

Exiles and Desire Crossing Female Bodies: Nina Bouraoui's *Garçon Manqué* and Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*

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ABSTRACT

This article compares two novels, Nina Bouraoui's *Garçon Manqué* (2000) and Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine* (2001), in which both female protagonists question their respective belonging to Algeria/France and to Lebanon/the United States. I will examine how both women attempt to claim and reappropriate their bodies—bodies that are considered illegitimate because they are the result of mixed marriages, which imposes on them a double rejection, forcing the protagonists to drift between the countries that lay claim to their identities. The article aims at firstly focusing on the violence their bodies have to suffer through the hybridity infecting them. Then, it examines the way both women struggle to legitimize their bodies by performing male bodies which they admire, desire, and criticize at the same time. This ultimately impels them to start writing, thus creating a space in which their existence is possible.

KEYWORDS: exile, hybridity, body, writing, memory,
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The 1980s witnessed the flourishing of Maghrebi literature in France and Arab-American literature in the USA. Literature has become the privileged space in which female voices have been able to express the struggles related to identity negotiations resulting from not only the double bind/loyalty they are subjected to, but also the double discrimination imposed on their bodies. This article will compare Nina Bouraoui's *Garçon Manqué* (*Tomboy*, 2000) and Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine* (2001) in which both female characters question their belonging to, respectively, Algeria/France and to Lebanon/the United States.

Maghrebi female literature emerges in the 1980s in a mostly male-dominated literary field and gains a particular significance in Algeria in reaction to a fundamentalist Islam that legally strikes women and their bodies. A “counter-literature” (Chalet-Achour 32) articulated by the denunciation of male hegemony and attempts at reappropriating a body claimed by a religious-political complex is at the heart of this female writing. The criticism regarding Maghrebi writing in French, especially female writing in Algeria,¹ is prolific and gives particular importance to denunciation which covers several grounds including decolonization, sharp criticism challenging the existing governments, and the double patriarchal domination that subjects women. Writing in French, as a reaction to a totalitarian system, provides a space in which the female writers can emerge a “*je*” (I) that is both fictive and autobiographical, preserving women's integrity, whilst allowing them to explore their creativity. Nina Bouraoui's work embodies her double belonging and is intertwined with biographical details.² Her first literary success, in 1991, *La voyeuse interdite* (*Forbidden Vision*) is narrated by a young Algerian woman who is confined to the paternal house and laws. In 1999, she publishes another novel that takes place in Algeria, called *Le jour du séisme* (*The Day of the Earthquake*), in which the female narrator explores the body as a site of identity conflicts, drawing parallels with the 1980 El Asnam earthquake.

Identity negotiations are also at the heart of Arab-American literature written in English, as 9/11 placed this literary current as well as the Arab-American community in the spotlight, forcing the writers to question the notions of double loyalty and/or betrayal. However, this is not the first time

¹ Including prominent writers such as Assia Djebar, Maïssa Bey, Malika Mokeddem, Nina Bouraoui, Leïla Sebbar, and Myriam Ben.

² She was born in 1967 in Rennes (France). She spent her childhood in Algeria and returned to France when she was a teenager.

they have faced an identity crisis. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the first Arab-speaking Christian immigrants from the Middle East were named “Turks from Asia” or “Other Asians,” as the region called Greater Syria was under Ottoman rule (Majaj 287).³ Surprisingly, the first literary works produced until the 1950s were mostly attempts to mediate and match Western literary references.⁴ Moreover, their writings took spiritual tones without directly addressing ethnical and identity issues. The migrant generation settling in the US after the 1960s was mostly Muslims who were politically aware, as they migrated to study or flee wars and terrorism. They politicized their identity as “Arabs,” choosing to challenge national boundaries. One can thus refer to memory as an umbrella topic allowing the Arab-American writers to “explore, assert, critique and negotiate” their politicized identity nourished by the racism, discrimination, violence, essentialist and orientalist views, and the conflicts shaking the Middle East since the 1960s and 1970s (Majaj 266-68).⁵ The topos of “home” becomes not only an aesthetic form through their insistence on poetry and Arabic traditions, but a prominent topic in their writings covering issues of exile, gender, assimilation, displacement, and war.⁶ Arab-American literature becomes a means of denouncing the way Arabs are viewed and claiming an identity which has been both despised and disregarded in the US. Rabih Alameddine’s work reflects the concerns raised by Arab-American literature. Alameddine (1959) is a Lebanese-American writer and painter whose novels are deeply rooted in Beirut. In *Kooloids: The Art of War* (1998), he tackles the issues of AIDS, homosexuality, and the Lebanese Civil War. *The Hakawati* (2008) explores the question of going home and the stories and memories that found one’s belonging and identity.

This article attempts to cross the paths of two female characters whose bodies circulate within third spaces, always defining their identity through their longing for belonging, undermined by transgression. Sarah’s body in Rabih Alameddine’s *I, the Divine* is defined as being illegitimate, due to her parents’ unexpected union. The novel’s turmoil starts when Janet (Sarah’s

³ Greater Syria covers today’s Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Palestine, and part of Jordan.

⁴ Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, and Mikhail Naimy are considered the founders of this literature.

⁵ These Arab-American writers include prominent contemporary writers such as Naomi Shihab Nye, Suheir Hammad, Mohja Kahf, Nathalie Handal, and Hayan Charara.

⁶ The connection between memory, exilic experience, and writing will be an important axis worth developing in another article, as one could also question the roles of family and national memory in the process of identity construction.

mother), an American student who decides to study in Beirut, meets Mustapha (Sarah's father), a Druze doctor.⁷ The family rejects this union, as the Druze community is not inclusive when it comes to foreigners who are not Druze. However, Janet has failed by not giving birth to a son, and so the perpetuation of the family name is halted. This failure is reason enough to send her back to the United States. Mustapha marries again but this time to a mountain girl, Saniya, who is much younger and most importantly Druze. In this novel, Alameddine opts for a non-linear narrative consisting of fragmented stories, told by Sarah, which are in fact failed attempts to recover and master one's memory and identity told repeatedly with new details and perspectives. Therefore, each chapter is literally called "Chapter One," "1," "Prologue," and "The Beginning."

Nina, in Bouraoui's autofictional novel *Garçon Manqué*, shares a similar background to Alameddine's Sarah. Nina's body also carries the blood-stained memory of another unexpected marriage, one that brought together her Algerian father and French mother. Nina, a teenager, recounts her life in Algeria in the 70s, more precisely, in the aftermath of the Algerian Revolution (the 1962 war of independence from France). Her story revolves around the physical and psychological violence to which her body is subjected, both in France and in Algeria, as she attempts to hide the visible traits that betray her origins, making her body vulnerable, but at the same time, producing a variety of possible identities. *Garçon Manqué* is characterized by its lack of chronological order. The sense of unity is ensured through a four-partite structure reflecting the narrator's struggles, as she is forced to negotiate her identity as French and/or Algerian, as well as a boy and/or a girl: the first part of the novel is devoted to Algeria, the second section focuses on France, the third one takes place in Rome as a space in-between France and Algeria, and the final portion involves her childhood friend, Amine, who is her male alter ego. Stylistically speaking, Bouraoui develops these divisions further by resorting to broken sentences, anaphorae, and a halting rhythm, reinforcing the internal fractures inhabiting her body.

⁷ "The Druze, also known as the 'Sons of Grace,' are a secretive, tightly-knit religious sect whose origins can be traced to Egypt a thousand years ago. They believe that God was incarnated on earth in the form of their leader, al-Hakim bi-Amrih Alla. The Druze do not have their own homeland. Thus, many of them migrated to the isolated mountains of Lebanon, Syria, and Israel, while others settled throughout the Middle East" (Rohland).

Sarah and Nina's illegitimate bodies respectively navigate between Lebanon and the United States, between France and Algeria. Even though their trajectories seem separate, similar axes join and cross their paths. I will first examine the hybridity that invades and conditions their bodies as a reminder of their parents' illegitimate unions. Then, I will discuss the importance of the body in both novels and the fluid expression that conflicts with the institutional forces attempting to dominate them. The third part will be devoted to the notion of writing as a space in which Sarah and Nina, not only negotiate, but also fight the institutional forces attempting to alienate, devour, or simply deny their existence.

In order to examine these different axes comparatively, I will situate the notion of hybridity at the crossroads of Homi Bhabha's, Judith Butler's, and Frantz Fanon's works which explore "third spaces" and/or "middle zones" and the way they affect the body. As far as the body is concerned, I will focus on Butler's and Pierre Bourdieu's works, as they place the body in its social and linguistic contexts. Butler and Bourdieu highlight the permeability and vulnerability of the female body in various social and institutional frameworks that threaten its integration, wholeness, and integrity. References to Assia Djebar, Mireille Rosello, and Régine Robin, whose works address the concepts of writing and memory, will inform the comparative analysis of both novels.

I. Hybridity

As mentioned above, Sarah and Nina have to deal with the hybridity inherent to their bodies, as both were born from mixed marriages. However, their family stories cannot be reduced to a binary cultural crossing based on the distinct origins of the parents inscribed in the girls' bodies. Thus, according to Bhabha, the question of hybridity does not aim at identifying the axes which form the third space, but rather the emergence of new positions that develop within this third space. As he points out, "this third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Rutherford 211). This space becomes the site in which "private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy" (Bhabha 13). Bhabha resorts to the notion of intimacy in order to question the "binary divisions through which such spheres of social

experience are often spatially opposed” (13). As for Butler, she highlights the violence that the individuals have to suffer as a result of inhabiting these third spaces she calls “middle regions, hybrid regions of legitimacy and illegitimacy” with no clear or distinct nominations. Therefore, these middle regions could become conflict zones for individuals occupying these spaces when they have to face “violent boundaries of legitimating practices that come into uneasy and sometimes conflictual contact with one another.” Thus, in these “nonplaces recognition, including self-recognition, proves precarious if not elusive, in spite of one’s best efforts to be a subject in some recognizable sense” (*Undoing Gender* 108).

Nina, in *Garçon Manqué* summarizes her Algerian life in the 70s with a single word: “rien” (“nothing”), on which she elaborates by saying that in Algeria, “[ils n’existent] pas. . . . De mère française. De père algérien. Seuls [leurs] corps rassemblent les terres opposées” (“[they] don’t exist. . . . Born of French mothers. Born of Algerian fathers. [Their] bodies alone reunite the conflicting lands”) (7-8 [1-2]).⁸ The hybridity inscribed in her blood and body gives rise to a fragmented identity: “Être séparée toujours de l’un et de l’autre. Porter une identité de fracture. Se penser en deux parties. A qui je ressemble le plus? Qui a gagné sur moi? . . . La France ou l’Algérie?” (“Forever split between this one and that one, enduring a fractured identity, seeing myself as divided. Who do I look like the most? Who has conquered me? . . . France or Algeria?”) (Bourauoui, *Garçon Manqué* 19 [10]). In Alameddine’s novel, Sarah underlines that her sisters and she are illegitimate institutionally speaking, as their parents could not get a civil marriage in Beirut and, most importantly, under Druze law (48). In both novels, Nina’s and Sarah’s bodies mirror the consequences of their parents’ desires and passions. Therefore, one could deduce that the desire for the foreign-other could be perceived as a hybrid infection. As Nina highlights, her body immortalizes the “faute” (“fault”) her parents made: “Cette mauvaise nouvelle. En pleine guerre. Embrasser l’ennemi. Le désirer. Faire la paix avant les autres. Par le corps. Se mélanger. Faire des enfants” (“Such bad news in the middle of war. To kiss the enemy, desire him. To make peace before others do through the body: to mix and have children”) (Bourauoui, *Garçon Manqué* 110 [66]). As far as Sarah’s father is concerned, according to the Druze community, he is simply “infected” by the passion for a foreign woman. The notion of infection is

⁸ Page numbers of *Tomboy* are provided immediately in brackets after *Garçon Manqué*.

based on the anecdote of Mustapha and Janet's first meeting, after Janet has been pricked by a sea urchin and to "save her foot," he has to "suck the poison out of the most beautiful ankle in the world" (Alameddine 48).

Fanon accurately interprets the notion of hybridity—without naming it as such—as being an affliction and infection caused by an in-betweenness which he does not know how to reconcile: "[My] shoulders slipped out of the framework of the world, my feet could no longer feel the touch of the ground. Without a Negro past, without a Negro future, it was impossible for me to live my Negrohood. Not yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned" (*Black Skin* 106). Fanon develops this feeling of hybridity to which one could attribute pathological features. Indeed, migrants,⁹ when they have to express the malaise inhabiting them, seem to suffer from a "pain without lesion," from an "illness distributed in and over the whole body," and from a "continuous suffering" (*African Revolution* 7), as a result of a life in-between "without a family, without love, without human relations, without communion with the group" (13). Fanon, in his attempt to explain the roots of this syndrome from which the migrants suffer, concludes that "the first encounter" with the self "occurs in a neurotic mode, in a pathological mode" involving a feeling of emptiness and "a bodily struggle with death," precisely "a death in life" since the migrant "will never be happier in Europe than at home, for he is asked to live without the very substance of his affectivity" (13). He is indeed "cut off from his origins and cut off from his ends" and has thus become "a thing tossed into the great sound and fury" (15).

This contamination takes a medical dimension in Nina's case when her French maternal grandparents insist that she get examined once in Rennes in order to discard/erase the Algerian damage done to her body and appropriate and heal the contaminated French blood: "Demain j'irai chez le médecin pour vérifier ma vie algérienne. Juste par précaution. Sang, ouïe, os, réflexes. Passer en revue le corps. Traquer. Déceler. . . . Voir si tout va bien. Après ce pays, cette terre, cette Afrique du Nord" (Tomorrow I will go to the doctor to check my Algerian life, just in case. Blood, hearing, bones, reflexes. To inspect the body, search, detect. . . . [To] check that all is well after living in that country, that land, North Africa) (Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué* 110 [66]). In Sarah's case, this infection contaminates her life in the form of deprivation

⁹ Fanon focused on the case of Arab migrants in France. See "The North African Syndrome" in *Toward the African Revolution*.

even leading to social, professional, and affective death, a handicap dominating her life: “Four forty-one. She must have dozed a bit. Try again. Closes her eyes. She curses. She should have taken Restoril. Too late now. She should have taken melatonin even though it makes her feel bad. Should she take a Xanax? This is not an anxiety attack. It may relax her though” (Alameddine 91).

The hybridity inherent to the protagonists’ beings creates a sense of void and illegitimacy. The conflicting familial and national memories, added to the institutional legitimizing forces, pathologize women’s existence by imposing norms that defy and deny their bodies that are, from this point onward, fractured.

II. The Fluid Body

As we have seen, within the framework of both novels, the clash and at the same time the intertwining of the social, institutional, and familial spheres generate third spaces and/or intermediary zones which could be perceived as an infection, an illness contaminating the body. These intersections are intimately anchored in Nina and Sarah, whose bodies become spaces of negotiation for familial and national traumas. This form of pathological hybridity, according to Fanon, is an “amputation” which burdens and even bends individuals by the weight of inertia that seems to be against the fluid nature inherent to their beings: “Nevertheless with all my strength I refuse to accept that amputation. I feel in myself a soul as immense as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers, my chest has the power to expand without limit. I am a master and I am advised to adopt the humility of the cripple” (*Black Skin* 108). Inertia, caused by deprivation and pathological symptoms, is in opposition to the fluidity inhabiting and defining both women whose bodies navigate in-between the duality mapped by the countries they inhabit. According to Zygmunt Bauman, fluidity is a specific feature belonging to liquids and gasses that are subjected to an ongoing change in terms of form. It is, however, important to note that liquids cannot keep a particular form or be fixed. Moreover, fluidity is not marked by space but time, as liquids are not able to sustain the same form in a constant manner. Liquids are therefore characterized by the ease with which they travel, unlike solids which are spatially static. This occupation is dictated by the bonds that hold the atoms together in a stable and lasting way. The bonding process

organizes the resistance which solids deploy against an eventual separation of atoms (Bauman 1-2). One could assume that institutional forces become the bonds that restrain individuals who transgress the norms. These forces inscribed in bodies are in charge of transforming the bodies into stages in which the prescribed norms express themselves, performatively speaking. This bondage to institutional forces is ensured over time through perpetual repetitions, as Butler highlights in her now famous definition of gender and its performativity. Butler notes that the “repeated stylization of the body,” as well as “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time,” construct “the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 45-46). The fluid quality of Nina’s and Sarah’s bodies thus seems to be sustained in time and space by institutional constraints. Hybrid bodies stage not only their own unfulfilled yearnings, but also the social and institutional expectations which, if they are not met, render their existence and survival impossible. They are thus excluded from their own bodies, in exile in themselves, their bodies made vulnerable, at the mercy of the institutions in charge of shaping them.

In order to ensure their survival and mask their vulnerability, Nina and Sarah initially resort to two opposite modes of self-expression: they express themselves through silence and insults respectively. These two forms of expression which, at first glance, seem contradictory, tend towards a common goal: the preservation of a body doubly vulnerable and permeable by its femininity and by the conflicts inherent to their blood. Nina resorts to silence as a means of escaping from the reality of her situation and to deny her double identity to protect herself: “Mon silence est une omission. Qui saura de quoi je suis faite? La terre algérienne. . . Elle formera le regret. Elle formera ma peur des autres. Les autres. Une rumeur qui détruit” (“My silence is an omission. Who will know what I am made of? The Algerian earth . . . will give shape to the regret, to my fear of others, my fear of their destructive rumors”) (Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué* 34-35 [19]). On the other hand, Sarah’s father appropriates her speech by training her to insult, which implicitly reveals his unfulfilled wish to have a son. He, therefore, shapes her speech to conform to masculine linguistic codes: “The Lebanese dialect is filled with delectable curses, a luscious language all its own, of which I was a true poet, trained by none other than my father. . . I grew up an avid practitioner” (Alameddine 7). The silence that allows Nina to mask her voice and the insults that Sarah

associates with the masculine world become means for both female characters to penetrate masculine bodies. They indeed stage their bodies by choosing to perform male bodies, which could be perceived as an act of denial of the woman within who is rejected by the body. As Bourdieu notes in *Masculine Domination*:

It is mainly through the agent who holds the monopoly of the legitimate exercise of symbolic violence (and not only of sexual potency) within the family that the psychosomatic action is performed which leads to the somatization of the law. The words of the father have a magical effect of constitution, creative naming, because they speak directly to the body . . . (70-71)

As the social conditions and the laws concerning women are perverse, Nina and Sarah, like Antigone described by Butler, represent the “perversion to the law” (*Antigone’s Claim* 67). Both women pervert and distort the paternal laws imposed on their bodies by creating masculine alter egos.

Both women attempt to reach the invisibility they are yearning for through visibility. Football, a collective game mostly associated with men, can be considered a strong means of bonding and thus reinforcing homosociality. It becomes the stage where Nina and Sarah perform the male body and conform to the expected masculinities allowing them to gain invisibility, therefore male approval. Paradoxically, they achieve this through visibility, attracting male admiration. Nina clearly highlights her football performance as acting, thus allowing her to lie and to conceal her isolation and loneliness by belonging: “Ils applaudissent. J’apprends à être devant eux. J’apprends à me montrer ainsi, changée. Ils me regardent. Seul mon corps captive. Je dis mon mensonge. Par mes gestes rapides. Par mon attitude agressive. Par ma voix cassée. Je deviens leur fils” (“They applaud. I learn how to be in their presence. I learn how to show myself, transformed. They look at me. My body itself captivates them. My lie becomes public: by my rapid gestures, my aggressive attitude, and my broken voice. I become their son”) (16 [8]). Through public performance, Nina succeeds in protecting her lie, which consists in excluding the girl—the daughter—whom Algerian men reject, by imprisoning her within the privacy of her body. Her victory and sense of belonging is achieved through the use of the attribute “their son” which, not only defines her connection to the community through

homosociality but also through blood, family ties, thus legitimating her body. The longing for belonging becomes even stronger with Sarah who, not only seeks her father's approval (as mentioned above), but also has to face, on a microcosmic level, a boys' school where she is the only girl with PE classes "geared exclusively toward young males": "I had always been a tomboy and I was blessed with a soccer-playing ability which amazed even those who knew nothing about the game" (Alameddine 11). The football field and uniform thus become Sarah's stage and disguise respectively, allowing her to be an undistinguishable part of the collectivity during PE classes: "I showed up with the rest of the class on the soccer field for the first PE class. I was wearing the school's logo in yellow, white shorts with the logo in green" (11-12). Collective nouns such as "class" and "school's logo" are in charge of reinforcing her belonging to masculine groups.

Both women express themselves through their bodies, desiring to appropriate the language of domination. However, as Butler notes, the norm cannot "exist without perversion." This perversion to law, which could be translated here as the gender transgression, only reflects the "negative feature of the law." Consequently, the relation between the law and its transgression "remains static," as there is no clear "articulation of the norm itself" (Butler, *Antigone's Claim* 76). Therefore, these similar performances, which seem to express their desire to make their bodies visible through transgression and cultivate a sense of gender fluidity, are in fact only means of conforming to the norm. Butler describes this phenomenon as being "yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law's self-amplification and proliferation" (*Antigone's Claim* 127). The imitation of men (as displayed above) could reflect both women's aspiration to fulfill their longing for belonging translated through their yearning for invisibility: "Je veux être un homme. . . . Etre un homme en Algérie c'est devenir invisible. Je quitterai mon corps. Je quitterai mon visage. Je quitterai ma voix. Je serai dans la force. L'Algérie est un homme. L'Algérie est une forêt d'hommes" ("Here in Algeria I want to be a man. . . . To be a man in Algeria means becoming invisible. I will leave my body, my face, my voice. I will be on the side of power. Algeria is a man; it is a forest of men") (Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué* 37 [21]). The bond to men seems to be ensured through the intertwining of the Saidian notions of filiation and affiliation. Indeed, the female body, in both novels, is the locus combining not only a biological

“son-ness” (filiation), as both women are related to the men through blood, but also the chosen metaphorical association to a “parent or sibling,” which is revealed through the performance of the masculine (affiliation) (Makaryk 462). Moreover, if one takes into account the etymology of both Saidian notions, filiation refers to the Latin word *filius* meaning “son,” and “affiliation” also comes from the Latin verb *affiliare* meaning “to adopt a son” (*Merriam-Webster*). If one also goes back to the root “*fil-*” that means “thread” (*Gaffiot*), one could deduce that these forms of family and male bonding become lines entrapping the female body instead of liberating it.

However, the female body cannot be protected permanently through the appropriation of masculine traits and behaviors. As Butler notes, the body involves “mortality,” “vulnerability,” and “agency,” as “the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence.” The body, therefore, is the space where “doing” and “being done to” become equivocal (*Undoing Gender* 21). The permeability and vulnerability associated with the body is accentuated in times of crisis, namely wars.

The wars and their aftermaths, which both novels choose to portray, precisely represent the struggles to affirm a national identity that favors masculine hegemony. In *Garçon Manqué*, Nina’s family, as well as the other mixed families, have to face the hostility shown to the French who have chosen to remain in Algeria after its independence (1962), following over a century of French colonization that resulted in the ferocious Algerian War of Independence (1954-62). *I, the Divine* treats the Lebanese Civil War of 1975 (through 1990). Subsequent to Ottoman rule and the French mandate, the conflict opposes the various ethnic groups in the country, namely Shi’a and Sunni Muslims, Maronite Christians, Druze groups, and Palestinians. Beirut is dressed in red shades of violence and the entire country is immersed in blood and filth that becomes their routine: “In time, the smell of cordite, of garbage, urine, and decaying flesh, would become familiar to us, banal and clichéd” (Alameddine 39). Not only does war contaminate women’s routine, but it also forces them to face dangers and threats. War becomes another symbol of male domination expropriating women of their bodies, as they are at the mercy of men who themselves are trapped in symbolic forms of capital, such as honor and virility. Women thus become a means of allowing men to increase their capital of masculinity through diverse forms of physical intimidation, ultimately leading to rape.

According to Bourdieu, the vagina is “socially constituted as a sacred object, and therefore subjected to . . . strict rules of avoidance or access” and is conceived as a “fetish and is treated as sacred, secret and taboo” (16). Rape is consequently an act of transgression since, as Bourdieu highlights, “the body (like blood) can be only given, in a purely gratuitous offering, presupposing the suspension of violence” (17). The sacredness of the virginity ensures women’s symbolic capital as long as they are able to maintain it intact. When women are subject to rape, their symbolic capital, unsoiled so far, collapses. Bourdieu goes further by explaining that:

. . . [Gang rapes] are designed to challenge those under test to prove before others their virility in its violent reality of violence, in other words stripped of all the devirilizing tenderness and gentleness of love, and they dramatically demonstrate the heteronomy of all affirmations of virility, their dependence on the judgment of the male group. (82)

One could therefore claim that war accentuates an entangled desire in men: the desire devoid of any sense of moral judgment aiming at affirming male power over women through rape: this, in turn, would lead to the approval of other male members of the group. Rape owes its extreme violence, not only to a crude desire to own the female body to ensure one’s superiority through the phallus, but also to the group pressure that assaults men. This point is fully explored in *I, the Divine* when Sarah is gang-raped. What terrifies Sarah the most in this ordeal is not only the fact that she is at the mercy of these men but also the powerlessness she feels, when confronted by the most primitive desires of men: “The desire was not coveting, or lust, not even possessing. It was a primitive desire, dominance, aggression. For the first time, she wanted to die” (Alameddine 195). The violent force of this scene reaches its climax through a series of images related to blood that become the leitmotiv of the scene. Sarah’s body bears the imprints of the violence combined with blood: “The taste of blood, was it her lips or his fingers? She never figured it out because the punch she received in her kidneys blinded her” (Alameddine 198). Later on, her blood is transferred on her rapists, increasing the value of their capital of virility and dispossessing her of her symbolic capital: “The man stood up, arrogant in spite of the fact that he was naked from the waist down, his penis covered with blood” (198).

Furthermore, this scene is also a means for the rapists to challenge each other and to perform a form of ultra-virility, conforming to the social pressure imposed on men as well: “*You want to remain a virgin all your life. Come. Come find out the pleasures of being a man*” (198).

In *Garçon Manqué*, male desire involves further paradoxes rooted in the colonial past. Men, indeed, both desire and repudiate the female body, especially when it comes to Nina and her French mother whose blood betrays them in Algeria. Her mother is subjected to instances of violence, even ambushes where she is showered with “stones and spit” (“une pluie de pierres” and “une pluie de crachats”) (Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué* 78), “as if all the hatred from the war were coming back in a flash” (“comme si toute la haine de la guerre revenait à cet instant”) (78 [45]).¹⁰ In spite of the burden of the colonial memory embodied by her mother, men seem to desire her: “Ils frôlent. Ils ne s’arrêtent pas. . . . Une main touche ses cheveux. . . . Toucher. Savoir. Connaître. Ma mère est un trésor” (“The men brush against us and keep walking. . . . A hand touches her hair. . . . To touch. To know. To understand. My mother is a treasure”) (Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué* 13 [6]). Men therefore seem to reach France through the mother’s body. The desire for the mother is transferred onto Nina, as, according to her, her mother “makes [her] a foreigner” (“Je deviens une étrangère par ma mère”) through her presence and her French blood (Bouraoui, *Tomboy* 6 [12]). Her body, thus, also becomes an object of both desire and repudiation leading to an attempted abduction and rape.

“*Vol*” and “*viol*”—the pun Nina insists on making when narrating the attempted rape scene—succinctly expresses the end of her innocence.¹¹ It is important to highlight that her Algerian life is limited to their house in a *Résidence*, their car, and eventually the beach. The fact that the man is able to enter the garden, i.e. an intimate space, does not bode well. Nina is fascinated by the man, especially his seductive voice: “Il est jeune. Il porte un costume. Il est beau. . . . Seule sa voix existe. Sa proposition. . . . Il sourit souvent. Il sait attirer vers lui” (“He is young, wears a suit, and is handsome. . . . All I hear is his voice, his offer. . . . [He] smiles often, knowing how to seduce me”) (Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué* 43 [24]). As in fairy tales, the young woman is attracted by what she desires unknowingly, yet what represents the utmost

¹⁰ The page number of the French version is provided in brackets in this instance.

¹¹ The two words mean “rape” and “theft” respectively.

danger for her. “Il caresse mes cheveux. Il dit: C’est de la soie. Il caresse mon visage. Il dit: C’est du velours” (“He touches my hair and says it’s silky. He caresses my face and says it’s like velvet”) (44 [24]). The tension expresses what in fairy tales is generally followed by the fall of the innocent young protagonist, here Nina’s innocence and her desire for Algeria which the man embodies: “Toute l’Algérie contient cet homme. Toute mon enfance se dirige vers lui” (“All of Algeria contains this man. My entire childhood veers toward him”) (44 [24]). The brutality of the scene is borne out of the mythical quality of tales. Nina’s attraction to the man, who resembles a Bluebeard-type character, proves self-destructive, as what the man really embodies is Algeria’s desire to own her and make her “fall in the fire and burn,” by “encircling” her with “his skin” and “drowning” her with “his voice” (Bouraoui, *Tomboy* 24).¹² At this point, Nina is aware of the permeability of her body, now powerless to protect her: “mon corps, ma seule défense, ma blessure. . . . 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” (“My body is my only defense, my wound. . . . It’s the rape of my face, my eyes, and my skin. It’s the violation of my trust. It’s an immense betrayal”) (Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué* 44 [25]).

The brutality of the scene ends with the intervention of Nina’s sister, even though her body is as vulnerable as Nina’s: “Ma sœur contre l’homme. Son corps pour mon corps. Un sacrifice” (“My sister confronts the culprit. She trades her body for mine. A sacrifice”) (Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué* 47 [24]). In order to overcome the event, Nina’s unconscious opts for denial and lies, engendering amnesia and silence, thus hiding the truth in her body: “Je ne me souviens pas. Mais je sais. . . . Ma mémoire n’entre pas dans ce lieu. C’est un lieu interdit et peuplé. C’est le lieu des rêves. C’est un camp. C’est une concentration. C’est mon âge blessé” (“I don’t remember. But I know. . . . My memory doesn’t go back there. It’s a forbidden place inhabited by dreams. It’s a camp, a concentration. These are my wounded years”) (47-48 [26]). When her body and its integrity is stolen from her, her only means of dealing with such brutality seems to control it by driving it back into oblivion. Such a process, though, does not seem to help her regain autonomy over her body; on the contrary, the body seems to further escape her.

¹² “Tomber dans le feu et me brûler. . . . Est-ce l’odeur des fruits ou l’odeur de sa peau qui vient autour de moi et enserre? Est-ce sa voix ou le silence du parc qui noie?” (Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué* 43-44)

Men's desire to appropriate women's bodies haunts Sarah in the aftermath of the gang rape and Nina after the rape and kidnapping attempt. When she is in exile in her own body, because she has been soiled by some brutal masculine sexual drive, a woman finds herself in an extraterritorial situation. Then, she must form new strategies allowing her to reclaim her own body. In the case of many, this means by writing. According to Assia Djebar, the extraterritoriality women suffer from may be cured by the writing process, as it is the only real territory women can freely inhabit (44). In fact, the body regains its fluidity through writing as the territory where women's existence on their own terms and in their own words becomes possible.

III. The Space of Writing

Writing, as it has already been demonstrated and highlighted on a number of occasions, is without a doubt a space of (d)enunciation: the two novels presented in this article are no exception. In Bouraoui's novel, revenge seems to be one of Nina's sources of motivation for all the times she has been silenced: "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" ("I will make it public. Better yet, I will write and expose their hatred in a book. I write, and someone will recognize himself, find herself [*sic*] pathetic. They will remain voiceless, drowned in silence") (*Garçon Manqué* 132 [80]). Words become the resonance of her silence allowing her body to resist the inertia imposed on it and find its fluidity: "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" ("My equilibrium lies in my solitude, a unifying force. I invent another world, without a voice, without judgment. I dance for hours. A trance followed by silence. I learn to write") (26 [14]).

Nina's writing, however, cannot be reduced to a binary space of retaliation. On the contrary, it consists in a complex space of negotiation where she cannot escape and has to face her identities that are not only multiple but also fragmented: "Mon silence est un combat. J'écrirai aussi pour ça. J'écrirai en français en portant un nom arabe. Ce sera une désertion. Mais quel camp devrais-je choisir? Quelle partie de moi brûler?" ("My silence is a battle. I will also write because of this. My writing will be in French, while

my last name remains Arab. It will be a desertion. But which camp should I choose? Which part of me should I burn?") (Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué* 33 [18]). Her conflict of identity also reveals her desire to leave a mark and prove the existence of her body defined as being illegitimate: "L'idée de la mort vient avec l'idée d'être toujours différente. De ne pas être à sa place. De ne pas marcher droit. D'être à côté. Hors contexte. Dans son seul sujet" ("The idea of death comes with always feeling different, not fitting in, not walking straight, being in the margins and feeling like an outsider, confined within myself") (121 [73]). Her writing style reflects the conflicts that inhabit her through a broken and halting rhythm ensured by nominal sentences and isolated words, fragmented sentences, and even anaphorae: "Au-delà des plaines de la Mitidja. Au-delà des arbres. Au-delà de mon corps féminin. Au-delà de la mer: la terre française, natale et négligée" ("Beyond the Mitidja plains. Beyond the trees. Beyond my female body. Beyond the sea is France, my native and neglected homeland") (26 [14]). Above all, the disjointed and fractured rhythm inherent to the novel coincides with its four-partite structure. Algiers, Rennes, Tivoli and Amine all reflect Nina's longing for belonging and her struggles related to her body considered illegitimate, as she incessantly negotiates her identity not only as Algerian and/or French, but also as a boy and/or a girl. However, her attempts to appropriate these four spaces are challenging. They indeed manage to escape from her: Algeria rejects her; France ignores and refuses to recognize the children born from mixed marriages; Amine is the projection of her desire for the masculine body and identity she attempts to appropriate throughout the novel; and finally Tivoli, geographically situated between France and Algeria is where she attempts to free herself from the affiliations/senses of belonging invading her body by detaching herself from the complex identity web entangling her body. She desires to reclaim the body she has been denied: "Mon corps portait autre chose. Une évidence. Une nouvelle personnalité. Un don, peut-être. Je venais de moi et de moi seule. Je me retrouvais. Je venais de mes yeux, de ma voix, de mes envies. Je sortais de moi. Et je me possédais" ("My body revealed something new, an evidence, a different personality, a gift, perhaps. I came from myself and myself alone. I was finding myself, born solely from my eyes, my voice, and my desires. I shed my old self and reclaimed my identity") (Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué* 185 [112]).

Writing seems to provide the space in which Nina and Sarah both desire to emerge as the “I” in their own stories stifled by institutional forces, namely, the private sphere constituted by their respective families as well as by the power of history infecting their bodies with the entanglements of national and personal memories. As Butler points out, “The particular force of the word as deed within the family or, more generally, as it circuits within kinship, is enforced as law” (*Antigone’s Claim* 65). Thus, both women are similar to Butler’s Antigone who “represents not kinship in its ideal form but its deformation and displacement” (24). Such women have to put “the reigning regimes of representation into crisis and raise the question of what the conditions of intelligibility could have been that would have made [their lives] possible, indeed, what sustaining web of relations makes our lives possible” (24). Using the power of words becomes their way of reappropriating their bodies and voices dominated, stifled and, as a result, weakened by the hybrid and patriarchal forces inherent to their beings. Writing becomes the space in which they face and fight the forces hijacking their bodies and voices.

The obsession with the web of relations resulting from memories and history inscribed in female bodies is also one of the central themes of *I, the Divine*. Each chapter becomes a new attempt for Sarah to reappropriate her story and voice. The novel is precisely structured in a discontinuous, fragmented, and disjointed manner. This unconventional structure reflects the hybridity inherent to her being. As the subtitle indicates, and as mentioned earlier, it is a novel *In First Chapters*, which means that each chapter is called “Chapter 1,” “1,” “One,” “Prologue,” or “Introduction.” The unusual chapter titles reinforce and cultivate Sarah’s desire to start over and over again when she fails to capture her memory. This idea is emphasized by the fact that, in each chapter, the same events recur but are narrated differently with new details, unspoken facts, innuendoes, silences, or new developments. Moreover, the chronological order of events is not respected. The reader participates in the negotiation of her story presented in a fragmented way, as he or she is invited to follow her storyline leaping from Beirut to New York, from New York to San Francisco, and to Beirut again. In order to enhance the contradictions inhabiting Sarah, the narrator resorts to a variety of short and long sentences, monologues, lack of punctuation, and passages written in French which are rewritten later on in English. The lack of transition combined with recurrent echoes from one narrator to another also reinforces

the lack of coherence: the omniscient narrator observes the characters in their most intimate and secret moments and suddenly “I” takes over the narration.

According to Régine Robin, disjointed memorial forms are legitimate, as the characters negotiate and put together different levels of memory, such as national and familial since they are “marked by all these scenarios that can reinforce but also contradict one another” (57). Thus, Sarah is, according to Robin, at the crossroads of a “scattering of flash memories, in a pre-established meaning, in an identity struggle, in a fragmented counter-memory, or on the contrary, in a dispersal of migrant memories” (57). For instance, Sarah’s subjective view regarding her stepmother is countered by her sister Amal’s account and that of the omniscient narrator, who reveals Saniya’s intimate thoughts. In this way, Saniya’s story is rectified and finds its coherence through the fragments constituting her existence. Sarah describes her as a despicable and mean character from a fairy tale: “I had a fairy-tale childhood complete with the evil stepmother” (Alameddine 33). However, this memory is jeopardized by Amal who reminds Sarah of Saniya’s sufferings and the psychological tortures their grandfather put her through: “It was Grandfather who started the attacks. He turned all of us into the jeering audience. You should talk to her sometime and listen to her stories about him” (Alameddine 288).

Unlike her mother and stepmother, who have both chosen dispossession of their own identities as a result of their obedience to patriarchal rules, Sarah attempts to recover and capture the personal and familial memories that escape her. When she attempts to put into words the gang-rape scene, she needs two chapters to overcome the taboo of silence. In the first chapter, she tells, in French, the reader about waiting for a taxi under the Beirut sun where she briefly mentions her recent sickness (Alameddine 192). It does not include any hint regarding a gang rape or any form of threat; this chapter therefore seems odd and disconnected from the rest of the story. In the next chapter, entitled “Chapter One: *Spilt Wine*,” the previous description is repeated but told, this time, in English. The reader immediately grasps the meaning of the title associated with the loss of virginity. In this new chapter, Sarah is finally able to reveal all the sordid details which she has hidden so far.

According to Robin, silence has several functions: one can deal with “structured silence,” “silence-refusal” and “silence on things that embarrass, disturb, or hurt.” These different categories of silence take place at “individual

as well as collective levels.” This way, “the named object takes tangible form. If it is not verbalized, it remains vague” (Robin 60). Emancipation from the power and domination of these feelings is all the more important for women. As Bourdieu highlights, “the magic of symbolic power,” which contributes to the perpetuation of the dominant-dominated relationship, appeals to emotions, such as “shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt” (60). Therefore, these emotions become obstacles that reinforce the masculine domination, as it is perpetuated through implicit and/or explicit violence against which women do not fight back. Consequently, women contribute to the perpetuation of masculine domination through silence. Sarah reclaims her body drowned in memories and in the silence of taboos and shame by using the power of words, as she dares to depict the unspeakable rape scene.

IV. Conclusion

Mireille Rosello highlights that in memorial narratives “it is impossible to live in the past *and* impossible to break free” (18). According to Rosello, the memorial process does not aim to “break free ‘from’ the past” but to recognize that “living with the ever-present past is unavoidable, that, therefore, the present is this so-called past of violence and guilt, but also that a welcoming of that heritage does not mean that we must reproduce it” (19).

The titles of both novels, which seem contradictory at first glance, precisely illustrate “the unavoidable ever-present past” that entangles Nina and Sarah’s bodies. The sexual, identity, and institutional crises that the women face throughout the novels appear to be resolved at their respective culminations. The title *Garçon Manqué* expresses how Nina’s transformation into a tomboy is not only in order to compensate for, but also to face the deficiencies and fragments affecting her life, which she claims to have achieved at the end of the novel when she kisses a woman within during her stay in Tivoli. Indeed, she highlights that she comes “from [herself] and [herself] alone” (“Je venais de moi et de moi seule”) (Bouraoui, *Tomboy* 112 [185]). On the other hand, the title *I, the Divine* conveys a sense of completeness and unity for which Sarah is yearning. At the end of the novel she owns the fact that she belongs to her tribe and even adopts a brand new identity—not only national but also religious—through a female Druze leader also named Sarah, known for leading the way for the Druze faith at its beginnings. By appropriating and taking hold of their stories in-between, both

women seem to have found the wholeness they were longing for and seem to be freed from and/or reconciled with the duality inherent to their beings. However, one may wonder whether the act of writing is an achievement in itself, allowing women to reconcile the in-betweenness and overcome the dominations subjecting their bodies.

The fluid expression and articulation of both narratives are ensured by the intertwining of writing, exile, and body that problematize and forge both women's hybrid identities. One could, therefore, question the importance of the sheer act of writing in terms of clearly settling, reconciling, and even freeing oneself from not only the institutional forces, but also the conflicting and complex identities inhabiting one's being. Writing is indeed the space of reflection for female struggles, as women have to incessantly question the conditions under which their life is possible. Both endings, by opting for a set-in-stone reconciliation, seem to deprive the novels from new overtures and questionings nourished by further explorations within the extraterritoriality and fluidity that writing provides.

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