforest 89-90).

In addition to perceiving herself as a storyteller, Poitras also stresses how her anthology is a literary response to music which has touched her (Telephone Interview with Poitras). Once again, short stories prove the perfect vehicle for crossing or blending borders since they may be brief like songs are. Lyrics also share a few similarities with literature, namely poetry and tales, since they can rely on rhyme schemes and storytelling. Two stories in particular illustrate Poitras’s intermediality with music: “Grunge” and “Sur la tête de Johnny Cash.”
Since they intersect with two international musicians, Nirvana and the famous country singer, these tales partake too in Poitras’s borderlessness. She uses two specific intermedial techniques in these short stories to cross artistic boundaries: "medial transposition" and "intermedial references" (Rajewski 51, 52, bold in original).

"Grunge" revolves around an anonymous female character who, in second- and first-person perspectives, recalls an episode of her teenage years: her organizing a party, gone chaotic, with her potential boyfriend Chewy. The title is taken from the eponymous music movement and opens with an epigraph from "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by Nirvana—the band considered most representative of the genre (MDM 49). Summing up or determining the song’s meaning is particularly difficult since it may appear nonsensical (Creswell 81, 83, 88; Fish 89, 95). Furthermore, Kurt Cobain, the group’s lead singer, provided contradictory explanations for its creation or meaning (Berkenstadt and Cross 64-66). "Smells Like Teen Spirit" is twice explicitly referred to in “Grunge” (MDM 49, 51). The short story also comprises a few elements from the Nirvana song and even video: a party gone out of control, a seemingly unmotivated group of friends, and Chewy is depicted as a Cobain lookalike (54). However, Poitras uses medial transposition to translate the essence of the song and band rather than the lyrics directly. For Duane R. Fish, Cobain’s music revolves around three core themes that, while personal, have allowed an identification with Generation X young adults (95):17 "Feelings of Angst," “Suicide and Violence,” “Sex and Drugs” (89, 92, 94, italics in original). The second page of “Grunge” echoes Cobain’s thematic since the narrator describes herself and her companions as “renfrognés, drogués, mal dans notre peau” (50). While not necessarily affecting all characters, binge drinking, sexual promiscuity, physical violence, doing drugs and (the possibility of) suicide are either explicitly depicted or alluded to in the narrative. However, what transpires most intensely in “Grunge” is the feeling of angst:

Nous étions las de ce qui nous dépassait, de ce que nous ne parvenions pas à identifier clairement, c’était comme être en colère contre un nuage très dense et opaque. Nous étions survoltés, contrariés, tristes, . . . notre vie nous apparaissait semblable à un lent assommoir . . . Nous cherchions quelque chose d’intéressant et il n’y avait rien, mis à part désirer le corps de l’autre et nous familiariser avec la quantité d’alcool qu’il nous était possible d’absorber avant de courir vomir tout notre ennui dans les toilettes des bars où nous réussissions parfois à nous infiltrer malgré notre minorité, jusqu’à se sentir pareil à un gant viré à l’envers abandonné sans raison valable sur le trottoir, dans le centre-ville, à 5h46 du matin, quand le ciel est rose mais que personne n’est là pour s’en réjouir, sauf l’homme secret qui promène son loup blanc en cachette. (54-55)

A rich lexical field of anxiety, despair, and vacuity—“dépassés”, “survoltés,” “triste,” “assommoir,” “rien,” and “vomir”—translate angst in this excerpt. “Ennui” even constitutes a leitmotif in the narrative since it is repeated several times or declined in various synonyms and grammatical variations (49, 51, 52, 54-55). For Catherine Creswell, two lines from the chorus of “Smells Like Teen
Spirit”—“I feel stupid and contagious! [>] Here we are now, entertain us!”—both “suggest obscure obstacles, confusion, observations that slip away from articulation” (88). In the excerpt, the narrator and her friends are, indeed, unable to identify a specific source for their restlessness—strikingly illustrated with the analogy at being angry with a dark cloud—and, therefore, resort to various excesses as the only way to cope, or even be entertained. Poitras, therefore, has transposed the chorus’s feeling of angst—but also the intention to escape from it—in her short story. For Creswell too, Nirvana’s song is “satiric and self-deprecating” (80)—other important aspects of Generation X (97)—and it relies on “empty clichés” (81). Poitras’s depiction of teenage ennui in the quoted paragraph does rely on stereotypes such as systematic frustration, apathy, or corporeal excesses. Nirvana and Cobain also heavily relied on irony (Creswell 93, 91, 96-97; Fish 91)—yet another commonality with Generation X (Creswell 97). The second line of the chorus analyzed by Creswell is the actual epigraph for the story and further represents, for the critic, “self-deprecation” and “sarcasm” (88). The narrator opens the story with an unflattering portrayal of herself and her friends, as well as their obsession with the band, constantly playing its hit song (49-51). She underlines that they, thus, ironically “incarn[ait] précisément ce que Kurt Cobain dénonçait” (51). Poitras here proposes both a self-deprecating and ironic—yet still gentle—portrayal of the “grunge” teenage fans. They view Cobain as a rebellious icon yet they incarnate the very criticism his song implies: because of their chronic boredom and angst, they “wait to be entertained” just like any adolescent. This bittersweet depiction runs throughout the narrative.

Similarly to “Grunge,” “Sur la tête de Johnny Cash” does not necessarily transpose a specific story or song—three are mentioned in all—but rather their spirit.18 The short story especially mirrors two specific aspects of Cash’s artistic persona: his being a “storyteller” (Cusic xliii; Edwards 35, 96) and “L’Homme en noir” (MDM 109). For Leigh H. Edwards, although Cash has cultivated a contradictory image and politics, he was nonetheless perceived—chiefly through the song and character of “The Man in Black”—as speaking for the “disenfranchised” (1-2, 7, 48, et passim). “Sur la tête de Johnny Cash” revolves around an epic feud over the ownership of a dead orca between villagers and scientists. The title is taken from the Mayor who “jure sur la tête de Johnny Cash” to keep the animal (111). This battle over the dead orca is actually a ploy that allows Poitras to provide a touching portrayal of the remote community:

[Le maire] comprit pourquoi le cachalot leur importait tant, à eux tous. Il pensa à la multiplication des pancartes ‘À vendre’ et ‘À louer’, proportionnelles à l’apparition de salons funéraires . . ., de clubs de l’âge d’or, de bingos et de résidences pour personnes âgées. On ne voulait plus vivre ici, on ne venait plus qu’y mourir . . . ‘C’te gros poisson, pour nous, c’est une chance de renaître sous une nouvelle identité.’ . . . [Le maire] s’apprêtait à livrer le dernier combat de sa vie politique pour les gens du coin, ignorés dans leur éloignement et qui retrouveraient ainsi leur dignité oubliée. (110-11)
It is necessary to underline that this passage occurs shortly after the mayor has listened to Cash’s “One Piece at a Time.” This humorous song depicts an automobile worker who steals a variety of pieces from his workplace so as to build his own car, simply because he cannot afford those he makes (Cash “One Piece at a Time”). For Edwards, Cash’s protagonists “all struggle to survive economically, [and he] emblazons their pride in work and honor” (143). This excerpt from La Mort de Mignonne undeniably echoes Cash’s endeavor. In her short story, Poitras positions herself as the “woman in black,” as a defender of the “laissés-pour-compte” just as Cash has been (MDM 109). In the passage and whole narrative, she sides with the disenfranchised and poor villagers. She depicts their declining community and way of life, to which the placards, as well as the aging and dying population testify. Like Cash, she also stresses their pride and honor since, as the mayor underlines, they wish to reclaim their dignity and see the Orca as a means for rebirth. “Sur la tête de Johnny Cash” also establishes another bridge with the singer: storytelling. Like “La Beauté de Gemma,” the short story could be considered a modern tale since it borrows from more conventional fairy storytelling. In the passage above, she again uses the passé simple. She also clearly portrays the villagers as the “good,” simple protagonists. When Poitras introduces the scientists with “alors ils apparurent, dans leurs anoraks gris requin, traînant de petites valises stérilisées” (107), they appear more as villains especially because of their sudden manifestation, their colorless clothes, and, later in the narrative, through their desire to cheat the villagers out of the ownership of the orca (111-13).

The short stories’ function as intermedial references is harder to establish; although brief like songs, they do not contain verses, rhymes or choruses. Still, they display what Werner Wolf calls a “Musikalisierung des Erzählens” [musicalization of storytelling] (101, my translation). For Creswell, “Smells Like Teen Spirit” relies, among other things, on “repetition,” sentences that “lose track of their subjects,” “alliteration,” and “assonance” (81). Reconsidering the long excerpt from “Grunge” quoted above, one realizes that the final long sentence resembles the song’s style: it contains alliterations of the “r” sound; possibly an assonance with “i”; in the end, it loses its subject with the depiction of the glove, beautiful sky and the almost surreal eruption of the man walking his wolf; finally, its length could mirror the tune’s speedy rhythm. When strong feelings or actions are depicted, such as in this example or during the party when Chewy “cheats” on the narrator (57-58), Poitras switches to these long sentences. This generates a break in the narration and translates the intensity of the passages. The link to “Smells Like Teen Spirit” may be drawn here because it evolves around a similar rhythm: slow verses broken by a more aggressive and speedier chorus. Finally, the various forms of the word ennui, as well as the numerous assonances and alliterations throughout the narratives, could also translate the use of repetition Creswell has identified in the song.

As for Cash, he was also known to frequently switch between speaking and singing (Cusic x-xl; Edwards 96), namely in “One Piece at a Time.” “Sur la tête de Johnny Cash” is principally a third-person narrative that features first-person dialogues or interventions by the protagonists. This oscillation may too
be interpreted as Poitras’s translation of Cash’s singing style into writing. Nevertheless, just as in “Grunge,” one may also read a more direct musicalization:

La venue du cachalot avait viré le village à l’envers. Toute cette agitation, ces enjeux de fierté, ces luttes territoriales et ces bouteilles vidées chez Cow-Boy sur des airs de Johnny Cash pour une baleine fécondée trop jeune et qui, sentant son heure approcher, avait dérivé vers la terre ferme en ayant la folie de croire que les hommes seraient en mesure de sauver son petit. C’était mal les connaître, eux qui, encore ivres et envoûtés par les vapeurs d’ambre gris, buvaient à leur victoire leur paye chez Cow-Boy en massacrant The Beast in Me. (117)

This passage comprises a few alliterations— the recurring “v”, “j”, “t”, “f”, and “k” sounds—and also the assonance with “é” and “i”. Several passages throughout the short story rely on these techniques, thus, reinforcing an impression of musicality. Then, just as in “Grunge,” alternating short and long sentences also provide a certain rhythm to the excerpt and whole narrative. Furthermore, the descriptions of the decaying orca pertain to Poitras’s synesthetic lyricism, a poetic form that invokes musicality as well. Finally, this passage is also a medial transposition of the Cash song itself. In “The Beast in Me,” the narrator speaks of his “darker” side, almost sympathetically, and how it cannot always be kept under his control (Cash “The Beast in Me”). For Edwards, the song translates “the struggle between good and evil within [one]self” (102). If we reconsider the portrayal of the villagers and the scientists as heroes and villains, Poitras transposes in her tale this epic struggle too. Yet, Poitras also plays with the polysemy of “beast”: an animal and/or monster. Here, she sympathizes both with the orca and villagers. The animal’s plea was unheard or misunderstood by the humans as it became the object of a bitter feud and was eventually commodified for its ambergris, a rare fragrant stone (MDM 115). Ironically however, its death enabled the rebirth of the forsaken village. This final passage could, therefore, be considered as a sad moral to the tale.19

Conclusion

This article has, unfortunately, left out many other fundamental aspects of Poitras’s writing: her exploration of Bildungsroman leitmotifs, her perpetuation of the nature vs. culture dichotomy, or her depiction of hypermodern society. Gender is also an important facet of her writing. Poitras embraces the label feminist for herself, yet refuses to have it—or “écriture féminine”—applied to her work; instead she wants to have her writing seen as universal (“Contre La Chick Lit”; Telephone Interview with Poitras). Nonetheless, through her fiction, she exposes enduring gendered prejudices and violence, as her fictionalization of rape in Soudain le Minotaure demonstrates.20 Poitras’s position echoes Lori Saint-Martin in her essay Contre-voix, for whom younger women writers still address in a “métaféministe” manner the problematic aspects of womanhood (240-41).
I opened this article with Lévy-Beaulieu’s criticism of younger writers, namely their relying too heavily on international influences. In line with Paradis’s conclusion (91) and Poitras’s own response, this study confirms that transnational intertextuality and working across international arts are not a sign of a declining Quebecois literature. Quite the opposite, Poitras shows that certain themes or forms have a universal power. By crossing and blending cultural boundaries in *Soudain le Minotaure*, she has mirrored and interrogated the meaning of one’s relationship to others, a relevant question in a globalized world. Her synesthetic writing, breaking borders between the senses but also allowing her readers to engage almost physically in reading, echoes her refusal of limitations and her desire to empathize with others’ experiences. In *La Mort de Mignonne*, she steps across artistic and cultural boundaries too with intertextuality and intermediality. Both thematically and aesthetically, she adapts, transposes, and (re)claims fairy tale and fable archetypes, as well as international popular music. Beyond a mere translation, she transforms them into interactive responses. In her early fictions, Poitras actually generates a dialogue between cultures and art forms, and consequently, establishes a literary borderlessness.

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**Notes**

1. An initial version of this article was presented on June 12, 2010, at the 5th Women in French Conference at Wagner College. The presentation was entitled “Le goût de la littérarité: La fiction de Marie Hélène Poitras.”

2. See, for example, Lavoie (59-60) and Paradis (86-91). Lavoie interviewed a number of editors who acknowledge the problematic aspects of young Quebecois writers, yet do not necessarily share Lévy-Beaulieu’s pessimistic opinion. For Poitras specifically, see namely Dorais 134 and Laforest 89.

3. In her letter, Poitras intentionally situated herself as a Quebecois writer through her knowledge and embracing of Quebec’s literature or history. In nearly all interviews quoted here, she also claims the heritage of Anne Hébert.

4. Paradis formulated a comparable criticism against Lévy-Beaulieu in her article (87, 91). She analyzes three novels whose features resemble Poitras’s style: a common desire to open up to others (87, 91); the irrelevance of geographical boundaries for Gregory Lemay (89); and Karoline Georges in particular “fait appel à nos sens eux-mêmes, et offre une expérience totalisante de la littérature” since her book comes with a CD (90). Paradis does not mention intermediality though, nor is Poitras featured in her corpus.

5. The version reprinted in the anthology was reworked. The online tale with the villagers’ reactions is no longer available, to my knowledge.

6. *Rock & Rose* would also require a discussion of how the series inscribes itself—or not—within the tradition of young adult literature in Quebec. As for *Griffintown*, it reprises some of the stories and characters encountered in *La Mort de Mignonne*. It thus draws on the aesthetics and themes developed in Poitras’s first two publications.

7. See note 17 for a definition of intermediality.

8. Bessière identifies intertextuality as a common practice in his corpus too (190).
Laforest makes a similar comment on *La Mort de Mignonne* and against Lévy-Beaulieu (89).

Interestingly, Paradis notices a similar trend in her corpus; her authors “soulignent l’inévitable relativité dans les relations humaines, où je n’a de sens que par rapport à l’autre” (91, italics in original). This echoes both Bessière’s study and Poitras’s description of her writing.

Bessière speaks of the importance of “dissensus” too (182-83, italics in original). However, it is linked to the notion of community, something not developed by Poitras in *Soudain le Minotaure*. This is why Bessière’s concept of “transindividualité” cannot apply entirely either (220, 350): Mino and Ariane still represent specific, if not universal, individuals in spite of their commonalities.

Though with a different lens and conclusion, Lee Elain Skallerup associates borderlessness with Dany Laferrière’s writing (of trauma) too (“Dany Laferrière, Japanese Writer?”).

The failed rape has actually made Ariane question the reliability of her sensory perceptions (*SLM* 95, 123). Consequently, as a means to overcome and resist her suffering, she wants to increase their sharpness (123-24).

Crossing borders and blending cultures come to signify a path to recovery in the short story “C’était salement romantique” too, though in a humorous manner. An anonymous female narrator travels to Mexico and recognizes her own heartbreak in the town’s landscape, as well as in Mexican popular culture productions such as *telenovelas*, chicken fights, and a staged human sacrifice (*MDM* 37-39, 45).

Poitras deploys the same figure in “Fées et princesses au bout de leur sang.” There, the elder sister and narrator considers herself a fairy or protective figure who prevents little girls from jumping into adulthood, and especially into normative femininity, too soon (78).

Some stories could also borrow from more canonical works based on storytelling such as “Comme la renarde à trois pattes,” which seems to draw on Boccaccio’s *Decameron* or Marguerite de Navarre’s *Hetpameron*. It features five characters—two women and three men—who retreat to the country for the weekend and who entertain themselves by confessing the “plus grand mensonge qu’ils aient jamais orchestré” (151). Each story, just as in Boccacio and Navarre, is followed by a discussion about the implications of the lie or the liar’s (im)moral behavior.

“Smells Like Teen Spirit,” the band’s music and especially Cobain, have generally been considered—and denied—as representative of Generation X. See namely Berkenstadt and Cross 64, 68-69, 129-30, et passim; Creswell 79-80, 97; Fish 94, 95; and Mazzarella 49-68. Generation X members “are the children of baby boomers, born between 1965 and 1976 (dates vary between 1961 and 1981)” (Williams, et al. 252). In the media, they are “characterized by alienation, isolation, powerlessness, anger, despair, and numerous other negative attributes” (Mazzarella 64), as well as “facing economic and social instability” (Williams et al. 252). Born in 1975, Poitras belongs to Generation X.

“One Piece at Time,” “Ring of Fire,” and “The Beast in Me” (109, 111, 117, italics in original). Although Poitras only mentions the persona of the “Man in Black,” this song could be considered an intertext too (109).

Music plays a key role in *Soudain le Minotaure* too. There are several references to international classic and popular musicians such as David Bowie or Chopin and the music of Portishead plays during the assault (117, 131, 87, 93, 97). More interestingly,
the two sections open, respectively, with epigraphs from musicians PJ Harvey and Tori Amos (10, 80). Their songs actually reflect the subject of each part: Harvey sings with a manly aggressive voice of brutality and Amos tackles survival. Soudain le Minotaure, thus, seems intermedial with Portishead, Harvey, and Amos.

These two first-person narratives, one masculine the other feminine, also inscribe themselves in the trend Katri Suhonen has noticed in Prêter la voix; contemporary women writers take on a masculine perspective to better deconstruct sexism and masculinity (14, 20, 26, et passim).

Works Cited


