

QUEERING IDENTITY, QUERYING SELF: A DECOLONIAL
FEMINIST READING OF THE ŒUVRE OF NINA BOURAOUI

BY

DAISY SAVAGE

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College of Arts and Law
University of Birmingham
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Abstract

This thesis innovatively brings Queer of Colour and Decolonial Feminist theories into conversation with the works of Nina Bouraoui in order to achieve three interrelated aims: to critically analyse and re-evaluate the portrayal of identity in Bouraoui's oeuvre; to examine whether Bouraoui's writings themselves can be read as a form of Decolonial Feminism; and to propose the establishment of non-hierarchical, rhizomatic networks of feminist voices that work toward creating a society which is more aware of, and seeks to dismantle, the multiple oppressions faced by so many.

Bouraoui, a French-Algerian queer writer whose work navigates themes of race, gender, sexuality, and belonging, provides rich source material for exploring complex, intersectional identities that exist at the margins of dominant cultural narratives. By exploring her writings through the lens of Queer of Colour critique and Decolonial Feminism, this thesis will interrogate the ways in which Bouraoui constructs, resists, and reimagines identity, particularly in relation to colonial legacies and queer subjectivities. Particularly suited to this conversation with Bouraoui are the works of Chicana feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, and Black lesbian writers like Audre Lorde and bell hooks.

Finally, the project argues for the need to foster non-hierarchical, rhizomatic networks of feminist discourse, inspired by Bouraoui's resistance to fixed identities and singular truths. Celebrating transnational coalition building, this thesis envisions new forms of feminist solidarity that transcend boundaries of race, gender, and nationality.

For my parents,

Michael Savage 1953 – 2017

Rose Savage 1954 – 2009

In loving memory.

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Introduction: Decolonial Dialogues

'J'ai peur de comprendre quelle femme je suis.'

- Nina Bouraoui¹

'Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in the very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared.'

- Gloria Anzaldúa, *Speaking in Tongues*²

'Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place.'

- Cherríe Moraga, *La Güera*³

The fears around self-understanding evoked by prolific French-Algerian writer Nina Bouraoui and influential Chicana feminists Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga in the above quotations point to a particular problem which this thesis seeks to address: since patriarchal forces have sought to keep women in rigidly defined roles while simultaneously discouraging self-reflection and self-love, how are we, as women, to explore questions of identity and selfhood? More critically for the

¹ Nina Bouraoui, 'Je suis la faussaire de mon passé', *Revue des deux mondes*, (2019) <http://www.revuedesdeuxmondes.fr/article-revue/je-suis-la-faussaire-de-mon-passe/> [accessed 14/3/22].

² Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 33.

³ Cherríe Moraga, 'La Güera', in *This Bridge Called My Back* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), pp. 22-9 (p. 24).

purposes of the present study, how do women whose existence is bound by the triple or quadruple oppressions alluded to by Anzaldúa take up a space within which to forge a sense of self which is not predicated on those very oppressions? As she explains in her ground-breaking text, *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

Alienated from her mother culture, “alien” in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.

Perhaps counterintuitively, it is often within and between these very spaces of alienation and uncertainty that the woman of colour depicted by Anzaldúa finds the strength to face the fears which she and Bouraoui describe. Her extolling of writerly practice as survival and power, and Moraga’s call to face up to oppressions in ‘La Güera’, quoted above, offer two methods for such self-exploration, and provide the key starting point for the arguments made throughout this thesis about the possibilities for change engendered by the breaking down of borders in search of cross-cultural connection. As Moraga contends, the fears discussed by Bouraoui and Anzaldúa are perhaps best overcome by simultaneously reaching inwards and facing outwards in search of a better future. This is a complex dance which requires often painful self-examination. For the writers discussed in this thesis, both processes are achieved through speaking and writing. As Anzaldúa asserts, ‘[w]hile writing and speaking act as a safety valve, they are also political acts that spring from the

impulse to subvert, resist, educate, and make changes.’⁴ The point at which the safety valve becomes the political act is one of the key focuses of this thesis.

Nina Bouraoui engages in what Moraga terms ‘heartfelt grappling’ with her own oppressions and the legacies of patriarchy and colonialism throughout her published work. As a half-French, half-Algerian queer writer, much of her œuvre could arguably be said to spring from those impulses outlined by Anzaldúa. Although she has not always desired to be labelled as a particular kind of writer, she has stated that her writing is ‘pour les gens fragiles, différents.’⁵ Elsewhere she explains how witnessing a protest march against gay marriage also stirred the impulse to subvert and educate with her writing. She explains: ‘Alors si un écrivain a parfois le devoir de parler, c’est le moment...je parle pour les autres. Tous ces jeunes gens qu’on jette dans la tourmente, qu’on force à se nier, alors qu’ils sont dans leur vérité.’⁶ One can already begin to see reflected in Bouraoui’s own words the political grappling with oppressions called for by queer of colour feminists like Anzaldúa, Lorde, and Moraga, the call for people to be permitted to live ‘in their truth.’ As Lorde has asserted, ‘in a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action.’⁷ This thesis innovatively brings these queer of colour and decolonial feminist approaches into conversation with Bouraoui’s œuvre in order to explore the potentially redemptive nature of such a discourse. This is not to collapse individual works together or to erase differences between these women, but rather to respond to Audre Lorde’s assertion that, ‘divide and conquer must become

⁴ *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 187.

⁵ Nina Bouraoui, ‘J’ai appris à supporter ma propre homophobie’, *Femme Actuelle*, (Paris 2018).

⁶ Annick Cojean, ‘Nina Bouraoui: quelle richesse, cette homosexualité qui fut un long chemin!’, *Le Monde*, (2018).

⁷ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 105.

define and empower'⁸ if we are to make meaningful changes in our own fields and the world at large. Charles Forsdick has argued that, '[t]he intersections of Modern Languages, postcolonialism and comparatism retain rich possibilities and permit the reinvigoration of all three fields.'⁹ It is my contention that the approach taken in this thesis contributes to such reinvigoration by developing a new framework for interpretations of Bouraoui's work and queer decolonial feminist thought more widely, broadening the scope of French and Francophone studies by engaging in and promoting transcultural dialogue between feminist voices, including those from outside of the francosphere. In so doing I also respond to Paola Bacchetta's call for scholars to engage in what she calls self-reflective transnational transdisciplinarity, a process which seeks to establish 'all sorts of connections among scholarship within and across contexts, translocal connections, connections of many different types of intensities, within and across the borders of disciplines, to urge disciplines to open their borders.'¹⁰ In search of such connections, this thesis is underpinned by queer decolonial feminisms and seeks to answer the following key research questions.

Firstly, what can be achieved by bringing queer of colour and decolonial feminist thought into conversation with the work of Nina Bouraoui? It is my contention in this thesis that women, and particularly women of colour, are far too often expected to 'stay in their lane', by which I mean that their work is only allowed to be read within a very specific cultural and/or political context, if it is read at all. Writing by men, meanwhile, tends more often to be unmarked and to be read cross-culturally, allowing for new ways of thinking and understanding, but simultaneously

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Charles Forsdick, 'Beyond Francophone Postcolonial Studies: Exploring the Ends of Comparison', *Modern Languages Open*, (2015), 24.

¹⁰ Paola Bacchetta, 'Decolonial Praxis: Enabling Intranational and Queer Coalition Building', *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, 18 (2010), 155.

limiting those new ways of thinking and understanding to a masculinist standpoint. For example, the work of writers such as Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha, while produced in culturally specific settings, is widely used in methodologies of postcolonialism the world over. It has historically been taken for granted that these male voices speak universally for the postcolonial condition. The women with whom I bring Bouraoui into conversation actively dispute this gendered status quo. As Carol Boyce Davis has pointedly enquired, 'where are the women in the theorizing of postcoloniality?'¹¹ Although there has been a huge upsurge in women's voices speaking from the postcolony since Boyce Davis posed this question, I would argue that there is still a reticence to accept bringing these voices into conversation with one another. Anecdotally, in proof of this, when presenting my research at a symposium, I was asked whether it was academically sound to use the work of a Chicana feminist to interrogate the work of a French-Algerian writer, given their geographical, cultural, and historical differences. Tellingly, this was not asked of one of the other speakers who used the work of Frantz Fanon to discuss Māori history. In light of this methodological imbalance, I have made the political decision not to use male critical voices in this thesis, unless absolutely necessary. Instead, with Boyce Davis's question in mind, I centre the voices of women who offer critical insight into the issues discussed throughout this project, but whose voices are rarely heard in the context within which this project is produced, namely the UK academy.

The second question moves to ask whether such an engagement with queer of colour and decolonial feminisms may allow for new ways of understanding subjecthood in Bouraoui's œuvre, inviting new ways of reading and responding to

¹¹ Carole Boyce Davis, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migration of the Subject* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 80.

Bourraoui's work, using the methodologies of queer decolonial feminism critically to explore how she negotiates questions of identity at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and nationhood. By bringing Bourraoui into conversation with queer of colour and decolonial feminist thinkers, I seek to move away from white, Western constructs of feminism, white, male prevalence in Queer Studies, and the overreliance on male theorists in Postcolonial Studies discussed above, to prioritise the voices of women who are more traditionally marginalised in discussions of feminism, sexuality, and the legacies of colonialism. Such a politically motivated approach is perhaps even more urgent in the context of French and Francophone Studies. In their introduction to the 2011 issue of *Les cahiers du CEDREF*, entitled 'Théories féministes et queers décoloniales', Bacchetta and Falquet identify a significant gap in queer studies in French, based on the fact that French queer theory has historically been influenced solely by White, queer, US-based theorists. As they explain,

le fait que la construction des théories queers en France ait pris comme point de départ le plus souvent exclusif les théories queers blanches états-uniennes, les a amenées à reproduire des points aveugle dans l'analyse, en échouant à traiter des rapports de pouvoir multiple et inseparables, au-delà du genre et de la sexualité.¹²

Although there have been advances in this area in the decade since Bacchetta and Falquet highlighted this issue, not least in the long overdue French translations of

¹² Paola Bacchetta and Jules Falquet, 'Introduction au «théories féministes et queers décoloniales: interventions chicanas et Latinas états-uniennes»', *Les cahiers du CEDREF*, 18 (2011), 9.

ground-breaking texts such as *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Borderlands/La Frontera*, some of the blind spots alluded to by the authors remain. As Blase Provitola notes in a 2019 article on the radical lesbian collective, the Groupe du 9 novembre, 'dominant conceptions of lesbian sexual identity are imbued with liberal racism and Republican universalism.'¹³ In analysing Bouraoui's representation of lesbian sexual identity (as well as gender and cultural identities) through the lens of decolonial feminisms, this project seeks to overturn this racist and sexist status quo. The title of the thesis intends the word 'queer' to be read in these terms as, although the theorists who form the methodological spine of this work are not Queer theorists in the academic sense associated with figures such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, it is my contention that writers such as Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa have influenced queer theory and broader discourses on intersectionality, identity, and resistance which are at the heart of this work.

The third question asks whether Bouraoui's literary texts can be read as a method of theorising and therefore as a way to do the work of queer of colour and decolonial feminist theory. This question responds to Bacchetta and Falquet's discussion of reductionist readings of queer of colour scholarship. They assert: 'Réduire le travail des Chicanas et Latinas états-uniennes à du témoignage ou de la littérature, c'est faire disparaître la complexité de ce travail politique subversive – rendu possible par l'usage de différentes formes d'écriture.'¹⁴ As this thesis will attest, Bouraoui and her works have also frequently been reduced to fixed identity categories and static labels, their political potential overlooked, or even denied. Before considering how the thesis will seek to answer these questions, let us now

¹³ Blase A. Provitola, 'In Visibilities: The Groupe Du 6 Novembre and the Production of Liberal Lesbian Identity in Contemporary France', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 27 (2019), 223.

¹⁴ Bacchetta and Falquet, p. 21.

turn to Bouraoui herself in order to understand why the aforementioned reductive labels may be used in discussions of her and her work, and why it is important that we move away from those and instead recognise the potential of her œuvre to be read as a form of 'travail politique subversive.'

Mixed Métissage: Situating Bouraoui

To date, Nina Bouraoui has published twenty books in her native France. Her first novel, *La Voyeuse interdite*, published in 1991, received the Prix du livre Inter and catapulted her to international fame. She also won prestigious literary prizes for the experimental memoir, *Mes mauvaises pensées* (published in 2005 and awarded the Prix Goncourt), and the 2020 novel, *Otages* (which received the Prix Anaïs Nin). Her most recent publication, *Le Désir d'un roman sans fin* was released in 2024.

Yasmina Bouraoui was born on 28th July 1967 in Rennes, France to a French mother (Maryvonne) and an Algerian father (Rachid). Her parents met while studying at university in Rennes in the early 1960s. Their relationship caused consternation amongst their fellow students and outrage in Maryvonne's family, coming as it did at the height of the Algerian War (1954 – 1962). As we shall see throughout this thesis in the analysis of Bouraoui's œuvre, the political repercussions of this relationship are at the heart of much of the trauma in Bouraoui's autobiographical writing, but also, conversely, act as a catalyst for her own political awakening as a young woman. Maryvonne and Rachid's first daughter, Djamila was born in 1962 with Yasmina (Nina) following five years later. The family relocated to Algeria's capital city, Algiers, shortly after Nina's birth and there they remained until 1981. As such, Bouraoui's formative years were spent in a country in the early stages of post-independence. Algeria during this time was far from a post-colonial paradise,

revelling in its new-found freedom from French oppression. Still reeling from the devastation wrought by the War of Independence, the nation was then plunged into decades of filial in-fighting and fratricide, as different groups sought to exercise their right to lead the country. In many ways, rather than celebrating a long-awaited liberation, the country simply replaced one form of subjugation with another. As Karima Lazali attests, '[i]ndependence fell victim to the same trap it was trying to escape, namely the psychic, symbolic, and geographic occupation by a conquering force.'¹⁵ Now, though, rather than the foreign occupier as the target of their ire, Algerians were turning on one another.

This violently ambivalent political situation continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s, culminating in the devastating Internal War of the 1990s, a war for which we still do not know how many people lost their lives. The brutality of this fratricidal war is still remarkable in its violence. As novelist Nabile Farès attests:

I couldn't understand how people born among us, who were said to share "our home," could commit crimes in front of us, and not just any crimes, but cutting off heads, arms, feet, hands, noses, ears, fingers, as though they had inherited all the world's crimes and this were their filial duty.¹⁶

The official death toll for the so-called *décennie noire* is 200,000, but that figure is widely disputed. As well as the many thousands who lost their lives, many more people, including scholars and students who feared persecution, fled Algeria never to return. Although Bouraoui herself left Algeria in the early 1980s, the horrors of the

¹⁵ Karima Lazali, *Colonial Trauma* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), p. 81.

¹⁶ Nabile Farès, cited in Karima Lazali, *Colonial Trauma*, p. 151

war 'back home' traumatised her and, as we shall see, are deeply embedded in her œuvre. As she explains in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, 'Tout devient sang, suie, boue, glaise, feu: l'Apocalypse. Ils assassinent mon enfance.'¹⁷

Algeria's violent 20th century is perhaps best summarised in one word: erasure. On a political level, consecutive French governments refused to acknowledge the role of the French in the massacres, disappearances, rapes, and mutilations which in many ways defined the Algerian War of Independence, euphemistically referring to 'le problème algérien' when discussing the events of 1954-62. Only very recently has any French government actually accepted the word *guerre* in relation to the atrocities. Benjamin Stora's report, commissioned by Emmanuel Macron and published in 2021, went some way to recognising the facts of the war, but still fell short of recommending a state apology.¹⁸ Also notable by its absence was a discussion of the systemic torture carried out by French troops. Once again, there are gaps in the official record, what psychotherapist Lazali has called the blank spaces of colonial history.

Erasure is also at the centre of the response of consecutive Algerian governments to the atrocities of the 1990s. Since the war officially 'ended' in 2002, those in power have continued to push a reconciliation narrative, a narrative which was written into law with the 2005 Charter for Peace and Reconciliation. Where conflict is recognised at all, it is framed as a tension between Islamist jihadists and those promoting democracy. All other stories and histories are proscribed by a state-led programme of censorship and silence. All of these blank spaces create a state of deep psychological uncertainty. As Lazali attests, 'History doesn't speak for itself. It

¹⁷ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* (Paris: JCLattès, 2018), p. 157.

¹⁸ Benjamin Stora, 'Rapport sur les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation et la guerre d'Algérie', (Paris: Présidence de la République française, 2021).

speaks through subjects who, ideally, debate with historians and politicians over its interpretations.¹⁹ But how can those subjects speak if that history is perpetually erased and denied, and what happens when they don't? Lazali warns that, 'the part of History refused by the political order continues to be transmitted from generation to generation and creates psychic mechanisms that entrap the subject in existential shame.'²⁰ It is important to understand this specific historical context because it carries a huge weight of influence in Bouraoui's work. As Lazali attests, '[l]iterature strives to give expression to the blank spaces and the ideological blind spots present in the historical record.'²¹ But how do we situate Bouraoui within this complex socio-historical context, especially given her mixed-race identity?

As we shall see in Chapter Two of this thesis, Bouraoui's *métisse* identity is frequently the cause of a great deal of internal strife as she struggles to situate herself in either a French or an Algerian context. This leaves her somewhat adrift, questioning her own right to citizenship, particularly when it comes to Algeria. As she pointedly asks in the 2005 novel, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, '[p]ourrais-je parler de patrie, moi qui me sens orpheline d'une terre?'²² The powerful imagery used by Bouraoui here is echoed in both the literary and academic fields, as the writer finds herself pigeonholed as either a French or a Franco-Algerian writer.

In a publishing context, Bouraoui is usually considered simply as *une écrivaine française*. Her books are shelved in the French literature section of bookstores. This may not appear to be remarkable, given that she was born in and now lives in France, but it does work to erase the fact that she is half-Algerian.

¹⁹ Karima Lazali, *Colonial Trauma*, p. 3

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7

²² Nina Bouraoui, *Mes Mauvaises Pensées* (Paris: Stock, 2005), p. 254.

Meanwhile, many of her books are unavailable in Algeria, as are those of several other Francophone Algerian writers who could be read as critical of the Nationalist programmes of Arabization and gender inequality. Once again, there is a process of erasure at work here.

Much academic writing about Francophone Maghrebi literature focuses on authors who do not have mixed heritage. They are usually identified as Algerian writers who choose to write in French (although in some cases, they are unable to write in other languages). Farid Laroussi asserts that there are 'hardly any' Francophone Maghrebi writers who place themselves in a 'particular French literary tradition.'²³ Bouraoui, however, does see herself as a French writer, and cites Annie Ernaux, Françoise Sagan and Marguerite Duras as influences. Does this mean she cannot be read as part of a decolonial movement? One of the key aims of this thesis is to promote a transnational network of feminist writers and thinkers who are connected through what they say and do, rather than where they are from. As highlighted above, it is important to note that, unlike Republican Universalism, this does not mean erasing or ignoring an individual's socio-historical or cultural situatedness.

Helen Vassallo is perhaps the most prolific scholar to have written about Bouraoui in English, having published multiple articles on the author, as well as a full-length monograph exploring the works of Bouraoui and Leïla Sebbar, another French-Algerian writer. In the latter, Vassallo makes an interesting point about the position of these two authors in relation to postcolonialism, arguing that, while the writers cannot be separated from Postcolonial Studies, it would be inappropriate to

²³ Farid Laroussi, 'When Francophone Means National: The Case of the Maghreb', *Yale French Studies*, 103 (2003), 85.

think of them as Postcolonial writers given the 'absence of theoretical or militant intent or social comment in [the] narratives' and, further, it could potentially be 'problematic to align them with a more politically disadvantaged group of people whose experience does not necessarily map onto their own.'²⁴ As discussed above, my reading of Bouraoui contests the notion that her writing is absent of social comment and political intent, but Vassallo's argument does highlight the potentially problematic nature of postcolonial as a term since it appears so reductive and tightly confined.²⁵ To qualify, in Vassallo's reading, it seems that the work must be militant and that the writer must have a particular heritage. Anna Kemp, meanwhile, argues that, "the term "postcolonial" is intended to say less about the writers it designates, than it does about the reflexes of those doing the designating.'²⁶ This is a salient point and speaks to my concerns around uses of the term. As we have already seen in Vassallo's reading, designating a writer as 'postcolonial' appears to imply the presence of certain characteristics or writerly behaviours, and could therefore result in a heavily policed notion of what such writers should be and do. This is something which I am actively trying to avoid in my analysis of Bouraoui and is one of the reasons that I have chosen to use the term 'decolonial' as a less rigid alternative.

Vassallo's argument surrounding the requirement for postcolonial writers to have a particular heritage in order to be politically authentic is compounded by Bouraoui's autobiographical history. Many critics agree with Kemp's assertion that 'Bouraoui is difficult to classify in biographical terms.'²⁷ According to Katherine

²⁴ Helen Vassallo, *The Body Besieged: The Embodiment of Historical Memory in Nina Bouraoui and Leïla Sebbar* (Plymouth: Lexington, 2012), pp. 6-7.

²⁵ See below for more on the decision to use 'decolonial' instead of 'postcolonial' in this thesis.

²⁶ Anna Kemp, 'Freedom from Oneself: Artistry and the Postcolonial Woman Artist in Nina Bouraoui's "La Voyeuse Interdite"', *French Forum*, 38 (2013), 238.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 240.

Harrington, Bouraoui is 'a writer who falls between several categories.'²⁸ Kirsten Husung takes this a step further by pointing out the various categories that Bouraoui seems to fall between: 'Son œuvre pose la question du classement, vu l'origine de l'auteure et les thèmes qu'elle aborde: est-ce de la littérature française, francophone, maghrébine, en l'occurrence algérienne, ou beure?'²⁹ Siobhán McIlvanney likewise emphasises the difficulty in categorising Bouraoui, asserting that she 'cannot easily be assimilated under the category of *beur* writers.'³⁰ Marta Segarra takes this one step further, claiming that Bouraoui *cannot* be considered a *beur* writer because, 'elle n'a jamais connu les problèmes socio-économiques posés par l'émigration, et que certains de ses ouvrages touchent à des sujets qui n'ont rien à voir avec cette espace et cette thématique.'³¹ Vassallo, meanwhile, argues that 'Bouraoui has chosen to locate herself within a Metropolitan context, and to affiliate herself to the Westernized side of her heritage,' and that, 'Nina/Bouraoui finds her happiness and "place in the world" by assimilating into French culture.'³² This may explain why there is a great deal of focus on fractured identity and the uncertainty of nationhood in both Bouraoui's work and critical responses to it; there are clearly far more definitions of what the writer is *not* than there are perspicuous ideas of what she is. One of the aims of my research is to move away from the either/or problem and to consider how various identity categories intersect to create new spaces of possibility in the writer's œuvre. While not denying the psychological difficulties experienced at the borderland of the two cultures, this thesis will suggest that a queer decolonial reading of

²⁸ Katharine N. Harrington, *Writing the Nomadic Experience in Contemporary Francophone Literature* (Lanham, MD [u.a.]: Lexington Books, 2013), p. 77.

²⁹ Kirsten Husung, *Hybridité et genre chez Assia Djébar et Nina Bouraoui* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), p. 168.

³⁰ Siobhán McIlvanney, 'Double Vision: The Role of the Visual and the Visionary in Nina Bouraoui's "La Voyeuse Interdite (Forbidden Vision)"', *Research in African Literatures*, 35 (2004), 106.

³¹ Marta Segarra, *Nouvelles romancières francophones du Maghreb* (Paris: Karthala, 2010), p. 104.

³² Vassallo (2012), p. 93 and p. 100.

Bourauoui's work allows for a third way to explore these issues: less either/or than both/and/more. As Bourauoui herself states, 'I can lay claim to having a triple status: I'm a woman, I'm of mixed race and I'm gay.'³³

In a similar vein, critics have highlighted the difficulty of positioning Bourauoui in a socio-cultural context. In her book on Bourauoui and Sebbar, Vassallo argues:

Locating Bourauoui within a framework of Gender and Sexuality Studies [as opposed to Postcolonial Studies] may seem more self-evident because of her insistence on her sexual identity, but we must still be wary of making any facile claims about her work as belonging to this genre, when she has never explicitly stated an intention with these discourses.³⁴

The apparent need to situate Bourauoui within *either* Gender and Sexuality Studies *or* Postcolonial Studies is something which this thesis seeks to move away from by embracing the intersectional approaches of queer of colour and decolonial feminisms and recognising that, as Antonia Wimbush highlights, 'questions of national and gendered identity [and] sexual and linguistic identity' pervade much of Bourauoui's 'introspective, self-reflexive literature.'³⁵ While it is true that Bourauoui rejected labels in early interviews and stated that '[j]e n'ai jamais voulu être un porte-drapeau', she has never denied that her texts and writerly identity are predicated on her lived experience as a queer woman of colour.³⁶ As demonstrated by writers like Anzaldúa,

³³ Nina Bourauoui, 'Top 10 Books of Autofiction', *The Guardian*, (2020).

³⁴ Helen Vassallo, 'Embodied Memory: War and the Remembrance of Wounds in Nina Bourauoui and Leïla Sebbar', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 1 (2008), 23 n.61.

³⁵ Antonia Wimbush, *Autofiction: A Female Francophone Aesthetic of Exile* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), p. 113.

³⁶ Charlotte Vanbever, 'Un Auteur a beaucoup de pouvoir', *La Dernière Heure*, (2008).

Lorde, and Moraga, these identities are indissociable from one another and it is only a confrontation with the multiple oppressions which target these intersecting identities, and a subsequent embracing of those identities on one's own terms that permits the creation of both a sense of self and the possibility of connection with others. As Bouraoui asserts elsewhere:

Quelle richesse, cette double culture qui fait de moi une Française éclairée de l'intérieur par l'Algérie! Et quelle richesse, cette homosexualité qui fut un long chemin! Elle apprend à vivre dans la marge. Elle apprend à regarder les fragiles. Elle apprend à reconnaître les «étrangers». Moi, j'ai appris la tolerance. Et l'écoute, l'ouverture.'³⁷

Bouraoui's celebration of her own multiple and complex identities, and of a life lived "dans les marges", echoes the intersectional approach to identity adopted by feminists like Lorde and Anzaldúa.

Pitfalls and Progress: A Question of Terminology

Before further explaining how the thesis will respond to the research questions outlined above, let us turn to an examination of the potential confusion surrounding my use of the term "decolonial" as opposed to "postcolonial" in my discussion of queer of colour scholarship and the work of Nina Bouraoui.

There are two key, interrelated, reasons for a movement away from the term postcolonial in the context of the current project. The first has to do with the potential ambiguity of the prefix "post-" and the implied temporal binarity inherent therein.

³⁷ Bouraoui in Cojean (2018).

Anne McClintock called postcolonial “prematurely celebratory” as early as 1992 in her article, ‘The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term “Post-Colonialism”’. The same year, Ella Shohat contends:

The term “post-colonial” carries with it the implication that colonialism is now a matter of the past, undermining colonialism’s economic, political, and cultural deformative-traces in the present. The “post-colonial” inadvertently glosses over the fact that global hegemony, even in the post-cold war era, persists in forms other than overt colonial rule.³⁸

The prefix, then, could be interpreted as conveying a sense that relations of power are definitively changed once a country has achieved “flag independence”, and may suggest that the “colonial” was a finite and historically specific period which is now very definitely in the past.

The idea that the balance of power has shifted from the colonial to a supposedly more benign post-colonial risks either ranking or ignoring the ongoing and multiple zones of oppression inherent in people’s lives, and such a Manichean binary is particularly problematic for women. As McClintock asserts, ‘[n]ot only have the needs of “post-colonial nations” been largely identified with male conflicts, male aspirations and male interests, but the very representation of “national” power rests on prior constructions of gender power’.³⁹ Indeed, colonial *and* post-colonial nationalist discourses often either exclude women or treat questions of gender ‘in a

³⁸ Ella Shohat, 'Notes on the 'Post-Colonial'', *Social Text*, 31-32 (1992), 105.

³⁹ Anne McClintock, 'The Angels of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term “Post-Colonialism”', *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992).

tokenistic way, or as subsidiary to the category of race'.⁴⁰ Woman may be the objects of both (male) coloniser and (male) nationalist ideologies and iconographies, but she is rarely a subject in her own right. As Ania Loomba highlights,

Women are not just a symbolic space but real *targets* of colonialist and nationalist discourses. Their subjection and the appropriation of their labour is crucial to the workings of the colony or the nation. Thus, despite their other differences, and despite their contests over native women, colonial and indigenous patriarchies often collaborated to keep women 'in their place'.⁴¹

The intersectional approaches of queer decolonial feminisms move away from this system of priority by recognising the multiple and overlapping ways in which those in the borderlands, especially women, are victimised.

The foregoing arguments encapsulate the second reason for my opting to move away from the term 'postcolonial' in the context of transnational feminisms: women's bodies and minds are colonised by more than foreign political powers expanding their global empires, yet traditional postcolonial discourses often fail to recognise the multiple oppressions women endure at the hands of *both* colonial and nationalist powers. For Ketu Katrak, postcolonial theorists also often neglect to analyse the damaging effect of a return to 'traditions' in the aftermath of independence movements, or they may fail to examine the cultural and historical context of such 'traditions'. As such, the 'key issue of the control of female sexuality is legitimized, even effectively mystified, under the name of "tradition"'.⁴² An analysis

⁴⁰ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 7.

⁴¹ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 214-15.

⁴² Ketu H. Katrak, 'Decolonizing Culture: Toward a Theory for Postcolonial Women's Texts', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 35 (1989), 168.

of this double-bind reveals, for Katrak, 'the often implicit violence in the many culturally legitimized ways of controlling women's bodies and minds'.⁴³ These arguments emphasise the need for a mode of theorising which engages with postcolonialism's call to challenge the overarching legacies of colonial power, and also recognises the specific, ongoing, and multifarious relations of power at play in women's lived experience which include but are not limited to, those colonial legacies.

In the context of my own research, then, and recognising the potential tensions inherent in the decision to prioritise any one of these terms over the others, I am attempting to work towards a decolonial feminist genealogy of Francophone women writers which is informed by, and in conversation with, decolonial feminisms transnationally. This genealogy begins with the current project's examination of Bouraoui's œuvre, and takes as a foundational statement Bacchetta's assertion that,

Postcolonial theory could be enriched with a more intense critique of power...The 'de' acknowledges materialities, power across scales, the symbolic, culture, and it acknowledges a completely intimate relation to subject formation under conditions of colonialism. And the 'de' has a sense of undoing and undoing also opens up a space for a different kind of doing.⁴⁴

In other words, my work attempts to respond to both Anzaldúa's call for feminists to 'meet on a broader communal ground'⁴⁵ and Cherríe Moraga's assertion that Feminists of Colour are, '[w]omen without a line...who contradict each other [and

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Bacchetta (2010), pp. 180-1.

⁴⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 25. anniversary, 4. edn (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), p. 109.

who function] between the seemingly irreconcilable lines ...[It is between these lines that] the truth of our connection lies.'⁴⁶ In the context of Bouraoui's work, a Decolonial Feminist approach is one which seeks out these lines and connections while simultaneously working against what Spivak wryly terms the phenomenon of white (wo)men saving brown women from brown men, a phenomenon which serves both to reinforce Orientalist tropes about the savagery of the former colonies and to limit the scope of what people (especially women) from those colonies are permitted to write about.⁴⁷ Exposing what has arguably been an overemphasis on the generic 'condition of the Algerian woman' in readings of Franco-Algerian women writers allows us to look beyond those tightly policed confines and read Bouraoui's works as *both* critiques of localised power structures *and* Decolonial Feminist texts more broadly.

The aim of this work is not to suggest that Algerian women writers are *not* critical of the nationalist movement in Algeria and the position it gives to women. Indeed, many Algerian writers address gender as a form of exile in their work. Rachida Yassine has highlighted that Assia Djébar's works, for example, 'are indissociable from Algerian history and women's place therein.'⁴⁸ The problem lies in reducing texts by these writers to being *only* about Algerian women's experiences at the hands of Algerian men, and thereby permitting them *only* to write about this, and reading the texts from a standpoint of the 'enlightened West'.⁴⁹ As Anna Kemp has indicated:

⁴⁶ Cherríe Moraga, cited in Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, Minn. [u.a.]: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 59-60.

⁴⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 66-111.

⁴⁸ Rachida Yassine, 'Algerian Female Identity Re-Constitution and Colonial Language: A Postcolonial Malaise in Assia Djébar's *L'amour, La Fantasia*', in *Algeria Revisited*, ed. by Rabah Assaoui and Claire Eldridge (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 118-34 (p. 118).

⁴⁹ Serene J. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

The writers whose work is grouped together under the rubric of 'francophone', 'postcolonial' or 'minority' women's writing may differ from each other in terms of class, ethnicity, nationality, and how they situate themselves in a postcolonial context, but what they share is a field of reception that, for various reasons, perceives them as Other.⁵⁰

A decolonial approach seeks out the spaces between the lines of universalism and relativism, recognising socio-historical specificities *and* the role played by global power structures, but also working towards transnational feminist solidarities. As I have already highlighted, I have been asked why I use the work of Chicana and Queer of Colour feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga to explore work by a writer in such a different cultural context. Again, this question is not usually asked when we use Fanon or Bhabha. Once more we see that women who are 'perceived as Other' are also often permitted to function only within a very limited cultural specificity. The aim of the decolonial feminist process is to recognise the specificity of individual experiences but also to be able to map these onto a wider collective project of decoloniality. As Bilge asserts, intersectionality is 'a tool that does not serve the same purpose in different hands' but, rather, takes 'into account systemic disparities in social location.'⁵¹ The work of 'undoing and doing differently' required by decolonial feminisms is best enabled when its agents are permitted to communicate across borders, and it is my contention that creating genealogies of women writers who can speak to and with one another is one way towards what Chandra Mohanty calls feminism without borders.⁵² Decolonial feminism is a

⁵⁰ Kemp, pp. 237-50 (38).

⁵¹ Sirma Bilge, 'Intersectionality Undone', *Du Bois Review*, 10 (2013), 419.

⁵² Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003).

feminism without borders. As Françoise Vergès attests, 'Decolonial feminism accepts the existence of other feminisms; it does not wish to become *the* theory, but to facilitate transborder and international alliances.'⁵³ Vergès is a critical voice in Francophone decolonial feminism and bringing her into conversation with both Bouraoui and decolonial feminists from different cultural settings is a key part of this project's aim to create networks of feminist resistance. Despite the importance of Vergès's voice (alongside other Francophone decolonial feminists such as Houria Bouteldja), I would argue that there remains a significant silence around queer identities and their intersection with race and gender amongst Francophone decolonial feminism more broadly. This is why the thesis centres Chicana and Black lesbian feminisms in its methodological approach. This is not to ignore Francophone decolonial feminisms, but instead is a belief that by reading theorists like Bouteldja and Vergès alongside Chicana and Black lesbian feminisms, we allow Francophone decolonial feminisms to better respond to the intersection of decolonial/queer/of colour, which is where this thesis situates Bouraoui.

In writing this thesis, I am also cognizant of criticism aimed at scholarly and disciplinary feminism which, writes Bilge, 'appears to be more concerned with the institutional success of the knowledge it produces than institutional and social change through counter-hegemonic knowledge production.'⁵⁴ One of the ways this project seeks to resist this is by bridging a gap between counter-hegemonic knowledge production from disparate social and cultural settings in order to encourage greater mutual understanding and to create broader networks of solidarity and action. As Loomba asserts, 'Postcolonial critique, however we interpret the term,

⁵³ Françoise Vergès, *A Decolonial Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), p. viii.

⁵⁴ Bilge, p. 409.

can be meaningful only in conversation with scholarship and activism across the globe that strives to achieve a truly postcolonial world.’⁵⁵ Gurminder Bhambra proposes the notion of ‘connected sociologies’ as a mode of bringing together what she outlines as the more material, socio-economic focus of postcolonial studies, and decolonialism which she associates more with the ‘critical social theory tradition’.⁵⁶ This thesis attempts to create its own connected sociologies by bringing together feminist voices from different socio-historical settings and paying close attention to the results of those conversations. With this in mind, let us now turn to those voices with whom Bouraoui will be brought into dialogue.

Borderland Thinking: Queer of Colour Decolonial Feminisms

As highlighted above, Bouraoui’s œuvre lends itself particularly well to a dialogue with queer of colour decolonial feminisms, engaging as it does with questions of fragmented identity, gender, sexuality, and nationhood. The Chicana experience, in particular, has the most obvious historical and geographical parallels with the Algerian one which forms a key part of Bouraouian writing. Gloria Anzaldúa, in her seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera* describes the ‘acquisition’ of Texas (one of ten US states which were formerly part of Mexico), its becoming American rather than Mexican, as a kind of layering of one country over another. This colonial extension of reach, as opposed to a perhaps more cleanly demarcated annexation of some distant land (this, of course, happened too), mirrors the French seizure of Algeria, in that Algeria was designated as an ‘extra’ *département*, to all intents and purposes *within* France, rather than a colony under control of, but *external to* France.

⁵⁵ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), p. 265.

⁵⁶ Gurminder K. Bhambra, ‘Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 17 (2014), 115.

In these instances, I would argue, borders become more blurred, more contentious, as do identities. Anzaldúa's visceral image of the border as a *herida abierta*, an open wound, is a useful way to think through the implications of this colonial layering. She describes the border as a place, 'where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture.'⁵⁷ It is this border culture which, for Anzaldúa, forges the *mezcla*, or hybrid, identity and creates within the individual the feeling of being an Outsider Within. In the introduction to the third edition of Anzaldúa's text, included as an appendix to the fourth edition, Bacchetta addresses the French context specifically, citing Anzaldúa's potential influence on the emergence of an 'unshackled, new subject-in-process', a subject position in direct opposition to what she describes as the 'imposition-erasure dance' of the French state, which:

Moves between the forced imposition of its own dominant narrative about French colonialism and calculated colonial amnesia. This imposition-erasure dance is integral to the French procedures of assimilating postcolonial immigrants. One "becomes" French by becoming first a blank slate that can then be cultured like a plant to take shape as a French nationalized sub-citizen subject.⁵⁸

The solution to this, for Bacchetta, lies in Anzaldúa's call to 'rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions', and instead to experience one's

⁵⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 25.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p. 236

own multifarious gendered and sexed body as a way of reclaiming one's own becoming. This "becoming" is in many ways a celebration of the full range of one's self/ves, a self-fulness, to borrow Lisa Downing's term.⁵⁹ In order to engender this becoming, however, the subject must be comfortable embodying the Outsider Within status Anzaldúa describes.

The Outsider Within status finds its echo throughout Bouraoui's œuvre, as her (often semi-autobiographical) protagonists struggle to establish a sense of identity at the intersections of race, nationality, gender, and sexuality. However, I would argue that it is often these very uncertainties which provide the fruitful ground for Bouraoui to explore and embrace her multifarious identities. The process of writing the Outsider into being conversely allows Bouraoui to create a space in which that Outsider is allowed to exist. For her, 'l'écriture agit comme un élixir, son geste m'apaise, me rend heureuse.'⁶⁰ Bouraoui, then, uses her writing to embrace her hybridity, echoing in turn Anzaldúa's assertion that '[t]he new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity... she turns the ambivalence in to something else.'⁶¹

This outsider status becomes amplified yet further for the lesbian *mestiza*, the double deviant who is not fully at home on either side of the border, but who also is not accepted by her fellow border dwellers. In fact, not only is she not accepted: she is not even seen as fully human. As Anzaldúa explains, '[t]he queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe's fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human.'⁶²

⁵⁹ For more on Downing's concept, see Chapter Four of this thesis.

⁶⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 43.

⁶¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p.101.

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 40

In 2018, sociologist Salima Amari published the first, and currently only, full-length study of lesbians of Maghrebi origin living in France. Based around a series of in-depth interviews the women in Amari's study frequently demonstrate the existential pain associated with social perceptions of their deviance. Often, the fact of their Maghrebi heritage is the first experience of rejection by the surrounding culture: 'Cette expérience de rejet et de racisme s'inscrit dans un processus de «mise en minorité» à travers l'«altérisation» et la «racisation».⁶³ This process of othering can cause the individual to turn back to 'others who are othered' in order to seek guidance and comfort. However, as discussed above, the lesbian *mestiza* may find herself in the position of double deviant, accepted neither by those doing the othering nor by 'others who are othered' if her deviance is deemed too great. Amari, describing the experience of Soraya, one of her subjects, explains: 'Le «double stigmaté», c'est à dire que sa volonté d'échapper au stigmaté homosexuel au sein de la société majoritaire, l'emmène à vouloir échapper également au stigmaté de fille d'ascendance maghrébine au sein du groupe des lesbiennes.'⁶⁴

This double bind means that Amari's interviewees often do not feel 'at home' in any of the communities with which they have apparent affiliation. Interestingly, for Bouraoui, embodying the space of the written word was synchronous with her first forays into the queer space of *le Kat*, a lesbian nightclub. The processes of creating and becoming are therefore bound together in her work, the spaces bringing each other into being. And yet it is also at *le Kat* that she experiences enhanced levels of fear and shame: 'J'éprouve au Kat un forme de honte sociale...Je souffre de ma propre homophobie.'⁶⁵ An experience which segues back to Anzaldúa's discussion

⁶³ Salima Amari, *Lesbiennes de l'immigration* (Vulaines sur Seine: Éditions du Croquant, 2018), p. 42.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 192

⁶⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 31.

of homophobia and the fear of going home, of being rejected if we admit to the socially unacceptable aspects of ourselves. This fear is discussed at length in Amari's study, as well as smaller studies by Christelle Hamel et al. as many of the interviewees struggle with how they can, or even if they should, discuss their homosexuality with their families. In a sad twist on Bouraoui's internalised homophobia, one of Amari's interviewees describes taking her sister to a gay bar to come out to her, only to have to pretend her claim is a joke because of her sister's outrage at the possibility she could be a lesbian. Even the spaces which should be safe, then, can become places of uncertainty and rejection. While Bouraoui is able to navigate and embrace some of her fears and uncertainties through her writing, the women in Amari's study very often have little or no space within which to do this. Often, this is thanks to their concerns around the potential reactions of friends and family; cultural and societal norms and expectations carry a huge weight. It is to these norms and expectations that we shall now turn.

It is hugely important, in the interests of a wider decolonising project, to see the parallels between disparate groups of oppressed people, to recognise when different communities or groups of people suffer similar discriminations, and to investigate both why and how this occurs, as well as to ask how these groups manage to overcome, or push back on, these discriminations. Whilst the influence of Chicana and Queers of Colour feminists on other branches of decolonial feminisms is not new (indeed, the epigraphs to the two main sections of Amari's book come from Cherríe Moraga and Audre Lorde), the novelty of my research is the direct dialogue I create between these thinkers and their ideas and Bouraoui's exploration of gender, sexuality and nationhood. Cherríe Moraga herself speaks to the need for

this kind of transnational dialogue in her foreword to the fourth edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* when she describes her reaction to the Arab Spring:

I remember that February nearly four years ago, watching the late-night news, during the eighteen days of revolt in Tahrir Square, scanning the faces of protesters, searching for visual signs of *sisters* amid the fervent masses of men. I spy the hijab; swatches of dark fabric and multi-colored pastel blend among the hundreds of thousands. I press my ear to an Al Jazeera radio broadcast, “Hosni Mubarak steps down!” And I hear a woman’s voice, “I have worked for this my whole life.” She is crying and I am crying because her victory is mine. To view the world today through a feminist of color lens shatters all barriers of state-imposed nationality. *The Egyptian revolution is my revolution!*⁶⁶

Unlike its neighbours, Algeria was notably hushed in response to the Arab Spring, the voices of women, in particular, largely absent.⁶⁷ However, the winds of change have been felt more recently throughout the nation, with women actively inhabiting the space of demonstrations against President Bouteflika in 2019, for example. As these two instances highlight, the oppression suffered by colonised people, and women in particular, is exacted by both their European colonisers, but also by the nationalist movements which have succeeded them. Gloria Anzaldúa names this more insidious form of oppression *cultural tyranny*, a perceived set of rules and values, created by men to form ‘dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist

⁶⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back*, pp.xv-xvi. Original italics.

⁶⁷ Sangeeta Sinha, 'Arab Spring: Women's Empowerment in Algeria', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13 (2012).

as unquestionable, unchallengeable', through which society, and especially women, can be directed and controlled.⁶⁸ What so often makes cultural tyranny difficult to challenge is its multifarious nature, in which power dynamics are at play at various intersections in an individual's and a society's lived experiences.

The question of cultural tyranny extends to any area of women's lived experience in which their agentic potential seems to be capped by the expectations of externally controlled norms. Family, the other great social institution, is one such example, more particularly the familial space and the expected behaviours therein. I return again to Anzaldúa's notion of the 'fear of going home' and being rejected for one's unacceptable behaviours or characteristics, a fear which is voiced by many of the women in Amari's study. Often the norms policed by cultural tyranny are so firmly entrenched that one need not have had a negative reaction from one's relatives to fear that such a reaction would occur. The fear in regard to homosexuality is bound, in most cases, to the compulsory nature of heterosexuality, a norm which polices not only sexuality, but also the embodiment of self, as Amari highlights: 'L'attente sociale et familiale en termes de genre est étroitement liée à celle de la sexualité. L'hexis corporel devient ainsi un indicateur social des normes de genre et de la sexualité imposées.'⁶⁹ For Bouraoui, this particular aspect of social policing allows for a fluid and multifarious gender identity in her writing, seen most clearly in the semi-autobiographical novel, *Garçon manqué*, but visible throughout her oeuvre. This gender duality is mirrored in Bouraoui's work by her uncertain national and cultural identity: 'Au-delà de la mer: la terre française, natale et négligée. La mer tient entre les deux continents. Je reste entre deux pays. Je reste entre deux identités.'⁷⁰ For

⁶⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 38.

⁶⁹ Salima Amari, *Lesbiennes de l'Immigration*, p. 152.

⁷⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué* (Paris: Stock, 2000), p. 26.

Bourauoi, the ability to navigate these oppositional identities, and to switch from one to another, or rest somewhere in between, comes precisely through her ability to write them into being. The paragraph quoted above concludes, ‘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.’⁷¹ Crucially, then, writing enables Bourauoi’s multiple selves to exist. But equally, the solitude which brings this writing into being is important; Bourauoi, alone, embraces her-selves, allows them room to exist, is concerned with them alone. As mentioned above, this concern with self/selves lends itself to Lisa Downing’s concept of ‘self-fulness’, a form of resistance to gendered expectations, and more specifically expectations of the *feminine*. To be self-ful is to flout the culturally tyrannical command to embody the outward social functions ordained for women (roles which are principally concerned with caring about others before self) in favour of a full and loving relationship with the self.⁷² It is this self-fulness which gives Bourauoi’s work its narrative power, but also, perhaps counterintuitively, it is also this self-fulness which may allow her work to become one of the key building blocks for a collective “lesbianisme maghrébin”. Many of the subjects in Amari’s study describe a lack of visibility as one of the greatest barriers to embracing their sexual identity:

Depuis la prise de conscience de leur homosexualité, la majorité des enquêtées a soulevé le besoin de modèles de référence orienté non seulement vers le groupe lesbien global, mais également elles ont rapporté leur envie de se retrouver dans des cercles spécifiques où l’association de

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Lisa Downing, *Selfish Women* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019).

son identité (homo) sexuelle et de son identité culturelle et ethno-raciale est à l'ordre du jour.⁷³

Interestingly in the context of the present study, later in the text one of Amari's interviewees describes discovering Nina Bouraoui's novels once she has moved from Algeria to France and finding within them the kind of 'modèles de référence' alluded to above: 'Arrivée en France, Mounira découvre les romans de Nina Bouraoui qui raconte sa double culture franco-algérienne et son homosexualité. Pour Mounira il est important de «dire que c'est possible d'allier les deux», l'identité culturelle et l'identité (homo)sexuelle.'⁷⁴ In order to embrace their identity, these women assert that they need something to be able to base it on. Mounira's discovery of Bouraoui's texts provides a real-life example of the self-ful feminist exerting a wider influence on the collective. This self-ful feminist should not be read in opposition to a collectively-minded feminist. The two are not, I shall argue, mutually exclusive. As Moraga reminds us, '[t]he real power, as you and I well know, is collective'.⁷⁵

Bouraoui's experience as it is forged in her writing is often internally conflicted, as well as demonstrably different, at times, to the experiences of Amari's interviewees. Amari's subjects likewise demonstrate at least as many differences as similarities, and yet, there are experiences and reflections which are remarkably analogous. Whilst remaining cognizant of the dangers of discursively creating a collective identity for a group whilst situating oneself outside the group (c.f. Spivak), I believe it is also important to highlight the similarities discussed above *in order to*

⁷³ Salima Amari, *Lesbiennes de l'Immigration*, p. 193.

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 208

⁷⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back*, p. 29.

make visible the multiple oppressions that are at play in these women's lives. My decision to focus primarily on lesbian voices, and to foreground lesbian identity is influenced by Cherríe Moraga's assertion:

My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression...In this country, lesbianism is a poverty - as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. *The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression.* The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base.⁷⁶

Moraga's argument chimes with Emma Pérez's re-reading of Spivak's notion of *strategic essentialism* through which she argues that by firmly situating oneself in essential categories (for her: lesbian, Chicana, historical materialist), the decolonial feminist is better able to establish an identity towards power. It should not be seen, then, as a reduction to essentialisms, but a journey through self-defined essentialisms which, Pérez argues, is 'a powerful way to find the decolonized spaces among ourselves.'⁷⁷ It is in finding these spaces, I believe, that coalitions can be formed, collective identities which allow, and encourage, individual differences to be celebrated. This brings us back to Cherríe Moraga once more, and her belief that feminists of colour are 'women without a line'.

⁷⁶ Ibid. pp. 23-4

⁷⁷ Pérez, cited in Teresa Córdova, 'Anti-Colonial Chicana Feminism', *New Political Science*, 20 (1998), 394.

How, then, can we read Bouraoui's œuvre as a way of beginning to forge these connections, and what is the potential impact of this for the wider aims of the decolonial feminist project? Deena González's concept of speaking secrets to power, and Teresa Córdova's development of it, provide fruitful signposts here, by identifying the need for decolonial feminists to voice their experiences in the interests of self-love and differential allegiance as a countermeasure to the dehumanising effects of colonialism and, I would add, the nationalist movements which followed, and could be equally damaging to women's subjecthood. Córdova, in particular, highlights the value of lesbian writings in 'speaking secrets' to 'challenge the structure of power, the colonial patriarchy, and our participation in perpetuating this.'⁷⁸ By voicing her personal experience as a lesbian of colour, then, perhaps the Bouraoui is able to decolonise the spaces within which she writes and exists. Certainly, the voicing and interrogation of her sexuality form a key motif in many of Bouraoui's autofictional works. In an echo of Córdova's reading of lesbian Chicana writings as journeys of self-love, Mañes reads Bouraoui's autofictional writings, in particular *Garçon manqué*, *Poupée Bella* and *Mes mauvaises pensées*, as texts which 'nous permettent d'appréhender sa subjectivité, et de découvrir un désir profond de de reconnaître et de s'accepter.'⁷⁹ This desire for self-knowledge is further evidenced in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* (2018). For Córdova, this search for identity and love is a search 'not merely for an individual self, but a collective one,' which, through an oppositional consciousness, makes the personal both political but also shared, in the various understandings of that word.⁸⁰ Bouraoui's writerly search thus becomes part of a wider collective search for

⁷⁸ Teresa Córdova, *Anti-colonial Chicana feminism*, p. 395.

⁷⁹ Montserrat Serrano Mañes, 'Nina Bouraoui: construction sexuelle et transgression identitaire', *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 1 (2011).

⁸⁰ Córdova, p. 384.

decolonial lesbians of colour. As we have previously seen, with Mounira's testimony in Amari's book, this has already had an impact on the lives of Bouraoui's readers. I should highlight here that I am not suggesting that Nina Bouraoui always writes her novels for the sake of a wider collective. However, as Lisa Downing has argued:

Ensuring the possibility of female dignity - the potential coming-into-being of female self-fulness - does not have to issue from a position of love for others. It can be an exercise of pure self-interest *that also benefits others as a by-product.*⁸¹

Reading Bouraoui's texts in this way will allow me to situate literature/creative writing as a method of theorising as well as a mode of expression. I will argue that creative writing in and of itself can be an effective and affective way to 'do' decolonial feminist theory, as has been demonstrated in particular in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and *This Bridge Called My Back*.

Against the wave model of feminism

Before outlining what each of the chapters in this thesis will examine, let us briefly discuss the motivation behind my decision to bring Nina Bouraoui's oeuvre into conversation with feminists from not only a different cultural background, but also from an often-maligned period of feminist history. Many of the feminists who form the methodological spine of this project published their most influential work in the 1970s and 1980s. The first edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* was published in 1981; Lorde's *Sister Outsider* in 1984; Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* in 1987. These

⁸¹ Lisa Downing, *Selfish Women*, p.181 (Original emphasis).

texts are, I would argue, essential building blocks in the construction of a decolonial feminist future. However, some may wonder why my methodology relies so heavily on texts from the frequently criticised second wave of feminism. Part of the answer to this query is in the question itself. The wave-model is disappointingly prevalent in any discussion of feminism, but it is a model which, I argue, does a disservice to the movement in its implicit suggestion that one era or generation naturally surpasses and therefore improves upon, or even negates, that which has come before. There is a danger in ignoring or erasing the work of previous generations and this is especially true in the context of feminism, whose very existence is perpetually precarious thanks to the machinations of patriarchy and male violence.

Rather than a supposedly progressive (but, in reality, reductive and hierarchical) wave model, then, this project adopts a rhizomatic approach to feminist conversation and coalition. Borrowing from Rosi Braidotti's notion of the rhizome as a non-hierarchical network which privileges transnational interconnectedness, this rhizomatic feminist network seeks to encourage conversations which otherwise may not have taken place.⁸² Braidotti's conceptualisation of Deleuze and Guattari's initial theorisation of the rhizome is especially useful in the context of transnational, decolonial feminisms, as it prioritises a coalitional and non-judgemental politics.

There are also parallels between this supposed feminist desire to move on from one wave to the next, and the Algerian post-colonial movement in which, as Lazali highlights, 'the ancestor...became the enemy.'⁸³ The rhizomatic network I am promoting does not pit one generation against another but encourages transnational and transgenerational discussion, celebrating fluidity and multiplicity over rigidity and

⁸² Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁸³ Karima Lazali, *Colonial Trauma*, p. 105.

linearity. It is, I would argue, a form of what Clare Hemmings calls revolutionary feminism.

We need a *revolutionary feminism* to connect these struggles, one whose task and specificity are to connect those multiple forms of aggression, exclusion or abjection. And it must be transnational, in order to make connections with and across revolutionary feminist movements, to learn from mistakes as well as to grow through comparative analysis and deep solidarity.⁸⁴

In keeping with the notion of revolution and solidarity espoused by Hemmings, I have made the political decision not to include White male voices in the methodology of this thesis. Where men are cited, it is in the service of the voices of the women the thesis seeks to amplify.⁸⁵

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One of this thesis considers three of Bouraoui's earliest texts through the lens of Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of the Borderland. Defined by Anzaldúa as an unnatural boundary, borders create zones of uncertainty and exclusion. Those who reside in these spaces suffer physically and mentally as a result of their alienation, what Anzaldúa calls a 'psychic restlessness' in which a sense of self is seemingly impossible to find. I present a reading of *La voyeuse interdite*, *poing mort*, and *Le Bal des murènes* which explores how Bouraoui's characters fight to survive in the Borderlands and ask whether it is possible to thrive there despite the insidious

⁸⁴ Clare Hemmings, 'In Praise of Revolutionary Feminism', in *Engenderings*, (London: LSE, 2005).

oppressions they must face. Particularly useful in the context of the Borderland dweller is Anzaldúa's concept of the *mestiza* consciousness, first introduced by her in the seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. A *mestiza* consciousness is one which resists the binary forms of identity engineered by patriarchy and celebrates instead complex, pluralistic modes of being. This is a particularly powerful concept for the narrators of these three early Bouraoui texts, as each of them seeks to forge a sense of self in a deeply unwelcoming space. That this space is the family home in all three of these texts attests to the pervasiveness and insidiousness of patriarchal violence. Anzaldúa's discussion of Cultural Tyranny is also examined here as a way to understand how exclusion and violence often co-exist in the very spaces we believe ought to be the safest. Can reading these texts with and through the transformational practices of writers such as Anzaldúa allow these characters to find that psychic space of belonging even within the confines of the Borderland?

Chapter Two adapts Anzaldúa's discussion of *mestiza* consciousness to a reading of Bouraoui autobiographical texts which confront what it means to inhabit a *métisse* identity. The analysis will focus particularly on the imbrication of nationhood and gender as sites of ambiguity and alienation. Bouraoui's experience of *métissage* is especially complex, particularly as a child, as she is French-Algerian, a living embodiment of the violence (and subsequent silence) of the fraught relationship between these two nations. Moving into the second decade of Bouraoui's publishing career and beyond, the chapter will consider the representation of identity in several of Bouraoui's apparently more autobiographical texts, including *Le Jour du séisme*, *Garçon manqué* and *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*. Borrowing Audre Lorde's notion of Biomythography and Gloria Anzaldúa's Autohistoria-teoría, the chapter will consider whether what I call Bouraouian Biomythography might

provide us with new ways of understanding how identity is constructed in Bouraoui's œuvre and whether it may also be read as a form of decolonial feminist practice in itself. As with Chapter One, the inclusion of some of the lesser discussed texts in the œuvre is intended to act as a corrective to the fact that Bouraoui remains a writer who, despite her prolific output, is under-researched in both a Francophone and Anglophone context.

Chapter Three takes up the issue of sexuality through testimony. Bringing together Cherríe Moraga's concept of 'theory in the flesh' and Bouraoui's own discussion of writerly process as 'l'écriture qui saigne', I will seek to establish Bouraoui's more overtly queer texts as examples of creative and political expression in which the physical experiences of the body overlap with the liberatory possibilities of the *testimonio*, a visceral giving account of oneself. Through a close reading of *Poupée Bella* and *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, the chapter will interrogate Bouraoui's evolving understanding and representation of her own sexual identity.

Chapter Four engages with Downing's theory of the self-ful woman in an exploration of Bouraoui's œuvre which seeks to demonstrate how her very self-ful texts can be read as contributing to a broader collective sense of queer decolonial feminist identity. In her groundbreaking study, *Colonial Trauma*, Karima Lazali attests to the psychological trauma inherent in post-colonial Algeria: 'In Algeria, discourse is marked by this embattled state of being *against*... Arabism, Berberism, French assimilation, and so on. Which is to say, against the Other, and, by extension, against one's self.'⁸⁶ Chapter Four will demonstrate how Bouraoui overcomes this against-ness and its partner in crime, erasure, through a deep and

⁸⁶ Karima Lazali, *Colonial Trauma*, p.

often painful exploration of the self which, in turn, takes in and begins to heal, familial and social historical wounds. The argument which underpins this chapter is that, in order to fight for the good of the group, one must first deal with one's own needs. The analysis will demonstrate how Bouraoui's clinical excavation of self paves the way for the formation of a collective identity based on Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of El Mundo Zurdo (the left-handed world), a network of individuals united by the desire to liberate all those who are oppressed. This reflects one of the key political aims of the thesis and of decolonial feminism more broadly, namely that, as Moraga attests, the 'real power, as you and I well know, is collective.'⁸⁷

I believe that this project is timely and important. Bouraoui and the writers with whom this thesis brings her into conversation have for too long been neglected in the context of both modern languages and comparative literature. This project aims to demonstrate that, in order to develop the coalitional politics sought by decolonial feminism, it is critical that we listen to the voices of women who remain so often unheard, and that we listen to their stories on their own terms, as well as bearing witness to the conversations between them. As Cherríe Moraga so powerfully writes in *This Bridge Called My Back*, [w]e must not believe the stories *they* tell about us. We must recognize the effects that our external circumstances of sex, class, race and sexuality have on our perception of ourselves – even in our most private unspoken moments.'⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 4th edn (Albany, NY, USA: State University of New York Press, 2015), p. 29.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 196.

Chapter One – Entering the Borderlands: ‘The Outsider Within’

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them... A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary... Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, or go through the confines of the “normal”.

- Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*⁸⁹

Je ne pourrai jamais quitter ma rue. Je fais corps avec elle comme je fais corps avec ces filles des maisons voisines... Un jeu d’ombres, de lumières et de nuances habiles entre le clair et l’obscur révèle la présence des jeunes filles avides d’événements, encadrées par leurs fenêtres, debout, droites et sérieuses derrière la popeline des rideaux clos, elles ornent comme des statues érigées à la gloire du silence et de l’aparté des immeubles vétustes.

- Nina Bouraoui, *La voyeuse interdite*⁹⁰

Nous pensons être dans la vie et nous habitons les sous-sols d’une autre dimension, l’épicentre du sacrifice.

- Nina Bouraoui, *Le Bal des murènes*⁹¹

These three quotations each make illuminating and interconnected statements about the precarity of a life lived in the Borderlands.⁹² Those who inhabit this undetermined place, according to Anzaldúa, are those who are either excluded by wider society for transgressing the “confines of the ‘normal,’” or (as indicated in the second and third

⁸⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 25.

⁹⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *La Voyeuse Interdite* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 11.

⁹¹ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Bal des murènes* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), p. 66.

⁹² Throughout this chapter the words ‘Borderland’ and ‘Facultad’ and the phrase ‘Outsider Within’ are capitalised to emphasise my borrowing of Anzaldúa’s terminology.

quotations from Bouraoui's début novel and her third novel, respectively), those who remain within those confines but find themselves silenced and exiled, condemned to bear the scarred memories of the past and the uncertainties of the present. Often, in Anzaldúa's analysis, it is women of colour for whom this psychological violence is most profoundly experienced. She asserts:

Alienated from her mother culture, 'alien' in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.⁹³

The interstitial spaces which accumulate around the Borderlands tend to overlap and intersect, meaning that those who find themselves in these zones are multiply alienated and othered. As highlighted in the introduction to this thesis, it is this border culture which, for Anzaldúa, forges the *mezcla* or *mestiza* consciousness, an identity which is at once part of and apart from the dominant culture. Anzaldúa describes this Outsider Within status as one which can be physically and psychically problematic for the border-dweller; it is an uncertain and ever-shifting status which, 'results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The *mestiza*'s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness.'⁹⁴ There are, however, creative and performative possibilities inherent in a *mestiza* consciousness. Indeed, it is this very uncertainty and exclusion which gives those on the 'wrong side' of the border the impetus to forge their own existence

⁹³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 42.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

which, in Anzaldúa's conceptualisation, is often artistic: 'Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create.'⁹⁵

This Outsider Within status finds its echo throughout Nina Bouraoui's œuvre, as her protagonists struggle to establish a sense of identity and selfhood at the intersections of race, nationality, gender, and sexuality. As I argue throughout this thesis, Bouraoui herself, a half-French and half-Algerian lesbian, reflects Anzaldúa's depiction of the *mestiza* artist: 'The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradiction, tolerance for ambiguity... she operates in a pluralistic mode... Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns ambivalence in to something else.'⁹⁶ The ability to tolerate contradiction and ambiguity, and to turn ambivalence into something else is at the heart of my understanding of the Decolonial Feminist project. As Cherríe Moraga has attested, feminists of colour are: '[W]omen without a line... who contradict each other [and who function] between the seemingly irreconcilable lines ... [It is between these lines that] the truth of our connection lies.'⁹⁷ In the context of the current project, I would also add the borderlines of colonialism, French Universalism, and the Nationalist post-colony to Moraga's lines of constraint. In an article on Bouraoui's 2011 novel, *Sauvage*, Amaleena Damlé attests to the import of such lines in the author's work, stating that, 'in Bouraoui's writing, borders, be they political or personal, are experienced as culturally and historically constructed lines of constraint that multiply positions of alterity when crossed or transgressed.'⁹⁸ These lines of constraint are often seemingly impossible

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 101

⁹⁷ Cherríe Moraga, cited in Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, Minn. [u.a.]: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 59-60.

⁹⁸ Amaleena Damlé, 'The Wild Becoming of Childhood: Writing as Monument in Nina Bouraoui's *Sauvage*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 49 (2013), 167.

to transcend for the Borderland dweller, constructed as they are by the twin powers of patriarchy and racist colonialism.

How, then, can we read Bouraoui's œuvre as beginning to forge connections across these lines of constraint and between the *intersticios* of the Borderlands? This brings us to one of the key questions this thesis seeks to address: Can Bouraoui's literary texts be read as a method of theorising and therefore as a way to do the work of decolonial feminist theory? This chapter will begin to explore this question through a close reading of three of Bouraoui's early novels, examining how those at the Borderlands experience isolation and psychic unrest at various intersections and in different, but connected, interstitial spaces. The chapter will bring Bouraoui's early work into conversation with the theories of queer and decolonial feminisms, thereby addressing the project's other critical lines of enquiry surrounding what can be achieved through such a dialogue.

Bouraoui's own description of writerly identity has clear echoes of Anzaldúa's and Moraga's discussions of the Outsider Within and the 'irreconcilable lines' found at the Borderlands. She states: 'L'écrivain est forcément un marginal...c'est forcément quelqu'un de très seul et différent, qui n'appartient pas au monde...Les livres c'est sa façon de s'inscrire dans le monde, d'y trouver une place.'⁹⁹ Her early novels offer key insights into this marginality and an exposition of the perils inherent in a life lived in the Borderlands, particularly in the context of post-colonial Algeria.¹⁰⁰ This chapter will begin by examining Bouraoui's prize-winning début novel, *La voyageuse interdite*,¹⁰¹ focusing first on critical responses to the text and the way it was

⁹⁹ Bouraoui cited in Katharine N. Harrington, *Writing the Nomadic Experience in Contemporary Francophone Literature* (Lanham, MD [u.a.]: Lexington Books, 2013), p. 79.

¹⁰⁰ I use the hyphenated term 'post-colonial' to refer to the specific period of post-independence, and the capitalised 'Postcolonial' when referring to Postcolonial theory and criticism. The hyphen in post-colonial also serves to highlight the lines and borders still apparent in the post-colony.

¹⁰¹ The novel received the Prix du Livre Inter in 1991.

received in France and Algeria. While the novel constitutes an important addition to what I call a Franco-Algerian feminist genealogy, I would argue that it is often read as a neo-orientalist exposition of what Spivak wryly terms the phenomenon of white (wo)men saving brown women from brown men, serving both to reinforce Orientalist tropes about the savagery of the former colonies and to limit the scope of what people (especially women) in those Borderland spaces are permitted to write about.¹⁰² Exposing what has arguably been an overemphasis on the generic 'condition of the Algerian woman' in readings of Franco-Algerian women writers allows us to look beyond those tightly policed confines and read *La voyageuse interdite* as *both* a denunciation text *and* a decolonial feminist text more broadly.

I will then bring Bouraoui's début into conversation with her next two novels. *Poing mort* was published one year after *La voyageuse interdite*, with *Le Bal des murènes* following in 1996. My analysis of the texts will be underpinned by Gloria Anzaldúa's concepts of Cultural Tyranny and La Facultad, as I seek to explore how Bouraoui exposes and critiques the cultural violence endured by Borderland residents, while also hinting at the possibility of performing acts of resistance from within the confines of those very liminal spaces. As well as addressing a gap in Bouraoui scholarship by analysing texts in the oeuvre which have received little critical attention, this chapter will contend that these novels in fact form an important part of a Franco-Algerian decolonial feminist genealogy, via an exploration of Bouraoui's trenchant exposition of the violence and destruction of colonial, nationalist, and patriarchal projects.

¹⁰² Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 66-111.

The three protagonists in these early novels demonstrate what Anzaldúa calls the 'psychic unrest' of the Outsider Within. *La voyeuse interdite* appears to be set in post-independence Algeria and tells the story of protagonist Fikria and her immediate family, emphasising throughout the fact that the young narrator has been ostracised by her father (and, consequently, is also ignored by her mother) because she has reached puberty and has therefore become abhorrent to him. The violence of the father, and indeed of all the male characters in the text, is visceral and vicious, and results in Fikria being confined to her bedroom, from which she will be released only when she leaves the house to be married to a stranger. Fikria's bedroom consequently comes to represent a Borderland space, a location where her Outsider Within status is writ large. The unnamed narrator of *Poing mort* recounts a similarly exilic childhood, spent largely in isolation due to her apparent misdemeanours. She is a social pariah, rejected for her failure to conform to gendered behavioural norms. Tellingly, she is portrayed by the wider society in a highly gendered way, as a witch or a madwoman, a carrier of bad blood and disease:

les vieilles m'évitent, me repoussent et m'accusent...Elles me croient porteuse de tumeurs, d'arrêt de souffle, de poison et de mauvais sang, elles me crient éleveuse de poux et de rats, de serpents et de punaises. Elles parlent de messes noires, de funérailles joyeuses, de sacrifice de nuits, de sorts et de danses sataniques.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Nina Bouraoui, *Poing mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 70.

Here, Bouraoui clearly highlights and critiques the patriarchal social will to label women who fail to perform gendered norms as mad, bad, and dangerous to know. As a result of her social exclusion, the narrator engages in perhaps the most extreme form of 'voluntary' exile by removing herself from wider society and instead inhabiting the ultimate liminal space of the cemetery. She explains: 'J'ai choisi l'autre camp, celui des allongés. Plus de regard pour me juger, plus de voix pour ordonner.'¹⁰⁴ As we shall see, the ability to transform the Borderland into a space of one's own is a vital mode of resistance for the characters in these early novels.

Similarly haunted by violent legacies and the spectre of death, the again unnamed narrator of *Le Bal des murènes* also finds himself occupying overlapping Borderland spaces. Like Fikria, he spends a considerable amount of time confined to his bedroom, while the cellar and the mysterious crypt at the bottom of the garden also represent what Anzaldúa calls the spaces 'created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.'¹⁰⁵ He explains: 'Malade et alité, j'ai construit une demeure à l'intérieur de la demeure, une corbeille d'ange dans le dos du Diable, un tombeau ouvert où on peut prier à sa guise.'¹⁰⁶ It may seem antithetical to posit *Le Bal des murènes* as representative of decolonial feminism in the same context as the other novels, given that the narrator is male. However, as elsewhere in the œuvre, Bouraoui queers notions of gender and identity in the text, with the narrator expressing his subalternity through a disidentification with colonial patriarchy which is played out bodily: 'La maladie m'exclut du monde,' he declares. 'Ma différence est flagrante...on m'a cassé le nez avec une pierre au nom de la différence, de ma différence...Ma vérité est contenue dans mon corps et dans ses façons de périr.'¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Poing mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 40.

¹⁰⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Bal des murènes*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-4.

In many ways, the protagonist of *Le Bal des murènes* can be read as a mirror or companion narrator to Fikria. As she exposes and rails against the violence of nationalist, post-colonial patriarchal culture, so he denounces the barbarity of colonial abuses of power, the resulting narratives combining to provide a nuanced reading of the post-colonial condition and a dual denunciation of the brutality of patriarchal regimes *tout court*. Before further exploring the texts themselves, let us now turn to the contemporary context of their production to better understand the complexity of the work Bouraoui is doing in these narratives, and its potential import in our understanding of decolonial feminist theory in her fictional texts.

La voyeuse interdite or 'the condition of the Algerian woman'¹⁰⁸

As the alternative heading of this section attests, *La voyeuse interdite* is often read as a commentary on post-colonial Algerian society and women's position therein. The responses of the French and Anglophone press, excerpts of which appear on the back cover of the English-language edition, speak to the reception of the novel in the media: It is 'a terrible truth no one has quite told' about 'a young Moslem woman forcibly confined by her repressive and abusive family in Algiers.'¹⁰⁹ Exploring the response of the French media and the novel's early readership, Anna Kemp encapsulates this reading:

¹⁰⁸ This phrase is taken from a review of *La Voyeuse interdite* in the weekly French magazine, *La femme actuelle*. Part of the review is quoted on the back cover of K. Melissa Marcus' English language translation of Bouraoui's novel. The excerpt reads: 'Full of revolt and violence, Nina Bouraoui's novel, with exceptional literary talent, denounces the condition of the Algerian woman.'

¹⁰⁹ Nina Bouraoui, *Forbidden Vision* (New York: Station Hill, 1995).

Evoking the suffering of a young Algerian woman under a vicious Islamic regime, *La voyeuse interdite* provoked outrage in its French readership and attracted praise for its author's perceived courage. Since publication, literary critics have responded in a similar vein, reading the text as an exposition of the lives of Algerian women and imagining the author to be "speaking out", as a woman, on behalf of her suffering sisters.¹¹⁰

Note the term 'vicious Islamic regime': the reader is in no doubt that the culture which is being denounced in the novel is that of post-1962 Algeria. Equally, the quotation suggests, the novel was read as an autobiographical account by a 'suffering sister' of the state, courageous enough to speak out and thereby reach out to a sympathetic French-speaking audience.

Reactions in the Algerian media were markedly different, with Bouraoui accused of having created 'un portrait de l'Algérie qui servait à confirmer l'opinion de certains lecteurs français: que l'Algérie est un pays violent à coutumes rétrogrades.'¹¹¹ Marta Segarra highlights the fact that Bouraoui was criticised as an 'outsider' whose text bore little resemblance to the lived reality in Algeria: 'En Algérie...la critique a souligné l'extériorité de l'écrivaine par rapport à la réalité algérienne, son *étrangeté*; et on lui a surtout reproché...que le roman avait peu de rapport avec cette réalité.'¹¹² Caught between the responses of the French media and those of the Algerian press, *La voyeuse interdite* and its author find themselves in the Borderlands. Once again, what the writer is permitted to say, and indeed who

¹¹⁰ Anna Kemp, 'Freedom from Oneself: Artistry and the Postcolonial Woman Artist in Nina Bouraoui's "La Voyeuse Interdite"', *French Forum*, 38 (2013), 237.

¹¹¹ Trudy Agar-Mendousse, *Violence et créativité de L'écriture algérienne au féminin* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), p. 190

¹¹² Marta Segarra, *Nouvelles romancières francophones du Maghreb* (Paris: Karthala, 2010), p. 106.

she is allowed to be, is heavily policed from without. As Bouraoui herself will later go on to state: 'Auteur français? Auteur maghrébin? Certains choisiront pour moi. Contre moi. Ce sera encore une violence.'¹¹³

That *La voyeuse interdite* has been read by some as straightforwardly autobiographical also speaks to the space allotted to 'post-colonial' women writers in the Francophone context. As Kemp has argued, 'the "author-function" that pertains to postcolonial women's writing often amounts to an expectation that the work will be autobiographical.'¹¹⁴ This speaks, of course, to the public/private, male/female binarity whereby, as Anzaldúa has asserted, 'culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually, it keeps women in rigidly defined roles.'¹¹⁵

The readings outlined above also fail to acknowledge the colonial impact on the situation of women and sexual minorities, focusing as they do on the post-colonial condition. Paola Bacchetta has argued: 'Les colonisateurs n'ont pas seulement imposé leurs propres notions de genre et de sexualité à des sujets colonisés. L'effet de cette imposition a été d'empirer notablement la situation des femmes et des minorités sexuelles.'¹¹⁶ As a result of this *empirement*, women and sexual minorities are multiply othered, and bound by apparently impervious lines of constraint. A decolonial reading of the three texts analysed here seeks to examine the Borderland spaces between these lines of constraint and to ask whether Bouraoui's writing could form part of a wider decolonial feminist genealogy. In so doing, we can read texts like these as critiques of brutal regimes while also insisting that the reader look deeper to reveal what else the writer is saying about gender and

¹¹³ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, p. 34.

¹¹⁴ Kemp (2013), p. 239.

¹¹⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 39.

¹¹⁶ Paola Bacchetta cited in Houria Bouteldja, *Les Blancs, les Juifs et nous* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2016), pp. 90-91.

identity more broadly, and about the structures of power which generate these identities and simultaneously limit the ability of the marginalised to construct their own subjecthood. As Chandra Mohanty has asserted, the process of decolonising feminism 'involves a careful critique of the ethics and politics of Eurocentrism, and a corresponding analysis of the difficulties and joys of crossing cultural, national, racial and class boundaries in the search for feminist communities anchored in justice and equality.'¹¹⁷ If we are to read Bouraoui's writerly project as a mode of 'doing' decolonial feminism, Mohanty's call for careful critique is paramount, and is arguably missing from those readings of *La voyeuse interdite* which focus solely on what the novel says about post-colonial Algeria. Indeed, a decolonial reading of the text alongside *Poing mort* and *Le Bal des murènes* attempts to demonstrate the multi-layered effects of colonialism *and* nationalism, thereby highlighting the concomitant creation/reinforcement of gendered systems of oppression.

Bouraoui's early novels were published at a particularly fraught time in the geopolitical context of post-colonial Algeria. The country finally declared itself an independent state in 1962, following a bloody and brutal eight-year war with its French colonisers. The post-independence nation, however, struggled to extricate itself from the shadow of colonialism and there was no straightforward shift between colonial and nationalist Algeria. Indeed, as Saliha Belmessous highlights, '[e]ven nationalist leaders argued over what constituted an Algerian nation.'¹¹⁸ Bouraoui herself writes in the 2018 novel, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*: 'Tout est étrange en Algérie, à cause de la guerre et du sang versé sur les terres, dans les champs, dans les travées de vestiges romains qui surplombent la mer. La

¹¹⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), p. 11.

¹¹⁸ Saliha Belmessous, 'Emancipation within Empire: An Algerian Alternative During the Era of Decolonization', *History Workshop Journal*, 88 (2019), 153.

violence y est inscrit, éternelle.¹¹⁹ This violence overshadowed subsequent political regimes, from the presidency of Ahmed Ben Bella between 1962 and 1965, to the period under Chadli Benjedid (1972-1992), culminating in a Civil War which raged between 1991 and 2002.¹²⁰

For Elleke Boehmer, the concept of nation-building and the related nationalist movements which arise around it, is a complex compound structure:

Nationalism, whether ideology or movement, is never *sui generis*: it relies on the formative structures which are immediately to hand, and across history these have tended to comprise the formations of the old dynastic state and the patriarchal family. In the capitalist societies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in Europe as in Latin America, as later in Europe's other colonised regions, the nation grew up in conjunction with the formation of the bourgeois family, characterised by its construction of the home as a private, feminine sphere.¹²¹

This 'private, feminine sphere' was written into the Algerian constitution, with the passing into law of the 1984 Family Code. According to the tenets of the code, women existed only as wives, mothers or daughters, and had no rights as individual citizens outside these familial confines.¹²² In the context of decolonial feminism, it is

¹¹⁹ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 82.

¹²⁰ For a comprehensive overview of Algeria post-1962, see Martin Stone, *The Agony of Algeria* (London: Hurst and Company, 1997).

For an analysis of the Civil War and its ongoing repercussions, see Faouzia Zeraouia, 'The Memory of the Civil War in Algeria: Lessons from the Past with Reference to the Algerian Hirak', *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 7 (2020).

¹²¹ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 31.

¹²² For an analysis of the Family Code and its impact on women's rights, see Zahia Smail Salhi, 'Algerian Women, Citizenship and the 'Family Code'', *Gender and Development*, 11 (2003).

important to recognise that what Boehmer calls the *en-gendering* of the nation is also never *sui generis*, but is influenced by multiple structures of power:

The nation's *en-gendering* took on particularly acute forms in Europe's former colonies where the intersection of the male dominance prevailing within imposed and indigenous social structures meant that a *hyper-masculinity* became both the overdetermined legacy of colonial state power and a means of resistance to it...Women in the new postcolonial nations came to be subjected to a syncretic fusion of male rules, encoded as principles of law and enforced as cultural authenticity.¹²³

In light of Boehmer's analysis, it is interesting to note the similarities between the Algerian Family Code and the Napoleonic Code of 1804 with regard to women's rights (or the absence thereof). This was the code imposed by the French on its own domestic citizens and those in the countries it invaded. In Algeria's case, then, the position of women under the Family code was influenced by the French code which preceded it. As Ferial Lalami contends, 'sur la question du statut des femmes, colonisateur et mouvement national sont dans un processus interactif qui renforce l'un et l'autre.'¹²⁴ This reading challenges the neo-orientalist reaction of many in the French media and beyond who saw in Bouraoui's début novel an exposition of the savagery of an antiquated patriarchal culture supposedly particular to Algeria. The male-constructed space of the nation is not peculiar to the global South as 'White

¹²³ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 33.

¹²⁴ Ferial Lalami, 'L'Enjeu du statut des femmes durant la période coloniale en Algérie', *Nouvelles questions féministes*, 27 (2008), 21.

saviour narratives' might argue. This perhaps also helps to explain why Bouraoui chose to remove the explicit notion of geographical setting from her next two novels, a fact which only serves to highlight the short-sightedness of such neo-orientalist lines of thinking, particularly with regard to what *Le Bal des murènes* reveals about the abject horror suffered by Algerians at the hands of French colonial forces.

Anzaldúa states on writing about home: 'You are closer to home when you're further away. As a writer, I can write about places after I've left them, rather than when I'm still there.'¹²⁵ Bouraoui was living in Paris by the time she wrote *La voyageuse interdite*, her family having left Algiers in 1981. She lived with her parents and sister in Switzerland and the UAE before settling in Paris, where she still lives. Significantly, she has not returned to Algeria since the family departed suddenly when she was a teenager. There is a clear point of friction between her writing about Algeria while living in the capital of the former imperialist power. This is compounded, of course, by the fact that Bouraoui is half-French on her mother's side. As we have already seen, the Algerian press used this fact to position Bouraoui as an outsider who had no right to write about the lived experience of Algerian people. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, situating Bouraoui biographically is difficult. This is one of the things which both positions her in the Borderlands and makes her narrative voice a significant force therein. As Kirsten Husung asserts: 'Son œuvre pose la question du classement, vu l'origine de l'auteure et les thèmes qu'elle aborde: est-ce de la littérature française, francophone, mahrébine, en l'occurrence algérienne, ou beure?'¹²⁶ That there is no simple answer to these questions is testament to the multiple subject positions inherent in

¹²⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, p. 187.

¹²⁶ Kirsten Husung, *Hybridité et genre chez Assia Djebar et Nina Bouraoui* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), p. 168.

Bourauoui's work. What *is* key is that Bourauoui writes. As Boehmer asserts: 'To write is not only to speak for one's place in the world. It is also to *make* one's own place and narrative, to tell the story of oneself, to create an identity.'¹²⁷ The stories in these early novels may not be Bourauoui's own, but through them she stakes a claim to her own writerly identity and gives a name to what this thesis argues is a form of decolonial feminism. Marina van Zuylen has fittingly called *La voyeuse interdite* a 'narration of exile';¹²⁸ this is arguably as true for the writer as it is for her protagonist: It is perhaps no coincidence that Bourauoui began this novel at about the time she started going out on the gay scene in Paris; as Fikria is literally an outsider within, trapped behind the walls of the familial home, so too is Bourauoui coming to realise in just how many ways she is outside the norms of the various spaces she inhabits.¹²⁹ This is equally true for the narrators of the novels which followed *La voyeuse interdite*. The narrator of *Le Bal des murènes* finds himself, like Fikria, largely confined to his bedroom, while *Poing mort*'s protagonist inhabits perhaps the ultimate liminal space of the cemetery.

In the context of decolonial feminism, the setting for Bourauoui's early novels is important. As Françoise Vergès has argued, 'Réécrire l'histoire du féminisme en partant de la colonie représente un enjeu central pour le féminisme décolonial.'¹³⁰ Situating the narratives in what could be interpreted as post-colonial Algeria is therefore politically provocative, playing simultaneously on the entrenched myths of the liberated Western woman and the cloistered women of the global South, while

¹²⁷

Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 94.

¹²⁸ Marina van Zuylen, 'Maghreb and Melancholy: A Reading of Nina Bourauoui', *Research in African Literatures*, 34 (2003), 88.

¹²⁹ For more on Bourauoui's experiences in the gay scene, see Chapter Three of this thesis.

¹³⁰ Françoise Vergès, *Un Féminisme décolonial* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2019), p. 29.

also reclaiming a sense of 'home' for her protagonists. As outlined above, Bouraoui frequently wrong-foots her readership by both feeding into and subverting these tropes, yet the violence of lived experience for the narrators is never in doubt.

There are echoes throughout the novels of Anzaldúa's concept of Cultural Tyranny¹³¹, a perceived set of rules and values, usually created by patriarchal powers to form 'dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable', through which society, and especially women, can be directed and controlled.¹³² Cultural Tyranny extends to any area of a person's lived experience in which their agentic potential is capped by the expectation of externally controlled 'norms'. These norms are perhaps at their most stubbornly invidious when they are dressed up as traditions or are historically embedded. As Ketu Katrak notes: 'The traditions most oppressive to women are specifically located within the arena of female sexuality...The key issue of the control of female sexuality is legitimized, even effectively mystified, under the name of "tradition."' ¹³³ By questioning the validity of these 'traditions', Bouraoui's early novels protest against the status quo of women's lived experience in multiple contexts. We must, of course, recognise the threat posed by what Serene Khader calls missionary feminism, and not treat oppressive practices to 'metonymically stand for...cultures as a whole', or perceive the West as a 'gender-just telos to which all societies must reach'.¹³⁴ But we must also be able to critique the practices as they are described. The next

¹³¹ As with other borrowings from Anzaldúa, the term Cultural Tyranny is capitalised throughout this chapter.

¹³² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, p. 38.

¹³³ Ketu H. Katrak, 'Decolonizing Culture: Toward a Theory for Postcolonial Women's Texts', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 35 (1989), 168.

¹³⁴ Serene J. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism, Studies in Feminist Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 123.

section will explore how the texts under discussion here present realities of, and challenges to, the power structures of Cultural Tyranny.

The problematics of home: Exploding the myths of Cultural Tyranny

As we have already seen, the legacy of French colonial rule and the restrictions of the Family Code represented a double-bind for women in post-colonial Algeria, forcing them into ever tighter, more restricted modes of living. Bouraoui's œuvre, and these early novels, in particular, teem with the often-violent repercussions of such constraints, their transmitted memory. As Laurence Enjolras has highlighted: 'Bouraoui n'a cessé de dénoncer dans ses textes...la violence faite à Quiconque qui, de la naissance à la maturité, est forcé, ployé, bridé, moulé pour coller à une norme imposée.'¹³⁵ This description of violence inflicted on people (particularly, although not exclusively, women) as a method of imposing social norms of behaviour and identity chimes perfectly with Anzaldúa's depiction of Cultural Tyranny dressed up as a method of protecting those it seeks, in reality, to constrain. In a longer passage, she explains:

The female, by virtue of creating entities of flesh and blood in her stomach (she bleeds every month but does not die), by virtue of being in tune with nature's cycles, is feared. Because, according to Christianity and most other major religions, woman is carnal, animal, closer to the undivine, she must be

¹³⁵ Laurence Enjolras, 'L'Habit ne vêt plus la nonne', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 12 (2008), 19.

protected. Protected from herself. Woman is the stranger, the other. She is man's recognized nightmarish pieces, his Shadow-Beast. The sight of her sends him into a frenzy of anger and fear.

Women are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above the deviants.¹³⁶

Bouraoui's début novel encapsulates the insidious and destructive power of Cultural Tyranny as outlined here, as the writer examines how these cultural constraints are played out in the lived experience of the protagonist and her immediate family. The text is replete with references to the perceived social abhorrence of female sexuality and the consequent policing of girls' and women's daily lives. The novel's narrator, Fikria, confined by her parents to the home for fear of the dangers they believe are posed by her burgeoning adolescent sexuality, describes 'la souffrance d'être née femme dans cette maison',¹³⁷ thanks to the knowledge, transmitted by her parents (and by patriarchal society more broadly) that 'votre sexe [est] déjà coupable à la naissance.'¹³⁸ Fikria's father perfectly epitomises the wider social perception of female biology and sexuality in his response to the narrator's first experience of menstruation. Upon her reaching this milestone, Fikria's father stops communicating with her completely:

Deux ans. Deux ans déjà qu'il ne me parle plus. Deux longues années au cours desquelles mon corps n'a pas arrêté de suinter l'impureté...je reste sale et indigne de sa parole; je suis un épouvantail articulé, une

¹³⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, pp. 39-40.

¹³⁷ Nina Bouraoui, *La voyeuse interdite*, p. 28.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.14.

femelle au sexe pourri qu'il faut absolument ignorer afin d'échapper à la condamnation divine!¹³⁹

In this early section of the text, Fikria indicates that this symbolic violence is perpetuated on women and girls 'par la religion musulmane'.¹⁴⁰ Yet there is a clear suggestion that it is a misreading of religion on the part of men, echoing once again Anzaldúa's withering summary of culture's 'protection' of women in the name of religion. Indeed, Bouraoui goes on to demonstrate in *Le Bal des murènes* the insidious transmission of these beliefs about the functions of the female body, as we witness the narrator's mother react with disgust upon discovering her daughters' menstruation: 'Elle hurle, elle peste, elle accuse: «Petites putes, traînées, salopes!», elle se sent trahie.'¹⁴¹ That her words so closely echo those of Fikria's father evidences how deeply entrenched these cultural beliefs are and are all the more shocking to the reader because it is the mother who utters them. One may reasonably expect that a woman who has presumably lived through similar experiences of menstruation would empathise with her daughters. Instead, she is disgusted by them, even feeling as though they have betrayed her, highlighting patriarchal society's skewed conflation of female biology and sexual promiscuity but perhaps also the desire for her daughters to escape such a judgment in the only way she can perceive; by not reaching puberty.

In *La voyeuse interdite*, the results of this violence are apparent in the situation which Fikria decries throughout the novel, as the following quotation highlights:

¹³⁹ Ibid., p.31.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁴¹ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Bal des murènes*, p. 44.

Ils vivaient en l'an 1380 du calendrier hégirien, pour nous, c'était le tout début des années soixante-dix. Devant l'anachronisme grandissant de la vie de ces hommes, il fallut prendre une décision. Ferme et définitive. Dès la puberté, les femmes de la maison durent vivre cachées derrière les fenêtres d'un gynécée silencieux où le temps avait perdu sa raison d'être. Les heures s'écoulaient lentement puis finirent par disparaître, anéanties par l'irréalité de notre existence!¹⁴²

The anachronism described by Fikria is another example of patriarchal control over what Anzaldúa terms the 'deviant female'. As Salima Amari highlights in her sociological study on lesbians of North African origin who have immigrated to France, 'ce sont souvent les femmes qui doivent subir les normes religieuses les plus imposantes.'¹⁴³ As Fikria does in *La voyeuse interdite*, Amari is reflecting in this instance on Islam (given the religious and cultural backgrounds of her interviewees). However, it is not, I would argue, the denomination that is of import. This could equally be said of any man-made religion. It is the *man-made* prefix which designates the norms which weigh so heavily on women. Indeed, in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa herself reflects on her own belief that, 'the Catholic Church fails to give meaning to my daily acts...It and other institutionalized religions impoverish all life, beauty, pleasure.'¹⁴⁴ The institution is what is designed to superintend. For Fikria, as for Anzaldúa, religion is the name given to the stick used to beat women

¹⁴² Nina Bouraoui, *La voyeuse interdite*, pp. 21-22.

¹⁴³ Salima Amari, *Lesbiennes de l'immigration* (Vulaines sur Seine: Éditions du Croquant, 2018), p. 56.

¹⁴⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, p. 59.

into submission. It is an illusion of religion rather than one which has any relation the word of God, as Fikria wryly sums up:

Aujourd'hui: leçon de choses ou comment ne pas s'ennuyer dans un pays musulman quand on est une fille musulmane.

Dieu a pointé son index accusateur sur mon front, je ne dois pas sortir, éviter le regard de mon père lorsque mon sexe m'indispose, vivre cachée comme une chose dans l'ombre de ma mère, accepter les coups de martinet en me persuadant que je suis fautive.¹⁴⁵

In the context of both the novel and its contemporary setting, religion intersects with the exclusion of women from the creation of the nation-state (despite their involvement in the fight for independence) and the fictionality of a 'return' to tradition to both disenfranchise and control women. As Boutheina Cheriet has asserted:

More often than not, it is in its ambiguous attitude towards the universal enfranchisement of women that the new nation-state has been caught up in its tormented guilt toward the more traditional dimensions, namely the religious, the ethical, the customary, the local and the culturally specific.

Algeria provides an excellent illustration.¹⁴⁶

Taken further, of course, these relations of power are based on fictions of gender and the perceived inferiority/weakness of women. These fictions are not peculiar to

¹⁴⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *La Voyeuse interdite*, p. 64.

¹⁴⁶ Boutheina Cheriet, 'Gender as a Catalyst of Social and Political Representations in Algeria', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 9:2 (2004), 95.

Algeria but, as the novel evidences, the resulting behaviours are indicative of certain culture-specific phenomena. As Souad Khodja has noted in relation to women's position in Algeria, the structure of society is based on a system 'qui privilégie le collectif sur l'individuel, l'objectif sur le subjectif, le sur-moi sur le soi, la maîtrise sur l'excès'.¹⁴⁷ She goes on:

'Dans cette logique, la structure du pouvoir est très stricte et fonctionne sur la base d'un système d'opposition/affirmation (exclusion) qui peut se résumer selon cet enchaînement:

Haut	bas
Homme	femme
Fort	faible
Maîtrise	excès
Honneur	veulerie
Sacré	souilleries' ¹⁴⁸

In the context of *La voyeuse interdite*, reflecting Khodja's summing up, gender intersects with religion and cultural policing (particularly through the Family Code) to create an ever-shrinking Borderland in which Fikria and her sisters struggle to find a place to exist. Women, and by extension their bodies, become spaces of colonisation. This is encapsulated in the text through the concept of home. As Chandra Mohanty has attested,

"Being home" refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; "not being home" is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific

¹⁴⁷ Souad Khodja, 'Les femmes musulmanes algériennes et le développement', in *Annuaire De L'Afrique Du Nord* (Paris, 1979), pp. 123-34 (p. 126).

¹⁴⁸ Souad Khodja, 'Les Femmes Musulmanes Algériennes Et Le Développement', in *Annuaire De L'Afrique Du Nord* (Paris, 1979), pp. 123-34.

histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself.¹⁴⁹

Mohanty's assertion is echoed throughout Fikria's narrative, and that of the narrators in *Poing mort* and *Le Bal des murènes*, as the spaces which should be familiar and safe are instead spaces built on exclusion, oppression, and rejection. For Fikria and the protagonist of *Le Bal des murènes*, it is the familial home which represents this space, while for the narrator of *Poing mort* it is the school as institution, 'la maison où on apprend à se tenir tranquille',¹⁵⁰ as well as society more generally which has ostracised her: 'Les enfants avaient peur de moi. Les parents se plaignaient à ma mère.'¹⁵¹ School becomes a Borderland space of exclusion because she fails to adhere to its rules: 'Mise à l'index, je devais passer ma dernière année d'école dans la solitude et la condamnation.'¹⁵² The notion of 'home', then, is revealed as a fiction while at the same time being a brutal lived experience and, as Mohanty goes on to argue, it is one we are often doomed to repeat if we do not take significant action:

Each of us carries around those growing-up places, the institutions, a sort of backdrop, a stage set. So often we act out the present against the backdrop of the past, within a frame of perception that is so familiar, so safe that it is terrifying to risk changing it even when we know our perceptions are distorted, limited, constricted by that old view.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), p. 90.

¹⁵⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Poing mort*, p. 31.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁵³ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), p. 91.

The 'old view' in the context of *La voyeuse interdite* is the expression of Cultural Tyranny refracted through the notion of "traditions" which must be upheld at all costs. Fikria's parents, in particular, are guilty of acting out the present against the backdrop of the (imagined?) past. We see this in the father's imposition of silence on the family: 'aucune parole, aucun regard ne trahit le silence un peu solennel imposé par l'homme de la maison.'¹⁵⁴ As Fikria herself asserts, the future is already mapped out for her in this border dwelling unless, of course, she finds a way to escape: 'Mon avenir est inscrit sur les yeux sans couleur de ma mère et les corps aux formes monstrueuses de mes sœurs: parfaites incarnations du devenir de toutes les femmes cloîtrées!'¹⁵⁵

While the novel can be read as a critique of the 'repressive and abusive family in Algiers', might Bouraoui not also be addressing wider history of female oppression more broadly, and at the hands of (male) colonial and nationalist powers more specifically? Indeed, the author herself has attested that the novel is not intended to be read as a sociological documentary, stating: 'Ce livre n'est pas un document. Je n'ai pas voulu décrire la condition de la femme typée.'¹⁵⁶ Katherine Harrington reflects this line of thinking in her analysis of the text, arguing that the 'overall message Bouraoui expresses in *La voyeuse interdite* is one that can be applied to women and men worldwide in a number of different cultural and religious settings.'

¹⁵⁷ It would be facile to state that *La voyeuse interdite* depicts Algerian experiences of gender as more troubling than those which take place elsewhere. As Harrington

¹⁵⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *La voyeuse interdite*, p. 23.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁵⁶ Bouraoui, cited in Trudy Agar-Mendousse, *Violence et créativité de L'écriture algérienne au féminin* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), p. 191.

¹⁵⁷ Katharine N. Harrington, *Writing the Nomadic Experience in Contemporary Francophone Literature* (Lanham, MD [u.a.]: Lexington Books, 2013), p. 81.

and others attest, these delineations and entrenched definitions exist across national and cultural contexts. When we remove the religious dimension and the post-colonial context, things don't necessarily become less problematic for the novels' key characters. Like Fikria and her sisters, the narrator of *Poing mort* describes a similarly grim childhood and the idea that she is not able, or not willing, to cross the borderline from childhood to adulthood. 'Mon enfance fut solitaire et mélancolique,' she states. 'Je décidais de ne plus grandir.'¹⁵⁸ Similarly, in *Le Bal des murènes*, the narrator asserts 'je ne me vois pas vieillir'.¹⁵⁹ Childhood itself becomes a Borderland in these texts. Could we read this as an allegory of the childhood of a newly independent Algeria as damaged by the colonial generations before? If we zoom out, what are these narrators all demonstrating? They are all imprisoned by the symbolic violence of Cultural Tyranny and the transmitted memory of colonial violence as played out in the present moment. This is particularly the case in *Le Bal des murènes*, with its focus on the generational damage wrought by colonisation and the War of Independence. The text is one of the most violent in the œuvre, something which Bouraoui has herself recognised, commenting in an interview:

C'est un livre tellement violent que je ne peux plus le relire. Il me gêne. Comme si j'avais dû extraire de moi une violence qui n'était pas la mienne, un secret caché dans ma mémoire. Nous sommes dépositaires de secrets que nous ignorons et qui font néanmoins souffrir. Dans *Le Bal des murènes*, je ne sais pas quelle est la part de vérité. Peut-être est-ce aussi pour cela que j'écris: pour refaire l'histoire?¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Poing mort*, p. 42.

¹⁵⁹ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Bal des murènes*, p. 16.

¹⁶⁰ Dominique Simmonet, 'Ecrire, c'est retrouver ses fantômes', *www.lexpress.fr*, (2004).

This notion of 're-doing' history is important. All the texts discussed in this chapter reflect on the violent past and its echoes in the present. Confronting and invoking the possibility of 'remaking' it are at the heart of the decolonial feminist project since suffering that is unacknowledged and undescribed is impossible to overcome.¹⁶¹ The next section will explore how Bouraoui engages with this imbrication of past and present to further interrogate the impact of historically constructed lines of constraint on those in the Borderlands.

'Nous sommes les instruments de l'histoire'¹⁶²: The Past as a Borderland

It is important to remember that these early novels were written during the period of the brutal Algerian Civil War (1991-2002) and, as discussed above, with the memory of the War of Independence (1954-1962) still looming large. Although we are not given a fixed sense of place in all of the novels, there are clues that this turbulent period and the colonial brutality which has gone before it both inform the violence inherent in the texts, as Bouraoui hints in the quotation above. As the narrator of *Poing mort* highlights, '[q]uand le passé s'active pour rattraper le présent en une accélération incontrôlable, traduite par à-coups et dissonance, l'important est de garder les yeux grands-ouverts.'¹⁶³ By opening our eyes to what Bouraoui is saying about the past in these texts, might we be able to produce a more nuanced reading of what she is saying about the supposed present in *La voyeuse interdite*?

¹⁶¹ Zadie Smith, 'Somebody in There After All', in Toni Morrison, *Recitatif* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2022).

¹⁶² Nina Bouraoui, *Le Bal des murènes*, p. 67.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Le Bal des murènes, in particular, reflects on this imbrication of past and present violence. Helen Vassallo has observed that Bouraoui's work is 'marked by the legacy of opposition engendered by the colonial past that France and Algeria share,' and that 'a significant legacy of war and violence is an essential part of [her] heritage, as [her] blood mixes both colonizer and colonized, perpetrator and victim of violence.'¹⁶⁴ Although Bouraoui does not specify that the war referred to by the narrator is the War of Independence, there are hints throughout the text that the novel may be set in Algeria, such as the narrator's mother referring to him as 'raton'. This highly pejorative word was used by the colonial French to describe Algerians as 'thieving' and 'rat-like'¹⁶⁵; meanwhile the narrator describes his body as a site of colonisation: 'mes cachets bruts ou vernis qui dès l'aube colonisent le corps à jeun;'¹⁶⁶ there is also the cellar where people were tortured and killed – Bouraoui speaks about this in a later text as being a place she lived during her childhood in Algiers. The narrator's growing awareness of the horrors in his family history is symbolised in the early part of text by the mysterious and incessant tapping sound which plagues him:

J'entends frapper. Le bruit prend le jour ou la nuit, il mobilise ma tête, immobilise l'entrain, il reveille, coupe l'appétit, intrigue. J'entends frapper au sous-sol, le son est brutal et régulier, il bondit dans ma vit, déguisé.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Helen Vassallo, *The Body Besieged: The Embodiment of Historical Memory in Nina Bouraoui and Leïla Sebbar* (Plymouth: Lexington, 2012), p. 1.

¹⁶⁵ See Aïssaoui, R. and Eldridge, C. (2017) *Algeria revisited* (London; Oxford: Bloomsbury) for uses of this word in specific Algerian context (page 114, note 10 and page 151, note 42).

¹⁶⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Bal des murènes*, p. 19.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

As the narrator indicates, the noise seems to emanate from the cellar, one of the Borderland spaces of the text. The noise may be said to represent the violence of the past which is also at the very centre of his own family, thanks to what we learn about the grandfather's role in the war and the death of the grandmother. As such, the noise becomes part of the story, part of the family:

Il se fait attendre. Il prend ses aises, il a ses marques, ses repères, ses habitudes. Il fait partie de la famille.... Je l'entends quand il n'y a plus rien à entendre, après les vagues, après l'averse, après la tempête, après les mots.¹⁶⁸

The fact that the noise from the cellar 'fait partie de la famille' indicates the extent to which the violence of the past has become bound up with those who created it and those who endured it (in this case, the narrator's grandparents), but is also transmitted to those who follow (the narrator and his mother). The repetition of 'après', meanwhile, serves as an ironic reminder that we are never truly 'beyond' trauma; the past is still felt in the present, even by those who did not directly experience the violence. As Vassallo contends, 'the memory of violence is not restricted to the person or people who have directly suffered from the violence but can also be embodied in later generations.'¹⁶⁹

The cellar plays a key role in the text, having been a space of torture and imprisonment during the war, and in many ways represents the Borderland space of the past as the foundation of the violence of the present. 'Le soleil n'inondait jamais

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 9-9.

¹⁶⁹ Vassallo, p. 193.

la cave,' the narrator asserts, 'C'était déjà la fin du monde ici, une éventration précise, locale, terrible.'¹⁷⁰ As the narrative progresses, we learn more about the cellar. Some female prisoners would be taken out of the cellar to have sex with the soldiers and were then killed immediately afterwards, apart from one woman who stayed several months, 'protected' by the officer who desired her. She fell pregnant and he promised to protect the baby. He also assured his comrades that he would kill the mother as soon as the child was born. This, we learn, is the story of the narrator's grandparents. His grandmother is one of the last surviving prisoners. As others die around her and are carried away by the soldiers, 'elle, restait, la dernière survivante, le pauvre témoin, la spectatrice.'¹⁷¹ She is eventually murdered by the narrator's grandfather after having given birth to the narrator's mother. The narrator continues to bear witness, as those who came before were unable to do. He attests:

Nous sommes les instruments de l'histoire, je souris, et derrière mon sourire, un bourreau aux mains enflées rit aux éclats, je pleure, et derrière mes larmes, une jeune femme aux cheveux noirs crie qu'elle ne veut plus souffrir; pour elle, la mise à mort n'est qu'un détail, ils ont tué son honneur et ses raisons de vivre.

His bloodline links the victim and perpetrator of extreme brutality. He is the Outsider Within and the Insider Without. As the narrator goes on to assert, '[n]ous sommes dans la mort, aveuglés, quadrillés, sanglés, d'un tour de faits divers, les exploits de la guerre, d'une violence imperative, à peine épuisée.'¹⁷² Regardless of when the

¹⁷⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Bal des murènes*, p. 77.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.121.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

war actually took place, its repercussions continue to be felt generation on generation if the consequences of such brutality are not confronted, discussed, healed.

The other Borderland space linked to the violence of the past is the tomb at the bottom of the garden, a place which the narrator refers to as 'la ruine de notre histoire.' If the cellar represents the horrors of the war, the tomb seems to epitomise the very human consequences of this violence, 'son empreinte réelle, la fin d'une abstraction, d'une sensation, un début d'évidence, la misère qui passe, fracture, baigne.'¹⁷³ The narrator is acutely aware that the repercussions of this brutality will continue to be felt in the present and the future, that the echo of violence is 'interminable car portée à l'infini par la volonté des hommes, les petits sujets de Dieu.'¹⁷⁴ Tellingly, the grandfather, who is one of those responsible for the deaths of those in the tomb, fixates on this space when he enters the narrative. The narrator's mother is similarly obsessed with the grave, representing for her the loss of her own mother and the inescapability of the life she has been forced to live as a result of this brutal past. The narrator observes his mother at the site of the tomb:

Ma mère rudoyait la terre, mais plus encore, elle battait son destin, la fuite du destin, son manque de destin, sa vie sous menottes... Elle frappait son espace clos, l'obsession, un espace très ouverte en fait, de la tête, des poings, des mots, des grimaces, pleurant, s'énervant, elle s'acharnait à juger ce qu'on ne peut se représenter: l'origine, la racine.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 72.

As Fikria is forced to live in silence by her father, so too are the narrators of *Poing mort* and *Le Bal des murènes* condemned to silence by the overbearing weight of their history. 'Je suis victime du silence des miens,' explains *Le Bal des murènes'* protagonist, 'd'une histoire à l'étouffée.'¹⁷⁶ How, then, do these characters cope with the combined violence of past and present, particularly given their Outsider Within status and the Borderland spaces in which they exist? How do they convert these enforced silences into a narrative of understanding and defiance? The next section will seek to answer these questions by exploring Anzaldúa's notion of La Facultad, demonstrating how Bouraoui's characters are able to create spaces of resistance and identity even within the confines of the Borderland.

La Facultad: The Tools of Resistance

'La facultad,' Anzaldúa writes, 'is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface.'¹⁷⁷ To possess la Facultad is to see through the cracks in the borders constructed by society, and it is those in the Borderlands who are most likely to develop this skill. Anzaldúa goes on: 'Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest – the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign...It's a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate.'¹⁷⁸ As shown in the previous two sections of this chapter, the characters in these early Bouraoui texts are 'pounced on' at multiple positions, and must find modes of survival in Borderland spaces in which they have been marked as abhorrent because of their gender identity (Fikria

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 60-1.

¹⁷⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, p. 60.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 60-61.

and her sisters), their proscribed mixed heritage (*Le Bal des murène's* narrator), their past behaviour (the protagonist in *Poing mort*), or a combination of these and other social 'misdemeanours'. As a result of the Outsider Within status that stems from these social exclusions, the characters in these texts are sometimes able to look differently at the situation in which they find themselves by first looking inwards. Anzaldúa describes the psychological struggle inherent in bringing about change for those who find themselves in the Borderlands. She explains:

The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the "real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.¹⁷⁹

It is with this inner vision that those who possess *La Facultad* begin to harness not only the possibility of individual survival, but also the potential for structural change.

Several critics have noted the importance of the concept of *seeing* in the *La voyeuse interdite*, both in the title and throughout the narrative. McIlvanney, for example, finds in Bouraoui's debut 'both visual and visionary perspectives' whereby Fikria, the narrator, is 'a "voyeuse" in the more neutral sense of observer, as well as corresponding to its more socially – and sexually – deviant permutation.'¹⁸⁰ For McIlvanney, this 'double vision' is politically potent in that it 'endeavours to promote in its readers a political consciousness of the everyday realities experienced by women living in a sexually segregated society and of the consequent need to

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p.109.

¹⁸⁰ Siobhán McIlvanney, 'Double Vision: The Role of the Visual and the Visionary in Nina Bouraoui's "La Voyeuse Interdite (Forbidden Vision)"', *Research in African Literatures*, 35 (2004), 105-20 (108).

relativize notions of subversion and resistance.¹⁸¹ Kemp takes this point even further, arguing that there is an objectifying power in Fikria's vision, in which 'it is not only the Algerian patriarchal gaze that is appropriated in Bouraoui's text – it is also that of the white colonizer.'¹⁸² The novel's title attests to this; Fikria is a forbidden *voyeuse*. The juxtaposition of the terms highlights and challenges the extent to which such a position is denied to women in patriarchal narratives. This is another important tenet of decolonial feminism, as Boehmer attests: 'Through writing, through claiming a text – and a narrative territory – women sign into and at the same time subvert a nationalist narrative that has excluded them as negativity, as corporeal and unclean, or as impossibly idealised.'¹⁸³ The English translation of the text further evidences this, the title translated as *Forbidden Vision*. Fikria's agency is therefore removed, and she becomes a static and passive image of the narrative Boehmer describes here. As *la voyeuse*, she claims her narrative territory; as the *vision*, she is denied it.

All of the narrators in these early novels could be said to claim their narrative territory through a position of the forbidden observer. The narrator of *Le Bal des murènes*, for example, describes his surveillance of family life and the wider world from the relative safety of his bedroom: 'Je surveille de ma fenêtre ... Ma chambre est au troisième étage, au point d'agonie de l'escalier ... Près du ciel, au calme et aux images, ma position est en retrait. Je vois mais je n'admets pas. Je me protège.'¹⁸⁴ This notion of seeing without being seen calls to mind both Fanon's discussion of the veiled woman, but also Anzaldúa's explanation of the ability of

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁸² Kemp, p. 242.

¹⁸³ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 94.

¹⁸⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Bal des murènes*, p. 12.

those with *La Facultad* to see 'between the cracks' of power structures to the reveal the truth. The visual becomes, as McIlvanney asserts, visionary, as the narrators become aware of their subalternity but also the fictionality around which all such structures are based. This awareness, this vision, opens up the possibility for rethinking positionality and opting for a different construction of self. As the narrator of *Poing mort* asserts,

Visionnaire, j'étais l'unique détentrice du troisième œil, la sonde précieuse qui fait imaginer. J'avais choisi l'autre sens de la vie, la marche contraire, le pas à l'envers permettant de divaguer en pleine assemblée...J'optais pour l'ombre et la lenteur, je revendiquais l'aparté et la différence.¹⁸⁵

Again, the narrative here echoes Anzaldúa, in particular her discussion of the importance of the visual in bringing about change. She describes being possessed by a 'validation vision' through which she seeks 'our woman's face, our true features, the positive and the negative seen clearly, free of the tainted biases of male dominance. I seek new images of identity, new beliefs about ourselves, our humanity and worth no longer in question.'¹⁸⁶ Across these texts, Bouraoui equips her narrators with the ability to see beyond such 'tainted biases' and to begin to envision a new image of identity for themselves based on a sense of shared humanity.

This notion of the visionary suggests another tenet of *la Facultad*: the power of the mind. Anzaldúa explains: 'Confronting anything that tears the fabric of our everyday mode of consciousness and that thrusts us into a less literal and more psychic sense of reality increases awareness and *la Facultad*.'¹⁸⁷ Possessing *la*

¹⁸⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Poing mort*, p. 49.

¹⁸⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, p. 109.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.61.

Facultad is neither easy nor comfortable. As Anzaldúa suggests here, it requires a literal tearing of the fabric of the supposedly fixed structures one has been born or acculturated into. All of the narrators in these early novels experience this fracture. *La voyeuse interdite*, in particular, emphasises the potential power of the mind in the face of abject violence. ‘Fille, foutre, femme, fornication, faiblesse, flétrissures, commencent par la même lettre,’ Fikria’s father reminds us in his final words to his daughter before he imposes a silence on the house to punish her for having her first menses.¹⁸⁸ Fikria, of course, also happens to begin with the same letter. In Arabic, the name signifies intelligence or intellectual and it is not, I would argue, coincidental that Bouraoui chooses this name for her first protagonist. Names, or the lack of a name, are often important in Bouraoui’s novels. The bestowal of a name is, of course, one of the most basic identifying devices in many cultures. Names are how we know, and are known by, one another; the stories that they tell are important. Fikria’s name, for example, offers a clue to the fact that we are not dealing with a simple case of ‘girl imprisoned by paternalistic culture’, as some readings of the text have implied. The opening chapter of the novel makes clear that the narrator is determined to use her mind to find a way to exist *for herself* within the limited Borderland space of her lived experience:

Sans effort, j’arrive à extraire des trottoirs un geste, un regard, une situation qui me donnent plus tard la sève de l’aventure. L’imagination part de presque rien, une fenêtre, un trolley, une petite fille et son curieux sourire, puis, là, s’étale devant moi un nouveau tapis d’histoire tissé de mots et de maux que

¹⁸⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *La voyeuse interdite*, p. 33.

je stoppe avec un nœud grossier: le lyrisme. Je ne suis pas dupe de ma vision des choses...

Il faut prendre le temps d'observer, ne pas côtoyer sans voir, ne pas effleurer sans saisir, ne pas cueillir sans sentir, ne pas pleurer sans aimer ni hair.

L'important est l'histoire. Se faire une histoire avant de regarder le vrai.¹⁸⁹

Fikria, then, has carved out a space of existence for herself, made a story *for herself*, within the confines of the Borderland of the family home. This imaginative zone becomes a safe haven for the protagonist and provides an example in the text of what Chela Sandoval calls oppositional or differential consciousness. Sandoval describes differential consciousness as 'a strategy of oppositional ideology that functions on an altogether different register...it permits functioning within, yet beyond, the demands of the dominant ideology'.¹⁹⁰ Fikria's imaginative flights are what allow her to function in the oppressive society she is literally locked in, and, in the early part of the novel, it is within this space of the mind that she is able to meditate on the possibility of a collective struggle against these oppressions:

Un message? Oui. Descendez de vos tanières, ne perdons plus notre temps et le leur, désorientons avec courage le cours de la tradition, nos mœurs et leurs valeurs, arrachons rideaux et voiles pour joindre nos corps!

Et un carnaval de mains brisera les vitres, brisera le silence.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 9-11

¹⁹⁰ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Vol. 18, *Theory out of Bounds* (Minneapolis, Minn. [u.a.]: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 44.

¹⁹¹ Nina Bouraoui, *La voyageuse interdite*, pp. 14-15.

Fikria's use of the verb *désorienter* is apt, echoing as it does José Esteban Muñoz's *disidentification* and Ahmed's *disorientation*, both of which are useful in examining how Bouraoui conveys la Facultad in these texts. Muñoz describes *disidentification* as a 'mode of reading [which] resists, demystifies, and deconstructs the universalizing ruse of the dominant culture'.¹⁹² The dominant culture creates the world it wants to see, thereby inventing ways to control those who inhabit this world. Fikria highlights this in her wry observation about the absurdity of society's obsession with female sexuality, 'un sexe obsédant qui derange la jeunesse des filles, les rêves des hommes, un sexe convoité, désiré, imagine mais rarement satisfait'.¹⁹³ In a different but related way, Sara Ahmed's concept of disorientation allows for a re-examination of the universalizing ruse, whereby:

Inhabiting a body that is not extended by the skin of the social means the world acquires a new shape and makes new impressions... Becoming reorientated, which involves the disorientation of encountering the world differently, made me wonder about orientation and how much "feeling at home," or knowing which way we are facing, is about the making of worlds.

We see this again at the end of the second part of the novel as Fikria describes the way Alger has changed from a place of beauty and hope, 'le berceau des audaces, de la joie et de la gloire', to one of despair and absurdity, where: 'Les chiens mangent les ordures, les rats mangent les chats et les chiens sont mordus par les rats des ordures, alors, seuls animaux de l'écosystème illogique, les rats, joints aux

¹⁹² José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications* (Minneapolis [u.a.]: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 26.

¹⁹³ Nina Bouraoui, *La voyageuse interdite*, p. 116.

hommes, participant au massacre de la ville'.¹⁹⁴ The very geography of the city and its 'normal' functioning have been oriented by the dominant culture(s) in such way that it is difficult to know which way one is facing. Fikria's mind is her tool of disidentification from this absurd status quo; making imaginative worlds using the raw material of this corrupted geography is what ultimately provides her with a space within which to function.

Fikria's sisters, meanwhile, identify and *disidentify* in their own individual ways. The girls are called Zohr and Leyla, which can be translated as *day* and *night* in Arabic and, once again, these names are significant. Zohr, Fikria's older sister, 'est en guerre contre sa nature, nature féminine'.¹⁹⁵ She is the first-born, the morning, upon whom the light of understanding has dawned, an awareness of 'la souffrance d'être née femme dans cette maison'.¹⁹⁶ It is this awareness which leads to a symbolic civil war, played out on Zohr's body as she tries in various ways to mask, bind, or erase, the traces of 'femininity' she perceives:

Tous les soirs, elle resserre un savant corset de bandelettes qui masque deux seins dont les pointes sans support suffoquent derrière la bande de tissu close par une épingle à nourrice, elle-même logée dans la ridicule rigole séparant les deux pousses qui n'arriveront jamais à terme.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 27

¹⁹⁶ Fittingly, Zohr can be read as an alternative to the name Zohra, which happens to be the name of one of the most famous female fighters in the Algerian War (Zohra Drif). It is also likely that Drif was one of the inspirations for Fanon's essay 'L'Algérie de dévoile'. Once again, it seems that Bouraoui's choice of names is not coincidental.

¹⁹⁷ *La voyageuse interdite*, p. 27.

Zohr's physical self-abuse leads Fikria to claim that her sister, 'incarnait à mes yeux toute la misère de la nature humaine.'¹⁹⁸ Although the English translation uses the word misery here, *misère* could also be translated as poverty, echoing both Fikria's summing up of being born a woman in her family and in wider society, and Cherríe Moraga's assertion that being a woman is itself a form of poverty.¹⁹⁹ For Zohr, her tool of resistance is the gradual destruction of her own physical being. She is making herself invisible to the extent that, according to Fikria, she is no longer part of the living world: 'Zohr ignorait que la mort était déjà en elle'.²⁰⁰ Death is something of a fixation in the novel, and in fact plays a pivotal role in all of Bouraoui's early texts. Fikria describes the walls of her bedroom, which 'sentient le cadavre',²⁰¹ and her own body as being 'à la limite de la putréfaction'.²⁰² While not suggesting that death is a tool of empowerment, it perhaps represents for Zohr her only mode of disidentification within the dominant ideology. As Mona Eltahawy has asserted, women's bodies, 'so often reduced to proxy battlefields in men's conflicts, can instead be turned into our weapons of choice'.²⁰³ Indeed, to some extent, Zohr's mission is successful in that she will not be forced to leave the house for marriage. As the girls' aunt exclaims during her visit: 'Tu ne trouveras jamais de mari, Zohr! vieille fille! voilà ce que tu es, une vieille fille indécente! Comment peut-on se laisser dépérir ainsi?'²⁰⁴ Fikria describes her sister's reaction: 'Zohr ne dit rien, elle se contente de sourire puis ferme son poing gauche pour cacher un anneau invisible:

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 29

¹⁹⁹ Cherríe Moraga, 'Catching Fire: Preface to the Fourth Edition', in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), pp. xv-xxv.

²⁰⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *La voyeuse interdite*, p. 29.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 32.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 44.

²⁰³ Mona Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2015), p. 226.

²⁰⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *La voyeuse interdite*, p. 85.

son alliance avec la Mort.²⁰⁵ Zohr's physical decline could also be read, of course, as a symbolic death rather than a literal one. It is mirrored by Fikria's description of the gradual diminution of Algiers from an 'effigie de la planète entière, sacrée par les dieux et les déesses de l'Antiquité', to 'vieille fille, flétrie par les années, piétinée par les nouveaux hommes...un amas d'entrailles moisies qui s'entassent en montagnes de vie mortes et de souvenirs desséchés'.²⁰⁶ Fikria makes clear here the colonial traces which are still apparent in the geography of the world around her, and these traces are also evident in the girls' corporeal existence. Their bodies become sites of colonisation as they are controlled and policed by patriarchal society. Eventually, Fikria begins to mirror Zohr's behaviour: 'Manie de famille, je commence à dissimuler mes seins en me tenant légèrement courbée, les côtes rentrées et les bras en bouclier. Le corps est le pire des traîtres'.²⁰⁷ Later, she describes episodes of self-harm in which she pinches or cuts her skin. This destructive behaviour, she explains, is caused by her father: 'Complice secret de Satan il m'a donné goût à un plaisir sans bornes mais que je paye bien cher le lendemain! bleus, courbatures, écorchures...Activité délictueuse ou destruction de soi par soi'.²⁰⁸

The girls' youngest sister, Leyla, is even further dehumanised by her treatment at the hands of the girls' parents, as Fikria's introduction of her makes evident: 'Toujours à quatre pattes en train de fouiner dans les poubelles comme un petit animal à la recherche d'os et de restes de nourriture ...On la laissa se débattre avec la vie, seule...Interdiction formelle de la toucher'.²⁰⁹ There are clear echoes here once again of the female body as a Borderland, a space of both colonial

²⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 85-86.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 69-70.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 60-61.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 66.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 47-48.

occupation and simultaneously void of agency, of humanity, even. As Maria Lugones has asserted, 'the process of colonization invented the colonized and attempted a full reduction of them to less than human primitives, satanically possessed, infantile, aggressively sexual, and in need of transformation'.²¹⁰ This is true of Leyla to the extent that she seems almost not to exist for the other members of the family. Fikria goes on:

Elle n'a jamais parlé. Juste des grognements. Parfois elle lève les yeux vers nous, regard tendre lubrifié par une larme lourde de sens mais, ne trouvant personne pour le voir briller, il regagne le sol javellisé: son compagnon de toujours.'²¹¹

The implication here, of course, is that Leyla has never spoken because she has never been taught; we know that Fikria's father has imposed a silence on the house for the last two years, so Leyla has effectively spent her life in silence. There are clear echoes here of Spivak's subaltern 'brown woman' who has no space from which to speak and is therefore condemned to silence. We cannot call Leyla's silence a choice, since she has no alternative. If the subaltern does not (or cannot) speak, what does she do? As Loomba says, in a critique of Spivak, 'subaltern agency, either at the individual level or at the collective, cannot be idealised as pure opposition to the order it opposes; it works both within that order and displays its own contradictions.'²¹² So, too, do Fikria and her sisters. They do not want to live this way, but they have to; they despise their parents, yet they yearn for their love; they

²¹⁰ Maria Lugones, 'Toward a Decolonial Feminism', *Hypatia*, 25 (2010), 747.

²¹¹ Nina Bouraoui, *La voyeuse interdite*, p. 48.

²¹²Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), p. 232.

rebel in small but significant ways which, ultimately, are self-destructive. To return to the girls' names again, is it more probable that here is a case of night following day with an inevitability that speaks to the heavily entrenched rules which govern the lives of those in the Borderlands? Fikria finds herself somewhere between the two. She is a troublemaker, to borrow Audre Lorde's use of the word.²¹³

If Fikria's Facultad is displayed through a border thinking existence, the narrators of *Poing mort* and *Le Bal des murènes* demonstrate this process of disorientation and reorientation in a more physical way. Like Fikria's sisters, the mirror narrator in *Le Bal des murènes* suffers a corporeal dissonance as a result of parental neglect: 'C'est flagrant, elle ne m'aime pas', he states early in the text.²¹⁴ Yet the protagonist's mistreatment at the hands of his mother stems from her own inner turmoil caused by her own mother's death at the hands of her father. This is transmitted to the narrator and is corporeally realised through his illness. 'Je suis tombé malade avant de tomber sur le monde,' he explains, 'pourri dans ma poche d'origine, gâté à la racine.'²¹⁵ His illness, combined with the echoes of the past and the trauma of a family history rooted in violence, lead him to psychologically fuse his identity with a woman whose cries he hears from the basement. Like Fikria and her sisters, the narrator's body has been colonised by illness. However, he subverts the trope of colonised female body by having a female ancestor (whom we later learn to be his grandmother) take up space in his body:

Une intruse se nourrit de moi, je l'admets, je la reconnais, elle est dans mes secrets immergés, dans ma folie, à peine visible et très présente, elle est

²¹³ For more on this concept, see Chapter Four below.

²¹⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *La voyageuse interdite*, p. 17.

²¹⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Bal des murènes*, p. 25.

nichée dans mon sein d'homme. Je ne la nie pas, elle est l'un des éléments de mon identification, ma couleur, mon rayon vert. Je suis à deux voix. Elle me représente à moitié, elle est le départ et le sens de mon ambiguïté, elle vit tant que Moi et contre-Moi, nous luttons intra-muros.²¹⁶

As this identification with his grandmother overpowers the narrator, the reader witnesses his ultimate display of Facultad as he dresses in his mother's clothes and make-up and takes the final step in fusing his and his dead grandmother's identities. He describes 'les sœurs siamoises fondues, rassemblées en une seule entité, une clone illegal, contraire aux lois de l'éthique, masculin et féminine, une déviance, une saturation des sexes ajoutés, emmêlés, confondus, hybrides, interdits.'²¹⁷ He then approaches his grandfather, the former soldier who is responsible for the imprisonment, torture, rape, and murder of those held captive in the basement during the war, including the narrator's grandmother. He goes on: 'Je me montre, je suis là, je piétine, je m'avance, je cours au massacre, j'ouvre mes bras, mes jambes, me présente, la présente, l'identifie, le me désarme, m'appauvris, laisse la place, je la donne, je danse.'²¹⁸ Through his queer performance, he presents both a refusal of the structures of colonial and patriarchal power and a memorialisation of the murdered grandmother he has never met. Here, the narrator perfectly encapsulates Muñoz's assertion that: 'disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.'²¹⁹ By taking the subaltern position of his murdered grandmother,

²¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 61-2.

²¹⁷ Ibid., p. 117.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications* (Minneapolis [u.a.]: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 31.

the narrator reveals a familial and cultural story which others had tried to keep buried. The grandfather's response is telling: '«Tu lui ressembles, tu lui ressembles, tu es elle, tu es elle».'²²⁰ He does not merely resemble the grandmother, but has symbolically become her, thereby uncovering the hidden truths of colonial male violence, and the inescapability of the damage wrought by such violence.

'We lose something in this mode of initiation,' Anzaldúa remarks in her discussion of *la Facultad*, 'something is taken from us: our innocence, our unknowing ways, our safe and easy ignorance.'²²¹ Through his growing awareness and ability to see 'through the cracks', the narrator, like Fikria before him, has lost his innocence but has opened up the possibility of changing the narrative. He states:

Ma peur est une douleur. Elle sonne la fin de l'innocence, l'âge roi de l'enfant épargné, je suis dans la préoccupation et non spectateur de celle-ci, je l'ai en moi, je lui donne âme, je porte une zone noire, une vérité vêtue, ma mémoire est le tombeau d'un tombeau.²²²

The reference to a tomb here recalls the Borderland space at the bottom of the garden, the final destination for the prisoners of war like his grandmother, but also reaches back to the earlier narrator of *Poing mort*, for whom the Borderland space of the cemetery has become home. As discussed earlier, death, both literal and figurative, haunts all of these narratives. Fittingly, the character of death is portrayed in *Poing mort* as female, nicknamed 'la femme en habit d'os' by the narrator. The narrator describes how she 'tenait sérieusement ses comptes dans une agenda noir

²²⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Bal des murènes*, pp. 118-119.

²²¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, p. 61.

²²² Nina Bouraoui, *Le Bal des murènes*, p. 60.

à feuillets mobiles’, holding the ultimate power over the living.²²³ The narrator describes her first encounter with la femme as one of seduction: ‘Séduite par cet air de flûte indienne qu’elle jouait avant de frapper, j’aimais sa manigance, sa frivolité, cette façon d’arriver chez les gens, peu soucieuse des règles de courtoisie.’²²⁴ With her refusal to obey the rules and niceties of the world of the living, might we read la femme en habit d’os and death more broadly in the novels as a demonstration of la Facultad, and a denunciation of patriarchal systems of oppression? ‘Je glissais ma tête sous ses deux jambes de bois,’ the narrator explains, and, ‘à force d’habitude, je savais où la trouver.’²²⁵

Conclusion

In the introduction to this thesis, we asked whether Nina Bouraoui’s writing may be read as a mode of ‘doing the work’ of decolonial feminism. This chapter’s reading of three of Bouraoui’s earliest novels has situated the author within what this thesis calls a genealogy of decolonial feminist thought. The narrators of these texts are all Borderland-dwellers who develop what Anzaldúa calls la Facultad, enabling them to see through the cracks and expose the machinations of structures of power, both past and present, and in particular, colonial and nationalist lines of constraint. This exposition is not easy to achieve and is in fact the source of considerable pain to each of the narrators, requiring them to withstand illness, injury, isolation, and perhaps even death in search of a better way to exist. We may note the parallels with colonial survival here.

²²³ Nina Bouraoui, *Poing mort*, p. 19.

²²⁴ Ibid. p. 20.

²²⁵ Ibid.

That the texts offer no easy answers to questions of overcoming colonial and patriarchal power structures is testament to the insidiousness of those structures. The texts demonstrate the stranglehold of the past, particularly the transmitted violence of previous generations which continues to be felt in the present. This is especially true for those who have suffered as a result of colonial oppression. As we shall see, this is a recurring theme in Bouraoui's oeuvre and in decolonial feminist fiction more broadly.

By reading these early Bouraoui texts with and through one another, we see a far more nuanced conceptualisation of patriarchal and colonial power structures than has sometimes been suggested by a reading of the texts, especially *La voyageuse interdite*, in isolation. Furthermore, bringing the texts into conversation with queer and decolonial feminisms has allowed us to show how these apparently culturally specific texts may have wider resonance and should perhaps have a place in a genealogy of anti-violent, anti-patriarchal decolonial literature.

Chapter Two – Mixed *Métissage*: Mestiza Memoirs

The fiction of our lives – how we conceive our histories by heart – can sometimes provide a truth far greater than any telling of a tale frozen to the facts.

- Cherríe L. Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*²²⁶

It had not occurred to me that bringing one's past, one's memories together in a complete narrative would allow one to view them from a different perspective, not as singular isolated events but as part of a continuum.

- bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*²²⁷

Quand je regarde les choses je sais qu'il y a plusieurs façons de les regarder. Quand j'entends les mots je sais qu'il y a plusieurs façons de les entendre. C'est nous qui donnons du sens à ce qui nous entoure.

- Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage*²²⁸

Remaining in the intersticios of the Borderlands, this chapter will explore several Bouraoui novels which are widely considered to represent a more autobiographical turn in the writer's body of work: *Le Jour du séisme*, published in 1999, *Garçon manqué*, published in 2000 and *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, published in 2018. The analysis will also discuss elements of other novels, notably *Sauvage* (2011) and *Satisfaction* (2022), which draw recursively upon the other texts analysed here. As elsewhere in the thesis, the current discussion will demonstrate how the reading of each text both builds upon and reframes readings of the others. The chapter will examine how Bouraoui interrogates notions of identity both within

²²⁶ Cherríe L. Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 4.

²²⁷ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), p. 158.

²²⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage* (Paris: Stock, 2011). Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage*, (Paris: Stock, 2011).

and across the texts, focusing in particular on the imbrication of nationhood and gender as sites of ambiguity and alienation. As with the previous chapter, however, the analysis will also ask whether the Outsider Within status generated by such existential uncertainty may open up a new space for different ways of thinking and experiencing identity and the self. In particular, I will ask whether Bouraoui's writerly engagement with her own lived experience in the Borderlands of national and gender identity responds to Audre Lorde's assertion that poetry is not a luxury but 'a vital necessity of our existence...Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.'²²⁹ Lorde's celebration of poetry as a 'revelatory distillation of experience' speaks to the work that Bouraoui is doing across the texts analysed in this chapter.²³⁰ Poetry emerges, Lorde states, from a 'deep place' within each of us. In this deep place lies 'an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling' from which the poetic drive emerges to 'lay... the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.'²³¹ As Bouraoui shifts from the more fictional works of her early career to focus on her own lived experience, she engages intensely with these fears and constructs a poetic palimpsest through which to explore her own identity/ies. As she states in an interview in 2019: 'En chacun de nous veille une part sauvage...il faut inventer une nouvelle poésie, non pour apaiser mais pour accepter cette violence.'²³² This 'nouvelle poésie', I will argue, is formed across individual texts which, when read together, create a powerful poetry of self-exploration and self-creation.

²²⁹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 26.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 27.

²³² Nina Bouraoui, 'Je suis la faussaire de mon passé', in *Revue des deux Mondes* (Paris: 2019).

Relatedly, I will consider how to position these Bouraoui texts in the wider context of queer decolonial feminism. Are they *Bildungsromane*, autofictions, autobiographies, or something else entirely? How does each text contribute to our understanding of identity within Bouraoui's œuvre, but also in the broader field of queer feminist/queer of colour writing? The three quotations at the beginning of this chapter hint at the possibilities which may be presented to the writer who interrogates her lived experience at multiple sites, bridging memory, imagination, mythography and mirroring. Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde provide the theoretical framework for my analysis of Bouraoui's writing the self in this chapter. Lorde's notion of biomythography and Anzaldúa's concept of autohistoria-teoría are critical to my understanding of Bouraoui's interrogation of identity and self-formation in these works. Lorde coined the term biomythography to describe her 1982 memoir, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. The fusing of biography and mythography into one term allows for a written exploration of both the 'facts' of biography but also the mythological truths which exist in her heart and mind, and in her own wider social context; both elements make up her story and both are equally valid.²³³ 'Layers of meanings, layers of histories, layers of readings and re-readings through webs of power-charged codes mark biomythography,' asserts Katie King.²³⁴ The texts examined in this chapter engage in this process of reading and re-reading, resulting in a palimpsest in which Bouraoui both writes and repeatedly rewrites her own narrative. It is this palimpsestic writing which forms what I call in this chapter Bouraouian biomythography. The layers and webs which mark biomythography are also apparent in Anzaldúa's autohistoria-teoría, a term she created to describe

²³³ Note the similarity between Lorde's practice and the quotation from Moraga in the epigraph to this chapter.

²³⁴ Katie King, 'Audre Lorde's Laquered Layerings: The Lesbian Bar as a Site of Literary Production', *Cultural Studies*, 2 (1988), 336.

women of colour interventions into, and queering of, 'traditional' western autobiographical writing. According to the glossary of the Gloria Anzaldúa Reader, 'writers of autohistoria-teoría blend their cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling, myth and/or other forms of theorising.'²³⁵ My discussion of these concepts in relation to Bouraoui's writing will seek to address this study's key research questions, which ask whether an engagement with queer of colour and decolonial feminisms may allow for new ways of constructing subjecthood in Bouraoui's œuvre and, further, whether we may also read Bouraoui's own writing as an example of queer of colour, decolonial feminism. In particular, this chapter will explore the extent to which Bouraoui's 'critical reflection on the self' expose and contest the power structures of her wider social context.²³⁶ As Sara Ahmed attests, 'it may be through a discourse of the personal – on the becoming of the subject – that resistant and resisting political (dis)identifications may be rendered possible.'²³⁷

The texts discussed in this chapter begin to engage with Bouraoui's own becoming as a subject, with particular emphasis on her childhood and adolescence, a significant part of which engages with her reckoning with her own ambiguous status as a mixed-race child of French and Algerian heritage. In *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, Bouraoui describes her father's concern over how his daughters will be seen in Algeria 'en tant que filles et métisses,' highlighting two of the intersecting identity categories with which Bouraoui struggles across these texts.²³⁸ The 'mixed-ness' of her French and Algerian identities is a source of much anguish in the young Nina's life, not least because both 'sides' of her family tree are

²³⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 319.

²³⁶ Sara Ahmed, "'It's a Sun-Tan, Isn't It?'" Autobiography as an Identificatory Practice', in *Black British Feminism*, ed. by Heidi Safia Mirza (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 153-67 (p. 154).

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 174.

historically so violently opposed. We have already seen the impact of French colonial violence and Algerian nationalist violence in the brutality of Bouraoui's early fictional texts. Now we will begin to see how this is reflected in the more personal narratives of Bouraoui's own early life.

Métissage or, Weaving a Mestiza Consciousness

The title of this chapter brings together two terms which are seemingly synonymous in their relative linguistic contexts yet have potentially different connotations in disparate social and cultural settings. Françoise Lionnet has highlighted that there is no direct English equivalent for the French nouns *métis(se)* or *métissage*.²³⁹ When translations of the terms are attempted, she asserts, the most common interpretations are “half-breed” or “mixed blood”. As Lionnet makes clear, “these expressions always carry a negative connotation, precisely because they imply biological abnormality and reduce human reproduction to the level of animal breeding.”²⁴⁰ We may add to this the racist overtones implied in such associations. This is especially true, I would argue, in the colonial context in which one side believes itself to be inherently superior to the other. This is something we see reflected throughout Bouraoui's œuvre in the attitude of Nina's maternal grandparents.²⁴¹ Her maternal grandmother's response to Bouraoui's mother marrying an Algerian man is: ‘Pourquoi ne pas avoir épousé un garçon de chez nous?’²⁴² Bouraoui's parents' relationship is anathema to this white French couple

²³⁹ Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁴¹ As we shall later see, their views on gender and sexuality are also problematic.

²⁴² Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 86.

who perceive Algeria as some savage land. Nina and her sister also fail to reflect back the image her maternal grandparents expect to see:

Elle l'écoutait, employait pour désigner le territoire d'où il venait les mots <<village>>, <<contrée>>, <<gens>>.

Le métissage ça n'existait pas, pas chez elle²⁴³

Nina's grandmother's refusal to 'believe in' *métissage* echoes the historical French anomaly regarding the term. As Emmanuelle Saada explains, the word *métis* was used to designate mixed race people across the French empire, with the single exception of Algeria. This in turn speaks to the fact that Algeria was regarded by the French state as an extra *département*.²⁴⁴ The comment by Nina's grandmother emphasises the ensuing bind: If children like Nina cannot identify as *métis*, not only because the concept is not permissible²⁴⁵, but because the word itself is not employed in the context of Algeria, and if the very idea of an Algerian marrying into the family is also abhorrent, where does that leave Nina's generation, the 'pieds noirs de la seconde génération', as Bouraoui describes them?²⁴⁶ Is there, in other words, a non-negative way to construe and perhaps even embrace these terms and, further, to construct a space of belonging within the Borderland of mixed-ness? This is perhaps further complicated by the idea of race blindness which imbues French Universalism, and which has for some time been seen rather as problematically blind to racism rather than to race.²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 207.

²⁴⁴ Emmanuelle Saada, *Les enfants de la colonie. les métis de l'Empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007).

²⁴⁵ See Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1993).

²⁴⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*. p.122.

²⁴⁷ Cf. Danièle Lochak, 'Racismes, antiracismes : reconstruire l'universalisme', *Pouvoirs*, 181 (2022).

A search for *mestizo/a* and *mestizaje* in a translation engine offers the words 'mongrel,' 'half-breed' and 'half-caste' for the former and 'mixing', 'miscegenation' and 'crossbreeding' (and other similar expressions) for the latter.²⁴⁸ And yet, as discussed elsewhere in this thesis, these Spanish words have been widely embraced. Indeed, as Bettina Ng'weno and Lok Siu (glossing Elizabeth Copper) highlight, '*Mestizaje* emerged as a concept at the end of the 19th century and was institutionalized through the middle of the 20th century as a counter-argument to US and European ideologies of racial hierarchy and notions of degeneracy through racial mixing.'²⁴⁹ However, the authors also point out that many adherents to the concept of *mestizaje* in the Mexican context they discuss read *mestizo/a* identity as *only* the mixture of White European and Indigenous Mexican. Those with other mixed-ness (they cite Black African, Chinese and Japanese-Mexican in their example) remain effectively Outsiders Within. As Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodríguez acknowledges, 'mestizaje is steeped in a history of hate and trauma' due to its association with colourism and the 'maintenance of anti-Indigeneity and anti-Blackness'.²⁵⁰

The promotion of a 'proximity to whiteness' which is encouraged by the narrow reading of *mestizaje* described by Mojica Rodríguez, in many ways mirrors the negative connotations of *métissage* in the Francophone context. The Chicana feminist turn, however, offers a more inclusive reading of *mestizaje*. Gloria Anzaldúa's reclaiming of the term *mestiza*, and in particular her theory of *mestiza*

²⁴⁸ [https://www.linguee.com/english-spanish/search?source=auto&query=mestizo](https://www.linguee.com/english-spanish/search?source=auto&query=mestizo;);
<https://www.linguee.com/english-spanish/search?source=auto&query=mestizaje>

²⁴⁹ Bettina Ng'weno and Lok Siu, 'Comparative Raciality - Erasure and Hypervisibility of Asian and Afro Mexicans', in *Global Raciality: Empire, Postcoloniality, Decoloniality*, ed. by Sunaira Maira and Howard Winnat Paola Bacchetta (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 62-81 (p. 67).

²⁵⁰ Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodríguez, *For Brown Girls with Sharp Edges and Tender Hearts* (New York: Seal Press, 2021), p. 37.

consciousness, provide her and her fellow Chicana feminists with a non-normative yet inclusive mode of both identifying and theorising. Indeed, for Anzaldúa, her *mestizaje* is fundamental to her own feminist project:

I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture – *una cultura mestiza* – with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.²⁵¹

It may be argued, then, that *mestizo/a* and *mestizaje* have been reclaimed in a way that *métis(se)* and *métissage* have not, or certainly not yet as fully. Work has been done, however, to highlight the oppositional possibilities inherent in the French terms. As Caroline Beschea-Fache asserts, '[b]ecause it precisely lies within the margins of otherness, situated in the third space between the homogenous and the heterogeneous, between assimilation and diversity, *métissage* intrinsically opposes the normative tendency to fix identities.'²⁵² Lionnet similarly notes the 'fertile ground' of an engagement with *métissage* for 'our heterogeneous and heteronomous identities as postcolonial subjects.'²⁵³ My aim in this chapter is to demonstrate how Bouraoui makes use of this fertile ground in the texts under discussion. In particular, the concept of *tissage* in the word *métissage* lends itself well to my reading of the

²⁵¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. 25. anniversary, 4. edn (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), p. 44.

²⁵² Caroline Beschea-Fache, 'The *Métis* Body: Double Mirror', in *Francophone Women: Between Visibility and Invisibility*, ed. by Cybelle H. McFadden and Sandrine F. Teixidor (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 99-121 (p. 101).

²⁵³ Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 8.

texts, and speaks to the rhizomatic becoming that I argue is central to Bouraoui's textual construction of self and, consequently, to a Bouraouian theory of queer feminist decolonialism.²⁵⁴ In keeping with this notion of weaving, my analysis will attempt to braid together the terms *mestiza* and *métissage* as a way of (re)claiming the latter by embracing a politicised reading of the former, as espoused by Anzaldúa.

Reflecting on the impossibility of *métissage* in a nationalist context, Benedict Anderson highlights the parallels between fixed notions of nationhood and gender identity, asserting that, 'everyone can, should, will "have" a nationality, as he or she "has" a gender.'²⁵⁵ One of the aims of this thesis, and of queer decolonial feminism more broadly, is to examine the structures which demand such processes of identification, and to seek viable alternatives to any notion of compulsory 'belonging'. As Sara Ahmed argues:

we can no longer assume that the subject simply 'has' an identity, in the form of a properly demarcated place of belonging. Rather, what is required is an analysis of the processes and structures of identification – both psychic and social – whereby identities *come to be seen as* such places of belonging. By shifting the analysis in this way, both race and gender can be theorized not as fixed and stable 'essences' but as construction-in-process where meanings are negotiated and re-negotiated in the form of antagonistic relations of power.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ I adapt my reading of the rhizome from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

²⁵⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 1991), p. 3.

²⁵⁶ Sara Ahmed, "It's a Sun-Tan, Isn't It?' Autobiography as an Identificatory Practice', in *Black British Feminism*, ed. by Heidi Safia Mirza (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 153-67 (157).

Nina Bouraoui's œuvre, and particularly her autobiographical writing, is built around such a notion of 'construction-in-process', both in terms of *what* she writes, but also in the methods she uses to do so. In the works under discussion throughout this chapter, Bouraoui weaves her narrative across and between existing genres, sometimes within the same text. This bending and blending of established generic forms allows Bouraoui to view and present her own biography from multiple, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives, queering notions of gender, nationhood, sexuality, and any idea of monolithic 'selfhood'. Before examining *what* she is constructing in these early self-reflexive texts, let us first consider *how* Bouraoui shifts between genres in order to negotiate her own lived experience.

Bouraoui's fifth novel, *Le Jour du séisme*, published in 1999, is often seen as a turning point in her oeuvre, apparently marking a shift between fiction and autobiography. As Katherine Harrington has highlighted:

A stylistic break from Bouraoui's earlier novels is apparent from the first line of the narrative of *Le Jour du séisme*: 'Ma terre tremble le 10 octobre 1980'. With its opening first-person possessive adjective 'ma' and the exact date of an actual historical event, the author is immediately alerting the reader to the real-life autobiographical references in this text.²⁵⁷

The eponymous earthquake drives the narrative, causing a literal and metaphorical *herida abierta* to open up for the unnamed protagonist: 'La terre s'en va. Je suis seule. Je reste sur des ruines. Je perds mes définitions, des lignes tracées. Je perds

²⁵⁷ Katharine N. Harrington, *Writing the Nomadic Experience in Contemporary Francophone Literature* (Lanham, MD [u.a.]: Lexington Books, 2013), p. 89.

ma biographie.²⁵⁸ As we shall see, *le séisme* represents wounding and loss on multiple levels: Nina/Bouraoui's enforced departure from Algeria (we learn in *Mes mauvaises pensées* that she arrived in Paris on 5th October 1981, so must have left Algeria that month);²⁵⁹ the colonial history of the country; the violence of the 90s; the fracture of the protagonist's national and gender identity.

Appearing the year after *Le Jour du séisme*, Bouraoui's sixth novel, *Garçon manqué* also depicts a world of uncertainty and alienation, featuring a narrator who is very much in the Borderlands, caught between *los intersticios* of gender identity, nationhood and sexuality. The narrator is variously named Ahmed (p.15); Brio (a nickname given by her father, p.24); Nina (p.36); and Yasmina (p.60). This polyonymy is a feature of several of Bouraoui's texts and, as we shall see, is a key facet of what I am calling her mestiza consciousness. This is the first of Bouraoui's novels to adopt her own name (at least in parts of the text) for the protagonist, and for Helen Vassallo, is the first volume of her life narrative.²⁶⁰ Although we are not given a date for the events of *Garçon manqué*, there are a sufficient number of parallels with the earlier novel to suggest that they depict a similar time in Nina/Bouraoui's life:²⁶¹ Amine, the narrator's friend, features in both texts (he is only mentioned once in *Le Jour du séisme*, but is a key character in the later novel); the earthquake which drives the narrative in the earlier novel is mentioned about halfway through *Garçon manqué*:²⁶² many of the geographical locations are the same. If *Le*

²⁵⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Jour du séisme*, p. 15.

²⁵⁹ Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*.

²⁶⁰ Helen Vassallo, *The Body Besieged: The Embodiment of Historical Memory in Nina Bouraoui and Leïla Sebbar* (Plymouth: Lexington, 2012).

²⁶¹ The hyphen here is used to show the overlap between Nina (the narrator) and Bouraoui (the writer) in these texts.

²⁶² 'Le 10 octobre 1980, la terre tremble en Algérie. À El Asnam, on dit que la terre béante s'est refermé sur les corps. Qu'elle les a mangés vivants.' Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, p. 83.

Jour du séisme is an autofictional roman à clef, we may perhaps position *Garçon manqué* as more 'straightforwardly' autobiographical.

Sauvage, published in 2011, is in many ways a *métissage* of the two earlier texts. The narrator, Alya, recounts the disappearance of her friend, Sami, in a narrative which is set in the same time period and geographical location as both *Le Jour du séisme* and the majority of *Garçon manqué*. At the beginning of the narrative, she states: 'Je m'appelle Alya. Je vis à Alger, dans un ensemble d'immeubles construit sur une colline. Ici on a peur de l'année qui vient, l'année 1980.'²⁶³ Alya is fourteen years old. The unnamed narrator of *Le Jour du séisme* is thirteen. The historical setting and the ages of the protagonists are critical here because Bouraoui was herself fourteen when the family left Algeria for good in 1981. This key biographical information perhaps invites new ways of reading and interpreting all of these novels and speaks to my positioning of them as the foundational texts of Bouraouian biomythography.

In terms of genre, *Sauvage* arguably fluctuates between autofictional roman à clef and Bildungsroman. Alya's development over the course of the text, from the security of childhood and innocence to the realisation that the world is not always as it seems, a process set in motion by the disappearance of her best friend, Sami, is suggestive of the generic conventions of Bildungsromane. The safety and mundanity of life before this catastrophic turn of events is shown in the opening lines of the text:

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 pylons électriques. C'est toujours la même lumière sur la forêt de

²⁶³ Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage*, p. 9.

Bainem, qui semble prendre feu parce que le soleil se couche et je me demande où il tombe.²⁶⁴

There is a sense of security in this 'même lumière', a permanent and reliable force, echoed also in her friendship with Sami. This is contrasted at the end of the text as Alya comes to terms with the events which have changed her view of the world:

*Ce n'est plus 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 pylons électriques. Et ce n'est plus la même lumière sur la forêt de Bainem qui semble prendre feu parce que le soleil y tombe... Ce n'est plus pareil parce que j'ai changé.*²⁶⁵

Sami's invisibility haunts the novel, as their seemingly idyllic friendship unravels in the months leading up to his disappearance. Alya's journey from innocence to experience, driven by her coming to question what it is to be human and to attempt to live with others, lends itself to Sarah Graham's description of the 'classic Bildungsroman', which 'concentrates on a protagonist striving to reconcile individual aspirations with the demands of social conformity.'²⁶⁶ Crucially, Graham continues, the narrative of the Bildungsroman 'offers privileged access to the psychological development of a central character whose sense of self is in flux.'²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 202 (original italics).

²⁶⁶ Sarah Graham, 'A History of the Bildungsroman' (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), (p. 1).

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

While there is a clear argument for a positioning of the novel as a Bildungsroman, there are also multiple points where Alya's narrative intersects with those of the characters in the other texts under discussion in this chapter, and therefore, with Bouraoui's own story. She lives in an apartment in a group of buildings she refers to as 'la Résidence,' a name and description which matches that used in multiple other texts including *L'âge blessé*, *Garçon manqué*, *Le Jour du séisme* and *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*; the character of Ourdhia appears in the text, a recurrent presence across the œuvre and who, we learn in *Tous les hommes*, really did work for the Bouraoui family; her uncle went missing while fighting for the maquis in the Algerian War, as did Bouraoui's own; many of the events she describes which involve Sami (including an incident where Alya nearly drowns, and a fight between Sami and his friend which involves his head being cut open) are repeated elsewhere in the œuvre, usually with different character names; at least twenty locations in Algeria are used throughout the text, most of which are also seen in several other works, notably *Le Jour du séisme*.

Although covering a much broader time period than the other novels analysed in this chapter, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* (2018) incorporates reimaginings of events, and revisits characters and places from the other texts. Similarly, *Satisfaction*, published in 2021, presents a fictionalised retelling of many of the same events, with the young Nina now re-imagined as Bruce, a non-binary character. Where relevant, therefore, I will include elements of these later texts which I feel add weight to the discussions throughout the chapter. Bouraoui herself has written about the connectedness of her individual works. She states, '[m]es romans sont des jeux de Lego. Chacun s'emboîte dans l'autre.'²⁶⁸ It is this

²⁶⁸ Nina Bouraoui, 'Je suis la faussaire de mon passé', in *Revue des deux Mondes* (Paris: 2019).

emboîtement which this chapter seeks to unpack in order to present a decolonial feminist reading of the resulting *tissage*, or tapestry, which forms what I am calling Bouraoui's biomythography. The next two sections will consider how Bouraoui confronts the problematics of belonging and identity at two interconnected sites: transmitted notions of nationhood (particularly the impossibility of a unified French-Algerian identity) and the imbrication of race and gender as a Borderland space.

'Ici je suis une étrangère':²⁶⁹ Postcolonial (Be)longing and (alie)Nation

Bouraoui's impulse to tell her own story stems initially from the questioning of external forces. She explains, 'j'écris pour dire mon identité, pour répondre à un policier m'interrogeant sur ma nationalité, mes racines, ma nature.'²⁷⁰ That she uses the term 'interrogation' here, and that a police officer is the one doing the interrogating is important, emphasising the power imbalance between those who are forced to identify and those who demand such identification. Much of this is tied up with historical narratives of racialised identity and colonial power structures. Echoing Anzaldúa's depiction of *herida abierta* and the power of the past, Esposito notes that in *Garçon manqué*, 'Nina's sense of national belonging is described as a wound that is both open in the present and connected to the past.'²⁷¹ Of particular importance in these texts is the power of transmitted memories of the war and colonial pain. In *Sauvage*, for example, Alya explains: 'Mon père dit qu'il ne faut jamais oublier. Que la guerre n'est pas si loin. Qu'il restera toujours une part de cette souffrance dans chacun des êtres et même à l'intérieur de moi.'²⁷² Even though she did not live

²⁶⁹ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, p. 29.

²⁷⁰ Nina Bouraoui, 'Je suis la faussaire de mon passé', in *Revue des deux Mondes* (Paris: 2019).

²⁷¹ Claudia Esposito, *The Narrative Mediterranean: Beyond France and the Maghreb* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), p. 76.

²⁷² Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage*, p. 91.

through it, the agony of the war is transferred to and lives on in Alya and her generation because 'il y a une lignée de la douleur. Que tout se transmet comme un cadeau ou plutôt un mauvais cadeau mais que l'on est obligé d'accepter, par respect.'²⁷³ As Chapter One of this thesis highlighted, many of Bouraoui's early novels are haunted by the spectre of this transmitted memory. As her œuvre shifts to a more autobiographical lens, we begin to see how this affects her personally, and how this is complicated by the fact that she is both Algerian and French but also that, beyond that, the very idea of knowing one's origins and finding a sense of place is far more complex than one may be led to believe. As she explains in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*: 'Selon ma mère, on ne peut affirmer d'où l'on vient sans se tromper, l'origine est semblable à un chemin tortueux...même un arbre généalogique ne peut restituer la vérité car le propre de la famille est de garder les secrets.'²⁷⁴

Given this context of transmitted pain and underlying secrecy, it is perhaps fitting that Bouraoui's textual reckoning with her own sense of national identity begins with a seismic event. 'On assassine mon enfance,' she states in the aftermath of the earthquake which drives the narrative in *Le Jour du séisme*. 'Je perds l'origine. La terre disparaît avec mes secrets. J'entre en mouvements étrangers. Je commence la vie. Je perds ma place, essentielle.'²⁷⁵ As Laura Loth has demonstrated, as well as conveying the personal trauma experienced by the narrator in the aftermath of the quake, *Le Jour du séisme* also reflects 'the complexities of the postcolonial condition and centuries of psychological and physical trauma.'²⁷⁶ It is worth noting that it was

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 190.

²⁷⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Jour du séisme*, p. 22.

²⁷⁶ Laura Loth, 'Traumatic Landscapes: Earthquakes and Identity in Franco-Algerian Fiction by Maïssa Bey and Nina Bouraoui', *Research in African Literatures*, 47 (2016), 21-38 (p.22).

in 1999 that the French government officially declared that what had previously been referred to as the 'événements' of 1954-1962, had in fact been a war. It is perhaps not mere chance that this coincides with Bouraoui's decision to begin to write overtly about her own Algerian experience.²⁷⁷ Rosie MacLachlan has argued that the earthquake is symbolic of destruction of colonial past, but also a 'fragmentary force, separating the writer from the nostalgic land of her earliest memories.'²⁷⁸ Indeed, the earthquake is both real and symbolic, representing an enforced reimagining of what once appeared to be stable, but also providing an opportunity for what bell hooks calls breaking the hold of the past. hooks explains:

To me, telling the story of my growing up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self I was without really having to die. I wanted to kill that self in writing. Once that self was gone – out of my life forever – I could more easily become the me of me... I wanted not to forget the past but to break its hold. This death in writing was to be liberatory.²⁷⁹

As hooks attests, decolonial feminism does not seek to forget the past, but to break its hold in order to move towards a more inclusive future grounded in an understanding of the power structures at play in the past, but which also continue to penalise and persecute the global majority (women of colour particularly) in the present. While this process can be liberatory, as hooks asserts, a literal and

²⁷⁷ The term 'événement' is used throughout Bouraoui's œuvre to allude to an attempted abduction during her childhood. It is hard not to see parallels between the violation of Algeria and the physical violence of Bouraoui's own experience.

²⁷⁸ Rosie MacLachlan, *Nina Bouraoui, Autofiction and the Search for Selfhood* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), p. 84.

²⁷⁹ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), p. 155.

symbolic break with the past is not without pain for the narrator of *Le Jour du séisme*. 'J'attends la fin de ce monde,' she states. 'Je suis l'enfant du séisme algérien. Je dévie de ma route. Je change, à jamais. Le séisme prend mon bonheur.'²⁸⁰ We know that the Bouraoui family left Algeria for good shortly after the earthquake, owing to Nina's mother's deteriorating health, and that Bouraoui herself has never been back. There is no doubt that this surprise exit caused both physical and psychological pain for the youngest member of the family: 'Quitter Alger est une séparation de soi,' she states.²⁸¹ The very matter of the world she has always known is unalterably changed by the seismic destruction around her. In order to better understand how the young narrator comes to find herself in this predicament, let us look further back in her life story, to 1962, and the first encounter between the writer's parents, Maryvonne and Rachid.

Bouraoui's parents met as students at university in Rennes, Brittany. Her paternal grandmother seems taken with her mother at first, calling her beautiful, kissing her etc. Then, however, she instructs her not to 'porter de bikini à la plage quand elle s'y rendait avec les hommes, cela ne se fait pas en Algérie, il y a des règles à respecter, les rapports entre hommes et femmes s'organisent selon un ordre précis.'²⁸² Her father's female cousins, meanwhile, described by Bouraoui as 'ses prétendantes déçues' on learning of the marriage, 'auraient bien mangé ma mère avec du sel et du poivre, après l'avoir découpée au couteau.'²⁸³ Bouraoui is not afraid to call out violence against women as she sees it, no matter which side it comes from. Maryvonne may be a white French woman (she is somewhat ironically described by the grandmother as *la Suédoise*) but that does not justify the symbolic

²⁸⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Jour du séisme*, p. 73.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁸² Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 41.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

violence she endures. In fact, Bouraoui's extremely close relationship with her mother is perhaps one of the factors which further exacerbates her difficulties in developing an understanding of her own nationality. The person she loves most in the world, and seeks to protect at all costs, is also a visual representation of *la puissance coloniale* for those around her in Algeria.

The French side of the family, meanwhile, react in a completely racist way to Maryvonne and Rachid's relationship (as do her fellow students who nickname Maryvonne Khadija la Mouquère), highlighting not only the deeply ingrained racialised structures of the French culture, but also the very specific issues around French-Algerian relations. 'Quand elle a annoncé son histoire à ses parents, elle est devenue l'intruse sommée de quitter la maison familiale du Jardin du Thabor... Quand elle est partie avec ses valises, son père sur le perron: «Tu fais tout ça contre moi.»'²⁸⁴ Maryvonne's father's words here demonstrate not only a level of toxic masculinity in which everything must necessarily revolve around him, but also an inherently racist colonial mindset. Why does he take his daughter's relationship so personally? He speaks these words, of course, as the Algerian War is reaching its bloody end. Might we then read bitterness and fear in his response, as he symbolically loses what is 'his' to the 'enemy'? His reaction speaks to that fear of the brown man that so many scholars of colour discuss, and which is so deeply ingrained in predominantly white colonial settings, particularly in the context of colonised states achieving independence. Indeed, when Maryvonne and Rachid first meet, her father has him investigated by the police (note the parallels with Bouraoui's own depiction of police interrogation) as he suspects him of being 'un militant politique' intent on indoctrinating his daughter. Despite drawing a blank, he

²⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 44.

visits the dean of the university, asking him to ‘renvoyer le jeune homme vers son pays d’origine.’²⁸⁵ This kind of rhetoric around ‘sending them back’ is so common, stemming from the racist notion that people from ‘over there’ are less than ‘us’, less than human. The idea that they may come here and mix with ‘our daughters’ is anathema. Maryvonne’s mother reflects this, demonstrating her own racism when Rachid comes to ask for her daughter’s hand in marriage: ‘il devait cacher quelque chose comme tous les gens de *son peuple* dont elle craignait les réactions... Elle l’écoutait, employait pour désigner le territoire d’où il venait les mots «village», «contrée»«gens»’.²⁸⁶ There are intersecting points of racism in this reaction: the POC as criminal/dangerous; people of colour as one homogenous group (*son peuple*); the use of diminutives and differentials to describe living conditions ‘over there’. It is shocking to read the responses of Bouraoui’s grandparents, yet we know that these reactions would be far from unusual.

Her maternal grandparents’ attitude towards Nina and her sister was scarcely better. She describes her grandmother saying to her during the school holidays: ‘«Je vois bien que tu ne viens pas de chez nous, tu marches tout le temps pieds nus, sauvageon.»’²⁸⁷ As she did in her discussion of Rachid, Bouraoui’s grandmother demonstrates a white supremacist attitude here, emphasising the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and the inherent superiority of the former. Elsewhere in the text, the grandmother, a dentist, examines the children’s teeth and says how poorly they are treated ‘over there’. Bouraoui explains, ‘Par là-bas, il faut entendre: la contrée lointaine et sauvage, les arrières, notre pays qui n’est pas à la hauteur du leur, les

²⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 64.

²⁸⁶ Ibid. pp. 206-7.

²⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 121.

étrangers que nous demeurons.’²⁸⁸ Here the French conveys a double meaning which the English does not. They are strangers *and* foreigners, to their own family!

As she explains later in the text, Nina’s generation was considered to be the new pieds-noirs. ‘Des années après, les enfants de mariages mixtes, comme moi, se font appeler les pieds noirs de la seconde génération – l’histoire recommence.’²⁸⁹ This notion of history repeating is echoed throughout Bouraoui’s œuvre. One of the key tenets of a decolonial politics is to learn from the past so that we are not destined to repeat it. Perhaps Bouraoui’s repeated retellings is one way for her to ensure that she does not allow this to happen. This is further evidenced in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* by the use of chapter headings. The chapters which reflect on her own past experiences are entitled *se souvenir*. Those set further back in time and which focus on her parents and grandparents’ past are called *savoir*. The use of *savoir* as a title perhaps demonstrates her coming to know and understand the situation she is in through an exploration of the racism and violence endured by her parents, often at the hands of their own families.

Maryvonne’s parents’ racism was one of the reasons that the couple decided to make a permanent move to Algeria with their two young daughters, in 1967. As such, Bouraoui’s early years were spent, like the protagonists of all of these novels, in what the narrator of *Le Jour du séisme* calls ‘ma terre’. As noted above, the use of the possessive adjective here is significant. The phrase ‘ma terre’ is repeated no fewer than forty times across the short novel (99 pages). It is clear throughout all of these texts that the physical space of Algeria represents more for the narrators than a dwelling place. They are deeply connected to the land itself, on both a physical and

²⁸⁸ Ibid. p.77.

²⁸⁹ Ibid. p.122.

psychological level. As Alya states in *Sauvage*, 'je ne sais pas si l'on vient d'un pays, de ses habitants, mais je sais que l'on vient d'une terre, de ses sables, de son vent.'²⁹⁰ Leaving this land to which she is so firmly attached is a violent act for the narrator of *Le Jour du séisme*. As she explains later in the text:

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.²⁹¹

Repetition is a key feature of Bouraoui's œuvre, as evidenced in this passage with the multiple use of the verb *quitter* emphasising the finality of this leaving behind of both the physical space of Algeria, but also the narrator's childhood, even her very definition of self which she has learnt to construct through her connection to the land. Her leaving Algeria is literal, but it is also symbolic and appears to represent far more than a change of geographical state. Perhaps there is a growing sense that, as her desire to identify with Algeria grows, so too does her awareness that her *métisse* label means she does not fit the model of Algerian identity as defined by the post-independence nationalist movements.

We see the use of repetition again elsewhere in the text:

²⁹⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage*, p. 110.

²⁹¹ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Jour du séisme*, p.90.

Je deviens sans Alger.

Je deviens sans enfance.

Je deviens sans attaches, soumise au bruit et au souffle violent.

Je deviens une ombre sans lumière.²⁹²

The use of the verb *devenir* is another feature of Bouraoui's work, and, as we shall see in Chapter Three of this thesis, it is of particular importance in the 2018 novel, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*. In the above extract, she highlights her impotence in this notion of becoming based on external forces. And yet, in *Le Jour du séisme*, this very rupture of origins and attachments may counterintuitively be the thing that allows for a self-guided discovery of who she chooses to be. As she explains, the many personal losses caused by the quake leave behind a tabula rasa upon which to construct her adult self: 'Je perds Alger. Le séisme ouvre et referme la terre, sa victime. Il ravage. Il extermine. Je perds Biskra. Je perds Toghout. Je perds les lieux de ma mémoire. Ma vie, adulte, est à construire.'²⁹³ It is worth remarking upon the use of the first person in the above two extracts, in contrast to the third person in the previous extract. The definitive leaving behind brought upon by the verb 'quitter' appears to lead to a distancing from the self as well as the nation. It is to turn away from 'oneself', to leave behind 'one's' land and definitions. Yet when the verb 'devenir' is invoked, the subject seems to return more fully to herself so that it is 'I' rather than 'one' who becomes without attachments, without certain spaces of memory. It is a subtle shift, but the final line, 'ma vie, adulte, est à construire', perhaps hints at the constructive possibilities which may be discovered

²⁹² Ibid. p.74.

²⁹³ Ibid., p. 73.

when the narrator engages with her own sense of becoming rather than the more definitive notion of 'leaving' which engenders finite, closed off ideas of childhood becoming 'historical' and a sense of permanent regret.

How does this construction take place and what does she choose to include? Perhaps the mapping of Algerian geography helps with the preservation of a land to which she will never return. Indeed, the depiction of spaces in the Algeria-set texts is rich in detail, with place names particularly prominent, as Nina/Bouraoui re-inscribes herself onto the land from which she has been torn:

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.²⁹⁴

Where place names were largely absent in her earlier novels, Bouraoui now chooses to give them prominence, perhaps as a way to keep the memory of them alive, both for herself, but also in print. The path which the narrator weaves between the places which were so important to her as a child also serves as a way to fuse herself with the land from which she is literally and figuratively torn. As she later states:

Ma terre est atteinte, seule et close, unique et isolée, prise au jour du séisme, son temps fermé. Sa solitude forme ma solitude. Sa douleur aiguise ma

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 47.

douleur. Sa perte est mon manque. Elle est, en éclats. Je suis, en fragments.

Elle est, touchée. Je suis, traversée. Ma terre est mon corps.

Je deviens incomplète.²⁹⁵

The coupling of the narrator and the land in these descriptions is further strengthened by the apparent catachresis in the adjectives. Both she and the land are described as ‘in pieces’, fragmented, yet the use of ‘en éclats’ would arguably fit more readily with the person, while ‘en fragments’ would more usually be seen with the inanimate. Similarly, the land is ‘affected, afflicted, moved’, while the narrator is ‘crossed, cut across, passed through.’ This apparent mixing up of descriptors serves to highlight both the narrator’s affiliation with the land, but also emphasises that this can work both ways. The land has been attacked (by the earthquake but also, historically) by colonial forces and, more recently, by the Civil War of the 1980s and 90s), it suffers.

Significantly, in the later novel *Satisfaction*, the narrator describes the earth as ‘alive...unregimented, free. It will survive the violence we do to it.’²⁹⁶ This shift in understanding of the ‘afflicted land’ invites a range of questions: the land will survive, but will the people? Do we need to be able to ground ourselves in a particular piece of land to have a sense of belonging? At what point does the land cease to represent what it once did? For the narrator of *Le Jour du séisme*, the question of survival is closely linked to a process of reconstruction. The physical and psychological disruption of the earthquake cause her to seek out new ways of existing and understanding her position in the world. As she states early in the novel, ‘Je me

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

²⁹⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Satisfaction* (Canterbury: Héloïse Press, 2022), p. 47.

sépare de la terre...Je parcours une autre géographie...Je trace. Je reconstruis. Je cherche mon enfance sous les pierres... Je deviens l'enfant perdue...Je n'ai que le devoir d'être vraiment.²⁹⁷ Here the text reflects Lorde's description of biomythography, combining as it does real events with imaginary wonderings as the narrator searches for ways to attach herself to the land in order to forge a sense of belonging and identity. There are multiple layers of meaning in the text, each building upon the next as the narrator traverses layers of the earth in the wake of the quake.

The sections which are in speech marks in the text seem to represent the work of the imaginary, the overcoming of the quake and the fracture from her childhood, with the help of Arslan and Maliha, her spirit guides. The novel could also be read as an Anzaldúan *autohistoria*, blending as it does Bouraoui's own cultural and personal biography with memoir, history, storytelling [and] myth. As elsewhere in the œuvre, the imbrication of memory with the visual and the visionary plays a key role in the text:

Je deviens invalide. Seule ma mémoire reste. Elle induit l'image, les voix et les lumières. Elle donne le silence. Elle redresse le réel. Elle élabore par visions. Elle instruit et restitue les premiers signes de la terre, les avertissements. Elle valide les rêves, les traces et l'origine. Elle vient du seul pays.

Elle est natale et algérienne.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Jour du séisme*, pp. 24- 27.

²⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 16.

Memory and the visions it produces are, in this case, fused with a sense of Algerian-ness for Bouraoui. In many ways, this text is her monument to childhood and memory. Memory brings Algeria back to life, it is 'un lieu permanent', where, 'rien ne tombe. Ici la vie est heureuse. Ce lieu, unique, porte ma terre sans séisme. Il porte mon corps sans blessure...Je suis d'ici. Je me souviens.'²⁹⁹ The repetition of 'ma terre revient' in the closing pages is (six times across two very short pages of text) again reaffirms the connection the narrator feels with Algeria. It is also her paean to her paternal grandparents, to whom the text is dedicated.

This textual recreation of her childhood and ancestral home reflects Anzaldúa's discussion of writing about home: 'You are closer to home when you're further away. As a writer I can write about places after I've left them, rather than when I'm still there. This is especially true when I write about home.'³⁰⁰ Similarly, Cherríe Moraga has argued that 'as marginalized peoples, we all have to make our way back home to the sites that have rejected and deformed us in order to re-form them.'³⁰¹ As we know, Bouraoui has never physically returned to Algeria. Is her return in memory and in writing enough to do this work of re-forming? She has spoken about the incompatibility of her lived experience in Algeria and the fictional identity she has weaved across her œuvre. For Bouraoui, this fictional legend provides an edifice of protection. She explains:

J'ai quitté l'Algérie en 1981. J'ai peur d'y retourner parce que j'ai peur de ne plus écrire, de perdre ma fiction, de déconstruire la légende inventée au fur et

²⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 96.

³⁰⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 187.

³⁰¹ Cherríe L. Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 125.

à mesure du temps, de mes livres, ces pierres que j'ajuste pour ériger un édifice qui me protège.³⁰²

The fiction she has created is not entirely fictional, as we know. But the way she describes it here lends itself to the argument I am making in this chapter and in the thesis more broadly about a Bouraouian biomythography. It is fitting that she relates nationhood with the (in)ability to create. Like Moraga, Bouraoui's sense of national identity is further complicated by her own *métissage*. Indeed, as we have seen, even before the earthquake literally and figuratively tears her childhood apart, Bouraoui's position regarding national identity was one of uncertainty. Although *Garçon manqué* and *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* were published after *Le Jour du séisme* (in 2000 and 2018, respectively), their narratives provide contextual information which help to illuminate the multiple reasons that Bouraoui feels 'désaxée' by the events of this earlier novel.³⁰³

'Blessée jusqu'au silence': Racialised identity as social violence³⁰⁴

If *Le Jour du séisme* centres the writer's visceral attachment to Algeria and the violence of her sudden removal from the country, *Garçon manqué*, *Sauvage* and *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* reflect more deeply on the incompatibility of a French-Algerian *métisse* existence and begin to question notions of gender identity alongside those of national identity. The former novel takes place entirely in Algeria while the later texts introduce France and the complexity of

³⁰² Nina Bouraoui, 'Je suis la faussaire de mon passé', in *Revue des deux Mondes* (Paris: 2019).

³⁰³ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Jour du séisme*, p. 11.

³⁰⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, p. 130.

existing as half-French and half-Algerian. As highlighted above, there is a sense of hope amid the wreckage of *Le Jour du séisme*, particularly in the narrator's use of memory and imagination to recapture something of the land she loves. In *Garçon manqué*, *Sauvage* and *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, however, it is clear from the outset that the psychological pain of the narrator's mixed national identity will not be as easily soothed. Early in *Garçon manqué*, she states: 'Ici nous ne sommes rien. De mère française. De père algérien.'³⁰⁵ The text is replete with such short sentences, a structural representation of the narrator's juxtaposed national and cultural identities. A little later, she explains: 'Les Algériens ne me voient pas. Les Français ne comprennent pas. Je construis un mur contre les autres.'³⁰⁶ She is neither seen nor understood by either of the groups to which she nominally belongs. While in the previous novel, the narrator was to a certain extent able to reconstruct what is lost (Algeria) through memory and imagination, the suggestion early in *Garçon manqué* is that to construct a notion of national identity and belonging will be considerably more problematic, not least because of its intersection with other identity categories.

As Antonia Wimbush has asserted in her discussion of *Garçon manqué*, '[g]endered, national, sexual, and linguistic hybridity... provoke in Bouraoui's literary heroine an extreme sense of exclusion and alienation, mirrored by the author's personal preoccupation with these themes.'³⁰⁷ The issue of gender identity will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, but I would like first to examine the notion of national and linguistic identity which Wimbush highlights here, particularly

³⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., p.19.

³⁰⁷ Antonia Wimbush, *Autofiction: A Female Francophone Aesthetic of Exile* (Liverpool University Press, 2021), p. 114.

given the political potential of linguistic code-switching as a mode of queering notions of monolithic national identity.

Kateb Yacine, Driss Chraïbi, and Rachid Boudjedra³⁰⁸ have all written about their decision to use French either 'pour survivre',³⁰⁹ or as a way to escape the policing of the post-Independence patriarchal 'Arabo-muslim society which...was attempting to circumscribe the freedom of the writer.'³¹⁰ The imposition of classical Arabic in post-independence Algeria, an apparent shibboleth of unity and linguistic purity, denied linguistic pluralism as well as the existence of pre-colonial languages such as Berber. As Djamila Saadi-Mokrane reminds us, '[t]he Arabic, French, and Berber languages are all connected to the country's history, but in different ways. They exist as a collision of words and endure all the fractures that destabilize society.'³¹¹ ³¹² The notion of linguistic purity is a particularly well-imbedded nationalist fiction which reinforces notions of cultural hierarchy and denies the co-existence of languages celebrated by Saadi-Mokrane. As a result of this policing of language production, many of the most prominent Algerian writers who chose to write in French in the year between independence and the Civil War lived in exile, notably Assia Djebar, who was arguably the most important voice in terms of taking up the cause of women in her homeland.

While some Algerian authors of the previous generation chose to write in French as a mode of resistance and as a way to 'pass on the revolutionary message to the world', as well as to critique 'successive oppressive nationalist governments',

³⁰⁸ Boudjedra did eventually choose to write exclusively in Arabic, although as a means of challenging rather than conforming to, what he perceived as a resurgence of religious fundamentalism in Algeria.

³⁰⁹ See Boudjera's introduction to his seminal novel, *Nedjma*.

³¹⁰ Anne Armitage, 'The Debate over Literary Writing in a Foreign Language: An Overview of Francophonie in the Maghreb', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 20 (2000).

³¹¹ Djamila Saadi-Mokrane, 'The Algerian Linguicide', in *Algeria in Others' Languages*, ed. by Anne-Emmanuelle Berger (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 44-60 (p. 47).

³¹² Kabyle is also the first language of a number of people in Algeria.

Bouraoui can make no such political choice.³¹³ French is the *only* language available to her. As the narrator of *Garçon manqué* explains:

Je ne parle pas arabe... C'est une langue espérée qui ne vient pas... C'est une langue qui s'échappe. C'est une fuite et un glissement. Je prononce le *hâ* et le *rhâ* si difficiles. Je reconnais les sons, *el chekl*. Mais je reste à l'extérieur du sens, abandonnée.³¹⁴

We might assume, given the linguistic fracture displayed throughout these autobiographical texts, that Bouraoui and her protagonists would feel more at home in France and amongst the French, if only for reasons of language. After all, the ability to communicate cannot be underplayed. As Alya asserts about her inability to speak Arabic in *Sauvage*:

Cette langue qui s'échappe comme du sable est une douleur. Elle laisse ses marques, des mots, et s'efface. Elle ne prend pas sur moi. Elle me rejette. Elle me sépare des autres. Elle rompt l'origine. C'est une absence. Je suis impuissante. Je reste une étrangère. Je suis invalide.³¹⁵

The language used here is powerful: pain, rejection, separation, impotent, stranger, invalid. Her inability to communicate disempowers and alienates her. Bouraoui expresses a similar disconnect in her depiction of school life in *Garçon manqué*. In

³¹³ Sophie Croisy, 'Algerian History, Algerian Literature, and Critical Theories: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on Linguistic Trauma and Identity Reformation in Postcolonial Algeria', *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 10 (2008), 88.

³¹⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, p. 11.

³¹⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage*, pp. 11-12.

Arabic classes, she is placed on the opposite side of the class from ‘the real Algerians’. ‘La langue arabe ne prend pas sur moi,’ she laments, ‘[c]’est une glissement.’³¹⁶ The parallels between the two autobiographical protagonists are clear.

Even if the narrators don’t speak Arabic, however, they are imbued with it, surrounded by it. This linguistic disorientation is important. Indeed, those writers who chose to write in French as a form of rebellion often did so by adapting, twisting, and deconstructing the French language into new and different shapes. As Khatibi so stridently argued, the deconstruction of the coloniser’s tongue could be a useful mode of decolonising the mind and imagination.³¹⁷ There is a sense with those writers who choose to code-switch or write in a second language of a rejection of language as a monolith. As Croisy asserts, ‘every language, when used in a new context, is a new language.’³¹⁸ Both the narrators of *Garçon manqué* and *Sauvage* find novel ways to use the Arabic language even when it proves so ‘slippery’ to them. Alya in *Sauvage*, for example, develops her own stories from the books in Arabic that she doesn’t understand:

C’est comme les livres en arabe à la maison. Je lis mais je ne comprends pas; et je me dis que c’est une façon d’inventer son histoire à soi. De ne pas lire la véritable histoire du livre et d’adapter sa propre histoire à celle qui a été écrite et que je n’arrive pas à comprendre.³¹⁹

³¹⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, p. 34.

³¹⁷ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Plural Maghreb* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

³¹⁸ Croisy, p. 88.

³¹⁹ Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage*, p. 84.

However, it is not only in Arabic classes that the protagonists experience this racialised treatment, and in many ways the social disorientation experienced by the narrators of these texts is more troubling and damaging than the linguistic. As she explains, '[c]ertains professeurs nous placent à droite de leur classe. Opposés aux vrais Français. Aux enfants de coopérants.'³²⁰ The repetition of *vrais* in reference to the Algerian and French students demonstrates the inherently racist attitudes towards *métissage*, the notion of its impurity by comparison with 'true' national identity, meaning that the linguistic fracture experienced by the protagonists of these texts also plays out psychically and emotionally. They struggle to find a sense of belonging in both a French and an Algerian context. As Bouraoui states earlier on in *Garçon manqué*:

Être séparée toujours de l'un et de l'autre. Porter une identité de fracture. Se penser en deux parties. À qui je ressemble le plus? Qui a gagné sur moi? Sur ma voix? Sur mon visage? Sur mon corps qui avance? La France ou L'Algérie?³²¹

The use of question marks in this quotation emphasise the uncertainty Bouraoui feels about her identity, but also her impotence. They also highlight the previously discussed impossibility of *métissage*: there is a sense that one side can, indeed must, 'win' the battle and overcome the identarian fracture. She cannot answer these questions herself because, as highlighted by the racist classroom practices outlined above, they are bound up with how she is perceived from without. As Alya asserts in

³²⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, pp. 33-4.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Sauvage: 'Dans la vie, on veut toujours vous donner une place à occuper. Un rôle à jouer. Toujours. On ne choisit pas. Et ce sont les autres qui choisissent pour vous.'³²² Bouraoui has described this as a form of violence, a disempowering tactic used by those in power to maintain the status quo and to silence and invalidate those who do not belong to the primary group. Indeed, the role-giving and box-placing described by Alya is defined more by what one *is not*, rather than what one *is*. As Bouraoui explains in *Garçon manqué*: 'Je deviens inclassable. Je ne suis pas assez typée. « Tu n'es pas une Arabe comme les autres. » Je suis trop typée. « Tu n'es pas française ».'³²³ Note the racist overtones here with the use of 'typée' and its overt focus on physical characteristics. The word 'inclassable', meanwhile, brings us back to the earlier discussion about the impossibility of *métissage* in a French context: her identity is not merely fractured, it is unclassifiable.

The pervasiveness of monolithism renders those with racially mixed identities impotent. As Barbara Christian has argued, '[m]any of us are particularly sensitive to monolithism since one major element of ideologies of dominance, such as sexism and racism, is to dehumanize people by stereotyping them, by denying them their variousness and complexity.'³²⁴ Bouraoui exposes these ideologies of dominance as they are used to dehumanise her, even by members of her own family. These ideologies are further complicated for Bouraoui by the violent history between France and Algeria, a history of which she believes herself to be the product, something which causes immense psychological pain:

³²² Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage*, p. 116.

³²³ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, p. 20.

³²⁴ Barbara Christian, 'The Race for Theory', *Cultural Critique*, 6 (1987), 59.

Longtemps je crois porter une faute. Je viens de la guerre. Je viens d'un mariage contesté. Je porte la souffrance de ma famille algérienne. Je porte le refus de ma famille française. Je porte ces transmissions-là. La violence ne me quitte plus. Elle m'habite. Elle vient de moi. Elle vient du peuple algérien qui envahit. Elle vient du peuple français qui renie.³²⁵

As elsewhere in the text, Bouraoui uses short, juxtaposed sentences to startling effect here. She traces the history of both sides of her family, from the suffering of her Algerian family (particularly the loss of her uncle Amar during the war), to the refusal of her French family to accept the marriage of Rachid and Maryvonne, to her own sense of carrying the weight of all of this history, its familial transmission. She absorbs the violence and embodies the pain, ultimately situating her own family's experience within the wider context of Algerian anger and French denial.

Bouraoui explains that she witnesses this violence frequently in France, amongst families she meets on holiday, '[d]ans leur haine tissée. Dans leurs jugements. Dans leurs sentences. Les Arabes dehors.'³²⁶ There is an incompatibility, she states, 'entre eux et nous', an incompatibility which stems from ignorance (at best), but also from overt racism. Towards the end of a passage in which she describes conversations with these unknown French families who question her about the heat and poverty in Algeria ('comme au Maroc ou en Tunisie?'), she recounts the typical turn such conversations take: 'Et toi? Qui es-tu vraiment? Française, algérienne? On préfère t'appeler Nina plutôt que Yasmina. Nina ça s'arrange. Ça fait espagnol ou italien. Comme ça on n'a pas à expliquer nos fréquentations.'³²⁷ The

³²⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, p. 32.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-5.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

racism of these unknown people is writ large here, as is the refusal of the French system of universalism to recognise *métissage*. As Afua Hirsch asserts, when 'it comes to identity, names matter.'³²⁸ The 'inability' or refusal to pronounce certain names is hugely problematic. That these strangers announce that they will call her Bouraoui Nina rather than her given name, Yasmina, so as to make her appear more European and therefore less Algerian, less socially dangerous, is doubly so. Similarly, the notion that 'passing' as Spanish or Italian would make her more socially permissible, less of a threat, is reflective of the racial hierarchy at play here. Framed as a European with a tan, she is acceptable; as a brown woman with an Arabic name, she is dangerous, untrustworthy, to be feared. As she explains earlier in the novel: 'J'aurais toujours à l'expliquer. À me justifier. Ces yeux me suivront longtemps, unis ensuite à la peur de l'autre, cet étranger.'³²⁹

This need to explain, to justify her existence as a body 'out of place' echoes the experiences of so many of the feminists of colour referenced in this thesis. Nirmal Puwar's *Space Invaders* is particularly useful in analysing how the Outsider Within status comes into being for those who are not the 'somatic norm', and the pervasive damaging effect it can have. In the introduction to the book, she states:

The arrival of women and racialised minorities in spaces from which they have been historically or conceptually excluded is an illuminating and intriguing paradox...What are the terms of coexistence? This is an encounter that causes disruption, necessitates negotiation and invites complicity. Here we have the paradox of the increasing proximity of the hitherto outside with the inside proper, or, should I say, with the somatic norm. While they now exist on

³²⁸ Afua Hirsch, *Brit(Ish)* (London Jonathan Cape, 2018), p. 30.

³²⁹ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, pp. 19-20.

the inside, they still do not have an undisputed right to occupy the space.³³⁰

In the context of Puwar's analysis, 'black bodies', 'racialised minorities' and women all represent that which is not the unmarked somatic norm, i.e. white and male. As Bouraoui asserts, as a Space Invader she is left both powerless and with only unanswerable questions: 'Je ne sais plus qui je suis au jardin de Maurepas. Une fille? Un garçon? L'arrière-petite-fille de Marie? La petite-fille de Rabiâ? L'enfant de Méré? Le fils de Rachid? Qui? La Française? L'Algérienne? L'Algéro-Française? De quel côté de la barrière?'³³¹ The intersection of nationhood and gender suggested here serves to further complicate any notion of self-identification and belonging. Indeed, as has been highlighted by multiple critics, gender ambiguity is one of the key themes in Bouraoui's œuvre. The next section will analyse how Bouraoui grapples with this across the key novels discussed in this chapter, with particular focus on the imbrication of nationhood and gender identity.

Gender violence and the perils of gender identity

As highlighted above, national identity and gender identity often intersect in Bouraoui's novels, and this is particularly evident in the texts which form the focus of this chapter. The narrators of all of these novels are as preoccupied with uncertainties around their gendered identities as they are with the impossibilities of finding a place to exist within the tightly policed confines of nationhood. It may be argued that this gender uncertainty stems from a sense of dysphoria tied to each narrator's developing understanding of their sexuality.³³² However, in the context of

³³⁰ Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), p. 1.

³³¹ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, p. 141.

³³² See Chapter Three of this thesis for more on the intersection of gender and sexuality.

decolonial feminism, it is also important that we examine the ways in which gendered identity can be read as a manifestation of racialised, patriarchal power structures. As Puwar argues, 'when a body is emptied of its gender or race, this is a mark of how its position is the privileged norm. Its power emanates from its ability to be seen as just normal, to be without corporeality.'³³³ The notion of being seen as 'just normal' understandably appeals to the narrators of Bouraoui's texts, not least because they are already socially excluded thanks to their *métisse* identities. *Garçon manqué* in particular, demonstrates its protagonist's desire to identify with the somatic norm: 'becoming' or 'passing' as male opens up new spaces to the young narrator, spaces which are not available if she is female-presenting. In a clear reflection of the male body as the unmarked somatic norm, she explains: 'Être un homme en Algérie c'est devenir invisible.'³³⁴

The body is supposedly the site where we have 'a protective dwelling place...one true home.'³³⁵ This is manifestly untrue for the protagonists (and indeed many of the characters) in Bouraoui's œuvre. The body is frequently an unsafe space throughout these texts and is often a site of violence (kidnapping, rape, assault, murder). This is particularly true for the marked female body (although, importantly, male characters are also shown to be victims of largely male violence). One of the ways Bouraoui explores the possibility of the body as a 'protective dwelling place' is through a corporeal association with the masculine. 'Je prends un autre prénom, Ahmed. Je jette mes robes. Je coupe mes cheveux. Je me fais disparaître. J'intègre le pays des hommes.'³³⁶ In the novel there is a suggestion that

³³³ Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders*, p. 57.

³³⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, pp. 37-8.

³³⁵ Gill Rye and Michael Worton, 'Introduction', in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France* ed. by Gill Rye and Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), (p. 14).

³³⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, p. 15.

the young Nina's choice to 'disguise' herself as a boy stems from what is referred to in this and other novels as 'l'événement', an attempted abduction which took place when Nina was a child.³³⁷ She states: 'Je me déguise souvent. Je dénature mon corps féminin. Ainsi j'oublie la voix de l'homme...Je me travestis. Seule... Je deviens Brio.'³³⁸This is a potentially problematic premise for several reasons, not least because it could imply that Nina's gender performance is predicated entirely on the assumed response of the men she encounters. This is a theme throughout the novel, in fact, as she repeatedly expresses her desire to be accepted by 'le regard doux des hommes de Zeralda.'³³⁹ However, it is perhaps an understandable response for a young girl who has been the near victim of a violent attack, and as a woman who is acutely aware of the potential for male violence as she sees it around her. Indeed, Bouraoui has highlighted in interviews that it was during her childhood that she became conscious of the potentially abusive power of men:

Petite, je voyais bien où était la force: du côté des hommes, de cette oppressante forêt d'hommes. Je voyais comment, dans la rue, ma mère, puis ma soeur étaient la proie d'un désir masculin permanent. Je n'en ai pas ressenti de la répulsion envers les hommes, non. J'ai voulu être comme eux: anonyme comme un homme, puissante comme un homme. Du côté de la force et du pouvoir.³⁴⁰

In *Garçon manqué*, the young Nina's options follow this perceived binarity: accept powerlessness (as a woman, much as Fikria and her sisters must do in *La Voyeuse*

³³⁷ Bouraoui confirms the veracity of this in a 2004 interview. See Dominique Simmonet, 'Ecrire, C'est Retrouver Ses Fantômes', www.lexpress.fr, (2004). (2004) 'Ecrire, c'est retrouver ses fantômes', www.lexpress.fr. What she calls 'l'événement' is a recurrent theme throughout Bouraoui's oeuvre.

³³⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué*. Vol. 15254, *Le Livre De Poche* (Paris: Stock, 2000), pp. 49-50.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁴⁰ Bouraoui in Dominique Simmonet, 'Ecrire, c'est retrouver ses fantômes', www.lexpress.fr 2004.

Interdite) or 'become' male and therefore inviolable. The names she chooses for her male alter-ego, Ahmed and Brio, are telling in themselves. The two possibilities are played out in quick succession. As Brio:

Brio contre l'homme des orangers. Brio pour toute L'Algérie. Brio contre toute la France. Brio contre mon corps qui me fait de la peine...

Non, je ne veux pas me marier. Non, je ne marcherai pas comme une fille.

Non, je ne suis pas française. Je deviens algérien. *Yahya* l'Algérie.³⁴¹

As Nina:

Je tombe malade. Souvent. C'est un retranchement. Dans ma chambre. Dans mon lit. Contre le regard des autres. Quelque chose ne va pas chez Nina. Elle n'est pas normale. Il faut la montrer. La soigner. Elle aura des problèmes, plus tard. Mais non, elle est féminine, elle se met de la crème tous les soirs. De la Nivéa par paquets. C'est encore un faux geste. Un geste volé. La Nivéa, ma crème à raser. Je cache mon corps. J'apprends à étouffer. À me cacher. À ne plus manger. Mes yeux dévorent mon visage. Nina, son regard d'Indienne.³⁴²

There is a lot to unpick in these paragraphs: The public versus private; the pathologising of non-normative gender behaviour; the misread symbolism of the Nivea cream as a symbol of femininity versus its use by Nina to represent a traditionally 'masculine' behaviour; the eating disorder developed as a way of erasing

³⁴¹ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, pp. 50-1.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 52-3.

the unwanted signs of perceived femininity.³⁴³ Just as the narrator highlights the impossibility of her dual identity throughout the text, so too do the frequent juxtapositions which litter the text throw into relief the unworkability of binary systems of gender, nationhood, sexual identity. At the end of the passage, Bouraoui echoes Gloria Anzaldúa's depiction of the Borderland resident as simultaneously visible and invisible: 'I am visible - see this Indian face - yet I am invisible. I both blind them with my beak nose and am their blind spot. But I exist, we exist.'³⁴⁴ Despite Anzaldúa's battle cry, 'I exist, we exist', it is clear in Bouraoui's text (as elsewhere in Anzaldúa's writing and that of other decolonial queer feminists) that finding a way to identify oneself amid all of these warring factions (both literally and figuratively) is no easy task, and is perhaps exacerbated further by the fact that, once again, gender identity and cultural or national identity are imbricated; the narrator here associates Brio and the masculine with Algeria, public space and strength, and Nina and the feminine with France, private space and weakness. It is a neat juxtaposition of the colonial power imbalance, and the patriarchal status quo, but for the lived experience of the individual, seems to serve as a further othering device.

As we saw above in relation to race and national identity, it is often the perception of others which drives the protagonists' gender trouble. Nina's maternal grandparents, in particular, are troubled by her failure to perform femininity. In *Garçon manqué*, she describes how she must '[é]touffer Ahmed et Brio' when visiting her grandparents, noting that, '[m]a grand-mère aime les vraies filles.'³⁴⁵ Elsewhere she is told repeatedly that her gender ambiguity is problematic: 'Nina, un garçon manqué. Nina, une fille ratée. Nina, à force, il te poussera un zizi. Ou une

³⁴³ We also see this in the character of Zohr in *La voyageuse interdite*.

³⁴⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. 25. anniversary, 4. edn (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), p. 108.

³⁴⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, p. 92.

barbichette.³⁴⁶ She ‘fails’ as both boy and girl and therefore occupies an uncertain space which unsettles those around her. This is compounded by social attitudes towards sexuality. Amine’s mother, for example, worries that he will turn out to be gay by association with Nina, as does the mother of Ali in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*. The imbrication of gender and sexuality will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three of this thesis, but it is important to note here because it reflects so clearly both the homophobic and misogynistic attitudes so prevalent in patriarchal society, and also the reliance upon fixed, binary identities.

‘My own feminist architecture’: Bouraouian Biomythography

The previous three sections have outlined how Bouraoui presents some of the often intersecting problems of establishing a sense of identity across these texts. We will now consider how she manipulates these issues and queers the norms of autobiography to create what this chapter defines as Bouraouian biomythography. Across the texts we witness Bouraoui’s understanding and textual representation of identity develop as she embraces the multiplicity and complexity of her selves. *Le Jour du séisme* examines her physical and mystical relationship with Algeria; *Sauvage* and *Garçon manqué* bring fixed notions of gender and nation into question, while *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* bridges family history, gender, nation, sexuality, and the Algerian civil war. There is an understanding that all of these disparate elements form part of her identity. In some ways, the séisme which opens *Le Jour du séisme* creates a tabula rasa upon which Bouraoui can inscribe her own identity while also critiquing the imposed norms and fixed identities of

³⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 107.

patriarchal power structures. As the narrator explains, in the aftermath of the quake, '[j]e me sépare de la terre...Je parcours une autre géographie...Je trace. Je reconstruis.'³⁴⁷ There is certainly a sense of a journey being taken across these texts, one which revisits various points in Bouraoui's life and views them from different angles in order to reconstruct a sense of identity predicated on her own desires.³⁴⁸ As she states in *Sauvage*, '[j]e me disais que pour prendre conscience de la vie il fallait changer d'angle.'³⁴⁹ This is one of the key facets of Bouraouian biomythography, and a concept which echoes Cherríe Moraga's depiction of her own lived experience and writerly journey: 'My history, a solo journey it seems, traverses many movements of diverse, seemingly contradictory identities.'³⁵⁰ The result is a kind of palimpsest whereby each retelling or repositioning allows Bouraoui to both work through problematic experiences and develop a road-map which allows for the existence and celebration of contradictory identities.

In *Sauvage*, Alya, echoing Anzaldúa, speaks about finding a space of belonging and selfhood in what she calls 'un interstice,'³⁵¹ and that 'c'est dans cet espace que peut surgir la vraie personnalité.'³⁵² She goes on: 'Alors je me détache des choses et des autres pour ne pas jouer le rôle qu'on a envie de me donner. Je me replie, dans l'interstice, qui est aussi une fissure.'³⁵³ There are clear parallels here with Anzaldúa's description of her own writing: 'I write', she explains, 'to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have written about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to

³⁴⁷ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Jour du séisme*, p. 24.

³⁴⁸ Cherríe L. Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 15.

³⁴⁹ Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage*, p. 42.

³⁵⁰ Moraga, *A Xicana Codex*, p. 15.

³⁵¹ Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage*, p. 116.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy.³⁵⁴ We may also note the parallels between Alya's discussion of interstitial space and Anzaldúa's notion of nepantla as a liminal space which allows for deep conscious wrangling of self-hood. This is epitomised for Anzaldúa in the character of La Prieta, who recurs throughout her work. She explains:

Prieta experiences a sense of self that is and is not tied to time, space, or society. She experiences unusual events – a shamanistic event which awakens her, or a paranormal event where different realities converge. She undergoes a radical shift in her way of seeing the world, a coming to consciousness which changes her identity.³⁵⁵

We could replace the name Prieta here with Alya from *Sauvage*, or perhaps simply with Nina. This also lends itself to Bouraoui's own discussion of her creation of a fictional space to explore her own identity: 'je poursuis mon voyage imaginaire à l'intérieur de mes livres.'³⁵⁶

We may perhaps wonder whether biomythography is anti-identitarian in its methods. Certainly, one may argue that the characters in these texts are guided more by a desire for self-autonomy than static identification. There are echoes of Kristeva's *sujet en procès* in biomythography. 'It allows productively for the...slippage of a dynamic subject between what may otherwise be considered opposing terms: for example, between the individual and the collective in concepts of

³⁵⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'Speaking in Tongues', in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), pp. 163-72 (pp. 166-67).

³⁵⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'The New Mestiza Nation', in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. by AnaLouise Keating (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 203-16.

³⁵⁶ Nina Bouraoui, 'Je suis la faussaire de mon passé', in *Revue des deux Mondes* (Paris: 2019).

subjectivity and identity; between the autobiographical and the fictional in texts.³⁵⁷

We see this slippage throughout Bouraoui's autobiographical texts. In *Sauvage*, for example, Alya describes making a paper garland of interconnected human shapes, and remarks upon her joy at the fact that:

...d'une personne on pouvait faire plusieurs personnes. Et ça me fascinait parce que j'avais toujours pensé que je n'étais qu'une seule personne à l'intérieur de moi... Toutes ces émotions faisaient que l'on pouvait passer non seulement d'un état à l'autre mais aussi d'une personne à une autre.³⁵⁸

What Alya is saying here is quietly revolutionary. Here is a young woman of colour claiming her space(s), declaring a complexity of personhood that is simply not allotted to her by the patriarchal state and the state of patriarchy. She is a subject in process, to borrow Kristeva's phrase. This idea of becoming rather than being is a subtle but key difference, and one which is hugely important in the context of decolonial feminism.

For Bouraoui, this claiming of space takes place through language. As Alya states, '[d]ans les mots, je trouve ma vérité, mais elle n'est pas à tout le monde et elle n'est pas pour tout le monde.'³⁵⁹ This is key in the context of Bouraouian biomythography: language provides her with the tools to discover her own truth, a truth that is pointedly not for everyone. It is hers. And yet by sharing her truth in this way, she does add to a growing field of decolonial feminist thought. As Lorde notes:

³⁵⁷ Gill Rye and Michael Worton, 'Introduction', in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, ed. by Gill Rye and Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), (p. 9).

³⁵⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage*, p. 200.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.111.

'We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it.'³⁶⁰

As Ahmed has argued, '[f]reedom is not...something we have, but something we are doing: we are freeing ourselves from the weight of history.'³⁶¹ In order to do this we must not allow ourselves to be comfortable with the status quo, but nor must we forget that history which weighs us down. A recognition and re-examination of the past is at the heart of biomythography. The texts analysed in this chapter deal especially with the weight of Algerian history as Bouraoui experiences it. She becomes almost a conduit for the transmitted past of her ancestors:

La famille est le terreau de la peur et j'ai peur, je ne connais pas mon passé ni celui de mes ancêtres, je porte leur tristesse et peut-être leurs méfaits, je suis le vecteur, tout passe et passera par moi, car mes yeux cherchent ce que personne ne cherche, parce que je vois chez ma mère ce que personne n'a vu, parce que je vais écrire et que les mots reconstitueront la scène, vraie ou fausse, inventée ou rapportée, je la ferai exister pour qu'elle cesse de me hanter.³⁶²

The haunting that she evokes here is bound up with the violent history of France and Algeria. Earlier in the same text, she explains that, '[d]ans les années quatre-vingt-dix, c'est la mort d'un médecin psychiatre qui marque le début de *ma* terreur algérienne.'³⁶³ She goes on to describe how the 1970s (when much of the action of

³⁶⁰ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (London: Penguin, 2019), pp. 26-7.

³⁶¹ Sara Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (London: Allen Lane, 2023), p. 196.

³⁶² Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 191.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

these novels is set) are now a thing of the past: 'Les années soixante-dix se détachent, elles sont bien plus qu'une époque. Elles sont un pays dont on ne revient pas.'³⁶⁴ And yet, she does revisit them, repeatedly, in her writing. Indeed, it is through this revisiting and retelling, 'inventée ou rapportée', that she is able to free herself from the stranglehold of the past. Ahmed, glossing Lorde, emphasises how, as feminists, we open the door to the past to bring it closer, to stop the 'violence, the structure...the repetition' from happening again.³⁶⁵ Bouraoui feels that the violence of Algeria in the 1990s is at the heart of all of her subsequent writing. She becomes fixated, haunted even, by a particular scenario. 'Je le nomme *Le Projet zéro* car il me semble être à l'origine de tout ce que je pourrai écrire ensuite.'³⁶⁶ While she might not write explicitly about this violence, it is clearly present in her mind and therefore in her work. Violence is never far from the surface in all of these texts, whether it is the attack on Maryvonne, Amine and Ali's aggression, the ferocity of the earthquake. Violence is everywhere. And it is almost exclusively male. By re-imagining this violent past, Bouraoui moves to free herself and others from it. In particular, she comes to view the protection of women as a duty: 'Plus tard, je m'infligerai le devoir de protéger toute femme du danger, même s'il n'existe pas.'³⁶⁷ This is after the incident where her mother is attacked in Algiers. Fernandes and Arenberg highlight the notion of heroic masculinity in *Garçon manqué* as performed by the young Nina. Over the course of the texts, Bouraoui turns this on its head and becomes instead a feminist hero. She goes from wanting to 'be like them' (men in Algeria)³⁶⁸ to

³⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

³⁶⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy*, p.197.

³⁶⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 123.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 27.

³⁶⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué* (see above).

positioning herself as a protector of *all* women. This is an important shift, particularly in the context of decolonial feminism.³⁶⁹

While I am not positioning biomythography as a form of scriptotherapy, there is important healing work done in these texts, not least in the context of *métissage* and the apparent impossibility, or certainly incompatibility, of a French-Algerian existence. Again, Anzaldúa provides us with a model for dealing with this cultural alienation in the telling of one's story:

The mixture of bloods and affinities, rather than confusing or unbalancing me, has forced me to achieve a kind of equilibrium. Both cultures deny me a place in *their* universe. Between them and among others, I build my own universe, *El Mundo Zurdo*. I belong to myself and not to any one people.³⁷⁰

Like Anzaldúa, Bouraoui criticizes both sides of her *métissage* in these texts. She does not idealise Algerian identity and is aware that there is fault on both sides, albeit in different ways. Racism, sexism, classism and homophobia all feed into her family narrative. Like Anzaldúa, Lorde, and myriad others before her, she weaves these prejudices into her own narrative, uncovering them in order to disempower them. There is a kind of magic in this weaving of which Anzaldúa would surely approve: 'Je veux devenir magicienne,' explained the narrator of *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, 'transformer le réel quand il ne me convient pas, raconter les histoires à ma façon et en modifier la fin si elle n'est pas heureuse.'³⁷¹

³⁶⁹ See Chapter Four of this thesis for further discussion of the individual and the collective in decolonial feminism.

³⁷⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 49.

³⁷¹ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p.186.

In the introduction to this chapter, I quoted from bell hooks's discussion of autobiographical writing, in which she explains that she believed she must destroy her past self in order to exist fully in the present, in order to become more easily 'become the me of me'.³⁷² Ultimately, hooks comes to a different conclusion:

In the end I did not feel as though I had killed the Gloria of my childhood. Instead I had rescued her. She was no longer the enemy within, the little girl who had to be annihilated for the woman to come into being... Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, "the bits and pieces of my heart" that the narrative made whole again.³⁷³

Perhaps this is one of the best ways to explain the work of biomythography. In order for the self/selves to come into being, we must retrace our steps and even allow ourselves to get lost along the way.

Conclusion: Satisfaction?

In many ways, the construction of biomythography is firstly about survival. In *Feminist Killjoy*, Sara Ahmed asserts that, '[for] some of us, to survive a world we need to transform it. But we still have to survive the world we are trying to transform.'³⁷⁴ Bouraoui uses her writing as a means of survival in the sense of owning and honing her narrative through its repeated retelling. Writing becomes a way of fighting back, of exposing and countering history and building something more positive, and potentially restorative, from the wreckage. It is a way to break

³⁷² bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York and London Routledge, 2014), p. 155.

³⁷³ Ibid., p. 159.

³⁷⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy*, p. 48.

down the silences around gender and race which are inherent in both the colonial and nationalist context, as well as to expose the myths of French Universalism which serve to render difference invisible. In *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, Lorde reminds us that:

The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.³⁷⁵

This is one of the key tenets of the decolonial feminist project as I understand it. In a patriarchal society which has been constructed to keep women separate and silent, we must seek to speak to one another and to build bridges between ourselves.

With this in mind, might the texts studied in this chapter represent one of the building blocks of a mestiza genealogy and a feminist genealogy more broadly? As Lorde states elsewhere, 'in order to come together we must recognize each other.'³⁷⁶ I would take this one step further, and argue that in order to recognize each other, we must first recognize ourselves, outside of the confines of the systems which have sought to identify us from without, or even to deny us existence entirely. This is the difficult work that Bouraoui is grappling with in these autobiographical texts:

constructing a self through deep excavation of pasts both real and imagined. As Madame Akli states in Bouraoui's 2021 novel, *Satisfaction*, 'il faut savoir d'où l'on vient pour aller vers les autres et les comprendre.'³⁷⁷ In order to gain this

³⁷⁵ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 33.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.60.

³⁷⁷ Nina Bouraoui, *Satisfaction* (Paris: JC Lattès, 2021), p. 158.

understanding, Bouraoui builds her own story by blurring the boundaries of gender, nationhood, reality, and imagination to create a unique biomythography. Again, Madame Akli argues: 'Il faut construire sa vie, en faire une œuvre à soi, unique, peu importe sa taille, sa beauté, il faut qu'elle existe.'³⁷⁸ There is certainly a sense of something being constructed in these texts, returning to Bouraoui's lego metaphor at the start of this chapter. Ahmed speaks to the concept of building 'our own buildings when the world does not accommodate us,' and notes that: 'Books can be our buildings. We write ourselves into existence.'³⁷⁹ Through a critical engagement with her own and her family history, coupled with a harnessing of the power of imagination, Bouraoui writes into existence a multiple and complex self which has historically been denied by intersecting power structures. 'It takes courage,' she reminds us, 'to step outside of the norm and become the person you are.'³⁸⁰

As Audre Lorde has so powerfully argued in her eulogy of poetry as a feminist practice, '[p]oetry is not only dream and vision: it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.'³⁸¹ The texts analysed in this chapter form the skeleton architecture of Bouraouian biomythography, an architecture which harnesses the personal and political power of writing to lay the foundations for what this thesis argues is a crucial and often overlooked œuvre in the context of transnational and decolonial queer feminist writing.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 92.

³⁷⁹ Sara Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy*, p. 186.

³⁸⁰ Nina Bouraoui, 'Top 10 Books of Autofiction' (The Guardian, 16th September 2020).

³⁸¹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 27.

Chapter 3 - Queering Testimony: Nina Bouraoui's 'theory in the flesh'

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politics born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience...

We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words.

- Cherríe Moraga, *Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh*³⁸²

My poetry is an attempt to leave a testimony which will serve as a beacon and a flamethrower for other women and for those who find themselves in similar battles because they are different. My words are my bombs, my rifles, my guns; but they are also my daughters, my most endearing selves, my loves.

- Luz María Umpierre, *The Double "L" - Latina and Lesbian: A Testimony*³⁸³

Écrire est aussi une façon de se rassembler, de se retrouver à l'intérieur de soi.

- Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*³⁸⁴

As Chapter Two of this thesis has highlighted, in the second decade of her publishing career Bouraoui's novels began to reflect more deeply on her own lived experiences, tracing an ongoing search for self/selves which is simultaneously profoundly personal and multiply fractured. However, it was not until the publication of *Poupée Bella* in 2004 that she began to engage directly with her own

³⁸² Cherríe Moraga, 'Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh', in *This Bridge Called My Back* ed. by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), p. 19.

³⁸³ Luz María Umpierre, 'The Double "L" - Latina and Lesbian: A Testimony', in *Inversions*, ed. by Betsy Warland (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1991), pp. 117-25 (p. 120).

³⁸⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella* (Paris: Stock, 2004), p. 112.

homosexuality and her early encounters with the Parisian gay scene (particularly what she calls 'Le Milieu de Filles'), and to examine the impact of these experiences on her ongoing identity quest. In many ways, Bouraoui's encounters with both queer space and queer identity overlap in this period with her coming to writing. It is through the written word, as the quotation from *Poupée Bella* at the beginning of this chapter indicates, that she begins to establish a sense of self/selves, or, more accurately, a sense that such a conceptualisation of stable self-identity predicated on fixed categories is neither simple to establish nor, perhaps, is it desirable.

There has also been a gradual shift in Bouraoui's understanding of her own position in relation to her writerly identity and its subsequent impact on her audience. In early interviews, she actively resisted the terms "lesbienne" and "homosexuelle" as labels because, she believed, 'dire qu'on est homosexuelle, c'est être cataloguée par sa sexualité, et cela me dérange profondément. L'homosexualité n'est pas une identité'.³⁸⁵ The influence of French Republican universalism is evident in this statement, highlighting an apparent tension between Bouraoui's need to assimilate in the French context contrasted with the desire to make her own place and narrative, and, by extension, her own individualistic identity/identities. She does not want to be seen as a flag-bearer for the LGBT community and does not want to be identified by and with any links she may have to that community.³⁸⁶ However, in an interview given in 2020 to coincide with the publication of the English translation of *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, Bouraoui's stance has markedly altered.³⁸⁷ She states:

³⁸⁵ Katharine N. Harrington, *Writing the Nomadic Experience in Contemporary Francophone Literature* (Lanham, MD [u.a.]: Lexington Books, 2013), p. 97.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ The novel was translated by Aneesa Abbas Higgins and published in 2020 by Viking under the title *All Men Want to Know*.

I've always considered it my mission to bring light to the spaces occupied by the weakest...to use my books as a way of giving voice to those who've never had the opportunity to speak. My readers are aged between 15 and 85! They all thank me when they meet me. Cutting through the loneliness of a young gay person, helping them with my words – for me, that's a great victory and a source of immense pride.³⁸⁸

The current chapter will endeavour to examine how the bridging of these two seemingly irreconcilable statements occurs through Bouraoui's published work by bringing the writer's texts into conversation with Queer of Colour feminisms. Particularly relevant for the works under consideration in this chapter is Cherríe Moraga's concept of 'theory in the flesh'.

In her preface to the fourth edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*, Moraga describes theory in the flesh as 'both the *expression* of evolving political consciousness and the *creator* of consciousness, itself.'³⁸⁹ It is a means of creativity and political expression in which the physical experiences of the body overlap with the liberatory possibilities of the *testimonio*, a visceral giving account of oneself.

Moraga explains:

The very *act* of writing, then, conjuring/coming to 'see', what has yet to be recorded in history is to bring into consciousness what only the body knows to

³⁸⁸ Stephen Carlick, 'Nina Bouraoui Is a French Literary Icon; in Her First UK Novel, She Finds the Words Her Mother Couldn't', Penguin, (2020) <<https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/august/nina-bouraoui-interview-english-all-men-want-to-know.html>> [Accessed 17/4/21 2021].

³⁸⁹ Cherríe Moraga, 'Catching Fire: Preface to the Fourth Edition', in *This Bridge Called My Back* ed. by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), pp. xv-xxv (p. xxiv).

be true. The body – that site which houses the intuitive, the unspoken, the viscera of our being – this is the revolutionary promise of “theory in the flesh”.³⁹⁰

Moraga’s concept underpins this chapter’s analysis of two of Bouraoui’s texts: *Poupée Bella*, and *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, published in 2004 and 2018 respectively. The fourteen-year gap between the publication of the two texts is explicitly relevant to my understanding of Bouraoui’s development as a politically queer writer, not least in the shift from seeing writing as a way of repenting for her homosexuality in *Poupée Bella* to her tracing and embracing the threads of her own and others’ queer desires in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*. The chapter will examine the interlinked narratives, which I argue represent queer testimonial acts in Bouraoui’s œuvre, through the lens of personal *testimonio* as ‘theory in the flesh’. My reading of the texts will bring the works into conversation with both canonical feminist of colour *testimonios* and Salima Amari’s collection, *lesbiennes de l’immigration*, which focuses on the lived experiences of North African and French-North African lesbians of colour resident in metropolitan France. My reading of the texts will foreground how Bouraoui queers traditional autobiographical forms such as the journal/diary and the ‘coming of age’ memoir to tell a highly personal story which, I argue, can also be read as a mode of theorising. This position takes into account what many scholars view as Bouraoui’s highly personal narrative voice but also seeks to find what Spivak has argued are the elements of autobiographical writing which may also tell more objective truths.³⁹¹ As well as

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Interview with Sneja Gunew’, in *Women’s Writing in Exile*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), (p. 420).

engaging with the methodologies of decolonial and transnational feminisms, this chapter will trace the recursive line between the texts themselves, as each work enhances readings of the others, and will refer to other texts in the œuvre where relevant, particularly *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Nos baisers sont des adieux*.

'Out-law' genre: Situating the texts as queer *testimonios*

A key feature of this chapter's analysis of Bouraoui's work is its positioning of the texts as examples of queer *testimonio*. Usually employed in a Latin American context, John Beverley summarises *testimonio* as a 'novel or novella-length narrative...told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or a significant life experience'.³⁹² One could quite easily categorise much of Bouraoui's œuvre according to these parameters, and the texts under consideration in this chapter certainly fit this description. However, glossing Beverley, Smith and Watson assert that:

In *testimonio*, the narrator intends to communicate the situation of a group's oppression, struggle, or imprisonment, to claim some agency in the act of narrating, and to call on readers to respond actively in judging the crisis. Its primary concern is sincerity of intention, not the text's literariness. And its ideological thrust is the "affirmation of the individual self in a collective mode".³⁹³

³⁹² John Beverley, 'The Margin at the Center: On "Testimonio" (Testimonial Narrative) ', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 35:1 (1989), 12-13.

³⁹³ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 282.

Given what we have already learned about the idiosyncrasies of Bouraoui's œuvre, as well as her at least occasional reticence to be seen as any kind of spokesperson, can we be justified in calling these texts *testimonios*? Are these works produced with such an 'ideological thrust' and collective spirit? To paraphrase Rosie MacLachlan's question, cited in the introduction to this thesis, how can Bouraoui's very personal textual identity quest also constitute a form of writing for others? To better explain why I believe the novels in this chapter can justifiably be called *testimonios*, let us turn to an examination of the texts themselves and consider what they seek to convey, as well as the methods used to do so.

The texts in this chapter engage in different but related ways with Bouraoui's lived experience and search for identity. *Poupée Bella* (2004) is told in the form of a diary and highlights the writer's formative experiences in the Parisian gay scene and her simultaneous early forays in creative writing. Early in the text, Bouraoui explains, 'Je cherche un monde qui parlerait de moi'.³⁹⁴ It is the fact of not seeing herself reflected in the world around her that brings her to create a world for herself through her writing; this alone surely qualifies the text as a *testimonio*, as the parallels with Gloria Anzaldúa's testimonial text *Speaking In Tongues* (also written in journal form) make clear:

Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency that I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in writing compensates for what the real world does not give me...

³⁹⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p. 16.

...The act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy. It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self, which we women of color have come to think of as “other” – the dark, the feminine. Didn’t we start writing to reconcile this other within us?³⁹⁵

For Anzaldúa, then, the act of writing is one which is deeply connected with the process of discovering the true meanings of selfhood which, for the lesbian of colour, may often be both othered and smothered by a society which does not permit such women to exist. To write is to search for what has been hidden, repressed, denied. For Bouraoui, the compulsion to write becomes almost indissociable from the desire to explore her sexual identity through her encounters in the *Milieu des Filles*. ‘L’écriture prend dans le *Milieu des Filles*,’ she states. ‘C’est la seule façon, pour moi, de devenir une personne.’³⁹⁶ By recording and recounting this process of becoming, is she able to ‘reconcile the other within’, and if so, what does such a reconciliation entail?

Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir has been described by Bouraoui as the ‘most autobiographical’ text in her œuvre.³⁹⁷ It does, however, queer the norms of autobiography in its refusal to adhere to a linear narrative. Although not as straightforwardly diaristic as *Poupée Bella*, the text re-examines some of its predecessor’s events and characters, offering new insights and challenging the notion of linearity inherent in more traditional autobiographical texts. In this regard,

³⁹⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, ‘Speaking in Tongues’, in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), pp. 163-72 (pp. 166-7).

³⁹⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p.42.

³⁹⁷ Stephen Carlick, ‘Nina Bouraoui Is a French Literary Icon; in Her First UK Novel, She Finds the Words Her Mother Couldn’t’, Penguin, (2020) <<https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/august/nina-bouraoui-interview-english-all-men-want-to-know.html>> [Accessed 17/4/21 2021].

the text very much speaks to Monica B. Pearl's notion of lesbian memoir as a genre of exceptions. She asserts that:

If autobiography as a genre has several recognizable parameters and characteristics, lesbian autobiography has a history of both adhering to and playing with those parameters and rules – sometimes in the same text. The story of lesbian memoir and autobiography is the story of exceptions.³⁹⁸

One of the key aims of this chapter, and indeed the project as a whole, is to question whether reading Bouraoui's œuvre alongside writings by other decolonial and queer of colour writers allows for a new understanding of Bouraoui's modes of production and identity creation. Do these textual conversations allow us to read between the lines of texts and view them as 'both the *expression* of evolving political consciousness and the *creator* of consciousness, itself'?³⁹⁹

All of the texts examined in the current chapter could be classified as what the Latina Feminist Group have called *papelitos guardados*, the very private made public in the form of *testimonio*, a process which can be both empowering and revolutionary. In *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, they explain:

Papelitos guardados evokes the process by which we contemplate thoughts and feelings, often in isolation and through difficult times. We keep them in our memory, write them down, and store them in safe places waiting for the appropriate moment when we can return to them for review and analysis, or

³⁹⁸ Monica B. Pearl, 'Lesbian Autobiography and Memoir', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, ed. by Jodie Medd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 169-87 (p. 176).

³⁹⁹ Cherríe Moraga, *Catching Fire*, p. xxiv.

speaking out and sharing with others. Sharing can be a process of empowerment.⁴⁰⁰

The approaches discussed here very much speak to the autobiographical contemplation demonstrated in the texts examined in this chapter, and the red thread which weaves through the novels. The process of writing thoughts and feelings down and returning to review them is seen across the texts, and there is a clear sense of the very private being made public. As Bouraoui herself states in *Poupée Bella*, '[é]crire, c'est rendre public le Milieu des Filles.'⁴⁰¹ But how does this fit with the world into which Bouraoui is publishing these texts? As already highlighted, *testimonio* and *papelitos guardados* emerged in a Latin American setting very different from the French Republican context in which Bouraoui writes. Does Bouraoui's position as a queer decolonial writer make such personal testimony more or less risky in such a context? As Marta Segarra highlights in *Nouvelles romancières francophone du Maghreb*, the notion of bearing witness to one's lived experience has emerged almost as a genre in its own right in Francophone North African authors, particularly among women writers:

Ces parcours personnels souvent parsemés d'obstacles et de renoncements douloureux pour arriver à se construire une identité éloignée des modèles répressifs, favorisant l'émergence d'une écriture autobiographique et même

⁴⁰⁰ The Latina Feminist Group, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 1.

⁴⁰¹ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p.118.

de *témoignage*, propre à toute la littérature maghrébine, mais encore plus fréquente chez les écrivaines.⁴⁰²

Segarra's analysis of Francophone North African writers also brings up an important linguistic point: why use the word *testimonio* rather than the French *témoignage* in an examination of Bouraoui's work? In keeping with the ongoing concerns of the project, the current chapter brings the writer into conversation with queer and/or decolonial feminists whose work has a political potency which, I argue, is better captured by the already politicised *testimonio*. Although *témoignage* may be semantically correct in a Francophone context, it does not, I contend, carry the same symbolic weight.

Although Segarra points to a trend for testimony and textual identity creation in her exploration of Franco-Maghrebi women writers, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, there has been a dearth of queer female writing by women of Francophone North African origin. Almost ironically, Bouraoui demonstrates her need to see her sexuality reflected textually in her pilgrimage to the home of Colette and references to her novels. 'Ce ne sont pas ses livres qui m'attachent,' she explains, 'c'est son amour pour les femmes. Je ne suis pas seule.'⁴⁰³ She finds comfort in the knowledge that she is not alone in her desire for women, yet there is something missing. She must explore this desire through her own writing in order to truly understand it. As Monica Pearl asserts, '[l]esbian lives cannot simply be revealed: there needs to be a new language to understand or express them.'⁴⁰⁴ This

⁴⁰² Marta Segarra, *Nouvelles romancières francophones du Maghreb* (Paris: Karthala, 2010), p. 11 (my emphasis).

⁴⁰³ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p.69.

⁴⁰⁴ Monica B. Pearl, 'Lesbian Autobiography and Memoir', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, ed. by Jodie Medd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 169-87 (p. 176).

is perhaps especially true for Bouraoui as a lesbian of colour who does not see herself reflected in existing queer texts and spaces. As she explains in *Poupée Bella*:

Le Kat est relié à mon premier désir d'écriture, comme si le désir des corps, assouvi ou non, la découverte d'un nouveau monde, l'acceptation et l'exploration d'une sexualité en dehors de la norme menaient au livre, à l'imaginaire, aux mots.⁴⁰⁵

As we shall see, Bouraoui begins to find and refine her own 'new language' and sexual identity precisely through the writing of her experiences in queer spaces like the Kat and the wider Milieu des Filles.

Relatedly, one may ask why this chapter positions Bouraoui's writing in these texts as *testimonios* rather than situating them within the particularly French genre of autofiction, especially given the latter genre's clear influence on Bouraoui as a writer. As with the use of Biomythography in the previous chapter of this thesis, my contention is that *testimonio* better conveys the political potential of Bouraoui's work. While autofiction explores personal identity and biomythography weaves personal and cultural narratives into mythic frameworks, *testimonio* serves as a form of advocacy, amplifying voices of the oppressed and bearing witness to social and political realities. It is a deeply ethical and political genre, grounded in truth-telling and solidarity, which is at the heart of this project's reading of Bouraoui's œuvre. I am not suggesting that the works cannot be read as autofictional. What I am suggesting is that by reading them as *testimonios*, we may allow for a more political feminist narrative to emerge.

⁴⁰⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p. 43.

In positioning Bouraoui's texts as queer testimonial acts, I am also conscious of Biddy Martin's warning about the 'bound singularity' of the term 'lesbian autobiography'. Martin asserts that:

Their combination brings out the most conventional interpretation in each, for the *lesbian* in front of *autobiography* reinforces conventional assumptions of the transparency of autobiographical writing. And the *autobiography* that follows *lesbian* suggests that sexual identity not only modifies but essentially defines a life, providing it with predictable content and an identity possessing continuity and universality.⁴⁰⁶

There are clear echoes here of Bouraoui's own concern with being 'cataloguée par sa sexualité'. Is it possible to produce lesbian autobiographical writing that does not reinforce those assumptions outlined by Martin? The analyses in this chapter endeavour to demonstrate how Bouraoui subverts both terms in this equation, with reference to the multiple modes of production, and the writer's repeated overlapping and undoing of the idea of stable, monolithic identity categories. As Smith and Watson have highlighted, the decolonial writer is adept at weaving between the lines of accepted forms and simultaneously calling them into question:

[E]ven if the colonial subject does mime certain traditional patterns, she does so with a difference. She thus exposes their gaps and incongruities, wrenches

⁴⁰⁶ Biddy Martin, 'Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference(s)' in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenk (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 77-104 (p. 78).

their meanings, calls their authority into question, for “illegitimate” speakers have a way of exposing the instability of forms.⁴⁰⁷

Rather than read Bouraoui’s texts as ‘straightforward’ lesbian autobiography, then, this chapter positions decolonial queer *testimonio* as what Caren Kaplan has called an out-law genre.⁴⁰⁸ This writerly practice is one which subverts traditional forms and exposes the instability of both standardised categories of genre and gender, textuality and sexuality. In ‘Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects’, Kaplan identifies out-law genres as ‘useful models of multiracial, multinational, multiethnic, and polysexual struggle.’⁴⁰⁹ The following analyses will examine whether Bouraoui’s autobiographical texts can be read as exemplars of this form. To return to Martin’s argument, in her reading of *This Bridge Called My Back*, amongst other queer feminist writing, she asserts that:

[L]esbianism ceases to be an identity with predictable contents, to constitute a total political and self-identification, and yet it figures no less centrally for that shift. It remains a position from which to speak, to organize, to act politically, but it ceases to be the exclusive and continuous ground of identity or politics. Indeed, it works to unsettle rather than to consolidate the boundaries around identity, not to dissolve them altogether but to open them to the fluidities and heterogeneities that make their renegotiation possible.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁷ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 'De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography' (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), (p. xx).

⁴⁰⁸ Caren Kaplan, 'Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects', in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 115-39.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 127..

⁴¹⁰ Biddy Martin, 'Lesbian Identity', p. 390.

Bringing Bouraoui's texts into conversation with decolonial and queer of colour feminist writing, then, will allow her work to be read beyond traditional forms and predictable identity categories. This discussion will instead highlight the 'irreducibly complex and paradoxical status of identity in feminist politics and autobiographical writing,' while recognising that her own lesbianism constitutes a position from which to speak.⁴¹¹ Let us turn now to a closer examination of the fluidities and complexities of Bouraoui's *papelitos* themselves.

Out-law *testimonio*: Textuality and Sexuality

If, as Martin and Pearl assert, lesbian autobiographical narratives tend to disobey the conventional rules and narrative constraints of autobiography, we may expect Bouraoui's queer testimonios to subvert form and genre, and to create a 'new language' with which to explore her own sexual identity. As discussed above, the tension between disidentification from mainstream societal expectations, wanting to find a place to belong, and finding a language to express all of this is at the heart of these novels. Furthermore, existing forms of literary expression may not always be appropriate or adequate for the lesbian of colour; 'il faudrait inventer une nouvelle écriture', Bouraoui declares in *Poupée Bella*.⁴¹² The new writing or new language called for here is also central to the concept of queer *testimonio* as 'theory in the flesh'.

Although *Poupée Bella* is the first text to engage explicitly with Bouraoui's homosexuality and early experiences in the Parisian gay scene, the novel is certainly

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p.145.

more than a straightforward coming out story (if, indeed, such a thing exists). Nor is it a hagiography of monolithic homosexual identity. *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* similarly unsettles expectations of linear and stable autobiography, as it shifts in time between chapters. As with all the works analysed in this thesis, these texts are built upon intersecting and often contrasting subjectivities. Throughout these interlinked narratives, Bouraoui destabilises the notion of selfhood as moulded into one singular identity category, or into discrete categories which are mutually exclusive. This is not to say that the texts do not engage directly with homosexuality and what it means for the narrator to navigate queer spaces and identities as part of her own quest. Indeed, the central argument in this chapter is that Bouraoui's queer *testimonio* can serve as examples of lesbian lived experience and may provide a useful point of reference for women, like those in Salima Amari's study, who do not see themselves reflected elsewhere.⁴¹³ But to read them *only* as one of sexual awakening fails to consider the myriad nuances and tensions at play throughout these works and Bouraoui's œuvre more broadly. In this, Bouraoui shares a writerly space with Cherríe Moraga and Audre Lorde in particular. All three writers use their homosexuality as a lens through which to view the falsity of monolithic identities, and as a point of navigation across the multiple intersections of otherness in their lives. Through this process, these authors produce writings that, to return to Bidy Martin's discussion, 'work against self-evidently homogenous conceptions of identity, writings in which lesbianism comes to figure as something other than a "totalizing self-identification" and to be located on other than exclusively psychological grounds.'⁴¹⁴ In light of these considerations, Bouraoui's assertion that,

⁴¹³ See below for more on Amari's work.

⁴¹⁴ Bidy Martin, 'Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference(S)', in *Life/Lines Theorizing Women's Autobiography* ed. by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenk (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 380-92 (p. 383).

'[I]'homosexualité n'est pas une identité' is perhaps less a refusal to accept the implied link to the LGBTQ community, and more a call to recognise that sexuality does not exist in a vacuum, but is informed by other aspects of the self and of society.

It is important to state here that an opposition to the sort of "totalizing self-identification" Martin warns against does not mean denying one's sexuality. All the authors discussed here identify as lesbians and use their work to examine their relationship to their sexuality. Again, this is especially significant for the lesbian of colour who is both oppressed and obscured by the mainstream. As Gloria Anzaldúa states: 'The lesbian of color is not only invisible, she doesn't even exist. Our speech, too, is inaudible. We speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane.'⁴¹⁵ There is therefore a tension between the need to be seen, heard and understood as a lesbian of colour, and the desire to shift away from too narrow a focus on one particular aspect of one's identity. This is exacerbated, of course, by the already restricted space allotted to women (especially women of colour) in wider society, and the even more circumscribed world of literary publishing. This last issue would perhaps have been less of a concern for Bouraoui by the time she came to write *Poupée Bella*, given that she was already an established and celebrated author in France. This does not mean, however, that she was comfortable with her position either within the industry, or indeed within society more broadly, particularly since she was effectively 'coming out' with the publication of this text. She was certainly not in a place of self-acceptance when she began to write her first novel during the years portrayed in *Poupée Bella* and parts of *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*. As she explains in an interview:

⁴¹⁵ Anzaldúa, *Speaking in Tongues*, p. 163.

Once I started going to the Kat, writing became an urgent need...I learned so much from my nights there – about passion, shame, fear, human nature. I was the youngest, the women I was hanging out with were much older and from very different backgrounds to my own. For a writer, it was a gift. I'd come home in the early hours and write, probably as a way of 'purging' myself – tensions were rife among these women. And I somehow thought I could 'fix' my homosexuality. I thought if I managed to become a writer and be published, the reality of my queer nature would fade into the background. Foolish, yes, but it did give me the strength to finally accept who I was.⁴¹⁶

There is much to unpack here: the euphemistic 'different backgrounds'; the evident internalised homophobia; the coincidence of embracing writerly and queer identities; the ethics of using 'these women' as fodder for her writing and subsequently as a way to erase her own homosexuality. The quotation reveals a great deal about both Bouraoui's relationship to her sexuality and the wider social mores which dictate that such a sexuality requires 'fixing'. Contradicting the earlier belief that writing would cure her of her homosexuality, the final line demonstrates just how much writing, for Bouraoui, is bound up with self-acceptance and understanding. As she writes in *Poupée Bella*, '[I]a main qui écrit est une main qui guérit.'⁴¹⁷ What is being cured in this process is not her sexuality but her socially constructed beliefs about the inherent wrongness of that sexuality.

⁴¹⁶ Bouraoui in Stephen Carlick, 'Nina Bouraoui Is a French Literary Icon; in Her First UK Novel, She Finds the Words Her Mother Couldn't'.

⁴¹⁷ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p.126.

Taking into consideration the expectation of subversion outlined by Martin and Pearl, one may initially be struck by Bouraoui's decision to construct *Poupée Bella* as a diary, particularly given the often-negative critical responses to the genre, summarised by Philippe Lejeune as 'malsain, hypocrite, lâche, nul, artificiel, stérile, ratatinant, féminin...' and the fact that published (therefore, respected?) diaries are generally written by men.⁴¹⁸ Lejeune's pejorative use of the word feminine is revealing, reflecting as it does an historic mistrust of all things female, along with the notion that diary writing is presumed to be an inherently female pursuit. This is also evidenced in Anzaldúa's discussion, cited above, about the invisibilisation and silencing of that which is read as 'other', 'dark' and 'feminine.'⁴¹⁹ However, if theory in the flesh is driven by a desire to 'bridge the contradictions in our experience...by telling our stories in our own words', might not the journal format be fitting in its focus on the uncensored ego?⁴²⁰ Indeed, Bouraoui frequently cites Hervé Guibert as an influence on her own writing. Much of Guibert's autobiographical writing is drawn from his own diaries and focuses very clearly on the uncensored ego. Towards the end of *Poupée Bella*, she declares: 'On devrait pouvoir tout écrire, d'une écriture qui viendrait de l'intérieur de soi, une écriture secrète et inédite.'⁴²¹ As Nancy Arenberg reflects in her discussion of *Poupée Bella*, the 'focus of diary fictions tends to de-emphasise plot to concentrate on registering the feelings and reflections of the writer's most intimate thoughts.'⁴²² In terms of queer *testimonio*, the use of the diary form perhaps allows Bouraoui to share the deeply personal while simultaneously

⁴¹⁸ Philippe Lejeune, *L'autobiographie en procès: actes du colloque de Nanterre, 18-19 octobre, 1996*, Nanterre, Presses Universitaires de Nanterre (1997), p. 62.

⁴¹⁹ Anzaldúa, *Speaking in Tongues*, p. 163.

⁴²⁰ Cherríe Moraga, 'Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh', in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), p. 19.

⁴²¹ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p.141.

⁴²² Nancy M. Arenberg, 'Gender Hybridity in Nina Bouraoui's *Poupée Bella*', *New Zealand Journal of French Studies*, 35 (2014), 32.

forging a political praxis in the very process of that sharing. Reflecting this imbrication of lived experience and the writerly experience, she states, 'Ma vie est un journal intime...Maîtriser son écriture c'est se maîtriser soi.'⁴²³

A further potential constraint to the idea of a 'nouvelle écriture' is the normative chronology implied by *Poupée Bella's* diary form. Arenberg notes that Bouraoui 'follows the traditional structure of the genre by arranging the diary entries chronologically'.⁴²⁴ It is true that the text begins with a clear sense of place and time: Paris, 30 octobre 1987 – 21 juin 1989, and we know that this roughly corresponds with Bouraoui's own biographical timeline. But does the structure of the text really conform to autobiographical traditions, as Arenberg states, and do the generic constraints of the diary form mean that we cannot read the text as an example of queer *testimonio*? Although the diary entries do follow a linear chronology, there is an inherent fracture in the form of the narrative. Arenberg asserts that the 'staccato, and, in some instances abbreviated style of the entries reflects the compelling question of identity fragmentation.'⁴²⁵ Some of the fragments are only one line long. For example:

2 janvier 1988

Je perds mon visage dans le Milieu des Filles.

...

13 février

Je quitte la vraie vie et je n'ai pas peur de cela.⁴²⁶

⁴²³ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p. 33; p.83.

⁴²⁴ Arenberg, p. 31.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, pp.20-22.

We have seen this disjointed, truncated prose elsewhere in Bouraoui's œuvre, but the diary form certainly accentuates the sense of breaking apart, losing sight of who she thought she was, or perhaps who she was expected to be. As Montserrat Serrano Mañes highlights, the use of the journal format allows Bouraoui to exceed the limits of genre:

L'écriture hachée et saccadée de Bouraoui, si souvent présente dans son œuvre, devient encore plus évidente dans ce livre qui épouse la forme fragmentaire et immédiate du journal intime. C'est par le morcellement qu'elle échappe à toute contrainte compositive.⁴²⁷

The fragmentary form allows Bouraoui to avoid literary constraints while simultaneously engaging with the physical and emotional realities of her lived experience.

Furthermore, despite the apparent linearity of the extracts, the narrative is in a frequent state of temporal flux, with its allusions to events which took place before the action described in the diary entries themselves.⁴²⁸ One of the ways that this is achieved is through repetition of the word 'avant', which recurs no fewer than forty-five times in just over one hundred and fifty pages of brief textual fragments. In some extracts, the word is repeated multiple times, for example:

Avant, Marion s'enduisait d'huile de palme.

Avant, Marion disait: Nous deux, c'est pour la vie.

⁴²⁷ Montserrat Serrano Mañes, 'Nina Bouraoui: construction sexuelle et transgression identitaire', *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 1 (2011), 40.

⁴²⁸ This also happens in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* under the headings of 'devenir' and 'savoir', and in *Nos baisers sont des adieux* via the frequent temporal jumping.

Avant, Marion tenait ma main et embrassait mes yeux.
Avant, Marion m'appelait, de la plage, de la mer, de la digue, et je courais
vers le corps amoureux.
Avant, je savais l'amour.
Avant, j'allais gagner le Milieu des Filles.
Avant, je regardais le ciel et je croyais au paradis.
Avant, Françoise n'embrassait qu'une seule fille.
Je pourrais les gifler, mais je quitte le jardin.⁴²⁹

While there may be linearity on one level, then, there is also a sense of temporal flight which extends backwards beyond the text's beginning. Moreover, extracts such as the one quoted above give the impression that the narrator is engaged in a renegotiation of her identity which extends beyond the people through whom she may have forged this identity previously. In the novel's opening pages, Bouraoui speaks about how she has historically been perceived by others: 'avant, j'entendais: Elle a un drôle de visage, elle a un regard qui derange, elle n'est pas douce, elle a l'odeur d'un garçon, elle s'habille n'importe comment, elle a une beauté spéciale, on ne sait pas ce qu'elle deviendra.'⁴³⁰ We have seen this previously in Bouraoui's work, particularly when the writer describes the words of those from whom she wishes to distance herself. Her maternal grandparents are a good example of this. Similarly, in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, this notion of distance is provided by the repetition of 'Se souvenir', the title given to all the chapters which deal with her childhood. The extent to which one can perform this kind of familial or social schism in real life is uncertain. For many of the women in Amari's study, for example, the opinion of family and community far outweighs the desire or possibility

⁴²⁹ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p.147.

⁴³⁰ Ibid. pp. 7-8.

for an individualised renegotiation of identity.⁴³¹ However, the distancing work done by the word 'avant' does allow Bouraoui to imply that change *is* possible, at least in the context of a textual 'theory in the flesh.'

We also see this fracturing and suturing of time and the construction of self in both novels via the notion of "becoming", which recurs throughout the texts.⁴³² In her discussion of *Poupée Bella*, Arenberg notes that 'the verb *devenir* reaffirms Butler's notion of gender destabilisation [and] also encompasses the multiplicity of the body as a fragmented entity.'⁴³³ There is a testimonial quality to the repetition; a sense of unrehearsed bearing witness which brings us back once again to the concept of *Papelitos guardados* as 'the process by which we contemplate thoughts and feelings, often in isolation and through difficult times.'⁴³⁴ This is repeated in the later novel as Bouraoui uses the title 'Devenir' for the chapters which explore her experiences in the Milieu des Filles, and her coming to terms with her sexual identity. This recursive flow frequently extends beyond the boundary of the texts and its reference points, as Bouraoui often returns to places, events, and people in the later texts, sometimes changing the story, or telling it from a different angle. Moraga and Lorde also employ these time-related shifts within one text, particularly in *Loving in the War Years* (Moraga) and *Zami: A new spelling of my name* (Lorde), but Bouraoui does it *across* texts. This testimonial renegotiation echoes Moraga's description of theory in the flesh as both the expression and the creator of political consciousness. Within the very structure of the text/s, the concept of selfhood is developing all the time, identity constantly in flux. This is perhaps most clearly shown in the chapter

⁴³¹ See Chapter Five of this thesis for more on individual and collective identity.

⁴³² See also section on *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, below.

⁴³³ Arenberg, p. 42.

⁴³⁴The Latina Feminist Group, *Telling To Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 1.

titles of *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, fluctuating between states of remembering ('Se souvenir') to becoming ('Devenir'), knowing ('Savoir') to being (Être). Indeed, the later novel can be read as a synecdochical representation of Bouraoui's published work to date, revisiting places and characters, and retelling events from across the œuvre. The developing political consciousness emerges through Bouraoui's focus on the silent and silenced, the Borderland spaces of her own lived experience. As she states in the text: 'J'écris les travées et les silences, ce que l'on ne voit pas, ce que l'on n'entend pas.'⁴³⁵ Bouraoui uses a similar technique in the 2010 novel, *Nos baisers sont des adieux* and, as I have written in an article about that text, the rejection of straight lines and privileging of that which is not normally seen or heard echoes Sara Ahmed's notion of the 'discontinuity of queer desires', desires which 'can be explained in terms of objects that are not points on the straight line.'^{436 437}

This engagement with the personal and the subversion of normative structures position *Poupée Bella* and *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* firmly within the field of out-law genre and its focus on cultural and personal survival. As Kaplan argues: 'An oppositional relationship to writing and to genres such as autobiography requires the difficult embrace of unfamiliar narrative strategies as well as the validating insertion of your own familiar modes of expression and your own systems of signification.'⁴³⁸ Even the books' titles are suggestive of this oppositional relationship and a concomitant desire to counter stereotypes and challenge conventions. *Poupée Bella* references the popular 'Bella' range of dolls,

⁴³⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 258.

⁴³⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham, NC ; London: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), p. 71.

⁴³⁷ Daisy Savage, 'Mixed Métissage: Desire and Disorientation in Nina Bouraoui's *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, *Francosphères* (Liverpool University Press, forthcoming).

⁴³⁸ Caren Kaplan, 'Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects', p. 132.

manufactured in France between 1946 and 1984. The young Nina would, of course, have been familiar with the mass-produced toys but is unlikely to have seen herself reflected in them.⁴³⁹ There is a multi-pronged irony here: in the expectation that all girls want to play with dolls; that all little girls are the same; that those girls and the women they become are expected to conform to an image and a narrative that is externally produced. On the opening page of the text, and echoing *Garçon manqué*, Bouraoui makes clear that she does not accept these social norms: 'je suis une femme, je suis un homme, je suis tout, je ne suis rien, je déteste les filles qui font trop filles, je n'ai rien d'une fille normale.'⁴⁴⁰

If Nina herself is read as the *Poupée* of the title, she is subverting the form by telling her own story rather than having it told for her, and by reflecting onto the Bella doll an image and a narrative which would not ordinarily be inscribed upon it.

Describing a visit to a gay club with her friend, Julien, the narrator wryly notes: 'Il y a toujours une fille qui accompagne un garçon, il y a toujours une poupée Bella dont on est fier.'⁴⁴¹ The role of the woman, then, is always reliant upon and guided by the existence of the man, even in the context of this apparently queer space.⁴⁴² As we shall see in the next section of this chapter, the stigmatisation of female sexuality, and especially queer sexuality, is apparent even within such spaces. As Cherríe Moraga has argued, '[m]ost women are not immune from experiencing pain in relation to their sexuality, but certainly lesbians experience a particular pain and oppression.'⁴⁴³ The oppression here between a gay man (Julien) and a lesbian

⁴³⁹ Although Bouraoui spent most of her childhood in Algeria, her maternal Grandmother often sent her granddaughters gifts from France. It is therefore likely that Nina was at least conscious of these dolls and others like them.

⁴⁴⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p. 7.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.70.

⁴⁴² Tellingly, in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, Bouraoui refers to 'la souffrance' as her poupée Bella. Again, she completely queers the expectation of la poupée.

⁴⁴³ Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga, 'What We're Rollin around in Bed with (Sexual Silences in Feminsim: A Conversation toward Ending Them)', *Heresies*, 3 (1981).

(Nina), their 'mariage blanc', recreates the power dynamics of compulsory heterosexuality.⁴⁴⁴ Indeed, the relationship between the two characters is frequently troubling to the reader.

Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir, meanwhile, may also be read as a challenge to gendered status quo, with its ironic (?) reference to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (the quotation also functions as the book's epigraph). Bouraoui here repurposes the words of a man who emphasised the inferiority and passivity of women to explore her own ongoing search for meaning and selfhood. The text's final sentence makes this even clearer: 'Nous ne cesserons de chercher à savoir, nous, les hommes et les femmes, égaux et différents, lancés dans le tourbillon de la ville et des atomes invisibles et magnétiques.'⁴⁴⁵ In a passage towards the end of the book, she states: 'J'écris les travées et les silences, ce que l'on ne voit pas, ce que l'on n'entend pas.'⁴⁴⁶ Reaching beyond Aristotle's assertion, Bouraoui here legitimises her own desire for knowledge, and highlights the value of amplifying that which is not ordinarily seen or heard. One of those unseen spaces which is amplified in both of these texts is the world of the lesbian bar. The next section will consider how Bouraoui simultaneously celebrates spaces of lesbian visibility and questions the notions of queer utopia and homonormativity throughout the texts.

In the Ghetto: Queer Space as Borderland

A critical element of Bouraoui's 'theory in the flesh' across the novels under consideration here is her engagement with sexuality and the difficulties, as well as pleasures, she experiences in her attempts to reconcile this part of herself with her

⁴⁴⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p.35.

⁴⁴⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 264.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.258.

other disparate and shifting identities. Bouraoui's work in these texts speaks to Moraga's examination of her own process of 'lifting the lid' on her lesbianism and the subsequent realisation that she, and other women like her, are multiply oppressed on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality. Moraga explains:

In this country, lesbianism is a poverty – as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. *The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression.* The danger lies in attempting to deal with the oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of her own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place.⁴⁴⁷

For Moraga, 'this country' is the USA, but the arguments she makes could be transposed to almost any Western national context. France has its own problems with lesbian oppression and invisibility, particularly in public settings.⁴⁴⁸ 'Pour le sens commun, les lesbiennes n'existent guère,' states Michel Bozon in his introduction to Natacha Chetcuti's groundbreaking study, *Se dire lesbienne*.⁴⁴⁹ This denial of lesbian existence is also evident in the dearth of lesbian spaces in France's cities, a marginalisation which is arguably in stark contrast to their male counterparts. Paris, Stéphane Leroy asserts in his 2005 paper, 'Gay Paris', is 'today one of the major

⁴⁴⁷ Cherrie Moraga, 'La Güera', in *This Bridge Called My Back* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), pp. 22-9 (p. 24).

⁴⁴⁸ For a detailed examination of lesbian identity in a French context, see Natacha Chetcuti's *Se dire lesbienne* (Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages, 2010). On invisibilisation and the lack of lesbian role models, see Alice Coffin, *Le Génie Lesbienne* (Paris: Grasset, 2020).

⁴⁴⁹ Bozon in Natacha Chetcuti, *Se dire lesbienne* (Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages, 2010), p. 8.

centres of homosexuality in Europe and the world.⁴⁵⁰ The opening in 1978 of the bar 'Le Village' at the heart of the ancient Marais district, a zone which straddles the 3rd and 4th arrondissements, symbolised a shift from Bourdieu's notion of the invisibilisation of homosexuals in public spaces, to what Scott Gunther has called 'a new kind of visibility' for the gay community.⁴⁵¹ Visibility was at the heart of Le Village owner, Joël Leroux's project. In an interview with *Le Parisien* in 2001, he explained: 'Starting from the principle that we had nothing to hide, I wanted people inside to be able to see what was happening outside and vice versa.'⁴⁵² The success of Le Village led to rapid development and expansion within the Marais district, as more and more bars, restaurants, shops and clubs opened to cater to the gay community.

However, The Marais clientele was, and remains, predominantly male. Lesbians, Leroy tells us, 'are (almost) nowhere to be seen,' and 'almost 97% of gay establishments in Paris are intended for men only.'⁴⁵³ Although Leroy doesn't qualify this figure, his findings are borne out by other researchers: There are, according to Michael Sibalís, no lesbian bars in the Marais;⁴⁵⁴ Nadine Cattán and Anne Clerval argue that lesbians are largely 'invisible and invisibilised in urban spaces';⁴⁵⁵ Gill Valentine and Tracey Skelton similarly highlight that invisibility is particularly true of lesbians and lesbian spaces.⁴⁵⁶ As such, according to sociologist and queer activist, Sam Bourcier, 'visibility in the Marais...serves a single type of identity, masculine,

⁴⁵⁰ Stéphane Leroy, 'Gay Paris: Elements for a Geography of Homosexuality', *Annales de géographie*, 646 (2005), 579.

⁴⁵¹ Scott Gunther, 'The Indifferent Ghetto', *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, 6 (1999), 34.

⁴⁵² Michael Sibalís, 'Urban Spaces and Homosexuality: The Example of the Marais, Paris' 'Gay Ghetto', *Urban Studies*, 41 (2004), 1745.

⁴⁵³ Leroy, p. 582.

⁴⁵⁴ Sibalís.

⁴⁵⁵ Nadine Cattán and Anne Clerval, 'Un Droit à la ville? Réseaux virtuels et centralités éphémères des lesbiennes à Paris', *Justice spatiale*, 3 (2011), 1.

⁴⁵⁶ Gill Valentine and Tracey Skelton, 'Finding Oneself, Losing Oneself: The Lesbian and Gay 'Scene' as a Paradoxical Space', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27 (2003).

bourgeois and white.⁴⁵⁷ Those lesbian bars and clubs which did exist were often short-lived, as Bouraoui herself highlights: 'Les clubs de femmes ferment les uns après les autres.'⁴⁵⁸

This sociological phenomenon is also reflected in the literary world. Nina Bouraoui remains one of the only Francophone women writers to have written openly about her experiences as a lesbian, and significantly, as a lesbian of colour. While this is slowly changing, I would tend to agree with Garréta and Savigneau's assertion that in France 'gay male literature is clearly identifiable and identified,' while there is a 'dearth in their female counterparts.'⁴⁵⁹ As such, Bouraoui's autobiographical accounts of her lived experience are vital artifacts in what Monica B. Pearl calls the 'historical shifts from lesbian invisibility to lesbian visibility.'⁴⁶⁰ This is yet more urgent for the lesbian of colour who, as Anzaldúa has argued, doesn't even exist. Indeed, Amari's 2018 study represents, 'la première recherche totalement dédiée à la question lesbienne chez les migrantes du Maghreb et d'ascendance maghrébine en France.'⁴⁶¹ Bouraoui, however, had begun to explore this question fourteen years earlier. To what extent do her queer *testimonios* visibilise and legitimise lesbian lived experience? And can these 'heartfelt grapplings' serve as what Luz María Umpierre calls a 'beacon and a flamethrower' for other women?⁴⁶²

As already highlighted, much of *Poupée Bella* and around half of *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* is situated in and around Le Milieu des Filles, the name Bouraoui gives to the lesbian bars she frequents in Paris. Unlike the queer

⁴⁵⁷ Bourcier, cited in Sibalis.

⁴⁵⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 199.

⁴⁵⁹ Anne F. Garréta and Josyane Savigneau, 'A Conversation', *Yale French Studies*, 90 (1996), 225-26.

⁴⁶⁰ Monica B. Pearl, 'Lesbian Autobiography and Memoir', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, ed. by Jodie Medd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 169-87 (p. 180).

⁴⁶¹ Salima Amari, *Lesbiennes De L'immigration* (Vulaines sur Seine: Éditions du Croquant, 2018), p.7.

⁴⁶² Luz María Umpierre, 'The Double "L" - Latina and Lesbian: A Testimony', in *Inversions*, ed. by Betsy Warland (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1991), pp. 117-25.

utopia of le Marais, le Milieu is not a concrete, clearly-delineated space. It is instead a collection of disparate and often discreet spaces in which women who love women gather socially, and where the writer herself spent a good deal of time in the 1980s and '90s. It is a timeless, Borderland space for Bouraoui: 'C'est un lieu sans époque ou qui réunit toutes les époques. Nous sommes à part. Nous le resterons. Les homosexuelles.'⁴⁶³ This notion of lesbians existing apart from, and yet still within, the wider social structure is critical to an understanding of Bouraoui's developing sense of her sexuality and its centrality to both her lived experience and her writerly practice.

Crucially, although Le Milieu de Filles appears to be Bouraoui's own invented term, the names of the bars and clubs she mentions in these texts are the names of real lesbian (and sometimes gay male) spaces.⁴⁶⁴ Le Katmandou is perhaps the most famous of these, but we also read about her visits to Le Soft, Chez Moune and Le Memorie's, amongst others. Using the real names of these spaces simultaneously renders visible the Milieu and situates Bouraoui's narratives within a firm geographical and historical context. This is in keeping with much of Bouraoui's autobiographical work, and further emphasises the testimonial quality of the texts. We may, perhaps, contrast this with Anne F. Garétt's 1989 novel, *Sphinx*. Garétt was a DJ at the Katmandou in the 1980s and the bar features heavily in the text. However, Garétt opts to change the name of the bar and to anonymise her protagonists, to the extent that they have sometimes been read as heterosexual rather than lesbian. While Bouraoui does occasionally change the names of her characters, her decision to give the real names of these lesbian spaces in her texts

⁴⁶³ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 141.

⁴⁶⁴ The term 'le milieu' is a generic term used to describe the gay bars of Paris.

could be read as a political decision which renders visible these often hidden and proscribed spaces. This is not to say that Bouraoui's writing of *Le Milieu* reflects an idealised transition into a lesbian utopia. Indeed, the truth is often very far from idyllic.

In many ways, *Le Milieu de filles* represents a space that is simultaneously one of identity and exclusion. A description, in *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, of the entrance to *Le Kat*, dated 1986, carries echoes of the marginalisation and invisibilisation of lesbian spaces outlined above, mixed with the deep desire to belong to a group:

Elle semblait avoir été creusée dans le mur. J'avais peur de sonner, d'entrer, j'avais peur d'être vue. J'avais peur de ce qui se tenait derrière. Il fallait sonner et attendre. Une lucarne s'ouvrait. Une fois à l'intérieur, je restais près du bar. Je ne dansais pas. Je regardais le sol ou les murs. Une autre peur arrivait. La peur de ressortir.⁴⁶⁵

The fear and uncertainty that Nina feels in this scene clearly demonstrate a lack of lesbian visibility but also a concomitant sense of internalised homophobia: she is literally frightened of what she might find, or that she may be seen and 'found out'. This is made yet clearer in a passage in *Poupée Bella*, in which she states: 'Chaque fois, avant d'entrer dans une boîte de filles, j'ai peur; parce que j'ai rendez-vous avec ma conscience. Je crois encore à l'immoralité de cette vie-là.'⁴⁶⁶ There is an apparent sense of shame and fear associated with the repercussions of being seen

⁴⁶⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Nos baisers sont des adieux* (Paris: Stock, 2010), p. 22.

⁴⁶⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p. 52.

in this proscribed Borderland space, a shame that Bouraoui argues is 'à cause des autres', because of others.⁴⁶⁷ Indeed, as Chetcuti-Osorovitz and Jean-Jacques argue, it is the potential for violence and hostile reactions from wider society (or, perhaps more worryingly, those closer to home) which frequently pushes lesbians to render *themselves* invisible. Again, Bouraoui echoes this as she spends the daytime searching for the women she has seen in these spaces at night: '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.'⁴⁶⁸ Indeed, the spaces of day and night play a critical role in Bouraoui's relationship with her own sexual identity. Returning to the portrait from *Nos baisers* again, she states:

Le jour je changeais de trottoir, me faisant la promesse de ne plus y retourner.

La nuit, mon désir était plus fort que ma crainte d'être reconnue par quelqu'un qui n'existait que dans mon imagination.⁴⁶⁹

Homosexuality becomes bound up with darkness and the inherent danger of succumbing to the dark desires she feels, while in the daytime, in the light, she is able to resist (by literally changing sides) the pull of the darkness.

The sense of internalised homophobia becomes yet further pronounced in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*. 'Je crois devoir payer ce que je suis', she claims;⁴⁷⁰ 'Je suis terrifiée à l'idée d'avoir été démasquée, de mériter une

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 21-2.

⁴⁶⁹ Nina Bouraoui, *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, p. 22.

⁴⁷⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p.16

punition;⁴⁷¹ ‘J’éprouve au Kat une forme de honte sociale. Une honte dont j’ai honte...Je souffre de ma propre homophobie;’⁴⁷² She worries that someone will ‘dénonce’ her to her fellow students who know nothing of her ‘penchants’ and ‘inversion’.⁴⁷³ The kind of language the young Nina uses about herself is deeply rooted in the mores of wider society. Existing in the Borderlands makes Bouraoui and the other women who inhabit le Milieu social deviants. As Anzaldúa reminds us: ‘Deviance is whatever is condemned by the community. Most societies try to get rid of their deviants. Most cultures have burned and beaten their homosexuals and others who deviate from the sexual common.’⁴⁷⁴ This notion of deviation of course echoes the idea that there is a pre-ordained route which should be followed, and that to divert from that path is to invite, at best, alienation and at worst, annihilation. As we have seen in the extracts above, internalising these prejudices and expectations of the wider community can lead to an ambivalence or even a disconnect from the self. The lesbian of colour, of course, is doubly deviant, as she belongs fully to none of the groups to which she may nominally be assigned. This is further complicated in the often claustrophobic, cliquy world of the lesbian bar, as Alexis de Veaux highlights in her biography of Audre Lorde.

Seeking a social group to which she could belong, Lorde began to frequent the lesbian bars of New York’s East and West Village. As De Veaux explains:

The home she found in community with [white lesbians] was a precarious shelter in which she was deeply conflicted by her compartmentalization as

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴⁷² Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., p. 32.

⁴⁷⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. 25. anniversary, 4. edn (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), p. 40.

either silenced black or colourless lesbian. Lorde both enjoyed her exotic position and resented the isolation of being an outsider in this newfound “community.” Thus, her bonds with white lesbian women were troubled, insufficient as definitions of community.⁴⁷⁵

The ambivalence of Lorde’s experience is writ large in De Veaux’s description, with enjoyment and resentment coalescing in this Borderland community. ‘As public spaces,’ De Veaux continues, ‘the bars were intense, complex sexual theatres in which lesbians were no longer alone and had the chance to develop ideas about community and act out desire.’⁴⁷⁶ This depiction could also accurately be used for Le Milieu as Bouraoui experiences it, with its sexual dramas and complex politics, bound by the overarching theme of desire. She explains in *Poupée Bella*:

‘Nous avons toutes le même désir et je n’ai pas peur de cela. Je suis faite des filles de la nuit. Je suis faite de cette intelligence-là. Je suis faite de leur violence et de leur douceur.’⁴⁷⁷ If the repetition of ‘je suis faite de...’ emphasises Bouraoui’s potential sense of belonging to the group, the juxtaposition of ‘violence’ and ‘douceur’ surely serves to amplify the precarity of such a community, as does the recurring motif of ‘la nuit’. While these women may be bound by their desires, they are also bound by their fears. As Bouraoui writes elsewhere:

Dans le Milieu des filles, j’apprends le mensonge. Je ne sais pas si c’est lié à la nuit, ou à l’homosexualité, comme si le mensonge était une extension de

⁴⁷⁵ Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: Norton, 2004), pp. 56-7.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 57.

⁴⁷⁷ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p. 22.

notre nature à force de nous cacher, de dissimuler, pour nous protéger des autres.⁴⁷⁸

As such, Le Milieu becomes an uncertain and threatening place, especially for the solo traveller. This is one of the reasons that Nina, like Lorde before her, seeks out other women to integrate with.

Like Lorde's community of white lesbians, Bouraoui eventually joins forces with 'la bande d'Ely'. This is a pivotal moment for the young protagonist as she begins to feel a greater sense of belonging in Le Milieu. The effect is almost instantaneous: 'La bande d'Ely m'accepte tout de suite, je retrouve les filles avant de sortir au Kat, cela me rassure.'⁴⁷⁹ And yet, she must still wear a mask of sorts in these early moments: 'Je me présente, pour être acceptée, comme celle qui écrit, avec un léger mépris.'⁴⁸⁰ This desire to be accepted cuts across Bouraoui's œuvre, as does the motif of disguise and alter-ego. And yet there is something perhaps more disturbing to the reader about the fact that she feels the need to adopt a disguise (albeit one which is close to her contemporary reality) in a space which should feel safe. This discomfort is exacerbated by the continual presence of Ely, who is a divisive character across these texts and is certainly one of the antagonists of the œuvre, despite her apparent acceptance of Nina into her group. Evidencing both Ely's ambivalent character and the insularity of Le Milieu, Bouraoui notes:

Ely connaît toutes les filles... Ses connaissances se divisent en deux catégories: celles avec qui elle a passé une nuit ou plus, celles avec qui elle

⁴⁷⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 193.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 47.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 34.

s'est battue, les deux catégories se confondant parfois pour la même personne.⁴⁸¹

This insularity is named by several of Amari's interviewees as the reason for their abandoning Le Milieu.

As well as dealing with their own internalised homophobia and the complex social politics outlined above, women who enter these spaces for the first time may find themselves judged according to certain community criteria. Especially prevalent in Le Milieu is the butch/femme or masc/fem coding, which De Veaux also highlights in her discussion of Lorde's experience in lesbian bars. Reflecting on this in *Poupée Bella*, Bouraoui remembers somebody commenting to her: 'Tu n'es pas assez masculine pour les filles.'⁴⁸² This policing of outward appearance is also highlighted by many of the women in Amari's study. Soraya, for example, explains: 'La première fois que je suis rentrée dans une boîte *gay*, on m'a dit que tu n'as pas l'air lesbienne.'⁴⁸³ Mounira, meanwhile, speaks about having to ring a bell to be admitted to a gay club, only to be refused because she does not fit the stereotypes (see also Bouraoui's description of the Kat, above).

De Veaux's discussion of the New York lesbian scene of the 1950s and '60s highlights the issue of class and the fact that many of the women in the queer spaces Lorde frequented were predominantly poor and working class. Bouraoui is potentially problematic in this regard, demonstrating what may be read as a sense of class superiority in her depiction of the patrons of Le Milieu. She speaks of her 'honte sociale' with regard to associating with women who are 'étrangères à mon

⁴⁸¹ Ibid. p. 58.

⁴⁸² Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p. 25.

⁴⁸³ Salima Amari, *Lesbiennes de l'immigration* (Vulaines sur Seine: Éditions du Croquant, 2018), p.176.

milieu, des ouvrières, des anciennes détenues, des prostituées.⁴⁸⁴ Although she claims to be ashamed of this, Bouraoui makes clear that she struggles to fit in with these women, is even scared of them because, 'elles ne ressemblent pas et elles ne ressemblent pas aux femmes de mon enfance.'⁴⁸⁵

There is also an overt racism in many of these interactions, seemingly coalescing around the idea that a woman of colour, particularly a woman of North African heritage, cannot be a lesbian. In *Tous les hommes*, Ely manages to demonstrate her own racism and others' fetishization of women of colour in one deeply troubling exchange with Nina:

Ely ne me demande jamais de l'embrasser, je ne lui plais pas: «Les Arabes ce n'est pas mon truc, je sais qu'il y en a qui adorent, pas moi, et puis vous avez cette peau dorée l'été, mais un peu verdâtre l'hiver, non?». ⁴⁸⁶

Ely may be the antagonist, fuelled by her own self-hatred, but the rest of the women who make up 'la bande' also struggle to reconcile their lives within and outside Le Milieu. Reflecting on the character of Laurence, who ultimately kills herself, the narrator states: 'Je pense à Laurence, elle s'abîme à cause de son homosexualité et nous nous abîmons toutes à notre façon pour la même raison.'⁴⁸⁷ The use of the verb *abîmer* here is powerful. There is a destructive drive within these characters, just as there is a toxicity in the Milieu. While it is not surprising that these characters are fuelled by self-loathing, given the social circumstances outlined above, it is hugely important that Bouraoui discusses the destructive nature of internalised

⁴⁸⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 31.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

homophobia across these texts. It is insidious, and by writing openly and honestly about it, Bouraoui asks her readers to question a society which allows people to damage, even destroy themselves, because their sexuality is proscribed. Using her own lived experience to do this makes her political argument all the stronger. As she states in *Mes mauvaises pensées*: 'Je lis que des hommes et des femmes tombent malades de ne pouvoir vivre leur homosexualité. C'est très dangereux de réprimer ses désirs. Cela peut conduire à la folie et à d'autres formes de violence.'⁴⁸⁸ The characters in both *Poupée Bella* and *Tous les hommes* are vivid examples of this illness, madness, and violence.

Many will recognise the hostility and claustrophobia, even the self-destructive forces sometimes at play, in the lesbian social space, as highlighted above. So why would one choose to frequent such a place and to return so regularly? One reason, perhaps, lies in Bouraoui's statement in *Tous les hommes*: 'Au bar, assise, j'attends, c'est triste, j'accepte cette tristesse car dans ce lieu qui ne me plait pas, je cherche quelque chose.'⁴⁸⁹ It is this search which leads the young Nina away from any preordained path and instead along a less certain route: 'je ne sais pas où elle me conduira, elle est couverte d'épines et d'orties.'⁴⁹⁰

As Sara Ahmed has highlighted, 'the lesbian body does not extend the shape of this world, as a world organized around the form of the heterosexual couple.'⁴⁹¹ The world that Ahmed describes is organized in straight lines and clearly defined identity categories. We may add the clear lines and visible contours of the (male) gay Marais to this world. What happens, then, when one refuses to or is unable to follow those lines, as Bouraoui describes above? Ahmed continues:

⁴⁸⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p.47.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁹¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 20.

Inhabiting a body that is not extended by the skin of the social means the world acquires a new shape and makes new impressions. Becoming a lesbian taught me about the very point of how life gets directed and how that “point” is often hidden from view.

Becoming reorientated, which involves the disorientation of encountering the world differently, made me wonder about orientation and how much “feeling at home,” or knowing which way we are facing, is about the making of worlds.⁴⁹²

Ahmed’s choice of words here is illuminating. The notion of ‘becoming’ a lesbian could of course indicate that she had previously identified her sexuality differently.⁴⁹³ But could it not also suggest that the coming to homosexuality is a process of disorientation from the ‘well-trodden’ path of compulsory heterosexuality, followed by a reorientation on a path that had not previously been made visible? This suggests that there are empowering, creative, and performative possibilities in this process of disorientation and reorientation. Indeed, it is often this very uncertainty and exclusion which gives those in the Borderlands the impetus to forge their own existence. This, perhaps, is where spaces like Le Milieu become important sites of self-identification and lesbian visibility, as well as a space to explore desire. We see this in the progression both across and within the texts under discussion here, as Bouraoui moves from shame to acceptance to pride in a textual visibilisation of her own lived experience as a lesbian of colour. By not following the preordained path, we find her leaving behind ‘la vraie vie’ and turning instead towards Le Kat which

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Note also that the chapters in *Tous les hommes* which describe Bouraoui’s journey through Le Milieu are entitled ‘Devenir.’

represents 'ma terre inconnue...Je suis libre. Je suis dans le ventre de la terre. Rien ne peut arriver.'⁴⁹⁴ Disorientation is not necessarily a simple process, but rather encapsulates what Bouraoui calls 'ma ville clandestine dans la ville, ma jeunesse qui ne va pas dans le sens de la jeunesse des autres.'⁴⁹⁵ However, she is steadfastly determined to make the journey: 'C'est éprouvant d'être différente, même si je ne peux plus faire autrement, j'ai fait un pas, je suis fière de moi.'⁴⁹⁶ Ultimately, for Bouraoui, the disorientation process results in the making of textual worlds. Writing, she says, is to 'rendre public le Milieu de Filles'.⁴⁹⁷ In so doing, she simultaneously celebrates and interrogates spaces of lesbian visibility, as well as grappling with the sources of her own oppression both within and outside those spaces. 'J'ai un roman à écrire,' she declares in *Tous les hommes*, 'ma nouvelle vie d'homosexuelle (je la nomme ainsi pour m'accepter, pour m'affirmer), à organiser, elle me prend du temps, je me promets d'avancer, de vivre quelque chose.'⁴⁹⁸ Let us now consider how this process of disorientation is imbricated with the writing process in Bouraoui's œuvre.

Conclusion: L'écriture qui saigne: A politics born of necessity?

In the introduction to this chapter, I proposed Cherríe Moraga's 'theory in the flesh' as a mode of reading Bouraoui's work, and as a bridge between her early reticence to be defined by rigid sexual labels and her later pride in bringing the often messy and difficult realities of queer experience to a wider readership. This chapter has argued that through a deep excavation of her own queer lived experience, Bouraoui's autobiographical writing simultaneously interrogates self and society in a

⁴⁹⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, pp. 22-3.

⁴⁹⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 251.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Nina Bouraoui, *Poupée Bella*, p. 118.

⁴⁹⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, pp. 79-80.

way that is also politically liberatory for the writer herself, and perhaps also for her readers. Through the very process of writing, of tracing hidden or obscured paths, Bouraoui arguably uncovers more in these two highly intimate novels than she does across the rest of the *œuvre*. Like Moraga's 'theory in the flesh', Anzaldúa's discussion of organic writing also speaks to the work that Bouraoui is doing in these texts:

It's not on paper that you create but in your innards, in the gut and out of living tissue – *organic writing*, I call it. A poem works for me *not* when it says what I want it to say and *not* when it evokes what I want it to. It works when the subject I started out with metamorphoses alchemically into a different one, one that has been discovered, or uncovered, by the poem. It works when it surprises me, when it says something I have repressed or pretended not to know. The meaning and worth of my writing is measured by how much *I* put myself on the line and how much nakedness I achieve.⁴⁹⁹

As demonstrated here by Anzaldúa, and in the epigraphs to the current chapter, testimonial writing represents both a form of self-exploration and a political beacon which can help to light the way for those who follow. In order to provide that impetus, must a writer be willing, as Anzaldúa argues, to put herself on the line? This is certainly the case for writers like Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa, whose work continues to act as what Luz María Umpierre calls a 'flamethrower' for other women. In this concluding section I contend that Bouraoui's own notion of

⁴⁹⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'Speaking in Tongues', in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), pp. 163-72 (p. 170).

l'écriture qui saigne, like Moraga's 'theory in the flesh', Lorde's conceptualisation of poetry as a 'revelatory distillation of experience,' or Anzaldúa's 'organic writing',⁵⁰⁰ takes *her* work beyond self-exploration and into a sphere of radical self-acceptance and political potential. In all of these concepts, the very process of writing is bound up with the physical and spiritual realities of lived existence, presenting an opportunity for disorientation which, in turn, opens up new ways of perceiving that existence. It is this which gives these queer feminist works their political thrust, as Lorde explains:

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action.⁵⁰¹

For Bouraoui, the honest exploration of her feelings which takes place in these texts is represented by 'l'écriture qui saigne'.

Bouraoui coins the term 'l'écriture qui saigne' in *Mes mauvaises pensées* to describe her writing process. She states: 'Je rêve d'un livre de transformation, qui m'aurait suivie depuis mon enfance, je rêve d'un album, je rêve d'un almanach; je dois tout écrire pour tout retenir, c'est ma théorie de l'écriture qui saigne.'⁵⁰² This form of writing is very close to organic writing and theory in the flesh and initially helps to soothe the writer as she confronts issues around sexuality, homophobia, and familial trauma. As she states in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement*

⁵⁰⁰ Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), p. 8.

⁵⁰¹ Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, p. 9.

⁵⁰² Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p. 22.

savoir, '[l]'écriture agit comme un élixir, son geste m'apaise, me rend heureuse.'⁵⁰³

One may be drawn to ask, particularly given Bouraoui's choice of medium, whether *l'écriture qui saigne* may also be referred to as scriptotherapy. Suzette Henke's concept posits writing as a therapeutic tool useful for processing traumatic experiences. Certainly, *Poupée Bella* lends itself to that, not least due to the genre. At one point in the text, Bouraoui explicitly states that her early attempts at writing were a form of purging and repentance: 'En rentrant du Kat, j'écris pour me faire pardonner mon homosexualité et pour me faire aimer.'⁵⁰⁴ Meanwhile *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, with its textual confrontation with historical familial trauma, could be read alongside the works Henke analyses in *Shattered Subjects*.

However, I would argue that the texts studied in this chapter go beyond the bounds of scriptotherapy to the extent that they ultimately seek to reveal rather than to heal. Like many writers, Bouraoui may initially be engaging in a form of scriptotherapy through her journal, but she ultimately realises that this is not legitimate, perhaps because the things she seeks to 'heal' may be socially proscribed, but actually form a central part of her self-architecture. As she ultimately discovers: 'Il me faudra des années pour déconstruire l'idée fausse que les mots protègent, réparent ou rendent meilleurs.'⁵⁰⁵ Words don't heal, but they help because they reveal what we have so often hidden from ourselves. Words may not protect, but they project, again often allowing us to see authentic truths which may have been obscured. It is this which qualifies '*l'écriture qui saigne*' as what Moraga

⁵⁰³ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 42.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

calls a politics born of necessity: 'L'écriture n'apaise pas, c'est le feu sur le feu.'⁵⁰⁶

And it is this fire which brings about social change. As Lorde attests:

We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.⁵⁰⁷

Bouraoui may not be as explicitly political as some of the women this thesis brings her into conversation with, but her work does do political labour. She has been named as a singular queer voice for queer Francophone North-African women, including those in Amari's study and the queer writer Fatima Daas. Her later interviews recognise the power of that influence, as do the works analysed in this chapter. Early in *Tous les hommes*, the narrator says, '[e]n vérité, les femmes n'osent pas témoigner.'⁵⁰⁸ This chapter has sought to disprove that statement by demonstrating that precisely through her written *testimonio*, Bouraoui has created a powerful personal and political queer manifesto.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 214.

⁵⁰⁷ Audre Lorde, *Your silence will not protect you*, p. 9.

⁵⁰⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 40.

Chapter Four – El Mundo Zurdo: Collective Identity and the Self-ful Woman

*The bridge I must be
Is the bridge to my own power
I must translate
My own fears
Mediate
My own weaknesses*

*I must be the bridge to nowhere
But my true self
And then
I will be useful*

- Kate Rushin, *The Bridge Poem*⁵⁰⁹

What is at stake in embracing an ethic of female self-fulness is making the demand for respect on one's own terms.

- Lisa Downing, *Selfish Women*⁵¹⁰

Community is simply the way people live a life together. And they're doing it all over the world. The only way to write for la comunidad is to write so completely from your own heart what is your own personal truth. This is what touches people.

- Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the war years*⁵¹¹

In the foregoing chapters, we have seen Bouraoui's characters navigate the Borderlands of identity, from gender and sexuality to nationhood, place, and historical self-understanding. I have highlighted how Bouraoui uses these fictional and autobiographical texts to ask questions about her own position in the world and

⁵⁰⁹ Kate Rushin, 'The Bridge Poem', in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: SUNY, 2015), pp. xxxiii-xxxiv (p. 153).

⁵¹⁰ Lisa Downing, *Selfish Women* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), p. 154.

⁵¹¹ Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1983), p. vi.

to comment upon the status quo as her characters see it, creating what I have called, borrowing from Cherríe Moraga, a Bouraouian theory in the flesh. This chapter will synthesise some of the key themes which have emerged across the previous chapters by considering the roles of the self and the collective in Bouraoui's œuvre and will seek to position Bouraoui's theory in the flesh as a method of centring of self, an ethic of female self-fulness, which may be useful in the search for a mutually beneficial feminist future. As Gloria Anzaldúa so succinctly asserts, 'one must possess a sense of personhood before one can develop a sense of sisterhood.'⁵¹² The chapter will also act as a conclusion of sorts to the thesis, returning to the previous chapters and analysing how Bouraoui's œuvre as a whole may be said to contribute to the kind of decolonial sisterhood Anzaldúa discusses above.

As has been the case throughout this study, the three quotations which open this chapter signal the overarching themes of the chapter itself, emphasising as they do that a respect for, and an understanding of, the self are critical first steps in any endeavour towards collective allegiance. Kate Rushin's poem, published in *This Bridge Called My Back* neatly encapsulates the powerful potential of a committed engagement to the self, while Lisa Downing and Cherríe Moraga's statements highlight that, not only is the personal political, but it is also central to both an appreciation and conceptualisation of the self and 'la comunidad'. Taking these ideas as a starting point, the following analysis will offer a new approach to subjecthood in Bouraoui's body of work by examining the representation of identity in the writer's texts through the lenses of Lisa Downing's concept, the self-ful woman,

⁵¹² Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 150.

and Gloria Anzaldúa's discussion of *El Mundo Zurdo* (usually translated as 'the left-handed world'), as well as Audre Lorde's political understanding of the agency of the erotic. All three of these methodologies are critical to this chapter's hypothesis that Bouraoui's self-ful texts demonstrate a key tenet of decolonial Queer feminism: in order to embrace and empower one's community/ies, one must first embark on a journey into, and communion with, the self/selves. My readings will demonstrate how these concepts can be brought into conversation with one another, resulting in the centring of a radical, intimate relationship with and to the self/selves which counters the received understanding of roles expected of supposedly fixed identity categories such as lesbian/Franco Algerian/woman/of colour.

In the following analysis, I will explore three of Bouraoui's texts which bring together many of the themes discussed in the previous three chapters of this thesis. As discussed above, Bouraoui's 2005 work, *Mes mauvaises pensées* won the Prix Renaudot. It is a fitting way to open up an exploration of the self-ful feminist in her work as the text responds to Moraga's call in this chapter's epigraph to write her own truth completely from the heart. As we saw in Chapter Three of this thesis, her 2018 novel, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* also engages in the kind of self-ful excavation of the past which this chapter argues is necessary for a truly revolutionary relationship with oneself and with wider society, allowing her to construct her own narrative. As she states in the opening part of the text, she becomes her own 'architecte et...archéologue.'⁵¹³ This later text goes perhaps further than *Mes mauvaises pensées* in its attempts to speak to the wider abuse and suffering of women. The structure of the text lends itself particularly well to this. As discussed elsewhere in this thesis, the four chapter 'types' are entitled: *Se souvenir*,

⁵¹³ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 12.

Devenir, Savoir, and Être. While all of the chapter types include Bouraoui's own lived experience, some of them also tell the experiences of other women, especially those close to her. In the first category, we see her revisit the women of her Algerian childhood, depicting the suffering they endure at the hands of men and wider social expectations; in the Savoir chapters, she explores her mother's experiences, again frequently at the hands of men. As we shall see, these chapters provide key building blocks in a feminist reading of Bouraoui's self-ful writing. The third text discussed in this chapter is Bouraoui's eleventh novel, *Nos baisers sont des adieux*. The narrative portrays self-ful desire, particularly the desire of women, as a replenishing and provocative force. The text is made up of a series of short stories or portraits, as Bouraoui has called them, each bearing the name of a person, object, or artwork, as well as a place (usually a town or city), and a year. The entries span the years 1972 to 2010 and, notably, are not printed in chronological order.⁵¹⁴ The epigraph offers an early clue that the text may mark a shift in focus from the earlier autobiographical concern with (not) belonging to one or other side of a binary identity, and instead towards a process of becoming and construction through a connection with desire: '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.'⁵¹⁵ Rather than suggest that it is other people who are responsible for her experiences, the text which follows demonstrates how Bouraoui's encounters with others, with objects, with desire and the erotic, provide one possible route towards her construction of self. As Audre Lorde argues in *Uses of the Erotic*, 'in touch with the erotic' she becomes 'less willing to accept

⁵¹⁴ See below for more on how Bouraoui queers form in this text.

⁵¹⁵ Nina Bouraoui, *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, p. 7.

powerlessness.⁵¹⁶ The powerlessness to which she alludes in her experiences of being unable to fit comfortably into fixed identity categories is transformed instead into a celebration of the self through the erotic, a process which harnesses the power inherent in a rejection of those very fixed and imposed identity categories.

I will also position these three self-ful texts as examples of rhizomatic writing. Myriam Geiser notes that Bouraoui's use of the term 'des spirales de mots' to position her writing in *Mes mauvaises pensées* allows her to 'descendre les strates du passé pour remonter à la surface du présent.'⁵¹⁷ This notion is in keeping with Bouraoui's own description of herself as architect and archaeologist, as well as with the 'two-way movement' Anzaldúa describes in her discussion of *El Mundo Zurdo*. As elsewhere, the discussion will also bring other Bouraoui texts into conversation where they add to the overall argument. The analysis will be split across three broad sections entitled Mind, Body, and Spirit. Once again, this is influenced by Anzaldúa's desire to embrace the holistic self in order to truly realise one's self-ful power. She argues:

To me spirituality, sexuality, and the body have been about taking back that alien other. According to society...I must suppress or kill a certain part of myself – the ego or sexuality. But I don't believe you have to slay the ego...I need to accept all the pieces: The fucked-up Glorias go with the compassionate, loving Glorias; they're all me.'⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁶ Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic', in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), p. 28.

⁵¹⁷ Myriam Geiser, 'Nina Bouraoui : 'L'Écriture, c'est mon vrai pays [...] à la recherche d'une voix entre le silence du souvenir et la rage des mots.', in *La Littérature <française> contemporaine: contact de cultures et créativité* ed. by Ursula Mathis-Moser and Birgit Mertz-Baumgartner (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, <édition lendemains>, 2007), pp. 215-23 (p. 222).

⁵¹⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 88.

As Anzaldúa makes clear, women, and especially women of colour, are socially bound to hide or erase certain parts of themselves in order to be granted the permission to exist, in order not to be branded the madwoman, the whore, the witch. Anzaldúa gloriously rejects this social demand and reclaims her whole self, warts and all. We may note the similarities between this radical self-acceptance and that of the narrators of Bouraoui's earliest texts (discussed in Chapter One of this thesis). In what follows, I will explore how Bouraoui comes to accept all the pieces of herself through her rhizomatic written self-exploration and self-decolonisation and will ask how that might, in turn, cohere with what I am calling the self-ful Left-Handed World of queer decolonial feminism.

In her book, *Selfish Women*, Downing examines the feminist possibilities which may emerge from a political engagement with the female self as a full and complex being, the bridge to her own power and her true self, to borrow from Rushin's poem. Downing's neologism, 'self-ful', shifts away from the often negatively connoted (particularly for women) 'selfish' to focus more pointedly on what she calls 'strategic self-interest.'⁵¹⁹ The term self-ful is, Downing highlights, intended to be 'linguistically jarring' in order to 'reflect the epistemologically and ontologically jarring nature of the very concept it is designed to describe, as it conjures up something rare, occluded, nascent, or not yet fully brought into being.'⁵²⁰ Women are simply not permitted by social structures to centre the self. Even the self-ful woman writer, perhaps usually given a degree more latitude owing to her status as an artist, is often viewed as ontologically obnoxious in her seemingly self-interested narcissism. Anita

⁵¹⁹ Lisa Downing, *Selfish Women*, p. 20.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Brookner's scathing review of Bouraoui's *mes mauvaises pensées* highlights the pervasiveness of this line of thinking. I quote from the review at length because it demonstrates the extent to which female self-fulness is, as Downing asserts, occluded:

The Prix Renaudot went to Nina Bouraoui for *Mes Mauvaises Pensées* (Stock), a novel destined to arouse either sympathy or detestation. Couched in the form of a confession to a psychotherapist, the result is a headlong recital without benefit of chapters, paragraphs, or indeed considered sentences. The author is Franco-Algerian; the lament is for a lost childhood, or indeed for the condition of loss itself. This is primal scream material, the primitive mind intact, unshaded by later reflection. Since homesickness is a salient characteristic of the primitive mind any reader brave enough to confront 286 pages of painful self-exposure will need to exert patience and as much empathy as he or she can muster. Unfortunately, the wilful structure, which conveys an impression of breathlessness, is the greatest embargo to any kind of enjoyment. A bizarre choice, unlikely to gain many adherents.⁵²¹

As this chapter will demonstrate, *Mes mauvaises pensées* is one of Bouraoui's most self-ful texts, a stream-of-consciousness narrative which focuses almost entirely on Bouraoui's understanding of, and relationship to, herself, and the coming into being of who she is in that captured moment, often through a deeply honest reckoning with the past. As she states in the text, 'Il faut de l'imagination pour vivre, pour avoir des

⁵²¹ Anita Brookner, 'French Prize Novels', in *The Spectator* (London, 2005).

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? ». ⁵²² This kind of writing may, of course, not be to everyone's taste. However, Brookner's review suggests more than a mere stylistic dislike of the text. She appears instead to take issue with the fact that Bouraoui has chosen to focus so completely on her internal thought processes, resulting in what Brookner calls 'painful self-exposure'. The repeated use of the terms 'primal' and/or 'primitive' are doubly problematic, both because of the historical racialised context, and since she thereby suggests that Bouraoui has not thought through what she is writing; the text is an unedited, unstructured, 'headlong recital' by a 'primitive mind'. This, for Brookner, will not do. It is a text which can only arouse either sympathy or detestation, but it is certainly not a text to be enjoyed, nor is it a text to be learned from. It is important to remember that Brookner is reviewing the text *after* it has won the Prix Renaudot. In this context, her ire is even more puzzling. One wonders whether the bizarreness of the award, in Brookner's reading, stems from the fact that Bouraoui's text is so brazenly full of self. She centres the self in a way that women are not expected, and certainly not permitted, to do in most contexts. This is especially true for women of colour, particularly in the living fiction of French universalism. As Bouraoui asserts in the text, 'les seules promesses que je dois tenir aujourd'hui sont celles que je fais à moi-même: je me promets d'être et cela est déjà suffisant.' ⁵²³ It may not be sufficient for Brookner, but Bouraoui here very powerfully demonstrates what Downing calls in the epigraph to this chapter, an ethic of female self-fulness.

⁵²² Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, pp. 59-60.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Focusing her attention initially on ‘difficult, unpalatable, and *inconvenient* women’ such as Ayn Rand and Margaret Thatcher, Downing makes the case for a radical reimagining of reified patriarchal notions of ‘category woman’.⁵²⁴ She asserts: ‘Women are not all paragons of virtue, self-sacrificial animals, or – worst of all worlds – blandly *nice*. Women are complex, multifaceted – and yes, sometimes selfish and unlikeable. And when we ignore this, we shore up patriarchy’s view of women as one-dimensional.’⁵²⁵ This is further compounded for the woman of colour who is either othered or mythologised by society at large. Audre Lorde points to the othering part of this equation in her *Cancer Journals*. She states:

I don’t feel like being strong, but do I have a choice? It hurts when even my sisters look at me in the street with cold and silent eyes. I am defined as other in every group I’m a part of. The outsider, both strength and weakness.⁵²⁶

The only answer available here for Lorde is to be ‘strong’ despite her forced outsidership, even when she does not feel like being strong. Especially because, as Anzaldúa highlights in her own discussion of strength, that power becomes just another way for women of colour to be mythologised and reduced to caricature. She describes how her ‘white and non-Chicano friends’ often tend to romanticise her own strength as a woman of colour. ‘Though the power may be real,’ she asserts, ‘the mythic qualities attached to it keep others from dealing with me and rob me of being able to act out my other selves.’⁵²⁷ And there’s the rub. This positioning of the woman of colour as either sub- or superhuman precludes both the possibility of

⁵²⁴ Lisa Downing, *Selfish Women*, p. 151.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 153.

⁵²⁶ Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (London: Penguin, 2020), p. 5.

⁵²⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 45.

community and a deeper sense of self. Downing's concept, then, offers us a Third Space between the 'exceptional woman', the mythologised woman, and the decentred (and therefore erased?) woman who works only for the good of the wider group(s) to which she belongs or seeks to belong. It allows us to pivot the centre and weave between different ways of being in and for oneself.

It perhaps seems paradoxical to speak of a self-ful writer (as I argue that Bouraoui is) as a good fit for a collective politics of decolonial queer feminism, largely because of the kinds of discourses around patriarchal expectations of women that Downing critiques in *Selfish Women*. But, as Hill Collins and Bilge assert, 'a transformed individual identity is potentially transformative and long-lasting. Once people are changed on the individual level, they are likely to remain so. Focusing on the self, on its wholeness, provides a major impetus for individual and collective empowerment.'⁵²⁸ For Anzaldúa, this transformation begins with a decolonising of the self. She argues, 'we need to work through internalised violence, attempt to decolonise ourselves, and find ways to survive personally, culturally and racially.'⁵²⁹ This chapter will demonstrate how Bouraoui engages in this decolonising behaviour throughout her oeuvre through the lens of the self-ful narrator, focusing on *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* as especially good examples of a woman working through internalised and transmitted violence, and *Nos baisers sont des adieux* as a celebration of the erotic as a tool of feminist resistance.

Downing also reflects in *Selfish Women* on the unfortunate tendency within Western feminist movements to reject earlier feminist lines of inquiry and debate,

⁵²⁸ Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016), p. 135.

⁵²⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 126.

highlighting the failure of the 'wave' model to allow for conversations across time periods and between disparate feminist identities and frameworks. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the wave model is problematic for several reasons, not least in its apparent focus on what Clare Hemmings has called narratives of progress, loss, and return.⁵³⁰ Hemmings explains, 'Western feminist progress narratives' insistence that feminist theory has moved to a more expansive present, one full of new epistemological innovation and complex objects and analytical frames, relies on a flattened vision of the feminist past.'⁵³¹ This flattened vision of the past is precisely what we must avoid if we are to construct the feminist utopia of *El Mundo Zurdo*, a world which celebrates *all* women. As Hemmings goes on to argue, the very delineated timelines of the wave model's narratives of progress, are also problematic, particularly in terms of who is cited in feminist critiques, especially in the academy:

To claim unparalleled vibrancy of a postmodern or poststructuralist project in the present, progress narratives rarely cite the 1970s directly, position the 1980s as the exclusive decade of identity politics, and position the 1990s as the era of intersectional complexity. In citation terms, this carving up of the past into neat decades means that the 1970s comes to carry the singular weight of an essentialism now past, the 1980s becomes overburdened with the citation of black and/or lesbian feminist authors, who rarely make it into the 1990s (except as postcolonial or queer theorists), while the 1990s teems

⁵³⁰ Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (London: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁵³¹ *Ibid.* p. 162.

with individual authors whose marked similarity to and difference from one another underlines the comparative intricacy of this period.⁵³²

This argument highlights some of the key reasons that the current work has sought to move away from this carved up 'ebb and flow' wave pattern which risks erasing or completely ignoring certain voices, and instead towards a rhizomatic understanding of feminism which allows the important voices of those who have gone before us to be brought into conversation with the contemporary moment, and to be discussed in contexts other than their narrowly defined cultural and historical setting. Which brings us back to Gloria Anzaldúa and her notion, El Mundo Zurdo.

In her description of El Mundo Zurdo, Anzaldúa interrogates how one can navigate the '*pull between what is and what should be.*' She asserts:

I believe that by changing ourselves we change the world, that travelling El Mundo Zurdo path is the path of a two-way movement – a going deep into the self and expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society.⁵³³

Anzaldúa belief in the need for us as individuals to go deep into the self in order to effect change speaks to Downing's call for an ethic of female self-fulness. Downing emphasises that self-fulness 'does not have to issue from a position of love for others. It can be an exercise of pure self-interest *that also benefits others as a by-product.*'⁵³⁴ Anzaldúa makes similar claims with her assertion that El Mundo Zurdo

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 49.

⁵³⁴ Lisa Downing, *Selfish Women*, p. 151 (original emphasis).

begins with the self: 'I belong to myself and not to any one people.'⁵³⁵ My hypothesis in this chapter's reading of the self in Bouraoui's œuvre is that by embracing the possibilities of self-ful-ness, decolonial feminism, and indeed, feminism more broadly, may move closer to the transformational space of El Mundo Zurdo, a place where we are each individuals, where, to return to Anzaldúa, 'not all of us have the same oppressions, but we empathize and identify with each other's oppressions...In El Mundo Zurdo I with my own affinities and my people with theirs can live together and transform the planet.'⁵³⁶

As elsewhere in the thesis, I am bringing diverse women's voices together in this chapter. Once again, it bears repeating that in doing so I am not seeking to conflate these individual women's lived experiences and feminist work. Rather, the bringing into conversation of these disparate voices is a key tenet of the process of creating a 'left-handed world' in which women with different socio-historical backgrounds can work in harmony with one another while still foregrounding their own lived experience. The rhizomatic connections of El Mundo Zurdo are at the political heart of this project.

Roots, Radicals, Reciprocity: In search of inclusivity in Francophone feminisms

While one of the central aims of the current project is to seek feminist connections through transnational conversation, it should also be reiterated that this does not entail obscuring or ignoring the historical, geographical, and sociopolitical realities within which these women exist. Indeed, as addressed elsewhere in this thesis, recognising an individual's situatedness is the first step towards truly fruitful

⁵³⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 50.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*

transnational dialogue and informed solidarity. As such, and before looking more closely at Bouraoui's texts, it would be useful to consider how the concepts of collective and self-ful feminisms may function in the contemporary Francophone context specifically, and to question how this maps on to global decolonial feminisms more broadly.⁵³⁷

'Le terme de «féministe» n'est pas toujours facile à porter,' states Françoise Vergès in her 2019 manifesto, *Un féminisme décolonial*.⁵³⁸ As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, France's colonial past, coupled with the state's unwavering commitment to *laïcité* and purportedly colour-blind Republicanism, not to mention the neoliberal co-opting of certain feminist and LGBTQI+ politics which Vergès calls out, make for a hostile environment for the development of an inclusive feminism and have even, as Vergès attests, caused many women, herself included, to question the very label of feminism itself. However, Vergès ultimately reclaims the term for two reasons which are central to this chapter's understanding of inclusive feminism: "J'ai été amenée à me dire féministe, d'une part en raison de l'émergence d'un féminisme de politique décolonial large, transnational, pluriel, d'autre part du fait de la captation des luttes de femmes par le féminisme civilisationnel."⁵³⁹ The notion of 're-emergence' draws the eye here. Presumably, then, this sought after version of feminism has appeared before...so what was it, and where did it go? It is my contention in this chapter, as throughout the thesis, that the feminism which Vergès celebrates here shares much with those writers and activists who form the methodological spine of this project. That civilizational feminism is the enemy Vergès perceives is testament to the fact that collective projects such as *This Bridge Called*

⁵³⁷ For a wider historical reading of feminisms in a French and Francophone context, see the introduction to this thesis.

⁵³⁸ Françoise Vergès, *Un Féminisme décolonial*, p. 13.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

my Back still have much to teach us about how women, and especially women of colour, are multiply oppressed. The influence of those projects, though, is clear to see. In recent years, Vergès (in a Francophone context) and Veronica Gago (in a Hispanophone context) have looked at the concrete struggles of women of colour in their own manifestos on decolonial feminism. They use women's lived experience as the prism through which to renegotiate and remake the feminist movement. In the Francophone context, groups such as les Indigènes de la République, Groupe du 6 novembre, Lesbiennes of Color (LOC), and Les Féministes Révolutionnaires have done similar work, coalescing around shared understandings of women's struggles. And yet, it remains difficult for groups such as these to gain traction in wider feminist movements or indeed in society more broadly, not least because their causes are perceived to be acting against the idyll of a colourblind Republic determined to forget its colonial past. As Vergès reminds her readers:

Se dire féministe décoloniale, défendre les féminismes de politique décoloniales aujourd'hui, ce n'est pas seulement arracher le mot «féminisme» aux mains avides de la réaction, en peine d'idéologies, mais c'est aussi affirmer notre fidélité aux lutes des femmes du Sud global qui nous ont précédées. C'est reconnaître leurs sacrifices, honorer leurs vies dans toutes leur complexités, les risques qu'elles ont pris, les hésitations et découragements qu'elles ont connus, c'est recevoir leurs héritages.⁵⁴⁰

The state may not want us to look back, but the decolonial project demands it. Once again, there is much to learn from those feminists who have come before us.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 10.

In the context of the current chapter, and in the thesis more broadly, we are looking back to feminism's so-called second wave.⁵⁴¹ As Downing asserts:

There is something invigorating about the radical feminism of the 1970s insofar as the project of returning to the root cause of inequality, attempting to eradicate the effects on women of patriarchy, and seeing what might emerge in terms of female selfhood is enormously ambitious, in a way that is quite unparalleled in contemporary feminist writing.⁵⁴²

I tend to agree with Downing's enthusiasm about certain aspects of radical feminism, and this is one of the reasons I return so frequently to feminists like Lorde, Anzaldúa and Moraga. The ability to cut through to those root causes of inequality (coloniality, heteropatriarchy) has arguably been impaired by what Vergès calls civilisational feminism on the one hand, and misguided in-fighting on the other, not least in the context of an increasingly isolationist and right-wing politics across Europe and, indeed, around the world.

Particularly pertinent to my own theorising is Downing's reminder that the term 'radical' stems from the word 'root', such that radical feminism is predicated on getting to the root(s) of the issue. What groups like Ni Putes, Ni Soumises and Les Féministes Révolutionnaires share is a common root-system (coloniality, heteropatriarchy) and a common goal (liberation). Sadly, the verb in the previous sentence ought perhaps to be in the past tense in the case of many of these groups, such as the Groupe du 6 novembre, since the hostility and toxicity mentioned above have caused them to disband. Downing points to the contemporary trend for women

⁵⁴¹ For more on my decision not to use the wave model, see below and the introduction to this chapter.

⁵⁴² Lisa Downing, *Selfish Women*, p. 143.

to 'police other feminists and themselves to ensure that they are centring others in their activism.'⁵⁴³ Such policing, rather than forging feminist links, can lead to groups and individuals being disbanded or 'cancelled', and potentially precludes the possibility of intellectual debate or fruitful discussion around different oppressions and how best to fight them.

This is not to suggest that we should ignore others' experiences in fighting our feminist battles, quite the opposite. As Vergès argues, it behoves us to receive the legacy of those women who have come before us. This is just one of the reasons that the wave model of feminism does not fit, I argue, with a politics of inclusive feminism and why I use the term 'rhizome' to define this project's proposed network of decolonial feminists: we do not serve each other by erasing our own stories. As such, this chapter's investigations begin at the micro level of the self-ful feminist *before* considering how the work of the individual may impact on the wider group. One may be drawn to ask; can one act for one's community while also centring the self? I would argue that feminism and activism more broadly is better served when we upend the question: how can one serve one's community *without* first centring the self? This is perhaps most urgent for those who's self-fulness is developing within the context of the postcolonial condition. As Karima Lazali has noted, 'the individual subject cannot be reduced to the community. It traces its own private paths that are both within the public and unreachable at its margins. And yet serious conflicts within the larger public bar the emergence of subjectivities.'⁵⁴⁴ It is this tension which El Mundo Zurdo seeks to work against by promoting the emergence of feminist subjectivities and encouraging engagement between those individual

⁵⁴³ Ibid. p. 146.

⁵⁴⁴ Karima Lazali, *Colonial Trauma* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), p. 22.

subjectivities. El Mundo Zurdo as I identify it in this chapter is a rhizomatic society, a network of individuals (and groups) who are linked by a common desire to liberate *all* women but beginning, necessarily, with the self. Fittingly, once she has outlined the fundamentals of decolonial feminist praxis, Vergès goes on to describe what she calls her own ‘trajectoire anticoloniale’.⁵⁴⁵ ‘La biographie’, she states, ‘n’explique pas tout, et assez souvent d’ailleurs pas grand-chose, mais je me dois dans un livre sur le féminisme de dire quelque chose de ma propre trajectoire – non qu’elle soit exemplaire, mais parce que les lutes des femmes y ont joué un grand rôle.’⁵⁴⁶ Let us now turn to a closer reading of Bouraoui’s own anti-colonial trajectory, a trajectory in which women’s struggles have also played an important part.

Mind: In the psychiatrist’s chair

‘Je viens vous voir parce que j’ai des mauvaises pensées.’⁵⁴⁷ Thus begins Bouraoui’s 2005 ‘roman-confession’, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, a textual stream of consciousness in which Bouraoui addresses a series of questions, recollections, and confessions to her psychotherapist. As Brookner so acerbically argues, this is a work of painful self-exposure which does not make for easy reading. However, Bouraoui’s stylistically unfettered writings in this text have much to tell us about her self-perception and the stranglehold of the past, as well as having a certain potential to provide an understanding of how the truly self-ful individual can in turn be an agent for wider common goals. Contrary to Brookner’s scathing remarks, the therapeutic revisiting of the past which happens in the text is, I would argue, absolutely necessary for Bouraoui to break the hold of that violent past, both lived and

⁵⁴⁵ Françoise Vergès, *Un Féminisme decolonial*, p. 15.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p. 11.

transmitted. In many ways, with this text, she is rewriting history by centring the self. Indeed, one of the key tenets of decolonial feminism is to deconstruct that which has come before in order to reconstruct a present and future identity which is able to break free from those past oppressions. As Bouraoui herself puts it in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, '[j]'assemble tout ce que je sais de ma famille comme j'assemblerais les morceaux d'un objet brisé pour le recomposer. Du désordre naît un ordre'⁵⁴⁸ We may have seen her confront her past in previous texts (see especially Chapter 2 of this thesis), but it is not until *Mes mauvaises pensées*, I would argue, that we witness a truly self-ful engagement with her lived experience of trauma, both personal and transmitted.

There is also a feminist grit in Bouraoui's decision to use the world of psychotherapy as a setting for her text, given that supposed madness is often used a weapon against women, especially women of colour, who dare to challenge the patriarchal status quo. Further to the use of madness as a form of social policing, as the Combahee River Collective have asserted, the realisation that one is the victim of multiple forms of oppression can itself provoke feelings of madness: 'Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism.'⁵⁴⁹ Bouraoui's chosen medium, then, could itself be viewed a feminist choice, particularly given what the text reveals about her own journey towards understanding the insidious power of patriarchy in her own family.

Indeed, a large part of the work Bouraoui does in *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* involves confronting familial

⁵⁴⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 12.

⁵⁴⁹ Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*. 4th edn (Albany, NY, USA: State University of New York Press, 2015), p. 211.

trauma which, as I shall argue below, can itself be linked to colonial and postcolonial trauma. As we saw in Chapter One of this thesis, the violence of the past, if not confronted, continues to echo in the present, often with devastating consequences. In the same chapter, we also considered Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *la Facultad* as a mode of looking inward, of seeing things a different way. Might therapy provide one way for Bouraoui to do this? Echoing the terror depicted in those earliest novels, for Bouraoui in these therapy sessions, everything begins with fear and especially the fear associated with loss. The pathology of fear is transmitted through Bouraoui's family, almost becoming part of the family bloodline:

[C]'est comme une maladie la peur, chez nous, cela vient de mon oncle disparu au maquis, cela vient avec mon père qui a peur du monde, cela vient avec ma sœur qui a peur de la mort, cela vient avec moi qui ai peur des autres.⁵⁵⁰

It is telling that Bouraoui begins this discussion of fear with her uncle who disappeared during the Algerian War while fighting for independence. His loss haunts the *œuvre*, and the family.⁵⁵¹

The only member of the immediate family not mentioned in this passage is Bouraoui's mother, Maryvonne. Her omission is surprising, given that much of the narrative association with fear revolves around her. Indeed, a great deal of the fear which Bouraoui depicts is engendered by her maternal grandfather, who could be read throughout the text, and in the wider *œuvre*, as a proxy for both colonial and

⁵⁵⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p.145.

⁵⁵¹ For more on disappearance and loss, see the Body section below.

patriarchal powers. It is a fear which is transmitted to Bouraoui through both parents, but particularly through Maryvonne. She explains:

je crois qu'il y a une information familiale, on ne transmet pas seulement la chair à ses enfants mais aussi les conflits; le rapport de ma mère avec son père influe aussi sur le rapport que j'ai avec le monde, avec les hommes.⁵⁵²

As we learned in Chapter Two of this thesis, Bouraoui's maternal grandparents were highly problematic in their response to Maryvonne's relationship with Rachid. The author leaves us in little doubt that their response to the marriage was racially motivated, and that the ambivalent relationship Nina and her sister have with their maternal grandparents is due to their *métissage* which is not 'accepted' by Maryvonne's parents. There is even an ironic reversal of the fear trope in Bouraoui's recollection of her maternal grandmother, who seemingly fears Nina herself: 'je garde le souvenir d'une femme qui a peur de moi.'⁵⁵³ As we have already seen, this 'fear' is engendered by Nina's *métisse* identity. We learn in *Mes mauvaises pensées* that Maryvonne's relationship with her father was troubled even before she met Rachid. As Bouraoui asserts, '[a]vant je ne pensais pas qu'on pouvait souffrir de ses grands-parents, je me disais que la famille ne commençait qu'à partir de soi'.⁵⁵⁴ The young Nina is quickly disabused of this wonderfully self-ful notion as she learns of the fear her mother feels around her own father: 'Je n'ai jamais pu regarder mon père dans les yeux tant j'ai peur de lui.'⁵⁵⁵ There are various examples of her grandfather's cruelty towards her mother throughout the œuvre. In one memorable

⁵⁵² Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p.149.

⁵⁵³ Ibid. p. 200.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 138.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

scene depicted in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, he takes her to a bullfight. She cries and begs to leave the area, traumatised by the brutality and cruelty of the spectacle. Her father's response: 'il l'a traitée de mauviette, de minable, et lui a dit: «Toi, tu finiras dans les poubelles.»'⁵⁵⁶ This type of aggressive language characterises Maryvonne's relationship with her father, as do the harsh punishments she receives as a child: 'Son père est devenu plus sévère, parfois il était comme fou...il l'enfermait avec son frère dans la cave quand ils n'étaient pas sages.'⁵⁵⁷ We may note the echo of this in the fearful space of the cellar in *Le Bal des murènes*.⁵⁵⁸ It is interesting to note how Bouraoui's self-ful therapeutic writing opens up new ways of reading and understanding those texts which are usually read as straightforwardly fictional.

It is not without foundation, then, that we may situate Maryvonne as a victim of abuse. We learn in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* that, as a child, she is sexually abused by her parents' friend, Monsieur B, and throughout the œuvre we witness her psychological abuse at the hands of her father. As Bouraoui makes clear, her mother's childhood was effectively taken away by male abuse: 'Son enfance était symboliquement détruite, elle n'aurait plus la possibilité de l'occuper, d'en profiter; elle a su et compris très tôt combine les hommes peuvent être mauvais.'⁵⁵⁹ It is not only the men in her life who fail her. When Maryvonne attempts to tell her mother about Monsieur B's abuse, her response is shocking: 'ma grand-mère lui a dit qu'il y a un mot pour qualifier les filles de son espèce: «vicieuse».'⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 146.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 109.

⁵⁵⁸ See Chapter One of this thesis.

⁵⁵⁹ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 145.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 154.

Later, when the Bouraoui family move to Algiers, Maryvonne is attacked by a stranger in the street. Bouraoui recalls the scene:

Ma mère renter dans notre appartement d'Alger, la robe déchirée, des crachats dans les cheveux, des traces de suie sur la peau, elle couvre ses seins de mains pour les cacher...J'imagine un homme-bête pendu au cou de ma mère, la dévorant. Je viens de ce tréfonds.⁵⁶¹

As the final sentence of this quotation makes clear, the attack has a profound effect on the young Nina, as does a scene she recalls in *Mes mauvaises pensées* where she and her mother are followed by a man on the beach. She describes 'cette colère qui revient quand je suis dans la rue, cette colère contre les hommes qui se cachent.'⁵⁶² The anger which Bouraoui feels here is very much a feminist anger, engendered by her lived and transmitted experiences in a world of male violence. Inhabiting this anger in the psychotherapist's office invites a political awakening. As she will go on to claim in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, '[p]lus tard, je m'infligerai le devoir de protéger toute femme du danger, même s'il n'existe pas.'⁵⁶³ Her own experiences have left her duty-bound to protect women. We are beginning to see, then, how an apparently self-ful writer like Bouraoui can also be read as having wider political meaning for women more broadly. As the Combahee River Collective attest, there is a 'political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives.'⁵⁶⁴ For the purposes of the

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 26-7.

⁵⁶² Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p. 27.

⁵⁶³ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 27.

⁵⁶⁴ Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*. 4th edn (Albany, NY, USA: State University of New York Press, 2015), p. 211.

current project, I would argue that this statement is true for all women of colour. Perhaps, indeed, for all women, and all those who are oppressed and abused by the twin powers of patriarchy and colonialism. As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this thesis, those personal experiences of seemingly disparate, culturally diverse women can speak to each other in powerful ways. The CRC's statement here can be seen in these Bouraoui texts as she starts to unpack the multiple violences of the past. We could argue that her own political awakening comes from the realisation of her mother's abusive family history and also the blank spaces of colonial trauma on her father's side of the family.⁵⁶⁵ Initially, she seeks to distance herself from her maternal grandfather but realises that this is not as easy as one might hope: 'je n'arrive pas à me défaire de cet homme dont je n'ai hérité d'aucun trait, d'aucun richesse, je ne veux rien de lui, et je ne veux rien lui donner.'⁵⁶⁶ Instead, she must find another way to rid herself of this unwanted heritage.

As highlighted in Chapter Two of this thesis, Bouraoui's *métisse* identity is the cause of a great deal of psychological trauma. Speaking of her French mother and Algerian father, she says:

C'est au-delà de l'histoire des corps, je suis dans une conscience politique, je suis dans le partage du monde, je n'ai jamais séparé mes deux amours, je suis faite de ce ciment, la violence du monde est devenue ma propre violence.⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁵ For more on this, see the Body section, below.

⁵⁶⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p. 151.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

The young Nina grows up with an acute and political awareness of the precariousness of her position. She carries the transmitted fear of her mother and seeks to be her protector, turning violence back on itself as she enters her own space of rage. Meanwhile, she knows very little of her father's childhood or his parents: 'je n'ai pas les preuves de son histoire.'⁵⁶⁸ She describes both herself and her father as people 'sans racines profondes.'⁵⁶⁹ As a result, Bouraoui finds herself in the Borderlands of transmitted fear and unknowable roots, meaning that she is unable to find a place for herself within either side of the family: 'ça ne prend pas, ça ne prendra jamais, ça me mets mal à l'aise, c'est comme être à côté de soi, comme si je ne pouvais pas m'aimer en entier.'⁵⁷⁰ The ability to love one's full self is vital, I would argue, if one is to survive in a world which would rather you didn't exist. Bouraoui's inability to love herself fully is exacerbated here by her homosexuality: 'je ne m'aime pas, je n'ai plus honte, mais je ne m'aime pas, ça reste et je me demande comment procéder pour m'aimer un peu plus.'⁵⁷¹

The fact that these two passages directly follow each other is important, emphasising the psychological pain caused by her outsider-ness, a process which creates a psychological split from the self. As she states in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, 'je ne sais plus qui je suis, et pire encore, je crois devenir ce que j'ai toujours été'.⁵⁷² Both of these concepts, no longer knowing who she is or, worse, becoming who she has supposedly always been, indicate a sense of fear and a concomitant inability (or refusal) to know and embrace the whole self. Gloria Anzaldúa speaks about this exact feeling of fear in an interview with Linda Smuckler. She explains:

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 150.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, pp. 86-7.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid. p. 88.

⁵⁷² Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p. 15.

To a certain extent, you're happy with Linda and I'm happy with Gloria. But there are parts of Linda you probably keep down because you think that it wouldn't be admissible for those parts – especially the sexual parts, the parts religion and society don't permit – to rise up... We only know the consciousness part of ourselves because we don't want to think that there's this alien being in the middle of our psyche. For my whole life, I've felt like there's this alien being inside myself.⁵⁷³

The similarities between Anzaldúa's words and Bouraoui's early lived experience are clear to see. It is the suppression of this inadmissible parts which has led Bouraoui to the psychotherapist's office. She has made a conscious decision to allow the 'alien being' to rise up. In the introduction to this thesis, I quoted Cherríe Moraga's powerful statement in *La Güera*. It bears repeating here because the psychological excavation which Bouraoui is engaged in in *Mes mauvaises pensées* is perfectly encapsulated in Moraga's words: '[w]ithout an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place.'⁵⁷⁴ Bouraoui begins this work of heartfelt grappling in her sessions with the psychotherapist. But, as she reveals as she works through the trauma and the oppression, she has been engaged in this work all along. The difference is that now, here in the doctor's room, she is dealing with the mental scars, the

⁵⁷³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 87.

⁵⁷⁴ Cherríe Moraga, 'Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh', in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), p. 24.

psychological pain. Elsewhere, as we have seen throughout the œuvre, it is bodily scars which weave through the narratives. Through her sessions with her therapist, she begins to understand how mind and body are imbricated. Just as one cannot exist without the other, one cannot be healed without the other. Let us now turn to the representation of bodies in Bouraoui's work.

Body: Death, Disappearance, Desire

'The bodily realm of experience,' Lisa Downing writes in *Selfish Women*, 'is central to selfhood'.⁵⁷⁵ It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that bodies play such an important part in Bouraoui's œuvre. How, though, do we situate these bodies historically, geographically, and politically? And how do we take back self-ful ownership of a body marked by war, abuse, violence, both lived and transmitted? As we saw in Chapter Two of this thesis, this corporeal reclamation is especially difficult for Bouraoui, whose *métisse* identity, coupled with multiple historical family traumas, make her own body a kind of Borderland space. Initially, Bouraoui attempts to compartmentalize her disparate identities, to erase the Algerian version of herself, unable to exist in what Amaleena Damlé has called a body cleaved into 'two irreconcilable fragments.'⁵⁷⁶ The Algerian historical timeline from colonisation to violent turmoil in the 1990s, to postcolonial and post-independence identity crisis, maps onto Bouraoui's autobiographical journey across these texts, and is often played out corporeally throughout the œuvre, as Damlé highlights above. As Karima

⁵⁷⁵ Lisa Downing, *Selfish Women*, p. 5.

⁵⁷⁶ Amaleena Damlé, *The Becoming of the Body : Contemporary Women's Writing in French* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 155.

Lazali attests, in a colonial context, 'it is bodies above all that bear the memory of widespread mutilation.'⁵⁷⁷ In this section, we will explore how Bouraoui represents this mutilation through bodily disappearance, illness and death, as well as her reclamation of her own bodily identity as a space of sexual self-fulness. As she so self-fully states in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, '[j]'ai conscience de mon corps, c'est une conscience érotique, je pense que tout le monde devrait se désirer avant de désirer les autres.'⁵⁷⁸ It may seem jarring, inappropriate even, to suggest sexuality and the erotic as a way to escape patriarchal and colonial abuses of the body. However, as we shall see, there is a political feminist force in doing so. Indeed, Audre Lorde has argued that by embracing the erotic within us, 'not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.'⁵⁷⁹

As we saw in Chapter One of this thesis, bodies in Bouraoui's early work, in particular, are frequently ill, dying or dead. Elsewhere in the œuvre, we regularly witness bodies drowning, suffocating, fighting to survive. In *La voyeuse interdite*, Fikria engages in episodes of self-harm. Her older sister Zohr is anorexic, while younger sister Leyla has been neglected to such an extent that her corporeal existence is barely human. In *Poing mort*, the narrator, who may or may not be dead herself, lives in a cemetery, while the narrator of *Le Bal des murènes* lives as an invalid, sick in body and haunted by noises from the cellar. His body becomes a site of shame and perceived failure, particularly the failure to perform masculinity. Lazali has written about the depiction of bodies as spaces of shame and humiliation in both colonial and post-Independence Algeria. She asserts: 'Reducing the subject...to a

⁵⁷⁷ Karima Lazali, *Colonial Trauma* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), p. 66.

⁵⁷⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p. 35.

⁵⁷⁹ Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic', in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), p. 30.

shameful body creates an identity founded on exclusion... It forces the subject to only recognize itself in the image created for it by the Other through a real or imagined gaze.⁵⁸⁰ All of the protagonists in these early texts are reduced in this way and, it is critical to note, this process is enacted by paternal figures; there is a generational transmission of shame. In *La voyeuse interdite*, it is Fikria's father who triggers feelings of shame in his daughters as their female-ness presents him with his own form of shame at having produced a male (and therefore legitimate) heir. They become nothing but sexualised bodies to him. As Lazali goes on, '[s]hame is the sign of a radical nudity. It indicates that the subject is struggling with the shame of existing as no more than a naked and nameless body.'⁵⁸¹ Lazali's argument equates this paternal transmission with 'the injury caused by various colonial abuses [which] takes root in the present as "social trauma"'.⁵⁸² Fikria and her sisters, then, are caught in an impossible loop of shame which begins with colonial violence, passes through post-colonial nationalist violence, and back again. As we saw in Chapter One of this thesis, the only mode of escape available to the girls appears to be the destruction of those bodies.

We see this historical imbrication of past and present abuse, rooted in patriarchy, perhaps most clearly in *Le Bal des murènes* as the unnamed protagonist, haunted by the noises from the basement, gradually learns the awful colonial history of his own family and what took place in the family home, including his grandfather raping and then murdering a prisoner of war who turns out to be the narrator's grandmother. There can be little doubt in the reader's mind about what we are witnessing in this text: the narrator's sick, naked, nameless body; the unclear yet

⁵⁸⁰ Karima Lazali, *Colonial Trauma*, p. 99.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² Ibid. p. 98.

also paradoxically vivid violent memorial traces; the haunting noises from the cellar; the complete breakdown in the relationship between the protagonist and his mother and, in turn, between her and her own father...all of this points to the text being rooted in the colonial and post-colonial violence of Algeria. What is also important to note in the context of this chapter is how Bouraoui's later texts reveal the veracity of those sick and dying characters, their grounding not only in reality, but also in the lived experience of Bouraoui herself and of her family, to recover them from those 'blank spaces' of history. In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, Bouraoui explains to her therapist that, 'il y a une vraie violence, vous savez, avec la mort dans ma famille, parce que c'est comme un jeu, un jeu d'enfant.'⁵⁸³ While there may be a slightly sardonic tone to the statement, it becomes clear in Bouraoui's later works that the fictional fixation with violence, illness and death of the early novels is at least partly rooted in lived experience and transmitted trauma.

One of the phrases which emerges in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, repeated with a frequency we are used to seeing in Bouraoui's work, is 'la peau buvard'. Bouraoui uses this term in reference to herself as she becomes the bearer of all the transmitted trauma and fear of her family. She explains: 'Je lis dans un livre qu'il y a un sujet buvard dans une famille, que c'est dans le système même de la famille, une peau qui prendrait tout.'⁵⁸⁴ The powerful image of the skin as a form of blotting paper speaks to the notion of transmitted trauma as both a psychological *and* a physical phenomenon. For Anne Martine Parent, 'la peau buvard' represents '[I]'inscription de son histoire et de celle de sa famille sur sa peau, à la surface du corps, [et] est à lire en parallèle avec l'imbrication du passé dans le présent du discours, ramenant tout

⁵⁸³ Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p. 142.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 29.

sur le même plan.⁵⁸⁵ Like the narrators of her earliest novels, Bouraoui herself carries the pain of the past into the present. As the blotter, though, she seeks to take some of that pain away from her loved ones, to transfer it and perhaps even attempt to heal it. We see this in particular in her relationship with her mother, Maryvonne. As discussed above, Maryvonne's relationship with her father is extremely traumatic and through Maryvonne's illnesses, both physical and psychological, this trauma is transmitted to Nina. As she discusses with her therapist in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, 'vous dites que les enfants de parents malades se sentent coupables, vous dites que j'ai toujours eu des mauvaises pensées, vous dites que j'ai sûrement cru être à l'origine de l'asthme de ma mère.'⁵⁸⁶ Symbolically, then, Bouraoui becomes the container of her mother's illness. It is clear to see how this could be read in a wider context to demonstrate how trauma is passed from one generation to the next and will continue to be if healing work is not done. This, I would argue, is the work that Bouraoui is engaged in across her œuvre.

Bouraoui explains that, initially, she believes that the symbolic death of the white threat (through her maternal grandfather) is the only way to heal this trauma. In a queering of Freudian parricide, she states, 'je pense qu'il faudrait que je tue le père de ma mère pour qu'elle respire enfin.'⁵⁸⁷ He, however, remains strong. As her mother says during a visit: 'Tu sais, il est en meilleur état que moi. Toute la vie glisse sur lui.'⁵⁸⁸ It is not too much of a leap to suggest that Maryvonne's father may be said to represent the persistent presence of patriarchy and colonial violence, the ease with which he, as the avatar of the white male, glides through life, ignoring the

⁵⁸⁵ Anne Martine Parent, 'La Peau buvard de Nina Bouraoui', *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine*, 4 (2012).

⁵⁸⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p. 67.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

damage he has done. The damage he continues to do, in fact. As she explains, 'je sais que mon grand-père est plus fort que tout, qu'il n'a peur de rien. Son langage est une lame de rasoir.'⁵⁸⁹ Elsewhere in the text, to demonstrate this razorblade language, there is a powerful scene where the family is out to lunch at a restaurant and Nina's grandfather uses the 'b' word (presumable 'bougnoles') to refer to a shopkeeper. Maryvonne is disgusted at her father's use of a deeply offensive racist slur and, in a rare moment of fearlessness around the man of whom she is terrified and traumatised, she says, '[p]as devant mes filles. Tu peux tout me faire, mais pas devant mes filles.'⁵⁹⁰ The young Nina does not understand the word her grandfather has used, and is more upset by something else her mother has said:

Nous quittons le restaurant, je suis triste; il y a un vide immense qui se creuse autour de moi, ce vide ne vient pas du mot *b.*, c'est l'autre élément de la phrase, tu peux tout me faire, mon angoisse est là, dans une violence qui en cache une autre.⁵⁹¹

This ability to expose and resist violence within violence is at the heart of the decolonial feminist project and here, Bouraoui demonstrates how her earliest family experiences revealed this insidious violence to her. Later, of course, she also realises the meaning of the 'b' word and exposes her grandfather's racism by recounting this episode in her own decolonising journey. In this scene, Maryvonne acts as the 'peau buvard', attempting to shield her daughters from a racist slur which directly attacks their Algerian-ness. In turn Bouraoui becomes the 'peau buvard' for

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 146.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 20-1.

Maryvonne, revealing her traumas as a way of confronting and perhaps attempting to heal them.

The concept of the blotting paper also extends to the wider collective, particularly in the context of Algeria. Through her body of work, Bouraoui inscribes the pain and trauma of Algeria's violent past on her body of work, allowing the texts to act as a kind of 'peau buvard' for the trauma. As she states in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, 'on dit qu'écrire sur son mal fait disparaître le mal.'⁵⁹² One of the methods Bouraoui uses to demonstrate the collective trauma of Algeria's past is through a textual fixation with disappearance, and particularly the disappearance of bodies. The most frequently cited example is Bouraoui's paternal uncle, Amar, her father's eldest brother who disappeared while fighting with the Algerian resistance during the War of Independence. Disappearance is perhaps one of the defining factors of Algeria's colonial history. As Lazali reminds us, around a third of the Algerian population disappeared during the War of Conquest, France's brutal 19th century invasion, while we still do not know exactly how many people disappeared during the War of Independence and the *décennie noire*. Not only are the numbers vague, Lazali tells us. There is no list of names of the many thousands who disappeared during this fratricidal period. One wonders if this may be one of the reasons for Bouraoui's frequent use of narrators with no name. As discussed earlier, the absence of a name can suggest unknowability, while the refusal to name someone may be a sign of disrespect. Perhaps by allowing the nameless to tell their stories, Bouraoui is reminding us that the dead and the disappeared must not be forgotten. As she explains in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, those of us who remain have a duty to remember those who have gone: 'Les morts sont chaque fois ressuscités par notre

⁵⁹² Ibid., p. 35.

langage, ce sont eux les livres, ce sont eux l'écriture qui court, ce sont eux les petits papiers amoureux.⁵⁹³ Again, we can see how Bouraoui positions her œuvre as a form of 'peau buvard'; telling her own story, she also tells wider truths about society and its brutality.

The œuvre is littered with disappeared and disappearing bodies, from her paternal uncle to the recurring image of drowned and drowning individuals (the girl she pushes into the pool in Zeralda is a particularly haunting memory); her childhood body left in Algeria; Algeria itself as a disappeared body. As she explains in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, '[i]l y a un fantôme de l'Algérie, comme il y a un fantôme de celle que je fus. J'ai disparu de moi-même.'⁵⁹⁴ Bouraoui's words here echo Lazali's discussion about the colonial practice of erasure, a process which effaces the memory of the pre-colony, but also the memory of what is done during the brutal colonial period and its aftermath. As Lazali asserts, '[d]isappearance eats away at the spirit of the living and turns the catastrophe into an eternal present.'⁵⁹⁵ We see this in Bouraoui's own lived experience as Algeria disappears from her and she, in turn, disappears from herself:

Il y a la disparition en moi de l'Algérie. Plus de traces, plus rien, je m'efface de l'intérieur, je suis mon propre parasite, il y a la négation totale en moi de l'Algérie: la renonciation à mon père, à ce qu'il est, à ce qui le précède, c'est d'une grande violence, c'est d'une grande injustice aussi.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹³ Ibid., p. 46.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

⁵⁹⁵ Karima Lazali, *Colonial Trauma*, p. 68.

⁵⁹⁶ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 96.

As Bouraoui attests here, there is a violence to this process of disappearing and being disappeared. Colonialism is a politics of forgetting and of denying alterity. Bouraoui's œuvre, as with all decolonial feminist work, encapsulates a politics of not forgetting. This may perhaps be one explanation for the amount of repetition both within individual texts and across the œuvre. In these texts, by exposing her own very personal traumas, as well as the transmitted trauma of her family, she reveals a great deal about wider experiences of violence, particularly the violence inflicted on women by men and by colonisers on the colonised, and how those experiences are destined to be repeated if they are not confronted.

Earlier, we discussed Anzaldúa's argument about decolonising the self by working through internalised violence. We have seen this in all the texts discussed in this thesis so far, but it is perhaps most symbolically dealt with in *Mes mauvaises pensées* and *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*. There is an extra layer of difficulty in the Algerian context, given Bouraoui's mixed-race identity, and the fact that so much of her family history is shrouded in mystery. Once again, in order to deal with the blank spaces of her own history, Bouraoui as writer becomes a conduit for the erased, the disappeared, the forgotten:

La famille est le terreau de la peur et j'ai peur, je ne connais pas mon passé ni celui de mes ancêtres, je porte leur tristesse et peut-être leurs méfaits, je suis le vecteur, tout passe et passera par moi, car mes yeux cherchent ce que personne ne cherche, parce que je vois chez ma mère ce que personne n'a vu, parce que je vais écrire et que les mots reconstituent la scène, vraie ou

fausse, inventée ou rapportée, je le ferai exister pour qu'elle cesse de me hanter.⁵⁹⁷

This idea of recreating unknown scenes and acting as a vector for those who have come before is central to the Bouraouian mode of decolonial writing. Here, she speaks in particular about carrying the trauma of her ancestors, but her œuvre also tackles the blank spaces of colonial and postcolonial violence. Indeed *les années noires* seem to represent something of a turning point in her relationship to Algeria, to the extent that these violent years become an obsession: 'Dans les années quatre-vingt-dix, scellée au Malheur algérien, je coche sur une carte les lieux de chaque massacre, lieux où j'ai embrassé le soleil, profité des bains de mer sans fin...je faisais corps avec la nature.'⁵⁹⁸ It may seem crass to link these brutal massacres and her childhood enjoyment in the beauty of the Algerian countryside. But the ability to witness those two contrasting moments in the same space represents an important step in Bouraoui being able to recognise her Algerian-ness and its embodiment, for her to be angry at what has happened, and is still happening, here. The stories she hears about *la décennie noire* haunt her to the extent that her recollections about this violent decade become almost her own origin story: 'un récit m'obsède, je vois chacun de ses images, comme si elles avaient été projetées sur les murs de ma chambre...Je le nomme *Le Projet zéro* car il me semble être à l'origine de tout ce que je pourrai écrire ensuite.'⁵⁹⁹

There is a marked shift here between Bouraoui's early reticence to write about, or even to identify with, Algeria. This is perhaps because she personally

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 190-1.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 123.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid.

knows many of the victims whose stories she tells parts of. As she explains in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, '[d]ans les années quatre-vingt-dix, c'est la mort d'un médecin psychiatre qui marque le début de *ma* terreur algérienne.'⁶⁰⁰

The importance of her being able to recognise and give name to her terror during *la décennie noire* is emphasised by the use of italics here. And yet, as she goes on to say, she feels that she is not entitled to write about the massacres because she is half French. Who, then, is permitted to tell these stories? This, as Lazali has highlighted, is one of colonialism's enduring victories. By suppressing alterity and promoting amnesia, the colonial legacy seeks to ensure that there is nobody left who feels they can tell the story. Despite what she says, she does tell them in her way, as we saw in particular in the early texts in a more fictionalised style, and in these later texts through the stories of people she actually knew. In one particularly harrowing scene in *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, Bouraoui recalls the murder of a woman she knows. 'L'enquête piétine puis son fils, Tarek, se rend à la police et avoue avoir demandé à trois de ses amis de donner une bonne leçon à sa mère qui ne vivait pas comme une honnête femme doit vivre.' He has no evidence of this of course. 'Il est persuadé qu'elle profitait à l'extérieur, loin de lui, de sa beauté qu'il compare à un incendie.'⁶⁰¹ Again, Bouraoui bears witness to women's bodies being brutalised by men. Through her own storytelling and by recalling the lived experiences of people she has known, Bouraoui tells the story of Algeria during these traumatic, violent years.

As we have seen throughout this chapter and the thesis more broadly, bodies, and especially women's bodies are the site of trauma and erasure in Bouraoui's

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., p. 128.

œuvre. How, then, can one begin to take back ownership of a body which has historically been denied, abused, erased? For Anzaldúa, the kind of corporeal self-fulness I am discussing here can be found in the space where sexuality and spirituality cohere. She explains:

I feel connected to something greater than myself like during orgasm: I disappear and am just this great pleasurable wave, like I'm uniting with myself in a way I have not been... When I'm being sexual, sensual, erotic, it's like all the Glorias are there; none are absent. They've all been gathered to this one point.⁶⁰²

This is a self-ful approach to corporeal identity not just because she literally speaks about 'all the Glorias..connected', but also because she engages so directly and deeply with her own experience of sexual pleasure. Bouraoui approaches her own bodily autonomy in a similar way. In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, she explains to her therapist, '[j]'ai conscience de mon corps, c'est une conscience érotique, je pense que tout le monde devrait se désirer avant de désirer les autres.'⁶⁰³ This is not to suggest that sexual desire is the only way to experience and explore one's self-fulness, but it is an important element of the Bouraouian mode of self-ful feminist writing, and is one way to counter the historic erasure of both women's bodies and their pleasure. Let us turn now to consider how desire and the erotic are employed as tools of corporeal self-ful celebration by Bouraoui, through a reading of her novel *Nos baisers sont des adieux*.

⁶⁰² Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 85.

⁶⁰³ Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p. 35.

In the essay 'Lust Horizons', Ellen Willis asks what women's sexual choices would look like if they were really free.⁶⁰⁴ As Amia Srinivasan highlights in a text which seeks to answer Willis's vital question, 'such choices, under patriarchy, are rarely free.'⁶⁰⁵ How, then, does a woman living under patriarchy exercise, or even begin to imagine, such freedom? In her paper 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', Audre Lorde argues that:

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire...

Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavours, my work becomes a conscious decision – a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered.

Of course, women so empowered are dangerous.⁶⁰⁶

There is an ambivalence to the erotic as outlined by Lorde here: it is a kind of Borderland space between early self-identification and the willingness to lose that sense of identification through engaging with the 'chaos' of deep feelings. An engagement with the erotic requires that decisions become conscious rather than patriarchally performative. As Lorde points out, women who dwell in this space are dangerous, their danger lying, of course, in a refusal to conform to imposed patriarchal codes of behaviour, a refusal to 'suspect this resource [the erotic], vilified,

⁶⁰⁴ Ellen Willis, *No More Nice Girls: Countercultural Essays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

⁶⁰⁵ Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 84.

⁶⁰⁶ Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic', in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), p. 24.

abused and devalued,' and instead to respect it, to honour it, to recognise its power.⁶⁰⁷

This is not the first time that desire is employed as a narrative device by Bouraoui. Love, desire, and sexual attraction are key elements of many of her texts, both autobiographical and fictional. But how she writes about desire here, and how it is employed in the service of experiencing the self and constructing a self-ful identity, mark a shift. Consider, for example, the two entries cited here:

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 de plaisir, ou si la jouissance échappait au langage parce qu'elle était un abandon de tout.⁶⁰⁸

Le langage glissait de la scène, ne pouvant la résumer ni la rapporter, il n'y avait pas de cadre pour cela, les reliefs étaient flous, les limites absentes, c'était un état, impliquant le corps et non la parole....

... Cela arrivait au réveil. Je gardais le souvenir d'un état plein, il ne manquait rien, sauf les mots qui ne pouvaient couvrir l'explosion du ventre, l'ivresse (recherchée par la suite), l'étonnement, puis une tristesse, douce et inédite.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 22.

⁶⁰⁸ Nina Bouraoui, *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, p. 9.

Ce plaisir recouvrait tout, il y avait un rapport avec le savoir.⁶⁰⁹

These are the first entry when read in print order, and the first chronologically. In both entries, with a partner in the first, and alone in the second, Bouraoui celebrates what Lorde calls the erotic's electrical charge as that which is beyond language but simultaneously deeply connected to one's own experience of self. Many of the portraits which follow contain either the word *désir* or *plaisir* and centre around the erotic and the 'replenishing and provocative force' engendered by 'its revelation'.⁶¹⁰ Describing the text, Bouraoui explains how each of the entries, though geographically and chronologically diverse, are connected to one another through desire, 'comme si le désir était une identité. Comme s'il était notre seule pays. Territoire sauvage et illimité'.⁶¹¹ Desire, then, is the red thread which weaves through the text, opening a path through the Borderlands, connecting moments of the writer's lived experience. To return to Anzaldúa's discussion of the spaces between the different worlds the Borderland dweller inhabits, Bouraoui returns to many of the spaces and places she has inhabited on a self-guided tour of her life to this point, told through the medium of art and desire. Rather than be lost in them or have them policed from without, perhaps to become ambivalent to her own desire, she self-fully takes control of both memory and imagination by situating herself 'dans tous les mouvements de l'existence'.⁶¹² The writer as narrator is in all these portraits; she experiences all of them, nothing included is decided from without. Again, there are echoes of Lorde's erotic here, in particular the 'internal sense of satisfaction' she

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

⁶¹⁰ Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic', p. 23.

⁶¹¹ Nina Bouraoui, *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, p. 19.

⁶¹² Ibid., p. 28.

discovers when she celebrates the erotic.⁶¹³ Bouraoui demonstrates this internal sense of satisfaction in 'La première fois' (cited in full above), as she describes her first experience of sexual pleasure at the age of five: 'Ce Plaisir recouvrait tout, il avait un rapport avec le savoir.'⁶¹⁴ Of course, this is also a wonderful example of a writerly refusal to abide by the rules of patriarchy surrounding women's sexuality, and especially that of girls (which is not supposed to exist). We accept young boys having sexual urges, but it is anathema to discuss this in relation to girls. Female sexuality and the erotic once again become a Borderland space.

Again, this Borderland space is further amplified in the context of non-normative female desire. Around halfway through *Nos baisers sont des adieux* is the portrait, *Deux femmes, Fontainebleau 1978*. This is a pivotal moment in the narrator's life, apparently recalling her first encounter with a lesbian couple whom the family visits because one of the women went to university with the narrator's mother. She explains: 'C'était un sentiment de filiation. Elles n'étaient pas mes mères mais je me sentais d'elle comme on se sent d'une nationalité. Je trouve ce qui de creusait en moi depuis l'enfance. Je me retrouvais.'⁶¹⁵ The way the young narrator describes the feelings she has during the visit carry clear echoes of Lorde's depiction of the power of the erotic, particularly the notion that, 'as we begin to recognise our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like [the] only alternative in our society.'⁶¹⁶ Finally able to understand the feelings she has been so confused by since childhood, the narrator is able to reject suffering and self-negation as her

⁶¹³ Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic', p. 23.

⁶¹⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, p. 24.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁶¹⁶ Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic', p. 28.

destiny. When she and her mother leave the house, her mother tells her, '[c]e sont des gens comme les autres.'⁶¹⁷ The narrator's internal response says so much:

NON, elles n'étaient pas comme les autres. Mais comme moi. J'étais excité d'échapper à la vie des autres. D'avoir à suivre un autre chemin que celui que l'on avait trace pour moi. D'écouter mon cœur et ma peau. De ne pas regarder en arrière. D'avoir la certitude que le désir, dans notre cas, constituait une sorte de destin.⁶¹⁸

The young narrator's realisation that there are others like her, who exist, even thrive, in their desire, outside of the patriarchally acceptable meaning of the word, lead her to 'listen to her heart, her skin', rather than to the voices from without. As Lorde asserts:

when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense.⁶¹⁹

Bouraoui reads desire as 'un désir d'appartenance à l'autre, non par soumission mais par connexion.'⁶²⁰ It is this desire for connection, chosen not enforced, which drives the narrative. Perhaps this is one way of manifesting those free sexual choices sought by Willis. This is particularly well demonstrated through the artworks

⁶¹⁷ Nina Bouraoui, *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, p. 80.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid.

⁶¹⁹ Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic', p. 28.

⁶²⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, p. 28.

that Bouraoui chooses to include in the text. It is to these pieces that we shall now turn.

Nos baisers sont des adieux resolutely embraces the concept of writer as artist. As Bouraoui has stated, the 'chapters' are to be viewed as portraits, moments in time captured and recorded. Across the text, Bouraoui presents snapshots of her own lived experience and a growing connection to the power of her erotic desire, interwoven with her encounters with a selection of artworks across a broad range of media. Much of the art featured in the text, particularly the paintings and photographs, privilege the naked female body and serve to depathologize the erotic experiences and pleasures of women. Her description of the Egon Schiele piece, for example, depicts 'un tableau sans tristesse. Un tableau d'attente et de silence. Le corps n'est pas épuisé mais offert, son plaisir, imminent.'⁶²¹ There is something quietly political in Bouraoui's reading of the image as capturing the moment before the pleasure of the woman's body, making her the subject rather than the object of the piece. Reflecting on a Marina Abramovic work, she describes 'une nudité non invasive, non intrusive. Ni une gifle ni un affront, mettant en scene la fragilité des femmes.'⁶²² Again, the woman's nudity is not pornographic but, as with much of Abramovic's work, asks the audience to consider how women's bodies are commodified by society. As Bouraoui attests when viewing the Abramovic work, women 'avancent nues malgré leurs vêtements...objets de désir ou de déni d'une foule qui les regarde ou les ignore.'⁶²³ Both pieces serve to demonstrate how art which centres women's bodies so often does so from a voyeuristic position, or perhaps more precisely, as the last quotation highlights, such art often imitates life,

⁶²¹ Ibid. p. 68.

⁶²² Ibid., p. 151.

⁶²³ Ibid.

to the extent that women's bodies are stripped of their agency by the objectification of the social (read: male) gaze. The power of desire and its pathologizing by the straight lines of the social is perhaps best demonstrated in Bouraoui's description of a photo by Oleg Kulik. She states: 'L'obscénité ne venait pas de l'image. C'est elle qui venait à l'image. Le désir se propageant comme une maladie.'⁶²⁴ The problem, once again, for Bouraoui is not the deviation of the art or artist, but the strict and often hypocritical mores of wider society.

In *Feminism, Interrupted*, Lola Olufemi draws a parallel between art and feminist activism, on the premise that both call for a witness and demand a response. A piece of art, she explains, will always elicit a response from its witness. In the context of art, that response, of course, is often guided by the social parameters which Bouraoui reflects on with her description of how observers of Kulik's work bring obscenity to the image, rather than the other way around. Olufemi argues: 'We do a disservice to the power of art and artistic creation when we assume that it is less important than political intervention, likewise we do ourselves a disservice when we assume that art alone can liberate us.'⁶²⁵ Art and activism, then, at least in Olufemi's reading, are not mutually exclusive. To really challenge the status quo, we need to engage our political selves as well as our creative selves. It could be argued that the works Bouraoui tends towards in this text demonstrate exactly this combination of engagement. All these works provide Bouraoui with an outward visual representation of the inner, imaginative work she is engaged in throughout this text. The artists, as well as their work, are also notable for their own challenges to conformity. As Anna Rocca attests in her article on *Nos baisers sont*

⁶²⁴ Ibid. p.74

⁶²⁵ Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), p. 84.

des adieux, 'all of the selected artists...are revolutionary, transgressive, subversive, liberating, visionary, and prescient...All pushed boundaries, incorporated personal experience into their work, and challenged popular definitions of normal, appropriate, and acceptable.'⁶²⁶ In other words, they are deviant. Which brings us back to Downing and Lorde. Art, like Downing's self-ful woman and Lorde's empowered woman, can threaten the status quo because it cannot be controlled by normative rules and processes. As Olufemi asserts, art 'is best utilised as a weapon, a writing back, as evidence that we were here.'⁶²⁷ By using these artists and their work as way markers in her autobiographical journey of desire and the self, Bouraoui makes a clear case for the power of the erotic and a political point about what Olufemi calls the 'resistant potential of artistic practice.'⁶²⁸ Bouraoui creates a radical artistic artefact through her engagement with radical artistic artefacts. Her observation of a fresco near her lover's office perfectly illustrates this point:

Je ne suivais ni ordre ni logique, orientant le dessin selon une folie qui me dépassait. Mes idées se mélangeant dans ma tête, comme les représentations, à la fois naïves et monstrueuses...J'allais toujours plus loin, par jeu, par excitation, sans censure ni morale.⁶²⁹

Bouraoui's mind and body both refuse to follow the straight and 'sane' lines, trusting themselves to be guided instead by 'la folie' and 'l'excitation'. The author's choice of words here is illuminating, given what we have learnt about the supposed madness

⁶²⁶ Anna Rocca, 'Nina Bouraoui's *Nos baisers sont des adieux*: Ekphrasis and the Accumulation of Memories' *Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature*, 38 (2014), 12.

⁶²⁷ Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted*, p. 85.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Nina Bouraoui, *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, p. 25.

of a woman who does not follow the straight lines of society. Through her interaction with this piece of art on the side of a building, Bouraoui gloriously and self-fully embraces the ‘madness’ within her, refusing to be censored or policed.

Conclusion: Spirit – Imagined Communities and Revolutionary Love

In her book *Les Blancs, les Juifs et nous*, Houria Bouteldja posits the notion of ‘l’amour révolutionnaire’ as a necessary foundation for any project of decolonial struggle.⁶³⁰ For Bouteldja, “l’amour révolutionnaire” is a process which entails both self-critical reflection and the forging of alliances between oppressed groups or individuals. Crucially, this coalition building begins with a reckoning with the self, an excavation of one’s own prejudices and inherited belief systems, similar in its methods to Anzaldúa’s call for a decolonial political practice to being with a decolonisation of the self. This concept of revolutionary love lends itself especially well to this chapter’s discussion of Bouraoui’s own journey into self. Bouraoui’s “amour révolutionnaire”, her spirit connection, comes through the process of writing. As she explains in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, ‘[j]e dois écrire ce que je vois, c’est ma façon d’habiter l’existence, c’est ma façon de fermer ma peau; pour effacer mes mauvaises pensées, je tiens un carnet.’⁶³¹ By writing her lived experience, unravelling the transmitted traumas which haunt her and her family, she begins to heal some of the wounds: ‘ma vie d’auteur me semble pour une fois si légère; je ne joue aucun rôle, tout se rassemble à l’intérieur de moi: ce que j’écris et ce que je suis.’⁶³² There are very clear echoes in Bouraoui’s words and Anzaldúa’s own self-ful writerly process. She attests: ‘[w]riting saved my life. It saved my sanity. I could

⁶³⁰ Houria Bouteldja, *Les Blancs, les Juifs et nous* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2016).

⁶³¹ Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p. 79.

⁶³² *Ibid.*, p. 172.

get a handle on things by writing them down, rearranging them, and getting a different perspective.⁶³³ Bouraoui's writing cannot bring back those who have disappeared or were killed. Nor can it completely repair the traumas experienced by her own family and herself. But what it can do is offer her a different perspective on these things. For example, it is through writing that she comes to the realisation that she doesn't have to remain tied to those family members who have caused her harm:

c'est l'hiver de cette famille, c'est l'hiver de ces gens que je regarde, de loin, parce que je ne suis plus de leur cercle, je me suis détachée, je me suis enfuie, je n'ai plus de lien, je n'en aurai plus, mes grands-parents sont les grands-parents de mon enfance, ils ne sauront rien de ma vie de femme, ils ne sauront rien de mes livres.⁶³⁴

None of which is to say that there needs to be a symbolic break with family for the self-ful individual. But in recognising the damage done by those to whom she is related, she is able to focus on healing the self and those she loves. As she says to her therapist in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, 'j'ai l'idée d'une thérapie contagieuse, en me soignant je crois soigner les gens de mon cercle, ma famille, ma sœur qui habite votre rue, l'Amie...'⁶³⁵ This contagious therapy might well be the revolutionary love which is central to the work of decolonial feminism.

Also useful in this discussion of the self-ful woman as part of a wider feminist collective is Chandra Mohanty concept of the 'imagined community.' As she says, the 'idea of imagined community is useful because it leads us away from essentialist

⁶³³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 89.

⁶³⁴ Nina Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, p. 76.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

notions of Third World feminist struggles, suggesting political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance.⁶³⁶ There is an imagined community between the protagonists of Bouraoui's early texts, as discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. We could argue that this imagined community extends to all of Bouraoui's works as she seeks throughout the *œuvre* to centre those whose voices have historically been marginalised. Often, for Bouraoui, this begins with the self and, as Amaleena Damlé has argued, this self-ful focus is a powerful tool for connection with the other. She explains:

Writing the self in in-between spaces also thus becomes a means of writing about the other, or rather of slipping between the individual and the particular to the collective and the general, of collapsing the transcendent, bounded subject into the vitality of experience.⁶³⁷

The vitality of experience discussed by Damlé here is at the heart of Bouraoui's *œuvre* and is particularly present in the works examined in this chapter. How do we move from this, or perhaps more suitably move with this, towards a politics of feminist community which embraces and celebrates the self-ful individual as well as the wider collective. For bell hooks, the first step is clear: '[w]e need to rid ourselves of misguided notions about self-love. We need to stop fearfully equating it with self-centredness and selfishness.'⁶³⁸ In a world that is engineered against female self-love, we need this now more than ever. hooks goes on: '[w]hen we can see ourselves as we truly are and accept ourselves, we build the necessary foundation

⁶³⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), p. 46.

⁶³⁷ Amaleena Damlé, *The Becoming of the Body: Contemporary Women's Writing in French* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 158.

⁶³⁸ bell hooks, *All About Love* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), pp. 66-67.

for self-love.⁶³⁹ Only then can we reach out to others. This chapter has argued that Bouraoui provides a powerful example of the self-ful woman as a revolutionary feminist force, a writer who has done the difficult work of self-excitation and carved a path along which others may reach out to her. Echoing hooks in a piece originally written in 2014, but which appears in the 2024 collection, *Le Désir d'un roman sans fin*, Bouraoui self-fully states: 'Tu te sentais heureuse, complice. Tu suivais ton chemin.'⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁹ bell hooks, *All About Love* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 53.

⁶⁴⁰ Nina Bouraoui, *Le Désir d'un roman sans fin* (Paris: JCLattès, 2024), p. 127.

Conclusion: Decolonial Feminist Futures

And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation.

- Audre Lorde, *The Transformation of Silence into Language* ⁶⁴¹

I say 1 mágica, empty yourself. Shock yourself into new ways of perceiving the world, shock your readers into the same.

- Gloria Anzaldúa, *Speaking in Tongues* ⁶⁴²

il faut trouver son chemin, il faut trouver les bons mots, pour se faire entendre, ce n'est plus la force de la voix qui compte, c'est le contenu, c'est ce qu'elle porte, ou plutôt ce qu'elle transmet.

- Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir* ⁶⁴³

Thesis overview and personal reflections

One of the key motivations behind this thesis was the desire to celebrate the voices of women who self-consciously, and often at great risk to themselves, take up space in a world bound by the twin powers of colonialism and patriarchy. Women, and especially women of colour, are perpetually forced into Borderland spaces,

⁶⁴¹ Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, p. 3.

⁶⁴² Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, p. 170.

⁶⁴³ Nina Bouraoui, *Tous les hommes désirent naturellement savoir*, p. 93.

frequently isolated, told to 'stay in their lane.' This thesis has endeavoured to celebrate those women who refuse to be cowed in this way, and who find ways to be heard from within the confines of the Borderland. In fact, more than merely celebrate those individual voices, I have sought connections between these women and their words in order to demonstrate how much more powerful an anti-racist, anti-patriarchal women's movement can be when women engage in cross-cultural conversation with one another. As Audre Lorde argues: 'And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognise our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives.'⁶⁴⁴ The notion of responsibility is a hugely important one for those of us with the privilege to find ourselves in academia's ivory tower. It is vital that we seek out the voices of those women Lorde describes, that we listen to those whose lived experience may be vastly different from our own, but who have powerful, even vital, messages to deliver about how women are oppressed and silenced and how that oppression may be overcome.

The call to transnational dialogue central to this thesis is also a political riposte to the worrying contemporary trend towards tribalism and identity policing by which a person's (especially a woman's) right to discuss a particular topic is judged from without based upon her own (assumed-from-without) identity categories. In the introduction to this thesis, I recalled a question I was asked about how I could justify bringing together voices from such culturally different backgrounds. At the same event, I was asked how I, a White British woman, could 'speak for' those women of colour I intended to use in my research. The loaded way this question was asked is worth unpacking as it reveals a great deal about why I believe this research is so

⁶⁴⁴Ibid., p. 5.

critical and so timely. Firstly, the person asking the question made several assumptions about me in identifying me as white, British, and female. Only one of these things is true, but the assumption speaks to the fact that so often the fundamentals of our identity are attached to us from without. Secondly, and more importantly in the context of the project, the person asking the question assumed my work to be 'speaking for,' rather than in conversation with, the writers whose work I was examining. There is a racially motivated undertone to the questioning here, betraying the belief that a seemingly white person would paternalistically speak on behalf of a person of colour rather than engage in conversation with them. There is also the wider suggestion that, given our cultural differences, I could not, perhaps should not, have anything to say about, with, or to these women. Which brings us back to Lorde's essay, in which she argues that we must not 'hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own.'⁶⁴⁵ These mockeries of separation are most aggressively used against women as a mode of social control, a way to preserve the patriarchal status quo. Lorde goes on to highlight some of the many ways women are socially conditioned not to enter into dialogue with one another:

For instance, 'I can't possibly teach Black women's writing – their experience is so different from mine.' Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust? Or another, 'She's a white woman and what could she possibly have to say to me?' Or, 'She's a lesbian, what would my husband say, or my chairman?' Or again, 'This woman writes of her sons and

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

I have no children.' And all the other endless ways we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other.⁶⁴⁶

The rigid structures of patriarchy and colonialism rely on us robbing ourselves of ourselves and each other. The pervasive nature of these structures even holds within the supposedly intellectually liberal university, as the above anecdote attests. This thesis has argued that the dialogues of decolonial feminism may be how we begin to get ourselves back. As Lorde so eloquently argues in the essay quoted above, silence cannot protect us; it can only keep us hidden from one another, believing ourselves to be alone in our individual struggles.

Nina Bouraoui has, throughout her career, made a point of not being silent. From the very earliest novels of the 1990s, which have so much to tell us about patriarchy, colonialism, and the insidious nature of transmitted trauma, to her most recent, heartbreaking, account of the devastation of her father's death, and the forthcoming publication of her journals, Bouraoui's writing has always responded to Gloria Anzaldúa's call to arms in the epigraph to this chapter. As alluded to in the introduction to this thesis, Bouraoui writes at the point where the safety valve becomes the political act. This, I would argue, is true of all of the women who have featured in this project and, from a personal perspective, having the privilege to work with the writing of these women over the last five years has made me realise that this is what we must all do: we can find safety in the production of knowledge and of art, but we must also use it to incite change and to stand up for those who are oppressed, persecuted, erased.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

Identity is one of the central foci of this thesis but, in contrast to the heavily policed notions of identity discussed above, the women writers who form the backbone of this project interrogate identity in ways which invite, rather than occlude, conversation and collaboration. At a time when the very notion of identity is so fraught, engaging with women who read identity as a multifaceted and politically potent space is crucial. In her book, *Feminism Without Borders*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty asks, '[h]ow can we craft a dialogue anchored in equality, respect, and dignity for all peoples?'⁶⁴⁷ It has been my argument in this thesis that writers like Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde and Cherríe Moraga respond to this question by first excavating the self, and then reaching across borders to one another. Rather than police identity and promote division, these feminists use their differences as a starting point for political coalition. As Mohanty argues:

In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully. It is this intellectual move that allows for my concern for women of different communities and identities to build coalitions and solidarities across borders.⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, p. 125

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 226.

Projects like *This Bridge Called my Back* have a dialogue of equality, respect, and dignity baked into their pages; these coalitional projects still have so much to teach us, and it is surprising to me that these writers are not more widely referenced in a British academic setting. Bouraoui is similarly under-researched in the context of French and Francophone studies. This thesis has endeavoured to correct this oversight.

By bringing these women into conversation with one another, I have also sought to trouble the norms of academic citational practice, centring the voices of women of colour in fields which are typically saturated by the voices of men (postcolonial studies) and white women (feminist studies). As Boyce Davis pointedly asked in the introduction to this thesis, where are the women in postcolonial theory? In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of women's voices in postcolonial discussions in the academy (less so in nation-building), and it is pleasing to finally see work by writers such as Anzaldúa and Moraga translated into French. Equally, the work of feminists such as Françoise Vergès and Houria Bouteldja are leading the way in Francophone decolonial feminism.

Impact and future projects

The impact of this research is multifaceted, contributing significantly to both literary studies and feminist theory, particularly at the intersections of Queer of Colour critique, Decolonial Feminism, and Francophone literature. The project has offered an important and timely reinterpretation of the Bouraouian œuvre, questioning how her work has traditionally been understood, and proposing a more nuanced interpretation of her complex portrayals of identity, race, gender, and sexuality. This should encourage future projects to view Bouraoui's writing not only as

autobiographical or postcolonial literature but as part of a larger, more intersectional feminist politics that challenges rigid definitions of identity. In keeping with this, and the desire to create genealogies of decolonial feminisms, future research may wish to bring Bouraoui into conversation with writers such as Fatima Daas, whose work *La Petite Dernière*, was published during my period of research. That more Queer of Colour voices are emerging in the Francosphere is to be celebrated and is thanks in no small part to Bouraoui and her refusal to be silent.

As mentioned above, this thesis has called for the creation of non-hierarchical, rhizomatic feminist networks, inspired by Bouraoui's approach to identity and alterity and the tireless anti-colonial, anti-patriarchal work of feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde. The impact of this goes beyond academic circles, encouraging activists, artists, and thinkers to form collaborative, intersectional alliances that are fluid and adaptable, rejecting rigid structures of power and exclusion. The rhizomatic framework offers a model for feminist organising that values multiplicity, non-linearity, and interconnection—qualities that are essential for building more inclusive feminist movements. Again, future projects may wish to consider broadening the scope of the research to feature different media. One element which is lacking in the current project is a discussion of class and/or religion. These are both rich areas for interrogation in the context of decolonial feminism in both the Francophone context and more broadly.

Finally, this research makes an important interdisciplinary contribution, bridging comparative literature, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies. By drawing from multiple fields, it demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary approaches in addressing complex questions about identity, power, and resistance. This

encourages scholars across disciplines to collaborate and draw from diverse theoretical frameworks to deepen their understanding of these and other issues. In short, the impact of this research lies in its ability to reframe Bouraoui's work, expand decolonial feminist discourse, strengthen intersectionality in literary studies, and propose new ways of feminist organising. Its reach extends beyond the academy, offering practical insights for both scholarly work and feminist activism, ultimately contributing to the ongoing project of creating a more inclusive, just, and interconnected world. This has been, to borrow from Houria Bouteldja, a project of revolutionary love. I look forward to the next part of the journey.

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