

Nina Bouraoui and “le pays des mots”: Performativity and Presence
in *Garçon manqué*, *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Nos baisers sont des adieux*

By

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In memory of Professor Steven Winspur, his words and his actions.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iv
 INTRODUCTION	
Literary Performativity: Women Writing Queerly in French	1
Theories of Performativity: Language, Literature, Gender and Performance	3
Writing/Performing ‘I’: Queerness and Literature in French	9
Queer Women’s Writing in French: Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous	12
Literary Performativity in Monique Wittig’s <i>Le Corps lesbien</i>	20
How to Do Things with “Sexts”:	27
The Transformative Potential of Writing Queerly	
 CHAPTER 1	
Mapping the Language of Violence and Resistance in <i>Garçon manqué</i>	30
<i>Garçon manqué</i> : An Introduction to Reading Grammar in Bouraoui	34
Gender Trouble in Post-Independence Algiers	37
Resistance and Empowerment in Response to Gendered and Ethnic Violence	44
The Significance of Linguistic and Bodily Agency	60
Transnational Trauma and the Migration of Violence	69
 CHAPTER 2	
“Écriture qui saigne”: Interconnectedness, Empathy and the Transformation of Trauma in <i>Mes mauvaises pensées</i>	79
Trauma and Testimony, Existentialism and Ethics of Care	81
Reading <i>Mes mauvaises pensées</i>	84
<i>Je</i> and <i>Jeux de Mots</i>	86
<i>Je</i> and (Time) Travel	92
<i>Je</i> and (M)others	103
<i>Je</i> and Inter(textual)connectedness	111
<i>Je</i> and the Transformation of Trauma: Writing that Bleeds	119
 CHAPTER 3	
Experientiality, Aesthetics and the Sensory Moment in <i>Nos baisers sont des adieux</i>	129
Narrative Theory: On Temporality and Experientiality	130
Memory, Temporality and Aestheticization	133
Part 1: Narration and Tense Differentiation	134
Part 2: Aestheticization and the Sensory Moment	140
Aestheticization of Relation	143
Ekphrasis and Narrative, Narrative and Aesthetics	150
 CONCLUSION	
L’Invitation au “pays des mots”	155
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 162

ABSTRACT

In three texts by Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué* (2000), *Mes mauvaises pensées* (2005) and *Nos baisers sont des adieux* (2010), the performative force of linguistic and narrative strategies establishes a sense of presence through which the reader is invited to inhabit Bouraoui's "country of words." Reading French feminists Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous through theories of performativity (Austin, Derrida, Butler and Phelan), reveals that despite their famous split they shared the common project of transforming the world through writing – and thereby set the stage for Bouraoui's innovative literary works. Literary performativity correlates to queerness as a way of writing that resists and revises normative textual models, creating space for subjects marginalized by oppressive discourses – notably associated with gendered language, gender roles, and the postcolonial French discourse on Algeria. Bouraoui's *Garçon manqué* disrupts conventional notions of personhood, with an emphasis on gender, ethnicity and migration – and delineates the linguistic and narrative significance of violence, resistance and agency as enacted in the text, especially as they relate to the enduring effects of the Algerian War. Contemporary trauma studies and the existentialist ideas of Martin Buber help to demonstrate that *Mes mauvaises pensées* enacts a remediation of conflicts, dilemmas and traumas through its fluid textuality and the narrator's uncanny ability to take on the traumas of people who enter her life and transform them through writing. *Nos baisers sont des adieux* uses aestheticization and the sensory moment to illustrate how writing becomes a space of presence and equanimity where memories and art can coexist as beauty, superseding or transcending trauma and other internally divisive forces. The juxtaposition of close readings of these three texts reveals both the evolution of Bouraoui's writing and the interconnectedness of her books,

while highlighting the ways these works of literature intervene in the fields of trauma studies, postcolonial studies and queer theory. Bouraoui's oeuvre is particularly valuable as a space where the transformative potential of narrative can be investigated and better understood.

INTRODUCTION

Literary Performativity: Women Writing Queerly in French

Chaque livre est mon nouveau continent. L'écriture est devenue ma seule définition. J'aime appartenir au pays des mots, au pays de la création. Avec l'amour c'est la seule façon pour moi de supporter la violence du monde et son écrasement. Il me semble vivre une époque qui manque de sens. L'écriture est une forme de résistance au vide.

– Nina Bouraoui¹

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, writers of French expression have worked to challenge and subvert not only traditional narrative forms but also conventional linguistic associations and their relationship to lived experience. From the genre of the *nouveau roman* and the formal constraints of writers' collectives such as OULIPO² to the experimental writing of materialist lesbian feminists in the vein of Monique Wittig and the concept of *écriture féminine* incited by Hélène Cixous, the impact of innovative writers and radical literary movements has profoundly marked and influenced the body of literature written in French. Although it can be useful to approach literature as a cultural artifact reflective of mainstream ideologies, it is also imperative to consider how the power of certain literary works contributes to our understanding of the world and, more specifically, how we might revise our understanding of the world in response to – or in dialogue with – what we read.

¹ Nina Bouraoui in a 2008 interview for *BSC News*.

² OULIPO (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle or Workshop for potential literature) is a collective of writers invested in the creation of texts using constrained writing techniques such as lipograms and palindromes.

This dissertation positions the contemporary author Nina Bouraoui in a trajectory of innovative women's writing in French that uses narrative to address questions of difference, trauma, resistance and empowerment. It explores the ways in which literary performativity in three of Bouraoui's books contributes to a sense of presence, and thereby contradicts the common idea that narrativity presumes an absence. In particular, it investigates the connection between narrative, memory and the transformation of trauma, especially as it relates to gender, cultural difference and the enduring effects of the Algerian War.

Nina Bouraoui was born in Brittany in 1967 of a French mother and an Algerian father, and she grew up in Algiers in the wake of Algerian independence. In 1980, she returned to France before living in Zurich and Abu Dhabi and ultimately settling in Paris where she resides today. Her books are heavily influenced by her travels and her childhood in Algeria. Bouraoui's first novel, *La Voyeuse interdite*, which focuses on the experiences of a young girl in Algerian Islamic culture, won the Prix du Livre Inter in 1991. During the 1990s, she published four more books, *Poing mort* (1992), *Le Bal des murènes* (1996), *L'Âge blessé* (1998), and *Le Jour du séisme* (1999), which employ poetic prose to address various themes including death, love, illness, childhood and natural disaster. Since 2000, Bouraoui has continued to publish novels every year or two, and her focus has shifted to include the exploration of fluid sexuality, desire, memory and art.³ This dissertation provides detailed analyses of three of these works, *Garçon manqué* (2000), *Mes mauvaises pensées* (2005) and *Nos baisers sont des adieux* (2010).

Because Bouraoui's books deal with questions of postcolonial identity, belonging and oppression relevant for individuals of Maghrebian heritage living in France, her texts are

³ For more information on Nina Bouraoui's life and works, see the biography compiled by Amaleena Damlé through the Center for the Study of Contemporary Women's Writing at the University of London.

sometimes considered as belonging to *Beur* literature.⁴ However, because French-born Bouraoui spent the first fourteen years of her life in Algeria, much of the content of her books falls outside what typically categorizes *Beur* literature. As Boustani and Jouve have noted: “Par son histoire et ses circonstances personnelles, Bouraoui ne peut pas non plus s’inclure pleinement dans la dénommée « littérature beure », puisqu’elle n’a jamais connu les problèmes socio-économiques posés par l’émigration, et que certains de ses ouvrages touchent à des sujets qui n’ont rien à voir avec cet espace et cette thématique” (150).

As the epigraph to this introduction reveals, Bouraoui sees herself as belonging to a “pays des mots.” In the chapters that follow, we will discover how the reader of Bouraoui’s texts comes to inhabit this space as well, and to participate in the “résistance au vide” enacted by the linguistic and narrative strategies of Bouraoui’s books. In this introduction, I first develop an approach to reading for performative value that draws on Austin, Derrida and Pollock, among others. I then apply this approach to selected passages from canonical feminist works by Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous. These analyses demonstrate the usefulness of a performative approach when reading innovative and nonconventional literary works, and thereby set the stage for the following chapters. In addition, my interpretation of Wittig and Cixous addresses the link between queerness as a way of writing and queerness as it relates to non-normative genders and sexualities, both of which are important questions in Bouraoui’s texts.

Theories of Performativity: Language, Literature, Gender and Performance

In order to understand the performative and its significance for this project, I begin with an introduction to performative language as originally developed by J. L. Austin. The

⁴ See, for example, Katherine Harrington’s *Writing the Nomadic Experience in Contemporary Francophone Literature*.

fundamental innovation of Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* undermined the historical notion that language is descriptive and that all utterances can therefore be deemed true or false. Austin distinguishes what he calls "performative" utterances from "constative" utterances of language (91). Constative utterances are statements that can be judged as true or false.

Frequently, they describe a state of affairs such as "The cat is on the mat" and were commonly considered to be the chief purpose of sentences until Austin introduced the notion of the performative (3). Austin states that often things that are said cannot be true or false, but rather that they accomplish an act simply by being pronounced in a particular context. For example, " 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*' – as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stern," performs the special action of naming the ship. The act of actually saying something, moving the lips to produce intelligible sound, being called a "locution," Austin names this specific type of performative an "illocutionary act" in light of its self-referential quality (98-99). What it says is what it does.

Locutions used with a certain force – such as promises, orders, questions, affirmations, or apologies – are all examples of illocutions. For Austin defines an illocution as "performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something" (99-100). Austin continues to show that some illocutions, called perlocutions, will also elicit "consequential effects" in the form of a response or reaction of the audience (101-103). For example, the locution "He said to me, 'You can't do that!'" is interpreted as the illocution "He protested against my doing it." This subsequently elicits the perlocution: "He stopped me, he brought me to my senses, &c. He annoyed me" (102). In *Speech Acts*, John R. Searle clarifies this concept further by showing that some illocutionary acts, which he prefers to reference as "speech acts," are performed in the absence of specific illocutionary verbs. Searle writes: "It is

possible to perform the act without invoking an explicit illocutionary force-indicating device where the context and the utterance make it clear that the essential condition is satisfied” (68). Saying “I’ll do it” thus implies “I promise that I’ll do it.” In this way, Searle and Austin highlighted intention and context as being crucial to the success of a speech act.⁵ Furthermore, this dependence on seriousness and conventionality is what seems to have prompted Austin to distinguish true performative utterances from their “parasitic” counterparts, referred to as etiolations of language, which are “said by an actor on the stage . . . introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy” (22).

Although language is generally considered to be performative in a verbal context, for the purposes of this study I employ the notion of performativity more broadly, considering the writing of a text to be a type of speech act that is in turn repeated by the reader. This interpretation of the nature of speech is supported by the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who distinguished language (*la langue*) as a grammatical and lexical system from the actualization of the system in writing or in speech (*la parole*).⁶ Moreover, Derrida underscores this perspective in *LIMITED INC*. Derrida enters the debate on performativity by problematizing Austin’s decision to differentiate etiolations from the body of performative language. He then plays on the concept of iterability, which while qualifying writing itself as legible and therefore repeatable in another context, undermines the notion of context as the final governor of meaning: “To be what it is, all writing must, therefore, be capable of functioning in the radical absence of every empirically determined receiver in general” (8). Furthermore, the very thing that allows

⁵ See *How to Do Things with Words* 14-15.

⁶ See Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale*.

communication to be possible, its repeatability, is also what can cause it to derail entirely.⁷ What Derrida contends is that all language, spoken or written (although in the Derridean sense this distinction between the two collapses), is by its very nature “citable.” Drawing a parallel between the separation of “non-serious” etiolations and “ordinary language” and the way in which writing has traditionally been considered as parasitic to speech, Derrida advances the position that no performative utterance would succeed if it “were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a ‘citation’,” rendering, therefore, all language parasitic (18).⁸

What Derrida proposes is a reconceptualization of performative force that takes into account the relationships between preestablished social structures and language use. As Steven Winspur has gone on to show, speech acts, therefore, are indeed textual in the sense that their successful performance depends on a “previously coded script” (177). Winspur explains that often this script is rewritten by literary works whose “power . . . resides in their recasting the performative force inherent in [preexistent textual] models” (184). Referring to such performatives as “text acts,” Winspur suggests that “ethical change through the power of textuality” does indeed take place when reading certain literary texts that “prompt us to reorganize the model text acts to which we previously clung” (181). If we borrow Austin’s language, in a sense, writing is not only an illocution, but also a perlocution due to the fact that it elicits a reaction from its readers. Winspur writes: “the effect of the act . . . is always on the side

⁷ The same illocutionary verbs can be used again and again, and a speech act is performed each time they are uttered. Repetition of the same speech act, for example, “I promise. I promise. I promise,” while serving to enforce and emphasize the action taking place, conversely, could also be seen as detracting from the validity of the initial promise made.

⁸ Searle, however, retorts that a fictional promise is in fact parasitic on an actual promise (its host) in the sense that it depends on it as a model. Derrida’s response seems to highlight the fact that Searle has entirely missed the point. See “Limited Inc a b c . . .” in *LIMITED INC* (102-103).

of its receiver (or reader) and not on the side of the utterer. The text act relies therefore on potential readers for its completion and interpretation” (178).⁹

With an emphasis on context and repetition, Judith Butler has further developed the concept of performativity to encompass discussions of the social realm, more specifically, introducing theories of gender performativity. For Butler, gender is something that one does, not something that one is. And our notions of what it is to be a man or a woman are based on the discursive reiteration of certain characteristics, which are then read as belonging to the gendered/sexed categories we construct and continue to enforce (9-11). Butler writes: “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (10). Sharon Marcus has delineated how performativity is intrinsic to queer theory and argued that “By expanding the range of visible, plausible, and livable sexualities, queer studies expands the meanings of *woman* and *man*” and is therefore a crucial tool for feminist theory” (200). In literary studies therefore, queerness is a useful analytical lens not only for the construction of gender but also, and often concurrently, for the ways texts deviate from normative models and conventions.

In “The Fortunes of the Performative in Literary and Cultural Theory,” Jonathan Culler has delineated a “double approach . . . to reflect[ing] on the nature of literature as event” that incorporates multiple dimensions of a text’s performative force (25). Culler argues:

On the one hand, we can say that the literary work accomplishes a singular, specific act. It creates that reality which is the work, and its sentences accomplish

⁹ For further discussion of the intersection between literary theory and the performative, see Shoshana Felman’s *Le Scandale du corps parlant* and Sandy Petrey’s *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*.

something in particular in that work. . . . But on the other hand . . . we could say that a work succeeds, becomes an event, by a massive repetition that takes up norms and, possibly, changes things. If a novel happens, it does so because, in its singularity, it inspires a passion that gives life to these forms, in acts of reading and recollection, repeating its inflection of the conventions of the novel and, perhaps, effecting an alteration in the norms or the forms through which readers go on to confront the world. (24-25)

This dissertation investigates the various performativities summarized by Culler and the ways in which they act on the reader through Bouraoui's books, prompting change whose significance is linguistic, personal and sociocultural. In this way, I endeavor through my own writing not simply to describe what Bouraoui's books do, but rather to reproduce for you my experience of reading her books. In so doing, I aim to extend the sense of presence created by Bouraoui's "pays des mots" to readers who might have limited familiarity with her oeuvre. Moreover, it is my belief that this approach has much to teach us about language and narrative and how they might be shaped, stretched and reenvisioned in relation to the uniqueness of our lived experience.

The impact of the performative on creative/critical writing has perhaps been most notable in the field of performance studies, in the work of feminist-scholar-writers including Peggy Phelan and Della Pollock. In *Mourning Sex*, Phelan portrays this kind of writing thus:

Rather than describing a performance event in "direct signification," a task I believe to be impossible and not terrifically interesting, I want this writing to enact the affective force of the performance event again, as it plays itself out in an ongoing temporality made vivid by the psychic process of distortion (repression, fantasy, and the general hubbub of the individual and collective unconscious), and

made narrow by the muscular force of political repression in all its mutative violence. (11-12)

Phelan's lexicon highlights the tension between the psyche and the physical body, which come to experience the impact of the performative through the written word in a way that reproduces an analogous experience of presence. She continues: "I want less to describe and preserve performances than to enact and mimic the losses that beat away within them. In this mimicry, loss itself helps transform the repetitive force of trauma and might bring about a way to overcome it" (12). In her essay "Performing Writing," Pollock echoes Phelan's understanding of performative writing, while also taking care not to delineate it as a "genre or fixed form . . . but [rather as] a way of describing what some good writing *does*" (75). Pollock's aim is to show (in doing) how performative writing might "resolve the alienation of meaning and reference within postmodern textualities not by reinscribing presence per se but by making writing exceed its determinations within structures of absence/presence in order to perform a social function" (76). It is through this lens that I approach the transformative work enacted by Bouraoui's books, as demonstrated in the following chapters.

Writing/Performing 'I': Queerness and Literature in French

At the same time as presence is a source of the performative's power, the performative in turn subverts the conventional notion that narrative presumes an absence (as denoted by traditional third-person narration). On the contrary, through certain narratives, performativity creates a sense of presence that may or may not be linked to any given personal pronoun. According to Emile Benveniste's linguistic theory in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, the pronoun 'I' – unlike third-person pronouns – has a unique usage that does not describe a subject

but simply gives a shorthand designation for the agent of the utterance in the instance of discourse. Benveniste posits that only two personal pronouns are able to embody the notion of the person: ‘I’ and ‘you’ (251). Because they refer to beings who cannot speak (unlike ‘I’) or be spoken to (unlike ‘you’) in the moment the discourse is referencing them, third-person pronouns do not indicate a subjective person, but instead reference an objective situation (255). Inherently then, for Benveniste, subjectivity is limited to the moment in which the linguistic system is actualized, that is in speech or in writing.

In *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust*, Michael Lucey demonstrates that “the representation of sexuality, and, in particular, of same-sex sexual relations and of actors in them, is central to the evolution of literary prose forms in twentieth-century France” (9). Lucey emphasizes the ways in which usage of the first person pronoun ‘I’ in literature has drawn attention to nascent social groups who were articulating themselves around questions of sexual identity in the first part of the twentieth-century. In addition, these literary instances of ‘I’ have shaped social conceptualizations of non-normative (queer) sexualities. Lucey’s work offers a new lens through which to examine textual performativity, particularly in regard to queerness. Expanding on Nelson Goodman’s notion of “worldmaking,” Lucey underscores how the “ritual function of speaking about sexuality thus participates in . . . the attempt to found, to impose, to perpetuate an epistemological vision or version of the world” (66). Similarly, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s influential essay “Sex in Public” makes the case that all cultural forms, notably including the novel, have the potential to “allow for the concretization of a queer counterpublic” by “index[ing] a virtual social world” (558). Berlant and Warner elucidate:

A queer “world,” like “public,” differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright. The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies. (558)

By consistently resisting homogenization and hegemony, queer world-making projects work to counter, undermine and subvert (hetero)normativity. In literature, this doesn’t only happen by presenting the reader with queer themes, characters and contexts. More importantly, it is the refusal to adhere to normative textual models – to conceive of language, narrative, subjectivity and agency in new ways – that renders certain texts doubly queer, generating renewed understandings of links amongst language, personhood and the world. In my view, this take on queerness is intrinsic to the performative force of Bouraoui’s books.

Queer-oriented French literary studies are dominated by the examination of gay and lesbian (self)-representations in literature, while the written text’s potential to problematize notions of identity remains largely unexplored. Such textual approaches are therefore incapable of addressing the ways in which certain literary works are more performative than they are mimetic – a distinction that is of the utmost importance where queerness is concerned. After 1979, when George Stambolian and Elaine Marks set the stage by editing *Homosexualities and French Literature*, a text devoted to the pluralism and diversity of homosexualities and their relationship to the French literary tradition, one might have expected to find more scholars interrogating the articulations between French literature and conceptualizations of non-normative sexualities – not as unidirectional, but as dialogic. However, with rare exceptions such as

Lucey's work, research has continued to focus on textual representations of the empirical world instead of considering how the texts themselves create an alternative network of significations with the potential not only to inform our commonly held understandings but to subvert them altogether. As Anne F. Garréta has remarked: "The empirical self and the writing (or reading) self are not identical; fiction is the realm where identities, far from being reinforced, may be displaced" ("In Light of Invisibility" 212-213). In approaching Bouraoui's writing through this lens, this project endeavors to show how performativity and presence relate to questions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, migration, trauma, art and memory, and what the intersections of these categories reveal about the relationship between literature and life.

Queer Women's Writing in French: Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous

In order to position Nina Bouraoui in a trajectory of queer¹⁰ women's writing in French, I now turn to a discussion of two canonical feminists well known for their literary and theoretical texts: Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous. An innovative writer and theorist, Monique Wittig was overwhelmingly at odds with her feminist contemporaries on the question of essential sexual difference. Echoing Simone de Beauvoir in her materialist perspective that refutes the notion of biological determinism, Wittig advanced that sexual difference is not innate but rather learned in a dominant culture that reinforces binary gender. Whereas feminists like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray worked to elevate the status of women¹¹ by showing how women could embrace forms of expression and relationships to their own bodies that deny patriarchal conceptions,

¹⁰ Here, I use the term "queer" to denote the performative character of this writing – writing that also happens to address questions of gender and sexuality. I do not apply this term to the writers themselves.

¹¹ Wittig is careful not to use the term "women" which she views as slotted in staunch opposition to "men" and thus implicated in the perpetuation of heterosexist and antifeminist discourse. See "The Mark of Gender" in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*.

Wittig rejected the gender binary altogether. Despite marked tensions between Wittig and Cixous, reading their texts with attention to performative force suggests that their politico-literary projects were not as disparate as commonly believed. By examining the performative force of Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1969) and *Le Corps lesbien* (1973) alongside Hélène Cixous's "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1975), the following analyses demonstrate the ways in which all three texts act on their readers, signaling linguistic and socio-cultural paradigm shifts that challenge heteronormativity, gendered language and patriarchal tradition.

To situate this study in the context of French feminisms, it is important to note that much of the critical attention paid to Wittig has been in response to her staunch opposition to the notion of *écriture féminine* as conceived by Hélène Cixous.¹² In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Toril Moi explains the concept of *écriture féminine* and its relationship to feminism, as well as the evolution of Cixous's perspective throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.¹³ *Écriture féminine* is a theory that considers the voice of the woman writer to be completely enmeshed in the writing itself such that the body and the text are consubstantial. What is written is *literally* the female body, originating primordially from the mother. In Cixous's view, women's bodies are privileged in the sense that their pleasure is decentralized in the same way that *écriture féminine* transcends traditional, thereby masculine, narrative structures.¹⁴ Because the signification of the

¹² For a discussion of theories of women's writing, particularly involving the debates between Wittig and Cixous, see, for example, Diane Griffin Crowder's "Amazons and Mothers? Monique Wittig, Helene Cixous and Theories of Women's Writing" and Cecile Lindsay's "Body/Language: French Feminist Utopias."

¹³ *Sexual/Textual Politics* 108-115.

¹⁴ Not unlike Cixous, Luce Irigaray's earlier work aimed to liberate women's sexuality while reinforcing sexual difference. In *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Irigaray described feminine sexuality as multiple and masculine sexuality as phallocentric. More recently, however, Irigaray has echoed Wittig in her suggestion that a sexual liberation implies a linguistic transformation. "It must be emphasized, too, that sexual liberation cannot be achieved without changing the laws of language that relate to gender," Irigaray writes. She continues: "Sex is an important dimension of culture, but we have to redress the balance of power in relationships between the sexes in language, society, culture" (*Je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference* 33).

qualifier *féminine* can be read either as the adjective “feminine” or the adjective “female,” this question remains: is *écriture féminine* gendered writing or sexed writing?¹⁵ Regardless, in “Le Rire de la Méduse,” Cixous herself comes to reject such binary masculine-male/feminine-female logic to a degree, eventually concluding that it is possible, but not prevalent, to find femininity in the writings of men as well as in those of women (42).

Despite marked theoretical differences, one is likely to be struck by the resemblance of Cixous’s and Wittig’s personal agendas to write “woman,” in and through her body for Cixous, into language for Wittig, and yet into the world for them both. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, the editors of *New French Feminisms*, paint a beautiful synthesis of the discord between Wittig and Cixous: “Contextual differences are less important than textual similarities. On the level of a new imagery of woman, the explicit ideological disagreements between Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous fade. The reader reacts to the representation of the female triumphant” (37). What is perhaps even more interesting to note is the potential to read much of Cixous’s own manifesto of *écriture féminine* as a prolific (performative) manifestation of precisely what Wittig’s theoretical work envisions. This is not to suggest that Wittig’s novels be considered as *écriture féminine*, nor Cixous’s feminism as materialist, but rather to propose that Cixous’s writing not only embodies the female voice, but also indirectly advances claims supporting Wittig’s own political agenda of materialist feminism, which contends that sex is not prediscursive, but itself a gendered category (*The Straight Mind* 6-8).

¹⁵ This question, of course, presupposes a distinction between sex as biological (prediscursive) and gender as socio-cultural (discursive), a distinction that is refuted by Wittig herself, as well as by contemporary queer theorists such as Judith Butler. Butler writes: “perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (*Gender Trouble* 10-11).

Since the publication of her first novel *L'Opoponax* (1964), Monique Wittig has been appreciated for her literary innovation. She has systematically chosen to differentiate her subjects from a linguistic system that, in privileging the masculine, innately precludes them. Wittig states: "Gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes. Gender is used here in the singular because indeed there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the 'masculine' not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general" (*The Straight Mind* 60). Wittig writes in order to topple the hegemonic marginalization of all subjects that are other than the heterosexual male, both in literature and in society. Her politico-literary project depends heavily on her rejection of the traditional usage of personal pronouns. In *L'Opoponax*, Wittig avoids both gender and "the general" by employing the impersonal universal pronoun *on*. In *Le Corps lesbien*, she elects to write *j/e* and *t/u* in order to mark gendered language founded on heterosexist and phallogocentric discourse as foreign to the lesbian and thereby rendering the lesbian universal. And in *Les Guérillères*, the exclusively feminine plural subject pronoun *elles* displaces *ils*, which is the topic to which we now turn.

In *Les Guérillères*, Wittig's systematic usage of the pronoun *elles* reverses the masculine gender dominance characteristic of French grammar. Typically used to refer to a group of men, a group of men and women, or even a group of all women with only one man, *ils* symbolically precludes the existence of women. Wittig writes against this tradition. The novel itself depicts an Amazonian society at war against men and, by extension, a patriarchal system. The fact that even the title of the work is a neologism emphasizes the performative potential of the piece. A synonym for *guerrières*, or women warriors, *guérillères* turns the gendered order of language on its head by subsuming *il* in a feminine substantive; women displace men as the universal. The orthography itself demonstrates how *il* becomes a part of *guérillères*, or rather, *guér-il-lères*.

Moreover, reading the book serves to contextualize who exactly *les guérillères* are, and what they do, which in turn catalyzes a structural reorganization of thought. The already fragmentary text is punctuated at regular intervals by a long series of women's names printed in capital letters that begins and ends with a sort of poetic manifesto. These names are borrowed from other sociocultural contexts, appropriated as active participants in a society of women. In this politico-literary work, women are recast as *guérillères* in a new language, and in a new context in which the notion of woman no longer makes sense. In writing, Wittig's universalized subject transcends binary gender, reclaiming a language to speak of herself (or himself).

Les Guérillères is a circular text in the sense that, on a mimetic level, victory in the war against men takes place at the end of the book, whereas *elles* has been the universalized subject since the book's beginning. The first page announces: "ELLES AFFIRMENT TRIOMPHANT QUE / TOUT GESTE EST RENVERSEMENT" (7). Indeed, in writing *Les Guérillères*, Wittig's act is to overthrow an oppressive discourse, by reclaiming (rewriting) women's literature, history, and language, as is marked by the systematic usage of the pronoun *elles*. At the end of the book, Wittig includes a list of previously published works from which she drew material for *Les Guérillères*, explaining: "*Les Guérillères* sont le lieu de rencontre de quelques textes, dans lesquels des «prélèvements» ont été effectués, à la fois comme références socio-historico-culturelles du livre et comme des distances que le livre tente d'opérer par rapport à elles" (209).

The performative nature of the text, even when considered independently from Wittig's political project, is further underscored by the repetition of *elles disent*, which is written nearly forty times throughout the relatively short work. Wittig succeeds in drawing our attention to the performative potential of writing/speaking. In a particularly revealing example, she writes:

Elles disent, ils t'ont tenue à distance, ils t'ont maintenue, ils t'ont érigée, constituée dans une différence essentielle. Elles disent, ils t'ont, telle quelle, adorée à l'égal d'une déesse, ou bien ils t'ont brûlée sur leurs bûchers, ou bien ils t'ont reléguée à leur service dans leurs arrière-cours. Elles disent, ce faisant, ils t'ont toujours *dans leurs discours* traînée dans la boue. Elles disent, ils t'ont *dans leurs discours* possédée violée prise soumise humiliée tout leur saoul. [emphasis added] (146)

In this passage, the series of verbs describes very physical actions, the object of which is none other than the feminine-gendered body. But it is the usage of language that makes this objectification possible and, likewise, that precludes its perpetuation once the oppressive language is obsolete. The performative force is double as *elles* take action *dans leurs discours*, rising up against what language has historically perpetuated against them:

Elles disent, je refuse désormais de parler ce langage, je refuse de marmotter après eux les mots de manque manque de pénis manque d'argent manque de signe manque de nom. Je refuse de prononcer les mots de possession et de non-possession. Elles disent, si je m'approprie le monde, que ce soit pour m'en déposséder aussitôt, que ce soit pour créer des rapports nouveaux entre moi et le monde. (153-154)

Wittig's and Cixous's texts share this hyperawareness of the performative force of writing and their works act upon the reader in similar ways. This is apparent from the opening lines of Cixous's "Le Rire de la Méduse":

Je parlerai de l'écriture féminine: *de ce qu'elle fera*. Il faut que la femme s'écrive : que la femme écrive de la femme et fasse venir les femmes à l'écriture,

dont elles ont été éloignées aussi violemment qu'elles l'ont été de leurs corps ;
pour les mêmes raisons, par la même loi, dans le même but mortel. Il faut que la
femme se mette au texte – comme au monde, et à l'histoire, – de son propre
mouvement. (39)

In Cixous's view, the relationship between writing and the body is consubstantial. In writing, Cixous enters the world. Quite fittingly, the text is an example of the *écriture féminine* about which she writes. For like the woman's body, Cixous's text is decentralized. For example, the repetition of her literary and also metaphoric (for she is always speaking on two levels) call to arms *Ecris!* emphasizes the cyclical, pervasive, and flowing nature of the piece. Cixous also plays with syntax in order to demonstrate that women's writing need not be tethered by it (syntax/the phallus) in the way that men's writing is. Likewise, this relationship to syntax of a freeform nature mimics the decentralization of sexuality in the female body. Just as a woman's "libido est cosmique" (not centered on the phallus), her person is multiple and surging, "capable de perdre une partie d'elle-même sans être perdue" (50). In the same way that a woman must write her body in order to reclaim it, the writing itself is sexualized, aligned with masturbation. One might even note being caught up in the energy of the text, whose climatic nature seems to propel us through until the very end.

As the title of the piece suggests, one of the aspects of the text with the greatest performative force is Cixous's reworking of the mythology surrounding the figure of the Medusa who is recast as emblematic of women's power and generosity, no longer to be feared as monstrous and deadly. Cixous advances that if only women show the world their "sexts" (a neologism playing on the notion of women's sexuality as a new form of writing), radical change will occur. As Cixous explains: "l'écriture *est la possibilité même du changement*, l'espace d'où

peut s'élancer une pensée subversive, le mouvement avant-coureur d'une transformation des structures sociales et culturelles" (42).

Because *écriture féminine* seems too limited a project to speak to Wittig's universalizing point of view, she criticizes it for fueling the myth of a heterosexual binary in which the woman's role is strictly to reproduce the species, naming this obligation "the reproduction of heterosexual society" (*The Straight Mind* 6). Interestingly, Cixous is also writing against the myth of woman, in the sense that she foregrounds singularity and difference as opposed to a shared set of womanly attributes. She thereby problematizes the category, without calling it into question altogether as Wittig does.¹⁶ But if one were simply to consider *écriture féminine* as a revolutionary new form, would it not then also exemplify the kind of "war machine" Wittig advocates? Wittig writes: "Any work with a new form operates as a war machine, because its design and its goal is to pulverize the old forms and formal conventions" (*The Straight Mind* 68-69). Indeed, one might argue that Cixous's call to women to enter into writing is an attempted universalization of the female point of view. This universalization of the particular, when the particular is not the general, seems to be what Wittig values the most: "It is the attempted universalization of the point of view that turns or does not turn a literary work into a war machine" (*The Straight Mind* 75). Linda Zerilli has suggested that: "In Wittig's hands, what Judith Butler calls 'doing gender' as performance might be called 'doing universal'" (168). The way in which Wittig privileges the subject 'I' informs both linguistic and social paradigm shifts; the 'I' who is writing challenges notions of gender and sex the moment 'I' is written into the text. As Wittig points out: "In spite of the harsh law of gender and its enforcement upon women, no woman can say 'I' without being for herself a total subject – that is ungendered, universal,

¹⁶ Cixous writes: "il faut dire, avant tout, qu'il n'y a pas . . . une femme générale, une femme type. Ce qu'elles ont en commun, je le dirai. Mais ce qui me frappe c'est l'infinie richesse de leurs constitutions singulières" (39).

whole” (*The Straight Mind* 80). For Cixous, women’s writing “will do” something (*ce qu’elle fera*), (39). Moi summarizes it in this way: “writing is no more than the extension of this self-identical prolongation of the speech act” (114). Indeed, in writing, language can *do* something. With this in mind, in order to better understand the performative’s potential to reshape the relationship between the possibilities of language and the reality of the body, let us consider a text that puts performativity to work in challenging and recasting this relationship: Monique Wittig’s *Le Corps lesbien*.

Literary Performativity in Monique Wittig’s *Le Corps lesbien*

Fundamental to Wittig’s political project, as manifest in both her literary and theoretical work, is the concept of “lesbian” as a gender that transcends the binary opposition tethering “woman” to/against “man” in what Judith Butler has since called “the heterosexual matrix” (*Gender Trouble* 30-31). Indeed, Wittig is perhaps best known for having said that “lesbians are not women,” a belief that proliferates itself in her essays as well as in her novels (*The Straight Mind* 32). In Wittig’s view, by rejecting compulsive heterosexuality, a lesbian cannot be quantified in opposition to a man, and is thus not a woman, but rather innately subverts and subsumes the notion of a gender binary.

Wittig views the ‘I’ who is writing as situated in a privileged position that is “ungendered,” “universal” and “whole” and commends Benveniste’s perspective in her essay “The Mark of Gender” (*The Straight Mind* 80-87). Intentionally exploiting the moment of discourse in writing *Le Corps lesbien*, Wittig explains:

The bar in the *j/e* of *The Lesbian Body* is a sign of excess. A sign that helps to imagine an excess of ‘I,’ an ‘I’ exalted. ‘I’ has become so powerful in *The*

Lesbian Body that it can attack the order of heterosexuality in texts and assault the so-called love, the heroes of love, and lesbianize them, lesbianize the symbols, lesbianize the gods and the goddesses, lesbianize the men and the women (87).

Certainly the phrase “lesbianize the men and the women” is striking. Indeed, central to Wittig’s project is not simply the liberation of the lesbian subject, but rather the liberation of all subjects marginalized or objectified by the heterosexual matrix. Thus, to lesbianize a man is to render him other in a way that subverts the system by which his very being has been defined.

Butler expands on Wittig’s lesbianization of the world, showing that it does not simply reclaim a space of sovereignty for the lesbian or the woman alone, but rather challenges institutionalized heteronormativity:

The *j/e* of *The Lesbian Body* is supposed to establish the lesbian, not as a split subject, but as the sovereign subject who can wage war linguistically against a “world” that has constituted a semantic and syntactic assault against the lesbian. Her point is not to call attention to the presence of rights of “women” or “lesbians” as individuals, but to counter the globalizing heterosexist episteme by a reverse discourse of equal reach and power. . . . The speaking subject becomes more than the individual, becomes an absolute perspective that imposes its categories on the entire linguistic field, known as “the world.” (153)

As Butler so eloquently affirms, Wittig’s universalizing lesbian project intends to establish agency for all those disenfranchised by the hegemony of heteronormativity. That is to say that Wittig’s text performs a sort of queer world-making that underscores and subverts the domination of misogynistic and heteronormative discourse.

Wittig draws heavily from Bakhtin whom she sees as having a “strictly materialist approach to language,” thus suggesting that language creates social reality, and prompting Wittig to write: “Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it” (*The Straight Mind* 78). Likewise, in *Le Corps lesbien*, the alteration of personal pronouns claims the privileged position of the ‘I’ who is writing, while at the same time challenging the very language in which ‘I’ writes. Analogously, the anatomical dissection and reconstruction of the lesbian lovers in the text informs a continuous renegotiation of the physical body, conceptualizing it in opposition to compulsive heterosexuality, both physically (in regard to biological reproduction and sex) and linguistically (in regard to language, socio-cultural roles and gender). Wittig exploits the lesbianized anatomy of her narrative agents in concert with a lesbianized language in order to topple the socially institutionalized episteme. Indeed, she “violently shapes” the social body, rewriting discursive notions of sex and gender to include the lesbian. This act of love – at the same time violent and tender – transpires between *j/e* and *t/u* in the instance of discourse. And this moment is sheltered from the injustice of a patriarchal world by the very slash that marks *j/e* and *t/u* as other. Moreover, through the text’s performativity, the reader participates in this exchange between the lovers.

By recasting the relationship between language, the body, and lived experience, the performative force of Wittig’s oeuvre stretches into realms beyond the linguistic and the literary. This is certainly true for *Le Corps lesbien*. For example, Kym Martindale has read the book as a subversion of Vesalius’ 15th century phallocentric anatomy texts, which are widely considered to epitomize the pedagogical basis of the discipline still today. Martindale’s discussion is fascinating and insightful, bringing to light the way in which *Le Corps lesbien* challenges scientific objectivity and masculine/heteronormative authority by physically deconstructing and

reconstructing a lesbian subject charged with erotic and epistemological desire. Martindale also argues that it is in the text's "non-plurality that [it] lets us down, because there lies in its closures, fear: fear of beings other than lesbian" (354). The analysis of Wittig's text that I present in the following pages refutes Martindale's claim by showing that part of the book's performative force lies in its plurality. For when the heterosexual matrix is deconstructed, the Wittigian lesbian body emerges as a universal representative of all bodies that are other.

Contrary to Martindale's suggestion that *Le Corps lesbien* is "a text which fears the interpretative role of its reader," I contend that the text is not at all a passive body fearing or even anticipating interpretation, but rather that its value is, above all, performative (343). Just as the lovers in the novel forcefully dissect and resuscitate each other, Wittig mentions in her author's note to the English edition of *Les Guérillères* that "a generic feminine subject can only enter by force into a language which is foreign to it" (10). Therefore, the text is intentionally active, both on mimetic and diegetic levels, as Wittig's poetics exemplify the very shifts her political agenda intends. Moreover, one could argue that the book is in and of itself an illocutionary utterance, an affirmation, in which Wittig performs "an act *in* saying something," to echo Austin. In a sense then, Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* serves to illustrate the performative potential intrinsic to all language. For language is indeed powerful enough to shift paradigms, transforming our world, when we exercise it like a "war machine."¹⁷

The textual structure of *Le Corps lesbien* in itself merits reflection. The novel is a series of prose poems of varying, but relatively short, length (a half page to two pages each), and is segmented roughly every twelve pages by two pages of larger bold print listing components of the human anatomy – from organs to secretions – and often employing technical anatomical

¹⁷ Wittig writes: "It is the attempted universalization of the point of view that turns or does not turn a literary work into a war machine" (*The Straight Mind* 75).

nomenclature, as is true for the text as a whole. The first such page reads from left to right, top to bottom: “LE CORPS LESBIEN LA CYPRINE LA BAVE LA SALIVE LA MORVE LA SUEUR LES LARMES LE CERUMEN L’URINE LES FÈCES LES EXCRÈMENTS LE SANG . . .” (22). And the last of these pages ends: “LA GORGE LA TÊTE LES CHEVILLES LES AINES LA LANGUE L’OCCIPUT L’ÉCHINE LES FLANCS LE NOMBRIL LE PUBIS LE CORPS LESBIEN” (175). The repetition of *LE CORPS LESBIEN*, which both opens and closes this anatomical inventory of the lesbian body, serves to lesbianize the phallogocentric Vesalian anatomy text, as discussed by Martindale. Here, the lesbian subject has written herself out of heterosexist male discourse. In subverting the female reproductive role, the Wittigian lesbian reclaims her biological anatomy, entering into a new discourse with her reflective lesbian partner, writing in a new language that universalizes the lesbian point of view. Instead of reproducing heteronormativity, *Le Corps lesbien* reproduces (which is to say performs) lesbian subjectivity, lesbian language and lesbian pleasure. This reappropriation of anatomy in *Le Corps lesbien* parallels the reappropriation of history in *Les Guérillères*.¹⁸

Structurally speaking, the text seems circular, the bodies of the lovers continuously being dissected and resuscitated. The anatomical lists traverse the novel like an essential fluid that fuels the lovers as each of their parts is eroticized: the eardrums, the intestines, the uvula. When one reevaluates the prose in light of the stream of body parts and secretions that punctuate it, the

¹⁸ In my reading of the text, descriptions of the love exchanged between *j/e* and *t/u*, while clearly understood as an eroticization of lesbian authority, can also be construed as analogous to the dialogue established by Wittig’s work and the literary, linguistic, and theoretical domains into which it intervenes. For if the lovers’ mutual dissection often appears to be violent, as so many critics have concurred, it is a productive violence that serves to mimic the violence by which Wittig’s lesbianization of the world defies the heterosexual matrix and all things that enforce it. In a chapter of *French Erotic Fiction*, Jennifer Birkett offers an interesting discussion of intertextuality in *Le Corps lesbien*, specifically noting Wittig’s rewritings of DuBellay, Baudelaire, and Flaubert, as well as ancient mythology. For Birkett, the title of the text itself directly refutes Gérard Zwang’s *Le Sexe de la femme*, challenging his “claim that women lack the authority to speak of their own erotic experience.” Conversely, for Birkett, the blatantly striking authority of the “erotic voice” of Wittig’s subject opposes Zwang’s “taboo of naked flesh” by foregrounding women’s erotic experience as a “self-possessed body” that rejects interpretation by an “expert” (110).

performative value of the text is accentuated. One might imagine Wittig implying any one of a number of verbs denoting speech acts, such as: “I state / I describe / I assert THE LESBIAN BODY.”¹⁹ Performativity is reiterated, reproduced exponentially, continually subverting any notion of fixed identity, always prepared to counter a discourse of marginalization. *Le Corps lesbien* proliferates, subverting heterosexism and encompassing everything that the binary would render abject – indeed, the world.

Only three pages into *Le Corps lesbien*, one reads: “J/e découvre que ta peau peut être enlevée délicatement pellicule par pellicule, j/e tire, elle se relève, elle s’enroule par-dessus tes genoux, à partir des nymphes j/e tire, elle glisse le long du ventre...” (9). Here, the speech act is a discovery on the behalf of *j/e*. However, the reader, too, experiences this. Indeed the entire book could be seen as a journey, through the lesbian anatomy as well as through history, as Wittig, her subjects, and her readers work in concert to map a new language and lesbian identity along the way. It is perhaps for this that the lesbian is often considered a metaphor for creativity. As Marilyn R. Farwell describes: “Outside of any categories, Wittig’s lovers release creative as well as sexual energy. The text, too, is a sensual body that the lover caresses and violently puts together” (116).

Teresa de Lauretis has suggested that in *Le Corps lesbien*, one witnesses a sort of “dismemberment and slow decomposition of the *female* body limb by limb, organ by organ, secretion by secretion.” De Lauretis continues: “No one will be able to stand the sight of it, no one will come to aid in this awesome, excruciating, exhilarating labor of love: dis-membering

¹⁹ Searle offers a partial list of such verbs on page 23 of *Speech Acts*. Namascar Shaktini has shown that what I refer to as the performative value of the text is not limited to Wittig’s authorship. For the nature of the text itself necessitates that one must read it actively; one must decide what to read first or next, be inclined to read from start to finish or peruse the poems out of sequence. Thus, in participating in the mutual dissection and reconstruction of the lovers, and therefore in the deconstruction of the text, the readers themselves become producers of text (“Lire *Le corps lesbien*” 79).

and re-membering, reconstituting the body in a new erotic economy...” (166-167). Although I concur with de Lauretis’ reading that the female body (as positioned in a heterosexist binary in opposition to the male) is in fact decomposed by Wittig’s text (in the sense that the elements of her constitution have been deconstructed, liberated of social constraints, and then reformed as lesbian), I feel it is important to note that the performative nature of the text is not that of a “slow decomposition,” but rather that of an abrupt dissection – a productive violence – and then yes, “re-membering” of lesbian identity. I read what happens in the text, what the text does, as a dissection due to the intentionally meticulous precision by which the bodies are forcefully, categorically, authoritatively taken apart and put back together by Wittig. The following passage, in particular, emphasizes the way an anatomical analogy can be employed to relate physical dissection of the bodies on a mimetic level to the performativity of Wittig’s text as it enters the world through the language of *j/e*:

Tu m/e retournes, j/e dans tes mains suis un gant, doucement fermement
inexorablement tenant m/a gorge dans ta paume, j/e bats j/e m//affole, j’ai plaisir
de peur, tu dénombre les veines et les artères, . . . tu, tes cheveux souverains sur
m/a figure penchée tu regardes, tu tes yeux ne quittant pas m/es yeux couverte des
liquides des acides des nourritures mâchées digérées, tu pleine de sucres rongée
dans une odeur de merde et d’urine rampes jusqu’à m/on artère carotide pour la
trancher. Gloire. (93-94)

Here, one can read the glove being turned inside out metaphorically to describe Wittig’s manipulation of language. In the same way that “language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body,” a glove can create an illusion masking what is hidden beneath, similar to the function of a myth such as the gender binary Wittig works to overturn. The body, thus, is turned

inside out, distinguishing itself in staunch opposition to the heterosexual. One might understand the throat as a metonymy for the voice of the writing subject who is required to speak in a language that precludes her. Therefore, by having her carotid artery severed by her lover, the Wittigian lesbian performs an action in literature with repercussions on several levels, all leading to *gloire*.

Similarly, in another particularly striking passage, Wittig engages and reworks the idea of the erotic:

Tes bras d'acier chauffé à blanc brûlent m/es bras, m/a plus ardente . . . M/on clitoris dégage de son capuchon brûlant roule sur tes pieds scintillant prêt à orner un de tes doigts dans le châton d'une bague. M/es yeux sur un plateau à toi présentés sont, dis-tu, délectables. M/es cheveux tombés par touffes se collent dans ta gorge t'étouffant, j/e m/e dissous j/e m/e défais j/e m/e consume m/a malheureuse maîtresse tu m/e consommes avec trop de précipitation. (184-185)

Here, the clitoris, eyes and hair – parts of the body that are often eroticized and objectified in lyrical poetry (and in a patriarchal system) – are reappropriated in the context of lesbian love where they serve both to suffocate and to nourish *j/e* and *t/u*. These lovers then seem to transcend all physical constraints in total and reciprocal devotion. Through a semantic deconstruction, Wittig's lesbian subject gains both a body and a language of her own.

How to Do Things with “Sexts”: The Transformative Potential of Writing Queerly

In her essay “The Straight Mind,” Wittig writes that the “discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms” (*The Straight Mind* 25). However, in *Le Corps lesbien*, as well as in her oeuvre, we witness subjects

who do speak in their own terms. For Wittig seems to suggest that in writing, the empowered subject 'I' is able to perform the subversion of discourses with which 'I' articulates. The performative value of *Le Corps lesbien* depends upon the interplay of Wittig's intentional use of gender-defiant language and the textual performance of the lesbian as a universalized being that counters heterosexual discourse. As the text appropriates its own language, the female body is reconstructed outside of a role in biological reproduction, which, for Wittig, would imply the reproduction of heterosexual society. As Wittig herself has noted: "The movement back and forth between the levels of reality (the conceptual reality and the material reality of oppression, which are both social realities) is accomplished through language" (*The Straight Mind* 19).

Despite the famous split between Wittig and Cixous, an examination of the performative force of their literary texts – which, as we have seen, are also inherently theoretical texts – reveals an important commonality: a project to transform the world through writing, or rather, to do things with their "sexts." By expanding on theories of performative language to encompass all communications, both verbal and written, we can better understand exactly what literature *does*. In Cixous's words: "Maintenant je-femme vais faire sauter la Loi : éclatement désormais possible, et inéluctable ; et qu'il se fasse, tout de suite, *dans* la langue" (48-49). It is with these words in mind that I now turn to the work of contemporary author Nina Bouraoui, whose literary texts continuously challenge me to deepen my understanding of language and narrative and the ways they act together to create meaning in my life.

The following chapters explore various perspectives on performativity and presence in three of Bouraoui's books. In doing so, they both expose and engage the transformative potential of writing queerly and the power of doing things with words. In chapter one, "Mapping the Language of Violence and Resistance in *Garçon manqué* (2000)," I establish a way of reading

Bouraoui that includes careful consideration of specific linguistic and narrative structures to reveal the significance of violence, resistance, agency and empowerment – both for Bouraoui’s *je* and for the reader. The second chapter, “‘Écriture qui saigne’: Interconnectedness, Empathy and the Transformation of Trauma in *Mes mauvaises pensées* (2005),” extends my approach to a more recent book that shares many themes and narrative threads with *Garçon manqué*, while it also productively transforms the conflicts, dilemmas and traumas presented in the earlier book. Finally, the third chapter, “Experientiality, Aesthetics and the Sensory Moment in *Nos baisers sont des adieux* (2010),” looks at temporal and spatial issues in the book in order to reveal how the text promotes aestheticization and equanimity through its foregrounding of the sensory moment. Overall, this dissertation invites you to inhabit Nina Bouraoui’s “pays de mots,” and to be changed by the beauty and complexity of the many things her texts do.

CHAPTER 1

Mapping the Language of Violence and Resistance in *Garçon manqué*

The prolific contemporary writer Nina Bouraoui was born in France in 1967 of a French mother and an Algerian father, five years after Algeria gained its independence from France. Although she lived in Algiers until the age of fourteen and developed a deep interest in writing and in the nuances of language, she never learned to speak Arabic.²⁰ In her novels, Bouraoui deals with questions of transnational identity, queerness, violence, desire, trauma, art, life and death. Her literary works focus on individuals in continuous renegotiation with their contexts, identifications and life narratives, as the author weaves together retellings of personal experiences with philosophical reflections and familial and cultural histories. Readers of Bouraoui often witness first-person narrators²¹ who feel torn between opposing cultures while demonstrating an acute awareness of existing in a liminal space between genders, families and nations. The beauty of Bouraoui's prose frequently contrasts with the painful images and traumatic memories she invokes, and certain narrative threads seem to haunt her novels. Sometimes these narratives are recurring and reinforced, and other times they are eclipsed or subverted altogether. This process calls into question how one might productively articulate a sense of self (cohesive, fragmented, fluid, paradoxical, etc.) in the face of personal and historical trauma – like that experienced in post-independence Algeria, or at an ordinary bus stop in

²⁰ In a 2004 interview with Dominique Simonnet for *L'Express*, Bouraoui explains her relationship to writing: "J'ai commencé à écrire, à parler et à aimer en même temps, quand j'étais enfant. Née d'une mère française et d'un père algérien, j'ai passé les quatorze premières années de ma vie en Algérie, pays dont je ne possédais pas la langue. J'étais une enfant sauvage, réservée, solitaire, et j'ai commencé à écrire sur moi pour compenser cette fuite de la deuxième langue, pour me faire aimer des autres, pour me trouver une place dans ce monde. C'était une forme de quête identitaire. L'écriture, c'est mon vrai pays, le seul dans lequel je vis vraiment, la seule terre que je maîtrise."

²¹ Due to the lack of identifiable features of the narrative voice in Bouraoui's novels studied here, I will not make use of the term "narrator" beyond these introductory pages. Instead, my analysis will consider the repeated use of the subject pronoun *je*, which, for clarity, I will systematically reference simply as *je*.

France. To this end, this analysis will show how Bouraoui's texts recast writing itself as a means of crafting productive narratives with the potential to disrupt preconceptions, enable personal and cultural healing, and reconfigure the links between language, literature and lived experience.

Throughout *Garçon manqué* and elsewhere in Bouraoui's oeuvre, her narrators' actions and reflections are both highly situational and often seem to be contradictory. This has led critics to propose a variety of approaches to understanding subjectivity in Bouraoui's work, including studies that focus on autodiegesis, cultural hybridity and new alterities from the post-colonial to the post-queer.²² The challenges posed by Bouraoui's writing style and the unique literary subjectivities it generates are further complicated by the autofictional nature of much of her work. Critics have taken various positions on the categorization of Bouraoui's texts, often reading them as autobiographical. Philippe Lejeune has argued that autobiography requires "identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*" (193). Although there are textual moments in Bouraoui's oeuvre that might be easily read as autobiographical – and Bouraoui does talk openly in interviews about the relationship between her lived experiences and her writing – there are often inconsistencies within the texts themselves. Moreover, Bouraoui's poetic style leaves the relationship between *je* as protagonist and *je* as narrator unclear. For these reasons, it is more appropriate to consider the works studied here as semi-autobiographical or autofictional. An advantage to reading them as autofictional is that the genre accounts for the active rewriting of lived experience – the blending of autobiographical and fictional elements in the literary articulation of the self, as well as the idea that writing about one's life inherently entails writing about the lives of others. As Serge Doubrovsky stated in a recent interview: "Je crois

²² Laurence Enjolras' article "L'Habit ne vêt plus la nonne" examines the emergence of a "sujet post-queer" in Bouraoui's narratives (18), whereas Benaouda Lebdaï's thoughtful essay on postcolonial hybridity and literature's impact on historical recollection takes a different approach by both referring to Bouraoui as "a French novelist of Arab origin" and, at the same time, exploring "the psychological impact of historical events on Bouraoui's life" (36).

fondamentalement que, quand on écrit sur soi, on écrit sur les autres, car on n'existe pas tout seul.”²³ My analyses of Bouraoui resonate with Doubrovsky’s perspective, while privileging the exposure of linguistic and narrative networks in her novels over any presumed authorial intent.

Texts like *Garçon manqué*, which blend the author’s lived experiences with cultural histories and fictionalized narratives, prove both compelling and problematic in terms of interpretation. With this in mind, interpretations of Bouraoui’s novels range from those that distinguish the text’s narrator from its author while advancing arguments about both, to those that consider the writer and her writing to be inextricably enmeshed in ways that more traditionally delineated genres are unable to represent.²⁴ Helen Vassallo has noted that early criticism on Bouraoui did not question categorizing her work as autobiography, while she opts to approach it through the lenses of life narrative and illness as metaphor.²⁵ Elsewhere, in “Confessions d’une enfant du siècle: Nina Bouraoui ou la « bâtarde » dans *Garçon manqué* et *La Vie heureuse*,” Martine Fernandes references *Garçon manqué* as Bouraoui’s “premier texte autobiographique” (67).

Instead of investigating the relationship between the author and the literary production, this dissertation examines the ways in which Bouraoui’s texts enter into conversation with each other, produce their own theories and engage their readers through linguistic and narrative disruptions. Although my approach could easily be extended to Bouraoui’s other novels, this dissertation focuses on *Garçon manqué* (2000), *Mes mauvaises pensées* (2005), and *Nos baisers sont des adieux* (2010) because they share many common themes, tensions and narrative threads,

²³ Serge Doubrovsky in a 2011 interview for *Le Point*.

²⁴ See Adrienne Angelo’s “Réseau(x) identitaire(s): La migration et la force ‘électrique’ dans le parcours littéraire de Nina Bouraoui” and Karima Yahia Ouahmed’s “De la double origine à l’être-deux dans l’écriture de Nina Bouraoui.”

²⁵ “Wounded Storyteller: Illness as Life Narrative in Nina Bouraoui’s *Garçon manqué*.”

while employing diverse narrative strategies that produce a variety of meaningful textual effects. My analysis will show that Bouraoui's novels invent their own models of writing and reject standard definitions of subjectivity because the invention of a new writing form also creates new verbal clusters related to personhood. Through their linguistic and narrative disruptions, Bouraoui's texts scramble elements of identity, thereby drawing the readers in and obliging them to participate in the creation of hypothetical and shifting subjectivities that are shared.

This chapter will first provide an analysis of the opening pages of *Garçon manqué* as a model for reading the novel. My analysis will demonstrate how the text guides its readers towards a unique understanding of various linguistic components and narrative structures that give meaning to the book, meaning that extends to much of Bouraoui's oeuvre. Next, *je*'s complex relationship to gender and culture is explored in the section "Gender Trouble in Post-Independence Algiers." This bridges into an examination of how *je* comes to relate to violence in the section entitled "Resistance and Empowerment in Response to Gendered and Ethnic Violence." In the second part of the chapter, the section "The Significance of Linguistic and Bodily Agency" focuses on *je*'s efforts to position herself in relation to others and in response to her environment. Lastly, the final section, "Transnational Trauma and the Migration of Violence," turns to an investigation of these dynamics following *je*'s arrival in Brittany and eventual relocation to Paris. Overall, this chapter not only offers a detailed interpretation of *Garçon manqué* but also proposes a way of reading Bouraoui that serves as a point of departure for subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

Garçon manqué: An Introduction to Reading Grammar in Bouraoui

The opening pages of Nina Bouraoui's *Garçon manqué* demonstrate how the author's innovative writing style challenges a naïve referential reading of literature and cues the reader to pay careful attention to language, agency and positioning. In the book's initial scene, the childhood best friends Amine and *je* are running side-by-side on Algeria's Chenoua Beach. *Je*'s active presence in this natural environment is underscored by a series of short sentences that create an anaphoric structure dependent on the heavy repetition of *je cours*. The focus is on *je* so that what we learn about the beach itself is secondary to *je*'s experience of it; there are no stand-alone descriptions of the setting. For example, we read: "Je cours avec la mer qui monte et descend sous les ruines romaines. . . . J'entends la mer qui arrive. J'entends les cargos quitter l'Afrique. Je suis au sable, au ciel et au vent. Je suis en Algérie. La France est loin derrière les vagues amples et dangereuses. Elle est invisible et supposée" (9). At this point, Bouraoui's poetic prose serves to foreground *je*'s existence and, more importantly, *je*'s agency. Interestingly, the only primary clauses in which *je* is not the subject give precedence to France, evoking the trace of a distant and unknown land that infiltrates our consciousness as it encroaches on *je*'s experience of this Algerian beach. The sense of peace and belonging evoked by *je*'s relationship to an all-embracing nature in the sentence *Je suis au sable, au ciel et au vent* changes our understanding of what it means to "be in Algeria," the claim evidenced by *Je suis en Algérie*, which both directly follows it and uses the same subject-verb pair *je suis*. The mention of cargo ships leaving port links to thoughts of France at the other edge of the sea, which fractures the movement of this passage, breaking the fluidity of the repetition of *je cours* at the same time as it heralds a shift in tone: "Je tombe avec Amine. Je tiens sa main. Nous sommes seuls et étrangers" (9). Whereas *je* previously expressed a profound connection to the surrounding elements, the

introduction of France into this narrative is accompanied by a sense of isolation that marks both *je* and Amine as *étrangers*.²⁶

At this juncture, the burgeoning dislocation between *je* and the Algerian landscape is intensified by the presence and actions of four men who suddenly emerge from behind the dunes and walk towards the water: “Ils marchent vite . . . Ils ont de grands gestes. Ils parlent en arabe. Leurs voix traversent la plage. Elles sont avec les vagues. Elles sont avec le vent. C’est une emprise. Ils passent près de nos corps. Ils ne s’arrêtent pas” (9-10). The appearance of these men ruptures *je* and Amine’s experience of the surrounding space – visually, aurally and physically. The fact that they are speaking Arabic, a language *je* fails to grasp²⁷, lends weight to the significance of their voices, to which the verb *traverser* attributes a physical dimension. Similarly, the use of the substantive *emprise*, which strongly connotes the men’s dominance, is further reinforced by their failure to acknowledge or look at the two youths despite directly crossing their path. For *je*, the explanation is clear: “Nous n’existons pas” (10). At the same time as the men’s voices overtake the landscape – occupying the beach, waves and wind with which *je* had seemed consubstantial only moments before – their physical presence dissociates the two young *étrangers* from their bodies which suddenly no longer belong to the space they inhabit. This disassociation is marked by the disconnect between the subject pronoun *ils* and the use of *nos corps* instead of *nous* in the sentence *Ils passent près de nos corps*. It also suggests that the point of view is that of the men (*ils*), which eliminates the subjectivity of *nous* and renders Amine and *je* mere objects or physical masses (*corps*). Moreover, it is after the men leave the

²⁶ Given that the book’s title foregrounds gender, it is worth noting that *je*’s gender has yet to be indicated on a linguistic level. Because Amine has already been marked as masculine, the qualifiers *seuls* and *étrangers* reveal nothing about *je*’s gender.

²⁷ “Je ne parle pas arabe...Je fais quinze ans d’arabe...Cette langue qui s’échappe comme du sable est une douleur” (13).

beach that *je*'s gender is noted for the first time by the feminine-inflected adjective *gaie*²⁸: “Je reprends la course. Je ris. Je suis plus gaie qu’Amine. La mer me porte. Elle prend tout. Elle m’obsède. Elle est avant le rêve de la France. Elle est avant le voyage. Elle est avant la peur” (10). As this vignette²⁹ comes to a close, the focus returns to the power of the sea. At the beginning of the passage, we witnessed the repetition of *je* primarily as an active subject with tangential descriptions of the sea.³⁰ Following the men’s interruption and the import of their voices, which both dominate the narrative and act as grammatical subjects, the reprise of the sea is accompanied by a reversal in linguistic agency. Whereas *je* was the primary agent at the beginning, she has now become the direct object tethered in opposition to the sea, which exerts force over her with the verbs *porter* and *obséder*. Similarly, the repetition of *je* seen earlier is now countered by the repetition of *elle*, the subject pronoun replacing the sea that subsumes *je*. In this way, *je* is both psychologically and linguistically overwhelmed by her environment.

In a reiteration of the *nous n’existons pas* induced by the men on the beach, the final lines of this opening vignette reinforce a sense of nothingness for *je* and Amine and, paradoxically, foreground the possibility (obligation) of profound agency in their bodies: “Ici nous ne sommes rien. De mère française. De père algérien. Seuls nos corps rassemblent les terres opposées” (10). This passage establishes a connection between human and geographical bodies whose import is not limited to mutual influence. In this view, a human body becomes a plastic medium with the

²⁸ The usage of *gaie* is, perhaps, ironic, given the questions of sexuality and gender at play in the book.

²⁹ Asterisks serving to differentiate particular events and reflections punctuate the book. It is useful to consider how this kind of narrative fragmentation creates sections of text with unique grammatical patterns like the one discussed here.

³⁰ In this passage, the alternation between verbs repeated once and those used a single time mimics the rhythmic crashing of waves against the shore and follows the pattern AAB-AAC-DD-EE: “Je cours...Je cours...Je longe...Je cours...Je cours...Je tombe...J’entends...J’entends...Je suis...Je suis...” (9). Similar to poetic rhyme schemes, this structure strengthens the relationship between the predicates sharing a common verb. The EE pair, therefore, further reinforces *je*'s consubstantiality with the sand, sky and wind – indeed a oneness with an Algeria of natural beauty, not an Algeria of political unrest and French colonial history.

capacity to bridge geographical divides and, at the same time, embody histories of conflict. In their flesh, these children of French mothers and Algerian fathers bear the weight of centuries of violence, and they are obliged to negotiate this conflict within themselves in order to survive in the world. The use of the adjective *seuls* marks this obligation first as isolating, in the sense that their bodies are all alone, and second, as inherently necessary – a sole opportunity – given their status as children of what *je* refers to elsewhere as “une union rare” (11). Noticing this recurring opposition helps the reader approach this highly fragmented text through the lens of antithesis. At the same time as these final lines illustrate how Bouraoui’s writing asks the reader to conceive of identity in new, complex and ever-shifting ways, they also foreground the tension related to nation of origin and dominant culture, namely the opposition between Algeria and France, that is further delineated by the two main sections of the book respectively entitled *Alger* and *Rennes*.

The first two pages of *Garçon manqué* thus underscore Bouraoui’s unique writing style which focuses the reader’s attention on the interplay of gender, nation and dominant culture in the context of the narrative. They also underscore the ways in which violence and agency inform and problematize our understanding of these concepts. I will now further illustrate this point by examining a series of passages from the *Alger* section that foreground an awareness of gender. In these examples, nation intersects with gender in ways marked by ethnic, linguistic and sociocultural difference.

Gender Trouble in Post-Independence Algiers

Je’s awareness of gender is particularly acute when she moves through public spaces with one of her parents. For example, as she and her mother walk down the street side-by-side, her mother’s presence both draws attention to *je*’s foreignness and creates an opportunity for *je* to

more fully occupy an Algerian identity. Narrated in the present tense like most of Bouraoui's work, this key vignette exposes the reader to the tension and danger inherent in *je* and her mother's "dernière promenade." *Je* recounts:

Je deviens une étrangère par ma mère. Par sa seule présence à mes côtés. Par ses cheveux blonds, ses yeux bleus, sa peau blanche. . . . C'est notre dernière promenade. Ma mère est un défi. Elle sait. Elle passe les hommes sans regarder. Ses yeux vont jusqu'à la mer. Elle nie la ville, une forêt noire et serrée contre la lumière du ciel. Elle est en danger. Je suis là. Je protège malgré moi. (14-15)

The word *promenade* used here connotes the pleasure of a leisurely stroll, an experience the streets of Algiers deny to those who do not belong. Contrary to the book's opening scene where the men on the beach fail to acknowledge *je* and Amine's presence, here it is *je*'s mother who does not look at the men or the city, but fixes her gaze on the sea. Whereas the act of not looking demonstrates the men's power over the youths in the first situation, in the case of *je*'s mother, this action can be read in two ways. For *je*, it serves to underscore her mother's vulnerability as a white Frenchwoman in post-independence Algiers, and thereby contributes to *je*'s protectiveness of her, even before the child is aware of this role. Paradoxically however, the mother's refusal to acknowledge these men with her eyes can also be read as an expression of enduring colonial power, although for *je*, her mother is plainly in danger (*en danger*). This duality, at the heart of the book's tensions, is intrinsic to *je*'s identity as both French and Algerian, threat and protector.

In both of these passages, the focus on the sea reminds the reader of the distance that separates Algeria from France – a geographical boundary breached during colonization. As the narration of this encounter in the street continues, *je*'s choice of words alludes to militaristic

violence at the same time as it foregrounds markers of traditional French femininity, so that notions of gender and colonial power become further entangled:

Mon regard est armé. Mon regard est injuste. Ils frôlent. Ils ne s'arrêtent pas. Ils murmurent. L'enfant est un prétexte. L'enfant est une sécurité. L'enfant coupe comme une lame. Je deviens ma mère. Je deviens sa robe. Je deviens son parfum qui reste derrière nous. Je deviens sa peau convoitée. Une main touche ses cheveux puis se retire par la seule force de mon visage fermé³¹. Toucher. Savoir. Connaître. Ma mère est un trésor. Amine et moi remplaçons nos pères. Là, nous sommes deux vrais Algériens. (15)

The *ils ne s'arrêtent pas* of this passage echoes the same line from the book's opening scene³², further inscribing the complex power relations at play in the narrative and the ways in which they are often articulated through linguistic agency. Given that the pursuit of resources and riches was a driving force behind colonization, the description of *je*'s mother as *un trésor* is striking.³³ Because the Frenchwoman already has value in her own native economy, in this scenario, her role as an object of desire is twofold. At the same time as her body serves as a site where what was stolen can potentially be reclaimed by the Algerian male gaze, the fact that she is viewed as a treasure in both cultural environments impacts *je*'s protectiveness. The series of infinitives punctuated as independent sentences enacts an interplay between entities in conversation and, given the verb *toucher*'s association with physical duels, between entities in conflict. Whereas *toucher* marks a moment of contact, *savoir* and *connaître* complicate the tension between

³¹ Elsewhere *je* will use the expression *visage fermé* to describe Amine (25).

³² "Des hommes surgissent des dunes . . . Ils marchent vite en direction de la mer, un rendez-vous . . . C'est une emprise. Ils passent près de nos corps. Ils ne s'arrêtent pas" (9-10).

³³ In *Main basse sur Alger, enquête sur un pillage*, Pierre Péan has written about how the French pillaged treasure from the Regency of Algiers during the 1830 French Conquest of Algeria.

knowing and familiarity, in such a way that these verbs come to carry the weight of an unresolved colonial history now transmuted into gendered interactions on the street.

In this vignette, the juxtaposition of the contextually contradictory substantives *étrangère* and *Algériens*, both of which refer to *je*, sets up a traditional binary opposition between foreigners and natives that is inherently problematized by *je*'s existence in this milieu. *Je* sees herself as both standing in for her mother (“je deviens ma mère”) and, paradoxically, replacing her father by channeling his force, masculinity and sense of belonging in Algeria. Although *je* indicates little about the hand that touches her mother’s hair, we understand that it belongs to an Algerian man who recoils only in response to *je*’s face, as her features both reveal the force of her protectiveness and suggest the existence of her father.

Elsewhere, *je* describes her excursions in Algiers alongside her father, which contrast sharply with her experience when she accompanies her mother, even if she relies on many of the same grammatical structures and word choices: “Je deviens algérienne avec mon père. Par sa main dans ma main qui protège. Par ses cheveux, ses yeux, et sa peau, brune. Par sa voix. Par sa langue arabe. Par ses prières. Par ses parents dans son corps, une invasion. . . . Je marche les chevilles ouvertes. Je suis avec mon père. Je crois devenir algérienne. Je suis sauvée” (25-26). The use of the verb *devenir* emphasizes *je*'s awareness of a shift in how she feels about herself in relationship to how others perceive her and the impact of this awareness on her sense of personal safety. Whereas she is the one who protects her mother, here the verb *protéger* names an action carried out by her father. His hand and his physical appearance, his language and his religion not only protect her, but also give her a sense of belonging, however ephemeral. In this scenario, *je*'s body takes up space, moving in the world with confidence. *Je*’s *chevilles ouvertes* also pose a challenge to traditional Muslim culture in which women’s ankles would not be exposed.

Alongside her father, she tastes the freedom and agency afforded by masculinity and cultural belonging, through which she becomes a somewhat secularized Algerian woman (“je deviens algérienne”). The security and stability *je* enjoys during sojourns with her father provide a foil for the everyday sense of foreignness and invisibility she endures. Whereas Amine often mirrors *je*’s experience, for example, when they are referred to together as *deux Algériens* who replace their fathers in the passage previously discussed, in relationship to her father, *je* is individuated and marked in the feminine as *algérienne*. Yet, as with her mother, it is a question of becoming; it is not a fixed identity. Moreover, the usage of the verb *croire* in “je crois devenir algérienne” near the end of the passage highlights *je*’s uncertainty and demonstrates that even in a moment of relative ease, *je* does not cease to question who she is.

A syntactical nuance in the introductions to the scenes in which *je* moves in public with either her mother or her father highlights the distinction in the roles her parents play. “Je deviens une étrangère par ma mère” contrasts with “je deviens algérienne avec mon père” in two important ways (14; 25). First, alongside her mother, *je* is doubly foreign, as the substantive *étrangère* shows. On the one hand, her mother’s visible Frenchness also marks *je* as a stranger in Algeria, and, on the other hand, *je* can be read as out of place in relation to her mother whom she does not resemble. In the phrase *je deviens algérienne*, however, the subject *je* is validated and qualified with an adjective. Second, the shift in prepositions from *par ma mère* to *avec mon père* underscores how *je* is subjugated by her mother’s presence and, conversely, exists with relative autonomy as an agent in the world alongside her father.

At the same time as *je*’s transnational heritage complicates her worldview and awareness of gender, her complex relationship to gender impacts her understanding of both Algerian and French cultural norms. The book’s provocative title, *Garçon manqué*, foregrounds this tension

related to gender. Translated in English as “tomboy,” this substantive refers to a girl who engages in typically boyish behaviors, activities and physical self-presentation. In French, however, it also carries the negative connotation of a lack, missed opportunity or failed attempt – a profound sense of displacement that subtends *je*'s struggles throughout the text. Indeed, when the reader first encounters a proper name that refers to *je*, it is one that she has chosen for herself and only shared with Amine: "Seul Amine sait mes jeux, mon imitation. . . . Je prends un autre prénom, Ahmed. Je jette mes robes. Je coupe mes cheveux. Je me fais disparaître. J'intègre le pays des hommes" (17). Here, the interconnectedness of gender and dominant cultural norms leads *je* to refer to Algeria as “le pays des hommes” and she takes action to transform herself into someone who can belong here – someone whose existence is not only possible but, more importantly, affirmed. Having observed men at the beach – their strength, resiliency and dominance over the landscape – she imitates their mannerisms, writing: "Ils sont violents. Ils sont en vie" (17). The juxtaposition of these two simple sentences exposes a crucial tension threaded throughout Bouraoui's writing: the notion that truly being alive and claiming agency is a sort of productive violence that requires force and determination. Although this is not an inherently gendered notion, at this point in the narrative, masculinity and autonomy in Algeria are very much intertwined. It comes as no surprise then, given the onomastics of Ahmed, that *je* inscribes dominant Algerian culture into her masculinity by adopting one of the names of the prophet Muhammed.

In many ways, *je* views the possibility of survival in Algeria as dependent on her ability to exist in the world as a man. Moreover, it is only indirectly that we learn her name is Nina, and it is never an identity she truly inhabits. The name first appears while she recounts pretending to be Dahleb, the Algerian footballer, who autographs a photo for Nina: "Je deviens Dahleb le

joueur qui signe sa photographie, « à la petite Nina, avec toute ma tendresse »" (20). *Je's* father encourages her to engage in traditionally masculine activities, from his everyday cultivation of her physical agility to his request that she watch over the house in his absence: "[Mon père] m'élève comme un garçon. . . . Il transmet la force. Il forge mon corps. Il m'apprend à me défendre dans le pays des hommes. . . . Il détourne ma fragilité. Il m'appelle Brio" (26). The reprise of the expression "le pays des hommes" demonstrates that *je's* interactions with her father, his encouragement of her masculinity, and his choice to call her Brio instead of Nina, corroborate her belief that Algeria is a hostile place for women. Moreover, the term Brio, which denotes vigor and vivacity, reveals *je's* father's efforts to provide her with the force required for life in Algeria.

As these examples show, in *Garçon manqué* the problem of gender and its complex relationship to nation and dominant culture are so substantial that they become disruptive. *Je* – and, by extension, the reader – experiences this problem from multiple perspectives but without any solution. At the same time as Bouraoui's text foregrounds gender and ethnic difference, the author's unique writing style systematically complicates the categories of gender and ethnicity in the context of the narrative. Consider for instance *je's* observation that her mother's company marks her as foreign while her father's provides her the opportunity to become Algerian, as previously discussed. This aspect of *je's* experience is countered by her realization that, in his absence, she replaces her father by channeling a force that protects her mother and marks *je* as a *vrai(e) Algérien(ne)*.³⁴

³⁴ Because *je* and Amine are described together – as in the book's opening scene – we are left to interpret whether *je's* gender in this instance is masculine (universal), feminine (unmarked) or something altogether different that escapes linguistic representation but instead relies comfortably on Amine's masculinity: "Amine et moi remplaçons nos pères. Là, nous sommes deux vrais Algériens" (15).

Resistance and Empowerment in Response to Gendered and Ethnic Violence

We have already seen how the *je* of *Garçon manqué* has a difficult relationship to alterity in terms of gender and ethnicity. We saw, for example, in the text's opening scene that *je* is psychologically overwhelmed by the presence of the men speaking Arabic on the beach and that her experience is mirrored by her objectification on a linguistic level. This narrative strategy establishes a framework for thinking about subjectivity, language and agency in the context of the book so that when excessive force, physical violence or an otherwise traumatic event punctuates the narrative, the reader is acutely aware of *je*'s response. My analysis will focus on instances like this one in which *je* experiences a sense of being overwhelmed and will examine the strategies she develops to empower herself and resist or else cope with the force, violence or trauma at hand.

Bourauoui's work is replete with examples of the violence that plagued post-colonial Algeria. According to Christopher Hitchens, the main events of the Franco-Algerian conflict that led to Algeria's independence are commonly understood to have begun on May 8, 1945. As Europe celebrated the end of World War II, Muslim protesters marched for independence in Sétif. The march became a massacre as protesters killed over a hundred *Pieds-Noirs*, and French armed forces retaliated by murdering thousands of Algerians. In the 1950s, the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) incited armed revolts throughout Algeria and called for a sovereign state. Tensions continued to exacerbate, and in the months leading up to independence in July of 1962, the OAS (*Organisation de l'armée secrete*) French paramilitary group staged terrorist attacks in an attempt to maintain *l'Algérie française*.³⁵ In particular, the violence perpetuated by the OAS plays an important role in *Garçon manqué* since *je*'s building, *la Résidence*, was the site of a massacre of Algerian woman, as discussed later in this chapter.

³⁵ See Hitchens' "A Chronology of the Algerian War of Independence."

Both the memory of Franco-Algerian conflict and its repercussions permeate Bouraoui's texts. Much of this violence – which largely targets women and foreigners – impacts the language, narration and characters of *Garçon manqué*. The forms of violence *je* encounters range from systemic injustices to acute traumatic events that, in turn, magnify the impact of the relatively innocuous quotidian interactions with which they intersect. Helen Vassallo has argued that Bouraoui's work exemplifies Benjamin Stora's notion of a *guerre intériorisée* through what she describes as its quest to “assert individual subjectivity in a historical context characterized by erasure and effacement.”³⁶ Stora made the case that in the absence of any official remembrance of the Algerian war, individuals internalized its legacy, which frequently surfaced in writing.³⁷ While I agree with Vassallo that Bouraoui's narration does attest to the internalized violence of Franco-Algerian relations, in my view, the critic's analysis inappropriately conflates the author with the *je* of her texts and relies on an oversimplified distinction between cultural and sexual identity.³⁸ Although this dissertation explores similarities as well as differences between the models of writing and conceptions of personhood generated by Bouraoui's texts, it rejects the idea that one book succeeds where others fail. In this chapter and subsequent chapters, I will delineate the ways in which Bouraoui's texts succeed in displacing the failed agency of various forms of violence. They do this by productively using linguistic and narrative ruptures and repetitions to break up and regenerate each narrative. Moreover, my analysis will demonstrate how the reader actively participates in this transformational process.

³⁶ “Unsuccessful alterity? The pursuit of otherness in Nina Bouraoui's autobiographical writing” 38-39.

³⁷ *La Gangrène et l'oubli: la mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie*.

³⁸ Vassallo contends that Bouraoui's autobiographical texts reify the binary notions of sexual and cultural identity the author aims to subvert. Vassallo's analysis criticizes *Garçon manqué* and *Poupée Bella* (2004) for confirming stereotypes about racial and sexual difference and advances that only in *Mes mauvaises pensées* does Bouraoui succeed in negotiating what Vassallo refers to as a “‘new’ alterity” (51).

Violence is pervasive in *Garçon manqué* and the understanding of gender and cultural difference that the book provides comes largely in response to this violence. Although the chronology of events narrated in the text is not always clear, the connections are profound between what *je* takes in from her world and how she positions herself in respect to the violence of this world. This analysis will look first at the presence of violence in Algeria after independence and how *je* weaves this anti-colonial backlash into *Garçon manqué*. She writes: “Chaque jour est une violence. Chaque jour est une explosion. Dès 1970 la violence algérienne est dans la rue. Elle vient du temps immobile. Elle est dans ces corps qui cherchent. Qui marchent en cercles” (41). Blending comparisons of the city to both a forest and a sort of corporeal carnival, *je* describes bodies pressed together walking in circles on concentric streets that *je* is forbidden to access. The city is dangerous and therefore particularly uninhabitable for women. *Je*’s description of the men who loiter outside her school gates emphasizes her sense of powerlessness and objectification and, at the same time, it also reflects her intentionality. As for the men – a group to which *je* yearns to belong – their violence is complicated by a deep sense of sadness and longing.

Ma vie est un secret. Moi seule sais mon désir, ici, en Algérie. Je veux être un homme. . . . 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.

L’Algérie est un homme. L’Algérie est une forêt d’hommes. . . . Ici les hommes sont seuls à force d’être ensemble. Ici, les hommes sont violents à force de désir.

. . . Être un homme en Algérie c’est perdre la peur. Ici je suis terrifiée. Leurs yeux. Leurs mains. Leurs corps contre les grilles du lycée. Jamais je ne regarde. Je les sens. Ils attendent. Mes yeux. Mon corps. Ma voix. Des objets à prendre. Ici,

les hommes sont tristes. . . . La mer est une envie. . . . Ils espèrent. . . . Ils inventent un départ. Ils inventent une arrivée. Ils feront mieux que les autres. Ils sauront. Le rêve français. Leur regard est une arme. Leur main est une braise. Leur désir est un conflit. Ils se blessent, seuls. Ils sont fragiles. Je les aime pour ça. Ils ne savent pas. (39-40)

Early in the passage, *je* employs the future tense to delineate what it means to become invisible in Algeria by becoming a man – leaving behind her body, face and voice, and aligning herself with (masculine) “force.” Ironically, while *je* desires this identity – specifically because it is unmarked in Algeria and, therefore, unremarkable – she also notes the sadness of these Algerian men as well as the conflict posed by their desire for a life in France. So although the significance of desire aligns *je* with the men she covets, the men’s objective renders *je*’s position precarious. In other words, in order to become part of Algeria, in order to belong, *je* wishes to become a man. However, according to the text, what it means to be a man in Algeria, paradoxically, is to long for a life in France – a life in which an Algerian man will exist only as an outsider. *Je*’s advice to Amine promptly corroborates this viewpoint: “En France tu seras un étranger. En France tu ne seras pas français” (40).

The reality of *je*’s everyday life is depicted in the description of the men who watch her from outside the gates of her school. In this passage, the periods that punctuate the phrases denoting the men’s eyes, hands and bodies accentuate the inherent threat of violence, each fragmented sentence acting as a thrust against *je*’s agency. *Je* never looks, but rather is receptive, sensing the men’s presence and taking inventory of what they might want from her – her eyes, body and voice merely objects for the taking. Here, withholding a look can also be read as a reflection of *je*’s intentionality; *je* does not engage them precisely so that she can become them.

This action is a *prise de pouvoir* that underscores her intent. Moreover, her refusal to acknowledge the men reverses the dynamics of the book's opening scene in which not being noticed by the men on the beach signified for *je* that she and Amine did not exist.

The conclusion of this passage further nuances the contradiction these men embody. In a recapitulation of the phrase "Leurs yeux. Leurs mains" that underscores the predatory quality of the men outside *je*'s school, here their gaze is described as a weapon (*une arme*). Conversely, their hands (*leur main*) are depicted as embers. This metaphor suggests that the part of them that most directly and meticulously engages in physical contact with their world has been burned and, as a source of great heat, has the potential to start other fires. Qualified in such a way, these men are shown to be both dangerous and vulnerable. Indeed, they have already been harmed (one might interpret, by French colonization). On this note, the expression "ils se blessent, seuls," which reads as both reciprocal and reflexive, reveals that the men continue to hurt themselves, given the conflict inherent in their dream of France. At the same time as *je* has described herself as "terrifiée" in Algeria because she is not a man and feels observed by them, she also clearly and directly expresses love for these men in their fragility and ignorance ("ils sont fragiles. . . . ils ne savent pas"). In this passage, therefore, the reader understands *je* not only as a frightened schoolgirl – a stranger in her own city – but also as a mature and seemingly omniscient presence, expressing love for the very men who contribute to her discomfort. Even if this love is arguably self-serving in that *je* draws personal strength from what she views as these men's fragility, it nevertheless demonstrates a certain complexity that is worth noting about her at this point.

Je goes on to restate the impossibility of her situation by couching her desire to become a man in a hypothetical journey through the forbidden streets of Algiers: "Je pourrais me perdre dans les rues d'Alger. M'isoler de mon corps. Être envahie par le corps des hommes. . . . Chacun

est le miroir de l'autre. Chacun est la défaite de l'autre. . . . C'est un corps unique, à force. . . . Je sais marcher avec les étoiles. Je ne sais pas marcher avec les hommes" (41-42). *Je's* attestation that she knows how to walk among the stars but not how to walk among men underscores the rare sense of peacefulness she experiences in nature as articulated elsewhere in the book. This passage attempts to structurally integrate *je* into the city by cataloguing the names of some of its streets. Ironically however, *je* overwhelmingly appears as the subject of negative verbal structures, which only serve to reinforce the impossibility of her inclusion in this urban environment:

Je ne sais pas les rues. . . . La rue du Golf. Le boulevard Zirout-Youcef. Je ne sais plus la Casbah. Je n'y vais plus. Je ne sais pas Bab el-Oued. Je n'y entre plus. Je ne sais rien d'Alger-centre. Je sais tout du désert. . . . 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. J'existe trop. Je suis une femme. Je reste à l'extérieur de la forêt. (42)

This passage relies on attenuation to show that in trying to hold space as a man, *je* will shed identifying features like her name and face, becoming progressively undifferentiated and subsequently inconsequential – shifting from being a part, to an element, then to a shadow, and finally a fragment. At this juncture, *je's* usage of the *futur simple* is ruptured by the present-tense sentences "J'existe trop. Je suis une femme." In this way, her qualification as a woman not only prevents her from accessing Algiers in her everyday life, but also marks the end of the hypothetical journey made possible by the text.

Whereas *je* and Amine are dismissed as children (and undifferentiated in terms of gender) in the novel's opening scene, as *je* grows older and the book progresses, her gender comes to bear on her interactions in ways that prove increasingly problematic. Ironically, the sense of not existing ("Nous n'existons pas.") that *je* takes away from the encounter with the men on the beach now seems preferable to this sense of existing too much ("J'existe trop.") that accompanies being visible as a woman and thereby subjected to the male gaze (10; 42). Henceforth in the book, *je* becomes acutely aware of situations in which she is gendered, both by men and by women, and this gendering plays out in various ways.

Beyond the physical violence of the streets, the violent potential of gendered language is highlighted on multiple occasions. In one instance, while cliff jumping with Amine, *je* is captivated by the energy and flexibility of Paola, a woman noted to be neither Algerian nor French who impresses the crowd with her graceful plunges from the rock face:

C'est une bonne nageuse, disent-ils. Elle ne plonge pas, elle donne. Son corps. . . .
Elle est près de moi. 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 ne réponds pas. Je ne sais pas. Je ne me sais pas.

(38)

Despite *je*'s desire to live as a man in Algiers – despite her role-play as Ahmed, Brio and Dahleb – being marked as masculine in this way is a violation that renders her speechless, ashamed and unsure of herself. The repetition of *je déteste* emphasizes *je*'s resistance not only to her environment and the people who inhabit it, but also to the countries of her heritage, which are thereby implicated in this gendered interaction. In the sentence *je ne me sais pas*, the use of the

verb *savoir* in the pronominal without a qualifier is unusual and suggests that the self is something that can be known like a fact, a name or a category. The everyday threat of violence coupled with frequent assaults to *je*'s identity provide a challenging backdrop against which a series of unique experiences plays out.

The first acute traumatic event the reader encounters describes how *je* witnesses the drowning of a young Algerian man despite *je*'s father's best efforts to save him. She introduces this vignette with the words of a Frenchwoman spoken to *je*'s mother upon her observation of the man's struggle: "Sur la plage de Moretti, alors qu'un jeune homme se noie, au loin, déjà perdu, si loin. Il appelle. Elle [La Française] dit encore: « Pourquoi y aller? Le sauver? Risquer sa vie? Ils sont si nombreux. Tous ces corps bruns et serrés. Cette population. »" (15-16). The paragraph ends abruptly here in such a way that this Frenchwoman's voice is left to haunt the descriptions that follow, as a reminder of the systemic erasure of a population by colonialism and the resolve of those who seek to overthrow this system: "Mon père court vers la mer. Il nie cette voix qui refuse. Il va vers l'autre voix, celle de l'homme qui se noie. Il est déjà loin. Il soulève un corps. Il revient sur le dos, entravé. Il dépose sur le sable un jeune Algérien. Il pourrait être son frère, Amar. Il pourrait être ce corps mort à la guerre" (16). In this passage, the phrase *il est déjà loin*, which refers to *je*'s father, echoes the *déjà perdu, si loin* description of the man drowning. In this way, the two of them are drawn closer together in time and space and this unknown man is personalized. He could be *je*'s uncle, Amar, who died in the war and whose body was never recovered (32-33). Although we recognize when the subject pronoun *il* shifts from referencing *je*'s father to referencing the young man who drowned, the repetition of *il* nevertheless linguistically reinforces the connection between these two men. In a sharp contrast to the Frenchwoman's callous dismissal of the value of this man's life, *je* is intimately moved by his

death and by her father's efforts to rescue and revive him: "Cet homme est mort. Je ne l'oublierai jamais. Chaque homme croisé portera son image, une image fantôme qui rompt l'enfance. Il pourrait être toi, Amine. Ton visage. Tes yeux baissés. Tes cheveux. Il pourrait être ton corps bientôt adulte. Il te suivrait comme une ombre et un jumeau" (16-17). In a passage narrated almost entirely in the present tense, the shift to the *futur simple* with *je ne l'oublierai jamais* is significant. It reminds the reader that *je* not only witnessed this man's death and the Frenchwoman's indifference but also is weighed down by the burden of this memory, which will inform all her future interactions.

The scene serves as a counterpoint to *je*'s recollection of how she nearly allowed herself to drown only to be saved by Amine. In the paragraphs leading up to this pivotal event, *je* and Amine are at the beach with Amine's mother who, like *je*'s mother, is a Frenchwoman of pale complexion and suffers under the relentless heat of the Algerian sun. After explicitly describing Amine's mother's face against the sun as *une guerre*, in a reversal of the traditional view of Algeria as subjugated to France's colonial power, *je* asserts: "Elle est écrasée par l'Algérie" (29). She then continues to list what the sun burns, enumerating "mon corps trop brun" directly followed by "la peau blanche de la femme française" (29). Despite her dark skin, *je* is not impervious to the force that overwhelms Amine's mother. *Je* then unexpectedly turns her attention to Amine, noting his sadness at the same time as she envies his masculine adult physique: "Je rejoins Amine, l'ami triste. Il court et revient. Il fuit sa mère. Il fuit la terre. L'Algérie est sa prison. Son corps est mon envie. . . . Je suis trop petite pour mon âge" (29-30).

In this vignette, *je* describes the beach as a suffocating and isolating force and the sun as a violent beacon of danger personified as "un homme qui dévore l'Algérie" (30). The reader accompanies the young friends on their escape from the beach, which is narrated with a

repetition of the subject pronoun *on*: “On fuit la plage. On fuit le corps perdu de la mère d’Amine. On quitte le feu. On va vers l’hôtel de Zeralda” (30). But they (we) do not escape the force of the sun – metamorphosed as a man – which prompts *je* to dive into the swimming pool in a fierce act of resistance against her environment. In a staunch visual opposition, the sun in the sky mirrors *je*’s body at the bottom of the pool:

Je descends, loin³⁹. Je reste au fond longtemps. Le soleil incendie. Le feu contre mon souffle. Le feu contre ma volonté. Il m’attend. Je ne remonte pas. Le soleil révèle. Je ne suis pas algérienne. . . . Le soleil est une vengeance. Je ne suis pas d’ici. Je ne remonte pas. . . . Noyer mon ennui. Noyer le visage de la mère d’Amine. Noyer la solitude de nos corps livrés. Noyer ma vie algérienne. La piscine est profonde. J’entends ma voix dans ma gorge. J’entends mon sang. Se noyer en Algérie. Vaincre le soleil. Rester là. Ne jamais rentrer en France. (30-31)

The masculine nouns *soleil* and *feu* – replaced by *il* throughout the scene – reinforce the analogy between this force and a man, recalling the previously discussed impression that Algeria is a “pays des hommes.” Moreover, the repetition of *contre* links breath to willpower and, by extension, physicality to mental determination in ways characteristic of Bouraoui’s work. At the same time as the sun exposes and isolates *je*, her willingness to resist its force becomes a reclamation of agency emphasized by the reiteration of the sentence *je ne remonte pas*.⁴⁰ As in the text’s opening scene, *je*’s experience is mirrored on a linguistic level such that everything that was overwhelming her before she dove into the pool now becomes the object of the verb

³⁹ The use of the adverb *loin* echoes the scene in which *je*’s father attempts to save the young Algerian man from drowning. Both of their locations are described as *loin* (33).

⁴⁰ The repetition of *je ne remonte pas* echoes the repetition of *je plonge* from the scene in which Paola refers to the narrator as *beau*. Syntactic similarities such as these reinforce the interconnectedness and mutual influence of the external forces *je* must withstand and to which she must respond – from heat to gendered language to cultural norms.

noyer. Paradoxically, the phrase *noyer ma vie algérienne* is countered by *se noyer en Algérie*, which demonstrates that the annihilation of her Algerian life is also the annihilation of her very being. This action also reveals her deep desire to remain forever in Algeria by drowning in the pool. She explains that it is Amine, the only one who understands her struggle, who helps her swim back to the surface as the vignette closes: “Le secret de la piscine hantera notre histoire” (31). In the same way that the man who drowns is depicted as an *image fantôme* that disrupts childhood, this near-death experience will haunt their history. Like the violence propagated by the French colonization of Algeria – of which Amar’s disappearance is a constant reminder – these *images fantômes* forever tether the living to the dead.⁴¹

Further complicating her understanding of gender and agency, a kidnapping attempt referenced by the euphemism *l’événement*⁴² impacts *je*’s desire to access the world of men and move freely through Algiers.⁴³ Before narrating this traumatic event, however, *je* develops a hyperbolic description of the rats of Algiers who devour cats and attack dogs, and, she warns: “Quand les rats mangeront les chiens, les hommes de la rue seront la cible des rats” (44). She describes how the fear of rats forces humans to live on upper floors and keep their windows closed at night, despite the stifling heat: “Les rats entrent dans les appartements. C’est l’odeur du lait qui attire. Ils éventrent les nourrissons. Ils logent dans les berceaux. Devenir un rat. Longer la ville interdite. Mon danger” (44). This startling image of infants disemboweled in their cradles and replaced by rats is contorted by a chiasmatic structure in which rats replace children and *je*

⁴¹ Similarly, one might suggest that *je*’s near suicide in a hotel pool has overtones of the negative impact of colonialism.

⁴² Interestingly, the French government referred to the Algerian War as “les événements de l’Algérie” until 1999. For a discussion of the ways this cultural trauma was publically silenced at the same time as individuals communicated these memories through writing, see Amy L. Hubbell’s “Unspoken Algeria: Transmitting Traumatic Memories of the Algerian War.”

⁴³ “Je n’ai pas le droit de sortir seule. Depuis l’événement. La rue est mon ennemie. La rue est un vrai corps. C’est le lieu des hommes. . . . La rue est interdite depuis l’événement” (43-45).

becomes a rat able to roam freely in this forbidden city. The ambiguity of the substantive *mon danger* therefore suggests not only the danger the rats pose – from which *je* is not exempt – but also her potential to become, like them, an imminent threat. This reading casts an eerie light on the prophetic announcement that men will someday be the target of this violence – and suggests that *je* is capable of acting out this violence – prefiguring some of the intrusive thoughts that occupy the *je* of *Mes mauvaises pensées*.

A network of oppositions and contaminations underlies the passage that recounts *je*'s experience of a handsome, well-dressed, French-speaking Algerian man who attempts to abduct her from the garden of her home. His seductiveness is mirrored by the structure and repetition of the text, which draw the reader in with an alternation between third-person narration of the event and first-person and second-person pronouns that relate the man's words and *je*'s internal responses. This present-tense narrative strategy creates suspense and mimics the sense of captivation bordering on intoxication that *je* experiences: "C'est un inconnu. Je sais son visage, une lame de couteau. . . . Il sait attirer vers lui. Il dit: Tu es belle. Je suis encore une fille. Pour lui. Il dit: Viens avec moi. Je n'ai pas peur. Il sent bon. . . . Est-ce l'odeur des fruits ou l'odeur de sa peau qui vient autour de moi et enserre? Est-ce sa voix ou le silence du parc qui noie? (45-46). *Je*'s syntax leaves it unclear whether this stranger is carrying a knife or whether *une lame de couteau* is used metaphorically to describe his face, gesturing towards the traumatic impact of this experience. The man is depicted as handsome in a traditional sense and the conflation of his allure and the sensual beauty of the orange grove is emphasized by synesthetic descriptions in which smells and sounds take on an oppressive physical dimension even before this stranger physically touches *je*'s hand:

Il prend ma main. Il répète, toujours: Tu es belle. C'est un murmure. Tu t'appelles comment? C'est une prière. Toute l'Algérie contient cet homme. Toute mon enfance se dirige vers lui. Il caresse mes cheveux. Il dit: C'est de la soie. Il caresse mon visage. Il dit: C'est du velours. Ses mains. Sa douceur. Sa barbe. Ses sourcils. Sa main encore qui contient le monde entier. Il dit: Viens. (46)

The softness connoted by *murmure* and *prière*, terms belonging to an aural lexicon, aligns with the stranger's verbal responses to his tactile experience of touching *je*'s hair and face, whose softness he describes as silk and velvet. The focus then shifts to the man – his hands (which are touching her), his softness (which echoes hers), his beard and eyebrows (the most masculine features of his face) and back to his hand that is holding hers – delineating his attributes and recreating for the reader the sense of newness and seduction *je* experienced. The idea that his hand holds the entire world marks the profound significance of this moment of contact that changed everything and, paradoxically, also alludes to the temptation of the unknown. Moreover, the verb *contenir* marks a chiasmic structure in which all of Algeria contains this man at the same time as his hand contains the entire world. There are others like him; he could be anyone. Equated with Algeria, he is beautiful, tempting and dangerous. Despite his allure, *je* does not follow him: “Je reste là, près des orangers, sous le ciel bleu, avec mon corps, ma seule défense, ma blessure” (46). This prose dissociates the personal subject pronoun *je* from her body, a body that, paradoxically, is both her wound and all that protects her.

Je goes on to highlight the contradiction inherent in this kidnapping attempt – how it can mean so much despite having failed – by repeating that the event is both everything and nothing:

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. C'est un

étranger qui tient ma nuque. Il brise déjà, sans savoir. Il retire l'enfance. Est-ce la mer qui vient ou le cri de ma sœur ? Est-ce le vent qui se lève ou la force de ma sœur ? Est-ce la pluie qui s'abat ou la vitesse de notre course ? . . . Ce n'est rien et c'est déjà tout. Ses mains sur mon visage. Ses mots sur mes yeux. Sa voix contre mes lèvres fermées. Son attention. Son désir. Sa douceur, une immense brutalité. Sa violence, algérienne. (46-47)

In the first paragraph, *je*'s ambiguous usage of the word *viol* – which can signify rape, violation or transgression – nevertheless connotes an experience with negative qualities, as reinforced by the substantive *trahison*. On this note, the sentence “C'est un étranger qui tient ma nuque” can be read as both literal and figurative. The line that follows, “il brise déjà, sans savoir,” further complicates the reader's understanding of what transpires here because *briser* is lacking a direct object. For this reason, we are left to imagine what *je* infers. In the same way that the man is conflated with descriptions of the orange grove at the beginning of this vignette, here the series of questions beginning with *est-ce* juxtaposes natural forces – the sea, wind and rain – with manifestations of human agency.

The paradox *sa douceur, une immense brutalité* qualifies this man who comes to stand not only for all men but also for all of Algeria – a country of great beauty and horrific violence. Similarly, the man's gentleness is brutal, his impact rendered more violent because his poise and beauty are desirable. This experience both ruptures *je*'s relationship to her childhood and nascent sense of gendered self and, at the same time, gives birth to her fear: not only fear of the world, but also a fear of being able to know and trust herself because, in a way, she was drawn to him, as evidenced by his attractive description⁴⁴: “Ce n'est rien et c'est déjà tout. Cet homme fonde

⁴⁴ The idea that *je* was tempted to follow him is also affirmed by the *je* of *Mes mauvaises pensées* and the *je* of *Nos baisers sont des adieux* (222-223; 69-72).

ma peur. Cet homme est la peur. Du bruit. De la rue. Des cris” (47-48). *Je* questions what might have taken place that escaped her memory and explains that she didn’t remember this man until later in life. However, a shift to the future tense clearly marks *je*’s intention : “Je deviendrai un homme pour venger mon corps fragile” (48). She then goes on to describe the ways she modifies her appearance and gestures, performing masculinity in order to erase the trace this man left on her body – a body he read as feminine. In doing so, she erases his repetition of the phrase *tu es belle*. *Je* adopts his power to act by becoming him: slicking her hair back, pretending to shave her face, desiring shoes like her father’s – the same type of shoes the stranger wore.⁴⁵

At this juncture, we encounter a vignette that reverses the dynamics of the cliff-jumping scene (where Paola called *je* “beau”). In this vignette, a woman refers to her as a “jolie petite fille,” a description she now fiercely resists: “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. . . . Non, je ne veux pas me marier. Non, je ne laisserai pas mes cheveux longs. Non, je ne marcherai pas comme une fille. Non je ne suis pas française. Je deviens algérien” (53). It is interesting to note how the nickname her father gave her, Brio, is the agent of resistance that pronounces the name Ahmed in response to the woman’s inquiry. Much like the protection afforded by her father’s company, the support of his approval of her masculinity facilitates this act of defiance as she claims the socioculturally charged surname Ahmed. This scene also reverses the inflection of shame *je* experienced during the cliff-jumping scene⁴⁶ as *je* becomes an agent that “puts the world to shame.” The repetition of *non* in this passage

⁴⁵ Helen Vassallo has used these actions to support her argument that Bouraoui plays into binary gender roles, whereas I see the narrator’s behavior as a specific response to a traumatic event – a form of resistance to violence – that is anchored in a given narrative context.

⁴⁶ “Je plonge. Avec ma honte. Je ne remonte pas” (38).

underscores her resistance and disowning of a feminine/French identity in favor of a masculine/Algerian one.

The relative sense of self-empowerment established in this scene is subverted as *je* explores her masculinity only to bear the weight of the world as punishment. In a passage that structurally replicates the accumulation of external forces pressing up against her physical body, *je* builds a bridge between the possibility of individual agency and the reality of the world: “Mon corps est le centre de la terre. Je romps mon identité. Je change ma vie. Sentir mon ventre dur. Ma poitrine musclée. Mes épaules fortes. Se nier. Voir un autre visage dans le miroir. Se parler. Se penser virile. C’est une faute. Je me punis” (54). The reader then encounters a series of sentences each beginning with *avec* and detailing aspects of the Algerian landscape that syntactically come to contribute to *je*’s self-inflicted punishment – with the wind, with the hail, with the violent storms, with the mudslides, with the cold, with the wet bodies of cliff-dwelling monkeys. This anaphoric structure recreates the heaviness and magnitude of the forces pressing against *je*’s body, a body described as the center of the earth – a locus of power where the pressure is tremendous. Whereas this list of geographical features is introduced by the pronominal *je me punis*, which underscores *je*’s agency in her own punishment, it is followed by the simple intransitive verb structure *tomber malade*. The passage continues: “Je tombe malade. Souvent. C’est un retranchement. Dans ma chambre. Dans mon lit. Contre le regard des autres” (54). Here, the action of subtracting or removing designated by *retranchement* is antithetical to all that was accumulated by the preposition *avec*. For *je*, her world is rendered smaller; it is no more than a bed in a room, which contrasts sharply with the dynamically vibrant environment of Algeria. Moreover, the phrase *contre le regard des autres* demonstrates that her illness is in response to others, and that she, in the smallness of her space, is positioned against their gaze.

The passage continues: “Je cache mon corps. J’apprends à étouffer. À me cacher” (55). The use of the verb *étouffer*, which denotes being suffocated, choked or suppressed, both reiterates the sense of subjugation *je* endures – suggesting every fear she experiences – and, quite fittingly, connects to her worries surrounding her mother’s asthma. With both *étouffer* and *tomber*, there is a question of opposing forces: the pressure inside and outside the lungs, and the pull of gravity against the body’s resistance. The dynamics of these actions, which are revisited elsewhere in Bouraoui’s books, prompt the reader to consider the significance of linguistic and bodily agency in the novel.

The Significance of Linguistic and Bodily Agency

The passages discussed thus far demonstrate how *je* positions herself with respect to violence from the onset of *Garçon manqué* in ways that remain relevant throughout the text and will also prove instrumental in subsequent chapters of this dissertation. The lexicon and syntax of *Garçon manqué*, as well as its structural fragmentation and repetition, establish a network of relationships between substantives, prepositions and verbs that provides a unique grammar for approaching Bouraoui’s writing.⁴⁷ We have seen that *je*’s responses to violence run the gamut of forms of resistance, ranging from self-empowerment to self-effacement, and that this resistance is manifest linguistically and structurally in the narrative, as well as behaviorally in *je*’s actions. Moreover, agency is the key to this positioning. In order to map the language of violence and resistance in *Garçon manqué*, the second part of this chapter will focus on how Bouraoui’s *je* uses linguistic and bodily agency to position herself in various ways in relation to others and in response to her environment. These narrative manipulations reveal the significance of *je*’s

⁴⁷ While qualities like fragmentation and repetition are characteristic of many autofictional texts, my analysis illustrates the specific functions served by these stylistic features in Bouraoui’s writing.

relationship to her story, the historical and political import of the telling of this story, and the ways in which the reader participates in this transformational process.

In recent years, humanists have begun to examine the significance of narrative in the formation of individual and group identities. In her ground-breaking book, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson demonstrates that identities are narratively constructed by the interplay of first-person and third-person perspectives on the acts, experiences, characteristics, roles, relationships and values that give meaning to our lives (71). Advocating the counterstory as a means to resist and replace dominant, oppressive narratives, Nelson argues that – despite the role others play in limiting the identities open to us – the individual ultimately does have the freedom to begin to shape her life through narrative acts of insubordination and self-definition. Nelson frames the impact of such counterstories in terms of renewed moral agency, directly linking empowered individual or group identities to narratives that enable that agency. The impact of counterstories that work against dominant paradigms is more easily attenuated, however, when the subjects the counterstory seeks to empower are sociopolitically marginalized. Undoubtedly, like the stories *je* recounts in *Garçon manqué*, these are the very narratives that need to be told the most. Bouraoui's work clearly demonstrates the interplay of dominant, homogeneous cultural narratives and the subversive counternarratives that disrupt, displace and recast how we take meaning from these stories.

The importance of narrative – and, by extension, of language – in shaping who we are and how we relate to the world has been acknowledged in the field of mental health and has grown in popularity since Michael White and David Epston introduced the narrative therapy approach some twenty years ago. Unlike other theoretical orientations that privilege psychoanalytic frameworks or cognitive-behavioral models, narrative therapy holds that our

identities are shaped by our narratives, by how our life stories are told and by how they relate to dominant, oppressive narratives – such as heterosexism, Eurocentricity, patriarchy and capitalism. Narrative therapy uses deconstruction to conceptualize non-essentialized notions of identity, so that individuals can isolate particular attributes that are typically taken for granted as essential, externalize these attributes and subsequently reconfigure how they understand them in language – and in relationship to dominant paradigms. This process is both linguistic and ontological, and it offers us the chance to remap the narratives of our lives in productive ways.⁴⁸

In this view, how we relate to ourselves, to each other, and to our lived experiences depends on the language and narrative structures we employ. We have already seen how *Garçon manqué* exemplifies Stora's notion of a *guerre intériorisée* that surfaces in writing. What remains to be explored, however, are the ways in which the writing of the memory of the Algerian War effectively transforms it. As previously noted, the text has been criticized for reifying stereotypes about racial and sexual difference instead of debunking them. And although certain passages do appear to support this argument when taken out of context, such a reading fails to consider how these passages interact with each other and how, when considered together, they serve to engage, erode, complicate and refute dominant cultural narratives. At the same time as the text bears witness to acute and recurring traumas, it reworks these traumas by anchoring them in narratives that make them visible, and it creates opportunities to relate to them differently.

Je's narration of the traces of the 1962 OAS⁴⁹ massacre of Algerian women at *la Résidence* provides a striking example of the impact of historical trauma and its disruption of

⁴⁸ See Michael White and David Epston's *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*.

⁴⁹ The Organisation de l'armée secrète (OAS) was a French paramilitary group that attempted to prevent Algeria's independence.

narrative continuity. Referencing her housing complex as “le lieu des crimes,” she recounts the discovery of bloody knives and champagne glasses wrapped in newspapers from 1962 and couches this narration in a series of reflections on her own body and shifting identities: “Je me sépare de la Résidence, un corps, de cet appartement qui tremble, une peau déchirée. . . . Je passe de Yasmina à Nina. De Nina à Ahmed. D’Ahmed à Brio. C’est un assassinat. C’est un infanticide. C’est un suicide. Je ne sais pas qui je suis” (62). In this passage, the memory of the murder of the Algerian women becomes entangled with *je*’s figurative death, whose agent is ambiguous. Her home is haunted by the ghosts of these women, contaminated by the madness of vengeful men: “Se laver dans leur sang. Être dans leur fièvre. Vivre avec l’image de ces femmes égorgées. Avec leurs cris. Avec ces gestes. En pleurer. La nuit. Prendre la violence malgré moi et devenir violente” (63). In the same way that *je* calls into question her responsibility in not knowing who she is (*c’est un suicide*), she also absorbs and internalizes the violence of this place, only to find refuge at Amine’s. His mother wants to separate them, put them in different classes, for fear her son will become “homosexuel . . . à force de traîner avec . . . cette fausse fille” (63). But *je* turns these worries on their head, stating: “C’est moi qu’il faut sauver. Me faire parler de force. . . . Seul le langage sauve. . . . Mon silence construit mon avenir. Ne jamais être à sa place. À côté de soi. . . . C’est moi que ta mère doit sauver” (65). Here, Bouraoui’s *je* establishes a link between language and survival and, similarly, between silence, disembodiment and displacement.⁵⁰

These tensions become more pronounced when *je*’s father travels on business. She writes: “Les hommes de l’OAS reviennent à chaque départ de mon père. Trois femmes seules

⁵⁰ This attestation echoes Julia Kristeva’s reflections in *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*. Kristeva writes: “N’appartenir à aucun lieu, aucun temps, aucun amour. L’origine perdue, l’enracinement impossible, la mémoire plongeante, le présent en suspens . . .” (17-18).

dans l'appartement. . . . Ma force ne suffit pas" (66). During his absences, the driver Riyadh looks after the family – *je*, her mother and her sister – and protects against the ghosts of the men from the OAS. *Je* describes how they return through the chronic asthma of her mother's body because the sense of solitude and fear they evoke is the same (68). When *je*'s mother has a nightmare that her daughter is tied to train tracks with a train silently approaching, *je* makes the train analogous to life, stating: "Ma mère ne peut rien pour moi. Elle n'arrêtera pas le train. Elle n'arrêtera pas la vie, sa lente et sûre progression. Je suis écrasée. Écrasée par l'Algérie. Écrasée par la France. Écrasée par ma sensibilité. Écrasée par tous mes prénoms. Écrasée par la peur. C'est Riyadh qui ferme sa chambre d'hôpital" (69). The repetition of *écrasée* in this passage emphasizes the weight of everything that is crushing her.⁵¹ Moreover, the omission of the predicate *je suis* syntactically diminishes *je*'s presence at the same time as that which overwhelms her is foregrounded. *Je* quite literally disappears while her fear, sensitivity, names and conflicting family histories join forces against her in the moment of her mother's hospitalization.

Je's world grows progressively smaller and more restrictive (as reinforced by the emphatic use of verbs like *écraser*) at the same time as she grows progressively more restless. When Riyadh takes her to run on the beach, the narration demonstrates the paradox of *je*'s situation. She longs for mobility at the same time as she feels increasingly constrained: "On va à la plage en plein hiver. Il me laisse courir comme une folle. Sur le sable mouillé. Près des vagues, immenses, des murs qui s'effondrent. Je cours seule. Avec ma force. Avec un monstre que je nourris" (68-69). The analogy between the waves and walls is a striking one. Only the waves come undone whereas the walls of the city and *la Résidence* do not. It is also interesting to note the semantic contradiction in that *avec* directly follows *seule*. At the same time as she is

⁵¹ This anaphoric structure parallels the passage in which the repetition of *avec* linguistically recreates the weight pressing against *je*'s body.

alone, she is with this force – this violence that she absorbs. She is running “with the monster she feeds.” This passage echoes *je*’s desire to be a rat able to traverse the city the way men do.

Shortly after, *je* recounts that she no longer accesses the park at her home because of the man who attempted to kidnap her, explaining that it is “son lieu, désormais” (80). Similarly, stating that Algeria has become her *grande inquiétude*, she narrates – in the present tense – the events of the day she recognizes this change took place (80). Her mother is driving when their car is ambushed by a group of children who shower it with stones and spit. They drop their pants to expose their genitals – “Leur petit sexe. Leur petite arme” – and strike *je*’s mother (80-81). In relating this story, *je* returns to the same paradox used to describe the kidnapping attempt: “Ce n’est rien, des coups d’enfant. . . . Mais c’est déjà tout. Cette main levée. Cet attentat. Cette agression de l’enfant sur la mère. De l’Algérien sur la Française” (81). This act is nothing because the aggressors are merely children whose blows carry little force. But it is also everything because its meaning is tethered to every aggression, every violence perpetuated in the context of Franco-Algerian relations and, moreover, of gendered relations. For this reason, the children’s actions are even more striking; they are a backlash, a danger, a warning, or an imminent threat that is growing and will grow with them.

At this point in the narrative, the tension is exacerbated. The reader is progressively more aware of the everyday dangers of *je*’s life and, at the same time, the manner in which these dangers are revealed serves to reinscribe and magnify their intensity. Further demonstrating the links between trauma and ruptures in narrative continuity, a series of traumatic vignettes punctuates the end of this section of the book. Many of them appear as relatively brief fragments marked by asterisks, a structural device that captures them like snapshots, mimicking the intrusiveness of the recollection of traumatic memories – one memory triggering the next –

despite their seeming randomness. These six pages contain nearly twenty vignettes that depict threatening phone calls, a break-in, a sexual assault in a movie theater, an earthquake, a man chasing children with an axe in the city center and the repeated words of *je*'s mother: "Ça finira dans un bain de sang" (83). Here, the intensification of violence in the text is interwoven with a prefiguration of *je*'s departure for France. Using the second person and the masculine to address Amine, *je* warns him of what he will experience in France: "En France tu entendras bicot, melon, ratonnade . . . Et ils diront: « mais ce n'est pas toi ». Ce sera une douleur" (41). Interestingly, nearly the same expression will be directed at *je* in the *Rennes* section of the book to excuse the racist⁵² slurs she overhears from strangers in France: "Ce n'est pas de toi dont il s'agit" (126). This parallelism complicates the distinction between Nina and Amine in two ways. First, it emphasizes the impact of a shared heritage that renders them other both in France and in Algeria. Second, it shines light on the text's frequent conflation of *tu* and *je*. This subversion of a distinction in personal pronouns – of self and other – aligns with *je*'s problematization of the categories of colonizer and colonized that Nina and Amine⁵³ embody. Consider for instance a passage in which *je* tells Amine of his future in France:

Mon visage est ton visage. Ma tristesse est ta tristesse. . . . Ta blessure sera ma blessure. . . . Tu me chercheras à Paris dans d'autres visages, sous d'autres mains, dans d'autres voix et tu ne me trouveras pas. . . . Je serai dans ton miroir. Je serai dans ton image. Je serai dans ta tête. . . . Cette terre [l'Algérie] nous construit. Tu

⁵² Although the distinction between *je*'s maternal and paternal families is their ethnicity (and not technically their race), because "racism" is widely used to describe prejudice based on ethnic and cultural difference, the term remains relevant here. On this note, racism in contemporary France is largely directed at people who are read as being of Arab descent. As this chapter shows, beyond differences related to culture and nation, Bouraoui's *je* frequently observes how her skin color impacts her interactions in the world, as well as what she witnesses of other people's experiences.

⁵³ It is worth noting the phonetic similarity between Amine and Yasmina (the narrator Nina's given name) in that the series of phonemes [m], [i], [n], [a] at the end of Yasmina becomes [a], [m], [i], [n], a reorganization consistent with French *verlan*, often used to counter normative culture.

ne seras plus rien sans elle. Sans moi. Sans nous. Tu ne sais pas encore, Amine, que sa perte est insupportable. Que l'effroi viendra de là. Que le déséquilibre viendra des massacres. (75-77)

This narration clearly intertwines *je* and *tu*, even renders them consubstantial, at the same time as a slippage develops that moves from *je* and Amine's shared experience of difference to fears we will come to know as *je*'s (both in the second half of the book and, more pronouncedly, in *Mes mauvaises pensées*), although here they are attributed to Amine. The idea that *tu* becomes self-reflective is further solidified in the pages that follow as the years Bouraoui herself lived in Algiers (1967 to 1981) are referenced as the years of knowing Algeria that *tu* will miss. Even more strikingly, she goes on to say that *tu* will want to write "ton livre vivant," an important concept in *Mes mauvaises pensées* (79). Another significant connection with *Mes mauvaises pensées* is the reference to *tu* finding *ton amie* who will calm, protect and empower *tu* in ways consistent with *je*'s experience of *l'Amie* in *Mes mauvaises pensées*.⁵⁴ The final pages of this section of the book further reinforce the intersubjectivity of *je* (Nina) and *tu* (Amine/Nina) as *je* explains her reasons for leaving Algeria: the suffocating heat and her nightmare about the massacres (violence we understand will haunt her in the way she describes their effect on Amine in the passage discussed earlier). At this point, on a mimetic level, *je* and her sister leave Algeria, these "terrains de violence," for a summer with their maternal grandparents in Brittany (92).

For *je*, their summer in France is her mother's apology to her grandparents. She writes: "S'excuser, voilà la raison de ce départ. De ces grandes vacances forcées. Excuser ma mère. Tu n'épouseras pas un Algérien. Excuser par mon corps, si doux, si tendre, cette séduction. Cette histoire entre la Française et l'étudiant algérien. Excuser 1962. Excuser l'Algérie libre. Mon corps contre les hommes de l'OAS" (96). This passage begins as a request that their

⁵⁴ "Tu trouveras ton amie. Elle s'appellera Anne F" (79).

grandchildren's presence be accepted as an apology for their daughter's marriage to an Algerian man. But it hyperbolically escalates to encompass the demand that *je*'s body atone for the history of conflict between France and Algeria. Moreover, its direct reference to "les hommes de l'OAS" cues the reader to recall the discovery of the bloody knives and champagne glasses at *la Résidence*. This sense of corporeal responsibility echoes back to the book's opening scene in which *je* and Amine's experience of Chenoua beach is interrupted by the appearance of the four men whose failure to acknowledge the youths' presence leads to her attestation that as children of French mothers and Algerian fathers, they do not exist. Yet despite the invalidation of their existence, it remains the burden of their bodies to bridge this chasm, to unite that which has been divided – including their families and their nations of origin.⁵⁵ The quasi-oxymoronic phrase *vacances forcées* highlights the tension between liberty and obligation that is central to *je*'s experience. Not only is she uprooted⁵⁶ from Algeria, but she is also forced to "[é]touffer Ahmed et Brio" because her grandmother likes "les vraies filles" (96). Whereas *je* is allowed to dress comfortably in Algeria, she despises her feminine French clothes, referring to them as her "déguisement" (97). Similarly, her forced disassociation from a relatively empowered masculine self parallels her departure from Algeria, "le pays des hommes." This interconnectedness of gender and nation further compounds *je*'s sense of otherness and contributes to the complex undertones of resistance that permeate the text. So frequently denoted by the preposition *contre*, the import of resistance is often narrated without the use of verbs, such as in "mon corps contre les hommes de l'OAS." This syntactic strategy levels the playing field between subjects and objects and renders agency in more neutral and reversible ways. At the same time, the

⁵⁵ In the passage previously discussed, *je* writes: "Seuls nos corps rassemblent les terres opposées" (10).

⁵⁶ The narrator of *Mes mauvaises pensées* refers to herself as a "déracinée" (19).

preposition *contre* connotes a sense of combat and opposition that reminds the reader of the violence of war.⁵⁷

Je goes on to explain that she and her sister will come to hate not France, but rather the idea of “une certaine France” upheld by families unwilling to embrace difference who propagate convictions like “[l]es Arabes dehors” (98-99). She explains that in the 1970s, the French were not accustomed to Algerians, interracial marriage or immigration, but thought only of war, deserts and Algerian nationalists. *Je* reappropriates some of these common stereotypes about Algeria, namely the heat and the violence, in her retracing of the young girls’ voyage from Algiers to Brittany: “Quitter Alger. Le regard des hommes, l’incendie, le ciel, les orages de chaleur. Fuir la violence de cette terre. L’emporter avec moi. L’exporter en France. En Bretagne. À Rennes. À Saint-Malo. Je vais à la guerre. Je prends le foulard de ma mère. . . . Mon arme” (101). This passage both reverses the direction of *je*’s original migration after her birth in Rennes and, analogously, redirects post-colonial violence. This violence, which largely played out in Algeria, is now exported to France with *je*, who carries her mother’s scarf like a weapon.⁵⁸

Transnational Trauma and the Migration of Violence

Whereas the first half of the book, entitled *Alger*, focuses on *je*’s experiences in and around the Algerian metropolis, the second section, *Rennes*, takes place in the vicinity of the capital of Brittany. *Je* describes France as “ce pays calme et riche” and her depictions of Brittany contrast starkly with the violence she left behind in Algeria (106). And yet she is shadowed by –

⁵⁷ The significance of this interpretation of *contre* extends to its use in other passages discussed here, such as the kidnapping attempt and *je*’s resistance to being gendered by others.

⁵⁸ “Parce que la guerre d’Algérie ne s’est jamais arrêtée. Elle s’est transformée. Elle s’est déplacée. Et elle continue” (105). It is interesting to note how the use of *foulard* in this context also serves to locate *je*’s existence in France amid anti-Islamist discourses so frequently characterized by debates in which the *voile* becomes a metonymy for Islam’s menace to French nationalism.

and, moreover, comes to embody – a traumatic past that contaminates her thoughts and the book’s narration. Consider, for example, the scene where their French grandfather meets *je* and her sister, Jami, at the train station. The depiction of him waiting for and greeting his granddaughters is interwoven with reflections on cultural norms and excessive security measures taken against Algerian travelers in France. This account of the girls’ arrival in Rennes is also interrupted by descriptions of the beaches of Brittany, which are an antithesis to the text’s opening vignette in which *je* is at Chenoua beach with Amine. Running freely alongside the sea in Algeria, *je* and Amine were described as “seuls et étrangers” in a warm and vibrant environment underscored by expressions like “les vagues chargées d’écume, des explosions blanches” and “la lumière d’hiver encore chaude” (9). In Brittany, however, the landscape is cold and sterile. Even the sun, oxymoronically, is cold and aligns with the stark whiteness of the people: “Tous ces enfants blancs qui courent vers le soleil froid” (106). Similarly, the waves, which in Algeria were so full of movement and energy, in Brittany are simply “glacées” (106). *Je* had been taken by the sea in Algeria, stating: “[La mer] m’obsède. Elle est avant le rêve de la France. Elle est avant le voyage. Elle est avant la peur” (10). Now, upon returning to the place of her birth, she is struck by fear. She looks at children on the beach – a place that had been empowering for her – and remarks: “Tous ces petits corps déjà morts. Ces enfants blancs. Leur petit torse. Leurs petites côtes. Leurs petits genoux découverts. . . . Ils sont trop fins. Ils sont trop blancs. Accrochés à leurs mères. Assistés. Sécurisés. Dans ce pays calme et riche. Dans cette profusion” (106-107). For *je*, the abundance and comfort afforded these sheltered white French youth is a sort of premature death. In this passage, the usage of *petit* evokes a sense of frailty that belies the notion of France’s abundance. And despite *je*’s force and resiliency – “Moi je reste à l’affût” – the time she will pass in this space, participating in this “petite vie bien organisée,” will

mark a death for her as well (107). The repetition of the preposition *contre* in the following passage underscores the resistance and conflict *je* endures and embodies: “Mes larmes aux yeux contre l’Algérie française. Contre la France aux Français. Contre cette Bretagne évidente qui m’envahit et m’efface” (107). The qualifier *française* demonstrates that France has permanently marked Algeria. *Je* resists French Algeria as well as a France for French people, as embodied by the people she observes in Brittany. Her positioning as the direct object of the verbs *envahir* and *effacer* plays on concepts closely linked to colonialism, invasion and the subsequent impact on cultural norms.

Je later returns to descriptions of St. Malo’s *plage du Pont* that demonstrate a slippage between her lived experience and catastrophizing thoughts related to her trauma history. She begins by locating the beach geographically and noting that unlike the segregated beaches, bars and restaurants of colonialism, *la plage du Pont* is open to everyone, “[m]ême aux Arabes” (157). The emphasis on the cold and white of Brittany’s beaches, as discussed earlier, is also reiterated here: “Tous ces baigneurs. Toutes ces peaux blanches et glacées. Toute cette agitation. . . . Courir vite pour ne pas prendre froid” (157). The focus then shifts to a survey of first aid supplies available in case of an emergency: “En cas d’accident. Se noyer. Tomber des rochers. La plage du Pont est une plage familiale. Tranquille et familiale” (157). The actions of drowning and falling are depersonalized by their designation in the infinitive. Written as stand-alone sentences, their sense of grave finality is emphasized with each period. Even as the reader is reminded that this is a calm and familial beach, the verb *se noyer* conjures the memory of the young Algerian who drowned despite *je*’s father’s best efforts to save him. The death of this young man who could have been anyone is forever enmeshed with the voice of the Frenchwoman who did not believe he was worth trying to save given that Algeria was already so

full of “ces corps bruns et serrés” (16). The emphasis on skin color, both in *je*’s descriptions and in the words of the Frenchwoman, highlights the way that ethnic difference connects to memories of conflict. As in the previous passage where the children on the beach were described as “déjà morts,” *je*’s prose conflates leisure with death as descriptions of sunbathers are compared to bodies killed in a massacre. For *je*, their placement and immobility resemble corpses “figés dans leur dernier geste,” like the Algerians slain in the *village de B* in a bloodbath that happened so quickly that there was no time for those killed to register the reality of the situation:

Comme tous ces corps découverts après le massacre du village de B. Des corps d’enfants. Coupés en deux. Des corps de femmes tailladés sur la longueur. Comme une fermeture Éclair. Des corps d’hommes sans tête. Et des têtes sans corps. Avec des yeux encore ouverts. . . . Qui n’a rien vu. . . . C’était déjà trop tard. Pour voir et pour comprendre. C’était trop vite. Trop fort. Ce n’était déjà plus la vie. Et ce n’était même pas la mort. (158)

By superimposing this massacre on an ordinary beach scene, Bouraoui’s *je* subverts the reader’s previously held associations with this milieu and enmeshes them with the horrors of violence.⁵⁹

The pages that recount *je*’s initial experiences at her grandparents’ house are full of warmth and life – the tenderness of their tiny dog and aromas of the garden – that come to eclipse her memories of Algeria: “Je me sens très loin de l’Algérie soudain. J’ai l’impression de l’oublier. Je profite de ce dépaysement. Je me sens libre. . . . Ma capacité d’adaptation est une fuite de la réalité. Je suis ici sans y être vraiment. La tortue est sur le dos” (113). The term *dépaysement* has multiple meanings that highlight *je*’s internal conflict. In one way, we

⁵⁹ Olivier Clarinval has suggested that “these images not only reinforce the association of France with death but also emphasize the radical disconnect of the French population from the horrors lived by people whom they fought and continue to harm through their insults and mistreatments” (150).

understand that she is taking advantage of the change of scenery Brittany provides and that she feels liberated from Algeria. Given all the restrictions upon her freedom in Algiers, such as the fact that the streets were off-limits to her, it is plain to see that the relative safety of Rennes would be a welcome respite. *Dépaysement*, however, also connotes a sense of disorientation and exile. When read this way, the idea that she could benefit from estrangement becomes as paradoxical and contradictory as her identity. With this in mind, the turtle that *je* finds overturned on its back parallels her own experience as newly arrived in France.⁶⁰

In her grandparents' garden, *je* retraces her mother's steps and imagines how she decided to tell her parents about the Algerian student she wanted to marry. In a single paragraph, she bridges this story with the medical exam her grandparents have scheduled for her the following day, demonstrating how conflict is both resolved and forever embodied in her flesh: "En pleine guerre. Embrasser l'ennemi. Le désirer. Faire la paix avant les autres. Par le corps. Se mélanger. Faire des enfants. Je la sens, cette peur. Elle est encore là, dans le jardin, sous mes pieds, dans mon corps brûlant de soleil. Demain j'irai chez le médecin pour vérifier ma vie algérienne" (114). The narration of her experience at the doctor's office that follows demonstrates how, in being examined for irregularities and deficiencies, *je*'s body becomes a site to be colonized that replaces Algeria, the geographical body she left behind: "Voir si tout va bien. Après ce pays, cette terre, cette Afrique du Nord. S'approprier nos corps. Les fouiller. La médecine française sur nous. Cette pénétration" (114). The verb *s'approprier* strongly suggests a militaristic occupation, like that of French Algeria, while the archeological connotation of the verb *fouiller* further develops the relationship between geographical and corporeal bodies so significant in Bouraoui's work. In addition, the author's usage of the substantive *pénétration* enmeshes colonization with

⁶⁰ *Je* will later go on to describe her "faculté d'adaptation" as "une multitude de petites trahisons" and her "parfaite négation" (165-166; 175).

notions of sexual dominance. In the same way that France's colonial "mission civilisatrice" was largely experienced as violent and oppressive, here, *je* understands French medicine neither as a comfort nor as a reassurance. On the contrary, *je* endures it as a violation of her body.

At the same time as her body is dominated by French medicine, *je* also experiences direct and indirect verbal assaults on her identity that undermine the relative sense of safety of her life in France. Specifically, the threat of physical violence that permeated her childhood in Algeria is largely replaced by verbal aggression in France, further complicating the tension between ethnicity and language established in the book's opening pages. The narrative intertwines the echoes of students who taunted *je*'s parents – notably with the phrase "Radidja la mouquère" – and *je*'s own experiences with racist language (131; 151 and 153). There are the slurs pronounced by French families *je* encounters who insist they are not referring to her and blame the wine for their indiscretion (126). There are her acquaintances who prefer to call her Nina rather than Yasmina so they won't have to explain their relationship because the name "Nina" could be read as Spanish or Italian (127). There is the woman at a bus stop who looked directly at *je*'s father and said "Il y a trop d'Arabes en France. Beaucoup trop. Et en plus ils prennent nos bus," a double affront in that she insults him in his presence without acknowledging him directly in her words (134). In their force and intention, for *je*, these words take on a physical dimension and become the primary weapon in a sort of guerilla warfare in this "France aux Français" (107). *Je* explains how these assaults, not unlike the aggression of the streets of Algiers, become a part of everyday life: "Puis ça deviendra une habitude d'entendre ça. Ces mots prendront comme des petits feux de forêt. Ça sera dans toute la ville de Paris. Comme des pièges à déjouer. Comme des mines à enjamber. Dans la rue" (134-135). The analogies established in this passage recast

language as both militaristic and of bodily consequence in this urban landscape, as the strongly corporeal connotation of the verbs *déjouer* and *enjamber* indicates.

Je's responses to these insults further develop a link between voice and embodiment. The wound inflicted by this woman's words at the bus stop manifests in *je*'s silence: "Moi je serai terriblement blessée par les mots de cette femme. Blessée jusqu'au silence" (134). When she remains silent in the face of these insults, she explains that it is not because she is weak: "Mon silence confirme juste l'expression: *être terrassé par la douleur*" (135, Bouraoui's emphasis). The multiple connotations of *terrassé* make it the *mot juste* here: *Je* is knocked down (as in a physical fight), struck down (as though by an illness) and prostrated by her emotion – "ce désir si violent" (135). At the same time, the root *terre* reminds the reader of the geographical bodies – France and Algeria – in opposition and coexistence at the heart of this conflict. The pain of this injustice renders her incapable of speaking at the time, a silencing she describes in corporeal terms: "Encore cette incapacité à répondre. Ma peau qui rougit. Les battements de mon cœur. Mon ventre serré. Comme étourdie après un coup de poing" (135). The written narrative turns this oppression on its head by redirecting silence into a physically tangible form of language: writing. In a key passage, *je*'s choice of verb tenses draws the reader in and obliges her to participate in this process: "Et mon silence toujours. Parce que ma voix n'est rien. Elle s'échappe comme du vent. Bien sûr qu'il ne fallait pas répondre. Je trouverai mieux. Je l'écrirai. C'est mieux, ça, la haine de l'autre écrite et révélée dans un livre. J'écris. Et quelqu'un se reconnaîtra. Se trouvera minable. Restera sans voix. Se noiera dans le silence. Terrassé par la douleur" (136). Here, the shift from the present to the imperfect to the future highlights the interplay between, on the one hand, *je* as the agent of this utterance and, on the other hand, her various identifications on a mimetic level in the narrative. The metatextual references to the writing process create a

mise en abyme with the sentence “J’écris” as a focal point while the past participles *écrite* and *révélée* qualify the very stories we just read. In this way, there is a conflation between *je* and the young Nina who vows to write her vengeance. The positioning of “J’écris” directly before the series of verbs in the future tense sets into motion a self-reflective process in which the reader is obliged to share responsibility and examine her position. Moreover, the use of the verb *noyer* creates an analogy that connects silence to the physical experience of drowning and near-drowning so prevalent in the narrative. Lastly, *je*’s choice to repeat the qualifier *terrassé* marks a reversal as *je* reclaims agency through writing, silencing those who had enforced her marginalization.

At the same time as *je* struggles with having a sense of place throughout the narrative, which will also be the case for the *je* of *Mes mauvaises pensées*, she is always acutely aware of the significance of place and the ways in which spaces hold layers of memories, histories and the traces of people who have passed through them. This is reflected on a narrative level. For example, the descriptions of her grandparents’ house link the German occupation of France to the French occupation of Algeria as *je* questions: “Qui aurait pensé? . . . Après la Libération. Quand ils ont retrouvé leur maison confisquée par l’armée allemande. Qui aurait pu penser à ce tableau-là? Deux petites métisses le nez dans le chocolat Poulain. Les filles de Rachid” (129). For *je*, “le petit salon bleu” where her father asked for her mother’s hand in marriage is of the same blue as the Algerian sky, which is less blue than the sky in Rennes. This description reminds us of the sadness of this blue in Algeria, the painful beauty that echoes all too well that of her parents’ relationship – the ways they were ridiculed, invalidated and attacked. It also evokes a natural element that conjures up the presence of Algeria in its resemblance and in its difference. In this reflection, the act of the girls eating chocolate in their grandparents’ house

parallels the juxtaposition of the memory of terrorist attacks with *je*'s grandmother's tenderness as she bathes her grandchild: "La nuit des massacres. De l'amour dans les mains de ma grand-mère qui me lave. De l'amour sur tout mon corps. . . . De l'amour ou de la fierté? De l'amour ou du pardon? De l'amour ou une dévoration? De l'amour, certainement, dira ma mère" (128-129). For *je*, despite being aware of the love in her grandmother's gestures, or the love in her voice and her words, there remains the question of an apology that subtends this love, a regret that attenuates the happiness and makes *je* question her experience.

In addition to *je*'s self-reflective tendencies, her sensitivity not only to space but also to others is an additional destabilizing force in the narrative. We have already seen the ways in which the text sometimes conflates *je* and *tu*, particularly in the section that prefigures the sisters' departure for France. In the *Rennes* section of the book, amid a series of vignettes marked by asterisks – structurally similar to the traumatic events of the *Alger* section – the relationship between Amine and Nina is closely examined. The substance of most of the vignettes concerns the ways the French respond to *je*, things they say to her and questions they ask. The parallel between this section and its Algerian counterpart aligns the largely physical violence of Algiers with violence perpetuated on a linguistic level in France, like the comparison between *mines* and *mots* discussed previously. At the same time, this destabilization in narration – couched in a play between the first and second person – also underscores the reader's participation in making sense of *je*.

In *Garçon manqué*, the nuanced attention to language, agency and positioning presents the reader with a unique grammar that is key to unlocking networks of meaning in the text. As the analyses in this chapter have demonstrated, careful consideration of linguistic subjects and objects, active and passive verbs, anaphoric repetition, and structural and thematic parallelisms

and antitheses reveals the significance of violence and resistance on both mimetic and diegetic levels. These narrative manipulations disrupt commonly held assumptions about personhood – reshaping our understanding of the relationship between subjects and their contexts – in the same way as Bouraoui's *je* troubles normative paradigms related to gender and cultural belonging. The following chapters build on the grammatical concepts identified in this analysis and investigate narrative and linguistic strategies and their relationship to performativity and presence in two of Bouraoui's more recent works, *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Nos baisers sont des adieux*.

CHAPTER 2

“Écriture qui saigne”: Interconnectedness, Empathy and the Transformation of Trauma in

Mes mauvaises pensées

This chapter draws on the approach developed in my analysis of *Garçon manqué* and extends it to Nina Bouraoui’s *Mes mauvaises pensées*. Published in 2005, five years after *Garçon manqué*, *Mes mauvaises pensées* reads as a stream-of-consciousness, first-person narrative addressed to *je*’s psychotherapist in which *je* reflects on her relationships – notably with her lovers and her mother – and delineates the disturbing thoughts that torment her. These “mauvaises pensées” range from the general to the specific, from the personal to the interpersonal – the fear of jumping from a window, no longer mastering her language, unintentionally harming a child, or watching someone’s skin melt from their bones. At the same time as *Mes mauvaises pensées* shares many themes and narrative threads with *Garçon manqué*, it also enacts a remediation of conflicts, dilemmas and traumas presented in the earlier book. Although this might seem paradoxical given the graphic and often troubling nature of *je*’s thoughts in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the following analysis will show that *Mes mauvaises pensées* presents a kind of salvation not only for *je*, but also for her loved ones and her world.

This transformation is made possible through processes that differentiate *Mes mauvaises pensées* from *Garçon manqué* in three important ways: First, whereas *Garçon manqué* creates a sense of solitude and diffidence as evidenced by *je*’s identity struggles, feelings of isolation, and recurring disidentification⁶¹ with people and spaces, in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the sensitivity and perceptiveness of an ever-evolving *je* attest to her pronounced interconnectedness with

⁶¹ In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and The Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz has used the term “disidentification” to delineate the process through which people marginalized by mainstream culture negotiate racial and gender difference by participating in queer world-making.

others. Second, in contrast to the *je* of *Garçon manqué*, who exemplifies trauma in a relatively unemotional, impersonal, and often metalinguistic way, the *je* of *Mes mauvaises pensées* personalizes all trauma she encounters. For this reason, this overwhelmingly empathic *je* conveys other people's stories with the same intimacy and attention to nuance with which she shares her own. She gives voice to experiences both painful and pleasurable, and thereby attests to her self-proclaimed role as a *sujet-buvard* who indiscriminately takes on stories and emotions from the people who enter her life. Finally, through the book's fluid textuality, writing becomes consubstantial with life – not exclusively *je*'s life, but also the lives of all those with whom she has come into contact and whose stories have become part of hers. Let us recall that the two main sections of *Garçon manqué* – *Alger* and *Rennes* – bisect the text at the same time as they mirror *je*'s struggle as a child of mixed heritage in a frequently hostile environment. Moreover, the book's short, often abrupt sentences contribute to a sense of fragmentation and lack of cohesion not unlike *je*'s internal conflict. In an analogous but reversed fashion, syntactical features of *Mes mauvaises pensées* align with a *je* who is cohesive, expansive and limitless. Written as a single paragraph composed of long, rambling sentences, *Mes mauvaises pensées* stylistically replicates the kind of writing *je* aspires to – a kind of writing she refers to as *écriture qui saigne*.

These three points are interdependent; at the same time as a deeply permeable and impressionable *je* takes on the traumas of people who enter her life, she fleshes out and productively reworks these traumas in a narrative form. Given the coexistence of these concepts throughout the book – and, therefore, the difficulty of isolating one from the others in analyses of specific passages – this chapter is organized around a series of intersections that place *je* in relationship to aspects of her world. After an introduction to pertinent theoretical concepts and an

examination of the novel's opening lines, this chapter first considers the relationship between *je* and specific *jeux de mots* in the text and how these linguistic manipulations contribute to our understanding of her uniquely permeable and reflexive nature. The second section focuses on *je*'s travel, and both explores the significance of her movements through different spaces as a resident and/or a visitor (such as cities in Europe, Algeria and the United States), and investigates how her recollections span different time periods and reengage them in the therapeutic (narrative) moment. Next, the third section looks at the empathic nature of *je*'s relation to others, especially her mother. In the fourth section, the analysis turns to intertextual connections between the *je* of *Mes mauvaises pensées* and the *je* of *Garçon manqué* and the ways in which *je*'s profound interconnectedness with her world serves to repair tensions and traumas presented in both books. And, lastly, the final section of this chapter focuses on the relationship between *je*'s concept of *écriture qui saigne* and the transformation of trauma the text provides.

Trauma and Testimony, Existentialism and Ethics of Care

In her ground-breaking work on trauma, *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich argues that the field of trauma studies has historically reinforced a division between the public and the private that ignores the experiences of marginalized people. Deviating from mainstream trends in psychology and literary studies, for Cvetkovich, the “investigation of trauma . . . becomes an inquiry into how affective experience that falls outside of institutionalized or stable forms of identity or politics can form the basis for public culture” (17). Contrary to clinical perspectives on trauma, Cvetkovich treats trauma as “a social and cultural discourse that emerges in response to the demands of grappling with the psychic consequences of historical events” (18). In Cvetkovich's view, public approaches to trauma – like performance, activism, literature and art –

are able to work through trauma at the same time as they create social change. Cvetkovich takes into consideration the contributions of theorists and psychologists including Caruth, Seltzer, Felman, Lamb and Herman, while positing trauma as “a collective experience that generates collective responses” (19). Similarly, Felman and Dobb’s work in *Testimony* has shown that the narration of trauma is an interactive experience between the listener and the speaker. Laub writes: “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (57). In this way, as Cvetkovich has noted, testimony is a “performative rather than constative” event (28).

As a work of literature, *Mes mauvaises pensées* engages this take on trauma and testimony in two ways. First, to borrow Cvetkovich’s language, *je*’s “affective experience” (as she narrates it) demonstrates that she not only encounters trauma directly, but also takes on other people’s traumas such that her narrative attests to a “collective experience.” Second, *je* productively reworks trauma through the writing of the book, which is in this way performative. Not only does *je* come to relate differently to memories and thoughts that initially disturb her, but also the reader comes to understand trauma and recovery in a new way by participating in the unique testimony the book provides. Whereas the latter point, to some degree, applies to all literature in which the study of trauma is relevant, it is especially true of *Mes mauvaises pensées*, a text whose linguistic and narrative innovations alter the reader’s understanding of language – and of how language relates to trauma, recovery, and lived experience. This transformative process is perhaps most evident when we consider the nature of *je*’s engagement with the world, and we can better understand this engagement through the application of certain existentialist ideas.

Since World War II, the existentialist movement has dealt with how to find meaning in life in light of the atrocities of war and the alienation of the modern world. Philosophers and literary figures including Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir argued for the significance of individual choice and personal responsibility, while psychotherapist Viktor Frankl – a survivor of Nazi concentration camps – developed an existentialist, meaning-centered approach to psychoanalysis.⁶² Existentialist ideas also permeate the work of Pied-Noir writer Albert Camus who was politically active during the Algerian War, a conflict that has significantly influenced Bouraoui's writing. Whereas existentialist thought overwhelmingly emphasizes individual existence and freedom, Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue focuses instead on the "sphere of between," the space of interrelationality between two individuals. As Maurice Friedman explains: "The meaning of this dialogue is found in neither one nor the other of the partners, nor in both taken together, but in their interchange" (85).

Given the interrelational nature of *je*'s engagement with the world in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, concepts from Buber's dialogical philosophy are useful in reading *je*. In turn, our reading of Bouraoui's text expands on aspects of Buber's existentialist vision. James W. Walters has written on the connection between Buber's brand of existentialism and feminist ethics of care. According to Walters, "Buber and feminist ethics are united in their high regard for the centrality of unique, concrete, personal relations between persons" (91). Walters' study highlights the work of philosopher Nel Noddings, arguing that Noddings's "ethic of care is fundamentally Buberian" (77).⁶³ Walters summarizes Noddings: "Care happens as the one-caring

⁶² See, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, Simone de Beauvoir's *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* and Viktor Frankl's, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*.

⁶³ Although Noddings's perspective is founded on the notion of essential gender/sexual difference – a binary Bouraoui's books problematize and, moreover, an ideology that is at odds with my approach – I nevertheless include Walters' reference in light of its focus on interpersonal relation. With this in mind, I ask that we remember that

becomes ‘engrossed’ with the other, displacing the motive to seek only personal gain . . . and enters into a genuine relationship. That relationship is always between specific, concrete persons, and is reciprocal” (78). As Walters points out, Buber’s vision is not limited to caring relationships between humans, but extends to “our perception of and relation to nonhuman life: zoological entities, botanical entities, and the elements” (101). This chapter explores some of the ways *je* endeavors to care for others – especially her mother – and the role that narrative plays in this caring. In addition, as we will see, *je*’s receptivity to “nonhuman life” demonstrates an ethical and reparative way of being in the world: interrelationally.

Reading *Mes mauvaises pensées*

The opening lines of *Mes mauvaises pensées* announce *je*’s complex relationship with all those who are important to her and her story. Here *je* identifies her reason for seeing *docteur C*, the psychotherapist to whom the text is addressed and who is frequently and directly referred to as *vous*, an addressee one might also interpret as the reader of Bouraoui’s book: “Je viens vous voir parce que j’ai des mauvaises pensées. Mon âme se dévore, je suis assiégée” (11). The phrase “Je viens vous voir” positions the reader as both a witness to *je*’s therapeutic process and as her direct interlocutor, and thereby underscores the transformative potential of reading the text actively. In her article “*Sujet Buvard, Sujet Bavard*: Nina Bouraoui’s Words to Say It,” Adrienne Angelo has commented on the various connotations of *mauvaises*, highlighting the notions of shame and guilt, tragedy and danger, and falsehood and fabrication this highly charged yet commonplace adjective conjures up. Angelo argues that while *mes pensées* might be read as synonymous with *mes mémoires* or *ma vie*, titles that characterize the life-writing genre, the

feminism (and, by extension, “feminist ethics of care”) is not just for women. See Nodding’s *Caring: A Feminist Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*.

phrase “mes pensées,” when paired with the qualifier *mauvaises*, “points to self-criticism and so posits a guilty conscience that seeks disclosure” (84).

In contrast to Angelo’s interpretation, this chapter reads these thoughts as “mauvaises” insofar as they prove initially disruptive for *je*. On this note, it is not plainly their content that makes these thoughts disruptive – although, as Angelo has shown, this is sometimes true as well – but rather, these thoughts are disruptive because they so readily permeate a deeply sensitive, empathic and self-reflective *je*. Often arising in response to events that do not directly involve her – for example, upon overhearing a physical struggle or witnessing someone else’s grief – these “mauvaises pensées” come to encroach upon *je*’s day-to-day life, controlling her activities and her ability to know and trust herself. This perspective is supported by the phrase *je suis assiégée*, which posits a *je* who, in being intruded upon by these thoughts, finds herself surrounded and besieged by them. The word *assiégée* is *à propos* here, for it implies that the self has walls and, for *je*, these walls are markedly permeable; they are dynamic borders that divide *je* from others and from various iterations of herself, and they are continuously informed by her interactions. When *je* enters *docteur C*’s office – when she writes herself into the pages of the book – she carries with her all those whose stories have impacted hers. This is not only because in trying to repair her own life narrative, she endeavors to heal theirs as well⁶⁴, but also, as Richard Goodkin has described it, “because certain experiences with them overflow the moment at which they take place and continue to live on in her in an unresolved way.”⁶⁵ *Je* is “assiégée” by all of these things and, as such, she fears that her profound sensitivity threatens to devour her, as evidenced by the phrase “mon âme se dévore.” *Je* is highly permeable to other people’s

⁶⁴ *Je* announces her intentions to heal her family: “ce que je prépare c’est une pelote d’amour dont j’aimerais démêler les fils et recouvrir cette famille qui ne sait pas s’aimer ou qui ne sait pas dire ses sentiments” (200).

⁶⁵ Richard Goodkin, letter to author, 31 August 2014, TS.

traumas and this permeability makes it impossible for her to keep them at a comfortable distance. Paradoxically however, in the text, healing is made possible precisely by *je*'s *capacity* to hold space for all this trauma.

Je and Jeux de Mots

One of the ways in which *je*'s sensitivity and perceptiveness are emphasized is through specific kinds of word plays in the text. These syntactic and semantic manipulations show how *je* is perpetually evolving in response to others and the world. The following analyses focus in particular on the innovative usage of pronominal verbs and how these linguistic structures rework the force of verbs and the relationships between subjects and predicates in the novel. In this way, the *je* posited by the text is ever engaged both reciprocally and reflexively with herself, her history and her world.

The importance of pronominalization is highlighted early in the book in a passage in which *je* reflects on her transition from having previously been known as gentle and sweet, to the way she now views herself with fear:

Je veux retrouver ce temps où je disposais une chaise devant la fenêtre de la chambre, de peur de sauter pendant mon sommeil ; les phobies se sont déplacées, comme moi je me déplace, du réel à un monde qui n'existe pas, l'angoisse est une chute vertigineuse, de l'esprit, dans le corps: je tombe ou je *me* tombe, je deviens le vigile de mes mains, celles qui pourraient griffer, étrangler, dépecer ; on se réveille un jour et ce jour n'est plus le jour d'avant, on se réveille avec un visage, et sous la beauté de la peau se déploient les écailles d'un monstre, je ne sais plus qui je suis, et pire encore, je crois devenir ce que j'ai toujours été. (14-15)

The pronominal usage of the verb *déplacer* implies both motion, an intentional repositioning in space, as well as a shift in direction. Thus as *je*'s own movement is described as analogous to that of the phobias, the phobias themselves are personified. Instead of being afraid of unwillingly harming herself, she must now stand guard against the potential actions of her own hands, which have been appropriated by these *mauvaises pensées*. Metaphorically, *je*'s fear of jumping from the window is realized in the anguish she endures, describing it as a *chute vertigineuse*. The pronominalization of the verb *tomber* is of particular interest here. Being that it directly follows the structure *de l'esprit, dans le corps*, this *me* suggests a rupturing or multiplication of *je*, or rather an experience that cannot be quantified by traditional linguistic usage.⁶⁶ For why not write *je me fais tomber* if this is the intended meaning? Here, the *me* emphasizes the agency, receptivity, and intentionality of a self-reflective *je* in the face of these phobias.

When considered alongside Martin Buber's existential theory as he delineates it in *I and Thou*, the significance of *je*'s self-reflexivity points to reciprocity in relating to the world as opposed to a traditional relationship between subject (*je*) and object (others and the world). This is to say that *je*'s usage of certain pronominal verbs is one aspect of the text that aligns with the kind of reciprocal engagement Buber depicts. According to Buber, there are two modes of being in the world. In the I-It mode, a person "goes over the surface of things and experiences them" (55). Buber continues: "Those who experience do not participate in the world. For the experience is 'in them' and not between them and the world. The world does not participate in experience. It allows itself to be experienced, but it is not concerned, for it contributes nothing, and nothing

⁶⁶ There is a subtle paradox in saying that one becomes what one always was. Directly preceding this passage, the repetition of *je ne suis plus* metatextually prepares the reader for a different *je*: "Je me considère comme une personne malade et je sais que cette maladie est un arrangement avec le réel. J'ai toujours voulu fuir la vie; l'écriture et l'amour en sont les ultimes moyens. Il y a un décollement de moi, une sorte de brouillard, je ne suis plus la femme . . . je ne suis plus l'auteur . . . je ne suis plus l'amoureuse non plus, je suis prise dans une mécanique de haine" (14).

happens to it.” In contrast to the I-It mode, Buber argues that the I-You mode “establishes the world of relation” (56). To illustrate the distinction between the two modes, Buber takes the example of contemplating a tree. He shows that in his observing its form, feeling how it is alive, cataloguing it scientifically and even eternalizing it, “the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span.” However, in contemplating the tree, it is also possible to be “drawn into a relation” with the tree in which “the tree ceases to be an It.” Buber continues to exemplify the I-You mode through the example of the tree: “The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of my mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it – only differently. One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity (57-58). Buber’s notion of reciprocity as bodily confrontation, when applied to *je*’s relation to the world, demonstrates that she operates largely in the I-You mode. This is true not only of how she relates to others, but also of how she relates to versions of herself presented in her recollections.

Je reveals a deep awareness of her own self-reflexivity, which is at times both destructive and constructive. This is particularly evident in her relationship to her childhood in Algeria and the transition she was obliged to make at the age of fourteen when she and her mother moved to Paris: “il y a la disparition en moi de l’Algérie. . . . je m’efface de l’intérieur, je suis mon propre parasite . . . c’est d’une grande violence, c’est d’une grande injustice aussi. . . . c’est la violence de gens qui ne s’appartiennent plus . . . je me perds à l’intérieur de moi” (96). The analogy of being her own parasite underscores the duality of her experience while reinforcing her own sense of responsibility in this erasure of who she is. Similarly, the notion that this kind of violence is the violence of people who no longer belong to themselves reminds the reader that *je*, in being *assiégée*, runs the risk of becoming one of these people. The passage continues with the

repetition of the verb *laisser* to delineate all of the things she left behind followed by a syntactic structure that renders change synonymous with death: “je change, vite, ou plutôt je me tue, vite, j’apprends, je m’intègre, et je me désapprends” (97). Here, the repetition of *vite* creates a link between the action *changer* and the reflexive action *se tuer*, such that the potential for change and productive growth is also an annihilation of the self in the conventional sense. Furthermore, this paradox creates a parallel with *je*’s attestation that learning (*apprendre*) necessitates that she unlearn herself (*se désapprendre*). She must unlearn herself, which is to say, unlearn who she is because of Algeria. Several pages later, *je* details the content of letters she received in Paris from her former classmates in Algiers, stating: “Je n’ai jamais répondu ; sous mes livres, il y a la lettre que j’aurais dû écrire” (106). In this passage, she reiterates the tension between self-effacement and survival in similarly antithetical terms, while also addressing the difficulty of positioning her body anew in France:

Je dois devenir une autre pour m’en sortir . . . je dois me renier pour réapparaître, je dois garder le silence pour gagner le bruit de la vie . . . je dois vous oublier pour me *refaire* . . . vous me manquez tant, et quand je dis cela, je pense que moi aussi je me manque . . . je savais vivre en Algérie, ou du moins je savais où me placer et aussi comment me déplacer ; . . . mon mouvement est aussi celui de mon corps, pris par cet espace, je suis en train de *devenir* sur vos cendres, je suis en train de *devenir* sur une disparition, sur ma disparition. (106-108)

Emphasizing reciprocity in the I-You relationship in ways that resonate with *je*’s language, Buber explains that we cannot find You by seeking it, but rather You “encounters [us] by grace.” Referencing this kind of encounter as “actual life,” Buber writes: “The You encounters me. But I enter into direct relationship to it. Thus the relationship is election and

electing, passive and active at once” (62). *Je* sheds light on a life that is both passive and active, the kind of “actual life” to which she aspires:

[T]out est là, mon destin amoureux, mes rêves, madame B. n’est pas en vie, elle est dans la vie, je jure d’exister ainsi, c’est-à-dire de *m’exister*. L’Amie a ce don. C’est à cause de cela notre rencontre au jour de l’an, le couloir des yeux, le silence autour de nous, cette force d’être dans le monde et ensemble dans le monde. Cela me fait penser au mot *cosmogonie*, dont j’ai perdu le sens. Depuis mes mauvaises pensées, je perds aussi le sens du monde, ou de ma faculté à y participer, je reste en dehors, comme les malades dans leur maladie ; je suis épuisée, tous les matins je fais l’inventaire de mes phobies de la veille, tous les matins je porte ma culpabilité, c’est aussi une façon de voir, c’est comme les images en trois dimensions, je vois après la première image, je vois, après la première vérité. (38)

In this passage, *je* states that her *mauvaises pensées* are inhibiting her from participating in the world, and this feeling of remaining outside (*en dehors*) contrasts with her understanding of the vitality of *madame B.* (a family friend from *je*’s childhood) and *je*’s current partner, *l’Amie*, who are both immersed in the fullness of life. Rather than simply being “en vie,” a perspective that references an individual subject as alive based on internal biological processes, *madame B.* and *l’Amie* are “dans la vie.” This nuance in prepositions locates life beyond the borders of the individual body, figuratively pointing to subjectivity that does not exist in isolation, but rather is encompassed by, and continuously engaged with, the world around it. *Je* explains that this way of living “dans la vie” makes her think of the word *cosmogonie*, whose meaning she has forgotten (“j’ai perdu le sens”). She then tags onto the expression *perdre le sens* to note that she

is also losing the meaning of the world. Ironically then, the word denoting the branch of science dealing with the origin of the universe, *comogonie*, for *je*, becomes a reminder that her understanding of this universe – and participation in it – is eroding. In this passage, *je* feels at a distance, inventorying her phobias and viewing the world indirectly. She describes this process as her inability to participate in the world, and it aligns with Buber's I-It mode of being because: "I-It is made possible only by . . . the detachment of the I" (Buber 73). Running counter to this experience of detachment and distance, the neologism *m'exister* provides *je* with the means to write herself back into an I-You, reciprocal mode of being. With *m'exister*, *je* problematizes the relationship between subject and object by turning a strictly intransitive verb into a pronominal one, and this pronominalization has both linguistic and therapeutic repercussions.

A typical pronominal verb in French is characterized by the equivalence of its subject and object; the action of the verb is both performed and received by the same subject/object as, for example, in *se laver* or *se dire*. Although many transitive verbs easily become pronominal verbs when their direct or indirect object is replaced by a reflexive pronoun – *je lave le bébé* becomes *je me lave* and *je dis la vérité à mon ami* becomes *je me dis la vérité* – the pronominalization of an intransitive verb is not only ungrammatical but also paradoxical. For it presupposes that this verb whose action is understood to be complete in the absence of an object – and, in fact, whose signification is tethered to this absence – forms not sentences in its traditional usage, but fragments. One might now read *J'existe*, as an incomplete sentence in the same way that *je lave* or *je dis* are known to require either a reflexive pronoun and/or an (in)direct object in order to be intelligible. In the cases of *laver* and *dire*, an action carries the bulk of the verb's meaning, independently of specific subjects or objects. With *exister*, however, the action of the verb is collapsed in its subject such that the verb itself is nothing more than tautological; *j'existe*

signifies no more than a positioning of the subject *je*. This attribution of existence to a personal subject moves the activity named by the verb onto the personal pronouns and effectively privileges subjects over their (linguistic) contexts. *Je*'s innovation of *m'exister* leads us instead to reevaluate the force of the verb – quite literally, its action – and the complex relationships between subjects and objects whose interdependent significations are held together by such actions. As for *m'exister*, the intelligibility of the utterance is linked to both the subject and the object such that the verb's import asks us to conceive of linguistic agency as shared.

But is *m'exister* a properly reflexive verb? That is to say, are *je* and *me* one and the same as in other pronominal structures that mark self-reflection or self-determination like *se dire* and *se décider*? Or is *m'exister* a sort of reciprocal verb, which although not used in the plural does mark a radical differentiation of *me* from *je*, a sort of *dédoublement* of the writing subject? As in: “the action of *je* makes possible or intelligible *me*, the person I can write about or even be; I am bringing *myself* into existence, thereby eclipsing the fact of being by the act of becoming.” Or rather, is *m'exister* an altogether different syntactic structure that reappropriates and subverts preestablished grammatical concepts while advocating a new vision of agency? All questions for exploration aside, in the context of the book, *m'exister* begins to make sense. Not only does this neologism denote *je*'s process with an accuracy unmatched by any other verb, but it also provides her with a new way of engaging the world linguistically, which alters the nature of her lived experience; Bouraoui's *je* is perpetually becoming.

Je and (Time) Travel

Despite moments where she expresses feelings of detachment, the *je* of *Mes mauvaises pensées* is so strongly interconnected with others that this sense of interconnectedness often

spills over into her experience of time and space such that the distinction between unique moments and milieus is blurred. Moreover, the novel's fluid style replicates this ambiguity and often leaves the reader lacking clarity pertaining to the time and place of specific events and, on occasion, the people involved. *Je* is attentive to the ways in which her personal and cultural history informs her understanding of space and how she might therefore make sense of the interactions between subjects and objects in a given space. This concept is presented early in the book in a passage that underscores the geological similarities between Algeria and the south of France:

Avant mes mauvaises pensées, il y a cet été à Nice . . . je crois que tout commence là, dans une confusion des lieux, le sud de la France que je découvre, l'Algérie qui revient par superposition d'images : la mer, la baie, les palmiers, les jeunes garçons qui sifflent sur la Promenade, ces yeux, les yeux de mon enfance. J'ai retrouvé mon paradis – les bains chauds et profonds, l'odeur des fleurs, la lumière rose – et j'ai retrouvé mon enfer : l'idée d'une force qui étouffe. (15)

Je describes this conflation of spaces as a *superposition d'images*, and it links Algeria to Nice's Castel Plage through a series of shared characteristics. Whereas *je* is active in relationship to France, as the subject of the action *découvrir*, Algeria is the agent of the verb *revenir*.

Linguistically, this demonstrates *je*'s subordination to the force of her past. For although she is intent on exploring a new environment, her memories of Algeria encroach on this experience. Of great interest here is the paradox that what *je* discovers through her experience of this space is itself a contradiction: paradise and hell. Echoing *Garçon manqué*'s paradoxical descriptions of Algeria as a country of extreme beauty and horrific violence, this passage highlights the tension between pleasure and suffering so prominent in Bouraoui's work. Elsewhere in *Mes mauvaises*

pensées, *je* refers to this paradox as her “tristesse algérienne.” She writes: “la mort devient un petit point noir parmi les milliers de points de feu qui constituent le soleil, il n’y a plus cette notion d’arrachement, mais il y a une immense tristesse, ma tristesse algérienne vient de cette association : la beauté qui se mêle à la mort” (161). The use of the verb *étouffer* in this passage introduces *je*’s relationship to Algeria and France and, by extension, her conflicting family histories. Connoting both suffocation and fullness, this verb reminds the reader of the force of everything that comes to bear on *je* and thereby aligns with our reading of *je suis assiégée* from the opening lines of *Mes mauvaises pensées*. *Je* is bombarded (with thoughts, sensations, memories), and she is spilling over.

The problem of being *assiégée* and its relationship to space is taken up again only several pages later as *je* describes being in the *métro* on her way to see *docteur C* when she hears an accordion player performing a song that reminds her of Algiers and consequently prompts a deluge of related images: “C’est cette superposition d’images qui entre dans ma vie, c’est cette interférence, je suis rattrapée, je suis envahie, je suis dépassée . . . chaque image relaie une autre image, c’est l’image qui entre dans ma vie et ce n’est pas moi qui entre dans l’image” (18). In this passage, the repetition of *je suis* and the series of adjectives formed by the past participle act as a reprise of the phrase *je suis assiégée* in the book’s opening lines. *Rattrapée*, *envahie*, and *dépassée* all qualify the state of being of the linguistic subject *je*, while the “r” of *rattrapée* further emphasizes recurrence as *je* is seized once again by these overlapping and cascading images. And although they are snapshots of her own memories, there is the sense that they are bombarding her from the outside. These images, which are born of a different stage in *je*’s life, insert themselves into the present instance of discourse. In the first part of this chiasmic structure, *l’image*, typically the object of a verb or preposition, is affirmed as an active subject

(“c’est l’image qui entre dans ma vie”). Conversely, the personal pronoun *je* does not even appear. The disjunctive pronoun *moi* that replaces it is further marginalized by the negation of this most common and impersonal of phrases: *ce n’est pas*. This solicits an ambiguous reading. Either it simply emphasizes that the image enters her life and not the other way around, so that we understand: *je n’entre pas dans l’image*. Or it suggests that some subject does enter the image, but that this subject is not *moi*, but another. This ambiguity further conflates the various iterations of *je* as they come into being together through this moment – in their interconnectedness with each other and with the people and stories that constitute who they are. Similarly, *envahie* and *dépassée* suggest being overrun and overwhelmed, a reading that aligns with the *assiégée* of the book’s opening lines.

In a particularly striking example, *je* bridges her reflections on the therapeutic process with her childhood memories of Algiers, all in the present tense. The effect of this technique is that the events of her childhood are experienced anew in the moment they are written, in the moment they are shared with *docteur C*, and, by extension, shared with the reader:

Avec vous, je suis dans la vie, dans ma vie, dans ses replis et c’est une façon pour moi de retrouver l’écriture, de la fouiller ou de la fonder, je sais, je comprends mieux, j’écris sur le sensible, c’est une écriture vivante, je suis un auteur vivant, la disparition de l’écriture est aussi l’effacement du sentiment de vie ; l’abandon, c’est la mort, l’absence c’est la mort, parce que j’ai si peur pour ma mère, quand elle étouffe, quand elle traverse les rues d’Alger, quand elle rentre par la route moutonnaire, quand elle dit, à la campagne: « Je vais derrière le champ, les marguerites me semblent plus grandes. » Elle est là et elle n’est plus là. (42-43)

Linking the absence of writing to the idea of death – and subsequently revealing that she fears for her mother’s life, a topic addressed in the following section – *je* expresses that the therapy session is a form of “living writing.” Similarly, the threat of her mother’s disappearance is analogous to the disappearance of writing itself, such that the term *disparition* becomes a euphemism for death that links the physical body (*corps*) to the written text (*corpus*), as designated by the phrase *écriture vivante*. In this example, the menace of death, and of *je*’s abandonment, is provoked by her mother’s absence from *je*’s field of vision. The impact of this absence extends to the narrative moment through *je*’s usage of the conjunction *parce que*, which both denotes causality between her childhood experiences and her current struggles and, at the same time, bridges a temporal gap that connects the act of writing (in the present) to the act of being alive (in the present as well as in the past). This kind of stylistic parataxis enables *je* to reengage childhood memories in a way that unhinges their content from fixed associations, and thereby creates opportunities to modify the narratives to which they previously belonged. In this passage, being alive means being “dans la vie,” surrounded, engaged and participating in reciprocal experience – living in the I-You mode. According to Buber, presence requires encounter and relation, as is so often characteristic of the present moment for *je*. In contrast to this notion of presence, Buber contends that in experiencing the world as objects, one always lives in the past (63). Interestingly, Bouraoui’s *je* seems to turn Buber’s notion on its head by recollecting the past and engaging with it anew in the reciprocity of the I-You mode, as this chapter shows.

In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, a confusion between spaces, particularly France and Algeria, is achieved through *je*’s narration of what she experiences as a *superposition d’images*. This dynamic narrative strategy ruptures any fixed sense of space in the book, and thereby enables the

recreation of situations from the past, not as though they are being remembered, but as though they are being relived.⁶⁷ *Je*'s narration in the present tense further supports this strategy by establishing a diegesis in which memory and the present moment are weighted equally. This approach creates opportunities to relate to past events differently, as evidenced diegetically and syntactically in the text. In conjunction with the book's destabilization of time and space, its polyvocal nature enables the transformation of traumas that are not only individual and personal, but also cultural, historical and shared. Many of the *mauvaises pensées* that bring *je* to see *docteur C* are directly linked to acute and chronic traumas presented in *Garçon manqué* and elsewhere in Bouraoui's books. Some of these events are specific to *je*'s lived experience. Others belong to one or many of the countless voices woven into the text, which include family members, lovers, and acquaintances of *je*. Subsequent sections will take up the question of *je*'s relationship to others as well as recurring narrative threads in her oeuvre.

Je's narration calls into question the relationship between time, place and personhood in various ways. When *je* reflects specifically on the physical details of her Algerian home, their house on stilts and the surrounding natural beauty, the present tense is employed in phrases like "nous vivons," "le vent ressemble," and "il y a la mer qui semble avancer vers moi" (19). Somewhat paradoxically, however, although *je* is often overtaken by imagery from her past, she does not conceive of herself as a product of this environment: "je ne sais pas si je viens de là, je ne sais pas si je suis constituée de cela, il n'y a que des terres humaines je crois, Alger existe parce que j'y ai vécu, parce que je m'y suis laissée ; c'est moi qui fais Alger et non l'inverse. Je ne suis pas une exilée, je suis une déracinée" (19). In the first part of this passage, the terms *là* and *cela* emphasize the distance between *je* and the Algiers she has just described. She cannot

⁶⁷ Although this is relatable to the therapeutic situation, it is also worth considering how this strategy impacts both the form and content of the narrative as well as the reader's experience of it.

say with certainty if she comes from this land because all that Algiers is depends on her experience and memory of it. The locution *terres humaines* underscores the idea that place is always colored by human perspective and influence at the same time as we are impacted by that place. And yet there is a tension in the phrase *je m'y suis laissée*, which renders *je* a subject capable of transcending not only space, but also time. *Je* is articulated in this instance of discourse, while the reflexive pronoun *me* to which *je* is tethered has been left behind. Additionally, the pronominal verb *se laisser* is typically followed by an infinitive, which may be constructed as either an active verb or a passive verb. So although *je m'y suis laissée* is quite clearly intelligible as “I left myself there,” it also marks a sort of ellipsis where the reader might pick up the trace of any number of verbs. *Je m'y suis laissée aller*, for example, suggests active selflessness – which could be read as exploding the bounds of the self to encompass other subjectivities – while *je m'y suis laissé faire (par le monde)* might imply that *je* did not choose this type of self-abandonment, but rather was subjected to external forces.

Je contrasts the idea of being indistinguishable from her first home (*la Résidence* in Algiers) with her lack of familiarity, indeed, her lack of familial relationships, with her Parisian surroundings. Whereas she engages Algeria in an I-You, reciprocal mode, once in Paris, she experiences the world through the lens of I-It. *Je* writes:

[J]e suis là, dans le long couloir de l'appartement de la Résidence, seule, perdue, comme happée par l'espace, comme incluse à ce lieu qui me définit, parce qu'il y a ici une mémoire des choses, une mémoire de ma vie, il y a ce que je ne trouve pas au 118, dans l'appartement de la rue Saint-Charles . . . il y a toujours la gêne de mon corps là, en France, que je n'arrive pas à placer ou à reconnaître, je joue un jeu dans le quinzième arrondissement, je joue à devenir une autre. (137)

In Paris, *je*'s efforts to place her body are unsuccessful, and she expresses an awareness of detachment and lack of reciprocation. Moreover, despite being physically located in Paris when she speaks to *docteur C*, she articulates a sense of closeness and proximity with her Algerian home by transitioning from the adverb *là* to *ici* as she describes her experience, a transition that is not mirrored in her account of France. Rather than invoking a sense of isolation, in reflecting on Algeria, the adjectives *seule* and *perdue* suggest dissolution of the boundaries between self and surroundings. This reading is reinforced by *happée*, which marks *je*'s position as an object that is swallowed up by space. Whereas co-existence with her environment comes naturally in Algeria, *je* experiences her body as foreign to – and, therefore, separate from – her environment in France.

As *je* productively integrates all these narrative threads into the therapeutic moment, she repairs her relationship to both the present and the past by reworking the force of the stories she carries with her. This transformation is perhaps most evident when she tells *docteur C* about her trip to Provincetown. Again, through parataxis, *je* links the moment of boarding the plane to the moment of preparing herself to talk to her therapist about her love of women: “Je n’ai que de l’amour quand je prends le petit avion hall C, porte 5 de l’aéroport de Boston, je n’ai que de l’amour quand je sais, là, face à vous, que je m’apprête à vous parler des femmes, de mon rapport aux femmes, de ce lien, de cette adoration” (174). In this passage, the repetition of *je n’ai que de l’amour* establishes a parallel between the precise location of the airplane and the location of *je*'s body in the instance of discourse, which is positioned across from *docteur C*. In this sentence, the *je* of the past is moving towards women physically – given the plane’s destination of Provincetown, a place *je* refers to as “la ville des femmes” (177). And, at the same time, the *je* of *docteur C*'s office is moving towards women psychically in the substance of the therapy

session. *Je* has already noted that she feels “en paix avec les femmes” and, therefore, with *docteur C* because, she explains: “le corps qui me fait face, votre corps, est le corps d’une femme” (174).

Because *docteur C* is linked to the category of women in this passage, commentary on how *je* relates to women in Provincetown, by extension, applies to how she relates to *docteur C* as she shares this story with her. This is evidenced in the following passage, which tethers Provincetown to women to writing to love, and thereby syntactically and semantically connects places travelled throughout the narrative:

Quand je regarde autour de moi, je me rends compte que nous sommes six passagères dans le petit avion, et je suis bien, je me sens en sécurité, je me sens en sécurité avec moi vous savez, je sais mon corps près du corps des femmes, je sais ses façons de tenir ou de se retenir, il y a un lien entre les femmes, il y a un fil invisible ; je sais que j’écris par amour vous savez, je sais que j’écris dans cette forme de félicité, et quand j’écris sur Diane⁶⁸, je la serre encore dans mes bras, et quand j’écris sur l’Algérie, je pourrais crier : « Je suis de retour ! », mais de quoi suis-je partie sinon de moi-même ? Et c’est en arrivant à Provincetown que je sais d’où je viens, tout est là, tout se tient derrière le soleil rouge et dans ma voix qui dit : « Je suis, ici, chez moi » ; cette phrase signifie aussi que je suis chez moi à l’intérieur de moi, vous savez, je me laisse traverser, il ne s’agit plus de regarder, mais de vivre enfin ce que je regarde (177)

In this passage, *je*’s repetition of *vous savez* emphasizes particular utterances while reminding the reader that she is telling a story. This phrase also establishes a sort of complicity between *je* and *vous*, which suggests that *je* wants to be understood both by her therapist and by the reader.

⁶⁸ Diane is one of *je*’s former lovers, and this romance plays an important role in *La Vie heureuse* (2002).

Here, *je* feels secure (*en sécurité*) not only in general, but also, specifically with herself. She attributes this sense of security to her understanding of her body among the bodies of other women.⁶⁹ She then transitions to reflections on her writing as inextricably linked to love such that in writing about her first lover, Diane, *je* states: “je la serre encore dans mes bras.” This line demonstrates that in the act of writing about Diane, *je* holds her in her arms once again, and, through the ambiguity of the adverb *encore*, it also suggests that she is *still* holding her, as though they had never separated. In this way, *je* subtly shows how writing transports her to moments past and allows her to relate differently to these moments in the present. Similarly, in writing about Algeria, *je* feels she could declare “I am back!,” as though she had physically returned and her words could be heard and responded to. The content of this passage, which is seemingly scattered, connects people and places through the actions of *je*’s love and her writing. Finally, she describes her sense of belonging in Provincetown, stating that her existence is no longer about observing (*il ne s’agit plus de regarder*), but rather about living what she observes (*mais de vivre enfin ce que je regarde*). The phrase *je me laisse traverser*, which can be read as active and passive at once, illustrates this process – underscoring a *je* who is permeable, empowered, and reciprocally engaged in the world.

This analysis has shown that what *je* describes as a “superposition d’images” is catalyzed by her sensory experience of space – including, but not limited to, the visual (15; 18). For example, in describing Nice, she references *les bains chauds* and *l’odeur des fleurs*, which relate to the senses of touch and smell. Similarly, it is an auditory experience of violence encountered at a distance that solicits the *mauvaises pensées* that lead *je* to see *docteur C* in the first place.

⁶⁹*Je*’s descriptions of Provincetown suggest that she feels safe there specifically because the town is devoid of the threat of male violation, which is one of the defining features of her view of Algeria. The reader witnesses her sense of security and its link to the absence of violence most clearly in the space of a Provincetown “Gay Tea Dance”: “je ne suis plus happée, je suis à côté des corps qui m’attirent, que je choisis, que je vénère parce que ce sont des corps désarmés ; il n’y a aucune violence ici, moi aussi je suis sans violence” (182).

She recounts: “La nuit qui précéda mes mauvaises pensées, je me souviens d’une voix de femme qui appelait au secours, je me souviens avoir entendu des coups contre une fenêtre fermée: on frappait un corps. Il y a eu un glissement de la violence sur ma violence, ces cris ont réveillé d’autres cris, si secrets, si noyés au fond de moi” (12).⁷⁰ The impersonal quality of the description of this act of violence is juxtaposed with the strikingly personal effect it has on *je*. She hears the voice of a woman calling for help and the sounds of blows against a closed window. But what she deduces, *on frappait un corps*, could imply violence being inflicted on any body and by anyone. The subject pronoun *on* relates both to an unknown singular subject and to a universal subject that implicates the world in this violent act. Similarly, although we connect the body being struck to the voice of the woman, because *corps* is qualified by the indefinite article *un*, the ambiguity of the phrase textually links *je*’s personal experience to this act of violence she recognizes acoustically. It could be her body. It could be her hands. In this example, what *je* describes as *un glissement de la violence sur ma violence* is analogous to the *superposition d’images* that has such a profound effect on her experience of space. The impact of such superpositions⁷¹ in the text serves to destabilize any fixed sense of space and, at the same time, it dissolves boundaries between individual bodies and voices.

⁷⁰ The usage of the term *noyés* is worth highlighting here in so far as it prefigures the literal and figurative drownings that play an important role in the book, as this chapter shows.

⁷¹ Whereas in the fields of geology and archaeology, superposition denotes the manner through which sedimentary layers are deposited in a linear, chronological fashion, in contemporary quantum theory, it describes the nature and behavior of matter and forces at the sub-atomic level. In this view, superposition claims that objects are in all possible states simultaneously and that it is our efforts to measure a given object that limit it to a single possibility. For an approachable introduction to quantum theory, see Robert Lawrence Kuhn’s *Closer to Truth: Science, Meaning, and the Future*. What is particularly interesting to note is that quantum theory’s notion of superposition aligns neatly with what Buber has to say about the I-You mode of being. Buber writes: “The You also appears in space, but only in an exclusive confrontation in which everything else can only be background from which it emerges, not its boundary and measure. The You appears in time, but in that of a process that is fulfilled in itself – a process lived through not as a piece that is part of a constant and organized sequence but in a “duration” whose purely intensive dimension can be determined only by starting from the You. It appears simultaneously as acting on and as acted upon, but not as if it had been fitted into a causal chain; rather as, in its reciprocity with the I, the beginning and end of the event. This is part of the basic truth of the human world; only It can be put in order. Only

Je and (M)others

We have already seen that *je* is largely engaged in an I-You mode of being in which her relation to the world aligns with Buber's concept of "universal reciprocity" (Buber 67). This reciprocity is accounted for on a linguistic level through the text's emphasis on – and occasional coinage of – pronominal verbs that recast conventional relationships between subjects and objects. *Je* is highly sensitive and easily affected by her environment and her *mauvaises pensées* in ways that problematize our understanding of time and space, bridging the past into the narrative moment of the therapy session. She is interconnected with, and receptive to, her world and to the people who are a part of it – lovers, distant and immediate family members, strangers, acquaintances, and cultural and literary figures. Indeed, the harmony created by a convergence of voices in the text contradicts the content of the *mauvaises pensées* she painfully conveys. Instead of shrinking in the face of so much violence, grief and distress, *je* is boundless and positioned in constellations, not only with other people but also with cultural and geographical bodies – the waters where she swims, "The Logical Song," Hervé Guibert's writing, and the films of David Lynch. Far from being alienated, she is connected to all that is and ever was a part of her world. The text is a plurality of narratives woven together and thus nothing about the repeated use of the subject pronoun *je* is permanently identifiable; she is in constant flux and in conversation with others and with her environment. *Je*'s receptive, protean nature is especially evident in her uncanny ability to take on other people's traumas, which she then endeavors to repair by introducing them into her therapeutic narrative. Certainly, there are moments where *je* seems to maintain distance from others – observing them in an I-It mode from the perspective of a distinct

as things cease to be our You and become our It do they become subject to coordination. The You knows no system of coordinates" (81).

“I” – such as when the voice of *la Fille à l’héroïne*, a woman *je* briefly dated, enters the text.⁷²

Still, more often than not, *je* is overwhelmingly empathic and her empathy is most pronounced in how she relates to her mother and her mother’s trauma.

Je’s mother’s life is threatened throughout the text – both by her lifelong struggle with asphyxia, and by political upheaval and the risk of violence as evidenced by *je*’s childhood recollections of Algeria. In addition, her life is psychologically threatened – particularly by her father’s cruelty towards her. *Je* is affected by her mother’s experiences, empathically feeling her mother’s pain as though it were her own, only to endure a host of secondary emotions – notably guilt, shame and anger – that make *je*’s relation to her mother doubly difficult. For example, after her grandmother’s *attaque*, which *je* believes has left her paralyzed, *je* cannot bring herself to visit her:

[J]e prends mes réservations, chaque samedi, et je laisse ma place vide dans le TGV Rennes-Paris. Je ne peux plus prendre ce train, je ne sais plus occuper cette place, de petite-fille, depuis que je suis devenue une femme, je me sens sans lien avec cette famille, je suis sans ressemblance, sans passé, le seul lien que j’ai serait le lien de la peur. Ma mère a si peur de son père, et je ne sais pas pourquoi, sa peur me fait peur vous savez et je refuse de l’accompagner, elle va seule à Rennes. (141)

In this passage, the double meaning of the term *place* links *je*’s empty train seat to the role she no longer knows how to fill in her family; her connection to them has been reduced to the fear she feels in response to her mother’s fear. In this instance, *je* experiences the same emotion as her mother without understanding the story behind the origin of this emotion. She explains: “J’ai

⁷² The voice of *la Fille à l’héroïne* is denoted by italics and, in this instance, both the typography and the content reflect *je*’s distance from her (70-73).

peur de la peur de ma mère sans en connaître le vrai motif, le vrai sujet, c’est comme une maladie la peur, chez nous, cela vient de mon oncle disparu au maquis, cela vient avec mon père qui a peur du monde, cela vient avec ma sœur qui a peur de la mort, cela vient avec moi qui ai peur des autres” (145). In *je*’s family, fear – described metaphorically as *une maladie* – has its own *histoire*. And the narrative about this fear textually links *je* to her sister and her father through the repetition of the phrase *cela vient avec*.

Recent scholarship and scientific research on empathy has shown that narrative can prompt empathic responses in its readers and that this kind of “narrative empathy” can have positive personal and social outcomes. In “A Theory of Narrative Empathy,” Suzanne Keen advances this take on empathy, stating that: “Empathy, a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading” (208). With this in mind, in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, we see that *je* is exposed to her mother’s narrative – and moreover her family’s – and that she also endeavors to rewrite these narratives by laying them bare and couching them in the narrative of the book itself. In this process, predictable, dominant narratives become decentralized as other markers of meaning take on greater significance.

The reader witnesses this process in terms of how *je* comes to unfold and divulge parts of her mother’s story. When *je* does return to Rennes, she presents her fear differently: “oui j’ai encore peur, mais c’est une peur qui vient du corps des autres, c’est une peur qui vient de l’extérieur et qui contamine, contamine, contamine, je prends tout, là, enfermée dans la voiture américaine des vacances françaises . . . je prends ces organismes vivants, qui m’envahissent, qui me terrifient” (158). Riding in her grandparents’ car, an experience that reminds her of her childhood vacations in Brittany, she absorbs odors and sensations from the other passengers –

the smell of her grandfather's breath, her mother's perfume and the warmth of the dog's tiny belly. The items *je* delineates are described succinctly and with familiarity. In this way, they evoke a sense of comfort that contrasts with the effect of the negatively connoted verbs *contamine*, *envahissent* and *terrifiant*. Whereas *contamine* strongly suggests infection, thus reinforcing the analogy between fear and illness in *je*'s family, it also hints more generally at the idea that *je* is influenced and transformed – by others and by her surroundings. Thus, *je*'s attestation that she is confronted bodily and externally by fear – and, simultaneously, by all of these things – creates a coherent metaphor. The phrase *organismes vivants* comes to stand in not only for the molecules she inhales (bacteria, esters and recycled air), but also for the matter against which she brushes up (skin cells, dog hair and the warmth radiating from her mother's hands). In this way, *je*'s bodily and emotional experiences are enmeshed; the contamination is physical and psychic.

Shortly after, *je* reveals what she believes to be the initial source of her mother's trauma: “elle a ces mots qu'elle ne dit qu'à moi, les mots de son père, et c'est de là que vient la gêne, vous savez, dans les mots de cet homme, qui disait à ma mère, enfant : « Mets-toi un truc sur ta tête. » Cette phrase ne veut rien dire. Et elle veut tout dire” (159). *Je* goes on to counter her grandfather's words in writing, naming her anger towards him and introducing a counternarrative about her mother's *beau visage*: “Et j'en veux tant à cet homme vous savez, quand je vais chez H&M avec ma mère, et que je la regarde se noyer dans le flot des corps qui semblent la traverser, ma mère dont son père se moquait, ma mère et son beau visage” (160). Here, as *je* depicts her mother in a busy apparel store, the words *se noyer* and *flot* establish a link between, on the one hand, the effect of her grandfather's harsh words, which leave her mother feeling insignificant and mutable and, on the other hand, her respiratory problems, which threaten to drown her

figuratively.⁷³ Elsewhere, we learn that *je*'s grandfather has called her mother “la honte de la famille,” presumably because she married an Algerian and moved to Algiers. We learn that he has also said to her: “Tu finiras mal” and “Tu l’as épousé pour m’embêter,” words reproduced in direct quotes in the text (224; 81). *Je* weaves the idea of *tu finiras mal* into her own life narrative when she tells of learning an exercise routine from her great-grandmother. *Je* writes: “alors, vite, je fais comme elle – abdominaux, tractions, étirements, souffle, alors moi aussi je change mon sang, parce que j’ai peur de la bile, j’ai peur de mal finir” (198). Here, the transgenerational import of the words *tu finiras mal* is made strikingly clear, and *je*'s writing works against this menace.

With the knowledge that her mother did not feel supported or loved by them, neither in her childhood nor in her marriage, *je* experiences guilt that her relationship with her grandparents is based in love: “Je me suis sentie coupable d’aimer des gens qui n’avaient aucune douceur envers ma mère, et pire encore, je me suis sentie coupable de recevoir de la douceur de ces gens” (162). She then goes on to explain how this relationship contributes to her self-destruction with each instance of kindness her grandparents show her:

[Q]uand mon grand-père prend ma main, je me détruis de l’intérieur, quand il dit « tu es si jolie », je me détruis de l’intérieur, quand il dit encore : « Sacré petit oiseau », je me détruis de l’intérieur, quand je lis leurs cartes postales *Nous embrassons notre petite*, je me détruis de l’intérieur, et j’élargis le cercle de ma destruction : il est impossible pour moi de recevoir un compliment, en règle générale. (163)

⁷³ Angelo has suggested reading *je*'s mother's respiratory problems as figurative drownings (“*Sujet Buvarde, Sujet Bavard: Nina Bouraoui's Words to Say It*” 84).

The repetition of *je me détruis de l'intérieur* marks *je*'s destruction both as self-inflicted and as originating from within the walls of the self, although it is prompted by the actions of others. Her grandparents' kindness, which is manifest in speech, writing, and physical affection, has an opposite effect on *je* who states: "je m'interdis ce droit à être aimée, je défends, jusqu'au bout ma mère, je m'interdis le bonheur" (163). *Je* not only empathizes with her mother's fear, but also limits her experience of positive emotions in order to align with the emotions available to her mother.

Whereas Hélène Cixous posited *écriture féminine* as a consubstantial correlation between writing and the body through which women escape phallogocentric tradition, when *je* writes "l'écriture est aussi l'écriture du corps de ma mère," she extends the relationship between feminine writing and the body as posited by Cixous and renders it as something that transcends the individual body to encompass the mother-daughter relationship (31). This is also evidenced by the way *je* takes on and fleshes out her mother's traumas, as this chapter's analyses show.

Despite the ways in which *je* and her mother are enmeshed through their respective traumas and *je*'s emotional responses to her mother, *je*'s relation to her mother is sometimes marked simultaneously by both distance and intimacy. Take, for example, her narration of the childhood memory in which her mother nearly dies of suffocation on an airplane in route to Algiers. At the same time as the young *je* views her mother as a *passagère anonyme*, she relates this experience with such attention to detail that she establishes a sense of closeness and self-reflection that reverses what she understood as her childish aloofness: "je suis heureuse et ma mère étouffe dans l'avion ; . . . je regarde ma mère comme une passagère anonyme, je suis sûre d'être un monstre parce que j'ai honte. Je me sens responsable. Le corps des enfants fatigue, le corps qui a porté un autre corps s'épuise, moi je ne porte rien, je ne veux pas" (31). Elsewhere, *je*

links her mother's near suffocation on the airplane to a hypnotist's performance in which her mother is chosen as a participant, while underscoring the central problem at play: absence. The idea of absence is both the menace of physical death and a lack of psychological presence because, *je* writes, "je n'ai jamais assez de mère près de moi, je la veux en entier" (207). When her mother is taken to the stage, hypnotized, and thereby separated from *je*, her body remains physically present while she becomes psychologically absent. The duality of this experience becomes emblematic of *je*'s fears:

[C]'est son image d'une femme qui disparaît derrière les éclairs et que je regarde, allongée puis décollée de l'estrade qui la porte, et c'est toujours sa toute petite voix que j'entends: « Je suis toute petite, toute petite, je suis une toute petite fille » ; et sa voix n'est pas sa voix ou c'est sa voix dans l'avion un jour :
« Appelle l'hôtesse ma chérie, je sens que je pars, je pars, je pars. » C'est partir le problème, c'est le corps de ma mère qui part de moi, c'est cette vision que je ne supporte pas, et c'est ce mécanisme qui reprend, avec mes mauvaises pensées ; quand elles viennent, je crois perdre mon corps, ou plutôt je crois détacher mon corps de mon cerveau, et je sais que c'est la peur qui génère tout . . . quand ma mère part dans son asthme, dans ses états de mal, elle part vers le danger ; c'est comme si mon corps avait la mémoire du corps de ma mère, c'est comme si ma peur de me séparer était juste la réplique de cet abandon. (206)

During the hypnosis, *je*'s mother's presence is reduced to her *image* and further generalized by the qualification *l'image d'une femme*, which depicts her as anonymous – a woman, any woman – just as *je* views her when she suffocates on the airplane. Similarly, *je*'s description of her mother's voice as *toute petite* echoes the repetition of *toute petite* in the words her mother

pronounces under hypnosis. *Je* does not recognize this voice straightforwardly as her mother's, but rather aligns it with her mother's voice on the plane at the onset of her asthma attack. This passage interweaves the hypnosis and airplane narratives in the same way that the mother's repetition of *je pars* on the airplane mirrors her repetition of *toute petite* during the hypnosis. At least this seems to be what stands out to *je*. Thus both literally and figuratively, her mother disappears from *je*'s frame of reference, becoming smaller and smaller as she goes.⁷⁴ In turn, *je* glosses this disappearance onto her own experience of her *mauvaises pensées* in which fear disrupts her sense of cohesion between her body (*corps*) and her mind (*cerveau*), a fissure she endeavors to repair through narrative.

At the intersection of William James's work on the self and Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the polyphonic novel, in "The Dialogical Self: Toward a Theory of Personal and Cultural Positioning," Hubert Hermans advances the notion of a "dialogical self," a perspective through which both self and culture "are conceived of in terms of a multiplicity of positions among which dialogical relationships can develop" (243). In contrast to an individualistic (rationalistic, Cartesian) self, Hermans' view of a dialogical self takes into consideration a plurality of *I*-positions, each of which is "tied to a particular position in time and space." Hermans writes: "the dialogical self is based on the assumption that there are many *I*-positions that can be occupied by the same person. The *I* in the one position, moreover, can agree, disagree, understand, misunderstand, oppose, contradict, question, challenge, and even ridicule the *I* in another position" (249). This way of thinking about the self sheds light on how, in *Mes mauvaises*

⁷⁴ The idea of *étouffement* is significant elsewhere in the text, most notably in *je*'s summary of how she understands it in relationship to departure: "je suis partie d'Alger à cause de l'asphyxie de ma mère, je suis partie de Zurich à cause de l'étouffement de Diane, son corps, à elle aussi, se posait sur moi, m'engloutissait" (169).

pensées, the repeated usage of the subject pronoun *je* comes to represent *je*, not only at countless moments of her life, but also during myriad interactions with others.

In a particularly revealing passage, *je* relies on the preposition *sous* to demonstrate the complexity of self that makes her writing possible. Here, the focus shifts from formal anatomy, to familial descent, to the ancestry of the book itself and the sessions with *docteur C* that underpin its pages, and finally to the nature of *je* and all that constitutes it: “moi, je vois au travers de la peau ; sous le visage de ma mère, il y a les os de la mâchoire, sous les yeux de l’Amie il y a deux béances qui me fixent, sous les peaux des enfants, il y a les cartilages blancs, sous le ventre de mon père, il y a moi, sous l’écriture de mon livre, il y a l’écriture de ma thérapie, sous le *Je*, il y ma grand-mère qui est malade” (36). In this passage, *je* transitions from direct associations, like the visual bones underneath skin, to indirect associations that interconnect her father to her grandmother to the “*Je*” of her writing – both therapeutic and literary. In this way, the preposition *sous* does not simply denote the idea of overlap (evoking *je*’s notion of *superposition d’images*), but rather it comes to suggest a pandimensional reciprocity between *je* and her world – as it is lived and as it is written.

***Je* and Inter(textual)connectedness**

The previous analyses focus on the significance of linguistic manipulations, the impact of time and place, and *je*’s relationship to others, particularly her mother. As a result, they establish a way of reading *je* as a dialogical self who exists largely in an I-You mode of reciprocal engagement with the world. We now turn to an exploration of interconnectedness and intertextuality between the *je*’s of various narrative threads interwoven in the novel, as well as the significance of certain *points de repère* that link *Mes mauvaises pensées* to Bouraoui’s earlier

book, *Garçon manqué*. Many of the points of reflection encountered by the *je* of *Mes mauvaises pensées* resonate with those introduced in *Garçon manqué*. These range from general considerations including crossculturalism, violence, and sexuality, to specific tensions such as *je*'s mother's illness and *je*'s relationship to water and drowning. Additionally, in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the rewriting of specific events drawn from the earlier book and retold in the present tense provides opportunities to relate to these events differently and thereby shapes how they are understood. The narration of *je*'s near drowning in the Zeralda pool provides a striking example of this transformative process. It also demonstrates how the present-tense retelling of past events links them diegetically in ways that align with the *superposition d'images* that *je* describes.

References to the Zeralda pool incident punctuate the text, and a reader familiar with *Garçon manqué* will recognize a key distinction between the narratives. Whereas *je*'s friend Amine saves her from drowning in *Garçon manqué*, the *je* of *Mes mauvaises pensées* announces, notably early in the book, that she saved herself: "Je me suis sauvée seule de la piscine de Zeralda, je suis revenue de moi et tout est parti de moi, comme là, devant vous" (16). This disparity between the two books is significant in that it highlights the focus on agency and reciprocity so fundamental to *je*'s ability to recast her relationship to her history in *Mes mauvaises pensées*. This event not only has powerful repercussions that color *je*'s perspective on death, but it also serves as a touchstone when we consider the confusion between *je*'s body and other bodies in the text.

A particularly revealing example of this narrative strategy connects three important events, which are interwoven with metatextual reflections on the therapeutic process: *je*'s experience at the Zeralda pool; the near drowning of a girl she may (or may not) have pushed into a pool as a child; and *l'Amie*'s near drowning. The passage begins with an anaphoric

structure that links a series of events through the repetition of the phrase *qui je suis*, while posing the following question: “Qui je suis, ce jour de février dans la propriété de madame B.?” (129). It then proceeds to complicate this question by reiterating the structure *qui je suis quand* followed by brief descriptions of various situations and contemplations, such as: “Qui je suis quand je tue une vingtaine de crapauds réfugiés dans un puits sec? Qui je suis quand je crois voir des yeux qui me regardent dans les feuillages? . . . Qui je suis quand je pense que j’aimerais partir le plus loin possible de toute attache?” (129-130). Semantically, a tension develops between, on the one hand, the agent of these actions, which are attributed to the subject *je*, and, on the other hand, the reality that the only thing connecting these actions to a specific linguistic subject *je* is the very question of who *je* is. Moreover, whereas some of these actions appear to refer to *je*’s childhood, such as killing the toads, others are independent of temporal and spatial constraints. The effect of positioning them alongside each other in this way calls into question the nature of personhood and the means by which we know who we are in any given contextual moment. As Angelo has noted, the text “attests to the idea that self is not singular but plural, that articulating one’s identity is always a dialogue in process” (86). We then see a reprise of the initial question followed by a reminder that *je* is, in fact, telling a story:

Qui je suis, ce jour de février dans la propriété de madame B.? Il y a cette fille, vous savez, dont je ne vous ai rien dit ; . . . c’est difficile de vous dire, de tout vous dire, de raconter avec ma voix cette journée de février . . . que je pourrais relier à toutes les journées de février, puis de mars, puis de ces mois qui viennent de passer, ces mois qui sont si pleins de vous, de votre visage, de votre voix :
« On en reste là. À mardi », de vos longues mains, de votre alliance. (130)

Here, the *vous savez* reminds us of the diegetic contract established in the book's opening lines, which tethers *docteur C* to the reader through the personal pronoun *vous*. Although the insertion of the therapist's voice into the narrative might seem abrupt, its placement between other aspects of her person, as catalogued by *je*, serves to reproduce on a syntactic level the temporal slippage *je* describes.

Next, *je* introduces the setting where the encounter with this girl takes place, which focuses on the feeling of a void she experiences coupled with a consciousness of her body as alone and separate: "le vide quand [madame B.] me dépose devant le portail de la propriété . . . que je suis là, avec mon seul corps, dans cette nature si douce, si algérienne" (131). She then recounts, in the present tense, her interaction with this girl, which bridges into a juxtaposition of the three distinct yet interconnected near-drowning incidents:

[I]l y a ces yeux sur moi, qui arrivent, ce sont les yeux d'une fille de mon âge . . . il y a le corps de cette fille debout, devant moi . . . je me relève, je me tiens au bord de la piscine, elle dit : « Attention, tu pourrais tomber », et c'est elle qui tombe, vous savez, elle tombe sur le dos, et il y a l'orage qui avance vers nous . . . et je ne sais pas ce que j'ai fait, mais elle se noie, devant moi, et je ne l'aide pas, je la regarde, parce que je sais que c'est ma main qui l'a poussée, au début, pour rire, vite, parce que je ne supporte plus son corps et sa peau blanche, elle dit : « Je ne sais pas nager », et il y a encore la superposition d'images de mon corps sous l'eau de Zeralda et un jour le corps de l'Amie dans la baie de Nice, qui a failli se noyer, parce que en moi il y a cette fille que je fais tomber, et que je prends chaque noyade à mon compte. (132-133)⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Later in the book, *je* contradicts this narrative and states that she did not push the girl: "Je sais que la fille est tombée toute seule dans la piscine. Je sais que je n'étais pas coupable de ma noyade à Zeralda. Je sais que ma mère

In this passage, the combination of present-tense narration, usage of the conjunction *parce que*, and notion of superposition connects events from three distinct times and spaces. Moreover, the inclusion of the girl's voice in this passage replicates the recollection of memory, which foregrounds certain aspects of lived experience – in this case, words spoken – while fragmenting and obscuring others. Overall, the present-tense, polyvocal narration in *Mes mauvaises pensées* works in concert with spatial superposition to create a textual environment conducive to the destabilization of linearity and fixed associations. And it is precisely these qualities in Bouraoui's work that support linguistic and narrative transformation of trauma by replicating an acute traumatic event in the form of other experiences that *je* comes to control through writing. If *je* assumes each of these (near) drownings as her own responsibility, she also endeavors to mitigate their harm – both by physically preventing them and by repairing their damage on a narrative level.

In her narrative, *je* both rewrites specific traumatic events and rewrites her relationship to herself and her own body. Echoing the sense of isolation she experiences in *Garçon manqué*, in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, *je* summarizes her complicated relationship to her body and her Franco-Algerian family history only to recast the body as an entity capable of transcendence and remediation: “Je pense au frère de mon père dont on n’a jamais retrouvé le corps, je pense aux images de la guerre d’Algérie . . . C’est toujours cette histoire, au fond de moi, de venir de deux familles que tout oppose, les Français et les Algériens. Il y a ces deux flux en moi, que je ne pourrai jamais diviser, je crois n’être d’aucun camp. Je suis seule avec mon corps” (52). In this passage, *je* underscores the uniqueness of her body, which, born of her French mother and Algerian father, doesn't fully belong to either of the peoples to which it is congenitally

n'étouffe pas de moi dans l'appartement. Je sais que mes mauvaises pensées sont avant tout dirigées contre moi” (222).

connected. This association with the world through opposing family histories is more than physical. It is consubstantial. The liminal space *je* occupies, between being French and being Algerian, is tantamount to the very essence of her being: “je vous dis, tout de suite, que je suis de mère française et de père algérien, comme si mes phobies venaient de ce mariage. C’est au delà de l’histoire des corps, je suis dans une conscience politique, je suis dans le partage du monde, je n’ai jamais séparé mes deux amours, je suis faite de ce ciment, la violence du monde est devenue ma propre violence” (20). The phrase *je suis dans le partage du monde* has contradictory meanings analogous to the very tension with which *je* struggles internally; she is both the crossroads of difference and the common ground. And although she does not separate her *deux amours*, they are accounted for individually, just like the *deux flux* of the previous passage. The term *ciment* plays on the twofold nature of *je*’s position, for it is at the same time a substance that holds different elements together and keeps them apart. While *je* is created from a love that united two people of opposing nations, she in turn becomes a bridge of flesh between her father’s Algeria and her mother’s France. On this note, the dimensions of her physical experience are ascribed geographic and celestial proportions:

La chose vient avant la nuit, pendant le *chien-loup*; la chose, qui est la peur mais aussi l’angoisse, prend le corps entier puis le rompt, je me serre alors dans mes bras, parce que aucun bras ne suffit, aucune voix n’apaise, c’est le passage du jour vers la nuit qui fait cela, c’est cette transformation, quand la terre monte vers le ciel, quand le ciel descend vers la terre, quand tout se mélange, quand je perds ma place, quand je ne sais plus où mettre mon corps. La violence passe par le corps, c’est ce que je sais, c’est ce que je ressens. (92)

As night falls, there is a conflation of earth and sky replicated semantically by the paradoxical chiasmatic structure in which the earth rises and the sky descends. The juxtaposition of dark and light, of earth and sky, in effect, catalyzes the same kind of confusion solicited by *je*'s experience of certain spaces and particular sounds, like her visit to Nice's Castel Plage or the accordion player's song in the *métro*. The result of this contamination is that *je* loses her place and no longer knows where to put her body. This is to say that she does not know how to position herself in space, not only because she has lost her bearings, but also because her body is no longer a fixed point able to be coordinated, but rather has become expansive and thereby able to hold the violence of the world that moves through her. In this way, both *je* and the world's violence are transformed.

Violence is not the only thing *je* experiences moving through her body. On the contrary, rather than conceptualizing the body as something with opacity that takes up space, *je* conceives of it as permeable: "J'ai toujours été une étrangère, vous savez, il est difficile, pour moi, de me définir, mon corps transparent est traversé par le monde, par les gens que je fréquente, cela vient dans la chambre d'Alger avec la chose qui est la peur de la mort et aussi la peur de la vie" (95). This passage demonstrates that whereas the body moves through the world, an action the book foregrounds in the travels *je* recounts, for *je*, the relationship between body and space is reversed such that what is external to her moves through her. This kind of reciprocity echoes Buber's comments on the I-You mode of being, in which *je* and her world are changed by one another. The description of *je*'s body as *transparent*, a qualifier belonging to a visual lexicon, establishes a relationship between visibility and physicality that reinforces tensions related to her mixed heritage. It is both the people *je* encounters as well as *le monde*, its vast geographies, that move through her. The verb *traverser* is of interest here in that it typically connotes a movement from

one point to another, a crossing in which points A and B are defined and the passage that connects them is but dependent upon these two points. This word choice reinforces, on a semantic level, the difficulty *je* has in defining herself because her surroundings continuously inform her understanding of who she is.

For *je*, this transparency, achieved through empathy and permeability, is a source of positive identity insofar as it enables her to begin to reposition herself within her life narratives in productive, empowering and healing ways. *Je* frequently reflects on the relationship between literary production and the therapeutic process, often in metatextual references like this one:

[J]e suis fatiguée de venir parfois, je suis fatiguée de vous raconter, je commence souvent ainsi: « Aujourd’hui, je vais bien », mais je sais que je ne soigne pas mon aujourd’hui, il y a un chevauchement des temps, je soigne mon enfance. Vous dites que j’ai toujours eu des phobies d’impulsion, et que je les ai refoulées parce que j’en avais peur. Quand je sors d’ici, il y a cette chaleur dans mon corps qui revient, c’est la peur chaude, l’excitation, je sais que j’ai un livre avec vous, que je le porte comme on porte un enfant. (209)

Interestingly, in this example literary production is analogous to carrying a child, and this biotextual gestation induces a sensation *je* describes as warmth returning to her body. A metonymy for blood, which both warms the body and supports a fetus, this resurgence of warmth marks a healing both psychological and syntactic. Here the confusion between *corps* and *corpus* blurs the boundaries between narration and embodied experience, a strategy that supports the transformation of trauma in the book – both for *je* and for her world.

Je and the Transformation of Trauma: Writing that Bleeds

Mes mauvaises pensées explores the relationship between writing and the body in various ways. This exploration includes *je*'s direct reflections, the interplay of her reflections with structural aspects of the text, and the introduction of analogies that further strengthen this relationship. The combinatorial effect of these strategies presents the reader with a book in which *je*'s therapeutic journey aligns with the transformation of trauma on a narrative level. Moreover, given the polyvocal, atemporal nature of the book, the reparative work enacted is not limited to *je*'s experience. Rather, it includes other voices that are woven into the text, as well as the familial and cultural histories that have impacted the book's writing, both in content and in form.

Very early in the text, *je* establishes a link between language and corporeality that tethers *je*'s therapeutic process to the writing of the book: "j'ai des milliers de mots dans ma tête, des milliers de petits organismes vivants, j'ai des gestes répétitifs – éteindre, allumer, éteindre, allumer, cent fois, mille fois par nuit, toucher les feux rouges, les pylônes électriques, les arbres, la pierre, les murs de mon école. Mon corps est aussi le corps du monde, je ne suis pas séparée" (26). Here, the analogy between words and living organisms invites the reader to conceive of writing as organic. In this way, the text produced is not plainly of *je*'s creation, but rather responds directly to the actions of the tiny living organisms located within *je*'s mind. The phrase *j'ai des gestes répétitifs* syntactically bridges the action of the body to the action of these *mots-organismes*, while the following verbs and substantives reproduce syntactically the experience *je* undergoes. The reader also toggles between turning the light off and on, participates in the count from one hundred to one thousand, and comes to engage cerebrally with the signifier of each object *je* touches. Whereas most of these objects exist independent of temporal constraints, the inclusion of *les murs de mon école* corroborates the claim that she has a longstanding history

with these repetitive habits, as declared to *docteur C*: “Comment j’étais enfant? C’est votre première question: comment j’étais? J’ai déjà des mauvaises pensées mais je ne m’en souviens plus” (26). In this way, both the present and the past come into play syntactically to generate a situation in which the healing to take place transcends the constraints of time and space. This reading reinforces *je*’s attestation that she is healing her childhood. Additionally, at the same time as this narrative strategy intertwines the concepts of body and text, it also muddles the distinction between *je* and the reader as the reader is subjected to the same repetitive gestures *je* describes. The end result is that the narrative’s potential for healing transcends the bounds of the individual body and, moreover, asks us to question how we define what constitutes an individual body. This interpretation is reinforced by the final line in the passage in which *je*’s body is not only her own (*mon corps*), but also the world’s (*le corps du monde*).

Bouraoui’s *je* often reflects metatextually on the writing process, going so far as to articulate her theory of *écriture qui saigne*. Although *je* does not explicitly delineate this theory, the relationship between corporeality and language is richly developed in the text, such as in the *mots-organismes* example. She also associates the concept of *écriture qui saigne* with the influence of Hervé Guibert’s writing: “J’ai lu dans un livre d’Hervé Guibert, qu’il y avait des gens malades de leur enfance ; cette maladie s’appelle *l’enfance qui saigne*. Le langage est aussi un langage qui saigne, je crois” (16). This passage establishes a parallel between childhood and language, both of which are described in corporeal terms as something that bleeds and, by extension, both of which can be a source of illness. *Je* borrows Guibert’s notion of *enfance qui saigne*, which is described as an illness caused by one’s childhood. It follows therefore, that the idea of *langage qui saigne* be understood as an illness caused by language, which further corroborates the *mots-organismes* analogy. In *je*’s case, however, the same language that acts as

a source of infirmity also bears the potential to catalyze healing when its reparative properties are accessed through writing.

When the concept of *écriture qui saigne* first appears, it is contextualized in terms of the necessity of writing: “Je rêve d’un livre de transformation, qui m’aurait suivie depuis mon enfance, je rêve d’un album, je rêve d’un almanach ; je dois tout écrire pour tout retenir, c’est ma théorie de l’écriture qui saigne” (22). Here, writing is a means of archiving life. The concept of *écriture qui saigne* reinforces the analogy between words and organisms in that writing itself becomes a living organism that, figuratively, bleeds. In another example, *je* further explores her relationship to writing, describing it as a prison and delineating the ways it wields power over her. But her descriptions also lean towards personification and emphasize that writing is its own living entity with agency and moods. Finally, *je* compares this *écriture physique* to paintings fashioned in the painter’s blood: “L’écriture est aussi une prison, je dois la justifier, je dois la réparer, je dois la supplier quand elle ne vient pas, quand elle est mauvaise. . . . Je pourrais parler d’une écriture physique, comme ce peintre qui peint avec son sang pour le rouge puis le noir de ses tableaux. C’est encore l’écriture qui saigne” (35). Here, one might read the verb *saigner* not only as intransitive – the writing itself is actively bleeding, and this process produces something meaningful in a textual form, but also as transitive – the act of writing as a therapeutic remedy that “bleeds” *je* of thoughts that torment her. The notion of writing that bleeds highlights the connective properties of the text, which links together countless bodies on a narrative level through a common figurative element: blood. Whereas the effects of acute and chronic traumas have ruptured *je*’s relationship to her body, the recasting of writing as corporeal serves to repair this relationship on a narrative level. Elsewhere, *je* reflects on her relationship with her father and how his approach to reading her texts differs from her mother’s, whom she describes as her

“lectrice la plus rapide.” *Je* writes: “mon père me lit lentement, il m’apprend et il se redécouvre, dans ce prolongement des sangs, de l’écriture qui saigne . . . c’est dans les mots que je retrouve mon père, c’est notre pays je crois” (176). At the same time as blood signifies connection – linking *je* to her family and also to two ethnic groups – in addition, blood can be read as a metaphor for ink and, by extension, for writing. Moreover, both the book’s imagery and *je*’s self-reflections strongly suggest that this writing is excessive.

One of the ways that the excessive quality of *je*’s writing is highlighted is through her self-declaration as a *sujet-buvard*. We have already seen that in *Mes mauvaises pensées* Cixous’ notion of *écriture féminine* is expanded beyond the individual body of the writing subject *je* to encompass the mother-daughter relationship. Indeed, Bouraoui’s text refashions the correlation between writing and the body to make writing consubstantial to life itself. In building upon the narrative strategies already explored, *je* presents us with a concept she employs metatextually to describe her relationship to the writing process: “il y a une écriture de l’histoire familiale, parce que ces histoires font aussi partie de moi, je suis le sujet-buvard, j’ai la mission de restituer les mouvements de chaque feuille de chaque branche de l’arbre familial” (197). The notion of *sujet-buvard* plays on the French word for blotting paper, *papiers-buvard*. Used to soak up extra ink when writing, this paper carries the trace of the words it touches. The connection between writing and corporeality is particularly evident in *je*’s relationship with her family. Early in the book, she reflects on this connection: “Je lis dans un livre qu’il y a un sujet buvard dans une famille . . . une peau qui prendrait tout ; mes livres sont faits de cette peau, la peau lisse et fragile, la peau photographique, mes livres sont devenus mes livres-miroirs, puis mes livres de guerre, puis ils se sont retournés contre moi ; j’ai perdu mon écriture pendant trois ans, j’ai repris mon rôle de buvard auprès de ma famille, j’ai entendu un livre que je ne pouvais pas retranscrire,

j’ai reçu un livre de paroles que je ne pouvais pas convertir” (29).⁷⁶ Here, *je* conceives of her skin metaphorically as paper, which further underscores the analogy between ink and blood, between writing and life: “je sais nier ce qui ne va pas en moi, cette peau sensible qui prend tout, la peau buvard qui fera écrire, qui fera raconter, qui fera rougir aussi” (64). *Je’s sujet-buvard* nature has much to do with her personality because it leaves her unprotected and perpetually impressionable. At the same time as *je* attributes her writing to her *peau buvard*, she also reflects on how this quality contributes to her difficulty in differentiating between what originates within her and what she takes in from the outside world: “Je ne sais pas non plus si c’est le fait de ma violence ou de la violence du monde, qui m’étourdit et me transforme. Je suis aussi la peau buvard de ce monde” (80). This confusion proves to be both problematic and salvational in terms of how *je* relates to the world’s violence, because it is synonymous with how she relates to herself: “je suis en guerre contre le monde entier et contre moi-même, c’est cette peau buvard, c’est ce problème de tout prendre, de tout garder” (66). In this instance, the concepts of *sujet-buvard* and *peau buvard* connect *je* to the physicality of lived experience through the act of writing. In turn, writing becomes a space capable of transforming trauma and its repercussions in reparative and productive ways.

One way the book enacts the transmutability of trauma is through its entanglement of violence, beauty and death. This relationship strikes the reader early in the text in a passage that begins as *je* reflects on *docteur C*’s elegant appearance, stating that “les malades ont besoin de beauté” and calling it her “obsession” (24). She then continues to catalogue the sources of beauty

⁷⁶ Parts of the book seem to reproduce these *paroles* without direct differentiation between speakers. Many voices punctuate the text, marked by both quotation marks and italics. Sometimes direct discourse is attributed to a specific speaker; other times a conversation is written as one long quotation composed of various voices never explicitly distinguished from one another. In passages such as this one, the reader is left to trace the relationships between each pronoun and its referent, some of which remain ambiguous: “C’est vrai que tu portais les cravates de papa en cachette. Tu étais une boule d’amour. Nous formions un couple, maman. Oui et j’en suis fière. Tu sais, on a fait de notre mieux. Je ne suis pas n’importe qui moi, je suis votre père” (213). Elsewhere, *je* refers to the voice of her family as a “brouillard de voix” and a “spirale de voix” (89-90; 212-213).

present in her life and memories. In a single sentence, in which the word *beauté* appears eight times, she cites art, literature, cinema, the boys of Paris' Marais neighborhood, and, finally, Algiers and her adolescence. After this focus on beauty and emphatic repetition of the word itself, the next sentence appears shocking: “Je ne suis pas une enfant suicidaire, mais je suis fascinée par la mort” (25). This abrupt juxtaposition with the preceding lines structurally mirrors the intrusive nature of *je*'s *mauvaises pensées*. It also casts new light on her descriptions of aesthetic beauty, which come to be entangled with the idea of death. She continues:

[V]ous dites que c'est à cause de la maladie de ma mère, à cause de ses asphyxies ; c'est encore la beauté des nuages en avion, la beauté de la forêt d'eucalyptus, la beauté de ma mère qui étouffe, sa peau bleue, son corps presque perdu, sa beauté quand je déjeune avec elle . . . la beauté de sa peau que j'ai peur d'ouvrir avec une petite paire de ciseaux qu'elle a laissée près du téléphone. (25)

The temporal ambiguity in this passage is largely clarified several pages later when *je* expands upon the day her mother nearly died of asphyxiation in an airplane: “Ma mère perd connaissance, les nuages filent derrière mon hublot, je me concentre sur le ciel, si beau” (31). As discussed previously, the text makes it clear that *je* is a child and that they are on a return flight to Algiers. The reader now understands that this memory is inserted in the narration of her contemporary *mauvaises pensées* and therapy process. Similarly, her fear of harming her mother punctuates this reflection on beauty – syntactically and visually linking beauty to death through the violence of suffocation and opened skin. Even the phrase *la beauté de ma mère qui étouffe* when considered alone is paradoxical in that the mother's suffocation (*sa peau bleue*) seems out of place and disruptive alongside the peaceful natural beauty previously invoked.

In *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Garçon manqué*, the impact of trauma on *je*'s experience manifests in the nature of the fears she delineates, in how she positions herself in response to these fears, and in syntactical aspects of the narration itself. Specifically, in *Garçon manqué*, the memory of the violence of Algeria permeated and shaped *je*'s experience of France in the second half of the book, as the previous chapter demonstrates. *Mes mauvaises pensées* reengages the same tensions while also exploring violence's origins, movement, and coexistence with other forces, such as beauty. We have seen how exposure to violence ruptures the continuity of *je*'s sense of self and prompts her *mauvaises pensées*, leaving both *je* and the text transformed. At the same time, the paradoxical nature of violence in the book contributes to the transformation of trauma. One way this transformation takes place is through the text's entanglement of concepts like violence, beauty and death. Another is through the repetition and recontextualization of such concepts. Both of these strategies contribute to our understanding of *écriture qui saigne* because they demonstrate that this type of writing is neither fixed nor conventionally representational. Rather, such writing scrambles our understanding of common narrative concepts like space, time, voice and tone. Through its linguistic and formal manipulations, it also disrupts preconceived notions about the body and personhood. Which is to say that, in this book, words come to signify differently. If we interpret *écriture qui saigne* as a paronomasia of *écriture qui signe*, it follows that the text presents its own network of meanings independent from, but not unrelatable to, previously held morphological and grammatical associations.

Je views her writing as a project that endeavors to capture the very essence of ephemeral life. She writes: "Mon écriture est un vice. Je suis à l'enterrement de ma tante et je sais que j'ai un livre dans la tête. J'ai honte de cela, j'ai honte de tout écrire. J'y vois une totale absence de morale, une totale absence de respect puis j'y vois un grand amour, écrire serait alors fixer la

vie” (79). This passage directly underscores the idea that *je*’s writing is excessive and even unhealthy – shamefully so (*j’ai honte de cela, j’ai honte de tout écrire*) – and, at the same time, *je* recasts this excess of ink as an abundance of love (*un grand amour*). In this way, her writing aims to care for the people whose stories are a part of it. The expression *fixer la vie* denotes *je*’s efforts to render in narrative form the dynamic complexity of life. At the same time, *fixer* also points to the intensity with which she observes her world as well as her intention to create, through writing, a sort of homeostasis in this world such that those she loves can not only survive, but also thrive. On this note, *je* continues her reflection by comparing her perspective on writing to her childhood memories of a butterfly preserved under glass. For *je*, the butterfly – brilliant and motionless against its paper backdrop – so succeeded in captivating her attention that, in doing so, it seemed alive:

[Le papillon] me semblait vivant, parce que je pensais qu’il absorbait toute la vie, toute notre vie, par le simple fait d’être à sa place, chaque jour, avec ses ailes brillantes et translucides, avec ses antennes collées au papier qui le tenait, il y a de cela dans l’écriture, je dois rendre des comptes, je dois écrire ce que je vois, c’est ma façon d’habiter l’existence, c’est ma façon de fermer ma peau ; pour effacer mes mauvaises pensées. (79)

Writing is what enables *je* to “erase” (*effacer*) the thoughts that torment her – as though they are words able to be erased from a page – and she aligns this erasure with the ability to “close her skin” and thereby shift her hypersensitivity to the world. Indeed, through writing, *je* comes to relate differently both to her history and to her everyday experiences. This transformation repairs, on a syntactic level, the impact of trauma and its repercussions as delineated in the text.

Let us recall the beginning of the book when *je*'s encounter with the accordion player in the *métro* prompts a flood of images that overwhelm her, transposing memories of Algeria onto her experience of Paris, as mirrored linguistically in the text. Now, near the end of the book, having called into question and reconfigured notions of time, space, voice and personhood, she has crafted a new version of her life narrative, in which the role of the accordion player is drastically different. As she traverses Paris on foot after a session with *docteur C*, she reflects:

[J]e rentre à pied, juste après vous, je traverse le parc Monceau, l'herbe, les arbres, les manèges, les balançoires, les cris des enfants, ce décor-là me relie à l'Algérie, je suis seule dans la ville et je sais que j'ai trouvé ma place à Paris. Je suis en vie, vous comprenez, Place de la Concorde, je suis en vie, arcades des Tuileries, je suis en vie, place Vendôme, je suis en vie, place des Victoires, je suis en vie, j'ai un lien amoureux avec Paris ; . . . il y a toujours ce joueur d'accordéon. Il joue des chansons qui me font penser à vous, à nous . . . (210-211)

In this passage, Algeria and Paris – the past and the present – coexist in *je*'s consciousness instead of one eclipsing the other. The repetition of the phrase *je suis en vie*, which alternates with Parisian landmarks, syntactically positions *je* as fully present and embodied in this space.

This chapter's analysis of *Mes mauvaises pensées* has focused on a highly permeable *je* who is in constant dialogue with her world, taking on the traumas of people who enter her life and effectively repairing these traumas through the narrative of the book. As *je* notes: "c'est ici . . . que se défait l'histoire que j'essaie, aujourd'hui, de reconstruire, de réécrire, l'Algérie est dans mon cœur qui saigne, c'est ce flux qu'il faut arrêter ou du moins contenir, je suis débordée. . . . je sais, d'une façon si précise, que ce qui déborde de moi sera, un jour, contenu dans un livre" (235-236). And in this way, in the final pages of the book constituted by what has

“overflown” from her, as *je* and *l’Amie* visit the grave of *l’Amie*’s father, *je* is drawn into relationship with the world and feels surrounded in love: “je sais et je sens l’amour, tout autour de nous” (269). Then, with an anaphoric structure dependant on the repetition of *je garde*, she textually reproduces a sampling of everything that has spilled over into the pages of her book – both the words of people who have touched her life and the images she has taken away from shared experiences with them. Here, the verb *garder*, which connotes not only keeping but also caring for, points to *je*’s transformed relation to her *mauvaises pensées*, as the narrative comes to a close with these words: “Quand je viens vous voir, je garde l’idée d’une confession” (269).

CHAPTER 3

Experientiality, Aesthetics and the Sensory Moment in *Nos baisers sont des adieux*

The final chapter of this dissertation turns to the analysis of one of Nina Bouraoui's more recent works, *Nos baisers sont des adieux* (2010). It explores temporal and spatial issues in the book and their relationship to visibility and sensory experience. In *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, although the reader recognizes recurring narrative threads, themes, and stylistic techniques characteristic of Bouraoui's oeuvre, the text's unique focus on the sensory moment serves to aestheticize not only key narrative events but also *je*'s relation to others. This strategy promotes a sense of equanimity that transmutes the thematic content of any given passage.

Nos baisers sont des adieux consists of ninety-three short chapters that are entitled and marked by a place and a year from 1972 to 2009. Varying in length from one sentence⁷⁷ to nine pages⁷⁸, the chapters average a half page to a page in length and focus on lived experiences presented as vignettes replete with vivid imagery, which are interspersed with ekphrastic descriptions of works of art. This emphasis on visibility serves to underscore aestheticization in the text. Moreover, whereas the vignettes are presented achronologically, they are often linked thematically or semantically in ways that create a coherent arrangement of diverse memories, just as diverse objects are positioned in a still-life painting.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ "Le SMS, Paris 2009" simply reads: "Je t'embrasse comme au premier jour de nous," (152).

⁷⁸ "L'enregistreur, Alger 1977" focuses on a tape recorder that belonged to *je*'s sister and recounts stories recorded on it during their childhood. Interestingly, the chapter details two stories that were recorded orally as well as a third that was documented via dictation (134).

⁷⁹ Using the analogy of an arrangement of photographs in an album, Anna Rocca has noted the thematic and semantic connectedness of certain memories in *Nos baisers sont des adieux*. This chapter expands on this aspect of Bouraoui's book ("Nina Bouraoui's *Nos baisers sont des adieux*: Ekphrasis and the Accumulation of Memories" 3-4).

In order to appreciate how the sensory moment functions in *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, I first consider how it relates to temporal issues by engaging the notions of temporality and experientiality in narrative theory. Next, a section on memory, temporality and aestheticization looks at two different ways the book structures memory. In the first, a focus on narration and tense differentiation illuminates experientiality, action, and reflection in the book – particularly in regard to specific moments and events that overlap with recurring narrative threads in Bouraoui's texts. Conversely, the second strategy serves to aestheticize the sensory moment and the experience of space through the prevalence of imagery and the invariable usage of the *imparfait*. I then turn to an analysis of the aestheticization of *je*'s relation to others. In these examples, the relevance of space is minimized and, therefore, the reader's attention falls on how figures relate against the spatial backdrop. Lastly, the final section looks at examples of ekphrasis in the book and how ekphrasis interacts with narration of the sensory moment to impact not only the reader's understanding of the text, but also her understanding of the relationship between narrative and memory – between narrative and life. Overall, these analyses will show that in privileging the sensory moment over common narrative conventions, Bouraoui's text aestheticizes a wide range of experiences, and thereby renders violence and love – desire and repulsion – in equally appealing prose.

Narrative Theory: On Temporality and Experientiality

Tracing the evolution of narrative theory from Genette's *Narrative Discourse* to Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, narratologist Monika Fludernik has shown that "the understanding of temporality becomes increasingly divorced from objective or scientific notions of time and moves towards more psychological, subjective and contextually malleable

conceptions of temporality” (“Chronology, Time, Tense and Experientiality in Narrative” 120). In this view, the reading process has more to do with the reader’s “*experience* of time” than it has to do with the “notion of clock-time.” Fludernik expands on this vision of narrativity to propose that the narrative genre is characterized by experientiality.⁸⁰ In contrast to the traditional idea of narrative as a sequence of events, i.e., plot, Fludernik redefines narrative as portraying the “experiential reality” of a narrator or protagonist, which may or may not align with the notion of temporality. Instead, for Fludernik, narrative “relies on representation *of*, and *by means of*, consciousness” (120). Although Fludernik’s approach foregrounds narrative processing over chronology, it does address “issues of temporality, in so far as they relate to experientiality” (121).

The study of tense and experientiality undertaken by Fludernik establishes a distinction between teller narratives and reflector-mode narratives. Whereas in teller narratives, the preterite denotes pastness in relation to the moment of the teller figure’s narration, reflector-mode narratives do not have a teller figure. Fludernik writes: “[The past tense] is anchored in the consciousness of the reflector character, and in relation to this deictic centre it signals simultaneity. In reflector mode texts the preterite therefore has no deictic meaning of pastness” (123). Fludernik goes on to consider the kinds of tense alternation characteristic of novels since the late twentieth century, which often employ the present tense to narrate memory. In sum, Fludernik makes the argument that “tense has little to do with time, or even with temporal categories per se, but serves as a textual and relational device” that highlights the psychology of the protagonist and how the protagonist relates to his or her “experiential present [or] to his or her memories of previous events” (125). Therefore, tense reveals something about experientiality

⁸⁰ For an in-depth discussion of experientiality, see Monika Fludernik’s *Towards a “Natural” Narratology*.

and, at the same time, “tense shifts tie in with configurational patterns of foregrounding and backgrounding rather than with automatic sequential rules” (131). This is to say that tense not only reflects the experience of the narrator, but also guides the reader’s experience of the text.

In this chapter, I extend Fludernik’s observations to analyses of *Nos baisers sont des adieux*. Given the differences in French and English tenses – Fludernik focuses on English-language narratives – coupled with the significance of temporal issues in *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, reading the book through the lens of experientiality both illuminates our literary interpretation and expands the theories laid out by Fludernik. Temporality in *Nos baisers sont des adieux* has not gone unnoticed. Indeed, critic Anna Rocca has argued that in contrast to Bouraoui’s earlier works, in which present-tense narration highlights “pervasive feelings of fear” related to traumatic events, in *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, “the use of the past tense . . . establishes an authorial degree of both distance and control” (3). Although I agree with Rocca’s assertion, I would like to deepen our understanding of temporal issues in *Nos baisers sont des adieux* by looking beyond the opposition between the present and the past. In doing so, my analysis takes up the question of verbal aspects, specifically the distinction between punctual action (traditionally denoted by the *passé simple* in French texts) and durative or repetitive action (denoted by the *imparfait*). My analyses will show that the consistent usage of the *imparfait* verb tense blurs the distinction between the impact of specific events (some of which are familiar to readers of Bouraoui) and the impact of viewing works of art, all of which contribute to our understanding of *je*. Because the *imparfait* is traditionally used to give background information or to narrate recurring situations from the past, its systematic usage – even to relate unique events – privileges description over narration and thereby weighs interpersonal and artistic interactions equally. This strategy serves to aestheticize *je*’s experience of space, as well as her

relation to others and to herself. Moreover, given the systematic usage of the *imparfait*, the occasional verb in another past tense is striking and requires further analysis, which this chapter will provide.

Memory, Temporality and Aestheticization

This section explores two contrasting strategies for rendering memory in the text. The first relates to temporal shifts; the second relates to aesthetics. The analyses that follow consider memories with various thematic content – traumatic, erotic and serene. To begin, *Nos baisers sont des adieux* differentiates itself from the treatment of trauma elsewhere in Bouraoui's novels, as explored in the previous two chapters. Whereas *Garçon manqué*'s unique linguistic and narrative patterns reflect the impact of trauma and *je*'s response, in *Mes mauvaises pensées* *je* positions herself in a network of trauma and love in which her capacity to fully exist directly relates to her sensitivity. Critics have commented on the progression in Bouraoui's books, noting the movement from abjection and struggle related to conflicting histories to acceptance, fluidity and desire.⁸¹ *Nos baisers sont des adieux* exemplifies this transition. Most interestingly, its presentation of trauma in juxtaposition with desire underscores the contributions narrative makes to the healing process and, at the same time, it creates a textual world in which trauma coexists as a contained experience alongside pleasure and intimacy. In Bouraoui's earlier novels, trauma infiltrates the everyday; the *je* of *Garçon manqué* is continuously responding to trauma and, in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the impact of trauma leaves *je* hypersensitive and permeable. She is both afraid of harming those she cherishes most and, at the same time, she is deeply and profoundly moved by the world's beauty. In *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, we are presented once

⁸¹ See Rocca's "Nina Bouraoui's *Nos baisers sont des adieux*: Ekphrasis and the Accumulation of Memories" and Helen Vassallo's "Unsuccessful alterity? The pursuit of otherness in Nina Bouraoui's autobiographical writing."

again with key memories and central tensions characteristic of Bouraoui's work: the kidnapping attempt, violence against women, the violence of war, the beauty of nature, unfolding and complex sexualities. In this text, however, the recollection of these memories focuses on the sensory moment such that the reader participates in *je*'s aestheticization of these experiences.

Part 1: Narration and Tense Differentiation

First, my analysis will address a chapter of *Nos baisers sont des adieux* in which tense differentiability is significant. A particularly striking example that serves as a gateway to exploring the text is *je*'s treatment of the kidnapping attempt that took place during her childhood in Algiers. In *Garçon manqué*, this episode is narrated in the present and, like here, is referenced by the euphemism "l'événement". Anna Rocca has identified this attempted abduction as an example of how Bouraoui uses ekphrasis and the past tense in *Nos baisers sont des adieux* "to suspend those pervasive feelings of fear which are characteristic of [her] previous narratives" and to create an "authorial degree of both distance and control" (3). In this vignette, entitled "L'homme, Alger 1972," the usage not only of the *imparfait* but also of the *plus-que-parfait* is notable. As Fludernik has shown: "Tense and time do not bear any formal correspondence with one another. Tenses, if at all, operate on the basis of their differentiability" (129). In *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, this differentiability is pronounced. What does it reveal about *je* and experientiality?

In this example, the initial focus is not on the event itself but rather the aftermath of the attempt – the ways in which it was processed and remembered. And this is all done in the *imparfait*, which contrasts with isolated usages of the *plus-que-parfait*. The passage begins with an inventory of what they did not know about the man who attempted to abduct her: "On ne

savait pas qui il était . . . On ne savait pas vraiment son visage, ni le son de sa voix. Ni moi ni ma sœur. L'événement avait glissé de nos peaux. Il s'était brûlé à la terre" (69). Here, the verbs *glisser* and *se brûler* in the *plus-que-parfait* rupture the descriptive quality of the text and accentuate this lacuna in memory. There are many parallels between this telling of the kidnapping attempt and how it is related in *Garçon manqué*. Particularly notable is the man's "douceur" and the way the concept of *douceur* structures this passage:

Il décomposait ainsi ses gestes, ses mots, il arrêtait ainsi le temps, nous y emprisonnant comme dans une forteresse. Mon père disait que c'était un paradoxe, cette douceur. Je retenais le mot sans le comprendre, le *paradoxe*, ce qui engendrait de nombreuses questions sur la nature de chacun, sur les désirs aussi, sur ce qui ne devait pas se confronter, comme deux éléments étrangers qui n'auraient jamais dû être en présence. L'homme et moi. Moi et l'homme. Le tableau ne tenait pas. Mon père évoquait les probabilités. Une guirlande de chiffres se déployait dans mon cerveau. Notre rencontre était mathématique. Ou non. Il n'y avait peut-être ni hasard ni paradoxe, l'homme devait croiser ma route et moi la sienne. L'un et l'autre avions quelque chose à nous apprendre. À nous annoncer. Nous étions liés. Il fallait l'accepter. (69-70)

In this passage, *je* uses the verb *décomposer* in relation to the man's movements and his body. Interestingly, the way in which she breaks down (*décompose*) the subsequent thought process when her father refers to this *douceur* as a "paradoxe" textually reproduces the slowing of time the narrative describes. Fludernik refers to this type of description as "freeze" (126). The initial analogy, in which *je* and her sister are "imprisoned" (as though in a fortress) can be read in two ways. The phrase *nous y emprisonnant* extends the action of *emprisonner* through the usage of

the present participle, while the *y* (there) can be read not only as the place they were standing during the encounter with this man, but also as the figurative space one might inhabit while caught up in a memory such as this one. It is paradoxical in and of itself that the man is said to break down his gestures and language (a deconstructive movement) while this action blocks *je* and her sister into a “forteresse” (a constructive, restrictive movement). This analogy also riffs on the common fairytale narrative of a man who locks a girl away in a remote, impenetrable location. Only here, this location is not spatial, but temporal; the fortress is a moment in time.

The reflections that follow further reinforce a sense of paradox by positioning *je* and the man in opposition to one another, notably as “deux éléments étrangers qui n’auraient jamais dû être en présence.” This comparison engages the idea of the periodic table, in which elements exist neatly and distinctly; their reactions are predicable and attributable to scientific principles. Therefore, by extension, *je* and *l’homme* are depicted as powerless to alter the nature of their (unfortunate) interaction, a perspective that deprives them both of agency in their encounter. The chiasmatic structure of the next lines “L’homme et moi. Moi et l’homme. Le tableau ne tenait pas,” recreates for the reader the sense of diametric opposition the text describes. It also reinforces the allusion to the periodic table (*le tableau périodique*), and, moreover, it gestures to a painting (*un tableau*), which further inscribes this memory as a work of art not unlike those depicted elsewhere in the book.

As the passage continues, the relationship between *je* and the man shifts from one of opposition to one of alignment. This begins in a sentence that references them crossing one another’s paths. Earlier in the vignette, we see that naming what they did not know about this man, paradoxically, established an understanding of how he was remembered. Similarly, the usage of the negative structure *ne...ni...ni* in the phrase “il n’y avait peut-être ni hasard ni

paradoxe” suggests to the reader that *je* is remembering this encounter as consequential. The narrative delineates that neither chance nor paradox is responsible for their meeting, at the same time as the usage of the verb *devoir* connotes necessity and fate. In the next sentence, *je* and the man are weighted equally and interchangeably in the subject “l’un et l’autre,” which ends with “avons quelque chose à nous apprendre.” Here, the two of them merge in the reflexive pronoun *nous*, becoming indistinguishable, reciprocal, and thereby sharing linguistic agency and receptivity. This reciprocity carries over into the action *apprendre*. Finally, *nous étions liés* connects them as a unified subject, therefore linguistically reproducing in the text the situation described. Interestingly, the final sentence, which closes the paragraph, reverts to the impersonal, general subject implied by *il fallait l’accepter*. Who needed to accept this? Her? Him? The family? The reader? All potential subjects are, at the same time, included in – and rendered invisible by – this grammar. In this passage, *je*’s narration of the aftermath of her encounter with this man demonstrates how the experience was processed and encoded into memory.

The second half of this chapter tells the story of what transpired in the orange grove that day, primarily in the *imparfait* with occasional uses of the *passé composé* and *plus-que-parfait*. This strategy underscores the largely sensorial impact of this experience; the significance of action is minimal, yet noteworthy. *Je* begins by describing the light filtering down through the trees and the feeling of cool grass under their feet. She then continues to explain how she and her sister believed they were alone because they heard nothing:

Nous ne savions pas qu’il nous regardait, on se sentait seules au monde, juste nous deux, ma sœur et moi, dans le silence de l’été, qui figeait l’air. Le bruit de la ville ne remontait plus à nous, en fermant les yeux, on se croyait sur une autre

planète. C'était à cause de cela, le décolllement. L'absence de souvenirs précis. Il y avait juste un point qui absorbait tous les autres points. C'était l'odeur. (70-71)

The primary sense here is smell, as *je* goes on to delineate “l'odeur des oranges, de l'herbe et du soleil” followed by “l'odeur de quelque chose que je ne connaissais pas, l'odeur du désir mais je n'en étais pas sure, alors je ne disais rien” (71). The curious phrases “l'odeur du soleil” and “l'odeur du désir” underscore how *je* takes a feeling like warmth or an impulse like desire and transmutes it into the sensory moment as an aroma.

A comprehensive shift in tense in the final paragraphs of the chapter differentiates this section from the descriptive nature of the sensory moment that precedes it. To illustrate my point, I will reproduce here the first sentence of each of the chapter's paragraphs in the order in which they appear:

On ne savait pas qui il était, d'où il venait, s'il était de passage à Alger ou s'il vivait près de chez nous. . . .

On savait qu'il parlait français, qu'il portait un costume et une chemise . . .

Ma sœur disait qu'il ne portait aucune violence en lui. . . .

On ne se souvenait pas assez de lui pour établir un portrait-robot auprès de la police, pour lancer des recherches dans la ville . . .

L'homme devenait tous les hommes d'Alger, marchant dans mon ombre et dans nos rêves. . . .

Nous jouions à l'orangerie, les arbres empêchaient le soleil de passer, c'était beau, c'était la nuit dans le jour, une nuit traversée d'éclats, l'herbe était fraîche sous nos pieds, on avait retiré nos chaussures. . . . Était-il appuyé contre un

arbre, ou caché, avait-il fumé une cigarette avant, était-il connu des services de police, des autres enfants de la ville ? . . .

Nous avons eu le bon réflexe, enfin surtout ma sœur, de crier et de s'enfuir, loin de lui, crier et s'enfuir, il fallait toujours agir de la sorte. . . . Ma sœur a couru vers nous, me tirant par l'épaule, me faisant un peu mal. . . . (69-72)

The first five paragraphs establish the background information surrounding the event, the general understanding of what transpired (the impersonal quality of this information is underscored by the repetition of the pronoun *on*), and the role *je*'s sister played in establishing the knowledge of this man. When the subject pronoun shifts to *nous* in "nous jouions dans l'orangerie" the reader is transported into the space where the event occurred, as though through the effect of a camera's zoom or a pair of binoculars. While focused on this space, we experience a sense of dreamy stillness, reinforced by the importance of smell as previously discussed. Then, when the next paragraph begins to ask questions about the man, it interrupts the suspended quality of the scene in the orange grove, obliging the reader to reflect on the questions *je* poses ("Était-il appuyé contre un arbre, ou caché, avait-il fumé une cigarette avant, était-il connu des services de police, des autres enfants de la ville ?"). The passage continues to narrate the interactions between *je* and the man. Notably, she did not resist his touch, following him without protest. Lastly, the final paragraph relates how *je* was rescued by her sister. In these lines, we return to the significance of smell, which now stands in for the action's of *je*'s sister as the fragrance of her perfume displaces the organic smells of this space ("l'odeur des oranges, de l'herbe et du soleil . . . l'odeur du désir"). *Je* writes:

[Ma sœur] m'a pris dans ses bras, puis elle a crié. Son cœur contre ma poitrine.
Son odeur d'eau de Cologne « Bien-Être », la bouteille verte avec les fleurs

blanches sur ma peau. Il n’y avait plus rien de lui. Plus rien. . . . Je me suis laissé emporter par ma sœur comme j’aurais pu me laisser emporter par l’homme, à cause de l’odeur des fleurs, de la nuit éclatée de soleil, du silence. Incroyable silence qui tombait sur l’herbe comme de la pluie. (71-72)

Here, the text presents a color-focused visual description of the perfume bottle as opposed to a description that privileges the smell of the perfume. So although the text emphasizes the significance of the fragrance in encoding the memory of this experience, smell is rendered through a visual lexicon. Moreover, this fragrance is attributed a corporeal dimension that touches *je*, in the same way that she comes into contact with her sister’s body – a body that distances her from the man.

My analysis of this chapter has shown that temporality relates to experientiality and guides the reader’s interpretation. In addition, we have observed how certain passages that foreground the sensory moment are interspersed with passages that focus on non-sensorial action and reflection. This kind of temporal differentiation does occur elsewhere in the text, both in the fashion we have studied it here⁸² and, on occasion, as an isolated word in a vignette primarily narrated in the *imparfait*. As a point of contrast to marked temporal differentiation, let us now address consistent narration in the *imparfait* and how it relates to aestheticization.

Part 2: Aestheticization and the Sensory Moment

In contrast to the narrative style of “L’homme, Alger 1972,” other chapters of *Nos baisers sont des adieux* are written in an invariable tense: the *imparfait*. This strategy underscores the sensory moment and serves to fully aestheticize the recollection of memory. In

⁸² For an additional example that functions similarly to “L’homme, Alger 1972,” see “Le jupon rouge, Paris 1987” (104-108).

“L’homme, Alger 1972,” we witnessed this technique sporadically and to a lesser degree, for example, in the description of the orange grove. Other chapters in the book, however, present experiences with such a clear and unwavering focus on the sensory moment that they aestheticize the memory presented. This process is supported by both the *imparfait* and the abundant imagery of the passages in question. Moreover, some of these vignettes exhibit a similar format to the presentation of the works of art in the book, and thereby suggest that memory, too, has a frame and a composition.

An example that strikingly demonstrates aestheticization, interestingly, bears the same location and year as the passage just discussed, while offering a vastly different thematic content. From its opening lines, the vignette entitled “La première fois, Alger 1972,” borrows from a visual arts lexicon to relate an experience of arousal: “Le langage glissant de la scène, ne pouvant la résumer ni la rapporter, il n’y avait pas de cadre pour cela, les reliefs étaient flous, les limites absentes, c’était un état, impliquant le corps et non la parole” (24). The text announces the disappearance of language and its inadequacy at expressing this experience. The words *cadre* and *reliefs* evoke the idea of a work of art, however, it is not a two-dimensional composition, but rather a transcendent, corporeal experience.

Next, *je*’s room is situated in relationship to the city and the port, and the light entering the room is described: “le soleil faisait des raies sur le carrelage, ces raies reviendraient dans chaque livre. C’était une lumière particulière, qui encerclait mon corps, une lumière de poudre” (24). *Je*’s metatextual reference, in the *conditionnel présent* to the inclusion of these rays of light in her books places this memory in conversation with the rest of her oeuvre through the medium of sunlight as represented and reproduced in this textual space. Although the light is described from *je*’s perspective, this focus also guides the reader’s eye. The figure of a young *je*

surrounded by light holds a central place in this tableau, as though the light is emanating from her, while the word *poudre* suggests a soft, gentle quality, which attributes a positive connotation to the experience.

The narration continues to state in the *imparfait* that *je* was sleeping in shorts and a tank top. The rest of the chapter also uses the *imparfait*, beginning with a nontraditional usage in the first sentence: “Cela arrivait au réveil. Je gardais le souvenir d’un état plein, il ne manquait rien, sauf les mots qui ne pouvaient couvrir l’explosion du ventre, l’ivresse (recherché par la suite), l’étonnement, puis une tristesse, douce et inédite” (24). The verb *arriver* in the *imparfait* takes the action of an occurrence and suspends it, prolongs it infinitely and indefinitely. Whereas it might be tempting to read this as a habitual action (how things *used* to take place), this interpretation contrasts with the title of the chapter, “La première fois,” which communicates the specificity of a uniquely remarkable initial experience of arousal. The effect of employing the *imparfait* to relate this experience invites the reader to step into the scene as an observer and to witness this protracted moment. It is a moment of pleasure, pleasure linked to knowledge – knowledge to which we are now privy – as stated in the chapter’s final line: “Ce plaisir recouvrait tout, il avait un rapport avec le savoir” (24). Fludernik has shown, in her analysis of alternation between the present and the preterite in *The English Patient*, that “the narrative evokes a kind of filmic stasis by making fuzzy the distinction between habituality and singularity” (129). In this chapter of *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, and in others like it, we see an analogous phenomenon related to the predominance of the *imparfait* in the text. In “La première fois, Alger 1972” a punctual event is suspended and stretched out, which grants the reader access to the sensory moment *je* relates.⁸³ In this vignette, *je* experiences her own body and the space it

⁸³ This experience of narrative presence parallels Roland Barthes’ well-known reflections on photographic presence in which he experiences an encounter with his mother through her photograph (as opposed to viewing a

inhabits. Moreover, the text aestheticizes this experience through its imagery and narration in the *imparfait*. Other vignettes in the book employ similar strategies, but with a focus on *je*'s relation to others in which the significance of setting is minimized.

Aestheticization of Relation

This section focuses on the aestheticization of *je*'s relation to others, and the ways in which the relevance of space is minimized in order to highlight interpersonal relations against a spatial backdrop. We will begin by considering an important relationship in the book: the romance between *je* and Sasha. The book's opening chapter is also its only repeated title, "Sasha, Paris 2009," which appears fourteen times and focuses on *je*'s romantic relationship with Sasha. In this initial iteration, *je* highlights the tension between word and image: "Il n'y avait aucun intrus, aucun jeu de rôle, aucune image qui s'interposait. Il n'y avait aucune force ou soumission, aucune mise en scène ou décor, aucun secret" (9). Interestingly, the book reworks this tension between word and image through its textual depictions of the visual, its ekphrasis, as discussed by Rocca. In this initial chapter, Bouraoui's *je* draws attention to the relationship between the visual and the linguistic, and calls into question their capacity to represent lived experience. She writes that there is "aucune image qui s'interposait. . . . aucune mise en scène ou décor" a series of substantives belonging to a visual lexicon, and continues: "À chaque fois je me demandais s'il était possible d'en faire le récit, s'il existait des mots, une narration du plaisir, ou si la jouissance

representation of her). Barthes writes: "Je crois qu'en agrandissant le détail « en cascade » . . . je vais enfin arriver à l'être de ma mère. Ce que Marey et Muybridge ont fait, comme *opérateurs*, je veux le faire, moi, comme *spectator* : je décompose, j'agrandis, et , si l'on peut dire : je *ralentis*, pour avoir le temps de *savoir* enfin" (*La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* 155). Here, Barthes' language muddles the distinction between temporality and spatiality, such that enlarging an image (which takes up a relative amount of space) becomes a means of slowing time. In this regard, the phrase "je ralentis" relates both to the object that is slowed down by the shifting image (the mother in her ephemerality) and to the slowing down of the author who, through his relation to this image, comes to finally *know* (*savoir* enfin). It is also worth noting that both Bouraoui's *je* and Barthes relate the slowing of time to the idea of knowledge or knowing through the notion of (*le*) *savoir*, a morpheme that carries the trace of the verb *voir* ("to see").

échappait au langage parce qu'elle était un abandon de tout" (9). Here, *je*'s metatextual reflection on the possibility of language to communicate lived experience hinges on its narrative capacities, not on its descriptive capacities, as denoted by the words *récit* and *narration*. Rocca has equated the text to a "scrapbook . . . with short, evocative descriptions of people, places, objects, and works of visual art" (1). Extending Rocca's analogy, my analyses engage how the text's narrative lens relates to the reproduction of sensory moments.

The recurring figure of Sasha is accompanied by descriptions of the settings that provide a frame for her romance with *je* – Sasha's bedroom, the streets of Paris, and even the virtual space of Facebook. Some of these descriptions serve to catalogue their environment in the most objective way: "Se rendre au supermarché, au tabac, à la boulangerie, au café, au restaurant, à la station-service, au distributeur. . . . Marcher dans les rues de Paris, en portant notre désir comme un secret qui devenait encore plus excitant quand nous le confrontions au monde courant" (52). In this example, there is nothing to distinguish these spaces from any other. They are marked as meaningful simply because *je* and Sasha pass through them together, but there is nothing to distinguish one place from another. Which is to say that their value is dependent on the love relationship rather than the relationship being shaped by these places. The lack of spatial differentiation here contrasts sharply with the specificity of desire experienced between *je* and Sasha. Moreover, whereas the initial vignette names that there is *aucun secret* between them in their intimacy and *jouissance*, here their desire is described metaphorically as a secret that becomes increasingly exciting when it interfaces with the everyday world (9). The use of the verb *confronter* in this sentence carries multiple meanings that further underscore the uniqueness of this desire; in being exposed to the world, the excitement grows – because of the thrill of making visible something so intimate – and this intimacy is also viewed as more exceptional in

contrast with the banality of the outside world. Or rather, the lack of specificity in descriptions of the outside world creates a backdrop upon which the intensity and motion of *je*'s romance with Sasha is all the more striking. Their relation is moving, both emotionally and spatially; it is *(é)mouvant*.

Elsewhere, *je* recounts how Sasha's experience of places they frequent is altered by their movement through that space. For example, one chapter tells of Sasha coming to pick *je* up in Monceau Park. In this passage, as in the rest of the book, usage of the *imparfait* adds a descriptive, continuous, background quality to actions that are traditionally described with the *passé composé* or *passé simple*, such as "Elle m'offrait un disque qu'elle avait gravé" (23). *Offrait* suspends the act of gifting the burned CD such that this action becomes part of the aestheticized sensory moment between *je* and Sasha that is reproduced narratively. Conversely, the fact that Sasha had burned the CD prior to this encounter ("un disque qu'elle avait gravé") falls outside of the sensory moment. The opening line of this vignette, "Elle venait me chercher à l'entrée du parc Monceau," therefore, ensconces this encounter in the scenery of the space (23). *Je* corroborates that the park is forever informed by their exchange, but she does not specify in what way it is different. In recounting Sasha's subsequent actions and perspective, *je* writes: "À chaque fois qu'elle passait devant le parc, elle m'en envoyait l'image par le biais de son téléphone, ajoutant qu'elle n'en aurait plus jamais la même vision" (23). Here the significance of the visual has many layers; the past is represented like a visual description and the visual experience of the space is informed by the past.

In chapters that take place in Sasha's bedroom, the setting is entangled with an imagined one as *je* engages the storybook quality of their romance. Interestingly, the reader learns nothing of Sasha's physical characteristics and very little of the room itself. Rather, in one example, the

detailed descriptions of an imagined setting contribute to a sensorial and emotional understanding of the scene cued by visuals belonging to an entirely different environment: nature. In this way, the imagined space imparts aesthetic qualities to the relation between the women, but in and of itself is transmutable and replaceable. *Je* writes:

Quand je fermais les yeux, les murs de sa chambre devenaient des falaises.
J’entendais le vent dans les feuilles des arbres hauts, nos corps dans la chaleur se transformaient en héros d’argent. . . . Le désir traçait des spirales. Nous glissions l’une sur l’autre sans tomber, notre équilibre était parfait. Nos nuits étaient des aubes, nos jours des soirées, nous vivions à l’envers du temps. Quand je la quittais, je ne savais jamais si j’allais la retrouver. Si le silence allait nous ensevelir comme du sable. Nos baisers ressemblaient souvent à des adieux. (21)

This passage establishes a series of oppositions – architecture and geography, day and night, closeness and separation – evoking a sense of transcendence that remains, nevertheless, strikingly impersonal.

A second bedroom scene reiterates elements from the first – *je* and Sasha’s bodies in the warm summer breeze – while *je* directly reflects on the fairytale quality of their romance: “Parfois je pensais que c’était une histoire. Parfois je pensais que c’était une aventure. Les deux hypothèses me plaisaient” (115). In these lines, thinking is linked to narration and intrigue as well as to pleasure. Elsewhere, while returning home from Sasha’s in a taxi, *je* delineates the spaces she has inhabited (“l’espace que j’avais occupé”) – the garage, elevator, living room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, garden – like a panorama or patchwork floor plan of Sasha’s home, “comme les preuves d’une histoire que je n’arrivais pas à posséder en entier” (82). Again, these spaces are not individualized, but rather simply catalogued as having been occupied. Playing on

the double meaning of *histoire* – translated in French as both a history or a story (which could be a love story or an affair⁸⁴) – once physically separated from Sasha, *je* exists alongside their romance and does not manage to occupy it fully: “Nous construisions une fable qui n’existait qu’à l’instant où nous la vivions. En un sens, nous étions contemporaines de notre amour” (82). *Je* calls attention to the ephemeral nature of their experience at the same time as she textually reproduces a series of sensory moments characteristic of their relation in a way that emphasizes ephemerality. This preoccupation with capturing the moment is emphasized when *je* talks about photographing Sasha: “Je la photographiais pour capturer son visage et l’espace qui l’entourait. J’étais dans une démarche du souvenir alors que je ne l’avais pas encore perdue. Je multipliais ses images, en vue d’un manque prochain” (123). In this example, there is a focus on the visual, but it is a metarepresentational reflection on the visual rather than a description of visual qualities. Here, *je* endeavors to reproduce textually not what is seen, but how she relates to what is seen.

The chapters focused on Sasha contrast with the other chapters of the book because they offer comparatively sparse visual description. This distinction is striking in that, overwhelmingly, the book provides one of two things: 1) aestheticized descriptions of sensory moments that rely on visual imagery and 2) descriptions of visual works of art. Even the chapters focusing on *je*’s relationships with other people are much more visual than those dealing with Sasha. How might we interpret this distinction? As a point of contrast, let us consider the first chapter that bears the title of a woman other than Sasha, “Esther, Paris 1994.” This vignette begins with the qualification of a burn on *je*’s face as “minor” (*pas grave*) followed by Esther’s commentary, which establishes an analogy between the skin of the face and one’s life (narrative):

⁸⁴ Thank you to Richard Goodkin for pointing out that *histoire* could indeed be translated as an affair.

Un visage c'était toute la vie contenue et même si ce n'était qu'une jeunesse qui tenait là, c'était déjà une histoire et une histoire c'était à chaque fois un début d'amour, et l'on ne pouvait pas brûler les traces d'amour, disait Esther, parce que c'étaient comme des filaments qui pouvaient donner naissance à d'autres débuts et ne pas soigner son visage, c'était abîmer son avenir ou ses souvenirs amoureux. La peau du visage était sacrée. (14)

Here, the face is described metaphorically as a (hi)story and, paradoxically, as both the future (*avenir*) and memories of the past (*souvenirs*). The qualifier *contenue* in the expression *la vie contenue* calls to mind the opposition between spatiality and temporality at play in the text, by riffing on the old adage *la vie continue* ("life goes on").⁸⁵ This paranomasia suggests that *je* searches for a means through which the passage of time slows down and comes to a halt, such that the depth and complexity of an entire life might be contained (*contenue*) in a single moment: a moment captured in a face and, moreover, captured in narration.

The passage continues by referencing the two pharmacies open in Paris at 5:30 AM and bridges into a description of Esther's body, the body of a heroine user⁸⁶: "La dope (c'était son mot) l'avait enfermée dans un corps métallique. Tout était devenu dur en elle. Ses os des broches, son sang de la pierre. Elle se sentait comme un objet. Et parfois moins qu'un objet" (14). Esther's anatomy – her body, bones and blood – is portrayed as inorganic materials such that she becomes, like a bronze sculpture, "un corps métallique." The metaphor of her bones as rods contrasts with the next image: that of her blood as stone. While this analogy does reinforce her attestation of everything having become hard (*dur*) inside her, it also removes the circulatory

⁸⁵ Once again I express my indebtedness to Richard Goodkin for calling attention to the opposition between the spatial and the temporal as highlighted by the expression *la vie contenue*.

⁸⁶ The reader might note an intertext with *la Fille à l'héroïne* in *Mes mauvaises pensées*.

function of blood, rendering her body stagnant, depriving it of movement and fluidity. Through these descriptions, the reader views Esther (through the narration of how she experiences herself as told by *je*), as one would view a mixed-media sculpture: metal and stone. This view of Esther's body as rigid and tense is in opposition to the language used to relate her experience of shooting up:

Elle disait s'être piquée toute seule. Elle avait la main. Et cela l'ennuyait.

L'habitude et l'absence de peur. Elle plongeait seule, d'un monde à l'autre . . .

Elle voulait partir. Mais elle revenait. Toujours. Ce n'était pas la chance. C'étaient les événements de l'existence qu'elle comparait aux vagues scélérates. On ne savait jamais ce qui pouvait venir, arriver. Jamais. (15)

Here, the hardness of the body contrasts with the vibrancy and movement of the drug-induced state into which Esther enters. This fluidity is highlighted by the verb *plonger*, which strongly connotes an aqueous environment. Moreover, the direct comparison between life's events (*les événements de l'existence*) and rogue waves (*vagues scélérates*) further emphasizes the contrast between liquid and solid in this passage and, at the same time, underscores the unpredictability of life. The paradoxical usage of the adverbs *toujours* and *jamais*, which frame the expression *vagues scélérates*, reinforces this contrast.

As the decision is made to visit the pharmacy on the Champs, *je* explains that she need not be concerned about the late hour because Esther knows how to protect her if anything violent were to arise:

Elle était armée. Je n'avais qu'à ouvrir la boîte à gants si je ne la croyais pas. . . .

Elle disait que c'était un petit calibre mais qu'il pouvait faire de jolis dégâts.

Quand elle a dit jolis, elle savait que cela n'allait pas avec le mot dégâts. Mais elle

n'a rien ajouté. J'ai pris l'objet noir dans ma main. C'était lourd et épais. Après, j'ai eu l'image d'un sexe d'homme. (15)

This passage reverses the descriptions of Esther's body that move from the organic to the inorganic. The gun – a hard, metallic, inorganic object – prompts *je* to envisage male genitals. Whereas the notion of phallus as weapon is a recurring figure in Bouraoui's work, this example is unique because the gun prompts the anatomical imagery and not the other way around.⁸⁷ In addition, temporal differentiation in this chapter is emblematic of the traditional distinction between background descriptions and punctual action; the *passé composé* emphasizes how Esther's words direct the reader's perspective (against the backdrop of the *imparfait*) in the same way that a painter's usage of light directs the viewer's gaze. This passage is also a good example of how one vignette often connects to the next through a thematic element, which is the topic to which we now turn.

Ekphrasis and Narrative, Narrative and Aesthetics

The final section of this chapter looks specifically at ekphrastic descriptions of works of art in the text and how ekphrasis relates to *je*'s narration of the sensory moment. In the weapon-as-genitals example just discussed, the final line reads: “Le ciel était mauve avant le jour” (15). Given the context – which is emotional, impulsive and infused with imagery both sexual and violent – the color *mauve* becomes entangled with this thematic, encoded with the tension inherent in such a weapon, whose force is linked to the opposition between vitality and mortality. The brief yet particularly rich chapter that follows, “Un dessin de Tracey Emin, Venise 2007,” which provides a description of a drawing, picks up this thread and further complicates it:

⁸⁷ Rocca has cited this passage as an example of “ weapons metaphorically stand[ing] for penetration” (14).

L'encre et la peinture se traversaient sans se mélanger. Cela me faisait penser au rapport des os et de la peau, les premiers se cachant sous la seconde. La peinture était mauve foncé, presque noire à l'image du sang séché. C'était un grand format. Sous le trait à l'encre surgissait le premier trait au crayon. L'encre était un trait définitif sur lequel on ne pouvait revenir. Qui ne pouvait se modifier. Comme une coupure au scalpel. C'était une femme couchée, une cuisse relevée, l'autre pas. Le sexe n'était pas dessiné mais on savait. Il n'y avait aucun visage, c'était juste le corps, l'invasion.

Un corps dessiné après une jouissance que l'on imaginait violente. Le papier kraft faisait penser à la peau, les taches à la chair nue. (16)

Je's descriptions of Emin's mixed-media work of art, quite fittingly, rely on mixed linguistic registers that establish a textual consubstantiality between the anatomical body and the artistic production. The relationship between ink and paint in the composition makes *je* think about how skin covers our bones. Because the reader's awareness is focused on this layering, which is scaffolded by the terms "first" (*premiers*) and "second" (*seconde*), the structure invites the reader into the body, to transgress – through narrative – the boundary provided by skin. Interestingly, the work in question is itself a representation of a human body. And the color of the work, *mauve foncé*, is further qualified as "presque noire à l'image du sang séché." In the previous chapter, mauve is the color of the sky before dawn, from which we infer that the mauve will become lighter and lighter as the sun moves towards its zenith; the color is dynamic and changing. Here, however, the mauve is described not only as dark and almost black, but also "in the *image* of dried blood" ("à l'image du sang séché"). Because this blood has already dried, its color is now

fixed, impervious to the passage of time and, therefore, in opposition to the plasticity of the color mauve in the previous chapter.

Another notable example of ekphrasis⁸⁸, “La Fresque, Paris 1996,” directly follows “La première fois, Alger 1972,” the pleasure-focused scene discussed earlier. In quasi-juxtaposition with “La première fois, Alger 1972,” “La Fresque, Paris 1996” describes a grotesquely erotic drawing that *je* creates twenty-four years after the experience related in “La première fois.” The light, warmth and gentleness of this earliest experience of arousal is, in “La Fresque,” replaced by dark and chaotic imagery and interspecies eroticism with violent undertones. Words like *mélange*, *chaos*, *orgie*, and *folie* qualify the drawing and *je*’s approach to producing it: “Mes idées se mélangeant dans ma tête, comme les représentations, à la fois naïves et monstrueuses. . . . J’allais toujours plus loin, par jeu, par excitation, sans censure ni morale” (25). Whereas “La première fois,” portrayed arousal in a positive, self-referential, and orderly fashion in which pleasure is linked to knowledge, in “La Fresque,” the word *érotique* describes a scene as *monstrueuse* as “La première fois” was serene. The syntax of this passage imitates the randomness of a drawing executed on multiple sheets of paper held together with Scotch tape. One paragraph describes how figures in the drawing relate to each other, linking them all in one long sentence with many clauses: “Un rat mordait le sexe d’un homme qui lui-même léchait la gueule d’un chien qui se serrait contre le ventre d’une femme tenant dans sa main un oiseau qui ressemblait à une verge tendue ou à une arme pour se défendre” (25). Here, the repetition of the relative pronoun *qui* along with the *gérondif* form *tenant* establish links between the various animals in the scene and the specific body parts that bring them into contact. Interestingly, *je* describes the bird the woman is holding as resembling either an erect penis or a weapon. This

⁸⁸ For additional ekphrastic descriptions of works of art, see pages 3; 18; 39; 42; 50; 51; 77; 83 and 88.

recurring correlation between weapons and male genitals also lends a circular structure to this description (which begins with the image of a rat biting a man's penis), and thereby further reinforces the self-propelling motion and illogical composition of the drawing described. In this way, *je*'s prose recasts a drawing in writing and, at the same time, transmits the sense of *excitation*⁸⁹ with which *je* relates to the production of this drawing.

Although *chaos*, *monstrueuses* and *arme* carry a negative, even violent, connotation, by anchoring them in an ekphrastic description of a drawing – a drawing that is limited by the edges of the collaged sheets of paper – Bouraoui's *je* mitigates the impact of these words and their associations. This passage thus exemplifies how an unstable moment can be fixed through aestheticization. Analogously, the narrative is contained within a single page where it coexists as a sensory moment alongside other moments in the book – moments full of pleasure, desire, wonder and love, and sometimes also violence and fear. In this way, Bouraoui's text asks the reader to remain present with the sensory moment of a given vignette – to observe its intricacies – and to approach with equanimity what is pleasant or unpleasant about this moment until it is displaced by the next.

This analysis of *Nos baisers sont des adieux* has demonstrated how narrative experientiality and aestheticization work together to foreground the sensory moment. Moreover, we have seen how this focus on the sensory moment blurs the distinction between the text's narration of specific events and its ekphrastic descriptions of works of art. In this way, *Nos baisers sont des adieux* challenges us to examine the relationship between our lived experiences and how we make meaning of these experiences by crafting narratives about them. Overall, the text's performative force troubles the opposition between the aesthetic (visual) and the narrative

⁸⁹ In French, *excitation* connotes both enthusiasm and sexual arousal.

(aural), and this strategy allows the reader to experience a vast array of thematic content, while cultivating a sense of equanimity and presence that relies on the neutralizing – though never banalizing – effects of aestheticization.

CONCLUSION

L'Invitation au “pays des mots”

L'écrit ça arrive comme le vent, c'est nu, c'est de l'encre, c'est l'écrit, et ça passe comme rien d'autre ne passe dans la vie, rien de plus, sauf elle, la vie.

– Marguerite Duras⁹⁰

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

– Audre Lorde⁹¹

In this dissertation, I have demonstrated an approach to reading Nina Bouraoui that values the performative force of her texts and the ways in which performativity establishes a sense of narrative presence. Through their performative force, *Garçon manqué*, *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Nos baisers sont des adieux* invite the reader to inhabit Bouraoui's “pays des mots.” My introduction draws on theories of performativity in order to locate Bouraoui in a tradition of queer women's writing in French that includes the now canonical work of Monique Wittig and

⁹⁰ *Écrire* 53.

⁹¹ “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” 37.

Hélène Cixous. In doing this, I have also correlated literary performativity to queerness as a way of writing that resists and revises normative textual models, as opposed to limiting queerness to identity politics. My analyses of Wittig and Cixous show that despite their theoretical differences, they share a common goal of transforming the world through writing. Nina Bouraoui's books contribute to this project.

Chapter one provides a detailed analysis of linguistic and narrative structures in *Garçon manqué* that is transferrable to the body of Bouraoui's oeuvre. Insofar as postcolonial violence is perpetuated through language, the chapter looks in particular both at how language usage relates to violence, resistance and agency, and at how language can be used to refute and transform the impact of this violence. For example, in the book's opening scene when *je* and Amine are not acknowledged by the men speaking Arabic on the beach, *je* writes "ils passent près de nos corps" and "nous n'existons pas" (10). This attention to language sets the tone for the book as the reader witnesses how the men's presence fractures the two youths' sense of belonging in this space. Expanding on this initial analysis, the chapter explores the significance of active and passive verbs, anaphoric repetition, parallelisms and antitheses, and the interplay of subjects and objects. We notice how a nuance in prepositions such as the distinction between "par ma mère" and "avec mon père" relates to *je*'s sense of subjugation or empowerment alongside her parents when they frequent public spaces in Algiers (14; 25). Elsewhere, the profuse repetition of *avec* replicates the pressure *je* feels in a moment of crisis and self-doubt (54).

This chapter also shows how *Garçon manqué* disrupts conventional notions of personhood, with an emphasis on gender, ethnicity and migration. This disruption is enacted through the book's linguistic and narrative strategies, which attest to the relationship between narrative and identity. With this in mind, the chapter integrates theories of the narrative

construction of identity and the ways in which narrative can be used to resist dominant, oppressive narratives such as heterosexism, Eurocentricity and patriarchy (Nelson, White & Epston). For example, *je* responds to racist insults directed at her father at a bus stop in France by transforming her initial silence into writing: “Bien sûr qu’il ne fallait pas répondre. Je trouverai mieux. Je l’écrirai. C’est mieux, ça, la haine de l’autre écrite et révélée dans un livre. J’écris” (136). Here, the use of verb tenses guides the reader through the narration of the memory, *je*’s reflections on how best to respond, and her engagement in the act of writing itself. At the same time as these strategies reveal how language reflects the everyday trauma of *je*’s experience, they also demonstrate how she wields language in order to respond to her environment and complex and shifting sense of self. The chapter establishes a unique grammar for reading Bouraoui, and its analyses of her style are useful in considering how key narratives and central tensions are reworked elsewhere in her oeuvre.

Chapter two examines how the tensions and traumas presented in *Garçon manqué* are reworked in *Mes mauvaises pensées* through the book’s fluid textuality – its *écriture qui saigne*, to borrow the book’s own metaphor. The chapter begins with a discussion of contemporary trauma theory and Buberian existentialism that sheds light on how Buber’s notion of the “sphere of between” relates to exposure to – and transformation of – trauma. My analyses show how *je* comes to negotiate the aspects of her past in Algeria that disrupt her present in Paris. For *je*, violence is connected such that one troubling memory or image triggers a barrage of memories and images that may or may not directly relate. For example, at the beginning of the book, when she hears an accordion player performing a song that reminds her of Algiers, she is subjected to a deluge of images that psychologically overwhelm her – and this experience is mirrored on a linguistic level as *je* is described as “rattrapée,” “envahie,” and “dépassée” (18). Conversely, at

the end of the book, when *je* hears the accordion player, she writes: “Il joue des chansons qui me font penser à vous, à nous” . . . (211). At the same time as this line addresses the success of her therapy with *docteur C*, it also acknowledges the role the reader (*vous*) has played in bearing witness to the narrative transformation of trauma the book enacts.

In addition to the ways *je* repairs her own traumas through the narrative, the performative nature of *écriture qui saigne* coupled with *je*'s deep sensitivity allow her to take on other people's traumas and to transform them as well. For example, she counters her grandfather's cruelty towards her mother (his words: “Mets-toi un truc sur ta tête”) by recasting her mother in a narrative that focuses on her “beau visage” (159; 160). The chapter draws on theories of narrative empathy (Keen) and Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine*, expanding it in light of the text's notion of *je* as *sujet-buvard*. In doing so, it shows how *je*'s writing achieves what it names: “il y a une écriture de l'histoire familiale, parce que ces histoires font aussi partie de moi, je suis le sujet-buvard” (197).

Finally, chapter three explores the significance of aestheticization and the sensory moment in *Nos baisers sont des adieux* to show how writing becomes a space of presence and equanimity where memories and art can coexist as beauty – independent of thematic content that might otherwise render them traumatic, erotic, or inconsequential. The chapter integrates narrative theory that focuses on issues of temporality and experientiality in order to establish how tense relates not only to *je*'s experience, but also to the reader's experience. My analyses show that because the text is narrated largely in the *imparfait*, and many of these usages are unusual, narration is correlated to aesthetics such that a wide range of experiences sit neatly alongside ekphrastic descriptions of works of art. For example, we observe how the kidnapping attempt, which is a recurring scene in Bouraoui's work, is narrated in such a way that smells are

synesthetically transformed into visual descriptions: “Son odeur d’eau de Cologne « Bien-Être », la bouteille verte avec les fleurs blanches sur ma peau” (71). Elsewhere, an experience of arousal is narrated as though it were an ekphrastic description of a portrait: “le soleil faisait des rais sur le carrelage . . . C’était une lumière particulière, qui encerclait mon corps, une lumière de poudre” (24). This focus on the sensory moment blurs the distinction between the aesthetic and the narrative, promoting a sense of equanimity that challenges the reader to reflect on the power of narrative in making meaning of our lives.

It is my hope that this juxtaposition of three of Bouraoui’s books makes apparent not only the interconnectedness of these texts, but also the evolution of Bouraoui’s writing. Throughout the works studied here, we see a progression in how *je* wields language to relate to the world differently and, reciprocally, how her experiences continuously inform her usage of language. It is a centrifugal movement that shifts from a *je* who concentrates on her own inner conflict, to a *je* who is deeply enmeshed with others, to a *je* whose focus expands to encompass the world in which she and her loved ones exist. In *Garçon manqué*, we witness an inner fragmentation that links to conflicting family histories and the relationship between gender, nation and ethnicity. In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, this dynamic is reversed such that a previously fragmented *je* becomes overly connected, only able to transform through writing what she has absorbed from the world. And in *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, we explore how chronology and time relate to aesthetics and narration such that, through Bouraoui’s focus on the sensory moment, the text becomes an aesthetic space where memories and art coexist, superseding or transcending trauma and other internally divisive forces.

In addition to the significance of this progression, at the same time as recurring narrative threads and tensions are handled differently in each of the novels discussed here, the overlap and links between them provide important context that adds layers of meaning to the interpretation of any single work. It would be fruitful to expand this study to include close readings of the other books Bouraoui published in the same time frame as *Garçon manqué*, *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Nos baisers sont des adieux – La Vie heureuse* (2002), *Poupée Bella* (2004), *Avant les hommes* (2007), and *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* (2008) – all of which share common themes and characteristics. Bouraoui's oeuvre is particularly valuable as a space where the transformative potential of narrative can be investigated and better understood. *Je*'s negotiation of trauma throughout the texts highlights the role language plays in structuring our everyday lived experience and sense of belonging in the world. When considered together, the chapters of this dissertation not only offer innovative and detailed readings of three of Bouraoui's books, but also present a model for approaching contemporary texts whose formal manipulations resist interpretation by conventional methods. This approach highlights how close readings can contribute to trauma studies, queer theory and postcolonial studies. And it also reminds us of the importance of acknowledging the uniqueness of textual networks and the ways in which they might coalesce to create a "pays des mots."

With this in mind, I recall the words of Roland Barthes, whose book *Le Plaisir du texte* embraces its readers, enveloping them in the very experience of *jouissance* Barthes' prose describes. Barthes writes:

Ce que je goûte dans un récit, ce n'est donc pas directement son contenu ni même sa structure, mais plutôt les éraflures que j'impose à la belle enveloppe : je cours, je saute, je lève la tête, je replonge. Rien à voir avec la profonde déchirure que le

texte de jouissance imprime au langage lui-même, et non à la simple temporalité de sa lecture. (20)

As we have seen in this study of Nina Bouraoui, through literary performativity, the radical textuality of certain narratives contributes to queer world-making in very tangible ways, inciting a sort of active reading that endeavors to bridge the gap between academic discourses and lived experiences – between being queer in theory and being queer on the streets. Whereas theory and scholarship are read by relatively few people – and are often criticized for disenfranchising those they claim to serve – literary texts such as Bouraoui’s intervene in theoretical and philosophical dialogues. Indeed, part of what is *novel* about these books is that they actualize what most theory, by its very nature, can only imply – making it accessible and generally more appealing to a broader readership. In *tasting* such works of literature (“ce que je goûte dans un récit”), I discern the importance of language in poststructuralist and intersectional feminisms, conceive of gender as socially constructed and come to interrogate essentialist ways of thinking about what constitutes who we are as humans. Where does the *paysage* end and where do I/we begin? And how might we best put into action what books have to teach us about how to do things with our words?

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