

# Écriture au Trans-féminine

## Trish Salah's *Wanting in Arabic*

Where “difference” is founded upon a model of the “same,” we are in the realm of Law, serving only what has been previously established.

This the death of *philosophy* and of *poetry*. But how not to already “suppose” the very thing we question?

—Erin Mouré

The question is how I can here try to rewrite this body which is less truth than occasion. . . . The fantasy is specific, singular.

—Trish Salah

Trish Salah's first collection of poetry, *Wanting in Arabic* (2002), offers a new twist on the notion of writing (in) the feminine. A male-to-female (MTF) transsexual, Salah seeks ways to think through her body and embrace her feminine subjectivity. Salah's desire to “rewrite this body which is less truth than occasion” resembles Sandy Stone's perception of the “*intertextual* possibilities of the transsexual body” (297):

In the case of the transsexual, the varieties of performative gender, seen against a culturally intelligible gendered body *which is itself a medically constituted textual violence*, generate new and unpredictable dissonances which implicate entire spectra of desire. In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries. (296; italics in original)

In her “Posttranssexual Manifesto,” Stone urges more transsexuals to forego the clinical and social imperatives to pass and become legible *as* transsexual, to make visible their formerly “erased histor[ies]” (295). Like Stone, Salah refuses to pass and actively seeks to be read.<sup>1</sup> I am engaged by *Wanting in Arabic* for the variety of its performances and the challenges it poses to gender theory.

The volume is divided into four sections: the eponymous “Wanting in Arabic,” “Language Becoming a Girl,” “Hysteria of Origins,” and “Enduring this Future.” My reading traces a continuum between French feminist *écriture féminine*, québécoise/Canadian *écriture au féminin*, and Salah’s oeuvre. If *écriture féminine* returns to the woman’s body to reconsider sexual difference, recuperate suppressed voices, and construct feminine subjectivity, then what I call an *écriture au trans-féminine* seeks to achieve similar recognition of the trans-woman’s voice and body.

*Wanting in Arabic* shares many traits with *écriture au féminin* as it has evolved in both québécoise and anglo-Canadian works: a feminist approach to writing that emphasizes gender in all aspects of being and textuality; a fusion of creative and theoretical modes, employing ludic wordplay and intertextuality to contest existing paradigms; the concept of the subject-in-process or reinvention of self through writing/reading; and the desire to achieve communal, collective political consciousness through writing. Salah acknowledges her affiliation with *écriture (au) féminin(e)* through deliberate re-citation of numerous precursors, including Erin Mouré’s *Furious*, Hélène Cixous’s *The Book of Promethea*, and Nicole Brossard’s *Mauve Desert*. At stake in the notion of *écriture au trans-féminine* is precisely the question of agency: the trans-woman’s claim to participate in liberatory gendered discourse *as a woman*.<sup>2</sup>

Politically and theoretically, feminist and queer scholars often seem to idealize hybridity and transgender as though they were automatically transgressive and radical. But as Jay Prosser points out in *Second Skins*, queer and transgender discourses tend to co-opt transsexual narratives and elide the physical experience, the psychic and ontological investments, of transsexuality:

there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, *to be*. What gets dropped from transgender in its queer deployment to signify subversive gender performativity is the value of the matter that most often concerns the transsexual: the *narrative* of becoming a biological man or a biological woman . . . in brief and simple the materiality of the sexed body. (32; italics in original)

Paradoxically, Salah’s poetry seems to be both performative and constative. It proclaims her to be both transsexual and woman, recognizing simultaneously the social construction of gender and the impulse to ground notions of womanhood in experience of the female body. Malcolm Woodland asserts “*Wanting in Arabic* is . . . a text that wants to be ‘read’ *as* transsexual, rather than to ‘pass’ as an *écriture féminine* [sic]” (40). I contend this is a false dichotomy:

for trans-women to be accepted as women, they must be read as *both* transsexual *and* women, rather than one or the other. The current article offers close analysis of selected poems from the first three sections of *Wanting in Arabic*, focusing particularly on tropes of liminality, pronominal wordplay, and the practice of an *écriture au trans-féminine*. Engaging with debates critical to sexual (in)difference, feminist and transgender revisions of psychoanalysis, and myths of origin, Salah's exuberant and irreverent writing enters into dialogue with other lesbian feminist practitioners of *écriture au féminin*.

The opening poem "Phoenicia ≠ Lebanon" introduces several leitmotifs at play throughout the collection. The speaker recalls a father born in Lebanon, "transformed / in the middle passage" and dead of stroke at thirty-seven, and a mother "*Irish Catholic, with her own 'troubles'*" (21-22, 26; italics in original). These genealogical clues establish a diasporic context of past religious, national, and colonial struggles that bleed into the present. The speaker invokes the patriarchal figure of Odysseus as counterpoint to her father; this classical allusion anticipates other canonical figures appearing later in the collection, as Salah reinvents myths of origin. As imaginary birthplace, Phoenicia holds particular import for a language poet, since the Phoenicians invented a phonetic alphabet later disseminated to other civilizations through trade.<sup>3</sup> The opening page also reveals the speaker's transition from male to female: "i am my father's *daughter* / May he rest in— / who, as a small *boy*, intimidated at the thought of the priesthood— / of following in my father's footsteps . . ." (14-15, 17-18; emphasis added). It is surely significant that Salah "outs" herself on the first page of the book. The historical past, the geographical boundaries marking former empires, nations and peoples, are non-identical with the present; Lebanon is no longer Phoenicia, just as the speaker is no longer the small boy s/he once was. But layers of past transformations and their (emotional) traces continue to resonate in the present. The speaker speculates that while the father did not live to see his son "caught dead in a crossfire in Beirut or Belfast," that son "died" in another fashion: "*and after my surgery comes / that boy's dead by any other name*" (64, 67-68; italics in original). Salah's poetry trades "*in the in between*"—the rise of "daddy's little girl" from the (un)dead boy, the spectres of the past in the present—since "*what the dead do best is rise / Phoenix-like, again*" (95, 61, 69-70; italics in original). The literal death of the father becomes intertwined with Salah's repudiation of the law of the father, though haunted by his lost homeland and language.<sup>4</sup> As Woodland observes in his reading of memory and refrain in the volume's ghazals,

To be *Wanting in Arabic* is, for Salah, to lack a particular kind of relationship to a cultural patrimony; it is to lack the patriarchal language, and to lack the sexed patriarchal body that grants the subject a particular identity in relation to that cultural patrimony. Or, rather, it is to have refused that identity and that patrimony, and to have chosen something else—not simply a cultural and sexed ‘opposite’ but an in-between space that challenges such binary thinking. (49)

My discussion focuses on the balancing act involved in identifying as both transsexual and woman, and the textual strategies Salah adopts to devise an *écriture au trans-féminine*.

The figurative death undergone by the subject in the process of sex-reassignment surgery is interrogated in “Reading *The Book of Suicides*” (21-24). A poem in six parts, the first begins with the lines “Sometimes death begs permission to approach / Sometimes we are confused, death and I” (I, 1-2). This reminds readers of the trauma and health risks involved in surgery. In contrast, the second section insists, “A change of sex is not a suicide note / Or, it goes across death, to a particular word” (II, 1-2)—an assertion that picks up a key meaning of the prefix “trans.” The confusion may not be the speaker’s (the assumption implicit in a clinical label like “gender disorder”), but the observer’s, who mistakes sex reassignment for suicide rather than (re)birth. Reflecting on desire and language, the sequence revisits a variety of motifs with deep resonances in poetic tradition, including moon, sun, earth, rose, snow, the veil, the fall, and mourning. Salah juxtaposes symbols conventionally linked with masculinity (the sun) and femininity (the moon, earth), symbols linked with death (snow, night) and regeneration (dawn, light, fire), to convey the speaker’s liminal position. “Reading *The Book of Suicides*” is as much about the promise of transformation and hope for the future as it is about mourning for what is lost:

A rose is kept for your garden.  
 And wilder growths allow you to imagine  
 Vast expanse beyond slant pale of headstones  
 Neither the world nor Ghalib<sup>5</sup> dead, imagine—  
 Your promise fulfilled, snow rising to heaven.  
 Roses bloom inward, a miniscule infinity  
 Bubbles of earth aflame, efflorescent with air. (IV, 4-10)

Sometimes Salah inverts the expected connotations of an image, as when “snow rising to heaven” signals resurrection rather than death. Similarly, the motif of falling that recurs throughout the collection carries a private

meaning for Salah: “I used to think dysphoria meant falling, / to fall out of, or even, within” (“Surgical Diary Nov. 3, 2000” 1-2). The term dysphoria actually comes from the Greek roots “dys” (bad, abnormal) and “pherein” (to bear), so in this context, despite its ominous associations with (original) sin and immorality, “falling” is somehow more bearable than the alternatives: “Veiled, pressed to the ground, and proud. / I fell long hours to endure this *peace*” (“Reading” I, 9-10; italics in original). Imagery that might suggest the abject—obscurity beneath the veil, prostration, a fallen condition—is revalorized to express pride and peace.

In “Reading *The Book of Suicides*,” as elsewhere in the collection, pronominal use is slippery and undecidable. For example, when the speaker asks “With what body are you leaving?” (II, 4) it remains unclear whether the question is addressed to a lover or friend who is abandoning the speaker, or whether this constitutes an apostrophe to the transitioning self—or both. The decision to transition often has profound effects on loved ones. Friendships, intimate relationships, even kinship relations will inevitably alter and may even end, after surgery:

Suppose, when next we meet you do not know  
This face or flesh, suppose my name is changed.

Reincarnated, skipping over death, the lovers.  
I know you distrust the tale already. (II, 7-10)

If the formerly male subject “dies,” he is “reincarnated” as the new woman (echoing the phoenix imagery of “Phoenicia ≠ Lebanon”). Alternatively, it is love itself that will be reincarnated, surviving the death of one embodiment and birth of another. For of course there is no corpse here: “Where who is dead is a different dead / Or word for who is a rose, has arisen” (III, 1-2). Who, or what, has died? Is the post-operative body the “same” body? Where, exactly, does gender identity reside, in relation to body and mind? Reformulating Freud’s famous dictum that biology is destiny, Judith Shapiro suggests “For transsexuals, gender is destiny and anatomy is achieved” (272). One of the most striking things about *Wanting in Arabic* is the relative absence of the male body from the story. Salah reveals little or nothing about her decision to transition; she does not represent the male body or her feelings towards it in any detail, avoiding the common motif of being trapped in the wrong body, with the concomitant expressions of hatred or disgust for that body.<sup>6</sup> The emotional affect is almost exclusively invested in the female body. Like other (lesbian) feminists practising *écriture au féminin*,

Salah celebrates the woman's body. Any difference lies in the material specificity of trans experience.

The final section of "Reading *The Book of Suicides*" sums up the vagaries of desire and identification for the "third sex":

A change of sex is not a suicide note  
 What is a crypt? She heard him with his word.

Veiled, crossed out, divide of his mouth still open  
 She made her up—a language—we can only imagine

For the future, divide of the world still open  
 Not man or woman then—angelic, childish, feral, undead

Language keeps its secrets, pink tongue roses, blooming  
 The intoxication of death or you, a body becoming its own

Name or sounding it out, slivers of cool wrists  
 Broken, inscribed as accident, an accent encrypting

A change of sex, the languish of your shadow.  
 Or the sounding bell of this word's breach:

What a sex is, is *forever* misled. (VI, 1-13; italics in original)

Woodland understands the "crypt" as figure for the former self; he argues "the reduction of the pre-operative self to mere object or empty sign is also marked by the way the first-person speaker relegates the former self here to a third-person status" (41). While it is true that the second and third person often appear to refer to the vanished masculine identity, Salah also uses the third-person "she" throughout the collection, and the antecedents of these pronouns are invariably uncertain. For instance, a line like "She made her up" alludes to the subject's self-invention in the third person, and possibly to the application of make-up—to constructions and performances of femininity. If there is dissociation from the former male self, because this poetry is written in the voice of an already transitioning (if not always fully transitioned) subject who identifies as woman/lesbian,<sup>7</sup> the third-person feminine marks a certain distance between the speaker and the emergent female self as well. But the shifting pronouns also mark that which is in excess of the frame—a constant dynamic transformation. At the same time, this poem declares twice "a change of sex is *not* a suicide note." Someone, some body, some consciousness and memory, continue across "death," from the past into the present. Surely it is significant that Salah phrases this as an unanswered question (what is a crypt?)—gender imperatives can never be fully comprehended. Apart from the obvious burial chamber, figuratively

a crypt can mean a hiding place, as implied by the pun on “encrypting.” Perhaps the masculine aspect of the self is not fully dead, but occluded, much as the feminine side had to be disguised formerly. Consequently, he is now “veiled, crossed out, divide of his mouth still open” while she is made up, in language among other things—here, a language “we can only imagine / For the future,” given the seemingly relentless binary gender “divide of the world.” Language keeps its secrets, codifies human communication and behaviour far beyond the will of any individual. But meanings change, codes can be broken—as suggested by “the sounding bell of this word’s breach.” Feminist theory and writing have been speculating for decades about the gendering of language and discourse, the extent to which change in language effects change in the (social) world. Salah poses fascinating new questions about what *écriture au féminin* means in the context of a transwoman’s body/text. As she puts it in “when there are three” from “Language Becoming a Girl,”

who is writing *in* the feminine on whose body  
 whose cheesy equation of *the feminine*  
 with desire  
 is giving, getting  
 off here  
 and *who* slips (34-39; italics in original)

The transsexual body apparently breaks the rules—but if gender is always impersonation and approximation, how is this particular embodiment any more “misled” than any other?

At the end of “Reading *The Book of Suicides*,” this “body becoming its own / Name or sounding it out” is characterized as “Not man or woman then—angelic, childish, feral, undead.” These competing alternatives imply the transsexual is either more or less than human—“a figure of mythology, monstrous or divine,” according to the caption accompanying the image of one transsexual’s naked body in Catherine Millot’s *Horsexe: Essay on Transsexuality* (48). Millot asserts that “Transsexuals want to belong to the sex of the angels”—an inference based in part on the statement of the FTM informant she calls Gabriel, who tells her that “transsexuals are neither men nor women, but something else” (126, 130). Salah’s line catalogues a history of attitudes towards transsexuality: whether infantilized, derided as subhuman animals,<sup>8</sup> or idealized as transgender warriors, transsexuals have frequently been relegated to the limits of personhood. The undead seems a particularly apt metaphor for the “intermediate nonzone” of transition (Prosser

3), not living yet not quite dead, a revenant. While tropes of liminality continue throughout the volume, those related to death and haunting recede somewhat; the final section “Enduring this Future” rather emphasizes the healing of the post-operative body, the caring, supportive circle of family and friends, and the speaker’s active engagement in grassroots protest (such as a demonstration against poverty in Toronto held on June 15th, 2000). Images of death and loss are counterbalanced by images of crossing and rebirth, and the re-mythologizing impulses that give the text its energy and vitality. At the heart of the collection lies a series of intensely sensual poems exploring sexual fantasies and celebrating the trans body and sexuality, a poetic response to existing psychoanalytical and medical discourses on transsexuality. Salah locates contemporary transsexual/transgender (TS/TG) realities at the very roots of Western culture.

Collectively, the poems in “Language Becoming a Girl” and “Hysteria of Origins” perform a similar function to Luce Irigaray’s project in *Speculum of the Other Woman*—a title that takes on whole new meanings for trans-women. Salah deconstructs foundational discourses and myths of origin central to Western civilization, with a twist. “Language Becoming a Girl” suggests both language becoming to (appropriate for) a girl, and language itself in process, becoming-feminine. The first poem in this section, “when there are three” (27-33), is characteristic of Salah’s *écriture au trans-féminine*. The title alludes to notions of the third sex or third gender, the indeterminate status of TS/TG people, picking up a cryptic remark from “Reading *The Book of Suicides*”: “The third sex is always dead to the first / Transcending, to the second, susceptible” (IV, 1-2). Alternatively, if the speaker envisions herself as double, both male *and* female, then the third refers to a (former) lover or partner, and the effects of the decision to transition on this “third party” and their relationship. The poem’s numbered sections count backwards, iii, ii, i, like a patient going under anaesthetic; the movement towards a singular “i” may also reflect progression towards a more unified sense of self, post-op—three becoming one.<sup>10</sup> (Salah uses the lower-case “i” for the personal pronoun in this poem, although the standard upper-case appears elsewhere in the collection.) In “iii,” the pronominal play chiefly revolves around doubling of the second person, marked by periodic repetition of “& you.” Second-person address thus oscillates between apostrophe to the speaker’s alter ego and to the lover—and by extension to readers, drawing us into the drama. The indeterminacy is heightened by the fact that Salah frequently opens a parenthesis without closing it:



if i called you “darling” you would know all words are laden  
 what’s next? you might ask, roses?  
 well, i’m in the grip of something you won’t like  
     & i might call you (& you  
                     as a prelude to stealing you away  
 the delusion i could call (that you must answer  
                                     must be symptomatic  
 of what? my rapture in proximity?  
                                     my lack of ego boundaries? (1-9)

There are eight opening parentheses but only six closing ones in this section; as the asides accumulate, readers must decide which syntactical units belong together, constructing complex layers of meaning. Interpretation of the poem depends in part on whether one reads “the grip of something you won’t like” as desire *for* the beloved, or desire to become *like* the beloved. Does the poem represent a political ally suddenly getting romantic, hir desire unreciprocated, or an existing sexual partnership in the grip of sudden change? The syntax creates multiple open-ended possibilities. Salah contemplates what transpires when abstract theorizing about transgender as revolutionary politics meets the material reality of sexual desire, combined with the yearning for a different sexed being:

                                    the other night, we three (i thought we were three  
   *the perfect revolutionary couple*  
 poised for           radical intervention, engaged art and hot sex  
 well, my mistake, and thank you (& you  
   for your protests  
 because i was caught up in my own narrative, careening towards your  
 thighs, your lips & yours,  
 white tusks shining  
                                     like knights on white chargers off to slay sexism,  
 you know, though progressive non-possessive, wet and wild,  
   truly liberatory  
 my dispute with penetration  
   could hardly be called chivalrous (or disinterested . . .  
   (10-25; italics in original)

Gender politics take on a whole new dimension when they get into bed beside you. People who consider themselves “progressive” may discover their own preferences, prejudices and internal barriers when faced with profound and ongoing physical, psychic, and ontological changes in their partner. As Prosser puts it, “In transsexuality sex *returns*, the queer repressed, to unsettle its theory of gender performativity” (27; italics in original). In a few compressed lines, Salah wittily sends up a whole history of chivalric romance and

the complicated courtship dances of men and women; I particularly enjoy the collision between the shining white tusks (of the male chauvinist boar?) and the idealistic knight hoping to slay sexism. Casting “seduction as sedition” (31), Salah points to the treacherous nature of desire, its polymorphous threats to the status quo—of the relationship, the gender system, the nation, and for the transsexual subject himself, the supposed integrity of the sexed body. Whether such changes are condemned as betrayal or welcomed as subversion depends entirely on one’s point of view. In this context of shifting motives and mixed messages, the question “who is writing *in* the feminine on whose body” calls for urgent reconsideration of the notion of *écriture au féminin*. If to write the body is to recreate the world, what happens when the body itself is reconstructed? (This is one of the few poems in the book that refers explicitly to the male organ, asking facetiously “anyway what’s / one more cock / or less” [27-29].) Inscribing the feminine on his body, the transsexual subject seeks to write the female body materially as well as symbolically. Sandy Stone’s conception of transsexuality as intertextuality is pertinent here, as she aims to “seize upon the textual violence inscribed in the transsexual body and turn it into a reconstructive force” (295). In this sense, surgery itself becomes a kind of performative re-writing of the body that may have wider implications for how gender is conceived. In contrast, sex-change operations are frequently viewed with horror as mutilation by the broader community: “we’ve had enough of mutilation from our enemies, thanks, / don’t really need more from our friends” (48-49). The transsexual moment throws into question notions of embodiment, experience, essentialism, feminist epistemology, the social construction of gender—and numerous vested interests are threatened by the answers that might result. This segment ends with the speaker “stuck . . . in this unfinished / poem” (67-69), the line-break between “unfinished” and “poem” inviting the reader to supply the word “body” as well.

In “ii” attention shifts to the third person singular, which unlike first and second person in English is always gender-inflected. This poses practical as well as philosophical difficulties for TS/TG individuals, routinely mis-recognized or compelled by law and social convention to tick only one box, either M or F. Here, pronominal play revolves around experimentation with gender-ambiguous constructions like “s/he”:

s/he’s wearing her hair the way nostalgia does  
mirrors, tucked behind ears  
under reversed baseball cap s/he boundlessly

collapses in to you, these touches,  
your in)difference  
more than s/he could hope for  
given the shape s/he left you *in* (76-82; italics in original)

The oblique stroke in “s/he” acts as visual cue for the surgical cuts required to transform male into female. Salah’s “in)difference” re-opens a complex set of feminist and queer debates surrounding sexual difference and what Luce Irigaray calls “sexual indifference” (*Speculum* 28). Deconstructing Freud’s essay on “Femininity,” Irigaray demonstrates how the supposed sexual difference between men and women is predicated on the logic of the “*same re-marking itself*,” “caught up in the dream of identity, equivalence, analogy, of homology, symmetry, comparison, imitation” (21, 27; italics in original).<sup>11</sup> Where both principles are conceived solely in relation to one of the terms, there can be no genuine difference. *Écriture féminine* consequently seeks to foreground women’s embodied experience and libidinal desires as a means of resisting phallogocentric institutions and signifying practices that render women mute and invisible. Salah’s textual strategies frequently bear the traces of such tactics. For instance, the lines “as *in* as it gets / (and out of / all her—enveloping frictions / touches of, the very *inside*)” (83-86; italics in original) are reminiscent of the sensuous touching lips from Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Salah’s writing, however, is explicitly grounded in the trans-woman’s body: the italicized repetition of “*in*” and ensuing play on outside/inside draws attention to the procedure that uses penile tissue to construct a vagina. Salah also revisits Daphne Marlatt’s conceit of history as “hystery,” “the excision of women” (88), with cutting humour:

never has the hystery of this body been so un/clearly  
a case of his story (that old saw)  
going madly after hers  
après hors  
  
this *in* seme(s) less  
*in* sides taken, turned  
out of, or,  
  
after (87-94; italics in original)

The provocative pun on the “old saw” humorously compounds the revulsion of the average citizen at the thought of physical castration with the symbolic castration of women. According to the symbolic economy of specula(riza)-tion, to have no penis is to have no value, no significance—as signalled by the pun on semes/seems less. Irigaray’s explanation of women’s castration as

having “no sex/organ that can be seen in a form capable of founding its reality. . . . *Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth*” (*Speculum* 48; italics in original) is echoed by Salah’s lines,

the new girl is no  
thing to me  
no girl now not like you no way no how not ever (119-21)

If women have been rendered redundant, “après hors” (after, outside, beyond, without a version), where does that leave transsexuals? These lines also suggest to me the potential political tensions between trans-women (the “new girl”) and so-called “women-born women,” epitomized by recent conflicts surrounding women-only spaces and organizations.<sup>12</sup> One accusation levelled against MTFs by some feminists and/or lesbians alleges transsexuals reinforce patriarchal hierarchy, reinscribe the conflation of biological sex with gender expression, and usurp women’s power from the inside, as it were (his story going madly after hers). Yet those who wish to exclude MTFs from women-only spaces also risk accusations of biological determinism when they imply that only women socialized as girls from birth have fully experienced gender oppression. In effect, Salah’s *écriture au trans-féminine* stakes a claim to greater diversity in the politics of sexual difference—all the while knowing that indifference (in the sense of mere tolerance) is often the best transsexuals can hope for, posing such threats to the social/symbolic order.

The expression “après hors” also incorporates an allusion to Millot’s essay on transsexuality, *Horsexe*. As her title suggests, Millot believes that transsexuals are “outsidesex,” that they incarnate the phallus:

[Gabriel] feels neither man nor woman because the phallus is neither male nor female. Inasmuch as he personifies the term relative to which both sexes must situate themselves, he is outsidsex. . . . Incarnation of the phallus inevitably carries with it the obliteration of sexual features, and an attempt to join the abstract being beyond sex, the angel-being of the pure spirits. (135)

This type of logic, just one brief sample of the existing medico-psychoanalytic discourses that have shaped transsexual lives, helps explain Salah’s insistence upon her physical body and active sexuality in her writing. Although elsewhere in the collection Salah appears to cite Millot approvingly—“Millot writes that we transsexuals make a demand upon the Real, for its adjustment. Just so” (“Surgical Diary Oct. 23, 2000”)—Salah actually goes far beyond Millot’s rather conservative Lacanian argument, a creative misprision.<sup>13</sup> Millot’s abstract identification of transsexuals with the phallus

evacuates their subject position, misreading the transsexual in the same old tired terms once more:

horsexe/whore sexed  
—hardly a fit subject for desire  
speaking the whole story of a sex (k)not spoken  
/hor plaisir/our pleasures were telling  
  
the (h)our of an other us . . . (156-60)

Salah's wordplay clears space to speak the story of transsexual desire, deemed unfit and unspoken in the conventional Oedipal triangulation: "the unconscious oedipus complex takes the form of a k/not' / a can/not" (123-24). The speaker is also made to feel "whore sexed" by hir interlocutor's unspoken but implicit words, "how / like a boy," which figuratively "unspeak" (deny, undo, unsex) the transsexual: "like a boy cannot be spoken . . . uncut my tits, my clit, / *my womanly body*" (131-32, 134-37; italics in original).<sup>14</sup> In contrast, erotic poems such as "in this reel July is humid" and "where skin breaks" materialize and celebrate the transsexual lesbian body. The deconstruction of a phallogocentric discourse is just as urgent, if rather different, for Salah as it is for other feminists and lesbians.

The third section of *Wanting in Arabic* engages with what Salah calls "Hysteria of Origins." Alluding both to the pathologization of transsexual subjects, still defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) category of gender dysphoria,<sup>15</sup> and to the MTF's desire for a womb, "Hysteria of Origins" consists of five poems meditating on mythic or legendary figures of ancient Greece: Pandora, Tiresias, Eurydice, Orpheus, and Sappho. All five feature transgressive desires in some form, or straddle the bounds of life and death. If the purpose of classical myths is to establish taboos and account for origins, by transposing them to a contemporary transgender context Salah re-imagines what such figures might be and mean for the twenty-first century. The story of Tiresias, for example, has obvious resonance for a transgender mythology because he reputedly lived for seven years as a woman.<sup>16</sup> A prophet famed for accurate predictions of the gods' will, Tiresias retains traces of the sacred function of the hermaphrodite in ancient religious rites. This narrative is double-edged, however, from feminist and MTF points of view, because Tiresias's transformation into a woman is involuntary and carries punitive undertones. In "Tiresias' *Confession* (. . . in the snow)," Salah's twentieth-century incarnation occupies an analyst's couch, wondering "*what lies under?*" (5):

my obsession is      benign  
 is *love is a gift is not*  
*a mortal sin, not a demand, not an obsession, not a destruction,*  
*Will not result in ruin, in*  
*Ruin . . .* (9-13; italics in original)

Demoted from oracle to sinner and then to patient, the gender-crosser is now interpreted according to psycho-medical discourses rather than sacred ones—though the fateful apprehension of disaster forms one point of intersection. For the modern Tiresias, the “chemical castration” of hormone therapy replaces the magical metamorphosis. But the figure continues to exert the powerful fascination of the individual who gains forbidden or otherwise inaccessible knowledge—the experience of living as both man and woman:

the things you learn about snakes, eh?  
 wanting, to be the beloved  
 wanting, to woo the beloved for the rival  
 to be the beloved of the rival  
 to fix the vectors of that triangle  
 forever, angling obliquely toward survival,  
 laterally against playing  
 judge, jury and executioner, for all my sex (23-30)

While queer and transgender theorists may dream of an apocalyptic narrative that forever *unfixes* the vectors of the Oedipal triangle, a transsexual may long for certainty, to end the ambiguity of ‘hir’ in favour of the stability of ‘her.’ For Tiresias, though, having crossed and re-crossed that gender divide, taking sides is hazardous, and the meaning of “all my sex” remains an open question, as the line immediately following indicates: “which sex? who wins?” (31).

If Tiresias symbolizes transition itself, or the doubleness of being both man and woman, then Pandora represents the newly born woman. “Pandora’s Machine” (47-48), the first poem in “Hysteria of Origins,” explores the clinical and social pressures on TS individuals to pass, both before and after surgery:

what sex was I?  
 don’t ask, don’t tell  
 give it here  
 keep it safe, a little keepsake  
 from the good old days (1-5)

In Greek mythology, the first mortal woman was designed at Zeus’s command as revenge against Prometheus and humans for the theft of fire. Literally meaning “all-gifted,” the name Pandora has become synonymous

with the gift that proves to be a curse. Salah's poem thus plays against a misogynist myth concerning the origins of women, the classical counterpart to the Christian account of Eve as prime instigator of original sin and source of all men's misfortunes. In Salah's poem, Pandora's notorious box becomes a metaphor for secrets and prohibition, a variation on the closet which should not be opened on pain of dire consequences:

sometimes veering a girl/ flung  
aground/ it's nails hanging on  
the force of the explosions  
the unbounded questioning  
(unhinged, you shout—*Make it shut*  
*up!*—slick razor daddy, i loved you so  
even with your tools and your big ideas)  
a then verging boy with such pretty hands  
uncertain stare and auburn curls  
scrambling for the key  
like for dear life, for the inevitable *afterward* (6-16; italics in original)

These lines can be interpreted in multiple directions: it is conceivable that both the suppression of the former self and his history, and the denial of the longing to become a woman, create "the force of explosions." Colloquially, to open a Pandora's box is to begin a process that inevitably entails problems and complications, to start something that becomes unstoppable, so in this context it can also refer to the sex change procedure itself. Later in the poem, the "dissolution box" also stands (in) for the "cut up boy body, cut into girl body" (39). Salah's reference to being "unhinged" puns on the hinges of the box but also madness—the deeply-ingrained tendency to pathologize (a) woman (b) lesbian (c) effeminate boy (d) transsexual. Here the speaker scrambles for the key for dear life; paradoxically, only *releasing* the demons brings any hope for a (potentially) happily-ever-afterward. The transsexual subject must also accept some degree of pathologization as the only route to achieve surgery: "*in order to go awry you must confide in strangers / desire strangers' desires*" ("when there are three" 167-68; italics in original). The "slick razor daddy" with his shiny tools and big ideas expresses ambivalence towards the powerful authority-figure of the doctor/surgeon who has ultimate control over the fate of the transsexual; this may also explain why in the penultimate stanza the speaker "won't come on *Hope* / won't come on *Perhaps* / but on a knife's flared edge" (46-48). For the MTF transsexual, then, Pandora stands as a figure of temptation, desire, and identification, but

also as a cautionary figure, a scapegoat—she who possesses the longed-for “gifts” and cannot resist opening the box, but may be made to suffer for it. In a sexist, homophobic, transphobic world, the “good old days” were never that good in the first place. The formerly-male subject relinquishes his patriarchal power and privilege to achieve her feminine gender and identity—and the threat of oppression or injustice that may entail. Indeed, a transsexual lesbian subject is triply vulnerable. The pressures to conform also originate from multiple sites:

you came with a manual  
 cribbed lines from Hall, Woolf, Stein  
 telling me *to decide*  
 telling me *not to say*  
 telling me *keep it closed*  
 and so, I apologize  
 but again—explosions— (19-25; italics in original)

The “manual” here refers equally to medico-psychiatric discourse (the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* [DSM]) and to potentially prescriptive foremothers of the lesbian canon against which the MTF might be measured and found wanting. These lines reflect the disjunction between the utopian celebration in queer theory of transgender as symbolic disruption of the oppressive two-gender system and the lived experience of transsexuals who are frequently excluded from women-only spaces, denied access to key services because institutions fail to recognize their existence,<sup>17</sup> or accused of usurping women’s powers after a former lifetime of male privilege. Janice Raymond’s infamous diatribe against transsexual women is only the most extreme expression of a set of fears and vested interests that often take much more mundane but insidious forms.

In the closing lines of her “Surgical Diary,” Trish Salah asks “If desire is always a ruse, why this time or shape? / Why this cut, here?” Elsewhere she offers a partial reply: because “*the body never does cease to matter*” (“where skin breaks” 59; italics in original). Like other Canadian exponents of *écriture au féminin*, Salah foregrounds the gendered body as site of contestation, the feminine subject in the process of be/coming through writing. Transsexuals who opt for sex-reassignment surgery have a deep-seated investment in the materiality of a specifically-gendered and sexed body. While Salah does assert the strategic importance of being read *as* transsexual, she also expresses her necessary identification with the re/made female body—her being as a woman. In theory, the prefix “trans” in my neologism *écriture au*



*trans-féminine* is redundant. In practice, TS/TG narratives often “produce not the revelation of the fictionality of gender categories but the sobering realization of their ongoing foundational power” (Prosser 11). Foregrounding the notion of transsexuality as intertextuality, Salah writes back to an impressive cross-section of the metanarratives that perpetuate sex/gender norms. *Wanting in Arabic* invites readers to (re)consider the potentially exclusionary assumptions that underpin feminist and queer politics.

#### NOTES

- 1 Judith Shapiro makes a thought-provoking point about this notion of passing, however: “Since the term ‘passing’ carries the connotation of being accepted for something one is not, it is important to consider the complexities that arise when this term is applied to what transsexuals are doing,” given that many transsexuals would view the “masquerade” as being the other way around. The pre-operative body is often felt to be the “wrong body,” at odds with the “core self,” so the subject struggles to perform the gender role assigned at birth on the basis of anatomical sex (255-56).
- 2 This does not mean that Salah’s stance should be taken as representative or typical of (MTF) transsexual subjects more generally. For an important critique of transsexual activism as currently framed in relation to queer and transgender politics, see the work of Viviane K. Namaste in *Sex Change, Social Change*. Namaste argues the emphasis on identity politics and human rights issues obscures the substantive, pragmatic issues facing transsexuals in daily life: “an uncritical engagement with identity actually pre-empts any kind of institutional analysis” (19).
- 3 My thanks to Julia Emberley for reminding me of this point.
- 4 According to the poem, Salah has never been to Lebanon, and she subsequently comments on her inability to speak the language in “Wanting in Arabic.” But “Araby” also has particular resonance for transsexuals, since Dr. Georges Burou’s well-known clinic for performing sex-reassignment surgery was situated in Casablanca, Morocco, at a time when such surgery could be hard to obtain in the West (see Shapiro 249-50). Marjorie Garber plays on such associations in her title “The Chic of Araby: Transvestism and the Erotics of Cultural Appropriation,” included in *Vested Interests*.
- 5 Pen name of the nineteenth-century master of the ghazal in Urdu. See Woodland for detailed interpretation of the collection’s ghazals.
- 6 For instance, Jan Morris writes of her post-operative condition, “I felt . . . deliciously *clean*. The protuberances I had grown increasingly to detest had been scoured from me. I was made, by my own lights, normal” (qtd. in Millot 69-70). More recent observations by trans theorists suggest transsexual narratives reproduce the rhetoric of being “trapped in the wrong body” in order to conform to the conservative expectations of the psycho-medical profession, to obtain surgery. In this context, Salah’s refusal of the “wrong body” trope is consistent with resistance to such regulatory discourses.
- 7 A possible exception occurs in poems about Tiresias and Orpheus in “Hysteria of Origins,” where the first person is used; however, it depends whether the reader interprets these as dramatic monologues adopting these personae, or as in the voice of a contemporary subject contemplating their stories.

- 8 “Feral” might also be read as a more liberatory descriptor—a being formerly domesticated but now escaped and running wild.
- 9 Salah adopts the constructions “s/he” and “hir” in this poem, to express the equivocal location of individuals in transition, or those who do not wish to be forced to choose between the dichotomous M or F. Compare Leslie Feinberg, who similarly uses the pronouns *hir* and *sie*, which she notes are pronounced like “here” and “see” respectively (*Trans Liberation 1*).
- 10 Or perhaps simply more isolated, as some friends, acquaintances and lovers fall away. The final section’s layout on the page reflects this: the text is sparser, the lineation more disjointed, and words or short phrases hang suspended in blank space.
- 11 Teresa de Lauretis reprises this material in the opening pages of *The Practice of Love*, adopting the spelling “(in)difference” to express the discursive double bind she seeks to resolve.
- 12 Two case studies that might demonstrate points of intersection and tension between feminist and TS/TG politics are the controversy surrounding the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival’s admission policies, and the *Nixon v. Vancouver Rape Relief* case. Both revolve around the ethical dilemmas raised when the concept of safe spaces for (sometimes vulnerable) women clashes with TS rights. It is impossible to do justice to these sensitive and complex issues in this article. For a brief overview, see Section III on “Inclusion & Exclusion” in Scott-Dixon.
- 13 First published in 1983, Millot’s essay is most useful when she stops regurgitating the existing literature—which betrays all the sexist biases and limitations of its mid-century origins—and actually speaks with trans individuals. Not surprisingly, this has the effect of unsettling almost every assumption she has drawn to that point, and the essay closes rather abruptly just as it is getting interesting.
- 14 This notion of “unspeaking” is reminiscent of critical concepts like “*déparler*” and “*délire*” (unreadable/ delirium) in France Théoret, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Nicole Brossard and others.
- 15 The declassification of transsexuality as mental disorder is rather more controversial for some transsexuals than it was for lesbian and gay activists, because of the continuing need for access to expensive sex-reassignment surgery. Ironically, the medicalization of transsexuality at least holds out the *possibility* of coverage under health insurance plans. For more on this issue, see Namaste, who rejects the campaign of TG activists like Leslie Feinberg and Riki Ann Wilchins to de-list gender identity disorder from the *DSM* (as inadvertent support for the privatization of health care) and offers as a counter-example the activism of Margaret O’Hartigan, who worked to get surgery covered by state insurance in Minnesota (*Sex Change, Social Change* 7-8).
- 16 Lacan and Millot both invoke Tiresias, a circumstance which may have prompted Salah’s take on this figure.
- 17 Namaste has written extensively on this topic; see especially Part III of *Invisible Lives*.

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