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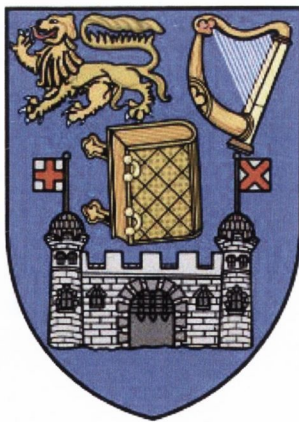
Literary Selfhood: Autofiction and the Construction of Personal Identity in the Work of Nina Bouraoui

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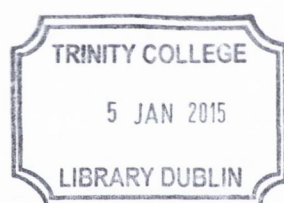
Trinity College Dublin

in partial fulfilment of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Rosie MacLachlan



2014



Thesis 10825

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Summary

The problem of “identity” forms a central theme of much contemporary French life-writing, and within recent work by women writers, and writers from other minority backgrounds, the autobiographical enterprise is often conceived of as not so much a representation of one’s life story, as the discovery, or even construction, of the writer’s selfhood. This is certainly the case for the Franco-Algerian lesbian writer Nina Bouraoui. Since publishing four successful novels in the 1990s, Bouraoui’s writing over the past fifteen years has repeatedly thematised her personal identity, which she has persistently and experimentally explored over a range of different autobiographical forms. In interview, Bouraoui has described her work as a form of “identity quest,” in which the writer attempts to resolve the difficulties of her problematic background through producing an alternative realm in which she feels comfortable. This thesis examines Bouraoui’s attempts to resolve her textual identity quest through analysing the interaction between autofiction and the construction of personal identity across nine of her most recent works. It proposes the notion of “literary selfhood” to describe the effect of Bouraoui’s retreat into the literary and the consequences of her textual identity quest for her extra-textual life.

Combining critical and literary theory on the importance of language to the construction of personal identity with a focused analysis on autofiction as a new and innovative form of life-writing, this thesis applies the radical literary theory of Monique Wittig, alongside the important contemporary queer theory of Judith Butler, to explain the effects of experimental literature on personal identity. Delineating three characteristics of “literary selfhood”—as “performative,” “narrative,” and “relational”—it argues that the selfhood which emerges from the textual encounter may best be described as “literary,” in order to emphasise the similarity of the construction of contemporary identity to the structures of both language and text.

This argument is pursued over a reading of Bouraoui’s texts, split into three thematic areas. In texts relating to her early life in Algeria, Switzerland, and France, Bouraoui

thematizes the development of her gendered and sexual identity. Across these works, writing is theorised as an “act of resistance,” a means for Bouraoui to respond to incidents of abuse and exclusion that she has experienced, and to appropriate for herself the right to self-expression and self-definition. At the same time, the writer returns to her Algerian childhood on several further occasions throughout her oeuvre, and three of her “Algeria texts” are read together in order to address Bouraoui’s repeated return to the same period and setting over a range of different forms. Across these works we discover that, particular as Bouraoui’s childhood experiences in Algeria were, the formative events to which she persistently returns have, in fact, much more universal bearing than expected, leading the writer to conclude that, over and beyond her troubled connection to Algeria, “l’enfance aussi est un pays.” In those texts set in the present day, meanwhile, Bouraoui’s own awareness of herself as a successful writer has a significant influence on the construction of her self-identity. Bouraoui has claimed in interview that “on écrit aussi pour les autres,” and the writer’s relationship to the textual encounter is analysed both for its impact on Bouraoui herself, and for how her work might potentially also influence her readers. This then leads into a wider consideration of the implications of Bouraoui’s textual re-writing of the self across her autofiction, and of how her own particular approach fits into the broader contemporary literary scene.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Claude and Vincenette Pichois Memorial Fund for the Research Award which has enabled me to carry out this study, as well as the Esther J. Luker and Maude Cobbe Bursary for allowing me to travel to Cambridge University to further my research in the Autumn of 2012.

Over the past three years the supervision of Professor Johnnie Gratton, together with the support of friends and colleagues in the Department of French, and School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultural Studies at Trinity College have been invaluable in providing a warm and stimulating environment for postgraduate study.

Prior to this, the support and guidance I received from St John's College, Oxford, as an undergraduate inspired me to begin this study, and I will always be grateful to the Oxford Access Scheme and the Richard Southern Bursary Award for allowing me to begin my journey through Higher Education.

Throughout this journey, I have been blessed with love and support from my wonderful friends and family and today, as every day, I am thankful to them.

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Introduction: “La seule terre que je maîtrise”

Longtemps, j'ai eu du mal à communiquer avec les autres. 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.

(Nina Bouraoui, “Écrire, c'est retrouver ses fantômes”)

Nina Bouraoui has described her work as an identity quest. A Franco-Algerian writer of mixed parentage, Bouraoui's early life was characterised by a series of identity problems, incorporating her ethnic background, her gender and sexuality, and an on-going sense of geographical displacement. Since publishing four successful novels in the 1990s, for the last fifteen years Bouraoui's work has explored this problematic sense of self, experimenting with a variety of autobiographical and fictional modes through which to construct a textual persona capable of resolving the issues experienced by her younger self. As the above statement, taken from a 2004 magazine interview, explains, Bouraoui's childhood in Algeria caused her to feel culturally dislocated, with her inability to speak the local language preventing her from communicating and identifying with other children. At the same time, as her self-referential works reveal, the young Bouraoui struggled to fulfil the conventional gender roles expected of a girl in Algeria, behaving instead as a “tomboy,” and growing up to identify as homosexual. From a situation of relative loneliness and detachment from those around her, therefore, Bouraoui describes her motivation to write as stemming from a need to recover from this period of silence, an urge to connect with others, and, through writing, to find a place for herself in the world.

Understanding life-writing as a form of identity quest which produces a textual space in which the writer can discover herself and begin to reach out to others, this thesis

will examine whether Bouraoui’s engagement with the form may take on a particular importance, helping not only to construct her textual persona—as another character in her own work—but potentially also shaping her extra-textual self. In this view, the construction of the writer’s personal identity may be conceived of as the result of a specific interaction with the literary, expressly motivated in Bouraoui’s case by her original position of marginality. How—and why—does Bouraoui respond to her personal identity problems by re-writing herself within her works? How successful is this response, and might it be politically positive, or is it just mere escapism? What is the relevance of “marginal” or “minority” identity in this case? Do such labels usefully apply to Bouraoui, and how might they affect the construction of her personal identity in language and literature? Considering the textual identities produced through Bouraoui’s work in the period 1999–2011, this thesis will seek to address these questions, examining the ways in which the engagement with self-referential writing may represent a crucial act of resistance to a number of contemporary problems—including race, gender, and social isolation—and investigating how literature might be, in Bouraoui’s words, the only medium through which the writer is able to formulate a coherent and manageable sense of self.

In this Introduction, we will begin by exploring the notion of literature as an “identity quest,” an idea which occurs not just within Bouraoui’s comments about her own work, but throughout much contemporary French women’s writing. In critical studies of this trend, the prevalence of such work among writers from minority backgrounds is particularly striking, and we shall address the question of minority identity, considering both the distinctive aspects of Bouraoui’s background and how she is situated within the contemporary literary scene. Having traced the importance of identity as a theme in scholarly work on both fiction and autobiography, we will then focus on the particular form with which Bouraoui engages—life-writing—considering the origins of autobiographical practice and innovative recent developments in the form relevant to Bouraoui’s work. In the fourth section of the chapter, we will turn specifically to a focus on Bouraoui, identifying which of her texts this thesis will examine, and exploring the writer’s background and career to date. The final part of

the chapter will then introduce the structure and content of the rest of this thesis, outlining the central themes and questions it will explore.

The "Identity Quest" in Contemporary French Women's Writing

In the introduction to her 2004 book, *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, a monograph investigating French women's writing published after 1990, Shirley Jordan writes, "While some of the questions they address are new, the overarching feature which dominates the work of women writers during this period is that of the 'identity quest'" (18). Prior to Bouraoui's description of writing as a means to help her establish her own identity, many other women writing in French had already sought to problematize identity in their work. As Jordan's comments suggest, this thematic interest in identity characterises women's writing both in the period since 1990 and throughout the decades preceding it, a fact recognised by critics throughout the recent history of scholarship in French women's writing. In 1989, for example, Adele King's *French Women Novelists* identified particular themes common to the work of various women writers, noting that "one major theme of women's writing is the problem of personal identity as experienced by women" (43). King analyses in detail the work of five twentieth-century women writers—Colette, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Yourcenar, Marguerite Duras, and Monique Wittig—and suggests that a common aim of women's writing is to establish an "emancipated self," with women publicly defining themselves in resistance to their historic cultural definition as merely man's other (43). In addition, in *Writing Wounds: The Inscription of Trauma in post-1968 French Women's Life-Writing* (2004) Kathryn Robson speaks of a "watershed" for women's writing in the period she addresses, proposing as one of its dominant themes "the quest for self-expression, to 'break out of silence', be it via fiction, autobiography, or hybrid forms of both" (14). Having long been marginalised from public life, and denied both political and social autonomy, women have until recently played a relatively minor part in the history of French literature, and the emergence of

significant numbers of widely-published and respected female writers in recent decades is a trend which has attracted considerable scholarly attention.¹

While King selects the writers on whom she chooses to focus for their work as novelists, her description of the form personal explorations of identity often take within their work resonates with the more autobiographical work of Bouraoui, and King explains, "The search for definition, and the uncertainty about the very existence of the self, might explain the frequent mixture of autobiography and fiction found in women's works (Colette's and Duras's for example)" (47). Here King's description of textual identity quests hints at a more fundamental level of self-exploration than the politically "emancipated self" already referred to. In addition to a public off-setting of historic marginalisation, women writers have frequently used their writing to explore existential doubts about the very coherence of personal identity.² This occurs as a persistent theme in both fiction and self-referential work by women, with Bouraoui one of the latest in a long line of writers to blur the distinction between these two forms. Writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, the work of Colette experimentally blends autobiography and fiction, for example in the 1928 work *La naissance du jour*, while several decades later, in 1983, Sarraute's memoir *Enfance* undermined autobiographical convention in problematizing the capacity of both memory and language to accurately convey her life-story. Contemporary with Nathalie Sarraute, the work of Marguerite Duras explores identity as a recurrent theme from the 1950s through to the early nineties, and contains highly intimate and psychoanalytically-influenced reflections, most notably in her 1984 autobiographical novel *L'Amant*. Writing from the seventies onwards, Annie Ernaux often takes a more ethnographic approach, representing her personal experiences for their potential

¹ Of course, women have written literary works throughout history, and examples of famous women writers may be found going back over several centuries of French literature. Historically, however, these women have been the exception rather than the rule. For an account of French women's literary history, see, among others: Sonya Stephens, ed., *A History of Women's Writing in France* (2000); Diana Holmes, *Women's Writing 1848-1994* (1996); Alison Finch, *Women's Writing in Nineteenth-Century France* (2000).

² Although we should not deny that writing by male writers sometimes explores similar themes, it is the particular connection between femaleness—alongside other "minority" or, more accurately, "historically marginalised" identity positions which interests us here, and this question will be discussed further in the following section of this chapter.

socio-historical value. Her contemporary Assia Djébar, an Algerian woman writer writing in French who thematises both gender and cultural identity in her work, is another notable voice to precede Bouraoui in the late twentieth century. Each of these women may therefore be seen as significant precursors, both to the increase of women's writing and publishing in the late twentieth century, and to the interest in explorations of identity which characterises the work of Bouraoui and other contemporary women writers like her.

After the publication of King's book in 1989, a number of critical works focused on women's writing emerged in the following years, recovering the previously neglected work of women writers through the history of modern French literature.³ In several of these accounts, explorations of personal identity continue to feature as an important theme. As Jordan's 2004 work reveals, however, following the critical flurry focusing on historic women's writing in the last years of the twentieth century, in more recent years scholarship on modern French women's writing has often tended to focus on a specific recent time frame, defined as "the contemporary."⁴ While King's study revealed certain existential doubts as to possibilities of personal identity among the twentieth-century women writers studied in her book, within more recent women's writing Jordan identifies a continued interest in questions of personal identity, explored in ever more nuanced and self-conscious modes. Jordan describes contemporary literary identity quests as typically involving: "Conspicuously heuristic and increasingly sophisticated self-constructions, as reader and writer alike acknowledge that the sense of self which protagonists and narrators seek is brought

³ Works published in this period include: Margaret Atack and Phil Powrie, *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives* (1990); Elizabeth Fallaize, *French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction* (1993); Jeanette Gaudet, *Writing Otherwise: Atlan, Duras, Giraudon, Redonnet, and Wittig* (1999); and Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize, *French Fiction in the Mitterrand years: Memory, Narrative, Desire* (2000).

⁴ The field of contemporary French women's writing owes much of its disciplinary coherence to the work of Gill Rye at the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Women's Writing within the University of London School of Advanced Studies. In recent years, the centre has organised a series of conferences and seminars using the "Contemporary French Women's Writing" designation, which has also featured in the title of books from Shirley Jordan (2005) and Gill Rye (2001, 2002), as well as numerous articles. Although the boundaries for inclusion within the period defined as "contemporary" are rarely steadfast, the centre's website does offer the following definition: "'Contemporary' includes literature published after 1968, with a preference for studies of post-1990 texts in any literary genre" (Rye).

into existence through writing, and takes shape as the text takes shape" (18–19). As with King, Jordan too focuses on women's novels, while acknowledging the progressive blurring of fictional and autobiographical genres within contemporary writing.⁵ Nonetheless, the notion, here, of one's sense of self being "brought into existence through writing" seems all the more apt with regard to autobiographical writing such as Bouraoui's.

While the work of Duras and Sarraute employed psychoanalytic themes, and troubled readers' understanding of language as a means for self-representation, the contemporary generation of writers has taken to heart the heritage of the post-structuralist period (discussed in Chapter One) in problematizing the very possibility of coherent personal identity. Of course, throughout literary history writers have used both fiction and autobiography to explore existential doubts as to the credibility and coherence of personal identity. Particularly within the last few decades of the twentieth century, however, these problematizations of selfhood came to converge into a strong thematic trend, prompted in large part by a corresponding situation in contemporary philosophy. The interrogation of the subject found in late twentieth-century critical theory and the psychoanalysis of preceding decades has impacted significantly on literary production, rendering "identity" an important subject not just for those occupying the margins—as women writers traditionally have—but for much of European literature overall.⁶ Nathalie Morello and Catherine Rodgers, in their anthology devoted to contemporary French women's writing, discuss the theoretical context which has prompted the contemporary phenomenon of the literary identity quest:

Le sujet est [...] de retour dans notre corpus, mais on est cependant loin d'avoir affaire au sujet complet, continu, unifié et unique d'antan. Il est

⁵ In the lines following the last quotation cited, Jordan states: "Postmodern thought has rendered the idea of recovering a lost (pre-existent) self redundant. I refer here in particular to experimental autobiography and autofiction" (19). Jordan also affirms that the narrative mode of the "identity quest" should not be seen as an entirely new literary phenomenon—she describes the identity quest as "a popular focus and important structuring device throughout the novel's history" (18)—but rather that within the contemporary period it has become a more urgent and intrinsic topic for many writers. Both of the forms Jordan mentions here are discussed in more detail below.

⁶ The first section of Chapter One will contain a detailed review of this theoretical context.

clair que la psychanalyse, le post-modernisme et toutes les formes de déconstruction ont marqué cette génération: beaucoup de sujets mis en scène sont dédoublés. Éclatés, mal définis, gagnés par la folie, en danger de se perdre [...]. Seule l'écriture semble capable, jusqu'à un certain point, de donner quelque direction aux personnages dérivants dans "l'ère du vide."
(*Nouvelles écrivaines: nouvelles voix?* 28)

If Bouraoui's recent interest in life-writing attempts to make sense of her personal identity through textually (re-)constructing herself, this practice, too, seems to result not just from her particular situation, but from the prevailing atmosphere of the period. While Bouraoui's particularity is potentially highly significant (it is not merely coincidental that both of the aforementioned critical works focus on women writers, and this is an issue we will go on to discuss), the historical dissolution of the subject to which Morello and Rodgers refer entails a much more generalised subjective anxiety, which will provide a crucial theoretical background to our analysis. A similar understanding of the significance of recent critical theory to the representation of identity, subjectivity, and selfhood within literature can be found in several further critical works on contemporary French writing.⁷ It is clear, therefore, that the textual representation of Bouraoui's problematic sense of self reflects not only her personal situation, but also an important aspect of recent literary practice.

The Question of Minority Identity

If the "identity quest" has provided a particularly salient motif within contemporary women's writing, we might imagine that distinguishing "French women writers" as a group would endanger the objectivity of our critical premise: investigating textual responses to particularised identity amongst a group of writers apparently drawn together for no other reason than their "marginality" risks artificially constructing the problem one seeks to understand. With regard to the construction of academic

⁷ Gill Rye's chapter "Women's Writing," in Gregory and Tidd's *Women in Contemporary France*, for example, discusses "women-authored fiction published in the 1990s" (133) and a selection of texts which "cluster around themes of selfhood" (134). See also: *This "Self" Which is Not One: Women's Life-writing in French*, edited by Natalie Edwards and Christopher Hogarth (2010); *Fin de millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis*, by Ruth Cruickshank (2009); and *Reading for Change: Interactions between Text and Identity in Contemporary French Women's Writing* by Gill Rye (2001).

disciplines, the analysis of French women writers as a distinct category risks unjustly perpetuating the notion that women writers are inherently different from men—potentially ghettoising women writers by refusing to consider them according to their genderless merits, and demeaning their critical integrity in suggesting a putative homogeneity to their work. In Bouraoui's case, this problem becomes all the more significant, due to what we might consider her triple particularisation, occupying historically marginalised positions with regard to not only gender, but also ethnicity and sexuality. Nevertheless, numerous critical works continue to follow this procedure of compartmentalisation, and it is among such anthologies that we find the highest prevalence of writers responding to the question of identity in a similar way to Bouraoui.

Most significantly, with regard to the question of a textual identity quest, several critics suggest that there is not just a correlation, but potentially also a causal connection, between the relatively recent proliferation of literary investigations of identity, and the increasing presence of "minority" writers within modern French publishing. Morello and Rodgers, for example, argue that many of the fragmentary and self-dissolving features increasingly found in modern French novels have in fact long been prevalent within writing by women:

De nombreuses caractéristiques traditionnellement associées à l'écriture des femmes (sujet fracturé, fuyant, recherche identitaire, écriture autobiographique, mélange des genres, plaisir de la narration, refus de se prendre au sérieux, subversion de l'autorité) se confondent désormais avec des tendances que des critiques ont repérées dans le roman contemporain.
(44)

By way of explanation for this phenomenon, Morello and Rodgers go on to propose:

Cette congruence peut peut-être s'expliquer par le fait que les femmes et leur production littéraire ont traditionnellement occupé une place marginalisée. Souvent privées de repères identitaires dès qu'elles sortaient des moules patriarcaux, elles étaient dès lors plus enclines à se poser des questions plus spécifiques à leur situation. Étant donné que la société française de la toute fin du XXe siècle se caractérise par une perte des repères identitaires traditionnels, il n'est peut-être pas surprenant que

beaucoup aujourd'hui se posent des questions similaires à celles qu'auparavant se posaient surtout les femmes. (44)

Morello and Rodgers' comments here might explain why, as a woman, Bouraoui should chose writing as a site to both pose and attempt to resolve questions around her personal identity.⁸ In addition, in "Changing the Script," an article tracing the development of the autobiographical form within women's writing, Michael Sheringham suggests that, having recovered from their historic position of literary exclusion, "autobiography now had much to offer subjects and communities of subjects in search of ways of articulating a new sense of identity. In the front line of these were women writers, and writers from the ethnic margins" (187). Equally, in her discussion of the experience of liminality and exile among women writers, Jordan, too, suggests that "the margins [...] connote not only suffering but creativity, autonomy and the possibility of self-knowledge" (*Contemporary French Women's Writing* 48).

In addition to her gender, the specific circumstances of Bouraoui's life appear to align her with two other political "minorities"—ethnic and sexual—and each of these identity positions will potentially be implicated in her textual self-construction.⁹ Where women, although denied equal rights with men, have always been a present and visible element of French society, the social status of homosexuals may be said to have

⁸ We should note that women's historic exclusion from public life is not particular to France, and in late twentieth-century Anglo-American feminist criticism, too, we find similar ideas. Estelle C. Jelinek's 1980 collection *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, for example, sought to address a dearth of critical readings of Anglophone women's autobiographical writing. The introduction to her collection, while using different expressions to those found within French studies, in many ways echoes Morello and Rodgers' argument here: "Whatever their age or circumstances, contemporary autobiographers are having more difficulty making sense of the past than did their historical predecessors. The complexity of the atomic era has made a holistic view of life difficult, and it has affected the form and content of autobiography as well. But however much the gradual collapse of traditional values has made women's values more acceptable to the present male culture, what may appear new is, in fact, for women the culmination of a long tradition" (20). On this see also *Autobiography and Questions of Gender*, edited by Shirley Neuman (1991).

⁹ As well as the texts already mentioned, the experience of women writers from the former French colonies is explored with specific regard to autobiography in *Gender and Displacement: "Home" in Contemporary Francophone Women's Autobiography*, edited by Nathalie Edwards and Christopher Hogarth (2008), and *Autobiography and Independence: Selfhood and Creativity in North African Postcolonial Writing in French* by Debra Kelly (2005). Autobiographical production by writers of unconventional gendered and sexual identities is the subject of *Heterographies: Sexual Difference in French Autobiography* by Alex Hughes (1999).

changed in even more radical ways over the last century and a half. According with the work of Foucault in *La volonté de savoir*, volume one of his *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976), Dominique Fisher and Lawrence Schehr in their Introduction to *Articulations of Difference: Gender Studies and Writing in French* (1997) identify the "homosexual subject" in France as only taking on "an independent form in the late nineteenth century" (2). While French literature in particular might be said to contain several examples of famous gay writers, several scholars have persuasively argued that France's tradition of republican universalism has long prevented the establishment of a gay "identity politics" movement to parallel those in Anglo-American countries.¹⁰ In addition to the still contested cause of women and gay writers being able to access authoritative cultural positions, within post-colonial studies, too, the idea of the oppressed subject's inability to access discourse, and to speak for themselves within the privileged sites of politics and culture, has been important.¹¹ One of the central questions this thesis will consider is whether reading a given identity as "marginal" compels, or, alternatively, merely exemplifies, a fragmented identity position. Might all contemporary selves be characterised through recourse to the "literary," or is the need to invent a new, textual, identity the consequence of these particularised speakers seeking ways to express themselves, having for the first time been allowed access to discursive positions?

Considering Bouraoui's position within these debates, it will be necessary to acknowledge two potentially opposing forces within her writing: her partial identification with each of these groups and, at the same time, her apparent refusal to be "representative" of any set identity position, focusing instead on her own intimate and personal journey of self-discovery.¹² While previous generations of female writers

¹⁰ See Renate Günther and Owen Heathcote's "Introduction" to "Gays and Lesbians in Contemporary France: Politics, Media, Sexualities," Special Issue of *Modern and Contemporary France* (2006); Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant Ragan's "Introduction" to *Homosexuality in Modern France* (1996); Martine Antle and Dominique Fisher's "Introduction" to *The Rhetoric of the Other: Lesbian and Gay Strategies of Resistance in French and Francophone Contexts* (2002); as well as Didier Eribon's "Traverser les frontières?" in *Les études gay et lesbiennes* (1998).

¹¹ See, for example, Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988).

¹² This question in particular will be addressed in Chapter Four.

have explored gender in writing, attempting to recover a formerly maligned femaleness within the literary sphere, Bouraoui’s work does not always conform to such essentialist conceptions of gender. Similarly, although examples of gay life-writing will often focus on providing affirmative representations of homosexuality, Bouraoui’s sexual self-description ignores the wider gay identity movement, focusing instead on her personal discovery of sexual experience. With regard to race, we know that Bouraoui’s decision to write about herself stems partly from the feelings of cultural exclusion she remembers from her childhood (see our opening quotation). After describing her move from Algeria to France in her first autobiographical text, however, Bouraoui rarely thematises her *métissage*, or engages explicitly with post-colonial themes or debates. Of course, for Bouraoui, all of these “marginal” identities will be important, each partly contributing to her overall self-recognition. None, however, will be seen as determining, or as providing the major political lens through which Bouraoui chooses to conceive of herself.

The Rise of Autofiction

The practice of autobiographical writing has a long history. In the French tradition, Michel de Montaigne opened his sixteenth-century work *Essais*, with the claim, “Je suis moi-même la matière de mon livre,”¹³ and two centuries later Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Les confessions* (1782–1789) borrowed the title of a much earlier, also autobiographical, Latin work: the *Confessions* of Augustine (AD397–398). Notwithstanding the complexity and self-reflexiveness of these notable texts, however, the form remained until the twentieth century primarily the domain of significant public men looking to leave a record of their lives for posterity, rather than being chosen for its particular literary interest.¹⁴ It was around the mid-1970s that this

¹³ “Je suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre” in the original, “Au Lecteur” (1580).

¹⁴ With regard to criticism on the form, an interesting example demonstrating the status of autobiography studies before the critical advent of the mid-1970s is James Olney’s first critical work, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (1972). Olney reads autobiographies by Montaigne, Jung, Fox, Darwin, Newman and Mill, and argues in his preface for the undervalued scholarly merit of the genre.

situation started to change, with young writers beginning to take a new interest in the form, and its potential for literary and artistic explorations of selfhood.¹⁵

Where, as we shall see in Chapter One, critical theory of the 1960s and 1970s set out to challenge the existence of a coherent, independent, and authorial subject, the idea of the self being represented in a text came to pose a particularly interesting conundrum. It is around this time that, especially in France, we find a surge of interest in life-narratives; a trend which is particularly striking due to the apparent contradiction it poses to the prevailing theoretical climate of the time. On a basic level, the possibility of an embodied individual deciding to represent their life-story, and temporarily invoking language as the means through which to do this, producing a literary persona of absolute continuity with its pre-textual author, runs counter to post-structuralist notions of the self as produced through—and contemporaneously with—language. Edmund Smyth makes this point in his Introduction to *Autobiography and the Existential Self*. Discussing the rise of autobiography in modern French writing, Smyth argues, “The revival of interest in autobiography [...] initially seemed to be incongruous with the axiomatic proposition that the author was no longer the source and origin of his discourse” (2). On a more textual level, however, this apparent paradox is revealed as potentially highly productive, as Smyth elaborates:

The study of autobiography emerges as affording the possibility of analysing the processes by which selfhood is constructed; uniquely, it becomes the site of the formation of subjectivity through writing. From this point of view, an autobiography is the locus of the confrontation between a fragmentary self and a multivocal text. (2)

In these comments Smyth, speaking as a literary critic, proposes a similar conception of the fertility of life-writing for understanding the construction of the self as that which we have heard from the author Nina Bouraoui, in the opening of this chapter. Where post-structuralist theory posits the construction of meaning in language, the

¹⁵ For an account of this development, see Sheringham (186–187). For a comprehensive collection on women’s life-writing in both French and Anglophone traditions prior to the period Sheringham addresses here, see *The Female Autograph* edited by Domna Stanton (1987). Alex Hughes’s *Heterographies* (1999) also contains a review of the development of autobiography specifically in the French tradition (see Introduction, 1–13).

literary text might prove a fertile space to seek to resolve the identity problems of a “fragmentary self.” In addition, if subjectivity exists only within “discourse” (as proposed in critical theory examined in Chapter One), then discursive representations of the self—even though apparently produced by a pre-textual author—may provide a space in which a certain form of identity emerges for the first time. In the contemporary period, therefore, the practice of autobiography can be seen to have a hugely important place within the confrontation between literature and philosophy, and the notion of a “literary selfhood” may prove valuable for further investigations into the nature of identity.

Enter Lejeune

Increased interest in textual self-representation from a philosophical point of view was then, in 1970s France, accompanied by a critical “reconsideration” of autobiography as an unfairly neglected genre, most notably by the literary critic Philippe Lejeune.¹⁶

Lejeune’s 1975 work *Le pacte autobiographique* has proved a seminal text for the ever-expanding corpus of theory on the form. Within this work, Lejeune attempts a definition of textual autobiography (as against, for example, the memoir, autoportrait or novel written in the first person), proposing: “DÉFINITION : Récit rétrospectif en prose qu’une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu’elle met l’accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l’histoire de sa personnalité” (14). Within this definition, Lejeune elaborates four categories for determining whether a text should be classified as autobiography: the form should be a prose narrative; the subject should be an individual’s life, or the development of their character; the identity of the narrator of the text should correspond to that of the author; and the protagonist should be identical with the narrator, who recounts their narrative retrospectively (14). Of these, Lejeune admits that each of these categories may permit some flexibility, except—initially—two of them, which are absolutely determining of autobiography: the identity of the writer with the narrator, and the identity of this narrator with the work’s protagonist, or “personnage principal” (15). Although Lejeune

¹⁶ The term “reconsideration” is Smyth’s, who identifies Michel Beaujour’s *Miroirs d’encre: Rhétorique de l’autoportrait* (1980), alongside Philippe Lejeune, in this regard (1).

himself, soon after *Le pacte autobiographique*, and consistently over the next 35 years, ultimately undermines even these last two qualifications, eventually liberalising all of his classificatory categories, it is the deterministic element of his definition that has been most consistently seized upon and reacted against.¹⁷

Ever since the publication of *Le pacte autobiographique*, the development of the genre of autobiography has involved expansion and diversification, with critics and practitioners alike apparently seeking to contradict the restrictions Lejeune’s definitions propose. Among the earliest examples of post-modern autobiography are the reflections of key post-structuralist thinker Roland Barthes in *Roland Barthes* (1975). Barthes chose not to write a conventional autobiography, refusing the linear narrative we typically expect of a life story in favour of an arbitrary alphabetical structure to organise a series of textual fragments reflecting theoretical musings on many aspects of his life and work. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, proponents of the *nouveau roman* then further demonstrated the influence of contemporary thought and the “crisis of the subject” on writers’ textual self-representations, together switching focus to experiment with *la nouvelle autobiographie*.¹⁸ Each of these examples to some degree poses a challenge to Lejeune’s autobiographical conventions, and it is from this context that “autofiction” emerged, an experimental approach to autobiography initially produced as a direct challenge to Lejeune’s typology, and the form which is most closely connected to Nina Bouraoui’s work three decades later.

Within *Le pacte autobiographique*, Lejeune attempts to classify different genres of “écrits de soi” in a table whose two axes denote two determining features: the correspondence of the protagonist’s name to that of the author, and the “pact” established between author and reader—that is to say, whether the writer wishes

¹⁷ For Lejeune’s liberalisation of his own typology, see Philippe Lejeune, *Moi aussi* (1986) and *Signes de vie: Le pacte autobiographique 2* (2005)—particularly the introductory chapter “Vingt-cinq ans après” (11–30).

¹⁸ In addition to *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975), see: Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* (1975); Émile Ajar (Romain Gary), *Pseudo* (1976); Nathalie Sarraute, *Enfance* (1983); and Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Romanesques* trilogy (1985–1994). A helpful summary of the *nouveau roman* movement can be found in Davis & Fallaize, *French Fiction in the Mitterrand Years* (9–12).

their reader to understand the text as novel or autobiography (28). Famously, however, this table left two empty boxes, representing supposedly impossible textual enterprises, which Lejeune explains thus: "exclues par définition la coexistence de l'identité du nom et du pacte romanesque, et celle de la différence de nom et du pacte autobiographique" (28).¹⁹ Where the notion of the "pacte autobiographique" that Lejeune outlines in his work is obviously, as a pact, a product of convention rather than fact or necessity, Lejeune confidently asserts that such a pact would be broken by a text's failure to conform to the rules he describes. A reader who encounters a protagonist named after its author will refuse the text the status of *roman*, while the understanding of a text as autobiographical depends precisely on this nominal identity. However, the incidental production of these two empty boxes in Lejeune's table prompted one of the readers of this work to respond by attempting to prove him wrong.

"Véracité de l'information, liberté de la mise en écriture"

In 1977 Serge Doubrovsky published *Fils*, a text which is labelled *roman*, while telling the story of a day in the life of a literary critic named Serge Doubrovsky. This action was apparently entirely motivated by Doubrovsky's desire to respond to Lejeune's categorical restrictions, as the latter recounts receiving a letter from Doubrovsky at the time that he was writing *Fils*, stating his intention to try and fill in Lejeune's "case aveugle". Lejeune writes, "Dans son 'roman' intitulé *Fils*, Serge Doubrovsky emploiera donc son propre nom. Cette ambiguïté du contrat de lecture traduira l'ambiguïté de son projet: véracité de l'information, liberté de la mise en écriture" (*Autofictions & Cie* 6). Lejeune's description of Doubrovsky's work here corresponds to the writer's own, as Doubrovsky uses the book's back cover to both provide an explanation for the apparently contradictory form of his work, and to coin a new term to define it, "autofiction":

Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels; si l'on veut, *autofiction*, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure du langage, hors

¹⁹ Lejeune reflects on this in his introduction to *Autofictions & Cie*, "Autofictions & Cie: Pièce en cinq actes", in which he refers to them as "Deux cases contradictoires" (5).

sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau. Rencontres, *films* des mots, allitérations, assonances, dissonances, écriture d'avant ou d'après littérature, *concrète*, comme on dit musique. Ou encore, autofriction, patiemment onaniste, qui espère faire maintenant partager son plaisir. (*Fils*, back cover—Doubrovsky's emphasis)

In both of these descriptions, the question of the truth of the protagonist's correspondence to the author is effectively secondary to the literariness of the text. The play of language is emphasised in Doubrovsky's casual list of rhetorical devices, and he foregrounds both the creativeness and the pleasure of literary interaction to the point of equating his writing with a form of onanism to be shared with his reader. Mischievous as this suggestion may be, his comments in the blurb reflect the themes of the novel, which in turn fit firmly into the intellectual atmosphere of the period. In the novel itself, Doubrovsky's eponymous protagonist visits a psychoanalyst, and struggles to differentiate events in his own life from the literary texts he encounters during his day's work. Through focusing on the play of language, over and above the life to which it ostensibly refers, Doubrovsky invokes the focus on language found within contemporary philosophy, together with its loss of faith in external referents, with his playful new form, "autofiction," destabilizing the possibility of representing a coherent selfhood pre-existing the text, instead prioritizing the literary act itself.

Since Doubrovsky's use of the term, "autofiction" has been embraced by a wide range of different authors, and reproduced in several different ways. Rather than sharing any definable common method, different practitioners allow varying degrees of fiction and autobiography in their texts, and theorists have correspondingly proposed divergent new definitions of the form. For example, according to Vincent Colonna, the first researcher to publish extensively on autofiction as a form, "Une autofiction est une œuvre littéraire par laquelle un écrivain s'invente une personnalité et une existence, tout en conservant son identité réelle."²⁰ Marie Darrieussecq, who is both a literary critic and a successful writer of autofictional texts, defines it thus: "L'autofiction est un récit à la première personne, se donnant pour fictif (souvent, on trouvera la mention

²⁰ Quoted by Lejeune in *Autofictions & Cie* (8). Colonna completed a doctoral thesis on autofiction in 1989, and later published *Autofictions et autres mythomanies littéraires* (2004).

roman sur la couverture), mais où l’auteur apparaît homodiégétiquement sous son nom propre, et où la vraisemblance est un enjeu maintenu par de multiples ‘effets de vie’” (“L’autofiction, un genre pas sérieux” 369–370). In each of these definitions, the civic identity of the text’s protagonist corresponds with that of the author, while the personality of that protagonist, and the circumstances and events of their life which the narrative reports, are not considered to be factual. In the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* (2001), Johnnie Gratton makes use of the opposing emphases of “act-value”—the effects achieved at the moment of one’s encounter with the text itself—and “truth-value”—the perceived accuracy of what is being described—in a reader’s understanding of the text, suggesting that autofiction involves the prioritisation of act-value, or literary effect, over truth-value, or referentiality (86). In each of these definitions, therefore, Lejeune’s “liberté de la mise en écriture” seems to be prioritised over referential fact, even while, following Doubrovsky, writers of autofiction usually share a commitment to an expanded notion of his “véracité de l’information.”

It is the broad scope of Lejeune’s dictum which will determine the use of the term “autofiction” within this thesis. Where, in recent decades, autofiction has been used in many diverse ways, differences between practitioners seem to make it impossible to tie autofiction to one specific mode of working, or theoretical approach.²¹ Gratton acknowledges that “the notion of autofiction has undergone a process of generalisation to a point where, despite pockets of resistance defended by the proponents of pure truth-value, the idea that fiction and autobiography inevitably overlap has become a kind of norm shared—both within and beyond the French

²¹ See, for example, the 2007 collection *Genèse et autofiction*, edited by Jean-Louis Jeanelle and Catherine Viollet, which demonstrates the wide range of uses to which the form has been put. This collection includes both a wide selection of scholars reading old texts as autofiction—among them Proust, Genet, and Perec—and some contemporary practitioners of the form theorising on autofiction themselves, such as Cusset, Forest, Laurens, Garreta. It also contains a fourteen-page bibliography of further works relating to autofiction. On Autofiction, see also: “Les Nouvelles autobiographies/ New Autobiographies,” special edition of *L’Esprit Créateur*, edited by Mounir Laouyen; Philippe Gasparini *Est-il je? Roman autobiographique et autofiction* (2004); Sébastien Hubier *Littératures intimes: les expressions du Moi, de l’autobiographie à l’autofiction* (2003); and Hélène Jaccomard *Lecteur et lecture dans l’autobiographie française contemporaine* (1993).

domain—by a significant number of critics" (86).²² If fiction and autobiography seem increasingly to overlap, a large proportion of Bouraoui's works may correspondingly be examined within the scope of this thesis. Stylised autobiography, self-referential poeticism, autobiographical novels, and fictional narratives involving a protagonist named after the writer all feature within Bouraoui's oeuvre between 1999 and 2011, and a broad demarcation of autofiction will therefore permit an analysis of the utility of the notion across many divergent styles.

Autofiction in the feminine

Shirley Jordan's recent article "État present: Autofiction in the feminine" (2012) draws attention to the diverse range of woman-authored autofictional work in the contemporary period, contending that, "Where traditional autobiography was seen by feminist critics as uncongenial to women, autofiction has proved singularly propitious. Women have played a significant role in shaping its evolution across media, but its fertility for feminine subjects remains under-theorised" (84). The under-theorisation of the form's utility for women—and other minority—writers is one of the questions this thesis will seek to address. While the question of the uses and limitations of the genre of autobiography for writers of "minority identity" will be explored at length in Chapter Four of this thesis, a brief and selective survey here of current female-authored autofiction may allow us to determine Bouraoui's position within this literary context.

Within recent writing by women authors, there are some who embrace the term "autofiction" when re-working factual details about their lives; others who refuse the term and yet represent themselves inconsistently, producing multiple textual self-reinventions clustered around the same material; and even those who take the term

²² In the Anglo-American tradition, for example, Raymond Federman's 1981 collection *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow* provocatively exemplifies this claim in Federman's introduction "Surfiction—Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction," (5—15), where he states: "Fiction can no longer be reality, or a representation of reality, or an imitation, or even a recreation of reality; it can only be A REALITY [Federman's emphasis]—an autonomous reality whose only relation with the real world is to improve that world. To create fiction is, in fact, a way to abolish reality, and especially to abolish the notion that reality is truth" (8).

to define not just their work, but their reality, comparing uncertain self-description in literature to the impossibility of consistent identity in life. Christine Angot, for example, is one of the most contentious writers to be associated with autofiction in recent years. Her 1999 text *L'Inceste*—as well as, most recently, *Une semaine de vacances* (2012)—probes the profound social taboo of incest, through recounting the writer's incestuous relationship with her previously estranged father. While the truth or otherwise of this account remains undetermined, Angot has consistently courted the controversy aroused by such claims, and her writing frequently makes explicit and defamatory reference to people in the writer's life—even weaving real-life legal correspondence into her literary work. Anne Garréta, the only member of the Oulipo group to have been born after its foundation in 1961, won the 2002 *prix Médicis* for her autofictional text *Pas un jour*. This text records incidents from the writer's romantic history expressed within the constraints of a specified set of style rules set out in the text's preface. In addition to the stylised nature of its composition, the autofictionality of the work is revealed in a "Post scriptum" which discloses that at least one of the liaisons described is purely fictional (168).²³ Chloé Delaume's experimental work, meanwhile, might be seen as a particularly pure form of autofiction, with the performance artist and writer effectively publicly abandoning her former self, in favour of a new identity entirely constructed through her work. Delaume's 2001 autofiction *Le cri du sablier* recounts in novel form the harrowing events of the writer's childhood—in which she witnessed the man she believed to be her father murdering her mother and then killing himself—which led her to change her name and adopt a new self-identity, as a character within her own work.²⁴ In her

²³ Garréta has also written a scholarly article on autofiction as a genre, "Autofiction: la Ford intérieure et le self roman," published in *Genèse et autofiction* (2007).

²⁴ A frequent theme of recent women's autofiction—as we have seen in each of the above examples—seems to be the need to overcome a traumatic event in one's life, and the possible fragmentation of the self that such events have caused. Shirley Jordan identifies the prevalence of the theme of trauma in women's autofiction, stating that "the impact of these unusual experiments derives, in part, from their authors' owning of excessive, sometimes violent, experiences, which are the more readily explored through autofictional distancing" ("Autofiction in the Feminine" 78), and therefore proposing that "the privileged connection between women's autofiction and trauma requires further analysis" (79). Although some incidents in Bouraoui's background might allow us to position her within this trend, this thesis will argue that in Bouraoui's case, autofiction ought to be understood not as a

corresponding theoretical work, such as the essay *La règle du je*, from 2010, Delaume repeats the provocative refrain: "Je m'appelle Chloé Delaume. Je suis un personnage de fiction," advocating the transformative potential of this literary surrender.²⁵

With regard to Nina Bouraoui, her relationship to autofiction might best be classified as ambivalent: although she currently questions the term itself, she also benefits considerably from its possibilities for her own work. Certainly, her recent critical reception is strongly linked to discussions of the form. For example, in a 2011 magazine interview, Bouraoui was asked: "Que pensez-vous du terme d'autofiction?" She responded:

Je ne sais pas ce qu'il signifie. Je veux être un auteur libre et je n'ai pas l'impression d'appartenir à ce mouvement, que je serais incapable de définir. J'ai très peur des tiroirs et des cases. J'ai toujours su que l'écriture était mon chemin, sans regarder autour de moi. Je me suis dé faite de ce complexe qu'on a essayé d'assigner aux auteurs qui écrivaient sur eux-mêmes. Je pense que, même si je parle du particulier, de moi-même, je vais vers le général. ("L'écriture au corps")

Bouraoui's reluctance to embrace the term thus stems from what she sees as its constrictive character. Alongside the predictable artistic desire to be seen as an individual, not someone following an established trend, Bouraoui also seems to join critics in accusing *autofictionnistes* of navel-gazing, a trait which she would not wish to attribute to her own work. In spite of these claims, however, Bouraoui admits to being influenced by other writers who have been connected with this trend, even if she refuses to accept that they too use the form: "J'adore Annie Ernaux, mais pour moi il ne s'agit pas d'autofiction. Dans ce cas, Hervé Guibert aussi faisait de l'autofiction! Je n'arrive pas à lire les livres comme ça" (45). While Annie Ernaux, like Bouraoui, now

response to trauma in particular, but rather as addressing more universal human situations. This argument is discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

²⁵ The description of Delaume's work as particularly "pure" to the ethos of autofiction stems partly from her similarity to Doubrovsky's later work. Following his publication of *Fils*, Doubrovsky continued to pursue the blurring of autobiography and fiction, even going so far as to doubt the truthfulness of himself as a referent external to his narrative. His 1982 work *Un amour de soi* encapsulates this in the striking claim, "I barely exist, I am a fictional being. I am writing my own autofiction," a claim which strongly resonates with Delaume's in this essay (qtd. in Gratton *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* 86). Gratton notes that Doubrovsky's claim in turn echoes Roland Barthes's suggestion in *Barthes par Barthes* that "all this must be considered as spoken by a character in a novel").

dislikes the term autofiction being applied to her work, Guibert is often classified with this group.²⁶ More importantly than the definition, however, each of these writers (alongside Marguerite Duras, who Bouraoui mentions in the same interview (43)) shares her interest in representing the self, and often does so in a way in keeping with the contemporary autofictional climate. Indeed, Bouraoui's response to a previous question, "Vous exposer fait partie de votre projet?" chimes with much that we have heard from active proponents of autofiction, and in particular Lejeune's characterisation of autofiction as "véracité de l'information, liberté de la mise en écriture":

Oui, mon matériau, ce sont mes souvenirs, ma mémoire, ce qui m'est arrivé. Mais j'opère une conversion. Je trafique la vérité, c'est une forme de pouvoir. L'écriture, c'est redire la vie d'une autre façon, non pour se protéger, mais pour la sublimer. Écrire, c'est avoir accès à un deuxième monde. (45)

The idea that the definition of autofiction should be elusive (as Bouraoui claims she cannot define it), meaning different things to different people, fits firmly within the wider trend of autofictional writing: rather than promote ontological and semantic confidence, autofiction seems to well embody the anxious post-modern writing subject. For these reasons, therefore, we will use the term "autofiction"—in spite of Bouraoui's objection—as a productive short-hand, encompassing all that is represented within these formal debates, throughout our reading of Bouraoui's work.²⁷

²⁶ Susan Bainbridge discussed Ernaux's attitude to the term "autofiction" in her paper "Bestsellers, Prize Winners, and the Enduring Appeal of the Autobiographical in Recent French Women's Writing," delivered at the Contemporary Women's Writing in French Seminar 10th Anniversary Conference, Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, University of London, 15 October 2010. See also Ernaux's article: "Vers un Je transpersonnel," in *Autofictions et Cie* (1993). On Guibert, Marie Darrieussecq, for example, describes how Guibert's decision to recount his experience with AIDS in a self-referential text described as a "roman" (*À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*), leads to: "la création d'un sens que seule la forme autofictive pouvait produire" ("L'autofiction, un genre pas sérieux", 378).

²⁷ Discussing her most recent work, *Sauvage*, Bouraoui said in a second 2011 interview: "Je voulais écrire un vrai roman, alors c'est vrai que, 'un vrai roman' ça ne veut absolument rien dire, mais il contraste avec ce mot qui existe en France, 'l'auto-fiction,' dont on qualifie souvent mes livres. C'est un mot qui me répulse un peu car je ne le comprends pas. J'ai toujours fait un travail sur le style, j'ai souvent privilégié la forme même si de moins en moins maintenant. Et c'est vrai que la structure

What is at stake?

Considering the example posed by Bouraoui, she has described her self-referential writing as a form of identity quest, and yet this quest is pursued not through methodical self-analysis, but by employing a more playful and literary form of self-reconstruction. What, therefore, might be the implications of this autofictional representation, and what insights might we hope to draw from investigating her "identity quest"? With regard to the development of autofiction, we might well object that the possibility that an aimed-for politically unitary, self-referential textual subject should surrender itself to artistic play is not immediately positive. In the case of writers from what we have termed marginalised backgrounds—colonised and post-colonial subjects, gay (and particularly lesbian) writers and, historically, women—the problematisation of the subject and its potential manifestation in the "anxious post-modern writing subject" may be seen as politically ambivalent. As editors Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson show in their reader *Women, Autobiography, Theory* (1998), women's use of the autobiographical form has long been formally disruptive, rarely emulating the controlled, consistent self-narratives of their famous male-counterparts. Autofiction, as we have seen, has quickly been embraced as a useful form for these groups, permitting less constrained, more liberating practices of self-inscription. At the same time, however, late twentieth-century identity politics stressed the importance for marginalised groups of asserting their subjectivity, with some activists seeing the contemporaneous "death of the subject" as a theoretical indulgence which would continue to deny these groups sovereignty over their identities.²⁸ While Bouraoui

architecturale, c'est à dire la résidence, le quartier d'Alger, cet immeuble c'est en effet là où j'ai grandi mais ça s'arrête là. Alya, c'est une jeune algérienne de 14 ou 15 ans qui grandit là-bas, qui perd son amour de jeunesse. Alors en effet, ce sont des thèmes assez récurrents chez moi mais c'est une autre Algérie, c'est une autre jeune femme. Heureusement que l'on transforme toujours notre vérité et que nos livres ne sont pas des rapports de police, sinon on serait prisonniers de soi-même. Moi j'ai toujours très peur d'être prisonnière de moi-même et de me dire que je réécris toujours le même livre. Peut-être que l'on réécrit toujours le même livre, inconsciemment, mais j'essaie d'avoir toujours d'autres pistes, j'essaie toujours de chercher plus loin, de ne jamais m'arrêter" ("L'Écrivain est un marginal"). While she remains resistant to the use of the term, therefore, Bouraoui's work would seem to fit with the definition of "autofiction" that we have outlined so far.

²⁸ In his Introduction to the collection *Subject Matters: Subject and Self in French Literature from Descartes to the present* (2004), co-editor Johnnie Gratton describes how "feminist critics, advocates of so-called autobiographical or confessional criticism, and exponents of identity politics" were united in

describes the subversion of autobiographical truth in her work as a form of power (above), such writing may equally be taken to demonstrate an acceptance of defeat, withdrawing from reality in favour of a textual world which is (going back to our opening quotation), “mon vrai pays, le seul dans lequel je vis vraiment, la seule terre que je maîtrise.” While this study will, in its central chapters, focus exclusively on Bouraoui’s work, the question of the consequences of autofictional self-representation may prove to have broader political stakes than just reflecting Bouraoui’s reconstruction of her own life, especially given the pervasiveness of autofictional experimentation, and Bouraoui’s own claim above that, in re-writing her own life, “même si je parle du particulier, de moi-même, je vais vers le général.”

Introducing Nina Bouraoui

Bouraoui was born in Rennes in 1967. The second child of the mixed-race marriage between an Arab Algerian man and a white French woman, Bouraoui spent the first thirteen years of her life in Algeria, before suddenly moving back to Brittany at the end of the 1970s. As she describes in *Garçon manqué*, the *métisse* Bouraoui family were never made to feel welcome in post-colonial Algeria, and mounting racial tension, culminating in verbal and physical attacks on her white mother, ultimately contributed to the family’s decision to leave, abruptly, for a holiday with their maternal grandparents from which they would not return.²⁹ After this, the family lived in Switzerland and Abu Dhabi, and at the age of nineteen Bouraoui moved to Paris,

critiquing structuralism: “It is common for a gendered and personalized voice to complain openly about the disempowering effects of the (post)structuralist critique of the subject” (11). One example of this is the work of Nancy K. Miller, discussed in Adele King’s *French Women Novelists*: “Nancy K. Miller says that Barthes’s ‘Death of the Author’ is not relevant to women, who, rather than valorising dispersal, need to overcome it [...]. You have to have an identity before you can desire death!” In addition, the first chapter of Liz Stanley’s 1992 work, *The auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*, is devoted to the question of feminism and postmodern identity.

²⁹ See *Garçon Manqué* (30). In the interview “Ecrire, c’est retrouver ses fantômes” Bouraoui says of this period, “Un jour, alors que nous étions en France pour des vacances, ma mère a annoncé que nous ne rentrions pas. J’avais 14 ans.”

where she lives to this day.³⁰ Bouraoui has not returned to Algeria since her childhood, and yet, while this early rupture has a significant impact on her later self, racial or cultural malaise is just one aspect of the personal themes about which she primarily writes. As suggested by the title of *Garçon manqué*, an important element of Bouraoui’s childhood experience—and one with which she continues to struggle as an adult—is that of first gendered, and then sexual, identity, with the “tomboy” behaviour of this text developing into an adult lesbian sexuality which features strongly in her later work.³¹

Her writing career began in 1991 with the publication of *La voyeuse interdite*, a novel describing the life of a young girl growing up in Algeria under strictly repressive social and family conditions. This work achieved immediate success, winning the *prix du Livre Inter* of that year, and quickly going on to sell 76,000 copies.³² Over the following seven years Bouraoui published three further novels, each dealing with socially isolated and brutalised characters: *Poing mort* (1992) describes a menacing and bitter old woman who lives and works in a cemetery, *Le bal des murènes* (1996) relates a sickly young boy’s disturbing relationship with his abusive mother in a house previously used as a war-time torture chamber, and *L’âge blessé* (1998) features a forest-dwelling hermitic old woman who remembers her life through an intermittent dialogue with her younger self. Themes of violence and abjection dominate Bouraoui’s early work; individuals in these novels all appear haunted by a legacy of danger and torture, internalised by characters occupying the edges of society, who are frequently silenced through isolation and misanthropy. However, while use of a first-person narrator is ubiquitous—not only in these early works, but throughout Bouraoui’s entire oeuvre to date—and elements of the writer’s own life appear to feature in

³⁰ Amaleena Damlé has assembled a biography of Bouraoui for the IGRS website. See “Nina Bouraoui: Biography.”

³¹ For example, in *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Nos Baisers sont des adieux*.

³² This figure is provided by *L’Express* magazine in a 1999 article about the *prix du Livre Inter*, “Cette France qui lit” by Olivier Le Naire.

some places in these novels,³³ there is nonetheless a decisive break within Bouraoui’s oeuvre after these first four texts.

In 1999, Bouraoui’s work underwent a thematic shift, away from frequently disturbing and violent works of fiction, and towards an interest in the self, explored over a series of self-referential texts. The first of these, *Le jour du séisme* (1999), is a poetic return to the writer’s childhood homeland, juxtaposing the story of a destructive northern Algerian earthquake in 1979 with its fragmentary effects on the anonymous narrator’s self-identity. Over the following five years, Bouraoui published three works explicitly retelling events from her own childhood and adolescence: the straight-forwardly autobiographical *Garçon manqué* (2000), the autobiographical novel *La vie heureuse* (2002), and *Poupée bella* (2004), a reconstructed “journal intime,” describing her early sexual experiences as a young adult. Bouraoui’s next publication, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, is her most critically successful work to date, winning the *prix Renaudot* in 2005. It is also her most experimental, taking the form of an unbroken monologue, recited by an apparently self-referential “je,” to her imagined psychoanalyst during therapy sessions. Following this text, Bouraoui departed briefly from self-referential writing to publish 2007’s *Avant les hommes*—a short narrative telling the story of Jérémie, an isolated young man coming to terms with his homosexuality—before staging an autofictional love affair of her own between a celebrated female novelist and a young male reader of her work in *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* (2008). Bouraoui’s subsequent text, *Nos baisers sont des adieux* (2010), collected together fragmented memories in a non-linear work of textual archaeology which repeats and expands upon life events recounted in earlier works. In her latest publication, *Sauvage* (2011), she returns to a more conventional novel form with a story which continues to explore many of the same themes and preoccupations as earlier texts through the guise of fiction.

³³ For example, the childhood experiences of the narrator of *L’âge blesse* seem to share certain elements with Bouraoui’s own—including the family arrangement of mother, father, and one older sister, and the description of the “résidence” in which the family live (Bouraoui describes a similar background in *Garçon manqué* and *Mes mauvaises pensées*).

Where the protagonists of her early fiction are usually socially excluded and solitary beings, Bouraoui’s writing about herself frequently focuses on personal relationships and on the interactions with people and places through which she ultimately comes to understand herself. While not all of the works published in the period 1999 to 2011 are explicitly autobiographical, the texts we have classified as novels—*La vie heureuse*, *Avant les hommes*, and *Sauvage*—reveal similar interests and preoccupations to the clearly self-referential texts—*Garçon manqué*, *Poupée bella* and *Nos baisers sont des adieux*—and to those which retell elements of the author’s life through varying degrees of autofictional experimentation—*Le jour du séisme*, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, and *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*. It is for this reason that this study will concentrate on those texts published since 1999, therefore following Bouraoui’s thematic “turn to the self.” Drawing upon a relatively loose definition of the term “autofiction” to ultimately encompass nearly all of these nine selected works, one of the questions pursued in the following chapters will be the status of genre within Bouraoui’s literary identity quest.³⁴

Bouraoui’s work has been well received by the literary establishment. As well as winning the *prix du Livre inter* for her first work, and the prestigious *prix Renaudot* in 2005, Bouraoui has recently been made a “chevalier dans l’ordre des Arts et des Lettres.” Her predominant writing style is notably poetic: her prose seeks to build up evocative images through layers of short, rhythmic sentences, and she has explained that she identifies her work more with art and painting than with the craft of a writer (see the interview “Nina Bouraoui: D’Enfance”). Bouraoui cites the work of Marguerite Duras and Hervé Guibert as important influences on her writing, and alongside fiction and autobiography she has also written songs, most notably providing lyrics for Celine Dion in 2007. In recent years, Bouraoui’s work has attracted ever increasing critical scholarship.³⁵ Of works published to date, those devoted in substantial part to

³⁴ The consequences of pursuing this broadened definition of autofiction will be discussed in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

³⁵ At the time of writing, in July 2013, the Modern Languages Association of America’s MLA International Bibliography records 44 entries of work related in whole or in part to Nina Bouraoui, covering 24 journal articles, 16 book chapters, and 4 published doctoral dissertations. A full bibliography of notable critical work currently available on Bouraoui is included in the bibliography of this thesis.

Bouraoui have tended to focus on three of her most successful works: *La voyageuse interdite*, *Garçon manqué*, and *Mes mauvaises pensées*. Thematically, these works can be categorised according to three particular critical trends: postcolonial Algeria and issues relating to racial violence; nomadic or exiled voices within contemporary literature; and gender and sexuality studies, particularly women’s writing. What these critical trends have in common is their identification of a certain psychological—or even existential—discomfort within Bouraoui’s work. Her problematic self-identity and the apparent social difficulty engendered by each of her “marginalising” characteristics are, therefore, fundamental to this writer’s potential importance. At once representing a new and unique historical and social position and complementing the progressive movement of the diversification of French literary voices, Bouraoui’s work may be seen to embody a distinctive and important moment within the cultural production of contemporary France. That such a potentially significant writer should use literature to (de-)construct her sense of self, alongside the particular qualities this form of textual identification can consequently be seen to have, forms one of the major areas of inquiry in this thesis.

Structure of the Thesis

In this introductory chapter we have heard that Nina Bouraoui situates her drive to write about herself in her troubled personal history. Due in part to her problematic and disorienting childhood, Bouraoui posits the literary text as a space to reconstruct a fragmented and confused personal identity, using writing to establish, in her own words: “Mon vrai pays, le seul dans lequel je vis vraiment, la seule terre que je maîtrise.” Around the turn of the millennium, Bouraoui moved from writing works of pure fiction to a persistent though varied textual exploration of the self. While her motivations for this were of course inherently personal, we have noted how the unorthodox autobiographical forms she employs apparently situate her within the broader contemporary trend of “autofiction,” which in recent years has proved particularly attractive to writers from traditionally marginalised backgrounds. The

remaining chapters of this thesis will examine Bouraoui's textual identity quest and consider what this type of engagement with literature might mean for such forms of "minority" identity in the contemporary period. The thesis will argue that, across the texts studied within this period, Bouraoui's personal identity problems cause her—like many similar contemporary writers—to pursue a textual identity quest through writing. Over the course of this textual identity quest, which thematises progressive stages of the writer's life and different areas of her problematic background, a new form of response to these extra-textual problems emerges through the autofictional act. "Literary selfhood" is the term which will be proposed to characterise this emergent new form of identity, a term chosen for the potential links it suggests between experimental literature and extra-textual theorisations of identity. This notion will then be critically assessed through readings of Bouraoui's work over the coming chapters.

Following developments within late twentieth-century critical thought, language has come to be seen as primordial in theorising the construction of personal identity, and Chapter One will consider both the development of this theoretical context and what specific applications it might have to the autofictional production of the self. Where the theorised "death of man" in the 1960s and 1970s heralded a "return" of the (attenuated) subject in the following decades, more recent work has focused the notion of social identity as discursively constructed onto analysis of specific aspects of personal identity, such as gender, race, and sexuality. While the ground-breaking work of Judith Butler in the field of gender studies will prove useful to our theoretical approach, current understandings of the self as "discursively constructed" fail to allow for any creative re-writing of the self akin to the form of literary selfhood that Bouraoui attempts to achieve in the realm of literature. Following a study of Butler's work, therefore, Chapter One will attempt to delineate a point of convergence between critical and literary theory through a recuperation of the work of the "proto-Queer" theorist Monique Wittig.³⁶ Elaborating our conception of "literary selfhood" as

³⁶ The term "proto-Queer" is used by Kristina Kosnick in an article which combines a reading of works by Monique Wittig and Nina Bouraoui (in addition to Anne Garréta): "Reading Contemporary Narratives as

a potentially radical new form of self-understanding, according to which personal identity may be transformed through the act of writing, Chapter One will identify areas of common ground between the contemporary formation of identity and the working of language and literature, which will then serve to structure the three subsequent chapters.

In Chapters Two, Three and Four of this thesis we will trace Bouraoui’s identity quest through a series of questions and themes. Chapter Two reads *Garçon manqué*, *La vie heureuse*, and *Poupée bella*, three of Bouraoui’s earliest self-referential works, as a developmental trilogy covering the writer’s childhood and adolescence and experimenting with a range of autobiographical modes through which to re-write the self. Considering the applicability of the post-structuralist notion of identity as “performative” to autofictional writing, it will assess Bouraoui’s representation of “minoritising” aspects of her personal identity—her race, gender, and sexual orientation—and consider the extent to which the writer is successful in affirmatively re-writing herself across these divergent modes. Chapter Three considers a further aspect of Bouraoui’s apparent minoritising specificity: her representation of her *métissage* and her recurrent drive to reconstruct her childhood in post-colonial Algeria, as demonstrated in texts from the beginning, middle, and end of the period of this study: *Le jour du séisme*, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, and *Sauvage*. Investigating the writer’s engagement with theories from psychoanalysis in these autofictional and fictional texts, it will examine the importance of stories and narrative structure to self-understanding. Tracing the recurrence of a specific place and time across Bouraoui’s work, this chapter will ultimately argue against existing critical readings of Bouraoui’s post-colonial particularity in favour of a more universal expression of nostalgia for one’s childhood. Following this, Chapter Four will attempt to assess the consequences of Bouraoui’s posited retreat into literature through a reading of relational identity in

Revolutionaries: Radical Textuality and Queer Subjectivity in the works of Monique Wittig, Anne F. Garréta, and Nina Bouraoui.” Although this short piece does not read Bouraoui’s writing through a Wittigian prism, as this thesis proposes to do, Kosnick does identify similarities between the two writers’ literary work, and her characterisation of Wittig as “proto-Queer” accurately describes the way in which Wittig’s work will be read in the following chapter.

her later autofictional work. Reading *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* and *Nos baisers sont des adieux* alongside the short novel *Avant les hommes*, it will seek to determine Bouraoui's own conception of the power of literature in shaping identity, and evaluate what effect Bouraoui's work might have on her own and her readers' identities.

As with the opening of this chapter, this study will draw on comments made by Bouraoui in a range of published interviews alongside analysis of her books in order to ascertain the writer's thoughts on her own textual construction, providing one lens through which to assess the success and efficacy of her identity quest. The use of interview statements also provides an additional type of recorded self-expression—a further form of self-referential text—which can serve as a form of control or counter-text against which to analyse the evidence of her literary production. It is hoped that this may help us in the overall aim of determining what is specific about the action of language within autofiction, and what it means to produce a textual or literary version of the self.³⁷ With regard to the varying forms of life-writing with which Bouraoui experiments, each chapter will consider a specific theme or question relating to Bouraoui's life-writing across three texts of differing form, partly in order to identify the relative capacities and limitations of each of the modes which Bouraoui employs. In most of these texts, the narrative voice will be taken to evoke the author. Where this is the case, in keeping with established convention in autobiography studies, the

³⁷ In her work *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (1976), Elizabeth Bruss mentions an interesting comparison of the autobiographical and interview forms with relation to Vladimir Nabokov. Identifying the similarity between the prose of an extract from Nabokov's autobiography and a recorded answer he later gave to an interviewer in which he retold the same story from his youth, Bruss claims that in order to remain flexible in attempting to categorise the changing genre of autobiography, we must be sure to distinguish between "'form,' the immanent material properties of a text, and the 'functions' assigned to that text." She continues: "Form and function are not isomorphic; several functions can be and usually are allotted to the same structure, and most functions are capable of being realized through more than one form. That this is a live distinction becomes clear in the following example. An interview, as an exchange of questions and responses between two participants, is obviously different from an autobiography, in which the direction of inquiry is controlled by one man alone. Yet Vladimir Nabokov can use language which is literally and syntactically identical to fulfil these divergent functions" (2). If Bouraoui uses both experimental writing and factual interviews to describe her identity problems and her desire to construct a space for herself within language, comparison of the two forms may help us identify the value of the literary as against truthful discourse, and the function of autofiction in blurring the two.

name "Nina" will be used to describe the text's protagonist, with "Bouraoui" reserved to mark a distinction between the writer and this textually produced self.

Bouraoui's textual construction of selfhood is particularly interesting because of her unique historical position. As a gay woman writer of mixed-race, and having a geographically and culturally dislocated upbringing, Bouraoui would until recently have found herself on the outside of public and literary discourse in many different respects. At the beginning of the twenty-first century however, she is able not only to infiltrate elitist French literary life, but to do so by thematising her own personal identity quest. This is not to say that Bouraoui is the only figure from historically marginalised groups to achieve a similar feat. As we have noted, many contemporary women writers in France seem in recent years to have approached writing as a means to investigate identity. Rather than breaking from the contemporary literary scene, therefore, we will endeavour to read Bouraoui's work as almost paradigmatic for this new form of emerging textual identity within life-writing. This suggestion will be considered further in the concluding chapter of this thesis, which will also critically assess the concept of "minority identity" in order to reflect on the premises which have structured the investigation as set out in this introduction.

1. Defining Literary Selfhood

In the Introduction, we considered literary contexts for Bouraoui's exploration of the self. As a mixed-race, non-metropolitan, gay woman writer, Bouraoui represents a number of minority identity positions, and these have, she claims, contributed to her decision to write about herself. Describing her self-referential work as a form of "identity quest," during the period 1999–2011 Bouraoui explores her life and childhood through a range of autobiographical and fictional forms, hoping thereby to discover a coherent sense of self, and proposing writing as "mon vrai pays, le seul dans lequel je vis vraiment, la seule terre que je maîtrise." In spite of her unusual background, however, we have seen that Bouraoui's situation is not unique within recent French literature, as a number of historic women writers and contemporary *autofictionnistes* appear to exemplify a similar relationship to the textual enterprise. In the realm of philosophy, too, Bouraoui's turn to language as a means to explore—and, possibly, to reconstruct—her identity has parallels with recent critical theory on human identity, and the proposition of a "literary selfhood" emerging through Bouraoui's life-writing therefore implicates a particular theoretical context.

In this chapter, we will look at contemporary debates within critical theory on identity in order to establish the specific theoretical perspective which will structure this investigation into autofiction and the construction of personal identity in the work of Nina Bouraoui. If Bouraoui, and writers like her, are increasingly turning to literature as a realm for investigating—and potentially re-writing—their personal identity, how might this specific use of literary language relate to the widespread theoretical move towards seeing all identity as discursively constructed? What, indeed, might we mean by the term "literary selfhood"? This chapter will consider what role literature might play in a theoretical field which foregrounds discursiveness and, specifically, the power of language in constructing human identity. We will propose that, in the work of Nina Bouraoui, the literary text may provide an arena of experimentation in which alternative identity positions—still "constructed in language," but language drawn

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from the literary realm rather than discursive social reality—can emerge. Through an exploration of committed feminist and queer critical theory from recent decades, we will also consider whether the autofictionality of this endeavour might be more than a merely escapist strategy and could in fact be seen as politically productive.

While we have situated the emergence of autofiction and the increased problematization of identity found in recent literature within the context of late twentieth-century post-structuralism, the first part of this chapter will explore how Bouraoui's autofictional "je" may potentially be seen to mirror the subject of critical theory in being "constructed-in-language." Next, we will draw on Judith Butler's immensely influential work on destabilising notions of essential identity—particularly through her early focus on gender and sexuality—before examining the extent to which her theory allows for the political transformation of discursively constructed subjects. On this point, the work of the radical lesbian theorist Monique Wittig, writing earlier and less extensively than Butler, but sharing a common set of presuppositions, will prove particularly instructive. For Wittig, identity is created in language, and literature, as a site for exploring and moulding language, may be harnessed to transform social identity. It is Wittig's theoretical work, therefore, which would seem to pose the greatest potential for uncovering a politically positive reading of Bouraoui's autofictional project, and we shall compare our proposed notion of "literary selfhood" to Wittig's discursive re-signification of the term "lesbian." With our broad theoretical perspective thus established, the final part of the chapter will outline specific areas of analysis through which we might test the congruity of this approach with the textual evidence provided by Bouraoui's autofictional works. Exploring in turn theories around identity as "performative," "narrative," and "relational," we will identify a series of themes and questions relating to Bouraoui's potential re-writing of the self through autofiction, which will be explored through close reading of her texts in the following chapters.

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1.1 The Identity Problematic

The problem posed by the notion of “identity” is a pervasive theme of late twentieth and early twenty-first century cultural life. As Stuart Hall notes in his introduction to a recent anthology on the topic, “there has been a veritable discursive explosion in recent years around the concept of ‘identity’” (*Identity: A Reader*, 15). For Ruth Cruickshank, in *Fin de millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis* (2009), the roots of this broad identity problematic, and the pervasive insecurity of the late twentieth century, may be traced as far back as the nineteenth century, and the iconoclastic work of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. In a period of relative faith in the unitary and coherent “self” inherited from Cartesian metaphysics and in the authority of church and state to give meaning and stability to the lives of their citizens, these three “maîtres de soupçon”—although engaged in no common project—collectively sowed the philosophical seeds which, for Cruickshank, would lead to a “long twentieth century of crisis thinking,” including the crisis of subjective identity (20). Friedrich Nietzsche hailed the “death of God,” refusing claims of absolute values such as religion, and instead declaring human life motivated by the “will to power,” rather than any divine or transcendental being. In Nietzsche’s world, everything is interpretive, objective truth is impossible, and all language is metaphor. For Marx, too, language does not transparently reflect reality, but is rather a social practice, reinforcing human exploitation through the dominant ideology of hierarchical class. Sigmund Freud, in turn, fundamentally challenged the idea of the human subject as master of himself or herself, theorising the existence of subconscious desires and drives impacting on human behaviour.

With regard to the idea of literature as the site of an identity quest, however, one modern perspective on the notion of identity will be especially productive: that which focuses on language, and which has been referred to as the “subject-of-language approach to identity” (Peter Redman, *Identity: A Reader*, 9). Roughly contemporary with Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure has been a key influence on this approach due to his early analysis of the characteristics of language. Saussure described language as an “arbitrary” medium, in which the

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linguistic “signifier”—the word used to express an object or idea—bears no essential relationship to the “signified”—the object or concept it purports to represent.³⁸ Rather than being transparent and inherently meaningful, or mapping firmly onto the material world we inhabit, linguistic signifiers form a discursive system in which individual components relate only to one another, and not essentially to the outside world. Scholars following Saussure—most notably Claude Lévi-Strauss—embraced this view of language as a network which, rather than reflecting meaning, produces it through difference, applying the same principle to a broad range of social and cultural phenomena to form the school of structuralism which dominated French thought in the 1950s and 60s.³⁹

From the point of view of autobiographical practice and the idea of writers representing themselves in language, the most interesting moment in the development of structuralism came in 1958, in an essay by the structural linguist Émile Benveniste, “De la subjectivité dans le langage.” This essay sets out the idea fundamental to the “subject-of-language” approach to identity—that subjectivity is itself a characteristic of language: “C’est dans et par le langage que l’homme se constitue comme *sujet*; parce que le langage seul fonde en réalité, dans sa réalité qui est celle de l’être, le concept ‘d’ego’” (259). While for Benveniste the human individual may be able to conceive of themselves beyond the social system, “subjectivity” depends on their interaction with other subjects outside of themselves, the conscious understanding of which requires the use of language:

La “subjectivité” dont nous traitons ici est la capacité du locuteur à se poser comme “sujet.” Elle se définit, non par le sentiment que chacun éprouve d’être lui-même [...], mais comme l’unité psychique qui transcende la totalité des expériences vécues qu’elle assemble, et qui assure la permanence de la conscience. Or nous tenons que cette “subjectivité,” qu’on la pose en phénoménologie ou en psychologie, comme on voudra, n’est que l’émergence dans l’être d’une propriété fondamentale du langage. Est “ego” qui *dit* “ego.”

Nous trouvons là le fondement de la “subjectivité,” qui se détermine par le statut linguistique de la “personne.”

³⁸ Saussure’s work is collected in the posthumous volume *Cours de linguistique générale*.

³⁹ For an account on the rise and fall of Structuralism, see François Dosse’s two-volumed *Histoire du Structuralisme* (1991).

1. Defining Literary Selfhood

La conscience de soi n'est possible que si elle s'éprouve par contraste.
(260)

While Benveniste refers to human utterances in general, not written or literary language, his view of subjectivity originating with the use of language could be seen as analogous to the project of life-writing in which the autobiographical self is figuratively produced through their textual communication with the reader (this, as we have seen, being particularly the case with Bouraoui).

Benveniste's argument that linguistic interaction is required in order to become a subject resonates with that of another key influence on the subject-of-language school: the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Following on from Sigmund Freud—and indeed, basing his work on the principle of “le retour à Freud,” against the diversified psychoanalytical forms which had developed in the years between the two thinkers—Jacques Lacan understands human psychic development as consisting of a series of key, universal stages through which the growing infant progresses in the early part of its life. The first of these stages, the “Imaginary,” sees the infant unable to perceive any difference between itself and its mother and unaware that the world contains anything which is not a part of itself. Following this, Lacan uses Freud's notion of the Oedipal Crisis to describe the infant's simultaneous experience of a series of firsts which will be constitutive of itself as a subject: it experiences desire (for the lost mother) for the first time; realises the possibility of otherness, through what it perceives as physical separation from the mother; and it also acquires language in ascending to the “Symbolic Order.” After the unitary plenitude of the “Imaginary,” the Symbolic Order is the social reality in which the infant finds itself corporeally alone, their use of language necessitating their acceptance of this difference from the mother. To say “I am” therefore affirms the subjectivity of the speaker, produced through reference to a separate other, and constitutes the origin of the self-understanding of the individual.⁴⁰

The work of both Émile Benveniste and Jacques Lacan will be important for thinking about autobiographical discourse. Although the situation of the autobiographical

⁴⁰ For a concise summary of Lacanian theory, see Toril Moi (99—101).

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writer is very different from that of the Lacanian infant, the notion that it is through the use of language that a person both comes to understand themselves as an individual and begins to participate in the social order appears to resonate with Bouraoui's primary motivation for writing (see Introduction, opening quotation). While there clearly exists an author called Nina Bouraoui who pre-dates her text, so that it is not literally the autobiographical engagement with language that institutes her subjectivity, the textual persona created through her writing, the autofictional "Nina Bouraoui"—indeed, the literary "self" discovered through the course of her "identity quest" and therefore the object of this investigation—is, apparently, produced through the language of her texts.

Although the views of both Benveniste and Lacan seem to entail the necessary presence of a desiring subject existing prior to social discourse, the power of language is seen as primordial, shaping and controlling the social subject's volition, and compelling many, if not all, of their activities. Over the course of the 1960s, however, with structuralist views pervading many different theoretical disciplines, some thinkers began to expand the view of language as a network arbitrarily expressing reality in order to challenge the existence of a non-linguistic reality outside of this structure. Theorists like Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault went on to posit the dissolution of the sovereign subject, instead replaced by a subject lacking individual volition and discursively "compelled" by a network of institutions.⁴¹ From this point of view, the apparently self-evident importance of the physical author, set apart from their textual creation, is not straightforwardly accepted. In fact, Roland Barthes went so far as to declare the "Death of the Author" and corresponding birth of the reader, who, liberated from any concern for authorial intent, is left to interpret the literary text in whatever way they can.⁴² It was not then until the early 1980s that critical theory saw

⁴¹ See, for example, Althusser's 1969 essay "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses," in which he argues that "all ideology has the function (which defines it) of "constituting" concrete individuals as subjects" (170). Extracts from Althusser's essay, alongside many other works important within this broad theoretical context, are included in the volume *Identity: A Reader* edited by Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman (2000).

⁴² See Roland Barthes Roland "La mort de l'auteur"(1968).

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the “return of the subject,” aiming to restore belief in individual agency, albeit an agency drastically diminished from its pre-structuralist form.⁴³

Returning to Bouraoui’s autobiographical writing, the idea that meaning is created by the play of language, rather than by the author’s intent, may also chime with the notion of literature as an identity quest, in which Bouraoui potentially conceives of a (textual) self-identity as reader, rather than writer, of her own work. From the point of view of this thesis, devoting a study to a particular author, especially one who writes autobiographically and thematises their identity in their own work, necessarily entails a level of acceptance of something like the writer’s “sovereignty”: the idea that there is a pre-textual person called “Nina Bouraoui” who is capable of operating as a free and integral agent—on whose motivations this thesis will at times attempt to speculate—and who chooses to represent themselves in writing. However, as Bouraoui’s work itself demonstrates, the coherence of her personal identity is neither straightforward nor carefree, and elements of both psychoanalysis and structuralism will productively inform its analysis. The identity trouble Bouraoui experiences therefore fits in not just with a literary trend, but also with a (connected) philosophical one. While much of this theoretical background pre-dates Bouraoui’s life and career, the final important reference in tracing the development of this (loosely conceived) school of thought is a ground-breaking modern philosopher working contemporaneously with Bouraoui: Judith Butler.

1.2 A Butlero–Wittigian Framework

Judith Butler is a highly influential contemporary theorist who, influenced by European post-structuralism and partaking in our broadly conceived “subject-of-language” approach to identity, rejects the existence of an essential or pre-discursive human subject, instead seeing both human agency and identity as socially constructed through the interplay of discourse. Publishing her first major work in 1990, the year

⁴³ In the Introduction to *Subject Matters*, Johnnie Gratton explains how “since the deaths of Barthes and Foucault in the early 1980s, one of the most significant developments in the field of critical thought has been the confirmation, diversification, and elaboration of the trend popularly known as the ‘return of the subject’” (11), emphasising “the attenuated nature of the subject in question” (12).

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before Bouraoui's first publication, Butler's work attempts to synthesise two possible approaches to seeing the subject as constructed in language—psychoanalysis and post-structuralism—through analysis of the production of certain minority identity positions. In Butler's view, no form of identity pre-exists the "play" of discourse, and our perception of ourselves existing as stable individual subjects is itself dependent on our being produced within the practice of signification. In *Bodies That Matter*, published in 1993, Butler argues:

Where there is an "I" who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that "I" and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus there is no "I" who stands behind discourse and executes its volition or will through discourse. (225)

If there is no "I" who stands behind discourse, the idea, or effect, of the "I" is necessarily produced at the same time as it is expressed in language, and in this light, life-writing might all the more strongly be taken to produce the subject of which it speaks at the moment of textual inscription itself. Butler's work is grounded in Foucaultian theory on mechanisms of power and repression which foreclose the identity positions available to any given subject. At the same time, however, she attempts to account for why, within a set of restrictions, a given subject adopts the identity it does, through a psychoanalytic investigation of the processes of "identification." She suggests:

There may be a way to subject psychoanalysis to a Foucaultian redescription even as Foucault himself refused that possibility. This text accepts as a point of departure Foucault's notion that regulatory power produces the subjects it controls, and power is not only imposed externally but works as the regulatory and normative means by which subjects are formed. The return to psychoanalysis, then, is guided by the question of how certain regulatory norms form a "sexed" subject in terms that establish the indistinguishability of psychic and bodily formation. (22)

The work of Judith Butler—and her philosophical precursors in the "subject-of-language" approach to identity—will form a dominant perspective from which this thesis attempts to analyse the representation, or construction, of selfhood within Bouraoui's writing. While the interrogation of the position of the author found in post-

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structuralism is significant with regard to the apparent insecurity of Bouraoui's pre-textual self, psychoanalytic themes are both implicitly and, at times, explicitly present in several of her works.⁴⁴ At the same time, the centrality of language to this philosophical approach also resonates with the autobiographical mode of writing, while Butler's particular perspective, approaching identity through the examination of sex and gender, as well as the otherwise socially marginalized in her later work, is methodologically appropriate to Bouraoui and the field in which she writes. Finally, the contemporaneous nature of Butler's work with Bouraoui's may prove to reflect a unique situation for modern subjects, following on both from the theoretical dissolution of the subject in the 1960s and 70s and the more generalized diversification of French literary voices over the course of the twentieth century.

Butler is best known for her work in theory on gender and sexuality, and specifically her prominent concept of "gender performativity," introduced in the 1990 work *Gender Trouble*. Given that, for Butler, nothing meaningfully exists prior to discourse—or, at least, that pre-discursive material cannot be theorized or conceived of in any useful sense—biological "sex," what we take to be a natural essence, shaping and determining our bodies, must in fact be thought of as discursively constructed, or culturally produced, through a series of acts and behaviours in the social domain. Butler's theory of gender "performativity" describes how, rather than reflecting some sort of natural essence, the daily enactment of our gendered identities produces femininity and masculinity at the same time as expressing them. Butler argues:

Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments—generally construed—are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means [Butler's emphases]. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (*Gender Trouble* 185)

⁴⁴ Of works covered in this thesis, those most notably influenced by psychoanalysis are *Le jour du séisme* and *Mes mauvaises pensées*, both discussed in Chapter Three.

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Where we are used to looking at an individual's body and perceiving it as male or female sexed, an identification which determines all aspects of social life, the surface characteristics of the body are in fact meaningless in themselves, and only take on significance once they are expressed within culture. Where Butler focuses on the specificity of sex and gender, in contrast to the more general critiques of subjectivity she inherits from French post-structuralism, this might be considered as a form of synecdoche, focusing on the performativity of one particular element of personal identity, among a whole myriad of identity categories now necessarily conceived of as discursively constructed. In fact, performativity might be thought of as a mechanism for constructing any number of discursive meanings and grafting them on to social bodies.⁴⁵ Butler's attribution of the term to a focus on sex and gender is, however, strategically significant, given her desire to contribute to an important debate within feminist theory.

Butler opens *Gender Trouble* with a challenge to the notion of "'Women' as the subject of feminism," (3) in which she questions whether the feminist movement may have reached an impasse, progression from which depends on a rethinking of the grounds from and for which it claims representation. Butler provocatively suggests that feminism—the political struggle for equality between men and women—might be perpetuating its own necessity in insisting on seeking equality for an inherently unequal subject position:

It is not enough to inquire into how women might become more fully represented in language and politics. Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of "women," the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought. (4)

Butler's controversial contention is that, with gender and sex not existing "naturally," but instead discursively constructed through performativity, feminism must critically

⁴⁵ With regard to race, for example, Butler states in *Bodies That Matter* that: "Rather than accept a model which understands racism as discrimination on the basis of a pre-given race, I follow those recent theories which have made the argument that the 'race' is partially produced as an effect of the history of racism, that its boundaries and meanings are constructed over time not only in the service of racism, but also in the service of the contestation of racism" (18).

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examine the category of “woman” before automatically championing it as an identity position to be defended.⁴⁶

Introducing Wittig

In the above claim, Butler echoes earlier arguments made by the more radical and incendiary thinker Monique Wittig. Wittig was a French feminist theorist writing during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, an activist during the events of May ’68, and a founding member of the French women’s liberation movement (le Mouvement de libération des femmes, or MLF), before breaking with France and moving to America in the 1970s.⁴⁷ Wittig is well known for her highly experimental literary texts. Her first novel, *L’opoponax*, won the 1962 *prix Médicis* for a narrative examining the childhood experiences of one girl, Catherine Legrand, through the ubiquitous use of the plural first person pronoun. Later texts, such as *Les guérillères* (1969) and *Le corps lesbien* (1973) continued Wittig’s interest in experimenting with pronouns, whilst also exploring unconventional forms, styles, and typography. Where Wittig’s fictional work is politically radical in itself, however, for our purposes it is her explicitly theoretical essays, written largely during the 1980s but collected in the 2001 volume *La pensée straight*, which are most significant.

Like Butler, Wittig rejects the idea of “woman” as a natural and essential human identity, instead seeing both sex and gender as socially or culturally produced myths.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ This is not the first time Butler makes such a claim. In her earlier essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” she states that “one ought to consider the futility of a political program which seeks radically to transform the social situation of women without first determining whether the category of woman is socially constructed in such a way that to be a woman is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation” (523).

⁴⁷ For a biographical account of Wittig, see the volume *On Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays*, edited by Namascar Shaktini (2006).

⁴⁸ Within Anglo-American feminist studies, the work of Simone de Beauvoir is credited as founding a famous distinction—ironically, as such a distinction does not exist within French—between “sex” and “gender,” following her well-known claim: “On ne naît pas femme, on la devient” (*Le deuxième sexe*, 2: 13). *Le deuxième sexe*, Beauvoir’s two-volume phenomenological study of the status of woman, had a revolutionary impact following its publication, largely due its suggestion that women, rather than inevitably destined to be subservient or second-class due to the sex into which they are born, in fact take on this subservience due to cultural, and therefore non-essential, pressures and practices. In the decades following Beauvoir’s work, feminists used the apparent distinction between sex and gender to argue that where “sex” is a natural fact, biologically imprinted onto our bodies and endowing each of us with the particular powers and duties of our sex, “gender” need not follow naturally from the form our bodies take, but is rather the socially lived experience of our sexed identities—culturally variable, non-essential and, where steeped in inequality, capable of and apt for reform or revolution. Although, as

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For Wittig, the apparently irrefutable facts of our material bodies—that males and females have clearly different bodies which are able to perform different functions within human life and reproduction—actually have no meaning or significance prior to social discourse. Rather than a transparent case of two distinct sexes existing “naturally,” Wittig views the division of society along gender lines as an entirely political action, performed and repeated in order to ensure the dominance of one purely socially constructed group over the other. Wittig argues that to distinguish two sexes is necessarily to establish them within a hierarchy, and sex therefore exists entirely in order to generate a relationship of domination: “Car il n’y a pas de sexe. Il n’y a de sexe que ce qui est opprimé et ce qui opprime. C’est l’oppression qui crée le sexe et non l’inverse” (“La catégorie de sexe”, 36). This fact is obscured from us, however, by “l’idéologie de la différence des sexes,” a set of naturalising discourses which, through affirming the category of sex, “servent à dissimuler le fait que les différences sociales relèvent toujours d’un ordre économique, politique et idéologique” (36).

Writing largely prior to Judith Butler, and before the rise of the Queer Theory movement, Wittig’s theoretical essays are all fairly concise, passionately but briefly arguing politically radical ideas, rather than developing them in more detailed academic works, as does Butler. Considering the two theorists together, however, we might posit Butler’s extensive analysis of the identificatory processes of sex and gender as in some ways a progression of Wittig’s work.⁴⁹ Butler’s notion of gender performativity, for example, attempts to explain discursive mechanisms that account for how the sexed body is culturally constructed in a more dispassionate and methodical way than, for instance, Wittig’s more fervent declaration: “J’insiste sur cette oppression matérielle des individus par les discours” (“La pensée straight” 56).

Butler notes, Beauvoir did not intend her analysis to be adopted in this way, distinguishing between sex and gender proved useful for second-wave feminism, to such an extent that forty years later Butler is forced to re-conflate the terms, arguing that the nature/ culture divide is not a useful one. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler suggests: “If the immutable character of sex is contested, 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” (9–10).

⁴⁹ Indeed, Butler devotes a section of *Gender Trouble* to discussing Wittig’s influence (151–175).

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As well as their common belief in gender and sex being non-essential, Butler and Wittig also use similar language in identifying the social structures which they see as imposing these categories. Within Butler's discussion early in *Gender Trouble* of the "structures of power" which produce gender, she conceptualises a "matrix of intelligibility," (24) an assembly of the various structures of power which constrain and produce subjects' identities, which meet as a determining network capable of excluding unacceptable forms of identity. With regard to sex and gender, the fundamental characteristic of this matrix for Butler is its heterosexuality—meaning not that non-heterosexual behaviours are prohibited, but that all sexual behaviour must be understood with reference to the governing norm of heterosexuality. She asks: "If 'identity' is an *effect* of discursive practices, to what extent is gender identity, construed as a relationship among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire, the effect of a regulatory practice that can be identified as compulsory heterosexuality?" (*Gender Trouble* 24).⁵⁰ Similarly, writing several years before Butler, Wittig argues that "la catégorie de sexe est une catégorie politique qui fonde la société en tant qu'hétérosexuelle" ("La catégorie de sexe" 38)—a political action which goes unquestioned due to the normalising effects of what she calls "the straight mind" or "*la pensée straight*."

Queer theory

Wittig and Butler's mutual critique of the oppressive conventions of heterosexual society chimes with a set of theoretical developments which emerged in parallel with feminist theory during the 1980s, the burgeoning field of gay and lesbian studies, which led, in the early 1990s, to the emergence of "Queer theory." The strategy for deconstructing social and sexual inequalities which *Gender Trouble* presents—challenging the ontological grounds on which identity is situated in order to question the ultimate basis for hierarchy and domination—saw Butler's work quickly taken up by this new theoretical movement, and, while Wittig's writing does not overlap with Queer theory in the same way, a 21st-century reading of her theory cannot fail to be

⁵⁰ Additionally, in the earlier essay "Performative Acts," Butler states that: "One way in which this system of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced and concealed is through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with 'natural' appearances and 'natural' heterosexual dispositions." (524).

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influenced by other work carried out in the fields of gay and queer studies in the last few decades.

In the same year as *Gender Trouble*'s publication, 1990, the academic and cultural theorist Teresa de Lauretis coined the term "Queer theory" to designate an anti-essentialist and deconstructive theoretical approach to the issues of sexuality and desire.⁵¹ Coming out of the field of gay and lesbian studies, which considered homosexual expression within literary and cultural production, Lauretis originally proposed "queer" as a term which might re-energise academic interest in sexuality—which had until then, she claimed, been dominated by white male analyses. Rather than focusing on the presence or absence of the established sexual categories of "gay" and "lesbian"—which, Queer theory argues, are socially constructed just as the "male" and "female" identity positions on which they depend—queer literary and cultural analysis takes a post-structuralist approach to issues of gender and sexuality, challenging conventionally understood identity positions and advocating newly divergent expressions of desire. A re-appropriation of a word previously used derogatively towards homosexuals, "queer" is a notion designed to resist the pigeon-holing labels of identity politics, rejecting the ontology of essentialism, and instead advocating a freer and more fluid sexual and social identity.⁵²

It is important, here, to note the distinction between "queer" and "gay and lesbian". If the human subject in its totality is merely a product of discourse, then the sexual practices engaged in by that subject must be culturally compelled, rather than relating to any essential property of their agents. Queer sexuality would therefore advocate

⁵¹ Lauretis used the term at a conference at the University of California in February 1990 before publishing a special issue of the journal *differences* which was entitled "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities" (1991). Other important contributions to the Queer theory movement at this time include *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1993), in which editor Michael Warner coined the term "heteronormativity," following Adrienne Rich early theorising of "compulsory heterosexuality" in her 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." For more on the history of Queer theory, see James Day and William Edmiston, *Queer Sexualities in French and Francophone Literature and Film* (2007). See "Introduction" to *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (1993), edited by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David Halperin, for the distinctiveness of Queer theory as a break-away element of Lesbian and Gay Studies in the early 1990s.

⁵² Butler discusses the re-appropriation of the term "queer" as an act of performative re-signification in *Bodies That Matter* (21). The "public assertion of queerness," she states, "enacts performativity as citationality for the purposes of re-signifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy."

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against defining an individual in terms of their sexual practices. Further than this, if all social identities are merely constructions of the current cultural system, and if that system in itself produces these categories as subjects of oppression, Queer theorists argue that this paradox can only be overcome by dissolving such categories of identity, rejecting any recourse to essentialism, and re-imagining ourselves as freer and more indefinable social beings.

The Question of Transformation

If Wittig and Butler broadly agree on the core view of both gender and sex as cultural constructions rather than essential facts, they differ in their responses to this discovery, with Wittig attributing far greater agency and capacity for transformation to subjects themselves than Butler allows for. Butler's follow-up to *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter* (1993), discusses in its preface some of the reactions to her first book, and attempts to address a common misreading of her notion of gender performativity as a theory which allows for an independent, wilful subject prior to gender. Butler paraphrases this misreading, stating:

If I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night. Such a wilful and instrumental subject, one who decides *on* its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realise that its existence is already decided *by* gender [Butler's emphasis]. (x)

Butler rebuts this characterisation of her argument from *Gender Trouble*, concluding: "Certainly, such a theory would restore a figure of a choosing subject—humanist—at the center of a project whose emphasis on construction seems to be quite opposed to such a notion" (x). Butler therefore refutes the suggestion that, if gender is a product of discourse rather than an essential truth, this should logically allow gendered subjects the space and freedom to choose to perform or put on a different gender, precisely because she does not believe in "a wilful and instrumental subject" existing—and choosing—pre-discursively. This question of transformative agency is, however, where Butler and Wittig's work differs. Where Butler refuses the possibility of pre-discursive subjectivity, discourse for Wittig appears as a secondary realm, outside of

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which it is at least possible to conceive of a being prior to subjectivation. Butler's discussion of Wittig in *Gender Trouble* acknowledges this:

There appear to be two levels of reality, two orders of ontology, in Wittig's theory. Socially constituted ontology emerges from a more fundamental ontology that appears to be pre-social and pre-discursive. Whereas "sex" belongs to a discursively constituted reality (second-order), there is a pre-social ontology that accounts for the constitution of the discursive itself. (156)

This two-order ontology is something Butler protests against, and yet, with regard to literary studies, and to the autobiographical or autofictional act performed by Bouraoui as author, a two-level approach seems more appropriate to our present purposes than Butler's more primordial ontological paradigm.

Unlike the (now unfashionable) absolutist structuralism of the 1960s—which at its most extreme claims that nothing exists outside the text—our study of Bouraoui's autofictional work will necessarily accept the existence of a pre-textual author, a real-life Nina Bouraoui who re-creates herself as an autofictional textual character, or "literary self." Where Butler contends that sex is always already gender and that the human subject must be already defined in this way prior to any independent choice or action in order to be socially intelligible in the first place, Wittig's theory allows for individual will or agency independently of restriction in the social realm. It is through the work of the earlier theorist, therefore, that we might be able to figuratively compare Bouraoui's literary text to constructionism's "social discourse," drawing a parallel between Wittig's pre-discursive agent and the pre-textual author's relationship to their textual self. Wittig, unlike Butler, contends that while our identities are constructed in language, there exists a definite possibility of transformative action through which subjects can potentially change aspects of their social identity by performing themselves differently. What is more, most importantly for her application to a reading of Nina Bouraoui's autofictional work, Wittig directs her belief in the transformative capacities of the subject specifically towards the act of writing. For Wittig, writing is a politically crucial activity, endowing any literary endeavour—but particularly those undertaken by writers from minority groups—with immense potential for radical social transformation.

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In the essay “Le point de vue, universel ou particulier,” Wittig refers to the theoretical context with which we have been dealing—the death of the author and crisis of meaning dominant in late twentieth-century French thought—and suggests that, where critical theory had foregrounded the role of language in constructing the subject, this can help us conceive of a means through which systems of domination might be overthrown: namely, the re-appropriation of language through the literary act:

On se demande qu'est-ce que le sujet? Dans le débâcle général qui suit la remise en question du sens, il y a lieu pour un, une minoritaire de s'introduire dans le champ (de bataille) privilégié qu'est la littérature où s'affrontent les tentatives de constitution du sujet. [...] la recherche littéraire constitue une expérience privilégiée pour faire advenir un sujet au jour. Cette recherche est la pratique subjective ultime, une pratique cognitive du sujet. (“Le point de vue, universel ou particulier” 90–91)

Where Wittig sees everything as constructed in language, it follows that, for her, language has the positive potential of re-constructing and changing the status quo:

Chacun de nous est la “somme” des transformations effectuées par les mots. Nous sommes à ce point des êtres sociaux que même notre physique est transformé (ou plutôt formé) par le discours—par la somme des mots qui s'accumulent en nous. Et ceci est vrai de toutes les catégories d'individus. Le souci de ces effets des mots, l'économie des transformations qu'ils sont à même d'opérer, font partie des travaux qui se mènent dans le chantier littéraire.⁵³ (“La marque du genre” 108)

The literary text in Wittig's theory becomes a privileged space, a political battlefield, in which writers may re-craft words, and where minorities—those groups which are marginalised or dominated through the current discursive regime—can re-appropriate language through engagement with the act of writing.⁵⁴ Indeed, for Wittig, the opportunity for minority subjects to liberate themselves through literary endeavour

⁵³ “Le Chantier littéraire” is also the title of Wittig's doctoral dissertation, posthumously published in 2010. Wittig obtained her doctorate from the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris in 1986, and much of the content of this work is repeated in the individual essays she published at this time, collected in the volume *La pensée straight*.

⁵⁴ Wittig also states: “Le langage pour un écrivain est un matériau spécial (comparé à celui des peintres ou des musiciens) puisqu'il sert d'abord tout autre chose qu'à faire de l'art et trouver des formes, il sert à tout le monde tout le temps, il sert à parler et à communiquer. C'est un matériau spécial parce qu'il est le lieu, le moyen, le médium où s'opère et se fait jour le sens” (“Le point de vue, universel ou particulier” 94).

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becomes not just a possibility, but almost an obligation. Language is both the basis of oppression and the means for revolution; the literary text, as privileged linguistic site, can re-write elements of our discursively constructed world, which will then go on to materially influence social oppression.

Wittig's lesbian

In the essay “La Marque du Genre” (1985) Wittig refers to Mikhail Bakhtin as one her few theoretical precursors in having “une approche matérialiste du langage” (104). Rather than maintain the classic division of the concrete and material (such as human bodies) on the one hand, and the abstract or conceptual (such as language) on the other, Wittig holds that language can have a physical impact on reality: “Je dis que même les catégories abstraites et philosophiques agissent sur le réel en tant que social. Le langage projette des faisceaux de réalité sur le corps social. Il l’emboutit et le façonne violemment” (105). In this example, “les catégories abstraites et philosophiques” to which Wittig refers are linguistic components bearing “la marque du genre,” a grammatical phenomenon that most people would consider neutral or benign, but which Wittig regards as an ontological violence, imposing the constructed category of sex onto social beings. In the first section of this chapter we posited Benveniste’s “De la subjectivité dans le langage” as one of the founding texts for the “subject-of-language” approach to identity. In this essay, Wittig subjects Benveniste’s work to a radical feminist analysis, questioning the extent to which his account of the personal pronouns may be applied to women. The free and egalitarian nature of the “I”/ *je* proposed by Benveniste—which, we recall, can be appropriated by any speaker for themselves (see above)—is, for Wittig, compromised by the need for gendered speakers to reveal the particularity of their social position. Given the inequality between the sexes inherent in their binary stratification, for Wittig women will never be able to speak from the same neutral position as men as long as they are required to reveal their gender in language: “Sous la dénomination de genre, la catégorie de sexe imprègne tout le corps du langage et force chaque locuteur s’il en est une, à proclamer son sexe physique (sociologique)” (“La marque du genre” 106). As well as being “discursively constructed” into a position of domination, then, each individual use of

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language by a woman perpetuates and reinforces her marginalisation, by requiring her to declare her marginality.

While Wittig follows Benveniste in the claim that the act of speaking establishes “le sujet en tant que sujet, en tant que sujet absolu de son discours” (“La marque du genre” 107), for the gendered subject this position of “sujet absolu” is unattainable: “Parler, dire *je*, se réapproprier tout le langage, ne peut se faire que par un *je* entier, total, universel, sans genre. Sans quoi il n'y a pas de parler possible” (107). Where the absolute subject, or “*je* entier” must be undivided, total, and “universal,” the mark of gender prohibits women from accessing this universal position by particularising the female speaking subject, rendering them relative, and denying them the sovereign capacity for genuine expression. It is relevant to note here that for Wittig, as for many second-wave feminists, the effect of gender is only felt politically by women; where in theory there are two genders, the masculine has long had the luxury of representing the neutral or universal as against the particularised feminine, and in this sense only the feminine can be considered a *marked* gender. For the radical Wittig, this is the intentional result of a conspiracy of domination—she claims, “Que l’universel ait été approprié historiquement, soit”—with the effect that, where men’s speech is not required to take on grammatical gender and can be seen as “universal,” women, although not numerically a minority, are linguistically forced into that position (107).

It is within this context of seeing gender as a particularising force which maintains oppression and inscribes social bodies that Wittig advocates political lesbianism. As the social category of “woman” is not a natural fact, existing a priori, but a constructed one, for Wittig (unlike for Butler) it should be possible for individuals who are conscious of this fact to avoid taking on such sexed positions. Wittig is clear that no (gendered) subject will live freely as long as the category of sex persists:

À ce point, disons qu’une nouvelle définition de la personne et du sujet pour toute l’humanité ne peut être trouvée qu’au-delà des catégories de sexe (homme et femme) et que l’avènement de sujets individuels exige d’abord la destruction des catégories de sexe, la cessation de leur emploi et le rejet de toutes les sciences qui les utilisent comme leurs fondements. (“On ne naît pas femme” 52)

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For this reason, Wittig suggests that the term “lesbian” could provide an alternative identity position outside of the categories of sex. If “man” and “woman” exist as categories defined entirely in relation to one another, then “lesbian” may represent an alternative to gendered identity; lesbians are not women, because what defines a woman is a particular social relationship to a man. The position of lesbian may therefore be embodied by any subject who refuses to conform to the binary gender division of heterosexual society:

Le lesbianisme pour le moment nous fournit la seule forme sociale dans laquelle nous puissions vivre libres. De plus, “lesbienne” est le seul concept que je connaisse qui soit au-delà des catégories de sexe (homme et femme) parce que le sujet désigné (lesbienne) N’EST PAS une femme, ni économiquement, ni politiquement, ni idéologiquement. Car en effet ce qui fait une femme, c’est une relation sociale particulière à un homme [Wittig’s emphases]. (“On ne naît pas femme” 52)

Where, as we saw in the essay “La Catégorie de sexe,” heterosexuality is named as the social regime enforcing the binary division of people into two sexes, Wittig now suggests that “lesbian” identity may be seen as liberating individuals from the social obligation endured by “men” and “women,” who are defined only by their capacities for reproduction. Instead of a strictly personal decision, however, or a long-term lifestyle choice, for Wittig to be a “lesbian” is a political act, simultaneously providing both the only means through which subjects may “pour le moment” live freely, and a revolutionary strategy which seeks the abolition of all oppressive categories of sex. Considering these claims, therefore, we should understand Wittig’s notion of the “lesbian” as emerging from a political relationship to socially constructed categories of sex, not a form of sexual orientation defined by the “natural” biological bodies of those who practice it.

Of course, Wittig’s choice of a term denoting an existing social identity position to define her new form of political subjectivity poses potential lexical difficulties.⁵⁵ In

⁵⁵ It is true that, at certain places in Wittig’s work, the distinction between female homosexuality as currently exists and the “lesbianism” which she advocates may not be made clearly or consistently enough, a weakness which has been seized on by some of her critics, see: Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminist, Nature, Difference*; Renate Günther, “Are Lesbians Women? The Relationship between Lesbianism and Feminism in the Work of Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig”; and Christopher Robinson, *Scandal in the Ink: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-century French Literature*.

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taking a Wittigian approach to reading the work of Nina Bouraoui, a writer who identifies as homosexual, there may be a temptation to falsely conflate Bouraoui's lived sexual practice with Wittig's political admonitions. However, understanding Wittig's "lesbian" in its intended re-signified sense, as an entirely new identity position which is only temporarily necessary in achieving the widespread overthrow of all identity categories, Wittig's theory may prove useful for a reading of Bouraoui's autofictional self-representation, not for the theme of sexuality, but for the possibilities of this literary form. According to our understanding of Bouraoui's recourse to life-writing as an increasingly popular contemporary response to problems of personal identity, the autofictional text appears as a space for exploring new identities and potentially developing experimental identity positions, freed from the restrictions of lived reality. Wittig's notion of "lesbian" identity may then chime with the liberating possibilities of the autofictional self produced through writing such as Bouraoui's. In order to mark the distinction between Wittigian lesbianism and the conventional definition of the word, therefore, it will at times be useful to employ the term "woman-loving woman" to emphasise the non-political nature of non-Wittigian lesbianism.

While Wittig's formulation of discursive identity is more dogmatic than Butler's, it is also more optimistic, given her belief in the radical potential of literature to re-write the oppressive and marginalising discursive system in which contemporary social life is currently instituted. For Wittig, "minority" writers may in fact possess their own means for self-liberation, in exercising this literary potential to appropriate discourse for themselves. Owing to the category of sex, "women"—probably the largest marginalised group, and one of the identity groups to which Nina Bouraoui belongs—would appear to be excluded from this potential, with grammatically gendered language denying the female speaking subject the capacity to access the universal speaking position. Rather than being insurmountable, however, these two facts, for Wittig, point to both the cause of the problem and the means for its resolution: "Il faut

For a detailed and persuasive defence of Wittig against Fuss and other critics, see Diane Griffin Crowder's essay "Universalizing Materialist Lesbianism" in the volume *On Wittig* (2005).

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donc détruire le genre totalement. Cette entreprise a tous les moyens de s'accomplir à travers l'exercice même du langage" ("La marque du genre" 107).

Within Wittig's political theory, the problem of gender inequality—the inevitable consequence of the existence of the discursively constructed category of sex—represents the fundamental social issue which must be overcome in order to liberate all subjects from gender domination. Given the power of language in instigating gender, Wittig believes that literature, as a site for experimenting with language, may provide a space for re-shaping social reality, appropriating the discursive system to the needs of minority writers, and instituting equality through the dissemination of radical new identity positions. Within Bouraoui's work, we have seen how the writer's problematic personal identity motivated her decision to write about herself, and we have proposed that through writing Bouraoui seeks to develop a new way of interacting with the world, producing a new form of "literary selfhood" through autofiction. It would therefore seem that Wittig's theory—alongside the better known work of her successor Judith Butler—can provide a fertile theoretical paradigm for our investigation of Bouraoui's work.

1.3 Characteristics of the Literary Self

In the first half of this chapter we have gone some way to establishing a Butlero–Wittigian framework, combining aspects of each theorist's work, through their common belief in the power of language to produce personal identity. Given our specific focus on the self-referential literary text, Wittig's more optimistic and agential account of an extra-textual subject constructed—and, potentially, re-constructed—through language will be favoured over Butler's more primordial model of the discursively produced subject. In fact, considering Wittig's claims about "lesbian" identity, Bouraoui's life-writing seems well placed to serve as a test case for examining Wittig's positive theory of the transformative potential of literature. Within our reading of Bouraoui's work, our focus will necessarily return on several occasions to two central questions, both of which may be elucidated by a Wittigian theoretical

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approach: the thematic question of minority identity, and the formal question of the implications of experimental literature, here with regard to autofiction. Given the division we have noted between Wittig and Butler on the issue of authorial agency, however, before going any further it will be necessary to consider what form of subjectivity we hope to examine when discussing textual identity, or the “literary self” of Bouraoui’s autofictional life-writing.

Defining selfhood

Returning to Émile Benveniste’s essay “De la subjectivité dans le langage,” we have already considered his affirmation that “c’est dans et par le langage que l’homme se constitue comme *sujet*; parce que le langage seul fonde en réalité, dans sa réalité qui est celle de l’être, le concept d’‘ego’” (259). In the years surrounding the rise and fall of structuralism, one recurrent criticism of social constructionism has been the apparent absurdity of denying human existence beyond and before the realm of language. Carefully considering Benveniste’s formulation of the “subject-of-language,” however, such a criticism seems here to be irrelevant. While it is “dans et par le langage” that people become subjects, and so in this sense subjectivity is linguistic, “le sujet” and “l’ego” comprise just one part of human identity, and Benveniste’s discussion can therefore operate at a theoretical remove from the material or bodily world. Framed in this way, it seems straightforward to describe one’s *subjectivity* as discursively constructed, or as essentially linguistic in character. But how are we to connect this model of “subjectivity” to our area of inquiry—Nina Bouraoui’s “personal identity”? Here, one might well argue the presence of a non-linguistic realm impacting on one’s sense of self (for example, most obviously, the corporeal).⁵⁶ The object of our investigation, however, is the extent to which elements of Bouraoui’s personal identity

⁵⁶ In *Fictions in Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin explores the idea of corporeal subjectivity outside of language through reference to the life and work of Helen Keller, a deaf-blind woman who was completely without language for the first seven years of her life. Eakin argues that, although Keller physically existed prior to her acquisition of language, she was missing an effective sense of self—which we might describe as her “subjectivity”—and that it was the acquisition of language which was responsible for her effective social birth. Quoting Keller’s autobiography, Eakin suggests: “Only after the event of the well-house [when Keller learnt her first word] did she achieve a conceptual grasp of self and of language, each inseparably linked to the other: ‘When I learned the meaning of “I” and “me” and found that I was something, I began to think. Then consciousness first existed in me’ (Keller, *The World I Live In*, 113–4)” (*Fictions in Autobiography* 212).

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are configured—and may potentially be transformed—through the action of language. For this reason, each of the chapters which follow will attempt to combine a consideration of aspects of the constitution of the linguistic subject, with a close reading of a series of works by Bouraoui, clustered around key themes relating to personal identity. Through examining these aspects of the linguistic subject in the remaining part of this chapter, we may delimit the form of subjectivity under investigation within our study of the construction of personal identity, elucidating the boundaries and characteristics of our notion of “literary selfhood.”

Where Benveniste defines “subjectivity” as that self which is produced through the use of language, the idea of the subject giving testimony about him or her self may resonate with our study of autobiography, and it is this form of “subjectivity” which appears potentially analogous with our writer’s textual self-representation. In the next section, we shall identify three characteristics which have been attributed to the “discursively constructed subject,” and according to which we might therefore characterise “literary selfhood”: identity as “performative,” “narrative,” and “relational.” Each of these will structure one of the following analysis chapters in providing a framework for examining a particular theme or question in Bouraoui’s life-writing. At the same time, the three characteristics may be understood as composing three separate levels by which we can juxtapose the construction of the literary text, with the construction of a “literary self.” As we shall see, the first of these features, the “performative,” relates to the functioning of individual words, which may be seen to construct the world around us through their repetition. The second, “narrative,” considers the way in which meaning and understanding are produced through discursive structures which align lived reality with the production of literary texts. Finally, “relational” describes both how meaning is achieved in language and how individual’s lives become meaningful through relationships with one another.

Performative Identity

“Performative” is a term we have already discussed through reference to Judith Butler’s influential notion of “gender performativity.” In Chapter Two of this thesis, we will consider Butler’s work on performativity alongside a reading of three of Bouraoui’s

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texts, examining the ways in which language performatively constructs elements of the writer's personal identity, both within and before her engagement with literature. In keeping with the origin of Butler's use of the term within her theoretical work on sex and gender, our analysis of performative identity in that chapter will consider Bouraoui's representation of her developing sexuality and gendered identification across some of her early autobiographical works, as well as tracing the effects of racist language as restrictive violence in the first of these texts. However, at the same time as attempting to describe how, within the subject-of-language approach to identity, linguistic subjects embody gender as one aspect of their personal identity, the notion of performativity is also of more general, less theme-specific importance for our overall project. This is because it is a term which articulates the central thesis of the post-structuralist understanding of identity, namely that identity is "discursively constructed." As performativity is central to conceiving of the social subject in this way, it potentially allows us a means to conceive of the autofictional figure "Nina Bouraoui" within Bouraoui's work as metaphorically paralleling the non-textual, or social, construction of personal identity.

The term *performative* derives from linguistics, and specifically a series of lectures given by J. L. Austin in the 1950s, later posthumously published as *How To Do Things With Words*. Austin examined the specific linguistic case of "speech acts"—how words function pragmatically in conversation—and divided them into different classes of utterances. Where speech acts are "constative," language has a referential function, in that it describes an actual state of affairs (3). With "performative" speech acts, however, the utterance does not so much reflect the state of the world, as bring about a change in that state (6). Common examples of performative utterances would be "I now pronounce you husband and wife," said by the celebrant of a marriage ceremony, and "I bequeath this watch to my brother," as occurring in a will (5). In each of these examples, the state of affairs referred to by the statement—a man and woman being married, and the transfer of possession of a watch from one person to their brother—occurs at the moment of the speech act, produced "performatively" in language. This is possible because both of these states—marriage and possession—are necessarily

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non-essential and without objective truth, depending entirely on social convention and the functioning of the human systems we have set up through language.

As we have already seen in Judith Butler's use of the term, for proponents of the "subject-of-language" school of identity, who (following Benveniste) do not believe that subjectivity can pre-exist discourse, the notion of the performative speech act producing, rather than reflecting, the state of the world, may articulate something quite different—and more universal—than Austin's lecture initially intended.⁵⁷ Where we have been considering the textual production of a transformative sense of self-identity, we might describe autofictional language as performatively producing a new sort of identity through the representation of the self in writing. A new sense of self, a "literary selfhood" resolving Bouraoui's identity quest, may therefore be performatively enacted contemporaneously with her writing project.

A defining moment in the development of performative theory, extending its application from solely "ordinary language" linguistics to inclusion within literary theory and critical thought more broadly, came in 1972, with Jacques Derrida's response to Austin: "Signature, événement, contexte." In this essay (originally a talk), Derrida, while largely approving of Austin's work, critiques a particular element of Austin's discussion of performative speech acts: his persistent decision to exclude from analysis anomalous, exceptional, literary, or non-"serious" uses of language (*How to Do Things With Words* 9). For Derrida, this exclusion obscures an important fact of language use: "La possibilité pour toute énonciation performative (et a priori pour toute autre) d'être 'citée'" (386). Repeating the example we considered above, of the marriage ceremony as performative utterance, Austin suggests in his second lecture that his characterisation of the minister's words as performative would not hold were they to be spoken outside of "the appropriate circumstances" (13)—for example, if they were spoken not by a genuine minister, but by an actor performing a wedding scene in a play. Derrida responds to this, however, with the suggestion: "Enfin, ce que Austin exclut comme anomalie, exception, 'non-sérieux', la *citation* (sur la scène, dans

⁵⁷ Indeed, by the eighth lecture in his series, Austin himself suggests that all speech acts could be performative, and therefore that all language necessarily has the potential to be performative too (94–107).

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un poème ou dans un soliloque), n'est-ce pas la modification déterminée d'une citationnalité générale—d'une itérabilité générale, plutôt—sans laquelle il n'y aurait même pas de performatif 'réussi'?" (387). For Derrida, performative speech acts (and ultimately all uses of language) depend on the possibility of repetition: for a statement to be comprehensible, its units of speech must be recognisable as already having been used before. Prior instances of use are necessary for a term to have any meaning attached to it, and each new utterance or use of the term therefore relies on the citationality, or "iterability" of those meanings.

In *Bodies That Matter* Butler uses Derrida's notion of iterability to explain some of the constraints operative on performative identity. As we have already seen, part of Butler's motivation for writing this follow-up book to *Gender Trouble* was to correct a common misunderstanding of her earlier work, which suggested that the performatively constructed subject was free to change their own identity through performing themselves differently (see above, section two). The notion of iterability allows Butler to describe how identity positions, like linguistic utterances, depend on a prior citationality—of social norms, rather than speech acts—in order to be meaningful: "Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularised and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject [Butler's emphases]" (95).

Butler's performative social subject, while not embodying any essential or pre-discursive identity, is therefore constrained by the system of language which produces it. Just as, in our original examples, the performative acts of being married or bequeathing a possession depend on previously existing conventions, performative identity is restricted by the norms of the discursive world. Where we have suggested that the autofictional text might see the performative production of a new form of identity within the literary use of language, it is possible that this textual space might be a site for restrictive conventions to be loosened, with textual performativity having a freer range for the expression of identity than its real-world equivalent. The notion of "performative identity" will therefore be useful in attempting to define the

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particular nature of Bouraoui's literary selfhood in contrast to the gendered, and racially and sexually minoritised, social subject embodied by the extra-textual writer.

Narrative Identity

The notion of "narrative identity" as a characteristic of the (attenuated) post-structuralist subject is employed by several theorists working in a social constructionist tradition, and has been applied both to textual identity, within autobiography studies, and to real or social identity within philosophy and critical theory. This idea borrows the concept of "narrative" as a stylistic technique or form basic to the structure of stories, and extends it to non-literary aspects of life. Anthony Kerby's 1991 work, *Narrative and the Self*, for example, puts forward the argument that "it is in and through various forms of narrative emplotment that our lives [...] attain meaning" (4). Where Benveniste suggested that subjectivity only emerges through the operation of language, Kerby extends this, as he proposes "a model of the human subject that takes acts of *self-narration* not only as descriptive of the self but, more importantly, as *fundamental to the emergence and reality of that subject* [Kerby's emphases]" (4). Kerby's suggestion is that the self-understanding of any human subject depends on their capacity to use language to make sense of themselves, for which narrative operates as the basic vehicle of meaning. He develops this model through a review of theory on narrative, from Nietzsche and Heidegger to hermeneutics and Paul Ricœur (1–47).

Where autofiction is a literary form in which writers use language to express and explore the idea of their self-identity, according to the theory of narrative identity, self-referential narrative description is not in fact a structure of meaning imposed retrospectively onto a human life: we only exist as self-aware individuals because of the working of narrative. In this way, narrative identity does not just parallel the linguistic and cultural structures of narrative, nor use them as metaphors for self-explanation: the two are co-continuous and inseparable. Considering written autobiography (or autofiction), the textual representation of a life-story is therefore not the first occasion on which events from one's life will have been coded as

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narrative, for narrative identity is actually a universal process, essential both to collective human culture and individual personal identity.⁵⁸

Indeed, the notion of “narrative identity” has already proved fruitful for the field of autobiography studies. Paul John Eakin, in particular, employs the term in discussing ways in which autobiographical identity may mirror our experience in the real world. In *How Our Lives Become Stories* (1999), Eakin suggests: “When it comes to autobiography, *narrative* and *identity* are so intimately linked that each constantly and properly gravitates into the conceptual field of the other. Thus, narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience, while self—the self of autobiographical discourse—does not necessarily precede its constitution in narrative” (100). Eakin’s work would therefore seem to support our posited notion of a “literary selfhood” emerging from the autofictional encounter. Just as the first part of this chapter reviewed the late twentieth-century theoretical crisis of subjectivity which perhaps instigated the rise of autofictional exploration, Eakin’s earlier work *Fictions in Autobiography* (1985) connects this particular form of identity to the prevailing theoretical climate. Eakin refers to the argument made by some critics that, given the theoretical context around the death of the subject, autobiography as a practice can no longer be thought possible, owing to the “self” being “by definition transcendent and ineffable” (213). In his response to this argument, Eakin outlines a notion of post-crisis identity which seems similar to our proposed form of literary selfhood:

If the self in its origins is so deeply implicated in the emergency [sic] of language, then we should be prepared to entertain the verisimilitude of the re-creation of self in the language of autobiographical discourse. If the self is itself a kind of metaphor, then we should be willing to accept metaphors of self in autobiography as consubstantial to a significant degree with the reality that they presume to incarnate, a reality deeply linguistic, if not in the very texture of its being, at least in the quality of any knowledge of it that we may hope to attain. (213)

⁵⁸ The ability to construct a narrative around one’s identity is also crucial to an individual’s health. Neurologist Oliver Sacks’ work *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (1985) describes the case of a patient suffering with Korsakoff’s syndrome, a neurological disorder which prevents him from forming memories, or remembering the story of his own life. Sacks’s “Jimmie G.” is a tragic figure, whose lack of narrative identity prevents him from perceiving any meaning in his own life (see Chapter Two, “The Lost Mariner”).

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The notion of “narrative identity” appears, therefore, as a point of natural convergence between theory on identity and the practice of experimental autobiographical writing. Returning to Anthony Kerby’s work on the subject, we might also note links between the working of “narrative” and some of the other concerns we will be investigating within this study. Kerby suggests that

persons only “know” themselves after the fact of expression. This approach necessarily places considerable emphasis on both habit (as support for identity) and the relevance of context (for the meaning of acts), and goes against all forms of intuitive self-evidence or introspection that claim an epistemic transparency of the self to itself. (5)

This self, then, might seem particularly relevant to Bouraoui’s autofictional identity. If Bouraoui begins her textual identity quest in search of a coherent and healthy sense of self, the autofictional subject produced over the course of her work provides a greater possibility for self-recognition than that apparently available to her pre-textual self. At the same time, the notion of “habit” points to the significance of repetition (or iterability) of both the possibilities for self-identity available to Bouraoui, and of the textual or discursive act itself. Beyond the level of linguistic iterability, Bouraoui’s progressive repetition of her self-identity over many texts makes up an important part of the autofictional process. In addition, the “relevance of context” ties in with our interest in Bouraoui’s particularity, and our question as to the utility of the autofictional form for writers from minority backgrounds. We will therefore examine the motif of narrative identity within Bouraoui’s work by focusing in Chapter Three on one of the most recurrent themes of her life-writing, her childhood in Algeria, and her problematic separation from this remembered setting.

Relational Identity

Jean-Jacques Rousseau begins his 1755 essay *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* with a discussion of man in his “natural” state, prior to the establishment of civil society. In this hypothetical pre-social state, Rousseau’s natural man resembles a solitary animal, preferring to roam alone in the wild and avoid social contact with others of his kind, and, owing to his state of natural isolation,

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having no need for language or for abstract thought.⁵⁹ Modern views of human nature, however, overwhelmingly oppose Rousseau's model of individualistic natural man, instead foregrounding "relationality" as a defining characteristic of human life informing language, civil society, and the development of personal identity. As we have already noted, in the early twentieth-century Ferdinand de Saussure analysed language as not only a human medium developed in order to facilitate interpersonal communication, but also as a system which within itself depends on relationships between signifiers in order to produce meaning. Following Saussure's structural linguistics, Claude Lévi-Strauss applied this model of language as a chain of signification to social interaction more broadly, while Émile Benveniste used it to describe the construction of identity in language (see above).

Just as meaning within language depends on relationships between signifiers, and human identity itself (within the post-structuralist view) depends on language, our understanding of our identities and our ability to attribute meaning to them also depend on our relationship to others. Not only in the abstract fields of philosophy and critical thought, but within psychology and child development theory too, the importance of relationships in developing one's sense of self has been foregrounded in recent decades.⁶⁰ While the characteristics of identity as "performative" and "narrative" provide ways in which we might describe the production of the discursively constructed subject, foregrounding relationality reflects consensus among critics and commentators that the self which "returns from structuralist exile" is socially dependent. Far from Rousseau's myth of natural man, the twenty-first century subject is understood to be an inherently social being, and, what is more, the need for relational interaction is no longer viewed as just a preference or desire, but as fundamental to our capacity for self-conception.

⁵⁹ Rousseau describes early men as "des hommes qui, n'ayant ni domicile fixe, ni aucun besoin l'un de l'autre, se rencontreraient peut-être à peine deux fois en leur vie, sans se connaître et sans se parler" (*Discours sur l'origine* 85). We may note that, emblematically, this Enlightenment myth of man as naturally individual chimes with Bouraoui's description of her childhood as "sauvage" (see opening section of Introduction).

⁶⁰ See, for example, Nancy Chodorow's argument on the importance of intersubjectivity to mental health in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989), particularly Chapter Seven, "Toward a Relational Individualism: The Mediation of Self Through Psychoanalysis".

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Within the field of autobiography studies, the significance of relational identity to one's self-conception is increasingly recognised, a shift which has had interesting implications for a conventionally individualistic and author-focused form. In 1988, Susan Stanford Friedman's essay "Women's Autobiographical Selves" proposed the idea of "relational autobiography" as a new form of life-writing particularly relevant to women. In this piece, Stanford Friedman argues that the prevailing view of autobiography, as written by an individualistic, sovereign subject, confidently recounting his life as master of his own narrative, discriminates against accounts of women's lives, which, she contends, typically emphasise the importance of community and relationships, over any putative possibility of independence from one's peers. Stanford Friedman uses one of the earliest critics to write on autobiography as a genre, Georges Gusdorf, to articulate what she considers to be the differences between the autobiographical "canon"—composed largely of powerful white western men—and a new, woman-friendly form of "relational autobiography."

Gusdorf's 1956 essay "Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie" is widely considered a founding work within the field of autobiography studies, and is still a respected and influential text, thanks to the early insight it gives on the cultural specificity of the autobiographical practice. Considering the development of European thought after the Renaissance, Gusdorf suggests that the specific circumstances of western cultural life following the sixteenth-century Copernician revolution had been uniquely appropriate for the development of autobiographical thought: "Le souci, qui nous paraît si naturel, de se pencher sur son passé, de rassembler sa vie pour la raconter, ne correspond pas à une exigence universelle. Il s'affirme depuis quelques siècles seulement et sur une petite partie de la carte du monde" (218). By contrast, Gusdorf states, outside of these circumstances, "Il est bien clair que l'autobiographie n'est pas possible dans un paysage culturel où la conscience de soi, à proprement parler, n'existe pas" (219). Here, the practice of autobiography may be seen to correspond, in a general sense, to the rise of the Cartesian subject; the sovereign individual who confidently proclaims "cogito ergo sum" has much in common with the navel-gazing man who—for the first time in world history, says Gusdorf—considers his life significant enough to warrant recording for posterity.

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We might think that, in acknowledging that this “conscience de soi” is not a universal, Gusdorf’s essay implicitly endorses the post-structuralist view of the sovereign subject as cultural myth, and therefore potentially already leaves space for a more “relational” alternative to individualistic autobiography to emerge. In spite of Gusdorf’s apparent cultural and historical sensitivity with regard to autobiography, however, Stanford Friedman criticises his restrictive definition of the form: “The individualistic concept of the autobiographical self that pervades Gusdorf’s work raises serious theoretical problems for critics who recognise that the self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities, and many non-Western peoples” (72). Stanford Friedman’s essay is, perhaps, now rather dated; her suggestion that the life experience of minorities is inherently different from more privileged social beings is much less popular in the early 21st-century, and does not sit well with the anti-essentialist, “queer” theoretical perspective of this thesis. In recent decades other autobiography theorists have argued that male identity is just as “relationally constructed” as female identity, or indeed any of the other “minority” groups Stanford Friedman includes within her theory.⁶¹ Stanford Friedman’s proposition is, however, interesting for this study because of her invocation of minority identity, which will have implications both for our reading of Nina Bouraoui, and for our Wittigian theoretical approach.

Chapter Four will therefore consider the theme of relationships within and across Bouraoui’s autofictional work, to determine the extent to which other people shape and determine Bouraoui’s “literary self.” Elements of Bouraoui’s “minority identity” will be implicated within this chapter, largely through the question of gay life-writing, and the significance of Bouraoui’s sexual identity to her relationship with the reader. At the same time, through analysis of the interpersonal relationships Bouraoui presents within her writing itself, we may determine the nature of her emergent “literary selfhood” and its connection to her extra-textual self.

⁶¹ See *True Relations: Essays on Autobiography and the Postmodern* (1998), edited by G. Thomas Couser and Joseph Fichtelberg, in particular Paul John Eakin’s essay “Relational Selves, Relational Lives” (63–81).

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Chapter conclusions

Each of the “characteristics” of the discursively constructed subject posited across the theories we have examined in this chapter describes a way in which contemporary identity may be seen to relate to literature and language. With regard to “performative identity,” we have heard how social identity positions, such as one’s gender, or sexual orientation, are not only discursively constructed within culture, but are also potentially governed by the same system of “iterability” which allows for meaning in language. If this is the case, where Butler’s theory limits the capacity of individual subjects to transform their identities, the creative re-writing of the self through autofiction may, in Wittigian style, allow for a freer, more experimental subject to emerge—a “queer” or “literary” selfhood. The theory of “narrative identity,” in turn, articulates a striking similarity between textual self-construction, as within Bouraoui’s life-writing, and the everyday processes and structures of (extra-textual) self-understanding. Where Bouraoui turns to writing in an attempt to make sense of her experiences and her background, the autofictional enterprise may be seen to represent a public manifestation of the more universal, private psychological act of seeking meaning in one’s life. If it is a distinctly “literary self” which emerges from this act, therefore, the implications of Bouraoui’s literary identity quest may extend further than her own particular situation. The notion of “relational identity,” too, implicates the relevance of Bouraoui’s life-writing to the world around her. Just as language depends on relationships—within and between “signifiers” and “signifieds”—in order to produce meaning, interpersonal relationships are crucial to the construction of one’s personal identity, and frequently define how individuals understand themselves. For Bouraoui, the act of writing in itself necessitates a reader, and any renewed personal selfhood arising from her autofiction will depend on the relationships which influence it.

Our proposition of a “literary selfhood” emerging from Bouraoui’s textual identity quest will, therefore, be governed by each of these characteristics, which will help guide our reading of Bouraoui’s life-writing over the following chapters. At the same time, the “Butler-Wittigian” framework established in the first half of this chapter will provide a theoretical framework through which to probe the results of Bouraoui’s

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textual self-exploration. Might the production of a “literary selfhood” have transformative political consequences, or is it merely a form of escaping social reality? In the following three chapters, we will turn to analysis of Bouraoui’s texts in order to address these questions.

2. “Écrire, c’est un acte de résistance”: Language and Identity in the Early Autobiographical Works

In 2004 Bouraoui was interviewed by Dominique Simonnet of *L’Express*, to mark the publication of *Poupée bella*, an autofictional *journal intime* telling of the writer’s young adult years in Paris, and her exploration of her sexuality in the city’s gay quarter. Being the first occasion in Bouraoui’s oeuvre when she makes explicit her own homosexuality, Simonnet’s questions about this text focus on the writer’s understanding of her sexual orientation and her decision to make it public. Simonnet asks, for example, if her sexuality “fut longtemps une souffrance,” to which Bouraoui responds: “Oui, mais elle n’était pas à l’intérieur de moi: j’aime la beauté des femmes, la sensualité, la douceur, et je n’en ai pas honte. La souffrance venait du monde des autres où je ne trouvais pas ma place” (“Écrire, c’est retrouver ses fantômes”). Later, Bouraoui continues, “l’homosexualité, ce n’est qu’un mot. Quand j’ai osé l’écrire pour la première fois, je me suis dit: ‘Ah! quelle incroyable victoire!’ Mais le langage nous emprisonne,” before addressing the connection between her sexuality and her writing: “À propos de mon dernier livre, on a parlé de *coming out*. Pas du tout! Je ne suis pas une provocatrice. Je suis militante à ma manière: j’écris. Écrire, c’est un acte de résistance.”

In Chapter One, we examined the theoretical work of Judith Butler and Monique Wittig, both of whom foreground the power of language in the formation of identity. Through them, we identified the notions of gender as discursively constructed, and of heterosexuality as the dominant regime imposing the binary division of people into two sexes. Although homosexual practices are not prohibited within this regime, compulsory heterosexuality does entail the marginalisation of non-reproductive sex, and this accords with Bouraoui’s claim above to have felt excluded by the heterosexual world, and to have suffered as a result. While the radical political lesbianism which Wittig advocates in order to overthrow the category of sex must not, of course, be conflated with Bouraoui’s romantic attraction to other women, Bouraoui’s description

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of the progression of her self-understanding as gay seems to mirror Wittig’s concern with the dominating power of language. Having initially considered “homosexuality” as an affirmative signifier, in response to the heterosexual culture from which she felt excluded, Bouraoui records her realisation that in fact “ce n’est qu’un mot”; ultimately, all conventional definitions of identity are inherently restrictive. If all language risks imprisoning those to whom it refers, however, Bouraoui then suggests—in a declaration which draws further parallels with Wittig’s theory—that her writing about this area of her life constitutes a personal form of activism, potentially symbolising an act of resistance to the heteronormative world.

In this chapter, we will examine the question of language and identity in Bouraoui’s early autobiographical work, reading a trilogy of works dealing with the theme of the writer’s gendered and sexual development through childhood and adolescence: *Garçon manqué* (2000), *La vie heureuse* (2002), and *Poupée bella* (2004). In each of these works, Bouraoui presents a narrator who is unable or unwilling to conform to dominant cultural expectations of gendered identity, and the restrictive definitions of sexuality to which they correspond. Instead, each of Bouraoui’s narrators attempts to resist the social norms she encounters. While within her transparently autobiographical work Bouraoui’s narrator ultimately finds herself constricted by the cultural world she inhabits, reiterations of this younger self in fictional and autofictional modes provide a means to transgress identity norms in creative and empowering ways, with Bouraoui’s re-writing of herself across these texts potentially providing the means through which writing becomes an act of resistance.

As the earliest and most openly autobiographical of these texts, our analysis will begin with *Garçon manqué*, tracing the writer’s early years in Algeria and France, and foregrounding the central role of language throughout the text. In this work, linguistic terms can have both a positive, affirmative effect on personal identity, and can be used by others to marginalise and exclude. Remembering incidences of both of these linguistic effects during her childhood, Bouraoui suggests the very act of writing this work as a form of resistance to other people’s attempts to verbally abuse her. While incidents of verbal abuse in *Garçon manqué* target the narrator’s *métisse* ethnicity as well as her problematic gender identity, in *La vie heureuse*, Bouraoui continues her

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exploration of the negative force of language, through the fictionalised story of a teenage girl’s identification as gay. Although aspects of Marie’s life chime with what we know of the author, prompting us to read *La vie heureuse* as an autobiographical novel, Bouraoui here benefits from the guise of fiction to explore non-heteronormative possibilities of personal identity. Finally, *Poupée bella*, the last text in this developmental trilogy, and the most formally experimental, returns to Nina, Bouraoui’s self-referential narrator, during her sexually formative years as a young adult in Paris. Here, the tyrannical power of language to divide and define individuals is overcome by a maturing narrative voice, whose explorations of the act of writing parallel her romantic adventures in seeking new lived—and linguistic—possibilities for identity. Before turning to our reading of these texts, however, we shall first overview some of the key theoretical principles governing our Butlero-Wittigian approach to considering the construction of personal identity in the work of Nina Bouraoui, and determine how the work of these theorists might relate in this chapter to a specific focus on language and identity in these works.

2.1 Strategies of Resistance for the Discursively Constructed Subject

As we saw in Chapter One, Judith Butler’s theory of gender as “performative” denies the existence of essential, pre-social identity, instead arguing that the particularising characteristics of individuals’ lived experiences are culturally compelled through the mechanisms of social power which determine our lives. Rather than inherently and inevitably following from genetic or evolutionary laws, an individual’s gendered identity results from their following a cultural obligation to behave in ways in keeping with discursively established gender regulations. A human adult’s actions in embodying a masculine behavioural style—walking, speaking, and interacting with the world around them in ways culturally understood to belong to the male sex—are not a “natural” result of their gender, therefore, but an arbitrary convention, produced not by the individual but by the pervasive cultural system which pre-exists them. If gender identity is not essential, but discursively constructed, however, Butler’s theory might suggest that an individual’s gender identity consequently need not be seen as

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inevitable, but as potentially variable, through the rejection of this state of affairs. We have seen in Chapter One that, in the preface to her second book, *Bodies That Matter*, Butler rejected misreadings of her work which had suggested that "one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night" (x). Nonetheless, some capacity for subjects to subvert gender identity does exist within Butler's theory, and the question as to the extent of this capacity, and its implications for political practice, will be important to our ongoing concerns.

In her early essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988), Butler posits that "what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status" (520). While "social sanction and taboo," for the moment, compel certain gender behaviours, forcing individuals to (unconsciously) repeat culturally acceptable gender acts, Butler suggests the possibility of contesting these regulations through subverting or refusing the continued repetition of gender norms. She suggests: "If the ground of gender identity is the stylised repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (520). Later in this essay, Butler identifies drag as one such possible form of "subversive repetition," in a footnote referring to the work of anthropologist Esther Newton (528, fn.12). It is in *Gender Trouble*, however, that Butler famously develops this idea in detail. Here, Butler notes how, "the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (175), elaborating:

If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of these are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance between not only sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman" [...] it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the*

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imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency [Butler’s emphases]. (187)

As a performance toying with viewers’ expectations of gender identity, analysis of drag shows appears to represent an opportunity for ideological change, with the revelation of “the imitative structure of gender itself” potentially entailing a loosening of the “regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence.” Drag acts may therefore be seen to demonstrate Butlerian theory in the guise of entertainment, and in so doing might provide a means for the gradual transformation of cultural understandings of gender and sexuality.

Despite the apparently radical nature of Butler’s pioneering view of gender as “performative,” her theory does not entail extreme political consequences, but rather a slight re-orientation of dominant cultural systems, to acknowledge—although not overthrow—the “falsely naturalized” construction of gender into two distinct and coherent categories. Many critics have discussed the apparently limited capacity for subversive transformation of gender identities in Butler’s work. Lois McNay’s work *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (2000), for example, seeks to resist what she sees as the determinism of some social constructionist thinking, arguing that “recent theoretical work on identity offers only a partial account of agency because it remains within an essentially negative understanding of subject formation” (2). In her reading of Butler’s notion of gender performativity, McNay criticizes “the underdeveloped idea of agency that arises in the negative paradigm of subjectification within whose terms the idea of the performative is elaborated” (35). As we saw in Chapter One, Butler contends that no form of agency or subjectivity pre-exists the discursive matrix which compels gendered identity, and this therefore limits the capacity for the transformation of gendered subjects. Anna Livia, quoting Butler in *Bodies That Matter*, explains how:

Speaking of the possibilities for action, [Butler] elaborates that identifying with a gender involves identifying with sets of norms with their own pre-existing power and status; one is forced to identify with a norm “one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely.” (200)

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While the norms through which gendered bodies are discursively compelled do not, therefore, *entirely* determine subjectivity, it is impossible to avoid being constituted by such norms. The result of this, as Livia explains, is that:

For Butler [...] and for queer theorists whose work is based on an understanding of her work, individual speaking subjects are obliged to perform gender by entering into a culturally comprehensible set of practices. Political agency is achieved only by reversing or resignifying the norm, that is, by subverting it in subtle ways. There is little space in this theory for revolutionary acts, no sense that one could hijack the prevailing norms and force them to go in the opposite or an entirely new direction. (200)

In dramatic contrast to this, the work of Monique Wittig does allow for a free and desiring political subject who may understand themselves outside of the heteronormative discursive matrix, and the revolutionary force of Wittig’s theory lies in the potential of these politically conscious subjects to actively choose to overthrow prevailing gender codes.

Of particular relevance to this study, Wittig identifies one group as especially valuable in the overthrow of the repressive regime of discursively inscribed gender: writers. Wittig’s essay “Le point de vue, universel ou particulier” (1980) was originally written as a preface to her French translation of *Spillway*, a collection of short stories by the early twentieth-century American lesbian writer Djuna Barnes, and therefore generalises out from a discussion of a particular gay writer. In this essay, Wittig claims that: “tout écrivain minoritaire (qui a conscience de l’être) entre dans la littérature à l’oblique” (91).⁶² In Wittig’s claim, we find two spheres in which language can act to marginalise: as we heard in Chapter One, women are particularised by the obligation of gender in language, resulting in their inevitable social domination; here, women writers equally carry this particularisation into the realm of the textual, with the result that they cannot “entrer dans la littérature” in a neutral or straightforward way. Within this juxtaposition of the two realms of language, however, we may take from the equivalence of linguistic and literary marginalisation—from the fact that being

⁶² A writer will be “minoritaire” if they belong to a marginalised social group: for Wittig, this would include women and those practicing alternative sexualities. However, given our focus on Bouraoui, we might equally include members of ethnic minorities within this designation.

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oppressed through language in “reality” follows the marginalised writer even into literature—a productive strategy for it to be overcome, as the “écrivain minoritaire” can exercise their literary power to re-write the status quo. In a move which Butler would explicitly object to, Wittig’s marginalised subject is able to transform themselves, or rather, to transform the social world which marginalises them, through re-appropriating the very medium which is the site of their oppression. Wittig states that “un texte écrit par un écrivain minoritaire n’est efficace que s’il réussit à rendre universel le point de vue minoritaire” (92), suggesting not just the possibility for writers from minority backgrounds to use their work to counteract social discrimination, but that doing so should be almost obligatory. With this in mind, we shall now turn to exploring Bouraoui’s representation of language and identity in the light of each of these theorists’ work.

2.2 Language as Violence in *Garçon manqué*

In 2000 Bouraoui released *Garçon manqué*, her first explicitly autobiographical text, describing her childhood in Algeria and France. While *Le jour du séisme*, written the year before, introduces a young, female, first-person narrator living in late 1970s Algiers, *Garçon manqué* for the first time departs from the stylised poeticism of this and earlier works, describing in realist mode the adolescence and family life of the narrator, whose name—in keeping with Lejeune’s early requirements of autobiography—is identical with that of the author, Nina Bouraoui.⁶³ The text is divided into four sections, each headed by the location in which the events of that section take place. Of the four sections, the first two make up the majority of the text, covering first Bouraoui’s early life in Algiers, and then the period following her family’s move to Rennes in the early 1980s. The book then closes with two chapters set after these events, first recounting a holiday the narrator takes to Tivoli in Italy as a

⁶³ For a discussion of Philippe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography, see Introduction, section two. Chapter Three begins with a reading of *Le jour du séisme* as the text which initiated Bouraoui’s autobiographical turn. The identification of this earlier text as self-referential depends, however, on our later-acquired knowledge of key autobiographical details, transparently provided by Bouraoui for the first time in *Garçon manqué*.

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teenager, and then a visit to the home of a childhood friend, Amine, on her return from this trip.

As the mixed-race child of an Arab Algerian father and a white French mother living in North Africa, Nina finds her racial identity difficult to navigate, and she is frequently socially excluded at school and in the street. However, aside from her immediate family—the mother, father, and sister Bouraoui describes in this and later autobiographical works—Nina has one other important companion with whom she shares this experience, her best friend, Amine, who is also *métis*. Over the course of the narrator’s childhood, problems of ethnic difference become mirrored in the community more widely, and Nina recounts an atmosphere of increased violence and racial tension in late-1970s Algiers. The heritage of the Algerian War of Independence is explicitly present in the racial abuse she and her family begin to suffer, and, as the community begins to polarise under the new governmental policy of Arabisation, the family become subject to not just verbal but also physical attacks.⁶⁴ Mounting aggression on the streets of Algiers then leads to the first structural turning point of the book, when Nina and her sister are sent to Rennes, their mother’s hometown, for an extended summer holiday from which they will not, in fact, return to Algeria.

Prevalent as the themes of racial and cultural identity are throughout the text, however, race and nationality are not the only personal difficulties with which the narrator of *Garçon manqué* struggles. At one point, in a short, fragmented paragraph set aside from any immediate context, Nina states: “Tous les matins je vérifie mon identité. J’ai quatre problèmes. Française? Algérienne? Fille? Garçon?” (163). As we may expect from the title of the work, the young Nina is something of a tomboy, and, in addition to her *métissage*, the themes of gendered—and, to a lesser extent, sexual—identity also predominate. In this quotation, Nina struggles with a list of four defining nouns, none of which she feels fully comfortable embodying. Here, as throughout *Garçon manqué*, words are presented as both powerful and restrictive,

⁶⁴ Benjamin Stora charts the rise of political Islamism in Algeria in this period in his book *Algeria 1830–2000: A Short History*, (2001): see Chapter 15, “The Jamming of the System: 1979–1988” (179–194, especially 179–181, 191). The question of the political climate of the post-colonial Algeria in which Bouraoui grew up is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, which focuses on Bouraoui’s repeated representation of Algeria across several texts.

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and, as much as the inherent difficulty of her racial and sexual difference from those around her, it is the linguistic forms Nina encounters which prove to be a key theme throughout the text.⁶⁵

Une magie répétée?

The narrator’s interest in language is evident from the opening scene of the text, in which Nina describes a group of men speaking Arabic on a beach outside Algiers: “Ils parlent en arabe. Leurs voix traversent la plage [...]. Je retiens un seul mot, *el bahr, el bahr, el bahr*, une magie répétée” (8). Although Nina does not speak Arabic herself, her memories of her childhood are impacted by this foreign linguistic environment to the point that key terms continue to resonate with her, and the importance of this is affirmed throughout the text, with the unusual inclusion of footnoted translations, here providing the French translation for the Arabic term: “La mer, la mer, la mer.” In this instance we assume, given the location and the men’s movement towards the sea, that the young Nina has been able to work out what the men were saying at the time, and her pleasant description of their speech as “une magie répétée,” complements the joy Nina feels in Algeria’s beautiful natural surroundings, as she enjoys hearing the Arabic term and does not (yet) feel excluded from the public community of the beach.

Nina’s memories of Algiers itself are similarly populated with remembered Arabic terms throughout the first part of the text. Still young enough to feel an affinity with the local children she sees playing in the street outside her home, Nina tells us at one stage how: “Je ne comprends pas tous leurs mots. Une phrase revient, *yahya** l’Algérie [*Vive l’Algérie!]. Je la répète devant le miroir du long couloir qui sépare les chambres. J’entends la voix de la foule, unique, une invocation. *Yahya* l’Algérie. Je suis avec ces enfants-là” (18). The Arabic words that she recognises inform both her own speech at

⁶⁵ Of Bouraoui’s works to date, *Garçon manqué* has proved one of the most attractive for literary critics, given its representation of the important contemporary themes of gendered and post-colonial politics. Trudy Agar-Mendousse’s book *Violence et créativité de l’écriture algérienne au féminin* (2006) provides the most extensive analysis to date of Bouraoui’s work within the context of female representations of the heritage of the Algerian War of Independence, while Helen Vassallo has positioned *Garçon manqué* as a germinal text within a post-colonial reading of Bouraoui’s work in several critical articles (2007, 2008, 2009). With regard to gender, both Ann-Sofie Persson and Christina Horvath have contributed book chapters examining the proliferation of identities in *Garçon manqué*, while Laurence Enjolras’s short summary article of Bouraoui’s work takes a Butler-inspired queer theoretical approach similar to our own.

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the time, and her autobiographical writing, given their prominent place within the text: “Je parle avec des mots d’arabe intégré à ma langue maternelle. Des incursions. Je ferme mes phrases par *hachma** [*La honte!]” (19). Citing individual words in the text, therefore, Bouraoui here draws attention to language as material, to be crafted by its users. In these examples, we hear the author’s young version of herself enjoying language, playing with the terms that she cites and foregrounding the way in which her whole world is mediated through these linguistic structures.⁶⁶ While the act of writing autobiographically in itself evokes a particular power of language—the writer selecting and crafting their terms in order to recreate their experience of the world within the text and transfer particular scenes from memory to page—Bouraoui’s narrator here relates the importance of language on the level of both form and content, preparing the reader for what will be a key theme throughout the text.

At later points, however, descriptions of language begin to assume a more sinister role in Bouraoui’s life, as she recounts linguistic memories which negatively impact on her identity, through both institutional exclusion, and individual verbal abuse. While informal memories from Nina’s home and holiday life portray a positive relationship to the foreign language around her, her depiction of Arabic language classes at school, where study of classical Arabic is obligatory, are less positive: “Je ne parle pas arabe. Ma voix dit les lettres de l’alphabet, â, bâ, tâ, thâ puis s’efface. C’est une voix affamée. C’est une voix étrangère à la langue qu’elle émet” (11). Much as she wishes to participate in the language she hears around her, Nina’s inability to speak Arabic emerges as indicative of her social difference, and this becomes particularly disturbing to her in the official and institutionalised site of her school: “Au lycée français d’Alger, je suis une arabisante. Certains professeurs nous placent à droite de leur classe. Opposés aux vrais Français. Aux enfants de coopérants. Le professeur d’arabe nous place à gauche de sa classe. Opposés aux vrai Algériens. La langue arabe ne prend pas sur moi. C’est un glissement” (33–34). Here language—in this example referring to the

⁶⁶ Such fascination with sounds continues through to the second part of the text, and includes notable moments of word play. For example, Bouraoui reproduces certain terms she associates with her grandfather, including word association around his pet name for his daughter—“Il l’appelle Méré. Je n’ai jamais su pourquoi. Méré. Mare. Mare nostrum. Notre mer. Ma mère, en Méditerranée” (105)—as well as playfully contrasting sitting in her grandfather’s car with sitting on an Algiers beach: “Deux petites Algériennes dans la grande voiture américaine. C’est si drôle. De Moretti à Buick. D’Alger-plage au siège cinq places” (106).

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“langue,” of French against Arabic—marginalises Nina. Being half-Algerian, she is expected to be able to speak Arabic, and is therefore different from the “vrais Français” at the school. However, her difficulties with the language equally exclude her from the indigenous community around her. Nina therefore becomes aware of the very real interaction between her material and linguistic environments; she is literally physically isolated due to her language deficiency, with the routine way in which she and Amine are moved around the classroom by different teachers emphasising the apparently arbitrary power such distinctions can hold.

While the difficult post-colonial politics of late 1970s Algeria contribute to Nina’s struggle, as a mixed-raced child, to feel comfortable in herself, we know that the *métisse* thematic is not the only problem Nina experiences with regard to integrating in Algeria, and at times her difficult gender identification is also revealed to be mediated through other people’s language. Early in the text, while out playing with her friend Amine and a group of local children, who are diving off a rock face into the sea, Nina encounters a woman, Paola, who takes an interest in her, and the narrator recounts a discursive exchange between them. Unfortunately, while meaning to compliment the athletic child she finds before her, Paola mistakes Nina’s gender, and this public misidentification causes Nina feelings of humiliation which will have an enduring effect on her self-identity:

Elle dit. Tu es beau. Je ne réponds pas. Je plonge. Je cache mon visage. Je plonge. Avec ma honte. Je ne remonte pas. Je déteste la mer. Je déteste les plongeurs. Je déteste la France. Je déteste l’Algérie. Tu es beau. Je reste avec cette violence. Je reste avec le soleil qui révèle. Tu es beau. Amine dément. Amine me protège. C’est Nina. C’est une fille. Amine se défend. Il n’aimerait pas ainsi un garçon. Il aime cette fille. Cette fausse fille. C’est sa folie. Pour ce singe. Pour ce travesti. Paola. Tu es encore plus belle si tu es une fille. Je ne réponds pas. Je ne sais pas. Je ne me sais pas. (36)

The short sentences—and lack of punctuation to mark out dialogue—are typical of Bouraoui’s writing style, not just in *Garçon manqué*, but throughout her autobiographical work. On this occasion, however, they serve to emphasise the destructive, fragmenting impact this memory has on Nina, as the young child remains silent in the face of language experienced as violence. The stranger’s words invoke a confused form of anger in Nina, now directed indiscriminately towards everything

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around her, and robbing her of any sense of confident self-knowledge that she previously held. While Paola’s words are not meant unkindly, they have a clear damaging effect, consolidated with each repetition of the phrase in the narrator’s memory. Frozen by humiliation, it is left to Nina’s male friend to defend her—and, in so doing, to defend himself. Instead of gratitude, Nina feels pity for her companion, culminating in a sudden self-hatred revealed in the list of offensive terms she now directs towards herself.

In each of these examples we discover that, within Bouraoui’s autobiographical textual world, language is very powerful, acting in both constructive and deleterious ways. In Bouraoui’s memories of childhood scenes, words help to build the world around her. However, at the same time language can also be used to exclude, marginalise, and actively abuse people—even when it is not intended in this way. With regard to Nina’s young gender identity, the comments of the stranger named Paola clearly instil an affect of trauma, demonstrating the devastating capacity of words to wound. If these early stages of the text already reveal an almost Wittigian appreciation of the significance of language, however, Nina’s long-term reaction to the incident on the rocks apparently manifests a Butlerian response to problems of gender identification.

While the remembered incidents contributing to Nina’s identity problems have thus far taken place in the public environment, the reader of *Garçon manqué* is told early on that, in private, Nina plays at being a boy: “Seul Amine sait mes jeux, mon imitation. Seul Amine sait mes envies secrètes, des monstres dans l’enfance. Je prends un autre prénom, Ahmed. Je jette mes robes. Je coupe mes cheveux. Je me fais disparaître. J’intègre le pays des hommes” (15). Where other people’s descriptions of her body are experienced as uncomfortable for Nina, her own self-descriptions are much more confident and agentive, and she happily explains how, in response to the restrictive society she finds around her, she prefers to inhabit her body in more masculine ways. Although the reference to “monstres,” here, may indicate some ambivalence in Nina’s turn towards masculinity, this form of “jeu” also gives her pleasure, as she details a series of physical gestures and activities from which she draws pride, and fascination: “J’ajuste mon maillot, une éponge bleue. Je marche les

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jambes ouvertes. Je suis fascinée" (15); "Ici je suis la seule fille qui joue au football" (16).

In addition to the assumed personality of "Ahmed," Nina's masculine identification also at times extends to a second alternative self, the paternally-endorsed character of "Brio." Far from a figure of patriarchal law, Nina describes how her father is accepting, and even encouraging, of his daughter's gender-play, with the adult Bouraoui remembering how:

Mon père m'initie à l'enfance. Il m'élève comme un garçon [...]. Il m'apprend le foot, le volley, le crawl. Il m'apprend à plonger des rochers bruns et luisants. Comme les voyous. Il transmet la force. Il forge mon corps. Il m'apprend à me défendre dans le pays des hommes. Courir. Sauter. Se sauver. Il détourne ma fragilité. Il m'appelle Brio. (24)

In descriptions of both "Ahmed" and "Brio," Nina identifies the masculine atmosphere of the Algerian capital—twice describing Algeria as "le pays des hommes"—in order to justify why she feels more secure in a male persona, and explain her father's interest in making her strong enough to defend herself in this environment. At the same time, on occasions when Nina does wish to feel feminine, Bouraoui's original Arabic first name, "Yasmina," is used, providing an additional persona, again occupying a different space along the spectrum of gender identity: "Yesmina me féminise. C'est fugitif. C'est un jeu. C'est un rôle. Qu'on efface très vite en plongeant des falaises du Rocher plat" (175).⁶⁷ In this collection of different character roles with which the young narrator identifies, each personified through use of a different first name, Bouraoui reveals the arbitrary nature of any one social identity, conforming to Butler's framework of gendered identity as something which is performed rather than essential. Using different names through which to separate the different elements of Nina's personality, the interaction between the linguistic and physical world is again apparent, with the simple alteration of a linguistic signifier—the child's first name—implicating a temporarily transformed mode of behaviour.

⁶⁷ While Bouraoui's original first name is spelt with an 'a' on the majority of occasions it occurs, in this extract she explains how her friend Amine pronounces it, "Yesmina, à l'algérienne. En appuyant sur le 'Y'" (175). It is for this reason that the above quotation includes the divergent spelling.

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If this personal spectrum of variously gendered characters demonstrates the notion of identities being constructed within culture, rather than existing pre-discursively, the more radical form of Nina's bodily reaction to her gender trouble evokes Butler's work on gender all the more explicitly. As well as taking part in traditionally masculine activities and playing out in public as a "tomboy," Nina confesses to privately cross-dressing, in a personal act of drag which, re-performing her body through masculine comportment, undermines the coherence of both male and female social identities:

Je me déguise souvent. Je dénature mon corps féminin [...]. Je me travestis. Seule. Sans ma sœur. Sans Amine. C'est une négation. C'est un jeu [...] Je plaque mes cheveux en arrière. Je porte un sifflet autour du cou. Je porte un faux revolver dans ma poche arrière. J'ouvre mes épaules. J'ouvre mes jambes. (49)

While here the narrator emphasises the private nature of her gender re-performance, the elements of playfulness which she includes within this description betray a confidence in her behaviour, which chimes with Butler's own treatment of the act of drag as a form of resistance to heteronormative cultural laws.

Nina's perception of her act of dragging as a form of creative transformation, re-signifying her gender identity within the confines of her own bedroom, is evident when, illuminated through this confession, we re-read earlier moments of the text. For example, Nina has already described how: "J'organise ma vie dans le secret. Je suis, vraiment, dans ma chambre. C'est le lieu de l'imitation. Je rapporte la réalité puis la modifie" (25). Alone in her room, modifying her gender representation away from societal expectations, Nina feels she can be herself—that she can just *be*. Most interestingly in this description, however, Nina then invites us to understand her dragging as a form of writing, in a metaphor which figuratively bridges Butler's restricted capacity for performative subversion and Wittig's more open understanding of the literary act itself as potentially transformative: "Je reste entre les deux pays. Je reste entre deux identités. Mon équilibre est dans la solitude, une unité. J'invente un autre monde. Sans voix. Sans jugement. Je danse pendant des heures. C'est une transe suivie du silence. J'apprends à écrire" (26).

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Throughout the first section of *Garçon manqué*, detailing Nina’s childhood in Algeria, we note a gradual change in the narrator’s personal comportment, becoming more combative and self-affirming in describing how she is perceived. Explaining how taking on the identity of Brio gives her more confidence, Nina later remembers a second incident of a stranger attempting to define her gender, and, while here the woman does not make the same mistake as Paola, Nina’s own self-identity seems vastly changed. Bouraoui’s typically sparse representation of this scene reads: “Brio contre la femme qui dit: Quelle jolie petite fille. Tu t’appelles comment? Ahmed. Sa surprise. Mon défi. Sa gêne. Ma victoire” (51). Within the Algiers section of the text, Nina progresses from feeling verbally assaulted and struggling with her sense of self, to a more empowered response to gendered difficulties, performing various identities according to her impulses, and ultimately appropriating a public masculine identity through which she satisfyingly fends off unwanted comments. When Nina and her sister are obliged to move to France at the half-way point of the narrative, however, the gendered solutions she has reached in Algeria are placed under renewed threat, and prove ultimately to be unsustainable.

“Tu es un garçon manqué...”

While the title of the book may lead the reader to anticipate its narrator’s boyish childhood behaviour, and perhaps even her nascent lesbian identity, the only incidence of the term “garçon manqué” actually being used within the body of the narrative occurs when it is voiced not by Nina but by her French grandmother, with whom Nina lives on initially arriving in Rennes. Once more, in this example it is other people’s language which attempts to restrictively characterise Nina’s identity, and the uncomfortable effect of this is clear from the narrator’s descriptions: “Voilà les mots de ma grand-mère française. Son regard. Tu es un garçon manqué. Non. Mes spectateurs sont fiers de moi. Je suis” (64). Here we see how the attempt of Nina’s older relative to criticise—and thereby to control—her bodily behaviour is inflicted through the medium of language, which Bouraoui draws our attention to, both with the introductory, “Voilà les mots de [...]” and through her choice of this phrase for the book’s title. As a work of autobiography, depicting her own childhood through her writing, we might expect that Bouraoui would have chosen a title which fits her own

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idea of her younger self. In the second section of the book, however, we discover that it is rather the memory of other people’s language which provides the non-complimentary characterisation of Nina as a tomboy, further affirming the significance of language to the construction of one’s sense of self. At the same time, we note the narrator’s internal resistance in this scene to her grandmother’s definition of her. While Nina’s grandmother seeks to encapsulate the child’s identity in the determining noun, the narrator’s internal voice rejects this, instead affirming the desire to exist independently of linguistic substantives—rather than a girl, a boy, or a tomboy, she states simply, “je suis”.⁶⁸

Unfortunately for Nina, if this act of internal revolt represents a temporary reprieve from her grandmother’s criticism, the child will not be able to withstand the institutional pressure to which her grandmother soon subjects her. Almost immediately upon their arriving in France, Nina’s grandparents book an appointment for her and her sister to be seen by a French doctor, “juste par précaution” (110). Although the *métisse* children are perfectly healthy, the foreign status of their bodies means they must be inspected and assessed, which Nina anticipates experiencing as itself a form of violence:

Sang, ouïe, os, réflexes. Passer en revue le corps. Traquer. Déceler. Les signes de carence. Oui, monsieur, on mange à notre faim. Des légumes, de la viande, des laitages. Analyses. Radio. Stéthoscope. 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. (110)

In the successive stages of examination, Nina’s description here relates a fragmentation of her body into different categories for medical analysis. Listed as isolated nouns, the constituent parts of her body are depersonalised and invaded by the institutional power of “la médecine française”—the sentence break between

⁶⁸ Helen Vassallo discusses this scene in her article “Wounded Storyteller” (2007). Although Vassallo’s reading of *Garçon manqué* in this piece focuses on the theme of illness rather than the power of language in itself, her identification of the affirmative importance of Nina’s response to her grandmother chimes with our own reading. Vassallo states: “Nina’s efforts to transcend the struggle with gendered identity culminate in her rejection not only of her feminine role, but also of the ambiguous label of ‘garçon manqué’ [...]. Bouraoui rejects the ‘tomboy’ implications of ‘garçon manqué,’ which mask the truth of her gendered subjectivity. She affirms herself as a subject, claiming simply that ‘je suis,’ and refusing to be trapped within categorising notions of gender and sexuality” (53).

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“S’appropriier nos corps” and “Les fouiller” textually enacting the appropriation of the girls’ bodies by their medical examiners. Interspersed with the list of terms dividing up the body, the doctor’s condescending speech equally asserts the children’s otherness, questioning the diet and conditions of their distant native land, which is not even named, but impersonally associated with the rest of the exoticised “Afrique du Nord.”

While being submitted to medical examination will feel for both of the Bouraoui children like an act of violation, Nina’s personal anxiety in the pages leading up to the encounter relates to her particular fear of what these French doctors will discover in the corporeal habits she has developed for herself in Algeria: “Demain on examine mon corps. Demain on trouvera Ahmed et peut-être Brio” (117). Referring to the masculine personas Nina was free to perform in her home country, the narrator’s concern here expresses fear not that there is genuinely anything unusual about her gendered body, but that her very personal way of inhabiting it is up for scrutiny. At first, Nina remains vigilant even in the face of such institutional powers, and her grandmother’s attempt to rearticulate Nina’s bodily performance in terms of medical discourse is mocked by the young narrator: “Ma façon de marcher steve-mcqueen. Une scoliose, docteur? Non, *L’Affaire Thomas Crown*” (121). Where the pressure for gender conformity features consistently not just in the doctor’s surgery but throughout all aspects of her new French life, Nina begins to change her behaviour and abandon her masculine personas: “Dans cet été français je cache profondément Ahmed. Je ne réponds pas aux voix qui disent: petit, jeune homme, monsieur-dame. C’est votre petit-fils? Dans ces cas-là je ne regarde pas ma grand-mère. Je sais qu’elle n’aime pas cette ambiguïté-là” (180). In spite of earlier descriptions of Algeria as a patriarchal country, the young Nina proves to have been freer there to subvert others’ gendered expectations of her than she now is in France. Where, towards the end of Nina’s time in Algeria, she begins to relish representing herself in a masculine way in public—“Brio contre la femme qui dit: Quelle jolie petite fille” (see above)—the powerful presence of her grandmother forces a change in Nina’s attitude, towards no longer wishing to be seen as masculine. While Nina’s gender problems are therefore worse in France than they were in Algeria, with regard to race, too, Nina’s life becomes even more difficult in this new country.

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Having been outsiders at school in Algeria, the liminal state of being neither French nor Algerian follows both Nina and her friend Amine when they each move to France later in their lives. At one point, the narrator imagines a conversation she will have with the adult Amine when they have both left Algeria for France, and in this new environment language will again be used to exclude: “Voilà ce qu’ils diront de toi. Que tu ne ressembles même pas à un Arabe. Que tu n’es pas assez typé. Tu diras: Mais les Algériens ne sont pas des Arabes. ARABE contiendra toutes leurs névroses, tous leurs fantasmes. Tout ce qu’il n’obtiendront jamais de toi” (88). Having briefly removed herself and her friend from the childhood period discussed in the text, here a mature Nina anticipates Amine’s future for him, using direct address to her old friend, in a conversation which itself centres on linguistic terms and their meaning. The dramatically capitalised “ARABE” represents not just a race of people, but a cultural idea for the French public, and Amine will be rejected and excluded for failing to conform to this category. Nina imagines that Amine’s arguing over definitions will fail to win favour with his European interlocutors, who wish to be able to categorise him according to the racial terms they are already accustomed to using pejoratively. That Nina’s imagining of this future scene begins “Voilà ce qu’ils diront de toi,” in turn, reveals her own concern with the language people are going to use to describe her and her friend. Ultimately, both the established racial identity “Arabe” and whatever *métisse* alternative Nina and Amine’s generation will go on to embody in the collective French psyche prove to be politically volatile ideas, which Nina and Amine will be denied the power to define for themselves.

Nina’s awareness of the racist language informing French colloquial speech features in both generalised and specific memories. In a non-specific fragment around the time that Nina is living with her French grandparents, Bouraoui writes of:

Mon regard-miroir sur toutes les familles françaises que je rencontrerai par hasard. Leurs mots. Leurs grandes discussions. Leurs familles politiques. Ces gens. Qui disent. Sans penser. Sans le faire exprès, soi-disant. Raton, youpin, négro, pédé, melon. Ça part tout seul. C’est une mécanique des mots. Intégrée au langage. (122)

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Here the decision not to contextualise any of these terms of abuse, or to single out any one incident from her memory, affirms the pervasiveness of Nina’s experience of abusive language, with her inclusion of common excuses given for such speech containing an implicit condemnation of the extent to which she and others are subjected to such terms on a casual basis. A few pages later, however, Nina does recall a specific scene of racial abuse, in a desperate description which illuminates the anger behind the above quotation—and reveals the horrifying power of casually racist language:

Un jour, j’entendrai, à l’arrêt du bus numéro 21, une femme dire en regardant mon père: Il y a trop d’Arabes en France. Beaucoup trop. Et en plus ils prennent nos bus. Ses mots et mon silence. Cette incapacité à répondre. À hurler. Cet homme est mon père. Respectez-le ou je vous insulte. Respectez-le ou je vous frappe. Respectez-le ou je vous tue. Et ce n’est pas seulement mon père. C’est un homme. Par lui c’est la vie que vous méprisez. Mais rien. Mon silence. Mon père et mon silence. Lui non plus ne dira rien. Effrayé. Ou habitué. Il restera de plus en plus longtemps à Alger. C’est tout. Moi je serai terriblement blessée par les mots de cette femme. Blessée jusqu’au silence. (130)

It is interesting here that, impassioned as the narrator’s inward response is to the woman’s racism, her mental reaction is entirely linguistic: instead of wishing she could physically hurt the woman, she wishes she could verbally threaten her with physical violence. The verbal nature of Nina’s wished-for retort is affirmed in the repetition of short phrases she would like to have piled up against the woman, each beginning “respectez-le ou...,” and in the continual contrasting of the woman’s words with her own “silence”—a term which features four times within the short extract. Although the accumulation of very short sentences is a pervasive feature of Bouraoui’s autobiographical writing style, the situation set up in this scene, reflecting on an instance of speech which the narrator experiences as an act of physical violence, perhaps encourages us to figuratively read the short sentences as a strained response to a series of blows inflicted by the physical power of the woman’s language. This memory then leads Nina into a series of others which she briefly recounts, using the metaphor of a forest fire to describe the spread of racist terms, as rising immigration sees social disorder and abuse quickly proliferate around the city of Paris: “Puis ça deviendra une habitude d’entendre ça. Ces mots prendront comme des petits feux de

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forêt" (130). Again affirming the destructive potential of vocabulary, Nina describes her distinctly bodily reaction to such language, extending the sense that the woman at the bus stop has caused her a physical violence to which she is frustratingly unable to respond: "Encore la rage. Encore la nausée. Encore cette incapacité à répondre. Ma peau qui rougit. Les battements de mon cœur. Mon ventre serré. Comme étourdie après un coup de poing. Muette. Mais avec ce désir si violent. Et ces mots qui ne viennent pas" (131).

Je trouverai mieux. Je l'écrirai

Through examples relating both to racial and gendered identity, in *Garçon manqué* Bouraoui represents language as having significant destructive potential, both producing social positions to which Nina and those close to her are obliged to conform, and wounding them when they fail or refuse to embody these constrictive roles. In the traumatic yet formative memories that Nina recounts of incidents of linguistic violence, the young narrator is unfortunately unable to respond, remembering with shame the passivity of her own silence. At the same time, however, language is not always a negative force within the text, as we have already seen in Nina's attempt, when embodying the persona of Brio, to speak out for herself against a stranger's negative gendered language. Where words can wound when used pejoratively, the narrative also includes incidents of the affirmative appropriation of language, to be used in positive and creative ways. In fact, following on from the above list of incidents of racial abuse, to which neither Nina nor her father were able to verbally respond, the angry narrator concludes the section: "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" (132). In this conclusion, we find a rare occasion on which Bouraoui alters the timeframe of her text, moving suddenly from the remembered past of this damaging incident, through a projected future attributed to the young narrator, and into the present tense, in an overt reference to the writer's activity in producing this work. Finally, the short future-tense sentences reveal the result Bouraoui hopes to achieve in publishing this book: her previous aggressors will recognise themselves in her descriptions and, with roles

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reversed, will be made to feel as the young Nina did, publicly shamed and unable to respond, silenced by the now powerful adult writer’s discursive act.

We find in Nina’s affirmation, therefore, a demonstration of Bouraoui’s comments in the opening section of this chapter, that writing can represent an act of resistance. While the interview with Dominique Simmonet addressed the question of the writer’s sexual orientation, Bouraoui’s response that, “je ne suis pas une provocatrice. Je suis militante à ma manière: j’écris” also seems to fit well with her narrator’s experience of being unable to publicly respond to racial discrimination, but instead resorting to writing in order to achieve justice for herself and her family. If this is Bouraoui’s intention in writing *Garçon manqué*, therefore, it would seem that, alongside her interest in representing how words may positively or negatively contribute to the development of one’s personal identity, the literary act can constitute a further level of language acting transformatively. A potentially Wittigian view of literary production as inherently political, when representing the writer’s “minority point of view,” thus begins to emerge from such incidents in *Garçon manqué*, a development due to feature all the more strongly in the later stages of the text.

While Nina is staying, without her parents, in the home of her French grandparents, she reflects on the experience of her mother growing up in this environment, and particularly of the events—which she has learnt of through the family history—that surrounded the beginning of her own parents’ relationship and marriage. We learn that Nina’s mother and father met as students in the late 1950s, when, despite the Algerian War of Independence raging in his homeland, Nina’s father had come to France by himself to study. The on-going conflict between France and Algeria, and the racism of the French people during that period, immediately made the couple’s relationship very difficult, and Nina’s mother was subjected to racist and sexist abuse from other students at the university (148–149). What most strikes Nina in remembering this family history, however, is how her mother must have felt when she was obliged to break the news to her French family that she was getting engaged to an Algerian, and Nina imaginarily re-stages this confessional scene in the room of her grandparents’ house in which she is now staying herself: “Voilà, j’ai rencontré un garçon. Il est étudiant à la faculté. Il est algérien. Enfin, français musulman, comme ils

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disent. Je l'aime. Je veux l'épouser. Il viendra ici, dans le petit salon bleu, demander ma main" (109–110). Incorporated within the body of the main paragraph, without speech marks or any textual sign to mark the words as dialogue, these short lines evoke the loneliness of Maryvonne, Nina's mother, at this time, with her obstructive family refusing to respond to her words. Nina then concludes the imagined confession and reacts to it within the same thought: "Vous ne voulez pas savoir? C'est sa solitude que je ressens. Puis sa peur. Cette peur immense de devoir annoncer quelque chose. De dire. De parler. De s'affirmer. C'est si difficile" (110). Integrating her own words, here, with her mother's, the daughter seeks to provide a form of textual support, wishing she could have been there to help her mother face the silence which greeted her affirmation of love. The notion of "s'affirmer, c'est si difficile," meanwhile, chimes with Nina's own internal response to racist abuse, paralleling the verbal confession within the family setting with her own act of writing autobiographically in response to her previous experiences of discrimination.

The motif of the difficult act of confession then features again where Nina describes the follow-up scene anticipated above, of her father arriving at her grandparents' house to ask for her mother's hand in marriage: "Aller à la confesse. Le petit salon des drames. Chaque maison a sa pièce réservée, un petit retrait géographique qui permet le murmure, la colère, la tristesse. Je vous ai réunis aujourd'hui dans le petit salon bleu pour vous annoncer que... Le salon bleu, là où Rachid a demandé la main de Maryvonne. C'était courageux" (126). While such formality for becoming engaged would have been necessary for any young couple at this time, Rachid's racial difference from Maryvonne should, in the eyes of her family, prohibit him from performing this symbolic linguistic act, and in both of these difficult affirmations we find Nina's parents struggling, through language, against the constructed social pressures of their racially restrictive environment. As narrator, Nina then recognises the difficulty of each of these linguistic acts and the consequent power of language. While she does not actually cite her father's question to Maryvonne's parents, she again integrates her parent's speech into her own textual reflections, marking the discursive place of the important question with the discreet set of ellipses. Through re-enacting these difficult scenes from her parents' shared history, Bouraoui here

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reiterates the political effect of these affirmative statements, in a vastly changed time and cultural climate. Where her mother and father’s difficult romantic declarations were made in private in her grandparents’ home, their inclusion within Bouraoui’s autobiographical publication demonstrates both a solidarity with her parents and a more public political engagement, potentially employing written language in order to resist discriminatory attitudes.

Where the majority of *Garçon manqué* is divided between two long sections, each headed with the name of the cities in which Bouraoui grew up—Algiers and Rennes—the two short chapters which bring the text to a close break with this form, and extend the location beyond France and Algeria. The first is titled “Tivoli” and tells of an “été exceptionnel” (183), when, instead of following her family’s tradition of visiting Saint-Malo, Nina went on holiday to Italy. Describing the sites that she saw and the people that she met on this trip, the Nina of this late chapter appears more grown-up than the earlier narrator, with the holiday apparently sticking in the writer’s mind due to her perception that this is where she developed into her adult self. The “Tivoli” chapter therefore appears as an appropriate conclusion to the text, drawing an end to the major themes of Bouraoui’s childhood, to be replaced by the birth of desire and subsequent exploration of sexuality. She describes how “tout était si facile. Être. Se promener. Tarder à rentrer. Regarder. Ne plus avoir peur. De rien. Parmi ces hommes. Parmi ces femmes. Je n’étais plus française. Je n’étais plus algérienne. Je n’étais plus la fille de ma mère. J’étais moi. Avec mon corps. Avec ce pressentiment. Quelque chose arriverait” (184). In this scene, the older narrator’s language echoes the “quatre problèmes” of her younger self, but from a much more positive point of view. Where we heard Nina state earlier that “Tous les matins je vérifie mon identité. J’ai quatre problèmes. Française? Algérienne? Fille? Garçon?” (163), the short sentences here alluding to “ces hommes” and “ces femmes,” before evoking the narrator’s dual nationality, suggest the resolution of each of these problems, with Nina no longer compelled to question her self-identity, and for the first time capable of feeling truly comfortable in herself. The affirmative ease, for Nina, of simply being—“Tout était si facile. Être”—recalls the younger Nina’s contestation of her grandmother labelling her

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a tomboy, while instead of fear, the older Nina's dominant physical feeling is that of excitement, and anticipation for the mature adult life which now awaits her.

Where each of these positive changes seems to have occurred, by this stage, as the inevitable result of growing up, Nina does not for all that forget her interest in language during this foreign holiday, and this passion is continued in cryptic terms in the closing phrases of the chapter: "Ils me parlaient. Et, sans connaître la langue, je savais que toute ma force était là, dans leurs mots, dans leurs chansons, dans la nouveauté qui hantait mon corps: le désir" (186). During Nina's trip to Italy, the narrator of *Garçon manqué* finds herself freed from the identity problems which have haunted her throughout her childhood. It is noticeable that this affirmative realisation of her independence, tied up with the birth of desire in her teenaged body, should occur in a new geographical location, symbolic of the new life which awaits her, and the apparently liberating potential of the foreign tongue she hears spoken around her. Then, as if to confirm the resolving nature of this holiday, the last chapter of the text records Nina's final visit to the house of her friend, Amine, in which the relationship between the pair seems to have changed in a profound way. In recounting the scene, Nina remembers how "mon corps avait changé dans cet été étrange et romain. Il avait l'expérience du désir," a fact Amine quickly notes, "et tu l'as senti, Amine" (187).

Where the foreign language Nina has been immersed in on holiday has served as a symbol for the birth of desire, Nina's subsequent decision to recount her experiences through sharing holiday stories with her friend once more presents language as powerful, here bringing about the end of a hugely significant friendship: "J'avais l'impression de raconter la fin de notre histoire. On s'est dit au revoir. On s'est embrassés assez fort. Pour la première fois. Comme un homme et une femme. Et tu ne m'as pas raccompagnée jusqu'à la porte" (188).

In ending in this way, the conclusion of *Garçon manqué* perhaps reveals a limited sense of progression for the narrator. While Nina is no longer plagued by her "quatre problèmes," the definition of her growing self as "comme une femme" is not as radical a response to issues of constrictive personal identity as our Wittigian theory may have required, and lacks even the subtly subversive potential of Butler's less radical

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stance.⁶⁹ In spite of this, however, within *Garçon manqué* other possibilities for transformative outcomes do exist. While we have heard how language can be a negative force—both in terms of *les langues* excluding those who do not speak them, as with Nina and Amine’s experience of school in Algiers, and in the force of specific words, or *langage*, hurled at both Nina and her father in the street—it might also be harnessed for positive effect, as with the writing of this text. The first of Bouraoui’s transparently autobiographical works, *Garçon manqué* foregrounds the power of language to the construction of the writer’s sense of self, and reveals some of the identity problems which cause her to turn to writing as “un acte de résistance.” While race has been a significant issue within this text, clearly demonstrating the capacity of discriminatory words to wound their targets, the theme of ethnicity will not now feature in the two texts which follow *Garçon manqué*, and which continue the story of Bouraoui’s younger life. Instead, across *La vie heureuse* and *Poupée bella* Bouraoui continues her exploration of the power and potential of language, through the theme of her developing gendered and sexual identity.

2.3 Re-Writing the Subject in *La vie heureuse*

Two years after *Garçon manqué*, in 2002, Bouraoui published *La vie heureuse*, a novel recounted by a first-person female narrator. The text describes “l’été de mes seize ans” (234) from the point of view of Marie, a young French girl living with her mother and sister in Zurich, while her father is frequently away on business. Presented in a series of over a hundred short chapters, the narrative of *La vie heureuse* appears somewhat disordered. While the central plotlines emerge in broadly chronological fashion, the narrator’s story frequently switches backwards and forwards in time, and often changes place from Zurich to Saint-Malo or Rennes, with the two distinct events in the young girl’s life which make up the plot of the novel rendered textually (if not temporally) parallel. Although the name of Bouraoui’s narrator has changed—from

⁶⁹ Helen Vassallo’s article “Unsuccessful Alterity? The Pursuit of Otherness in Nina Bouraoui’s Autobiographical Writing” (2009) reads four of Bouraoui’s works (*Garçon manqué*, *La vie heureuse*, *Poupée bella* and *Mes mauvaises pensées*), as a series of frequently unsuccessful attempts by Bouraoui’s narrators to identify an independent sense of self. Like ours, her reading of *Garçon manqué* critiques the limited nature of the narrator’s development over the course of the text (39–42).

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“Nina” to “Marie”—many of the events of the novel chime with the experiences of the younger narrator of *Garçon manqué* and with the life of Bouraoui herself. While we know from the earlier text that Bouraoui’s French relatives lived in Rennes, and used to holiday in Saint-Malo (see 146, 153, 172), when Bouraoui was an older teenager she and her family moved to Switzerland, where she lived predominantly with her mother and sister, as her father frequently worked away from home.⁷⁰ In addition to this, several of the characters introduced in this text will feature again in Bouraoui’s later autofictional work.⁷¹ Given these similarities, therefore, Bouraoui’s decision to change the name of her narrator from Nina to Marie seems to demonstrate an intention to engage differently with life-writing through the form of this text: while we assume the events of the narrative bear some resemblance to the writer’s real life, the choice of a textual alter-ego permits greater freedom for invention, potentially allowing Bouraoui to explore alternative possibilities in re-writing aspects of her adolescent experience, or to describe intimate family histories in a depersonalised way. At the same time, where our reading of *Garçon manqué* concentrated on the portrayed power of language and potential for linguistic reappropriation, the theme of language persists in *La vie heureuse* through a narrator who is at times preoccupied with words and the social identities they describe, owing to her own experiences of verbal abuse and her desire to resist being restricted by language.

La mort entre dans l’été

The text is introduced with an un-numbered chapter providing a prelude to the narrative to come, which opens with a precise temporal marker: “Klaus Nomi est mort du sida. La radio passe sa dernière chanson plusieurs fois par jour, comme une messe. C’est le premier corps que j’imagine sans chair [...]. La mort entre dans l’été” (9). Klaus Nomi, a cult musical performer well-known in the early 1980s, died on 6 August 1983, and is remembered as one of the first celebrities to die of AIDS-related complications (see *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music* 4th ed. 228). Beginning the text in this fashion,

⁷⁰ See Introduction, section four, for a short biography of Bouraoui’s life to date.

⁷¹ Most notably, Diane, the narrator’s first love, reoccurs in recounted memories in both *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Poupée bella*, in which her name is changed to “Marion” (see below). Bouraoui has also admitted extra-textually that this description of a high school lesbian relationship in Zurich is autobiographical—see “L’écriture est une pratique amoureuse,” interview with Edna Costello (2004).

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Bouraoui suggests that the news of Nomi’s death marked a significant point in her narrator’s young life, representing the first time Marie has thought about mortality, a coming-of-age experience which, given the specific cultural hysteria which would develop during the AIDS crisis, Bouraoui’s narrator may in a way be seen to share with the wider world.⁷² For the 21st-century reader, this opening reference may also—at least unconsciously—evoke the possible theme of homosexuality within the novel, such has been the enduring effect of the frenzied public association of AIDS with gay lifestyles in the decade following the period described here.⁷³ The foreboding line “La mort entre dans l’été” immediately suggests a changing situation in Marie’s life which will form a key narrative thread of the novel, and the feeling that the text opens on a turning point is confirmed in the following paragraph, in which Marie lists the happy childhood memories which will now be left behind: “Avant, c’était l’orage, les feux de camp, les marées d’équinoxe, les régates, le Coca fraise au sommet des falaises. Avant un rien m’amusait. Je veux plus désormais” (9). However, while the public response to the death of a celebrity has clearly stuck in her mind, we soon discover that Marie’s concerns about death at the start of this text are in fact much more personal when she describes a family reunion for her sixteenth-birthday, attended by her aunt Carol, who is revealed to be suffering from cancer: “Carol a été admise à la clinique le soir de mon anniversaire. Nous sommes tous entrés dans la nuit alors” (14).

In a significant moment in the narrative of Bouraoui’s previous text, *Garçon manqué*, Nina is lying awake at night in her grand-parents’ house, her own parents still back in Algeria, and she imagines herself in the place of her mother as a child: “Je suis dans la maison de ma mère. Dans la maison de son enfance. Et ma vie recouvre soudain la sienne, comme une répétition. Je prends tout d’elle. En une nuit” (112). During this sleepless night, Bouraoui’s narrator describes her mother’s family, and reveals that her

⁷² As Bouraoui demonstrates later in the novel, the AIDS crisis marked a change in people’s sexual habits which, particularly (though not exclusively) for members of the gay community, saw the end of a child-like free and open attitude to sex, to be replaced by the much darker association of sexual promiscuity with death. In Chapter 29, for example, Marie’s thoughts about teenage sex are clouded by fears of contamination, “Julien et moi, les deux sangs réunis,” and the listing of ways in which infection might be passed between lovers (65).

⁷³ Leo Bersani’s article “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” originally published in 1987, recounts widespread virulent homophobia which followed the outbreak of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s, not only in the media and the popular imagination, but also within the political and medical establishments.

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mother lost a sister, “Fanfan,” who died when Nina was a child (114). In *La vie heureuse*, we find in Marie’s first descriptions of her aunt a significant resemblance to the aunt “Fanfan” of the earlier text. Carol is introduced as “la dernière des filles, la plus blonde [...]. Enfant, elle appelait ma mère, sa «petite mère». Adolescente, elle l’attendait à la sortie de la faculté avec des pains au chocolat, inquiète de sa nouvelle vie: ma mère, amoureuse, avait quitté sa famille” (*La vie heureuse*, 12). In *Garçon manqué*, the relationship between Nina’s mother and her younger sister is described thus: “Mère petite mère qui accompagnera jusqu’au bout sa petite sœur Fanfan. Elle lui tiendra la main longtemps. Elle déposera une rose sur son corps. Fanfan, la dernière sœur. Celle qui s’inquiétait tant. Je t’ai apporté un croissant et un petit pain au chocolat. Fanfan, qui jouera si souvent avec nous” (114). Given the similarities between these two characters, it would seem that the description of Carol’s illness in *La vie heureuse* represents Bouraoui paying homage to her favourite aunt, with touching memories provided by the writer’s mother featuring almost identically in both texts. Where Carol’s illness and death make up a significant part of the narrative of *La vie heureuse*, Bouraoui’s choice of fictional autobiography for this second text—changing the names of her characters from their potential real-life referents—may reflect a desire to depersonalise the story slightly, or to respect the privacy of her family’s mourning, through the removal of overt biographical reference.

At the same time, however, we note the apparent incongruity of choosing a positive title for a work in large part describing a sad family loss. If we return to the night-time scene of *Garçon manqué*, this might be explained where Nina follows the information she gives about her mother’s childhood and her aunt’s death with a striking declaration which almost exactly quotes the title of this following work: “Longtemps je porterai en moi l’enfance de ma mère. Comme un héritage. Comme une blessure à effacer par ma vie heureuse” (*Garçon manqué* 114). Having imagined herself in the position of her mother as a child, the narrator of *Garçon manqué* apparently feels obliged to make up for her mother’s unhappy childhood through herself having a happy life, and the decision to write about her mother’s sister within a text which repeats this phrase in its title is clearly significant. The fictionalised nature of *La vie heureuse* may therefore be an attempt to respond to this pressure to be happy, with

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fictional transformation potentially allowing Bouraoui to not only pay tribute to her deceased aunt, but also to textually overcome the identity problems affecting the more transparently referential Nina of *Garçon manqué*. Just like the narrator of that earlier text, therefore, in *La vie heureuse* Bouraoui may be trying to fulfil a wish of her mother's, re-writing the family's life, and once more using positive language, in the form of literature, to redeem past difficulties.

Indeed, with regard to our particular focus on Bouraoui's problematic personal identity, the fictional alterations of *La vie heureuse* may be seen to have immediate—and even political—implications. In the scene above, relating the concern of Bouraoui's aunt for her older sister who has left the family, we note that the text of *La vie heureuse* fails to explain why "ma mère, amoureuse, avait quitté sa famille," while within *Garçon manqué* we know that it is the narrator's mother's choice of an Algerian partner that has caused her to be excluded from her parent's home: "Le cas Maryvonne. La seule à avoir deux enfants métisses. La seule à laisser sa jeunesse pour l'Algérie, le pays des hommes" (114).⁷⁴ Where some of the familial tensions of *Garçon manqué* are implicitly present within the domestic scenes of *La vie heureuse*, the key theme of the Bouraouis's mixed-race marriage does not feature; the largely absent father is never mentioned as being Algerian, and, unlike "Nina" in *Garçon manqué*, young Marie does not appear to be *métisse*. In fact, given the multiple identity problems affirmed by the narrator of *Garçon manqué*, perhaps the most significant difference between Nina and Marie—aside from the few years' age difference which separates them—is the absence of racial tension within Marie's life, as Bouraoui may be seen within this text to be re-writing herself in monoracial form.⁷⁵

Je dois tout refaire à l'envers

Although Bouraoui chooses to write race out of a fictional reworking of her teenage years in *La vie heureuse*, the other identity problems experienced by Nina in *Garçon*

⁷⁴ The difficult relationship between Bouraoui's mother, Maryvonne, and their family in Rennes is also discussed in Chapter Three, section three.

⁷⁵ Bouraoui does not explicitly describe the ethnic appearance of Marie or her family in *La vie heureuse*, and the assumption that Marie does not therefore resemble Bouraoui racially is in itself a politically dangerous one. This reading is, however, supported by occasional references to Marie's appearance within the text. At one point, for example, a male friend provides a brief description of her when he says: "Tu sens bon Marie et j'aime la couleur de tes cheveux après la mer, on dirait du miel" (65).

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manqué do recur in the narrator of *La vie heureuse*, where the gendered difficulties of the young tomboy develop into a homosexual orientation which forms the second central theme of the text. While Marie’s aunt’s illness and eventual death feature in chapters set in France, when at home in Zurich, Marie’s recounted life is taken up with her school and the friends she meets there. Of these, by far the most notable is a sexually provocative girl, Diane, who gradually enters Marie’s life and transforms it, instigating a romantic relationship between the pair which leads Marie to identify as a lesbian—before Diane ultimately abandons her for a boy, leaving the narrator broken-hearted. While *Garçon manqué* deals largely with the narrator’s problematic gendered identity, *La vie heureuse* now develops this theme into an exploration of adolescent sexuality, describing its narrator’s first romantic relationship, alongside her attempts to come to terms with her sexual identity and its complicated connection to the “vie heureuse” referred to in the novel’s title.

In the early stages of the text, whether recounting one of the recent summers she has spent in Saint-Malo, or parties attended with school friends in Zurich, Marie notes the promiscuous sexual activity of her teenaged friends (42, 50). While Marie participates in this early sexual experimentation, she finds she is not interested in boys in the same way as her female friends, and that these experiences mark her out as different:

Marge me dit bizarre avec les garçons. Ça ne va jamais, comme un vêtement qui tombe mal [...] Marge a raison. Je suis bizarre et en retrait. Il manque toujours quelque chose avec un garçon. L’ennui prend, dans le corps, dans les baisers, dans les caresses. Ce n’est jamais normal avec un garçon. Il ne se passe rien, ni à l’intérieur d’eux ni à l’intérieur de moi-même. (38)

As Bouraoui’s narrator does not at this time understand why she feels this way, her lack of interest in heterosexual activity causes her anxiety, and she worries about the fact that she is different: “Je me sens seule et différente. On me trouve particulière. Je finis par l’accepter. J’ai peur d’être folle” (40). This fear even leads Marie to seek out an explanation for her difference: “J’espionne ma sœur. Elle tient un journal que je lis non pour apprendre des choses sur elle mais pour découvrir ce qui me manque” (40).

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All of this will change, however, when Marie meets Diane. Having become classmates with Diane, Marie attends a birthday party at her house, at which point the narrator's monologue dramatically alters, entering an unusually intense and confused state:

"Tout cela est d'une tristesse infinie, triste de ne pas savoir qui je suis, triste à en pleurer, dans ta maison, chez toi, triste de traverser ton jardin dans la neige, triste de te trouver si belle, triste de t'avoir rencontrée. Comment cela a pu arriver, Diane? [...] C'est horrible que tu existes Diane" (61). In an emotional paragraph featuring the narrator's imagined direct address to her future lover, Marie relates the sadness of suddenly comprehending why and how she is different from her friends, initially experiencing her feelings for Diane as a terrible event which, if she is unable to resist them, will change her life in a negative way: "Je dois tout refaire à l'envers, l'enfance, ce qu'on m'avait dit, l'homme de mes rêves, le prince et la princesse, la légende" (61). The negation here of the traditional fairy-tales of her childhood represents the cultural pressure to conform to heterosexual orthodoxy which Marie currently feels, and her understanding of the radical nature of the sexual life choice she is about to make. Awareness of this pressure to be heterosexual resonates with Bouraoui's description, in the interview claims which opened this chapter, that "la souffrance venait du monde des autres où je ne trouvais pas ma place," and we may therefore speculate that Marie's sudden painful acceptance of her homosexuality is an experience with which the writer herself was able to identify. In spite of the difficulty of this recognition, however, Marie's internal tirade here ends positively, ultimately connecting her romantic attraction to Diane with the elusive "vie heureuse" of the novel's title: "Moi, je n'aurai pas peur de faire l'amour avec toi. Ce sera plus qu'avec un garçon. Il ne manquera rien, là. Ce sera la vie, la vie heureuse" (61).

Although the relationship which develops between Diane and Marie is not represented in any graphic detail, the transformative effect it has on the narrator is immediately clear, as we hear within a couple of pages of this revelation "Je change. Se rassemblent à l'intérieur de moi toutes les forces qui avant se séparaient. [...] Je commence à m'aimer" (64). In many ways, therefore, Marie's journey in *La vie heureuse* represents an affirmative coming-out story, from a confused and sexually disinterested teenager who feels herself excluded from the world of her friends, to a

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happy and love-struck young woman: "Je me sens normale depuis que j'ai rencontré Diane" (106). Through the inclusion of other gay characters within the book, too, the normality of Marie's sexual feelings is affirmed, once she is able to give up on her attempts at living a traditional heterosexual life. In a chapter recalling a previous summer holiday, Marie introduces us to: "Antoine S., mon premier vrai garçon de Saint-Malo" (145). Despite her best attempts to feel attracted to Antoine, however, Marie once more realises, following a brief relationship between the pair, that she is different from the people around her, and Marie and Antoine separate: "Je n'étais pas triste. Je ne voulais plus mentir. Antoine n'existait que dans ma tête. J'avais construit une histoire pour me protéger du vide. Je n'aimais aucun garçon" (147). Here describing her attempts to fit into heterosexual society using the terms of fictional invention—"J'avais construit une histoire"—Marie suggests that her lived experiences with Antoine were less real than the as yet un-acted-upon homosexual feelings she goes on to discover. In an ironic twist following this break-up, however, Antoine himself is in a gay relationship by the time he and Marie next meet, and in a later chapter Bouraoui uses this character to voice a positive view of homosexual life, which, while continuing the theme of the search for happiness, will also have an important influence on Marie's developing self-understanding: "Antoine dit que les homos sont souvent heureux d'être homos. Que ça procure beaucoup de joie. Antoine dit que ce sont les autres qui rendent malheureux. Antoine ne comprend pas pourquoi les hétéros sont obsédés par les homos. Antoine a vu un psy un jour. Il lui a dit que ce n'était ni un choix ni une maladie" (193).

In spite of these positive statements, Marie's sexual relationship with Diane nonetheless remains a secret one for most of the text, and despite Marie's happiness, she frequently relates having to defend her behaviour—both publicly and in her own imagination—from the negative reactions of those around her. Throughout the progression of Marie and Diane's relationship, the narrative is interspersed with apparent reflections on the nature of homosexuality, prompted in Marie by both cultural assumptions and enduring prejudices, expressed by those around her, and by the narrator herself. In one chapter, Marie responds to an imagined tirade of other people's explanations for lesbianism, continually refuting cultural stereotypes: "Diane

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ne remplace pas ma mère. Ce n’est pas ça l’histoire des filles. C’est autre chose. Ce n’est pas le souvenir de l’enfance, l’odeur de la peau et du lait, la petite voix qui endort, les mains qui soignent. Ce n’est pas cela, aimer une fille [...]. Ce n’est pas détester les hommes non plus” (69–70). Later, a school friend, Céline, who knows of the relationship, tries to persuade Marie that she is not, in fact, a true lesbian: “Ça passera, dit Céline. Et ça ne va pas avec mon corps. Je ne suis pas androgyne, dit-elle. Je ne fais pas garçon manqué. J’ai du succès. Elle ne comprend pas” (130). Indeed, Marie admits to herself having held similar prejudices just a few months before, remembering how “j’avais des mots horribles pour ces filles que je croisais parfois à Paris, à Saint-Germain. J’étais ridicule d’ailleurs. Je pensais que toutes les filles avec les cheveux courts et un portefeuille dans la poche revolver du jean étaient des filles comme ça” and, further, “Le mot ‘garçonne’ me dégoûtait. J’avais de la violence en moi, à cause de ça. Je devenais enragée, avant. Avant Diane” (128).

In the face of these discriminatory ideas, however, Marie is able to defend her own behaviour, affirming with increasing confidence that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality, and that the homophobia of her society and peers is in fact unacceptable:

Rien n’est grave, je pourrais tout dire, tout avouer, puisqu’il s’agit d’un crime, avouer, les mains ligotées, la lumière dans les yeux, le sérum de vérité dans mes veines. Oui je suis amoureuse de Diane. Oui je veux bien faire de la prison. Oui j’ai la tête froide. Oui c’est votre monde qui est malade. Oui j’ai raison. Non je ne regrette rien. Oui votre violence à mon égard est inacceptable. Oui je n’ai pas ma place parmi vous. Oui je déteste vos mots, vos insinuations. (158)

In *Garçon manqué*, Nina is unable to verbally respond to the racial abusers that she and her father encounter on the streets of Paris, even while internally she asserts the importance of speaking out in resistance to such abuse, and reclaiming language for herself. Here, the narrator of *La vie heureuse* has a similar reaction to the discriminatory attitudes of those around her. In keeping, once more, with Bouraoui’s interview comments discussed at the start of this chapter, Marie’s declarations that “c’est votre monde qui est malade,” and that “je n’ai pas ma place parmi vous,” affirm the frequent toxicity of heteronormative culture for young gay people. Where Marie

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actively rejects the pejorative force of these abusers’ language, casting out homophobic terms as “vos mots, vos insinuations,” she nonetheless maintains a belief in the importance of speech, promising to “tout avouer,” and proceeding with a list of mock confessions, in order to reclaim the right to affirmative self-definition. While the positive impact of this speech might be thought to be lessened by Marie’s inability to state it out loud, from the point of view of the reader, this scene is nevertheless effective. Where we have heard (both in interview and in *Garçon manqué*) that for Bouraoui writing can represent an act of resistance, the inclusion of such gay-affirmative monologues (both from Marie, and, earlier, Antoine) may yet represent the writer’s attempt to respond to cultural homophobia.⁷⁶

This reading is confirmed at the climax of Marie and Diane’s relationship, when, having been betrayed by her lover, Marie is refusing to speak to Diane. In retaliation, Diane reveals to Marie’s sister the sexual nature of the girls’ relationship, leading to a scene of confrontation between Marie and her sister and mother. At the opening of this scene, the authoritative force of language which we have seen in *Garçon manqué* is once more apparent, first in the mother’s reported demand for a discussion, and then in Marie’s inward response: “Il faut qu’on parle, Marie. Moi je n’aime pas cette phrase. Moi je n’aime pas parler. Moi je préfère fuir les problèmes” (270). In spite of her desire to avoid conversation, however, Marie’s recollection of the ensuing discussion sees her calm and defiant in the face of her mother and sister’s hysteria. The narrator recalls dialogue directed towards her from her crying family members: “Tu ne peux pas nous faire ça, Marie. Tu as quoi dans la tête? Tu es comme ça alors?” (270). Rather than respond verbally, however, Marie remains silent, and it is through the narrator’s inward monologue that we hear her calm affirmation: “Je ne dois rien à personne. Je ne suis pas coupable. Je ne suis pas malade. Je suis en pleine forme” (270). In the face of negative language from her family members, here, Marie’s narrative voice rejects the assumed grounds for their accusations, reclaiming her sexual experience as not deserving of discrimination. When the word “homosexuelle” is then raised by her mother and sister, Bouraoui’s narrator responds to it with a series of negations,

⁷⁶ The question of identity politics and Bouraoui’s attitude to being considered a “representative” gay author is discussed in Chapter Four.

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affirming the irrelevance of such terminology in the face of the life-changing romantic experience she has had: “Homosexuelle. Ce mot ne dit rien d’Uster [where Diane’s house is located], de la musique, de la chambre, des arbres qui nous protégeaient. Ce n’est pas vrai” (271). From here on, Marie’s rejection of the term encompasses both the insufficiency of language to describe her love affair, and the ideological and discriminatory power that linguistic terms are seen to hold: “Ce n’est rien, l’homosexualité. C’est un mot inventé. C’est dans la nature de chacun. C’est une affaire de peau et de rencontre [...]. Ce n’est rien cette définition médicale. Je ne sais pas pourquoi ma sœur a parlé. Pour me protéger sans doute. Je ne suis pas en danger. Je suis sauvée. Je sais aimer” (271).

Although once more an act of internal revolt, rather than a declaration that she is able to voice in front of her family, Marie’s affirmations here mirror Bouraoui’s comments, in the opening of this chapter, that “l’homosexualité, ce n’est qu’un mot” and that “le langage nous emprisonne.” Against restrictive descriptions of her romance, Marie celebrates the bodily and emotional intensity of her prior attachment. At the same time, her claim, of the term “homosexualité,” that, “[c]e n’est rien cette définition médicale,” recalls the subjection of the narrator of *Garçon manqué* to medical examination, in which Nina’s grandmother attempted to delimit Nina’s capacity for self-identification by surrendering her to institutional analysis. While the affirmative potential of these declarations may in a sense be limited by Marie’s inability to express them aloud, the author’s inclusion of each of these discursive acts of resistance in her writing can nonetheless serve a positive purpose, giving voice to usually abstract queer theoretical ideas through the realistic life-story of a young gay woman.

C’est un sujet qui surgit

Returning to the critical theory we have examined here and in Chapter One, the resonance of Marie’s experience is in fact particularly apparent in a declaration made earlier in the text. Describing the joy of her new lesbian relationship with Diane, Marie’s claim at this point appears to almost exactly personify Monique Wittig’s re-signifying proposition of the “lesbian” as non-gendered subject. Wittig claims that, through avoiding the repressive heterosexual system which, she argues, arbitrarily and

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unnecessarily institutes binary gender, “lesbians” may transcend gendered subjectivity and enjoy a revolutionary and open-to-all form of personal freedom.⁷⁷ While Marie’s own description of her lesbian feelings is entirely personal, and not connected to any external political theory, she may well be having a Wittigian-lesbian experience when she states:

On n’est plus une fille avec une fille. On ne se retrouve pas en elle. On ne comble pas et on ne manque pas. C’est plus que cela. Ça n’a pas d’histoire. C’est sans passé. C’est d’une grande virginité. Il n’y a aucun malheur à aimer une fille. Ça donne beaucoup de force. Ça rend intelligent, à force de mentir. Ce n’est plus une fille alors. C’est un sujet qui surgit. (70)

In this affirmation we may recognise Wittig’s claim, in *La pensée straight* that, “ce qui fait une femme, c’est une relation sociale particulière à un homme” (52)—a belief which leads Wittig to assert that: “‘lesbienne’ est le seul concept que je connaisse qui soit au-delà des catégories de sexe (homme et femme) parce que le sujet désigné (lesbienne) N’EST PAS une femme, ni économiquement, ni politiquement, ni idéologiquement. Car en effet ce qui fait une femme, c’est une relation sociale particulière à un homme [Wittig’s emphases]” (52). While Marie’s rejection of heterosexuality is not an economic, political, or ideological act, but a question of personal sexual preference, her refusal of the language usually used to define female homosexuality—claiming that rather than becoming a “woman-loving woman”, her relationship has seen her overcome her gender, and simply become “un sujet”—suggests a Wittigian, re-signified form of lesbianism, rather than a conventional one.

Where Wittig sees gender as inherently oppressive, rendering women “particularised subjects” who are denied full cultural sovereignty, the lesbian is a non-particularised form of subjectivity, capable of accessing authoritative discursive positions, and of re-appropriating language for themselves to suit their needs. Although such abstract theory may be hard to represent in realist literature, in a figurative sense, Wittig’s affirmative resolution of occupying a lesbian identity position in order to access linguistic sovereignty and absolute personal freedom may in fact chime with the

⁷⁷ It is important to note that Wittig’s lesbian does not intrinsically relate to the conventional definition of lesbian as “woman-loving woman,” but instead represents an entirely new form of social identity. Wittig’s controversial theory is discussed in detail in Chapter One of this thesis.

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conclusion of Marie’s story in *La vie heureuse*. Even though Marie ultimately suffers heartbreak when her girlfriend abandons her for other lovers, the closing stages of the text strike a positive note for the narrator’s future. While romantic disruption had, over the course of Marie’s school year, affected her academic performance, and Marie had been disciplined because of this, at the end of this period Marie receives more positive news with regard to her school report: “Le proviseur m’a parlé. Il est content de moi. J’ai fait des progrès. J’ai toutes mes chances pour passer en première” (254). What is notable in this development, however, is Marie’s change in academic direction. Having previously intended to focus on sports studies, we are now told that: “Je vais faire une section littéraire” (254). While reading has not featured as a favoured activity within the text thus far, at the book’s close, Marie seems increasingly interested in literature, a change which both hints at her referential connection to Bouraoui as author, and suggests possible positive consequences to her progressive re-appropriation of language.

In the final chapter of the book, Marie, her sister, and her mother, move away from Zurich, and to soften the blow of having been separated from all of her friends, we are told that Marie’s mother buys her “des cahiers à spirale” and “de quoi écrire” (285). The possibility of Marie herself beginning to write creatively therefore emerges. Where Marie’s immediate response to this gift—“Je n’ai qu’un prénom en tête, Diane, Diane, Diane. Bien sûr je ne l’écris pas” (285)—demonstrates that she is not yet entirely ready to move on from her recent experiences, we might nevertheless imagine that with time she will discover other topics about which to write. This future act of writing may, therefore, figuratively parallel the empowering capacity of Wittig’s non-gendered subject to appropriate all language for themselves in order to produce entirely new and liberated identity positions. Where it is important, within our reading of *La vie heureuse*, to avoid confusing Marie’s genuine attraction to women with the very different political lesbianism which Wittig’s theory advocates, parallels do appear to exist between Marie’s personal philosophical reflections on gender and sexuality, and Wittig’s radical re-signification of the term. If such a reading may be only symbolically aligned with the events in Bouraoui’s autobiographical novel, the final text in what we have labelled Bouraoui’s developmental trilogy, *Poupée bella*, goes a

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step further than *La vie heureuse*, seemingly providing a clear critique of presenting any conventional sexual identity positions as potentially affirmative.

2.4 Literary Escape in *Poupée bella*

Following on from *Garçon manqué* and *La vie heureuse*, in 2004 Bouraoui published *Poupée bella*, a text set within the writer’s student years in Paris during the late 1980s. Where thematically *Poupée bella* may, as we have suggested, be seen to complete a trilogy of works dealing with Bouraoui’s younger life, with regard to form, this work differs once more from the conventions of the previous two texts. Rather than straightforward autobiography, or self-referential novel, *Poupée bella* is presented as a reconstructed *journal intime*, apparently recording events from the writer’s life at the time she first experiences them, with entries dating from October 1987 to June 1989. Instead of a detailed and reflective record of events during this period, however, *Poupée bella* is constituted in major part by seemingly disconnected fragments, rarely attempting to be coherent or avoid contradiction. Although the narrator remains unnamed throughout the text, the opening entry—at four pages, by far the longest passage of the book—informs the reader that the diary writer is a young woman newly arrived in Paris, fitting with what we know of Bouraoui’s life in this period (7–11). As with *La vie heureuse*, themes and characters mentioned in the text conform to autobiographical details given elsewhere, and we will therefore continue our convention of referring to the anonymous narrator as “Nina,” both reading the text as autobiographical for Bouraoui, and marking a distinction between the writer and the younger version of herself embodied by the text’s protagonist.

The central plotline of *Poupée bella* is its narrator’s entry into “le milieu des filles”—the gay quarter of Paris, and its lesbian clubs and bars. As a new arrival to this part of the city, Nina anticipates with excitement the adult life which awaits her, and the affirmative possibilities apparently posed by this environment. In keeping with the troubled gender identity of the narrator of *Garçon manqué*, and the early lesbianism of Marie in *La vie heureuse*, Nina seems keen to meet women in this area, feeling that associating with them will allow her to figure out who she is. Where we might expect

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the text to be affirmative of the writer's homosexual identity, however, as the diary progresses, this positive socialisation does not fully emerge, and instead the established sexual identity positions the narrator anticipates appropriating fail her. As with the first two texts discussed in this chapter, the narrator's response to this social difficulty is to take up writing, and creative production once more emerges as a fertile site of resistance to confining social expectations. If writing, rather than sexual affirmation, emerges as the truly transformative experience of *Poupée bella*, therefore, we will once more note the relevance of a Wittigian reading, both for the sexual identity position Bouraoui's narrator ultimately adopts, and for the representation of writing as itself an act of resistance to problems of personal identity.

Je veux juste une voix qui répétera mon prénom

In the first entry, dated 30 October 1987, the narrator of *Poupée bella* is almost overwhelmed with excitement at all that she hopes awaits her in her new life: "Je n'ai rien de silencieux en moi, tout bouge, tout crie, tout se déplace, je quitte la vraie vie" (7). Here, the phrase "la vraie vie" refers to the world as Nina has previously known it, a world within which, reiterating the difficult gender identity we have already heard Bouraoui describe in *Garçon manqué*, she explains how: "Je suis un secret, avant, j'entendais: Elle a un drôle de visage, elle a un regard qui dérange, elle n'est pas douce [...]. Elle a une beauté spéciale, on ne sait pas ce qu'elle deviendra" (8). Much like the Nina of *Garçon manqué*, and Marie in *La vie heureuse*, this narrator recounts past experiences of having felt excluded by the community around her, with her memory of other people's descriptions of her retaining a powerful effect on her sense of self. In these comments, the suggestion of a certain confrontationality in Nina's comportment—"elle n'est pas douce"—recalls the young tomboy behaviour of *Garçon manqué*, while defining herself as "un secret" repeats the social discomfort of Marie in *La vie heureuse*, in response to the gossiping of those around her.

In contrast to this prior, restrictive life, however, the narrator's excitement at the start of *Poupée bella* apparently comes from the possibilities proposed by Paris's gay and lesbian quarter, or "le Milieu des Filles" (9). In a broken diary entry Nina describes the atmosphere in *le Katmandou*, one of the clubs of the gay quarter, both alluding to her

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sexual interest in other women, and at the same time suggesting that the realisation of her sexual desire will help her to discover her true self:

Il y a cette chanson de Stephan Eicher, *Combien de temps*, et à moi,
combien faudra-t-il de temps pour trouver, pour être choisie? Je pourrais
embrasser n'importe qui. Je veux juste une voix qui répétera mon prénom.

Combien de temps faudra-t-il pour trouver? Pour devenir ce que je suis ?
Combien de temps pour avoir mes habitudes au Katmandou? (9–10)

As with the opening of *La vie heureuse*, the reference to a contemporary celebrity allows Bouraoui to evoke the atmosphere of a particular period in her younger life, here through a song she remembers from these clubs and bars, before moving from a public cultural reference to the inherently personal re-creation of her developing personality at this time. While the questions in the second of these fragments demonstrate uncertainty for the protagonist, building a certain frenetic anxiety through their repetition, there is also a clear positive sense that it is in the new community of *le milieu des filles* that the narrator feels she will be able to find her true self, or "devenir ce que je suis." At the beginning of *Poupée bella* the narrator not only believes herself to be on the brink of self-discovery, but that this discovery will come in the specific environment which permits particular types of social, and sexual, relations. Having felt outside of heterosexual culture growing up, entering Paris's gay quarter will, she hopes, enable Nina to meet people like herself, apparently setting the text up as a conventionally affirmative coming-of-age narrative. Despite, of course, the primarily physical nature of the relationships Nina imagines having, within this ambition language is given the performative power of definition: in order to become her true self, Nina wishes to meet in the gay quarter someone who will confirm her uncertain sexual identity, someone who will provide "une voix qui répétera mon prénom."

With the opening claim, "Je quitte la vraie vie," we understand that Nina is referring to her youth and the world she has so far known, which she now confidently expects to be replaced by her new Parisian life. Over the following pages, however, the idea of "la vraie vie" recurs on multiple occasions, each time with varying reference. Within a few

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months of living in Paris, Nina's view of what constitutes "real life" appears to have changed, with one entry reading: "8 février. J'apprends à tout voir. J'apprends à tout entendre. J'apprends le Milieu c'est-à-dire la vraie vie. Je cherche des filles du Kat dans la ville. Je n'en vois aucune. Chaque nuit devient nos retrouvailles. Chaque nuit devient notre secret. Chaque nuit est une force contre le jour" (21–22). Here, Nina's familiarity with *le milieu des filles* has quickly become an enormous part of her life, so that during her daytime existence she is preoccupied with the women with whom she spends her evenings. Now identifying *le milieu* as "la vraie vie," the contrast of day and night in this entry reveals a stark separation of the two worlds in Nina's mind, with the mundane reality of her Parisian daytime rendered secondary to the intense community of her nocturnal activities. Only five diary days later, however, in an enigmatic fragment dated 13 February, the sense of "la vraie vie" seems to have shifted once more: "Je quitte la vraie vie et je n'ai pas peur de cela" (22). Here Bouraoui's autobiographical narrator appears to establish two parallel spaces: the normal, conventional world of everyday Paris, and the more intense night-time world of *le milieu*, in which affirmative language may help to transform the diarist's identity. While her decision as to which of these worlds is "la vraie vie"—and whether or not this real life is one that she wishes to inhabit—seems to depend on the narrator's state of mind at the time of writing each entry, it is clear that at this stage Nina views the relationships formed in the gay quarter as a means of potential transformation.

Over the following weeks and months, Nina engages in a series of lesbian relationships within *le milieu*. She meets S., with whom she has a short-term and casual romance (65–66), Françoise, an older woman who dates Nina while still involved with an absent male partner (130), and Mikie, a girl from the *banlieue*, to whom Nina remains attached for several months (94, 102, 145). Alongside these present lovers, the narrator devotes several diary entries to Marion, "la première fille que j'ai aimée" (31), who broke her heart as a teenager back home—and who we might therefore read as a repeated representation of the Diane character from *La vie heureuse* (40, 62, 72). In spite of this apparent success in the world of "woman-loving women," however, Nina finds herself disappointed with the lesbian world she has entered, and rather than positive and identity-affirming, her diary entries quickly become confused and

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contradictory, while at the same time revealing curiosities about other forms of sexuality.

Not long after Nina has found her feet in *le milieu des filles*, she finds herself thinking about the male-only spaces of the gay quarter: "J'ai envie d'entrer chez Moon [a male-only gay club], de danser avec une femme déguisée en homme. J'ai envie d'entrer dans une backroom de garçons" (24). Having come through the initial entry into her new environment, many of the narrator's diary entries begin to toy with the gender identities proscribed by conventional lesbian interaction, while the closest relationship she forms in this environment turns out to be with a gay man, Julien, whose more aggressive sexuality Nina wishes to emulate. Five consecutive short diary entries introduce Julien into Nina's life:

13 avril: J'ai rencontré un garçon qui aime les garçons : Julien.

17 avril : Le corps de Julien vient sur moi, dans ma tête.

20 avril : Je suis dans le corps de Julien.

30 avril: Le corps de Julien est déjà une désespérance. Je l'attends au Kat. Ma nuit est profonde. Ma nuit est un mensonge. Julien ne viendra pas ce soir.

2 mai: Il y a un glissement du désir. J'aimerais tant être Julien. (25–26)

Rather than enamoured with the women she has met, Nina here is preoccupied by her new male friend, and, while their relationship is purely platonic, Nina's diary entries suggest a resistance to the restrictiveness of purely homosexual female identity. She notes how "Il y a une beauté chez les garçons qu'on ne retrouve pas chez les filles" (30), while Julien is clearly aware of Nina's broader sexual curiosities, "Julien dit que mon désir de garçon doit passer par lui. Il y a une jalousie homosexuelle qui ne va jamais jusqu'au bout" (80). Nina's description of exploring Paris's gay quarter therefore disrupts the narrator's early expectations of homosexual society, revealing

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that *Le milieu des filles* is not the utopic, identity-confirming environment she had anticipated.

L’écriture prend dans le milieu des filles

While exploring the narrator’s entry into adult sexuality, *Poupée bella* also appears to recount Bouraoui’s emergence as a writer, in both developing authorial ambitions, and describing a passion for writing which will become even more important to her than physical and romantic love. Ultimately, the young Nina finds happiness and self-fulfilment—perhaps even self-realisation—not in the sexual environment of these clubs and bars, but in the textual. “Quand j’écris,” she claims, “je n’ai plus besoin du Milieu des Filles. Je prends possession de mon corps, de mon désir” (39), and, later: “L’écriture prend dans le Milieu des Filles. C’est la seule façon, pour moi, de devenir une personne” (42). Here, writing once more emerges as primordial for a Bouraouian narrator. When her romantic relationships do not transpire as straightforwardly affirmative, Nina begins to channel her confusion—and frustration that *le milieu des filles* has not satisfied her personal identity quest—into literary production.

At certain times, the narrator of *Poupée bella* makes her dual interest in love and writing explicit: “Je suis folle d’écriture comme je suis folle d’amour. J’attends les deux. J’attends ce succès-là” (44). While this entry makes a comparison between love and writing, at other points the two are conflated, in the romantic representation of the process of writing as itself a form of relationship. Much like the wavering connection she has at different times with various lovers, Nina represents her own ability to write as following a similar trajectory to a rocky romance: at times deliriously happy, frustratingly elusive, and heart-breakingly painful. At one point of apparent writer’s block, for example, the narrator explicitly compares her writing condition to love sickness—“Attendre un livre devient attendre l’amour” (46)—while three days later the comparison is extended to a sort of parallel: “J’ai peur d’écrire et J’ai peur d’aimer” (47). Beyond these general statements about love and writing, at points where the narrator goes into more detail about specific interpersonal relationships, even these are frequently framed through a discussion of writing, revealing how Nina’s feelings are consciously mediated through language.

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Referring to the first love whose memory recurs throughout her current endeavours, the narrator says at one point “J’écris selon les yeux de Marion, j’écris d’après cette révélation; l’écriture est charnelle. De plus en plus, elle devient une question de vie ou de mort” (68). She then goes on to contrast this, in the second half of the sentence, with her impression of her friendship with Julien: “Julien est mon sujet et je sais que j’écris sur moi, transformée par lui” (68). This productive element of Nina’s relationship with Julien features again a few pages later, revealing how she—at least “parfois”—prioritises his contribution to her capacity to write over any more personal interaction: “Julien est le témoin de mon écriture. C’est parfois sa seule importance” (76). Later on in the text, in the form of a condensed summary Nina compares her feelings for three of the most important people featured in the diary: “Quand j’ai rencontré Marion, j’ai tout de suite su que je l’aimerais. Quand j’ai rencontré Julien, j’ai eu peur du désir, avec Françoise j’ai un vide autour de mon corps qui pourrait ruiner mon écriture” (148–9). We sense in the narrator’s habit of listing her relationships in this way that each person is being compared for their usefulness—or threat—to the writer’s creative capacities. Most particularly, here, we are struck by the fear provoked by her current lover that the sense of longing and insecurity she engenders may “ruiner mon écriture.” Similar claims are made throughout the text, and in far greater concentration than any of the more emotional, interpersonal feelings we might expect from an exploration of a young woman’s emerging sexuality.⁷⁸

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given our identification of Nina with the extra-textual writer, Bouraoui’s life in late 1980s Paris seems concerned not only with discovering identity through sexual relationships, but with her nascent self-identification as a writer. Language and the act of writing seem to inform all of Nina’s individual relationships with people she meets in the milieu. At the same time, the strongest “relationship” she has turns out to be her own interaction with writing, both in the daily (or usually less regular) decision to write in the diary itself, and in a broader sense, when she discusses her views on writing and the impact her search for love has on her creative

⁷⁸ The representation of the writer’s romantic relationships through a comparison with their effect on her capacity to write is a theme continued in the later text *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, discussed in Chapter Four, section four.

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powers. Ultimately, the writer’s involvement with what she writes appears as that which most profoundly impacts on her identity, and it may therefore be literary construction, above social interaction, which is most powerful in allowing the narrator to “devenir ce que je suis.” Given this reading of *Poupée bella*, it is tempting to recall Wittig’s prioritising writing as an important political act, capable of enacting change. The essentialist, or “woman-loving woman,” lesbianism which Nina initially anticipated has been replaced by a more polymorphous “queer” sexuality, and, more importantly, by Nina’s own ability to write. Rather than finding herself through practices proscribed within restrictive definitions of sexuality, therefore, Nina finds mastery of language as the truly affirmative experience—“Maitriser son écriture,” she claims, “c’est se maitriser soi” (83).

Chapter conclusions

In this chapter we have read Bouraoui’s three publications from the period 2000–2004, *Garçon manqué*, *La vie heureuse*, and *Poupée bella*, as forming a “developmental trilogy,” tracing the theme of the writer’s emerging gendered and sexual identity over texts dealing with her childhood and adolescence, and into her young adult years in late 1980s Paris. In the comments taken from Bouraoui’s interview with Dominique Simmonet, “Écrire, c’est retrouver ses fantômes,” we heard the writer’s belief that, rather than necessarily empowering, terms such as “homosexualité” can in fact be imprisoning for those they aim to define, with Bouraoui therefore preferring to determine her own self-representation through the creative appropriation of language in writing. While in Bouraoui’s more conventional, clearly self-referential text, *Garçon manqué*, language was frequently presented as having a negative impact on the narrator’s sense of self, the empowering possibility of language serving as a site of resistance also emerged within that text. In the following, more autofictional works, *La vie heureuse* and *Poupée bella*, Bouraoui developed on this linguistic potential, producing re-iterations of her narrative self, which became progressively more independent and anti-definitional. In the movement from a more constrained subject—discursively constructed, yet limited in their capacity for

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resistance—in *Garçon manqué*, to the freer, defiant agency of the diarist of *Poupée bella*, the progression of Bouraoui’s narrators across these texts mirrors what we have identified as the divergent capacity for change within the theoretical work of first Judith Butler and then Monique Wittig. Where both the negative power of language and the narrator’s recourse to drag as a form of gender subversion in *Garçon manqué* recall elements of Butler’s work, the move into autofiction across *La vie heureuse* and *Poupée bella* allows for a more optimistic and transformative, Wittigian reading of Bouraoui’s emerging literary self.

Where this chapter has addressed the “performative” power of individual words, and their capacity to both instigate and resist forms of social discrimination, Chapter Three will move up from this specific level of language, to a broader examination of “narrative,” as a trope which structures both literary and extra-textual constructions of the self. We saw in *Garçon manqué* that, in addition to her gendered and sexual identity, Bouraoui’s young narrator suffered from linguistic abuse related to her race and ethnicity, and Chapter Three will consider the importance of Bouraoui’s *métissage* to her life-writing. Then, where we have considered the representation of the writer’s developing sexual identity within her early self-referential works, Chapter Four will revisit this theme through examining the question of political representativeness. We have suggested that Bouraoui’s turn to literature might, in Wittigian style, constitute something of a political act. But how far does Bouraoui carry this through, through the representation of sexuality in her later work? Through an exploration of the importance of the “relational” in Bouraoui’s work, Chapter Four will discuss the potential political implications of using the autobiographical and autofictional forms to represent divergent sexual identities, investigating the extent to which Bouraoui’s writing might be considered an “act of resistance” helpful not only to herself, but also to her readers.

3. “L’enfance aussi est un pays”: Narrative and Fragmentation in the Algeria Texts

Ma mère y avait suivi mon père, se coupant ainsi de sa famille française, par amour, mais aussi pour des raisons politiques. En Algérie, elle avait réussi à s'intégrer, mais elle souffrait d'asthme chronique. En fait, elle étouffait physiquement, psychologiquement. Et nous étouffions avec elle, dans ce pays très masculin, très violent. Nous ne fréquentions pas les Français, les trouvant trop sages; nous ne fréquentions pas les Algériens, les jugeant trop rebelles. Nous étions faits de cette sagesse et de cette rébellion. Nous restions entre nous, entre “métisses.”

Un jour, alors que nous étions en France pour des vacances, ma mère a annoncé que nous ne rentrions pas. J'avais 14 ans. Tout est resté en Algérie: mes objets, mes amis, mon enfance. La rupture a été d'une grande violence. J'ai alors commencé une seconde vie: en une semaine, j'avais perdu mon accent. J'ai voulu oublier l'Algérie, mais elle est revenue avec l'écriture. Écrire, c'est retrouver ses fantômes.
 (“Écrire, c'est retrouver ses fantômes”)

At an early stage of Bouraoui's thematic turn to the self, the *métisse* writer pinpoints her family's sudden departure from Algeria as a formative moment, both in contributing to her later identity problems, and providing an important focal point for her self-referential writing. As her comments in this 2004 interview reveal, Bouraoui's childhood residence in Algeria was never unproblematic, with her family's *métissage*, her mother's ill health, and the country's political and social climate all contributing to her impression that “nous étouffions [...] dans ce pays très masculin, très violent.” At the same time, however, the description of her separation from this land as a violent rupture affirms the integral nature of her early identification with Algeria, which she now suggests continues to motivate her on a perhaps unconscious level, mysteriously reappearing whenever she has chosen to write about herself.

In this chapter we will examine Bouraoui's representation of her childhood in Algeria through three texts relating to this theme: *Le jour du séisme* (1999), *Mes mauvaises pensées* (2005), and *Sauvage* (2011). Just as these interview comments would suggest,

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Bouraoui's identification with Algeria within these texts is often ambivalent, manifesting a deep affection for her childhood homeland, underscored by a more troubling association of the country with violence, fear, and social disorder. However, alongside a demonstration of the post-colonial specificity of the time and period recreated in each of these works—Algeria at the turn of the 1980s—Bouraoui's textual revisiting of her childhood also demonstrates more universal themes. In Bouraoui's version of familiar coming-of-age dramas, the blissfully secure world of youth emerges as more a metaphorical than a literal land, the fictive nature of which is revealed in the writer's textual revisiting of this traumatic rupture. In keeping with the psychoanalytic theory Bouraoui creatively explores in these texts, her narrators find themselves painfully separated from their origins, and are forced to use language and narrative as a means to try and help them come to terms with their respective losses. In this reading, it is therefore not only Bouraoui's particular identity problems which originate in her family's sudden departure from Algeria, but also her own engagement with language and literature, the form chosen for her identity quest. While the exploration of national and cultural identity is significant within Bouraoui's writing, and Bouraoui's narrators frequently express the importance of Algeria to their sense(s) of self, we will ultimately come to suggest that Bouraoui's discussion of period and place in these texts reflects a preoccupation less with her difficult separation from post-colonial Algeria than with the artistic expression of the common experience of having to leave one's childhood behind.

3.1 Narrative Identity and the Return to Origins

Several published critical articles on Bouraoui's work consider her as a post-colonial writer, whose experience of "exile" from her native land both permeates and motivates her autobiographical writing.⁷⁹ These critics have predominantly focused on

⁷⁹ The first book to include substantial reference to Bouraoui is Trudy Agar-Mendousse's *Violence et Créativité de l'écriture algérienne au féminin* (2006), which reads Bouraoui alongside Assia Djebar and Malika Mokeddem as an example of contemporary Algerian women's writing. Agar-Mendousse's study situates itself "à la rencontre de deux courants", "la critique postcoloniale" and "le postmodernisme," arguing that much as the latter may historically seek to deconstruct the categories underlying the former, within the Algerian context the two may productively be used together to define the necessity for writers—particularly women—to write against inherited discourses of domination (7). Sara Leek is a

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two texts in particular: *Garçon manqué*, which features an explicit coincidence of writer and protagonist and describes Bouraoui’s reflections on her early life in Algeria (see Chapter Two); and *Mes mauvaises pensées*, which covers a broader autobiographical period and contains several overt references to details of the writer’s life. Given our interest in this study on the particular uses of autofiction, however, it will be relevant to consider whether a clearer understanding of Bouraoui’s broad project of textual self-exploration may be gained from extending both the chronological and formal range of texts analysed. *Le jour du séisme* and *Sauvage*, published at either end of the period covered by this thesis (1999 and 2011 respectively), each return to almost exactly the same moment of the writer’s life through textual forms distinct from one another, and from her other autofictional works. Read alongside *Mes mauvaises pensées*, these texts will allow us to consider a wider range of forms than just the openly autobiographical, a choice which is appropriate both because of the strong thematic overlap between these texts, and because of Bouraoui’s own professed fondness for blurring boundaries between fiction and reality.

Published in 1999, *Le jour du séisme* is the first text to introduce some of the real people, places and events from Bouraoui’s life to which and to whom she would return on several occasions over the following 12 years. Featuring a young female narrator describing life in Algiers in 1980, this text can be seen as a return to origins for Bouraoui, with its central focus, an earthquake which hit and devastated Northern Algerian in October 1980, a form of grounding—or “un-grounding”—metaphor for much of Bouraoui’s later autobiographical work. Speaking in an interview to mark the publication of this text, Bouraoui explained her new interest in textually returning to Algeria, describing how “j’ai toujours pensé que l’écriture était un travail de mémoire, une façon de fixer le temps, de le rendre un peu plus éternel. Écrire ce livre c’est fixer mon enfance pour qu’elle ne parte pas [...]. L’enfance est aussi un pays” (“Nina Bouraoui: D’enfance”). In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the geological metaphor of the earthquake is then replaced with an autofictional exploration of psychoanalysis, as

doctoral scholar currently working on the theme of exile in the work of Bouraoui, Linda Lê and Nancy Huston. Her article “‘L’écriture qui saigne’” (2012) offers a detailed reading of *Mes mauvaises pensées*.

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Bouraoui uses the setting of a Parisian therapist's office to contemplate her memories of Algeria in a long self-referential monologue. Revisiting many of the places and events featured earlier in her work, this text both affirms the significance of Bouraoui's childhood experiences for her adult identity and health (or lack thereof), and sustains a "multi-layered" representation of the writer's relationship with Algeria, invoking a therapeutic practice invested in the theory of hidden depths and unresolved traumas residing in the psyche. Finally, *Sauvage*, Bouraoui's most recent published work, might not at first appear relevant to a discussion of Bouraoui's life-writing, owing to its fictional form. However, given the similarity of the setting and the characters of *Sauvage* to those we encounter in the earlier texts, this work may in fact be read as Bouraoui once more revisiting her own Algerian childhood, though in fictional guise. In this reading, the fact that Bouraoui is reconsidering the same material through fiction is highly significant: both the constructedness of the story and the additional characters featured can be seen to represent new forms of old themes, with the writer turning to fiction to deal with what she has so far struggled to close off in autobiographical form.

In Chapter One, we have considered how recent theory around the construction of the self in both philosophy and autobiography studies has foregrounded the importance of "narrative" as the basic vehicle of meaning which structures self-understanding. Where, within a post-structuralist framework, the essential coherence and sovereignty of the human subject has been thrown into doubt, self-comprehension is only possible through the imposition of an illusory, teleological account of the self. Paul Gifford has explained the impulse towards self-narrativisation as

the notion of telling oneself one's own story in order to gain some purchase—however provisional and experimental—on the emergent 'sujet' [...] so as to fashion or model, from the inchoate and fragmentary givenness of self-experience, a unified agent capable of acting in moral space, capable of assuming relationality, capable of growing and changing within the horizons, both immediate and distant, of the human condition. (231)

Following the crisis of the sovereign, Cartesian subject, postmodernity posits the absence of moral absolutes, in the face of which contemporary subjects must decide

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for themselves the meaning of their lives. In order to process "the inchoate and fragmentary givenness of self-experience" humans now deny this fact to themselves, and instead use narrative structures in attempting to establish some foothold, "however provisional and experimental," by which they might understand themselves. One of the most significant fields in which theorists have pursued the construction of the self through narrative structures is the practice of psychoanalysis, the branch of psychology founded by Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth century. In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks, a psychoanalytically-influenced literary critic, equally foregrounds the importance of narrative to self-understanding, paralleling narrative within psychology to the construction of literary texts. He explains, "Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue" (3).

Considering our specific "Butler-Wittigian" theoretical framework, the field of psychoanalysis represents an interesting point of divergence between our two theorists. While Butler uses psychoanalytical theory in *Gender Trouble* to attempt to identify the processes of identification which determine the construction of one's personal identity, Wittig rejects psychoanalysis as a discourse contributing to the regime of compulsory heterosexuality ("La pensée straight" 53). In spite of this disagreement, however, psychoanalysis and the notion of narrative identity will both prove important to Bouraoui's writing about Algeria, and it will therefore be necessary in this chapter to reduce the influence of our Wittigian perspective, in favour of the theorists with whom Bouraoui herself appears to engage.

3.2 Broken Land, Broken Childhood in *Le jour du séisme*

On Friday 10 October 1980 the Algerian town of El-Asnam—known today as Chlef or Cheliff—was hit by an earthquake. Measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale, this was the most violent and destructive earthquake the country had ever seen, killing around 5,000 people, and displacing many tens of thousands more.⁸⁰ 200 kilometres to the east, the main effect of the tremors was felt in the capital city of Algiers, home, at the time, to Bouraoui and her family. *Le jour du séisme* revisits this event and its effects on both her country and her life. Over a series of seemingly disconnected fragments, Bouraoui describes the destructive physical impact of the earthquake on the land, juxtaposing this with a nostalgic revisiting of events from her childhood and poetic descriptions of treasured places in the Algerian landscape. While memories of Bouraoui's childhood homeland clearly remain important to her, however, the narrator's identification with Algeria proves not to be a consistently positive one, and many of the identity problems which will feature in Bouraoui's later work—outsider status, gender frustration and fear of suffering violence—emerge for the first time in this novella. In a symbolic extension of the earthquake's destructive power, the narrative voice seems to have been fragmented by her association with *la terre algérienne*, and layered descriptions of the earthquake and its aftermath reveal multiple strata on which the narrator's identity has become ungrounded. Through Bouraoui's poetic treatment of it in this work, therefore, "le jour du séisme" becomes not just a notable historical event through which the writer has lived, but a metaphor for both her new autobiographical writing project, and many of the enduring identity problems which have prompted her artistic attempt at textual self-construction.

Ma terre tremble

Ma terre tremble le 10 octobre 1980. [...] Je suis marquée, à jamais. Mon aventure est unique. Son instant est un fragment et une épopée. Je viens d'un autre pays, un lieu modifié. J'obéis à un ravisseur. Je deviens une étrangère. Je suis traversée d'une histoire vraie, un acte de la nature, une révolte. Je change. Je sais ce qu'implorer le ciel veut dire. (9)

⁸⁰ The *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s entry on Cheliff notes: "The former El-Asnam area was struck by a severe earthquake in 1954 and by another in 1980; the latter, measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale, destroyed more than half of the buildings in El-Asnam and killed about 5,000 people. The town's official name was changed in 1981 because of El-Asnam's association with earthquake disasters" (152).

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From the opening moment of Bouraoui's novella, the interweaving of the earthquake's effects on the land and its effect on the writer is instantly apparent. The immediate use of the possessive pronoun to introduce the earth reveals the extremely personal nature of Bouraoui's account, against a more distanced or historical perspective, while the occurrence of "je," first appearing halfway through the opening paragraph, but then repeated several times in short succession, seems to suggest an affinity with the land which marks the speaker too as fragmented and broken by the earthquake. Ephemeral as the tremors were, they have had a lasting legacy and have contributed to Bouraoui's identity confusion—the origins of which this text now promises to reveal, in a story both "true" and "epic," intertwining a record of the earthquake itself and its impact on Algeria with the more individual story of the narrator's life at this time.

As well as a thematic turn away from fiction and towards discussing her own life, *Le jour du séisme* marks a change of form for Bouraoui. Instead of the chapters used in her earlier novels, the short text is laid out in a series of fragments, ranging in length from one paragraph to just over one page, in a structure which re-enacts the destructive effects of the earthquake. Bouraoui's text, like her land and, as we will discover, her life more broadly, has here fragmented to such an extent that narrative coherence has become difficult to maintain, and needs to be actively sought out or pieced together over the course of the book. Bouraoui's awareness of this difficulty is made apparent in a fragment occurring halfway through the text (used by her publishers for the book's back cover) which opens with an insistent questioning of people's awareness of her experiences: "Qui sait le séisme? Qui sait la vraie peur? Qui sait le désarroi? Qui sait ma terre fragilisée?" (61). This is then followed by a statement which would seem to link the earthquake to many of Bouraoui's other experiences and difficulties in later life: "Le séisme forme déjà l'exil et la différence. Il traverse le corps et impose une scission. Il dénature et fonde une autre origine." However troubled and chaotic Bouraoui's response to the earthquake is, her questions—which continue, "Qui racontera [...]?" before concluding, "Qui sait, enfin, mon enfance liée au mystère, algérien?"—implicitly compel her own response as a writer, setting up the recovery

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(or, perhaps, construction) of meaning and memory through the text as an important work of testimony and self-explanation.

This work of apparent autobiographical testimony does not follow any particular narrative thread, with the majority of fragments flitting about between scenes describing the land and more personal memories of Bouraoui's family and friends. One loose and experimental structuring device does recur, however: the unusual typographical choice of bookending certain strings of fragments with angled quotation marks («»), as if to suggest a grouping of the intervening passages as one narrative or series of thoughts. Within the fragments framed by these stretched-out quotation marks, Bouraoui each time describes—in addition to other motifs commonly repeated throughout the text—one particular place in Algeria; and reading all the fragments together, we count eleven separate stories of locations in the Algerian landscape, accounting all together for more than a third of the book's content. Two examples of this device reveal the importance of such groupings within the work as a whole. Following a fragment which opens, "«Les roseaux de Moretti détournent la mer par petites travées" (40), the text between the opening and closing of the quotation marks runs on for five pages and encompasses six separate fragments, each relating descriptions or memories of this one location, Moretti, a beach on the Algerian coast not far from Algiers. The first of these fragments takes as its subject an impersonal description of the reeds found around the beach there, while the second describes the speaker's particular experiences: "La chaleur est une fièvre," as "je cours sur la plage de Moretti" (41).⁸¹ In this way, our impressions of Moretti are built up in a series of fragmented layers which might not otherwise be taken as relating to one another, an effect in keeping with the metaphorical extension of the earthquake's splitting and splintering of similar locations in the Algerian landscape. Later, we find a single set of quotation marks framing three fragments which describe a different place, the route to Assekrem, through the Hoggar mountain range (62–64). Here the narrator's recollections nostalgically evoke Algerian cultural traditions: the speaker is "avec les djinns," walking in convoy with a group of women and children led by "un savant" (64).

⁸¹ This line in itself anticipates the opening of Bouraoui's second autobiographical work, *Garçon manqué*, which describes her Algerian childhood in a more conventional way, and opens, "Je cours sur la plage de Chenoua."

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Whether we read this as a true event from Bouraoui's childhood, or a romantic homage to classical motifs from North African literature, the writer's attraction to Algerian mysticism is clear, as she describes how this man "sait la route précise, des dunes et des roches, son tracé, désertique. Il sait aussi ma tristesse, une solitude. Il lit sur l'empreinte de la main, fondue au sable, une vérité, dérobée" (62).⁸²

These specific geographical accounts of Bouraoui's homeland therefore form an important part of her memorial work of recovery, expanding the image of the earthquake as metaphor to account for recent disconnections between herself and her former land. As well as these series of fragments, in other parts of the text we find more fleeting references to names of places that the speaker wishes to remember, succinctly listed in a piling up of further, fleeting, layers of memory, alongside reflective statements of why she is writing in this way:

La terre est une beauté. La terre est un vrai corps. Elle est vivante alors. Elle est à parcourir, de tête. Je vais de Béchar à Constantine. Je vais de Jijel à Mila. Je vais de Bordj à l'Assekrem.
Je constitue. Je fabrique. Je bâtis.
Je trace ma voie. (47)

In this surface-level reading, Bouraoui's testimony of her childhood in Algeria is a sentimental one, as she writes in order to remember specific places from her childhood. Through metaphorical extension, the earthquake has affected her ability to connect to her past life, causing a fragmentation of memory which both prompts the writing of the text, and pervades it on the levels of form and content. At the same time, however, Bouraoui's connection to Algeria is not uniformly as straightforward or positive as these evocative fragments might suggest, and other places in the text manifest a problematic or ambivalent connection to a country which Bouraoui can neither fully consider home, nor feel entirely safe in.

⁸² In her article "Violent Days," Patricia Geesey evokes women's oral tradition of storytelling in Algeria. Although this piece does not comment on Bouraoui, Geesey discusses a story by Assia Djebar—"La femme en morceaux" contained within her 1997 book *Oran, langue morte*—which uses the heritage of *The Arabian Nights* and the tale of Scheherazade in its depiction of present-day Algeria. Although Bouraoui is less invested than Djebar in this cultural heritage—Geesey notes that Djebar also evokes *The Arabian Nights* in other works, such as *Ombre Sultane* (1987)—this important cultural reference is clearly evoked in the image of a nomadic convoy moving through the Algerian desert.

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Le séisme est une guerre

In 1980, then 13-year old Nina (Yasmina) Bouraoui was living in Algiers, with her older sister, their Algerian father, and their white French mother.⁸³ Having been born in France in 1967, Bouraoui moved with her family to Algeria when she was a few months old. This "métisse"—or mixed-race—Franco-Algerian family did not, however, find it easy to assimilate in the newly-independent Algeria, as Bouraoui explains in the interview quoted above: "Nous ne fréquentions pas les Français, les trouvant trop sages; nous ne fréquentions pas les Algériens, les jugeant trop rebelles. [...] Nous restions entre nous, entre "métisses'." What is more, at the beginning of the 1980s—as Bouraoui recalls in more detail in her next work, *Garçon Manqué*—anti-European tensions were mounting in the capital city, and a number of incidents of racism and harassment aimed at Bouraoui's mother may have contributed to the family's decision to leave the country, suddenly, to begin their life again in France.⁸⁴ The day of the earthquake which hit northern Algeria in October 1980 therefore seems coincidentally to correspond to something of a social and political turning point, for Bouraoui herself, for her family, and for the young country of independent Algeria.

The bloody and destructive Algerian War of Independence from colonial rule—not recognised by the French government as such until 1999 (Cruickshank 50)⁸⁵—finished in 1962, bringing an end to over 100 years of brutal French colonial rule. In 1980 independent Algeria still bore the scars of this period, and the unrest of the coming decade would lead in the early 1990s to the outbreak of a destructive civil war lasting until 2002—which would therefore have been on-going as Bouraoui wrote this work in

⁸³ For a discussion of Bouraoui's original first name, Yasmina, see Chapter Two, section two.

⁸⁴ This is provided, in *Garçon Manqué*, as one explanation for the family's sudden departure (see Chapter Two, section two). Another, perhaps more important, explanation—discussed in more detail below—was the health problems Bouraoui's mother experienced due to the Algerian climate.

⁸⁵ See also: "Postscript," in Martin Evans *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (2012). Evans describes the climate which led to the French government's 1999 ruling: "Across these conflicts over memory and identity during the 1990s, one common theme was the demand for a public recognition on the part of groups most affected by the Algerian war. At the national level this pressure led to a partial retreat from the rigidities of the de Gaulle era which resulted, in June 1999, in a National Assembly vote in favour of a change in terminology. Henceforth, thirty-seven years after independence, France officially recognised the Algerian conflict to have been a full-scale war and not a 'police operation'" (364). For a detailed history of the Algerian War of Independence, see Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954–1962* (1977).

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the late 1990s.⁸⁶ Given both the personal and the political context of the period which the text covers, it is perhaps inevitable that a more disturbing or difficult identification with Algeria should underlie much of Bouraoui's nostalgia. The narrator's descriptions of Algeria are not all unproblematic, wistful depictions of treasured childhood scenes, but also suggest both post-colonial unrest as the nation struggles to come to terms with the heritage of its war of independence and the mixed-race narrator's more personal difficulty fitting in with native Algerian customs and culture.

One fragment, for example, concludes "ma terre est un corps blessé" (30), a line which, in comparing the country itself to a wounded body, may allude to Algeria's difficult task of attempting to recover from colonial French military violence. Here the earthquake has been personified as "le diable," an enemy whose face and whose violence, we are told, the speaker recognises, as "il assiège les villes," and "Il renverse les fondations. Il pénètre la sécurité. Il commande, soudain" (30). Later, the earthquake is explicitly imagined as a war in itself, in a fragment which opens with a repetition of the text's opening line:

Ma terre tremble. Le séisme est une guerre [...]. Il propage le conflit. Il dénature. Il soumet. Je perds la sécurité, du foyer. Je perds l'ordre, de la chambre. Je perds l'équilibre, de l'éternité, une illusion. Je deviens fragile. Je suis bouleversée. J'entre dans le bruit et dans la peur. (46)

Here short sentences, and disruptive commas—breaking the line where no line-break should usually occur—textually enact the loss of equilibrium referred to by the narrator. Although Bouraoui did not experience either of the wars to hit Algeria in the twentieth century, the comparison of this natural disaster with war firmly brings to mind the disturbing political events of her own and her parents' lifetimes. In comparison to the more relaxed reminiscences evoking her own memories, here the speaker dramatically identifies herself with the position of victim of war, the piling up of short sentences building an impression of fear and intensity, while the subject of each sentence progresses from the active, destructive "il" to the passive, shattered

⁸⁶ For an in-country history of the civil war, see Luis Martinez *The Algerian Civil War 1990–1998* (2000). Although this conflict is widely considered to have begun with the military *coup d'état* of 11 January 1992, the dates of Martinez's work trace the rising tensions and imposition of martial law in the two years prior to this, while the fact that his study was originally published (in French) in 1998 means the war was still on-going at the time of the book's publication.

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"je." The enduring impact of the war's devastation is recalled, too, in the earlier line, "Le séisme est éternel. Son temps est démembré [...]. Ma terre tremble en vérité. Sa violence est permanente" (12).

While our first reading situates the earthquake as fragmentary force, separating Bouraoui from the nostalgic land of her earliest memories, its effects may also be read as embodying the speaker's emerging sense of distance and difference from Algeria more generally, with her separation due to cultural and national difference becoming increasingly apparent as the text progresses. This trajectory of emerging difference can be traced through the appearances of the work's two other major characters, Arslan and Maliha. These Arabic names first appear at the end of the opening fragment, which ends on the mysterious note, "Toute ma vie, je raccorde au jour du séisme deux secrets montés des terres: les visages d'Arslan et de Maliha" (10). In a sort of hermeneutic puzzle, the reader will be required to determine, over the course of the text, the significance of these two people, and what their specific connection to the earthquake is. Dramatic as this situation may at first appear, however, Arslan and Maliha turn out not to be victims of the day of the earthquake, but rather the narrator's childhood friends, who emerge as two points of difference in the progressive unraveling of Bouraoui's childhood bond with Algeria.

Maliha is the narrator's young female friend, who features in several of her geographical recollections. In the series of fragments describing Moretti, for example, Maliha is with the narrator, playing in the waves of the beach (43). This happy childhood scene with a close friend is contrasted, however, with the more serious and dramatic passages describing the earthquake and its after-effects. At one point, Maliha's father, who is a doctor, opens his house to treat patients in need of a vaccination, presumably to fend off an epidemic threatened by the earthquake's destruction. In this scene, the narrator notes the role Maliha assumes in her father's service, and how different this is from the young girl she has known, drawing implicit comparisons with the more relaxed dynamics of her own, Western-influenced home:

Maliha devient une femme dans sa maison, fermée. Elle veille et reçoit. Elle apporte la citronnade. Elle fait, patienter. Elle seconde son père. Elle se démarque de moi, l'enfant. Les hommes passent derrière les volets clos. Ils

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ignorent les tracés intérieurs de la maison, la vie de Maliha, son mouvement. (69)

Bouraoui's first published work, *La voyeuse interdite*, describes the life of a young Algerian woman kept indoors and restricted to domestic duties, veiled from the masculine world outside (see Introduction, section four, for a brief discussion of this text). While the depiction of Maliha here is not nearly as desperate as this, the claim that she has become a woman emphasises traditional Algerian gender roles, to which the narrator herself will not be required to subscribe, as she by contrast remains a child in this context. At another point, with Maliha this time the one paying a visit to her friend, the narrator describes watching Maliha follow a Muslim prayer ritual, while she herself hides, "en cachette," spying on a religious and cultural world unknown to herself (49, see also 71).

Scenes involving Arslan, a male friend, also reveal the narrator's progressive awareness both of gender difference, and her own reaction against Algerian cultural norms. The image of a young girl separated from a male best friend at the age of twelve or thirteen because of the requirements of a patriarchal social system which she struggles to accept also occurs in Bouraoui's other autobiographical or autofictional treatments of her childhood.⁸⁷ In this text, Arslan is described as undergoing a series of coming-of-age rituals, from which the narrator is physically excluded on account of her gender (see 20, 32, 55–59). In the mountains of Assekrem, we then hear how the narrator's friendship with Arslan is pulled apart, both by parental interference and the pressure of their peers: "Arslan quitte à l'Assekrem. [...] Il va vers les autres, contre moi. Il court vers les petits hommes" (56); "Il apprend à être un homme. J'apprends la solitude. [...] Je fuis le regard des mères qui séparent, toujours, leurs fils, des filles" (57).⁸⁸

The most painful of the memories involving Arslan, however, comes towards the end of the text, in the final "«»" series, which constitutes a climax of sorts. The location

⁸⁷ For example Sami in *Sauvage*, discussed later in this chapter, and Amine, the male childhood friend of the narrator of *Garçon Manqué*, discussed in Chapter Two.

⁸⁸ This abandonment of the female friend by a young teenage boy during a trip to the mountains of Assekrem is repeated in *Sauvage* when Sami chooses to sit with Rafik instead of Alya, as discussed below.

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described is "la route Moutonnière," the road toward Algiers airport, and in this recollection Arslan is leaving Algeria—in a disappearance which, we will discover, echoes that of Sami in *Sauvage*—"Son départ est rapide et définitive. Il fuit, sans adieu. Je suis la seule à savoir" (90). Given Bouraoui's own emigration to France around this time, the emotive descriptions of this departure necessarily reveal a very personal perspective on the possibility of leaving Algeria, and chime with the interview comments we have considered above:

Quitter l'Algérie est un acte violent. C'est un arrachement qui implique la mémoire, son noyau, son intégrité. C'est se détourner de soi. C'est se rendre à l'errance. Quitter c'est rechercher, à jamais. L'enfance devient historique. Le temps est précieux. Le regret est permanent.
Quitter sa terre.
Quitter sa définition. (90)

While describing the devastating effect Arslan's departure has on her, this quotation draws together several motifs from the text which, having previously been attributed to the earthquake, may now be seen as resulting from the more personally disruptive experience of exile. Bouraoui explicitly connects "sa terre" and "sa définition," and suggests that leaving Algeria is a violent act, dissolving one's self-cohesion and rendering their childhood a distant product of memory. If, as Bouraoui claims, her childhood in Algeria has—almost against her will—"revenue avec l'écriture" (see above), the poetic evocation of the Algerian landscape in *Le jour du séisme* reveals a nostalgic longing to textually reproduce this country, separation from which the writer still feels as a violent rupture. The figures of Maliha and Arslan may then be taken to stand for the local Algerians who, while fitting briefly into the young Bouraoui's life, will always represent a secure mono-ethnic identity which Bouraoui herself will never be able to achieve. At the same time, however, several of the phrases the narrator uses here in remembering the departure of her childhood friend could equally refer more generally to the end of the blissful and carefree pre-earthquake era, as Arslan, Maliha, and the narrator are all forced to confront the end of their childhood: "Quitter c'est rechercher, à jamais. L'enfance devient historique. Le temps est précieux. Le regret est permanent." While the specificity of the Algerian situation is important at several moments in the text—most notably those evoking war—reference to the

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preciousness of time, and to "l'enfance" becoming "historique," here, suggest a more mature voice, whose nostalgic use of abstract nouns—l'enfance, le temps, le regret—reveals her to be reminiscing not just about the country in which she grew up, but also her childhood more generally.

L'enfance devient historique

As we have so far seen, both the positive and negative readings of the narrator's connection to the Algerian land have featured an instance of repetition of *Le jour du séisme*'s opening phrase: "Ma terre tremble." A third occasion on which this same phrase occurs in the text is in a fragment which reveals a still deeper layer of symbolism attributed to the earthquake, representing not only Bouraoui's separation from the Algerian land, but from her childhood overall:

Ma terre tremble. Elle est vivante et incarnée. Elle gémit. Elle est habitée. Un homme force mon enfance, de l'intérieur. Il tient le monde dans sa main. Il dirige les ruptures. Il broie les lignes, mes attaches. Il contrôle, les violences. Il organise, la destruction. (11)

In this, the second fragment of the text, the repetition of the opening phrase—taken from the first page giving factual and geographical details about the earthquake—immediately demonstrates the multi-layered meaning the earthquake will take on throughout the book. Where the opening fragment actively personified the earthquake as destructive force, this second fragment begins with a shift of focus to the land itself, with a series of verbs describing its reaction to the tremors. Very quickly, however, the personification of the earthquake returns, in an explicit metaphor paralleling its penetration of the land to that of an unknown man forcing his way into the narrator's life. This image may be taken to invoke colonial violence: the dynamic of imperial force as strong, masculine, dominating presence, overpowering the weak, feminised, and colonised land features widely in colonial and post-colonial theory, particularly as re-signified in recent years by feminist critics.⁸⁹ The idea that "il

⁸⁹ Trudy Agar-Mendousse's chapter on Bouraoui in her book *Violence et Créativité de l'écriture algérienne au féminin* (2006) discusses how works like *Garçon Manqué* subvert long-standing gendered readings of the colonisation of North Africa. She states: "Bouraoui associe à la France et à la mère de Nina des caractéristiques traditionnellement considérées comme 'féminines' telles que la fragilité et la

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tient le monde dans sa main," particularly, may allude to the strength of the French empire at the time of its annexation of Algeria in the early 19th century, while the atypical placement of commas in the following sentences instates a syntactic discontinuity to mirror this fragmentation of the Algerian land.⁹⁰ At the same time, however, the personal tone of "mon enfance," and the idea that the man's power is not just external to the speaker, but enters "l'intérieur" as well, conjures up a sexual signification which we are tempted to read as more individual than purely reflecting a gendered reading of Algeria's colonial history.

The possibility, here, that the narrator's description of being infiltrated and fragmented from within is no longer metaphorically describing the earthquake, but in itself recalls another terrifying adolescent scene, is confirmed about a quarter of the way through the book, in two intense and troubling fragments describing an encounter between the narrator and an abusive stranger (27 and 28). The details given here leave no doubt or ambiguity as to the earlier meaning of "un homme force mon enfance": "Je sens une main sur ma nuque. [...] Elle étrangle. Je résiste. Elle force sa prise. Je cède à sa violence. Elle relâche, à peine. Je reconnais la puissance d'un homme, ses ongles, ses doigts et son poignet" (27). In these fragments, the layering of short phrases, describing different elements of the man's actions and manner, reveal the harried tone of the trauma victim—"Il tient, en otage," "il appuie, sur la gorge," "il fait, plier" (28)—with each caesura breaking the line in a rhetorical enactment of the man's destructive actions. His attempted assault or abduction of the young girl is thankfully unsuccessful, and the climax of the encounter is retold by the narrator in ambivalent terms, preceding the positive news of her escape with an allusion to the profound effects this event may have had on her: "Ce n'est pas un homme. Un monstre creuse des sillons. Je tombe, dans un puits, l'éternité. Je me relève. Je me défends. Je cours, vite. Je fuis" (28). Where at first the narrator recognises her aggressor as having "la puissance d'un homme" he may be taken to embody masculine violence, connecting with a post-colonial reading of the earthquake. Later, however,

vulnérabilité, détournant ainsi la métaphore traditionnelle de la colonie comme femme à apprivoiser" (202).

⁹⁰ For an account of the annexation of Algeria by France, beginning with the invasion of Sidi-Ferruch by French forces in June 1830, see *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* by Martin Evans and John Phillips (2007), in particular Chapter Two, "Forced Marriage: French Algeria 1830–1962."

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she refuses his humanity, comparing him instead to a monster. Here, the terrestrial images of "des sillons" and "un puits" evoke the breaking or threatening of the land, while the dramatic inclusion of "l'éternité" affirms the enduring effect of these destructive acts. More important, therefore, than the motif of masculine violence alone, or of straight-forward colonial imagery, the connection between this event and Bouraoui's personal memories of Algeria proves pivotal to her sense of self-fragmentation and consequent decision to pursue her textual identity quest.

The event represented here, the attempted attack or abduction of a young girl by a male stranger, recurs in more detail later in Bouraoui's autobiographical work. In *Garçon manqué*, which followed a year after this text, Bouraoui reveals that this abduction attempt is something that did happen to her as a young child, playing in "le parc de la Résidence" where she lived in Algiers (*Garçon manqué* 43–45). In similar terms to those used in *Le jour du séisme*, *Garçon manqué's* first-person narrator describes being approached by a strange man who asks her to follow him. This man is explicitly connected to Algeria—"Toute l'Algérie contient cet homme" (44) "Sa violence, algérienne" (45)—and her own frightening experience to that of many Algerian children—"Tous les enfants qui disparaissent en Algérie" (45). His actions are also overtly associated with the narrator's youth, both in her understanding that it is her age which appeals to him—"Il dit: Tu es belle. Je suis encore une fille" (43), "Il sait mon enfance" (44)—and in the affirmation that what he has done has brought an end to her childhood—"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" (44). In both *Le jour du séisme* and *Garçon manqué*, therefore, the attempted abduction is associated with a violent rupturing from youth, as a strange figure, inherently connected for Bouraoui to a threatening masculinity within Algeria, enters the narrator's life and, in successive texts, "force mon enfance, de l'intérieur," and "retire l'enfance."

Bouraoui's "événement" is clearly a highly significant event in her memory of her Algerian childhood, and we may consider it a turning point in the writer's life, as she is for the first time confronted with the danger and sexuality of the adult world. That

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some of the textual fragments of *Le jour du séisme* evoke this event, and that the earthquake is made to stand, in one of its significations, for the destructive actions of this Algerian man, confirms the association Bouraoui draws between the Algerian land itself and her childhood, both of which are figuratively fractured in this text. While many of the descriptions of the land in this first, poetic, recreation of her Algerian childhood are nostalgic ones, we are also confronted with the darker side of the country, which Bouraoui refers to in the interview as "ce pays très masculin, très violent." From the same interview, we also now understand Bouraoui's feeling that, having abruptly been told that the family would not be returning home to Algeria from a holiday in France: "Tout est resté en Algérie: mes objets, mes amis, mon enfance. La rupture a été d'une grande violence." Bouraoui's desire to write about Algeria can, therefore, be seen to emerge from a need to textually revisit not just the land she has left behind, but also "mes objets, mes amis, mon enfance," with the violent "rupture" she feels describing not only her exile from Algeria, but also her departure from the more metaphorical, secure space of childhood. Having revisited her Algerian childhood for the first time in *Le jour du séisme*, however, Bouraoui's need to understand herself through reconstructing this period has not yet been fully satisfied, and later texts remain concerned with a similar depiction of this period and place, now explored through different literary forms.

3.3 Recovering Algeria in *Sauvage* and *Mes mauvaises pensées*

Sauvage

Sauvage (2011) is Nina Bouraoui's most recent work, and is her first to be set entirely in Algeria since *Le jour du séisme* 12 years before. From the vantage point of this thesis, therefore, these two texts can be seen to frame the period of Bouraoui's autobiographical explorations, and it is interesting that in many ways *Sauvage* revisits the same problems—and almost exactly the same period—of the earlier text, but in very different form. Unlike *Le jour du séisme*, the publication details given in the opening pages of the book label *Sauvage* a *roman*, and the autobiographical nature of the text is initially denied by the name given to the book's narrator and protagonist,

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“Alya.” Similarities between Alya’s situation and what we know of Bouraoui’s childhood in Algeria abound throughout the text, however: Alya is a 13-year old girl living in Algiers, with an Algerian father, a French mother, and one older sister. Versions of several of the protagonist’s friends and many of the important events which she recounts have featured elsewhere in Bouraoui’s oeuvre, and while some narrative elements of the text make *Sauvage* more novel-like than any of the other works in the 1999–2011 period, the meditative form in which the young girl reflects on the significant events in her life recalls several of Bouraoui’s earlier works, including *Le jour du séisme* and *Mes mauvaises pensées*.

The text covers the period 1979–1980, with a final entry dated “septembre 1980” (235), just one month before the earthquake of *Le jour du séisme* hit northern Algeria. The narrative centres around the mysterious disappearance, at the beginning of this period, of Alya’s best friend, a young boy named “Sami.” This echoes the affirmation (in *Garçon Manqué*, quoted above) that abduction is not uncommon for Algerian children, and within the opening pages the narrator tells us: “J’ai décidé d’écrire tous les jours dans mon cahier. De tout raconter pour Sami” (14). While the disappearance itself is never fully accounted for, the series of memories the narrator collects within the text provides a narrative impetus to the text. From an immediate mourning phase at the book’s opening, Alya progresses to a form of “closure” regarding Sami’s disappearance, before a new traumatic event is introduced in the closing stages of the book, that of “la piscine de Zéralda.”

Mes mauvaises pensées

Published in 2005, in the middle of the 12-year period separating *Le jour du séisme* from *Sauvage*, *Mes mauvaises pensées* is both Nina Bouraoui’s most critically successful work to date—it won her the *prix Renaudot* of that year—and her most formally experimental. This text is written as an unbroken monologue, apparently emanating from the narrator’s visits to a psychotherapist to discuss her “mauvaises pensées.” The text’s protagonist is therefore the narrative “je,” a first-person voice whose identity appears to conform to that of the text’s writer, within what the back-cover designates a “roman-confession.” Her imagined interlocutor, the therapist, does

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not herself speak during the text, but serves as a structuring point of reference. The narrator irregularly addresses the therapist to punctuate an otherwise long and meandering monologue describing events from her current life, her childhood in Algeria and experiences on moving to France, her romantic history with different partners, and the relationships within her family. This occurs in one uninterrupted block of text—covering 269 pages—in which sentences can span entire pages, and the people, places, and events referred to in one thought can arduously shift or be forgotten, abandoned until they are rediscovered several pages later. The effect produced, therefore, is of a troubled narrator's anxious efforts to express herself and her history, as the disorder with which her account is presented mirrors the apparent disorder of her revealed life-story. The reader sees voyeuristically not only into the protagonist's private therapy sessions, but inside her mind itself, and the unstructured and obsessive thoughts which occur within.

The bad thoughts of the book's title refer to an apparent psychological disturbance which has caused the narrator to seek help through psychotherapy, as the opening line reveals: "Je viens vous voir parce que j'ai des mauvaises pensées. Mon âme se dévore, je suis assiégée" (11). In critical readings of this text, Sara Leek (2012), Anne-Martine Parent (2012) and Helen Vassallo (2009) have each identified how the writer's relationship to the country of her childhood is implicated in this apparent breakdown, and the theme of Bouraoui's *métissage* is immediately clear in the early declaration to her therapist: "Je vous dis, tout de suite, que je suis de mère française et de père algérien, comme si mes phobies venaient de ce mariage" (20). While written in two very different forms, therefore (an unusually straightforward novel, in *Sauvage*, and a highly experimental autofictional account, in *Mes mauvaises pensées*), these two works return to many of the themes we have identified in *Le jour du séisme*. Reading the two texts side by side, we will discover both positive and negative representations of the Algerian landscape and culture, as well as the more universal theme of Bouraoui's attempts to come to terms with the end of her childhood through the narrator of each text. Having identified each of these levels of Bouraoui's identification with the land of her childhood within the content of each text, we will then turn to the question of form, in order to consider the nature of Bouraoui's fascination with the

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same time and place in her writing. Looking at the implications of using both simulated psychoanalysis and more overt fiction to recreate this childhood land, we will consider the importance of writing itself to Bouraoui's recovery of identity, and whether her adolescent "rupture" from Algeria might then be considered the originary moment for her literary oeuvre.

La violence de notre beau pays

As within *Le jour du séisme*, the theme of geographical place is important in both *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Sauvage*. In *Sauvage*, Bouraoui uses the figure of Alya to once more return to the location of her childhood, recreating the time and space of her home in Algiers at the turn of the 1980s, and bringing to life a specific cultural and historical atmosphere. The Algerian landscape recurs as a motif of both breath-taking beauty and terrifying wildness (thus the book's title, "Sauvage"), and much of Bouraoui's remembering of Algeria can be read as set in a positive, nostalgic mode. For example, the theme of mysticism abounds in the text: the frequent recounting of remembered traditions and superstitions which may seem foolish to the twenty-first century Western reader—the metaphysical or spiritual meaning attached to a desert storm (198), the holding of séances and recounting of local legends by Alya's friend "Fatia" (12, 155), and the recourse to prayers and fantasies, from even the local *commissaire* charged with investigating Sami's disappearance (223)—is recounted not through the cynical westernised voice of the adult writer, but a naïve and credulous younger self.

This narrator's deep affection for her homeland is evident in sentimental descriptions of the beauty of the Algerian landscape. Participating, at one point in the text, in a group trip to the desert, she tells us: "Quand on est arrivés sur le plateau de l'Assekrem il s'est passé quelque chose de spécial. Plus personne ne parlait. C'était impossible d'ailleurs de parler, de dire un seul mot. Rien. On était giflés par ce qui nous entourait. C'était impossible aussi de penser qu'autant de beauté pouvait surgir de là, d'un coup. Impossible" (191). At other moments, we find, just as with *Le jour du séisme*, the urge to catalogue a list of favourite Algerian sites which may anticipate the writer's future separation from them: "La route de la Corniche, la mosquée de Bejaia,

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la ligne en feu des montagnes de l'Atlas [...] le fleuve El Harrach, Cheraga, la route de Cherchell, les ruines romaines de la plage du Chenoua. Chaque territoire porte une image précise. Une image où je suis incluse. Une image nostalgique" (43). However, like *Le jour du séisme's* narrator, too, Alya's connection with the country she lives in is far from unproblematic, and while memories of the landscape produce an atmosphere of nostalgia in the text, this wistfulness is also constantly threatened by a layer of fear inherent to descriptions of the environment, a fear which may best be perceived through the text's central plotline: the disappearance of Sami.

Given the usually meditative and non-plot-focused style of Bouraoui's previous works, the complete disappearance of a 13-year old child may seem a very dramatic event around which to stage a narrative, and the mystery of the poor child's fate strikes the adult reader as highly emotionally charged. In spite of this, however, Alya's description of the circumstances around Sami's disappearance, and its immediate consequences in her daily life, are strangely devoid of drama. By the time the text begins, some period after the disappearance, Alya is alone in her mourning, with the adults around her seemingly accepting of—or even indifferent to—Sami's departure from their lives.⁹¹ While this strange absence of narrative focus may in part be explained by Alya's decision not to go into detail on the circumstances of the disappearance, its effect is to instil Sami's fate with a sense of mundaneness, with unsettling consequences for our perception of the local environment. Although there is nostalgia in some of Alya's descriptions of Algeria, this again is tempered throughout the text by darker associations drawn from the landscape, references to "la violence de notre beau pays" (58), and by a strongly sensed connection between "la mélancolie" and "la terre": "je sais d'où vient cette mélancolie, je l'ai toujours eue, même dans mon enfance, c'est un état, et c'est l'état de beaucoup de personnes ici, parce que l'Algérie est une terre forte, une terre qui monte vers le ciel, une terre où l'on a conscience de tout" (72). Within this context, Sami's disappearance appears as an uninteresting, and perhaps

⁹¹ Although Alya does not exercise any judgement on the adults around her, or give the reader reason to do so in her place, it is striking that, for example, Sami's parents should choose to leave the country soon enough after the event that Alya is still in mourning; they seem much quicker than Alya to give up hope of finding their son (120).

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even routine, fact of life for this community, in a country familiar with violence and fear because of its troubled history.

In her own recollections of her friend, Alya connects Sami with the ever-present motif of the Algerian war, both its haunting presence in contemporary cultural memory, and the sense that Algeria's fate has not yet been resolved and further fighting is to come: "Il était sûr de lui. La guerre allait revenir. C'était écrit. C'est sa mère qui le lui avait dit. Tous les jours, elle disait qu'il fallait se préparer à quelque chose de grave. Sami en riait, moi aussi, parce que sa mère voyait toujours en noir. Il en riait mais il y croyait" (21). That the missing child himself believed that it was unavoidable that Algeria would return to war lends a sense of inevitability to his own disappearance, and Sami and his mysterious fate are taken to almost embody this difficult period in Algerian history, through a deep-running association of the boy and his homeland. Alya states, for example: "Je me dis que les derniers mots et les derniers gestes de Sami sont quelque part, ici, en Algérie" (216).

In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the older narrator expresses some of the difficulty she has felt with being removed from the Algerian land through nostalgic descriptions of the country's beauty, and affirmations of the negative impact leaving it has had on her life and development. The moment in *Sauvage* when the narrator and her family and friends visit Assekrem and are overcome by the view that awaits them also features in this earlier text, as does the apparent need to document the places in Bouraoui's childhood which she remembers as most impressive: "Je pleure de beauté en Algérie, vous savez, je pleure au sommet de l'Assekrem, je pleure dans la forêt d'eucalyptus, je pleure sous les cascades de glycine, il y a une révolution de la beauté, la beauté algérienne a formé ce que je suis" (189). In these descriptions, Algeria is once more endowed with a natural and sublime beauty, which has an almost spiritual impact on the adult narrator: "Je marche dans les fougères géantes en Algérie, il y a l'enfoncement du corps dans le cœur même de la terre et donc de l'existence" (124). There is a clear sense, too, that the narrator's traumatic early separation from this land may explain her presence on the therapist's couch—"Pourrais-je parler de patrie, moi qui me sens orpheline d'une terre ?" (254)—while her description of the progress she feels she is making during therapy figuratively connects her own departure from

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Algeria with the theme of literal disappearance explored in the later text: "Je suis en train de *devenir* sur une disparition, sur ma disparition, je sais que j'ai deux histoires, il y a avant et après [Bouraoui's emphasis]" (108).

If the narrator of *Mes mauvaises pensées* is trying to understand her own "disparition" from the beloved *terre algérienne*, the paralleled fates of the adult writer and Alya's young friend are united, in both texts, with a third unresolved disappearance, that of Bouraoui's real-life uncle, Amar, an Algerian soldier "porté disparu" in the War of Independence. Bouraoui first refers to the uncle who was lost fighting for Algerian independence in *Garçon manqué* (31), and that text's description of how "la mort d'Amar est irréaliste. C'est un enlèvement. C'est une disparition. C'est une image sans fond. C'est un deuil qui ne se finit pas" (31), clearly parallels the fate of Sami in *Sauvage*, a doubling or mirroring of the two characters which features on multiple occasions throughout the later text (see *Sauvage*, 87–88, 106, 114). Where Alya connects Sami with this missing uncle, the wider significance of the heritage of the Algerian war is invoked, with the suggestion that if Sami's fate is not quite typical, it is certainly not unusual for a son of such a troubled land to meet a tragic end: "Souvent je pense que l'absence de Sami a un lien avec cela, avec l'histoire de ce pays. Puis je me dis que c'est à cause de mon oncle porté disparu au maquis" (106). The disclosure that Alya's uncle was "porté disparu au maquis"—"missing in action" rather than ever recovered deceased—then exemplifies the lack of true closure around his death, mirroring the still-open wounds of this period for the Algeria of the 70s and 80s. In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, too, the spectre of Amar features as a symbol of how the narrator's problems may be traced back to her separation from her own, fractured, origins:

Je pense au frère de mon père dont on n'a jamais retrouvé le corps, je pense aux images de la guerre d'Algérie [...] j'ai sa photographie dans le tiroir de mon bureau, il sourit, il porte un fusil et un chapeau, je ne sais pas s'il ressemble à mon père, je ne sais pas si je lui ressemble, il a la beauté de la jeunesse. C'est toujours cette histoire, au fond de moi, de venir des deux familles que tout oppose, les Français et les Algériens. (*Mes mauvaises pensées* 52)

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The speaker's not knowing whether or not she bears a resemblance to this man and the notion that "c'est toujours cette histoire" both emphasise the unresolved nature of the Algerian conflict within Bouraoui's life and its consequent status as a motivating force for her autobiographical reflections.

Where the metaphorical extension of the earthquake's terrestrial ruptures in *Le jour du séisme* allowed us to read multiple layers of signification—some positive, some negative—into the representation of the Algerian land, in *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Sauvage*, too, we find a narrator's ambivalent identification with the Algeria of her childhood. Towards the end of *Mes mauvaises pensées* the monologue goes on to describe another earthquake in northern Algeria, one which occurred after the publication of *Le jour du séisme*, on 21 May 2003. Although this is long after Bouraoui's own departure from the country, in *Mes mauvaises pensées* the narrator's father is still frequently travelling back to Algiers, and still lives in the family's home there. He is there when the 2003 earthquake occurs, and the anxiety felt by her and her mother, far away in France and cut off from a direct experience of the scene, is recounted for her psychotherapist (249). After a sleepless night, the narrator finally hears from her father, who has safely survived the quake, and Nina has occasion to reflect on her distance from her childhood home: "Dans le séisme d'Alger, il y a le séisme de l'Algérie, et je devrais dire de mon Algérie" (252). Having already, in *Le jour du séisme*, explored an Algerian earthquake as originary rupture, preceding her life-long identity problems, the events of this night in 2003 bring terrifyingly to life the (un-)grounding metaphor of Bouraoui's oeuvre, a highly dramatic moment which, at its climax, the narrator herself connects to her own writing: "Je suis ramenée à mon point de fuite, je suis ramenée à ma ligne algérienne qui est la ligne de départ d'une course de fond: ma vie. J'aimerais revoir le pays où j'ai appris à écrire. J'aimerais revoir le pays où j'ai appris à aimer" (252). Defining Algeria as the country in which she learned to write and to love, two occupations which Bouraoui sees as fundamental to her adult life, the description of the Algerian land as "mon point de fuite" emphasises its originating significance to her later identity. This, in turn, supports our reading that Bouraoui's textual return to Algeria is motivated by a desire to explore not only the specific cultural and political implications of a *métisse* Algerian childhood, but also the more

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personal memory of the safe and joyful space of childhood, and the difficulty of leaving this behind.

Ce n'est plus la même lumière

In the opening and closing scenes of *Sauvage* we find that, although the events of her life and her adolescent development have advanced by several months, the narrator's journey begins and ends in the same physical space. The opening page tells us that:

"C'est toujours la même lumière, quand je regarde de ma fenêtre, bien après le parking, bien après la maison de la famille Grango, bien après les câbles des pylônes électriques. C'est toujours la même lumière sur la forêt de Bâinem" (11). Over 200 pages later this contrasts with, "Ce n'est plus la même lumière quand je regarde de ma fenêtre [...]" (235), written in italicised script on a final page set apart from the rest of the text, bearing for the first time a location and a date, "Alger, septembre 1980."

Over the course of the text, the narrator's perspective on the world and her relationship with her surroundings have changed irrevocably, and while the view from her window contains the same banalities as earlier—"le parking," "la maison de la famille Grango," "les câbles des pylônes électriques" (235)—the change in the light represents Alya's more adult outlook. The similarity of the physical location thus marks a contrast with the emotional distance travelled in a journey of adolescent development. This change in perspective that Alya undergoes over the course of the text may, therefore, be read as a "coming-of-age" narrative, in which the young narrator journeys from the innocence and carefreeness of childhood to awareness of some of the threats and mysteries of the adult world, brought about by the traumatic loss of her playmate.

In a nostalgic early sequence, Alya recounts an adventure she and Sami once shared, mischievously breaking off from a school trip to some Roman ruins in order to explore the area around the coast for themselves (74). The fear and excitement the friends experience on this excursion seems to epitomise the blissful freedom they have at this age and the strong bond they share, as they separate themselves from their classmates, requiring nobody but each other (75). This self-sufficiency is affirmed when, after a seemingly long journey, Alya and Sami arrive at a hidden island and are

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overcome at the euphoric beauty of the scene: "Nous étions fous de joie puis Sami a dit qu'il avait envie de pleurer parce qu'il savait que tout s'arrêtait pour lui, qu'il n'aurait plus jamais envie de chercher le paradis, le bonheur, que tout se tenait dans un parfait équilibre, entre le rocher, les falaises, le silence et la couleur de la mer" (86). If this memory represents a scene of perfect happiness shared with Sami, however, we know that his declaration that "tout s'arrêtait pour lui" is sadly prescient, while for Alya too, the symbolic end of this blissful childhood is not far away.

We have seen how Sami's disappearance evokes an unspoken danger inherent in Alya's Algiers. At the same time, his role as a male friend who disappears at precisely the age that adolescent bodies first develop secondary sexual characteristics also represents a sort of stationary point of difference for Alya: as she herself moves from the innocent, sexless, world of children's play to an interest in more adult matters, young Sami is frozen in time, forever pre-adolescent. This contrast is apparent in the implicit parallel drawn by Alya between her memories of Sami and her experiences with a new male friend she has made since his disappearance, the figure of Frank Gaba.⁹² At many points in the text Frank Gaba, a boy who lives in the same building as Alya's family, is presented as a sort of "anti-Sami," with opposing tastes, behaviour, and outlook on the world. Most notably, while Alya suggests at one point that Sami may wilfully have disappeared in order to escape growing up—"je me dis que Sami a préféré rester proche de son enfance. Qu'il a disparu parce qu'il détestait le monde des adultes" (90)—Frank Gaba represents a strong and masculine teenage boy, with mature sexual fantasies and a violent urge to enter this adult world (90). Alya's interaction with Frank Gaba then marks out her own sexual development. During a dramatic family New Year's Eve party she allows Frank Gaba into her bedroom—the first male friend to enter there since Sami's disappearance—and immediately feels guilty for symbolically replacing her old friend: "Je fais entrer Frank Gaba dans ma chambre et je ne sais pas pourquoi mais j'ai l'impression de trahir Sami" (143). At the stroke of midnight, Frank Gaba seizes Alya in a first embrace which, with the changing

⁹² Throughout the text Alya refers to Frank Gaba by his full name, even when describing the pair at the height of their intimacy. This may be an attempted act of solidarity with Sami, expressing a continuing distance from Frank Gaba through refusing to refer to him by his first name alone. We shall follow the narrator of *Sauvage* in referring to this character by his full name throughout this reading.

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of the decade, foretells the end of her 1970s childhood, and the beginning of a new, adult world in the 1980s (170). A few weeks later, this transformation is confirmed in a scene describing the young couple exploring the park near where they live. Seeking a space of privacy, they head for the eucalyptus forest separated from their apartments by a barbed wire fence, and Alya therefore finds herself approaching both a literal and metaphorical boundary which must be crossed if she is to move on with her life:

"Quand on décide de franchir les barbelés, je sais que je vais quitter Sami. Que c'est un symbole" (206).

While the motif of Sami's disappearance and much of the atmosphere of *Sauvage* can be seen as containing details specific to Algeria—Bouraoui returning to the time and place of her youth in order to explore the particular difficulties of being a *métisse* child in post-colonial Algiers—the developing relationship between Alya and Frank Gaba demonstrates a more universal human experience of emerging sexual desire and awareness of an approaching adult world which contrasts with the carefreeness of childhood. Being embedded in a story narrated by a young teenager, this theme necessarily features more prominently in *Sauvage* than in the reflections of the adult narrator of *Mes mauvaises pensées*. However, the end of the narrator's childhood does also appear as a theme of Bouraoui's psychoanalytic monologue, both in fleeting references to early sexual experiences in her home town—"Notre ville sismique, qui cache une autre ville: Alger, comme mon corps cache un autre corps: le corps des premier désirs" (53)—and in the suggestion that visits to her psychotherapist are helping her to achieve closure regarding this period: "Je suis seule avec mon corps. C'est cela, peut-être, perdre sa jeunesse; je suis, à force de venir ici, à force de me raconter, en train de perdre ma jeunesse" (52). With regard to the more experimental text, of course, it is precisely the therapeutic process which is most interesting for our analysis, as the theme of "rupture" from the safety and security of childhood foreshadows a fundamental element of the psychoanalytic theory with which that text autofictionally engages. Let us now therefore turn to the form of each of these two later texts.

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3.4 Psychoanalysis, Closure, and the "Revenue avec l'écriture"

The trauma of the narrator of *Mes mauvaises pensées*'s unresolved rupture from her childhood homeland is clearly a significant motivation in her decision as an adult to seek help through psychotherapy. Bouraoui's formal choice to structure further autobiographical self-investigation around a fictional therapeutic encounter clearly warrants consideration of the literary and stylistic production of the work, as well as of its thematic content, both of which explicitly engage with psychoanalysis. At one point in the text, remembering walking through a field of daisies with her mother, Bouraoui openly cites the work of Sigmund Freud, father of psychoanalysis:

Dans *L'Homme aux loups* de Freud, il se passe quelque chose avec l'enfant quand il lance sa balle et qu'elle ne revient pas; c'est cela la compréhension du monde et de soi, c'est aussi cela la construction de la personne, je lis que les sujets qui souffrent de claustrophobie sont des sujets qui n'ont pas brisé avec la mère, ils subissent encore le *claustra* de celle-ci; pour moi, cela veut dire un corps qui enveloppe, qui s'accroupit sur son enfant, pour le protéger, et pour se protéger aussi; quand ma mère disparaît derrière le champ, les marguerites deviennent mes loups: pour moi, elle ne reviendra pas. (43)

Here Bouraoui shows her intention to engage with psychoanalytic theory, citing an important area of Freudian and post-Freudian thought: the fundamental importance of the relationship between infant and mother. In his 1920 essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud discusses the meaning of child's play, following the observation of his own grandson engaged in what has become known as the "fort/da" game. This game involved, according to Freud, the infant coming to terms with what is at the same time the most traumatic, most universal, and most necessary of developmental experiences: psychic separation from the mother and the recognition of one's own independence. Freud's discussion begins with an explanation that the infant in question had a very good relationship with his mother, who he loved dearly, and yet, mysteriously, he did not cry or complain when she left him for any period (14). Freud then suggests that his 18-month old grandson's game of playing with a reel of string may have symbolically stood for his attempts to deal with his mother's recurrent disappearance. Holding onto one end of the string, the child repeatedly throws the reel into his curtained cot, exclaiming "fort," the German word for "gone," as it

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disappears, before pulling up the string to retrieve the reel, and announcing "da," or "here." Noting the joy with which this second act is fulfilled, Freud explains: "The interpretation of the game then became obvious. It was related to the child's great cultural achievement: the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting" (15).

While Bouraoui's reference to Freud in the above quotation does not recount the case entirely accurately, it is clearly his *fort/ da* principle to which she alludes when she describes how "il se passe quelque chose avec l'enfant quand il lance sa balle et qu'elle ne revient pas": the play object of the child's game is again used to symbolise his mother, and the disappearance of this object represents a means of working through this crucial stage of infant development. The "child's great cultural achievement," in Freud's terms, of accepting his mother's departure, is then incorporated in Bouraoui's description as: "C'est cela la compréhension du monde et de soi, c'est aussi cela la construction de la personne." Bouraoui's engagement with psychoanalysis conforms with our reading whereby, through recreating her childhood over these three "Algeria texts," the writer wishes to explore the impact of her young experiences on her adult identity. The notion of an original "rupture," separating each of Bouraoui's narrators from their childhoods as they become socialised into a more threatening, adult world, may figuratively enact Freud's "cultural achievement" of the child achieving independent identity. While for Freud's infant, the traumatic rupture which founds individual identity occurs at a much younger age, the entrance into adult sexual identity occurring for Bouraoui's narrators during their adolescence might embody a corollary rupture of equal importance, which for Bouraoui is intrinsically bound up with her separation from the Algerian land. In addition to the theme we have already considered of Bouraoui revisiting the end of her childhood, however, a further form of rupture—undoubtedly influenced by her interest in Freud—may be gleaned through the often ambivalent representation of maternal relationships in *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Sauvage*.

In addition to the representation of the child's separation of the mother enacted through the "fort/ da" game, a further, more culturally pervasive aspect of Freud's

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theory on child development is also alluded to in Bouraoui's Algeria texts: his infamous notion of the "Oedipus complex." In his 1900 work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud controversially proposes his conception of a universal process undergone by all children during infancy, in which a primary sexual attraction to one parent must be revoked for fear of competition with the other parent. He states:

Being in love with the one parent and hating the other are among the essential constituents of the stock of psychical impulses [...]. This discovery is confirmed by a legend that has come down to us from classical antiquity: a legend whose profound and universal power to move can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity. What I have in mind is the legend of King Oedipus and Sophocles' drama which bears his name.
(*Complete Works* 4: 261)

For Freud, it is a natural and universal state of infancy that a young child should experience amorous feelings towards one parent and ensuing jealousy towards the other, who benefits from the sexual love of this desired parent. Where healthy development ensures that the child revokes this primary desire by internalising the prohibition against incest during the period of socialisation, remnants of the Oedipal syndrome often persist through to adulthood, causing an ambivalent relationship with one's parents. Within Bouraoui's Algeria texts, the theme of "being in love with one parent" occurs in several places, and where this is not always accompanied by Freud's corollary of "and hating the other," it is nonetheless clearly his theory of the Oedipal complex to which Bouraoui repeatedly alludes in her representation of difficult parent-child relationships.

La tristesse de ma mère

In works referring to her own life Bouraoui is careful to be sympathetic in her representation of family relationships. The members of her immediate family—mother, father and sister—are consistently portrayed as loving and supportive of one another, and Bouraoui certainly could not be accused of the sensationalism or invasion of personal privacies popular with other contemporary writers of autofiction. Throughout *Mes mauvaises pensées*, however, there is a persistent undercurrent of tension wherever the narrator describes her mother's role within her childhood

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experiences of Algeria. In *Sauvage*, where the overtness of autobiographical reference is relaxed, the theme of the ambivalent maternal relationship becomes even more explicit, as Bouraoui uses the freedom of the novel form to produce not just a narrator, but also additional characters through whom she may project elements of her own familial experience. In both of these cases, therefore, the form of the text allows Bouraoui to further her own autofictional self-investigation, with the psychoanalytic theme of the maternal relationship looming large over each textual version of her Algerian childhood.

In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the haunting motif of her mother's sadness appears early in the narrator's monologue, providing a further possible explanation for her pursuing psychotherapy: "[...] on n'arrive jamais à la fin de ma tristesse, ou à la fin de la tristesse de ma mère que je reprends comme une maladie, que je revis comme un devoir" (29). It is also connected at an early stage to the narrator's writing, suggesting both writing and therapy as narrative attempts to overcome through language as-yet-unresolved childhood difficulties with her mother: "J'écris parce que je suis en colère, je ne sais pas quitter l'enfance, je suis le chevalier de ma mère [...]. L'écriture est aussi l'écriture du corps de ma mère, de son corps allongé à l'arrière de l'avion, un jour" (30–1). In this snatched memory, Bouraoui begins to introduce one of the recurrent childhood scenes which she will build up over the course of the text, that of her mother's incapacity through sickness or injury, which will subsequently cause the family to leave Algeria for France. While in this instance the narrator remembers her mother losing consciousness on an airplane, and herself being embarrassed at the attention and concern this incident provoked, she also remembers further asphyxias, a broken leg, and, most dramatically, an oedema which nearly kills her mother (55–61). Here, the form of these recollections reveals their presence in the narrative as being important more for their symbolic than their literal significance. The lack of true medical detail given in the text leaves the explanation for the mother's poor health as not a physical, but a psychological one: the mother's relationship with her own father—who rejects her choice to marry an Algerian man—is presented as toxically harmful to her, as the

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narrator goes on to suggest: “Je crois que ma mère souffre de tristesse à cause de son père” (263).⁹³

The difficulties of the mother figure in *Mes mauvaises pensées* are important to a consideration of the narrator’s connection to Algeria for two reasons. The child’s awareness that her mother has been rejected by her own family for choosing to marry an Algerian, and that this in turn has had a detrimental impact on her mother’s health and happiness, foregrounds both the problematic place of the *métisse* family in post-colonial Algeria, and the significant influence that parental love (or lack thereof) can have on one’s sense of self. At times, the narrator expresses her connection with her mother through comparison with the latter’s own negative parental experiences: “J’ai des larmes pour elle, et j’ai des larmes pour moi, parce que je sais que mon corps d’enfant lui a servi de forteresse, que ma mère a réparé son enfance par mon enfance” (161). At the same time, the mother’s ill-health is given as an explanation for the family ultimately having to leave Algeria, and the maternal body—site of the fundamental or originary rupture in Freudian theory—therefore becomes implicated in the founding rupture of Bouraoui’s writing life, her separation from the Algerian land. Where the motif of the maternal body in *Mes mauvaises pensées* is ambivalently positioned in relation to the Algerian land, the difficulty of the maternal relationship reads as specifically connected to the particularity of post-colonial Algeria. The writer’s mother is rendered both emotionally sick by her initial choice to marry an Algerian and therefore be spurned by her own family and physically sick by her inability to adapt to the climate of her new country. At other points, however, the tension of this relationship is described in more universal terms, expressing developments through which everyone progresses during childhood, and occasionally even overtly embodying aspects of Freudian theory.

The reference to Freud’s Oedipal complex, for example, is clear where the narrator lists certain recollections: “[...] quand je pense, enfant, qu’un jour j’épouserai ma mère, le couple fantasme quand ma mère dit: ‘Nous avons vécu des choses

⁹³ Bouraoui’s concern with the unhappiness of her mother’s childhood also features as a motivating factor in her self-referential writing across two of Bouraoui’s earlier texts, *Garçon manqué* and *La vie heureuse*. See Chapter Two, sections three and four.

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particulières, nous deux'" (159).⁹⁴ The initial maternal relationship then appears to influence the narrator's future relationships as well: "J'ai toujours été troublée par les femmes plus âgées que moi, je crois que ma relation à elles passe par le filtre maternel" (183). At the culmination of a long scene recounting her memory of her mother's oedema, on 15 February 1980 (55), the narrator and her sister and father spend the night in hospital, waiting for news of the mother's condition. Here, the narrative voice makes reference to "tout ce que j'ai perdu cette nuit-là, la nuit du corps de ma mère" (62), imbuing this event with the psychoanalytic significance of representing her emotional separation from the maternal body, and ensuring passage towards freedom and independence, alluding to "la liberté quand je sais au fond de moi que je quitte l'enfance, que je peux être seule et séparée, que je peux trouver ma place dans le monde" (63).

Within this scene the narrator expresses retrospective guilt at the feeling of freedom she experienced during her mother's medical crisis, and the ambivalent relationship between her and her mother—particularly where the mother is implicated in the narrator's feelings about Algeria—features at a second point in the text, in a rare moment of overt familial tension. During a family reunion, the narrator remembers her mother complaining about her daughter's representation of her in a real-life interview (the Simmonet interview, "Écrire, c'est retrouver ses fantômes," with which this chapter opens). The monologue then gives Bouraoui's mother space to respond to her suggestion that the family was forced to leave Algeria because of the mother's health, through the mother's reported speech: "Je n'ai pas aimé ton interview dans *L'Express*. Pourquoi tu rapportes toujours tout à toi? Tu sais, j'ai fait de mon mieux. On

⁹⁴ Responding to Freud's work, Carl Jung in *The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (1915) proposed an equivalent syndrome, the "Electra" complex, to account for psychosexual development in the female child. Freud, however, rejects this possibility, in his 1931 essay "Female Sexuality", stating: "What we have said about the Oedipus complex applies with complete strictness to the male child only, and [...] we are right in rejecting the term 'Electra complex' which seeks to emphasize the analogy between the attitude of the two sexes. It is only in the male child that we find the fateful combination of love for the one parent and simultaneous hatred for the other as a rival" (*Complete Works* 16: 375). If Freud here clearly states that the Oedipus complex may not just be simply reversed to form an equivalent "Electra complex" for the female sex, he equally precludes women from identifying themselves as the central actor in his original Oedipal drama. Regardless of the detail of this debate within the development of psychoanalytic theory, however, Bouraoui's figurative use of the notion seems to suggest her appropriation of the original, "Oedipal" complex, for children of either gender, and as we are here addressing Bouraoui's borrowing of the notion rather than the value of the idea in itself, we shall follow Bouraoui's lead in referring to her experiences as "Oedipal" rather than "Electral".

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ne pouvait plus rester à Alger. J'étais malade comme un chien. Tu cherches toujours à me culpabiliser" (215). If the mother's defensive reaction here affirms the autobiographical status of what we have been discussing, it also perhaps provides an explanation for Bouraoui's choice of fiction to revisit her childhood in her next Algeria text, *Sauvage*. At the end of this scene, the narrator describes her intention to avoid further antagonising or upsetting her mother through her writing: "Je reste l'instrument de ma mère. Je pourrais écrire pour elle, moi qui n'ai jamais écrit contre elle" (217). A psychoanalytically-inflected maternal relationship then recurs in *Sauvage*—this time not featuring Alya, the narrator, directly, but present in the memories and impressions she holds of the relationship between Sami and his mother—as Bouraoui profits from the cover offered by fiction to explore psychoanalytic theory in even more explicit form.

We are told on many occasions throughout *Sauvage* that, like the mother of *Mes mauvaises pensées*, Sami's mother is not a happy woman (see, for example, 49). In addition, it is suggested that the problems she has in her own life may account for why Sami "détestait le monde des adultes" (90, above)—or even explain why he might have gone missing.⁹⁵ On one occasion, Alya goes away for the weekend with Sami and his mother, and Sami's father fails to join them despite plans to arrive back from an apparent business trip. Alya then describes Sami's mother's behaviour over the course of an evening, revealing a series of troubling incidents which, it is implied, will have had a disturbing influence on her son's development. The first of these recalls a session of after-dinner dancing involving a topless Sami, of which Alya tells us: "C'était gênant parce que son attitude était un peu sexuelle, dans le sens où il bougeait son bassin, ses fesses, et en plus sa mère le regardait en buvant son verre, en fumant des cigarettes. Il dansait pour elle. C'était cela qui arrivait" (54). This vision is described as set in an almost claustrophobically strained atmosphere, until the quasi-sexual incestuous tension is diffused by the arrival of "M. Hamza," the owner of the restaurant, and a man with apparent romantic interest in Sami's mother. After disappearing with M. Hamza for an unspecified period of time (63), Sami's mother

⁹⁵ In almost an exact repetition of the narrator's analysis of the relationship between the mother and the grandfather in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, Alya at one point states that: "Sami avait du mal avec l'amour, avec l'attachement, à cause de sa mère" (193).

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takes the children home to sleep, and during the night Alya looks out of her window to see, "sur la balancelle, la mère de Sami, la tête en arrière et les cuisses ouvertes [avec] un homme qui devait être M. Hamza (mais je n'en étais pas sûre)" (67). Alya's reaction to this sight is the desperate hope that Sami will not have to endure seeing the same thing, praying that God will "bander les yeux de Sami pour ne pas qu'il voie ce que j'étais en train de regarder" (67), as she seems aware of the destructive potential of the Oedipal saga being played out between Sami, his mother, and M. Hamza.⁹⁶

While in Freudian theory the Oedipal process originates in early infancy, Bouraoui's imaginary staging of a similar drama during Sami's adolescence supports our reading of the importance of the end of childhood as a "rupture" which, like the original rupture from the maternal body realised through the Oedipal process, is formative of future individual identity. Through Alya's impressions of Sami's relationship with his mother, Bouraoui implies the possibility that Sami's disappearance is connected to a failure to successfully come through this Oedipal rupture, as he goes missing rather than painfully enter the adult world. If we compare this maternal relationship to that of the narrator of *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the patriarchal threat—embodied in this scene from *Sauvage* by M. Hamza—does not, in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, hold the same important place in the narrator's negotiation of corporeal difference from her mother. Separation from the maternal body, such as is attested in the night at the hospital, does, however, partly initiate the narrator's adult identity and entry into the social world. We know too that the maternal body of *Mes mauvaises pensées* is ambivalently tied up with *la terre algérienne*, and that Bouraoui identifies her separation from this land as encapsulating the end of her childhood. The characterisation of Algeria as "ce pays très masculin, très violent," potentially embodied in the traumatic "événement" of Nina's attempted abduction, may, it seems, be taken to reproduce the figure of the Oedipal father, representing a

⁹⁶ In the ancient Greek myth after which Freud's notion of the Oedipal complex is named, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, the hero blinds himself when he realises that he has married his own mother.

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masculine power which inflicts a violent rupture on the young Bouraoui—if not from the Oedipal body, then from childhood itself.⁹⁷

Un edifice qui me protégerait

In the work of the post-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, for the infant who does successfully negotiate the Oedipal process, the blissful plenitude of the maternal body is replaced by the "Symbolic Order," a world where language exists as a substitute for an original unity which can never again be accessed (see Chapter One, section one).⁹⁸ In our reading, with Bouraoui's remembered childhood figuratively standing in for the maternal body, we might consider the textual world in which we encounter Bouraoui's narrators to be a figurative version of this; the "je" of *Mes mauvaises pensées* and Alya in *Sauvage* are both faced with trying to use language to make sense of themselves and their emerging identities. It may also describe the situation of the extra-textual writer, Bouraoui, using her writing to try and access the symbolic land of her childhood—a place to which she can never return, but that she repeatedly tries to re-enact, through language, in her writing. Further than this, the narrative forms used in each of these Algeria texts may in turn be explained through recourse to psychoanalytic theory.

Terry Eagleton's commentary on Freud's *fort-da* incident provides an interesting assessment, linking the psychoanalytic problem of overcoming separation from the mother to the origins of narrative: "This, the famous *fort-da* game, Freud interpreted in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as the infant's symbolic mastery of its mother's absence; but it can also be read as the first glimmerings of narrative. *Fort-da* is perhaps the shortest story we can imagine: an object is lost, and then recovered" (185). He continues:

From this viewpoint, narrative is a source of consolation: lost objects are a cause of anxiety to us, symbolizing certain deeper unconscious losses (of birth, the faeces, the mother), and it is always pleasurable to find them put securely back in place. In Lacanian theory, it is an original lost object—the

⁹⁷ We note here the paradox that Nina's mother herself is not Algerian. The physical maternal body of this white French woman, and the figurative maternal land of Bouraoui's childhood in Algeria are therefore set against one another.

⁹⁸ Toril Moi provides a useful summary of Lacan's theory on how the Oedipal crisis instigates the infant's entry into language in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 99–101.

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mother's body—which drives forward the narrative of our lives, impelling us to pursue substitutes for this lost paradise in the endless metonymic movement of desire. For Freud, it is desire to scramble back to a place where we cannot be harmed, the inorganic existence which precedes all conscious life, which keeps us struggling forward. (185)

Each of Bouraoui's Algeria texts may be seen as a reiteration of this fundamental narrative plot: the attempt to recover from loss. Most clearly, in *Sauvage*, Sami's disappearance represents a tangible lost entity, which Alya's narrative attempts first to account for and then, failing explanation, to overcome. In *Le jour du séisme* and *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the lost object is harder to specify, although both narratives open with a clear sense of the narrator's desire for recovery: in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the recovery of a putative healthy identity which is not plagued by bad thoughts, and in *Le jour du séisme*, a pre-earthquake, unfragmented Algerian landscape. Within each text, Eagleton's references, to first the "lost paradise" of the maternal body in Lacanian theory, and then Freud's "place where we cannot be harmed," might equally apply to Bouraoui's *terre algérienne*, prior to the violent rupture—through war, exile, or just adolescence—which causes her separation from her childhood land and the instigation of her adult identity. In both *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Sauvage*, Eagleton's description of how "narrative is a source of consolation" can be seen to motivate the narrators' respective accounts, as each reacts to their awareness that what they have lost cannot be recovered, by turning to fiction to pursue, in Eagleton's words, the pleasure of seeing the lost object "put securely back in place."

We have heard how, at the beginning of *Sauvage*, Alya claims to be writing in order to "tout raconter pour Sami" (14). The mourning child has been urged to express her feelings in order to recover more quickly: "Ma mère me forçait à parler disant que le langage allait libérer mon esprit [...] Mon père, lui, disait que je ne devais pas cacher mes larmes, pour guérir plus vite" (14). But, feeling unable to cry, she has decided to write instead: "Parce que c'est vrai que c'est important les mots, ça reste quand nos idées s'envolent déjà" (14). The curative possibility of language—or, at least, Alya's faith in its possibility—is therefore evident from the outset, and contrasts with the negative inflection of "le silence," which occurs at several points in the text as an apparent euphemism for Sami's disappearance (22, 103). Equally, the theme of stories

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and storytelling features throughout Alya's descriptions. Fiction is present as an important part of the culture, for example in her sister's friend Fatia's detailed telling of "l'histoire de la bague" (155–164). It is also evidently a constituent part of Alya's outlook on life, as when she remembers her negative response to a "récitation" she was made to learn as a child, "Une fourmi avec trente jambes, ça n'existe pas, ça n'existe pas. [...] Je me souviens que cette récitation me donnait de la colère parce que pour moi tout pouvait exister, il suffisait d'avoir un peu d'imagination" (168).⁹⁹

Alya's own creation of stories—which support a reading of her character as semi-autobiographical—features as both a form of escapism and self-defense. She tells us with regard to her imagination that "j'avais toujours besoin de construire des histoires dans ma tête, que la réalité ne me suffisait pas" (57), and that "je vais toujours là où le réel n'existe pas" (68). Alya's own writing is featured in the "cahier" she keeps while Sami is still with her. When Sami rejects Alya's friendship during a group excursion to the desert, choosing to sit with a male friend, Rafik, and thereby leaving her on her own, Alya's response is to busy herself with writing in this notebook, in the hope that "je pourrais construire un édifice qui me protégerait" (184). She continues: "[...] j'étais dans mon royaume de phrases et je me disais que les mots et les histoires qu'ils formaient étaient un moyen de fuir le réel quand celui-ci ne nous convenait plus" (184). Earlier, the same notebook is quoted within the text itself. Alya describes it as "une sorte de livre d'énigmes" and reproduces from it a series of textual fragments, a senseless and juvenile collection of aphorisms and opinions of unclear reference (125–133). What is interesting about the form of this writing, however, is that Alya describes the notebook as "ce que j'écrivais avant, quand je n'avais pas d'histoire à raconter" (125)—the implication being that since Sami's disappearance she does have a story to tell. When explaining the importance of now telling this story, Alya makes reference to the idea of fragmentation, and how crucial it is to link up the fragmented events of her life into a coherent narrative:

J'ai l'impression que tout a une existence propre mais que les choses ne sont pas reliées entre elles et que c'est moi toujours qui fais le lien entre les choses [...] je me dis qu'il faut que je me souviensse de tout pour toujours

⁹⁹ This poem, although not attributed in the text, is "La fourmi" by Robert Desnos, *Chantefables et Chantefleurs* (1945).

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faire le lien entre les choses qui existent et les choses qui arrivent, qu'il faut que je ramasse toutes les images en moi, toutes les paroles et tous les mots, que rien ne doit se perdre, et c'est comme si je contenais la vie alors, comme si j'en avais la maîtrise, comme si rien n'allait mourir [...] et si je vais encore plus loin, je me dis que je suis responsable de la disparition de Sami, que je n'ai pas assez lié les choses entre elles, pour comprendre, qu'un élément m'a manqué, que j'aurais dû voir, ou sentir. (70)

In this long extract we gain both an impression of the anxiety of the narrative voice, and the sense that a cure for this may exist in the possibility of a coherent narrative, the production of "[un] lien entre les choses." In its entirety the above sentence comprises more than 250 words, and is divided into 29 clauses, piled breathlessly one after the other. The narrator's angst that there may be no inherent meaning to, or connection between, events—that "les choses ne sont pas reliées entre elles"—is therefore reflected in the rambling and confusing form of her prose, which culminates in contradicting itself through the suggestion that there may after all have been a comprehensible link which would have explained why Sami disappeared. The assertion that a narrative sense might be found in the events of Sami's disappearance, if Alya looks carefully enough for it, then becomes both a moral obligation—"il faut que je me souviennne de tout"—and the explicit aim of her writing.

In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, too, the narrator admits to frequently having recourse to imaginative escapism, and suggests that narrative exploration may be the only way for her to come to terms with her identity and understand who she really is:

J'aimerais me représenter ce qui me définit, à cause de cette phrase: "Ton imagination te joue des tours." Il faut de l'imagination pour vivre, pour avoir des mauvaises pensées, pour écrire sur soi, puisqu'on ne se connaît jamais vraiment ; il faut de l'imagination pour se raconter, pour trouver la réponse à la question "Qui suis-je"? (59–60)

While the link here between imagination and "mauvaises pensées" does not immediately affirm fiction as a healthy force in the narrator's life, toward the end of her psychotherapy she asserts that "je ne me sens plus folle, et je sais aussi que je ne l'ai jamais été" (255), revealing the "bad thoughts" to be less a genuine mental health issue than a narrative structuring device allowing for the free-play of her imagination in the text. The narrator's improved self-awareness towards the end of the analysis

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discloses the therapeutic consequences of her textual recreation of Algeria: "Je sais qu'à force il m'a fallu inventer l'Algérie aussi, il a fallu reconstituer des souvenirs que j'avais brûlés" (195); and "je me sens en sécurité avec moi vous savez [...] je sais que j'écris par amour [...] et quand j'écris sur l'Algérie, je pourrais crier: 'Je suis de retour'" (177). Through recreating her childhood land over the course of her monologue, the narrator of *Mes mauvaises pensées* has been able to fictionally recover the psychoanalytic loss underlying the narrative, and her health is restored. That this healthy conclusion depends on a fiction, however, is affirmed in a final key event which features in both *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Sauvage*, and which will help us bring to a close our reading of the return to childhood in Bouraoui's Algeria texts.

La piscine de Zéralda

We have noted how the narrative structure of *Sauvage* is unusual among Bouraoui's texts, not just because it claims to be a novel—several of her earlier texts also do—but because of the dramatic story which drives the progression of the book. While Sami's disappearance pre-dates the opening of the narrative, and no moment of peripeteia occurs in the way of his recovery, the mystery of his whereabouts provides a hermeneutic puzzle at the beginning of the text, which motivates the reader until the final quarter of the book, when Alya ultimately overcomes her friend's departure and stops seeking greater explanation. At this stage, however, a new mystery is revealed to propel the work to its climax, a timely enigma which will reveal Alya's connection to Bouraoui's other autofictional narrators, and, through comparison with *Mes mauvaises pensées*, will confirm the efficacy for Bouraoui of manipulating narrative fiction in order to re-express her memories of Algeria.

Evidence of a new narrative mystery occurs gradually in the later part of the text, as Alya begins to hint that, despite her early intention to "tout raconter pour Sami" (14), she has not yet felt able to reveal all to her reader. She refers to how "j'avais de la haine parfois pour Sami, une haine qui faisait partie de mon histoire. À cause de lui, un jour, ma vie ou plutôt ma vision de la vie a changé, mais de cela, je ne peux pas encore en parler" (176), and, later, to how "ce n'était pas toujours de l'amour. Mais de ça, je ne vais pas encore en parler. Ce sera pour la fin. Pour la fin de mon cahier. Pour la fin

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de mon histoire" (201). Through the voice of her young teenaged narrator, Bouraoui here explicitly acknowledges evidence of construction behind Alya's story. Unlike the apparently shapeless, pondering monologue of *Mes mauvaises pensées*, Alya's "histoire" will be driven towards a revelation, a dramatic denouement to the text which will help us piece together not only Sami and Alya's story, but also the importance of Algeria more broadly to Bouraoui's writing project. In a significant injection of hermeneutic tension, Alya tells us, thirty pages from the book's end: "Je dois encore attendre. Un tout petit peu. Pour raconter ce qu'il s'est passé entre Sami et moi un jour. Et pourquoi je porte de la haine. Et pourquoi j'ai peur d'être responsable de sa disparition" (202). What is eventually revealed is the dramatic event of "le jour de Zéralda," when Sami and Alya once more head off on an adventure of their own, leaving Zéralda beach to explore an abandoned hotel nearby, and decide to swim in the unguarded swimming pool (226).¹⁰⁰ In the middle of their games, however, Alya finds herself stuck in the pool and, unable to float, calls for Sami to help her. He instead remains motionlessly watching, before turning and abandoning his desperate friend (228). While Alya survives the incident, her emotional response to Sami's actions proves more significant than the fleeting physical terror of nearly drowning: "Je savais que mes forces allaient revenir mais je savais aussi que Sami venait de briser ma croyance dans les hommes. Et c'était cela le plus dur à admettre. Il avait changé mon regard à tout jamais. Et il avait invité la haine et la colère en moi" (230). "Le jour de Zéralda," therefore, stands as a key moment in Alya's life, representing the first appearance of a new range of negative emotions, and opening up, at this late stage of the novel, a darker side to the missing boy at the centre of the story.

This incident also features in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, where the theme of drowning is repeated throughout the text; and the narrator and two of her past lovers are all described as having nearly drowned in various dramatic incidents in their lives (see, for example, 186). With regard to "la piscine de Zéralda," however, it is interesting that, while this scene features as an equally crucial event in the monologue of the older

¹⁰⁰ Puzzlingly, Bouraoui varies the spelling of Zéralda across the two texts, calling it "Zéralda" in *Sauvage* and "Zeralda" in *Mes mauvaises pensées*. Away from Bouraoui's writing, the common French spelling for this area outside Algiers does use an accent: Zéralda.

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narrator, the story she tells about it varies from Alya's in important ways. This rewriting therefore reveals both the centrality, for Bouraoui, of what the incident ultimately connects with in her memory, and of creative reconstruction as a productive force in her autofictional self-investigation. Some of the narrator's passing references to Zéralda in *Mes mauvaises pensées* conform to what we know of it from *Sauvage*. She claims that "je ne suis plus jeune depuis la piscine de Zeralda" (72), and echoes Alya's initial withholding of information, "Je n'ai rien dit pour Zeralda" (77). Following these early allusions, an initial account of the events in Zeralda is then revealed to the therapist in the tone of a confessional: "Il y a cette fille, vous savez, dont je ne vous ai rien dit; c'est si difficile pour moi [...] c'est si difficile de vous dire, de tout vous dire, de raconter avec ma voix cette journée de février, cette longue journée, que je pourrais relier à toutes les autres qui vont suivre" (130). It is clear that, whatever the speaker is about to reveal, she considers it to be of crucial importance, both to the therapeutic process—given her determination to explain what happened in spite of how difficult she finds it—and to her on-going malady, as she expressly connects this "journée de février" with "toutes les autres qui vont suivre." The inclusion of another girl in the scene, however, is different from what we know of the event in *Sauvage*: "Il y a les yeux sur moi, qui arrivent, ce sont les yeux d'une fille de mon âge, elle longe la piscine, puis vient vers moi" (132). And, when the near-drowning is recounted, the narrator's position has become dramatically different:

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, le ciel est jaune, comme chargé de terre, 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. (132)

In this version of the scene, Bouraoui's narrator has become the guilty party, not just in failing to help a drowning child, as does Sami in *Sauvage*, but actively causing them to nearly drown. Ultimately the girl does not drown, however, and it seems that on this occasion the biggest consequence of the narrator's actions will be her own difficulty in coming to terms with the memory of her destructive actions: "Je ne sais pas si je suis coupable, je ne sais pas si la fille est fâchée contre moi, je cours vers ma chambre, je cours à l'intérieur de ma vie, je sais, pour toujours, qu'il me faudra faire

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avec cette histoire, que je passe par là, que je me définis aussi ainsi, j'ai fait tomber quelqu'un à l'eau" (134). If it seems that this representation of the Zeralda incident may epitomise the "mauvaises pensées" for which the narrator of this text claimed to be seeking help, however, such a clear-cut reading of the incident is denied us when the narrator continues to return to this event, finally declaring nearly one hundred pages later, "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" (222).

Comparing the varying descriptions of the Zeralda scene, both within *Mes mauvaises pensées* and through comparison with *Sauvage*, it is clear that the contrary versions cannot all reflect experiences from the writer's own life, with progressive creative re-workings of this primal scene emphasising the narrative construction of these texts overall. Indeed, we need not believe that the writer herself experienced any form of drowning in Zeralda. The incident is, nonetheless, hugely significant when we consider the meaning attributed to it by the adult narrator of *Mes mauvaises pensées*. Although in this text it is not the narrator herself who nearly drowns, her reference to it as 'ma noyade' (222, above) reveals its importance to her, adding a further layer of autofictional *brouillage*, and potentially also anticipating Bouraoui's later reliving of the drowning through Alya in *Sauvage*. Following the final confession, "Je sais que je n'étais pas coupable," the narrator lists other things that she now—towards the end of her therapy—knows about her life, in an uncharacteristically factual manner:

Je sais que ma mère n'étouffe pas de moi dans l'appartement. Je sais que mes mauvaises pensées sont avant tout dirigées contre moi. Il y a un point de moi que je dois frapper, je me punis de mon corps, de ce qu'il a pu susciter un jour près des orangers. Tout revient là, tout se dirige là puis se dirige contre moi. Vous savez, j'ai failli me faire enlever enfant. (222)

Just as we initially read the deepest layer of signification attached to the earthquake in *Le jour du séisme* as alluding to the formative "événement" of Bouraoui's near abduction as a child, at the culmination of her therapeutical narrative, the speaker of *Mes mauvaises pensées* compares the memorable events of Zeralda—present throughout this text and at the climax of *Sauvage*—to this same near abduction, reinforcing its dramatic and enduring influence on Bouraoui's adult identity. Where

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the free-play of narrative provides a cathartic or curative outlet for the speaker of *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the final, honest account of this formative event reveals both the importance of the creative transformation of the original scene to Bouraoui's sense of health and a reason for the writer's persistent return to the same space and time in her texts. Bouraoui is forced to continually return to representations of the rupture from her Algerian childhood, not because of an unsurpassable identification with the land from which she is exiled—after all, she is free to return whenever she likes—but because this founding event, concluding her childhood and traumatically marking her entry into a dangerous adult world, is, she now admits, not one she is otherwise capable of remembering: "Je ne me souviens de rien, c'est ma sœur qui raconte puisque c'est elle qui m'a sauvée, je n'ai que sa parole, je n'ai que ses mots, mon désir d'écrire repose aussi sur ce défaut de mémoire" (222).

Chapter conclusions

With regard to the Algeria texts, the founding moment of Bouraoui's writing project proves not to be her sudden separation from the Algerian land—when her family fail to return there from a holiday in France taken when Bouraoui was 14—but the brutal "événement" of the attempted abduction of the young Bouraoui from beneath the orange trees in "le parc de la Résidence" where she grew up. This traumatic event features in some form in each of these texts: poetically in *Le jour du séisme*, as a guilty confession in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, and figuratively transposed into a scene of drowning in *Sauvage*. On each occasion, the emotional damage inflicted on the narrator may be seen to embody aspects of *la terre algérienne*—the "pays très masculin, très violent" of Bouraoui's interview—and we have seen how both the Bouraoui family's *métissage* and the history of Algeria's War of Independence are implicated in the writer's difficult relationship with this country. At the same time, however, we have considered how Bouraoui's narrators' experiences also represent more universal themes around the end of childhood, with the (violently and unwillingly attained) knowledge of the adult, sexual world to which this incident leads representing a necessary entry into adulthood which is not specific to the dangers of

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growing up in Algeria. Using psychoanalytic forms and themes in her work, Bouraoui herself identifies narrative structures as one means of coping with these adolescent traumas, and the repeated revisiting of a similar time and place across three formally different works emphasises Bouraoui's project of using literature as the site of a personal identity quest. The confession, at the end of *Mes mauvaises pensées*, that the speaker herself does not in fact remember "l'événement" at all, but is dependent on her sister, who saved her from the abduction, for everything she knows about the event, ultimately places this incident as a final form of "lost object." Formative as it has been to Bouraoui's adult identity, her inability to recall it in her own mind means she is both dependent on language provided by her sister—"je n'ai que ses mots"—and destined to continue to rewrite the incident, textually revisiting the lost land of her childhood, in an attempt to instil narrative meaning on an inherent disunity.

Through a parallel reading of the representation of Bouraoui's Algerian childhood in three formally very different works, we have identified how the recovery of a specific period and place constitutes an important motive for Bouraoui's writing project, and how the textual return to origins potentially reveals a greater need, that of using narrative forms to make sense of and come to terms with a range of life experiences which are not culturally-specific, but universal. While, as we have seen in Chapter Two, Monique Wittig advocates that minority writers must write for political reasons, our exploration of Bouraoui's Algerian background—one of the aspects of her identity for which she may be seen as "minoritised"—has revealed that, rather than resulting from her *métissage*, Bouraoui's urge to write seems grounded in a childhood story which is more general than particular. In the next chapter, we will nonetheless move away from the psychoanalytical theories with which Bouraoui engages in these texts, to return to a Wittigian perspective in considering what the political implications of Bouraoui's writing might be.

4. “On écrit aussi pour les autres”? Relational Identity and the Textual Encounter

Lorsque l’on est dans un monde qui ne parle pas de vous, on a besoin des artistes, des films, des livres. Si j’ai pu pénétrer dans des solitudes et, sinon les aider—ce serait très orgueilleux —, du moins faire entrer un peu de lumière, je me dois de continuer. On écrit aussi pour les autres.

(Nina Bouraoui, “L’écriture au corps”)

In an interview with the French literary magazine “Transfuge” in April 2010 Bouraoui was questioned about her decision to represent her sexuality in her autobiographical work. Asked whether she felt compelled to “faire sortir l’homosexualité féminine d’une forme d’invisibilité narrative,” she replied affirmatively, that films, books, and works of art were highly important for those in minority identity positions, and that if her writing could have a positive influence for isolated gay readers then she felt compelled, in part, to write for them. From Bouraoui’s descriptions of her childhood and adolescence, discussed in Chapters Two and Three, we know that the writer feels able to identify with “des solitudes,” and yet, given the non-conventional way in which Bouraoui represents her own sexuality, we may find it surprising that she should identify herself with isolated gay readers. Far from being a gay activist writer, Bouraoui represents her sexuality in a manner usually adverse to conventional understandings of identity politics; as we read in Chapter Two, Bouraoui’s narrators often reject the labels of the LGBT movement, and sometimes openly refuse a self-representation which would align them with other homosexual—or “woman-loving”—women. In other interviews, Bouraoui has gone so far as to actively seek to distance herself from the gay rights movement, stating “je n’ai jamais voulu être un porte-drapeau,” and publicly coming out against the campaign for gay marriage in 2004.¹⁰¹ Indeed, throughout Bouraoui’s autobiographical work, she presents her personal identity as

¹⁰¹ This quotation comes from the interview with Charlotte Vanbever for *La Dernière Heure*, “Un auteur a beaucoup de pouvoir” (2008). Bouraoui’s published comments on gay marriage date from 2004, in the interview “Écrire, c’est retrouver ses fantômes” with Dominique Simmonet of *L’Express*.

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utterly unique, unstable, and ephemeral, all qualities which would seem to rule her out of being "representative" for readers of any particular creed. Where our reading of Bouraoui's work thus far has pursued the notion of a personal identity quest, Bouraoui's engagement with the literary would seem to be an entirely self-interested and esoteric act. If this is true, however, then what ought we to make of Bouraoui's claim that "on écrit aussi pour les autres"?

In this chapter we will consider the question of relational identity within Bouraoui's life-writing. To what extent is the literary selfhood produced through these texts a relational entity, and how far does Bouraoui's work constitute an act of writing for others? In order to answer these questions, we shall analyse the two sides of Bouraoui's "textual encounter" in turn. In the first half of the chapter, we will consider the act of reading, both in Bouraoui's descriptions of how she has been influenced by things she has read, and how she perceives her own relationship to the readers of her work, in order to determine how the writer believes her work might have a positive influence on isolated readers. In the second half of the chapter, we will then turn to Bouraoui's relationship to her own writing. While we have seen in the Introduction to this thesis that Bouraoui describes her younger self as an isolated and uncommunicative child, turning to the act of writing as a means of reaching out to others, we will now examine how Bouraoui's stated (in)ability to relate to others has developed over the course of her writing project. To what extent has the literary enterprise had a positive influence on the writer, enabling her to reach out through writing for others? As the opening quotation of this chapter suggests, at stake within this investigation will be the significance of the question of sexual identity to Bouraoui's œuvre. In this, the argument of a queer Wittigian lesbianism, developed within Chapter Two, will be extended out for its potential implications to Bouraoui's readers. At the same time, it will be necessary to once more probe the question of form, first considering critical descriptions of autobiography as a particularly relational form, and attempting to identify what the consequences of autofiction might be for the textual encounter.

4.1 Writing For Others? Gay Identity and the Reading Encounter

Within critical studies in contemporary French women's writing, the question of how reading can impact on one's identity has been approached in several works in recent years. Gill Rye's *Reading for Change* (2001) discusses "interactions between Text and Identity in Contemporary Women's Writing" with a focus on Christiane Baroche, Hélène Cixous, and Paule Constant, while Emma Wilson's *Sexuality and the Reading Encounter* (1996) looks specifically at how the representation of desire can influence the reader of Marcel Proust, Marguerite Duras, Michel Tournier, and Cixous. With particular regard to Queer theory, in the year 2000 Sarah Cooper published her study on the impact that reading theory can have on the reader, *Relating to Queer Theory*, while prior to all of these, Michael Worton and Judith Still's 1993 work, *Textuality and Sexuality*, collected together eleven critical essays around the same theme.

Reading and Sexuality

Of these, Wilson's study is perhaps closest to the subject of our own investigation — she studies in detail the ways in which reading can impact on an individual's identity and, as well as pursuing a psychoanalytically inflected, post-structuralist approach similar to our own within this thesis, her work shares our present thematic focus of emergent sexuality. In particular, Wilson's term "the reading encounter" is useful for our present purposes, and is one we will make use of within this chapter. Wilson describes the reading encounter as marking an "intersection between the actual and the imaginary" which characterises the reader's engagement with a text (vii). With regard to the case of Bouraoui, it will be appropriate to extend the term "reading encounter" to a broader focus on the "textual encounter" to account not only for the presentation of the formative effects of reading within Bouraoui's corpus, but also how the writer's own identity is influenced by her role within the literary act.

On the question, specifically, of homosexuality, Christopher Robinson argues in his 2002 article "Identity and the Pragmatics of Reading" that:

The majority of gay writers, even those most hostile to the conventional cultural order, expect readers to "read" identity, including sexual identity, in both life and literature. In order to establish his own concept of identity a writer will draw attention to the reading act and to pre-existing literary

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stereotypes and traditions, reproducing, subverting or modifying them according to the model of identity which interests him. This is an act of complicity which expects the reader to recognize not an essence but an area of experience with which he feels a degree of overlap, i.e. he will be able to map himself onto the character or the character onto himself. (45)

As Robinson's use of pronouns reveals, his reading focuses on gay male writers—Guy Hocquenghem, Yves Navarre, and Guillaume Dustan. Nonetheless, Robinson's identification of gay writers' inherent awareness of the potential impact of literature on readers' identities, and his reference to "those [gay writers] most hostile to the conventional cultural order," chimes with our Wittigian reading of Bouraoui's representation of sexual identity in her work (see Chapter Two). If we can apply Robinson's claims to a writer such as Bouraoui, therefore, we may then understand the stakes implicit in a given writer's discussion of homosexuality in their work and the particular set of expectations they may have for their readers. With regard to the reader's response to representations of homosexuality in the text, the idea that representing gay identity in literature could be empowering—or even formative—for isolated gay readers is also a significant and established principle within modern gay publishing, as discussed, for example, in Loykie Limoné's 2006 article, "The 'Coming-out' of Homosexuality in French youth literature in the 1990s."

In *Lesbian Desire in Post-1968 French Literature*, Lucille Cairns describes "the importance of seeing one's marginalized (sense of) identity publicly visibilized in easily decipherable form, and, by the same token, of reducing feelings of isolation" (7). In researching this work on contemporary realist lesbian texts, Cairns asked readers of "Lesbia magazine," a popular French magazine for gay women, to "communicate their responses to lesbian-themed literature of the post-68 period." Cairns quotes a personal correspondence she received in response, from Céline Lion, a French lesbian reader:

Il me semble que lorsqu'on ne peut/ sait pas parler de son homosexualité, recevoir à travers la lecture est primordial. Je crois d'ailleurs que ce qui amène souvent à dire qu'il y a une "culture lesbienne," c'est qu'on a besoin de trouver des représentations proches de notre propre identité pour supporter de vivre dans un milieu qui globalement ne correspond pas à ce que nous sommes profondément. La lecture d'ouvrages "lesbiens" permet de pénétrer un monde auquel on appartient plus intensément. (8)

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In this reader's personal description of how she responds to lesbian texts, we find not only a similar idea to that described by Bouraoui in our opening quotation, but also similar language. Members of sexual minorities can feel that the environments they inhabit do not match up with how they feel within themselves. However, rather than remain isolated within the world of the dominant culture, reading of gay themes within literature permits the development of a minority culture, providing a means of support which may reduce social isolation. Even without true interpersonal communication, therefore, the textual encounter potentially becomes a relational space, sustaining and supporting minority identifications among readers.

Although Cairns' work looks largely at contemporary realist novels, with regard to life-writing we might consider that the affirmative possibilities for gay identity are even greater. After all, given the important status of the relationship between the reader and writer of works of this form, autobiography has been theorised as a particularly relational type of writing. Philip Lejeune's *Le pacte autobiographique*, a foundational text in critical study of the form, proposes that, more so than any other form, autobiography is dependent on a kind of agreement between the reader and writer, and that this relationship influences—or even defines—how the text is conceived and understood. As revealed in the title of his work, Lejeune conceives of a "pact" recognising a correspondence between the writer's lived experience and what his or her reader experiences in the text: "C'est à ce niveau global que se définit l'autobiographie: c'est un mode de lecture autant qu'un type d'écriture, c'est un *effet contractuel* historiquement variable [Lejeune's emphases]" (45). Although conventions for characterising any literary form will necessarily vary over time, Lejeune here claims that the defining feature of an autobiography is its contractual nature: no work can successfully be considered autobiographical unless the reader is convinced of the identity of the author with the principal character of the text. Where he states (as we have already seen in the introductory chapter), that "pour qu'il y ait autobiographie (et plus généralement littérature intime), il faut qu'il y ait identité de l'auteur, du narrateur et du personnage" (15), the presence or absence of this correspondence will be determined by the reader's response to the text: "Puisqu'ils [ces textes] ont été écrits pour nous, lecteur, et qu'en les lisant, c'est nous qui les faisons fonctionner"

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(14). This requirement, therefore, marks autobiography out as a unique genre, depending more than any other form on the reader's relationship to the text.

For Bouraoui's reader, we might suggest that Lejeune's criteria of author–protagonist identity is troubled, given her more *autofictional* approach to writing herself. Autofictionality might disturb or even prohibit an autobiographical pact from taking place with the reader—indeed, autofiction first emerged as a term in direct response to Lejeune's conditions (See Introduction, section three).¹⁰² While the absolute identity of narrator and author may be given greater experimental freedom in autofiction than previously, however, we might suggest that the perception of the reader nonetheless continues to be important: the reader must believe in an association of writer with narrator, or the text stops being *autofiction* and becomes mere fiction. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, two critics working predominantly within English-language autobiography studies (and therefore not explicitly commenting on French autofiction), have discussed the question of autobiographical truth and its implications for the reader. In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, they acknowledge that increasingly, "life narrators may present inconsistent or shifting views of themselves. They may even perpetrate acts of deliberate deceit to test the reader or to suggest the paradoxical 'truth' of experience itself" (12). This destabilised form of autobiographical expression need not however prohibit the reader–writer pact required by Lejeune, as Smith and Watson propose:

We need, then, to adjust our expectations of the truth told in self-referential narrative. Of course, autobiographical claims such as date of birth can be verified or falsified by recourse to documentation or fact outside the text. But autobiographical truth is a different matter, it is an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of life. (13)

Smith and Watson's suggestion here is that the autofictional freedom of changing superficial details of the life narrative—as Bouraoui does, for example, in recasting herself as "Marie" in *La vie heureuse*, or changing the gender of a romantic partner in *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*, as we will come to later—does not inhibit the primary

¹⁰² Interestingly, Hélène Jaccomard discusses the possibility of an "autofictional pact" in *Lecteur et lecture dans l'autobiographie française contemporaine* (1993), a publication resulting from her doctoral thesis on Violette Leduc, Françoise d'Eaubonne, Serge Doubrovsky, Marguerite Yourcenar.

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communicational aim of autobiographical writing, which is to share "understanding of the meaning of life" with one's reader. With regard to the example of gay sexuality, a concrete enactment of this rather romantic notion may be that the "autobiographical truth" of gay existence or identity is conveyed through a personal narrative with which the reader is able to identify, a more important goal than strict referential accuracy. This would seem to chime with Robinson's claim that a gay reading encounter may entail the reader recognising "not an essence but an area of experience with which he feels a degree of overlap." It would also fit with Smith and Watson's suggestion that:

If we approach self-referential writing as an intersubjective process that occurs within the writer/ reader pact, rather than as a true-or-false story, the emphasis of reading shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding. Autobiography then is an "intersubjective mode," depending on a certain relationship between the writer and reader throughout their textual encounter. (13)

According to this view, for the reader of texts in which Bouraoui describes her developing sexual identity, what matters is not the truth or otherwise of the relationships she describes—not, perhaps, the absolute coherence of the sexual identity represented—but instead the insight into an alternative world which may previously have been inaccessible. According to Smith and Watson's model, the reader's observation of relationships within the text—her "observing processes of communicative exchange"—complements their own "relationship" with the author, so that Bouraoui's writing about her sexual identity may help her reader—as much as herself—in the affirmation of particular identities.

Bouraoui as Reader

If critical theory supports Bouraoui's suggestion that representing her sexual identity in her self-referential work may constitute a positive, affirmative act for her readers, the act of reading can be seen to play an important role within identity-formation. Indeed, throughout Bouraoui's work her own experiences with the reading encounter are portrayed as having a significant effect on the development of her sense of self. Returning briefly to two of the texts we have considered within earlier chapters, in fact, we can see the effects of Bouraoui's own reading on her younger self, through

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her representation of reading as an act which is influential—and even formative—for her adult sexual identity. In Chapter Two, we read Bouraoui's eighth work, *Poupée bella*, as the concluding text of a "developmental trilogy" written between 2000 and 2004, and charting Bouraoui's gendered and sexual development through childhood and adolescence and into her early twenties. At the opening of this work, Bouraoui's narrator is twenty years old, and on the point of discovering the Parisian lesbian scene of the late 1980s. As she prepares to enter *le milieu des filles*, a world which, she hopes, will help her "devenir ce que je suis" (10), the narrator begins writing a diary, and it is through the form of this reconstructed youthful diary that the reader of the text learns of Bouraoui's experiences at this time. While we have already examined the importance of the theme of writing within *Poupée bella* (see Chapter Two), the corollary activity of reading also features at significant moments. In the opening diary entry of the text, the protagonist—whom we have referred to as Nina—reveals how she considers herself to be on the brink of a new life: "Je n'ai rien de silencieux en moi, tout bouge, tout crie, tout se déplace, je quitte la vraie vie" (7). Within the same train of thought, she then makes reference to two famous literary lesbians, revealing that the assumed established gay world Nina wishes to enter is one she has in fact so far only known through reading: "J'entends la ville et je ne suis plus dans la ville, il n'y a que mon corps, il n'y a plus mon désir, je suis la Missy de Colette, je suis la Thérèse de Carol" (8). The first inter-textual reference here is to Mathilde de Morny, the lesbian lover of the celebrated writer Colette at the start of the twentieth-century. The second relates to Patricia Highsmith's novel *Carol*, originally published pseudonymously in 1952 as *The Price of Salt*.¹⁰³ With these references, therefore, Bouraoui establishes her younger self as someone who was not only a keen reader of famously lesbian works of literature, but who was also significantly affected by them, relating to the characters

¹⁰³ First published under the name "Claire Morgan," Patricia Highsmith's *Carol* is celebrated as containing the first happy ending in gay fiction. In a 1991 re-edition of the text, bearing Highsmith's name, and containing an Afterword by the author, Highsmith describes receiving grateful letters from isolated gay readers. She explains how: "The appeal of *The Price of Salt* was that it has a happy ending for its two main characters, or at least they were going to try to have a future together. Prior to this, homosexuals male and female in American novels had had to pay for their deviation by cutting their wrists, drowning themselves in a swimming pool, or by switching to heterosexuality (so it was stated), or by collapsing—alone and miserable and shunned—into a depression equal to hell. Many of the letters that came to me carried such messages as 'Yours is the first book like this with a happy ending! We don't all commit suicide and lots of us are doing fine.' Others said, 'Thank you for writing such a story. It is a little like my own story...'" (*Carol*, 311).

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of Missy and Thérèse, and drawing the limited knowledge she had of gay lifestyles from these literary models.

The motif of gay reading continues as the narrative of *Poupée bella* progresses, and Nina meets other women in *le milieu des filles*. A year after the text opens, Nina describes the apartment of one of her girlfriends, "S.", saying: "S. vit rue Thérèse à cause de la place Colette. Je marche dans les jardins du Palais-Royal, je marche sous les fenêtres de l'écrivain. Ce ne sont pas ses livres qui m'attachent, c'est son amour pour les femmes. Je ne suis pas seule" (69). In addition to Nina's own past reading of this writer apparently motivating her decision to seek out Paris's *milieu des filles*, "S." here, is described as having decided which street to live on specifically because of there being a local square named after Colette, while Nina romanticises her visit to this area, imagining herself walking in the footsteps of a literary hero. It is interesting, however, that Nina states her love of Colette as stemming not from her literary power, but from "son amour pour les femmes." On the next line, the diary entry continues: "Le Milieu des Filles défait l'idée de l'amour. Les filles ont le chagrin des hommes. Nous sommes tous les mêmes. Nous sommes tous des orphelins" (69). While the characterisation of *le milieu* as undoing love here implicates a negative reading of homosexuality, the use of the first person plural following her reflections on Colette speaks of a sense of community among lesbians, implicating continuity even over the near century which separates Colette from these women.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, the claim of a figurative orphanhood felt by gay women invites us to read still greater significance into the identification of Colette with S. and Nina, with gay literary history apparently providing a form of guidance or heritage, so that, through their reading of Colette, gay women need feel less isolated.

From these textual references, therefore, we might begin to speculate as to how, from the evidence of *Poupée bella*, Bouraoui can justify her claim that "on écrit aussi pour les autres." The early reference to herself as a reader highlights the role of literature in Bouraoui's own life, providing a context and sense of history onto which she can map

¹⁰⁴ Colette lived from 1873–1954, and, in between heterosexual marriages, had a relationship with Mathilde de Morny between 1907 and 1910. See Michael Lucey's *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust* (2006), or Diana Holmes's 1991 book *Colette*.

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her new experiences. Given the opening premise of *Poupée bella*—an isolated young lesbian seeking out a community with which she can identify—how the reader encounters the text is clearly relevant to our question of "writing for others," and while the disordered tone of the text reflects the confused mental state of its young narrator, the intimacy of the diary form may also have a particular effect on the reader of the work. We might suggest that, faced with having to make sense of Nina's reconstructed teenage diary, the reader is made implicit in the protagonist's journey, as the author's younger self shares a series of highly intimate experiences, educating the reader at the same time as herself. Where the young Nina was able, in part, to identify herself as non-heterosexual thanks to her reading of works by Colette and Highsmith, the shared journey Bouraoui takes with the reader of her own text could be understood within a similar framework. Through sharing her own experiences as a young gay woman, Bouraoui may be hoping to provide support for isolated homosexual readers, or just to increase public awareness of the existence of this gay Parisian world—at one point of her writing, the diary's narrator claims: "Écrire, c'est rendre public le Milieu des Filles" (118). Just as the protagonist Nina, at the start of the diary, is uninitiated into the Parisian lesbian scene, and discovers over the course of the text facts about this world that she had never anticipated, the reader too may journey "from innocence to experience," and begin to identify with the narrator's nascent sexuality, confirming Bouraoui's claim that "lorsque l'on est dans un monde qui ne parle pas de vous, on a besoin des artistes, des films, des livres."

Where *Poupée bella* sees Bouraoui recast herself as a twenty-year-old reader, yet to begin on her writing career, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, published the following year (and discussed in Chapter Three), also includes homage to writers and to the act of reading, as Bouraoui relates the continued importance for her of both sides of the textual encounter. In this text, the importance of gay representation within literature is apparent in Nina's description of the books available to her in her family home. Celebrating her mother's love of reading and the positive influence it had on her own development, the narrator of *Mes mauvaises pensées* recounts, "Ma mère dit: 'Je n'aime lire que les Anglaises' et elle essaie de me faire aimer cette littérature qui est à l'opposé de ce que j'écris; elle la donne à ma sœur, et à elles deux elles forment la

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secte des Anglaises, ce qui me fait sourire, parce que je sais l'effet de la littérature: lire, c'est se lire" (141). In Bouraoui's view, English literature is less intimate and less open to sexuality than French-language writing, and here the fact that Nina's mother and sister enjoy reading "les Anglaises" is suggested as representing something about their own personalities more broadly. If this choice of literature is, for Nina, "à l'opposé de ce que j'écris," however, this does not mean that her mother is unsupportive of Nina's differing taste and identity, as the development of her own personality is equally formed through the contents of her mother's book collection: "Ma mère lit Jean-Louis Bory, Yves Navarre, Michel Foucault, elle forme une bibliothèque que je n'ai qu'à consulter pour savoir, très jeune, ce que je suis, pour savoir qui se forme au fond de moi" (184). Bory, Navarre, and Foucault were all gay men, writing—at least in part—about sexuality in late twentieth-century France, and Bouraoui here pays tribute to the positive influence that exposure to their books had on her at a young age, enabling her to identify as gay, and sustaining her previous claim that "lire, c'est se lire."¹⁰⁵

In these examples of Bouraoui's representation of her own youthful reading encounters, she clearly attributes significant formative power to the books she read and the writers who produced them. Having herself reflected on this positive potential of reading, we may imagine that the adult writer's self-perception includes awareness that she might be able to have an equally significant impact on the reader of her own work. Let us now turn, therefore, to Bouraoui's representation of the impact reading may have on other people's identities, first through a reading of her short novella *Avant les hommes*.

4.2 Escaping Isolation in *Avant les hommes*

In 2007 Bouraoui published *Avant les hommes*, a short first-person narrative describing the summer experiences of a teenaged boy, Jérémie. *Avant les hommes* stands out from each of Bouraoui's works from the preceding seven years, and from

¹⁰⁵ For biographical and bibliographical details on Jean-Louis Bory, Yves Navarre, and Michel Foucault, see *The New Oxford Companion to Literature in French*, edited by Peter France (107, 559, 320–322).

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the three books she has published since then. Although Bouraoui's first four publications in the 1990s were short works of fiction which we have classified as non-autobiographical (see Introduction), *Avant les hommes* is the only text within the twelve-year period of this study to bear no immediate resemblance to Bouraoui's life-story, and to depart from the usual pattern of being voiced by a young female narrator. Jérémie's story might, therefore, be seen as a brief departure from what we are considering as Bouraoui's broader literary aim within this time period, of examining her own personal identity within her writing. What makes the text particularly interesting for the question at hand in this chapter, however, is the character that Bouraoui chooses as her alternative narrator. As an isolated young homosexual, Jérémie perhaps represents the embodiment of the reader Bouraoui imagines in her comments about writing for others. Indeed, rather than a plot-focused novel, *Avant les hommes* represents Bouraoui's exploration of the psychology of young Jérémie, and a consideration of this text should, therefore, elucidate our broader investigation in this chapter.

Growing up in "un petit pavillon non loin d'une cité" (back cover), the protagonist of *Avant les hommes*, Jérémie, is a troubled and lonely teenager, being raised by a distant and apparently unloving mother. Jérémie is clearly aware of his own isolation, and openly asserts his feelings, desires and frustrations throughout the narrative: "Je me dis que je suis le garçon le plus seul au monde, je n'ai pas de pitié pour moi" (26) and, more dramatically a few pages later: "LOIN, c'est le mot qui me définit et qui définit toutes mes relations" (29). Due both to his gender and his socio-economic background, Jérémie is not Bouraoui's typical narrator, and yet many of the themes apparent in this text repeat interests Bouraoui has expressed elsewhere. For example, in a 2007 interview to mark the publication of this work, Bouraoui describes her interest in exploring adolescence and youth, which she sees as a hugely significant life stage, particularly for emerging sexual identity: "J'ai toujours été fascinée par la jeunesse et sa sensualité. C'est un état sauvage où on a l'impression que la sexualité va définir notre personnalité" ("Quand Nina Bouraoui parle des hommes"). In the character of Jérémie, Bouraoui gives voice to this interest, creating an intensity of tone aimed at capturing the uncertainty of his age, in a surprisingly self-aware narrator: "Je

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suis au début de ma jeunesse, ou de ce que l'on appelle la jeunesse, je suis entre avant et après, mais je n'ai pas vraiment d'histoire et je ne me représente pas l'avenir, c'est comme si je n'avais pas de prise sur le temps qui vient et qui est peut-être du temps qui me reste" (14).

Bourauoui's narrator appears both dangerously disconnected from the world around him and strangely astute in reflecting on this state. The motif of disaffected youth is apparent both in his frustrated declarations—"Ce monde qui me dit que tout est possible alors que rien n'est possible [...]. Je ne crois pas aux promesses de la vie" (30)—and in his recourse to recreational drugs as a form of escapism—"J'ai décidé de m'éloigner de ma mère en fumant des sticks de shit, je connaissais la dose suffisante pour la quitter et partir sur un autre continent" (22). In fact, despite significant differences between the circumstances of Jérémie's life and those of Bourauoui herself, this young first-person protagonist is in many ways similar to the one we meet at the beginning of *Poupée bella*. While the diary writer of *Poupée bella* is a few years older than Jérémie, meaning she is able to choose her living situation for herself, and that she feels correspondingly more in control of her own existence, both narrators feel out of place in the communities in which they have grown up, most especially due to their shared non-heterosexuality.

Je pense que l'on est seul au monde

The narrator of *Avant les hommes* is in love with a heterosexual male friend of his—who Bourauoui rather bizarrely names Sami, the same name she gives to the lost friend of Alya, in the 2011 novel *Sauvage* (see Chapter Three). We are told early on that, like the secondary character of *Sauvage*, Jérémie has problems with his mother, and one of the early enigmas referred to in Jérémie's life is this friendship with the absent Sami: "Je n'ai pas peur, je n'ai pas peur, depuis que Sami a disparu, je sais qu'il y a des choses que je ne peux pas réparer, c'est comme avec ma mère, j'ai décidé d'accepter tous les vides de notre histoire, il n'y a rien à faire parce qu'il n'y a rien à remplir" (26). The similarity between the "Sami" characters of *Avant les hommes* and *Sauvage* seemingly extends only to their names and mutual absence, however, as Jérémie's friend plays a very different role in his life than does Alya's younger playmate in

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Sauvage. In the first appearance of Sami in this text, Jérémie tells how "j'ai regardé une photo de Sami, un mec de mon lycée, et j'ai voulu jouir après" (14). As well as immediately revealing Jérémie's homosexuality, this early reference to the narrator's romantic yearning introduces loneliness and the search for love as two of the themes around which his teenaged angst is focused, which again connects the narrator of this text with many of Bouraoui's other works: "Je pense que l'on est seul au monde et que le paradis n'existe pas. J'ai le ventre dur, j'aimerais être dans les bras d'un autre pour pouvoir dire un jour: Je crois que j'ai existé" (48).

The ambition of physical union, and the feeling that a relationship will help Jérémie confirm his own existence, is repeated throughout this short text, as the narrator's sexual obsession with Sami becomes elevated to a status of potential self-affirmation: "Je veux Sami, je veux sa salive, je veux sa sueur, je veux son sperme, je veux que mon sang circule enfin, je veux un homme en moi pour savoir qui je suis" (39). While more sexually explicit than the narrator of *Poupée bella*, Jérémie's thoughts here remind us of the earlier narrator believing herself to be on the brink of self-discovery as she enters *le milieu des filles* (see above, and Chapter Two). Descriptions of Jérémie's suburban existence, isolated from the more cosmopolitan world of Paris, also resonate with the image we have proposed of Bouraoui's imagined reader of this earlier text: the isolated gay youth struggling to accept their difference from those around them. Jérémie admits that "Sami ne sait pas qui je suis vraiment et quand je pense à ça, ça me retourne le cœur, je lui ai menti pendant un an" (31), and, while Jérémie seems fairly confident of what the future holds for him as a gay man, he confesses to not yet being ready to join that adult world and leave behind his own: "J'ai envie d'un mec, ça m'obsède et ça me fait mal dans mon ventre, c'est du désir mélangé à de la tristesse; je sais où il faut aller pour en trouver un, mais je n'ai pas encore assez de force. Le monde dans lequel je vis ne me ressemble pas" (60). Where our affirmative reading of *Poupée bella* suggested that Bouraoui may intend, through writing, to open up Paris's gay quarter to isolated readers, the character of Jérémie fits with the notion of the isolated gay youth, whose suburban world is psychologically much more distant from Paris than its geographical location suggests: "Je pense à toutes les petites maisons de brique qui forment notre quartier, je pense à la ville qui me semble si loin" (39).

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Indeed, the idea that Jérémie's world does not fit him conforms not only to Bouraoui's description of homosexuals living "dans un monde qui ne parle pas [d'eux]," but equally to the claims of Lucille Cairns's real life gay reader, quoted above: "On a besoin de trouver des représentations proches de notre propre identité pour supporter de vivre dans un milieu qui globalement ne correspond pas à ce que nous sommes profondément."

If the circumstances of Jérémie's situation therefore make him, in spite of first appearances, a comfortably Bouraouian narrator, some of his attempts to respond to his personal anguish through literature fit too with strategies employed by Bouraoui's more self-referential characters. At several stages, Jérémie describes writing letters to Sami, figuratively mediating a love relationship through words which are then quoted in the text itself (32, 37). While these letters remain one-sided and unsent, the construction of an alternative, fictional world through written language recalls both Bouraoui's self-referential narrators in texts such as *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Sauvage* (see Chapter Three), and the way in which we have chosen to characterise Bouraoui's overall autofictional project as at times an escapist retreat into literature (see Chapter Two). Jérémie states, for example: "Ma réalité est composée de plusieurs couches, chaque fois que je retire un paysage, chaque fois je découvre un nouveau monde" (33). In spite of Jérémie's youth, he appears surprisingly aware of how his imaginary interaction with his best friend meets his own need for escapism, reflecting, "Avec Sami, j'avais une idée de ce que pouvait être le désir; je plongeais dans une deuxième vie qui n'était pas meilleure mais différente de la mienne" (58), and earlier: "Je construisais une (fausse) histoire autour de lui, interprétant chaque signe que je reliais à l'amour, ou à mon délire amoureux" (25).

De se sentir compris par un inconnu

Equally, as with the two texts already discussed in this chapter, reading appears in *Avant les hommes* as an important activity representing the power of words to access alternative lifestyles. Bouraoui's belief in the positive effects that reading can have features in the text in the form of a present from Jérémie's father, of which Jérémie explains: "J'ai reçu un colis de mon père, un petit livre, il a écrit sur la première page

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que ce livre pouvait donner un sens à la vie de chacun" (27–28). Jérémie's reaction to this is open-minded: "Je l'ai lu vite, au soleil, j'ai bu de la bière et les mots entraient dans mon sang en même temps que l'alcool" (28). Although drugs, alcohol, and sexual fantasies—rather than literature—remain Jérémie's dominant means of escapism, and the father's present is therefore not effective in the idealistic way in which it is intended, the act of reading the book does nonetheless have an influence on the young man's mind. The narrator describes his own reflections on what he finds written within the book, reporting, "Dans le livre, on dit qu'il ne faut pas essayer de changer les choses qui sont à l'extérieur de nous, comme la richesse et le pouvoir," with the result that "J'ai réfléchi à ce que je possédais vraiment" (28).

At other stages of the text, Jérémie experiments with reading poetry, initially lamenting, "Je lis de la poésie, mais les mots ne sont pas assez nombreux pour me construire une autre histoire que la mienne" (36), before developing a closer affinity with his reading: "J'aime lire de la poésie, j'ai l'impression qu'elle parle de moi, que l'on écrit quelque chose sur moi, même si je n'ai aucun rapport avec celui qui a écrit le poème, c'est comme un rêve de se sentir compris par un inconnu" (78). In each of these examples, the reading encounter suggests a form of textual interaction which may help Jérémie overcome some of his isolation, or even, his father hopes, find meaning in his own life. Furthermore, this possibility takes on particular significance where it is closely followed on the next page by Jérémie's reflections on his sexual orientation: "Aimer les hommes, c'est faire le vide autour de soi parce que l'on n'est pas comme les autres, c'est franchir la frontière, c'est regagner sa liberté, c'est devenir celui qu'on a chassé. Aimer les hommes, c'est mon plus grand silence, et la plus grande guerre que je doive mener" (79). Where Jérémie here claims an inherent link between gayness and isolation, the idea that when reading poetry he is able to feel understood once again manifests Bouraoui's belief in the positive potential of literature for gay readers' self-perception. At the same time, the reference to silence and, above, to the need to construct "une autre histoire que la mienne" affirms the themes of language and story-telling as crucial to relational identity, which in Jérémie's case repeatedly implicates his homosexuality: "Parfois, le visage de Ralph brouille le visage de Sami, j'ai envie d'un homme parce que j'ai envie d'une autre vie que la mienne, j'ai envie que

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l’on me raconte une histoire, j’ai envie de savoir comment cela se passe ailleurs, dans les autres cerveaux” (76–77).

While Jérémie’s geographical location—in a small, non-cosmopolitan community in the *banlieue*—has thus far prohibited him from meeting any other gay men, and his sexual interests are therefore necessarily focused on the unattainable heterosexual men around him, he perhaps resembles a younger version of *Poupée bella*’s Nina, expecting that with time he will be able to find an environment with which he fits more comfortably, should he move to the city. Like Nina, too, he is confident that such a move will be affirmative, and that he will be able to live a fuller, happier life once he finds a reciprocal romantic relationship. In the meantime, however, beyond the drugs and fantasising with which he fills his days, Jérémie craves information. He reads to understand the world around him, hoping to find a place for himself within it. In *Avant les hommes*, therefore, Bouraoui creates a character for whom the textual encounter can be truly transformative, allowing Jérémie to uncover a meaning for his own life, and to access the thoughts and feelings of others like him, from whom he as yet remains isolated.

Where Bouraoui’s comments that “on écrit aussi pour les autres” were made in response to a question specifically about female homosexuality, we find across *Poupée bella* and *Avant les hommes* a sense of shared experience for young gay men and lesbians, both marginalised by dominant contemporary society, and potentially benefitting from positive representations of gay lives within literature. If these two texts affirm a common response on Bouraoui’s part to homosexuals of both genders, however, the next text we will consider in relation to these themes, *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* (2008), troubles the question of gender—and indeed sexuality—potentially undermining Bouraoui’s claimed intention to provide a positive model for such readers.

4.3 Textual Relations in *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*

In 2008 Bouraoui released her 11th book, *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*. It tells the story of a successful female writer living in modern-day Paris who, at a book-signing in

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Zurich, meets "P.", an art student and avid reader of her work. Although the narrator goes unnamed, we learn that she has a similar back story—and back catalogue—to the work's author, leading us to connect her with both the "Nina" of earlier texts and a textual form of Bouraoui herself. At the first meeting between the text's two characters, P. tells the narrator of the enormous effect her writing has had on his life and his own artistic production, and presents her with a letter and a DVD containing a short film he has made in response to his reading of her work. Over the following months, reader and writer begin a correspondence, exchanging emails, photos and songs, and become increasingly intimate, until they meet again, in Paris, and become lovers. The rest of the narrative then follows the early months of the couple's romance, intertwining developments in their relationship with reflections on art, writing, and love, as well as persistently blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality.

Appelez-moi par mon prénom firmly identifies Bouraoui's narrator in her profession as a writer, and representing herself in this character necessarily reveals something of Bouraoui's perception of herself as a published author. In the character of P., Bouraoui then creates a fantasy reader whose actions and responses to her work might, we imagine, embody the ways in which she wishes her writing to influence the world, thereby further elucidating our question of "writing for others." Where our readings of *Poupée bella*, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, and *Avant les hommes* have already speculated on the ways in which Bouraoui believes the textual encounter can be transformative for the reader, this text actively instates such a reader within the narrative, a highly autofictional move which will provide a means to test our earlier speculations against Bouraoui's explicit depiction of her reader. At the same time, however, it will also trouble our understanding of Bouraoui's efforts to provide a positive representation of gay lifestyles. Through writing of a love affair between an authorial narrator and her reader and fan, Bouraoui perhaps creates the most intimate of possible scenarios with regard to potentially influencing her readers. In addition, we have suggested that sexual identity may be a particularly propitious area for the reader of life-writing to be influenced by what they encounter in the text, with gay writers potentially providing positive models of lifestyles frequently rendered invisible within dominant cultural

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forms. In *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*, however, Bouraoui strikingly abandons the theme of gay identity so prevalent in her earlier work, choosing a male reader as her narrator's lover, and thereby representing the first heterosexual relationship to feature in her life-writing. Our reading of *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* will therefore address the question of how we can reconcile this notable change with our ongoing consideration of Bouraoui's claims to "écrit aussi pour les autres." Probing the form of sexuality which is presented in this work, alongside a focus on the consequences of Bouraoui's textual choices—particularly, here, the recourse to autofiction—it will be productive to return to the work of Monique Wittig which we explored in Chapters One and Two, as Wittig's proto-queer, re-signified notion of the "lesbian" may help us to resolve the apparent paradox at hand.

J'avais voulu être libre

In the promotional interviews for the novel's 2008 release Bouraoui playfully suggested that the story of a heterosexual love affair between her and a reader may have been based in truth (see "Nina Bouraoui à la rencontre d'un lecteur"), but by 2010 she had publicly dropped this façade. In fact, in the interview "L'Écriture au corps," quoted at the start of this chapter, Bouraoui admits, "J'ai assez mal vécu mon avant-dernier livre, *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*," largely because "j'avais voulu être libre en écrivant une histoire hétérosexuelle." Where *Poupée bella* and *Mes mauvaises pensées* are self-referential narratives, describing periods of the author's life in a highly stylised form of autobiography, *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* represents a different kind of autofiction for Bouraoui: the story of a fictional love affair pursued by a clearly self-referential narrator, and set within her own contemporary real life. In this text, Bouraoui therefore constructs a complex autofictional world, in which the freedom afforded by the form allows her to fully pursue her interest in writing as a means for re-constructing her own identity—even through experimenting with alternative sexualities. Beyond just the desire to experiment with textual heterosexuality in this work, however, the autofictional construct is itself important both to the form and the content of the work. Throughout the narrative, Bouraoui weaves in layers of intra-textual reference which evoke the texts already discussed in

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this chapter, producing a highly experimental composition which foregrounds the potential impact of the textual encounter.

Throughout the early stages of her long-distance correspondence with P., the narrator of *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* refers to a novel she is in the process of writing, and how her new obsessive love interest has disrupted her writing life: "P. était entré dans ma vie, je ne pouvais pas l'en chasser. J'avais inventé un personnage qui se substituait au roman" (22). References such as this—in itself playfully alluding to the fictionality of this relationship—help confirm the autofictional edifice of the text, propagating the image of the narrator as a successful author resembling Bouraoui herself. With time, the narrator's references to her ongoing writing become more specific, and she reveals that she has begun a new project, her description of which immediately recalls *Avant les hommes*: "Je commençais à écrire les scènes de mon projet, débutant par l'architecture du lieu. L'histoire se déroulait dans une ville pavillonnaire, non loin des cités qui surgissaient à la sortie de Paris" (47). In addition to the similarity of location, Nina explains her choice of protagonists, "Je m'inspirais des tableaux du réalisateur Gus Van Sant pour décrire la jeunesse de deux garçons," describing how "Ils avançaient, à l'inverse de P., à peine sortis de l'enfance, projetés dans le danger du désir permanent, désir inassouvi reporté sur les drogues, la frustration provoquant l'excès. L'idée de ce livre arrivait avec ma rencontre" (47). The reference here to Gus Van Sant, like the other inter-textual references of *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*, affirms the interrelatedness of Bouraoui's artistic work with her own cultural explorations, which she explicitly acknowledges throughout her writing. Even more significantly, however, we also find a clear intra-textual connection, with the two protagonists she describes bearing a strong resemblance to the Jérémie and Sami of her own work *Avant les hommes*.

Most interesting in the above quotation is the comparison of Nina's two fictional protagonists with her new lover, P., and the affirmation that: "L'idée de ce livre arrivait avec ma rencontre." If we are to take *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* at face value as a truthful narrative, then on one level the text may apparently be read as an artist's diary, charting the progression of her work in the year 2007. If this were true, this reference would seem to reveal that, at the time of composing *Avant les hommes*, the

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author's romantic life not only motivated and supported her artistic endeavour, but actively inspired it, furnishing the material for her exploration of a new, masculine, protagonist. Of course, in the above quotation Nina refuses the identification of P. with these two boys barely emerging from adolescence, but the very fact that she needs to state this for herself may perhaps belie such a refusal. The narrator describes elsewhere in the text how, now that she is (unusually) in a relationship with a man, "J'éprouvais du plaisir à écrire à la place d'un homme, dérochant sa jouissance" (53), while in the later stages of her writing she actively affirms P.'s role in helping form the character of Jérémie, as P. describes his own life story for Nina, which at times strongly resembles Jérémie's. After a weekend visit to her lover, for example, Nina reports how: "Je reprenais mon travail, écrivant à la place d'un homme, je m'inspirais de son adolescence qu'il m'avait décrite dans une longue lettre qui ressemblait à une séquence. Il s'était perdu dans son désir, croyant mourir d'amour" (100).

At a key turning point in the relationship between P. and Nina, when, having corresponded with Nina for several months, P. happens to be making a trip to Paris with a friend, and the possibility of the pair's reunion therefore presents itself, Nina's act of writing *Avant les hommes* (or a text similar to it) is placed centrally and specifically within the text. On hearing P.'s news that he is due to visit Paris, Nina is initially upset that she has not been included in his plans, and her response to the couple's first argument is to retreat briefly back into her writing: "Je me réfugiais dans mon travail, écrivant le titre—*Les trois cent soixante-cinq jours de Jérémie*—et un premier chapitre. J'ouvrais mon histoire par la jouissance solitaire de mon héros, qui rejoignait toutes les solitudes humaines" (50). Although the stated title of Nina's text clearly differs from the finished work we have been discussing, the central character's name is the same, and the finished text of *Avant les hommes* does open on a scene of masturbation (13). If we accept the two texts to be the same, the change of title for the published version supports the notion that it is a work-in-progress within the narrative of *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*. It is striking therefore that Bouraoui should choose not only to create one autofictional text within which her protagonist is writing a second, but also that the ups and downs of an (auto)fictional heterosexual

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relationship should, within the world of *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*, affect the writing of her real-life earlier publication.

These allusions to *Avant les hommes* are not the only intra-textual references to occur within *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*. As well as creating a reader-lover who allegedly inspires the narrator in the writing of her new novel, Bouraoui ensures reciprocity of artistic influence within the relationship between Nina and P., through the sustained evocation of an earlier publication of Nina's which bears strong resemblance to Bouraoui's own *Poupée bella*. While we have considered how the situation of the narrator of *Avant les hommes*, Jérémie, is in some ways similar to that of both the twenty-year-old Nina of *Poupée bella* and the young man, P., with whom the (older) Nina of *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* becomes involved, a further layer of autofictional identification now emerges between this reader-lover and Bouraoui's younger self as represented in the earlier text. Where the narrator of *Poupée bella* considers herself to be on the brink of adulthood, seeking to understand the world around her and find a place within it, in "P." Bouraoui creates a young man at a similar stage of life, whose horizons have actually been broadened by reading Bouraoui's work.

Il peinait à y trouver sa place

At one point in *Appelez moi par mon prénom*, the narrator broaches the question of the significant age difference between her and P., recounting how: "Il m'avouait un jour son âge, que je connaissais déjà. Je décelais une certaine gêne et j'en fus émue" (40). Embarrassing as this issue may be for the narrator, P.'s youth is clearly crucial for the relationship Bouraoui constructs between them, due to the parallel, first implicitly and then explicitly drawn, between Nina's young reader, and herself as twenty-year-old narrator of *Poupée bella*. In an apparent citation or paraphrase of P.'s correspondence with her, Nina describes how: "Il ne craignait pas le monde, mais il peinait à y trouver sa place" (40), evoking the powerful image of a disoriented youth attempting to come to terms with the world. The progression of this conversation then hints at the role of Nina the writer in P.'s explorations: "Il aimait apprendre auprès des autres, ce que j'entendais ainsi—J'aimerais apprendre auprès de vous" (40). Whether

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or not P. intended Nina to understand his comments in this way, Nina is quickly influenced by the pressure of her perceived mentoring role. She describes how, walking around Paris, the city in which she lives, P.'s figurative presence alongside her prompts her to walk back through the areas she frequented at his age, reviving the period and atmosphere of *Poupée bella* in the memory of her own uncertain youthful explorations:

Il m'arrivait de le sentir juste derrière moi, une main sur mon épaule, son souffle dans mes cheveux. Il suivait mon pas rapide qui me menait à la place de la Concorde où Paris semblait se séparer. Je montais vers les Champs-Élysées, quartier de mes années d'adolescence lorsque je cherchais quelqu'un qui aurait pu me ressembler. (40)

Returning to what we have seen of *Poupée bella* within this chapter, we remember how the young Nina walks the streets of Paris—specifically "les jardins du Palais-Royal" (see above)—in quiet homage to her own literary hero, Colette, from whom she had drawn much of her knowledge of the gay lifestyle referred to in the search for "quelqu'un qui aurait pu me ressembler." Here, it is Nina's own reader she imagines walking alongside her as she explores the city. In this scene, therefore, Bouraoui unites two periods of her life, each demonstrating the development of her personal identity, and the role of literature in discovering and representing this sense of self. Nina's physical revisiting of her youth then recurs in her correspondence with P. a few pages later: "Je lui disais qu'il me faisait penser à moi au même âge et regrettais mes mots, m'étant fait la promesse de ne jamais faire allusion à cette différence ou de ne jamais m'en servir pour me situer, me faire plaindre ou nous comparer" (46). Even if Nina claims not to want to make this comparison apparent within the relationship itself, however, the resemblance of P. to the narrator of *Poupée bella* soon becomes evident not just thematically, but through overt reference to the earlier text.

Among many allusions which hint at the self-referentiality of Bouraoui's writer, the film which P. presents to Nina on their first meeting makes reference to *Poupée bella*: "P. m'avait donné un disque DV sur lequel était gravé le petit film qu'il avait réalisé [...] inspiré de cinq passages de mon Journal, qu'il avait intitulé *Je cherche un monde qui parlerait de moi*, phrase extraite du même Journal" (12). Italicised here we find the

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phrase used by the narrator of that earlier text amidst the difficult and confusing period she experiences on entering *le milieu des filles* at the age of twenty (discussed in Chapter Two)—also echoing Bouraoui's interview with *Transfuge*, in which she refers to the state of being "dans un monde qui ne parle pas de vous" ("L'Écriture au corps"). Although *Poupée bella* is not named as a reference in the text, the capitalisation of "Journal" here establishes the earlier work as a firm symbolic presence within the narrative, occurring not once but on several occasions over the course of Nina and P.'s relationship. Where P. tells Nina about his past, for example, this published diary appears in the text in physical form: "Mon Journal faisait partie des armes dont [P.] avait usé pour revenir de sa tristesse. Il en avait appris certains passages. Il me montrerait un jour son exemplaire, souligné" (48). We might therefore see P.'s reaction to Nina's work as embodying how she imagines her published work will impact on its readership: we are told that P.'s impassioned response to reading the Journal relates to a break-up in his own romantic life prior to discovering her book, and Nina's description of how he then used the text as a weapon "pour revenir de sa tristesse" expresses how significant the influence of his supposed textual encounter with her work has been.

Just as, perhaps, Colette provides a model for the young lesbians of *Poupée bella*, the narrator of this text seems to position herself within a similar authorial relationship to P.. She recounts how: "Il disait me connaître d'après ses lectures, conscient que je ne me livrais pas en entier mais qu'une part de vérité devait bien surgir, ou tendre le fil de mes pensées" (30)—a claim which corresponds with the loosened "autobiographical truth" identified by Smith and Watson as the potential impact of reading experimental or non-referential life-writing (see section one of this chapter). Nina's description of problematic gay relationships in *Poupée bella* has apparently been used by P. to navigate his own youthful straight relationships, and so we understand that the positive influence—or potential for affirmative identification—in the textual encounter goes further than just sexuality. If our reading of Nina's authorial influence on P. requires the broadening out of the potential positive impact of the textual encounter to a wider readership, therefore, it is possible that the justification for Bouraoui's claim that "on écrit aussi pour les autres" lies not in her representation of

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homosexuality within her work, but in the more progressive possibilities of her autofictional writing.

Un cheval de Troie?

So far, we have considered Bouraoui's attempts to "write for others" through publicising a conventional gay sexuality which may positively impact on her readers, in keeping with an important feature of gay writing evident in a literary heritage dating back to writers such as Colette. In Chapter Two of this thesis, however, we saw, through a reading of the early autobiographical trilogy of 2000–2004, that Bouraoui's own sexual identity cannot always be straightforwardly defined in this way, and the inclusion of an autofictional heterosexual relationship within *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* troubles the ease with which we might identify Bouraoui as a representative gay writer. Alongside the conventional use of the term "lesbian" as female homosexual, the work of Monique Wittig has provided us with an alternative definition of the term, to define not "woman-loving women," but anyone who refuses the binary sexual division imposed by the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality (see Chapter One). While Wittig's gender politics perhaps appear too abstract and too radical to be usefully employed for contemporary feminist activism, her interests both in how language forms identity, and how literature can potentially trans-form it, makes her an apposite theorist for a reading of Bouraoui's self-referential writing, and another element of Wittig's theory might now reveal a potential solution to the apparent contradictions we have been considering.

We have already, in Chapter Two, analysed the ways in which Bouraoui's personal sexual identity might better conform to a specifically Wittigian understanding of the term "lesbian." As our Wittigian reading of Bouraoui is not prompted by Bouraoui's personal sexual practice—Wittig's re-signification of the term "lesbian" operates independently of one's choice of romantic partner—the creation of a non-homosexual textual relationship in *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* need not trouble a Wittigian understanding of Bouraoui's autofiction. While Simmonet's question, at the start of this chapter, as to whether Bouraoui feels obliged to "faire sortir l'homosexualité féminine d'une forme d'invisibilité narrative" clearly does refer to conventionally

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understood—"woman-loving woman"—lesbianism, we might ourselves choose to re-appropriate the definition of the form of sexuality Bouraoui endeavours to "represent" in her self-referential work. Rather than "l'homosexualité féminine," the relational form Bouraoui is successful in "fai[sant] sortir d'une forme d'invisibilité narrative" may be, perhaps, a more queer, liberating and anti-definitional form of sexual identity—in short, a form of Wittigian lesbianism.

Where Wittig sees the social world—and particularly the oppressive gender categories into which it is divided—as entirely constructed through language, for her it follows that writers may be able to transform this world through politically involved literary production. For writers from "minority points of view," this capacity is particularly important, providing a means through which marginality may be overcome. We have already heard that, for Wittig, "Tout écrivain minoritaire (qui a conscience de l'être) entre dans la littérature à l'oblique" (*La pensée straight* 91—see Chapter Two). For those social subjects who, marginalised through the oppressive domination of the category of sex, are unable to speak as un-particularised, universal subjects, entry into the literary sphere is understandably difficult, and such writers are forced to pursue experimental forms in order to achieve their aims. In her essay "Le cheval de Troie," Wittig elaborates on how writers from minority backgrounds might nonetheless infiltrate the literary sphere, describing how: "Toute œuvre littéraire importante est, au moment de sa production, comme le cheval de Troie" (*La pensée straight* 97). Like the Trojan Horse, for Wittig minority writers can work their way into the upper echelons of cultural production through their work, with the result that, once published, the power of their literary craft will help to transform the social world for the better. In order to achieve this, Wittig proposes a strategy of "universalising" the minority point of view: "C'est finalement par l'entreprise d'universalisation qu'une œuvre littéraire peut se transformer en une machine de guerre" (102), and, therefore, "un texte écrit par un écrivain minoritaire n'est efficace que s'il réussit à rendre universel le point de vue minoritaire" (92).

Wittig's comments on universalization were first composed for her preface to a translation of Djuna Barnes's *Spillway*, and in this piece we are given a specific example of how universalising a minority position may change the social landscape,

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where Wittig explains: "Djuna Barnes tente l'expérience, et la réussit, d'universaliser le féminin (comme Proust, elle ne fait aucune différence entre les personnages masculins et féminins) et de retirer à ce genre son 'odeur de couvée.' C'est que ce faisant elle annule les genres en les rendant obsolètes" (90). Through re-working and subverting the meaning of textual gender—Barnes's characters may be what we would now describe, in the "queer theory" sense of the term, as "queer"—Wittig argues that Barnes achieves an (incremental) step towards social change, representing an alternative understanding of gender which can, at least for the duration of the text, have a transformative effect on the reader. For a writer seeking to publicise alternative identity positions, therefore, the propagation of their "minority point of view" within their literary work will be effective if it is "universalised" within the work—which is to say, rendered natural or automatic within the world of the text—in contrast to its marginal position in the world more broadly.

Within the same essay, however, Wittig sounds a note of caution against overly emphasising minority themes (for example, here, that of lesbianism in Barnes's work) lest a writer become pigeon-holed as only speaking to a minority audience, thereby limiting the impact of their work. She explains, "Écrire un texte qui a parmi ses thèmes l'homosexualité, c'est un pari, c'est prendre le risque qu'à tout moment l'élément formel qu'est le thème surdétermine le sens, accapare tout le sens, contre l'intention de l'auteur" (91). The minority writer must not allow their theme to overpower what they write, for, "Quand cela arrive à un texte il est détourné de son but premier qui est de changer la réalité textuelle dans laquelle il s'inscrit" (91). For Wittig, the efficacy of a literary work depends on it being read by a general public, and for this public to be affected by it, identifying, through reading, with the particular position which is being universalised. This is why important literary works are like the Trojan Horse: they can infiltrate their readers' viewpoints and transform their perspectives, operating as "une machine de guerre," without the reader even being consciously aware of what is happening.

Returning, now, to our reading of *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*, it may, of course, be tempting to dismiss this text as non-representative for Bouraoui's gay audience, given its central theme of a fictional heterosexual relationship between the writer and one

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of her readers. In the light of Wittig's comments, however, another possibility emerges, through which we might redeem Bouraoui's claim to "write for others." In *Poupée bella* we have suggested that, representing her own journey from isolated and sexually-confused young woman, to confident and worldly adult, Bouraoui may intend to throw light on non-heterosexual lifestyles, publicising Paris's *milieu des filles* in potentially affirmative ways. In *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*, Bouraoui's representation of "P." as a reader who has been transformed by his reading of that earlier text fits with the notion of *Poupée bella* as a representative text, albeit not in any straightforwardly gay or lesbian way. If we were to readjust our understanding of the form of sexual identity Bouraoui wishes to represent through her life-writing, however, the possibility that she has, in Wittigian style, "universalised" a queer form of identity would explain her decision to masculinise "P.", demonstrating the absolute openness of a re-signified, Wittigian form of "lesbian" identity.

Where *Poupée bella* was set entirely within Paris's gay quarter, and Nina interacted solely with non-heterosexuals—she states at one point, "Je ne me souviens plus des hommes qui aiment les femmes" (75)—the earlier text might be said to universalise alternative sexual identities, which in turn are not conventionally gay, but "queer" or Wittigian-lesbian. In this reading, "P."s interaction with that earlier text will have had Wittig's proposed effect on the reader, as his own sexual identity is transformed into one in keeping with the characters he encountered in his reading. Rather than a heterosexual man, the universalization of queer identity in *Poupée bella* has turned Bouraoui's imagined male reader into a "queer" or Wittigian-lesbian subject, whose sexual object choices no longer conform to the gender binaries of the regime of compulsory heterosexuality. The relationship between Nina and "P.," therefore, is neither gay nor straight, but the manifestation of a new form of anti-definitional sexuality.

Of course, Bouraoui's own explanation for her choice of a male autofictional partner in this text is rather more prosaic, as we heard her claim, above, that "j'avais voulu être libre en écrivant une histoire hétérosexuelle." Nevertheless, certain details Bouraoui gives of the interaction between Nina and "P." provide support for a queer reading of their relationship. Early in the text, the narrator's description of one of "P."s art

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projects leads to specific reference to Judith Butler—probably the best known of contemporary queer theorists (see Chapter One)—as an important theoretical influence, alongside several artists famous for their work in subverting gender identity: "Il avait travaillé d'après les œuvres de Claude Cahun, de Michel Journiac, de Cindy Sherman et les essais de Butler. Il était fasciné par l'ambiguïté, y trouvant une beauté sans fond dans laquelle chacun d'entre nous pouvait se perdre" (35). In addition to P.'s theoretical and aesthetic appreciation of gender subversion, Nina's musings about P.'s personal life also occasionally toy with his attractiveness to other men (17, 91), while the first time P. meets Nina in Paris follows his participation in the city's Gay Pride festival (49). Where these moments hint at P.'s openness to non-heterosexual relationships, within Nina's life, too, the notion that gender should be important to one's choice of sexual partner is apparently mocked in a reference to *l'Amie*—the girlfriend of the narrator of *Mes mauvaises pensées*, who also occurs in *Nos baisers sont des adieux* (see below)—which suggests that Nina's ex-girlfriend is now also in a relationship with a man (79). Where gender has clearly not been entirely eradicated within the world of the text, and the sex of individuals is repeatedly remarked upon, the significance of each character's gender identity is downplayed to the point of irrelevance. A "queer" understanding of individual identity, or even a Wittigian-lesbian rejection of gender binaries, therefore potentially emerges. When Nina casually describes, walking in public with her partner, how, "Il me semblait ne former qu'un seul corps, ni féminin ni masculin, à la jonction de nous deux" (86), it may be that, rather than either representing or refusing the gay community, Bouraoui is instead advocating a queerer and more open form of relationality through these autofictional texts.

From our reading of *Appelez-moi par mon prénom*, together with *Avant les hommes* and *Poupée bella*, we may conclude that with regard to our question of "writing for others," Bouraoui's writing is not "representative" of gay identity in a conventional sense, and yet Bouraoui herself does demonstrate a belief in the transformative power of the reading encounter. Incorporating Wittig's theoretical work into our analysis of Bouraoui's autofiction, this transformative power may in fact be particularly significant due to the form itself, with experimental life-writing potentially proving more, rather

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than less, influential on the reader. Like a literary Trojan horse, Bouraoui's representation of sexual identity in these autofictional texts may be seen to have a more empowering impact than merely demonstrating alternative lifestyles for the reader. If we agree with Wittig's theory on the effect of universalising the minority point of view in the text, Bouraoui's representation of a queer, or Wittigian-lesbian, sexual identity becomes extremely powerful, as, more open and inclusive than conventional gay-affirmative literature, even Bouraoui's (fictional) heterosexual reader, P., may be transformed through his reading of her work. In this analysis, the reading encounter becomes a site through which the social system may be (incrementally) altered, with Bouraoui's straight reader, in Wittig's terms, "liberated" from the regime of compulsory heterosexuality. Through our examination of the reading encounter in the first half of this chapter, we have established the importance of reading within Bouraoui's own life, and have speculated as to how her interest in reading has motivated the writer to foreground particular themes relating to her personal identity within her self-referential work. Where we have thus far considered the effect of Bouraoui's writing on her readers, we shall now turn back to the writer herself, to consider the impact of the other side of the textual encounter, the act of writing, on the construction of Bouraoui's personal identity.

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4.4 Resolving the Quest: *Nos baisers sont des adieux*

Longtemps, j'ai eu du mal à communiquer avec les autres. 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.

(Nina Bouraoui, “Écrire, c’est retrouver ses fantômes”)

We have considered the above quotation as an originating statement for Bouraoui’s writing project (see Introduction). Describing her entry into literature, and her decision to write about herself, Bouraoui refers to her childhood self as “sauvage, réservée, solitaire,” seemingly setting up language—both in terms of native tongue, and literary medium— as the crucial means through which she seeks to connect with the world. Writing has become an “identity quest,” through which communication and love will, she hopes, emerge contemporaneously. In Chapters Two and Three of this thesis, we considered Bouraoui’s efforts to “trouver une place dans ce monde” in texts relating her adolescence and young adulthood. First, we saw how writing and sexuality provided two mechanisms for pursuing Bouraoui’s personal identity quest, before investigating the persistent revisiting of her Algerian childhood, and the enduring consequences of her self-description as “une enfant sauvage,” for Bouraoui’s adult writing self. In the first half of this chapter, we have examined the consequences of Bouraoui’s literary engagement from the point of view of the reader, testing Bouraoui’s own perception that writing has allowed her to reach out to others, and to have a transformative impact on her readers’ lives and identities. With regard to the theme of relational identity in Bouraoui’s work, it will now be pertinent to examine the other side of the textual encounter produced through Bouraoui’s oeuvre: that of the writer’s own relationship to her craft. How successful has Bouraoui’s literary identity quest proven, and how might we now judge Bouraoui’s claim that: “J’ai commencé à écrire sur moi [...] pour me faire aimer des autres”?

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Nos baisers sont des adieux (2010), Bouraoui's twelfth book, and the final explicitly self-referential work published in the period of this study, will provide a useful text through which to seek answers to these questions, given both the scope of the text's content—which revisits each of the periods of Bouraoui's life that we have already considered—and its thematic focus, on writing, relationships, and Bouraoui's connection to the world around her. Examining specific elements of the form and content of this recent text, we will see how Bouraoui connects writing and relationships throughout her personal history, at first prioritising her literary engagement over the other relationships in her life, before a late shift which hints at a more productive resolution to her textual identity quest. While Bouraoui's early autofictional work seems at times to suggest an authorial retreat into the literary, escaping the real world in order to live out a less constrained personal identity in the world of the text, the construction of *Nos baisers sont des adieux* reveals a progression past this earlier escapism, in suggesting that there may after all be certain elements of life which are too significant to be expressed in writing. Through an examination of the interpersonal relationships which have been influential in the writer's life, Bouraoui in fact ultimately reveals a rich and meaningful emotional world which may, at times, even extend beyond the scope of the literary.

Le désir n'est pas isolé

From the opening page of *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, Bouraoui's continued concern for the themes we have considered with regard to her textual identity quest is immediately apparent. The work is prefaced with an open dedication, revealing a significant change of perspective from the interview comments we initially considered:

Le désir n'est pas isolé. Il est multiple et secret. Il est par les autres et pour les autres.

Je me suis raccordée aux hommes, aux femmes, aux objets et aux images qui ont construit la personne que je suis. (9)

In two paragraphs, set apart on an otherwise empty page, Bouraoui opens this work with a tribute to the men, women, objects, and images that have been significant to her. In the text itself, she goes on to assemble nearly a hundred apparently

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autobiographical fragments, disconnected and non-linear paragraphs recalling different moments in her life, through a focus on these external influences which, she claims, have together helped to construct the person that she has become. Bouraoui's representation of herself, here, as almost entirely constructed by relationships, chimes with critical theory we have considered in Chapter One, and with contemporary theorisations of the "attenuated" subject which "returns from structuralist exile" incoherent, inconsistent, and dependent on others. From the reserved—almost feral—uncommunicative child Bouraoui describes in the earlier interview, the writer here posits her adult self as remarkably different. What is more, this development, into not only a communicative adult, but one who considers themselves—almost entirely—constructed through their relationships with others, has apparently taken place in large part thanks to her initial engagement with writing. As well as writing for others, it would seem, the re-construction of Bouraoui's personal identity over the series of her self-referential texts has had a transformative effect on the author herself, as, reaching out to others through her writing, the textual encounter proves positively formative of Bouraoui's adult sense of self.

While the structure of a text consisting of scores of dated fragments, rather than a clear narrative, is familiar from *Poupée bella*, the form of *Nos baisers sont des adieux* differs from that earlier text in some important ways. Where *Poupée bella* took the form of a reconstructed diary, covering less than two years of the author's younger experiences, the different sections of *Nos baisers sont des adieux* stretch over a 37-year period (1972–2009), ranging back over Bouraoui's life, and constituting a work of memory rather than claiming to be a contemporary record. They also do not follow a chronological sequence, but vary apparently indiscriminately across this period, as if in an order prompted by no more than the unstructured and chance reminiscences of the author's nostalgic mind. The length of the fragments varies considerably, from a couple of lines to several pages, and each of them describes a different scene from the writer's memory. Above each entry, a heading in block capitals reveals the year in which the scene took place, a geographical location—frequently Paris or Algiers, though roaming as widely as Abu Dhabi (21), the United States (121) and the Balearic

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islands (56)—and a title, usually the name of a person, or description of an object, featured in the scene to follow.

In some of the fragments Bouraoui appears to be recalling past relationships. Early on, for example, we encounter "Darrell, Abou Dhabi 1985" (21), before "X, Berlin 1993" (114) and "Rachel, Paris 1999" (124), all of whom feature on just one occasion in the text. Many of the dates and locations Bouraoui writes about are also familiar to the follower of her previous work. The period of *Poupée bella* is recreated in fragments headed "La Porte du Kat, Paris, 1986" (28), and "Julien, Paris, 1989" (211); the traumatic attempted abduction in *Garçon manqué* is recreated in "L'homme, Alger, 1972" (94), and the best friend of the narrator of *Sauvage* evoked under "Sami, Alger, 1978" (53); while the question from an old friend, "Tu as arrêté les femmes?" in "Gil, Paris, 2008" (85) seems to lend credence to the story in 2008's *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* that at that time she was dating a man (albeit not one called "P."). Significant lovers featured in past works also reoccur, notably Marion—the first love remembered in *Poupée bella* and fictionalised as Diane in *La vie heureuse* (139)—and *l'Amie*—the main lover to feature in *Mes mauvaises pensées* (218). In this one text, therefore, Bouraoui revisits each of her formative relationships, alongside other important events which have taken place in her life during this period. Throughout each of the representations of relationships, however, it is Bouraoui's own connection to her work as a writer which is foregrounded: at times writing itself appears to constitute one of the most important relationships of the narrator's life, and one which is always competing with human lovers for the writer's attention.

In a fragment entitled "X, Berlin, 1993" Bouraoui remembers a girlfriend she had at the time that she was trying to write her third novel: "X disait que j'avais eu de la chance pour mes deux premiers romans. Et que la chance ne revenait pas, sinon ce n'était plus de la chance" (115). Much like the Nina of *Poupée bella* (see Chapter Two), for the narrator of *Nos baisers sont des adieux* the memory of this girlfriend's negative attitude to her work causes her to reflect on the effect of the whole relationship on her literary production, and, in turn, on the nature of this writing itself: "Je vivais nos jours comme j'aurais pu vivre des jours de peine. Je faisais des efforts. Rien ne circulait. Depuis notre rencontre, je n'arrivais plus à écrire. Au début, j'y voyais une

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forme de liberté. De ne plus savoir. De ne plus y penser tous les jours. De cesser de doubler la vie, de la reconstruire" (115). Just as within a difficult relationship, the narrator's attachment to writing here is highly ambivalent: in one sense the lifestyle change involved in being with "X" is empowering, freeing her from the artistic torment of constantly reconstructing life through writing, while on the other hand the experience amounts to "des jours de peine," in which the natural flow of her daily existence seems to have dried up. What is most clear from this fragment, however, is the narrator's conviction that interpersonal relationships can threaten her ability to write, and throughout the text we find a preoccupation with the notion that some romances are productive for the writer's creativity while others are not.

In contrast to "X," the fragment "Le Bureau, Paris, 1996" (137) begins directly with: "Je retrouvais l'écriture grâce à l'Amie." Though we might expect the rest of this short entry to perhaps elaborate on how this new person helped the writer re-find her creative potential, no explicit explanation is forthcoming. Instead, the narrator uses typically abstract descriptions, and focuses almost entirely on the act of writing, rather than any particular qualities of *l'Amie*. Her reunion with writing is referred to as a meeting—"C'était un rendez-vous"—a journey—"Je partais en voyage. Ma traversée incluant mon passé et mon présent"—and, finally, as a love relationship of its own—"Je me liais au désir du livre aussi fort que le désir que j'aurais pu éprouver pour une personne." The detail of her connection with *l'Amie*, meanwhile, is restricted to a conversation about her writing success: "L'Amie, le soir, attendait notre phrase fétiche:—Je suis sauvée" (138). At this stage, Nina's concern with her capacity to work seems to overpower her interest in relationships. While labelling fragments with titles relating to past lovers apparently conforms to Bouraoui's intention in the book's dedication to pay tribute to the people who have been influential in her life, writing remains the primary force which governs her interaction with the world; the desire for writing, here, is at least as strong as that she feels for the people who make up her relational world, and whether or not writing has a positive effect on the writer's real life remains uncertain.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Whatever *l'Amie*'s skill in facilitating her partner's writing, the effect is obviously a successful one, as a fragment dated two years later, "Le Fruit, Paris, 1998," apparently reports on the results of this

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Bouraoui's preoccupation with writing—even above the stated interest in men, women, objects and images, to which the text is dedicated—largely continues in the rare parts of the text where the form differs from the short, focused fragments which predominate. In the first of these divergent sections, a four-page fragment is titled "Le journal, Paris, 2004" and takes the form of a diary excerpt, with six brief entries covering a two-week period (49–52). The theme of the diary is the break-up of a relationship with an unnamed partner, and the narrator's immediate attempts to deal with the rupture. It opens with her explaining how: "Je me laisse recouvrir par le temps, refusant de relire ses lettres, de regarder ses photographies, de porter les vêtements que j'ai portés en sa présence" (49). Here, the diary writer avoids thinking about her ex-partner, shunning the writing and the pictures which captured their finite relationship. While the intensity of the feelings described, as well as the form in which they are presented (a Paris-based, fragmentary diary) recalls the atmosphere of *Poupée bella*, in this extract we once more find the writer's romantic life influencing her writing: "Tout ce qui me lie à elle me lie à une souffrance encore plus grande que celle qu'elle a engendrée: j'ai perdu mes gestes amoureux (écrire, téléphoner). Je compte sur les jours pour endormir ma peine, écrivant un nouveau livre qui devient un rempart à la vie que nous avons partagée" (50). Initially losing the ability to write, due to the trauma of this recent break-up, the narrator of this passage's decision to write a new book constitutes an attempt to find catharsis, with writing therefore both threatened and encouraged by the end of this affair. Where Nina's relationship with l'Amie apparently came second—for both members of the couple—to her ability to write, the break-up described here leads the writer to replace love with writing. The description of her new book as "un rempart" ambivalently suggests escapism, with Nina once more retreating into the world of words as a defensive gesture, having "perdu [s]es gestes amoureux."

process, referring to l'Amie and for the first time naming one of Bouraoui's publications from this period: "Il y avait sans cesse un livre entre nous, comme un pont. Il y aurait sans cesse un livre entre nous, comme la vie. [...]. Nous avons trouvé son titre, *L'âge blessé*" (156). *L'âge blessé* was Bouraoui's fourth novel, published in 1998. See Introduction, section three for a discussion of this and other texts pre-dating the period of this study.

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Il fallait tout noter

It is not only through the pursuit or rejection of interpersonal relationships that we find the complex connection between the narrator's work and her reality. The second occasion on which the form of the text notably changes recounts a childhood memory of Nina's earliest experiments with autobiographical expression, through which she learns the necessity, at times, of restricting self-expression. This fourteen-page long piece, entitled "L'enregistreur, Alger, 1977" (184–197), is by far the longest entry in the book, describing a series of events framed by the memory of a cassette recorder belonging to the writer's sister. Rather than any one particular interpersonal relationship, the theme celebrated within this entry is Bouraoui's life-long interest in telling stories about herself, with the scenes recounted potentially tracing the source of Bouraoui's enduring interest in life-writing.¹⁰⁷

The entry begins with Nina's sister asking her to think of a story from her own life that they can record on the cassette recorder. Her sister explains why this is such an exciting idea, and in the influence of this older sibling Bouraoui perhaps reveals the origins of some of her own interest in words and stories: "Elle disait que c'était excitant de fixer nos voix parce qu'elles allaient rester après nous [...]. Elle disait que les mots étaient des preuves à notre existence. Il fallait tout noter pour être sûre d'être en vie et non dans un rêve qui avait l'apparence de la vie" (184). The autobiographical impulse is clearly present in the siblings from a very young age, therefore, with the possibility of recording their personal stories here providing a means of self-affirmation. At the same time, however, Bouraoui also attributes to her sister a seemingly advanced perspective on the difficulty of separating truth from fiction in language, as she follows this instruction with a qualification which troubles Nina's previously simply-held belief in the virtue of self-expression: "Ma sœur me demandait de ne pas mentir, parce qu'il y avait déjà du mensonge dans les mots, et même dans la vérité, parce que la vérité ne s'appliquait qu'à la personne qui parlait, et

¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, James Olney suggests that the cassette recording of personal testimony may be understood as a form of autobiography—"Autobiography is both the simplest of literary enterprises and the commonest. Anybody who can write a sentence or even speak into a tape recorder or to a ghostwriter can do it" (*Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* 3)—an observation which supports our reading of this scene as pre-empting Bouraoui's later interest in life-writing.

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que cette personne interprétait déjà le réel à sa façon" (185). Here, Nina's surprisingly wise sister declares the absolute subjectivity of both personal testimony and truth, influencing the young narrator not only in the practice of autobiographical expression, but equally in the theoretical problematization of any such act.

Unfortunately, Nina's sister, the clear authority figure within this episode, does not believe that Nina has followed the prescription not to lie in her statements, and two personal stories Nina chooses for the cassette recording are both rejected by her sister as surely fictional. In the first of Nina's stories, she recounts a young male friend of theirs expressing his eagerness to lose his virginity, as he repeats the account his own brother has told him of the experience resembling entry into an "océan chaud" (187). Nina's personal reaction to this story forms the crux of her tale, as she tells her sister, and the cassette recorder, that: "Je pensais que moi aussi j'avais hâte de vieillir. Pour faire la même chose. Pour plonger dans l'océan chaud. Mais à aucun moment mon désir ne se portait sur un homme. J'étais comme lui. Faire l'amour avec une femme" (187). Following this apparent early attempt at "coming out," Nina's second story again strikes a similar note of unexpected identification with the boys she knows. Nina describes visiting another male friend, early in the morning, and entering the bedroom he shared with his brothers: "Quand Karim s'est réveillé il a dit que je devais sortir et l'attendre dans le salon parce que ce n'était pas un endroit pour moi, pour une fille. Moi je me sentais comme lui, comme ses frères" (188). While these events are recounted without any apparent insight or analysis from their naive narrator, their inclusion by the adult Bouraoui clearly invokes her more widespread goal of tracing the origin of her personal identity—alongside the troubling of issues of autobiographical truth. It is with sadness, therefore, that we hear the response of Nina's sister to these brave declarations:

À la fin de mes histoires, ma sœur m'a dit que j'étais un bon sujet pour le magnétophone, la preuve incarnée que les mots ne voulaient rien dire, que les mensonges dépassaient la pensée. Je l'ai suppliée de me croire. Elle a refusé de garder la cassette parce que mes mots, même s'ils étaient faux, feraient trop de peine à notre mère. (189)

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The question of the reaction of Bouraoui's family to her sexual orientation does not feature often in the writer's descriptions of her sexual and romantic development, and her relationships with members of her immediate family are largely positively presented in her autobiographical works. In this memory, however, the sister's censorship of Nina's stories about herself both threatens the security of the young child's developing self-identity, and introduces the question of which elements of interpersonal relationships may and may not be recorded in language. This theme is then brought to a head in the third story recorded by the *magnétophone*, told by an older girl and friend of Nina's sister, Maïwen. Visiting this girl's house in order to extend their cassette recorder game, Bouraoui describes her sister's friend as a troubled child, whose mother is unable to recover from the father's recent death—context which serves to undermine Maïwen's credibility when she recounts visiting the doctor and being molested during a physical examination (194). More significant than this narrative in itself, however, Nina's response to Maïwen's revelation demonstrates the young narrator's developing perspective on the appropriate limits of self-description: "Je pensais que l'on ne pouvait pas tout dire et tout écrire, qu'il y avait une ligne à ne pas franchir, qu'il fallait savoir garder des choses pour soi, que toutes les vérités et tous les mensonges ne se partageaient pas avec n'importe qui" (195).

In the incident of the *magnétophone*, Bouraoui for the first time introduces the possibility of limitations to what may be publicly expressed. If we may draw an implicit parallel between the young girls' experiments with a cassette recorder, and Bouraoui's broader project of self-representation as an adult writer, then the inclusion of this scene at a late stage in the text may reveal a developing outlook on the potential limits of autobiographical expression. Where the child's honest confessions are doubted and declared untrue by her older sister, the straightforward connection between self-expression and self-affirmation is problematized, in keeping with Bouraoui's explorations of autofiction in her work more broadly. In both Nina's and Maïwen's recorded stories, the narrator reveals that telling about oneself is not always primordial, and suggests that there are in fact some things which should not or may not be shared with others. Where each of these incidents is incommunicable for reasons of social propriety, however, in the text's final important formal divergence,

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the narrator encounters a different force placing limits on her self-expression: the idea that there are some things which just cannot be expressed in language.

S'il existait des mots...

While in the vast majority of cases, each fragment of *Nos baisers sont des adieux* has a different subject, Bouraoui equally giving the space of just one entry to each of the formative influences she collects together in the text, a significant exception to this emerges in the subject of "Sasha," who appears on several occasions throughout the work, and as such constitutes perhaps the most important figure in interpreting the central purpose of the text. Fourteen of the 92 sections which make up *Nos baisers sont des adieux* are devoted to Sasha, all bearing the same details in their title: "Sasha, Paris, 2009." This, in fact, is the title which directly follows the opening page, leading to a fragment describing the nature of the relationship between Sasha and the narrator:

SASHA, PARIS 2009

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. Nous jouissions de l'une et de l'autre, ensemble et
subjuguées.

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 échappait au
langage parce qu'elle était un abandon de tout. (11)

Here, the line "Nous jouissions de l'une de l'autre, ensemble et subjuguées" leads us to suspect the sexual nature of the liaison between Sasha and the narrator, while the use of the imperfect tense provides an initial indication that their connection may now be over. Rather than merely one further relationship to evoke in her collection of past lovers, however, Sasha emerges as the most frequently recurring character in the text, which finally proves, in a way, to be structured around her absence. In this early fragment, we find Bouraoui's on-going connection of love and literature, as she wonders as to the possibility of using words to genuinely record interpersonal experiences, and capture ephemeral romantic moments in language. The sincerity of the relationship between Nina and Sasha is affirmed in the denial of any role-playing or *mise en scène*, with which the extract opens, opposing the terminology of literary

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artifice to the real-life experience of this important love affair. The narrator equally rejects the ideas of intrusion or submission—each of which recall the *magnétophone* stories we have just considered—in place of which physical experience is foregrounded above any capacity of language to describe it. In questioning whether a relationship may truly be recorded in language, or whether pleasure might after all be ineffable, this extract, therefore, firmly establishes the possibility of limitations to language, furthering our suspicions that the writer's previous devotion to writing may now also be limited.

The second reference to Sasha, coming in the eighth fragment and following a diverse range of other subjects, is similarly less than a page long—as are all of the Sasha fragments—and again describes the narrator's feelings in reliving an aspect of their relationship, here the seemingly mundane experience of falling asleep in Sasha's room. The routine element of this is emphasised through the prominence of the imperfect tense: "Quand je fermais les yeux, les murs de sa chambre devenaient des falaises. J'entendais le vent [...]. Je penchais puis renversais mon visage" (27). Here, Bouraoui gives the impression that she is not so much recalling aspects of their relationship in order to describe it to her reader, but actively reliving the scene in her own mind. This reminiscence ends, however, in a description which does allow us to understand something of Sasha's significance, culminating as it does in a near quotation of the title of the book: "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" (27). Recreating some of the anxiety and intensity of Bouraoui's first description of her relationship with Sasha, we find the constant—and, for the reader, unexplained—fear that the narrator will be unable to retain this experience for long. The comparison of romantic embrace with saying goodbye underlines much of the transience found throughout the book, as well as enforcing the relationship with Sasha as a key motive for the writing of the work, owing to the reuse of this phrase in its title. The threat of silence, then, suggests the writer's continued struggle to articulate her life and her feelings within language—and, in so doing, to reach out to other people—alongside the newly emerging fear that, in certain instances, this may prove impossible.

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With these first two Sasha fragments, therefore, potentially establishing a recent relationship as framing device for the writer's fleeting nostalgia going back over the rest of her life, similar episodes are spread throughout the book, each describing a simple scene from her and Sasha's shared lives, steeped in hints that their happiness together will not last. In each of these fragments, we find clues as to what seems to be the inevitable conclusion of their relationship, for example, "Elle me demandait de promettre de ne jamais changer la force de mes sentiments, de l'aimer comme au début [...]. Je promettais, tout en sachant que quelque chose se détachait de nous, un temps révolu, l'été" (77), and, later: "Je faisais l'inventaire de l'espace que j'avais occupé [...] comme les preuves d'une histoire que je n'arrivais pas à posséder en entier. Nous construisions une fable qui n'existait qu'à l'instant où nous la vivions" (113). Although the end of the narrator's relationship with Sasha is never explicitly described, their ultimate rupture haunts each of the Sasha fragments, prompting us to read them as the nostalgic reminiscences of a recently past relationship. Having established this, Sasha's prominence as a recurrent character in the text takes on a particular significance, allowing us to consider the writing of the text as prompted not just by a general, philosophical, reflection on love and literature, or a tribute to all of her past lovers, but by the more poignant and pressing recollections of a recently bereft lover. Considering the third of the above examples, the terms in which Bouraoui frames the ephemerality of her relationship with Sasha are again particularly striking, given the clear comparison to literary forms. Where in the opening Sasha fragment we saw the narrator reject the terms of literary artifice, as if to suggest that this interpersonal relationship was more genuine and important than the more textually-constituted elements of her life, the retrospective view here once more borrows from the language of literature, through which Bouraoui is able to articulate the impossibility of making this relationship last.

If the opening scene of the text relates Bouraoui attempts to articulate a relationship and capture the intensity of interpersonal experience within the literary text, we might choose to understand the work which follows as representing another attempt at achieving this aim. Indeed, the central thread of the Sasha fragments allows us to read each of the apparently disordered and unfocused selections Bouraoui makes in the

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rest of the book as reflecting what she suspects about her chances of success in such an attempt: that a true "récit" or "narration du plaisir" cannot be attained, here due to the almost destructive power of pleasure leading, for Bouraoui, to "un abandon de tout." If Bouraoui's reflection on pleasure and relationships has indeed lead to such withdrawal from the more conventional, structured nature of everyday existence, however, then perhaps the unstructured and unpredictable form which the book takes is the only suitable way she can find of writing about love, and, where certain relationships prove too intense to be reflected in such a form, love may now prove to have overpowered writing as the dominant interest in the writer's life.

Returning to the two quotations with which we opened the analysis of this text—Bouraoui's description of herself as a withdrawn and uncommunicative child in the interview "Écrire, c'est retrouver ses fantômes," and the broad inter-personal dedication with which she opens *Nos baisers sont des adieux* in 2010—we might suggest that, describing opposite ends of her literary career, these two statements represent the two extremes of a developmental journey for Bouraoui. From an initial position of social isolation, the adult writer has begun to see herself as almost entirely defined through her relationships, and to a large extent this is a journey for which writing has provided the vehicle. If Bouraoui began her textual identity quest, in her own words, "pour me faire aimer des autres, pour me trouver une place dans ce monde," then the decision to publish a work made up of textual tributes "aux hommes, aux femmes, aux objets et aux images qui ont construit la personne que je suis" seemingly affirms the success of this quest. At the same time, however, inherent within the composition of this late text, there lurks the hint of important things within Bouraoui's life which cannot be represented in her writing.

Given the centrality of the Sasha fragments, and the narrator's reflections on the limits of language which they betray, we might therefore suggest that *Nos baisers sont des adieux* represents a symbolic relinquishing of writing as Bouraoui's space of sanctuary, following her earlier claim that "l'écriture, c'est mon vrai pays, le seul dans lequel je vis vraiment, la seule terre que je maîtrise." And yet, with her relationship with Sasha now ultimately past, the writer's response to these events is apparently to construct a book around them. It is, of course, true that Bouraoui does not abandon writing after this

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point. Her most recent text, *Sauvage*, was published the following year, and in Chapter Three we have considered this novel as a further iteration of Bouraoui's autofictional project. Nonetheless, as the last explicitly self-referential text Bouraoui has published to date, *Nos baisers sont des adieux* might well be seen as a form of concluding text for our reading of Bouraoui's autofictional work. With the affirmatively interpersonal nature of its content perhaps representing the writer's progression away from literary escapism, Bouraoui both celebrates the importance of the textual encounter to the writer's life, and alludes to meaningful emotional life beyond the scope of her autobiographical project. In spite of the ultimate defeat of the writer's hopes to contain the intensity of this final relationship within her writing, we may nonetheless celebrate the more balanced concept of Bouraoui's personal identity which emerges from this work—not entirely a "literary selfhood," but an authorial life existing independently of her writing project.

Chapter conclusions

In this chapter we have considered the formative impact of "the textual encounter" within Bouraoui's autofictional work, first from the point of view of the reader—both in references to Bouraoui herself as a reader, and in examining the position of the reader of Bouraoui's works—and then with regard to the writer, considering how the construction of Bouraoui's personal identity may have developed over the course of her self-referential work. In keeping with critical theory on personal identity as relationally constructed, we have considered the central importance of relationships to Bouraoui's developing identity, and have suggested that, in line with Lejeune's comments on the relational nature of autobiography, Bouraoui's *autofiction* may too be seen as an interpersonal act. In addressing the question of "writing for others," we have speculated, through Wittigian theory, on the potential political consequences of this interpersonal act, and traced the emergence of a "queer," or "Wittigian-lesbian" identity developing within Bouraoui's work, and potentially impacting on her audience. Throughout Chapters Two, Three, and Four of this thesis we have seen the broad range of autobiographical and autofictional forms with which Bouraoui has

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experimented during her textual identity quest, and it is clear that, while all human communication is necessarily relational, and literature inherently assumes and requires a reader, life-writing involves a particularly intimate form of relationship with the reader, which remains significant within more experimental autobiography or autofiction. Where Bouraoui chooses life-writing as the site of her personal identity quest, the resolution of this quest necessarily depends on her ability to reach out to others, and, in so doing, to find a place for herself in the world beyond the text.

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This thesis has addressed the question of autofiction and the construction of personal identity in the work of Nina Bouraoui. In the Introduction, we saw how Bouraoui has described her work as a form of “identity quest,” with the thematic turn towards the self in texts from 1999 onwards representing an attempt to textually resolve the difficulties resulting from her problematic personal history. Far from unique to Bouraoui, the notion of writing as a form of identity quest has been recognized as a common motif of life-writing, particularly for women and writers from minority identity backgrounds, both historically and, increasingly, in the contemporary period. In recent decades, literary explorations of identity have seen the development of a new genre of life-writing, “autofiction,” which recognises the difficulty of separating life from fiction and seeks to destabilise conventional understandings of the autobiographical form. This practice has proved particularly fertile for traditionally marginalised voices, and we suggested that Bouraoui’s work might constitute a useful “case study” for understanding the implications of the popularity of the form.

As a writer of growing popular and critical importance, Bouraoui has in recent years begun to attract attention from a range of scholars, who have often combined readings of particular Bouraoui texts with those of other writers, in order to illuminate a range of key contemporary problems. While we have been able to confirm the significance of individual Bouraoui texts for what they can tell us about issues of gendered, sexual, and ethnic identity in the 21st century, this thesis has also provided the first extended analysis to focus exclusively on Bouraoui, reading her work not just as representative of important modern literary themes, but as a coherent project of self-reconstruction by means of the autofictional form. We have heard how Bouraoui felt the need to begin a textual identity quest in order to examine, and attempt to resolve, her early identity problems. Through probing the writer’s presentation of the emergence of her own personal identity across this extended body of work, we have seen how Bouraoui’s autofictional engagement has helped her achieve these aims,

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through the emergence of an adapted subjectivity, or “literary selfhood,” within which the power of literary language is employed in a transformative and empowering way.

In Chapter One we identified the work of Judith Butler as an important contemporary reference within the social constructionist “subject-of-language” school of identity theorists. Both for her general influence on the development of Queer theory, and her specific analysis as to how gendered identity can be understood as “performatively” constructed in language, Butler’s work makes her an apposite theorist for a reading of the construction of contemporary identity within the work of a writer such as Bouraoui. We also noted, however, the limits Butler places on the possibilities of transformative agency among discursive subjects. Where subjectivity is, for Butler, constructed in language, and identity is iteratively produced through the repetition of social norms, individual agents are not able to choose to perform themselves differently, and the capacity for change is restricted to incremental subversions of the norms which define us. The work of Monique Wittig, however, was shown to provide a greater capacity for individual resistance to oppressive social systems. The work of both theorists has been important to our understanding of the ways in which contemporary identity positions are discursively constructed, both within social reality and the autofictional literary text. Wittig’s influence on Butler is acknowledged early in the latter’s career, and both theorists understand the pervasive social system as a regime of domination through compulsory heterosexuality. Where Butler’s academic standing as a philosopher, and her focus on sociological analysis, perhaps accounts for the rather pessimistic nature of how her work limits the capacity for change, Wittig’s focus in the field of literary theory has provided us with a radical perspective on the potential of the writer and the work of art.

Reading Bouraoui’s life-writing through a Wittigian lens, we borrowed Wittig’s notion of new literary forms representing “un cheval de Troie,” in entering the literary field and destabilizing it for new ideological purposes. More abstractly, Wittig’s notion of the lesbian as a social being existing outside of the regime of compulsory heterosexuality found some resonance in the sexual self-description of Bouraoui’s narrators. The identity position most often emerging from Bouraoui’s work seems to conform to this “Wittigian-lesbian”—or contemporary “queer”—definition. If Wittig’s

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view of the capacity of literature to transform social reality through the universalization of the minority point of view seems rather radical and unrealistic, Bouraoui's most autofictional works did seem to construct a world through which such influence on the reader may be enacted.

Owing both to thematic similarities and each writer's interest in formal experimentation, we suggested in Chapter One that Bouraoui's life-writing might even be well placed to serve as a "test case" for examining Wittig's positive theory of the transformative potential of literature. As our reading of Bouraoui's texts has demonstrated—particularly in Chapters Two and Four—this initial proposition has proved to have some merit. Where Wittig's work is extreme, idealistic, and grounded in experimental literature, it may well be seen as detached from reality (even in spite of her absolute belief in the ability of literary texts to impact on every day social life). Within the confines of a study of the autofictional construction of a new, experimental form of textual identity, however, such objections to Wittig's theory seem less relevant, and it is hoped that the identification of Wittig as an important theorist within this thesis may, therefore, contribute in some part to a broader reappraisal of her work.

In each of Chapters Two, Three, and Four, we considered a specific theme relating to Bouraoui's personal identity, through a progressive reading of three separate texts. This began, in Chapter Two, with the question of gendered and sexual identity, in response to which we followed Bouraoui's journey through what was described as a "developmental trilogy" of texts, covering in turn her childhood, teenaged years, and young adulthood. Addressing the interaction between language and identity across these texts, we traced Bouraoui's early explorations of potentially empowering, affirmative terms to describe minority identity positions, which she ultimately rejects as imprisoning. Instead, Bouraoui prefers to determine her own self representation through the creative appropriation of language in writing, with her publicising of life events constituting an act of resistance to all those who would seek to define her as marginal.

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In Chapter Three, we considered Bouraoui's representation of her Algerian childhood across *Le jour du séisme*, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, and *Sauvage*. Several critics have described Bouraoui's turn to the self as beginning with the publication of *Garçon manqué*, owing, understandably, to its overtly autobiographical nature. In Chapter Three, however, we examined how Bouraoui's earlier text, *Le Jour du Séisme*, can in fact be read as originating her autofictional self-exploration, textually revisiting the childhood homeland to which Bouraoui constantly returns throughout this period. We saw how, as an adult writer, Bouraoui appears trapped in the urge to repeat her traumatic separation from Algeria as a young teenager, and suggested that the writer's interest in psychoanalysis could provide a potential bridge between her real-life and textual experiences. Comparing her later representations of Algeria, in *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Sauvage*, with this early text, we discovered that, while the recovery of this time and place formed an important motive for Bouraoui's self-exploration, the textual return to origins could in fact reveal a greater need, that of using narrative forms to decode and understand a range of life experiences that are not culturally-specific, but universal.

Finally, in Chapter Four, we discussed the impact of the textual encounter on both Bouraoui and her posited reader, through analysis of three of her later works, *Avant les hommes*, *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* and *Nos baisers sont des adieux*. Here we were able to trace how the construction of the writer's personal identity had developed over the course of her self-exploration, progressing from a self-described "enfant sauvage" to an adult who sees herself as almost entirely constituted by her interpersonal relationships with those around her. Where Bouraoui chose life-writing as the site of her personal identity quest, the resolution of this quest necessarily depends on her ability to reach out to others in order to find a place for herself in the world beyond the text. In Chapter Four we saw the emergence of this desired place developing through Bouraoui's representation of her personal relationships, while also considering the implications of Bouraoui's autofictional engagement for those whose relationship to the writer is purely textual—her readers.

While this thesis has focused on Bouraoui's nine most recent works as together providing the means for the writer's textual self-exploration, our "case-study"

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approach outlined three “characteristics” of the subject constructed in language which may also allow us to consider what implications autofictional exploration might have for the construction of textual subjectivity—or “literary selfhood”—more broadly. The notion of “performativity,” we saw, depends on the function of iterability (the repetition or citation of prior instances of discourse) in order for language to be meaningful. Where critical theory has extended this notion to the production of identity, we discovered that, if identity is non-essential, it can be incrementally changed with each new iteration. If a literary selfhood emerges through Bouraoui’s autofiction, therefore, this new form of identity, too, will be constantly variable over an unending series of texts. With regard to narrative identity, we saw through Bouraoui’s recourse to psychoanalysis the inherent human desire to impose meaning on arbitrary and chaotic lives through the imposition of narrative structures. Where this is always a partially futile gesture in the real world, however, the representation of one’s life in writing allows for a managed and controllable space in which Bouraoui may continually explore, and re-write, her previous experiences. It was the “relational” characteristic, meanwhile, which was able to provide a definite means through which literary selfhood might impact positively, both on the writer, and on the reader of her work—a result which here depends on Bouraoui’s eventual interaction with the world beyond the text. Where we have suggested that autofictional exploration allows Bouraoui to establish a new form of personal identity, a “literary selfhood” which, freed from real-world constraints, can uncover new, transformative possibilities for contemporary identity, the same freedom from reality may at times also prevent the product of such explorations translating back into the writer’s real life. For this reason, it seems that the textual identity quest is not one which can fully achieve a resolution for as long as the writer continues to return to her craft.

Alongside the theoretical reappraisal of the work of Monique Wittig, one of the main contributions of this thesis is the detailed reading it provides of several of the most important works of a writer of growing critical and popular importance, who has not as yet been the subject of an extended single-author study. Where this thesis argued for a form of “literary selfhood” emerging from contemporary life-writing, it was methodologically appropriate to restrict the primary texts studied to those of one

5. Conclusion

author, in order to provide comprehensive analysis of the particular identity constructed over a series of one writer's works. By contrast, a comparative study of several authors' autofictional works would have produced more of a "snapshot" response to the question at hand—an approach which has many merits, but which would prohibit deeper analysis of how autofictional subjectivity had developed across an extended body of work. Nonetheless, one of the important further directions proposed by this study is the need to compare the results of our analysis of Bouraoui's work to that of other similar writers in the contemporary literary scene.

As we mentioned in the Introduction, Bouraoui is far from the only modern writer to choose to explore and reconstruct her personal identity through autofictional life-writing, and a natural progression from this in-depth study of one writer's self-referential work will be to use a similar approach to examine the work of other writers. Given the particular focus on gendered and sexual identity which has emerged across our reading of Bouraoui, suitable further subjects might include the work of Christine Angot or Anne Garréta. Equally, like Bouraoui, Marie NDiaye is a successful métisse French woman writer who has experimented with the autofictional form, while the radical work of Chloé Delaume would provide rich material for a further Wittigian study of the transformative potential of autofiction. Comparative analysis of Bouraoui's life-writing alongside the work of any of these women could elucidate how our identification of Bouraoui's "literary selfhood" fits within the broader scene of contemporary French women's writing, and, beyond even this disciplinary-specific sphere, might eventually go on to reveal the appropriateness of the notion to describe the construction of personal identity more generally.

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