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Writing Desire and Travestyng the Self: A Bakhtinian Reading of Nina Bouraoui's *Garçon manqué* and *Poupée Bella*

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As a number of critics have pointed out, virtually all of French Algerian novelist Nina Bouraoui's novels concern themselves with a problematic, inherently violent and unstable sense of identity (Jacomard 43; Lebdaï 38; Selao 75; Agar-Mendousse 189). In Bouraoui's *autofictions* *Garçon manqué* (2000) and *Poupée Bella* (2004), her sixth and eighth novels respectively, identitary fragmentation is linked to writing, to sexuality, and to a violent colonial history—the Algerian war of liberation, in which both sides of the subject's family fought on opposing sides. In this essay, I propose a Bakhtinian reading of the two narratives by focusing on the celebratory and creative spirit of both novels and by privileging the *carnavalesque*, playful, disorderly, and creative elements of the texts. I argue that the transformative power of continuous internal dialogism at work in both texts unleashes a creative energy that produces new and powerful synergistic forms, which express themselves physically—sexually—and on paper.¹ Consequently, the work of identity construction and deconstruction which begins in *Garçon manqué* and comes to fruition in *Poupée Bella*, is not so much traumatic as foremost a creative and existential endeavor inscribed in a healing and learning process facilitated by *autofictional* writing. Therefore, rather than reading *Garçon manqué* as an illness narrative, as suggested by Helen Vassallo or labeling Bouraoui's writing as a writing imbued by therapeutic melancholy and "creative pain," I propose to read it as a narrative of strength and creativity (Van Zuylen 85). Bouraoui's novels celebrate and bring out an authentic and unique self, as evidenced in the narrators' ability to transform and subvert societal parameters of socially acceptable behavior and norms and decreeing these new patterns of conduct normative in *their* world.

As Trudy Agar-Mendousse has pointed out, Bouraoui's works are remarkable, given that they defy any efforts of categorization other than fitting in the rather loose spectrum of postcolonial literature (190). In fact, Bouraoui herself expresses resistance against being categorized and wrongfully earmarked as a *beur* writer, immigrant writer, French-Algerian novelist, North African Francophone or French writer. A French writer with a North African childhood, Bouraoui's unconventional upbringing shines through in her works. Similarly, her novels call into question the notion of traditional gender categories, in particular femininity, which in her writing signifies foremost being desirable to other women. The daughter of a mixed couple, an Algerian father and a French mother—an unlikely couple who met during the Algerian war of independence and married in spite of fierce parental opposition—Bouraoui embodies both the postcolonial subject and writer *par excellence*, given that her texts are battlegrounds of resistance. Françoise Lionnet has stressed that fragmented postcolonial women writers face the challenge to negotiate multiple, opposing factors that make up their identities:

Women writing in postcolonial contexts show us precisely how the subject is “multiply organized” across cultural boundaries, since this subject speaks several different languages (male and female, colonial and indigenous, global and local, among others). The postcolonial subject thus becomes quite adept at braiding all the traditions at its disposal, using the fragments that constitute it in order to participate fully in a dynamic process of transformation. (17)

Bouraoui's writing is indicative of the struggle inherent in such an ambitious project, which aims at intersecting a variety of cultural, linguistic, and personal influences—in this case, Algerian and French, male and female, writing and living. As she has said in an interview published in the French weekly *L'Express*, writing is tantamount to making a political statement: “I am a militant in my way: I write. Writing is an act of resistance. Inside me, a real battle takes place in writing: it's a war! And all the better. Choosing writing as a profession is also a way of staying in wild territory” (Simonnet 132; my translation). Hence, her writing expresses a desire that resists categorization, both thematically and stylistically; it is resistance against “normalcy” and unwritten rules of how to live one's life. It is a

critique of conventional and socially acceptable norms of sexual behavior and orientation.

For a better understanding of Bouraoui's works, it is helpful to be familiar with a few biographical details. Born in Rennes in 1967 of an Algerian father and French mother, Bouraoui has dual citizenship. In 1971, the family moved to Algeria, and in 1981 Bouraoui, her mother and sister left Algeria to move to Zurich and the Arab Emirates. In 1981, Bouraoui moved to Paris where she studied philosophy and law, and eventually took up writing. In real life as in her literary works, Bouraoui has a strong penchant for nomadism, both physical and intellectual, as for instance shown in the tripartite structure of *Garçon manqué*, which is set in Algeria, France, and Italy.² The first person narrator referred to in the title—called Nina—routinely shuttles back and forth between opposing Algerian and French cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds, an instability that is reinforced by an equally highly unstable sense of identity and sexual awakening of the narrative “I.”

Negotiating Sexuality and Becoming a Writer

In *Poupée Bella*, the narrator is a young woman who lives an extremely fast-paced life, marked by night-time clubbing and day-time writing. In both *Garçon manqué* and *Poupée Bella*, identity instability is reflected semantically and stylistically, given the staccato, breathless style of writing, and the overabundance of repetitions, alliterations and anaphoric constructions repeating the subject “I,” suggesting an obsessive preoccupation with exploring, redefining, placing and establishing the self sexually and as a writer.³ In *Poupée Bella*, the female self is eager to gain visibility, to “become someone”: a subject of discussion. The use of interior monologues in *Poupée Bella*, which features short diary entries datelined Paris October 1987 until June 1988, serves to question selfhood and to determine the narrator's unclear position in the world. As the anonymous narrator puts it, the self is searching for the right place and for a meaning, much like the writer who aims to create a world as the narrator writes: “I have words in my head but I cannot manage to formulate my sentences. I am not in my place. I am not the right body at the right place; I am at the center of life and I have not yet found the meaning of my life” (*Poupée Bella* 25). The dilemma of not being able to anchor

herself as a woman or as a writer is at the center of this narrative. The narrator frantically seeks to establish herself in the world physically, emotionally, socio-economically, sexually, and intellectually—as a writer. In *Poupée Bella*, writing is not about love, which has not yet been found; rather, it goes hand in hand with an in-depth discovery of homosexuality and a search for love rather than seduction. It serves to “repair” a homosexuality that is lived out but has not yet been fully recognized as such.

The narrator expresses a sense of urgency in her quest for love: “Finding one’s place in a girl’s heart is finally finding one’s place in the world, in its pace and its silence. I want to know. I want to learn, I am running out of time. There is a homosexual dream and I have not yet found it” (*Poupée Bella* 16). Though the self claims to be at the center of life, to be “full,” the homosexual dream remains a dream, much like writing the perfect book, a book that would contain an entire life, remains an unattainable dream. In fact, the narrator is condemned to solitude because de-centering appears to be a characteristic of *being* which can never become truly centered, as French philosopher Gaston Bachelard remarks in *The Poetics of Space*: “Thus, the spiraled being who, from outside, appears to be a well-invested center, will never reach his center. The being of man is an unsettled being, which all expression unsettles. In the reign of the imagination, an expression is hardly *proposed*, before being needs another expression, before it must be the being of another expression” (214). Both writing and love thus inevitably end in failure, as does writing about the self, which can at the most result in an approximation and a succession of substitutions but never recreate an authentic rendition of the self. Similarly, homosexuality also works through substitution among gays and lesbians. Thus, the narrator becomes her friend Julien’s “boy” in the absence of his lover Antoine. To borrow the terminology of Gaston Bachelard, the challenge is not to substitute but to blend two spaces: the space of intimacy and the world space, both of which are characterized by their “immensity” (202). According to Bachelard, when human solitude deepens, these two immensities touch and become identical.

For a writer, the task of communicating with the world and capturing and, consequently, “imprisoning” space in words—an essentially invisible space, inhabited by the writer—is challenging. To place the narrative “I” of an *autofiction* within that construct while keeping a certain authenticity, without sacrificing the solitary nature of

the narrative voice is impossible, as this implies talking about the self without actually making any concessions, without disclosing the self. In *Poupée Bella* in particular, the challenge at task is to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct the self through language in order to create meaning and an authenticity the narrator herself strongly feels she lacks, given her triple marginalization, as a woman, a lesbian, and a French-Algerian *métisse*.

Identity-Building through Travesty in *Garçon manqué*

Garçon manqué, the first novel in which the author truly identifies with the narrator, an adolescent called Nina, presents the self as a site of constant becoming, change and renewal as Nina becomes a woman—that is a “woman’s woman”—and a writer. In Bakhtinian terms, Nina uses a “discourse that strives to determine the very basis of her ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of her behavior” (*Imagination* 342). To this end, she uses polyphony and parodic mimicry, which serve to depict a multitude of contradictory, at times racist and animalist portrayals and interrogations of the self. The many, diverse portrayals of the self reveal both how the self perceives itself and how it *assumes* or is indeed perceived by family, friends, and outsiders. The confusing interplay of a multitude of distorted mirror images reveal that the self perceives itself in various facets, which almost randomly mix and match age, genders, nationalities, and races. Thus, the Algerian, French and or French Algerian self is viewed as child, girl, adolescent, adult and then again as a tomboy, gay, and lesbian. By some French people she meets during summers spent in Saint-Malo, Nina is belittled and referred to in racist terms, as *bougnoule*, *bicot*, *melon* and even as a poodle by her own great-grandmother. After all, Yasmina, the Algerian name of the French name Nina, bears a striking similarity to a French name you would give to a dog. Extremely attuned to the subtext of word choice, Nina concludes that she is not so much viewed as a human, but more as a companion for her great-grandmother’s dog. In any of these memorable self-portrayals and portrayals of the self as it is purportedly seen by outsiders, the self is depicted in a position of exile. Cut off from the world, Nina is in a playful and strange mental world of her own. The heterogeneous parodic-travesty depictions of the self which are accompanied by a *polyphony* of voices can be seen as a critique of

opposing authoritarian voices, in particular those of her French grandparents, who tell her how she is supposed to look and act. Preoccupations with concerns of how the self is viewed and judged dominate in *Garçon manqué*.

While *Garçon manqué* can be read as a dark and traumatic narrative of the subject's predicament of "not quite fitting in either French or Algerian society" sexually, linguistically or physically—Nina looks Algerian with her dark hair, olive skin and green eyes but she does not fully master Arabic—the narrative also has an infectious and subversive, carnival spirit.⁴ Nina is not afraid to experiment with her looks and sexuality. Quite the opposite, she bravely tests out all of the possibilities that would enable her to determine and better understand the exact nature of her "core" identity. The festive and celebratory spirit of the narrative is reflected in images of light-heartedness and freedom, such as running on the beach, sunbathing and joyful laughter, images that are expressions of youthful, wild, agitated and creative energy that counterbalance the narrative's dark undertones. The paganism at work in *Garçon manqué*—the young girl gains pleasure from sunbathing and swimming, which can also prove fatal as demonstrated by her near-death by drowning experience—gives way to *a passage à l'acte* in *Poupée Bella*, which suggests a real maturity process, a progression from adolescence to adulthood. By moving to Paris from the Algerian countryside, the narrator's desire moves from the general to the specific, from nature to human. Consequently, her childhood fixation with beautiful, wild natural surroundings shifts to women who then serve to catalyze her desire.

A "product" of a post-independence marriage of a French Algerian couple, a *métisse*, Nina has a visceral sense of identity and spatial fragmentation and hence finds herself in emotional turmoil. She has two nationalities, two passports, two faces, two distinct and separate lives and worlds. As she belligerently puts it, "I come from war. I come from a contested marriage" (*Garçon manqué* 32). Consequently, her most intuitive sense of identity is grounded in violence. Nina perceives her own condition as life threatening, because she feels that society denies her very existence. Algeria does not acknowledge her existence, and neither does France: "Here [in Algeria], I am a foreigner here; here I am nothing. France forgets. Algeria does not recognize me. Here identity is molded. It is dual and shattered. Here, I avoid the children's gaze. Here, I do not understand the language" (*Garçon manqué* 29).

And yet, it is in Algeria that a conscious and definitive identity building takes place and that the self recognizes itself as double and shattered. Within the narrative construct, carnival, as a joyful interplay and upheaval of oppositions, is stylistically and thematically determined by a strong and pervasive undercurrent of violence, evidenced in the accusations and manifestations of racism and the staccato style of writing. This unstable, problematic sense of identity is reinforced by a questionable sense of both national and sexual identities. While Nina has two passports, she has only one face and one body, which must suffice to express her fractured and dislocated sense of identity.

The narrative suggests that the concept of hybridity *can* be used to describe the complexities of gender and nations-spanning identities. The term hybridity, used by Mikhail Bakhtin to suggest the disruptive and transfiguring power of multivocal language situations and, by extension, of multivocal narratives, aptly describes the narrator's confused sense of identity, in particular, the violent confrontation of several perceptions of the self within the self. In the narrative, hybridity shines through in the polyphony of voices in the form of identity-assigning Algerian and French voices. This polyphony of voices confounds the narrator who in turn resorts to carnivalesque creativity to confound those who tell her what she is or rather, what she is not. As she puts it, defining her self is challenging: "Every morning, I check my identity. I have four problems: French? Algerian? Girl? Boy?" (*Garçon manqué* 163). Throughout her adolescence, Nina's self-checking habit leads to an acute identity confusion, which culminates in a thwarted suicide attempt. This confusion is particularly strong during her childhood vacations in France when she is confronted by her difference: "I don't know who I am any more in the Maurepas garden. A girl? A boy? Marie's great-granddaughter? Rabiâ's granddaughter? Méré's [sic] child? Rachid's son? Who? The French girl? The Algerian girl? The Franco-Algerian? On which side of the fence do I stand?" (*Garçon manqué* 141). In spite of her own confusion, Nina attempts to please everyone. Her obsessive urge to constantly transform and disguise her all too apparent outrageous self, expresses her fear to be "found out" and punished for not conforming to a given norm. As a result, she becomes a *maestra* of transformation, as she morphs from Yasmina, her Algerian female self to Nina, her French female self, to Ahmed, her invented Algerian male identity, or Brio, the energetic, carefree, male identity assigned to her by her father.

Throughout the narrative, Nina is faced with her own complexities and sexual ambiguity. The text can be read as a first-person identity quest, a narrative account of coming into one's self and overcoming one's perceived insufficiencies, as opposed to conforming to a definition of the self that is imposed on the self from the outside world. To make up for her linguistic deficiency—Nina does not master Arabic—she is quasi forced into role-playing. It is through disguise and through role-playing that she creates her own pictorial language and claims a space and role for herself. It is through her grotesque and clownish appearance that she can manage to draw attention to herself and make the world aware of her very existence. More importantly, by developing a creative and existential habit of role-playing, Nina develops key capabilities that are instrumental in shaping her future literary career. It is by parodying the world, and by exploring its limits and its absurdities that she develops a critical mindset.

According to Bakhtin, we can never see ourselves as a whole. "Man cannot really see and interpret his own exterior aspect as a whole; mirrors and photographs won't help him; his real exterior look can be seen and understood by outsiders only, thanks to their spatial *exotopy*, and thanks to the fact that they are the other" (Todorov 94). In other words, the other is necessary to accomplish individual consciousness. In the narrative, Nina is told, "You are *not* a Arab girl like the others . . . You are *not* French" (*Garçon manqué* 33; emphases mine). Nina counters these negations creatively in presenting provocative images of herself. In the process of identity building, Nina meticulously arranges and rearranges the pieces of the identity puzzle of how outsiders see her and how she sees herself. In Bakhtinian terms, she develops a parodic-travesty consciousness through her constant role-playing, which is oriented toward the object—herself—as well as toward a parodied word *about* the object that in the process becomes *itself* an image (*Imagination* 61). Throughout this playful process, the self takes great delight in taking on various grotesque and absurd identities. As if by a *tour de magie*, the narrator changes her identity and fossilizes into an image of itself. The narrator thus becomes Nina—her French self—Ahmed—her self-assigned male Algerian identity—Brio, the adventurous, energetic self assigned by her diplomat father—Steve McQueen—her seductive, sexy, self-assigned male self—Yasmina—her Algerian self—or Amine, her *métisse*, franco-Kabylian childhood friend and androgynous Algerian double.

In *Garçon manqué*, Yasmina's/Nina's change of identity is a ludic performance, which becomes as easy as changing clothes. Identity building is thus an enormously empowering process in the course of which she learns to pick who or what she wants to be at any point in time. In the text, the body is thus far from immortalized and completed; rather it is a site of conflict, the locus of constant change, always subjected to a vertiginous need for renewal (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 10). In the process, the body becomes a site of contradiction, a visceral and visual expression of violence and disorder. For instance, when looking into the mirror in search of—just what or whom exactly?—the narrator sees herself as an old man with a red *chéchia* and rotten black teeth, her Algerian grandfather, the antithesis of the image of the young neatly dressed French girl with immaculate teeth, the self image projected by her Breton dentist grandfather. Regardless of how it is perceived by the outside, the narrator's body lives in and out of itself. It is dissociated from its surroundings, as if in a vacuum, fashioned only by the self's whims.

The physical and psychological divide of the self is echoed textually and geographically, given the dominant presence of both Algeria and France. In addition, the bodily divide is also gendered, as the female self sees its reflection in the androgynous male called Amine, a name incidentally very close to Nina, which according to Martine Fernandes, allowed Bouraoui to reveal her lesbianism (67). Interestingly, the narrator in *Poupée Bella* refrains from using the term lesbianism. Instead, she consistently uses the term homosexuality, suggesting that travesty also comes into play at the level of sexuality and desire, and that it is indeed a key ingredient of desire. In *Garçon manqué*, Nina's penchant for transvestism manifests itself in an episode where she puts on a pair of jeans that belongs to Amine and refuses to give them back to him. Wearing Amine's jeans is a hugely empowering experience. While she wears his jeans, she not only becomes a man but also emasculates Amine. Feeling sexually stimulated and empowered by wearing his jeans, she engages Amine in a mind play, which is essentially a role-reversal, as she becomes the man making love to Amine who has become a woman.

As mentioned before, the transition from adolescence to womanhood is a key theme of *Garçon manqué*. Thus, the adolescent girl pretends to be a boy, acting aggressively, strongly objecting to being mistaken for a girl. As she puts it, "My whole life will consist [sic] in restoring

this lie. To set it right. To erase it. To be forgiven. To be a woman. To finally *become* a woman.” (16; emphasis mine). The self-effacement of the body *is* a challenge, always replacing itself, playing a boyish role, even playing against itself in order to become accepted into the local school’s football team. Clearly, the *carnavalesque* self does not fit a mold. It is not ready-made or completed but dynamic, ever-changing and playful. For instance, in Algeria, the girl “plays” France with Amine, pretending to be in France, dressing, acting and speaking as the French would and listening to the French language Radio-télévision algérienne. In France, on the other hand, she clings on to a piece of Algeria in the form of her mother’s scarf, breathing in its strong perfume.

Similarly, gender role reversal plays an important part in the narrative, as Nina takes on a male identity by pretending to become Amar, her Algerian uncle who was killed in the Maquis during the War of Liberation. Throughout the text, she pretends to become a boy, just as she suddenly becomes a legitimate Algerian national by the sheer presence of her Algerian father who protects her from the outside world. Nina’s compulsive self-travesty needs play themselves out on the body, in her need to transform her body, almost like the hero in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Often, she feels like an impostor, unable to get a grip on the Arabic language and yet looking North African, not fitting either parameter, neither French, nor Algerian. Therefore, her compulsion to dress up, accurately reflects her intellectual and emotional state of mind, which is essentially nervous and highly unstable. Her ludic mindset expresses itself both verbally, through the invention of an Arabic idiolect, and visually, through her urge to play dress up, such as wearing a traditional white *bournous*. As she puts it, “I disguise myself often. I denature my feminine body. . . I *travesty* myself. Alone. Without my sister. Without Amine. It’s a denial. It’s a game” (*Garçon manqué* 49; emphasis mine). Nina’s penchant for travesty is essentially a mode of survival, a desperate attempt to define her ambiguous sexual identity. As indicated by the title, *Garçon manqué*, Nina *should* have been a boy. Travesty then signifies the male self trapped in a female body, which in and out of itself, is grotesque. Moreover, Nina looks small and girly and when she dresses up like a boy, she cuts a grotesque, ambivalent and fascinating figure. As she puts it, her needs and desires are monstrous. In order to become a boy, she cuts off her hair, takes on the male first name Ahmed, throws away

her dresses, breaks her voice, and plays soccer with the boys, the only girl allowed on the team. Thus, Nina’s self-image contains a utopian aspect, as she wants to be looked on as a boy, rather than a tomboy.

In France, Ahmed/Yasmina becomes Nina, travestied against her will and humiliated. Forced to look neat and girly, she has to wear a flowery French designer outfit which is in stark contradiction with her rebellious Algerian identity: “I wear a very slim pair of pants, very girly, with little red hearts prints, blood stains that repeat themselves on a short and puffy-sleeved blouse. A Daniel Hechter outfit. An outfit I detest. My costume. My French skin. (I must) leave. (I must) look for my second face” (*Garçon manqué* 93). This grotesque disguise makes her look like a buffoon, as she comes to impersonate a grotesque realist image of her French self. Equally, the obligatory yearly doctoral visits in France for physical and dental treatments are performed to take off her Algerian edge, to “fix” her physical shortcomings and tame her unruly personality. During the summer break spent with her French grandparents in Brittany, in Rennes and in St. Malo, she feels forced to deny her Algerian self and to efface any traces that might give it away: accent and physical shortcomings come under scrutiny and she has to dress formal. Thus, she is told, her skin is too dark, her body is too short, her gaze too piercing. Unsurprisingly, it is only on neutral territory—in Italy—that she can live out her desire and have her first same-sex encounter. It is during her Roman vacation, on “neutral” territory, that the self can liberate itself from the exigencies of France and Algeria—order and violence—and finally discover desire.

Writing Desire: The Celebratory Spirit of Sexuality, Travesty and Writing

Desire, however, is again grounded in violence, as the narrator in *Poupée Bella* points out: “Nothing is ever said about the violence of mutant desire” (59). Within a same sex female couple, both partners are women and yet become men, a transformation that requires a lot of strength on the part of both partners. This is so, because desire continuously shifts. A construct of the mind, desire operates through substitution for the “real” thing. As the narrator in *Poupée Bella* explains: “I want a woman dressed as a man. I want to fall asleep on a belly. I want the perfume, I want the softness, I want the hand on the hip. I want arms that take away” (*Poupée Bella* 100). Travesty is thus

no longer a game performed for solitary pleasure. Rather, it has entered the realm of sexual desire and is projected unto another person, engaging with the other in a circle of violence and desire.

The narrators in both narratives are undergoing an acute *identity conflict*, given that the multiple definitions of their selves have become incompatible (Baumeister et al. 408). While Nina is searching for her sexuality, the narrator in *Poupée Bella* is struggling to reconcile her homosexuality with her writing career, while searching for real love which, ideally, would duplicate her own desire. As a result of her identity crisis, the narrator in *Garçon manqué* finds it difficult to reconcile the demands placed on her by her own diverse commitments and by expectations from the outside world. In Bakhtinian terms, she must recognize what is given to her directly and what is given only through another (Todorov 96). Rather than choosing one set of identity and acting consistently in sync with one set of values and goals, she skillfully, continuously shifts from one facet of her identity to another, in defiance to outsiders who judge her on the basis of one set of societal, religious and sexual norms. For Nina, becoming a clown is a survival skill, given that laughter as a form of familiarization of the world is a “vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically” (*Imagination* 23). At the same time, laughter minimizes the role of memory, thus liberating the subject, in this instance, Nina—from the weight of tradition and history and putting her in a position to use (what Bakhtin calls) the artistic logic of analysis or dismemberment, that of turning things into dead objects (*Imagination* 24). In the same vein, the carnival spirit expresses itself within the narrative in a positive, forward-looking attitude, which bears a potential for renewal and change for the better, rather than dwelling on a painful past.

Rather than being a victim of opposites imposed on the self against her will, Nina exhibits a rebellious attitude and a determination to turn her apparent weaknesses into assets. In lieu of seeking out one clearly identifiable identity, she embraces her sexual complexities. In so doing, she becomes one and multiple, a liar and truthful, girl and boy, old and young. This explosive identity mix allows her to develop an acute imagination, a desire to invent and reinvent herself, an ability, which is to pave the way to her future literary career. As Nina pertinently notes, it is the distance between two worlds, not merging of two worlds, that sparks creativity: “I stay between two identities . . . I

invent another world . . . I learn to write” (*Garçon manqué* 26). By telling stories from early on in her life and learning to invent the self and the world, a voiceless and non-judgmental world, she is well on her way to becoming the mature novelist portrayed in *Poupée Bella* where writing—the clothing of words on a white page—substitutes bodily travesty. Ironically, writing just a bodily travesty will again make her vulnerable to outside criticism, given the *worldiness* of her text and its reception by the public.

While *Garçon manqué* focuses on the self’s childhood and adolescence, *Poupée Bella* presents a mature self, which remains restless in search of love and desire. At Parisian gay nightclubs called *Kat, Boy, Scorp, Studio A, Les Dessous Chic, l’Eldorado, Kit Kat, Rex, Memory’s* and *Soft*, she slowly learns to live out her homosexuality:

My story unfolds here; it’s the grand life. My night is infinite. My night is soft. My night is violent. I know how to dance. I have a first name. I have a face. I exist. I cross the forest of women. I walk on the sea. I perform miracles. I change. I leave my body-phantom. I enter in the friction of skin . . . I am at the center of the night . . . I hear the things of life. Everything opens below me. Everything exists. Everything appears . . . I am in the time of my body . . . I am in the time of my homosexuality. (*Poupée Bella* 13-4)

The tomboy in search of identity depicted in *Garçon manqué*—boy or girl, French or Algeria—has made that choice in *Poupée Bella*. As mentioned before, the self in *Poupée Bella* has accepted her homosexual identity—a woman-identified woman who wishes to be a man—and more importantly, a writer who is in the most empowering and desirable position of being able to create worlds and identities. While preoccupations with how the self is judged remain present in *Poupée Bella*, their focus has shifted from the immediate circles of family and friends to that of a particular lesbian and gay nightclub milieu, given that the self—assuming that the female self in that novel refers to the same self as the one presented in *Garçon manqué*—has embraced her homosexuality and seeks to establish herself in gay and lesbian clubs and circles.

Therefore, I would argue that *Poupée Bella* could indeed be read as a continuation of *Garçon manqué*, given that the ill-at-ease “tomboy” has become a desirable young woman who has embraced her unconventional sexuality. The narratives present other parallels. For instance, the figure

of the double is also present in *Poupée Bella* in the form of Julien, a young gay man who is out on a “hunt” to find sexual gratification. Julien is a friend, a brother to the female narrator in *Poupée Bella* who does not desire Julien sexually; rather, she desires to *be* the lesbian version of Julien. In other words, she longs to be a ruthless sexual predator, guided only by desire: “There is a shifting of desire. I long so much to be Julien. I have an immobile hand. I have a hand that does not write” (*Poupée Bella* 21). While her writing allows her to dissect her own sexuality, some aspects of her desire are opaque and cannot be put into words.

Still, her newly acquired demiurgic faculties underline her sense of omnipotence, her exhilaration of wholeheartedly leading a new lifestyle which, in *carnavalesque* fashion is top down, a reversal from a conventional one: love, desire, life takes place at night, in clubs, where she seeks out her peers. The top down reversal is matched by a lack of equilibrium. For instance, “regular” life during the day has to be relearned, while perceptions of age change drastically. At night, she feels young and desirable, while at other times the self feels alone, timeless, disillusioned and one hundred years old. At night, the self is eager to experience what Adrienne Rich has termed a lesbian continuum—a lesbian’s life that is marked by a woman-identified experience which includes but is not restricted to sexual desire and relations with another woman.

In *Poupée Bella*, the self is paradoxically obsessed with her “self” and yet effaces itself in the process; the author is no longer present as a figure of consciousness with transparent intentions. Instead, it is language that structures subjectivity and the “I” becomes a replaceable marker. In the narrative, language serves primarily to express desire, which in itself cannot be analyzed hermeneutically. This loss of control of subjectivity as a graspable cogent sense of identity is also expressed in the title: *Poupée Bella*. The term refers to pretty young girls who hover around gays; the term also refers to a popular doll sold in post-second World War France, from 1946 to 1984. By referring to fond childhood memories of playing with said *Poupée Bella*, the title suggests a lack of autonomy and independence. A “*Poupée Bella*” or pretty young doll herself, the narrator is viewed as a pretty *object* of desire by fellow lesbians in night clubs, and runs the danger of being manipulated, being emotionally and sexually played with rather than being in charge of herself. In the narrative, she cannot resist playing

games of love and seduction, given her penchant to fall in love with older women. Often, the female self takes on a passive attitude and wants to be sought out, chosen by a lover. Thus, she wonders

. . . How much time will be necessary to find, to be chosen? I could kiss anybody. I just want a voice that will repeat my [first] name. How much time will be necessary to find? To become what I am? How much time to be a regular at the *Katmandu*? How much time to find my place, my table, my seat? How much time to dance? I am searching like men search. (*Poupée Bella* 9)

The parallelism and repetition of questions underscore an uncompromising questioning and self-searching. The self wants her presence acknowledged by another voice, an obsession, which is also present in *Garçon manqué*, where the narrator seeks to assert her own authorial voice. The narrator in *Poupée Bella* describes her nights as violent and untruthful as she constantly changes to make herself desirable. At the *Katmandu*, she witnesses a “spectacle of travesties” [sic], with gay men dancing half naked to make themselves desirable (46). In contrast, the narrator feels truly in charge of herself when she writes, completely freed from the fears and pressures of creating a reputation for herself in lesbian circles: “When I write, I no longer need the girls’ milieu. I take possession of my body and my desire. I don’t want to be read. I don’t want to be caressed” (*Poupée Bella* 30). Of course, writing is never innocent. It can, for instance, serve as a tool of seduction. The ultimate form of control and satisfaction, it can serve as vengeance against unfaithful or former lovers or those who are happy while she is not. Yet it enjoys a much higher standing than homosexuality. Writing heals from disappointment, of having failed to find love at night: “I am already in the amorous defeat [sic], I remain in the success of writing that comes after the night. It’s balm on my skin” (*Poupée Bella* 83). While the female self is condemned to age and lose her luster and desirability, which is difficult to accept given demands for an ever-young and beautiful gay world, writing never loses its power and desirability.

Writing, and in particular writing of *autofictions* or semi-autobiographical writing like Bouraoui’s, is existential and physical, much as living out one’s homosexuality and yet it is not freeing: it is a prisoner’s work—a burden, the burden of describing one’s interior

life—it is madness, the madness of wanting to keep up with ever-shifting, irrational forms of desire. In Bouraou's narrative, writing signifies *writing on the body*; it is a means of controlling the body, a means of self-control and thus a key factor in the process of identity-building: "It is the only way, for me, to become a person. One never stops writing. I *could* stop loving women" (*Poupée Bella* 33; emphasis mine). Writing is timeless, and it is a work of love: "I have an enamored writing [sic]" (15). As *Poupée Bella* suggests, engaging with homosexuality and writing are similar activities, given that they are both pivotal, life-altering acts. While every single lesbian relationship changes the self, the self that is invested in the process of writing is also changed upon completion of a project: "Every time, it's the deconstruction of a system. I am no longer the way I was before. I don't write the same as before" (*Poupée Bella* 39). Both travesty and writing, as performative, deceitful and creative acts, then can be seen as a means of making sense of the world and oneself, a means of constructing and rearranging the various facets of the self in context in a meaningful way.

The self is positioned in a homosexual continuum of becoming, which is not dissimilar to the writing process, which is also continuously happening. By self-fashioning and parodying the outside, direct world and playing linguistically and metaphorically, the narrator hones her own linguistic consciousness and develops the ability to work creatively with language. In Bakhtinian terms, by writing *autofictions*, the narrators in both texts acquire the skill to develop signifying means of expression—language above all. They develop a complex self-awareness and become aware of the heterogeneous composition of their image. However, writing is not always an effective means of accounting for reality and emotions. Writing fails to fully cover complex subjects such as love and desire, as the narrator in *Poupée Bella* realizes. At the same time, writing can get in the way of life, and can imperil love: "I don't know if I must live or write. I don't know if love is the sacrifice of writing or if writing slowly erases love" (*Poupée Bella* 35). Both writing and love are idealized in a sublimation calling for an ideal writing, a scientific, learned writing, and an ideal love. Though this sublimation is unattainable, happiness, she concludes, consists in writing and loving at the same time.

To conclude, *Garçon manqué* traces the reciprocal confrontation of various antagonistic selves within the self, as well as that of the self as

it purports to be perceived by others, while the narrator in *Poupée Bella* is beginning to live her homosexuality. By becoming a regular at Paris' lesbian gay nightclubs, the narrator in *Poupée Bella* builds a reputation for herself. Dialogue is two-fold: with her peer group, the acquaintances and lovers she meets, but, most importantly, within herself through her writing, and the exploration of the links between homosexuality, writing, and identity. In Bakhtinian terms, this internally persuasive discourse is a characteristic of the individual who lives through dialogue and self-fashioning, whose entire awareness is "a becoming," a constant change and growth process (*Imagination* 341). This assertion of subjectivity or rather, subjectivities, is rendered by both choice of form and content, that is through the life narrative itself, as well as the portrayal of the narrator's *carnavalesque*, pictorial metamorphoses. By creating parodying and travesty doubles of its own, its own comic-ironic *contre-partie*, as it were, the self asserts its sense of identity and legitimizes its very existence as a player and as a creator. Rather than being perceived as an illness or a mishap, the chameleon and homosexual selves allow for a creative, polyphonic, self-fashioning internal dialogue, which expresses itself on the outside in an unconventional lifestyle, in a *carnavalesque* and unruly fashion. By offering changing images of the self in both novels, some of which are deceiving—mere fabrications of the mind—the narrators hone their writing skills and reach a new level of awareness and expertise as creators.

NOTES

¹ All translations from the French are mine.

² See Snell for a discussion of nomadism in *Garçon manqué*.

³ See Agar-Mendousse's chapter "La violence linguistique: violer le langage, violer le lecteur" for an in-depth analysis of the violence that the narrator inflicts on the language, both linguistically and semantically. Agar-Mendousse analyzes Bouraoui's powerful metaphors, her sentence structure, as well as her predilection for certain figures of style, in particular her excessive use of repetitions, alliterations, anaphors, zeugma, ellipsis, and

intentionally inaccurate French syntax and vocabulary—for instance her consistent use of *savoir* in lieu of *connaître*.

⁴ As Bouraoui said in an interview, she was an introverted child and found it difficult to communicate with other people. She began writing early on, as a way of connecting with other people and to gain their love: "I started writing, talking and loving at the same time, when I was a child . . . I was a bashful, reserved, solitary child, and I started writing about myself to compensate for this flight of the second language, to make myself loved by others, to find a place for myself in this world. It was a form of quest for my self. Writing is my only country, the only one in which I really live, the only territory that I master" (Simonnet 132; my translation). This concession recalls similar statements made by French-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar. For instance, in *Je ne parle pas ma langue de mon père, Lettres parisiennes: Autopsie de l'exil*, and in numerous other works, Sebbar has reiterated that she writes in French to make up for the fact that she does not speak Arabic—her father's native language—as well as to overcome the separation from Algeria where she spent her childhood.

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