“Lived experience at the level of the body”: Annie Ernaux’s *Journaux extimes*

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In her two “journals of the outside,” *Journal du dehors* (1985-1992) and *La Vie extérieure* (1993-2000), Annie Ernaux composes brief, seemingly disconnected entries filled with insights gained from observing the world beyond her personal life.1 “I wanted to retain something of the time,” Ernaux writes on the cover of *Journal du dehors*, “and of the people whose path I crossed only once” (E 7).2 Frequently referred to by Michel Tournier’s term “*journaux extimes*” (as opposed to *intimes*) because of their focus on the public sphere despite the format of a personal journal,3 *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* record the memories of daily realities as fleeting as the crossing of a stranger’s path, or the changing traffic detours produced by highway construction (LVE 99). Ernaux’s desire to retain the fullness of these lived moments places her work firmly in the tradition of writers concerned with aspects of modern life that are both so mundane as to escape comment, and so profound as to provide moments of extraordinary insight; namely, the “everyday.”4 Attending to the ways people place groceries in the shopping cart (JDD 28) and the words they use to scold their children (LVE 10), Ernaux echoes Michel de Certeau’s belief that it is the ordinary that “can reorganize the place from which discourse is produced” (5).

Ernaux’s attention to the physical body and its role in forging memory, however, performs a critique of the invisibility of the body so often found in writings of the everyday. Greater focus upon the physicality of herself and others allows Ernaux to tap into emotions arising from the porous border that sometimes separates the private from the public. For her, the bodily emotions of fear, shame, and desire connect the “Anonymes” (her initial title preference for *Journal du dehors*) by the currents they send “rippling through us” (E 7).5

This understanding of the body as locus of social memory allows for an expanded topography in Ernaux’s *journaux extimes*. Whereas everyday theory and literature have typically privileged the urban as the site in which modernity’s coherency is disrupted, Ernaux’s attention to the body
allows her to perform her critique wherever she experiences a strong emotion in response to a stranger’s presence. She does not need to go out “in search of” the marvelously everyday. Instead, she experiences the everyday as she carries out the daily activities of shopping at the supermarket, parking her car, and commuting on the train.6

Ernaux’s observations generally occur in the place where she herself lives, the centrally planned “new town” of Cergy-Pontoise.7 Theorists of the everyday have had a field day with the phenomenon of “new towns.” Created in toto in the early 1970s, Cergy-Pontoise is distinctly lacking in the Benjaminian “aura” that emanates from the dynamic mixture of old and new that has made urban areas so compelling to those “who walk the city.”8 With its middle-class aspirations of order and affordable comfort, the new town has been denounced by Henri Lefebvre as a place of “unredeemable boredom” (Introduction to Modernity, 119) in which, Guy Debord adds, “nothing ever happens” (Debord, 126). Inhabiting a new town and dwelling upon the physical vulnerability of her own self and of those she observes, Ernaux challenges “everyday” theory’s class-based aesthetics and the frequently neutral body.

However, the exclusion of suburban space and the unquestioned masculinity of the flâneur are valid critiques of the growing field of “everyday” theory. Writing about the French painter Berthe Morisot who lived and worked in the Parisian suburb of Passy, Kathleen Adler critiques what she calls the “Baudelairean line of succession” and suggests that the sub-urban be considered when thinking about women and the everyday (5). As Ben Highmore points out in Everyday Life and Cultural Theory, the prioritizing of the street over the home already predisposes the focus of everyday theory away from conventionally female concerns (15). The locale chosen for exploring the everyday - the street, the home, the urban or the suburban - predetermines who will be seen as the subjects of change and disruption. If the middle-class suburbs, coded feminine because of their expressed interest in the nuclear family home and the perception of greater physical safety, are excluded from the everyday, is the everyday itself coded masculine? Laurie Langbauer argues that Lefebvre, at least, would have to answer in the affirmative. According to Langbauer, Lefebvre isolates women as the indoctrinators who teach their subjects not to contest the everyday (51). When Lefebvre does mention women, it is generally to confirm their inability to contribute to the necessary critique of everyday life: “Because of their position in everyday life – which is specifically part of everyday life and modernity – they are incapable of understanding it” (1984, 73).9 Spaces in which women could be subjects who find flashes of potential change
Annie Ernaux’s *Journaux extimes* in everyday life are negated because women essentially *are* everyday life. The difficulty inherent in a woman enacting the same sort of “roaming” critique is detailed by Janet Wolff in her article, “The Invisible Flâneuse.” Wolff, like Adler, critiques the lineage of the flâneur and argues that lack of the right to appear alone and unmolested in public precludes the possibility of a flâneuse (41).

A serendipitous illustration of the improbability of what Janet Wolff terms the flâneuse is the opening scene of Erich Rohmer’s 1987 film, *L’Ami de mon amie*. I say “serendipitous” because the scene not only mocks the possibility of a female flâneuse, but it is also set in Ernaux’s new town, Cergy-Pontoise. In the film’s opening scene Blanche is having lunch by herself at a cafeteria when Lea introduces herself and asks if she may join her. “If I sit by myself,” Lea explains, “some jerk will always come along and try to pick me up.” Lea is not allowed the protection of anonymity, and must take precautions that foreclose the freedom of solitude. Ernaux’s own fears of being a woman out alone are vivid in the following brief but complete journal entry: “As I leave the elevator in the underground garage, third level down, I am greeted by the rumble of the air extractors. Nobody would hear a woman scream if she was being raped” (E 25-26).

**The Non-Abstract, Always Unique Moment of Bodily Memory**

The fear of rape that arises when alone in a dark maze-like space is just one instance of the many visceral responses that characterize Ernaux’s thoughts. When she writes that strangers whose path we cross just once “reveal our true selves by the interest, the anger or the shame that they send *rippling* through us” she creates a complex economy of permeability (E 7, emphasis in the original). The boundaries separating one self from another are softened by the ripples that go “through us” and our responses to the surrounding environment are cast as simultaneously sensual, emotional and cognitive. Ernaux’s focus upon the physical responses of attraction, repulsion and fear is termed “social memory at the level of the body” by Michael Sheringham in his article “Cultural Memory and the Everyday” (47). Taking *Journal du dehors* as an example of how cultural memory operates through bodily experience, Sheringham describes how the act of remembrance occurs when “just the right bit of information” provides an insight that calls forth a memory that had not previously existed in that precise state. “Always one-off, enunciation is performative: it arises in and impacts on a specific situation (the *énoncé* has to be understood in its context); its sphere of operation is the singular occasion, and it is therefore linked to the body’s presence in the act of
utterance" (ibid.). Ernaux herself voices a similar understanding of the workings of memory in L’écriture comme un couteau: “J’ai insisté sur le fait qu’il y a toujours un détail qui ‘crispe’ le souvenir, qui provoque cet arrêt sur image, la sensation et tout ce qu’elle déclenche” (42). Memory, which compels Ernaux to record certain experiences, is an unsystematic faculty whose uniqueness is grounded by the physical presence of a particular body in a particular moment. The choppy unevenness of the journal entries is a reflection of the uniqueness of these flashes of insight that occur under a fleeting and singular alignment of circumstances. Irreducible difference, grounded in bodily experience, appears to resist conformity to an abstract template.

The physical experience of memory may or may not occur within the parameters of one individual’s sensory perception, but the alignment that precipitates the intensity of the moment is inherently social. For Ernaux and Sheringham, the non-systematic and bodily nature of social memory is predicated upon an openness towards the other. If we understand being in public as a process of divulging and intercepting intimate feelings, then the public becomes shot through with the private. The border delineating the private from the public does not completely crumble, but its porosity is by no means uniform; feelings ripple through us across the public/private schism at some times more than others. And the moments of heightened porosity are those in which memories are likely to be forged. A quote from Rousseau that serves as the epigraph to Journal du dehors articulates this radical openness: “Le vrai moi n’est pas entier en nous” [the true self is not complete within ourselves]. De Certeau echoes Rousseau’s emphasis on the necessity of the other in the creation of memory, and likens birds that lay their eggs in others’ nests to memory that “produces in a place that does not belong to it” (quoted in Sheringham 49). It is with this sentiment of belonging to hitherto unvisited places and identities that Ernaux concludes Journal du dehors:

On other occasions, a woman waiting at a check-out desk would remind me of my mother because of the way she moved or spoke. So it is outside my own life that my past existence lies: in passengers commuting on the subway or the RER; in shoppers glimpsed on escalators at Auchan or in the Galéries Lafayette; in complete strangers who cannot know that they possess part of my story; in faces and bodies which I shall never see again. In the same way, I myself, anonymous among the bustling crowds on streets and in department stores, must secretly play a role in the lives of others. (E 95)

Like de Certeau, who finds personal alteration inseparable from the mobilization of memory, Ernaux experiences the reconstitution of her own self as she pursues the memories of others. Trying for a few concentrated moments to look at each person who passes her, Ernaux
Annie Ernaux’s *Journaux extimes* feels close to their existence and recognizes the potential for self-transformation that this process holds: “Si je poursuivais une telle expérience ma vision du monde et moi-même s’en trouverait radicalement changée. Peut-être n’aurais-je plus de moi” (LVE 26). Without this sense of permeability between the anonymous public and her private self Ernaux would not be led to ask, as she frequently does, “Why am I not that woman?”(E 32).

Ernaux confuses the distinction between public and private by maintaining the conventions of an intimate journal—writing disconnected entries of varying length—while focusing on strangers and the experiences of people in distant places. She thus enacts the traversing of public and private lines that are fundamental to her creation of memory. The “crispe” of “un détail qui ‘crispe’ le souvenir” provides the necessary tension to propel movement across the personal and the social, and is experienced, at some level, bodily. Other contemporary French writers, two of whom I will discuss below, similarly confound conventions of intimacy with the observation of strangers, but Ernaux’s focus upon the role of the body in traversing these overlapping realms allows us to access a far greater degree of intersubjectivity than is imagined in the other texts. Indeed, an Ernaux-ian twist to the epigraph by Rousseau might be “Our true body is not entirely in us.”

**Bridging the Public and Private: The Body and Shame**

The troubling of the distinction between the personal and the public that is the energy source of Ernaux’s *journaux extimes* enjoys a special relationship to the emotion of shame.11 Only rarely is the personal pronoun “I” employed in the journals, and when it is used, it is often with a self-conscious attempt to complicate its uni-directionality.12 In an entry that centers around buying a copy of *Marie Claire* and the possible immaturity of believing in the romantic horoscope therein, Ernaux explains her decision to use *I* as opposed to a he/she by stating that *I* refers to the reader as well: “‘I’ shames the reader,” she concludes (E 17). *I* not only refers to the writing narrator, but also to the reader who says “I” in the act of reading. Here, it is the emotion of shame that emphasizes the interrelatedness of the writer and the reader.

Shame again emerges as a dominant response when Ernaux describes how personal feelings are revealed in public settings:

> I believe that desire, frustration, and social and cultural inequality are reflected in the way we examine the contents of our shopping cart or in the words we use to order a cut of beef or to pay tribute to a painting; that the violence and shame inherent in society can be found in the contempt a customer shows for a cashier or in the vagrant begging for money who is shunned by his peers... (E 7)

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“L’intime est encore et toujours du social,” Ernaux explains in *L’écriture comme un couteau,* “parce qu’un moi pur où les autres, les lois, l’histoire ne seraient pas présents est inconcevable” (152). Ernaux gives as an example the myriad public factors – legal codes, political discourse, economic realities – that combined to produce the intimate experience of having a *sonde* inserted in her vagina in order to complete an abortion in the early 1960s (152-153). “Intimate” moments such as these, when the public and private collapse into each other are the moments that both expose the self and provide a catalyst for memory. “I am visited by people and their lives,” Ernaux writes, “like a whore,” (E 62) suggesting that our interrelatedness is always charged, physical, and somehow shameful.

Without the immediate presence of the body, Ernaux implies, it is not possible to feel shame. She mocks “certain intellectuals” who claim that the French public is filled with shame for having done nothing to help those suffering in Sarajevo. “Ils se trompent,” she responds, “la réalité lointaine ne fait pas honte” (LVE 39). A man, however, leaning against a subway wall with his fly down is a “sight that stamps out everything else” (E 32). Two short entries later, Ernaux writes of her own experience of exposure at the outpatient ward of a hospital. Here, patients are filed into cubicles —“A, B, and C,” she tells us, emphasizing the feeling of inhumanity in this “non-place”—and instructed to disrobe in preparation for the doctor’s visit. Freezing before stepping out into the brightly-lit room in her panties, Ernaux compares herself to the “hens who huddle together at the back of the room when the door is flung open” (E 34). Visually these two descriptions of unwilling nudity face one another across the page, heightening the connection between shame and the body in public.

*Shame* is the title of Ernaux’s 1997 semi-autobiographical fiction that explores the adolescence of a young girl in a poor Norman town. Like the author herself, the novel’s narrator was sent by her working-class parents to a private school populated by girls from affluent households. The young narrator’s humiliation increases as she begins to see her own petit-bourgeois home through the lens of the middle class. The reader is encouraged to believe that the event that initiates the narrative is the attempted murder of the narrator’s mother by her father. But another significant catalyst is the young girl’s memory of coming home one night with several classmates and having her mother greet them at the door with a urine stain on her nightgown (92).

The public display of bodily fluids plays a structural role in Ernaux’s *jouremaux extimes.* The opening entry of *Journal du dehors* and the concluding entry of *La Vie extérieure* bear a striking similarity. They both feature women, in public, with bloodstains on the lower half of their bodies. In
Journal du dehors the stain is not explicitly identified as menstrual blood, but is associated with something hidden and scandalous. A woman is carried on a stretcher across the marketplace by two firemen: “A blanket concealed her legs and half her body. A little girl said to another, ‘There was blood on her sheet.’ But there was no sheet” (E 11-12). The choice of the verb “concealed” (cachait) to describe the role of the blanket calls forth its opposite, “reveal,” in a way that a blanket “placed” would not. The choice of “conceal” draws attention to the thin line that protects her from public, unwilled exposure as she is carried through “people rushing to shop at Franprix.” And if there is no sheet at all, why does a little girl say “there was blood on her sheet”? Might this be indicative of anxieties about her own looming puberty?

The positioning of this episode within the journal’s first entry also bears contemplating. The first paragraph of this opening entry describes graffiti on the wall of the train station. This description clearly establishes the anonymes as the subjects of the book. What, then, does positioning in the opening entry a female-to-female discourse on non-visible blood establish for the reader? Citing the description of Ernaux’s own abortion in *Les Armoires vides* (1973) Carol Sanders states that Ernaux tries to write the previously “unmentionable aspects of women’s lives” (23). This willingness to focus her attention on aspects of life generally considered not worthy of attention is precisely what Ernaux is establishing by recording the work of anonymous graffiti writers, followed by allusions to a possibly trivial, but common, concern – “Have I spotted?”

The image of menstrual blood gains more significance in the final entry of *La Vie extérieure*, where Ernaux describes the scene that crowds of commuters at the Cergy train station would have seen on November 4, 1999. A large poster of a man and woman embracing is about to be torn down to make way for renovation. Both are dressed in the “cool” style of the 1970s, and the bottom buttons on the woman’s dress are undone, revealing her bare legs. “Sur la robe, à l’endroit supposé de sexe, quelqu’un a lancé de la peinture rouge qui forme une éclaboussure de sang’ (LVE 131). Here, the implication is clear—the red paint was put exactly at the place where menstrual blood might have been seen, had a few more buttons on the woman’s dress been undone. The most “shameful” unveiling of the workings of the female body—menstrual stains—are emblazoned on the larger-than-life image of a woman frozen in public view. The entry that first begins these journals in 1985 places a woman’s concealed and exposed body amidst the anonymity of modern life in the same way that the final scene in 1999, with throngs of commuters passing by the vandalized poster, fixes a female body in a modern crowd.
Fantasy in Media: Public Screening of the Private, or Private Screening of the Public?

When Ernaux focuses on media coverage, her attention is consistently drawn to accounts of personal violation that engender communal glee. Looking at some of the sources she references will elucidate how her memories interact with, or create, the various historic “events” she describes. Although she is self-consciously looking outside herself rather than to herself for her insights, clearly Ernaux is choosing which scenes to record and how to arrange them. Her selection of media references is influenced by her own interest in the emotions generated by the unwilling exposure of the private in the public sphere. The two articles dealing specifically with female sexuality and physical violation that are referenced in Journal du dehors, “Un Musée Marcos à Manille,” and “L’Excision ritualisée,” detail the public treatment of such private matters as a woman’s lingerie and a young girl’s genitalia.

The earlier entry, “Un Musée Marcos à Manille,” describes the opening of the Marcos’s mansion to the public directly after Marcos was ousted from power (Le Monde 16 March 1986). Filipinos from an infamously poor area are bussed in to be the first witnesses to the exposed decadence and frivolity of the Marcos regime. The author of the newspaper article, Philippe Pons, focuses on their interest in Imelda’s boudoir and her undergarments. More than the extravagance of the political halls “c’est l’intimité d’Imelda qui attire les visiteurs.” Ernaux’s retelling retains the same focus, though her statement is more categorical and specific: “The attention of the men and women who visit the ‘museum’ focuses first, and almost exclusively, on the silk underwear of Imelda, the wife of President Marcos” (E 21). Pons writes that “La reine est nue,” though Imelda was not a queen, and equates Imelda with Marie Antoinette. Ernaux’s language is far less metaphorical, and rather than describing Imelda as “dépossédée même de son intimité” Ernaux writes that “The revolution in this country ends there – in the sexual trappings of a woman, who moreover was hated” (E 21). Instead of an analogy to a vanquished queen of the past, we have the flat statement that Imelda was “hated.” Instead of “her own intimacy,” we have the explicit adjective “sexual.”

The power of Ernaux’s far less lyrical account lies in its brutal simplicity. What, she seems to ask, is so revolutionary about publicly vilifying the sexuality of a woman? Absent from Pons’s account is a similar comment about the limitations of the revolution; his account is more focused on the individual, Imelda Marcos, and less applied to women in general.

Interestingly, both Pons and Ernaux conclude with fantastic projections. Pons writes of visitors spreading rumors that they have
seen illicit videos in which Imelda stars, and that they have found sexual
talisman underneath her bed. While Pons’s final sentence, cited above,
leaves the reader with the sentiment of sorrow for the denuded queen,
Ernaux leaves the reader with a speculation about the thoughts of the
museum-going public. She surmises that after examining the numerous
undergarments, “the women dream of wearing them, the men of jerking
off inside them” (E 21). Ernaux tries to erase the distance between the
objective account of the visitors attending the museum and the thoughts
and feelings experienced by the visitors in that particular moment. In so
doing, she identifies sexual fantasy as an integral component of the
everyday.

Likewise, Ernaux’s account of “L’Excision ritualisée” is focused on the
thoughts and emotions of those participating in a spectacle (Le Monde 6
March 1986). In this case, the spectacle is that of a young girl being held
down and having her legs pried open as a group of women excise her
clitoris. While the article in Le Monde provides a lengthy overview of the
current status of sexual mutilation in Africa, it is the italicized first-
hand account, comprising less than one-fifth of the entire article, that
Ernaux draws upon in her own entry. She allows no room for abstraction,
and begins with the sentence “The little girl is seated in a chair.” Ernaux
strays from the contents of the first-hand account only when she writes
“the matriarch in charge of the excision slices off the clitoris with a knife,
or a shard of glass” (E 39). Le Monde’s first-hand account does not contain
a shard of glass, but elsewhere in its third-person analysis of sexual
mutilation glass is mentioned. In this case, Ernaux used information
available in the general analysis in order to strengthen the account of the
particular lived experience. The inclusion of “or a shard of glass” allows
Ernaux to accentuate the violence and danger of the act of excision. More
striking, however, is the artistic license taken with the thoughts of those
performing the excision. The first-hand account in Le Monde does not give
any voice to the women assembled there. Ernaux, however, defines their
emotional state: “Women castrators, happy to perpetuate their condition
of excised women. Devoted fairies gathered around the open belly,
prematurely tearing out the moans of pleasure in an initial scream of
pain” (E 39). Although later in the analysis there is the recognition that
there are African women who are fighting to maintain what they see as
their right to excision, neither their “happiness” nor their “devotion” is
directly articulated in the Le Monde account.

Ernaux’s move here is similar to the one in her retelling of the “Musée
Marcos à Manille” when she described what she envisioned going on in
the minds of the spectators. In both of these entries Ernaux strays furthest
from the original articles when describing the consciousness of the parties to the spectacle who are neither victims nor master orchestrators. Significantly, it is not the experience of the young girl or the exposed Imelda Marcos that Ernaux chooses to explore, but the complicity and glee of the spectators. Ultimately, it is the experience of Ernaux’s everyday that the reader encounters. And the banal and ephemeral thoughts that comprise this complex fabric are often focused upon the body as it is experienced or imagined in a public setting.

Ernaux’s *Journaux Extimes* and Everyday Writing of the 1990s

This consistent focus upon physicality sets Ernaux’s everyday writings apart from those of several other contemporary French writers of the everyday. François Maspero’s *Les Passagers du Roissy-Express* (1990) and Jean Rolin’s *Zones* (1995), in particular, share certain similarities with Ernaux’s *journaux extimes*.17 *Les Passagers* and *Zones* are concerned with the people and places of urban and suburban Paris that do not make it into the tour guides. Maspero writes that the desire to carry out his idea of a one-month trip on the publicly forsaken Line B of the RER was provoked by his friends’ disdainful reaction when he suggested that locally overlooked areas might be of interest to travelers. Thus the focus is on noting the un-noted. Also in keeping with Ernaux’s journals is the way in which immediate experience is privileged over conclusions that have been abstracted from data. Maspero and Rolin draw upon their own direct experiences of these places and the people who inhabit them.

Yet Maspero’s and Rolin’s works have more in common with one another than with Ernaux’s *Journaux*. Writing from the sites of her daily routine, Ernaux is never displaced. She would not describe her comings and goings as “ce voyage sans destination” (Rolin, 35), because she does not set out to travel into previously uncharted territory. It is not only the intentionality of their voyages that set Maspero and Rolin apart from Ernaux; it is also their use of dissimulation that results in a clearer distinction between self and other. Rolin creates a sense of voyeurism when he tries to keep “une jeune fille maigrichonne” in sight on a parallel subway. He foregrounds the distinction between observer and observed when describing one of his nightly walks: “Je feignais d’étudier tout en surveillant le type…” (39).18 Likewise, when Maspero and his companion are asked by residents about their professions, they hide the fact that they are a journalist and a photographer, but instead answer “traducteur” and “démonstratrice dans les grands super-marchés” (128). And indeed, in their distant pats they had both done the type of work
they claimed. However, the intent to conceal the professions pertinent to their presence in the suburbs is clear. Whereas Ernaux reiterates the theme of her epigraph “Notre moi n’est pas entier de nous” throughout her journals, a similar awareness of a mutually constituted self and other is not present in Maspero’s and Rolin’s works, where the very set-up foregrounds the distance between observer and observed.

Ernaux emotionally responds to “those who have crossed her path just once” and finds herself altered by these experiences. She foregrounds the continuity between the self and the other when she identifies communal social codes and dwells upon vulnerable bodies, including her own. By contrast, Maspero and Rolin, who manipulate their identities in order to facilitate surveillance, seem to leave behind both their homes and their bodies. Despite their nightly changing of hotels and their daily wanderings in unknown areas, they both appear remarkably safe. Violence, fear of unwanted exposure, sexual fantasies, and physical grooming—bodily concerns that have a strong presence in Ernaux’s journals—surface only rarely in *Zones* and *Les Passagers du Roissy-Express*.

**Do New Towns have an Everyday?**

While Rolin bemoans the media’s criminalization of his site (55), media coverage of Ernaux’s new town from the same period focuses on styles of architecture and infra-structural advancements. “La voie royale de Cergy-Pontoise” (*Le Monde* 17 January 1986), discusses the complex fusion of building styles and points out the accessibility of scenic spots for leisure. Cergy-Pontoise—and the older town of Cergy in particular—is by no means devoid of a history of crime and poverty. But it is the centrally planned elements of the new town—uniformity and lack of historical aging—that Ernaux interacts with most closely in her *journaux extimes*. Guy Debord, however, writes that the motto of the new towns might well be “Nothing will ever happen here – and nothing ever has” (126) and according to Henri Lefebvre, the vacuousness of the new towns is apparent in their utter readability. “Everything is clear and intelligible. Everything is trivial…the text of the town is totally legible” (1995, 119). For both Debord and Lefebvre the new town epitomizes the principles of abstraction and separation that dominate the age of capitalism. The survival of polytheistic practices that makes the city so compelling for de Certeau have been nullified by central planning. Similar to the division of labor on the assembly line, everything that can be divided in the new town has been so: theoretically, culture is performed at the Cultural Center, information is sought at the Bureau of Information, and shopping
is done at the shopping mall. “All those things which have made up the interwoven texture of the spontaneous places of social living since the Neolithic age,” writes Lefebvre of the new town, “have been hurled into time and space” (122).

The previously-mentioned Eric Rohmer film *L’Ami de mon amie* (1987), set in Cergy-Pontoise, provides a visual interpretation of the *ville nouvelle* that supports the views of Debord and Lefebvre. The main character, Blanche, is a bureaucrat at the local Ministry of Culture, highlighting the separation and abstraction (here in the field of art) that Lefebvre and Debord find so deadening in the new town. The preponderance of sites of leisure—swimming pool, tennis courts, artificial lake—showcase the continuum of alienation that Lefebvre locates in neatly separated leisure activities (1991, 33). Indeed, the lake on which Blanche and Fabian windsurf is so placid and bereft of movement that it mocks the possibility of the vivid sensations necessary for Lefebvre’s moments of “immanent critique of everyday life” (Highmore 141). In a scene where Blanche and Fabian repeatedly run into one another, the circularity of the new town’s planned walking paths, the “systems of compulsion” that for Lefebvre are brought about by such flat readability (1984, 62), preclude the potential for identification that de Certeau locates in the “enunciative act” of walking the city. Debord’s insistence that “nothing ever happens” in this space broken off from historical time, and Lefebvre’s verdict of “triviality,” are perhaps most exemplified in the concluding shot of the film. Here, the four main characters, who have just rearranged themselves into two newly formed couples, are clad in colors that suggest a future re-arrangement of the romantic pairs (Aumont 366, Magny 42-44). The two characters in blue, for example, are currently in different couples, but might be best grouped together at some later date. The potentially passionate plot of the film, which revolves around romantic intrigue and betrayal, is belittled by the final scene, which foregrounds the utter exchangeability of characters and the simple legibility of the signals of color.

Does Ernaux’s experience of the same new town coincide with Rohmer’s cinematic interpretation or the general critiques of Debord and Lefebvre? She certainly feels a similar sense of spatial alienation in the town where, after twelve years, she is still unable to find her way around (E 56). Her description of one sunny March morning does not speak of warm familiarity: “No density. Just shadows and light—the parking lots blacker than ever, the dazzling concrete. A one-dimensional place” (E 41). There is no hint of an appealing “character” in her descriptions of Cergy-Pontoise. The choice of the sites she describes most
Annie Ernaux’s *Journaux extimes* frequently – parking lots, shopping malls, highways, commuter trains - defies late twentieth-century notions of “mystique” or “charm.” Yet, Ernaux *likes* the new town. Though she first felt she was in some “no man’s land” where all she saw was “the concrete facades, pink or blue, and the empty residential avenues,” she gradually began to enjoy living in “a cosmopolitan district, in the midst of lives started elsewhere” (E 5-6). She appreciates the cultural diversity of the immigrant populations it attracts, and she enjoys the anonymity the new town affords her. Whereas her feelings about her hometown of Yvetot are laden with memories of a censorious mother and the self-consciousness of having straddled socio-economic classes, she seems to find solace and acceptance in her more anonymous new surroundings. For Ernaux, the break with her own particular history does not present an insurmountable problem, nor does it render the daily life of her new town event-less, as it does for Debord, or “trivial,” as it does for Lefebvre. Lefebvre might bemoan the loss of “surprise” in the new towns (1962, 122), but Ernaux is able to experience there the flashes of inspired critique that fuel Lefebvre’s account of everyday life and modernity.

Largely situated in a new town, *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* are comprised of Lefebvre’s “moments” in which fleeting but vivid sensations “promise the possibility of a different daily life, while at the same time puncturing the continuum of the present” (Highmore 116). When Ernaux sees the parking lot attendant elsewhere, cracking jokes and shopping with his girlfriend, she also sees the emotions and desires of a man whom she had only before seen at work with a bored expression on his face (E 49). When she overhears a father sharply tell his daughter to pull down her skirt and sees the mother ignore the sexual implications of the father’s words, the recording of this non-action suggests the possibility of an alternative action (LVE 10). Numerous examples of these moments are found in Ernaux’s *journaux extimes*, and many of them occur in the new town. A site that has been dismissed as “outside of history” by much theory of the everyday is, for Ernaux, rich with insight and revelation.

**Conclusion: Ernaux’s Expanded Everyday**

Multiple factors combine to make the ex-urban environment of Cergy-Pontoise a worthy site of the literary everyday for Ernaux. Intensely aware of class distinctions and wary of an aesthetic sensibility that champions the impoverished while ridiculing aspirations to middle class comfort, Ernaux is not interested in condemning vast sectors of the population to permanent tackiness and false consciousness. But
demographics are not the only factor influencing Ernaux’s chosen venue. Her cultural memory is an embodied mental process that privileges the physical presence of other people more than it demands a specific set of architectural and social structures. This heightened sense of permeability has Ernaux describing lived occasions through her own fantasy of the consciousness of others. Attention to the thoughts of others, however fantastic, creates a space in which different experiences can be pondered. The temporary alignment of circumstances creates unique moments that give access, in Sheringham’s words, “to a space that is not psychological (personal history) or ideological (official narrative) but lived experience at the level of the body, which gestures the exploration of personal and communal space” (54). Ernaux’s attention to the physicality of herself and those around her, and to the role of the body in creating memory, allows for charged experiences of personal alteration, regardless of the surrounding aesthetic environment.

Ernaux’s contributions to the writing of the everyday are her way of refusing to adhere to the pre-existing definitions of what constitutes the everyday. She sees no need to excise the physical issues of vulnerability, desire and shame that loom so large in the daily negotiation between self—or selves—and the other. Ernaux’s irreverence toward the implicit guidelines of artistic appropriateness is well expressed in a flash of insight that combines elements of suburban life with sexual fantasy:

\[
\text{Voir écrit PARIS sur fond bleu, juste au moment où j’empruntais la voie qui mène sur l’autoroute A15, m’a brusquement rempli d’étonnement, de bonheur. Pour la première fois, je lisais ce nom sur le panneau avec l’imagination de mes quinze ans, quand je n’étais jamais encore allée à Paris, que cette ville était un rêve. Instant rare, où la sensation du passé revient dans le présent, se superpose à lui. Comme en faisant l’amour, quand tous les hommes passés et celui qui est là n’en font qu’un. (LVE 27-28).}
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Here, en route from Cergy-Pontoise, Ernaux exalts not the picturesque spires of the Parisian skyline, but the word “Paris” printed in blue on a government-issued traffic sign. Neither the automobile nor the suburban highway is a conventional trope of the literary tradition of the everyday, yet in describing a moment of deep feeling, it is among these that Ernaux situates herself. And in elaborating upon that moment, she again reaches beyond the accepted conventions of the everyday and explicitly expresses the subjective position of a sexually desiring woman.

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Notes
1. While Journal du dehors (JDD) and La Vie extérieure (LVE) are two separate books, for the purpose of this essay I view them as one entity. The lack of an epigraph in LVE, an exception among Ernaux’s books, suggests the applicability of the epigraph in JDD to LVE. JDD’s epigraph is a quote from Rousseau, “Le vrai moi n’est pas entier de nous.”
2. Quotations from the original are referenced as JDD; quotations from the English translation, titled Exteriors, are referred to as E. Ernaux added a prologue to Exteriors that does not appear in the French original. La Vie extérieure, hereafter referred to as LVE, has not been translated into English.
3. The subtitle to the review of Journal du dehors in Le Monde reads “journal du dehors est le contraire d’un journal intime” (Savigneau 25). Some critics, such as Lawrenve Mall in “L’Ethnotexte de la Banlieue,” argue that despite the focus on people that she does not personally know, Journals du Dehors is not truly a journal extime because ultimately it is Ernaux who is revealed here (Mall 134). Ernaux, herself, agrees with this sentiment (E 9).
4. The “grandfather of the everyday” Henri Lefebvre (Conley 75) opens Everyday Life in the Modern World by asking the reader to try to reconstruct a random day from the past fifty years. Any attempt to learn about this “particular day amongst so many others in a relatively peaceful and prosperous year” will not, Lefebvre predicts, produce “much information as to the manner in which ordinary men and women spent that day, their occupations, preoccupations, labors and leisure” (1). These particular practices of everyday life, whose transience and invisibility Lefebvre bemoans, are precisely what Ernaux hopes to capture.
5. The experience of fear, physical pain and discomfort is a dominant theme of literature of witness, among whose works Ernaux’s writings can also be situated. Recent literary works of witness have broadened an earlier focus on acts and policies explicitly carried out by a repressive state to now include diffuse social and cultural, as well as political, machinations. Two conferences dealing with literature and witnessing, taking place twelve years apart, illustrate this shift; “Littérature du Témoignage” at the Université d’Angers in 1992 dealt almost exclusively with traumas produced by totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe; in 2004 at Université de Paris II, “Littérature, fiction, Témoignage, Vérité” included papers on the AIDS crisis, post-colonial Africa, and “l’oeuvre auto-sociobiographique d’Annie Ernaux.” Ernaux’s interest in clochards, pickpockets and bored employees, her attention to the fragility of the human body, and the vantage point gained from having moved between social classes herself, make her writings a type of witness. Situating her work in the litera-
ture of witness would draw valuable issues to the fore, such as the ethical responsibilities and limitations of speaking for others, the role of the creative act within witness, and the question of appropriate action. For the purposes of this paper, however, my placement of Ernaux within the tradition of the everyday allows me to look at how the banal illuminates social structures, and the ways in which the body receives and produces a multiplicity of signals involved in this process. Ultimately, I am interested in troubling, rather than accentuating, the distance between the self and the other.

6. Ernaux has stated that she does not need the stimulation of travel in order to observe everyday life (Ionesco 936).

7. In response to the postwar economic boon and population increase, the Schéma Directeur, a plan of decentralization and regional development which included Parisian new towns, was ratified in 1965. Urbanized regions that might incorporate several existing towns, were consolidated into administrative units whose central planning was largely carried out by governmental agencies. Located 25 kilometers northwest of Paris, Cergy-Pontoise was the first of the Parisian new towns (Evenson 344-355).

8. The most frequently cited chapter of de Certeau's The Practice of Everyday Life is his chapter “Walking the City.”

9. This formula of women being the ground upon which articulation takes place brings to mind Luce Irigaray's critique of Plato, in which she identifies the “cave” as the necessary ground of articulation that can be entered, but can not itself enter. The ban against semblance between the grounds of possibility for articulation and articulation itself, means that the “cave”—the feminine in Irigaray's view—is permanently excluded from articulation (168-179).

10. I will return to L’Ami de mon amie when I turn to the perception of the ville nouvelle within everyday discourse. Interestingly, while the flâneur is indirectly critiqued, the cultural irrelevance of the new town, I argue, is corroborated in Rohmer's film.

11. I use the verb “enjoy” here with a nod towards Slavoj Žižek's understanding of the term “enjoyment,” which for him is neither chosen nor pleasurable, but is, rather, compelled and obscene. Obscene because it is the manifestation of the real—an inexpugnable lack that threatens all attempts at consistency—and as such escapes language (Žižek 164). Subjects of the symbolic order do not have direct access to the Real, but a remainder, a surplus of the Real (“surplus enjoyment”) permeates all our symbolic institutions and manifests itself as their obscene undersides. While Žižek and Ernaux do not partake of the same theoretical framework, it is interesting to note Ernaux's compulsive exploration of the theme of shame, often located within the body and not fully articulated in language.

12. Monika Boehringer argues that the ‘je’ in Journal du dehors is “transpersonnel” and therefore multivocal (138).

13. The anxiety that lies behind this concern is demonstrated by the extent to which the bleached whiteness of menstrual products and promises of “not showing” dominate the advertisements of the feminine hygiene industry.

14. Lyn Thomas makes the observation that Journal du dehors stands out in Ernaux's work for being the text that deals most with race because it is a text that focuses on others. When Ernaux is the primary subject of her own texts class and sex play key roles in the formation of identity, but when the focus is not so fully upon herself, as in her “journal of the outside,” race also becomes a factor (78).

15. Locating the newspaper articles – which do not appear in Journal du dehors – was time-consuming because their appearance in Ernaux’s entries is out of sequence with their publication in Le Monde. “Un Musée Marcos à Manille,” published March 16, 1986, comes 24 entries before her entry on “L’Excision ritualisée,” published 10 days before the Morcos article. While the journal entries are not systematically dated,
none of the scattered date markers are out of chronological order, suggesting that the entries are in chronological order.

16. “L’action la plus remarquable est celle des intéressées elles-mêmes, les femmes africaines, qui luttent pour ce qu’elles considèrent comme leurs droits fondamentaux et ceux de leurs enfants” (Le Monde 6, March 1986).

17. Patrice Lelorain’s Paris section urbaine (1996) could also be placed in a similar dialogue with Ernaux’s journals. It is simply for space considerations that I have not included this work.

18. Curiously, the sentence ‘Je feignais d’étudier...’ belongs to the passage that Gallimard chose to place on the back book jacket. There, however, this sentence – and this sentence alone – is removed via ellipsis. Removing this indication of active deception allows Gallimard to present Rolin’s project of writing about the overlooked parts of Paris as though his own body were not a mediating factor, as though it were possible for Rolin to be simply a fly on the wall.

19. Unlike Debord, who is unequivocal in his dismissal of new towns, Lefebvre is willing to entertain the idea the new town is a necessary form of social experimentation “where at last men are able to conquer and control their everyday lives” (1962, 125). “Socialism or supercapitalism?” Lefebvre wonders about the new town, “The city of joy or the world of unredeemable boredom?” (119).

20. Ernaux is acerbic in her response to social historian Jacques Le Goff’s article in Libération in which he writes “The subway is quite a curiosity.” “Would the people who commute every day feel the same way about the Collège de France?” she asks (E 41). Asked by Claire-Lise Tondeur why she focuses so much upon alcoholics and tramps, Ernaux responded by drawing a distinction between the poor of her childhood and intellectuals such as Le Goff: “…Ces gens, ils sont proches de moi. Je ne suis pas proche de Le Goff, de l’écrivain dont je parle dans Journal du dehors ou d’un directeur de galerie. Pourquoi? Parce que l’enfance est plus forte que tout” (Tondeur, 37-44).