

Milo Sweedler. *The Dismembered Community: Bataille, Blanchot, Leiris, and the Remains of Laure*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2009. 214 pp.

Colette Peignot, whose writing became known under the pseudonym Laure, died in 1938 at the age of thirty-five. Before her death, she had participated in the early 1930s in the Cercle Communiste Démocratique, making multiple contributions to journals such as *La Critique sociale* and *Le Travailleur communiste syndical et coopératif*. Later she became involved with Georges Bataille, both sexually and intellectually, and was associated with the projects in which he was engaged in the 1930s (particularly the Collège de Sociologie and Acéphale). Her greatest impact on this milieu is to be seen in a number of posthumous publications that reflect the reciprocal influences between her thinking and those of Bataille and Michel Leiris, among others. Her death was a significant blow to Bataille, and the scene of her death appears in dramatized form not only in Bataille's writing, but also in a fictionalized but recognizable form in Maurice Blanchot's narrative *L'arrêt de mort*. Her spectral presence was also brought to life in the form of her literary legacy by Bataille and Leiris, who published the first posthumous writings by Laure—a name none of her previous publications bore. Moreover, her haunting survival can be read in other texts by them as well, as it can in Blanchot's later writings that refer by name to this intriguing figure, whose elusiveness is in part a function of the erasure called for by Blanchot himself.

In tracing this complex set of relations, Milo Sweedler implicitly likens himself to a “cryptographer” (19) setting out to decipher key aspects of the work of the three male authors who simultaneously name and encrypt, efface and project, the figure of Laure. *The Dismembered Community* shows in convincing detail that, in a first phase (roughly 1934-39), the social, intellectual, and textual triangle made up of Laure, Bataille, and Leiris constitutes a moment of tremendous importance at a crucial juncture of French intellectual history. Blanchot, for his part, makes his entrance slightly later, in 1940, when he and Bataille first meet. He plays a more negative role in subsequent years, attempting, Sweedler argues, to expunge Laure as a significant influence on Bataille's thinking on community. But it is also the case that Bataille himself expunged her name from his own published writings.

The Dismembered Community attempts to restore Peignot's place within this biographical, cultural, and intellectual context. Sweedler does this by reading texts by Laure, especially “Le sacré” and “L'histoire d'une petite fille,” which make up what he calls an “Autohagiography” (the title of the first chapter): a meditation on the sacred and “communication” that gives these experiences an inherently autobiographical dimension. He also details the posthumous construction of Laure under a multivalent name “that situates her,” as Sweedler

writes in the Conclusion, “by way of the heterogeneous traditions associated with Petrarch and Sade, in relation to the sublime and the ignominious” (173). Bataille's partial transposition of Laure into the character Dirty in *Le bleu du ciel* bears witness to this double aspect. With respect to Leiris, Sweedler documents Laure's objections to his conception of “the sacred in everyday life,” which she vindicates, for her part, in terms of nudity: “‘communication’ felt as *nakedness*,” a phrase that appears as a leitmotif in *The Dismembered Community*. At stake throughout is a reflection on the modes and the sites of the sacred—whether bedroom, bathroom, or bullfighting arena—at a time when the question of community was experienced with great urgency, in the face of its absence, decline, or fascistic mobilization. For these authors, such questions were necessarily played out, in part, at the level of interpersonal relationships mediated by reading, writing, and eroticism.

One of the most fascinating moments of this book revolves around a strange rivalry between Blanchot and Laure for Bataille's friendship, a posthumous rivalry pursued by Blanchot decades later. In *La communauté inavouable* (1983), Blanchot writes disparagingly of what he takes to be Laure's dangerous influence on Bataille, insofar as it tempted the latter to link community with “fusion.” Thus would Blanchot reclaim Bataille's friendship for himself, separating it definitively from the false path that had earlier threatened his friend. Blanchot's attempt to expel Laure from the nexus of friendship and community that was played out, historically, socially and textually, over her dead body, together with Bataille's own erasure of Laure's name from his corpus, attest to profound patterns of gendered thinking at the heart of a densely staged experience of eroticism, death, hauntedness, and writing. *The Dismembered Community* does excellent work in bringing out the shape and stakes of this drama.

At another level, one occasionally wishes for more elaboration of the theoretical issues the study touches on, which are numerous and complex. For example, in the convincing demonstration that Bataille's thinking during the war involves a “pathological mourning” for Laure which induced a substantive and productive guilt in Bataille—who then wrote a book called *Le coupable*—Sweedler does not introduce the much recognized psychoanalytic term one would expect, melancholia, though there is ample reason to do so. While he quotes from Freud's “Mourning and Melancholia,” the text is not cited by name, and so this highly relevant topos goes by the wayside, unmentioned. This example shows how the book deals with its theoretical underpinnings in a somewhat glancing fashion that frustrates a desire for a fuller account. Similar points could be made of Sweedler's germane and suggestive references to Jane Gallop and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The swiftly moving treatment of theoretical references is no doubt a consequence of the book's attempt to address its complex topic in several registers at once: as cultural history, as a nexus of intellectual engagement, as a

set of biographical intrigues, and as a complicated play of published, unpublished, revised, uncollected, and (eventually) collected texts. Although less successful on a theoretical level, *The Dismembered Community* provides a richly woven account of the complex intrigue at its center. Readers can be grateful to this study above all for its detailed treatment of this intrigue and for the groundwork it lays for further explorations. Peignot's strangely encrypted place in the occluded heart of one of the most volatile periods of twentieth-century French intellectual history receives here a welcome illumination.

Jeff Fort
University of California, Davis