

[WORKING PAPER]

**Contested Borders: Cultural Translation and Queer Politics in Contemporary Francophone Writing from the Maghreb**

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While transnational processes, globalisation, and migratory movement continue to produce multiple forms of biopolitical domination within and across geopolitical borders, the concomitant deconstruction and delocalisation of borders are similarly producing radical transformations of political subjectivity, citizenship, and sovereignty no longer confined within the borders of the nation-state. As Ratvica Andrijasevic observes, borders have been diffused and dispersed under conditions of globalisation as they are less continuous linear structures enclosing a political territory and demarcating a state's external edges, but have become more discontinuous, porous spaces that do not necessarily map onto fixed geographical demarcations. Thus, we are witnessing, she notes, processes of rebordering that blur the traditional boundaries between what is internal and what is external to the nation-state (396). Along these lines, geopolitical borders, similar to symbolic or discursive borders (race, gender, sexuality, class), are neither entirely fixed nor impenetrable, but are constructed and operate as relational sites of power, (re)negotiation, and struggle. As Henrice Altink and Chris Weedon write in *Gendering Border Studies*, borders can no longer be regarded as part of the international geopolitical landscape of the nation-state system, but are a part of a larger network of discursive practices that create and negotiate meanings, norms, and values that shape everyday life (2).

At the same time, however, it is critically important not to decontextualize or dehistoricise actual movements and flows across geopolitical borders and to examine carefully which borders are more protected and for whom, and under what conditions certain

borders are more heavily demarcated and policed than others. This implies a kind of inconsistency and ambivalence toward the permeability of borders and the ways in which various forms of rebordering occur, to the extent that, as Eithne Luibhéid observes, the roles of the nation-state, nationalism, and nation-based citizenship have not disappeared entirely under conditions of globalisation, the economic restructuring of the globe, and migration, given that such conditions can both uphold and contest regional, transnational, and neo-imperial sites of power while producing simultaneously various forms of exclusion, marginalisation, and struggle for transformation (173-74).

While border studies is not the explicit focus of this essay, I have been interested in how the study of borders, and their potential deconstruction and rearrangement, encroaches upon sexuality as a cultural border that (re)signifies relations of power and social hierarchies particularly in postcolonial contexts in Africa. Postcolonial writing, after all, has always inhabited the space in between two or more cultural worlds. The crossing of cultural borders that results from such locationality, intensified by the flows of migration and diaspora, calls into question the nation-state, or territorially-based social or cultural determinants of sexuality, as sufficient sites of analysis for understanding more fully the broader contexts of gender and sexual politics in a transnational world. Through focusing specifically on emergent francophone literature by lesbian and gay writers from the Maghreb now living in France, I want to examine representations of dissident desire that occur in the spaces between geopolitical and other discursive borders and that both subvert and exceed the internal/external distinction made possible by the very instantiation of borders. How do the processes of migration, relocation, and deterritorialisation displace the problematic split between metropolitan centres and postcolonial peripheries and enable the negotiation of new forms of African subjectivity and dissident sexuality while highlighting the instability of cultural norms and claims to cultural authenticity both in North Africa and in the West?

An emphasis on border encounters, border crossings, and cultural mediation between Africa and Europe enables a challenge to the homogenising impulses of postcolonial nationalisms in the Maghreb, and their hegemonic holds on national belonging, on the one hand, and a simultaneous queering of a fantasised, fully integrated Europe on the other, thus implying, in the largely autobiographical literature I shall be examining, new strategies of agency, resistance, negotiation, and struggle in the spaces between two totalising cultural worlds, and inciting what Paul Bandia marks as the very act of (cultural) translation (274). I refer to cultural translation as the contiguous processes of cultural exchange historically derived from the colonial relation, but also manifest through the processes of globalisation and transnational exchange, particularly in the experience of those who migrate from the postcolonies to the former imperial centres in Europe. Speaking of those who have historically negotiated the spaces between cultural borders in *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said notes that they ‘exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, [and] their condition articulates the *tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions* in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism’ (332; emphasis added). With migrant identity, in particular, the experience of the tensions and contradictions in the overlapping spaces of culture that Said mentions incites the practice of cultural translation in order to bridge geographical distance and the transfer of experience from the culture of origin while negotiating new identities and the pressures of a foreign space in the culture of settlement (Bandia 275-76). In this article, I am interested, then, in exploring the ways in which Franco-Maghrebi lesbian and gay writers engage in cultural translation through their own writing as a way of negotiating the felt experiences of dissonance between their indigenous culture and that of Europe in order to make sense of their sexual subjectivities as always already culturally mediated and configured within power relations pertaining to race, gender, ethnicity, class, and geopolitical location.

I also write out of a desire to contest assumptions in some areas of postcolonial studies that reduce queer theorising to a western phenomenon and cast it a priori as an imperialist gesture. For example, I have questioned Marc Epprecht's position on queer theoretical work as a western intrusion into 'authentic' indigenous African cultures and as dependent on western theoretical frameworks and western forms of empirical evidence (Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa?* 14) without any elaboration as to what these theoretical frameworks may be or how they are distinctly western. Joseph Massad's stipulation that the co-called gay international is responsible for (re)producing homosexuals, gays, and lesbians in the Arab Muslim world where they simply do not exist, given that the hetero/homo split is foreign to Arab Muslim societies (162-63), is also problematic, and is not supported by the literature and lived experiences of lesbian and gay men in the Arab Muslim world, though certainly I would agree with Massad that their sense of being sexually dissident is not reducible to western assumptions about sexual identity or sexual politics. Both Epprecht's and Massad's arguments cross and intersect within the context of the Maghreb, which is both African and part of the Arab Muslim world. Epprecht has since tempered his stance on queer theory by admitting in his latest book that 'the undeniable successes of queer liberation in the West, and the insightfulness of much of queer theory, suggest a lot of potential' (*Sexuality and Social Justice* 23). But this comes across as rather patronising and disingenuous regarding a field of enquiry that has already had a major impact on postcolonial studies and has itself been transformed and revised as a discourse through its multiple and varied encounters with the specificities of postcolonial theorising and postcolonial cultures.

I don't have the space to rehearse and repeat these arguments in more detail here, but since hostilities to, or suspicions of, queer work continue to crop up, it might be more productive to look at the work of Ayo A. Coly, who in a recent article in *Culture, Theory and Critique*, grounds the queer *within* the postcolonial, asserting queer as organic to it, and as

especially indigenous to Africa (2) in her analysis of the film *Karmen Gei* (2001) by Senegalese filmmaker Joseph Gai Ramaka. The film is an adaptation, or cultural translation, of Bizet's opera that reinvents Carmen as a bisexual libertine within a highly homophobic political landscape. Brilliantly putting Achille Mbembe's idea of the African postcolony 'as an assemblage, an always in-process and multidirectional timespace of multiplicities, embeddings, proliferations, simultaneous enunciations and dissolutions' (Coly 3)<sup>1</sup> in relation with Jasbir Puar's embrace of assemblages which attune us to 'movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities' (Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* 215) as opposed to (queer) identities that are tangibly evident, Coly argues that because the discursive economy of the postcolony is set up structurally for constant self-disruption and fragmentation through its very logic of contingency and impermanence, given its history of cultural disruption through the legacy of colonialism, it is possible to theorise the inherent queerness of the postcolonial (4). Looked at in another way, and through a slightly more comparative lens, Robert Young, in a recent issue of *PMLA*, has argued that postcolonial literature is always already comparative through a sort of involuntary comparatism imposed by the violent historical imposition of colonial rule (688). Because postcolonial literature is always haunted by the spectre of its own comparatism, always located in relation to other literatures to which it does not belong, and always already occupying the space *in between* borders, postcolonial literature, according to Young, seeks to *uncompare* the comparative situation, to refuse the comparative relation by speaking back and reversing the power relation. Yet, it is nonetheless still caught up in the comparative enterprise by decentring, by domesticating the foreign rather than being assimilated into its globalised form, by *recomparing* on its own terms (689), through an act of what I have already referred to as cultural translation. This liminal space of the in between, the dissident refusal to compare whilst still comparing, the simultaneous enunciations and

dissolutions that cross and intersect postcolonial timespaces, alongside the ongoing remapping of borders, geopolitical and otherwise, helps to create a conceptual space at long last for theorising queer as a postcolonial enunciation that disrupts the oppositional binary between them that my own work, admittedly, may have unwittingly perpetuated.<sup>2</sup> As Coly rightfully clarifies, in rethinking the postcolonial/queer relation:

The two have long been kept at bay by critical theorists, discursively sealed off from one another as if to preempt contamination that each side will leave to regret.

Conversely, projects of “queering postcolonial studies” and “decolonizing queer studies” (Spurlin 2006: 7), have mostly adopted the convergence and intersectional model. . . . I am, however, concerned that the model reinscribes the postcolonial and the queer within the very binary logic that the approach sought to resist in the first place. The implicit premise that the queer and the postcolonial are indigenous to different locales reifies the notion that the queer is a foreign import into the postcolonial. (2)

I am convinced of the efficacy of Coly’s retheorisation of the postcolonial *as* queer; that is, as always already inhabited by fracture, by splittings, by difference, and by radical contingency which is supported in Mbembe’s work. Mbembe is neither specifically addressing queerness nor the Maghreb, but he opens a space for the theorisation of queerness in African literatures and cultures, the very subject of this special issue. This theorisation, however, would not be reducible or limited to the confines of the geopolitical borders within Africa alone, but is complicated further when these very borders are crossed by queer postcolonial African subjects, which further situates African culture as relational rather than merely as ontological.

In locating queer as imbricated within the postcolonial, that is, within the very relational spaces between multiple languages, histories, and cultures, I have found that emergent forms of queer francophone writing ‘coming out’ of the Maghreb do not inscribe same-sex desire as an effect of territorially or nationally-based social and cultural determinants alone, but have created spaces for textual and social negotiations of new forms of dissident sexualities and national and regional belonging. The analysis of the work of the Franco-Maghrebi writers I have selected in what follows examines articulations of new sites of cultural struggle and resistance to reframed nationalisms in the former French colonies of North Africa as well as a resistance to the simple mimicry of sexual identities in Europe or the West. The work of Rachid O., Abdellah Taïa, and Nina Bouraoui instantiate, in my view, an act of uncomparability à la Young while nonetheless holding the comparative gesture in suspension and demonstrating aptly Mbembe’s identification of the fallacy of interpreting postcolonial relationships through the binary oppositions of resistance and absolute domination alone (Mbembe 104). Moreover, by writing in French, the postcolonial writers I shall discuss inflect, as Katheryn Batchelor argues, a European language with vocabularies and turns of phrase indigenous to their own cultures, rather than using French in the same way as European writers for whom French is their primary or only language. According to Batchelor, these linguistic transformations act as forms of ‘compositional translation’ that modify, in varying degrees, the conventions of standard European languages (248). While this subversion of language, on the one hand, serves to decolonise the historical legacy of the language of colonial literature (Zabus qtd. in Batchelor 249), the underlying subversion simultaneously queers the European language as used by postcolonial writers in the present day by creating new possibilities of meaning and expression to name lived experience differently from the ways in which it would be named by the standard, conventional forms of

(European) language usage, indeed a form of (queer) translational praxis in itself within the postcolonial frame. Thus, while the texts I discuss and analyse have been written in French, the site of comparison is not between linguistic fields per se, but through the act of compositional and cultural translation located in the writing itself as a form of struggle to attempt to rename sexual subjectivities in new terms.

To illustrate where the comparative impulse is evoked but then dismantled and reframed in resistant terms, and the ways in which gendered subjectivity is shaped and reshaped, Franco-Moroccan writer Rachid O. blurs the generic borders between history and autobiography as a political strategy for rewriting postcolonial history and attempts by cultural nationalist to replace one history by another following colonial domination. In his autobiographical work, *L'Enfant ébloui* (1995),<sup>3</sup> Rachid O. dispels myths around the development of masculine gender identification through a separation from femininity, a western model of gender normativity inherited from psychoanalytic thinking, which interrupts simultaneously the intertwining metaphor of the broader postcolonial narrative from the feminised colony, ideologically penetrated by the European coloniser, to the hypermasculinised postcolonial nation-state. Rachid's narrator writes of the memory of embracing femininity at a young age in Morocco when he is allowed to go to the women's hammam with his mother or with female relatives until about the age of seven. He writes: 'C'est un endroit, le hammam, où les femmes sont intimes et rigolent entre elles' (33) [The women's hammam is a space where women are close and enjoy each other's company—my translation.] Rachid doesn't find this close intimacy when forced to go to the men's hammam when he is a bit older and can no longer gain entrance into the women's section. Standing at the material border, that is, at the actual partition between the two hammams, and therefore at the very border of gender, Rachid recollects:

À l'entrée du hammam, il y a deux portes collées, Hommes et Femmes. C'est un choc pour un enfant de ne plus entrer par la porte à côté où il a passé longtemps. Il n'y avait rien de spécial au hammam des hommes, c'était très différent du hammam des femmes, c'était humainement froid. Il n'y avait rien de chaud que la chaleur, la vapeur....

Quand ils [les hommes] se lavent les fesses ou le sexe, ils se cachent.... Pour moi, c'était une frustration de ne rien voir, car je voyais tout chez les femmes (34; brackets mine).

[At the entrance of the hammam, there are two doors labelled 'Men' and 'Women.' It's a shock for a child no longer to go in on the side of the entrance he has used for so long. There was nothing special about the men's hammam, it was very different from the women's hammam; it was emotionally cold. There was nothing warm about it other than the heat and the steam.... When they (the men) wash their buttocks or genitals, they hide themselves.... It was frustrating for me to see nothing, because I saw everything with the women—my translation.]

Most important, Rachid's narrator seems attracted to the ways in which women in the gender-exclusive space of the hammam speak of men in a feminine language he comprehends and for which he acknowledges as shaping his desire for men later in life: 'Je commençais à m'intéresser aux hommes comme elles [les femmes du hammam] s'y intéressaient' (31). [I became interested in men as they (the women in the hammam) were interested in them—my translation.] Similar to a history of feminist work in the Maghreb that has attempted to reclaim an alternative, feminine voice that has been erased out of colonial and postcolonial history, one that ruptures gender, sexual, and cultural borders, Jarrod Hayes notes that

‘Rachid O. participates in the recovery of a history that has been neglected by official discourses...by bringing to the present what many have tried to bury in the past’ (523). While postcolonial cultural nationalisms often read homosexuality as a remnant of empire and as a form of imperial penetration that weakens the nation-state, Rachid O. recuperates as memory and cultural struggle his refusal to separate from femininity as the psychic precursor to ‘proper’ masculine gender identification, and as a way of understanding his desire for men despite nationalist, cultural, and religious prohibitions against it.

Coming back to the use of the coloniser’s language as a way of subverting its received usage and creating new meanings, Rachid O’s use of the French verb *rigoler*, in describing the intimate bonds women share in the hammam, quoted above, takes the adjective form *rigolo* or *rigolote*, which can mean *plaisant*, *amusant* or *curieux*, *étrange*, or in English, ‘comical,’ in the first sense, but also ‘odd’ or ‘queer.’ These multiplicities of meanings, these embeddings and contradictions, these slippages of signification, these anti-normative spaces where contradictory meanings emerge in working across languages, and between cultural borders, are the very spaces where desire resides, and critical attention to these differences instantiates a simultaneous undoing of the comparative situation in the writing and a reframing, or queering, of the comparative moment in translative terms within the same language.

At the same time, queer francophone writing emerging from the Maghreb has fractured traditional cultural distinctions between sexual borders, that is, between gender-defined performances of sexuality between men (active/passive) and the struggle for a sexual identity as a discursive position not reducible to its manifestations in the West. Some work suggests that the active role in sexual relations between Arab Muslim men fulfils the same sexual position of virile masculinity within a regime of compulsory heterosexuality, and that the passive role is seen as a betrayal of manhood and male power and is therefore stigmatised

(e.g. Murray and Roscoe). Indeed, in an earlier tradition of writing in the Maghreb, Moroccan Berber writer Abdelhak Serhane, in *L'Amour Circoncis*, wherein he discusses the sexuality of young Moroccans and highlights the difficulties of male sexual bonds in a Muslim country, speaks of homosexuality in a more traditional heterosexually-gendered manner. Writing in 1995, he says: 'l'homosexualité "active" et l'homosexualité "passive" n'ont pas la même signification symbolique dans l'imaginaire collectif des Marocains. La première est considérée comme une manifestation de virilité par opposition à la seconde qui est vécue comme une source d'humiliation et de dégradation' (Serhane 1995, 159). [Active homosexuality and passive homosexuality do not have the same symbolic meaning in the Moroccan collective imaginary. The former is considered to be a sign of virility by contrast to the latter, which is lived as a source of humiliation and degradation—my translation.]

Joseph Massad, in his book *Desiring Arabs*, while seeming to question this as strictly paradigmatic, also makes use of the active/passive binary himself and uses such terms as practitioners of 'same-sex contact' to describe sexual relations between Arab Muslim men in contradistinction to the taking on of a sexual identity by gay men in the West, since, according to Massad, the hetero/homo distinction did not emerge historically or culturally out of Arab Muslim societies but is a distinctly western (i.e. foreign) phenomenon (41; 173). But to what extent is the active/passive binary helpful to understand sexual relations between North African Arab Muslim men, and is the act of being penetrated anally necessarily synonymous with humiliation and degradation?

Taking up this challenge, the work of Franco-Moroccan author Abdellah Taïa also operates in the spaces between cultural borders and between the binary taxonomies of gender, thereby questioning, as Sophie Catherine Smith argues, the ontological security of understanding homosexuality in North Africa (36) as a reduction to the highly gendered, hierarchical active/passive opposition I critiqued earlier. Taïa's novel, *Une mélancolie arabe*

(2008), an autobiographical work and memoir, represents the struggle for sexual identity not determined in advance by highly gendered active/passive sexual roles, and this is specifically encoded in the text, as with Rachid O., through the very strategic use of the French language. In the first section of the novel 'Je me souviens' [I remember], Abdellah meets a group of three older boys associated with hegemonic masculinity who greet him using a woman's name 'Leïla.' The leader of the group, whom Abdellah finds quite handsome and attractive, has propositioned him sexually by fondling Abdellah's buttocks. Abdellah knows what the group leader wants and reflects to himself: 'Et lui, *le beau, l'homme, le patron, le chef*, m'a indiqué faussement gentil, le chemin' (16; emphasis added). [And he, the handsome one, *the man, the leader, the boss*, pretending to be nice, showed me the way—my translation.] On the textual surface, Abdellah appears to be cast in the role of *zamel* (Arabic for *pédé passif*), given that he has been propositioned to be penetrated by the gang leader, who is represented in highly masculinized terms through the deliberate use of French masculine nouns italicised in the quotation above, and all of this appears to set up the active/passive binary opposition. But the reader soon learns that Abdellah's thoughts, as opposed to what is happening on the level of the narrative plot, are not about merely submitting to hegemonic masculinity, and thereby being degraded and humiliated the way Serhane has characterised the passive role in sexual relations between Arab Muslim men, but fantasising instead about egalitarian homosexuality, both pleasuring and being pleased through the bottom role. Through the purposeful use of self-reflexive verbs, Abdellah imagines the sexual encounter about to come as marked by reciprocity, betraying his intention simply to submit to the sexual authority of the group leader (Smith 43): 'Dans ma tête je voyais même déjà ce que nous allions faire, inventer. *Se dénuder. Se découvrir. Se toucher*' (16; emphasis added). [In my head, I even saw the things we would do and come up with. Get naked *together*, explore *together*, touch *each other*—my translation].

Here there is a presence of a subtext that surfaces between the lines of the main text, the latter of which appears to set up and reflect the gendered active/passive binary. As Paul Bandia notes, the process of cultural translation, instantiated through finding an existence between two or more cultural worlds experienced simultaneously, ‘highlights the instability of cultural norms and disrupts claims to tradition and authenticity’ (279-80). Given the title of this section of Taïa’s book is ‘Je me souviens,’ it is important to note that the act of cultural translation occurs at the mediation of the memory of erotic experience in Morocco and the lived experience of migration in France, whereas in Rachid O’s text, early formative memories of gender and gendered experience are translated *into* desire from the perspective of post-migration. When the sexual encounter begins, Abdellah refuses to be referred to as Leïla, and, in his thoughts as his interlocutor begins to undress, he rejects the feminised, passive role of submission: ‘Je voulais lui dire et redire qu’un garçon est un garçon, et une fille est une fille. Ce n’était pas parce ce que j’aimais sincèrement et pour toujours les hommes qu’il pouvait se permettre de me confondre avec l’autre sexe. De détruire ainsi mon identité, mon histoire. . . . Devenir Leïla, non. Non. Jamais’ (22). [I wanted to tell him over and over again that a boy is a boy and a girl is a girl. Just because I sincerely loved men, and always would, did not mean that I would allow him to think of me as the opposite sex. To destroy my identity and my history just like that. . . . To become Leïla, no. No. Never—my translation.] After the older boy pleads with him during the sexual encounter, ‘«Ouvre-toi, Leïla. . . Donne tes fesses, elles sont à moi de toute façon. . . .»’ (24) [‘Open your buttocks, Leïla. . . Give me your ass, in any case it is mine. . . .’—my translation], Abdellah replies defiantly, ‘«Je ne m’appelle pas Leïla. . . Je ne m’appelle pas Leïla. . . Je suis Abdellah. . . Abdellah Taïa.» Il était surpris. Dans mes yeux, il lisait enfin autre chose que la peur et la soumission’ (24). [‘My name isn’t Leïla. . . My name isn’t Leïla. . . . I am Abdellah. . . Abdellah Taïa.’ He was surprised. In my eyes, he read at last something else besides fear

and submission—my translation.] The passive role, and its attendant shame, is not being repudiated as a form of weakness and feminisation, but is being embraced, that is, translated culturally and politically, as a site of intimacy, pleasure, and, most importantly, agency.<sup>4</sup>

Through the evocation of *autre chose* in the passage above, there is a fracturing, a splitting toward a shift, and an imaginative desire for an opening to another kind of sexual relationship between men with an *interchange* of sexual roles not prescribed in advance through predefined, fixed gendered positionings. More importantly in the novel, there are other imaginative and actual crossings of borders, between those pertaining to gender, sexuality, and national affiliation, as well as locations in the liminal spaces between these categories where agency and resistance reside in the struggle to attempt to name one's relation to the world, a space which is potentially transformative of fixed national and cultural hegemonies both in the West, and in the Maghreb, demonstrating that sexuality is simply not fixed in indigenous North African societies and cultures, any more than western forms of sexual identity are merely imported or uncritically absorbed by those in/from the Maghreb, but that *multiple* and hybrid forms of same-sex sexual desires can *co-exist* within the same culture, *both* in the performative *and* in the discursive sense. In Part II of *Une mélancolie arabe*, 'J'y vais,' [I'm Going There], Abdellah moves to Paris in an attempt to reinvent himself in the West, to repudiate the silence that he felt came with being gay in Morocco, only to find out that he is objectified in other ways by Javier, a Frenchman of Spanish background: 'Il était devant moi jour après jour. Il ne m'a jamais salué. . . . Il était là, loin, loin, en permanence dans mon champ visuel, muet, opaque' (41). [He was right in front of me day after day. He never greeted me. . . . He was there, right there, constantly in my field of vision, mute, opaque—my translation.] 'C'était lui qui avait décidé de notre lien. . . . Il avait le pouvoir' (40, 49). [It was he who had decided our bond. . . . He had the power—my translation.] Even though the active/passive binary does not usually structure

sexual relations between men in the West in a fixed or determinate way (Smith 47), given his history, Abdellah feels dispossessed of subjective agency in France, which exemplifies his continued and ongoing struggle to move beyond the instrumentalisation of his erotic life imposed not only by his indigenous culture, but by postcolonial and post-immigration conditions in France, thus demonstrating the contingencies, the intersectionalities, the variabilities, the splittings, and the translative displacements that constitute queer postcolonial African subjectivities.

A more intensified and self-reflexive negotiation of split subjectivity and borders, geopolitical and otherwise, is evident in the writing of Nina Bouraoui, who is multiply positioned and living in diaspora, asserting in her book *Poupée Bella*: ‘J’ai plusieurs vies. J’ai plusieurs corps sous mon corps’ (21) [I have many lives. I have many bodies beneath my body—my translation], which not only confounds singular understandings and simplistic oppositions around gender, desire, and ethnic and national belonging, but also addresses textual layers of multiple meanings beneath the narrative of the main text. Similar to Rachid O’s and Abdellah Taïa’s attempts to challenge binary thinking around gender, sexuality, and national belonging, Bouraoui’s autobiographical writing tries to make sense of the disparities between these positions as she remains suspended in the space between two national cultural identifications, being neither fully French nor fully Algerian, as well as suspended in the space between hegemonic gender distinctions which also hints at dissident sexuality, as reflected in the title of her work *Garçon Manqué* where Bouraoui elaborates:

Tous les matins je vérifie mon identité. J’ai quatre problèmes. Française? Algérienne?  
Fille? Garçon? (163)

[Each morning I check my identity. I have four problems. French? Algerian? Girl?  
Boy?—my translation]

It must be noted that this space of hybridity, this fragmentation of subjectivity in Bouraoui's work, is not a mere mimicry of (queer) theoretical orientations of the West, nor is it an imposition of western frames of reference onto indigenous cultures. Somewhat similar to Mbembe's subsequent theoretical elaborations that speak more specifically to Africa, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin have reminded us that postcolonial writing is always already mediated and that postcolonial experiences are uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious; that is to say that subjective agency has emerged in postcolonial writing from its beginnings through a resistance to singular and fixed notions of identity and culture imposed under colonialism, and that this has remained part of the broader tradition of postcolonial writing from the colonial period until the present (12). I mention Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's seminal text *The Empire Writes Back* because one must not assume that the decentring of subjectivity and an emphasis on indeterminacy with regard to identity and cultural authenticity belong simply to the parameters of recent western theory; the imperialist gesture lies not in the theorisation of this decentring and difference in postcolonial contexts, but in the hubris that assumes that the indeterminacy of identity and cultural authenticity has emerged out of the history of European thought alone. As Mbembe aptly reminds us, subjects in the postcolony 'have to have marked ability to manage not just a single identity, but several—flexible enough to negotiate as and when necessary' (104). While the negotiation of multiple identities has been a feature of the work from the Maghreb I have been discussing thus far in relation to sexuality, I believe this fracturing of subjectivity, and the negotiation of its multiplicities, is much more explicitly encoded in the writing of Bouraoui.

Similar, but not reducible, to the feminist work of Assia Djebar, which tries to reclaim the voices of Algerian women that have been lost in standard narratives of colonial and postcolonial history, especially the strategic roles women played in the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62), Bouraoui's writing, according to Helen Vassallo, depicts the troubled past between Algeria and its former coloniser, which Vassallo refers to, citing Benjamin Stora, as 'la guerre interiorisée,' that is, the collective amnesia surrounding the war and the lack of an official remembrance which turns its legacy inward (38; qtd. in Stora 238). With regard to Bouraoui's work, Vassallo argues that 'la guerre interiorisée' becomes a personal struggle to try to name an individual subjectivity within a historical and cultural context marked by women's socio-cultural erasure and effacement (39), particularly in the years following the conflict and its ongoing legacy. As Bouraoui writes in *Garçon Manqué*: 'Je viens d'une union rare. Je suis la France avec l'Algérie' (9; hereafter cited as *GM*) [I come from an unusual coupling. I am France with Algeria—my translation], which not only locates her in the space between national borders, given that her father is Algerian and her mother French, but simultaneously locates the specific historical conflict between coloniser and colonised within her writing: 'Je viens de la guerre' (*GM* 32).

This troubled historical relation becomes inscribed in Bouraoui's subjectivity, yet also fractures it. Writing of the intense alienation she experiences in Algeria being half-French, Bouraoui writes: 'Je suis une étrangère. Ici je suis rien. La France m'oublie. L'Algérie ne me reconnaît pas . . . Ici je cherche ma terre. Ici je ne sais pas mon visage. Je reste à l'extérieur de l'Algérie' (*GM* 29-30) [I am a foreigner. Here I am nothing. France forgets me. Algeria doesn't recognise me. . . . Here I search my world. Here I don't know my face. I remain on the outside of Algeria—my translation]. By not knowing her face, by searching for her grounding, Bouraoui initiates the possibility for a new kind of alterity between national borders as well as between the borders of gender, thereby linking and simultaneously

deconstructing these two essentialist categories as mentioned in my earlier quotation of Bouraoui above: ‘Française? Algérienne? Fille? Garçon?’. Bouraoui’s masculine disguises as a young girl reveal the rejection of biological essentialism as the foundation of gender: ‘Je me déguise souvent. Je dénature mon corps féminin (*GM* 49) [I often disguise myself. I denaturalise my female body—my translation]. While Vassallo sees this as a rejection of one kind of biological essentialism, she sees it as embracing another through escaping from ‘the confines of a stereotypical feminine model only to embrace a stereotypically masculine one’ (Vassallo 43). But in this earlier work of Bouraoui’s Algerian childhood, I see the emphasis more on performative and *translative* play, that is, on the rejection of biological sex as the origin of gender, and on the possibilities of inhabiting new spaces of alterity while challenging the predominant view that gender is simply ‘the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex,’ producing a ‘natural sex’ as prediscursive, as ‘prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts’ (Butler 11), thereby textually translating gender into a political relation, rather than reinscribing it in a natural relation, to biological sex. This is why I have translated *mon corps féminin* in the quotation from *Garçon Manqué* above as ‘my female body,’ since the term *féminin* translates as both female and feminine from French, and since there is no separate term to use ‘female’ as an adjective in French; in this regard, it is important to pay critical attention to context and to the verb *dénaturaliser*. I disagree with Vassallo’s assumption that Bouraoui is simply replacing a feminine model with a masculine one; rather, the critical form of translative work here lies in Bouraoui’s exposition of any causal or natural link assumed to (pre)exist between sex and gender as a political invention. Bouraoui accepts neither her cultural belonging nor her gender as natural or given, but links them; that is to say, she accepts neither her Algerian cultural background, nor her biological sex, as originary, and therefore as her destiny, but recognises and explores their constructions, ruptures, and fragmentations in *Garçon Manqué*.

This splitting, this negotiation of corporeal difference as a space between is also evident when Bouraoui goes to France in her youth for a two-month holiday, ‘en vacances de ma vie algérienne’ (*GM* 102), with her sister, Jami, to visit her mother’s family in Rennes. Reflecting on her arrival in France on the way to Rennes after passing through border controls at Orly airport in Paris, she reflects:

Je porte ma valise à deux mains. Une énorme valise. Mes affaires de vacances. . . . J’aurai toujours une grande valise. Comme tous les Algériens. Comme tous les étrangers qui descendent du train, du bateau, de l’avion, chargés. Une maison entière dans les mains. . . . Un jour, on fouillera des valises suspectes. . . . Algériens, passagers très dangereux. Ces bombes humaines. Ces gens de la guerre. Ces terroristes par leur seul visage, par leur seul prénom, par leur seule destination. . . . Que faites-vous en France? . . . On fouillera pour la sécurité, diront-ils. Mais aussi pour salir et rebaisser. Parce que la guerre d’Algérie ne s’est jamais arrêtée. Elle s’est transformée. Elle s’est déplacée. Et elle continue. (*GM* 100-01)

[I carry my bag with two hands. An enormous suitcase. My holiday things. . . I will always have a big suitcase. Like all Algerians. Like all the foreigners who get off trains, boats, planes, so loaded down. An entire house in two hands. . . . One day, someone will rummage through suspected suitcases. . . . Algerians, very dangerous passengers. These human bombs. These people from the war. These terrorists by their mere face, by their very given name, by their mere destination. . . . What are you doing in France? . . . One will search through our things for security reasons, they will say. But also to smudge, to belittle. Because the Algerian War has never stopped. It has taken another form. It has been displaced. And it continues—my translation.]

In France, with her large suitcase representing her Algerian life, Bouraoui becomes, once again, othered, this time subjected to the French gaze, once again invoking the troubled history between Algeria and France through the referencing of the legacy of the Algerian War, which, in her view, is not a mere historical event, but an ongoing effect of imperial power and constitutes her subjectivity in France (through race) in a way that is almost a mirror image to the way in which she internalised the war when in Algeria (through gender). It must be noted that queer migration is not necessarily a movement from repression to (gendered/sexual) liberation, but that it is often, as Luibhéid points out, one of continued, though restructured, experiences of inequality (170). With regard to Bouraoui and Taïa, inequality is experienced through epistemes of racial and class differences in their translocation from North Africa to Europe.

Rather than merely resisting binary categories, Bouraoui shifts to a much more direct articulation of her desires after moving to Paris as a young adult in her second autobiographical work, written in the form of diary to record her thoughts. She writes in *Poupée Bella*: ‘Je cherche un trésor. Je cherche un monde qui parlerait de moi. . . . Je suis dans le temps de mon homosexualité’ (16-17; hereafter cited as *PB*). [I seek a treasure. I seek a world that would speak of me. . . . This is the time of my homosexuality—my translation.] In contradistinction from her approach in *Garçon Manqué*, where she focuses on her gender alterity whilst in Algiers, which intimates her sexual alterity as well, and the difficulty of finding a place for her gender/sexual difference within the borders of Algeria, Bouraoui seeks a world in Paris that already speaks about her, that affirms, or even constitutes, her subjectivity. In *Poupée Bella*, there is also a noticeable shift from a concern with national borders to the spatial location of her body: ‘Je suis dans la seule vérité. La vérité de mon corps’ (13). [I am within the only truth. The truth of my body—my translation.] At the

same time, Bouraoui hopes to erase other parts of herself, such as her racial difference, in order to assert sexual difference and find her place in the world: ‘Trouver sa place dans le cœur d’une fille c’est enfin trouver sa place dans le monde’ (19). [Finding one’s place in the heart of a girl is finally to find one’s place in the world—my translation.] Responding to Bouraoui’s claim that she wishes to lose her face in the lesbian bars of Paris, Helen Vassallo claims that through losing herself, Bouraoui hopes to find herself through becoming faceless (45), thereby erasing the mark of racial difference, which is reminiscent of the work of African-American lesbian writer Audre Lorde, who, in her biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, describes the difficulties of being accepted as lesbian in her African-American community in Harlem in New York City and her initial struggles to attempt to downplay her racial difference in the lesbian bars of Greenwich Village in the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> While Vassallo sees the replacement of the earlier phrase, ‘[une] place dans le monde’ mentioned above, with Bouraoui’s subsequent stipulation, ‘Je suis un corps dans le monde. Je suis une fille qui aime les filles’ (*PB* 23) [I am a body in the world. I am a girl who loves girls—my translation], as a mode of survival rather than as a deliberate capitulation to the white dominant culture in France in general, and to the predominately white Parisian lesbian bars in particular, it is true, to some extent, that Bouraoui’s sense of self is no longer linked to a geopolitical environment confined only to national borders, but to a subculture where her body and desires emerge into a more fullness of being (Vassallo 46). But one cannot too readily dismiss the pull of western culture given the fact that Bouraoui’s survival depends on acquiescing, to a certain degree, to western culture hegemony, which demands that she ‘whiten’ her racial difference in order to assert, or live out more fully, her sexual difference. Even the subcultural spaces she inhabits in Paris still arrange bodies in particular ways, in particular relations to one another. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, whiteness is not reducible to white skin, but is a regime, a ‘straightening’ device, an effect of what coheres, of what allows

certain bodies to move with comfort through space and so inhabit the world as if it were home (135-36), whilst racialised bodies, especially given the legacy of colonialism when they are located in the former imperial centre, often remain disoriented by the so-called familiarity and social reproduction of what Fanon has labelled ‘le monde blanc.’ This does not necessarily result in a simple capitulation to assimilation, but the pull of whiteness as a site of power must be figured as part of the struggle of sexually dissident African bodies migrating to Europe through translating the memory of their indigenous cultures as a point of reference in order to make sense of their material existence in the new culture in which they find themselves, and through using their lived experience of the new culture to translate and reshape their understanding of their indigenous culture so that it no longer functions as a determinate or fixed point of origin, thus taking into account both the ongoing effects of a history of imperialism and continuing forms of resistance to them.<sup>6</sup>

The impulse Bouraoui feels to inhabit whiteness does not erase her imbrication within and between national and cultural borders; Vassallo attempts to resolve the cultural differences, plurivocities, and contradictions that Bouraoui inhabits by suggesting a deterritorialisation of her œuvre from a geographical ‘terre’ to a metaphysical or literary grounding, given that the act of autobiographical writing becomes Bouraoui’s new territory through which to negotiate sexual alterity which was not possible in Algeria, and a discursive or narrative plane through which to navigate, at the same time, the geographical borders of her lived experience (49-50), culminating in the third autobiographical narrative *Mes Mauvaises Pensées*. While it is true that resisting the fixed categories française/algériennes and fille/garçon, crossed in *Garçon Manqué*, allows Bouraoui to acknowledge her life, identity, and desires as fluid and permeable as Vassallo rightly claims (51), Vassallo’s argument still seems to perpetuate the metropolitan/periphery opposition, not taking into account fully Luibhéid’s stipulation mentioned earlier that queer migration is not necessarily

synonymous with liberation, since the movement from the postcolony to the West also comes at a cost with a whole new set of borders with which to cross and negotiate. The sexual alterity that Bouraoui comes to experience and realise, and perhaps live more fully in her sojourn from Algiers to Paris, is always already interimplicated through, and marked by, race and class differentials and by postcolonial and post-immigration conditions which necessitate the negotiation of other sets of social and cultural borders through the act of writing and through an ongoing, continuous struggle for subjectivity in the everyday world when these very borders are crossed.

The work of the writers I have been discussing engages in acts of cultural translation around nation, gender, race, ethnicity, and class alongside, and *in addition to*, sexuality, challenging the essentialisms of tradition and cultural authenticity in North African culture and fantasies of a Europe that is fully integrated and culturally unified. Because these works are written in French, it is important to understand from the analysis already given that these writers are doing more than simply using the language of the former coloniser, but that French is being used strategically to rework its received meanings, and that translation, as a result, becomes more than mere interlinguistic transfer. As Catherine Porter reminds us, translation is a multidimensional site of cross-lingual performance on which diverse social and intellectual tasks are performed (6). Extending this, cultural translation cannot be regarded as a passive or reproductive process; the Franco-Maghrebi writers I have been discussing seem very much aware of western sexual categories and western conceptions of sexual identities, but neither reproduce nor reify those, nor the gender/sexual codes of their indigenous cultures, in their writing. In fact, the term *lesbienne* never appears in the works by Bouraoui that I have been discussing. Rather, the very act of writing attempts to address and name the struggle to negotiate new forms of sexual subjectivity, while, at the same time, the struggle to write and

sexual struggles are inextricably intertwined as Bouraoui explains: ‘Je suis en devenir homosexuel, comme je suis dans le livre en train de se faire. . . . J’ai peur d’écrire et j’ai peur d’aimer. Chaque fois c’est l’abîme, chaque fois c’est l’origine de soi (*PB* 49, 65). [I am in the process of becoming homosexual, just as I am in the book as I am writing it. . . . I am afraid of writing and I am afraid of loving. Each time it’s the abyss, each time it is the origin of self—my translation.] Here, metaphorically perhaps, the borders of self and other seem to be crossed—the chasm of profound differences that emerges through the act of writing, and the utter untranslatability of one’s intimate desires. While the works of Rachid O, Abdellah Taïa, and Nina Bouraoui I have discussed assume what Bandia refers to as ‘a translative nature’ that straddles two different cultural worlds (274), new spaces of non-reciprocity between cultures specifically pertaining to gender, sexuality, race, and subjectivity are produced—sites of supplementarity and heterogeneity that expose the instability of cultural norms and the nation-state system as the basis for citizenship and sovereignty—which radically call into question notions of a stable or fixed African cultural authenticity or (sexual) identity. These spaces of difference, where contradictory meanings emerge in working across national borders, not only instantiate cultural translation as a queer praxis, but enable new thinking, as Puar suggests, about the idea of queer diaspora, the ways in which people might be connected beyond the sharing of a common ancestral homeland so as to imagine other kinds of kinship for diasporic bodies such as affectionate and/or erotic lines of affiliation besides, or apart from, filiation with a particular nation-state or region (“‘The Turban is Not a Hat’” 69-70), but not without, I would add, the inscription of racial, ethnic or gender differences as these are not superseded by affective or erotic lines of affiliation. More broadly, seeing the world from a position of the point where various cultures touch, that is, from a position that is more oblique, less ‘straight’ and less centred, and located in the liminal spaces between invented borders, may be a (queer) space productive of new thinking in the

struggle to name one's shifting and varied relation to African cultural identity, national/regional belonging, and the world. But while the figuration of queerness in/of Africa may give voice to struggles for erotic autonomy as viable praxes of decolonisation, it will always remain an assemblage, a (re)negotiation, a hybrid, differentially inflected, unstable, shaped and reshaped, translated and *retranslated* in its very untranslatability through the very processes of cultural mediation that have always constituted African literature and culture.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*: 'Conflict arises from the fact that the postcolony is chaotically pluralistic, and that it is in practice impossible to create a single, permanently stable system out of all the signs, images, and markers current in the postcolony; this is why these signs and markers are constantly being shaped and reshaped, as much by the rulers as by the ruled, in attempts to rewrite the mythologies of power' (108). While Mbembe writes primarily about francophone sub-Saharan Africa in *On the Postcolony*, with the focus of his examples coming from Cameroon, his analysis is nonetheless helpful and relevant to new queer francophone literatures emerging out of the postcolonies of the Maghreb.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Spurlin, 'Broadening Postcolonial Studies/Decolonizing Queer Studies' and *Imperialism within the Margins*, Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> Rachid O.'s book *Chocolat chaud* (1998) is a fictitious autobiographical account of a Moroccan man exploring sexual identity in France, and may therefore seem the more appropriate text for analysis here. But I have chosen to focus on texts by Franco-Maghrebi writers that address their early years spent in North Africa as a critical reference point for their lived experiences of gender and sexual struggle retrospectively, prior to migration, but from the point of view of having already emigrated at the time the texts were written, while

touching upon their struggles with the processes of integration in France, as a way of capturing their sense of location in the spaces between cultural borders and their translations of their sense of sexual difference in this space between, thereby problematizing any notion of a given or self-evident notion of queerness in African literature and culture.

<sup>4</sup> In writing about the ‘complicated cultural and historical entanglements between “black” and “queer,” (8) specifically, and perhaps between racial and sexual difference more broadly, in her book *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*, Kathryn Bond Stockton notes, citing Leo Bersani, that gay men have been associated historically with anal penetration and with sexual passivity in public discourse (14), regardless of whether they occupy the active or passive position. This is quite significant considering problematic understandings that reduce sex between Arab Muslim men to the highly gendered active/passive binary where the active role is usually not associated with homosexuality per se. But the interesting question Stockton is asking is how shame and debasement, culturally conflated with sexual passivity, are consciously, creatively, consistently, or obliquely negotiated into intimate acts of pleasure (150), which seems to be working in Taïa’s novel, alongside a defiant sense of agency and power that becomes inscribed in the bottom role. This defiant refusal to identify with hegemonic masculinity, and be feminised as a result, is also present in Rachid O.’s text as discussed earlier.

<sup>5</sup> See also Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* as another example of negotiating the borders between racial and sexual struggles.

<sup>6</sup> Continuing forms of resistance to the effects of imperialism would, of course, also include the resistance to strategies of neo-imperial domination in postcolonial nationalisms in so far as these reconstitute forms of heteropatriarchy, such as the confinement of women to subordinate and domestic roles and the effacement of the history of their struggles, and the

pathologisation and/or criminalisation of homosexuality, both of which are legacies of colonial rule. In my discussion of the (re)negotiated relationship between the memory of the indigenous culture and subjective material existence in Western culture in my discussion of Bouraoui in the main text above, I am borrowing loosely from Said's idea of 'contrapuntal reading' in *Culture and Imperialism*, which takes into account 'intertwined and overlapping histories' of conflict marked by a history of imperialism (18), and is extended further when framed by the politics of gender and sexual dissidence which Said does not consider.

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