

INTRODUCTION

The Erasure of Language and the Production of Meaning

This manuscript reconsiders the body in literature and visual representation as a physical and gesticulative domain for rethinking the constructions of gender, nationalism, and sexuality. Primarily examining contemporary literary production, I argue that the body in contemporary North Africa and Latin America serves as a physical and symbolic space upon which sexual, textual, national, and linguistic identities are vectored and through which postcolonial and hegemonic antagonisms of power are engaged. Rather than embrace “third world” identity as a residual repository of western thought, colonization, and linguistic infusion, as is often conferred in critical theory, I suggest that the paradigm of cultural identity in the Maghreb and Latin America is best understood through an examination of the emergent corporeal articulations of subjectivity prevalent in these literatures and cultures. This book argues that the body is a critical landscape through which the various discourses of nationalism, gender, and sexuality converge in order to construct a reading of the social that neither amasses identity as singular under the rubric of the “third world,” nor couches the other within western identity.

At the core of my study is language. What is the relationship between language and the realities behind it? In the United States the language of “race” is categorized and utilized such that “race,” a fiction that has long been disproved as a valid qualifier, is still in flagrant quotidian and political (mis)use. We saw this most clearly in the US presidential primary races in 2008 wherein the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, was considered “black” by some, “mixed race” by others, and “half black, half white” by still more commentators. Yet, the notions of “pure race” as opposed to “mixed race” and of “half races” demonstrate how our cultures perceive “race” at

its very root as essentialized, as identifiable and basically as classifiable. So underlying each fiction of race is a discourse that is not scientific, not epistemological, but purely historiographical in that “race” can only refer to itself *as historicity*, as what it has been understood to mean until this very moment. In contradistinction, history teaches us that most humans are of “mixed race”, that heritage is necessarily untraceable for most groups and that “race” itself is an invention having obfuscated ethnicity or religious groupings. So, how to discuss the discourses of various cultural fictions such as race, gender, sexuality, and nationalism, which are to this day understood in western popular culture as realities?

This book examines how language is often too much or too little in dealing with identity politics and herein the reader will note my use of language that is constantly and consciously calling into question the *very words* I use. Certainly, my use of language may often seem to “contradict” itself for how can one deconstruct gender if the writer is using “masculine” and “feminine” as markers of something understandable and real? And this is the heart of my experiment, for this work both discusses the collapse of western parochialism and epistemological imperialism which adheres to strict alliances between language and gender, nationalism, sexuality and sex (ie. butch/femme, masculine/feminine, top/bottom, homosexual/heterosexual, black/white, etc.) while also calling into question the very dichotomies that are examined *by virtue of their being juxtaposed through language* (i.e. that one cannot be both butch and femme or that butch and femme are necessarily oppositions).

In a perfect universe, I would love to never again use the words “western” and “non-western”, “third world” and “first world” or “traditional” and “modern”, since as I later elaborate, these modalities are as real as they are fictive: these terms are as polarized by the myths of certain cultural settings as they are non-identifiable in the very cultures to which they refer. These binaries are as much a product of a certain historical and social consensus (of certain persons in certain places) as they are terms that are under erasure (by other certain persons in other certain spaces). This work attempts a critique of the “non-sense” of specifically western literary, anthropological, and philosophical discourses which on the one hand wish to collapse the binaries of identity and “liberate” the subject from

language, but on the other hand, disavow any possibility of such liberation since the transgressive act of renaming identity becomes re-interpolated into a system of categorization which necessarily throws the subject at the very mercy of language.

The first chapter, “Western Theories of Gender and Sex: Performative or Real?”, examines feminist and queer theories in the west which assume certain freedoms of sexual and gendered identities while simultaneously prescribing very rigid constructions of identity. Analyzing theories and practices of performance, anthropology, architecture and American land art, I offer various paradigms for unraveling the somatic/performative nexus constructed in much of gender theory. The second chapter, “Language and the Body in Barthes, Khatibi and Sarduy: The Intertextual and Intersexual”, examines the writings of Roland Barthes (France) focusing on his notion of *langage poétique* which is a fragmented and pluralistic space of nature and the body while looking at how this notion of corporeal fluidity is also re-articulated and situated outside the west by Severo Sarduy (Cuba) and Abdelkebir Khatibi (Morocco) as a posture for reading cultural inflections of gender, language, and nationalism specific to Latin America and North Africa. Chapter Three, “The Body of *Fitna* and the Intractable Feminine: Exile, Nomadism, Memory and the *Bi-langue* in Maghrebian Literature”, situates the body of polyvalent sexes and desires within Maghrebian literature, focussing on Khatibi’s *Le livre du sang* as well as other Maghrebian texts wherein the “sacred” and the “profane” are not so much dialectically related, as much as they are integrated within the scope of desire and subjectivity, contamination and death, as these writers grapple with Islamic notions of purity and transgression as well as postcolonial ties to western constructions of language, nation, and gender. In Chapter Four, “The Violence of Representation in Latin American Literature: *Realismo mágico* and *Neobarroco* Bodies of Gender, Race, Sickness and Terror”, I turn to contemporary notions of magical realism and trace the history of the magically real in Latin America from narratives of the Conquest through contemporary fiction which attempts to relocate the “truth” of history while also embracing the *mestizaje* of Latin American constructions of culture, language, history, race and gender. Chapter Five, “Hybrid Bodies and Border Crossings: Nationalism and Modernity in Morocco and

Mexico”, examines the interstices of various discourses of traditionalism and modernity in Latin America and the Maghreb focussing upon the visual representations of nationhood in Mexico and Morocco through the official portraiture of late King Hassan II and the paintings of Frida Kahlo respectively. Locating the body as the terrain upon which modernity and tradition are simultaneously articulated and recast, this chapter attempts to understand how modernity functions in each specific cultural paradigm and how identity operates within a larger global spectrum wherewith history is rethought, destroyed and imagined as a means of asserting that which is always lost and discontinuous.

This work is an experiment in the erasure, collapse and reconstruction of language, performance and the body and the spaces between each: the language of performance and of the somatic; the performative of language and the body; and the body as language and as performance. In attempting to remain as critical to my own use of language as I do the discourses I critique, I inevitably enter into a *glissement* of language where to use a certain word might seem limiting, but not to use it would obscure meaning. This book aims to work with the nuances and contradictions of language as a I excavate the words as textures in literature and visual culture which, like the body, must confront the conterminous excess and paucity of meanings imposed from inside and out, forever changed by their erasures and rescriptings (ie. the *mestizo* as that “mixed race” that discounts racial purity while at the same time including it in that “mixed” refers to original purities). Indeed the body is a physical text and performative space which is as much a terrain for understanding the heterogeneous cultural and political realities of Latin America and the Maghreb as it is a tool for enacting the “magically real” topographies of nationality, gender, language, race and sex. Ultimately, this book investigates the possibility for the subject to name herself and to perform, rewrite, erase and reconstruct the very language through which she is rendered and brought into being.