# GENDERED BODIES THAT MATTER: *CROSSNATURE*, BELONGING AND WRITING IN NINA BOURAOUI'S WORK

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*Abstract*

In this article, I study Nina Bouraoui's two auto fictional novels, *Garçon manqué* (2000) and *Mes Mauvaises Pensées* (2005). My intended task is to show the merit of Nina Bouraoui in highlighting non-normative female sexuality. Like in the works of several Maghrebian writers of French expression (Ben Jelloun, Assia Djebar, Albert Memmi, etc.) and especially in the case of Nina Bouraoui, due to her dual nationality, there is a critical and deconstructive conversation about the notion of belonging, which will be read in the two novels here at stake. This conversation around citizenship is different from the one that can be found among other writers because it is supported by a discourse on non-normative female sexuality. I consider how belonging to France/Algeria shapes the configuration and appropriation of the space as queer, comparing metropolitan France to postcolonial Algeria. This essay then goes on to discuss the narrator's negotiation of these two different spaces, examining issues around desire and (dis)comfort. Moreover, in both novels the narrator develops a special relationship with space in general and with nature and its elements in particular. These natural elements are present in an obsessive way, water particularly in the image of the sea. So how does the writer engage with her space? My intent is to critically examine the values, images, and tropes associated with the intersection of non-normative sexuality and nature, as presented in the two novels.

*Keywords*: Queer, Crossnature, Francophone literature, Algeria, France

The offspring of an Algerian father and a French mother, Nina Bouraoui was born in the city of Rennes, in western France, in July 1967. To this day, she remains attached to her North African roots, often returning to Algeria, the country where she spent her childhood and part of her adolescence. This attachment to paternal origins will leave an important mark on her writing. She has written more than eighteen novels divided

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between fiction and autobiography, the major themes of which are identity, uprooting, sexuality, love, childhood, and writing. In this essay, I will study her two auto fictional novels, *Garçon manqué*[1]and *Mes Mauvaises Pensées*.[2] The choice of these two texts is certainly not intuitive. In the first text, the narrator focuses the story on the period of her childhood and adolescence, in the second it is rather a question of Nina the adult. The choice is suggestive of complementarity, that is not only in the level of the narrator's life periods but also in the themes. In these two stories, the author reveals the many torments that make her quotidian life difficult to manage and the problems she faces in adapting her personality, behavior, and sexuality to the environment where she lives. In addition, the two titles reveal something of the narrator's thought process. The first suggests she possesses a complex sexual identity, and the second insists on the torments related to this identity.

Bouraoui's in-betweenness is not only interesting (from a cultural point of view) but also important in understanding postcolonial queer theory, as Hayes, Higonnet and Spurlin clearly explain in the introduction to their collection *Comparatively Queer: Interrogating identities across time and cultures*.[3] Bouraoui's cultural and ethnic background confirms her diversity and thus gives an aesthetic interest to the queer in her writing. It is true that Bouraoui writes from the diaspora, but she writes mainly on and about her Algeria, her Maghreb, her Maghrebian presence in France, her Kabyle land and the *Algérois* sea, all through her queer subjectivity. We should also not forget that Bouraoui is one of the rare openly lesbian writers in the Maghreb known to the public and on the literary scene. Indeed, she "seeks not only to cross these borders but also to turn them into an object of study in their own right"[4] through her queer body. This specificity of Bouraoui makes the reading of her work more appealing and the queer opens up to other fields of exploration which create a sort of intersectionality between race, ethnicity, language, and citizenship. Studying a Maghrebian diaspora author would certainly testify to the richness and diversity of the North African region in the

1 Paris, LGF/Livre de Poche, 2000.
2 Paris, Gallimard, 2005.
3 Jarrod Hayes, Margaret R Higonnet and William J Spurlin, *Comparatively Queer: Interrogating Identities Across Time and Cultures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
4 Jarrod Hayes, Margaret R Higonnet and William J Spurlin, *Comparatively Queer: Interrogating Identities Across Time and Cultures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

Mediterranean context and logically adhere to a "trans-Mediterranean *navette*" to use Assia Djebar's expression. In this same context, Edwige Tamalet Talbayev says that:

> A transcontinental Mediterranean is eminently connected, relational, and contiguous. It forms an extension of the space of the Maghreb to which it is bound through the presence of other cultural idioms born of the region's interactive history. Whether its poetic configuration echoes national tensions regarding diversity or seeks to obliterate them through a vertigo of translations and detours, the Mediterranean surges as a plane of connectivity. It is a continent -one that contains, holds together, places within the same inclusive space the many shores of the sea. Through this coextensivity it emphasizes both tensions and conjunctions, rifts and continuities.[5]

The diasporic presence is seen then as a spatial extension of the Maghreb, as Talbayev explains. These tensions and conjunctions, ruptures, and continuities, are to be found in the novels studied in this article. Bouraoui embodies them perfectly through her diverse and queer body. Analyzing Bouraoui's texts here contributes to these "inter-regional" (Ncube) representations of same-sex desire in this trans-Mediterranean/Maghrebian context. In addition, Nina Bouraoui plays a considerable role in the renegotiation of "marginal sexualities"[6] and produces – with other *male* writers – texts that are "important in offering alternative narratives of queerness in the Maghreb."[7] The texts of Bouraoui (and eventually of other male writers like Abdellah Taïa, Rachid O., Eyet-Chekib Djaziri, and Hicham Tahir) challenge and produce a new vision of the region very different from the one created by European writers (mainly French), who wrote on non-normative sexualities and homoeroticism in North Africa and the Middle East, largely from an exterior, exotic and orientalist point of view. The contemporary literature of Maghrebi writers is very crucial in the sense that it allows North African subjects to share their personal perspective of their non-normative sexuality. These bodies thus become subjects who take the full agency to talk about their own experiences, and do not wait for the orientalist approach of Western writers.[8]

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5 Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, *The Transcontinental Maghreb: Francophone Literature across the Mediterranean* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 141.

6 Jarrod Hayes, *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

7 Gibson Ncube, "Renegotiating the Marginality of the Maghreb in Queer African Studies," *Johns Hopkins University Press: College literature*, Vol.45, 4 (2018): 627.

8 Ncube, "Renegotiating," 627.

## 1. *When the Nature Meets the Body*

This transregional/trans-continental Mediterranean setting extends to a consideration of nature. Nature, embodied in water, seasons, trees, deserts, and gardens, is a prominent element for Nina's story and writing. The liquid element in particular has a complex relationship with the body – both share a violent history, fluidity, movement, anger, the in-between, the imprecise, and the vague. The metaphor of these natural elements, which runs through the two texts, complexifies the relationship between the main subject, her environment, and her body, whose trajectory is linked to the history of this same nature. In these two texts, there is a celebration of human resonance with nature.

My intent is to critically examine the values, images, and tropes associated with the intersection of non-normative sexuality and nature, as presented in the two novels. The objectives of this section are to determine the usefulness of these two key aspects and how they form our understanding of female homosexuality in the North African context. Nature in both texts encompasses and involves space, time, movement, history, and bodies. This is an "imaginative force," to use the expression of Gaston Bachelard, from his essay on *Water and Dreams.*[9] Nature in Bouraoui's narratives is present in her and around her. It produces effects that define her being and her body:

> Les autres forces imaginantes creusent le fond de l'être; elles veulent trouver dans l'être, à la fois, le primitif et l'éternel. Elles dominent la saison et l'histoire. Dans la nature, en nous et hors de nous, elles produisent des germes; des germes où la forme est enfoncée dans une substance, où la forme est interne.[10]("Others plumb the depths of being. They seek to find there both the primitive and the eternal. They prevail over season and history. In nature, within us and without, they produce seeds – seeds whose form is embedded in a substance, whose form is internal.")[11]

Bachelard in his essay speaks essentially of two imaginations related to poetic creation in general: a formal imagination and a material imagination, to precisely evoke the metaphors and images of water. In my queer analysis of nature that deconstructs and reconstructs the understanding of the sexual scene across the Mediterranean from both its southern and

9 Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 18 réimpression, 1942).

10 Bachelard, *L'eau*, 11.

11 Translated from the French by Edith R. Farrell (1983).

northern shores, I would add to these two imaginations, a queer imagination – or better yet, a queer reality: a reality that reflects the non-normativity of female sexuality in the Maghreb context. This queer reality is also inspired by the work of Astrida Neimanis on hydro-feminism. Neimanis argues that water sustains our own bodies, but also connects them to other bodies, and to other worlds.[12] Her concept of watery embodiment claims that connections happen and develop via the traversal of water. This watery embodiment "draws on feminist theories of subjectivity but parses them through contemporary feminist and posthuman understandings of agential realism, transcorporeality, and queer temporalities."[13]

Natural element tropes are abundant throughout literature, enough so to become a starting point for new critical theories such as ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and others. The images related to nature express directly or indirectly death, birth and rebirth, protection, affection and eroticism or some sort of subversive and queer experiences. In their volume on *Queer Ecologies*, Sandilands and Erickson affirm the role of nature in constructing and shaping the sexuality of individuals according to their surroundings, their spatiality and their culture:

> From Whitman and Thoreau to Gloria Anzaldúa and Jamaica Kincaid, many other works of literature have engaged sex and nature in significant and innovative ways and could be offered up to queer ecological reading (…); just as "nature" has been involved in complex ways in the organization and regulation of sexual knowledges, spaces, and practices, so too have writers challenged and worked with these involvements in order to queer them.[14]

Nature is critical to the evolution of the narrator and traces her emerging vision of her body and sexuality. In the first novel and from the outset, there is a detailed and meticulous description of the landscape. In the first lines of the novel, nature reflects a feeling of uncertainty and agitation that illuminates the anxiety of Nina, slightly lost in understanding her body "*en zone floue*": "Je suis au sable, au ciel et au vent."[15] ("I belong to the sand, the sea, and the wind."[16]) She goes through all the natural elements in a

12 Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology. Environmental Cultures* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 2.

13 Neimanis, 4.

14 Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 25.

15 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 7.

16 All quotes from *Garçon manqué* will be followed by an English translation by Marjorie Attignol Salvodon and Jehanne-Marie Gavarini (2007).

single stroke. She moves from the lowest to the highest and in the middle, there is the wind, a disruptive and agitating element. There is clear and reliable evidence that the narrator is aware of nature and its elements around her and sees it as a projection and reflection of her body.

Following this interaction with the earth, the sky, and the wind, Nina sees several men walking toward the sea: "Leurs voix traversent la plage. Elles sont avec les vagues. Elles sont avec le vent. C'est une emprise. Ils passent près de nos corps. Ils ne s'arrêtent pas. Ils tendent la main vers l'horizon. Je retiens un seul mot, *el bahr*, *el bahr*, *el bahr*, une magie répétée."[17] ("Their voices carry across the beach, echoing in the waves and the wind. I feel mesmerized. They brush against our bodies and continue walking past us, their arms reaching toward the horizon. I remember one word only: *el bahr*, *el bahr*, *el bahr*. Repeated enchantments.")

In this mixture of movement and voices, the girl retains only one word, *bahr*, that means "sea." From these very first passages one can see that nature cannot be reduced to the simple accumulation of elements; it draws its evocative power from its aesthetic and symbolic meanings. I read this intersection as a site of queer north African *crossnature*. In the word *crossnature*, I emphasize the mutual interchange between the queer female body and nature. Beyond a simple decoration, the vital elements of nature act on the structure of the narratives and largely decide the fate of the character. "Cross -" suggests a back-and-forth movement; an interdependent relationship that reflects non-normative sexuality locally and transnationally. I theorize this term by also referencing the work of queer ecology, which explores homoerotic possibilities, marginal trajectories, and temporalities and spaces beyond boundaries:

> Particular kinds of natures have been cultivated in order to produce and promote particular forms of sexual subjectivity. Both historically and in the present, then, sexual politics has had a distinctly environmental-spatial dimension, and landscapes have been organized to produce and promote (and prohibit) particular kinds of sexual identity and practice.[18]

In the word *crossnature*, I also posit, there is a communication between the female subject and her space. The girl finds in nature a place of refuge to express herself and explore her body, and from there begins developing her understanding of her non-normative sexuality: "De mon corps qui s'ennuie. Je n'ai que la mer. Je n'ai que le sable. Je n'ai que la vision des

17 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 8.
18 Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecologies*, 12.

récifs lointains. Je n'ai que les mouvements des nuages. Je n'ai que le ciel pour moi, un vertige. Je n'ai que la nature. Par elle je deviens adulte. Par elle je sais le désir. Par elle je suis attirée."[19] ("of my listless body. I only have the sea, the sand, the vista of distant reefs, the movement of clouds, the sky, my own vertigo. I only have nature, through which I become adult and learn about desire. I am attracted to her.") Desire and attraction are thus lived through and in, across and beyond nature. By saying that by nature she becomes an adult, Nina certainly wants to say that, thanks to nature, she has just asserted herself as a queer subject in Algeria.

Every kind of impediment and pressure exerted by the closed space of the city (i.e., Algiers) evaporates when Nina's body meets Algerian nature. Such encounter is anchored in the Maghrebian eco-space – the (Mediterranean) sea, the desert, and the Atlas Mountains. A closeness and a collusion with that physical landscape are thus born: "Ma *vie algérienne* bat hors de la ville. Elle est à la *mer*, au *désert*, sous les montagnes de l'*Atlas*. Là, je m'efface enfin. Je deviens un corps sans type, sans langue, sans nationalité."[20] (my emphasis) ("My Algerian heart beats outside of the city. It belongs to the sea and the desert at the foot of the Atlas Mountains. Here, my body is erased and becomes unrecognizable. I become a non-descript body, a body without language, without nationality.") By using the word 'enfin', it is as if there is an asphyxiation caused by the city and the urban space that prevents the girl from exploring her sexuality. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson talk about "the heterosexist spatiality of cities and urban spaces."[21] (2010, 19) To that regard, Beatriz Colomina writes:

> It is not a question of looking at how sexuality acts itself out in space, but rather to ask: How is the question of space already inscribed in the question of sexuality? […] Instead, architecture must be thought of as a system of representation in the same way that we think of drawings, photographs, models, film, or television, not only because architecture is made available to us through these media but because the built object is itself a system of representation.[22]

Nature, then, is a place where new ideals of sexuality, homoerotic desire, and the body's values could be explored away from the influence of heteronormative patriarchal spaces such as streets, buildings, and the city

19 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 26-27.
20 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 9.
21 Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecologies*, 19.
22 Beatriz Colomina, *Sexuality & Space* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), Introduction.

in general. Non-urban spaces are considered here as a site of freedom for female homoerotic desire. It is somehow *that* nature which is called upon to counteract the heterosexist / patriarchal order which dominates Algeria, and beyond the latter, the Maghreb, it is *that* nature which invest the queer female experience and can be invested by it.

The protagonist further asserts that nature affects her and her development and that it has the strength to reconstruct the female body and define it: "Seule la nature donne la force. Elle rassemble. Elle est puissante. Elle comble. Elle agit sur mon corps. Elle recueille. Par là, elle est inhumaine."[23] (Only nature gives us strength, reconciling and exerting its power over my body; it both overwhelms and shelters me. This is why nature is inhuman.") The discretion and intimacy of her sexuality, the girl develops them through nature, in the earth and in the sky. In other words, when there is no one to comfort her in her loneliness and her quest for self and desire, it is in these elements that she finds her consolation: "Le silence de la terre me captive. Par là, je fonde le secret. Il me suivra longtemps."[24] / "J'ai toujours aimé le ciel. Sa couleur. Ses nuages. Ses tourbillons. Sa pureté. Cet immense secret qui le traverse."[25] ("The silence of the earth enchants me. This is how the secret is born. It will follow me for a long time. / "I have always liked the sky, its color, clouds, turbulences, and purity – an immense secret that penetrates.")

*Crossnature* makes the subject feel her body, her sexuality, and her queerness. It erases all the boundaries and in so doing, eases the interactions between the Maghrebian woman's body and her entourage, even when, and perhaps even more when she encounters new natural realms: "…il y a l'enfoncement du corps dans la nature qui est un état sensuel, je marche dans le cœur même de la terre et donc de l'existence ; c'est cette sensation d'excédent de vie, ou d'excédent de sexualité qui vient dans les Everglades à Miami…"[26] ("There is the sinking of the body into nature, which is a sensual state. I walk in the very heart of the earth and thus of existence; it is this sensation of an excess of life, or an excess of sexuality, that arises in the Everglades in Miami.")[27]

Nature, sensual pleasure, and Algeria are three interdependent entities that complement each other. Each entity recalls another. This sense of de-

23 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 34.
24 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 34.
25 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 133.
26 Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, 130.
27 All quotes from *Mes mauvaises pensées* are my own translation.

sire and gratification that she feels in Miami's Caribbean natural setting[28] reminds her of Algeria, because everything began in Algeria. From Algiers, passing through Brittany to Miami, water is Nina's traveling companion on her journey, which is a journey of self-research and the search for writing at the end. Throughout the two texts, water is a structuring motif insofar as it largely decides the fate of the character.

To organize her escape from the heteronormative reality, and, in order to find the reality of her body, Nina resorts to water: "…la tête sous l'eau, démise du réel, en rupture des bruits du monde. Être sous l'eau, c'est organiser sa fuite, vous comprenez, et j'ai tant l'habitude de cela…"[29] ("With the head underwater, removed from reality, disconnected from the world's noises. Being underwater is to arrange one's escape and I am so accustomed to that.") Water is personified in the image of a body. This body is a source of pleasure. The sexual pleasure that the narrator seeks and tries to fill is obviously found in this element: "…parce que l'eau ressemble à un corps d'eau, se noyer, c'est aussi se noyer dans un corps-océan, dans un corps qui a donné du plaisir…"[30] ("Because water resembles a body of water, drowning is also drowning in an oceanic body, in a body that has given pleasure.")

Such a personification is even more suggestive and reveals how much the author aspires to an infinity of pleasure, to any form of pleasure. The use of the expression "body-ocean" suggests that the writer wants to insist on the possibility to live and defend non-normative desires. Indeed, the spatial immensity of this oceanic landscape is a limitless continuum suggesting the image of the infinite. It is an infinity that has no limit and boundaries in time or space.

The connection between the queer female body and the water thus goes beyond the mere metaphorical image to become a material reality, a queer one as I have named it. In all her childhood stories, the sea is an essential element present with force. Sexual, carnal desire develops at the edge of the sea: "La mer prend tout. Je la regarde. De toutes mes forces. La mer se retire. Je la retiens par mon seul corps qui ne se retourne jamais complètement sur le corps de Paola."[31] / "On va à la plage en plein hiver. Il me laisse courir comme une folle. Sur le sable mouillé. Près des vagues, immenses, des murs qui s'effondrent. Je cours seule. Avec ma force. Avec un monstre

28 Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, 130.
29 Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, 196.
30 Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, 197.
31 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 37.

que je nourris."[32] ("The sea engulfs everything. I look at it with all my strength. The sea retreats. I hold it back with my mere body that is still partially facing Paola's body." / "We go to the beach in the middle of winter. He lets me run like a madwoman on the wet sand, near the immense waves, where the walls collapse. I run with my strength and the monster that I feed.") At the seaside, all of the natural elements mingle and cross-communicate (I am referring to the concept of *crossnature*) to constitute the queer reality of this body lying, running and wandering on the sand. A body that does not want to leave to enjoy this moment of symbiosis and synergy.

The discovery of oneself in and through nature started in Algeria, in the South:

> Cette colère, c'est la trace de la terre, la colère c'est encore la force de l'Algérie en moi, la force de sa beauté: les cirques, les plaines, la montagne, le désert, le vide de la nature, le vent, le vent sur mon corps, le vent qui fait plier les coquelicots, le vent qui soulève le sable, le vent entre les pilotis de l'immeuble, le vent sur l'eau qui se plisse et gonfle, le vent dans l'herbe, là où je me couche, où je me sens si bien, l'herbe du parcde la Résidence, l'herbe haute et fraîche, l'herbe de février, l'herbe sous mon ventre, le vent sur mon visage, les mots de ma mère : « Tu sens le vent », le vent dans les draps qui sèchent, le vent du Sud, le vent de l'orage, le vent dans ma tête quand je n'arrive pas à dormir, quand je suis envahie ; il y a un glissement de la terre algérienne sur mon corps, je veux dire par là que j'ai le statut de l'enfant sauvage. Je ne me suis pas remise de cela, vous savez. L'écriture vient de là. […] l'écriture c'est la terre, c'est l'Algérie retrouvée, […] j'écris ce que j'aurais dû vivre : je couvre la terre quittée.[33] (This anger is the trace of the land, anger is still the strength of Algeria within me, the strength of its beauty: the valleys, the plains, the mountains, the desert, the emptiness of nature, the wind, the wind on my body, the wind that bends the poppies, the wind that lifts the sand, the wind between the pilings of the building, the wind on the water that wrinkles and swells, the wind in the grass, where I lie down, where I feel so good, the grass of the Residence park, the tall and fresh grass, the grass of February, the grass beneath my belly, the wind on my face, my mother's words: "You feel the wind," the wind in the drying sheets, the southern wind, the storm's wind, the wind in my head when I can't sleep, when I'm invaded; there's a sliding of Algerian earth on my body, I mean by that that I have the status of the wild child. I have not recovered from this, you know. Writing comes from there. […] writing is the land, it's Algeria rediscovered, […] I write what I should have lived: I cover the abandoned land.)

32 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 66-67.
33 Bouraoui, *Mes mauvaises pensées*, 201.

*Crossnature* deconstructs heteronormativity by exposing the female body to new forms of homoerotic desires, in which the woman discovers unexplored areas that were hidden and repressed because of patriarchal heteronormativity. The metaphor of the wind that crosses, carries, and eventually transforms everything shows the deep desire to deconstruct patriarchal heteronormativity. Thinking with nature can be a catalyst to open up new possibilities for desires and feelings. Just like Neimanis[34] who thinks that bodies of water are a way to explore, share, and appreciate these liminal spaces, *crossnature* is designed to understand the body with its multiplications and its divergences in its natural environment.

In the same vein of queer ecology, the concept of *crossnature* attempts to

> probe the intersections of sex and nature with an eye to developing a sexual politics that more clearly includes considerations of the natural world and its biosocial constitution, as well as an environmental politics that demonstrates an understanding of the ways in which sexual relations organize and influence both the material world of nature and our perceptions, experiences, and constitutions of that world.[35]

We see clearly in Nina Bouraoui's perceptions of her sexuality and the nature that surrounds her that this duality or relationship are linked to her desire. She productively queers this same nature and enters in communication with its elements in order to criticize and resist classed gender and sexual formations in this specific situated context, which is the Mediterranean Sea with its two shores, given the continuous displacement of the author between Algeria and the metropolis. Because "place has played an important role in the creation of lesbian identity and community,"[36] I will study, in the following section, the author's belonging to these two geographical spaces, how it is queered and how it participates in the representation and the discourse around non-normative female sexuality.

## 2. *Queering Belonging and Citizenship*

Nina Bouraoui unveils the critical aspect of belonging in her writing from the beginning, without masks and without diversions. Since the first paragraph of *Garçon manqué*, the narrator tells us while she is at Chenoua

34 Neimanis, 18.
35 Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecologies*, 5.
36 Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecologies*, 174

Beach in Algiers with her best friend Amine, that "La France est loin derrière les vagues amples et dangereuses. Elle est invisible et supposée."[37] ("France is far away, behind the huge and dangerous waves. It is invisible and imagined.") This statement comes just after the utterance "Je suis en Algérie" and is in the novel's first section, entitled 'Alger'. This spatial contrast supported by the use of the adjectives "ample and dangerous" suggests the author's desire to deconstruct certain notions around citizenship and belonging. This deconstruction parallels her vision and her conception of her non-normative sexuality. Her description of France suggests the aspects of this same sexuality, 'invisible and supposed', and embodies the reflexive thrust of her writing.

Nina Bouraoui belongs to this diasporic world of the post-independence era. Nina is a child of the war. Her Algerian father and her French mother married in the 1960s, in the middle of the Algerian War for Independence. She spent all her childhood and part of her adolescence in postcolonial Algeria. Her family decided to move to France because of the insecurity and instability that heralded the Algerian Civil War. All these events are told in both novels, especially in *Garçon manqué*: "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."[38] ("For a long time I believe I am an anomaly, the result of a wrongdoing. I am forged by the war. I come from a controversial marriage. I bear the suffering of my Algerian family. I remember the rejection of my French kin. I carry these transmissions.") Very aware of the geopolitical, social, and cultural context that surrounds her, the author recognizes the difficulty of belonging and of citizenship and goes to queer them to find a definition that can be integrated to and by her different body, a body that refuses to conform and undergo patriarchal normativity. Her mere presence always reminds her of the conflict and the war, her parents, this couple of the war. This position pushes her to question her belonging and the notion of nation-state: "Quelle faute, alors? D'être la fille des amoureux de 1960. De rendre ce temps éternel. Par ma seule présence. Par mon seul regard. Par ma seule voix. Par ma seule identité. De remuer le couteau dans la plaie. D'insister sur cette mauvaise période. C'était la guerre."[39] ("What's my crime? Being the daughter of the lovers from 1960. My sole presence, my gaze, my voice, and my identity

37 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 7.
38 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 32.
39 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 124.

preserve that moment in time. Putting salt in the wound, dwelling on that terrible period of the war.") All the elements of her life, starting with her own body, are reminiscent of this union. This wound, born of this war but also of this love, will follow the author all her life. It is this wound that makes her rethink and queer her belonging. These contradictions shape the non-normative subject who develops, rebuilds, and regains confidence throughout history.

Nina Bouraoui is very aware that because of this union she is neither fully Algerian nor fully French: "Ici je suis une étrangère. Ici je ne suis rien. La France m'oublie. L'Algérie ne me reconnait pas. Ici l'identité se fait. Elle est double et brisée."[40] ("I am a foreigner here; I am nothing. France forgets me while Algeria doesn't know who I am. Here, identity is molded. It is dual and broken.") Despite these two nationalities, she feels as though she has none, which is why she sees the result of this union as a problem that she needs to deconstruct in order to claim it and thus affirm her existence as a non-normative subject who does not need to belong but rather needs to (re)think these relationships beyond the exclusive binary categories. "Chaque matin je vérifie mon identité. J'ai quatre problèmes. Française ? Algérienne? Fille? Garçon ?"[41] ("Every morning I scrutinize myself. I have four problems. Am I French or Algerian? Am I a girl or a boy?") This quote explains my initial idea which suggests that the deconstruction of belonging goes along with the negotiation and the claim of a queer sexuality. In this context, Annegret Richter[42] argues that Bouraoui's *Garçon manqué* interlaces cultural (non-) belonging to the problem of gender identity.

When she was a teenager and her parents decided to move to Rennes in France to live with her maternal grandparents because of the instability and insecurity plaguing Algeria, the reader expected that Nina would flourish sexually and continue to perform her queer identity through her body, her clothes, her desires, and her fantasies. However, her reality unfolded quite differently. Upon her arrival in France, she discovered that she was more fulfilled and freer in Algeria. She describes this trip as a wrenching, a strange voyage.[43] Her grandparents who practically represent white French society were embarrassed by Nina's appearance. Since they were not hap-

40 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 29.
41 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 163.
42 Annegret Richter, "The Problem of Belonging in Nina Bouraoui's Garçon manqué," *The World in Movement: Performative Identities and Diasporas*, edited by Alfonso de Toro and Juliane Tauchnitz, Brill, (2019), 180-193.
43 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 107.

py with their daughter's union with an Algerian man, they are not happy with its subsequent fruits: "C'est une peur effrayante. Ça donne mal au ventre. Cette mauvaise nouvelle. En pleine guerre. Embrasser l'ennemi. Le désirer. Faire la paix avant les autres. Par le corps. Se mélanger. Faire des enfants. Je la sens, cette peur. Elle est encore là, dans le jardin, sous mes pieds, dans mon corps brûlant de soleil."[44] ("It creates frightening fears and gives a stomachache. Such bad news in the middle of war. To kiss the enemy, desire him. To make peace before others do through the body: to mix and have children. I feel this fear. It is still here in this garden, under my feet, in my body burning with the heat of the sun.") Even the fear felt at her grandparents is experienced through nature and this confirms my analysis of *crossnature* in the *œuvre* of Bouraoui.

This fear that Nina feels in her maternal grandparents' house is familiar. It has lingered there since her father's first visit as a university student living on campus, when he visited them by himself to ask for her mother's hand in marriage. Somehow, this fear is synonymous with contempt. There is a disregard for everything that comes from Algeria, even when it comes to one's own grandchildren, to the point of taking Nina see a doctor to verify that she is in good condition, that she is consistent with the norm, that she is a normal girl and not "une fille ratée"[45]:

> Demain j'irai chez le médecin pour vérifier ma vie algérienne. Juste par précaution. Sang, ouïe, os, réflexes. Passer en revue le corps. Traquer. Déceler. Les signes de carence. Oui, monsieur, on mange à notre faim. Des légumes, de la viande, des laitages. Analyses. Radios. Stéthoscope. Voir si tout va bien. Après ce pays, cette terre, cette Afrique du Nord. S'approprier nos corps. Les fouiller. La médecine française sur nous. Cette pénétration."[46] ("Tomorrow I will go to the doctor to check my Algerian life, just in case. Blood, hearing, bones, reflexes. To inspect the body, search, detect any signs of nutritional deficiency. Yes, sir, we eat enough vegetables, meat, and dairy. Blood tests, x-rays, and a stethoscope to check that all is well after living in that country, that land, North Africa. The French health system takes over, appropriating and searching our bodies; it penetrates from head to toe.")

Following Butler and Spivak (2007) one can argue that this rejection of which Bouraoui speaks in her *récit* is the consequence of the attempts of a nation-state to build and uphold its own/one identity and its homogeneity. This "identity" is supported by the institutionalization of "states of excep-

44 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 110.
45 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 107.
46 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 110.

tion"[47]. Under the order of the French maternal family, the children must first be controlled in order to be able to integrate into French society. This control is described as a penetration and therefore a violence exercised by different state institutions (the family, the doctor).

Her new French space is uncomfortable because she is seen as a foreigner, a subaltern, a girl of color, an anti-normal girl who needs to return to the norm by following the rules of her French grandparents. She is "subjected to the French gaze."[48] France, like the grandmother who loves only real girls ("les vraies filles"[49]), constitutes a continuation of its imperial power. Indeed, the girl is obliged to modify everything to be accepted: "Être présentable. Bien coiffée. Faire oublier. Que mon père est algérien. Que je suis d'ici, traversée. J'ai le visage de Rabiâ. J'ai la peau de Bachir. Rien de Rennes. Rien. Qu'un extrait de naissance. Que ma nationalité française. Faire oublier mon nom. Bouraoui."[50] ("I must look presentable, well-groomed, to make them forget that my father is Algerian and that I am Algerian too. I have Rabiâ's face and Bachir's skin. Nothing from Rennes. Nothing but a birth certificate and my French nationality. I try to make them forget my name. Bouraoui.") This imperial power is reflected in the feeling of discomfort on the one hand and surveillance and control on the other. The girl confesses that in France, she is "sous surveillance."[51] Moreover, this discomfort complicates her adolescent life a little while trying to confirm herself as a queer subject: "Je suis gênée d'être là. Dans cet inconfort. Qui suis-je ? Cette phrase reviendra souvent. Pendant longtemps."[52] ("I am embarrassed to be here, overwhelmed by my discomfort. Who am I? For a long time, this sentence will repeat itself.")

We have seen so far that home/belonging and the loss of home/unbelonging run through and participate in the narrative of the author's life and sexuality. Nina continues to think and examine the condition of this generation to which she belongs, a generation that is foreign and invalid to both homes. Hers is a generation that is not completely Algerian nor

47 Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (Oxford: Seagull Books, 2007), 35.

48 William J Spurlin, "Contested Borders: Cultural Translation and Queer Politics in Contemporary Francophone Writing from the Maghreb," *Indiana University Press: Research in African literatures*, Vol.47, 2, (2016), 113.

49 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 92.

50 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 92.

51 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 117.

52 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 142.

entirely French. A generation that is subjected at all costs to belittlement, categorization, and elimination from the social scene.

> Oui, je l'aurais, mon esprit de vengeance. Le même esprit que ceux qu'ils appelleront, un jour, beurs. On ne pourra plus dire Arabe, en France. On dira beur et même beurette. Ça sera politique. Ça évitera de dire ces mots terrifiants, Algériens, Maghrébins, Africains du Nord. Tous ces mots que certains Français ne pourront plus prononcer. Beur, c'est ludique. Ça rabaisse bien, aussi. Cette génération, ni vraiment française ni vraiment algérienne. Ce peuple errant. Ces nomades. Ces enfants. Fantômes. Ces prisonniers. Qui portent la mémoire comme un feu. Qui portent l'histoire comme une pierre. Qui portent la haine comme une voix unique. Qui brûlent du désir de vengeance. Moi aussi j'aurais cette force. Cette envie. De détruire. De sauter à la gorge. De dénoncer. D'ouvrir les murs. Ce sera une force vive mais rentrée. Un démon. Qui sortira avec l'écriture.[53] ("Yes, I will want revenge, just like those whom they will call *beurs* later. The word Arab will no longer be acceptable in France. One will say *beur* and even *beurette*. This will become a political issue. These words will replace the terrifying designations – Algerians, Maghrebians, North Africans – words that certain French people will no longer be able to pronounce. *Beur* is playful, and it conveniently puts down an entire generation as well. Neither completely French nor completely Algerian, a generation of wandering people. Nomads and ghost children, these prisoners preserve memory like a fire and hold onto history like an heirloom. They remember hatred like one remembers a unique voice. They burn with desire for revenge. I will have this strength as well, this desire to destroy, gofor the kill, denounce, and break free. My sheer strength is restrained, a demon that will surface in writing.")

The last sentence of this passage shows the importance of writing in the queer project of Bouraoui. The writing in all its states, stylistic, linguistic, and semantic strongly participates in the construction of the queer subject in a postcolonial context characterized by the uncertainty of her belonging. This belonging, we understand that it depends essentially and above all on the body which is why I also consider this aspect of citizenship and home as being one of the pillars of this queer project along with *crossnature*. They both posit that there is a communication between the female subject and her space. Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat argue that the concept of belonging "cannot be housed simply within the material space of walls and roofs, of fenced topographies and well-drawn maps."[54] Home is rather a

53 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 129.

54 Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat, *Dangerous Liaisons, Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1.

set of material, physical, affectional, and emotional securities and feelings despite the real citizenship that someone is holding. Belonging is the place where desire can be fulfilled within and across the borders of nation-states and even when it is non-normative. Sexuality and desire assembled in the human body are seen, experienced, and felt within and beyond the borders of the notions of citizenship, nation-state and belonging.

At the end of *Garçon manqué*, Nina Bouraoui concludes the process of thinking her belonging by affirming that it is within and through the body that she conceives and lives it. She finally realizes that she is neither Algerian nor French but rather herself, reconciled with her non-normative body. "Je n'étais plus française. Je n'étais plus algérienne. Je n'étais même plus la fille de ma mère. J'étais moi. Avec mon corps."[55] ("I was no longer French. I was no longer Algerian. I was not even my mother's daughter anymore. I was myself, comfortable with my body.")

She understood this reality that belonging starts from her and her body, as opposed to the inverse. She deliberately announced this discovery in a country that is neither Algeria nor France. It is in the Italian city of Rome that her body is detached from this tug-of-war between her two countries. It is in Rome that she fully appreciates the beauty of her body, and all its details that thus constitute her belonging:

> Je suis devenue heureuse à Rome. J'ai attaché mes cheveux et on a découvert une nuque très fine. Et encore plus. Des attaches sensibles. Un joli visage. Des yeux qui devenaient verts au soleil. Des mains et des gestes de femme. Une voix plus grave et contrôlée. Je suis devenue heureuse à Rome. Mon corps portait autre chose. Une évidence. Une nouvelle personnalité. Un don, peut-être. Je venais de moi et de moi seule. Je me retrouvais. Je venais de mes yeux, de ma voix, de mes envies. Je sortais de moi. Et je me possédais. Mon corps se détachait de tout. Il n'avait plus rien de la France. Plus rien de l'Algérie. Il avait cette joie simple d'être en vie. […] Tout changeait. Par ma peau. Par mon regard. Rien ne serait plus jamais comme avant. Par mon seul corps. De ce qui s'en dégageait. Par sa décision. D'être un corps libre dans les jardins de Tivoli.[56] ("I became happy in Rome. I tied my hair back. We discovered a thin nape. Sensitive ties. A pretty face. Eyes that turned green in the sun. female hands and gestures. A deeper and controlled voice. I became happy in Rome. My body revealed something new, an evidence, a different personality, a gift, perhaps. I came from myself and myself alone. I was finding myself, born solely from my eyes, my voice, and my desires. I shed my old self and reclaimed my identity. My body was breaking free. It no longer had French traits. It no longer had Algerian traits. It experienced the simple joy of being

55 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 184.
56 Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué*, 185-186.

alive. […] Everything was changing – my skin, my vision. Nothing would ever be the same again in my lone body. My aura changed. My body had decided to be free in the Tivoli gardens.")

Like sexuality, belonging is a permeable concept, in which multiple forms related to the human subject participate in its construction. To the question formulated by Butler and Spivak which is how to go beyond the nation-state towards a better acceptance of cultural differences and inclusion,[57] Bouraoui responds with what I identified as her queer project, which highlights the nature around her, her body, and her non-normative sexuality. The construction of belonging in Bouraoui's work is always contested and queered. Spurlin suggests that the deconstruction of these normative concepts of belonging, borders, and citizenship sheds light on sexuality as "a cultural border that (re)signifies relations of power and social hierarchies particularly in postcolonial contexts in Africa."[58] By queering all these concepts that are somehow very *straight* in their common sense, Bouraoui creates new sites that have the body as a point of reference. More specifically, the nonnormative body, becomes in her writing a provocative metaphor that challenges binary thinking around gender and sexuality, and thus provides new ways to renegotiate and rearticulate belonging.

I have demonstrated here that the queer female body has developed and extended itself in its environment, including the nature that surrounds it, and I have created and analyzed the concept of *crossnature* through which the author undergoes and experiences her desires and queer subjectivity. Then, I showed that the belonging is lived through the body essentially. This same body is explored in and through the writing act. A writing that aims to deconstruct a language, a form, and a canonical and heteronormative structure. This explains my reasoning behind choosing these two texts, as they cover a large part of the life of Nina Bouraoui (an *autodiegetic* narrator in both texts) starting with her childhood in Algeria, the return to France, her love encounters, and her debut in the world of writing and publishing. Thus, it is a whole journey, one that cross-communicate with nature to challenge a heteronormative entourage, questioning, and disturbing hegemonic concepts, and everything is accomplished through writing. The author uses the words to tell but also to explore and navigate her sexuality.

57 Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (Oxford: Seagull Books, 2007), 55.

58 William J Spurlin, "Contested Borders: Cultural Translation and Queer Politics in Contemporary Francophone Writing from the Maghreb," *Indiana University Press: Research in African literatures*, Vol.47, 2, (2016), 105.

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