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“Ni Fille, Ni Fils:” Gender/Genre Fluidity in Nina Bouraoui’s *Garçon manqué* and Leïla Sebbar’s *L’arabe comme un chant secret*

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Abstract

“Ni Fille, Ni Fils:” Gender/Genre Fluidity in Nina Bouraoui’s *Garçon manqué* and Leïla Sebbar’s *L’arabe comme un chant secret*

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This paper is an exploration of Nina Bouraoui’s semi-autobiographical novel *Garçon manqué* and Leïla Sebbar’s collection of autobiographical essays *L’arabe comme un chant secret*. The protagonist of Bouraoui’s *Garçon manqué* has many first names: “Je passe de Yasmina à Nina. De Nina à Ahmed. D’Ahmed à Brio,” the narrator states (62). Through the narrator’s exploration of her gender identity, the novel traces themes of the body as a site of exile, the gendering of land and nation, and the multiplicity of identities.

The narrator describes her body as a site of exile, torn between France and Algeria, inhabiting both the masculine and the feminine. Her fluid gender identity opens up queer possibilities as she questions and explores her sexual orientation. Similarly, in her writing, Sebbar plays with gendered language to challenge colonial, patriarchal, and linguistic systems of domination and control. Shifting the gendered articles and adjectives, Sebbar feminizes words that are grammatically masculine, and masculinizes words that are grammatically feminine, deconstructing fixed notions of identity. The ways in which she queers gender in language disrupts binaries of colonizer/colonized, mother/father, son/daughter, France/Algeria. Throughout this paper, I demonstrate how Bouraoui and Sebbar employ autofiction and autobiography to reveal the constructed nature of gender identity as it relates to language and nationality in a Franco-Algerian context

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Introduction

In Nina Bouraoui's semi-autobiographical novel *Garçon manqué*, and Leïla Sebbar's series of autobiographical essays *L'arabe comme un chant secret*, both authors describe their complex gender and national identities as being "in-between," "both," and "neither." As daughters of French mothers and Algerian fathers, Bouraoui and Sebbar use autobiographical writing to explore the ways in which gender identity is shaped by national identity. In her essays, Sebbar disrupts gendered language to express these contradictions, describing her mother as a masculine colonizer, and her father as a feminine colonized subject. Bouraoui expresses similar gender ambiguity in her novel, but her character chooses to play with her gender expression in a response to this internal conflict. Bouraoui's protagonist takes on multiple names and multiple identities as she crosses from Algeria to France, playing different roles and "dissimulating" in a response to linguistic, cultural, and racial conflicts.

How do you respond to a fractured identity? How do you express this identity, and try to come to terms with this fracturing through language? In this essay, I explore these questions through the lens of gender and sexuality. Through the form of the autobiographical essay, Sebbar depicts snapshots of her childhood growing up in Algeria. She plays with language in an attempt to convey the contradictions in her family history and her own identity. Writing between the late 20th and early 21st century, Sebbar's essays develop new conceptions of gender in language as she grapples with her identity over time. Bouraoui's life-writing is spread across this same time span as she explores coming to terms with gender identity and queer desire from childhood to young adulthood. Bouraoui has written a series of autobiographical novels depicting her childhood, of which *Garçon manqué* is the second. *Garçon manqué* is split into five parts: Algeria, France, Rome, Tivoli, and the final piece, which is titled Amine. Throughout the novel,

the main character engages different roles as she takes on different personae. In Algeria, she becomes a boy in a response to the threat of sexual violence, and in an effort to become more like her childhood friend Amine, and more like her father. In France, she assimilates to femininity to please her grandmother, who prefers “real girls.” As the story progresses, she seems to come to terms with her femininity in certain ways, but never expresses a “true” identity as male or female, neither French nor Algerian.

Bouraoui’s and Sebbar’s life writings disrupt essentialist categories and assert their independence by refusing restrictive identities. In my investigation of Bouraoui’s and Sebbar’s narrative forms, I demonstrate how Sebbar challenges gendered language, and how Bouraoui depicts gender fluidity through first-person narrative. By deconstructing gender in their writing, Bouraoui and Sebbar provide the tools and the understanding for scholars to make space for trans and genderqueer identities in Franco-Maghrebi literary studies. Additionally, Bouraoui and Sebbar write from the perspective of a Franco-Algerian adolescent to reflect on the role colonial violence plays on the gendered subject. Through reading these two Franco-Algerian women writers in conversation, I argue that Bouraoui and Sebbar employ autofiction and autobiography to reveal the constructed nature of gender identity as it relates to language and nationality.

In the section “Autobiographical form,” I demonstrate how Sebbar’s choice of autobiographical essays and Bouraoui’s use of autofiction depict fractured identities at the intersection of French and Algerian heritage. I argue that this “fractured identity” at the heart of their works results in an ambiguity of gender and literary genre. Not only do these authors resist restrictive gender and national identities, they also resist generic conventions. In “Queer Maghrebi Studies,” I discuss Bouraoui’s and Sebbar’s depiction of trans and fluid gender identity in their life-writings. Additionally, I employ a queer theoretical framework to argue that queer

theory can benefit from Franco-Maghrebi literary studies, particularly in interrogations of gender and national identity. In “France/Algeria, Fille/Garçon,” I describe how Bouraoui and Sebbar disrupt essentialist categories of gender and nation through their literary techniques. By close-reading passages related to questions of identity, I explain that the experience of “in-between-ness” Bouraoui and Sebbar describe is a result of French racism and colonialism. In “Colonial Gender,” I show how Bouraoui and Sebbar cite the colonial history of Algeria as the origin of their gender ambiguity, and I argue that by deconstructing the gendered body, both authors disrupt the power relations between colonizer and colonized. In “Linguistic Affiliations,” I close-read Bouraoui’s and Sebbar’s discussion of their alienation from Arabic, and the violence they experience from French as a colonial language. In “Gender and Sexual Violence” I close-read Bouraoui’s protagonist’s gender expression as a response to the threat of gender and sexual violence, and discuss her use of drag and gender performance to resist essentialist classification. In “Queer Language, Queer Desire” I discuss the role of queer desire in their works, and I explore the significance of their coming-to-writing and coming-to-identity. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on the importance of Bouraoui’s and Sebbar’s life-writings for understanding the intersections between gender and national identity.

Background

Leïla Sebbar was born in 1941 in Aflou, Algeria to a French mother and an Algerian father. Both her father and her mother were schoolteachers. She grew up in a colonial school compound and was never taught Arabic. Sebbar’s childhood was shaped by France’s colonial presence in Algeria, and the Algerian war of Independence, which began in 1954, when she was 13 years old, and ended in 1962, a year after she had left Algeria to attend university in France.

Nina Bouraoui was born in Rennes, France, in 1967 to a French mother and an Algerian father, and spent the majority of her childhood in Algeria, before returning to France at the age of fourteen due to her mother's poor health (Vassallo 3). With over twenty years' difference between these two authors, their autobiographical writings encompass multiple layers of diaspora and separation. Despite the temporal distance between their texts, there are clear parallels in their attempt to understand their fractured identities as daughters of French mothers and Algerian fathers. In evaluating the role of autobiography in these two authors' works, I explore how gender identity is shaped by conceptions of national identity and belonging.

L'arabe comme un chant secret is a collection of autobiographical essays written by Leïla Sebbar between 1978 and 2010. From the first essay in the collection, "Si je parle la langue de ma mère," written in 1978, to the final essay, "J'écris l'Arabe imaginaire, mon père," written in 2010, this series of essays traces Sebbar's relationship to gender, language, family, and nation. *L'arabe comme un chant secret* is dedicated "A tous les enfants qu'on a séparés de la langue des père et mère." Sebbar opens her first essay of the collection, "Si je parle la langue de ma mère," with the question: "Comment je suis revenue à moi?" (Sebbar 11). The art of writing, for Sebbar, is not so much a return (rétour) as a detour (détour): "Pour arriver un jour jusqu'à moi il m'a fallu le détour des livres. Détour politique. Le détour de la guerre. Le détour des femmes" (15). To read this collection of essays is to experience this feeling of retour/détour: to return to Sebbar's identity, her history, it is necessary to take a detour through language. In her writing, Sebbar plays with gendered language to challenge colonial, patriarchal, and linguistic systems of domination and control. She feminizes words that are grammatically masculine, and masculinizes words that are grammatically feminine by shifting articles and adjectives, deconstructing fixed notions of identity.

Nina Bouraoui resists classification as either a French or a Maghrebi author. In *Garçon manqué*, she writes: “Auteur français? Auteur maghrébin? Certains choisiront pour moi. Contre moi. Ce sera encore une violence” (Bouraoui 36). While I do not wish to perpetuate this violence by labeling Bouraoui as either a French or a Maghrebi author, I believe it is necessary to recognize her identity as the daughter of a French mother and Algerian father in relation to her literary project. Bouraoui published a series of semi-autobiographical novels between 1999 and 2005, the second of which is *Garçon manqué*, published in 2000. The novels span the author’s childhood and adolescence split between France and Algeria. While the main character in *Garçon manqué* shares the same name and life history with the author, Bouraoui has never claimed that the novel is autobiographical. In *Garçon manqué*, Bouraoui depicts a childhood split between Algeria and France. The main character, Nina, goes by many names: “Je passe de Yasmina à Nina. De Nina à Ahmed. D’Ahmed à Brio” (62). The child of a French mother and an Algerian father, the protagonist describes her identity as fractured: “Porter une identité de fracture. Se penser en deux parties. À qui je ressemble le plus? Qui a gagné sur moi? Sur ma voix? Sur mon visage? Sur mon corps qui avance? La France ou l’Algérie?” (21). Bouraoui’s use of “gagner” carries a double meaning. With the obvious connotation of victory in the war between France and Algeria, Nina also views her identity as a game. Throughout the novel, Bouraoui uses verbs such as “déguiser,” “dénaturer,” “changer,” “se transformer,” “inventer,” and “dissimuler” to deconstruct gender and question conceptions of nation and belonging. The narrator states: “Je ne sais pas qui je suis. Une et multiple. Mentreuse et vraie. Forte et fragile. Fille et garçon” (62). As a work of autofiction, *Garçon manqué* bridges the gap between autobiography and fiction, embracing multiplicity and rejecting national, linguistic, or gendered categorization.

Autobiographical Form

Bouraoui and Sebbar take different approaches to autobiographical writing: with the short autobiographical essay, Sebbar returns to themes from her childhood from an adult's point of view, sharing snapshots of her life story with the reader. In her autofiction, Bouraoui's uses first-person narrative, free indirect discourse, fragmented sentences, and repetition to reflect the interiority of an adolescent girl coming to terms with her gender identity and her sexuality. Sebbar's deconstruction of gendered language gives us as readers the understanding and the framework to understand the gender ambiguity that comes from a fractured national identity. Bouraoui's use of autofiction in turn shows how this fractured identity is expressed on the body of a child who is Franco-Algerian. In *Autobiography and Independence: Selfhood and Creativity in North African Postcolonial Writing in French*, Debra Kelly meditates on the role of the genre of autobiography in contemporary postcolonial literature. She writes:

Michael Sheringham has called autobiography 'an anxious genre,' and argues that all autobiographers write in the 'margins of major conceptual systems, existing narratives, or paradigms of selfhood at large in philosophy and psychology.'...the autobiographer necessarily engages not only with the self, but also with the other in various forms, and raises at the same time the question of the heterogeneous, hybrid form of autobiography...If this is true of all autobiography, then the challenges inherent in the autobiographical act have a particular resonance for the colonial and postcolonial subject writing against the dominant discourses of the colonial system. (11)

Similar to Kelly's description of the "anxious" nature of autobiography, Bouraoui and Sebbar create a hybrid autobiographical style which resists dominant colonial discourses of gender and national identity. In the case of Bouraoui, this "anxious genre" resists even the definition of autobiography, which by its nature becomes too constrictive.

As a work of autofiction, *Garçon manqué* resists classification as a work of fiction or an autobiography. In “Nina Bouraoui: construction sexuelle et transgression identitaire,” Monserrat Serrano Mañes writes:

On pourrait, peut-être, penser que sous le titre de roman Bouraoui cache plutôt une autofiction. Il s’agirait ainsi d’une sorte de troisième voie, une troisième forme d’écriture qui se trouverait à la confluence des deux autres – autobiographie, roman – et que le lecteur peut déceler dans l’intertextualité bouraouienne. Il revient donc au récepteur, en tant que destinataire, de découvrir les points d’intersection des modes génériques considérés classiques, et de reconnaître la nature réelle d’une écriture qui n’est pas conventionnelle, mais autobiographique dans son essence, formellement fictionnelle, profondément autofictionnelle. (47-48)

Mañes’s conception of a third form of writing describes Bouraoui’s resistance to any form of binary classification, be it in terms of her own identity, or in her choice of literary genre. As Mañes notes, it is up to the reader to decipher what is reality and what is fiction. While I feel that Bouraoui’s autobiographical background is important for our understanding of *Garçon manqué*, I make no attempts to qualify what elements from the novel are true to Bouraoui’s personal experience. However, I find it important to think about these intersections of genre as it relates to Bouraoui’s protagonist’s own unstable and ambiguous identity. In an interview in *L’Express* in 2004, Nina Bouraoui spoke about her writing style, stating that her style is not thought out, instead, it resembles her body: “Je parle une langue de la sensation, une langue du corps. Mais j’aimerais bien que cela soit un corps un peu plus harmonieux, avec des gestes moins saccadés. Mon style n’est pas pensé. Il me ressemble” (Simmonet 2004). While interrogating what is fact or fiction in Bouraoui’s writing is unnecessary in my project, I wish to investigate what it means to write in a style that resembles the author, particularly the author’s body.

While Bouraoui resists classifying *Garçon manqué* as an autobiography, Sebbar’s essays are explicitly autobiographical. Sebbar describes her project as a writer in “Le silence de la langue de mon père, l’arabe:”

J'écris. Des livres. J'écris la violence du silence imposé, de l'exil, de la division, j'écris la terre de mon père, colonisée, maltraitée (aujourd'hui encore), déportée sauvagement, je l'écris dans la langue de ma mère. C'est ainsi que je peux vivre, dans la fiction, fille de mon père et de ma mère. Je trace mes routes algériennes dans la France. (68)

To trace these essays chronologically is to observe Sebbar's journey through Algeria and France, her shifting relationships to French, her mother's tongue, and to Arabic, a language she will never learn. Through Sebbar's autobiographical essays, we as readers are able to experience fragments of Sebbar's childhood: growing up within the confines of the school compound, visiting her Algerian relatives, and her experience of coming-to-writing as a young woman. Sebbar questions how to return to herself, to her history and to her identity through language. Across the span of these essays, Sebbar resists these fixed identities by disrupting gendered systems of power in language, challenging binaries of colonizer/colonized, mother/father, daughter/son, France/Algeria. Similarly, Bouraoui's project deconstructs gender through her protagonist's proliferation of names, identities, and gender expressions.

In an interview with James Adam Redfield, Sebbar describes her project as a writer as a movement back-and-forth:

In my work, in everything I write – I can't stop myself, whether I'm writing novellas, novels, memoirs – I'm always in this back-and-forth. I think this back-and-forth, this movement, is conditioned in space and in time by my own birth. I'm in this dual back-and-forth between two continents, two cultural, historical and religious spaces – antagonistic and amorous, conflicting and amicable – I realize it's a *definition* I can't escape. I'm very much *in* this movement – if it's not there I'm not interested, I can't write. And the back-and-forth is also the inside-outside...always. (Redfield 2005)

To read Sebbar is to engage in this movement back-and-forth, entering into a continuous process of meaning-making and re-making. This space of movement, I argue, is where queer possibilities emerge. As Brinda Mehta notes in *Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices Against Violence*, "The cross-cultural textuality of Sebbar's work enables her to traverse the multiple spaces of identity and life experience by eradicating internal and external borders that threaten to limit self-

expression” (33). Mehta theorizes this cross-cultural practice as “migratory textuality,” which “produces complex (post)colonial identities situated between, within, and beyond France and North Africa to delegitimize the nationalist, religious, and cultural absolutes that marginalize all those who inhabit in-between spaces” (34). Bouraoui’s and Sebbar’s textual practices simultaneously resist “nationalist, religious, and cultural absolutes” as they re-work colonial, patriarchal, and linguistic systems of domination and control.

Queer Maghrebi Studies

Sebbar’s disruption of gendered language, and Bouraoui’s fictional representation of trans-national and fluid gender identity, create possibilities for queer readings of gender and nation in a Francophone context. By drawing from queer theory, I will elucidate some of the gendered nuances of Sebbar’s and Bouraoui’s work with language and identity. In her introduction to *Queer Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing*, Donna McCormack writes:

What I am calling queer postcolonial narratives, while not always or necessarily direct responses to these debates, offer entry points into exploring the continued political potency of queerness in colonial and postcolonial contexts. More specifically, I argue that queer postcolonial texts imagine worlds that challenge, collide with and chip away at the supposed permanent and traditional structures of heteronormative, racist colonial and neocolonial societies. They are concerned with how sexuality and gender are imbricated in the racialized colonization of bodies. (8)

In my reflection on these authors’ writings and their use of language, I do not make any claims about Bouraoui’s or Sebbar’s gender identities or sexual orientations, but I am interested in Sebbar’s disruption of gendered systems of power in French, opening up queer possibilities in a binary language. I argue that queer theory can benefit from looking at gendered systems in language through literature that demonstrates how linguistic and gender identities are influenced by race and colonialism.

While Bouraoui has been classified as a lesbian writer, she resists defining her sexuality in interviews. When asked about her use of the term “homosexualité” in her novel *Poupée bella*, Bouraoui responded:

L'homosexualité, ce n'est qu'un mot. Quand j'ai osé l'écrire pour la première fois, je me suis dit: 'Ah! quelle incroyable victoire!' Mais le langage nous emprisonne... Dire que l'on est homosexuelle, c'est être cataloguée par sa sexualité, et cela me dérange profondément. L'homosexualité, ce n'est pas une identité. Je pense que le désir et la sexualité ne sont pas dissociables de l'amour. (Simmonet 2004)

In this interview, Bouraoui expresses the relief many people in the LGBTQ community feel at saying a word out loud for the first time that they have for a long time identified with: victory. She recognizes the magnitude of claiming and naming a marginalized identity, often associated with shame, as a moment of victory in her life. However, Bouraoui immediately notes that language imprisons us. She does not wish to be categorized based on her sexuality, which she does not view as an identity. In many ways, the thoughts she expresses in this interview ring true for the protagonist Nina in *Garçon manqué*. Nina wishes to become “un corps sans type, sans langue, sans nationalité” (Bouraoui 10).

In “Confessions d’une enfant du siècle: Nina Bouraoui ou la ‘bâtarde’ dans *Garçon manqué* et *La Vie heureuse*,” Martine Fernandes notes that *Garçon manqué* is not a “coming-out story” in terms of Bouraoui’s sexual orientation, in the same way that her national identity remains equally unclassifiable: “l’affirmation de la subjectivité se mêle à un profond désir de rester inclassable. On verra ainsi que la subversion de la confession permet à Bouraoui de rester dans l’indéfinition, aussi bien au niveau de la nationalité que de la sexualité” (68). While discussions of Bouraoui’s gender identity and sexual orientation in relation to her semi-autobiographical writings has proven helpful in my research, in this paper I will be focusing on the fictional character of Nina to explore this insistence on remaining unclassifiable in terms of

gender and national identity. Just as Bouraoui herself does not wish to be defined by her sexuality, her characters across her works of fiction resist labels. I believe that exploring Nina's gender fluidity in *Garçon manqué* raises similar issues to Sebbar's project, and expands on Sebbar's challenging of binary language. In the novel, Nina changes her name and gender expression multiple times to explore the connections between her national and her gender identity.

In *Queer Maroc*, Jean Zaganianis explores themes of gender, sexuality, and queer and trans identity in contemporary Moroccan literature. Zaganianis analyzes literature by Maghrebi writers to show how “Les langues, les cultures, les sexes se mélangent et montrent la fragilité de leur identité à travers l'étrange similarité qu'ils ont avec ce qui est construit comme étant différent d'eux ” (312). Bouraoui and Sebbar's discussion of language, nation, and gender similarly reflect the fragility and instability of these categories, revealing their construction. Zaganianis argues that “la transidentité est symbiotiquement liée à la transculturalité” (311-312). I do not use the term “transgender” in my analysis because neither the authors nor Bouraoui's protagonist use the term “transgender” in reference to their identities. However, I believe that it is important to think about the connections between trans identity, non-binary genders, and national identity while reflecting on their works. In “Intersectionality, Lost in Translation? (Re)thinking Inter-sections Between Anglophone and Francophone Intersectionality,” Alexandre Baril notes an “absence of trans issues in Francophone feminists' discussions,” and invites Anglophone feminists to think about the politics of language and power in our intersectional analyses (9). Bouraoui and Sebbar offer an important link between Francophone Maghrebi literary studies, and Anglophone trans studies in their exploration of the intersections between linguistic affiliations, national identity, and gender identity and expression.

Discussing *Garçon manqué*, Zaganiaris writes:

Cette identité ‘fracturée’ se rattache à un corps exilé à la fois de son appartenance cohérente à une nation mais aussi à un genre déterminé. La narratrice est prise entre deux identités culturelles... Il en est de même pour ce qui a trait à l’identité de genre. (310)

Both Bouraoui and Sebbar express this “fractured” identity in their writings, and relate their exilic experience to gender indeterminacy or fluidity. They describe the experience of being “prise entre-deux:” caught between binary gender and conflicting national identities. Bouraoui’s and Sebbar’s projects dismantle the gender binary in similar ways to queer and trans theorists, and expand on their theories by incorporating the intersections between gender and national identity. Jarrod Hayes writes in *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb*: “Instead of using queer theory to queer Maghrebian literature, [*Queer Nations*] suggests ways in which Maghrebian literature might also be said to queer both queer and postcolonial theories, which then can complement each other in productive ways” (20). Bouraoui and Sebbar not only show us how gender identity is intrinsically tied to linguistic and national identity, but they also alternative forms of self-making. Sebbar’s queering of French provides space to re-imagine what gender looks like in a binary language. Bouraoui’s exploration of gender performance through her protagonist breaks down the categories of national and gender identity. Due to these connections and intersections, I argue queer theory can benefit from Franco-Maghrebi literary studies, particularly the work of Bouraoui and Sebbar, to shift a colonial imagining of global queer identities.

France/Algeria, Fille/Garçon

Bouraoui’s and Sebbar’s literary techniques attempt to articulate an “in-between” space: a literary space that is between and outside of gender, race, and national identity. In interviews,

Sebbar has often referred to her identity as “croisée,” crossed, or at crossroads, and “coupée,” or cut (Marx-Scouras 45). This divided self is ideological – in terms of gender, culture, and language – and physical, in terms of the geographical divide of the Mediterranean between France and Algeria:

Comment, par quel miracle m’est revenue la mémoire de ces ‘je,’ ce ‘je’ ? Par quel jeu de miroir est apparu ce que je n’ai pas connu ni éprouvé de l’autre côté de moi et de l’autre côté de mon corps natal, le pays de mon père ? L’Algérie loin de la France, écartée par la mer, un très large fleuve qui sépare, mais c’est comme si on voyait l’autre rive, toujours, que le ciel soit clair ou qu’il soit obscur. Pour opérer les détours multiples et qui ne se donnent pas toujours pour tels, il faut la rupture. Sans violence. Consentie. (Sebbar 72-73)

Sebbar writes that to navigate these ideological and geographic detours, there must be a break, a “rupture.” How does she envision this non-violent rupture? Through writing, Sebbar ruptures language to cross these divides and return to herself, to access both sides of her identity, on either side of her “corps natal.” Sebbar describes not just a singular self (‘Je’), but multiple selves: “ces ‘je,’ ce ‘je’” (72). The word “je” is echoed by its homonym, “jeu,” to further highlight the instability of identity as a game of smoke and mirrors. Through language, Sebbar is able to see both sides of the shore, “que le ciel soit clair ou qu’il soit obscur.” She is able to navigate these “détours multiples et qui ne se donnent pas toujours pour tels” by detouring through writing. The link between nation and gender identity is at the heart of Sebbar’s work: she expresses this same sentiment of feeling “prise entre-deux:” caught between two languages, cultures, and opposing sides of the Algerian war. Sebbar’s project as writer is to cross these divides, to embark on a journey across the fractures of her exilic identity to return to herself.

In *Garçon manqué*, Nina finds herself caught between her mother and father, France and Algeria: “C’est une guerre. C’est une union. C’est un rejet. C’est une séduction. Je ne choisis pas. Je vais et je reviens. Mon corps se compose de deux exils. Je voyage à l’intérieur de moi”

(Bouraoui 22). The contradictions of her identity are explained in this passage: her body is composed of two exiles, situated in both a war and a union, a rejection and a seduction. Nina chooses to remain in-between, in movement: “Je vais et je reviens...Je voyage à l’intérieur de moi” (22). She describes her identity as “double et brisée” (31). As a child, Nina describes herself as without identity: “Je deviens un corps sans type, sans langue, sans nationalité. Cette vie est sauvage. Elle est sans voix et sans visage” (10). As William J. Spurlin notes in “Contested Borders: Cultural Translation and Queer Politics in Contemporary Francophone Writing from the Maghreb:”

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. (114)

This “new kind of alterity” is a point of connection between Bouraoui’s and Sebbar’s projects. Sebbar uses language to disrupt these essentialist categories, while Bouraoui’s protagonist plays with her gender expression to come to the same conclusion: that gender identity and conceptions of nation are constructed, and that new spaces in language and in writing must be formed in response to these restrictive categories.

Sebbar’s first understanding of gender and nationality is one of negation. “J’ai su d’abord ce que je n’étais pas. Je n’étais pas un garçon,” she writes (14). “Je n’étais pas vraiment musulmane,” she continues, “on disait les ‘Musulmans’ pour ne pas dire ‘les Arabes’...Je n’étais pas française puisque j’avais un nom arabe” (14). Sebbar is made aware of her racial and cultural difference when she is interrogated by the French girls she grows up with. “Elles me posaient toujours les mêmes questions. Mes origines. Je ne disais rien...” (7). Sebbar’s name reveals her Arab heritage: “Mon nom même, prénom et patronyme, annonce que je suis la fille de mon père, un Arabe, un ennemi de la France,” she writes, “un assassin de bons, de vrais Français,

propriétaires industriels de ce pays sauvé de la friche et de l'ignorance, en rupture salutaire de langue inculte, de religion obscurantiste, de coutumes obsolètes..." (66). Sebbar's name recollects France's *mission civilisatrice*, the French imperialist project to civilize Algeria. Her name is one part of her identity that has not been subsumed by colonial rule:

'Leïla.' Le seul mot qui ait échappé à la langue de ma mère. Le seul que j'entende encore et qui fait en quelque sorte scandale, perdu là, présent sur une page ou par la voix de quelqu'un. Le seul qui témoigne aujourd'hui que la langue de ma mère m'a fait violence, comme à mon père. (22-23)

The main character of Bouraoui's novel shares the same name as the author – Yasmina Bouraoui – although she is most often called Nina. When she arrives in France she says must forget her last name, Bouraoui: "Faire oublier. Que mon père est algérien. Que je suis d'ici, traversée... Faire oublier mon nom. Bouraoui. Le père du conteur. D'*abi*, le père, de *raha*, raconter" (Bouraoui 96). By breaking down the meaning of her name, Nina recollects her Algerian family's history. However, she insists on forgetting this history in an attempt to assimilate into French culture. While Nina's last name recollects her family's history, she switches between multiple first names to alter her identity, occasionally taking on the Arabic names of Ahmed or Yasmina, and at other times presenting herself as the ethnically and nationally-ambiguous Nina or Brio.

Bouraoui's discussion of the terms "Arabe," "Algérien," "Maghrébin," and "beur" reflect a similar sentiment to Sebbar's response to racialized language:

On ne pourra plus dire Arabe, en France. On dira beur et même beurette. Ça sera politique. Ça évitera de dire ces mots terrifiants, Algériens, Maghrébins, Africains du Nord. Tous ces mots que certains Français ne pourront plus prononcer. (Bouraoui 133)

Bouraoui's protagonist argues that terms of racial alterity terrify the French. As Sebbar notes that the French preferred the term "Arabe" to "Musulman," Bouraoui's generation has developed new terminology to refer to French children of North African descent: "beur" and "beurette."

Nina finds the term “beur” equally ludicrous: “Beur, c’est ludique. Ça rabaisse bien, aussi” (133). She describes her generation as “ni vraiment française ni vraiment algérienne. Ce peuple errant. Ces nomades. Ces enfants fantômes. Ces prisonniers” (133). Nina’s description of her generation as nomads, ghosts, and prisoners reflects the history of racist and colonial violence France has inflicted on Algeria. Nina views this violence in the relationship between her mother and her father. She describes racism as something sexual: “Un vice. Une maladie honteuse.” She continues: “Le racisme est une maladie. Une lèpre. Une nécrose. C’est le corps de ma mère avec le corps de mon père qui dérangera. Ces deux chairs-là. Ce rapport-là. Cette union-là” (153-154). Nina is the child of this union: “Je viens d’une union rare. Je suis la France avec l’Algérie” (11). The fractured identities Bouraoui and Sebbar describe in these passages are a direct result of French racism and colonialism. By rejecting national and gendered categories, they resist French colonialism and neocolonialism. Through writing, Bouraoui and Sebbar forge their own hybrid, multiple identities.

Colonial Gender

Sebbar links her gender identity to the colonial history of Algeria: “Où me trouver? Fille ou garçon? Du côté des colonisés, de la force? Petite fille modèle, rebelle?” she asks (15). Sebbar’s father is the masculine colonial subject, and her mother is the feminine colonizer. “J’étais un bon colonisé. Comme mon père. Je n’étais pas une fille,” she states (23). When Sebbar writes “I was a good colonial subject,” “J’étais un bon colonisé,” the article and noun are in the masculine. Sebbar is referring to herself as a masculine colonial subject, like her father, resulting in conflicting national and gender identities. Within the school compound, Sebbar writes:

Mon père, maître incontesté de l'île idéale, serait un pauvre colonisé, une victime, et ma mère, sa complice dans l'école, la maison, la chambre, le bourreau, la bourreau? Impossible féminin à ce mot de barbarie. (44)

In French, the word for victim is grammatically feminine. Sebbar's father, as a masculine colonial subject, "un pauvre colonisé," is simultaneously a feminized victim, "une victime." Sebbar plays with her mother's gender in this colonial dichotomy: is her mother "le bourreau" or "la bourreau?" While the word for torturer is grammatically masculine, Sebbar questions whether to add a feminine article to it. Is it possible to feminize a word like "bourreau?" In the history of colonial Algeria, it is still uncommon for writers and scholars to discuss the role white French women had to play in France's "mission civilisatrice." Sebbar's mother, however, clearly represents France's colonial presence. "My mother. She is France," Sebbar writes (33). Because her mother represents masculine colonial power, Sebbar's father is emasculated, resulting in Sebbar's crisis of gender identity.

As the daughter of "un victime" and "une bourreau," Sebbar calls into question her own gender identity. Sebbar is no longer a child, or a person, but a product:

Et moi, dans cette histoire de corps, d'âme et de langue? Fille d'un victime et d'une bourreau...Prise au piège. Tourmentée. Entre un masculin féminin et un féminin masculin. Qui est le père, qui est la mère? Produit neutre, ni fille ni fils, enfant d'une union contre nature? (45-46)

Sebbar envisions herself physically trapped between a feminized masculine and a masculinized feminine, resulting in a product that is neither daughter nor son. Sebbar uses the terms "trapped" and "tormented" to highlight the inescapability of this identity. She poses questions to grapple with this internal conflict, and leaves them unanswered. Her question "Qui est le père, qui est la mère" once again inverts her parents' genders, resulting in her questioning of their sex. Her use of the term "nature" relates to both biological nature and immorality. Her parents' union is "against nature" because their biological sex is indeterminate, and immoral due to their

conflicting nationalities. In *The Body Besieged: The Embodiment of Historical Memory in Nina Bouraoui and Leïla Sebbar*, Hellen Vassallo argues that “[t]he inadequacy of language to express the reality of her experience is evidenced in the reversal of genders in ‘un victime’ and ‘une bourreau,’ and then linked to body and essence...” (136). However, I do not believe that Sebbar’s choice to “reverse” genders expresses the inadequacy of language. Instead, Sebbar offers new possibilities in a grammatically gendered language. She challenges the limitations of French to expose its binary construction, offering space for new formations of identity.

Sebbar’s relationship to Algeria traverses the Mediterranean, remaining with her in France. “L’Algérie ne me quittera plus. Et je naîtrai à moi-même (il y faudra de longues années, des centaines de pages) de l’union qui m’éblouit sans m’aveugler, l’Algérie avec la France, mon père algérien avec ma mère française” (78). Through writing Sebbar is able to work through her relationship to Algeria and to her parents, she is able to write “Une histoire si singulière, si étrange, si discrète que je commence à peine à vouloir, pouvoir en parler, en écrire” (78). It is the Algerian war that causes Sebbar to return to this juncture: “Il a fallu la guerre, la guerre d’Algérie, pour avoir la certitude foudroyante que je suis la fille d’un Arabe et d’une Française, que la France a colonisé l’Algérie, que mon père est colonisé et ma mère colonisateur (colonisatrice?)” (43). Sebbar questions whether her mother is a “colonisateur” (masculine) or a “colonisatrice” (feminine). She includes this new formation of the word “colonizer,” the feminine version in parenthesis. Is it possible to feminize a masculine word? Sebbar re-imagines colonizer as feminine to account for her mother’s role in the colonization of Algeria, reversing the stereotypical misconception that only men are complicit in colonization.

Like Sebbar, Nina carries the wound of the Algerian war with her, particularly while living in Algeria:

Ici je cherche ma terre. Ici je ne sais pas mon visage. Je reste à l'extérieur de l'Algérie. Je suis inadmissible. Ici je déteste la France. Ici je sais la haine. Ici je suis la fille de la Française. L'enfant de Roumia. Ici je porte la guerre d'Algérie. Ici je rêve d'être une Arabe... Ici je porte la blessure de ma famille algérienne. (32)

Nina often expresses a loss of identity as a loss of face: she ceases to know herself by no longer recognizing her face. Her alienation is not only psychological, but physical. Nina views herself as "inadmissible:" she cannot be acknowledged or accepted in Algeria, yet she hates France.

Nina knows hatred, because her mother represents the colonizer. Bouraoui and Sebbar both use the term "Roumia" in their texts, an Arabic word that refers to Christians, and particularly Europeans ("Roumi"). She dreams of being Arab, in order to reject the colonial violence she has inherited from her mother. Nina feels that she is caught in the Algerian war, and she carries the conflict on her body: "Je suis dans la guerre d'Algérie. Je porte le conflit" (33). Bouraoui and Sebbar describe their connections to the Algerian war – despite their generational difference – as an integral part of their bodies, something they carry. The war is a wound, a source of pain, and follows them on their journeys through history and identity. Part of their destabilizing of gender, then, is to dis-integrate the Algerian war from their bodies. By breaking down the gendered body, the relation between colonizer and colonized is removed, and new identities can emerge.

Linguistic Affiliations

In *Garçon manqué*, Nina does not speak Arabic, and she views this loss of language as a loss of identity:

Cette langue qui s'échappe comme du sable est une douleur. Elle laisse ses marques, des mots, et s'efface. Elle ne prend pas sur moi. Elle me rejette. Elle me sépare des autres. Elle rompt l'origine. C'est une absence. Je suis impuissante. Je reste une étrangère. Je suis invalide. Ma terre se dérobe. Je reste, ici, différente et française. Mais je suis algérienne. Par mon visage. Par mes yeux. Par ma peau. Par mon corps traversé du corps de mes grands-parents. (13-14)

Arabic escapes Nina and rejects her. This loss of language marks a violent break from her origins, an absence. Her land, Algeria, evades her. However, she cannot escape her racialized body: her face, her eyes, and her skin betray her Algerian heritage. Nina accesses Algeria through her body, rather than through language: “L’Algérie n’est pas dans ma langue. Elle est dans mon corps. L’Algérie n’est pas dans mes mots. Elle est à l’intérieur de moi” (171). Returning to Bouraoui’s interview, where she states that she writes in the language of her body, Nina discusses a similar relationship between French and Arabic. Nina juxtaposes French as a written language and Arabic as an emotional, corporeal language: “J’écirai en français. Uniquement. La langue arabe est un son, un chant, une voix. Que je retiens. Que je sens. Mais que je ne sais pas” (171). Echoing the title of Sebbar’s collection of essays, Arabic is a sound, a song, a voice. Nina *feels* this voice but does not know it.

Sebbar similarly experiences a loss of Arabic, and copes with this loss through her writing. In “Language, Filiation, and Affiliation in Leïla Sebbar’s Autobiographical Narratives,” Carine Bourget notes that “[t]he violence Sebbar attributes to the French language echoes the colonial violence done to Algerians by imposing the French language, and creates a parallel between her and her father” (124). As French instructors, both Sebbar’s father and her mother participate in this colonial project. Sebbar’s father teaches at the “École des indigènes,” or “School for Indigenous Boys,” and her family lives on the school compound. Sebbar views the school compound of her childhood as a microcosm of France, a “république laïque minuscule” (Sebbar 30). “La maison d’école, le jardin de ma mère, ses enfants forment une petite France où se parle la langue de la France” (51). Arabic, “La langue de la Colonie,” does not cross the threshold (50). While Sebbar does not speak “La langue de la Colonie,” she resists the colonial rule of French by challenging its grammatical rules and restrictions in her writing.

The miniscule France contained within the confines of the home and school compound separate Sebbar from Arabic, and from Algeria. When Sebbar leaves the school compound, she is told that she does not belong in Algeria:

Les garçons du chemin me disent que ma mère ne devrait pas être la femme du maître ni ma mère, que la maison de mon père n'est pas sa maison, que l'Algérie n'est pas son pays ni le mien. Criant ce seul mot, ils disent, par ce harcèlement qui les réjouit, que je ne suis pas la fille de mon père, que je ne suis pas la fille de sa langue ni de sa terre, que la mère de ses enfants n'est pas une femme du peuple algérien. (65)

The boys call Sebbar, her sisters, and her mother "Roumia" or "Roumiettes," signifying "la Française, la chrétienne, l'étrangère, ma mère, et nous trois, les filles de cette femme" (64).

Another word that the young boys shout at Sebbar is "nique," or "fuck" (64). The word "niquer" (to fuck) comes from the Arabic verb "naaka," a word that has been "Frenchified" and is now a colloquial swear word in France (Bourget 128). This "Frenchified" Arabic word follows Sebbar across the Mediterranean: "...quel est le Français jeune ou vieux qui n'a pas entendu ce mot-là, dont la violence s'est atténuée en passant de l'Algérie à la France, de la banlieue à la ville?" (Sebbar 64). The story of the young boys' insults reappears in several of Sebbar's essays, connecting language to gender and sexual violence as it crosses the Franco-Algerian diaspora.

Gender and Sexual Violence

Nina changes her name and her gender expression to protect herself from the threat of sexual violence. She describes a scene in which a man attempts to kidnap and/or rape her. She connects this attempt to her femininity. When the man approaches her, he tells her "Tu es belle" (Boruraoui 45). This

reinforces her assigned femininity, as Nina notes: “Je suis encore une fille. Pour lui” (45). She recounts:

Il dit: Viens. Il regard autour de lui. Je ne viens pas. Je reste là, près des orangers, sous le ciel bleu, avec mon corps, ma seule défense, ma blessure. Ce n’est rien et c’est déjà tout. C’est le viol de mon visage, de mes yeux, de ma peau. C’est le viol de ma confiance. C’est une immense trahison. (46)

Nina views this man’s attempt to seduce her, to take her away, as a rape, as a betrayal. She marks it as the end of her childhood. At the center of this encounter is her body, her only defense, her wound. The fragmented sentences and the use of repetition in this passage depict the trauma of this encounter. As Banu Akin observes in “Exiles and Desire Crossing Female Bodies: Nina Bouraoui’s *Garçon manqué* and Rabih Alameddine’s *I, the Divine*,” “Stylistically speaking, Bouraoui develops [divisions] by resorting to broken sentences, anaphorae, and a halting rhythm, reinforcing the internal fractures inhabiting her body” (114). After her encounter with the man in the orange grove, Nina’s desire to become a man is cemented: “Je deviendrai un homme pour venger mon corps fragile,” she states (48). Nina connects this man’s violence to Algeria: “Toute l’Algérie contient cet homme” (46). Like Sebbar’s experience with the word “nique,” this particular moment in Nina’s life follows her to France, and reinforces her desire to protect her body, and to become invisible.

After this encounter, Nina states that she wishes to become a man: “Ma vie est un secret. Moi seule sais mon désir, ici, en Algérie. Je veux être un homme” (39). By becoming a man, Nina can escape her identity and become invisible: “Être un homme en Algérie c’est devenir invisible. Je quitterai mon corps. Je quitterai mon visage. Je quitterai ma voix. Je serai dans la force” (39). She views being a man in Algeria as being without identity: “Je deviendrai un homme avec les hommes. Je deviendrai un corps sans nom. Je deviendrai une voix sans visage. Je deviendrai une partie. Je deviendrai un élément. Je deviendrai une ombre serrée. Je deviendrai

un fragment” (42). As a woman, Nina exists too much, she cannot hide or escape from herself: “J’existe trop. Je suis une femme” (42). To exist too much is to be visibly a woman. It is only by taking on the characteristics and mannerisms of a man that she can protect herself, that she can become invisible.

Although Nina often takes on the characteristics of a man, she does not wish for her gender to be determined by others. She describes a scene in which a stranger misgenders her on the beach:

Elle dit. Tu es beau. Je ne réponds pas. Je plonge. Je cache mon visage. Je plonge. Avec ma honte. Je ne remonte pas. Je déteste la mer. Je déteste les plongeurs. Je déteste la France. Je déteste l’Algérie. Tu es beau. Je reste avec cette violence. Je reste avec le soleil qui révèle. Tu es beau. Amine dément. Amine me protège. C’est Nina. C’est une fille. Amine se défend. Il n’aimerait pas ainsi un garçon. Il aime cette fille. Cette fausse fille. C’est sa folie. Pour ce singe. Pour ce travesti. Paola. Tu es encore plus belle si tu es une fille. Je ne réponds pas. Je ne sais pas. Je ne me sais pas. (38)

When Paola assumes that Nina is a boy, she hides her face, and wishes to remain underwater with her shame. This interaction is a violence: once again, Bouraoui employs repetition and fragmented sentences to depict the trauma of this experience. Because Bouraoui employs free indirect discourse, the things that people say to Nina are not separated out by quotation marks. In this way, the words become a part of her own internal voice, symbolizing Nina’s interiorization of these traumas. Paola’s statement and Amine’s response are incorporated into Nina’s narration, as these voices are repeated in her own words.

Nina’s father raises her as his son, and teaches her how to be a boy: “Mon père m’initie à l’enfance. Il m’élève comme un garçon” (26). Her father gives her a new name, Brio: “Il m’appelle Brio. J’ignore encore pourquoi. J’aime ce prénom. Brio trace mes lignes et mes traits. Brio tend mes muscles. Brio est la lumière sur mon visage. Brio est ma volonté d’être en vie” (27). “Le fils ou la fille de Rachid?” Is she her father’s daughter or son? Nina views her identity

as Brio as a resistance to France, to male violence, and to her gendered body: “Brio contre l’homme des orangers. Brio pour toute l’Algérie. Brio contre toute la France. Brio contre mon corps qui me fait de la peine” (52). Brio allows Nina to challenge other people’s conceptions of her, as when she corrects a woman who assumes that she is a girl:

Brio contre la femme qui dit: Quelle jolie petite fille. Tu t’appelles comment? Ahmed. Sa surprise. Mon défi. Sa gêne. Ma victoire. Je fais honte au monde entier. Je salis l’enfance. C’est un jeu pervers. C’est un jeu d’enfant. C’est une enfant perverse. (53)

In contrast to the scene on the beach when Paola assumes that Nina is a boy, Nina chooses to initiate this troubling of gender to garner the woman’s reaction. She enjoys challenging this woman’s impression of her. She takes joy in corrupting her childhood (“Je salis l’enfance”), playing a “perverse” game. In this scene, she is no longer a French girl, but an Algerian boy: “Non, je ne suis pas française. Je deviens algérien.” She is not “française,” like her mother, but “algérien,” like her father. This recalls Sebbar’s troubling of gendered words and adjectives. By feminizing “française” and masculinizing “algérien,” Bouraoui draws attention to the gendered connections she carries between France and Algeria. The French part of her identity is feminine, while the Algerian part of her identity is masculine. While Sebbar views her father as feminized due to her mother’s role as a masculine colonizer, Nina’s father brings her closer to masculinity.

Nina’s performance of masculinity in Algeria simulates “drag,” or performative cross-dressing. In *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam defines drag as the following:

‘Drag,’ as Esther Newton suggests, describes discontinuities between gender and sex or appearance and reality but refuses to allow this discontinuity to represent dysfunction. In a drag performance, rather, incongruence becomes the site of gender creativity. (236)

In *Garçon manqué*, Nina turns her gender confusion into a site of self re-making. Nina takes on the persona of a boy, as either Ahmed or Brio, by cutting her hair, wearing men’s clothes, and changing the way she carries her body:

Je prends un autre prénom, Ahmed. Je jette mes robes. Je coupe mes cheveux. Je me fais disparaître. J'intègre le pays des hommes. Je suis effrontée. Je soutiens leur regard. Je vole leurs manières. J'apprends vite. Je casse ma voix. (Bouraoui 17)

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler writes: "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency" (187). When Nina takes on the characteristics of a boy, she reveals how easy it is to "pass" as a boy. Nina changes her name, her clothing, and her hair, to assimilate in "le pays des hommes" (Bouraoui 17). By taking on a masculine identity, Nina simultaneously rejects the gender roles imposed upon her and the national identities she feels caught between: "Ne pas être algérienne. Ne pas être française. C'est une force contre les autres. Je suis indéfinie. C'est une guerre contre le monde. Je deviens inclassable. Je ne suis pas assez typée..." (35). Nina's performance as a boy is a resistance to any form of classification, be it due to her gender identity, her national identity, or otherwise.

When she arrives in France, Nina must repress her male personas by dressing in feminine clothing: "Étouffer Ahmed et Brio. Dissimuler. Ma grand-mère aime les vraies filles" (96). Throughout the novel, Bouraoui employs the terms "vraie fille," "une fille ratée," and, of course, the title, "garçon manqué," to call Nina's gender identity into question. However, without any direct dialogue, it is unclear whether these terms are being used by others, by Nina herself, or both. Nevertheless, Nina's performance of femininity is no more "true" to her identity than her performance of masculinity. Nina's full name, Yasmina becomes a secret name once Nina moves to France: "Personne ne m'appelle Yasmina à Saint-Malo. C'est un effacement volontaire. C'est moi qui devance, toujours. Qui me présente avec ce petit feu: Nina" (178). She chooses to keep her full name private, a shared secret between her and her childhood friend and lover, Amine:

Toi, Amine, tu m'appelles Yasmina. Mais pas devant les autres. C'est ton secret. C'est ta façon d'être un homme. Tu dis Yesmina, à l'algérienne. En appuyant sur le 'Y.' Ça donne de la puissance. De l'autorité. De l'homme sur la femme. De la domination. De toi

sur moi. Et du désir. Dans ta bouche. Yesmina me féminise. C'est fugitif. C'est un jeu. C'est un rôle. (179)

Calling Nina by her feminine name ("Yasmina") masculinizes Amine. However, Nina does not view "Yasmina" as a "true" name, it is still a "game," a "role." In this way, her femininity is just as much a role, or game, as her performance of masculinity. Sebbar destabilizes gender through language, while Bouraoui's protagonist performs gender by playing with her gender expressions. In both cases, this gender ambiguity is closely linked to queer language and queer desire.

Queer Language, Queer Desire

While the *Garçon manqué* is entirely told in the first person, or "je," Nina often addresses an interlocutor, "toi:" her childhood friend and lover Amine. Through her relationship with Amine, Nina not only explores her identity as a boy, but engages in a homosocial and homoerotic relationship with her childhood friend. "Amine m'aime comme un garçon," Bouraoui writes (17). Amine's mother fears Nina's gender ambiguity. She worries that Amine will become gay: "Son obsession: Je ne veux pas que mon fils devienne homosexuel. Elle dit le mot en premier. Elle dit mon mot. À force de traîner avec cette fille. Cette fausse fille" (63). "Le mot" refers to "homosexuel," a word that appears only a few times in the novel, yet seems to carry great weight for Nina, a word she refers to as "mon mot" (63). Nina's love for Amine is a love between men: "Je t'aime comme un homme, Amine" (63). In one of the most erotic scenes of the novel, Nina teaches Amine how to dance, and claims to penetrate him:

C'est moi que tu imiteras en France. C'est de moi que tu tiendras ça. Cette ronde sexuelle. Cette façon d'aller vers l'autre. De provoquer. De demander. De chercher. Toi tu ne viens jamais vers moi. Tu attends mon signe. Tu me subis. Je te traverse...Je suis en toi, Amine. Tu es pénétré. (64)

Nina loves Amine as if she were a man, and he a woman: “Tu veilles sous la peau d’une fille. Je t’apprends les forces du corps. Je t’aime comme un homme. Je t’aime comme si tu étais une fille” (64-65). At certain points, Nina describes their relationship as a love between two men, in others their genders are reversed. This relationship contrasts with the violation she experiences by the man in the orange grove, where she is vulnerable due to her femininity. Nina is able to take control over her relationship with a man by taking on the role of power: she is the one who penetrates Amine. In another scene, Amine lends Nina a pair of pants. Nina refuses to give them back, enjoying the intimate connection to Amine that the pants offer her: “Je vis dans ton vêtement, là où précisément tu tiens ton sexe caché” (70). Nina wonders if this gesture, this theft, is a moment of homosexuality: “N’est-ce pas à cet instant, par ce geste, par ce vol, que prend l’homosexualité?” (70). Nina later expresses desire for a woman, but the word “homosexualité” only ever appears in reference to Amine, and to his mother’s fear of Nina’s gender instability. In the final section of the novel, Nina reveals that she and Amine had never embraced one another before. Their relationship is therefore another game, a role that Nina takes on as she explores her gender identity and her sexuality.

Bouraoui and Sebbar both explore an attraction to women in their writing. In the opening of the first essay of the collection, “Si je parle la langue de ma mère,” Sebbar describes the excitement she feels at seeing a woman’s breast for the first time. She expresses “La surprise, le plaisir à voir ce sein nu, aussitôt recouvert. L’émotion” (Sebbar 15). This moment marks an important point in Sebbar’s adolescence:

...moi j’ai su pour la première fois que les seins des femmes, si je les voyais là, allongée sur le sable, je pouvais être émue. Pourtant je crois aujourd’hui que le sein de cette femme que je n’ai vu qu’une fois m’a en quelque sorte bouleversée. (13)

Sebbar speaks in the present tense, “aujourd’hui,” and remarks that this brief moment moved her deeply. While Sebbar describes only a brief moment of same-sex desire, it stays with her to the present. However, she still cannot find the language to express what she felt at the time, the breast “m’a en quelque sorte bouleversée” (13). This was a moment where Sebbar saw a different form of feminine beauty and sexuality. She compares it to her mother’s breasts, which were hidden from her throughout her life. Sebbar never explicitly talks about her sexuality or relationships in the subsequent essays, leaving this moment solitary and unique in its sensuality. In *Garçon manqué*, Nina expresses desire for a North African girl she meets in France: “Je rêve de Marion. De plus en plus. Je l’envie” (Bouraoui 165). Nina’s connection to Marion helps her adjust to life in France: “Je m’habitue à la vie française. À cette tranquillité. À la découverte de Marion. À son visage. À ses yeux bleus. À sa voix. À ses promesses” (173). Nina connects her attraction to Marion directly to her acclimation to French life. Marion symbolizes the intersection of France and North Africa, as her name is distinctly French, compared to Nina’s Algerian name. For both Bouraoui and Sebbar, intimate relationships with women mark a coming-to-identity.

Sebbar comes to a new understanding of her gender identity through her relationships with women and through her political activism. In the Women’s Liberation Movement in Paris, Sebbar recognizes herself in her name once again: “Le Mouvement de Libération des Femmes. J’ai su que je m’appelle Leïla. J’ai parlé. De moi” (24). In this moment, Sebbar is able to claim her name, evidence of her Algerian heritage that previously alienated her. Solidarity between women supports Sebbar in her return to herself: “Avec d’autres femmes je me suis cherchée, petite fille, du côté de l’enfance des femmes. Pour savoir. Je suis revenue à moi. C’était long. C’est difficile. Encore. Cette histoire que j’ai avec les femmes.” (24). Through these political movements, Sebbar comes to know herself as an individual: “Ces luttes, ces protestations

collectives m'enchangent. Je pense qu'elles sont justes et je ne suis pas *une individuelle*, je suis toutes les femmes, tous les exclus, tous les colonisés de l'Empire et de l'intérieur" (77, my emphasis).

As Sebbar searches for a sense of collectivity in political resistance, she no longer feels like a singular individual: "une individuelle" (77). In French, "un individu" is grammatically masculine, no matter who the subject is. This shift to the feminine is uncommon, and ambiguous in this sentence. While she makes the word feminine, she also negates it: "je ne suis pas une individuelle" (77). At the same time that Sebbar is asserting her identity as a woman, she is simultaneously challenging it by continuing to disrupt and negate gendered systems in language. In these political movements, Sebbar's origins no longer matter: "On ne me demande pas qui je suis, de qui je suis la fille, d'où je viens, quelle est ma place dans la société" (77). This space of collective organizing and political movement enable Sebbar to engage in the act of moving back-and-forth: she is not a singular individual, neither masculine or feminine, she is "toutes les femmes, tous les exclus, tous les colonisés de l'Empire et de l'intérieur" (77). Sebbar embodies both the masculine and the feminine in this statement: she is feminine "toutes les femmes," and the masculine "tous les exclus, tous les colonisés." She asserts political resistance and resistance to subjugation by resisting gendered structures of oppression.

Towards the end of the novel, Nina travels to Rome. She comes to feel more attuned to her femininity there:

Je suis devenue heureuse à Rome. J'ai attaché mes cheveux et on a découvert une nuque très fine. Et encore plus. Des attaches sensibles. Un joli visage. Des yeux qui devenaient verts au soleil. Des mains et des gestes de femme. Une voix plus grave et contrôlée. Je suis devenue heureuse à Rome. Mon corps portait autre chose. Une évidence. Une nouvelle personnalité. Un don, peut-être. Je venais de moi et de moi seule. Je me retrouvais. Je venais de mes yeux, de ma voix, de mes envies. Je sortais de moi. Et je me possédais. Mon corps se détachait de tout. Il n'avait plus rien de la France. Plus rien de l'Algérie. (Bouraoui 191)

As Nina comes to terms with her body, she recognizes her face, “un joli visage.” Opposed to the voice she used to alter when she presented as a boy, she finds her voice to be deeper and more controlled. She feels she possesses a new personality. Rather than being from France or Algeria, she comes “de moi et de moi seule.” While “venir” in French means to come *from* somewhere, it can also mean to achieve orgasm. In this way, Nina has found both personal and sexual satisfaction within her own body. She possesses herself, with no trace left of France or of Algeria. Nina’s statement “Je venais de moi et de moi seule” echoes Sebbar’s “return” to herself. The fact that Nina achieves sexual pleasure from her own femininity also points to her attraction towards women. As she comes to present as more feminine, her relationship to Amine is altered. In the last scene of the novel, they meet for the first time since childhood, and their dynamic has changed. Amine no longer makes eye contact with her, and she feels that their relationship has come to an end. Before they depart, they embrace each other “Pour la première fois. Comme un homme et une femme” (196). In this scene, Nina has power in her femininity. She intimidates Amine, and he cannot make eye contact with her.

Conclusion

Garçon manqué and *L’arabe comme un chant secret* provide a foundation for future discussions of the intersections between gender and national identity in a Franco-Algerian context. Bouraoui’s and Sebbar’s life writings depict their Franco-Algerian experience as a movement between, within, and outside of language, sexuality, nation, and gender identity. The authors use the forms of autofiction and autobiographical essays to reveal the constructed nature of national and gender identity, challenging binary limitations of genre. As I have shown, Bouraoui employs autofiction to challenge the static division between the personal and the

fictional, as both Bouraoui as writer and Nina as protagonist resist any kind of labels, be it due to their national origins, their gender identities, or their sexualities. In her autobiographical essays, Sebbar deconstructs gendered language to open spaces for gender ambiguity and non-binary identity.

L'arabe comme un chant secret is a series of detours through time, history, language, and identity. While Sebbar's writing challenges constructions of gender in language, I am interested in taking her project a step further. If Sebbar was able to come to her identity as a woman in the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s in France, how can feminists envision new formations of gender identity in a 21st-century Francophone context? Bouraoui shows us the instability of gender through Nina's performative acts in *Garçon manqué*, and offers the space to question what it means to inhabit multiple bodies and multiple identities. Bouraoui's depiction of gender fluidity and performativity expands on and contributes to Sebbar's work in challenging binary gender in language. Bouraoui's and Sebbar's writings illustrate how gender is linked to national and linguistic identity, and how conceptions of gender identity can be shaped by racist and colonial power structures. Baril asks: "How could specific languages be used to deconstruct gender identity or make gender self-identification easier or more difficult?" (12). By inverting articles and adjective endings, engaging in a back-and-forth between nations, cultures, and genders, Sebbar opens up possibilities for identity formations that resist grammatically gendered language.

Bouraoui's and Sebbar's life writings interrogate colonial oppression as it relates to gender and linguistic identity, and offer important opportunities to explore the expression of trans and genderqueer identities in a Franco-Algerian context. Additionally, I believe that we can benefit from studying Bouraoui's and Sebbar's works to understand how trans and genderqueer

identities are affected by colonialism, and implicated by the nation-state. This connection between Bouraoui and Sebbar merits further investigation in future projects. Without understanding the connections between gender and national identity, we risk perpetuating the violences of reductionism and essentialism that Bouraoui's and Sebbar's writings work so hard to disrupt.

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