

# THE SPACE, ANOTHER BODY

on terraced and redbrick housing, plays a part in the illustration of "sameness." It is used as a visual symbol of the community and, in the video, it leads us to question what it means to be different amidst such immense uniformity.

The volte face created by the position taken by the vicars in the video, who appropriate Peter Grimes's story in order to discuss their own differences in relation to the society in which they live, allows us to note that it is through the interpretation of a particular reality that desire is created or a particular character is assumed, and that nothing can be understood without being suffered or felt in the skin to the point that the truth is recovered for the self in an attitude that is imitative of a reality which, at first, does not concern them.

The fact that they assume for themselves the role of Peter Grimes, or the role of the misfit, helps us to understand better the role played by staging in constructing an identity, which, while appearing to us to be artificial, becomes real and heartfelt. The space occupied by causality between desire, staging, pleasure, and frustration allows a new staging to be created, or even allows us to reach the point where that staging is experienced, where we live it or participate in it as active agents. In this way, each of us, in our own way, tries to create or even embody his own character, as if it were a voice.

In the interpretation of history by these five vicars, we notice that the strategy of super-staging finds it difficult to create a hero, leading me to pose a question regarding the problematic figure of the hero. What has happened to the hero?

Everyone is a hero, but the hero is dead from the beginning, first due to tradition, and then because he loses his heroic quality by becoming global, by being embodied by others; in this sense they are all of us.

In the history of the opera, or even of the great tragedies, the hero is narrated by others; even in the present tense, he exists only by interacting with the other characters. His identity is constructed through his interactions with others. The hero has no place; he does not fit there. There are no heroes because this reality is false. The hero is a false reality because he wants to die. The others kill him. He quickly loses his heroic nature when he confronts the other characters, but, at the same time, it is in this situation that the hero exists. When he dies, the other characters remain: those who tell the story, who, ultimately, are the true heroes. The others, not managing to assume reality as theirs, look for the voice with which to sing it, to speak it. We can no longer look at the real as it is presented to us; we need artifice in order to be able to live, in order to understand ourselves. This is called being scared to confront reality, and it is with super-staging, with artifice, that we conceal and manage to speak of ourselves, although we move away from the world in which we live. The hero dies, reality disappears, and we are reborn, like the phoenix that arises from the ashes and returns to construct one more staging. ●

## KADER ATTIA

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I grew up between France and Algeria.

Until the age of 12, my parents had not decided to settle in one place. I was going back and forth between Algeria and France, between an Oriental and an Occidental world.

"When you leave a country, neither your home place nor the one you find, will be as important as the journey," my father used to tell me.

The journey is the space in between. It is the space we are almost always involved in, but which we rarely pay attention to.

As immigrants leaving their home place...

At the end of the sixties, Algerian people were massively emigrating for economic reasons. At this time, the growing French economy had become the stage for the "Dream of Modernity" historically called *Les Trente Glorieuses* (The Glorious Thirties). But France's former colonial space, which it had never developed, including Algeria, had not adapted to the new economic reality. Many people, from the territories of the former French colonial empire, were forced to leave their countries in search of jobs.

For all immigrants the quest for a better life in Europe represented their last chance to earn a living for some years, and still be able to return to their countries, *El Bled*, after a successful experience in France.

But actually, the more they thought of going back to their own countries, the less they did. They stayed in France alienated by modern signs of comfort: from the architecture to the pseudo efforts of social equality.

Then the journey ended.

Through this myth of Modernity and the reality of a consumer society, millions of economic, cultural, and political lives have been erased by the global order. Immigrants from the former colonial space (and I am speaking about colonial space all around the world) have become objects of this order instead of becoming its subjects: colonization of the mind.

The result is an extreme identity reaction to this order, which, unfortunately, became the basis for extremist Islamist ideologies. The expression of this reaction could also be seen on the body. The Body became the surface of identity expression: from clothes brands to the veil.

But Algeria has always maintained, even before hiding the body with a veil, a paradoxical relationship with the human body, and especially with the female body.

In Algeria, a country that is in between the Arab world and the African one, Sub-Saharan influences are strong. To understand the body's culture conflict in the North African world, it is important to keep in mind the 3,000 year old signs carved into the rocks of the Tassili caves, in the desert of the

Sahara as well as the practice of scarification (signs carved into the skin of the body), brought especially from the Sub-Saharan area.

These aesthetic practices evoke the beginning of aesthetic surgery. Actually the fact that the body became an expression of beauty and a social representation was a way to make up for what nature had failed to do. To repair nature's mistake.

The most interesting experiences I had with these "repairs of the body" in the post colonial Algerian area happened when a very close friend of mine, Kinuna, a transsexual, Muslim, and Algerian, decided to change her body several times, going back and forth between male and female. At the time, Kinuna had no ID documents in France, but when her father died in Algeria, she decided to attend the funeral even though, as an illegal immigrant, she could not make it through the airport in Paris. Instead, she took a taxi to the Moroccan border, where she took another taxi through the mountains of Morocco, until she reached Algiers. After her five day trip, she had to stay inside the car, in front of the building, in order to watch her father's funeral. Since she had left Algiers 3 years before, as a young man, she could not get out of the car to pay her respects to her father, as a woman. She stayed in the car parked in front of her family's house watching, from behind the dark window while others carried her father's body to the cemetery.

After the funeral, she returned to France the very same way she had left. There, she began the reverse process she had undertaken to become a woman, in order to get her original male body back: she had her breast prosthesis removed and began taking a male hormone treatment. She wanted to return to Algeria before the traditional forty days of mourning since her father's death had passed. I witnessed her transformation within two weeks. It was incredibly fast: she began recovering her deep voice and her behaviour towards me changed as well. She became somebody else. Then after mourning her father, as a man, with her family, she stayed in Algiers for a few months and married a woman, Fouzia.

She brought Fouzia back with her to France, the same way she had come into Algeria, and told her everything. She showed her photographs from the time she was a woman and told her that she strongly felt she needed to become a woman again. Fouzia accepted her, and Kinuna went back to surgery in order to get a new breast prosthesis implanted and restarted a new female hormone treatment.

Today, they live together and have two kids.

It was the first time in my life I felt how much otherness is inside us all and can be extracted at any time. I will describe how this very otherness can be considered more of an ethical issue than an aesthetic one.

When Algerian transsexuals came to France, they were looking for what Modernity has always claimed to provide: liberty and equality for everybody. The notion of a democratic morality isn't more than a Sisyphus myth, something that never really worked: from the massive architectural projects to the everyday life of immigrants.

Modernity's failure embodies, in many ways, what the Western world's hegemony uses as dogma—what Jean-Jacques Rousseau used to name the "Democratic morality"—to justify that otherness lies in the space geographically, culturally, and politically outside civilization.

When Algerian transsexuals came to Paris in order to claim their right to exist as Human Beings they were rejected by French society, both by left and right wing parties, and treated as a problem that had to do with otherness in France's heterosexual bipolar society. I remember the reaction of some press media, even from the left, when I tried to find support for 500 transsexual people from Algeria exiled in France and living clandestinely in Paris. At the time I was asking many newspapers to write an article about this issue, but nobody wanted to speak about it, they said who cares about Algerian transsexuals and who cares about transsexuals actually. Even in the global society of Paris, they were rejected by French society, from gay culture to the social leftist milieu. At the time, they could be, for instance, forced by the police to go back to Algeria, which was like a death sentence to them. I went to ask *Liberation*—a famous French left-wing newspaper— to write an article about this. The chief editor said: "Who cares about foreigner transsexuals? You should write something about the riots in the suburbs".

Then I understood why they would remain illegal in France, and why some transsexuals that had been forced to leave by the Police committed suicide at the airport.

But their reaction to this discrimination was interesting because it remained outside of French society. They always stayed connected to their own culture. Even if they were living in Paris, they actually always kept the traditional Algerian way of living. And at that point, they represented an otherness within the global culture that cities like Paris belong to.

In my pictures of them, the most interesting thing is definitely the way they dress, dance, and, eat. Despite a life of exile, they maintain a strong relationship with their home culture. In all the pictures I have taken of them, what is truly interesting is that they are all men dressing and living as women and existing in a space that is between the traditional and modern; an "in-betweenness" that is neither the woman's sexual identity nor the man's one. This hybrid space makes me think of the origins of hybridization between tradition and modernity.

Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, described the Orient as “an area from Rabat to Tokyo.” During centuries, this used to be the area of the Silk Road market: the stage for commercial and cultural exchanges between Occident and Orient in an endless movement of different kinds of knowledge. These territories of the mind teach us how transgender issues have to do with identity and not sexuality.

In India and Pakistan, the history of embodiment or incarnation is a divine attribute. The belief in incarnation, in India, has fortunately never been erased by the Christian presence of the former European colonial empire. Hijras have always existed as a part of both Indian and Pakistani societies, because, contrary to the Occidental beliefs that there are only two sexes, man and woman, Indus and Muslims believe in the third sex. The Hijras community in India changes all our perceptions about genders issues in general.

Hijras are the transgender, transsexual, and transvestite Indians and Pakistani people that live in communities called *ashrams* and that have been a very important part of society since the twelfth century. Their main activities are begging, praying, and dedicating themselves to their god.

Hijras are originally Sufi, another form of religion that comes directly from Islam, but that is closer to Buddhism. However there are also Christian and Hindus among Hijras, and they are very respectful of Judaism. It is believed that the current life of a Hijra could just as easily have taken place in another body, another place, and another religion.

But where do they come from?

There is a legend about a Sufi saint that lived during the seventh century in the area of Madras. A man came to him begging for the ability to become pregnant and give life. Several months later, the man became pregnant, but died because he never asked the saint for a female sex.

Hijras live in a community under the authority, which is more like a friendship, of their guru. There are seven groups of Hijras and they meet each year to organize a pilgrimage to the site of the miracle, where they spend three weeks praying in the mausoleum.

In some of the pictures and movies I have started to make of them you can see that the Hijras activities are basically, begging (the *Badhai*) and praying. The relation they have with their guru is one of the most important things in their *raison d'être* or reason for being Hijras.

What brings us again to the idea of otherness here is the way they exist “in between” tradition and Modernity, or in a space that binds these different issues. The space that exists between these different issues is also the link between them.

In the films I have recently shot in Mumbai, you can see how much the Hijras society today is also between our contemporary “modern” society and the traditional world of the past: e.g their guru, their begging in the streets, and their respect for their rules (for example, to never change the body since God will after death).

When I interviewed guru Kansha, a 91-year old Hijra, I asked him if he would transform his body into a woman’s, at least in some part. And he answered: “If you are able to change me now, go ahead!”

Today the Hijras society is changing. While they still maintain a strong bond with their guru, who’s role is still very important, they are beginning to leave the *ashram* and move outside of this traditional sphere.

All these dialogues from one side to the other of sexual identities, lead us to one question that could stand as a conclusion to my research and to my interest in transexuality: both from man to woman and woman to man. The female to male transsexual process is developing now in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and India. In the past five years I have met many women who have started the transformation to become men. This issue will be the continuation of my project.

I think the conclusion here is that if we want to understand sexual identity, beyond the first step, we have to understand how this hybridization works in our social, cultural political system, and how it brings a real otherness that is actually an echo of something more than an isolated entity.

Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, has taught us how much sexuality is political. The way Algerian transsexuals have always been treated in France illustrates this point perfectly. But the real issue of sexual identity that the existence of all hybrid forms of sexual identity tackles, from the bisexual Greek antiquity to the Hijras, is the space that describes this sexual otherness: a space in which everything is possible, maybe even poetry.

What is this space? This space is otherness, but beyond, what is this space in between? Here, I would love to evoke what Gilles Deleuze described as the fold (*Le pli*): an “interspace” that both separates and binds the two opposite sides.

The fold described by the Hijras is, I may argue, the same “in-betweenness” described all around the world by other sexual identities, and is not a third sex as many ethnologists claim today, but is actually what binds and separates the male and female sexual identities: an otherness that we can apply politically to an ethics that the world is still missing. ●