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Rosie MacLachlan, *Nina Bouraoui, Autofiction and the Search for Selfhood*. Oxford and Berlin: Peter Lang, 2016. viii + 174 pp. Bibliography and index. \$60.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-0343-1847-1.

Review by Nathalie Segeral, University of Hawaiï at Mānoa.

This study focuses on self-referential writing as an act of resistance in Nina Bouraoui's work during the period 1999-2011. It brilliantly argues that Bouraoui's corpus of autofictional work serves the purpose of identity construction and self-exploration while promoting the role of the reader by reaching those on the social margins—be it because of their gender, race, or sexuality. The author makes a convincing case for the reasons why the motif of the identity quest is essential to Bouraoui's writing and how she creates innovative, unconventional autofictional narratives. Bouraoui's original use of language functions as a medium through which the uniquely unrestricted space of autofiction allows for reinventing a problematic personal identity.

Nina Bouraoui was born in Rennes in 1967 of an Algerian father and a French mother; “she spent the first thirteen years of her life in Algeria, before suddenly moving back to Brittany at the end of the 1970s” (p. 2). She has been living in Paris since the age of nineteen and has never returned to Algeria. Her first novel, *La Voyeuse interdite*, was published in 1991. She has since published more than fourteen novels, several of them dealing with her homosexuality.

MacLachlan provides us with a very thorough literature review of critical theory pertaining both to gender studies and to life writing, through extensive discussions of radical French thinker Monique Wittig's and American Judith Butler's work in the field of gender studies, along with Teresa de Lauretis's foundational work on queer theory, and Philippe Lejeune, Emile Benvéniste, Lucille Cairns, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson, among others, including also a detour through Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. From the outset, her essay is critically oriented, with the introduction, titled “Seeking Selfhood in the Textual,” being clearly structured around a critical overview of the genre of “autofiction” in conversation with notions of “subjectivity” and “gender,” and a brief discussion of the distinction between the concepts of “queer” and “gay” and “lesbian.”

According to the author, Bouraoui's specific circumstances align her with three political minorities—ethnic, sexual, gendered—which are at the core of her problematic, fragmented sense of self. Thus, Bouraoui's turn to autofiction as the preferred means of addressing her complicated identitarian issues also “reflects an important aspect of recent literary practice” (p. 11) since in recent years, as Shirley Jordan and Adele King assert, fictional and autobiographical genres have progressively become blurred in French women's writing, whereby the text serves the purpose of exploring and reconstructing a sense of identity, given that “France's tradition of republican universalism has long prevented the establishment of a gay ‘identity politics’ movement to parallel those in Anglo-American countries” (p. 13)[1]—and has actually prevented establishment of any sort of identity politics for that matter.

The book is composed of three parts, each of them divided into three chapters. In the first part, entitled “Acts of Resistance: Rewriting Gender and Sexuality,” MacLachlan focuses on three Bouraoui texts representing gender and sexuality, through the lens of identity as performative: *Garçon manqué* (2000), *La Vie heureuse* (2002), and *Poupée bella* (2004). She argues that, as a gay writer, Bouraoui describes feeling more imprisoned than empowered by such categorizing terms, thereby language and writing become a way to resist restrictive definitions. The discussion of language as a medium through which violence and confinement can be inflicted, and literature as a means to counter this negative effect of language, is especially compelling.

The second part, titled “Recovering from Loss: The Textual Return to Algeria,” explores Bouraoui’s narratives dealing with Algeria, where she spent the first thirteen years of her life. The author exposes the specific inner dilemmas experienced by Bouraoui as a result of the “racial or cultural malaise” (p. 3) generated by the fact that “the mixed-race Bouraoui family were never made to feel welcome in post-colonial Algeria” (p. 2), causing them eventually to abruptly leave for a holiday with their maternal grandparents in Brittany, from which they never returned. This part offers a detailed study of *Le Jour du séisme* (1999), *Sauvage* (2011), and *Mes mauvaises pensées* (2005) through the critical lens of “narrative identity,” building on Anthony Kerby’s 1991 *Narrative and the Self*. After situating her study in the wake of previous critical work devoted to Bouraoui’s position as a post-colonial writer, MacLachlan makes a strong case of showing that Bouraoui’s experience of exile from her homeland does not restrict the scope of her self-referential writing, as her narratives dealing with her childhood in Algeria have a more universal, less region-specific reach.

Finally, part three, entitled “Writing for Others? Relational Identity and the Textual Encounter,” gives the reader a detailed study of three narratives pertaining to what MacLachlan sees as Bouraoui’s textual identity quest: *Avant les Hommes* (2007), *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* (2008), and *Nos Baisers sont des adieux* (2010). This part discusses Bouraoui’s ambivalent relationship to gayness in her work, insofar as, while she has stated in interviews that she wishes “to help counter the cultural invisibility of female homosexuality” (p. 119), she has also refused to become “a flag-bearer” (p. 119) and prefers to represent her sexuality independently from identity politics. This part of the essay argues that, when writing about homosexuality, Bouraoui uses the narrative site as “a textual encounter” becoming “a relational space” (p. 123), so as to enable minority readers to identify with it. Thus, while self-referential writing has helped Bouraoui in her own quest for identity, it has also enabled her to create a relational movement with her readers and to reach out to potentially marginalized groups.

Overall, this essay on Nina Bouraoui’s autofictional writing makes an important contribution to gender and genre studies in the field of Francophone literature, along with constituting a very thorough analysis of Bouraoui’s work that is, as far as I know, unprecedented. The other existing monograph devoted to Nina Bouraoui, at least in part, is Helen Vassallo’s *The Body Besieged: The Embodiment of Historical Memory in Nina Bouraoui and Leïla Sebbar* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2012). However, Vassallo’s study is more concerned with the memorial aspect of Bouraoui’s work, along with the complicated Franco-Algerian relationship. Thus, MacLachlan’s study casts a new light on Bouraoui’s work by reading her autofictional narratives in the light of identity and sexuality issues.

NOTES

[1] Here the author refers to the following studies: Renate Günther and Owen Heathcote’s “Introduction” to “Gays and Lesbians in Contemporary France: Politics, Media, Sexualities,” Special Issue of *Modern and Contemporary France* 14.3(2006):287-289, and Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant Ragan’s “Introduction” to *Homosexuality in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 3-7.

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