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'Foreign' Sexualities in Francophone Contexts

THOMAS C. SPEAR

The following remarks—presented in an abbreviated format at the MLA panel, “Queer Issues in the Foreign Language Classroom,” in December 1995—were originally intended to provoke discussion and raise questions more than to present any definitive answers. At the time, I had just finished reading an article that seemed appropriate to introduce the idea of cultural relativity:

“Young males are really the most dangerous people on the planet, because they easily respond to authority and they want approval. They are given the rewards for getting into the hierarchical system, and they’re given to believe they’re building heaven on earth. In most atrocities, there’s a big utopian dream—a cleaner society, or purer society. Young people are very idealistic, and the powers prey on the young people by appealing to their more idealistic nature.”

“[I challenge the] presupposition in modern Western society that people who commit a murder will live to regret it or that it will sicken their lives. [...] I haven’t seen it, to tell you the truth.” In fact, [...] “people who commit murder find it very easy to rationalize it and to come to terms with it,” and this is particularly so “when it’s being condoned by the state.” (84, emphases added)

The context of this statement is not urban United States; in an article on Rwanda in *The New Yorker*, Philip Gourevitch has quoted Dr. Richard Mollica, director of Harvard University’s Program in Refugee Trauma.

While murder and genocide are not “queer” subjects per se, I present Dr. Mollica’s thoughts not only because of the enormous impact of the recent Rwandan genocide upon our collective—and sometimes francoph-

one—human conscience, but also to remind myself and my readers that any considerations of "'foreign' sexualities in francophone contexts"—polygamy or homophobia, for example—should acknowledge the questionable prisms of "objectivity" through which we view cultural practices as being either "different" or perhaps "objectionable" when compared to our own.

* * *

What is the role of the professor who encounters cultural and sexual themes "different" from those with which his or her students are familiar? To what extent does the language and literature professor—in anglophone surroundings, perhaps more than the professor of "English" literatures—become a professor of colonial history, for example, or a social anthropologist? In francophone texts read with my students, we encounter sexual and gender-linked practices that are not necessarily either "Western" nor "*catholiques*,"¹ including: veiling of women; excision; inhabital configurations of homosexuality, homophobia, incest and mysogyny; and, institutionalized (simultaneous rather than serial) polygamy. The layers of "difference" are undoubtedly compounded by the "othering" effects of a "foreign" language, in this case, French, in the Bronx. Certainly as readers we can define ourselves by what we are not, by means of presumptions of dissimilarity. Does a reading of a text in a foreign language, however, lend exoticism or an additional *frisson* of difference to the textual meaning?

One of my roles, as professor of French, is to teach language. On the first day, when my students learn "*bonjour*," "*Je m'appelle Alex (Maria)*," and "*enchanté(e)*," I invariably introduce the French handshake: a simple up-and-down motion of the clasped hands rather than "shaking" hands, as is customary in the United States. Before the first session is over, there is the inevitable "*au revoir*," and I often compare the familiar, single "*beso*" of my predominantly Hispanic students with the double, triple, or quadruple French *bises*, and with the Anglo-Saxon distaste of any bodily contact whatsoever. From day one, therefore, in addition to making students screw up their faces in new positions in order to pronounce an "u" or an

¹ My English reader might understand the adjective "*catholique*" as referring to "universal" or to this particular Christian religion. Although I do, of course, also refer to the religious meaning of "*catholique*" in a French context, it is a pertinent cultural irony that the best English equivalence for this adjective here would be "kosher."

"é", I try to present the new language in a broad context of accompanying cultural mores and to invite each potential francophone to cross-dress, as it were, in a robe of identity linked to the codes of this new language.

For the literature professor teaching Ousmane Sembène, words such as "première épouse" or "co-épouse," may not pose any "translation" problems (in French or English). The author himself has deemed necessary to translate, in footnotes, other terms, such as "momé," "ayé" (60) and "awa" (116). At what point does the student's "translation"—that is, understanding, comprehension of the foreign—shift from language to culture? A colleague, when discussing Sembène's *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* with his class, found that the novel's culturally-informed intrinsic split by gender was mirrored in his classroom over the issue of polygamy. "All the women present," he said, "including an Iranian, took a position against it. Five African men took a stance in favor of it, saying that with polygamy, 'they have a choice.'" This "impeccable logic," my colleague explained, would have cost them dearly had he not intervened. "Voilà," he told me, "pour le multiculturalisme sur le terrain."

Does the Western, monogamous, heterosexual couple with children stand as a lens through which "Third World" social structures are seen as "different"? The immigrant student population where I teach includes many Hispanics and Irish- and Italian-Americans for whom the Catholic family is the norm, or at least the tradition. Do Catholics read Catholicly? Haitian students schooled *au pays* have never read André Gide, whose *opéra omnia* remains on the Vatican's *Index librorum prohibitorum*. My sense is that Catholic North Americans have an intrinsically better "understanding" of Catholic Europe—even in translation or, say, in Gide's infamous denunciation of the nuclear, Catholic family ("Familles, je vous hais!")—than, for example, of Muslim Sénégal.

Personally, I have loved teaching with the Senegalese author Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* because it lends to topical comparisons of the men's world versus that of the women, the "craquements [nécessaires] pour asseoir la modernité dans les traditions" (32), civilization and culture versus nature, and young women versus their elders. But does not Mariama Bâ's troubled portrait of polygamy suit Western feminists? Has Calixthe Beyala's work been overrated because it presents a rare instance of a francophone African woman novelist? Or can we not say that her highly critical and sarcastic objectivization of the African as well as "Western" male—this "inculte" (102) species with a "sexe imbécile [... et] sève inutile" (51)—is a truly refreshing and unique voice? Teaching in the context of North America, consciously or not, we seek out the "politically correct" in our chosen curriculum, with the indirect result often being a reaffirmation of a superiority of Western social practices.

When reading Ben Jelloun's *La Nuit sacrée*, an Ivoirienne student confided in me that she was very disturbed by the author's representation of incest between the blind man and his sister. Given the other scenes of sexual violence in the novel, especially the brutal sexual mutilation of the protagonist, I hardly expected the episodes of a negotiated and mutually accepted incest to draw exceptional focus. "In my culture," she told me, "we don't talk about such things." The fact that, for this student, the first language of instruction was French underscores the obvious conclusion that cultural identity is not necessarily linked with linguistic codes. Writing about "national-sexual" codes, Mireille Rosello speaks of such a "site of translation" (253), an "illusory site of transparency" (251) found when there is an assumption of "intercomprehension" among speakers of the same language (and she places "the same language" in quotation marks to stress this error). Using an example of a Québécois writer addressing a French public, Rosello understands the difficulty of her attempt to speak in a "theoretical space where a transnational-sexual dialogue is made possible," when, for speakers of a "same" language, "the margin of miscommunication is both immense and likely to be ignored" (259). When studying fiction, it is clear that some of the blinders preventing us as readers from entertaining *every* cultural and linguistic fantasy, taboo, and possibility are those which arise from an assumption of understanding of the "other," whose language we may understand but do not comprehend.

I doubt nonetheless that representations of Caribbean machismo are indeed all that "foreign" to a North American reader. Judging by the success of their novels, I might argue that macho males are not the only readers who "get off" on Caribbean writers of "créolité" and their doudouist depictions of *la coucoune*. In an argument I have developed elsewhere (see "Works Cited"), I express my own objections to some of these examples of ranting phallocracy that denigrates the weak woman and the homosexual. The cocky "fucker," or "kokeur," we find so prevalent in the works of two Martinican writers, Raphaël Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau, reappears in various forms in the fiction of other male Caribbean writers' fiction, two obvious examples being Danny Laferrière's well-endowed protagonists and René Depestre's "géolibertin." Certainly these considerations are taken into account when the queer theorist, as the feminist, filters a class reading list to fit his or her own ideological agenda. One would hope texts chosen for francophone literature curricula are chosen for the literary merits and/or socio-historical implications that raise the particular works above any such parochial—if not insignificant—objections. I might note, however, that to study francophone Caribbean intellectual history while fixated on the founders of "négritude," "antillanité," and "créolité" often secures the positions of the forefathers of Caribbean history (Césaire/Dam-

as; Glissant; Bernabé/Chamoiseau/Confiant). My reader can sense the bent I take in my own choices of texts; it may be of interest to give another example of how one colleague approaches these "different" sexualities.

This colleague, a professor in a department of Africology, tells me he can broach the "tabou subject" of homosexuality only because he is tenured. In his courses on traditional African religions, or in his course on political movements in the Black world, his students, "surtout les jeunes mâles, se sentent mal(es) à l'aise," he says, and often drop his course. "Homosexuality doesn't exist in the black world, period," his students say, "and anyway, we kill those kinds of people." Threatened for "having insulted the black world," my colleague argues that "in the United States, we deal with a world that is not only multicultural, but multinational; what goes on in a traditionally 'white' academic department does not occur in black studies." I mention this particular example to suggest consideration of racial as well as linguistic departmentalization of our university academies.

To give an idea of what kind of scholarship one can find on "foreign" sexualities, I list but a few chapter titles from a collection of essays titled, *Sexuality and Eroticism Among Males in Moslem Societies: "Moroccan Boys and Sex," "The Persian Boy Today,"* and, the most ludicrous, "Turkey on the Brink of Modernity: A Guide for Scandinavian Gays." Lest one think the entire anthology is a how-to book for fucking Arabs (which it tries to be), I cite a less stupid sentence from the book: "Whereas the fucking of Muslim boys by Westerners is seen as exploiting the Third World and thus causing resentment, fucking Westerners, whether male or female, is seen as a well deserved revenge for suffered injustice and as an expression of physical and moral superiority over a decaying West" (125). I am troubled by the fact that one of the homo-positive editors has botched his attempt to stress the importance to learn "about one's own cultural conditioning, one's own blind spots [and] one's own implicit unconscious judgements" (128). As Schmitt correctly points out, "In the societies of Muslim North Africa and Southwest Asia male-male sexuality plays an important role. But in these societies there are no 'homosexuals'—there is no word for 'homosexuality'—the concept is completely unfamiliar. There are no heterosexuals either" (5). It is, in fact, rather odd to apply the term "homosexuality" (with attendant notions of homo-positive gays or even "queers" of the West) to a North African context. The Algerian anthropologist Malek Chebel reminds us that, while the Coran may unambiguously condemn male homosexuality (and never evoke that between women), the absolute separation of sexes in Arabo-moslem culture generally leads to a "monogamous and monosexual" adolescence, and a certain sexual openness, or a "gestuelle imprégnée de douceur de vivre et de détente" (1995, 314-15). While insisting upon the "méconnaissance méprisante et

un déni complet de la réalité intrinsèque d'un tel élan" (1985, 20), Chebel ultimately insists upon Maghrebian "ambiguity" (1985, 17) in regard to homosexual practices. Given these social differences, how can Western critics pretend to apply the very term "homosexuality" to a cultural and sexual context so different from our own Judeo-Christian (and especially Protestant) norms? A Moroccan named Rachid O.—the author's "veiled" identity not without significance—has published an apparently autobiographical account, entitled *L'Enfant ébloui*, wherein he describes his relations with his schoolmates as follows:

Ils me faisaient des propositions mais chacun son tour, jamais en groupe, ils discutaient avec moi, aucun ne m'a jamais fait comprendre que c'était du chantage. Je n'ai jamais senti que c'était méchant ou agressif. Ils voulaient juste coucher avec moi comme ça se passe au Maroc quand il y a un plutôt joli garçon dans une classe, on lui répète qu'il est mignon jusqu'à ce qu'il craque et accepte de se faire enculer, et là ils pensaient que ce serait encore plus facile puisque j'étais déjà le petit ami du professeur. (66)

When Rachid, this "petit pédé féminin" (67), speaks of encountering a young European, he says, "Si je ne lui avais pas adressé la parole, je n'aurais jamais pu l'avoir, lui parler. Comme c'est un Européen, ce n'est pas comme nous les Marocains qui avons le contact facile. J'ai pensé que, même si je lui plaisais, il ne pouvait pas faire le premier pas" (104). When studying depictions of overtly homosexual acts—as one finds, for example, in the works of North-African writers Rachid Boudjedra, Mohamed Choukri, Rachid O., and Abdelhak Serhane—one must exercise caution to not apply our notions of homosexuality to a very different social context.

Excluding such examples as Schmitt and Sofer, most postmodern post-colonial scholarship is often quite instructive as well as entertaining; at times, the politically-correct anti-Eurocentrism and anti-homophobia is downright amusing.² Our multicultural, *multilingual* approach can defeat what I sense my Africologist colleague refers to as clannish "multinationalism." Transcultural wanderings in "foreign" literatures allow us to cross-dress in languages and codes of different cultural norms. While we may find a means of breaking the hegemonic "norm" of the heterosexual model, we may also be freed of Western modes of "normal" homosexuality. Several sessions at the MLA convention reminded me not only that ac-

² "The French West Indies have not fostered openly lesbian writers either, although other regions of the Caribbean are less repressive in this respect as well." A. James Arnold, "The Erotics of Colonialism in Contemporary French West Indian Literary Culture," *NWIG* 68, 1-2 (1994): 5-22: 14.

ademics have spawned a veritable cottage industry of postcolonial studies, but are also its severest critics. I would like to believe I can join ranks with the committed scholars of "homo-pomo-P.C.-post-colonial" research and cultural criticism, believing that the study of francophone post-colonial literature can help denounce "ethnocentric universalism,"³ and enable us to form "more progressive, counterhegemonic discourses."⁴

Because a foreign language can itself be a point of stumbling comprehension, it is perhaps easier for us to remain conscious of cultural filters when reading literature contextualized as "foreign" in an academic department of foreign languages. As with the first handshake or the first *bise* (or *baise*), I hope my students can share with me an eagerness to explore unknown francophone realities (or fantasies), and thereby gain some critical independence or objectivity *vis-à-vis* their personal stance of cultural reference.

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³ Chandra T. Mohanty, cited in Williams and Chrisman, 199.

⁴ Jean Franco, cited in Williams and Chrisman, 360.

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