In The Laugh of the Medusa (1975), Hélène Cixous appealed to women: “Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery; and not yourself. » Such non-normative, anti-patriarchal writing from the hands of women became known as “écriture féminine.” This paper argues that écriture féminine, like much of second-wave French feminism, has been misinterpreted by Anglo-American feminists as being solely focused on sexual difference. Although French feminists such as Helene Cixous do intimately treat the female body, interpretations of such texts focused solely on sexual difference fail to recognize the radical arguments within French feminist theory that call for going beyond sexual binaries and promote a genderless world. Teaching works in translation thus poses a particular problem when translated interpretations are misleading or incomplete. How, as teachers, do we promote a more complicated interpretation of a work? Particularly, how can we present second wave French feminist theory as queer and genderless and also grounded in female materiality?

I argue this can be accomplished by teaching écriture féminine using fiction. Two French novels – Monique Wittig’s Les Guérillères (1969) and Assia Djebar’s L’amour, la fantasia (1985) –  are exemplars of écriture féminine that promote a theory beyond gender binarism. Formally, the novels deconstruct traditional western reading patterns, and thematically they focus on the act of female writing as a vital tool to destroy the patriarchy. By innovating new types of language, Wittig and Djebar’s novels reveal French and Francophone women’s fiction as a site for imaginative, genderless novelty while also not ignoring the category of “women.” Thus, when teaching French and Francophone female texts, we can look to the creative world of fiction in order to transgress the boundary condition of sexual difference imposed by Anglo-Americans and be cognizant of the call for going beyond gender binaries. Moreover, I argue for the imaginative qualities unique to fiction which demonstrates its usefulness a tool for teaching alternative theories or interpretations more broadly.