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Hushed bodies, screaming narratives : the construction of trans-identity in 19th- and 20th-century French literature

Romanica Silesiana 8/1, 115-128

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

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Hushed Bodies, Screaming Narratives: The Construction of Trans-Identity in 19th- and 20th-Century French Literature

ABSTRACT: Michel Foucault described 19th-century France as a period of intense sexual scrutiny as well as a watershed moment that gave birth to the formal recognition, evolution, and study of “deviant” sexual identities. While this may be true, modern French studies still idle in examining the epistemological effect of this operative change in French ideology, society, and more specifically literature. If studies into 19th- and 20th-century French gay and lesbian literatures and ideologies have begun to flourish in some academic francophone circles, trans-literature has been overlooked. Moreover, this critical oversight inadvertently highlights the all too often modern omission of the “T” in the LGBT community. This article will place the works of five French authors spanning the 19th and 20th centuries in communication with contemporary queer theory in an attempt to examine the nascent evolution of what today might be considered transgender identity, as well as analyse the meaning attached to queer identities during this period in French and francophone literatures.

KEY WORDS: transgender, queer theory, 19th century, 20th century, France, narrative.

Introduction

In the early 1990s the term “transgender” became an almost immediate social adage due in part to its seemingly all-encompassing interpretive range. Included in this “imagined community” were “transsexuals, drag queens, butches, hermaphrodites, cross-dressers, masculine woman, effeminate men” (STRYKER 4) to name a few. One of the goals of the burgeoning movement was to undergird the notion that gender as it is lived, experienced, and performed in life is much more complex than can be understood by the binary sex/gender dichotomy

of Western modernity. The field of transgender studies that emerged from this movement concerns itself with notions of gender that confuse, disorder, muddle, disband, reorganize and rearticulate the heteronormative expressions most often attributed to the biological specificity of a sexually differentiated body. Moreover it seeks to examine the cultural roles that specific bodies are expected to play out, the intimate subjectivities assumed by a gendered sense of self and the socio-political conjectures surrounding gender-role performance, as well as the socio-political restrictions placed on certain gendered dispositions that work to frustrate their social expression.

Most often attributed to Virginia Prince, an advocate for freedom of gender expression, the term “transgender” originally designated someone who changed “social gender through the public presentation of self, without recourse to genital transformation” (STRYKER 4). Today the term has come to encompass all individuals whose social presentation of gender is at odds with social norms. While many of these gendered expressions that call into question the entire epistemological framework of gender and sex have more recently played out in films and stage shows such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1998/2001), as well as autobiographical novels such as *Je serai elle* [I would be her] (1983) by Sylviane Dullak or *Né homme, comment je suis devenue femme* [Born a man, how I became a woman] (1981) by Brigitte Martel, it would be misleading to assume that transgenderism was solely a postmodern phenomenon with no modern social or literary vestiges. This essay will place five French and francophone works in communication with contemporary trans-theory in the hopes of creating an intercultural conversation between postmodern trans-identity and its less studied past.

Corporeal (Dis)illusions The Body Narratives of 19th- and 20th-century French Trans-Identity

In his seminal work *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998), Jay Prosser qualifies transition as an “intermediate nonzone” (PROSSER 3), a shifting position of epistemological precariousness that destabilizes our ties to an essentially secure notion of identity. Moreover, the transgendered bodies that occupy this position produce corporeal narratives written through their gendered or sexual transition which can be considered “not only the bridge to embodiment but a way of making sense of transition, the link between locations: the transition itself” (PROSSER 9). Because transgender describes not only “a set of prac-

tices and discourse about identity and community but also implicates and is productive of particular ideas about gender and sexuality” (VALENTINE 74), reading modern and postmodern transgender narratives as stories of transitioning bodies can also historically situate non-normative gendered and sexual identities along an epistemological axis allowing for referential intercultural and intertemporal interpretations important to understanding the history of the trans-movement.

Published in 1834 and considered by the author one of his more eloquent works Honoré de Balzac’s (1799—1850) *Séraphîta* introduces an “être” [“being”]¹ (BALZAC 208) that embodies both masculine and feminine gendered characteristics in a body that seems to defy the world’s imposed heteronormative dichotomy. Born to parents instructed in Emanuel Swedenborg’s (1688—1772) theories of human corporeal transcendence of which s/he herself is an example, Séraphîta/Séraphitüs desires to understand perfect love, a love that transcends the male/female dichotomy, and therefore heteronormative imperative. A neutral palette onto which sex is brushed through gender and sexuality, the titular character uses gendered expressions, such as appearing more masculine to h/er feminine love interest, Minna, and more feminine to h/er masculine love interest, Wilfred, in order to bend gender and surpass the early constraints that Minna and Wilfred seem to impose on h/er body (221). As Séraphîta, the eponymous character is described as resembling a young seventeen-year-old boy whose frail and thin body mirrored that of a woman, hiding a power that can only be described in masculine terms (220). In a post-modern twist to a historical phenomenon Balzac also plays with the characteristics of 20th-century linguistic gender bending² manipulating linguistic indicators such as the pronouns used to describe the titular character: being recognized by Minna’s father as “mademoiselle” (226), to Minna as Séraphitüs, or “lui” [“him”] (266). Moreover, Séraphitüs, the name that Minna gives to this being is significant since as Donna Haraway remarks in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991) the process of naming is an artificial way of domination, taking away the agency of and objectifying what is incomprehensible, a totalitarian move to complete what remains incomplete in comprehension (HARAWAY 215). Naming with a masculine nomenclature then fulfills Minna’s “feminine” desire of placement in a heteronormative power dynamic; Séraphitüs must be man if he is to be loved by a woman (Minna). The formation of the body through naming is a discursive process that gives materiality to a body only through a linguistic power system of comprehensibility. Like the “performative speech act” described by Judith BUTLER in her work *Bodies that Matter* (1993), the naming of the titular character epistemologically produces that which it names allowing for a gendered and sexed social recognition between the

¹ All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

² See LIVIA 1997.

addressee (Minna) and the recipient (Séraphitüs)³. However, this performative speech act fails in the context of the narration since Séraphîta/Séraphitüs does not self-identity or identify others as either male or female, but an idealistic blurring of these biologically prescribed indicators. In other words, Séraphitüs does not recognize the sexed referent as h/erself and therefore the transfer of meaning cannot be completed. This idea is underscored in the narration, in one instance Séraphîta stating to Wilfred that man's myopic sense of vision tries to understand the world through only visible forms (sex) making a reality that conforms to his sense of the world rather than allowing the spirit to see what lies beyond the visible, to the depth of things (gender) (BALZAC 229—231). Unable to avoid an anachronism, we might call this character transgender or gender queer since the word hermaphrodite would be inadequate, semiotically pointing only to a biological function. Quite the opposite, it is in the presentation of h/erself to others that Séraphîta/Séraphitüs explains h/er very queerness during the story stating that man arbitrarily names what transcends his comprehension in order to control it (219). And while the narrator of the story is forced to represent gender queer with the necessary pronominal indicators (il [he]/elle [she]), he is quick to explain the eponymous character's gendered expression: "Nul type connu ne pourrait donner une image de cette figure majestueusement mâle pour Minna, mais qui, aux yeux d'un homme, eût éclipsé par sa grace féminine les plus belles têtes dues à Raphaël" ["No known sort would be able to give form to this figure majestically male for Minna, but who, to a man's eyes, would have eclipsed the most beautiful of Raphael's busts by her feminine grace"] (221).

Indeed, Balzac initiates a seemingly queer version of the holy hermaphrodite, the one who "defies" the sex/gender dichotomy of ancient civilizations where a being of both male and female characteristics was prized for h/er physical beauty, often considered masculine, and h/er spirituality often considered feminine⁴. However Balzac's story might also illustrate a Hippocratic view of sex, a view that recognizes two extreme poles (male and female) with hermaphrodites existing in between. Indeed, the Hippocratic hermaphrodite then has no sex per se but rather exists in between the sexes (similar to the transitional "nonzone" of which Prosser spoke), gendered expression then becoming all the more important to social comprehension. Even if at the end of the 18th century leading into the beginning of the 19th-century, a rampant positivism and social organicism made the body not only perfectable but necessarily so in order to improve the social fabric of which it was an integral part, Balzac seems to push the limits of this fluid incarnation to show not only the naturalness of a fluid gendered identity but how this identity transcends materiality and reaches the idyllic. This idea of a transgendered ideal is undergirded at the end of the story. In the ideal union

³ See also AUSTIN.

⁴ See BULLOUGH and FEINBERG.

of gender and sex, “l’homme a donné l’ENTENDEMENT, la femme a donné la VOLONTÉ: *ils deviennent un seul être, UNE SEULE chair ici-bas*” [“man gave REASON, woman gave PASSION/DESIRE: *they become one being, one flesh here below*”] (BALZAC 259) (emphasis in original).

Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835) by Théophile Gautier tells the story of the titular character’s struggle to understand the masculine gender, her transformation into a man (Théodore de Sérannes) in an attempt to comprehend it and subsequent queer love affair with d’Albert (as a man and as a woman) and Rosette (as a man and as a woman). D’Albert, as the emblematic French Parisian male of the early July Monarchy is in need of a woman, or more precisely, a mistress in order to feel fulfilled as a male (GAUTIER 7). In spite of his feminine tendencies, like the two hour *toilette* for which he is mocked (36), he meets a young *courtisane* named Rosette, herself a sort of *garçon manqué* who gets along better with men, and “avec les femmes...est méchante comme un diable” [“with women... is as mean as the devil”] (39). She is what d’Albert describes as “un délicieux compagnon, un joli camarade avec lequel on couche, plutôt qu’une maîtresse” [“a delicious (masculine) companion that you sleep with, rather than a mistress”] (39). The sense is subtle but one can easily see the play on the homoerotic tendencies of d’Albert as well as the less than feminine presentation of Rosette. Indeed, Gautier takes this gender-bending rhetoric even further. In the words of his young *héros*, d’Albert feels strange “quand on m’appelle monsieur, ou qu’en parlant de moi on dit: — Cet homme” [“when one calls me monsieur, or when speaking of me one says: — This man”] (43); or again calling his soul the “soeur ennemi” [“enemy sister”] of his body (44). This single citation elaborates the psychic-corporeal battle between a feminine soul (psyche) trapped in a man’s body or Karl Heinrich Ulrich’s (1825—1895) famous formula for homosexuality: *anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa* (a woman’s soul trapped in a man’s body), later used to describe Gender Identity Disorder and transgenderism.⁵ A phrase that the narrator himself mentions in other terms during the story: “Il arrive souvent que le sexe de l’âme ne soit point pareil à celui du corps” [“It often happens that the sex of the soul is not the same as that of the body”] (209). This idea is supported later by d’Albert’s desire to “rencontrer sur la montagne... ces serpents qui font changer de sexe” [“find in the mountains...those serpents that change one’s sex”] (92), stating that at first his desire was to be another type of man but now realizing that he would have preferred to be a woman (94).

Mademoiselle de Maupin’s story is quite similar to d’Albert’s. Modeling Judith Butler’s notion of the “performativity” of gender (BUTLER 1990), *Maupin*’s story could really be one of passing through gender play. Putting her feminine side to death, as she puts it (GAUTIER 217), *Maupin* plays on contrived masculine stereotypes to “pass” as male throughout the story. However, not all the stere-

⁵ See *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR).

otypes played out in the story are described as performative in nature. Speaking to her past, Maupin describes her “tomboy” beginnings, preferring horse riding, climbing, fencing, and running with the boys to the more delicate activities of her female counterparts (296). She occupies that place of “transition” described by Prosser being no longer a “femme, mais [...] pas encore un homme” [“woman, but [...] not yet a man”] (305); qualifying herself as “ni l’un ni l’autre des deux sexes” and stating “Je suis d’un troisième sexe à part qui n’a pas encore de nom” [“neither of the two sexes” “I am a third sex aside (from the others) that still does not have a name”] (363).

It is this precarious transitional space that creates the indubitably queer sexualities in the novel. If sexual identity is not tied to biology but rather “is learned through a language one is born into and through the given dynamics of identifications” (GHEROVICI 5), then it is through this framework that gendered expression becomes vital to understanding the shifting sexualities in Gautier’s story. Mademoiselle de Maupin is loved, albeit hesitantly, by d’Albert in her masculine form (as Théodore de Sérannes) shocking himself by stating: “j’aime un homme!” [“I love a man!”] (GAUTIER 188). Moreover, Théodore de Sérannes/Maupin and to a lesser extent d’Albert are also loved by Rosette creating a queer love triangle that further blurs heteronormative sexualities. At the end of the story d’Albert finally sleeps with Mademoiselle de Maupin (stripped of her masculine clothes), but rather than return to her own room after her rendez-vous with d’Albert, she enters Rosette’s, a housemaid revealing that she later found “le lit [...] rompu et défait, et port[ant] l’empreinte de deux corps” [“the bed [...] broken in and undone, and marked by the imprint of two bodies”] (GAUTIER 380). The transitional nature of Maupin’s identity at once situates d’Albert’s sexuality somewhere between homo- and heterosexual as well as situates Rosette’s somewhere in between lesbian and heterosexual. Queering the narrative even further, one can imagine only a constantly transitional sexuality for Maupin fluctuating through gendered expression between heterosexual or bisexual male, butch or lipstick lesbian, and/or gay male.

Found in the 1860s by Auguste TARDIEU (1818—1879) and originally published under the title *Questions médico-légales de l’identité* [Medico-legal questions on identity], the memoirs of Herculine Barbin (*Mes souvenirs* [My memories]) tells the story of a 19th-century French hermaphrodite, who was born with an ambiguous sexual constitution,⁶ grew up among women in religious houses, was forced at the age of 18 to assume a masculine role, and subsequently committed suicide after many failed attempts to integrate h/erself into society. Linguistically bending gender throughout the text by alternating between masculine and feminine linguistic gendered indicators such as gendered adjectives and

⁶ While never explicitly mentioned by Herculine in the text, the medical documents detailing h/er sexual constitution are attached to both the French and English versions.

past participles, the memoirs of Herculine Barbin might represent the ontogeny of trans-subjectivization by linguistic gender manipulation. To understand this linguistic phenomenon of gendered expression one need only look to the first paragraph of Herculine's autobiography:⁷

J'ai vingt-cinq ans, et, quoique jeune encore, j'approche, à n'en pas douter, du terme fatal de mon existence. J'ai beaucoup souffert, et j'ai souffert seul (**m**)! seul (**m**)! abandonné (**m**) de tous! ... Cet âge n'a pas existé pour moi. J'avais, dès cet âge, un éloignement instinctif du monde, comme si j'avais pu comprendre déjà que je devais y vivre étranger (**m**). *Soucieux* (**m**) et rêveur (**m**), mon front semblait s'affaisser sous le poids de sombres mélancolies. J'étais *froide* (**f**), timide, et, en quelque sorte, insensible à toutes ces joies bruyantes et ingénues qui font épanouir un visage d'enfant. J'aimais la solitude, cette compagne du malheur, et, lorsqu'un sourire bienveillant se levait sur moi, j'en étais *heureuse* (**f**), comme d'une faveur inespérée.

Herculine 9 (emphasis in original)

I am twenty-five years old, and, although I am still young, I am beyond any doubt approaching the hour of my death. I have suffered much, and I have suffered alone (**gn**)! Alone (**gn**)! Forsaken (**gn**) by everyone! ... That age did not exist for me. As soon as I reached that age, I instinctively drew apart from the world, as if I had already come to understand that I was to live in it as a stranger (**gn**). Anxious (**gn**) and brooding (**gn**), my brow seemed to sink beneath the weight of dark, melancholy thoughts. I was cold (**gn**), timid, and, in a way, indifferent to all those boisterous and ingenuous joys that light up the faces of children. I loved solitude, that companion of misfortune, and when a benevolent smile rose over me, it made me happy (**gn**), like an unhopd-for favor.

FOUCAULT 3

Indeed, Herculine Barbin takes full advantage of the linguistic system through which s/he writes in order to manipulate a recognizable gendered or sexed identity and instead linguistically produces a transitional self-expression of trans-identity through narration. Like the trans-autobiographies of 20th-century France, the memoirs of Herculine Barbin become the hermeneutic encoding of the self into text. Inaugurating an instance of linguistic trans-identity through heteroglossia,⁸ Herculine's nuanced narrative is encouraged by the linguistic construction of the French language, allowing for a compliant manipulation of the gendered self. I will add here to what Anna LIVIA called "linguistic gender bending," and term Herculine's gender manipulation linguistic trans-functionality since it functions in the text as a linguistic psychosomatic marker of trans-

⁷ For more on this process see GOMOLKA.

⁸ See BAKHTIN.

identity, rather than *only* “bending” gender. Moreover, in addition to subverting the very linguistic binary that should exclude Herculine, this gendered trans-functionality seemingly sustains h/er narrated self by reaffirming, within the terms of linguistic discourse, its social existence. In being addressed, one is said to be recognized both for what one is but also, as Judith BUTLER (1997) states, “to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible [...] If language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence” (5). From the very beginning of h/er narration, Herculine’s story is deflected through a trans-functional linguistic discourse that bends and resituates but does not break recognizable gender binaries with which the reader is familiar: masculine and feminine. Indeed, by choosing to teeter between a masculine and feminine semantic narrative construction, the reader is compelled to reorient him/herself toward a type of fluctuation rather than a concrete separation of gendered psychosomatic experience. This ambigendered discourse assumes then a subversive quality as it distorts the discursive functionality of the heteronormative imperative that would require a linguistic and/or psychosomatic “true sex.”

Compared to *Mlle de Maupin* in a preface by Maurice Barrès, *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) by Rachilde (1860—1953), tells the story of the sadomasochistic and aristocratic Raoule de Vénérande, who her aunt calls “mon neveu” [“my nephew”], who refuses her social and sexual “role” as a woman and assumes a masculine gendered identity viciously courting and ultimately feminizing Jacques Silvert desiring above all to make him, first her mistress (in the feminine) and finally her wife, in a series of decadent and perverse storylines. Paralleling a common fin-de-siècle literary trope, Raoule is described as the “dernier rejeton de sa race” [“the last descendent of her race”] (RACHILDE 7) making her both susceptible to hereditary degeneration and decadent morality (PICK). Her body bears the signs of this moral and physiological transformation, described as like that of large, well-built man but with contrasting soft feminine features (RACHILDE 5—7). On the other hand, Jacques is described in terms of his infantile features and feminine traits, compared at once to the *Venus Callipyge* (14) and the iconic gay figure Antinous (15).⁹ In one notable instance, reinforcing his feminine nature with vestimentary artifices imposed on the body, Jacques is caught in a less-than-masculine top; he embarrassingly states “J’avais froid [...] Est-ce que je sais si c’est une chemise de femme, moi!” [“I was cold [...] How was I to know it was a woman’s shirt!”] (21). However, if Jacques’s gendered expression and presentation are oftentimes figured in the feminine, the narrator is quick to point out the priapic nature of his male body. In a voyeuristic scene in which Raoule hawks Jacques through a transparent curtain while he undresses, the narrator states that Jacques was covered in luminous gold hair and “se serait trompé, par exemple, en jurant que cela seul témoignait de sa virilité” (14) [“would be

⁹ See WATERS.

mistaken, for example, in swearing that that (the hair) alone bore witness to his virility”]. Finally, following the same formulation found in *Mademoiselle de Maupin* and elaborated by Ulrich during the same period, Jacques is presented as a beautiful 20-year-old male “dont l’âme aux instincts féminins s’est trompée d’enveloppe” [“whose instinctively feminine soul was in the wrong casing”] (29). But if Rachilde poses the problematic of sexed bodies and gendered identities in the novel, it is not only about sex that the main protagonists are concerned, but rather the refusal to be classified as only one sex, or as the narrator puts it “la destruction de [...] sexe” [“the destruction of [...] sex”] (38). And rather than elaborate only a praxis of gendered expressions, the novel is above all concerned with the elaboration of a “théorie de l’amour” [“theory of love”]¹⁰ that refuses socially elaborated categories and constraints favouring the development of antithetical dichotomies like nature/anti-nature, material/ideal, real/appearances (all familiar tropes to the decadent reader) that frustrate and pervert the image of fin-de-siècle sexual and gendered identity. Indeed, it is through these complications that the stability of the masculine and the feminine are definitively blurred.

Androgynous, transvestite, lesbian, and gay are all used as defiant sexual and gendered categories against the social order that structures discourse: “adoptons *il* ou *elle* afin que je ne perde pas le peu de bon sens qui me reste” [“let’s stick with *he* or *she* lest I lose the only good sense that remains in me”] (RACHILDE 29) (italics in original), states a frustrated M. de Rattolbe when speaking to Raoule about Jacques. Adding to the presentation of sex and gender through discourse, Raoule speaks of herself in the masculine stating: “je suis un garçon moi” [“me, I’m a boy”] (13) and proclaiming “*je suis amoureux*” (26) (italics in original) [“I’m a man in love”]. But to conclude that the sexualities or gendered identities of the main protagonists are only blurred would be misleading. Like the love triangle in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, the three-pronged amative plot in *Monsieur Vénus* defies social conventions while still pointing to recognizable sexual identities and gendered expressions. Ostensibly, Raoule is a woman, who dresses as a man to court Jacques but also enjoys feeling the pleasures of being a woman, both in her sexual encounters with Jacques but also in the social presentation of herself (79; 20). In turn she is courted by M. de Raittolbe, who addresses her in the masculine “mon ami” [“my chum (masculine friend)”] (18) and desires to marry her; a proposal she refuses. M. de Raittolbe, however, is also fond of Jacques’s feminine characteristics and masculine corporeal allure, assuming an *a priori* homosexual sexual identity. In a twisted plotline, however, Jacques visits Raittolbe’s house dressed as a woman and the two live out a sexual fantasy that might be described in modern terms as bisexual fetish (for Raittolbe) and cross-dressing homosexuality (for Jacques) (86). Yet, beyond a masculine/feminine dichotomy is the relationship between dominant and dominated. Raoule, above

¹⁰ Stated in the preface by Maurice Barrès.

all, desires a dominant position vis-à-vis those around her. But Jacques also has an intimate relationship with Raoule, who while dressed as a man, practices a version of feminizing sadomasochism with Jacques (while she is dressed in men's clothing) who assumes the dominated position. This interplay of sexuality and gendered expression points back to Gherovici's assertion that sexual identity is understood through the given dynamics of identifications rather than tied to a biological function as well as Prosser's idea of personal narrative as an epistemological indicator of transgendered transition. It is through the intimate narrative conditions of each protagonist as well as the dynamics of identifications that they propose that we might "know" not who they are but what "being" (both as noun and verb) they express at any given moment.

Written in 1985, Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel, *L'enfant de sable* [The Sand Child], also offers a glimpse of this transitional place in which heteronormative and queer space intermingle through trans-narration.¹¹ The novel tells the story of young girl named Ahmed forced to grow up male in order to materialize the expectations of a phallogentric and heteronormatizing father and society. Haunted by another existence of which h/er own body is the material proof, Ahmed, through the use of journals, narrates h/er transition from a prewritten masculine space to a self-substantiated transgendered place; one that will re-inscribe an identity onto a body that was stolen from h/er at birth. H/er experiences then mediate a discourse between h/er intimate transgendered self-discovery, queer space becoming place as it acquires meaning and value, and the phallogentric society in which she lives and experiences. The effect of Ahmed's journal then is threefold. First, it is a panoptic piecing together of "corporeal parts" (BEN JELLOUN 9) dismembered and scattered by Ahmed's father's imposed normalizing discourse. Indeed, it is the creation of a transgendered identity, the taking back of agency by discourse that will repair the "break [...] the fracture [...] between [Ahmed] and his body" (4) caused by the heteronormatizing space into which h/er father placed h/er as a "man-made" male born female. Indeed, the journal equally acts as a Lethian device, allowing for the transition from or melding together of gendered intimate narratives by means of the deconstruction, erasure, and the concomitant rediscovery of the body's discourse. Finally, as mentioned previously the journal acts as a referential third space between heteronormative and queer space where we, as readers, are "woven together by the woolen threads of the same story" (18).

It is not though in the mirror that Ahmed need look to find the intimate discourse between self and body that is required for the creation of place; the body itself must become an instrument of self-avowal. Its movements translate psychosomatic discourse into narration, "In the arching arms of my body I hold myself; I descend to the depths as if to escape myself [...] Who am I?

¹¹ For more on the idea of "place" and "space" see TUAN 2001.

[...] I dance. I turn and turn. I clap my hands. I strike the ground with my feet [...] My body dances to some African rhythm” (37—39). Here inheres a reciprocal form of interactivity between self and world in which the body encounters space, and space is reoriented through the agency of this body-subject. It is through movement, through self-exploration that a corporeal space is transcribed into a writable discourse that in its somewhat violent convulsions, in its screaming excavation reaches an-other subjectivity. Similar to the recognition of the black man’s body in a Fanonian discourse (FANON), Ahmed’s body has been given to him at once through the manipulations of h/er father and by society through a cultural lens informed by stereotypes inherited from the heteronormative imperative. However, knowledge of the body remains in a space that is purely physical, which can only be experienced singularly and therefore necessarily individualized. Like the colonized black man, Ahmed’s body has been seen and experienced in the third person; indeed re-knowing the self as body consists in re-claiming it through exploration. Once married to conform to the Muslim traditions imposed on Ahmed’s masculine “other,” the feminine is viewed as a sister in the eyes of Fatima, Ahmed’s chosen wife. Ravaged by seizures and treated as anathema by a phallogocentric society, Fatima explains to Ahmed on her deathbed, “I have always known who you are, and that is why, my sister [...] I have come to die here, near you [...] I know our wound, we share it [...] I am your wife and you are mine” (BEN JELLOUN 58). Fatima here becomes Ahmed’s allegorical mirror; her hopes, her fears: woman in Muslim society. It is not insignificant then that Fatima is handicapped, ravaged by epileptic seizures. The body in which Ahmed mirrors h/er existence is what s/he might have been as a woman, “We are women before being sick, or perhaps we are sick because we are women” (58).

As Ahmed maps out his corporeal geography through discourse, the exclusive nature of the imposed heteronormative space is clarified, “To be a woman is a natural infirmity and every woman gets used to it. To be a man is an illusion, an act of violence that requires no justification. Simply to be is a challenge. Were it not for this body to be mended [...] I would open these windows and scale the highest walls to reach the crests of my solitude, my only hope, my refuge, my mirror, and the path of my dreams” (71). It is also here that linguistically, in the French version (BEN JELLOUN 1995), like Herculine Barbin and Raoule de Vénérande, Ahmed assumes the feminine as well as the masculine through gendered linguistic indicators, merging two discourses in the quest to discover a trans-identity; a subtlety ignored completely in the English version of the text. As Ahmed transitions back to a female expression of identity, s/he becomes violent to this “second skin,” inflicting pain through waxing h/er legs and underarms. Once free of the imposed outer shell, a common transsexual trope is introduced: the need to rethink childhood. This return to childhood is important in that it re-links the body to a temporal discourse that was never uttered; it allows

for a personal rewrite of the transsexual story, “I must go back to childhood, become a little girl, an adolescent girl, a girl in love, a woman” (73). It is here that queer space meets queer time, as Hablerstam notes, “‘Queer time’ is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (HALBERSTAM 2005: 6). Indeed, after this point in the story, Ahmed not only abandons the corporeal heteronormative space assigned to h/er from birth, but also invests in a new temporality, leaving behind h/er inheritance, any notion of reproduction, and h/er family.

Liberated from heteronormative space, corporeal exploration becomes essential to a comprehensive trans-identity: “[the] caresses in front of the mirror became a habit, a sort of pact between [her] body and its image, an image buried long ago that had to be awoken as [her] fingers lightly touched [her] skin” (BEN JELLOUN 87). It is through this exploration that Ahmed rewrites a feminine space onto her body. This new discourse is dovetailed with corporeal exposure. The circus on the outskirts of society, a place where sex is neutralized in its falseness, and gender underscored as a social creation, becomes h/er new home. Here is a space where “men dress up as female dancers [...] where there is an atmosphere of derision, without any real ambiguity” (93). It is here that, “sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, our character was moving toward the re-conquest of his being” (96). With the announcement of the death of the narrator/storyteller who has been reading Ahmed’s journals to an audience throughout the novel, Ahmed’s narrative is taken up by three of the listeners: Salem, Amar, and Fatuma. What all of these listeners have in common is a referential corporeal discourse that through experience overlaps with the experiential space created by Ahmed’s journal: Salem (a black man in a white society); Amar, possibly a homosexual and disillusioned schoolteacher convinced of the hypocrisy of his country; and Fatuma, a childless and husbandless woman in a society that hardly favours woman on the margins of tradition. It is at the end of the novel then, that this third space where referentiality and commonality is most clearly revealed and the words of the illusive storyteller from the beginning “In truth, you possess the keys yourselves, but you do not know it, and even if you did, you would not know how to turn them” (6) take on their fullest potential. In the end, the trans-body becomes the convergent place where feminist, postcolonial, and queer studies meet and discourses are experienced and negotiated seemingly allowing Ben Jelloun’s novel to transcend Moroccan borders and espouse the *Tout-Monde* literary concept.

As interest in trans-narratives and unconventional sexualities and gendered identities grows, placing pre- and modern texts in conversation with modern and postmodern theory can provide invaluable insight into queer ideologies of the past and how they might have been used to influence and mold the more modern and postmodern ideologies of today. Given the recent nature of the transgender

phenomenon in particular, these insights prove invaluable tools for the creation of a history of transgenderism, its intimate while oftentimes contradictory relationship with queer theory, as well as temporal anchors in the study of deviant genders and sexualities throughout time, history, and cultures. While just a sample of these instances, the works in this article stand to show that transgender identity, while not always expressed by a taxonomic nomenclature, developed in 19th- and 20th-century France alongside the more studied (I use the term quite loosely) gay and lesbian discourses also found in these novels. Through their discursive intermingling, a more integral comprehension of gendered and sexual identity can be achieved, and with more study, as well as the addition of literary and social enquiries into other cultures, a broader range of queer epistemology can be established and understood.

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