In *Eroticism*, Bataille considers eroticism as a special form of sexuality. He claims that eroticism "leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity" (13). Indeed, the sexual act requires that two beings interact intimately, which implies that, during this interaction, they lose their discontinuity: "Through the activity of organs in a flow of coalescence and renewal, like the ebb and flow of waves surging into one another, the self is dispossessed" (18). This loss of selfhood is crucial to the erotic experience, as "The whole erotic business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives" (17). For Bataille, this violation of selfhood leads not only to the dissolution of the self but also to the social rules that create it. In other words, the erotic experience exists in relation to the transgression of a rule or a taboo, while it is also conditioned by its existence. Hence, "The experience of death in eroticism is, by definition, always only proximate—simultaneously rupturing and maintaining the limits of individual existence" (Sur-
For Bataille, both the erotic experience and the poetic experience rely on a questioning of the social rules forming the self, and on the loss of selfhood during this particular experience: “Poetry leads to the same as all forms of eroticism—to the blending and fusion of separate objects” (25). Although Bataille alludes to a possible connection between poetry and eroticism in this passage and mentions several literary works in his study, he does not explain in specific terms how “poetry leads to the same as all forms of eroticism.”

Kristeva’s theory of the Semiotic and the Symbolic clarifies the communion of the experience of language and bodily experience that arises through jouissance. The concept of jouissance originates with Jacques Lacan. For Lacan, jouissance involves libidinal pleasures from the Imaginary or prelinguistic structure of the subject, erupting in the Symbolic, the realm of culture, law, and language. Jouissance has the ability to disrupt this Symbolic order. In Kristeva’s work, “jouissance is not an object and does not have any object,” as it takes place when the separation between the self and its object blurs (La révolution 497). Through this blurring of the self and the world, jouissance allows a multiplication of meaning.

In focusing on such linguistic phenomena, we can explore the repressed material at the origin of signifying processes. Indeed, according to Kristeva, language theorists have repressed the development that the body and the subject undergo during signifying processes. While Kristeva acknowledges that one must introduce a distance with respect to things in order to use language, language is not a pure mental abstraction for her. On the contrary,

1. While Bataille’s exploration of eroticism in relation to sexual taboos, religion, murder, and beauty is valuable, feminist readers often criticize it because of its depiction of women’s role during the erotic experience. Suzanne Guerlac notes that in Eroticism and History of Eroticism, the woman is an “object,” “a prostitute”; “she is cast in the role of the already aufgehoben slave while the man enjoys the role of the master” (92, 94). As a matter of fact, in Eroticism, Bataille explains that “In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity” (17). This distinction between masculine and feminine eroticism has been interpreted as sexist. Andrea Dworkin, for example, stresses that Bataille relies on a male-centered vision of sex. Judith Still, Susan Rubin Suleiman, and Susan Sontag (“Pornographic”), on the other hand, defend Bataille’s theory against reproaches of sexism on the basis “that the relation [Bataille] highlights between sex and death is a human question” (Still 235). Like Still, Suleiman, and Sontag, I find it more relevant to focus on the human implications of Bataille’s theoretical concepts, and I am interested, more specifically, in how they relate to literature.

2. The English version of Revolution in Poetic Language is a partial translation of Kristeva’s project in French. In this study, the passages cited as Revolution refer to the English translation. The passages cited as La révolution are taken from portions of Kristeva’s work not available in English translation. The translations of these passages are mine.
it exists as a product of the body. In emphasizing the importance of the body in linguistic constructions, Kristeva wants to avoid an understanding of art detached from the physical sensations that accompany its creation and reception. The relevance of Kristeva’s theory to a study of erotics in contemporary texts relies on its inclusion of linguistic elements that have been, and often still are, overlooked in semiotics (i.e., the extralinguistic that is part of our experience of language). In that sense, her theory provides a framework to address processes of signification, not only in terms of sense-making but also in terms of kinetic rhythms, material expressions, and somatic productions. Because the writers analyzed in this study explore the relation between the body and language, theoretical models that respect this relationship, like Kristeva’s, are key to our understanding of their works.

For Kristeva, bodily experiences of language occur through the interaction of the Symbolic and the Semiotic. The Symbolic relies on the regulations of rational discourse. The Semiotic is less tangible; it is the non-representational part of the signifying process located in the pre-oedipal phase of the child’s development. At this stage, *pulsions*—energies that move through the infant’s body—structure its life and articulate a mobile and ephemeral totality, which Kristeva calls the semiotic *chora*. She borrows the term *chora* from Plato’s *Timaeus*, where it denotes “an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral states” (*Revolution* 25). Kristeva notes that the *chora*, which she associates with “rupture,” “articulation,” and “rhythm,” “precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality” (*Revolution* 23, 26). Therefore, the *chora* does not signify: it is not a sign or a position, as it precedes language. The social construction that enables the subject to acknowledge the environment in which it evolves and to make statements about it is what Kristeva calls the “*thetic.*” In a non-*thetic* phase (i.e., in the *chora*), the subject has not yet developed an understanding of itself as a self—distinct from its object—and thus cannot use a linguistic structure that demonstrates this distinction. Hence, the semiotic *chora* becomes a pre-enunciation inseparable from the Symbolic, but in any signifying process, both the Symbolic and Semiotic poles are present; consequently, the subject cannot be exclusively symbolic or semiotic. As a result, the subject, or more specifically, the sujet *en procès*, is always in process or “always becoming” and “on trial,” as it constantly balances semiotic and symbolic functions.

This is clear in *Plus*, for example, where a man’s brain, called Imp Plus, is sent into orbit during a scientific experiment, “so the very brain, if it still was the brain, slid its canal beds—or, if he could have fixed himself at one point, seemed to slide and distribute its canal beds” (106). Imp Plus acts
not as a subject in the world but rather as an inclusive entity. The transformations of this entity challenge an understanding of a centered self. He wonders, for example, if the solar panels used for the experiment are part of himself: “They [the solar panels] were not inside of the brain. But they were not inside the capsule, whose bulkheads were outside the brain or what he had thought the brain [. . . ]. The oblong cells on the panels might not be the cells of Imp Plus, but they were part of what he was part of” (104). Because Imp Plus does not know what is a part of him and what is inside or outside of him, he inquires about the words that conceptualize his predicament. This inquiry shows the limits of linguistic communication and slowly challenges the symbolic order. He articulates: “Sockets was a word,” and “A question was what an answer was to” (1, 167). His sentences re-explore the meaning of words such as “sockets” or “question,” inquiring about the ways in which we signify. Imp Plus explains that “in all the words that passed was what they lacked. It was far more than the words were equal to” (184). His questioning alludes to language’s inclusion of both symbolic and semiotic dimensions, its containment of precisely what, as symbolism, it excludes. Such questioning recurs when Imp Plus expresses ambiguous and polymorphous ideas. He says, for example, “A thing called laughter had been graying or dampening or decaying a graph” (19). Unable to reduce his expressions to a symbolic logic, Imp Plus assembles contradictory ideas: laughter does not have colors, or wet textures. Hence, we see in Imp Plus’s language an example of the contradictions the Semiotic allows: how can laughter be laughter if it has a color?

We understand, in Imp Plus’s sentence, that the Semiotic invites us to accept an unconceivable idea (i.e., that laughter has texture and color, and that it can affect a graph). The seemingly incoherent statement introduces polymorphous concepts: what a graying laughter is can be interpreted in various ways. The word “dampening” itself carries the idea of “making wet” or “depressing.” Also, on a grammatical level, the repeating of “or” enacts the constant change that resists the stability of the Symbolic. We realize here that, as Kristeva shows, the Semiotic can disrupt the narration: the reader focuses not only on the message of Imp Plus’s words but also on the underlying substance that constructs language.

Because the text is strangely ambivalent, it draws attention to the morphemes that constitute it. In Plus and the other works explored in this

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3. As a matter of fact, we are not sure how to refer to Imp Plus since, in the narration, he is referred to as a “he,” as he was formerly a man, but distinctions between “it” and “he” are hard to draw because at first the character is deprived of his maleness, and then, as the brain re-builds a body, “it” becomes a non-gendered being.
study, morphemes do not always respect their limits—they are not merely a function of signifying language—so that plays on sounds and meaning go beyond the standard uses of the linguistic code. Through these phonetic and semantic disruptions, the text brings us back to the “topography of the body which reproduces itself in them” (Kristeva “Phonetics” 34). This opening to the repressed *chora* allows a reacquisition of the libidinal energies at the root of language acquirement, which provokes the subject’s *jouissance*. This re-emergence is revolutionary because “this semiotization sets off against social and linguistic norms a signifying practice in which the flux, the desire of the subject runs into language and disarticulates it by always maintaining it on the verge on being disintegrated by the drives” (Féral 10). For Kristeva, avant-garde writing tries to bring the semiotic sublayer to the surface, making libidinous productions more visible. This conception of the avant-garde’s balancing force against conventional ideologies has led critics to insist on the subversiveness of experimentations in innovative literature. However, what is often overlooked in Kristeva’s treatment of the politics of the disruption of selfhood, which is also at the root of the erotic process, is its formation of a positive activity in texts. In other words, theories of the self and desire, such as Kristeva’s, not only resist linguistic and social structures but also illuminate the pleasurable textual realities of text, which will be the focus of this study.

Analyses that dissociate the two complementary aspects of formally innovative writing—its subversive ventures and positive aesthetic productions—overlook what it offers beyond a response to the hegemony. The writing of Sukenick and Federman illuminates innovative writing’s positive cultural function. Sukenick thinks of textual innovations as forms of “mutiny” that come from “a refusal to proceed as usual, a diversion of the channels of power to more constructive ends” (*Narralogues* 22). This “mutiny” defies traditional narrative models, while also offering alternate

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4. The revolutionary impact of the Semiotic that Féral emphasizes in Kristeva’s work is often debated: critics condemn Kristeva’s indifference to historical and cultural difference. I suspect that this attack relies on the partial translation of *La Révolution du langage poétique*. The English version, which leaves out about two thirds of Kristeva’s original dissertation, focuses solely on its first chapter, “Preliminary Theoretical Matters.” The last two sections, “Semiotic Apparatus of Texts” and “The State and Mystery,” deal with the ways in which the Semiotic, under the historical circumstances of the Third Republic (1875–1940) in France, works in Lautréamont’s and Mallarmé’s poetry. In these chapters, Kristeva is interested both in how political changes affect aesthetic productions and in how *géno-textes* may treat, at the literary level, questions of a given society that remain unanswered during a period of political turmoil. Ironically, the 1984 American translation of Kristeva’s 1974 book emphasizes her theoretical apparatus, separating it from its practical applications, and Kristeva is now held responsible for her lack of concern for historical and cultural analyses.
linguistic practices. Therefore, Sukenick thinks of his work as an “unwrit-
ing” of “what has been formulated as experience,” of traditional storytelling techniques, in order to create a “new sense of experience” (“Unwriting” 26). This “new sense of experience” is the positive production that tends to be overshadowed by the subversive narrative techniques of works such as Mosaic Man. For Federman, “New Fiction” fills “the linguistic gap created by the disarticulation of the official discourse in its relation with the individual” (Critifiction 25), but this “disarticulation” is inseparable from the liberation it provokes, a liberation that enables readers to “re-vision” literature and society (Critifiction 125). In Plus, AVA, DICTEE, and VAS the “new sense of experience” and “re-vision” occur not only in relation to our conceptual models but also in relation to our sensual involvement with these novels. By interacting with fictions that question dominant definitions of body and text, we are able to conceive alternative ways to interact with literature and with the world. As critics of experimental writing have pointed out, a reevaluation of aesthetic and social models takes place at the intellectual level, as we are forced to question ideologies. However, because of our erotic involvement with these open texts, we also engage in new aesthetic and social possibilities. In an erotic relationship with the text, we are not alienated from our bodies and can thus discover different prospects for political agency.

My emphasis on the relationship between body and language has affini-
ties with Lecercle’s exploration of “the abstraction of language from the human body, and the expression of the body in language” (111). For Lecer-
cle, these expressions are marked in “délire,” or that which “is at the fron-
tier between two languages, the embodiment of the contradiction between them” (44). These two languages are the abstract, systematic, and mean-
ingful on the one hand, and the material, bodily, and self-contradictory on the other. Much like in Kristeva’s model, these two languages coexist: subjects and texts are constituted dialectically, as the material is repressed and emerges in abstract language, thereby challenging it. Délire is a nec-
essary part of language that “testifies to a disruption of discourse, and it is an attempt at reconstruction” (155). Thus, Lecercle’s work focuses on the moments of hesitation in language, or in Kristeva’s terms, the moments when the Semiotic tugs at the symbolic order: “Délire embodies the contra-
diction between the mastery of the subject and the re-emergence of chaos, of the original disruptive rejection” (43). A text that produces délire “dis-
solves the subject, threatens to engulf the reader in its disaster, yet saves him” (45). Lecercle proposes to explore this dissolution because our under-
standing of and relationship with language traditionally abstract the bodily
from communication. Instead of eclipsing the organs that produce language from it, Lecercle pays attention to linguistic nontransparent uses that make language an expression of “the speaker’s body, an outward expression of its drive” (44). According to him, délire is often part of fiction because both rely on “the mixture of danger and usefulness that words contain” (87). More specifically, flows of language in long sentences, unclear references of personal pronouns, unknown textual sources, humor, and obscure meanings are expressions of délire.

A text such as DICTEE epitomizes délire’s involvement of “language, nonsense, desire” (Lecercle 6). Cha’s interest in sounds, patterns, repetitions, and fluxes stresses the “unsystematic,” “self-contradictory,” and “impossible” qualities of material language (Lecercle 44):

Both times hollowing. Cavity. And germination.
Both times. From death from sleep the appel. Both
times appellant. Toward the movement. The move-
ment itself. She returns to word. She returns to word,
its silence. If only once. Once inside. Moving.

Here, Cha disrupts syntactical rules, mixes French and English, and uses repetitions and contradictions (see figure 1). She plays with short sentences to highlight the orderly basis of communication. At the same time, she accumulates fragmented phrases into incomplete sentences and ambiguous statements such as “She returns to word, its silence,” which does not clarify how “word” and “silence” cohabitate: to what word should one return in order to reach silence? And when does silence exist in words? In addition, “appellant” is a misspelled version of the French word “appelant,” and the English word “movement” is close to the French word “mouvement.” For Lecercle, such play on words follows basic phonetic development, while disrupting it when enabling each word to have more than one meaning. Cha’s play on different sonorities—the nasal sounds in the French “appellant” which can also be applied to “movement” and the [s] repeated in the English words—calls our attention to the materiality of her text and shows that language comes

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5. Throughout DICTEE, Cha uses misspellings and grammatical errors to express her position and that of other women when exiled and/or oppressed. Because inserting [sic] after each excerpt would be repetitive, I will remain faithful to the spelling of the text without mentioning its intentional “misspellings.”
from “the depth of the body [...] where only affect and the passions of the body can be expressed” (Lecercle 35).

Cha’s use of two languages also emphasizes the text’s intermediary dimension and illustrates her own interstitial position. This interstice of language and culture reveals that, because délire concerns the relationship of language and the subject, it also concerns the concept of “frontier.” When dealing with délire, “the problem of the establishment of frontiers becomes crucial[..] [I]t also means that language will always try to utter what cannot be said, the subject will always be tempted to go beyond the frontier: in order to define a boundary one must at least attempt to cross it. This is exactly what happens in délire” (51). In Cha’s work, the negotiation of this frontier pertains not only to language and the subject but also to cultural borders. The pleasure readers take in sonic variations, paired with Cha’s reflection on exile, racial stereotypes, patriarchal domination, and cultural struggles, makes a political statement in itself. In other words, the “constraints which are suspended in délire, as a result of which the subject dissolves,” make the erotic—through the subject’s dissolution—and the political inseparable (Lecercle 198). DICTEE’s politics lies in the renegotiation of the erotic and the national, but Lecercle shows that, because “libido is the energy of the collective unconscious, and délire is the direct product of libido,” délire is essentially political (167).

Lecercle makes this claim based on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s account of social paradigms in AntiOedipus and A Thousand Plateaus, where the authors propose a nonlinear and nonhierarchical mode of organization, the “rhizome,” which they oppose to the “arborescent” model of thought. Through the metaphor of the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari point out the limits of the tree model rooted in a Cartesian capitalistic paradigm which is centered and fixed. They disapprove of the illusion of pre-traced destiny (i.e., divine, anagogic, historical, economic, structural, or hereditary) that lies in this model, and underline that it represses libidinous flows of energy. In resistance to the “arborescent” paradigm, the rhizome assembles different elements and resists a linear ordered growth within open systems, thus enabling the libidinal to become part of a Marxist resistance to capitalist powers. Because délire challenges frontiers, Lecercle writes, it offers “lines of flight” akin to the rhizomorphous modes of travel that de-center human energy away from linguistic stability and capitalist reproduction (198). In destabilizing the sedentary structures of exchange and representation, délire creates an alternative mode of expression and organization. In Deleuze and Guattari’s work, much like in the studies of Kristeva and Lecercle, libidinal pleasures and political subversions are not distinguishable. Yet, interpreta-
tions of their works tend to emphasize the political to the detriment of the positive pleasurable production that accompanies and enables resistance.

Barthes’s late work addresses more directly bliss’s political upshot, as his analysis relies on an exploration of the readers’ blissful experiences—what Barthes calls jouissance—in relation to a more reassuring, less disruptive experience of pleasure. Pleasure relies on the confirmation of one’s cultural values and norms of interpretation, while jouissance relies on the violation of those norms and values. A text of jouissance presents the interaction of codes, a mix of languages, illogicality, incongruity, repetition, excess, and a dismantling of grammar and meaning. The reader of such texts is invited to “mi[x] every language, even those said to be incompatible” and “silently accep[t] every charge of illogicality, of incongruity” (Pleasure 3). The reader of DICTEE discovers that “the text no longer has the sentence for its model” but “a powerful gush of words, a ribbon of infra-language” (Pleasure 7):

| From the back of her neck she releases her shoulders free. She swallows once more. (Once more. One more time would do.) In preparation. It augments. To such a pitch. Endless drone, refueling itself. Autonomous. Self-generating. Swallows with last efforts last wills against the pain that wishes it to speak. |

Here, Cha disturbs grammatical rules in accumulating fragments and in using pronouns inadequately (see figure 2). In the phrase “the pains that wishes it to speak,” the use of “it” is confusing because its referent is absent in the sentence. Since “it” should be omitted for the sentence to be correct grammatically, we become aware of the rules of linguistic constructions. In this passage, it feels as though words are “employed for their sensual texture, like printed papers in a collage, as well as for their textual value” (Drucker The Visible 147). Cha’s use of the textual and sensual values of language insists on the power of radical changes that do not conform to rhetorical rules; her words are “unexpected, succulent in [their] newness [ . . . ] [—they] glisten, they are distracting, incongruous apparitions” (Pleasure 42).

For Barthes, these “incongruous apparitions” allow the reader to experience bliss, a state that challenges the self. “The dismantling of language is
intersected by political assertion” because it does not conform to the linguistic rules that allow the subject to feel secure in a world whose “court, school, asylum, [and] polite conversation” rely on the logical structures of language (Pleasure 8, 3). But, as DeKoven reveals:

We are not used to talking about linguistic structures as political. We generally restrict political analysis of literature to thematic content, or to those elements of style clearly related to it. We tend also to require, or feel uncomfortable without, evidence of conscious intention on the author’s part, particularly for political, cultural analysis of a radical or avant-garde cast. (xx)

The kind of politics DeKoven write about relies on a debunking of the valorization of the conventional modes of signification in which the social subject is rooted, but it also engages, in Plus, AVA, DICTEE, and VAS, a pleasurable recovery. Thus, the reader of these texts, unlike the reader who remains in control and is pleased by the reassurances of his or her values, encounters the political force of jouissance.

This account of jouissance has, however, suffered a number of critiques: while Barthes’s work on social and cultural myths is valued in the field of critical theory, his later work on the physical reactions to textual innovations has often been condemned. Jonathan Culler qualifies the “late Barthes” (from 1970 on) as “nostalgic or sentimental” for its “blend of knowingness and sentimentality” (439, 440). Culler, Eagleton, and other readers dismiss the shift from Barthes’s analysis of dominant discourses to his later concern for the subject of that discourse. They also wish for the scientific rigor of the early Barthes and find the late Barthes too personal. Behind this second critique lies an assumption about which forms of writing are better for communicating about literature. But for Barthes, it would be illogical to elucidate the pleasures of art from a neutral and abstract viewpoint because the fragments used to elaborate on the text of jouissance are part of the message conveyed about the erotics of rupture. In talking about the dispersed self, Barthes must reflect the unorganized and nonintegrated environment through a resistance to coherence and hierarchical structure.

In addition to dismissing the form of Barthes’s late works, Culler and Eagleton challenge his focus on a more local analysis of the subject’s use of the semiotic systems that Barthes considered in his early career. Critics also resent his attention to personal reactions, sensations, and physiological preoccupations. To many readers, these analyses appear useless because they do not have the obvious political repercussions of his early writing on fashion
and culture, for example. Here, a focus on the politics of negation seems to eclipse the pleasurable, when they are in fact inseparable for Barthes. In this context, what is particularly relevant to this study is The Pleasure of the Text, A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments, and Camera Lucida’s emphasis on a loss of self, which relates to the erotic experience and to the political potential of jouissance. Barthes’s late work enables a clarification of the positive aesthetic of formally innovative texts that have so far been confined to a primarily negative rhetoric. The loss of self that Barthes theorizes allows us to understand the erotic fusion of text and reader, a fusion that allows a mutual constitution of reader and open text.

The authors of Plus, AVA, DICTEE, and VAS exploit the erotic and political qualities of this mutual constitution. In fact, Barthes’s and Maso’s visions of literature are particularly close, as both think that, in a metonymic way, texts imply the presence of a body. Just as the room, the listener, and the performer are part of the instrument when someone plays music, the reader, in communion with the text, enables the activation of the system that animates it. Barthes and Maso consider the relationship to the text as a sensual dialogue, emphasizing “notions of language as heat and light, motion and stillness, a vibrant living thing capable of containing great emotion. Also fluid, shifting, elusive, fugitive, and darkness keep taking back. Bodies which make fragile amorphous, beautiful shapes for a moment and then are gone” (Maso Rain Taxi). Maso’s novel presents such a fluid and vibrant language in her depiction of the thoughts of Ava Klein, a comparative literature professor who is dying of a rare cancer. Her thoughts intermingle with references and direct citations from Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, Hélène Cixous, and Anaïs Nin—to cite only a few—as well as film transcripts. The novel does not follow a logical and chronological pattern but relies on repetitions, insistence, and loops of information to build the story of Ava Klein (see figure 3):

And now she seems a shadow saying Goldfinch
Holding a yellow bird in her mouth
Saying, Satin gown,
Not a person
Alabaster beauty.

Figure 3. Carole Maso. AVA p. 149 (c) 1993 Dalkey Archive Press.
The sentence is broken down into lines augmenting its possible meanings, allowing the reader, in Maso’s words, to “read any given line and any series of lines and put in as much of [his or her] own story or memory or anything to it” (personal interview). Hence, an excess of signification, often incompatible with the coherence of the narrative, is the occasion for the reader’s interpretive foreplay with “the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony” (Pleasure 66). This conception of literature confirms Cixous’s belief that in reading and writing we experience language as physical.

For Cixous, “The process of writing is to circulate, to caress, to paint all the phenomena before they are precipitated, assembled, crystallized in a word” (Rootprint 18). In “Coming to Writing,” Cixous implies that writing requires an opening of senses, provoking hybrid visions and sensations, an experience that breaks down the binary models she refutes. She thinks of these “in-between” sensations and visions in terms of the “Third body”:

What flows from my hand onto the paper is what I see-hear, my eyes listen, my flesh scans. [. . . ] I am childhood, my mother sings, her alto voice. More! Encore! a lovely tongue licks at my heart, my flesh takes in the German that I can’t make out. [. . . ] Lay, hymn, milk. Lièb! Love. [. . . ] I am woman, I make love, love makes me, a Third Body (Troisième Corps) comes to us, a third sense of sight, and our other ears [. . . ] but in order for the third body to be written, the exterior must enter and the interior must open out. (53–54)

In this passage, the two bodies are associated with Cixous’s body and her mother’s body since she refers to her mother’s voice as guidance for rhythms and sounds. The two bodies also relate to the body of writing, the work as a corpus: “Letters love me. Leise. Soft and low, I sense that I am loved by writing.” Here, she hints at the physical relationship between the writer and language. The Third Body would thus come between both. The two bodies can also be understood as two bodies during sexual intercourse, for she alludes to two bodies whose combination provokes the surge of a third body. Finally, Pamela Banting conceives of écriture féminine as an “interlangue somewhere between patriarchal discourse and an as-yet-unknown language,” which leads us to interpret the Third Body in similar terms here (236). The Third Body is the interlangue, both intermediary language and connection tongue, between the writer and the text. Each of the possible interpretations of the Third Body implies an exchange that provokes change.
The possibility of change and exchange through the Third Body relies on its position between the interior and exterior: it avoids the thinking process that separates the body and its environment, and its lawless realm enables new possibilities in writing. Nevertheless, critics of Cixous’s theory question it because of her emphasis on the relationship between body and text. These scholars blame Cixous for essentialism since they understand *écriture féminine* as a mode of writing that relies on the essence of a woman and that is a receptacle for biological determinism and pre-cultural femininity. In other words, critics interpret Cixous’s invitation for women to use their bodies as determining those bodies as the direct source of female writing. However, Cixous does not conceptualize the body as a better precedence for writing. Rather, she is “thinking of the body as a pictogram, [which] opens up ways of theorizing [. . .] bodies and texts” (Banting 240). Cixous’s “Sorties” and “The Laugh of the Medusa” elaborate on the Cartesian oppressiveness, which distinguishes between the intelligible and the sensual, as she claims that feminine writing relies on a writing of women’s bodies. Hence, as Morag Shiach argues, in Cixous’s work, “it is impossible to sustain the complete dichotomy between mind and body which offers the illusion of intellectual control at the cost of erasing, censoring, and hystericalizing the body” (70). Body and text do not precede one another, nor are they the source of one another. Only when relinquishing the dichotomy between mind and body, physicality and spirituality, and concreteness and abstractedness can we appreciate Cixous’s undertaking. *Écriture féminine* and the Third Body are analytical tools that elucidate the relationship between an eroticization of language and the positive political production that occurs in *Plus, AVA, DICTEE*, and *VAS*.

It may seem peculiar, however, to deal with eroticism in novels such as *Plus, AVA, DICTEE*, and *VAS* since, at the level of content, their primary focus is not sexuality. Barthes’s theories on photography clarify this seeming contradiction. Barthes distinguishes the pornographic picture from the erotic picture:

> Pornography ordinarily represents the sexual organs, making them into a motionless object [. . .]. The erotic photograph, on the contrary (and it is

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6. For instance, in her account of Cixous, Toril Moi tackles *écriture féminine* as an inconclusive Derridian practice because it calls for a return to the “voice,” the origin of writing for women. Mary Jacobus dismisses *écriture féminine* as an essentialist practice because it ignores the social-historical narratives which women embody. Teresa Ebert believes that Cixous reifies the notion of body and language. And Gayatri Spivak expresses dissatisfaction with Cixous’s exploration of the revolutionary potential of language.
its very condition), does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it may very well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me. (Camera 58–59)

Hence, it is “as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits to see” (Camera 59). For Barthes, then, a text that does not represent sexuality at the level of content might actually be more erotic precisely because of what it omits. Celia Daileader notes that, for Barthes, “eroticism, paradoxically, makes absence palpable, which is to say, it un-makes it, or rather unmasks it, in all its semiotic glory” (29). For her, “eroticism is an effect of this very engagement with or teasing of verbal boundaries, is perhaps achieved by way of the illusion that one has touched the edge of the intelligible, the describable, the discursive. Eroticism entails the illusion (if it is one) that it is possible to touch the body directly” (22). The “teasing of verbal boundary” alludes to something “missing” in language but felt by the reader. Thus, the absence of overt sexuality in Plus, AVA, DICTEE, and VAS might call for a more powerful erotic response.

This erotic response relies on the excesses of language that Kristeva, Lecercle, Cixous, and Barthes associate with blissful experiences. Yet, in Plus, AVA, DICTEE, and VAS, the material existence of the text—the visual form of the page of a book and the visual signs on it—also participates in the erotic excesses of writing. Johanna Drucker’s work on typography clarifies the importance of the materiality in works such as the ones studied here:

All books are visual. Even books which rely exclusively on type, or on unusual materials, or those which contain only blank sheets have a visual presence and character. All books are tactile and spatial as well—their physicality is fundamental to their meaning. Similarly, the elements of visual and physical materiality participate in a book’s temporal effect—the weight of paper, covers, endpapers or inserts, fold-outs or enclosures all contribute to the experience of a book. However, it is clear that there are books which maximize their visual potential by taking advantage of images, color, photographic materials, sequencing, juxtaposition or narratives. (The Century 197)

Because The Body of Writing focuses on such books, Drucker’s theories are particularly useful. In the following excerpt from one of her essays, which enacts its claim in the progressive enlargement of the typeface of the text,
Drucker calls our attention to the material of writing, which is traditionally neglected from interpretation. Usually, what language “means” is favored:

A prophylactic attitude attempts to protect the imagination from direct encounters with the world as the tongue, the hand, the arm, the fist around the pen, the fingers on the keyboard all reach into the heavy flesh of matter and are rewarded by the response of sensory experience.

This does not make meaning. It only makes a space in which meaning comes to have its face pressed against the glass, waiting to break through beyond the mirror of its own pale image. (Figuring 55)

Drucker’s work reveals that what we cast aside as framework or context in regard to writing cannot be separated from what texts express. Her theory of materiality is particularly useful when approaching the works of Maso, Cha, and Tomasula because these writers experiment with typography so that their texts are as visual as they are verbal. In calling attention to the page, the textures of language, and in inserting visual texts into their prose, these authors, like Drucker, “RESIS[T] THE VERBAL EXPECTATIONS THE CLEAN MACHINE OF READING [. . .], DISRUPTED BY THE INTERFERING SUBSTANCE WHICH DISTRACTS THE EYE” (Figuring 142). The “interfering substance” of these texts forces us to realize that the look of the page is not a surplus—an accessory to or an illustration of the message of the text. In fact, “There is a visuality of language which is not imagistic, but specific to the quality of written language itself. Not an inherency, but an actuality, tangible, perceptible, specific, and untranslatable, understood and grasped as effect” (Figuring 109). Therefore, the material of the book is in constant engagement with it. As Drucker’s choice of words attests, the physicality of writing calls for a bodily response: in the aforementioned essay, the hand that crafts the text’s visual existence provokes a sensory response, and in the above excerpts, the materiality of the text adds a physical layer to the expressive form, which necessitates a different engagement of our eyes in reading. Thus, the text becomes comparable to a body: “LIKE ANY OTHER ORGANISM, [IT] REJOICES IN THE PINBALL GAMES OF TOUCH AND UNCERTAINTY WHICH MULTIPLY THE POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH AN AUDIENCE

7. Drucker inserts another narrative in a smaller typeface in-between these lines, which adds to the distractive effect the essay theorizes.
EXCHANGE OF SATISFYING CONVERSATION LAID OUT ON THE TABLE TO SEDUCE THE EYE” (144).

The “seduction of the eye” is better understood in relation to the concept of the “haptic” in Deleuze and Guattari’s work. The “haptic” derives from their exploration of “smooth spaces”—spaces such as the sea, steppe, ice, and deserts that are constituted by continuous variation of free action and “have no background, plane, or contour” (A Thousand 496). In such spaces, we cannot use visual models for points of reference; we cannot map out the surface of water, for example, which relies on small and continuous changes. Instead, we are forced to focus on the particularities of such surfaces. The exploration of smooth places leads Deleuze and Guattari to develop two modes of visuality. The “haptic,” which allows us to consider space as tactile, as if caressed by our eyes, is opposed to the “optical” mode of seeing, whose goal is to identify the configuration of space and decipher shapes and images. During optical visions, we can see objects as distinct and identifiable because we are able, from a distance, to explore the surface and what is on it. On the contrary, during haptic visions, a movement close to the surface allows us to focus on components’ multiple combinations instead of on their assemblage. In other words, clear referents are not present in the haptic mode because we cannot use a prearranged deciphering of the surface. As Brian Massumi notes, the haptic, in “tak[ing] up a tactile function,” enables vision to “regathe[r] itself, enveloping its own links to its sensory outside” (158). This implies that the haptic vision weakens the separation between the subject and the surface, as opposed to the optical mode, where the subject demarcates itself from what it is observing.

Haptic visuality allows us to see surfaces as if we were touching them, and, as Claudia Benthien explains, touch brings awareness to the surface in contact with the subject but also to the subject’s body (200). This dual awareness occurs when the boundaries between the subject’s formation and the surface dissolve in an erotic conjunction. In avant-garde films, Laura Marks notes, viewers go through such conjunction when using their eyes as touching organs, thus blurring the barrier between themselves and the medium. The eye’s tactile function allows the viewer to leave his or her own position, to become part of the world, and then to dialectically return to a subject position in the world. For Marks, this shift in positions “is erotic. In sex, what is erotic is the ability to move between control and relinquishing, between being giver and receiver. It’s the ability to have your sense of self, your self-control, taken away and restored—and to do the same for another person” (Touch xvi). As a film critic, Marks links this taking and releasing of control to an alternation between close and far visions. In images, close
proximity to the medium blurs our vision so that we barely recognize what we are seeing and pay more attention to the substance of the material. I wish to transpose such explorations of the haptic mode to the reading realm, not only because *Plus*, *AVA*, *DICTEE*, and *VAS* mix visual and textual media but also because thinking of our eyes in terms of touching or caressing elucidates the opportunity of a loss of self through a physical connection to a medium. By forcing readers to focus on their physical qualities, these books invite us to come closer to their medium (the ink, the print, the page) so that we “zoom” in and out on the object in hand, as in “haptic *visuality*,” when the “eyes themselves function like organs of touch” (Marks *Skin* 183; *Touch* 2).

In the photograph of Yu Guan Soon on page 24 of *DICTEE*, for example, the overexposed picture appears almost as a silhouette of the female character: “the melded contrast of the texture of the extreme white and extreme black” insists on the imperfection of the photographic medium, which draws attention to the black and white flecks that make up the picture (Hadfield 128). The details of the picture compare to a movement from the global to the local, which resists systematic knowledge. As Georges Didi-Huberman reveals, when exploring Gaston Bachelard’s thoughts on details in visual arts, such movements introduce a division of the subject of close-up knowledge. It’s as if the describing subject, by dint of cutting something local out of something global, came to disassociate his very act of knowledge [. . . . ] It’s as if the describing subject, in the very “tearing-to-pieces” movement that constitutes the operation of the detail, instead of proceeding to the serene reciprocity of a totalization, redirected despite himself and onto himself the first, violent act of disintegration. (233)

Because the subject comes so close to the medium, he or she cannot reach a total vision, which he or she usually uses to construct knowledge. The close-up gaze provokes an interference with our habitual conceptual frameworks. In *VAS*, the close-up on page [352] does not allow us to understand the global message the image conveys (see figure 4): The novel focuses on Square, a writer considering getting a vasectomy in a world whose absurdity compares, at times, to A. E. Abbott’s *Flatland*. Square’s research on the operation leads him to uncover documents on the modification and tech-

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8. Because some pages are missing their number in *VAS*, I will refer to these pages in brackets hereafter.
nologization of bodies. A collage of data, theories, and pictures is presented parallel to his story; the following image is one of them. When facing this page, our vision comes so close to the skin that it is difficult to know which part of the body is represented, where the hair is situated, and what the red marks that appear on the skin are. It is impossible to draw global conclusions from the local picture or to make it fit within a system of knowledge about the body.\(^9\)

For Marks, such interactions with the artistic material induce change. Indeed, throughout the haptic experience, the subject is changing its nature: it loses itself, achieves a new stability, then changes again, alternating between being one with the object and being exterior to it. This alternation allows mutual formation of the subject and the text, which triggers new possibilities of knowledge production and invites the subject to conceive of alternative ways to interact with texts and the world. In other words, McElroy’s, Maso’s, Cha’s, and Tomasula’s works propose new modes of interaction with literature and society, and they enable readers to practice them during their reading techniques.

In that sense, Marks’s theory is useful to my interpretation of such texts, not only because McElroy, Maso, Cha, and Tomasula research the materiality of visual and linguistic elements but also because “Haptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image” (3 Touch; italics mine). This “bodily relationship” with the medium will be central in my reading of literature. But, while Marks underlines the changes that a viewer undergoes during his or her haptic experience, she does not address the ways in which this experience changes the reader’s relationship to the medium itself. Didi-Huberman’s work on experiences of pan is useful here because it explicates the repercussion of such experiences for our conception of art media. Didi-Huberman explores “a work of bedazzlement, in some sense, at once self-evident, luminous, perceptible, and obscure, enigmatic, difficult to analyze, notably in semantic or iconic terms; for it is a work or an effect of painting as colored material, not as descriptive sign” (248). He calls pan “the part of painting that interrupts ostensibly, from place to place, like a crisis or a symptom, the continuity of the picture’s representational

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9. While haptic experiences, like the experience of the detail, avoid the totalization of the vision, they focus even more on the surface, the material of the art. In other words, unlike the detail, they do not just isolate a local vision: “In a haptic relationship our self rushes up to the surface to interact with another surface. When this happens there is a concomitant loss of depth—we become amoebalike, lacking a center, changing as the surface to which we cling changes. We cannot help but be changed in the process of interacting” (Touch xvi).
system”—the strange abstract figure of a stain by the lacemaker’s hand in Jan Vermeer’s *Lacemaker*, and the liquid projection that comes from the hat’s fleece in Vermeer’s *Girl with a Red Hat* (266). Didi-Huberman uses Bergotte’s description of Vermeer’s painting to describe fragments that provoke “suspended” moments of visibility because of the intrusion of the painting material in our vision (259). Such intrusions occur in VAS, for example: page 257 bears the traces of brown and red liquids that appear vertically, disrupting the horizontal organization of the collage of web pages and writing (see figure 5). The stains disturb the deciphering of the image, as they partially hide some of the text and the “Replaceable you” web page. In that sense, they capture our attention and redirect it toward the color of the page, the ink on it, and the way it is organized, so that “such a zone [. . .] creates within the picture the equivalent of an explosion” (Didi-Huberman 252). Because the red and brown stains on the right hand side “propose[,] against the grain of representational function, a blaze of substance, color without fully controlled limit,” they oppose the optical apparatus and allow us to focus on a haptic mode of perception instead (Didi-Huberman 252).

In drawing attention to its substance, the *pan* cannot be absorbed by the picture; it resists inclusion so that “once discovered, it remains problematic” (268). As Didi-Huberman indicates, the *pan* is close to the haptic because it supposes a collapse of spatial coordination, a “quasi-touching” of the image (270). But in addition to the haptic, it makes us “understand the fragile moment of a disfiguration that nonetheless teaches us what figuring is” (271). Because the novels studied in this project explore the limits of their medium by using pagination unconventionally, I wish to transpose the theory of the *pan* to the written realm. Didi-Huberman himself alludes to connections between the *pan* in paintings and semiotic disruption, but he does not elaborate on them. I will explore the *pan* effects in the texts studied here, especially in AVA’s use of white space, which, as we shall see, highlights the materiality of the page.

10. As Luke Gibbons notes, it is “difficult to locate an English word—patch, facet, section, segment—that encompasses the full range of meaning Didi-Huberman plays with in the term *pan*” (71). The word “*pan*” also refers to an “area,” “expanse,” “zone,” and “stretch,” and Didi-Huberman borrows the idea and the figure from Marcel Proust’s description of Vermeer’s *View of Delft*: “That’s how I ought to have written,’ he [Bergotte] said. ‘My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with a few layers of colour, made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall’” (*The Captive* 185). “C’est ainsi que j’aurais dû écrire. Mes derniers livres sont trop secs, il aurait fallu passer plusieurs couches de couleur, rendre la phrase en elle-même précieuse, comme *ce petit pan de mur jaune*” (*La prisonnière* 222; my emphasis).
Figure 5. Steve Tomasula. VAS: An Opera in Flatland p. 257 (c) 2004 Steve Tomasula. The University of Chicago Press.
The consideration McElroy, Maso, Cha, and Tomasula give to textual materiality enables us to experience alternative relationships between reader and text. Their fictions call for a fusion between the cultural and physiological characteristics of reading: in engaging in a physical reading methodology, we concomitantly reconsider the cultural models that have excluded the body from intellectual activities such as reading. Thus, readings of formally innovative writing that have emphasized only cultural reconsiderations overlook the pleasurable sensuality inseparable from them. In the discussion of *Plus*, *AVA*, *DICTEE*, and *VAS* that follows, I explore this pleasurable production.