



*When the Self is transpersonal: writings bequeathed by Annie Ernaux*

## **When the Self is transpersonal: writings bequeathed by Annie Ernaux**

Quando o Eu é transpessoal: escritos legados por Annie Ernaux

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**Resumo:** Este estudo examina o "eu" transpessoal na escrita de Annie Ernaux e seu impacto nas gerações subsequentes de escritores, com foco em *Dix-sept ans* de Colombe Schneck e *Morrer de amor* de Natália Bravo. Ambas as autoras reconhecem o papel fundamental de Ernaux no desencadeamento de suas próprias narrativas, demonstrando a força interpelativa de seu trabalho. Ao analisar como a ênfase de Ernaux na experiência vivida, no meio social e na memória coletiva ressoa nessas distintas vozes literárias, esta pesquisa visa iluminar o cenário em evolução da escrita autobiográfica e seu potencial para mudança política e social.

**Palavras-chave:** Annie Ernaux; Colombe Schneck; Natalia Bravo.

**Abstract:** This study examines the transpersonal "I" in Annie Ernaux's writing and its impact on subsequent generations of writers, focusing on Colombe Schneck's *Dix-sept ans* and Natália Bravo's *Morrer de amor*. Both authors acknowledge Ernaux's pivotal role in triggering their own narratives, demonstrating the interpellative force of her work. By analyzing how Ernaux's emphasis on the lived experience, social milieu, and collective memory resonates in these distinct literary voices, this research aims to illuminate the evolving landscape of autobiographical writing and its potential for political and social change.

**Keywords:** Annie Ernaux; Colombe Schneck; Natalia Bravo.

### **1. Introduction**

Since *La Place* (1983), Annie Ernaux's first openly autobiographical work, the "I" that runs through her novels has been infused with the transpersonal, that is to say it extends beyond (trans) the personal level. Interestingly, it was with a narrative retracing her father's life — the story of "another" and, above all, of a certain social milieu — that Ernaux began using the first-person singular in her novels. *La Place* marked a decisive turning point in Ernaux's literary journey, transitioning from the novelistic style of her earlier works to her "true self" (Ernaux, 2019). This shift did not signify a subjective unveiling but was deeply tied to her auto/social/biographical writing, which, according to

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her, “lies somewhere in-between literature, sociology, and history” (Ernaux, 1987, p. 106). In this sense, the preliminary title that was first considered for *La Place* is particularly telling: “*Éléments pour une ethnographie familiale*,” as it underscores the central role of sociology in Ernaux’s literary endeavor.

In her speech upon receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature (2022), Annie Ernaux elaborated on her understanding of a transpersonal first-person narrative:

[...] the desire to use the “I” — a form that is both masculine and feminine — as an exploratory tool that encapsulates sensations: those repressed by memory and those continually bestowed upon us by the surrounding world, everywhere and at all times [...]. For me, it is not about telling the story of my life or freeing myself from its secrets, but about deciphering a lived situation, an event, a romantic relationship, thereby uncovering something that only writing can bring to light and, perhaps, making it resonate in the consciousness and memories of others [...]. While all experiences are inexorably individual — “it is to me that this is happening” — they can only be universally understood if the “I” of the book becomes, in a sense, transparent, thus allowing the reader’s own “I” to take its place. This “I” should, conceivably, become transpersonal, so that singular experiences reach the universal realm.<sup>2</sup> (Ernaux, 2022)

In becoming “transparent,” Ernaux’s ‘I’ invites readers to share in transpersonal experiences, fostering a powerful sense of relatability. By drawing from the lives and experiences of the oppressed and by incorporating popular discourse as the organic foundation of her narrative aesthetics, Ernaux brings to light those who have been made invisible, thereby producing literature with a distinctly political edge. In *Annie Ernaux et l’émancipation, ou comment trouver sa place*, Françoise Simonet-Tenant points out that Ernaux’s writings promote “a process of political emancipation” (Simonet-Tenant, 2022, p. 240).

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<sup>2</sup> “[...] le désir de me servir du « je » - forme à la fois masculine et féminine - comme un outil exploratoire qui capte les sensations, celles que la mémoire a enfouies, celles que le monde autour ne cesse de nous donner, partout et tout le temps. [...] Il ne s’agit pas pour moi de raconter l’histoire de ma vie ni de me délivrer de ses secrets mais de déchiffrer une situation vécue, un événement, une relation amoureuse, et dévoiler ainsi quelque chose que seule l’écriture peut faire exister et passer, peut-être, dans d’autres consciences, d’autres mémoires. [...] Mais toutes choses étant vécues inexorablement sur le mode individuel – c’est à moi que ça arrive – elles ne peuvent être lues de la même façon, que si le « je » du livre devient, d’une certaine façon, transparent, et que celui du lecteur ou de la lectrice vienne l’occuper. Que ce Je soit en somme transpersonnel, que le singulier atteigne l’universel.” All translations are the author’s own, unless otherwise noted.



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By emphasizing the transpersonal “I” in Ernaux’s writing, in conjunction with its potential for relatability and political resonance, this study aims to highlight the interpellative force her literature exerts on writers across different generations and backgrounds. We will be focusing on works that explicitly acknowledge Ernaux’s pivotal role in triggering off their own narratives. This is evident in *Dix-sept ans* ([2015] 2023) by French writer Colombe Schneck and in *Morrer de amor* (2021) by Brazilian writer Natália Bravo, both of whom have been deeply influenced by Annie Ernaux, as we will examine further below.

## **2. From *L’Événement* to Colombe Schneck’s *Dix-sept ans***

French-Jewish journalist and writer Colombe Schneck has a family history deeply marked by the Shoah and the Nazi Occupation of France during World War II. Since her debut novel, *L’Incredible Monsieur Schneck* (2006), in which she recounts the horrific murder of her paternal grandfather, Schneck has delved into family secrets, as seen in *La Réparation* (2012), and has also addressed taboo subjects, such as her bourgeois origins, in *Deux petites bourgeoises* (2021). Born in 1966 to the intellectual elite of the Parisian left, Schneck grew up in a world vastly different from that of Annie Ernaux.

Originally published in France in 2015, *Dix-sept ans* tells the story of an abortion experienced by the author-narrator in 1984. The procedure had already been made legal in France by then, thanks to the Veil Act, which was signed into law by Simone Veil during her tenure as the country’s Health Minister in 1975.

In the foreword to *Dix-sept ans*, Schneck identifies Annie Ernaux as having triggered her own narrative. The author-narrator states that she felt compelled by *L’Événement* — one of Ernaux’s major works — and regarded both the book and Ernaux’s statements as a personal call to action: “I felt as if Annie Ernaux was speaking directly to me. I needed to talk about what happened in the spring of 1984” (Schneck, 2023, p.12), says the narrator of *Dix-sept ans*.

*L’Événement* plays a central role in Ernaux’s literary journey: it is an account of the clandestine abortion undergone by the author-narrator under very poor conditions in



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the 1960s. Ernaux underscores the significance of the novel, since it delves into a theme that transcends life and death — an experience of profound anguish. The power embedded in the title, “*événement*” in French, marks a turning point: the term “happening” outlines a clear separation between “then” and “now,” carrying decisive weight in one’s very existence. The singular nature of the event is further emphasized by the presence of a definite article.

Unlike Ernaux’s other books, *L’Événement* received little attention upon its initial release in France and was met with a lukewarm or outright negative response. Topics related to the female body are not held in high regard among predominantly male literary critics, and abortion is a particularly unsettling subject. It remains one of the most frequent yet concealed acts in women’s history. The narrator of *Dix-sept ans* states the following:

I listened to Annie Ernaux and what she has to say about silence and the embarrassment that arises when “nothing is won for women,” and yet girls do not take enough action. At a time when legislation on voluntary termination of pregnancy is being highly questioned in Europe, and people continue to discuss the trivialization of abortion — even going so far as to make up the concept of “abortion for convenience” — I feel compelled to share what this “happening” meant and still means to me (Schneck, 2023, pp. 11-12).

Despite the differences between Ernaux’s and Schneck’s experiences with voluntary termination of pregnancy (in French, *interruption volontaire de grossesse* – IVG), Ernaux’s transpersonal “I” has evoked a sense of empathetic relatability in Schneck, serving as a narrative trigger. This type of writing, which addresses that which has been rendered unspeakable and made invisible, is inherently political, as Ernaux asserts in *Le Vrai lieu* (p. 108) in the quote featured in the epigraph to this paper. By breaking the silence and discussing abortion, Schneck engages in a political act in line with Ernaux’s warning: “nothing is won for women.” In France, one in every three women has terminated at least one pregnancy. In Brazil, where voluntary abortion is illegal, accurate estimates are difficult to obtain<sup>3</sup>, and the pervasive silence surrounding

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<sup>3</sup> Despite the difficulties in obtaining accurate data on the number of abortions in Brazil, studies such as the one conducted by Cardoso, Vieira, and Saraceni (2020) indicate that the highest mortality rates are found among unmarried Black and Indigenous women aged over 40 or under 14, residing in the North, Northeast, and Center-West regions.



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the procedure, including in literature, hinders the development of a political debate on this critical public health issue.

The capacity for relatability is a central theme to *Dix-sept ans* in several ways. As previously mentioned, an empathetic relatability factor is evident in the dialogue with Annie Ernaux at the genesis of Schneck's recollections. There is also a profound sense of relatability concerning the Veil Act, which enabled the procedure to be carried out under humane conditions in France. Additionally, the narrator expresses gratitude to her "absent son" whose non-existence "granted [her] freedom, allowing her to be alternately and at [her own] will, a student, a traveler, a lover, a wife, a mother, a reader, a tourist, a journalist, a writer" (Schneck, 2023, p. 72). At the end of the book, when addressing her absent son, Schneck revisits Annie Ernaux, explaining that the abortion she underwent was an important experience, not least because it influenced her desire to have children later on in her life: "I have realized this by reading Annie Ernaux's narrative" (Schneck, p. 72). It is worth noting, therefore, that *Dix-sept ans* begins and ends with Annie Ernaux as a framing device. This underscores the novel's indebtedness to the literature of the Nobel Prize winner.

### **3. From *Les Années* to Natália Bravo's *Morrer de amor***

In addition to her job as a writer, Natália Bravo (1982) from Rio de Janeiro is also a historian and translator, and both roles have left their mark on her work through the infusion of French expressions and a critical examination of History. Her debut novel, *Morrer de amor* (2021), was conceived as a literary homage to Annie Ernaux's *Les Années* (2008).

While Colombe Schneck and Natália Bravo have vastly different bodies of work, they both share a common thread: Annie Ernaux serves as their narrative trigger. Just as Schneck felt compelled by Ernaux, Bravo expresses a similar sentiment, stating: "I think I have somehow developed a need to respond to the author's call, so to speak. I felt called to action by her [Annie Ernaux]." (Campos, 2023, p. 618)



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*Les Années* weaves a cross-generational narrative spanning approximately sixty years, blending everyday events with major social and political occurrences that were taking place in France and worldwide. Conversely, in *Morrer de amor*, we follow the author-narrator's journey through four decades of her life, intertwining episodes from Brazilian and French collective memory with intimate and individual experiences — family, romantic relationships, marriage, and daughterhood. Throughout the novel, the narrator in Bravo's work reads and reflects on *Les Années*, simultaneously recounting “her years.”

The opening scene of *Morrer de amor* is particularly iconic. The family context it depicts is markedly different from that of Annie Ernaux, as the Brazilian writer hails from a middle-class family in 1980s Rio de Janeiro. The family meal, a recurrent theme in *Les Années*, is revisited and reinterpreted by Bravo, serving both as an homage to the French writer and as a critical commentary on her own cultural background. The first lines of *Morrer de amor* set the following tone:

Paris. Place de la République. It was a cold, rainy Sunday. I was reading *Les Années* by Annie Ernaux, a novel that blends historical narrative and memoirs, the personal and the collective, family history and national history. The protagonist's individual recollections are intertwined with defining moments in French history. Annie is both author and character. A child who has experienced her parents' reminiscences about World War II. Their resistance and suffering became her own. Their memories became her memories. And mine too. Of a child born in Brazil in the 1980s. An era of political openness. New characters were taking central stage. In politics, culture, and society. The way Ernaux transitions between the personal and the collective resonates with my own experiences. I was reminded of the child I was. Lost amidst the inflammatory comments of the adults at the dinner table, who blamed Brizola for all of Rio's crime rates in the 1980s. [...]

A break from reading Annie Ernaux. A strange plunge into my own childhood memories, which were also shaped by the political context of that time. “**My** years.”<sup>4</sup> (Bravo, 2021, pp. 8-9)

The incipit above presents a very specific spatial location. The narrator is in Paris, specifically at Place de la République, a “place of memory<sup>5</sup>,” where she is reading *Les Années*, a narrative also centered on memory and time. Among all of Ernaux's works, *Les Années* stands out as the most distinctive, showcasing unique characteristics within her

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> The term “place of memory” is quoted from French historian Pierre Nora.



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auto/social/biographical journey. “*Les Années* is time, nothing more<sup>6</sup>,” (Ernaux, 2022, p. 151) says the author in her writing journal.

The novel is distinguished by two key aspects: the first, and perhaps most obvious, is the absence of the first-person singular, making it an “impersonal autobiography” that primarily alternates between the use of “we” and the pronoun “she,” as we will touch upon later. The second distinctive aspect is the extensive time span covered by the narrative. Having a focus on time and the perception of its passage, the novel spans a longer period than Ernaux’s other works. Since *La Place*, Ernaux’s<sup>7</sup> sharp and lean writing style has emphasized specific segments: sometimes exploring the life of an ancestor — a parental figure, as depicted in the filiation narratives *La Place* and *Une Femme*, or a sister who died before she was born, as in *L’Autre fille* (2011) — other times focusing on a specific situation, a ‘slice of life’, such as the abortion in *L’Événement* or the violent sexual initiation in *Mémoire de fille* (2016). Her narratives are also known to delve into the depiction of emotions, like passion in *Passion simple* (1992) and jealousy in *L’Occupation* (2002).

The narrative structure in *Les Années* stands out for its broadened perspective, covering six decades of existence. *Morrer de amor* deliberately seeks to mirror this structure, though the author-narrator’s younger age, having been born in 1982, limits its time span.

In Bravo’s novel, the passage of time is marked in a non-linear fashion through references to different presidents in the recent histories of Brazil and France. To quote a few instances from the narrative: “It was 2005. Lula da Silva was the president of Brazil” (p. 20); “It was 2015. Dilma Rousseff was the president of Brazil” (p. 27); “It was May 2020. Emmanuel Macron was the president of France” (p. 121).

Regarding the symbolic significance of the dinner table, the “noisy polyphony of family meals” (Ernaux, 2019, p. 24) serves as a unique medium for the sharing of collective memory, and this element is found in both works. Ernaux’s narratives recall

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<sup>6</sup> “*Les années, c’est le temps, rien d’autre*”

<sup>7</sup> *The Years* is the only narrative by Ernaux that exceeds two hundred pages, while *The Young Man* (2022) is under forty pages.



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memories of war, poverty, and hardship. Bravo notes: “Just as in the family meals from Annie Ernaux’s memoirs, so were the memories of the Vargas Era transmitted within some Brazilian families” (Bravo, 2021, p. 108). In addition to noting the transmission of memories, Bravo’s critical stance stands out among the typical prejudiced family of Rio de Janeiro’s elite in the 1980s. The narrator comments: “My family’s conversations around the dinner table revealed what is most repulsive about Brazilian society: prejudice, racism, the elitism of a middle class that is always so sure of its superiority over others” (Bravo, 2021, p. 9).

French sociologist Anne Muxel highlights that memories from family meals inscribe families within a certain temporal, spatial, and relational order. She posits that these symbolic rites constitute family life (Muxel, 2002, p. 64). Undoubtedly, the structures of these rites differ considerably depending on socio-cultural perspectives. However, in both novels examined in this paper, the setting of a family meal serves as a vehicle for transmitting collective memory. In Bravo’s narrative, this memory is rejected and criticized, whereas in Ernaux’s works, it restores a world that has been rendered socially invisible.

Bravo is not a class defector nor does she depict social mobility as a theme in her work, unlike Ernaux. For the Brazilian author, her departure from her native milieu is critical and ideological. She offers an insightful outlook on the world of the ruling class, from which she originates.

Despite both authors’ different social backgrounds, Bravo reclaims Ernaux’s “authorial gesture” (Agamben, 2007) by blending collective and individual memories, with time itself serving as a driving force. As mentioned, the Brazilian writer takes a critical look at the social class represented by her family, the same ruling class that had supported the 1964 civil-military coup in Brazil. On the other hand, the grandparents in Bravo play a significant role, though with distinct characteristics. The author-narrator’s grandfather was the only person of African origin in his medical school class, while her grandmother is portrayed as a character who does not fit the social norms of her generation. This grandmother, who is also a major repository of knowledge and literature for her family, symbolically holds the key to the family library, which undoubtedly





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becomes her enduring legacy to the narrator. Natália Bravo dedicates another publication specifically to her maternal grandmother. Although the author has stated that *Marina* is not a biographical work, it can be seen as a filiation narrative of sorts and an ode to her own literature, with Annie Ernaux once again serving as a key reference. This new publication by Bravo is still in press at the time of this writing but has been made available to us in advance.

As the reader progresses through *Morrer de amor*, they also follow Bravo's reading of *Les Années*, creating a tandem-like reading flow. Both works are made up of short sentences, are laid out in a somewhat fragmented fashion, and feature a list-based aesthetic. Shared collective memories, capable of generalizations without resorting to abstraction, also connect both works. Nevertheless, in *Les Années* we find the imperfect past tense used in a unique manner, interspersed with the present tense, which is typically employed when describing photographs. Furthermore, the first-person plural is used, sometimes represented by the French "on" or the pronoun "she" when dealing with more intimate situations. This play on narrative and temporal dynamics, which transports the reader through time and creates a transpersonal effect, is unique to *Les Années* and is not found in *Morrer de amor*.

In Ernaux's writing we find a quest for palimpsestic time, where "she multiplies herself and exists physically at various points in her life" (2019, p. 224); conversely, in *Morrer de amor*, we are presented with the intertwined stories of the Marseillais Gabrielle Russier (1937-1969), to whom the book is dedicated<sup>8</sup>, and the narrator, who works as a teacher, like Russier (and Ernaux herself in the past). Ernaux briefly recalls Russier's life in *Les Années*, an event deeply embedded within the French collective imagination. Despite the tragedy that occurred, Russier's story has been perpetuated through cinema<sup>9</sup>, podcasts, and an iconic song immortalized by Charles Aznavour and Nana Mouskouri.

Bravo utilizes the traces left by Ernaux to develop the narrator's story, overlapping with Russier's, an approach that once again weaves together narratives, timelines, and

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<sup>8</sup>*Morrer de Amor* is dedicated to Gabrielle Russier and Malu, the author's daughter, once again intertwining the different layers of individual and collective history.

<sup>9</sup> This story was adapted into the film *Mourir d'aimer* (1971), a French-Italian production by André Cayatte inspired by the real-life story of Gabrielle Russier and Christian Rossi, starring Annie Girardot.



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locations. The romantic relationship between the young teacher Gabrielle Russier and her student Christian Rossi unfolds in France in 1969, following the events of May 68 and amidst libertarian slogans. Despite the boy's parents claiming to be progressive, their reaction to the couple's love affair was extremely negative. Russier ended up being arrested on false charges of kidnapping Christian and, unable to withstand the pressure, committed suicide. The event caused great commotion and shed light on the conservative side of French society.

Bravo's narrator recalls the tragedy to critically examine her relationship with a former student within the context of 21st-century Brazil, emphasizing that, nearly half a century after Russier's tragic experience, society still grapples with sexism and moralistic attitudes.

#### 4. Final remarks

Since the beginning of the century, French theorist Dominique Viart has highlighted Annie Ernaux's writing, particularly in *La Place* (1983) and *Une Femme* (1987), as a paradigm of contemporary "narratives of filiation." More than twenty years after Viart's initial observations, we perceive that the influence and paradigmatic nature of Ernaux's texts have extended far beyond filiation narratives.

The transpersonal first person developed by the author echoes in the works of numerous writers from subsequent generations who explicitly acknowledge Ernaux's literature as a pivotal influence for their own writings. Here, we have aimed to provide a small glimpse of a much larger phenomenon that includes names such as Didier Eribon, Édouard Louis, Nesrine Slaoui, and Lauren Elkin.

Although the works of Colombe Schneck and Natália Bravo, examined herein, differ significantly from one another, both draw inspiration from Ernaux and attest to the interpellative force of the literature written by the Nobel laureate. *Dix-sept ans* and *Morrer de amor* converge in the emancipatory and liberating impact of Annie Ernaux's writing.



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