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CHAPTER 14

Purloined Letters: Intertextuality and Intersexuality in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child*

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No one makes love lovingly without constituting a body without organs with the other or with others.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux*

Demonstration of phonological pertinence: a young bazaar vendor says, engagingly, "Do you [*tut/ti*] (non pertinent) want carpet [*tapis/taper*] (pertinent)?"

—Roland Barthes, *Incidents*

For the first time in its history the Prix Goncourt was awarded in 1987 to a North African born outside the *métropole*. The book that swayed the jury was Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sacred Night*, a sequel to the Moroccan writer's 1985 novel, *The Sand Child*. The two novels have in common a certain disruption of Eurocentric literary conventions by narrative structures traversed by Maghrebin oral traditions as well as their focus on the same female character raised as a man. But whereas the narrative voice in *The Sacred Night* is unitary, in *The Sand Child* several voices convene and often compete in telling the tale, which consists of unveiling some truth at its origin. And while the protagonist-narrator in *The Sacred Night* speaks from the position of an adult woman about her present state conditioned by her coerced past, neither gender nor sexuality nor time nor identity—absolutely nothing—in *The Sand Child* is stable. By 1987, in other words, Ben Jelloun (perhaps yielding to his market) had honed this story into a prize-winning, euphonic, and seamless parody of Arabic narrative traditions. *The Sand Child*, on the other hand, boldly presents itself as a generalized intertext on the verge of cacophony; its character struggles with the instability of intersexuality.

Desire is something to which Tahar Ben Jelloun's "sand child" cannot attribute any proper noun.¹ (Nor, for that matter, is the sand child—here

1. For all quotes and allusions to specific passages in *L'Enfant de sable*, I provide the page reference to the French edition, followed in brackets by the page in the

Ahmed, there Zahra—properly named by any narrative voice.) Ahmed marries his lame cousin, Fatima, who, anxious to have sex with her new husband, contents herself with cuddling him and sucking her own thumb. Growing impatient, however, Fatima reaches to caress Ahmed's genitals and confirms what she has already half guessed: she has been given in marriage to a female spouse (75). Later, befuddled "himself" by "his" female body, Ahmed is pressed by a crone to reveal his identity. A name being laughably insufficient, the creature forces him to strip and then thrusts her toothless mouth to his small breasts (112–15 [84–86]). Acts, in lesbian encounters, correspond to Ahmed's body but not to his gender.

When in a dream Zahra subverts the power of a judge by seducing him, she does so as a man enticing a man who anticipates the disrobing of another male body (97). The antecedent for Zahra's fantasm is the legend of Antar, the warrior and marabout of wanderers: a woman who, disguised as a man, simulated sodomy on her outraged male lover (83). Zahra's own wanderings bring her to a circus, where her side show consists of performing in masculine drag. Her boss, Abbas, feels authorized to sodomize her as he would a male because his mother, Oum Abbas (the sole woman to whom he has sworn fidelity), has identified Zahra as an "old queen [*vieille tapette*]" (148). Acts, in gay encounters, correspond to Zahra's gender but not to her body.

All sexualities between bodies homomorphic or heteromorphic are dysfunctional in *The Sand Child* because they are ordeals subordinated to a quest for stable identity against the force of an implacable nomadism. Just as erotic acts with the other fail to deliver pleasure to the "sand child," no gender is certain in this rhizomatic novel-machine designed to inveigle its readers into a state of generalized uncertainty. By exploring the intercultural dynamics and literary devices (especially intertextuality) that Ben Jelloun mobilizes to render nomadism and elicit uncertainty, I will, aided by Deleuze and Guattari, convey my understanding of what Ben Jelloun has tried to have this enigmatic text do.

A Child Is Stamped

Hajji Ahmed, a devout Muslim, considers himself cursed because his wife has given birth to daughters only. With seven so far, he moves to dictate, somehow, if not the sex then at least the gender of his eighth child be-

translation. Because numerous entire sentences—including many of those that are essential to my reading—were inexplicably deleted from the Sheridan translation, all passages from *L'Enfant de sable* here are translated by me.

fore its birth. Patriarchal coercion will deny this eighth daughter her gender: named Ahmed, *sister* of Hajji Ahmed, *she* will be refused all linguistic markers of her female body. In a public square, a storyteller takes charge of narrating the ensuing travesty. Tradition with regard to boys is strictly followed: a (fake) circumcision, an initiation to the hammam by the mother, then, when “decency” commands, a transfer under the father’s tutelage to the men’s hammam, a man child’s education. The sand child’s body cannot, however, forget, and inevitably with adolescence comes ovulation. To the narrator’s bafflement, Ahmed’s menstruation coincides with his sudden stubborn commitment to assume unflinchingly the societal roles (except that of appearing in public) imposed upon his gendered being. Yet, while Ahmed reaps benefits reserved for men, an unnameable and irrepressible desire transports him elsewhere in his private ruminations. An anonymous admirer exhorts him, through an exchange of letters, to pass out of his house as a woman. The critique of this anonymous admirer demonstrates that an infamous condition foisted upon Muslim women has taken on radical proportions: the architectural enclosure to which patriarchal law confines a woman has been shrunken to the dimensions of the djellaba dissimulating what Ahmed’s body, denuded, would affirm.

Initially confident, the narrator grows weary of his storytelling charge and abdicates to a succession of secondary narrators who contribute bits and pieces to a fantastic tale that everyone in the public square seems to know but no one knows how to finish. Suggestions abound that Ahmed’s gender uncertainty may be the projection of every narrator’s own ambivalence: the first narrator’s confusion may have had roots in a libidinal economy reorganized or “straightened out” by religion.

Incongruously, the scene of the Rashomon-like narrative braid shifts, in its penultimate sequence, from Marrakesh to Buenos Aires, then back across the Atlantic to Andalusia. A new narrator, referred to as the “blind troubadour,” attempts not so much to unravel the enigma that Ahmed embodies than to present an experience of his own with elements he considers analogous to that enigma. Just before lapsing into total blindness, the troubadour was handed a coin by an alluring woman with a manly voice reminiscent of Tawaddud, one of the most prominent among prominent female characters in *1001 Nights*.² Addressing his audience with erudite detail and

2. This passing of a coin from hand to hand has value equivalent to the gesture which, in Chaplin’s *City Lights*, allowed the blind girl to finally “see” the tramp, thus proving, according to Slavoj Žižek, the Lacanian thesis that the letter always arrives at its destination (3–7).

still transfixed years later by the woman and her puzzling gesture, the narrative of Buenos Aires describes the coin:

It was a *bâtêne*, a fifty-centime piece, a rare coin that circulated for a short time in Egypt around 1852. The coin I had in my hand was well worn. With my fingers I tried to reconstruct the effigies engraved on each side of it. . . . On the front was a man’s face with a delicate mustache, long hair, and rather large eyes. On the obverse was the same design, except that the man no longer had a mustache but a female appearance. I later learned that the coin had been struck by the father of twins, a boy and a girl, for whom he felt a fierce passion. (175–76 [138])

This shift—with its obscure talismanic coin and coming so very late in the work—will bring us closest to unlocking the enigma of Ben Jelloun’s “sand child.”

The Coinage Fades

I still think that everything is given to the writer for him to use.
(185 [145])

I believed that the spring from which I drew my stories would never dry up . . . I stole stories from others.
(207 [163–64])

While Ahmed, as we shall soon see, grapples with a surfeit of names, Jorge Luis Borges, arguably as essential to this novel as the hero, is never named. Instead, as Ben Jelloun studs the text with allusions to Borgesian literary practices, the author of *The Book of Sand* appears in the guise of the blind troubadour. Previous commentators have identified an impressive number of references to Borges’s works in *The Sand Child*—names of characters, quotations, plots, and situations (Erickson 114–16; Gontard 112–15). In the crucial instance from which I have just quoted and which I will now analyze, Ben Jelloun comes as close as he can to plagiarizing Borges. Borges is not just *any* author to steal from, since most of his work questions the concept of originality in literature, the significance of the signature, and the very notion of authorship. Only by the manner—illustrated by the above epigraphs—in which Ben Jelloun’s blind troubadour unmistakably characterizes his philosophy and writing technique as that of Borges does the novel restore a parodic credit to the Argentinian storyteller for the unavowed literary borrowing.

Ben Jelloun’s intertextual deviation *imitates* (as the content of the text

deviated *explains*) the nomadic survival tactics that the intersexual sand child adopts. Receiving the *bâttène* from the hands of the unnamed woman with Tawaddud's masculine voice puts the blind troubadour in mind of another ancient coin—the *zahir*. Although he never states what design the *zahir* bore, he performs two curious operations. First he explains to the audience that before being attributed to coins, *bâttène* and *zahir* were names for fundamental concepts: "You are well aware of what the word [*zahir*] means: the apparent, the visible. It is the opposite of the *bâttène*, which means the inner, that which is buried in the belly" (176 [138]). Then, in the section that Ben Jelloun lifted from Borges's story, "The Zahir," the blind troubadour provides details of the *zahir*'s history that have the effect of turning its symbolism back toward that of the *bâttène*: "the *zahir* is the bottom of a well in Tétuan and was, according to Zotenberg, a vein in the marble of one of the thousand two hundred pillars of the mosque in Córdoba" (176 [138]). (This section, which admittedly strains the limits of conventional logic, was inexplicably cut from the English translation.) It should be apparent that while Ahmed is not nominally present in the scene, because these coins allude to androgyny and ambiguity they are symbolic objects of exchange that circulate to or from the person of the main character.

On the surface, what appears to be a binary of opposites turns out, according to Ben Jelloun through Borges, to be a concatenation of the notion of the invisible (*bâttène*) with a physical token of visibility (*zahir*) which, on further examination, has invisible characteristics as well. Islamic historians employ the conceptually dichotomous adjectives of *batin* and *zahir* to group disparate sects of scholars into Batinites (*batiniya*), or those who in the Koran and Sunna seek an inner or hidden meaning, and the literalist Zahirites (*zahiriya*). Edward Said has examined the assaults of a group of Zahirites on the esoterism of Batinites in eleventh-century Andalusia (*Word, Text, Critic*, 36–39). Although Said admits that the theory may have had negligible influence on the West since the Renaissance, he extols as prophetic for structuralism the Cordovan Zahirite insistence that "words had only a . . . meaning . . . anchored to a particular usage, circumstance, historical and religious situation" (36). *The Sand Child*, however, is the product of a contemporary Moroccan writing mainly for a European readership who appears determined to maintain a middle ground, or even, at times, to favor a Batinite approach to signs in their relation to being.

By lifting this key passage from Borges's "The Zahir" and inserting it into *The Sand Child*, Ben Jelloun fits the body of his text with an intertextual prosthesis. With the possible exception of the book's English-language trans-

lator and publisher,³ nobody seems thus far to have measured the import of this conspicuous example of intertextuality in the narrowest sense that Gérard Genette (8) lends the term: quotation, plagiarism, and/or allusion (see Kristeva, *Séméiotikè*). Without quotation marks or offset margins, Ben Jelloun's prosthetic passage of purloined letters disappears in its textual underbrush. Even so, it casts a light on an obscure sector of Islamic history that in turn illuminates the ontological enigma of the sand child. Like the palimpsests hiding Michel's egotism in Gide's *L'immoraliste*, lifting the veil of mystery over this passage reveals the irreducible multiplicity of Ahmed's being.

As the sand child, represented by the *bâttène* and the *zahir*, resists unitary and definitive characterization, so Ben Jelloun's narrators clothe that selfsame female body alternately in the gender-inflected names "Ahmed" and "Zahra." Such undecidability justifies, as I deconstruct Ben Jelloun's means for weaving such a tale, my employing the combined form "Ahmed/Zahra" and the portmanteau pronoun "s/he" to designate the intersexed child of the desert.

Pitfalls and Verdigris

One of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it has multiple entries.

Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux*

Ahmed/Zahra's sensual certainty of self evolves, without resolution, through space as well as time. Ben Jelloun underscores the inextricable link between movement and change by forging the dual parameters into a single image: Ahmed/Zahra passes through seven symbolic city gates, marking successive developmental stages. Seven chapters of the nineteen in the novel—six at the beginning and one at the conclusion—bear the names of these gates. Surrounded by a wall punctuated by these gates, a labyrinthine Arab medina is the public space in which Ahmed/Zahra will take his/her first steps. Like the intolerable secret that Hajji Ahmed concocted to keep everyone including his "son" from knowing the body, these gates call for keys or magic words to open them.

3. If, as I suspect, Alan Sheridan and his publisher did not overlook this passage, then they omitted it for the wrong reasons: either they thought they were protecting themselves and/or Ben Jelloun from accusations of plagiarism (which I demonstrate are impossible to maintain) or they judged the passage too tedious for most readers. An article by Ben Jelloun may suggest, however, that he may later have become apprehensive about the way his debt to Borges might appear: "C'est dans un rêve . . ."

and the Muslim woman's *transit*, Ahmed/Zahra's "coming out" entails risk redoubled. Before breaking out of the concentric prisons of house and veil, s/he must first shed his/her man's clothing, cast off the social masquerade, and reclaim the gender his/her body indicates. When Ahmed/Zahra decides to follow his/her anonymous correspondent's exhortation to "go out into the street, abandoning masks and fear" (86 [63]), Ben Jelloun's narrators and audience, women and men, presumably all Muslim, express dread at the ominously familiar consequences. While "coming out" may promise Ahmed/Zahra a rebirth into existential authenticity—less a metamorphosis, we are told, than a return to what s/he is (111)—some episodes are composed to foreshadow that living out this truth could lead Ahmed/Zahra to the ultimate price paid by his/her brother/sister in enigma, Herculine Barbin, the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite whose memoirs were recovered and edited by Michel Foucault.

Despite this menace, Ahmed/Zahra does forswear the double shell of isolation. Having largely avoided mirrors during his/her masquerade as a man, Ahmed/Zahra will now seek them out in a grotesquely belated mirror stage. Autoerotic narcissism quickly supersedes specular wonderment. But even this is not enough: s/he must *be seen* by others. As an initial step in reeducating emotions and rejecting old habits, s/he naively longs for encounters of any nature. Out in the open, Ahmed/Zahra is immediately assaulted by male scopophilia, yet s/he accepts this perpetual violation with fascination, as if it were an initiation rite for "becoming-woman" ("I was intrigued as I emerged slowly—but with fits and starts—toward the being that I had to become"). Ultimately, however, Ahmed/Zahra heeds the advice of Abbas (one of his/her most violent oppressors) that "in this country, you oppress others or they oppress you" as s/he reclaims gender ambiguity in self-defense (121 [92]).

The most sensually exalted passage of *The Sand Child* is a long portion of Ahmed/Zahra's journal read to an audience so awestruck that it refrains from its usual interruptions (152–58 [70–79]). A residual benefit of the male privilege of education, Ahmed/Zahra's knowledge of art and literature lends a cultural dimension to the expansion of his/her erotic horizons. Ben Jelloun takes this opportunity to extol the unbridled sensuality in poetry and miniature painting, forgotten since Islam's first centuries. With repetition of the verb *sortir* lending a haunting rhythm to his/her journal, the hero/ine describes a longing to be touched by innumerable, anonymous, wayward hands. This erotic encounter, neither quite with or without others, devoid of commitment or even knowledge of the others' identity, is the nomadic sex-

Points at which deterritorialization and reterritorialization occur, the seven gates into Ahmed/Zahra's ontological *medina* equal, among other things, the number of our bodily orifices. Representing the inevitability of adolescence, the Saturday gate (chapter 4) is paradigmatic of the irradicable multiplicity crucial to the sand child's being. As it reminds us that gates belong to the class of objects never definitively closed or open, Ahmed/Zahra's pubescence problematizes the notion that mutations in identity are ever either avoidable or inevitable. Passing through the Saturday gate, Ahmed/Zahra's body becomes "perplexed" and the journal in which s/he has been trying to sort out the puzzle of existence renders up a hiatus of blank pages. Writing itself with breast development and menstruation, Ahmed/Zahra's body demonstrates that to incarnate the social role for which his/her father groomed him/her "leads nowhere" (41 [27]). "I imagine him torn between the evolution of his body and his father's will to make him a man through and through," ventures the storyteller (42 [28]). Here, as at each of the seven gates of life, Ahmed/Zahra reaches the threshold of a stable identity only to succumb to aphasia before the impossible transcendence of undecidability. His/her epistemological exploration of self reverts to the virginity of the blank page—a symbol of that which is simultaneously all and nothing—which so obsessed Mallarmé. That exploration encounters as well the un-deconstructable limits of conjoining and separation that Derrida recognized in the concept of hymen (both nuptials and maidenhead) and which he employed ("La double séance" in *La Dissémination*) in order to better read Mallarmé's *Mimique* in light of Plato's *Philebus*.

Veil of Complicity

The Algerian writer Assia Djebar has conducted a poetic campaign by repeatedly writing that when a Muslim woman sheds the veil, goes out into the street, thereby flaunting her commitment to a nontraditional role, she incurs repudiation, shame, imprisonment, torture, even death. Among several examples from this great writer's *oeuvre* where courageous women find companionship with each other in their common struggle against patriarchal oppression are *Les Alouettes naïves*, the lead story in *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, and *L'Amour, la fantasia*. The expression "coming out," by which homosexuals in the English-speaking world denote a public act of defiant self-identification, bears figurative resemblance to the literal egress by which some Muslim women risk their lives to challenge a mainstay of patriarchal tradition. Composed of both the homosexual's *transition*

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The hymen—Ahmed/Zahra's physical (and metaphysical) threshold—is intact. Until menstruation, no blood had flowed from his/her body. Conversely, from that moment on, this was the only blood that flowed. In accordance with Islamic tradition, Hajji Ahmed brought his sand child to the barber for ritual circumcision. The former placing his thumb where the penis would have been, the blood that gushed was thus that of the father and not the "son." The appearance of menstrual blood inspires Ahmed/Zahra to reflect upon the binaries that s/he embodies and that patriarchal metaphysics divaricates: "I am the architect and the house, the tree and the sap, a man and a woman." With that revelation comes the understanding that the embodiment of dualities can become a weapon for abrogating them. S/he declares war on the name/no (*nom/non*) of the father (Lacan): "It was certainly blood. The resistance of the body to the name—the splash from a belated circumcision" (46 [30–31]). To keep his/her clothing from stain, s/he will, like Jean Genet, become a petty thief. Disorder in patriarchy, borne by the menstrual blood flowing from the "forgotten gate" (chapter 6) of Ahmed/Zahra's body, will avenge the outrageous law of gender imposed by the father.

Ben Jelloun's choice of the term "resistance" to describe the defense of our vulnerable bodies against the strength of the law corroborates Lyotard's thesis (in analyzing Kafka's "Penal Colony") that "death is jealous of birth [as] the law is jealous of the body [as] ethics is jealous of aesthetics" (Lyotard, "Prescription" 184). "My body still bears the imprint of my father," writes Ahmed/Zahra, "He may be dead, but I know he will come back. That imprint is my blood: the path I must follow without losing my way. . . . My innocence is stained by a bit of pus. I see myself smeared with this yellowish liquid, which reminds me of the time and place of death" (66 [46]). Even with its blood flowing out at regular periods, Ahmed/Zahra's body can hope to do no more than maintain its position at the threshold between life and death.

The Well-Tomb

For me, their birth gave me reason to mourn. . . . It goes without saying that you will be the well and the tomb of this secret.
(22–23 [13–14])

For a father with Hajji Ahmed's beliefs, each birth of a daughter is tantamount to a death in the family: "Each of their births gave me reason to mourn" (22 [13; deleted]). With the birth of his eighth daughter, he tried to transform just one of those "deaths" into a "life" with the result that Ahmed/Zahra remained one and the other. Rather than settle upon a definitive

quality to which Ahmed/Zahra aspired from the moment s/he found it evoked in travel accounts by European writers (156 [122]). Texts by André Gide, Isabelle Eberhardt, Jean Genet, Paul Bowles, William Burroughs, Roland Barthes, and others come immediately to mind in this remark, yet another passage deleted from the Sheridan translation of *The Sand Child*. For Ben Jelloun to credit Europeans for perpetuating a tradition of erotic freedom is tantamount to taking a final jab at Islam for having betrayed its sensuous past.

Although Winifred Woodhull, in her well-wrought *Transfigurations of the Maghreb*, has shown *The Sand Child* to be a "nomadic text," I would suggest further that, as a testimonial to the erotic intensities defining its nomadic hero/ine, the novel works to establish an equation wherein *madama* = *text* = *body* (= *being*) by extending all the interconnections among these variables. *Being* is marked with a cautionary parenthesis because Ahmed/Zahra never definitively opts for one gender to the exclusion of the other. S/he stabilizes him/herself as an ontological androgynous, a social epicene, a multiplicity at the threshold of many pseudo-unities. Although reaping advantages to the end from appearing in public disguised as a man, s/he knows that unbridled libidinal scanning is less akin to the legendary travels of Ibn Battuta than to the inner, vicarious tourism of Des Esseintes, "the nomadism of those who no longer budge and no longer imitate anything but just fit things together" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux* 35): "I made up those journeys, those nights without dawns. . . . If I had been a man I would have said, 'I am Ibn Battuta!' But I'm only a woman" (164 [128]).

As if enacting Gide's lessons to Nathanaël in *Les Nourritures terrestres*, Ahmed/Zahra repudiated the family before it could repudiate her. S/he also dismissed epistemologies from psychology to Islam which "claim to know and explain why a woman is a woman and a man a man" (89). Yet "going from myself to myself" (99 [74]), s/he knew that the experience of "coming out" leads to nothing definitive and would leave him/her eternally at a threshold: the "threshold of complicity" (91 [68]) where Ahmed/Zahra resorbs the anonymous correspondent who falls silent. Ahmed/Zahra's movement becomes a virtual oscillation where intense emotions of the *here and now* count infinitely more than any future remembrance of having been there.

Molten Flux

It is time I knew who I am. I know I have a woman's body. . . . that is to say, I have a woman's genitals, though they were never used.
(152 [118])

identity, Ahmed/Zahra learns to oscillate on the verge of several. When Hajji Ahmed evokes *mourning* to describe how the birth of successive daughters made him feel and chooses the metaphors of *well* and *tomb* to characterize his wife's body when pregnant with Ahmed/Zahra, he consigns his dark secret to her and unwittingly condemns her to ontological undecidability.

How are these terms of *well* and *tomb* interconnected? We know from Freud and (later) Kristeva (see *Soleil noir*) that when the mourning process cannot be arrested the lost love object cannot psychologically be "laid to rest" and the living death of melancholy ensues. To fall (or be pushed) into a well alongside which one normally toils to quench thirst transforms the source of life-giving water into a tomb. The numismatic research of the blind troubadour permitted him to locate the *zahir* (a coin whose significance was reputed to be antithetical to that which is "within," *bâttene*) at the bottom of a well. We recall also that it was deep in some figurative well that Ahmed/Zahra located Fatima's thoughts. Using the well, the belly, and, more ominously, the tomb to connote female genital anatomy, Samuel Beckett illustrated the poverty of our existence in a graphic passage of *Waiting for Godot* that, to my mind, concisely figures Ahmed/Zahra's precarious ontological balancing act: "one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (58). This statement is delivered, I hasten to add, by Pozzo (Italian for "well"), the blind master suddenly furious at those who would meddle with Lucky, his slave (in Latin, *plagiarius*). Pozzo's aphorism captures the time of existence that—through the sand child—Ben Jelloun attributes to all of us. That time is an instant that we experience as an eternity: the cinematic threshold dividing as it joins the frame of childbirth and the blackout frame of the tomb.

The Coin: The Rub

My hand tried to stem the flow. I looked at my fingers, spread out,
linked by a bubble of that translucent blood, and through them I
could see the garden, the motionless trees, and the sky broken by
the highest branches. My heart pounded.
(47 [31])

The lyricism of Ahmed/Zahra's entranced look at menstrual blood; his/her realization that no more than a man's does a woman's anatomy result from some primordial castration; *The Sand Child's* exhaustive explo-

ration of the Muslim woman's condition no matter what her tie to other women or men—mother, daughter, sister, wife, lover, loner. Can these products of a male writer's pen qualify as some sort of *écriture féminine*?

Ahmed/Zahra's initial opinion of women was formed by the adulteration of his/her gender through lessons imposed by patriarchy which are in turn rooted in the notion (to which psychoanalysis, moreover, is not immune) that girls are *garçons manqués*, that women are truncated men. For Hajji Ahmed, blaming his wife for bearing him none, the only *truly* human baby is a man child (26–27): "when you had your seventh daughter, I realized that you carry some infirmity within you" (22 [12–13]). So long have the seven sisters and their mother been treated as subhumans by their father and "brother" that blood runs sluggishly through their veins (66 [46]). Choosing later to identify with the "subhuman" gender s/he was trained to loathe, Ahmed/Zahra describes his/her mother's body as an "indistinct, half-living, half-dead matter" (131 [101]).

Autoeroticism brings Ahmed/Zahra closest to realizing him/herself as woman: "In the aching arms of my body I hold myself . . . I fall asleep, entwined in my arms" (54 [37]). In his/her ecstasy, Ahmed/Zahra composes another list of images of the being s/he might embody. Most of these images were omitted from the English translation and it is worth citing all of them not only because they attest to Ahmed/Zahra's ultimate solidarity with the womanhood-as-handicap lived by his/her sisters and mother, but also to appreciate the beauty of Ben Jelloun's dense imagery: "Who am I? And who is the other? . . . A swamp visited by desperate men? A window overlooking a precipice? A garden beyond the night? An old coin? A shirt covering up a dead man? A bit of blood smeared on half-opened lips?" (55 [38]).

Ahmed/Zahra marries his/her lame and epileptic cousin, Fatima, in order to offend family, society, and existence and to push the logic of travesty to its limits. Ahmed/Zahra's first proximity to another woman awakens his/her curiosity about a body so similar to his/hers. What Ahmed/Zahra expects to discover in examining Fatima's genitals while she sleeps is even more peculiar than what s/he does find. While Fatima wears a daunting "armored" chastity undergarment (77), as we might infer from the chapter's title, "The Walled-Up Gate," Ahmed/Zahra reports that she has not excised herself or sewn together her labia (76). Not only is female genital mutilation alien to Moroccan mores but the notion that infibulation could be practiced on oneself is nothing short of grotesque.

Once this monstrous marriage has sufficiently outraged everyone, Ahmed/Zahra begins to neglect Fatima's special physical needs, treating her

(as any "real man" should) as an expendable commodity, perpetuating the deterioration of her health. But Fatima harbors a hidden fortitude, a tenacity born of her infirmities (including womanhood) that, to Ahmed/Zahra's amazement, places her on par with the resilience society nurtures in males. In revealing to Ahmed/Zahra that she has known all along that his/her genitals are female, Fatima declares: "We are women before being sick, or perhaps we are sick because we are women . . . I know our wound; we share it." With unbound tenderness, Fatima is the only character to signify to Ahmed/Zahra that she recognizes their shared intersex: "she slipped into my bed as I slept and began gently to stroke my belly" (80 [58]). As the leper at the conclusion of Flaubert's "Légende de Saint-Julien l'Hospitalier" did, so Fatima insists on identity through infirmity by fusing herself to Ahmed/Zahra as she dies: "She wanted not only to die but to drag me down with her as well" (79 [58]).⁴

From the moment s/he avows empirical familiarity with both genders, Ahmed/Zahra aspires to be neither: "To be a man is an illusion, an act of violence that requires no justification. Simply to be is a challenge. I am weary [*las et lasse*]" (94 [70]). The true ontological deformity, then, would be existence as either gender to the exclusion of the other: a deformity that Ahmed/Zahra can elude by remaining at a threshold between man "becoming-woman" and woman "becoming-man."

Alloy

Abdelkébir Khatibi writes the Maghreb in terms of an incontrovertible plurality—in its peoples, tribes, nations, and especially in its simultaneous linguistic cultures. The body is plural too, as Tahar Ben Jelloun (after Barthes) is adamant about showing. A node among others in the rhizome of desire, the corporeal machine's profusion of parts extends out, its openings connecting it to other bodies. These multiple bodily negotiations are so often the focus of Ben Jelloun's narrative that the sand child's body could be more accurately identified as the novel's main character with Ahmed/Zahra positioned as the body's perplexed conductor.

4. Written as a quasi epitaph for Fatima, the following words (absent from the translation) close the chapter: "Beaucoup plus tard, une voix venue d'ailleurs dira: 'Remange-moi, accueille ma difformité dans ton gouffre compatissant'" (81 [59]). In her final moments, Fatima says and does, albeit with more tenderness, what the leper in Flaubert's story "La Légende de Saint Julien l'Hospitalier" says and does in his (2:648).

The conflicting signals received by Ahmed/Zahra's body only serve to orient it further toward the multiple connections offered in the rhizome of desire. The clash between the two-day ceremony during which her/his eyes were made up with khôl and Ahmed/Zahra's traumatic first haircut (31) underlines gender ambiguity. Indeed, body shaving is so intrinsic to the ritual grooming of both sexes in Islam that Ahmed/Zahra's later neurotic face-shaving and trichotillomania (the obsessive plucking of one's hair) are unreliable as repetitive behaviors that tend to mark gender (see 90, 96, 98, 115). This scene finds an unexpected parallel in Sartre's description of the sudden and irrevocable loss of his childish gender ambiguity when his locks were sheared. In his autobiographical *The Words*, Sartre recounts how his mother, possibly compensating for her own "sad childhood," "would have liked [him] to be a girl really and truly," and thus did her best to raise him with "the sex of angels, indeterminate, but feminine around the edges." Her plan fizzled when his grandfather brought him to the barbershop where young Sartre watched his "curls roll down the white sheet around [his] neck and fall to the floor, inexplicably tarnished" (103–4 ff). Like the pubescent girl who passes as a queer boy in Hallström's film *My Life as a Dog*, Ahmed/Zahra binds his/her chest to impede the growth of breasts (36). Ahmed/Zahra's desire to henna his/her hair and impulse to shed tears are deemed "feminine" and harshly repressed. As a woman trained to be a man, Ahmed/Zahra's ruses to surreptitiously locate and employ cloth needed for stanching the body's menstrual flow further skews him/her by transforming him/her into a thief.

But the erasure of Ahmed/Zahra's gender ambiguity is not as conclusive as Sartre describes his as being in *The Words*. Although cross-dressing or masquerade dissimulates his/her body to him/herself (as to others), Ahmed/Zahra manages to decipher that body with increasing efficiency. From using a small mirror to compare his/her sex with those she saw in the women's hammam to the tireless efforts to read desire through rereading his/her journal entries (that is, literary deterritorializations of his/her body), Ben Jelloun causes us to consider that "the veil of flesh that maintained the necessary distance between himself and others" (7 [1]) is in fact the support of all writing and the source of all speech. Without this correlation of the body to the imbricated acts of writing, reading, and speaking, it would be impossible to understand the bizarre relationship between the black silk wrapping that envelops the mysterious journals and the silky black hair of the woman with Tawaddud's voice who haunts the blind troubadour during his Andalusian night.

The Spun Spinning

Storytelling is *The Sand Child's* principal narrative device. In large part, however, the stories told rely on the authority of the intradiegetic written text: Ahmed/Zahra's journals themselves contain his/her correspondence with an unnamed individual. It is because Ahmed/Zahra is an omnivorous reader, we are told, that s/he emits a steady flow of writing. So much of his/her time is devoted to producing the written word that s/he becomes indistinguishable from those blackened pages. His/her writing is interrupted ("I would write before and after these sessions" [116 (87)]) only by masturbation before a mirror—a ritual pact between body and image. The form of the written word enhances its erogenous instrumentality: although Ben Jelloun writes the novel in French, the sentences read and written by his hero/ine are rendered, he tells us, in the cadenced calligraphy of Arabic (109), whose cursive letters harbor the power to reanimate bodily sensations anesthetized by the law of the father. Rereading his/her correspondent's letters, Ahmed/Zahra quivers: "It is as if his sentences were stroking my skin, touching me at the most sensitive points of my body" (96 [72]).

We have seen how the perplexities unleashed by adolescence cause a suspension of Ahmed/Zahra's writing: "I sometimes spent hours in front of the blank page." But while in most cases the white page is the virginal product of a writer's stupor, for the indeterminate Ahmed/Zahra it is none other than him/herself: "My body was that page and that book" [87]. And while s/he may give free reign to a body desperately writing itself to parry the law's vengeful violence, the guilty innocence of the body remains a blank page, free to be embellished by others ("J'ai perdu la langue de mon corps" [96 [71–72]]). In coming to terms with the limitations of writing as resistance to the law, Ahmed/Zahra is not alone. After musing that reading leads him far *inside* books (172), the blind troubadour also realizes that he is but a book—one among thousands (177–78). Besides contributing to Ben Jelloun's intertextual play with Borges, this reiteration of the (*medina* =) *text* = *body* = *being* equation echoes one of the most memorable tropes that Sartre forged to describe the hermaphroditic organicity of being.⁵

5. The proof of Sartre's equation *my being* = *books* is irrefutable. It is in his description of books, then, that the hermaphroditism of his being becomes apparent: in his eyes, they possess the characteristics of both genders. *Male*: "I revered those standing stones: upright or leaning over, close together like bricks on the book-shelves or spaced out nobly in lanes of menhirs. I felt that our family's prosperity depended on them. . . . I would touch them secretly to honor my hands with their dust." *Female*: "I would draw near to observe those boxes which slit open like oysters, and I would

The storytellers' audience is repeatedly warned about a seductive power inherent to the written base upon which Ahmed/Zahra's story is founded. From a safe, disengaged, aloof, extradiegetic position, they too are at constant risk of being sucked into the intradiegetic vortex. Under the sway of the intertext, we readers as well are liable to becoming one with the intersex: "Now the story is in you. It will occupy your days and nights, dig its bed in your body and your mind" (208 [164–65]). None can escape the ambiguities of Ahmed/Zahra who, like the carafe Marcel plunged into the Vivonne, both contains and is contained by all life and all bodies.

"Sing O nightingale, sing, don't lower your voice"

Moroccan proverb

Speech is not neutral.

—Luce Irigaray

While Ahmed/Zahra's writing falters, then halts altogether, his/her voices hold forth. The insistence of intertextuality in Ben Jelloun's novel results less from postmodern paralogism or metafiction than from the author's incorporation of the Berber oral tradition of his native Morocco and from the intertwining of speaking and writing in Islamic culture.⁶ Thus the Koran and the *1001 Nights*—two paradigmatic Islamic texts of the voice—have massive presence in *The Sand Child*. Both have origins in oral transmission and the perpetuation of both is heavily dependent on orality: the very word "koran" means (and demands) recitation; the yarns of the *Nights* are often repeated aloud.

The voice and the insinuations that society draws from its timbre unite three women in Ben Jelloun's novel: Ahmed/Zahra, Fatouma, and Tawaddud. Through her recounting of dreams deemed pertinent to the hero/ine, the identity of Fatouma (one of the book's last narrators) converges with that of Ahmed/Zahra. A bizarre complicity arises, as I will show in a moment, from the near onomastic relation between the name "Fatouma" and

the nudity of their inner organs, pale, fusty leaves, slightly bloated, covered with black veinlets, which drank ink and smelled of mushrooms" (Words 40–41).

6. Erickson (118) identifies Ben Jelloun's intent as paralogism. Mustapha Marrouchi (72) notes the metafictional move by which Ben Jelloun returns, in *The Sacred Night*, to the same narrative space of the public square. On the Berber oral tradition, see Sarra Gaillard. There is also evidence, in this text as in Ben Jelloun's *Harrouda*, that the poetry of hetaera living in the remote High Atlas of Morocco has influenced him. For an immersion in this fascinating folk poetry, see Merrida N'Ait Attik.

that of Ahmed/Zahra's deceased wife. Tawaddud, who along with Scheherezade surpasses by far the intelligence of men, stands out among all the female characters of the 1001 Nights. A slave girl, Tawaddud managed to save her master from ruin by responding with flawless virtuosity to questions eliciting the quasi totality of Islamic knowledge and posed by Harun Al-Rachid's wise men. Her ordeal is Scheherezade's *en abyme*.

While one might argue that the masculine voice that Ben Jelloun attributes to Tawaddud may result from a male author's projective revision of a woman's encyclopedic knowledge, that voice allows us to associate her with the woman who handed the *bâttène* to the blind troubadour: "I have rarely heard a voice at once so deep and so shrill. Was it the voice of a man who had undergone an operation on his vocal cords? Or the voice of a woman wounded in her life?" (174 [137]).⁷ And, far from Buenos Aires, during a night spent in the gardens of the Alhambra, the blind troubadour will once again hear "a woman's voice, deep and mocking . . . : a woman's voice in a man's body" (195 [154]). Is this voice Tawaddud's? Does the mysterious gift-giver still shadow him? Is it Ahmed/Zahra's voice? . . . or perhaps our own?

For Ahmed/Zahra, yearning "to recover the natural rustle" of his/her voice means looking for a mitigated chord: some voice quality allowing him/her to disappear into anonymity. Detecting a feminine quality in his/her correspondent's voice, s/he envisions her future, authentic *self* as simply a "voice upon which an acrobat would walk" (98 [73]). This aspiration to selfhood is a tightrope precariously bridging masculinity and femininity but never reaching either; it anticipates an ideal expressed by Fatouma: "In life one should carry two faces. It would be good to have a spare face—or, better still, no face at all. We would just be voices, as if we were all blind" (162 [126]).

On a pilgrimage to Mecca, a cry with supernatural force swells within Fatouma's breast. Intuitively, she comprehends that to release it would avenge a dead woman's suffering. Repressing that cry, however, she wonders: "Why did that cry find refuge in me and not in a man, for example? An inner voice answered that the cry should have been in a man's breast and there had been a mistake—or, rather, the young woman had preferred to give it to a woman capable of feeling the same suffering as herself" (165 [129]). Fatima's deathbed fusion with Ahmed/Zahra has thus borne its fruit

7. Scheherezade tells the story of "Abu al-Husn and His Slave-Girl Tawaddud" from the 436th through the 461st *Night* (see *Thousand Nights and a Night* 5: 189–245). Nowhere does Tawaddud mention the sound of her voice. Tawaddud's tale should be read in conjunction with "The Man's Dispute with the Learned Woman Concerning the Relative Excellence of Male and Female" (154–63).

après-coup in a foreclosed cry of loving solidarity between women. That shrillest manifestation of voice reveals to us that Fatouma is Ahmed/Zahra pregnant with an internalized Fatima as it triggers the novel's climactic canceling of ontological differences, equating everybody with the sand child.

"Y" Name

Naming Zahra "Ahmed" was Hajji Ahmed's compensatory act for failure to *will* the transmission of the Y chromosome. The prerogative of fathers in patriarchal societies, the implacable logic of naming was ingrained in Ahmed/Zahra. Hajji Ahmed's enactment of Lacan's *nom du père* theory is truly impeccable: ignoring the existence of his first seven daughters by declining to name them (17), he imposed that unbearable weight on his eighth by giving her his name. In a dream following Hajji Ahmed's death, Ahmed/Zahra hears him say: "Ahmed, my son, the man I formed, is dead. You, woman, are merely a usurper" (130 [100]). The paternal specter then buries him/her alive.

Although the weighty attribution of names gives Ben Jelloun a pretext to engage in a vigorous *external* critique of patriarchy, by linking the role of an author to that of father, a critique of naming can be turned back on Tahar Ben Jelloun. What does he try to accomplish through his *own* nominalism? Given the importance of mirrors in *The Sand Child* and the author's close affiliations with Parisian literati, it is likely that the mirroring or "graphic inversion" that transforms an S into Z, "the letter of mutilation and deviance," was on the author's mind in choosing Zahra.⁸ Amat, in a gesture of obvious identification with the hero/ine, refuses to refer to him/her by *any* name—least of all Zahra—because s/he signs her manuscripts with the initial A. More precisely, this initial would be *alif*: not only the first letter of the Arabic alphabet but certainly another reference to Borges and his 1949 story, "El Aleph."

Once out in the world, several other names or sobriquets are attributed to Ahmed/Zahra. While Oum Abbas lends him/her the stage name of "Ami-

8. Roland Barthes's abiding fascination with the relationship between these letters is well known: see his reading of Balzac's "Sarrasine" in *S/Z*. The forms of S and Z recur in the pronunciation of *sarrasin* (from the Arabic *charkiyin*, meaning "Oriental"), the noun Europeans used for Muslims from Asia, Africa, and Spain in the Middle Ages. Raymond Queneau's legendary Zazie, a pubescent girl superbly perched between childhood and adulthood, masculinity and femininity, grappled with the multiple identities of Aroun Arachide (*sic*) ("Harun Peanut"). Given Queneau's encyclopedic knowledge and wild imagination, one cannot dismiss the possibility of an allusion here to the androgynous Peter Pan who adorns one of the most famous brands of peanut butter.

rat Lhob," some narrators prefix "Lalla" to Zahra. Perhaps after all, though, as Amar insisted, her name is simply *alif* since, just as in mathematics where the letter represents the power of infinite sets, Ahmed/Zahra is everyone at once and everyone is Ahmed/Zahra. The point is that once one welcomes the multiplicity of being, a plethora of names is no more bothersome than the plurality of the body or the polyphony of the text. As Deleuze and Guattari wrote in *Mille Plateaux*: "The individual acquires his/her veritable proper name when s/he opens her/himself to the multiplicities that pass through him/her everywhere at the conclusion of the most severe exercise of depersonalization" (51). In the end, Ahmed/Zahra attains a state of consciousness that one might call, after Blanchot, *le pas au-delà*: a state of consciousness in which, if one has "known the disturbance of name and the duplicity of body," one feels both here and not, already beyond rescue and contemptuous of it (151 [117]).

Paratactic Intensities

"The end of what? Circular streets have no end!"

(21 [12])

So we are in Marrakesh, in the heart of Buenos Aires, whose streets, I once remarked, "are like the entrails of my soul."

(174 [156])

A rhizome neither begins nor ends. It's always in the middle, between things, inter-being, *intermezzo*. . . . The tree imposes the verb "to be" but the rhizome's tissue is the conjunction "and . . . and . . . and . . ." There's enough force in this conjunction to shake and uproot the verb "to be."

—Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux*

With its shifting storytellers, discursive and epistolary exchanges, quotations, parodies, pseudo-plagiarisms, the generalized intertextuality of Ben Jelloun's *Sand Child*—regardless of whether it is the apotheosis of modernism or an exemplum of the postmodern—stretches the limits of decipherability. While the layout of an Arab medina is frequently likened to a labyrinth, the multiple openings in the novel's principal topology more closely conform to those in Deleuze's and Guattari's model of the rhizome.⁹

9. See Deleuze and Guattari (*Kafka* 3): "How can we enter into Kafka's work? This work is a rhizome, a burrow. The castle has multiple entrances whose rules of usage and whose locations aren't very well known. The hotel in *Amerika* has innu-

Unlike a labyrinth, there is no teleology of escape built into the sand child's rhizomatic ontological maze. Ahmed/Zahra must learn the pleasures of travel within an infinite network of libidinal intensities.

Deleuze and Guattari developed their theory of how minor literatures function vis-à-vis dominant cultures by invoking the infinitely knotted structure of stops and starts that is a rhizome. Ben Jelloun's work, written by a Moroccan Muslim in French, conforms to some of the criteria that contribute to the subversiveness of minor literature. But form is never so much the issue for "minoritary" writers, concerning whom I will add one final comment here. Because of his birth within the economically privileged class, Jorge Luis Borges has been identified with the "high" culture or elitist aesthetics of modernist Europe. Purely formalistic readings of Borges are usually intended to confirm this identification. But when Ben Jelloun shunts his blind troubadour "from an Argentinian shanty town into an Arab medina" (192 [151]), or—even more outlandish—when he declares that Marrakesh is at the heart of Buenos Aires, he reclaims Borges for the decentering project of minor literature. By shunning—at least in this one instance—the geography of culture fostered and nurtured in the salons of European capitals, Ben Jelloun transplants Borges into the rhizome where his Morocco can easily connect with the *criollo* quarters of Latin American medinas.

Ben Jelloun's intertext about an intersexed "enigma who oscillates between darkness and an excess of light" (85 [62]) is designed to implicate everyone. His mapping of the threshold that defines our being-with-others begins at Bab El Had—the "limit" or "border" gate—and culminates at the Gate of the Sands. He lures us in and sets us into motion like grains of sand in an ever-shifting Sahara. Wherever and however it is displaced, no grain eludes the proximity of others—ultimately all others: "We exchange our syllables until our hands may touch" (105 [78]). Any limit to encroachment while we ineluctably approach and intertwine with others demands a becoming-other at her/his threshold.

merable main doors and side doors that innumerable guards watch over; it even has entrances and exits without doors." Deleuze and Guattari share with Lyotard a sense of the importance of this notion. The formers' description of how intensities work in Kafka's writings could be said of Ben Jelloun: "Kafka's animals never refer to a mythology or to archetypes but correspond solely to new levels, zones of liberated intensities where contents free themselves from their forms as well as from their expressions, from the signifier that formalized them. There is no longer anything but movements, vibrations, thresholds in a deserted matter . . . underground intensities" (*Kafka* 13).