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Untranslatable Desire: Inter-Ethnic Relationships in Franco-Arab Literature

Mehammed Amadeus Mack

Upon their emergence, a certain generation of North Africa-born Francophone writers—Rachid Boudjedra, Assia Djebar, and Tahar Ben Jelloun—met with a critical reception that focused a special attention on the exploration of gender and sexuality in their work. They were celebrated for boldly discussing “alternative” sexuality and non-normative gender expressions at the fringes of North African culture. Yet what might be considered “fringe” was perhaps not intended as such by the authors, who often located outwardly transgressive acts in longstanding precedents, as Tahar Ben Jelloun did with cross-dressing in *The Sand Child*.¹ This introduces the seemingly paradoxical notion of the “traditionally eccentric,” or that common space within most every society for the expression of eccentricity. By exploring sexuality, and especially sexual “eccentricity,” Franco-Arab and North African immigrant writers can become intelligible to, and resonate with, a French readership already curious about gender and sexual transgression in the Muslim world, a world often defined in terms of stricture. I select the term “Franco-Arab” over other markers like “*beur*” and the cumbersome “French citizen of North African origin” after much deliberation, wishing to take into account outside and self-designation, while making exceptions for those of North African descent who don’t identify as Arab but rather *kabyle* or *berbère*.

In important ways, a certain literature answers the demand for sexual knowledge and gendered rebellion, but seeks to complicate sexual assumptions about the Arab/Muslim world and introduce another story in their place, perhaps less bleakly realist, more stylistically

adventurous, and amenable to what cannot be easily explained or categorized. In *Desiring Arabs*, Joseph Massad critiques not only the “distorted” political and journalistic representations of Arab sexuality that dwell exclusively on regression, violence, intolerance, and phallogentrism, he also presents the potential of Arabic literature (and the cinema based upon it) to offer a less judgmental and non-fearmongering view more attuned to local vocabularies of the sexual.²

Literature sometimes succeeds in representing a fuller scope of sexual diversity where an abusive ethnography concerned only with classification and truth claims fails.

This essay examines the sexualization of postcolonial relations at the level of literature, paying special attention to how postcolonial resentment is portrayed via the figure of the “Arab boy,” transplanted from an exploited status in colonial settings to an unassimilated status in contemporary France. The difficulties of communication that occur, when certain French writers aim to depict this Arab figure, are then sourced to problems of cultural translation in a variety of instances. Gay-identified Moroccan authors like Rachid O. and Abdellah Taïa, who write in French from France, have responded to calls for sexual disclosure as “native informants,” while simultaneously supplying disturbing and destabilizing answers in stories often featuring sexualized Arab youth. These writers first reify and then challenge a tradition of sexualized literary collaboration that has existed ever since the writer and translator Paul Bowles fostered the emergence of Moroccan voices for a Western audience. Contemporary writers like Renaud Camus and Frédéric Mitterrand have themselves pursued forms of collaboration with North African cultural actors that recall the collaborative precedent. Between the era of Tangiers as a haven for gay writers and now, however, their young Arab interlocutors have gone from being available and servile, to “difficult” and resentful. In the North Africa of tourism, service

economies, and colonial availability, Arab boys seemed perfectly intelligible and transparent to the Western writers who visited and also slept with them. However, the post-colony of urban France after immigration offers no such assurances. Instead, a resistant wall of non-intelligibility, manifest in frustrated desires on both sides, has created a gulf between a set of European and North African partners who have entered into agreements of literary collaboration. The language of protest articulated by the Franco-Arab parties arguably stems from their French interlocutors' refusal to acknowledge power imbalances in past relationships of collaboration (as well as the greater history of sex tourism in North Africa). Such language cannot be translated as its productive causes have been overlooked. This situation results in impeded cultural translation: collaborators of now divergent backgrounds enter into literary exchange from incommensurate vantage points, unable to sustain the desire of collaboration necessary for their project. Within these exchanges, I am analyzing a gray area of translation that encompasses both cultural and intra-linguistic divides, that casts the question of intelligibility in social terms. Naoki Sakai elaborates a version of it here: "(The) occasion of making sense out of nonsense, of doing something socially—acting toward foreigners, soliciting their response, seeking their confirmation, and so forth—is generally called translation, provided that we suspend the conventional distinction between translation and interpretation."³ The failed, unenthusiastic communication between Franco-Arab and French interlocutors emerges from the inability to agree on a common vocabulary across variables of class and historical outcomes that have made commonality of experience difficult. These divisions persist even within the seemingly cohesive community of contemporary gay writers in France, such that intra-lingual translation between its sub-communities becomes necessary. It is also the case that when the two interlocutors pass—

with the transition from colonial to post-immigration settings—from being at home in two different languages (French vs. Arabic/Berber) to being equally proficient writers in the same language, a reckoning in France ensues, about past conflicts that escaped articulation when the same scene was set in North Africa.

The pages of mainstream French gay magazines like *Têtu* and *Pref* have often singled out the Paris-based author Abdellah Taïa, hailing him as a courageous gay rights pioneer for his Moroccan homeland.⁴ His “coming out”—an interview in the Moroccan francophone monthly *Tel Quel* in 2006—was the subject of much fanfare, yielding many declarations of historic firsts. Though the more anonymous Rachid O. was published before Taïa, Taïa was heralded as the first “out” gay writer from the Arab world. This omits, however, historical precedents such as literary production celebrating non-identitarian homosexual practices. In this vein, Khaled El-Rouayheb has importantly documented the Arab heritage of same-sex male sexuality that does not line up with the assertion of homosexual identity: he details a homosexual praxis that places a greater emphasis on inter-generational dynamics, on esthetic appreciation of the male form, and roles that may shift with age.⁵

The transnational positioning of many of authors like Taïa and O.—who write from France about North Africa—has recently come up for critique from Jean-Pierre Péroncel-Hugoz, a former *Le Monde* journalist living in Morocco, who writes:

Aujourd’hui, au nord de la Méditerranée, une toute petite poignée de plumitifs maghrébins sans autre sujet d’inspiration que le gigolisme ou des parties de touche pipi dans des toilettes publiques, ont calculé qu’en posant en victimes de leur pays

d'origine dans le Marais . . . ou sur les Ramblas de Barcelone, il y avait là un moyen idéal pour flatter leur ego et faire fructifier leur gloriole et les ventes de leurs répétitives plaquettes autobiographiques . . . ⁶

[Today, north of the Mediterranean, a small handful of penpushing Maghrebis—without any inspiration besides pimping themselves or “sword-crossing” in public bathrooms—have calculated that, by posing as victims in their home countries while in the Marais . . . or on the Ramblas of Barcelona, they might find the ideal means to flatter their ego, their misplaced vanity, and spur to fruition the sale numbers of their repetitive autobiographical booklets . . . —my translation]

Such a comment goes to show just how much Franco-Arab writing about sexuality, often celebrated and relatively lucrative, can be the object of skepticism and aspersions of material self-interest. Péroncel-Hugoz believes that O. and Taïa's books sell because of their banal (according to him) transgressive elements, rather than their literary merits or insights into North African culture. This dispute about authenticity is, as always, epistemologically impossible to settle in an age when transnational exchanges obfuscate the borders between now permeable national cultures, Moroccan or French.

While French, and more recently American publications have tended to present Taïa's literary project as an extension of a Stonewall liberation narrative—an inexorable march towards greater visibility and freedom of sexual disclosure—portions of Taïa's work actually offer a critique of the globalization of homo-normative discourses and the way they might pave over the

specificity of Moroccan sexual practices and attitudes. Homonormative discourses that demonstrate latent but unacknowledged class and racial privilege are challenged, in particular, the kind of homonormativity that posits a universal drive towards “outness” and independence from family, a homonormativity in which the aspiration is to move beyond a more undefined, working class, non-globalized sexuality. What complicates matters is that, within non-fictional sex tourism literature, the pursued partners of homonormatively “mature” Western homosexuals have often been these homo-normatively “immature” and sexually undefined men in the former colonies. The chapter “Terminus des Anges” in *Le Rouge du tarbouche*⁷ stages an “overdue” confrontation between a privileged position of (sexual) tourism and the grievances that result from the economic disparities inherent in tourism. This confrontation is developed through a civil, alternatively stern and emotional conversation between a Moroccan protagonist, M’hamed, and a French visitor, René, who, despite the best of intentions, is firmly entrenched in the dynamic of economic injury. Over the course of “Terminus,” M’hamed (an occasional guide who says he prefers women but does not decline generous men) strikes up a rapport with René and takes him to the family home late at night. After offering what he declares “most precious” (his body), M’hamed implores René to help him obtain papers so that he can leave Morocco, a country that belongs to tourists rather than ordinary Moroccans, in M’hamed’s opinion. René does not know what he has stepped into and feels a sudden strangeness and panic. In their short time together, he has grown to care for M’hamed, especially after the latter sobbed in his arms when explaining his suffering. Hearing his cries, M’hamed’s mother called out to him from another room, a domestic detail that cemented René’s affection for him. Yet the vignette ends without closure, with no promises about the future made. Their conversation changed nature,

from light hedonism to serious social lament, with Taïa exposing the undercarriage of precarity that forces many into the sex tourism industry.

The “Terminus” chapter importantly starts with the morbid invocation of homosexual authors past who sought, in North Africa, a type of sexual and personal release unavailable in Europe: “Paul Bowles est mort” (Taïa 113) (Paul Bowles is dead—my translation). This quote seems to signify the literal, historical closing of a chapter perhaps momentous and productive for those European authors yet less emancipatory for their sexual interlocutors, as well as for those later readers who, like Taïa, became concerned about the human object of those authors’ sexual “conquests.” Such a direct return-to-sender framework forthrightly answers still continuing publication trends in international LGBT publishing which favor first-person, “western”-narrators giving accounts of sexual dalliance in the “lands of Islam,” from the spotty scholarship (or sex tourism literature) edited by Arno Schmitt and Jehoeda Sofer⁸ to the recent collection *Gay Travels in the Muslim World* by Michael Luongo.⁹

While past sex tourism literature taking place in North Africa has featured deferential youth “at the service” of foreign visitors, more recently, such literature has eroticized the post-colonial figure of the resentful or indomitable Arab boy, no longer seeking to please, with tourists “at his service” instead. The “difficult Arab boy” is a trope that extends from precedents in the travel literature of Joe Orton—now legend in the “gay” tourism canon—all the way to modern examples like the “thuggish” yet attractive types that show up and steal the show (and women) in an annoyed Michel Houellebecq. One recent literary meeting of minds encapsulates this discussion: the collaboration of the famed French journal writer Renaud Camus and the young Franco-Arab author Farid Tali. Both openly homosexual, Tali met Camus at a screening of

a film about one of the prominent author's writing workshops, directed by Pascale Bouhénic in 1997. A tense but amicable relationship ensues, special enough that they decide to publish a co-written journal about their encounter, entitled *Incomparable*, named after the handsome "Farid" whose name translates to "unique" or "singular" in Arabic.¹⁰ The journal entries, they agree, are to be placed one after the other, with Camus' appearing first. Such a structure echoes the longstanding tradition, within gay-interest literature about North Africa, of collaborative writing as an at once literary and sexual inauguration, as Joseph Boone has pointed out.¹¹ The tone of the entries evolves from hopes of inter-generational love (fifty-something Camus desires twenty-something Tali) to the mute bitterness of dashed expectations, resulting in the abrupt end of Camus' section. With the start of Tali's section, the journal then shifts to a much shorter, sparer, arguably more "innocent" (the full meaning of this word choice will become clear) account of a young author's impressions upon meeting an admired pioneer, and his ensuing hopes of one day getting published.

Tali and Camus' interaction is arguably more noteworthy for its socio-cultural and political ramifications, rather than its literary particularities. Shortly after completing the book project, Tali appeared, alongside Abdellah Taïa, in the groundbreaking faux-documentary film *Tarik El Hob/Le Chemin de l'amour* directed by Rémi Lange, which tackles the intersecting questions of homosexuality, immigration, and attachment to North Africa.¹² The film recounts the journey of a Franco-Algerian sociology student to Morocco, where he hopes to pursue a research project on sexuality and taboos in the Arab world. Starting off in a heterosexual relationship, he gains an interest in men, it is suggested, *because* of the project and replicates the Gidean model by exploring an uncharted part of his sexuality through an enabling trip to North

Africa. The film features a pilgrimage to Jean Genet's grave in Morocco, and suggests that exploring the heritage of same-sex relations in the wider Arab world would constitute a necessary rite of passage for self-identified gay North Africans born in Europe, disoriented or unassimilated in terms of sexual identity and ethnic belonging. Though not excessively stressing misery or false consciousness like other offerings in the same domain, Lange's film is quite voyeuristic with its unexplained nudity and storyline that has the protagonist's enlightenment coincide with undressing. The script was written by Lange although the characters are shown to speak autobiographically. Farid Tali appears in the film as a pessimistic voice on the question of whether Muslim/Arab "origins" can be reconciled with "homosexuality," answering in the negative while the camera focuses on his handsome yet anguished face. He speaks of the harsh but exquisite suffering that surfaces—productively for his literary output—when that dilemma is intentionally *not* resolved.

Renaud Camus, Tali's collaborative partner here, has been celebrated as a gay literary icon, famed for his journals, art histories, and especially his chronicle of sexual encounters *Tricks*.¹³ After the collaboration with Tali, in which he flattered his French-born protégé's immaculate French, as well as his level of "integration," Camus ventured into somewhat novel territory. He founded a political party, The "In-nocence" Party/Le Parti de L'In-nocence, whose mission statement underlines that the party "est constitué autour des valeurs de civisme, de civilité, de civilisation, d'urbanité, de respect de la parole et d' 'in-nocence' . L'in-nocence est une vertu; comme telle elle consiste à sans cesse s'évertuer. Elle est, par nature, politique"¹⁴ ([the party] is constituted around values of civicness, civility, civilization, urbanity, respect for speech and 'in-nocence.' In-nocence is a virtue; as such it consists in never ceasing to increase in virtue.

It is, by its nature, political”—my translation). In-nocence is to be distinguished from innocence: it is a doctrine against “*nocence*,” easier to assimilate in French to “*nuisance*” (harm), with the imperiled object being French culture. In addition to his anti-immigration rhetoric, Camus has made statements betraying anti-Semitism. In what later came to be known as the “Camus affair,” the author reproached, in his 1994 journal, the publicly-funded channel France Culture for what he deemed the over-representation of Jews and Jewish themes on its radio program “*Panorama*.”¹⁵

Camus rings the alarm bells warning of “*nocence*” to an endangered French civilization. He alleges that a gradual process of cultural impoverishment has been fomented by waves of immigrants whose offspring lack “respect” for the French language. Camus was one of the official signatories behind the controversial “Apéro Géant de la Goutte D’or: Saucisson et Pinard” (Giant Cocktail Hour in the Goutte d’Or neighborhood: Saucisson and Pinard). A Parisian district heavily populated by Muslim immigrants and their descendants, La Goutte D’or is importantly undergoing gentrification today. This was an event that consisted in a cultural provocation of sorts whereby participants would ostentatiously savor French gastronomical symbols (pork sausage and spirits, forbidden to Muslims) in an area which they declared in danger of being completely “islamicized.”¹⁶ Such a “danger” seemed overstated to some, considering the rapidly escalating property values in the area, driving out working class Muslim families. Camus published the *Abécédaire de l’In-nocence*¹⁷ (*The Alphabet Book of In-nocence*), an instruction manual crossed with an introductory encyclopedia of terms, whose objective is to keep an insufficiently aware French public (Muslim or not) informed about a threatening religion presented as a novel arrival, not a generations-old presence. Now France’s second most practiced

religion, Islam has firmly and irreversibly implanted itself in France as innumerable indicators, among them the 2006 Machelon report, have confirmed.¹⁸ The party has attracted much political attention in a context wherein platforms of cultural endangerment and the prospect of “islamicization” have successfully been rendered mainstream, after first being disseminated by the far-right Front National Party. Under Marine Le Pen, daughter of founder Jean-Marie Le Pen, the Party made great electoral gains and increasingly defined the tenor of the immigration debate: in the 2012 Presidential election Marine outdid her father and obtained nearly 18% of the vote.¹⁹

In 2010, Camus convened the “Assises internationales sur l’islamisation de nos pays” (Assizes/Seated International Meeting on the Islamicization of our Countries), where he bemoaned the cowardly response to threats against French linguistic institutions. He connected the issue of linguistic poverty to controversies about urban violence, immigration, and changing demographics:

. . . d’où cette langue qu’il (le complexe politico-médiatique) a inventée pour *ne pas* dire, pour *ne pas* montrer, pour cacher ce qui survient et qui est déjà survenu: les *jeunes* pour les délinquents, les *quartiers populaires* pour les quartiers que les couches populaires indigènes ont dû fuir, les *quartiers sensibles* pour les zones de violence et de non-droit, le *multiculturalisme* pour la grande déculturation, la *diversité* pour le triomphe du même, pour la disparition des identités, pour la banlieue universelle.²⁰

[. . . And hence we have the language that (the political-mediatic complex) has invented in order to *not say*, to *not show*, to hide what is happening and what has already happened: *youth* for delinquents, *popular neighborhoods* for the neighborhoods that the indigenous popular classes have had to flee, *sensitive neighborhoods* for zones of violence and lack of rights, *multiculturalism* for the great “deculturation,” *diversity* for the triumph of the same, for the disappearance of identities, for the universalization of the *banlieue* (multi-ethnic, working-class, housing projects in the suburbs).—my translation]

That the wheel flattening identities should be consequent to a policy of multiculturalism—which is in part a strategy of tolerating limited assertions of cultural identity—and not from Republican universalism, is telling. This fact renders Camus’ complaint similar in structure to that of the very constituency—identitarian minorities of immigrant origin who assert an embattled cultural pride—he is criticizing. His use of the word “indigenous” is revelatory and somewhat paradoxical, as he inserts a colonial category in order to refer to a “pure” France untouched by colonial experience and the ensuing diversification of the population through immigration from the former colonies. Similarly, in interviews, Camus has spoken of a “counter-colonization” of replacement; he has declared agreement with the recent analyses (but not the formerly negationist and anti-semitic platforms) of the Front National, and has professed his admiration for such anti-immigration polemicists as Eric Zemmour and Alain Finkielkraut.²¹ More recently, some critics have pointed to the “rightward” movement of homosexual elites, inscribing within the same phenomenon Renaud Camus, François Mitterrand, and LGBT activist and journalist

Caroline Fourest (who wrote a book-length polemic against the Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan)²². They point to the ever-increasing trend of apocalyptic writing that mourns the “inevitable” loss of cultural *and* sexual liberty in the same breath.

Camus is not the only celebrated gay French writer to make connections between immigration and the dissolution of French culture and letters. Roland Barthes, who was a close acquaintance of Camus’ and wrote the preface to Camus’ *Tricks*, filled the impressionistic *Incidents* with mostly regretful stories of encounters with indistinguishable Mohammeds he met during a teaching engagement in Morocco, boys he finds depressingly dull, especially when they try to assert themselves intellectually: “Un Mohammed,” “Mohammed Gymnastique,” “Mohammed (évidemment)” (A Mohammed, Mohammed Gymnastics, Mohammed [obviously]).²³

A now infamous Barthes’ citation appears prominently in Jean Fernandez and Marie-Haude Caraës’ study of what they call the “*colonisation littéraire*” (literary colonization) of Tangiers by European and American writers. This “colonization” provides a relevant foreground to the “colonization” of “indigenous France” of which Camus speaks. In the citation, Barthes’ relates his impressions of the city in sexual terms:

Dans la rue Samarine, j’allais à contre-courant du fleuve humain. J’eus le sentiment (rien d’érotique) qu’ils avaient tous un zob et que tous ces zobs, au rythme de ma marche, s’égrénaient comme un objet manufacturé qui se détache en cadence du moule. Dans ce flot, mais vêtue de la même étoffe rugueuse, des mêmes couleurs, des mêmes haillons, de temps en temps une carence de zob.²⁴

[On Samarine street, I walked against the current of the human tide. I had the feeling (nothing erotic) that they all had a *zob*/cock and that all these cocks, in rhythm with the march, were being spread out one by one like a manufactured object that detaches from the mold with a constant cadence. Within this flow, dressed up in the same rugged fabrics, in the same colors, in the same rags, every now and then a gap in the flow of cocks. —my translation]

Caraës and Fernandez comment and note the exceptionality of Barthes' descent into crude language, placing him in a network of like-minded travelers to Tangiers :

Roland Barthes à Tanger. Si tout est sexe à Tanger dans l'oeil de ces écrivains, c'est un sexe marchand/t. Roland Barthes, pourtant peu habitué aux crudités langagières, le dit ici textuellement . . . Rien d'érotique en effet, mais pervers peut-être. (Caraës and Fernandez, 69)

[Roland Barthes in Tangiers. If everything is sex and genitals in Tangiers in the eyes of these writers, it's *mercantile/marching* sex (emphasis added). Roland Barthes, seemingly not in the habit of crude language, engages in it textually here . . . Nothing erotic, in fact, but perverse, maybe.—my translation]

Such passages fall in line however with the literary heritage of gay European writers, when visiting Morocco, noticing sex everywhere, and sometimes undergoing, à la Gide, a sexual awakening themselves. Barthes importantly uses the Arabic word for penis (“*zob*”)—now assimilated into argotic French—as a stand in for all the anonymous passers-by.

In his literary-romantic dalliance with Tali, Renaud Camus explicitly rebuilds a mentorship first experienced with Barthes, furthering the line of literary filiation: “Tout me fait penser à Barthes, dans cette histoire, *cette non-histoire*—à commencer par le Maroc, bien entendu. Il y avait entre Barthes et moi la même différence d’âge, ou peu s’en faut, qu’entre moi et ce garçon. Et pas une seule seconde je n’ai envisagé, malgré la vénération, que m’inspirait Barthes, que pût survenir quoi que ce fût qui relevât de l’ordre sentimental, ou sexuel”²⁵ (Everything makes me think of Barthes, in this story, *this non-story*—starting with Morocco of course. There was, between Barthes and I, the same age difference, give or take, as between myself and this boy. And not once did I consider, despite the veneration I had for Barthes, that anything on a sentimental or sexual level might transpire—my translation). Camus sees in his relationship with Tali an exact echo of the inter-generational one he had established earlier with Barthes, with the elements of age disparity, Morocco, and “regrettably” platonic admiration conserved. Here Barthes notes—regarding the same “incident” from which the “Mohammed (of course)” citation was culled—the over-abundance of “Mohammeds,” and the simplicity of their literary ambitions:

Mohammed L., rencontré un matin vers dix heures, est tout propre de douceur et de sommeil; il vient de se lever, dit-il, parce que hier soir il a composé

très tard des vers pour une pièce de théâtre qu'il écrit, 'sans personnages, sans intrigue, etc.'. Un autre, Mohammed le petit, m'avait dit faire de la poésie 'pour ne pas s'ennuyer'. La poésie permet ici de *se coucher trop tard*. (Barthes, 44)

[Mohammed L., encountered one morning around ten, is still half-asleep; he just got up, he says, because last night he composed some verses for a play he's writing—"no characters, no plot," etc.—and stayed up very late. Another Mohammed, the little one, told me he wrote poetry "to keep from (getting) bored." In this country poetry allows you to go to bed too late.—my translation]

Camus too states in *Incomparable*, that literature, the subject Tali most wants to discuss with him, takes second stage in the dynamic between sage mentor and handsome apprentice: "(Farid) me reproche doucement de ne pas vouloir parler de littérature avec lui . . . Je m'abstiens de lui dire que je ne pourrais parler de littérature avec lui, éventuellement, qu'*après* l'amour, dans l'accroissement du désir satisfait" (Camus and Tali, 23) ([Farid] softly reproached me for not wanting to speak of literature with him . . . I abstain from telling him that I'll only be able to speak of literature with him, potentially, *after* love, within the heightening of satisfied desire.—my translation) This misunderstanding about the nature of the other's desire, fueled by the assumption of intellectual unreadiness, impacts the task of cultural translation. It should be recalled that Camus and Tali's literary project, at the origin of *Incomparable*, is itself an exercise in cultural translation: both the new author and the experienced author must decipher each other's references, positioning, motives, speech. The notion that translation fails because of a

problem relating to educational disparities, is here rendered moot, because Camus' intellectual references prove readily accessible to Tali. The communication gap results, rather, from a reluctance to consider Tali as a purely intellectual peer. Camus' comment is ironic considering his later, "*in-nocent*" activism against the "negative" influence of the multi-ethnic *banlieue*. In his campaign against the universalization of the *banlieue*, Camus critiqued the privileging of physical assertion over intellect at the heart of what he believed to be the slow deterioration of the French educational project in such areas. In his appraisal of Tali, he switches priorities and ranks physique before intellect, or physical fulfillment as a condition of intellectual communication.

Perhaps the most extreme example of a French gay author both incited to discourse and displeasure on the subject of Franco-Arab sexual partners, is Patrick Cardon, who wrote the ostensibly literary but monotonously pornographic *Le Grand écart ou tous les garçons s'appellent Ali (vignettes post-coloniales)*, a novel that in its very title repeats the gesture of interchanging all Arab boys for one another.²⁶ Former Culture Minister Frédéric Mitterrand, who was once mired in a sex tourism controversy surrounding his autobiography *La Mauvaise vie*²⁷, had invited Cardon as featured guest of his literary talkshow on gay-interest channel Pink TV.²⁸ Cardon entitled one of his book chapters "Mohamed (bis)," the use of "bis" indicating a "second time" or a "second boy" and thus reinforcing anonymity: "La première fois que je le rencontrai (il) ne m'a guère frappé par son originalité. Mais je le reconnais chaque fois dans la rue et, suivant mon humeur, mon entourage, il me reconnaît." (Cardon, 50–51) (The first time I met him, he did not strike me as very original. But I do recognize him in the street and, according to my mood, or my entourage, he recognizes me too.—my translation) Cardon repeats Barthes'

gesture of placing a modifier in parentheses to distinguish homogenous “Mohammeds” from one another. He concludes the three-page vignette with: “Je voudrais être riche pour conserver mes boys, qu’ils ne me disent plus pour me quitter, qu’ils doivent se rendre au boulot” (Cardon, 52) (I would like to be rich to conserve my boys [“*mes boys*,” an expression which formerly had manservant associations in the colonies], so that they’d never again tell me, when they have to leave, that they have to go to work.—my translation) In *Incomparable*, Camus himself had confused not “Arab tricks” but rather Moroccan writers with one another, taking Tali for Rachid O. at first:

Je me souviens aussi que j’avais envisagé qu’il fût Rachid O., l’auteur de *L’Enfant ébloui*, dont je n’ai jamais vu qu’une seule photographie, assez impressionnante, il est vrai, dans e *Nouvel Observateur*, il y a deux ou trois ans. Mais lui, non sans un peu d’emphase, comme un qui serait un peu vexé qu’on osât comparer sa beauté à n’importe quelle autre, dénie toute espèce de ressemblance avec Rachid O., qu’il dit bien connaître et qu’il juge relever d’un tout autre type physique, ou même ethnique. Néanmoins ils sont compatriotes, marocains tous les deux. (Camus and Tali, 9)

(I also remember that I had envisioned that he was Rachid O. . . . of whom I had seen only one photograph, quite impressive, in the *Nouvel Observateur*, two or three years ago. But he, not without some emphasis, like someone irked that one would compare his beauty with that of any other, denies all resemblance with Rachid O., someone he knows

well and who belongs to an entirely other physical, or even ethnic type, he says.
Nevertheless they are compatriots, both are Moroccan.))]

Camus expresses some surprise at the desire *not* to be confused with others of the same ethnic background. This lack of sensitivity is not far removed from the interchangeability of Arab boys humorously entertained by the writers studied here. Joseph Boone has documented the prominence of such gestures producing an effacing anonymity of Arab boys in the travel literature of Orton, and Gide, among many others.²⁹ Boone's analysis (of Joe Orton, in this passage) is worth citing in full as it pinpoints the symbolic and affective violence—also found in Barthes, Cardon, and Mitterrand—of ridiculing Arab boys and their romantic or professional ambitions as intellectual voids. It also connects the dots that demonstrate a persistent interest in North African adolescents below the (French) legal age:

A corollary of the occidental tourist's fantasy that all boys are available for the right price is the assumption that they represent interchangeable versions of the same commodity: (nearly) under-age sex. The number of identically named Mohammeds that Orton meets thus becomes a running joke in his diary ("His name, inevitably, was Mohammed"[193]³⁰), and to keep his schedule of assignations from becoming hopelessly muddled, Orton assigns the boys farcical surnames: Mohammed (I), Mohammed Yellow-jersey, Mohammed Goldtooth. What may be humorous in the abstract is of course dehumanizing in reality, for such type-casting only reinforces the boys' anonymity and dispensability. Tellingly, Orton not only turns against the

one Mohammed who attempts to assert his individuality—proudly declaring to Joe and company that he is off to Gibraltar to make a life for himself, with a legitimate job—but also belittles this ambition as bourgeois careerism and then claims, to top it off, that Mohammed is a bad lay. Not coincidentally, it is also this Mohammed who has asserted his subjectivity by complaining to Orton, “You give me money, yes—but me want *l’amour*. Me like you. Me want *l’amour*” [Orton, 174]. *L’amour*, of course, is the one item missing from the vacation cruise package Orton has signed up for.” (Boone, 102)

What this group of authors shares—besides a closed-circle citationalism by which they refer to each other—with the “forefathers” of literary gay tourism to North Africa, is a common agreement about an irresistible yet exasperated attraction to “dim-witted” Arab boys. This results in pronouncements about the “difficulty,” callousness or one-dimensionality of such boys, who seem propped up as cultural vacuums unreceptive to their poignant, esthetic appeals. Barthes and later Cardon complain that they can’t find a suitable Arab boy with whom to talk literature. Joseph Boone and others have pointed out that, in privileging sexual discovery and liberation above all else, such writers have turned blind eyes to power differentials of class and race, the very factors that may have produced the educational discrepancies writers like Barthes complained of, as well as the lacunas in his own cultural translation. Indeed, the anthropologist critics who have objected to the very practice of cultural translation have pointed to imbalances of power between translated and translating cultures as the reason why this practice cannot be equitable. Yet some commentators, like Jonathan Dollimore, have sought to nuance the

exploitative aspect of literary sex tourism, asking of the critic more appreciation for the abstracted homosexual's historic "involvement with difference":

. . . contrary to what (a critique of sexual tourism) implies, she or he has, in historical actuality, embraced both cultural and racial difference. The relationship to these other kinds of difference has, for some homosexuals, constituted a crucial dimension of their culture. Sexually exiled from the repressiveness of the home culture . . . homosexuals have searched instead for fulfillment in the realm of the foreign. Not necessarily as a second best . . . That this has also occurred in exploitative, sentimental, and/or racist forms does not diminish its significance; if anything it increases it. Those who move too hastily to denounce homosexuality across race and class as essentially or only exploitative, sentimental, or racist betray their own homophobic ignorance.”³¹
(qtd. in Aldrich, 250)

Whether between the colony and the mainland, or between the *banlieue* and the city center, the cohort of writers studied here have implicitly constructed an “incompatibility” between an enlightened homosexual aesthetics of belles lettres and a “brutish,” ethnic, male sexuality, which must remain essentially silent if it is to be properly virile and attractive. To what extent their representations “trap” (Franco-)Arab boys in postures of mute virility because of the very demand for that virility, has not been critically engaged with in this literature. It is this “fixing” of the situation that inhibits cultural translation, as the flow of language is blocked by definition,

since these writers simultaneously want and do not want an intellectual partner: Barthes and Cardon get bored when handsome men want to talk literature, yet become frustrated after more intimate engagement with the mute virility they initially desired. Among other motives, one can posit that silence and brevity are answers to a literary verbosity that may have been used to take advantage, in past encounters of this type. Another avenue worth exploring is just how such connections between virility and education are reflected in contemporary mediatic representations: those that declare the disruptive, “hyperactive,” and “hypersexual” Arab and black teenage boys in French classrooms to be beyond educational salvation. Hopes of salvation are sustained, however, for their female counterparts who ultimately, for obscure reasons of gender preference, have the potential to escape a deadening, sexually-informed ignorance. Such a tendency to privilege girls rather than boys’ educational aspirations was recently reinforced by a sensational Arte documentary on the rise of patriarchal violence in the *banlieues*, pertinently entitled “*La cité du mâle*” [*The Evil/Male City*], a play of words on the French homonyms “male” and “evil.”³²

Camus’ collaborator, Farid Tali, departs from these limiting expectations courtesy of his adventurous style, experimenting with abstraction, abandoning the socio-fiction often expected of first-time Franco-Arab novelists. Though Tali is, in terms of linguistic sophistication if not storytelling ability, “superior” to Abdellah Taïa and Rachid O., he is still much less elaborate than Camus, his prose being both much sparer and shorter (his section consists of less than half the length of Camus’). Considered side by side, Camus seems to eclipse Tali in volume and presence, Tali’s literary entrance almost timid in its restraint. This is not the “split writing” among peers seen with Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle in *De l’hospitalité*, with columns

placed side by side.³³ Reciprocity has often been a key concept in philosophical reflections on hospitality: would hospitality rest upon a presumed reciprocity, or upon selfless overtures that assume no reciprocity? By being so generous (voluminous?) in his prose offerings, does Camus honor Tali or eclipse him? Conversely, by being so humble in his literary stature does Tali honor Camus or deny him? What seems apparent most of all in their collaboration, is a communication gap, as occurs often in love stories about disproportional expectations and misunderstood intentions. However, when considered against a heritage of collaborations, between France and North Africa, that toe the line between the literary and the sexual, Tali's stylistic reticence stands out for its unwillingness to perpetuate that heritage.

Thus, even though the collaboration appears to offer an opportunity for Tali to demonstrate literary skill and gain notice, the evident contrast in verbosity reinforces the stereotype of relative intellectual dullness. Taken by itself, Tali's contribution might have been evaluated on its own merits; next to Camus however, the text appears almost as a meek withdrawal. Camus, like Barthes, takes near-sarcastic tones in *Incomparable* when commenting on the outmoded interest of his Franco-Moroccan interlocutor in the formal questions of literature, suggesting his protégé might be late to the game. Tali recounts being taken aback by Camus' offer to publish journals in parallel, and mentions his feelings of being pre-determined to muster a lesser offering:

J'y vois d'abord de l'ironie. Mais il est sérieux, me dit que puisque j'écris un journal, ce serait une bonne idée. Oui peut-être. Mais spontanément, dans ma rage identificatoire, je me dis que je ne peux pas en écrire autant que lui, que ça ne peut pas être aussi

intéressant, qu'il est rodé dans cette technique, désinhibé par l'exercice, moi non . . . Je croyais qu'il allait me l'expliquer, me donner à découvrir la voie toute tracée de la littérature à venir, me dire voilà ce qu'il faut écrire maintenant. C'est là toute mon obsession que de croire que je pourrais aller plus vite que la musique et m'éviter des années de travail. (Camus and Tali, 111–2)

[First I thought he was being ironic. But he was serious. He said, since I was already writing a journal, it would be a good idea. Maybe. But spontaneously. In my identificatory rage, I told myself I could not write as much as him, that it couldn't be as interesting, that he is well-tread in that technique, uninhibited through practice, as opposed to myself . . . I thought he would clarify (literature) for me, offer the already traced path toward the literature to come, for my discovery . . . That was my obsession, thinking that I could go faster than the music and avoid years of work . . . —my translation]

One incident, touched upon by both authors in *Incomparable*, is revealing, as it offers two radically different interpretations of the same event, a dinner party with the artist Flatters (a nickname for Jean-Paul Marcheschi) during which Tali committed a breach of etiquette—according to Camus' reproach—guilty of disrespecting the food and being difficult during conversation. The dinner turned into a debate around the topics of: whether soccer star Zinedine Zidane is a *harki* (descended from those indigenous Algerians who fought on the side of France during the Algerian war of independence), and whether it is problematic to call Tali's Moroccan compatriot

Rachid O. and his writing “graceful,” in a naturalizing way (Tali next wonders if they’ll call it “pure,” “fresh”?) (Camus and Tali, 30, 100). Tali, on the other hand, detected a hint of the politically objectionable, as well as much condescension, in the speech of Camus’ entourage. Tali remembers being intellectually underwhelmed by the level of discourse: “On y parle de Zidane, de la famille de Monaco et très peu de littérature. Et moi qui pensais que les intellectuels passaient leur temps à ça” (Camus and Tali, 100) (We spoke of Zidane, of Monaco royalty and very rarely of literature, and here I was thinking that intellectuals spent all their time talking about it.—my translation)

The precedent of the European/Arab homosexual encounter (embodied by Burroughs, Gide, Wilde, Barthes, Orton, Bowles, and with political solidarity by Genet and Sénac) is a memory that, according to Robert Aldrich, has become part of the historical record, a period illuminating parallels (in some instances) between anti-colonialism and homosexual activism.³⁴ For several Francophone Arab authors, the site of that encounter has become a “sore spot”—ever since the first instances of resistance with Mohammed Choukri and Mohammed Mrabet criticizing their translator Paul Bowles. These writers become alarmed when such dynamics resurface in the post-colonial relations between European and Franco-Arab. In some rare but vocal European gay literature, post-colonially aware and politically engaged, there is significant attention paid to the politicized stakes of such encounters. The authors air stories of self-declared “revenge fucking,” sometimes happily encouraged by the European party. The work of French playwrights Bernard-Marie Koltès and Jean-Marie Besset—with their appeals to white guilt born of colonial injury—exemplify how a section of the gay literary elite has firmly broken with the cohort of writers presented here, in fleshing out the socio-political contexts that would have

made intelligible the offense provoked by “incidents” Barthes, Cardon, Camus, and Mitterrand described. When these authors write stories of “revenge fucking,” they almost humorously participate in a mock therapeutic exercise that voluntarily delivers the nationalized, “pristine” European body to the injured colonial party for a subversive penetration, as the radical gay French activist and artistic group FHAR suggested in their manifesto: “Nous sommes plus de 343 salopes. Nous nous sommes faits enculer par des Arabes. Nous en sommes fiers et nous recommencerons. Signez et faites signer autour de vous.”³⁵ (We are more than 343 sluts. We’ve been fucked by Arabs. We’re proud of it and we’ll do it again. Sign and circulate this petition—my translation). This was a parody of the famous 1971 “Manifesto of the 343” circulated by French feminists who advocated for the legalization of abortion in France.

As within that statement, the site of such encounters was already shifting as early as Barthes’ era to the European metropolis. The “exotic,” sheltering distance of North Africa could no longer permit such temporary, affectively irresponsible sexual forays, the (Franco)-Arab partner could not be as easily abandoned, sexual relations could no longer remain inconsequential, without the possibility of a jilted party acting on resentment. At the same time, metropolitan gay writing itself—on the subject of (Franco)-Arabs—could no longer issue uncontested statements about “Arab” sexuality, as access to this topic had been pluralized and the claims regarding it could more easily be challenged by those with an interest in it, as Taïa’s corrective in “Terminus des Anges” has indicated. These demands of reciprocity have occurred at sites of post-colonial contestation, including not only the parks and cruising grounds of *intramuros* Paris, but also the *banlieue* itself. There, a certain gay “consumer” interested in the domestic-exotic has increasingly become interested in an “Other” sexuality, encountering a

banlieue populace previously separated by economic segregation, all of this facilitated by the shortcuts through clandestinity afforded by the internet, its personal ads, and other various enablers of serendipitous contact. Though not my province here, it is worth inquiring into how the encounter between gay intelligentsia and mute virility has been altered by the internet age, with personal ads providing text-centric opportunities for personal elaboration, forums in which the selective user can set criteria to find their ideal type. Filmmaker Christophe Honoré's 2010 *L'Homme au bain*—with its profiles of *banlieue* homosexuals and their exploitative artist admirers—has illustrated that demand for this encounter has not subsided (on the level of representation), and that a certain intelligentsia still scorns *banlieue* virilities, all while engaging with them sexually.³⁶ Such a change of circumstances has only recently been attested to in first-person gay Franco-Arab autobiography (Ilmann Bel's *Un Mauvais Fils*).³⁷ In journalism, reports have echoed this post-colonial eroticization of the *banlieues* and “classist” revenge scenarios (Franck Chaumont's *Homo-Ghetto*), with an especially revelatory exposé being Fouad Zeraoui's debate with Chaumont in the pages of *Têtu* magazine, on the evolution of being gay in the *banlieue*.³⁸ Fouad Zeraoui, I should add, is the promoter of the popular gay ethnic club night in Paris, Black-Blanc-Beur. It is in film, however, that the trope of post-colonial “class revenge” of a homosexual nature has most fully been explored (Sébastien Lifshitz' *Les Terres froides*, Robert Salis' *Grande école*).

In the literature at hand, the post-colonial trope of avenging affective injustice does not have to take the form of an explicit sexual encounter. Often its strongest instantiation takes the form of a practiced indifference, on the part of Franco-Arab characters, to the desires of non-Arab admirers, or in other words a willful denial of reciprocity. This refusal of a full encounter,

of an exchange, is visible in passages where authors attempt to decipher apparent frustration in a slighted party, without doing the work of cultural translation beforehand and assessing their privileged place in a pre-existing story of entanglement between France and North Africa. In conclusion, we can perhaps trace this cultural untranslatability back to one of Naoki Sakai's distinctions between types of address. The writers profiled here have remained entrenched in "homolingual address," or the communication of two parties' with the same references.

"Heterolingual address," on the other hand, is that "in which one addresses oneself as a foreigner to an other foreigner" (Sakai, 33). These writers seem to recoil from the latter form of address, which would require abandonment of the pretense to having a kind of national "home court" advantage in French letters. Sakai touches upon this when he explains that acceptance of heterolingual address would require a form of instability enabling the redefinition of hierarchies: "Rejected in homolingual address is the social character of translation, of an act performed at the locale of social transformation where new power relations are produced" (Sakai, 33). In many of the works profiled here, reciprocity is a casualty of the breakdown of hospitality within post-immigration and post-colonial circumstances. Parallel to this process, estranged parties position and consolidate themselves against one another in a hierarchy, through a process of "critical alterity," or defining oneself through the other's difference. This inaccessibility often leads to a deprivation of subjectivity in the Franco-Arab figures described by disappointed admirers, as Mitterrand and Cardon's "voiding" and construction of Franco-Arab "dullness" makes clear. What some authors view, with noticeable frustration, as the opacity of Franco-Arab subjectivities can instead be read as a strategy of resistance against exploitation (Mohammed Choukri and Mohammed Mrabet are prominent examples). A wariness perhaps causes the described Franco-

Arab subjects—chided by Barthes and Cardon for their “uncooperative” behavior—to forego a sexual reciprocity that might itself go perilously unreciprocated had they engaged in it. This fear is expressed in Taïa’s re-writing of typical sex-tourism dynamics, the Arab party often left in the country visited by the tourist, or discarded after “use” in the metropole. Tali, however, in *Incomparable*, departs from the resentment-filled trope of “writing back,” by writing simultaneously (Camus and Tali agree to present their material at the same time), and in the process realizes that what seemed like an enchanted encounter actually gave way to an astonishing gap in cultural and political understanding, upon the discovery of which each party goes their own way.

Certain publishing tendencies continue to reflect the precedent of expatriate writer Paul Bowles and the way he ushered new voices from North Africa into the publishing world, through recording and translation, producing works which have also consistently focused on sexuality. These literary collaborations between authors and writer “apprentices,” often eroticized, show up in contemporary publishing with novels that are co-written, or written by French authors who relate oral anecdotes first pronounced by North African or Franco-Arab partners. Even though such projects aim to publicize Arab voices, what consistently emerges is the figure of the “problematic” Arab boy, an object of attraction that simultaneously elicits frustration at the level of cultural misunderstanding in the non-Arab French authors. One of these authors, Renaud Camus, departed from his collaboration with the young writer Farid Tali to found an anti-immigrant party that perceives in immigration a threat to the transmission of French culture. These authors make explicit connections to the previous “Tangiers” generation of homosexual writers seeking liberty in Morocco, creating a kind of citational network. What has changed in

the intervening time is the figure of the “Arab boy” described, who transitions from an exploitable young *arabe de service*, to an independent, sometimes resentful or indifferent young man who must be constantly courted and is capable of unreciprocated desire. Cultural translation between these parties at first seemed blocked by disparities in education and writerly sensitivities; but with Franco-Arab writers now contending with their French colleagues on more equal footing, it is revealed that cultural translation failed for less literary reasons, namely a lack of social and political recognition.

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