

DEFINING POSTMODERN MASCULINITIES: A SYMPTOMATIC APPROACH TO  
UNDERSTANDING FRENCH MASCULINITIES

BY

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how the postmodern climate of the late eighties to nineties affords masculinity a new space to confront social and gender hierarchies while questioning dominant narratives and moving them to the periphery. Throughout each chapter, I am examining the discourse of crisis as it appears in the texts of French authors Michel Houellebecq, Erik Rémès, Guillaume Dustan, and Maghrebi author Abdellah Taïa. Each chapter offers a unique perspective into how postmodernism intersects with the supposed “crisis of masculinity” while underlining how these authors propose new performances of masculinity that sublimate classical interpretations and representations.

In my first chapter, I highlight a breakdown in socio-cultural transmission and the weakening of the patriarchy by analyzing the representation of paternity in the texts of Michel Houellebecq and Erik Rémès. My analysis shows how the construction of masculinity in these texts is directly linked to the absence of a paternal figure. This absence in turn then questions the dominance and power of the patriarchy as it configures its authoritative power on the transmission of norms from father to son.

In the second chapter, I analyze how the HIV/AIDS narratives of Guillaume Dustan and Erik Rémès queer the reproductive model. Their novels predicate existence with seropositivity and therefore to exist in the novel, one must be HIV+. These authors work to shift the center of discourse away from heterosexual reproduction to a queer model that necessitates the seroconversion of other queer men. Their texts work in two contradicting fashions: on one hand seroconversion replaces reproduction because in their literary universe only queer HIV+ men can exist and therefore erases heteronormativity from the novel; however, this model is still a reproductive model, albeit queer, that is mimicking its heterosexual biological counterpart.

The third and final chapter examines both the textual and digitextual works of Abdellah Taïa departing from hexagonal masculinities and examining how Maghrebi masculinities negotiate the transforming backgrounds of postmodernism in a different socio-cultural setting than France. The literary analysis will demonstrate how Taïa's protagonists attempt to carve out a distinct queer masculinity in the face of a culture that denies queers any masculinity. The digitextual portion of this analysis shows how Taïa injects himself as an author and public intellectual into the public landscape of Moroccan culture attempting to give a voice to marginalized Moroccan sexualities.

The dissertation serves as an example of how one can explore a discourse of crisis of masculinity through the lens of postmodernism. Ultimately, the masculinities that are performed and brought to the fore of each novel anchor themselves on traditional notions but stand in opposition to heteronormative models.

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## Introduction

*“Viril mais pas macho, protecteur mais pas dominateur,  
fort mais pas violent, tendre mais pas mou,  
sensible mais pas efféminé, ferme mais pas autoritaire.  
C’est dans le ‘mais’ que réside tout le paradoxe  
de la condition masculine occidentale d’aujourd’hui.”*  
-Eléonore Clovis, *Radio France*

In the post-68 era, literary, sociological and cultural discourses have dealt extensively with what many sociology and gender scholars like Peter McAllister, Alain Corbin, and Jean-Jacques Courtine call a “crisis of masculinity,” pitting those who wish to protect a much more traditional masculine gender role against those who wish to abolish the distinction altogether.<sup>1</sup> The underlining commonality among each resurgence of this “crisis” of masculinity is largely due to continual social shifts in and definitions of gender norms. As factors continue to change the gender dynamics of a given culture, in particular France, the gender roles expand and contract to accommodate the shift.

It appears, therefore, that any shift in gender norms implies a “crisis of masculinity” according to these scholars.<sup>2</sup> Therefore in this dissertation, I will examine the historical construction of masculinity in late twentieth and early twenty-first century French literature, highlighting the concepts of a “crisis of masculinity” in the French social climate of the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately I am examining the discourse of crises as it appears in the works of my authors. I chose this timeframe because it coincides with a period when postmodernism is in full effect and has radiated through many social and and cultural domains i.e. literature. In order

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<sup>1</sup> This is a cultural-specific concept and does not mean that the crisis in masculinity is a global epidemic but unique to this study regarding French masculinities.

<sup>2</sup> For French scholarship on the crisis of masculinity, see bibliographic references for Francis Dupuis-Deri, Raewyn Connell, and Alain Corbin.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that contemporary queer scholarship tends to distinguish between masculinity and masculine sexualities denoting the former as a socially constructed gender and the latter as sexual preference that can be tied to a sexual identity. However for my project, I believe that masculinity is inherently sexualized and to draw a distinction between the two terms not to be necessary for a discussion surrounding the discourse of crises. Indeed, likely for scholars like Provencher, Schehr, and Pratt, the term is crucial to their analyses of queer sexualities.

to study masculinity during this time period and the literature that comes out of it, I have divided the project into three chapters that each shed light on an evolving literary representation of masculinity. These chapters will come to define what postmodern masculinities and masculine sexualities are through an examination of the themes of paternity, disease, and technology. What ties the chapters of this project together is the overarching social narrative of postmodernism. Elusive and resistant to conformity, postmodernism is often defined simply by its opposition to modernism. It is an era “hostile to metanarratives, a climate that resists the urge to totalize” (Lunenfeld xiv), whose literature avoids tidy endings and categorization while subverting classical narrative structures. Postmodern literature is a conscious text, aware of its status and of its rebellious narrative.<sup>4</sup>

The postmodern texts examined here serve as examples of how their authors attempt to renegotiate the contract of their masculinity (or masculinities). If one is to agree that these texts display an abandonment of traditional literary representations of masculinity, then this abandonment leaves an empty space in which French authors can produce new constructions of masculinity. The timeframe is characterized by swift social and technological advances that produce an exponential amount of disturbances within social norms and hierarchies. Lawrence Schehr remarks that authors and readers of postmodernity are spectators and participants in a massive cultural shift: “For the first time in ages, we are witnessing a changing hegemony [...] given [the] changing discourses and mores” (*French Postmodern* 2). My dissertation provides a discussion of how this “changing hegemony” (and possible related epistemic shift) is reflected in

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<sup>4</sup> I do not claim that postmodern literature is the only literary “movement” conscious of its own literariness. Rather I want to highlight this trait postmodernist literature displays. See Patricia Waugh’s *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1998), where she analyzes the metafictional traits of postmodernist literature but also suggests that all literature is metafictional. See also Linda Hutcheon’s *Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, and Fiction* (1988).

French literature and what that literature is saying about masculinity and masculinized sexualities.

But where does this crisis surrounding masculinity and masculine sexualities stem from? It appears that popular culture is already catching on to some sort of shift in traditional roles for men. Hanna Rosin of *The Atlantic* published an essay entitled “The End of Men” in July of 2010, where she writes that “Man has been the dominant sex since, well, the dawn of mankind. But for the first time in human history, this is changing—and with shocking speed.” Rosin’s comment reflects two important notions that sit at the core of my analysis; first, there is a shift in the dominance of the male sex that in turn causes pandemonium and alarm, i.e.: a crisis, within the gender hierarchies. Secondly, the fact that this change is said to be occurring at “shocking speed” echoes some of the traits of postmodernity—it is fast and indifferent. As more domains of life are mediated by digital technology and facilitated by its speed, change is rapidly occurring.<sup>5</sup> Rosin links the shift of dominance in patriarchal societies to the economic revolution western societies underwent during postwar industrial booms. As more women entered the labor force, their social engagement increased. Moving to the city, attending college, applying for professional positions all contributed to the social shift we are currently witnessing.<sup>6</sup> Rosin goes so far as to ask the question, “What if modern, postindustrial society is simply better suited to women?” furthering her perception of a shift reality.

This article provides a good starting point for understanding a “crisis of masculinity” because Rosin’s article was rapidly republished and cited in national French newspapers as

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<sup>5</sup> Technology, speed, and digital media will all be discussed in the third chapter of this project. Technology is not a hallmark trait of postmodernity, but instead it is the rate of its consumption and the integration of its use that coincide with most postmodern shifts, whether philosophical, theoretical, literary, artistic, etc. See theory regarding digital media in chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon is unique to the western bourgeois as class played (and still does) into how women (and now minorities) could access these new domains.

pivotal support for arguments about why French masculinity was in crisis. *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* all took part in propagating this concept of a “crisis of masculinity.” Each article emphasized how the social, economic, and cultural dominance of man was starting to lose its footing as men lost the majority in the global workforce. The American magazine *Psychology Today* published an article the same year as Rosin’s essay asking: “What will happen to men?” providing another example of the growing consciousness of the rapid erasure of traditional Western masculine roles. The author writes: “In a post-modern world lacking clear-cut borders and distinctions, it has been difficult to know what it means to be a man and even harder to feel good about being one” (Williams). William’s quote brings up some interesting concepts that will be discussed later. Masculinity is shifting during a time when the shift has no definitive outcome as postmodernism cannot be defined and does not define others. Furthermore, any attempt at defining what “it means to be a man” is likely to be fruitless, as being a man, according to Williams, is not that great anymore for those living in a postmodern society.

France is no stranger to publications of this sort asking the same questions. In 2013, France’s second largest newspaper, *Le Figaro*, published an article entitled “Où sont passés les hommes?” Author Sophie Roquelle repeats Rosin’s previous comment about women taking over the work force: “Les millions d'emplois masculins détruits d'un côté ont été compensés par la création de millions d'emplois féminins de l'autre.” French men are feeling less socially effective as their old “breadwinner” status is no longer guaranteed. As we will see in Chapter 3, even the recent debates on *le mariage pour tous* threaten masculinity as two gay men or men now can represent the French family destabilizing, for certain families, their normative status and



heteronormative gender roles. It appears that anything that destabilizes or possibly questions the validity and hegemonic status of masculinity is a catalyst for this crisis.

France's quasi obsession with masculinity took a step further with some radio documentaries on *France Culture*. In 2013 two *Radio France* programs on the current state of men were published. The first one, entitled "Homme sweet homme," takes a look at the current state of French masculinity or more accurately at the abandonment of masculine hegemony linked to the advancement of women:

Avec la libération féminine amorcée depuis les années 60, le vieux modèle s'effrite, brouillant les frontières traditionnelles de répartition des tâches et des rôles entre les sexes. Les femmes s'affirment et revendiquent leurs droits, leur liberté de choix d'un travail, d'un enfant, d'un homme.

(Clovis and Mariani)

The documentary describes French women as taking advantage of the social situation in France and capitalizing on the gender advancement of the post-68 society. Clovis and Mariani highlight the current paradox of contemporary male gender roles: "Viril mais pas macho, protecteur mais pas dominateur, fort mais pas violent, tendre mais pas mou, sensible mais pas efféminé, ferme mais pas autoritaire. C'est dans le 'mais' que réside tout le paradoxe de la condition masculine occidentale d'aujourd'hui." This commentary about masculinity hits the nail on the head when it comes to the social idealism surrounding men and their gender role. Let them be men, but not too manly. Clovis and Mariani's commentary demonstrates how French culture has flipped the switch and desires to dictate masculine comportment, one that combines the virility of traditional men with a pinch of "modern" feminine sensibility, *et voilà*, this is the twenty-first century man.

While that is one side of the argument, the documentary balances the equation and looks at the male reaction too, asking “Et les hommes, qu’en pensent-ils? Du bien, pour les post-soixante-huitards ayant goûté aux joies des libertés partagées? Du mal, pour les plus anciens attachés à une structure patriarcale rigide?” There lies the quandary of French gender discussion, largely because the media, social theorists, critics, and academics alike all position masculinity studies from a negative viewpoint, where masculinity is in crisis and its social norms have lost something, arguably for the better or for the worst for certain generational groups. Critics tend to talk about a “crisis” or an “abandonment” of masculinity, therefore positioning the social advances of women in a positive light which positions the shifts in masculinity consequentially as negative. I propose to explore the discourse of these crises as well as the possible masculinities that are produced at this time rather than follow suit with much of what gender critics are suggesting is a crisis of French masculinity, particularly regarding the French literary performance of masculinity.

In other words, I will not try to justify why men are no longer being “men,” nor will I seek to find the cause of shifts in gender norms from a socio-cultural perspective. Rather, my goal is to highlight how this perceived crisis has been reflected in contemporary French literature and produces new possibilities for protagonists to enact possible masculinities that do not necessarily fit traditional French literary and cultural models. My project will therefore examine how postmodernism allows us to explore these discourses of crisis through three models of paternity, disease, and digital media and understand how masculinity evolves in literary texts, possibly reflecting social shifts as well.

In the same year, the *Radio France* documentaries about masculinity included another broadcast entitled “*Distinguer masculinité et virilité*” with philosopher Thierry Hoquet. The

documentary goes on to feature an essay by the same author.<sup>7</sup> The book showcases how France is treating discussions about the evolution of masculinity. While the text focuses on what distinguishes masculinity, virility, and sexuality, it still contributes to the overarching discussion about masculinity in a postmodern era where definitions lose their absolute value. In his book *La virilité: A quoi rêvent les hommes*, Hoquet attempts to distinguish virility from masculinity and what he calls “la crise contemporaine de la masculinité.” He asks a lot of the same questions posed in my first chapter regarding the nature and meaning of virility. However, Hoquet’s book remains largely socio-philosophical whereas my project shifts the question to literary representations of virility and masculinity in the works of Michel Houellebecq and Erik Rémès, among others. Hoquet’s text is another example of the French interest in studying masculinity and masculine sexuality from multiple perspectives and disciplines. What makes my project unique is the literary emphasis it places on the discussion surrounding masculinity as I further examine what French literature tells us about French masculinities so as to deduce how these masculinities operate or rather, are performed within the postmodern context.

Because I tie this study of French literary masculinities with postmodernism, it is prudent to justify postmodernism as a thematic approach in each chapter. Postmodernism denotes a period in flux in the late twentieth century. It is predominantly defined as the rejection of simple codification and idealism, a time when value is placed on self-consciousness and an awareness of a concept’s limits. This period evades concrete classifications because the characteristics of postmodern literature dismantle or deconstruct the rules of modern narration and classical protagonist portrayal. Each of my chapters represents a questioning of an archetypal model, whether it be the patriarchy and heteronormativity in the first chapter, a queered biological reproduction via seroconversion in the second, or the convergence of these topics on a new

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<sup>7</sup> Thierry Hoquet, *La virilité: A quoi rêvent les hommes*. Paris: Larousse 2009.

literary platform—the Internet, in the final chapter. I first examine the decline in paternal and filial relations and the abandonment of the paternal role that leads to the overall breakdown in the French family. The study then moves to the breakdown of the male body itself through the infection of the AIDS virus. I conclude with the breakdown of traditional literary models and the shift to digital media as they become a platform to explore masculinities.

In my first chapter, I examine texts by Michel Houellebecq and Erik Rémès to juxtapose the heterosexual and queer variations of paternity, in an attempt to underline its effects on the construction of the main protagonists' masculinity. There is not a lot of critical research regarding how French literature constructs paternal-filial relations and how these relations then affect the construction of masculinity in later generations. While some critical work has been done on the concept of fatherhood in French literature and the traditional literary model of the “good father,” who has been rehashed from the late-eighteenth century through mid-twentieth century by both novelists and their critics (Rousseau, Balzac, Zola, Proust, etc...), there have not been any attempts to discuss how fatherhood has shaped gender performativity as I do in this chapter.

Ann-Marie Sohn discusses paternal figures in her book *Sois un homme: La construction de la masculinité au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, investigating the masculine *habitus* and what social decorum dictated as dominant and normative behavior at the time. Sohn brings to light the classical models of paternity to be found in Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*, Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart*, or Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. These classical models can profitably be contrasted with the paternal figures in the novels of this chapter. Writers have not purposefully abandoned the concept of the “good father,” it just so happens that the “good father” is no longer represented in “postmodern” literature. His presence is in decline and his absence is noted.

Therefore in chapter one, I examine first what postmodern literature means and how the texts of Houellebecq and Rémès, fit the aforementioned construct. I then discuss the French family unit, in particular the role of the father and why his absence signals a major breakdown in socio-cultural transmission. Houellebecq's novel *Les Particules élémentaires* serves as the literary anchor of the chapter as the main protagonists Michel and Bruno are examples of a new paternity and a new masculinity in the novel. Paternity establishes the necessary link from generation to generation and solidifies the patriarchal rule; however, the breakdown of the patriarchal establishment demonstrates to what extent the battle of safeguarding traditional notions of masculinity has been lost. The protagonist Bruno remarks: "Je n'ai rien à transmettre à mon fils." He aptly summarizes the entire discourse of the postmodern man in the Houellebecqian universe. His quote represents contemporary French literature's depiction of the postmodern heterosexual male who no longer upholds nor believes in the integrity of the family unit. Furthermore I show how the father-son relationships affect the protagonists' sexuality and how they enact it vis-à-vis women and other men in the novel.

The remainder of the first chapter takes the same thematic approach but examines how the queer narrative stems from a breakdown in paternal-filial dialogue in the novels of Erik Rémès. At this point, the discussion about French masculinities takes another turn because of the author's queer subject matter. Houellebecq and Rémès share ways in which their protagonists interact with paternal figures, unifying the chapter's thematic approach. Rémès' masculinity and sexuality are by and large the product of a sex act that constantly brings him back to the initiatory sex scene with his stepfather. Therefore, Rémès' masculine sexuality is a constant search for his father's phallus that determines the performance of his masculinity.<sup>8</sup> His protagonist echoes the same socio-cultural breakdown expressed by Bruno when the former says

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<sup>8</sup> Or even the Father's Phallus from a psychoanalytic perspective.

that “sexe rompt la pile. Sexe brise la chaîne,” in *Je bande donc je suis*. His sex acts with numerous male partners break down the paternal-filial barrier as they prioritize existence (“Je bande donc je suis”) over patriarchal dominance.

It is worth noting, however, that in contemporary French literature, there is also a preoccupation with roots and origins as well as heritage and filiation. Contemporary works and scholarship demonstrate how this preoccupation stabilizes and unites a nation, builds a heritage. In turn, this obsession serves as the biggest argument against same-sex marriage as filiation and genealogy are not as clear-cut.<sup>9</sup> I mention this to show how this time frame is not simply an apocalyptic era for fatherhood, but that the texts of this postmodern study highlight the erasure of familial units. Furthermore, other critical perspectives aside from queer sexualities show us how paternity and more so genealogy are no longer paradigms that dictate cohesive family ties (Noudelmann 8). As Marie-Claire Barnet states, “À l’ère des clonages, des manipulations génétiques, en tous genres, la famille aurait encore un bel avenir devant elle, mais autrement, à réinventer et non pas tout trace par le sillon des traditions” (14) therefore ancestry is changing and that change is reflected in postmodern texts, in part, in a erasure of paternal roles.

The second chapter is centered on French AIDS literature, and explores the queer narrative and the breakdown in the patriarchy’s power from a biological and epidemiological perspective to see what this literature can bring to a study of French masculinity. Critics have mostly discussed the merits of this literary genre and have focused solely on the effects of the disease. Rather than spending time analyzing the representation of the diagnosis, I start my analysis from within the diagnosis itself and look at novels of both Dustan and Rémès in which HIV/AIDS is the norm and seropositivity an existential condition

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<sup>9</sup> See Dominique Viart “Filiations littéraires” and Laurent Demanze “Récits de filiations” both from *Encres orphelines* 2008.

As stated earlier, if postmodernity is characterized by its deconstructive principles, then HIV/AIDS is the disease of postmodernity *par excellence*. By examining the texts of the aforementioned authors, who are both queer HIV+, I suggest that the breakdown of the heteronormative family unit continues when these authors queer the reproductive model itself via the concept of disease transmission. I introduce a new term—*virality*—as the queer, middle ground between the ideal virility of classical masculinity and the socially-rejected viral seropositive male, opposite ends of the social spectrum of acceptable “masculinities.” Then, through a textual analysis of the protagonists’ actions, I show how the virus replaces the biological reproductive model where the infectious seed of the seropositive partner impregnates/converts others to populate a literary universe of HIV+ men.

This interpretative strategy frames the HIV/AIDS virus in a different setting: I focus on what the protagonists are doing with the virus rather than on how they simply survive with it and avoid impending death. In contrast to previous AIDS narratives in French, predominately those of Hervé Guibert, Rémès and Dustan use their serostatus to reach a goal—repopulating a literary world via disease transmission. The texts of Guibert, while quintessential to the study of French AIDS narratives, are representative of a form of passivity, the seropositivity of the protagonist leading to inevitable suffering and eventual death from complications related to the disease. Dustan and Rémès refuse this leitmotif of suffering and social condemnation that is implicated with seropositivity. They utilize the virus to code their queer masculinity and rewrite its definition such that HIV/AIDS becomes the constant in their novels and seropositivity the normative standard.

The analysis of Dustan and Rémès’ works is framed by the sociological theory of Paula Treichler and Cindy Patton regarding HIV/AIDS and what it means to live with AIDS. The

impact of the disease on Western society pushed back against gay activism, especially in France where issues of government rights vis-à-vis minority communities were a large reason why providing aid to fight the disease was lacking public support. Furthermore, by theorizing HIV/AIDS and its epidemiology, one can further understand how it is a postmodern disease, as it dismantles the structure and safety of human T-cells only to have them become reproductive agents for the virus itself. Moreover, the history of its epidemiology contextualizes the reaction French society had to the HIV/AIDS crisis and also gives insight into the world in which the authors were writing.

The two authors distinguish themselves from one another by the process through which they populate their seropositive world. Their texts directly question the power of the patriarchy and heteronormativity as they reappropriate the one remaining function of heterosexuality—procreation. Indeed by reappropriating the presumed biological necessity of procreation and queering it, they are redefining traditional concepts of virility and classical notions of masculinity. The novels written by Dustan are introspective, displaying a protagonist who questions his own existence in regard to his sexual practice. This is in sharp contrast to his contemporary Rémès, who bases the existence of Berlin Tintin, his main protagonist, on sex. Berlin Tintin *is* because he has sex, in particular unsafe sex with multiple men as he promotes the subculture of barebacking. Rémès' novels show how the exclusivity of HIV/AIDS is being erased by making the virus universal; the actions of Berlin Tintin are realizing nothing less than the ultimate goal of French universalism—equality for all. The French motto becomes *liberté, égalité, seropositivité* for these authors.

In the third and last chapter, I move from traditional forms of literature in order to highlight how discussions of contemporary masculinity and masculine sexuality are occurring in



a digital context. By juxtaposing Abdellah Taïa's literary construction of masculinity with the online discussion surrounding the author, in part constructed by him, I compare what an author can accomplish via each of these modes of discursive practice. The goal is to demonstrate how one can look to these digital platforms as a source of literature as well as a context for understanding the evolution of French masculinities. One of the fundamental components of this chapter is the discussion surrounding new media and digital media as creating new reading experiences for their user. I rely on digital media theory to demonstrate to what extent the user's experience of digital reading is a sensory experience that fully incorporates the reader and his or her response. Examining the reading habits of digital media serves to underline an important concept, that is, how we read.<sup>10</sup> Discussing reading practices allows us to see to what lengths users go to engage with digital media and the infinite texts and hyperlinks that take them on an endless journey through content. As further detailed in chapter three, the reader's experience "online" is not bound by the finiteness of a book's contents, rather it is boundless as the immediacy of extra-textual knowledge is satiated by a click rather than impeded by shifting to another book. The reader is no longer confined to the knowledge found in a book or to a library collection, and thus the reader's experience changes.

The first part of the third chapter is dedicated to the use of digital media in the French context, mainly during the *mariage pour tous* debate of 2013, as illustrated by a *Google Plus* ad for a new feature called Google Hangouts. It is a teleconferencing system that the technological giant advertised in France in conjunction with *Unis Pour l'Égalité*, an organization who aims at using digital media to help promote same-sex marriage. I use the ad to show how the French concepts of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité* are showcased via the videoconferencing system and

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<sup>10</sup> How we read, and subsequently, where we read, is discussed by Robert Darnton in his text "First Steps Towards a History of Reading" *Australian Journal of French Studies*. 23:1, 2014. This article helped build, in part, the framework of the third chapter.

how the ad highlights the very basic principle French citizens are said to hold in regards to their co-citizens—*fraternité*. I also analyze a popular YouTube clip by Mike Fédé that went viral on the Internet during the peak of the debate about same-sex marriage. I treat his video monologue as a form of poetic literature, showing how it echoes a larger social commentary about same-sex marriage in France. The message of this video clip overlaps with that of Google's, highlighting the privileging of brotherhood over difference.

The second half of the chapter analyzes both the print and digital works of Abdellah Taïa. I chose to study this author because he is representative of a specific ethnic and sexual minority in France. As a Moroccan “gay” author writing from France, Taïa has his protagonists negotiate the line between a queer and a Moroccan identity without sacrificing one for the other. His literary texts serve as a good end point for this thesis as it returns to the major themes of the previous two chapters (paternity and queer sexuality), but this time from a Francophone perspective that is both literary and later, digitextual. Taïa's literary corpus and personal online activism highlight the difference between the author's literary “ideal” and the reality of current French and Moroccan gender discourse.

What makes Taïa an author of interest for this project is the way in which he separates his literary practice from his online presence. His literature speaks to what is not being said, performing a circumlocution of what is really being discussed when he defines masculinity and sexuality without ever explicitly framing them from a queer perspective. Instead, he evades orienting his text to be read as overtly queer. His texts show how Moroccan Francophone literature develops and maintains the complex narrative of masculinity and queer sexuality. This kind of literature is therefore placed in stark contrast to the online persona that Abdellah Taïa adopts not only as a gay activist but also as someone who wants to give a voice to gay

Moroccans. Within the entire literary corpus of his works, Taïa never associates his protagonists with being gay—while online however, he is clearly labeled the gay Moroccan author.<sup>11</sup> His coming-out was published by the Moroccan magazine *Telquel* with his picture on the front cover and the subtitle reading, “Homosexuel, envers et contre tous” (June 2007). In Western English-language publications, he has been labeled the “gay Moroccan author”<sup>12</sup> and it is not an identity he shies away from. Therefore, my goal is to show what his literature demonstrates about masculinity and masculine sexuality as nuanced from the point of view of a Moroccan torn between France and Morocco. My goal is to also underline what Taïa’s online interviews, meta-interviews, and texts reveal about his personal beliefs surrounding French masculinity. Taïa is shown to be an example of how the literary and digital world collide and how an author can distance himself from the context of his work as well as embrace it further using digital media.

It should be mentioned that the French authors whose works will be examined in the forthcoming chapters belong to a certain bourgeois white class. The protagonist of these texts, by in large, are not economically on the fringes of society thus affording them a certain level of comfort. This is in stark contrast to the social, sexual, and economic margins that Abdellah Taïa writes from. These various backgrounds diversify the performances of masculinity that are being studied but also raise interesting question concerning to what degree class affects performativity and the ability to actually write about these experiences, i.e.: uniquely reserved for a bourgeois middle class who can afford both socially and economically to write about these “taboo” topics.

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<sup>11</sup> While there is same-sex love and same-sex relations in Taïa’s novels, there is no association of his characters with being “gay.” At most, it is a term reserved for French lovers or Westerners in general and does not apply to the protagonist nor other Moroccans.

<sup>12</sup> *The Huffington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *Out* magazine all have used this nomenclature. *Out* went so far as to say “Taïa always knew he was gay” (Hickin) which I would argue is slightly anachronistic at the time of the interview. The idea of “gay” as we know it in Western society was not translated yet into Moroccan culture. As I argue in the third chapter, he knew he might be a *zamel*, which carries a different meaning in Arabic than “gay” in English.

In the following chapters, my dissertation will explore the various iterations of what I call postmodern masculinities attempting not to define what masculinity has become, but rather to define how the discourse of crisis has allowed new literary models to come forth. This dissertation project is fruitful for the fields of Gender Studies and French and Francophone literature because it ultimately examines how postmodernism produces a climate for which one can analyse the crisis in masculinity through the three aforementioned themes ultimately allowing masculinity to avoid categorical imperatives highlighted in literature thus far.

Chapter 1: *Papa, can you hear me? French fatherhood and masculinity in Michel Houellebecq and Erik Rémès*

“Je n’ai rien à transmettre à mon fils.”  
-Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*

Father-son relationships provide a basis for understanding cultural constructions of masculinity since the patriarchy relies, in part, on the transmission of gender norms from father to son. Some shifts in the transmission of these norms can undermine the patriarchy’s hegemonic rule. The 1983 film *Yentl* provides an interesting starting point for this discussion about paternity and masculinity as the main protagonist challenges both gender roles and paternal-filial relations. While the film is not French, it highlights how issues of paternity and patriarchal power are being discussed in the twentieth century. The main character Yentl, (Barbra Streisand) receives Talmudic education from her father, a privilege normally reserved for men and denied to women. Ashkenazi law/tradition prohibits women from pursuing any study in its Law. Such a practice highlights the distinct religiously-oriented gender roles. The expectation versus the reality comes to a fore when Yentl says, “If we don’t have to hide my studying from God, then why from the neighbors?” implying that the neighbors, who represent the cultural norm, are not to be trusted and that they would disapprove of her actions.

Yentl embodies characteristics that are typically masculine. In a sense, Yentl feels more like a son than a daughter to her father, and as such he treats her that way. As a result of her education and upbringing, she feels a connection to her community and her father. His death marks a shift for Yentl, a moment of change for her as she has to blur gender roles and boundaries, queering her social relations and family.<sup>13</sup> Yentl suffers through all this not because

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<sup>13</sup> I use the term “queer” in a broad sense defined as “an anti-normative position with regard to sexuality” (Jagose 98), however, I would add gender performance in addition to sexuality.

she is committed to promoting gender equality in Ashkenazi communities but because she feels a commitment to her father and what he represents. In order to symbolically do right by him, she “becomes” a man.

The signature song of the movie, “Papa, can you hear me,” echoes a sentiment that is reproduced throughout the texts examined in this chapter. The song metaphorically questions the presence of the (F)/father<sup>14</sup>. The texts of Michel Houellebecq and Erik Rémès answer Yentl’s question. The father cannot, and quite frankly, does not want to hear the petitions of the son. This lack of “reply” is growing in representation both sociologically and in French literature. The popular American men’s magazine *Esquire* published an article by Marche in June 2013 entitled “Why Fatherhood Matters” with a daunting subtitle: “Because society crumbles without us.” The author’s claim about society’s dependency on the patriarchy aside, we can see nevertheless that Marche believes masculinity and fatherhood are intertwined. He writes about how he reacts to his own father’s death and claims, “That day, on that walk, I had become a man” (Marche 82). The author insinuates that his father’s passing unlocks a self-awareness of cultural obligations that his father’s presence prevented him from engaging previously. The idea here is that there are multiple discussions surrounding fatherhood and a shift in parental responsibilities. What I hope to underline in the chapter are French literary examples of shifting paternal depictions.

For Marche, fatherhood is tied to the shifts in masculinity: “As the patriarchy is slowly dying, as masculinity continues to undergo a constant process of redefinition, fatherhood has never mattered more” (82). For the article’s author, fatherhood is masculine, the ultimate signifier of what it means to be a man, the last remaining domain that cannot be rendered gender

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<sup>14</sup> I use “Father” to represent the culturally posited figure of paternity, the leader of the patriarchy and representative of masculine domination. I use “father” to represent the familial role that a person of male gender usually fills.

neutral.<sup>15</sup> In this reading, fatherhood is strictly tied to masculinity. I aim to show that in the texts of Houellebecq and Rémès, there exists a play between the presence and the absence of the father that contributes to shifting notions of sexuality and definitions of masculinity.

Sociologists have documented the phenomenon that fatherhood is becoming an abandoned role. In her collection of case studies entitled *Making Men into Fathers*, Barbara Hobson discusses the social dynamics and politics of masculinity via fatherhood. For her, the crisis in fatherhood can be linked to the economic decline in male breadwinners and therefore to the ultimate position of the man/father within the family (Hobson 6). She goes on to highlight that the core definition of “fatherhood” is challenged when men discover that they do not know how to father or do not father at all (25). The case studies of Nordic and Western industrialized countries documented from 1988-1997 show an ever increasing number of fathers who do not live with their children, thus displacing and figuratively deterritorializing the father and fatherhood from the familial unit. I believe this has two effects: it redefines fatherhood, and therefore masculinity from the perspective of the biological “father”; and subverts the power of the patriarchy for the latter believes that the male child may inevitably lack exposure to certain cultural gender norms reinforced by the presence and position of the father. It is important to note that I do not perceive these outcomes negatively (nor, would I argue does Hobson) but that each is a new variable in the evolving equation of late-twentieth to early-twenty-first century global masculinities.

It is prudent to note that most of the comments about fatherhood made thus far are about Western societies in general and nothing is particularly French. A project devoted to tracing the

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<sup>15</sup> The late twentieth century sees many “domains” shifting from traditional masculine ones to an egalitarian model in Western societies, e.g.: family bread-winners, owning property, military enlistment, voting rights, contraception. In her book, *Making Men into Fathers* (2002), sociologist Barbara Hobson studies contemporary European families and remarks how there is now an open accessibility to these social domains that were previously strictly masculine.

evolution of Western masculinity in society more generally would be fruitful, but it is not the goal of this study. I shift my focus to French fatherhood because of the growing corpus of late-twentieth century texts that bring to the fore questions of paternal presence and role.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, I posit that these changes in paternal responsibility trickle down into the construction of a masculine identity and sexuality. To prove this, I focus on two late-twentieth century authors whose worlds converge on the same topic—the father. I propose that the role of the father (or lack thereof) within the protagonist’s life bleeds into their construction of masculinity and sexuality turning them into anti-normative characters whose behavior is marginalized, isolated, and confined to the periphery of society.

### **Masculinity in French Literature**

The shifts in the representations of masculinity in postmodern French literature point to a key moment in redefining literary configurations of gender roles and norms. These changes are concomitant with the exponential social and technological shifts that characterize the last decades of the twentieth century. I examine how French authors Michel Houellebecq and Erik Rémès showcase a post-modern masculinity in their texts *Les Particules élémentaires* and *Je bande donc je suis* respectively. This examination will allow me to show how these two texts are indicative of a broader change that one can observe in French literature. Houellebecq's novel subtly pits traditional models of masculinity and heterosexuality against new ones, whereas Rémès queers his literary universe, its characters, and their sexuality, demonstrating that notions of masculinity exist outside normative literary worlds.<sup>17</sup> The over-arching goal of this chapter is to assess the integral part that paternal relationships and paternity play in the construction of

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<sup>16</sup> This list includes authors like Annie Ernaux or Frederic Beigbeder.

<sup>17</sup> I find David Halperin’s understanding of queer in *Saint Foucault: Towards a gay hagiography* (1997) to be helpful in grasping Rémès’ work. He defines queer or queering as whatever is “at odds with the normal” (62) where the term designates positionality, something outside of the normal not necessarily positive or negative.



masculinity both from the heterosexual and queer literary standpoint. Specifically, I hope to show how Houellebecq's postmodern, post-technological man is increasingly devoid of the traditional characteristics that define French literary masculinity by underlining the indefinite death of the paternal character and its consequences on the protagonists' social and sexual constructions of masculinity. To what degree this then reflects or affects the authors' personal construction of masculinity is up for debate as literature and society have always shared a unique rapport. I will then discuss how the same play of paternal absence and presence is a larger metonym for the search for the phallic signifier and how the main protagonist's father-son rapport establishes the crux of queer sexuality and masculinity within Rémès' text.<sup>18</sup> While this chapter will demonstrate shifts in masculinity that I believe are unique to the social climate of the 90's (Rosin 80-81), it will do so in order to answer larger questions about the relationship between literature and society that help the reader discern how these authors reflect their social environment and are the products of it.

Houellebecq's novel *Les Particules élémentaires* chronicles the lives of step-brothers Michel and Bruno. The first part of the novel traces Bruno and Michel's heritage in a fashion similar to Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart*; however instead of carrying the notion of *une histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, Houellebecq's novel is a look at life under a "postmodern empire" where these two brothers are at odds with the social conditions of their lives. Bruno is a 40 year old "cadre moyen" who is largely depicted as solely dedicated to the pursuit of his sexual happiness. His brother, Michel, is a respected biologist who has sacrificed his emotional and physical happiness to a successful career. Both are witnessing the decline of their sex drives and sex lives. The novel emphasizes that these two men are only

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<sup>18</sup> As discussed in the introduction of this project, the phallic signifier is the generative male power that men are seen to have but simultaneously in search of.

looking for relationships so as not to die alone and illustrates how societal shifts have obstructed their quest.

The book attempts to normalize the two characters by giving them quasi-successful relationships later in life: Bruno settles down with Christiane and Michel with Annabelle, his girlfriend when the two were teenagers. However, both relationships ultimately end up reinforcing the incompatibility of heteronormative discourse with the postmodern world of Houellebecq's novel; the two simply do not coincide. Michel and Bruno can be interpreted as two sides of the same man. The prologue to the novel starts, "Ce livre est avant tout l'histoire d'un homme" but it is a "man" who is split in two; a dualism that allows the narrator to reinforce the self-fragmentation that each character exhibits. Furthermore, by writing about Michel and Bruno, the narrator is suggesting that each is permanently incomplete since the story is about "one man," but told from the perspective of two deficient men. Michel and Bruno both represent the unfinished, the inadequate, and the lacking,<sup>19</sup> since deficiency becomes a leitmotif of the novel and typifies the characters' interactions and self-assessments.

Rémès' novel *Je bande donc je suis*, on the other hand, creates an interdependence of existence and sexual cognition; Rémès' being, his *être*, is tied to his sexuality.<sup>20</sup> A reconfiguration of the Cartesian cogito allows this author to pin his sexuality, queerness, and seropositivity onto the center of any discussion of masculinity. The tale of Berlin Tintin is similar to Houellebecq's novel in that it is the story of one man, and his self-discovery involves his sexuality, his queerness, and finally his serostatus.<sup>21</sup> It breaks from the literary tradition of AIDS writers à la Hervé Guibert who chronicle life and suffering with the disease. In Rémès'

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<sup>19</sup> I use the word "lack" to mean "lack of being" (manque à être) in the Lacanian sense where lack is directly relational to desire: "Desire is a relation of being to lack" (Lacan 233).

<sup>20</sup> I use the term sexuality in a larger sense here to mean his queerness but also, the physical act of having sex—intercourse. Rémès' being is tied to the physical act of sex.

<sup>21</sup> Rémès links all of these together through his play of the cogito into "Qui bande, donc existe".

literary universe, life is depicted in a world where HIV + is the norm and new advancements in drug treatment provide a coping mechanism for dealing with the inevitable death caused by the disease. What this novel provides that is unique to this study of masculinity is this man can only perceive himself through the pursuit of the F/father's phallus, an initiatory discovery that he is constantly trying to reproduce. The father's phallus is Lacan's symbolic phallus, the signifier of desire for the Other, the ultimate signifier that fulfills desire for the object. Obviously the desire is never fulfilled for the symbolic phallus, the existence of desire precludes the search for the phallus. What I suggest from reading Rémès' text is that his insatiable sex quest is a reconfiguration of his desire for his father's penis, the symbolic power of the phallus.

### **Framework and Approach**

Postmodernism is a term that denotes a period of flux in the late twentieth century. It is a condition (a set of symptoms), meaning that it encompasses the shifts set off by the realization that metanarratives of the past can no longer accurately codify and explain culture in general, and literature in particular. Postmodernism is a reaction to the metanarratives of modernism to the extent that it has lost faith in these narrative structures. Postmodernism exposes a movement or narrative's inability to explain, label, and neatly categorize.<sup>22</sup> It is important to emphasize the conditional element of postmodernism since "condition" is a term that reflects a particular state of being or quality of life. The postmodern condition is a syndrome, a recognizable pattern of symptoms that indicates the particular mentality of a society, albeit a fictional, literary one being studied in this project. It is a time when instability is the norm, as technological tectonic plates

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<sup>22</sup> This is a quick summation of Jean-François Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*. (1979) and Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacres et Simulation* (1981).

clash with social, cultural and economic change and aftershocks are felt in multiple domains.<sup>23</sup> Of course technology even in its most banal form, predates postmodernism; this is not what is unique to the postmodern condition; however, it is the interaction of technology and postmodernism, which catalyzes an imitable reaction. Houellebecq narrates a world that is conscious of this postmodern condition, depressed by the situation and the futility in attempting to change it. Rémès' character, Berlin Tintin, lives in and inhabits this world to the fullest degree because these postmodern shifts create a space for his discourse.

Throughout this project certain terms will be chosen carefully to reflect men's socio-cultural expectations. Masculinity, virility and even maleness are not interchangeable terms but mark various points plotted on a large spectrum of historically constructed gender relations. Masculinity is performative, it is a set of culturally acceptable attributes that in theory are independent of those who perform it.<sup>24</sup> This is distinct from maleness as a scientific, classifying term that designates certain chromosomes and sexual organs precisely not entailing nor supposing masculinity. Late-twentieth century queer theory and gender politics have deconstructed the relation between being biologically male (maleness) and being socially perceived as masculine (masculinity).<sup>25</sup> This project sets out to underline the relationship between males and the masculine ideal or its traditional incarnation, as reflected in literature. Therefore, the conclusions drawn will be placed in juxtaposition to a standard literary norm of masculinity, specifically paternity for this first section. I do not wish to lump all pre-postmodern literature into one homogenous continuum of masculine representation; rather I am proposing

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<sup>23</sup> I think here of Paul Virilio and Marc Augé, whose philosophical and theoretical work testifies to the effects of technological advancements and what that means for society at large. Furthermore, without going into much detail, I do want to acknowledge that these changes are largely influence by the exponential growth of globalization.

<sup>24</sup> If masculinity is a performance of social qualities, then women can play this role.

<sup>25</sup> See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990).

that the texts in this chapter differ from a more canonical representations of paternity and masculinity like those of Balzac's *Père Goriot* and *Eugénie Grandet* among other examples.

Another distinction needs to be made between masculinity and virility in order to understand how postmodern man is characterized in French literature. Virility is an aspect of masculinity; it is a static concept that is achievable, recognizable, but not often defined apart from its biological purpose. Virility is the metonymy of masculine perfection and is held in the highest regard. It represents the apotheosis of masculine sexuality because it is the perfection of masculine traits. Masculinity is not synonymous with virility, but virility is a idealized type of masculinity since one can be masculine, enact traits socio-culturally associated with males, and not necessarily symbolize what the Greeks defined as *andreia* (man) or the Romans as *virilitas*. Virility becomes an encompassing term that defines sexual prowess, psychological and physical superiority, and moral fortitude. It is the basis of legends and cultural myths; in the two novels, it is the "other" who is always talked about and serves as a basis for comparison.<sup>26</sup> What is characteristic about the texts of Michel Houellebecq and Erik Rémès is that the male protagonists are not virile but rather remark how virile others are, thereby enforcing the legendary status of virility, reducing the protagonists of these novels to their simple biology—their maleness, that is, in possession of a penis.<sup>27</sup> In Houellebecq's works, the other is designated as virile object of the narrator's gaze. The others he marks as "virile" are examples of the Lacanian *Other* as a cultural "system of meaning" that embodies virility.

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<sup>26</sup>Virility as the *other* is cogent with Lacan's Symbolic Order for I will suggest that the characters studied in this section pursue their desire (largely sexual) but that these desires are inherently desires of the other and this other is virility.

<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that in one of Rémès' texts, *Le Maître d'amour*, the main character Berlin Tintin describes himself as "viril" when advertising for his escort service. I attribute this solely to the fact that within this text, Berlin Tintin is positioned as the phallus for others—the only character within the text that is not in lack of being for he is the phallic reference his clients are looking for to fill their desire since the phallus is the symbol of virility.

An intriguing example of this is when Houellebecq's main protagonist, Bruno describes his father Serge Clément : "Il se dégageait de sa personne une virilité puissante et sans complications" (27). Serge is both father and *Other* for he later abandons Bruno never filling the psychoanalytical "lack" that Bruno will develop; however, he remains as one of the first symbols of virility for Bruno. In his *Discourse of Rome*, Lacan explains the relationship between desire and the *Other*, defining how meaning comes from the desire for the *Other* (Lacan 106). This means that whenever Bruno comments on virility he inscribes his desire for the *Other* and constitutes himself in relation to the Symbolic Order, since "the subject's reality is [...] the reality of the Symbolic Order." (Benvenuto and Kennedy 90) By admiring the virility of a person as an "other," Bruno then becomes aware of the opposition the Symbolic Order produces between absence and presence, i.e. the link between masculinity and virility. This is something that holds true as well for queer author Erik Rémès who associates virility with the *Other* as symbolized by the phallus: "...je me disais que la queue de l'homme, le superbe signifiant phallique comme disait l'Autre avec un grand A, est bien le symbole revendicatif et positif de la virilité" (122).<sup>28</sup> In these two texts, the other is always virile and virility is always other

Therefore defining how masculinity and virility differ becomes an important concept to understanding how the other is virile but the protagonists are still masculine. Masculinity is a set of characteristics defined by socio-cultural norms that are traditionally associated with "men". It is mobile and malleable, reflecting the expectations of cultures and societies as they evolve throughout history. Masculinity for our purpose is in line with the expectations of patriarchy.

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<sup>28</sup> Rémès is a trained in psychoanalysis so one can claim he is being cheeky with his knowledge of Lacan and his own interpretation of sex. Furthermore, Rémès appears to fail at distinguishing between the penis (la queue) and the phallus. This distinction is important because the phallus is what symbolizes virility and is a product of the Symbolic Order. The penis is an organ, a biological extension that designates gender. I make this comment because Rémès' quote seems to blur the lines of penis, phallus, and their equal representation of virility. By nuancing the difference, the reader comes to a better understanding of the motivations behind Rémès' sexual adventures.

When one claims that masculinity is in crisis, one is often claiming that some sort of outside force destabilizes the social and sexual dominance of men. This is not surprising as the principles of modernity, let alone post-modernity, cannot coincide with the dominance of the patriarchy, for both attempt to avoid all-encompassing narratives. The time during which Houellebecq and Rémès are writing is an era of "post": post-colonialism, post-modernism, post-queer, post-phallus. As literature moves its center away from the straight bourgeois male, both character and narrator, and refocuses it on peripheral voices, it solidifies the egalitarian principle of modernity that allows for minority and marginalized communities to become centers in their own right. In the case of Houellebecq, masculinity is understood through a process of negation; by understanding what his protagonists are not, one discovers the definitions of French masculinity according to Houellebecq's literary world.

Houellebecq's novels are crucial to a study of late-twentieth century masculinity because of the pronounced dystopian, misogynistic, homophobic narration that characterizes his works. The Houellebecqian vision of the world is one where men – i.e. “real” men—“have lost to women, to the effeminate, to the jerks, and to the simians that we [Westerners] have all become,” (Schehr 203).<sup>29</sup> Houellebecq diagnoses the illness of Western society which, according to him, suffers from excessive capitalism, rampant communitarianism and a political correctness that brings the periphery to the center at the expense of the normative; therefore he insinuates that this lack of “normativity” is the cause of these social ills. Houellebecq is a sort of biographer of the “natural” as his writing recounts the fall of the phallogentric, heteronormative world and its consequences on literary figures of masculinity. If Houellebecq is diagnosing society with an illness, then Rémès lives with it. He writes from a world born of these consequences; the queer,

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<sup>29</sup> Schehr's use of “simian” reduces men to a simple animal species of no importance, but it also highlights the racist undertones of Houellebecq's novel and its depiction of blacks characters.

AIDS-infected characters who come from a fallen society that Houellebecq warned us about. The voices of Rémès' text express the former periphery now at the center of a queer universe.

Within the world of Houellebecq's and Rémès' novels, there is a loss of paternal authority; in fact one could go so far as to say that there is a loss of paternal presence. While the father figure is mentioned in the text in his patriarchal role as ruler and mentor, the activity of rearing a son is nonexistent or not within the confines of normative parental roles. The reader observes the end of the father's reign and his disappearance right after the opening pages of the prologue in *Les Particules élémentaires*. The first part of Houellebecq's novel is titled *Royaume perdu* signaling the loss of patriarchy and paternity in the novel. This "lost kingdom" reminds us of Schehr's previous statement on the incompatibility of masculine hegemony and male patriarchy in a postmodern world. These old social paradigms of heteronormativity and phallogocentrism come face to face with their mortality, as social movements break down their reign and dismantle their power. By titling his section *Royaume perdu*, Houellebecq acknowledges the possibility of the fall of the patriarchy and masculine hegemony within his text.<sup>30</sup>

We know from earlier that the patriarchy is dependent in part on the transmission of norms from one generation to the next; however it is also dependent on the subjugation of the "family" it rules. The family is the first social unit that mimics and constitutes gender relations and norms. Understanding the "family romance" will help identify the lack and absence of paternal figures in Houellebecq's novel. The notion of "family romance" in Freud refers to a fantasy where a child imagines leaving his or her parents, for whom he feels a lot of disdain, in the hopes of adopting another set of parents with higher social value. This concept is key to

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<sup>30</sup> I will later discuss how the relationship between the king and his subjects is similar to the father's rule over his family.



comprehending Lynn Hunt's psychoanalytic interpretation of the French Revolution where the execution of Louis XVI is symbolic and even metonymic of the death of the father figure in ordinary families. What I wish to extrapolate from her analysis is that the death of the father figure is a reoccurring theme that reproduces itself at key social moments—in her study, the French Revolution; in mine, post-modernity. Since the king and his subjects are analogous to the father and his family, *la puissance paternelle* is inherently linked to French political and social discourse and patriarchy remains a defining cultural element over an attempted shift to *fraternité*.<sup>31</sup>

The family is a special unit in French culture and even more integral to the purpose of this chapter. I take time to analyze it because it is the very entity that crumbles in Houellebecq and Rémès' novels for the family is the father's kingdom. As critic Morrey Douglas details in his analysis "Stop the World, or What's Queer about Michel Houellebecq," the individualism brought about by sexual liberalism and recounted in Houellebecq's novel has caused the "dissolution of the family, removing the last communal barrier that protected the individual from the brutality of the market" (Morrey 180). Houellebecq's market is both economic and sexual; a pervasive force that previously was kept at bay by the protective barrier of the family unit now dissolved.

The family is the center of normative discourse and anchors the normativity of heterosexuality. By undermining its authority, whether through the loss of paternal power or the possibility of non-normative "families" becoming mainstream, one displaces the center of the discourse, possibly privileging another center. Aside from the possible loss of paternal role models, the French family unit took another hit with the debate and successful passing of the

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<sup>31</sup> Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (1993) takes a fundamental look at how the family unit is a microcosm for the king's relationship with his subjects

*Pacte civil de Solidarité* which opened the door to a possible acceptance and recognition of gay marriage by the government and made public what is considered private: “Le débat sur le mariage gai se situe à l’intersection du privé et du public (il donne une reconnaissance sociale à une forme d’intimité)” (Fabre, Fassin 49). This French version of civil unions moves the discussion of marriage and family from one that dealt with normativity and tolerating gays to actually legitimizing homosexuality, homosexual couples, and even homosexual parenting in the public eye.

The “PACS” is a symbolic act that does not simply require the recognition of a small community acknowledging its existence. Rather, it extended benefits and recognition to gay couples as equals to their heterosexual counterparts, thus inherently questioning the legitimacy of heterosexuality as the norm, the standard, the center: “Ce qui est remis en cause n’est pas l’hétérosexualité en elle-même, bien sûr, mais l’hétérosexualité en tant que norme,” (Fabre, Fassin 50). The debates over the PACS highlighted the social and cultural uneasiness that is indicative of the time period during which the authors in question are writing. By showing the multiple ways in which the family unit dominated by the father is changing, I hope to show this is a perfect framework to conduct an analysis of masculinity via paternity.

Thus with the family unit hypothetically in decay, an analysis of this decay within Houellebecq’s novel will provide insight into how he perceives masculinity as shaped by the presence/absence of the father. The family unit is a central component to gender discussion since kinship is the basis for most, if not all, organized social relations. The family unit, through kinship, is also the transmitting agent of socio-cultural and gendered norms (Hunt 196), therefore any impediments to its transmission breaks down the transmission of socio-cultural norms. It is

this breakdown in the family unit and the abandonment of fatherhood in Michel Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires* that I will now analyze.

### **The Father and the son**

Published in 1998 to much acclaim, Houellebecq's novel traces the life of two step-brothers, Bruno and Michel. The novel is a despondent look at Western society and how far humans have disassociated themselves from former social paradigms and presents a pessimistic perspective of the human condition, in particular from a male's point of view. The story and its male centrality can be read as a synecdoche for the decline of Western dominance and as such, is a fruitful template to read shifting gender norms. The novel's initial chapters are biographical, retracing the genealogy of Bruno and Michel's family. The reader learns of grandfathers and their physical, emotional, and social characteristics. Houellebecq creates a framework against which he will later juxtapose the actions of future generations of the family affording the reader an opportunity to witness social change and how it affects a family. Furthermore, by teasing out the genealogy of this particular family, Houellebecq inscribes a reading of the multiple generations within Lacan's Symbolic Order where the opposition between "presence" and "absence" indicates that something is missing (or lacking).

Traditionally, the conjugal unit is responsible for a child's formation, but since the reader is living under a "nouveau règne" (Houellebecq 9),<sup>32</sup> Houellebecq breaks from the traditional depiction of a family unit. Responsibility for the upbringing (*éducation*) of Michel and Bruno, the step-brothers, is transferred to a grand-mother or the boarding school.<sup>33</sup> I believe that through Houellebecq's introduction of the parents, Serge and Janine, as "un couple moderne"

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<sup>32</sup> "Nous vivons aujourd'hui sous un tout nouveau règne," (Houellebecq 9).

<sup>33</sup> See Neli Dobрева, "Figures et transformations du corps féminin (en asexué) dans *Les Particules élémentaires* de Michel Houellebecq" for a brief analysis of the role of the paternal and maternal grand-mothers in this novel.

(27),<sup>34</sup> the reader understands that this is a break from previous paradigms of heteronormativity—i.e. the conjugal union traditionally reconciling social integration and republican duties (having and raising children for the republic). In fact, as already mentioned, the author reinforces this idea of rupture with the past in the prologue mentioning that the reader and the characters have entered "une période nouvelle dans l'histoire" (8). He poetically furthers the claim, "nous pouvons retracer la fin de l'ancien règne" (10), which I interpret as the framework through which the author will continually contrast the postmodern condition of his characters with a more constant, stable, and traditional model of masculinity or sexuality that his main protagonists now lack.

As a modern couple, Serge and Janine are invested in their careers as plastic surgeons and when Janine becomes pregnant with Bruno, it becomes quite clear that the care required for a child's proper upbringing is considered "peu compatible avec leur [Marc and Janine] idéal de liberté personnelle" (28).<sup>35</sup> Their apparent selfishness or egoism is not shocking; rather it is a symptom Houellebecq diagnoses as a "condition" of postmodernism. Bruno's adolescence and teenage years are spent at the *internat*, robbed of a paternal figure who would normally serve as an image and role model of masculine normativity. The narrator explains how during these formative years, Bruno's notion of masculinity and sexuality were framed within the concept of lack. In one particular scene where he is being bullied, Bruno becomes "l'animal oméga" contrasted with the potent virility of his bully Brasseur, the default "alpha" whose penis Bruno remarks is "épais, énorme", a stark contrast to Bruno, whose "sexe est petit, encore enfantin,

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<sup>34</sup> I believe that this "couple moderne" is juxtaposed against the socially accepted image of conjugal love that was held in turn-of-the-century France and lasted during the twentieth century. In *Sexing the Citizen* (Cornell University Press, 2006) Judith Surkis explains how married love was premised on "an enduring and harmonious union [...] ethical and selfless." Serge and Janine are, however, quite the opposite as their careers and "lifestyles" do not reflect this social ideal nor does their love endure in any sense.

<sup>35</sup> Houellebecq seems adamant on the point that their modern lifestyle does not permit the necessary time to raise a child properly—i.e. normatively.

dépourvu de poils” (43). This imagery sits oddly because the description is not customary of eleven year olds. However, the narrator is solidifying Bruno’s position of being below average by using “dépourvu,” an uncommon word choice for a prepubescent boy. This adjective highlights the narrator’s constant effort to mark Bruno as lacking. As a pre-teen, Bruno would normally progress towards a normative masculinity, but the narrator’s verb choice indicates a downgrade—a regression over a progression. With his word choice the narrator underlines a shift, another symptom of a condition suffered when the (hetero)normative discourse is undermined.

In a similar fashion, Bruno's step-brother Michel is abandoned by his father, Marc Djerzinski. A year after Bruno's birth, his mother Janine became pregnant by Marc with Michel. The narrator quickly explains how Marc is troubled by Michel's birth: "La naissance de son fils, en juin 1958, provoqua en lui un trouble évident" (29). He cannot put his finger on why he is bothered by his son's birth, but he is and therefore chooses to leave him with Michel's grandmother. Michel is sent off to the same boarding school as Bruno and his father is later "déclaré officiellement disparu” (31), leading to a complete erasure of Michel's presence in Marc's life. It is not that Marc quickly packs up and leaves Michel. Rather he displays traits of a detached father reminiscent of the psychoanalytical concept of the emotionally absent father. Furthermore, the narrator does not leave Marc’s storyline opened. By stating “officiellement disparu” the reader understands the euphemism hidden in the legal declaration, Marc is likely dead thus ending the relationship between him and Michel. Furthermore, the “disparu” reinforces the intended “death” suggesting Michel becomes an adult orphan, a fatherless figure.

This indifferent view towards fatherhood carries over into adulthood. Bruno, in turn, abandons his own son, claiming "Je n'ai rien à transmettre à mon fils. Je n'ai aucun métier à lui

apprendre" (31), thereby disavowing his traditional patriarchal authoritative role. He further negates all paternal roles by rhetorically asking Christiane, his main lover, "Est-ce que les enfants ont réellement besoin d'un père?" (148). His usage of "rien" in the first quote further associates Bruno with negativity. He has nothing and that nothing represents a void, a lack that appears as a leitmotif for Bruno from childhood to adulthood. However, the paternal role not only defines masculinity but also gives it agency, a gender norm, a role to perform in a normative environment. By suggesting that the father figure is not needed, Bruno marches down a path where the French concept of "filiation" no longer exists. He breaks away from the Symbolic (in Lacan's sense of the word) quality of parenthood and only perceives his function as a biological necessity.

Bruno's first statement ("je n'ai rien à transmettre") is a strong attack against masculine hegemony and patriarchy. By not assuming his parental and paternal role, Bruno sets the stage for his son to also disregard paternal obligations thereby undermining the patriarchy's social power. In the novel, the power of patriarchy is centered on the transmission and assurance of normative values, and Bruno's rejection of such a process dismantles its power and threatens its survival. The "métier" Bruno would pass on would be the discourse that assures masculine hegemony, this is his duty as a member of the patriarchy. But this discourse, as we know already, is not compatible with the social climate of the novel.

Bruno's step-brother Michel is equally guilty of avoiding fatherhood, but in his case, it is at the expense of his love, since Annabelle, who frees him of his paternal duties, explains: "Tu n'auras pas forcément à l'élever, ni à t'occuper de lui, tu n'auras pas non plus besoin de le reconnaître" (274-275). Annabelle too is contributing to the postmodern abandonment of paternal obligations. She only needs Michel to fulfill his biological role and indicates that the

future child is not at all his responsibility. Neli Dobрева explains how his reaction is all but normal: “Michel accepte avec une froideur qui n’est plus humaine” (Dobрева 233), further stripping himself of any paternal and human responsibility to the child. Michel, like Bruno, ironically insures the lineage of a post-modern masculinity characterized by the lack of paternity and the symbolic death of the Father. Annabelle views Michel not as a father, but as a necessary component of the biological process of producing an offspring. She is the one who suggests he break from tradition and only serve as a seeder to her egg. By suggesting that Michel does not even need to recognize the child, Annabelle too destroys the French concept of “filiation” and symbolically makes Michel just an ingredient in a biological process.

### **Masculinity in question**

If absent fathers are indeed a symptom of the condition that is postmodern masculinities, the question then to ask is how does this affect our understanding of masculinity? Furthermore, how does the absence of the protagonists' fathers affect their construction of masculinity as depicted by the text? When a child is abandoned by parental figures, he or she may develop a psychological deficiency--a “me-against-the-world” attitude that highlights Houellebecq's leitmotif of solitude he uses to describe all his post-modern characters.<sup>36</sup> I do not mean that all children of single-parent families suffer from some sort of neurosis; rather, following Melanie Klein's object-relation theory, a child may compare his or her situation with the normative representation and initiate a defense mechanism centered on a perceived deficiency.<sup>37</sup> This theory would suggest that Bruno and Michel's actions are the product of an Object imposed on

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<sup>36</sup> While not discussed at length, one needs only to open to the prologue again and notice that this novel is not only about a man, but a man who is generally “seul” living his life “de loin en loin, en relation avec d’autres hommes.”

<sup>37</sup> In *Object Relations and Self Psychology: An Introduction*. (2000), Michael St Clair discussed Klein object-theory's relation to modernity.

their psyche, created during infancy and serving to predict adult behavior.<sup>38</sup> Bruno's or Michel's fatherless characters develop an emotional detachment from sexual practice, as demonstrated by Bruno's focus on orgasm instead of on the objective beauty of his partner. He attaches no value to the sex act and rather lets his mind wander while copulating or being fellated. His strongest emotional attachment is to Christiane, a single mother he met at a nudist colony. Their relationship is hardly romantic or classically normative; in fact the narrator explains, "ils vivraient tous deux le déclin du désir" (144), which reinforces the degree to which the quasi-parentless protagonist lacks emotional integrity, i.e.: normative parental traits. His strongest emotional bond with some people is, itself, a lack of real emotion.

More important to the study of French masculinity is how Michel and Bruno perceive gender norms. Without a father, neither witness a paternal performance of masculinity that would in turn frame their own construction of masculinity. The father's symbolic role is to pass on socio-cultural values, but his absence would then leave a void in a child's understanding of gender norms. My claim is not that Bruno or Michel do not know how to be men but rather that they act out a different concept of masculinity, one founded more on the post-modern elements highlighted in the text and possibly in French culture as a whole. There is no question that these two characters are men, biologically and sexually. Houellebecq's text does not create any sort of metaphysical question about gender in these characters. The narrator is more concerned with how the protagonists' enactment of masculinity is different from classical French literary notions such as the soldier Roland or the modern examples of Balzac's Rastignac or Proust's Charles Swann. These characters are not subscribing to classical, romantic, or heroic constructions of any century in the French literary tradition. It becomes apparent that the lack of a father and the

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<sup>38</sup> I use the psychodynamic term "object" to mean past images from infancy that become a part of the subconscious, predicting future behavior with others encountered in a specific environment.



rejection of paternity are linked to the progression of a post-modern masculinity that alienates previous stereotypical literary representations of bourgeois French masculinity<sup>39</sup>.

Let me take a moment to clarify that I am not saying there have not been any absent fathers in the past in French literature; rather, I am underlining the fact that the place of the father, that is to say his role, anchors a large portion of the characters' identity and self-perception. The father and his absence hold an ironically large presence in the text. Absent fathers are not unique to this time period, but they are a syndrome that represents the common denominator shared in the texts of this chapter.

The reference here is to the nineteenth century novel and the *pater familias*, or as Lynn Hunt would call it, "the good father" (Hunt 17). Anne-Marie Sohn explains that, at a social level during the nineteenth century, the saying "tel père, tel fils" was true : "L'opinion, par ailleurs, considère qu'à partir de l'adolescence chaque parent est responsable au premier chef des enfants de son sexe. Les pères ont donc tendance à façonner leurs fils à leur image" (Sohn 328).<sup>40</sup> Therefore, during the nineteenth-century, the father is both a social and a literary model, a mentor and a censor, contrary to the eighteenth-century Rousseauian model where fathers were emotional, affectionate and not necessarily concerned with absolute obedience or unquestioned authority (25). There is no better literary example of the French father than the titular character of *Le Père Goriot*. Houellebecq's novel implicitly juxtaposes the classical model of Goriot, the bountiful, good father, with those of *Les Particules élémentaires*. Although the novels are over

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<sup>39</sup> It do not wish to claim that the great nineteenth-century authors like Balzac, Zola or even early twentieth century authors like Proust idealize fathers. Rather, I wish to claim that their literature sets a precedent for the literary figure of the father that the late twentieth century abandons. In the texts of these authors, the father has a role, a place, a function in the family and in society that is integral to his relations with others in the text. For Houellebecq and other contemporaries, it is safe to say that the father's importance is greatly diminished, if not inexistent.

<sup>40</sup> In *Sois un homme : la construction de la masculinité au XIXe siècle* Anne-Marie Sohn examines nineteenth-century social and literary constructions of masculinity.

a century apart, in the nineteenth century, the father is canonically a producer and provider, whereas Houellebecq's novel undermines this role by eliminating his social contribution.

What is important here is to understand how men are sterilized in the text. In order to underline the deficiency in traditional markers of French masculinity, Houellebecq juxtaposes the de-virilization of his characters with that of the paradigmatic strong, handsome and virile man. From his youth, Bruno is placed in opposition to a masculine norm; in fact one could suggest that Bruno's masculinity is defined in opposition to the virile men to whom he compares himself. From his abuse at the boarding school by the bully Brasseur (who later goes on to date all the girls Bruno has a crush on) to his teenage years visiting his "new age" mother, the constant is that Bruno is not like the other men. Upon visiting his mother once during a vacation, Bruno notes that she has had sex with "un jeune type très costaud, un vrai physique de bûcheron," while he is relegated to a space where he becomes the voyeur, observing the other remarking on his lack (Houellebecq 70). In a very Oedipal scene, Bruno closely examines the bodies of the rugged man and his mother and then proceeds to masturbate. His mother and her sexual partner are others in which he inscribes his physical desire since he cannot have sex with them (one assumes because he lacks something).

Despite the large number of hippie women and men invited to his mother's villa, Bruno does not have the same access to the same sexual pleasures as his mother and the so-called "hippies" : "Les vulves des jeunes femmes étaient accessibles, elles se trouvaient parfois à moins d'un mètre; mais Bruno comprenait parfaitement qu'elles lui restent fermées." He alone among this group is set aside because "les autres garçons étaient plus grands, plus bronzés et plus forts" (60). Bruno does not fit the traditional perception of virility and therefore does not indulge in

sex while in competition with those who do fit the mold. His masculinity is transformed by the virility of the others, ultimately prohibiting the exercise of his own kind of sexuality.

In his adult life, the same scenario repeats itself upon his arrival at the nudist colony. The colony represents a very primal stage in gender roles. One can note that this nudist colony is the opposite of the world in which Bruno is living as a middle-management worker in an ever-growing technologically advanced society. Bruno attempts to strike up a conversation by helping a couple of women set up their tent; however these women perceive his presence as a threat: "Des hurlements s'élevèrent du wigwam contigu [...] La squaw se précipita et ressortit avec deux moutards minuscules". His attempt is a failure and is met with alarm. The situation continues to grow in intensity as "les hurlements redoublèrent. Le mâle de la squaw arriva en trotinant, bite au vent" (100). One should first note the gender roles, as the women produce a primordial distress call to which the male replies. Of course this male is large, wild, bearded. There is an apparent lack of civilization, as Houellebecq chooses to use the terms "squaw" and "mâle de la squaw" to enhance the juxtaposition between the postmodern, puny "blanchâtre" Bruno and these humans who appear more *sauvage*, and masculine, uncontaminated by postmodern social politics.

Attending the New-Age sex camp "Lieu du Changement," Bruno imagined orgy-filled scenarios that traditionally are associated with dominant masculinity. Yet at every turn Bruno is met with rejection, solitude, and frustration. In a scene where Bruno hoped to partner up with a woman for a nude couples massage, he comes face-to-face with the Lacanian real and does not seem to understand:

L'huile commençait à dégoutter sur le drap de bain, ses mollets devaient être complètement imbibés. Bruno redressa la tête. À proximité

immédiate, deux hommes étaient allongés sur le dos. Son voisin de gauche se faisait masser les pectoraux, les seins de la fille bougeaient doucement ; il avait le nez à hauteur de sa chatte. Le radio-cassettes de l'animateur émettait de larges nappes de synthétiseur dans l'atmosphère ; le ciel était d'un bleu absolu. Autour de lui, les bites luisantes d'huiles de massage se dressaient lentement dans la lumière. Tout cela était atrocement *réel*. Il ne pouvait continuer. (115)

Bruno can only understand and interpret via the Symbolic Order. The real is beyond him and he only experiences it through this traumatic experience that marks the break between his perception of masculinity and its symbolic form. The real, in this case the phallus as a signifier of masculinity, becomes overwhelmingly incomprehensible to him. What Bruno saw is a part of the real because there was no mediation and no way to represent what he saw, hence "il ne pouvait continuer". Furthermore, when he comes face-to-face with the Real, he comes face-to-face with the fear that he is already castrated, in search for the phallus that will fulfill his lack.

His sexual anxiety is further enhanced by problems of impotence. Bruno and men like him generally appear to be disinterested in sex because they are slowly losing the proper functioning tools. It goes without saying that any discussion about masculinity in part must be centered on some sort of discussion about the phallus. The phallus is not just the penis; but rather the patriarchal signifier, the symbol of male power. Referring to men, Christiane explains that "la pénétration les ennuie, ils [les hommes] ont du mal à bander" (140). Impotence is a common trope in this novel that indicates a weakening of virility. This happens on many occasions to Bruno. When he and Christiane would have sex, condoms are an obstacle since once he places the condom on, "il débanda complètement." His humiliation is followed by

apologies: "Je suis désolé, fit-il, je suis vraiment désolé". Christiane reassures him that such an event is natural and permissible, thus saving his virility in his own eyes.<sup>41</sup> However, this becomes a recurring theme according to the narrator who later speaks in generalities about male impotence and "la nostalgie de la virilité" (146). Such nostalgia indicates that the current situation is not living up to the former notions, norms, or even myths, of male sexuality.

The novel further develops Bruno's uncharacteristic sexuality by centering a portion of the text on his penis size. Bruno suffers from a classic case of small penis syndrome.<sup>42</sup> He is obsessed with the size of his penis, always remarking how others are bigger. Bruno is again placed in a situation where his masculinity is directly compared to those around him. In a scene where Bruno and Christiane are at a sex club, the narrator notes that, "avec sa bite de treize centimètres et ses érections espacées" (244) he compares poorly with the men surrounding him, who Bruno assumes have bigger penises and no problems maintaining their erections. The Freudian concept of penis-envy is usually attributed to females; however by attributing it to Bruno, the text further undermines the heteronormative discourse by queering Bruno, as these events distance him further from the centered discourse of which he likely wants to be a part. The men around him are performing an idealized masculinity and in order to participate, he, like the other men, engages in sex publically at this club; however his penis becomes flaccid and he tells Christiane he is no longer interested in sex largely because he feels inadequate. Such a situation causes the reader to realize that the description of Bruno's physicality mirrors the larger discussion on masculinity and male sexuality in the text, as his penis size is pitted against those around him. The sex club represents a performance of male sexuality as the men around him engage in an act that defines masculinity and virility. But Bruno does not belong in this club

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<sup>41</sup> "leur virilité sauvegardée dans son principe," page 144.

<sup>42</sup> One can argue penis-envy as well, as mentioned earlier.

because he does not perform, "Bruno n'était au fond nullement à sa place dans ce genre d'endroits" (244). The club is a chance for Bruno to perform a traditional masculinity but instead he finds himself rejected by the "very milieu that promised his salvation" (Douglas 184). Therefore, Bruno's masculinity is posited against a traditional model centered on virility, fertility, and potency.<sup>43</sup>

Within the universe of Houellebecq's texts, paternity is also an issue, although it is most prevalent in *Les Particules élémentaires*. It is worth noting, however, that questions about the role of a father are a recurring theme that characterizes his texts overall, whether subtly or not, and that the concept of the patriarchy in general is important in Houellebecq's work because of the place he gives it in his writing. In *La Carte et le territoire*, the main protagonist Jed's artistic development, impression, and outlook are influenced by his father. The entire first part of the book chronicles the development of Jed's talent as a product of his father's talent. In *Plateforme*, the book opens with "Mon père est mort il y a un an" (11). This death provides Michel Renault the opportunity to take a group vacation where he explores global sexual fanaticism and destitution (much like Bruno). Finally, the context of *La Possibilité d'une île* is set in the future where immortality-driven fanatics (in their forties of course) seek to create genetically modified clones that will live a sorrow-free, eternal life, thus ridding the world of any needed procreation. In fact, the narrator reports of childfree zones created through the West that outright portrays the complete abandonment of filiation. The power of the phallus is sapped when it loses the only biological quality it can give—life.

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<sup>43</sup> I cannot help but think back to the start of the first section of Houellebecq's novel and how he declares "la fin de l'ancien règne" echoing the call to end French monarchy. Bruno represents the end of this former reign of masculinity. This does not mean that there will only be radically different masculinities post-Bruno; rather it means that Houellebecq pessimistically and figuratively cuts off the king's head (indeed one could discuss castration). But just as royalist support existed through the Revolution, so do traditional concepts of masculinity and the end of this "reign" of masculinity is merely a turning point in a larger discussion of the evolution of (postmodern) masculinity.

Masculinity has always been changing. The unique narrative style found in the text of Michel Houellebecq makes it apparent that his main protagonists are adhering to the universal law of the masculine order. His characters are impotent, fatherless men whose lifestyle assures that future generations will inherit the same destitute and sexually pessimistic lifestyle.<sup>44</sup> Critics agree that the men in *Les Particules élémentaires* have lost the battle and misread the codes of conduct that promised to fortify their masculinity, “the ultimate result being psychological breakdown and indefinite institutionalization” (Douglas 184) when both Bruno and Michel fail to reintegrate into society via their sexuality. However, these critics seem to argue that the problem is simply that men are lazy: “Le rapport sexuel est facile[...] Aucun effort de séduction n’est requis” (Clément 28), and they go on to say that women are easy to have sex with: “La conquête est obtenue sans combats, sans efforts” (31).

Indeed a lot of criticism focuses on the prevalent misogyny in the text and accepts the performance of masculinity in Houellebecq’s novel as is. Daniel Lindenberg, for example, dramatizes Houellebecq as “a literary opportunist who uses his character to debase women for the enjoyment of legions of misogynist, *Front-National*-supporting male readers” (Amans 68), suggesting that Houellebecq’s misogynistic depiction of women promotes masculine domination in the hope of selling more books. But to whom? Surely not the conservative, Catholic middle-class male who likely is not reading his novel in the first place. In fact, by focusing on women these critics accept the male representation in the texts because they do not explore the multiple possibilities and performances of masculinity that the male protagonists enact. However, my project differs from previous criticism in that I want to question the assumptions regarding the depiction of masculinity in the novel.

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<sup>44</sup> That is to say future generations of males within Houellebecq literary universe. To what degree Houellebecq’s characters reflect contemporary French society is a socio-anthropological question.

Ultimately, the key to understanding the protagonists of *Les Particules élémentaires* is to understand their fathers. The manliness, the masculinity of Houellebecq's characters is inherently negated by the absence of the paternal figure whose cultural role is to pass on patriarchal universal law. The rupture in the French concept of *filiation* impedes socio-cultural transmission of masculine dominance and sets a new standard for possible future masculinities. As Bruno Viard states, Houellebecq's novel showcases "une crise de la filiation" (38) as everything falls apart in the Houellebecquian novel: "la décomposition, celle de la famille, celle du corps social, celle du corps humain" (40).<sup>45</sup> Fatherhood appears to be the binding agent that would keep the family and society together for Houellebecq's narrator, as the fathers in the text abandon their cultural and social obligations.

What is important to note is that these men find themselves at a pivotal moment, when traditional models of masculinity as represented in French literature are shifting. What will be interesting is to trace symptoms similar to those of Houellebecq's characters throughout contemporary fiction to possibly highlight a larger postmodern masculine condition in the late-twentieth century. I propose to expand this inquiry to another spectrum of sexuality—queer literature. In the next section, I outline how fatherhood and the queer are connected by the figurative umbilical cord and how queer protagonists also negotiate their masculinity via their paternal relationship.

### **Erik Rémès and Sexing the Father**

Within literary depictions of masculinity, anxiety about homosexuality will likely be present in any discourse about fathers. Furthermore, from a psychoanalytic perspective, any discussion about the absence of fathers is a discussion about the presence of homosexuality

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<sup>45</sup> In *Houellebecq, Sperme et sang*, Murielle Lucie Clément examines family relations in the form of looking at Bruno's interactions with each figure—maternal, paternal, fraternal concluding that sexuality in Houellebecq's literary universe is marked by incest or incestuous psychopathy (84-104).



(Simpson 13). In his text about queer masculinity, Mark Simpson explains that “if the boy has no father to love and introject, how will he be successfully masculinized?” Simpson echoes a classical argument against the normalization of same-sex relations and marriage to show how opponents to these trends defended heteronormativity from a psychological perspective. The question innocently begs the notion of how the child, with no father, will pick up on socio-cultural (and socio-sexual) norms when there is no father whose traits he can replicate? The emotional plea seeks to privilege the children while promoting its own agenda—assuring that homosexuality remains marginalized. I extend my study of the relationship between masculinity and paternity to the queer author Erik Rémès, a contemporary of Michel Houellebecq’s, whose style and unabashed sexual depictions rival those of the latter. I suggest in this section that Rémès ties literary representations of queer masculinity in his texts to a sort of primordial lack that is discovered through his relationship with his father.

A study of Rémès’ texts will enable us to queer the teleological world of heterosexual behavior so as to dismantle the power of the patriarchal society by deconstructing the symbolic role of the patriarch. Rémès differs from Houellebecq in that he replaces the absent father with a discourse about sexuality and seropositivity. Whereas Houellebecq’s characters wander and wade through their own gender construction, Rémès’ protagonist Berlin Tintin quickly declares his queerness and later, seropositivity, therefore sexualizing the construction of his literary world. It is largely assumed that Rémès’ main character, Berlin Tintin is the author himself, projected into the story; however, I will treat Berlin Tintin as separate from the author to avoid the complex politics of autofiction and also make different claims about Rémès and Tintin.<sup>46</sup> A quick look at his three major novels (*Je bande donc je suis*, *Le Maître des amours*, and *Serial*

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<sup>46</sup> There is a lot to be said if one reads Berlin Tintin as a Rémès in the text. The politics of autofiction are important to this genre. By distancing Tintin from Rémès, I can freely talk about Rémès’ intention and also the multiple incarnations of Berlin Tintin who appears in Rémès’ novels.

*fucker*) demonstrates how the author writes in a universe that has no referent to the heteronormative world, since his texts queer the normative functions of sex while strategically underlining what AIDS means for gay men.

As far as paternity and masculinity are concerned, Rémès' work supports some of the claims I have already made about post-modern masculinity. A study of his work will further develop the point that the paternal role is in crisis, or more accurately, that the father represents an endangered species on a list of disappearing literary figures. The prevalent social fear of "absent fathers" presumes that sons will have no figure on whom they can introject gender norms. Conservative thought would believe this leads to degenerate forms of masculinity perceived as soft, most dangerously in the case of the homosexual. Rémès' first novel, *Je bande donc je suis*, centers the protagonist's initiation into sexuality around his relationship with a paternal figure. The relationship Berlin Tintin will exhibit with his stepfather is queer *par excellence* for it deconstructs the normative relationship that French *filiation* is based upon. The author alludes to this in his poetic hymn that starts the first part of the book:

Sexe rompt la pile

Sexe brise la chaîne (20).

This section is titled "Papa" and his poem highlights, even foreshadows, how the narrative will negotiate the lines of paternity, sexuality, and masculinity.

In *Je bande donc je suis*, Rémès introduces his main protagonist in a fashion similar to Houellebecq's, namely in an objective manner that frames the reader's approach to the story. Berlin writes, "Bonjour, je suis Berlin Tintin, j'ai onze ans et je suis déjà un grand garçon. Je vous raconte tout" (21). Here Berlin, in the realist tradition, declares who he is and what he is doing. He claims to take up the role of an objective narrator when he states, "Je vous raconte

tout,” alleging he will hide nothing and that his story is an objective portrayal of the events taking place. His first person narration gives insight and perspective to the events and action of the novel. His name reminds the reader of a young, curious, and adventurous reporter thereby reinforcing Berlin’s claim that he is exposing the true nature of his life.

Berlin Tintin is an orphan child ( “J’ai été abandonné à la naissance”) and is quickly adopted by a family whom he strongly hates and from which he quickly distances himself. However, most important to this introduction to Berlin is his sexual initiation. It is here that he evokes the title of the novel and explains, “C’est l’accès à la sexualité qui m’a fait grandir et prendre conscience de mon être, bander donc exister” (22). Berlin ties his existence to his sexuality, a literary strategy that is worth exploring further.

Sex equals being for Rémès, and any definition of masculinity will come forth through his sexual encounters because his protagonist Berlin Tintin cannot be if he is not engaging in sex: “Je savais que par eux [the men he slept with]—non par eux seuls mais par eux en grande partie—je me construirai[s]” (24). This textual detail illuminates Rémès’ text. On one hand, the future, “constuirai” denotes the certainty by which he will construct himself via these men. On the other hand, the conditional “construirais” suggests that something prevented the intended path he would have followed, likely HIV/AIDS. Therefore, one should not read his text as a diary of sexual encounters, but rather as a diary of his evolution, of his construction and definition of masculinity via his sexuality as an HIV positive man. This starts early since his sexual initiation takes place at the age of eleven; but his diary stops promptly to discuss his adoptive parents. As in the family affairs of Houellebecq’s protagonists, Rémès brings the reader’s attention to the family unit to frame Berlin Tintin’s upbringing and account for his actions.

Berlin's mother is a common gay trope—over-bearing, invasive, aggressive. She becomes aware that Berlin is gay after going through his room and discovering gay pornographic magazines. Her reaction threatens Berlin's privacy and confidence: "Elle a pété les plombs et disjoncté, a commencé à me gifler, m'a dit qu'elle préférerait que je sois morte, oui-oui, m'a parlé au féminin, m'a traité de folle, de sale pédé, de tante [...] " (25). The grammatical feminine markers are brought to the forefront by Berlin as he remarks that his mother uses a feminine ending in regards to his hypothetical death. The portrayal of gay men as women or feminine is not new; but here it highlights the greater question of how to negotiate masculinity within a publically perceived passive sexuality. The mother loses her familial role and simply becomes referred to pejoratively. Her search for the phallus, the psychoanalytical need to fulfill her own lack is presumably re-presented /re-produced by Berlin's own sexual passivity: "J'étais bien un enculé et j'en avais honte" (25).

While the mother is not the focal point of this chapter of my project, she still is a member of the familial unit. She plays a role in the negotiation and formation of Tintin's masculinity in part because of her invasive presence. However, turning back to the main focus—the father—Berlin Tintin explains that his adoptive father, who was "toujours absent", died of cancer (26). Berlin, like Michel and Bruno, is not simply a fatherless child but rather a child who lacks the experience of the paternal dialog that solidifies the patriarchal rule. The conservative Right would conclude immediately that his sexuality is a direct result of a disengaged father and dominant mother. Thus, I draw the attention to the commonality between our two authors, their protagonists, and their fictional father figures to highlight how both straight and queer literary discourse underlines a breakdown in patriarchal dominance.

Berlin's father dies of rectal cancer, which the son humorously describes: "[the father] avait enfin une bonne excuse pour ne plus être là". Berlin is a child with no ties, no heritage, no *filiation* within a larger, cultural code of paternity. He effaces the memory of the father altogether, giving the latter no place in the future and symbolically deleting his role, influence, and place in his life when he asks, "Enfin, n'avait-il jamais existé ce père-là?" (26). This statement reflects the earlier comments regarding Houellebecq's texts that the father is in a process of continual erasure. Within the texts of *Rémès*, he is gone. The ultimate goal, then, is to see how the loss of a paternal figure affects the sexual and masculine construction of the character in question by later highlighting some of Berlin's self-perceptions and actions.

The story takes a unique turn when Berlin's adoptive mother remarries the oncologist, Jacques, who had treated the father for cancer. Jacques is introduced to the reader as a possible solution to the parental lack Berlin is suffering from: "J'étais heureux qu'il s'occupe de moi, j'avais l'impression qu'il m'aimait" (27). However, the relationship is far from innocent; the next sub-section of the chapter is entitled "J'aime le gros sexe de mon papa." At a superficial level, the title connotes sexual attraction, admiration, and envy; however one can take a step further and read the title as a commentary about the return of phallic supremacy in this literary microcosm. Through the "gros sexe" of his father, Berlin is able to reestablish a patriarchal hierarchy. His statement implies a subjugation and submission to the phallic order in terms of his role as son (and later, lover). He furthers the claim when he states, "Je voulais cet homme, il serait à moi" (28), which again touches the physical, queer sexual contact Berlin desires and also supplants the lack of a paternal figure. Through Jacques, one can assume that Berlin has reestablished the patriarchal order of his world. However, this assumes that heterosexuality is the norm or the end result which it evidently is not in this queer text.

The aggrandization of Jacques continues as Berlin uses a vocabulary that reinforces the virile myth/symbol of Jacques's presence. He claims, "Mon Jacquot était beau, une force de la nature," which evokes a natural, unadulterated virility since it views Jacques's masculinity as a natural phenomenon and not as one that is linked to socio-cultural norms. He takes his perception of Jacques from the natural to the super-natural as his descriptions become a veritable apotheosis of his new step-father: "Mon père ce héros" (27) and later, "mon Hercule" (28).<sup>47</sup> Berlin finally finds that paternal figure from whom he could introject normative behavior; however the novel is outside of the normative and this is how Rémès shifts the normal paternal-filial relation that functions as a gateway for the transmission of gender roles. The sexual relationship that the protagonist and his step-father engage in is one that symbolically dismantles the familial hierarchy and shakes the foundation of patriarchal hegemony.

In order to discuss the unique depiction of Jacques and Berlin's relationship, one should first understand the dynamic of the dysfunctional threesome formed by the adoptive mother, the step-father, and Berlin. The reader is aware that Berlin does not have a positive relationship with his mother whom he only refers to vulgarly and never as mother. Rather, she is "la vilaine", "la toute-boudin"(28), "la toute-vacuité" (29), "la toute-castratrice" (25). This last signifier remarkably underlines how prevalent the principles of the Oedipus complex are in the text thus far, and who specifically is viewed as the castrator and castrated. Berlin never considers her to be his mother: "La mère, oulala, la mère non plus, n'existait plus, elle n'avait d'ailleurs jamais existé" (27). While her maternal qualities are lacking and demonstrate typical "deficient" mother characteristics, she still represents the maternal figure of the family romance and as such represents psychosexual competition for the attention of the "father"—Jacques.

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<sup>47</sup> A possible ironical allusion to Victor Hugo's *Après la bataille* ("Mon père, ce héros au sourire si doux") and *Odes à mon père*.

The psychodynamics of Berlin's sexual competition with his mother are quite clear: "J'ai envie de tuer la mère" (26). This matricidal urge suggests the Electra complex, and the pursuant anxiety felt by Berlin exemplifies the unresolved threat posed by the mother. Let me pause for a moment and admit that traditional cases of the Electra complex highlight mother-daughter competition which would require Berlin to be a woman.<sup>48</sup> At a rudimentary psychoanalytic level, one can perceive Berlin as a woman not only because of a Freudian interpretation of his homosexuality, but also because of his adolescent perception of himself as someone whose actions made him feminine.<sup>49</sup>

The Electra complex is useful for understanding Berlin's psychosexual anxiety when he views his stepfather with his mother. But the issue is resolved quite quickly when Berlin poisons his mother therefore eliminating her entirely from the (sexual) equation: "J'empoisonnai la toute-fiente avec la mort-aux-rats des souris du jardin" (32). This literary allusion to *Madame Bovary* highlights the pathetic nature of her death, similar in this sense to Emma's. The mother's murder is also a major turning point in the text because it provides the opportunity for Berlin and Jacques to carry on a full-fledged relationship. This relationship is a symbolic destruction of patriarchal authority in that the two become lovers and break familial ties.

The father-son couple leaves for vacation while the latter is still twelve years old. This trip becomes a sort of *voyage initiatique* that permits Berlin to confront any paternal conflict inherent to his postmodern masculine condition. The two travel to the beach where their intimacy grows and the dynamic of the couple switches from father-son to lovers. It is within the

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<sup>48</sup> Both the Oedipus complex and Electra complex assume that heterosexuality is universal which is definitely not the case in this text. Therefore applying the Electra complex to Berlin does raise interesting questions about the cohesiveness of same-sex relations and these complexes.

<sup>49</sup> Indeed according to Freud, unresolved issues surrounding the Oedipus and Electra complexes can lead to neurosis, hysteria, and ultimately homosexuality. All of this can be read as a humorous nod from Rémès, a trained psychoanalyst who plays with these stereotypes.

same sentence that Berlin explains how he is both son and lover: “Il m’aimait maintenant comme son fils et m’encula,” (30). The sentence opposes Berlin as son to Berlin as sexual partner for his step-father, who blurs the lines that establish the taboo of incest. The line is also blurred between child and adult as Berlin has a “sexe d’adulte” (29) yet a “petit cul d’enfant” (30) when he is penetrated. It is interesting to note the dichotomy of his “adult” self displayed to the reader as if to justify himself as a sexual partner for his step-father; yet when discussing his relation to his father, he primarily takes the role of the son, deferring to the father’s rule and power. The juxtaposed role of adult and child that Berlin wants to assume is indicative of the in-between zone he occupies. On one hand, he still submits to his father’s rule but on the other he wants to supplant it.

Up until now, Berlin has depicted himself in a shameful pejorative light. While it is true that he views his existence as inherently linked to his sexuality, he was ashamed of his same-sex attraction because he was being penetrated. The penetration by his step-father could be shameful in two obvious ways: first, the taboo of incest only seems to fortify Rémès’ obsession with his father and secondly, same-sex desire seems to produce little disgust in Rémès’ thoughts during this scene. One can go so far as to say that the stepfather physically (and therefore literally) supplants any phallic lack Rémès felt he was deficient in through penetration. The previous absent father is more than made up for, as Jacques is not only present in the son’s life, but also is representative of the Lacanian phallus; he is the giver, the seeder, the incarnate form of the phallus.

The roles are quickly reversed and this is where the relationship between the stepfather and Berlin deconstructs the power of the patriarchy. Berlin explains:

Plus tard dans la nuit, c’est moi qui encalais celui que j’aimais maintenant



comme mon père, j'étais l'oiseau sur l'éléphant, ne savais pas bien comment faire: il me guida. C'était ma première fois, je devenais un homme moi aussi.

(31)

By penetrating the father figure, the one he loved as his own father, Berlin is queering his interpretation of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. Here, a band of brothers comes together and ultimately kill and eat their father ending the "father horde" and his reign. However, in doing so they obtain an attribute, a source of strength, and complete their identification with him. In the queer Berlin sense, the penetration is equivalent to the consumption of flesh. By penetrating his (step-)father, Berlin identifies with him and fills his lack, fills his absence and assumes his proper place. His description of the scene juxtaposes again his role as child, apprentice ("[je] ne savais pas bien comment faire: il me guida") with that of his becoming an adult ("je devenais un homme"). By figuratively consuming his father, he is adopting the roles, customs and attributes that are inherited, introjected, and transmitted through normative filial relations.

The relationship reestablishes a hierarchy because Berlin looks to Jacques as the ruler, the educator who is responsible for erasing the shame Berlin felt for having sex with men: "Il me déculpabilisa" (32). Their bond is a queer understanding of paternal relations because it teaches Berlin to accept his sexuality: "Je commençais à accepter ce que j'étais, à accepter d'être pédé" (32-33). But it also queers that same relationship because Berlin trades roles with his step-father. He writes, "Il fut mon père et mon fils, mon frère et mon amant, mon maître et mon esclave" (33), highlighting the duality of all of their interactions. This constant and recurring duality is based on a lack of paternal dominance and is expressed through the fluidity of the boundaries between father-son, adult-child, penetrator-penetrated, etc... The submission to, yet dominance over, the patriarchy ultimately leads Berlin to claim who he is: "je pourrais [...] assumer mon

être” (33). It is finally here, after the death of his stepfather, after five long years of being son and lover that he considers himself a man—a gay man whose essence and masculinity is defined largely by the interactions he had with his father(s).

At the start of the novel, *Je bande donc je suis*, Berlin has sex with an Arab man whom he does not name: “Je revis cet Arabe dont je ne connus jamais le nom,” (23) therefore displacing his partner’s *nom du père*, and his lineage. “Qui bande, donc existe” (22), his self-recognition as a sexual being is not linked to his self-recognition as a completed being. In Berlin’s eyes, the ability to get hard does not mean that he is complete, or that he views himself as complete, or even that he has the means to come to terms with what it means to be a man. Berlin acknowledges his own deficiency: “J’avais déjà tant besoin d’un homme dans ma vie,” (23). The latter citation can be read as a way to underline the sexual desires of Berlin, who craves sexual contact,<sup>50</sup> but it also can be understood as a way to highlight the ensuing discussion about his paternal situation: “J’avais déjà tant besoin d’un homme dans ma vie,” is a confession and a plea to fill a gap. His answer comes in the form of Jacques who reinscribes Berlin into the normative model by recreating, reconstructing the bond of *filiation* through blood and penetration.<sup>51</sup>

Let me first unpack this queer reading of consanguinity. After Berlin and his stepfather have sex for the first time, Berlin awakes and notices Jacques’s “foutre rougi par le sang” (31). Within this context we have a mixing of the essence of the father, the very material that makes him virile, mixed with Berlin’s blood.<sup>52</sup> French law draws a distinction between consanguinity

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<sup>50</sup> “L’accès au logos” is a recurring theme in Rémès’s text for he links his larger philosophical being, his “être” and his existence directly to his penetration. The whole story of Berlin Tintin is established on the notion that before he was eleven, before he had sex with that Arab, he *was* not. The author treats this time period as a void zone, outside of the universe of his text in which only homosexuality, HIV, and men exist.

<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting that Acte 310-2 of the *Code Civil* prevents any adoption of a child born of incest.

<sup>52</sup> And later in chapter two, that very same material will make the seropositive men virile/viral as well.

and filiation: the former is a genetic bond that links offspring to parent; but the latter establishes the social and cultural context of the offspring in relation to his parents. In his second novel *Serial Fucker*, Rémès alludes to this scene when he writes:

Je n'oublierai jamais. Papa. Le goût de ces taches de sang. Mon sang sur son sexe que je léchais. Amour suave et amer. Du sperme et du sang. Voilà ce qu'est la vie. Juste un peu de jus et de rouge mêlés qui se jouxtent et s'étreignent à jamais. Je suis le fils du sperme et du sang. (*Serial Fucker* 113)

Flesh (penis) and blood mix to offer up a sort of sacrificial Eucharist for the protagonist's religion. This flesh represents his faith in the cogito, "qui bande, donc existe."<sup>53</sup> It is this mixture of blood and sperm that produces the protagonist, that gives life to his existence, and creates a link and bond to his father: "The definition of the self depends on the incorporation of the *nom du père*, the Lacanian phallus of the father that makes him complete, or seems to, were it not in and of itself a recognition of a lack" (Schehr 96). Berlin/the protagonist of *Serial Fucker* depends on this link, this rebirth with and of the father.

Within this universe of Rémès's (auto)fiction, the reader starts with the anonymity of sex and nameless Arabs, but then arrives at an identification of himself—"assumer mon être," Berlin Tintin is only Berlin Tintin after his step-father passes away: "C'est à ce moment-là, le jour de mes dix-huit ans, que commencent mes aventures: les aventures du gamin Berlin-Tintin" (33). To define himself, he incorporates the *nom du père* by having sex with it. The *nom du père* is the symbolic father who imposes law and hierarchy and in the protagonists' cases, regulates their desire. Subsequently, however, incorporating the *nom du père* inherently admits to the presence of a lack, a lack that only exists for Berlin and his *Serial Fucker* counterpart after their

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<sup>53</sup> In *French Post-modern Masculinities*, Lawrence Schehr calls "Je bande donc je suis", "seropo ergo sum" and other plays on the Cartesian logic of "cogito". They are a queer, re-appropriation of French logic that inscribes existence into sex. (57)

relationship with their stepfather: “C’est une force négative qui me génère: le néant” (123). This lack is constantly rewritten as both *Je bande donc je suis* and *Serial Fucker* are testaments to attempts at fulfilling a lack and reproducing the father’s phallus through new phalluses, “le sexe gouleyant de mes camarades,” (122) fill up his “absence d’objet.” Berlin expresses a fear of losing his father’s phallus and not only discovering his lack, but also never filling it or replacing it:

Ne me cache pas ce sexe que je saurai voir.

Ne me cache pas ce sexe que je saurai recevoir en moi. (36)

The fact is he does lose it and his quest to retrieve it comes to define his work, since as Schehr remarks: “No one really has the phallus except for the absent, dead father” (99).

These two novels, in part, are a record of the characters’ attempt at recreating the phallus of Jacques—the symbolic phallus of the lost, dead father. The phallus holds a central role in the texts of Rémès since he ties its presence or absence with being and non-being. In *Je bande donc je suis* he writes:

Cette toute proéminence est aussi le symbole de la puissance et de la volonté, ainsi que le lieu du manque. Le manque est cette visqueuse et glissante absence d’objet, une éclipse de l’être, de l’être qui est en n’étant pas. Le manque est simultanément de l’ordre de l’être et du non-être.  
(122)

Thus existence, presence, and phallus are all tied together in an everlasting quest for masculinity. If we assume, following Lacan, that Berlin is on a constant quest to fill a lack, then he is also on a constant quest to establish his existence (through various forms and queer iterations of the “cogito”) and discover his masculinity. But Berlin is aware of this, he is aware that to fill his

lack, he will be in search of the Father's phallus: "Le phallus est la représentation du manque, son incarnation. Le phallus est l'être-là du non-être du manque," (122).

He continually reinforces the lack that the Father's phallus left behind, as something to be filled. He moves his discussion to women's sexual purpose when he writes, "En exagérant un tant soit peu on pourrait dire que les femmes ont besoin du sexe des hommes pour ne pas sombrer dans le néant [...] Les hommes au sexe ou elles (homosexuels) n'en seraient pas loin (en avoir ou pas)" (123). Both women and gays are at risk of falling into the "néant", their own gap, their own lack that would prohibit their being, their existence and subsequent sexual self-discovery. Berlin's sexual endeavors are his attempts at filling the gap left by the absence of the Father's phallus, figuratively personified by his relationship with Jacques (*French Postmodern* 66). Much of the commentary on Rémès' corpus of texts acknowledges that both *Je bande* and *Serial Fucker* are chronicles of a serial-phallus seeker. Thus, it becomes more apparent that the barebacking subculture with which Berlin engages is his attempt at appropriating the lost phallus of the father. I agree that his seropositivity becomes his phallus and as Lawrence Schehr writes, "The moment of infection and its repetition as he potentially infects others are the sole moment in which he possesses the phallus" (102). As chapter two will demonstrate, bareback sex becomes the sole method by which Berlin can recreate the paternal-filial phallic exchange and also fulfill a procreative phallic duty.

Rémès's phallocentrism is not unique to the texts *Je bande donc je suis* and *Serial Fucker*. His novel *Le Maître des amours*, while largely different from the other texts in that it is not a story about a man with HIV, abandons the search for the Father's phallus (*le nom du père*) and places the main protagonist, also known as Berlin Tintin, and his phallus at the center. This text is not predicated on the fact that Berlin Tintin is in lack, rather that he is an example of a

phallus that fulfills the lack of others. In this text, Berlin is a bisexual prostitute who is hired to please various Parisian clients. The Berlin Tintin of this text practices safe sex, is seronegative, and fulfills both the intellectual and physical needs of his clients.<sup>54</sup> As a prostitute, he is sexually filling a role since he is positioned as the phallus, filling the lack of his clients who clandestinely contact him. His clientele are not simply men and women; rather, they are soldiers, commanders, husbands, fathers, couples, etc.—they are classic examples of masculinity and femininity that he deconstructs simply by placing himself as the phallic modifier who fills their lack. One of Berlin’s clients, Didier explains:

Berlin Tintin, tu es ma référence phallique. Tu représentes la virilité pour moi. J’en ai parlé à mon psy que je vois une fois par moi. Tu me fais du bien. Je n’avais jamais eu de tendresse comme ça avec un homme.

Encore moins avec une femme. (67)

For Didier, and others, he is the phallus that inherently marks virility and even justifies same-sex desire, more fulfilling than sex with women, although both are lacking. When Didier describes his relationship with his wife to Berlin, he echoes thoughts of similar to those of Berlin in *Je bande*: “Ne m’en parle pas. Il n’y a plus rien. Un gros néant de relation, du vide qui pue” (67). The reader will note the use of the words “néant” and “vide” that parallel earlier claims in *Je bande*: emptiness, a lack that is not fulfilled until the Father is found.

The question that arises from all of this is how the childhood or adolescence of Rémès’s queer characters affect their construction of masculinity? Masculinity is in question here, yet differently than in Houellebecq’s texts. Rémès links literary representations of masculinity in his texts to a sort of primordial lack, represented in the scene where his main character has sex with

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<sup>54</sup> I mention “intellectual” needs because in this novel, Berlin Tintin serves as a reference for all sexual questions his clients may have: “Tu es une vraie encyclopédie, Berlin Tintin, hihi!” (157) filling a lack of knowledge for these individuals.

his father. His formulation of “qui bande, donc existe” links sexuality to existence but an existence that is predicated on a search for the Father’s phallus that gives way to a perpetual cycle of masculinity. Masculinity for Rémès is embodied in the search for the Father’s phallus; and virility for him is the phallus itself.

In conclusion, the goal of this chapter is to understand how paternal roles affect the perception and construction of masculinity and subsequently how these roles affect the construction of the protagonist’s sexuality. In the case of Rémès and his main character, there is no discussion of gender; he is just a troubled child with a strong penchant for sex. But Berlin’s relationship with his adoptive father, on the one hand and stepfather, on the other, are diametrically opposed to each other. The adoptive father is detached, even invisible, and his absence breaks any cultural and familial link that Berlin would have established in a normative environment. This is reminiscent of Bruno and Michel who have no ties to a larger, meta-culture that grounds their familial heritage as their fathers are not present. It is as if Houellebecq’s attempt to genealogically trace back the history of Michel and Bruno is an artificial substitute for the cultural representation of their father. Houellebecq gives the reader this knowledge because Bruno and Michel will likely not have it and any future offspring will not be aware of it. The breakdown in notions of French *filiation* that appear in Houellebecq’s novel raises important questions about this concept and its portrayal in late-twentieth century literature.

Rémès, who writes slightly after Houellebecq’s *Les Particules élémentaires* was published, already inscribes his characters in a universe devoid of the former notions of *filiation*. Rémès’ main character, Berlin Tintin, is adopted by parents who eventually die off or are killed by the protagonist. Neither author writes about any sort of continued bloodline; rather each dismantles their cultural notions of lineage, heritage, and association, creating characters who are

members of an orphaned generation and die that way: “Michel Djerzinski a trouvé la mort en Irlande [...] se sentant dépourvu de tout attachement humain” (Houellebecq 304). These fatherless characters enact different constructions of masculinity; nevertheless their construction is in direct correlation with the “consequences” of a fatherless childhood and adolescence. For Houellebecq, the lack of paternal role models transforms itself into sexual anxiety that manifests itself at times in Bruno’s sexual impotency.<sup>55</sup> His masculinity is defined, in part, by his ability to have sex, much like Berlin. However, contrary to Rémès’ characters, Bruno and Michel are examples of what can happen when the search for the Father’s phallus turns out to be to no avail.

Bruno inscribes his masculinity in a reiterative process of sexual activity that leaves him without any fulfillment while his brother does the same, although arguably his search for the phallus is sublimated in his obsession with his work. Ultimately, the two characters fade as the end of their life marks their failure to resolve their lack. Michel dies forgotten and Bruno spends the rest of his days empty of desire: “tout désir était mort en lui” (294). These two characters never resolve their issues; rather one can conclude they are examples of failed masculinities or examples of new masculinities which postmodernity has allowed to come to a fore. Rémès differs in that he is not looking at the outcome, but at the actual process. His novels are a catalogue of what is happening as Berlin Tintin searches for the ultimate form of the phallus that would recreate/duplicate his experience with Jacques. Masculinity for him is the expression of the self which is the expression of his sexuality—his HIV+ self and the chronicles of his sex life.

Rémès’ point is that one cannot talk about masculinity without talking about sexuality and that one cannot talk about sexuality in the late-twentieth century without talking about AIDS. Therefore, I will now shift the discussion from the question of how paternity can affect

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<sup>55</sup> One could also argue that this represents castration anxiety in a psychoanalytical sense since Bruno’s biggest fear is losing sexual potency.



the construction of masculinity and masculine sexuality, to how masculinity is acted out by seropositive authors and characters whose sexuality has moved from the private to the public sphere. By exploring the relationship between AIDS and masculinity, we will uncover how French authors attempt to overcome or simply live with, the symbolic judgment of normative society that exists outside their texts. I make the distinction between “inside the text” and “outside” because both authors (Guillaume Dustan and Erik Rémès) of the next chapter create a universal seropositive world. Such a world assumes two things: queerness and the presence of AIDS. Western perception of HIV/AIDS viewed the disease as the consequence for sexually undermining heteronormativity: “A fatal disease, commonly believed to be caught by gay men who allow themselves to be penetrated, AIDS is the paternal law made avenging virus” (Simpson 87). In *Male Impersonators*, Mark Simpson discusses how the public perceived AIDS as divine judgment over a gay man giving in to homosexual desire and adopting the passive position. The passive position was seen as a threat to masculinity because penetration was equated to the surrendering of phallic power. AIDS is “merely the harsh but ‘just’ verdict” of the normative power systems in play at the time (87). My next chapter will move the discussion of masculinity and masculine sexuality as defined by paternal relations to a discussion of masculinity and masculine sexuality as defined through life with AIDS where AIDS becomes a tool for redefining masculinity and seropositivity.

*Chapter 2: Reclaiming Virility through Virality: Seropositivity and the Reappropriation of Masculinity*

“Et puis je me sens seul. Déçu. Et puis seul.”  
Guillaume Dustan, *Dans ma chambre*

“Now you can call me old-fashioned, you can call me conservative, just call me a man” is a poignant quote from the 1993 critically acclaimed film *Philadelphia*. Playfully spoken to his wife, personal injury lawyer Joe Miller (Denzel Washington) is responding to his wife’s claim that he has a prejudice against gay men. By stating, “just call me a man” Miller invokes a larger cultural stigma, discussion, and misunderstanding that surrounded both American and French HIV positive men—that, culturally speaking, they are not men. Miller’s emphasis on “man” strikes a sharp contrast between what is acceptable behavior for a man and what is not. He leaves “man” as the ultimate label, the one thing he is trying to hold on to in the face of an impending attack from those he perceives as sexually disoriented. During the AIDS epidemic, gay males were no longer regarded as men; common conservative thought perceived their sexuality as a confused subset of the male gender, the consequence of which produced HIV/AIDS. The discussion between Joe and his wife stems from a consultation former big-time lawyer Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks) sought with the former. Andrew believes his employment at a high-profile law firm was wrongfully terminated due to his HIV status. Joe Miller’s statement represents the social death that HIV/AIDS inflicts upon an individual because of the criminalizing attitude society took against those who were infected. Miller’s quote highlights the incompatibility of being gay and being a man in late 80s to early 90s Western culture. A high-

profile case centered on wrongful termination ensues and it immediately brings the private disease to the public's eye.<sup>56</sup>

The film *Philadelphia* shows how HIV/AIDS metaphorically forces gay men out of their private closet, subjecting them to the scrutiny of public judgment. The scrutiny becomes the main object of debate in the film since had Beckett's Kaposi sarcoma remained hidden, he would have likely never been fired. The film provides an interesting segue for this chapter because it is a prime example of how the clandestine nature of the disease, once rendered public, subjects its hosts to public moral scrutiny. In France sexuality is usually not a public matter: David Caron and Scott Gunther have stressed the universal acceptance of queer sexuality in France as long as it remained in the private sphere.<sup>57</sup> What HIV/AIDS does (both in the movie and in Western society in general) is to render the virus physical, marking, staining, branding its victim, and taking what was once private to the public for all to notice and chastise.<sup>58</sup>

Andrew Beckett believes his career ended over the recognition of his syndrome. His firing by the senior partners of the law firm is a metonym for his later social isolation and exclusion by the patriarchy. When these senior partners are summoned to court, one of them suggests a quick settlement. He claims that he wants to put the issue behind them. However, it becomes evident how HIV/AIDS can undermine patriarchal law since its existence is socially predicated on non-normative behavior and thus there needs to be a consequence for Andy's actions. The lead partner in the law firm, Charles Wheeler, says "Andy Miller brought AIDS into our offices, into our men's room, he brought AIDS to our annual god damn family picnic."

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<sup>56</sup> Andrew Beckett hides his serostatus from his employers because of their homophobia. He keeps his disease private and remains a successful lawyer until it produces visible traces indicating his status. Once the disease becomes recognizable, he is fired for supposed other reasons. The court case blurs the public and private sphere as it brings HIV/AIDS to the forefront of legal, cultural, and social discussion.

<sup>57</sup> See Caron's *AIDS in French culture: Social Ills, Literary Cures* and Gunther's *Elastic Closet*

<sup>58</sup> This disease is made even more public when Beckett takes the stand and his lawyer, Joe Miller, makes him open his shirt to display the lesions that cover his body, to display his illness, his proverbial leprosy.

One notices how Wheeler's comments go from the communal, "our offices" suggesting that Andy threatened everyone—that is to say HIV/AIDS threatens everyone, then towards masculinity as a whole, "our men's room," and finally, the ultimate offense, "to our annual god damn family picnic". This member of the patriarchy views HIV/AIDS as a threat to the family unit, and rightly so, as the family unit is under the patriarchy's dominance and control. To maintain its stronghold, the patriarchy must eliminate all threats.

*Philadelphia* traces the progression of the cultural view that those infected with HIV/AIDS do not exhibit traits of traditional masculinity. The HIV/AIDS crisis takes center stage, taking the spotlight from a normative discourse and centers it on the marginal voices of the epidemic's victims. Beckett is a metonym for HIV positive gay men as his sexuality and serostatus alienate him doubly. He is the ultimate threat to masculinity since he is gay and HIV positive. Ultimately, the jury finds Beckett's employment to have been wrongfully terminated. If one extrapolates from the jury as a representation of society, then one can conclude that the outcome of the trial represents the start of a social and juridical acceptance of HIV positive gay men. The film highlights the transformation of the public perception of HIV/AIDS who no longer view the male HIV/AIDS victims as emasculated.

The prejudice exhibited in *Philadelphia* is not unique to American society. Living with AIDS in France was just as controversial and has been chronicled in literature by Hervé Guibert and documented in numerous sociological studies. This chapter is not intended as a study of the onset of AIDS in France, but rather as an examination of the ways in which HIV positive French men negotiate the politics of masculinity in a post-AIDS world. In this chapter, I will examine how the concept of virility is re-appropriated for the queer community. If virility as a whole is the power to spread seed, then seropositive men are spreading the seed of the virus, ensuring its

passing from generation to generation. They reclaim virility through *virality* while renegotiating the blurry lines of their own masculinity. Erik Rémès and Guillaume Dustan, both successful post-AIDS authors,<sup>59</sup> chronicle life with the disease. I suggest that these authors not only write within a queer and seropositive literary world, but that they reappropriate the human biological reproductive model transforming it to (re)produce seropositivity. Impregnation is replaced with contamination and reproduction is replaced with seroconversion. These authors populate their queer republic with HIV positive men who in turn will reproduce seropositive men. They reappropriate the republican duty of procreation by populating their own seropositive nation.

### **Theorizing AIDS and Masculine Identity**

The overarching goal of this dissertation is to define what postmodern masculinities are, and a study of the HIV/AIDS epidemic proves to be a quintessential example of how this disease contributes to that agenda. Postmodernism and HIV/AIDS work well together because postmodernism is a moment of deconstruction, of unpacking the hierarchy of previous narratives and stripping away of all-encompassing movements. HIV/AIDS mirrors this principle in that the disease deconstructs the male body by attacking the immune system, turning its defense mechanisms into the breeding grounds for the disease. In a certain way, the virus reappropriates the narrative of defense when it comes to human T-cells, and turns it into a narrative of destruction as those T-cells populate inside our bodies. There is no other disease that causes such widespread panic as the HIV/AIDS virus does at this time, and the public reaction to it is a classic one: isolation, alienation, and social shunning, a verdict passed on the acts that

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<sup>59</sup> By “post-AIDS” I am using a term that has come to refer to the time after the initial onset and response to the virus. As cocktail drug treatment advanced, the disease became manageable in the eyes of the gay community. Post-AIDS, in fact, deals with the impact of the epidemic on society. The discourse on HIV/AIDS is no longer centered on the juxtaposition of life and imminent death. Rather, the discourse changes to life with AIDS.

supposedly entailed contamination. This is how HIV/AIDS and postmodernity come together as the latter is representative of a deconstructive model that privileges the isolation of language and its meaning.

The question that does arise is how HIV/AIDS redefines masculinity during this crisis. As Simon Watney has shown, public perception of AIDS frames a blood disease as a venereal disease and in this way it frightens the proponents of heteronormativity because it is initially associated with a gay behavior that in theory threatened the Patriarchy's domination.<sup>60</sup> Like the now obsolete body of thought regarding spontaneous generation in fruit flies, HIV/AIDS was thought to have spontaneously resulted from gay sex, a consequence of anal penetration. From a French cultural perspective (not only a masculine one) it represents a public verdict for a private action. By the end of the 1980s and into the early 90s, HIV/AIDS came to take on an abundance of meanings and metaphors. HIV/AIDS becomes an epidemic of representation, consumed with what HIV/AIDS means for society rather than what the virus does to the human body.<sup>61</sup>

Therefore, to theorize AIDS<sup>62</sup> means to admit that it had/has cultural, literary, linguistic, medical and biomedical consequences that continue to echo into contemporary discussions. When I use the term "AIDS theory," I want to engage in a larger, intellectual discussion with various disciplines about the multi-faceted impact of the virus on culture, society, and specifically literature and the relationship between the disease and language.

Of all the metaphors that come out of the AIDS crisis, Paula Treichler points out that "AIDS as war" represents an accurate understanding of how society dealt with the syndrome: "A long,

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<sup>60</sup> The patriarchy's power is not only maintained by a ritual passing on of socio-cultural customs from "father" to "son" but also from the conscious subjugation of women who willingly submit to this rule of order.

<sup>61</sup> Paula Treichler labels it an "epidemic of signification."

<sup>62</sup> I use the term "AIDS" and "HIV/AIDS" interchangeably to represent the broad clinical spectrum of HIV-related illnesses. Since I am discussing the literary reaction to this epidemic, distinguishing between the virus and the proceeding syndrome would not contribute much. My goal is to be inclusive of all facets and stages of the medical virus and subsequent syndrome so as to talk about the overall HIV/AIDS impact.

devastating, savage, costly, expensive, and continuing war [...] AIDS is a war whose participants have been in the trenches for years, surrounded by death and dying” (70). A war is a battle over something of common interest. When it comes to HIV/AIDS, the battle is being fought to legitimize the universal importance and impact the virus has had on not only queer community but also the population as a whole. Like all wars, certain privileged populations remain unaffected, passing the front line of battle as “tourists”, spectators, but not participants (Watney 44). Simon Watney suggests that only minority communities (social, sexual, ethnic) are the ones to suffer in war while others allow the death toll to rise. This ignorance of the privileged population denies reality because it denies any articulation of the epidemic’s impact on minority communities.

AIDS is intrinsically tied to contemporary discussions of masculinity (French discussions in this particular case), because the initial onset of the epidemic was viewed as fate, a consequence of homosexuality, a manifestation of sins that defied all bio-medical knowledge and targeted a subset of the population. The epidemic reinforced a binary opposition between homosexual and heterosexual driven by homophobia and previous “myths” about same-sex intercourse. By confining AIDS to the gay population, the scientific community of the eighties was legitimizing two things: one, that this “epidemic” could and would only infect a certain population, namely gay males<sup>63</sup> and their “vulnerable anuses,” (a relatively small population when compared to the multiple billions a non-gay disease could infect worldwide); two, such an argument asserted the social superiority of heterosexuality since the disease, by being limited to homosexual patients, reinforced heteronormativity as there was not threat to straight sexual intercourse. Heterosexual

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<sup>63</sup> Lesbians and women in general are thought not be affected by the disease as their “rugged vagina(s)” have evolutionarily come to fend off invading “killer sperm” (Treichler 125) confirming their moral superiority as the disease was perceived not to threaten them.

men still remain at the center and women, the peripheral gender, the constant as the bearer of man's fruit,<sup>64</sup> representing moral fortitude.<sup>65</sup>

This link between the virus and the narrative of heteronormative dominance is a critical to understanding masculinity through AIDS and its socio-cultural implications. It therefore becomes more apparent why a "postmodern" discussion about French masculinity should address how AIDS reconfigured the landscape of French masculinity in late twentieth century literature, and beyond. Media portrayals of the epidemic shelp us to grasp how the French landscape has shifted. In Cindy Patton's *Inventing AIDS*, the author discusses how in the pre-1985 media, a "virtual media blackout" about AIDS dominated all popular discourse keeping the disease off mainstream radars (18-19). This also relegated AIDS to a queer sphere that was unable to generate concern from dominant discourse or mainstream media outlets. Thus it came as a great shock in 1985 when the diagnosis and death of Rock Hudson was made public. Until this moment, ordinary heterosexuals felt somehow protected from infection by a transcendental and moral barrier, a halo of sexual superiority that miraculously fended off the virus, as if God's antibodies were bestowed on the morally good.

With the confirmation of Rock Hudson's seropositivity, an anxious, internalized panic swept through pop culture as AIDS no longer was a "gay cancer" but had now become everyone's disease both in America and abroad. With the media sensationalizing and passing judgment on AIDS victims, deep prejudices against the gay community arose. Rock Hudson is an important figure when it comes to "theorizing" this virus because of the place he occupied in

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<sup>64</sup> Paula Treichler demonstrates that by relegating AIDS to a "gay cancer", and strictly discussing the disease as a male threat, the scientific community is not only enforcing the ideological dominance of heterosexuality, but also sexism and the superiority of men over women. She uses examples of 1981-88 scientific studies that detail women as "insufficient carriers" of the virus (23).

<sup>65</sup> See Jacques Leibowitch. *A Strange Virus of Unknown Origin*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Ballantine 1985.



Western popular culture at the time. He was America's man, Hollywood's leading man who dominated cinema in the fifties and sixties. As a 6'5" Navy veteran, Rock Hudson represented the epitome of heterosexuality and masculinity. His diagnosis and death is a great place to segue into a discussion about AIDS in France and how they publically (and privately) handled the onset of this virus. From 1984-85, Hudson traveled through Europe, largely staying in France and confirming his serostatus in the country. His death was partially responsible for the public discourse on AIDS since Hudson's public admission of being HIV positive and subsequent death from AIDS-related complications forced this disease out of the closet for both American and French cultures.<sup>66</sup>

The over-arching goal of this section was to detail the social and cultural climate *from* which, not *in which* the authors of this chapter are writing because I argue that Erik Rémès and Guillaume Dustan are not "AIDS" writers but "post-AIDS" writers. Their texts are part of a literary continuum regarding HIV/AIDS novels. These authors write from a place where the disease is assumed, not detailed. Seropositivity is a prerequisite for entry into their novels. However, it is the social history outlined above that contextualizes their reactions and the reactions of their protagonists. HIV/AIDS becomes the constant in their novel; seropositivity becomes the normative line from which all other serostatuses deviate.

It is interesting to juxtapose the normativity of seropositivity in the novels of Rémès and Dustan against the formally socially ostracized position these men occupied—as diseased "others." Each seropositive gay man represented the embodiment of a cultural fear. Together they become a cultural other against which society could position itself in a normalizing fashion. While it may seem banal to say that homophobic AIDS rhetoric exists solely because AIDS

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<sup>66</sup> For more about Rock Hudson and his cinematic masculinity, see Richard Dyer's article "Rock—the Last Guy You'd Have Figured?" in, *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Me*. (1993), which showcases the implicit reply of "Yes, he was."

exists, I am suggesting that masculine hegemony and heteronormativity reaffirm their place in hierarchies via the infected other. Therefore, by theorizing AIDS, one also is questioning the dominance of heteronormativity and this is where the authors of this chapter come into play—writing as other, as they both create a world where heterosexuality has no meaning or importance.

### **HIV/AIDS in the French Context**

France has dealt with different forms of the plague from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, smallpox and measles throughout the eighteenth and finally HIV/AIDS in the late twentieth. Each disease solicited a cultural response, and HIV/AIDS is no exception to the other diseases that have marked the French social landscape. HIV + men became scapegoats for conservatives and were perceived as social and cultural threats to Frenchness during the late twentieth century, along with Jews, Muslims, immigrants, gays, and non-Catholics. This historical anomaly has been documented by David Caron in *AIDS in French Culture* as well as by Julian Jackson in *Living in Arcadia* in which he chronicles the fall of the homophile group, Arcadie, and the onset of HIV. Both studies conclude that French society issued a social quarantine that was thought to prevent the spread (and acceptance) of the disease.<sup>67</sup>

It is worth taking a moment to explore the history of homosexuality in France and to explain how both French society and the literary field responded when the crisis hit. In 1986, twenty-five percent of the French population considered homosexuality a disease that should be

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<sup>67</sup> What I mean here is two-fold: one, accepting the disease means that society is acknowledging its existence rather than denying the reality or seriousness of it. Two, allowing seropositive people to integrate into society, not quarantining them, is a form of "accepting" the disease as it prevents social isolation. Both of these reasons contribute to French society's approval of a "non-normative behavior" as previously conceived.

cured (IFOP 3).<sup>68</sup> An additional sixteen percent viewed homosexuality as “une perversion sexuelle à combattre.” Nearly fifty percent of the population did not view homosexuality as a normal behavior. This is the context in which the HIV/AIDS virus struck the French population. More importantly, is that this is the context in which the post-AIDS authors discussed in this chapter grew up. A society that in large proportion viewed gays as abnormal was prone to alienating victims of the virus.

Historically, the study of homosexuality in France can be traced back to 1791 and the decriminalization of sodomy during the revolutionary period. Philosophers at the time deemed the criminalization of private, consensual acts an unjustifiable invasion of privacy and a transgression of the lines that separate the public from the private in France (Gunter 87). This is a milestone as France became the first country in Western Europe to depenalize sodomy however it did not do much to cultivate gay rights especially considering France’s later reaction to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The decriminalization of sodomy reinforced the legal separation of public and private spheres where the government will not intrude upon the private nor will the private intrude upon or affect the public.<sup>69</sup> However, this legal and cultural precedent was ignored during the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Homosexuality is not visible (public) unless the agent chooses to declare it, or rather assume its identity.<sup>70</sup> From the Revolution through the mid-twentieth century, most same-sex relations remained indoors, private, away from public reactions. By 1980 and with the establishment of *Le Marais* as the gay district of Paris, many gays abandoned the strict political activism of groups like Arcadie that differentiated

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<sup>68</sup> In 2012 the same survey showed that six percent of the French population still thought homosexuality “est une maladie que l’on doit guérir” (IFOP 3).

<sup>69</sup> See post-World War II laws dealing with public acts of indecency. The French penal code punished acts of indecency among same-sex partners more severely than their heterosexual counterparts (Gunter 30-37).

<sup>70</sup> In Guillaume Dustan’s *Je sors ce soir*, the narrator writes, “Je ne savais pas qu’il était séropositif” (14), underscoring the idea that homosexuality and HIV/AIDS had become again notions of the private sphere because medical advancements in the nineties had made it possible for victims to be no longer physically marked by AIDS.

them from mainstream society in order to adopt a more republican assimilatory lifestyle.<sup>71</sup> From 1979 onward, many discriminatory laws were repealed due to the activism of groups like the *Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire* and publications like *Gai Pied*. Political militancy was a thing of the past (Gunther 65) as gays were left alone to private life queer lives in the Marais. By not publically threatening the status quo and putting French universalism first, gays at the time were trying to be first openly French, then clandestinely gay. The success of this passive activism is due to the fact that in the public sphere, all French men and women are supposed to be the same: citizens of the republic.

Critics like Victoria Best and Martin Crowley point out that French universalism privileges the heteronormative model under the guise of equality. In *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film*, Best and Crowley state that authors like Rémès and Dustan who celebrate seropositive barebacking behavior are creating an “identitarian position” pitted against that of French universalism and republicanism. “The emphatic celebration of anal pleasure [sex] entails, constitutes a defiant rejection of universalism dismissed as merely a cover for the propagation of familial, reproductive heteronormativity” (89). Moreover the rejection of France’s core republican principle is what provides the biggest metaphorical threat to the nation and is likely the reason why relegating queer identities to the private sphere seemed like an appropriate compromise. It kept the radical rejection of universalism hidden.

However, when it comes to the HIV/AIDS virus, there is no clandestinity, at least not at the onset. Many HIV victims suffered from Kaposi sarcoma, KS lesions that marked (*étiqueter*) the body, tagging the victims for social judgment. This is where the injustice

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<sup>71</sup> For more about the rise and fall of homophile movements and why French gays adopted a more clandestine lifestyle in the Marais, see Julian Jackson’s *Living in Arcadia* (2009 University of Chicago Press).

and the hypocrisy of the French legal and social systems played out. French society relegates homosexuality to the private sphere, but HIV/AIDS makes it public, creating social hostility and estrangement as the two spheres collide. Seropositive citizens were not criminals in the legal system; however they were definitely viewed as social deviants, which in the French context can have worse consequences, such as social alienation, isolation, and ultimately apathy (Gunther 80, Caron 154).

The French reaction to the onset and the treatment of AIDS testifies to the ways in which the nation dealt with the confrontation between Frenchness and sexual otherness. This understanding helps us comprehend how authors like Dustan and Rémès construct their queer literary worlds negotiating between Frenchness and queerness. Murray Pratt in “The Defense of the Straight State: Heteronormativity, AIDS in France, and the Space of the Nation” observes that the discourse surrounding AIDS during the peak of the epidemic was largely a discussion about the nation:

French accounts of issues relating to HIV and AIDS are remarkable in their persistent representations of the epidemic within the frame of the nation, often to the extent that the focus of even the most informed commentaries tends to slip away from being about AIDS to actually being about France in a more generalized sense. (264)

French intellectuals were often more interested in what could be learned about French society and how French national identity was reshaped by the outbreak of AIDS than they were in the virus itself and its medical impact.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Murray Pratt uses Jean de Savigny’s *Le Sida et les fragilités françaises* (1995) as an example of a text talking more about the effects of the virus on society and French identity politics than the syndrome itself.

Because the discussion surrounding AIDS is so inextricably linked to French society and identity, homosexuality and the disease were perceived as enemies of the state. The Right exploited the fear of HIV and AIDS, painting the disease and all gays as a moral threat to the French nation and aligning them with former and current threats such as Jews, women, immigrants, drug users, and modernity as a whole.<sup>73</sup> Homophobia in the eighties and early nineties became the new anti-Semitism as the anti-Semitic rhetoric reappeared in political discourse. The seropositive outsider would threaten the purity of the French “race” and weaken “the immunity of the state” (Pratt 267). The majority of this political discourse originated with the Front National. The FN claimed that HIV/AIDS is another foreign threat weaken the Hexagon’s borders. The FN replicated its former discourse on immigration in order to exploit the same panic towards the physical sexual “other.” Pratt further explains that by linking immigration and “deviant” sexual practices, the FN made the threat to French identity real to the public: “By positioning immigration and sexual practices other than monogamous heterosexuality as co-terminous and overlapping threats to French national identity itself, the FN attempted to gain control over how that identity should be defined” (268-69). The foundation of Frenchness is under attack right at its root; in a sense, the FN’s rhetoric imitates the virus’s tactic against the body’s immune system; an internal threat that has bypassed perceived immunity.

The Right’s politics reflected a larger concept that is key to this project—masculinity. The nation’s defense, its borders, identity, culture and society are built on a model of masculinity and heterosexuality that were disrupted when the HIV/AIDS epidemic spread throughout French society at the time. The foundation of Frenchness was called into question if AIDS victims were accepted socially.<sup>74</sup> The public’s reaction and ostracization of seropositive citizens was the

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<sup>73</sup> See Michael Pollack, *Les homosexuels et le sida: sociologie d’une épidémie* (1988).

<sup>74</sup> See the later juxtaposition of *républicanisme* and *communautarisme*.

result of a masculinist panic. The state agrees to provide for its citizens provided they fit the rubric of heteronormativity; on the flip side, the state's power and authority comes from the compliance of healthy, conforming family units. When an internal threat like AIDS publically showcases the clandestine nature of sexuality, it threatens the heteronormativity upon which French republicanism is founded. The disease pits the queer community against the larger French nation.

The Front National's political discourse was a result of the republican model that values a relationship with the citizen over a representative minority identity that many citizens may belong to. As such, homosexuals are sub-community within the larger French society. The French political landscape does not approve of social contracts being extended to communities, but rather to the individual citizen. The state can therefore force an individual to assimilate to French social and cultural hegemony, therefore legitimizing its purity and supremacy, rather than attempting to assimilate a socially, culturally, ethnically, or sexually distinct group into a society with social constructed norms. Groups negate the premise of a direct governmental relationship between the state and the individual.

As stated earlier, when homosexuality is practiced in the private sphere, it is deemed acceptable, as the government by law is not supposed to intrude on a person's private sphere. This is the unwritten agreement upon which French citizenship is built, a universal principle according to which the citizen is aligned with the state through a mutually beneficial contract. David Caron eloquently explains the interaction of the state, the individual, and the threat of communitarianism: "This traditional view of the republican model of nationhood defines French citizenship as a contract resulting from a political will, from the convergence of free, individual decisions to live together according to a core of basic universal principles" (283). The concept

of an indivisible nation cannot coincide with minority communities that represent individuals as political agents because the modern French nation is founded on an unspoken rule derived from the presupposed desire to live together with no intermediate actor separating the State from the individual.<sup>75</sup>

This unitarian model of “all for one, and one for all,” however, butts heads with economic and cultural globalization. The latter creates fear of social miscegenation since France has become increasingly interested in economic and cultural imports, the latter of which stems from the adoption and appropriation of Western culture. Talking about gay communities or any ethnic or social minority is a socio-political paradox in France where the desire to distance itself from the social fragmentation of American society is strong.

The confrontation between French *républicanisme* and communitarianism in the case of HIV is of particular interest since the virus was thought to be “[un] cancer qui toucherait exclusivement les homosexuels” (Guibert 21). On the one hand, French political culture is forced to treat HIV/AIDS as if the virus “were to abide by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen” (Caron 286); however, there was a silent hope that this virus would remain within the confines of a distinct community—the very community that the government would not recognize. This is the tension that for Caron comes with French homosexuality (286); gays are individuals, citizens of the republic and therefore entitled to all the rights granted by it; however they make up a perceived “despised” minority that, itself, cannot speak on behalf of its members. The result is that, in theory, French gay identity cannot exist within the larger

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<sup>75</sup> David Caron references Ernest Renan “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” (1887), where Renan details how the French republic is built on the notion of the citizen’s direct relationship to the state. This direct relationship is the only way individual rights are guaranteed without being diluted in and circumscribed by intermediate secondary allegiances/communities. Religion, language, ethnicity etc., belong to and are protected as part of somebody’s private sphere as long as they do not interfere with the “core principle” of the republican model of nationhood.



framework of French socio-politics. The reality, however, is that it does, on the border between Frenchness and queerness.

The challenge AIDS presents in the French context is the constant negotiation between queerness and Frenchness. This negotiation stems from the fact that the virus is linked to the gay community and as such is anti-republican because of its promotion of communitarianism (Caron 289). The “gay lifestyle” in particular is understood as a metonym for globalization and seen more as a homogenized adoption of gay American pop culture. Such a view posits Frenchness and queerness as extremes, incompatible within the socio-political scale. Caron remarks that French republicanism did well at maintaining its neutrality during a time when the branding of gay communities was in constant flux. By doing so, universalism became the happy middle ground and solidified the importance of Frenchness as a moderate norm and not a polarizing extreme. This leaves French queerness and sexual identity to be considered “anti-French” since one can label it an example of communitarianism or *mondialisation*. Either way, both are perceived to deviate from the central founding narrative of the French republic.

One could therefore label France’s initial lack of response to, and funding and support for HIV/AIDS victims as a case of republican homo- and xenophobia. This would, according to Caron, definitely describe the public sentiment and French mentality with respect to the gay community and HIV + French people.<sup>76</sup> At a political level, the reason why AIDS hit the French population so hard is directly connected to the influence of the republican model. Yes, there was a community of support but it was mainly the result of social activism and not political mediation. The “political non-existence” (Caron 292) of gays, as a vulnerable community, made any response by the French Republic impossible to execute, as it undermined the political essence on which it was founded. The government could not respond to a community as a

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<sup>76</sup> See Caron (1998, 284-285).

whole, it would have needed to respond to the individuals. Thus at the onset, the virus and its epidemiology were metaphorically shoved further into the closet to avoid the confrontation between the community and the nation. To this day, France has not solved the conflict between the fear of multiculturalism and the perceived necessity of universal integration.

As we have seen, French social reality is defined by a social norm that is implicitly heteronormative and heterosexual. While some deviations are accepted because they do not disrupt or shift the norm and its acceptance, the historical reality within which the authors discussed in this chapter write is strictly heteronormative. However, the reality of their texts is not; Dustan and Rémès construct a literary universe that privileges no sexual normativity other than unprotected sex between same-sex lovers. It centers the discourse on the margins of reality and brings to the fore the previously marginalized discourse on barebacking and HIV/AIDS. Their writings thus allow for an exploration of this subculture and its performance of masculinity.

This performance is based largely on the idea that bareback sex is morally wrong. By positioning this type of sexual activity on the outside of even homonormative discourse,<sup>77</sup> there is an implicit judgment about the behavior going as far as criminalizing it. Dustan and Rémès embrace this subculture, making it the norm from which abstention and seronegativity are the deviant, unacceptable behaviors. Dustan explains in *Dans ma chambre*, “Je ne connais plus personne qui soit séronégatif” (47), highlighting that the literary universe of his novels is HIV +.

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<sup>77</sup> Tim Dean in *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* suggests that “homonormativity” is a paradoxical term. On the one hand, it can exist at the cultural level as a norm in the queer community that has come to denounce barebacking as wrong and relegate the practice to clandestine spaces and underground communities. This would mean that barebacking is not “normal” in the gay community. However, theoretically speaking, homonormativity is in essence an assimilatory model that wants to align homosexuality with heteronormative practice. Therefore “homonormativity” follows the same model as its dominant hetero counterpart and amounts to nothing more than a queer version of normative practices that permit same-sex alliances.

I would go so far as to call it a *seronormativity*, a world where existence is based on the presence of a detectable viral load.

Dustan and Rémès belong to a subculture of gay men who have discovered that, on the basis of viral transmission or serostatus they can form a kinship, a network of relationships that resemble heteronormative familial bonds. However, the reappropriation of these heteronormative familial features may run the risk of reproducing exactly what this queering gesture of seroconversion seeks to erase. I would argue that while this is a theoretical risk, it is still a queer version of a normative relationship. Heteronormative families and kins are tied together by blood and what these authors promote is kinship through a seropositive bloodline. Instead of sharing genetic resemblance, these men share immunological resemblance. This gives meaning to the subculture, a *raison d'être* that establishes their community. However, a large portion of previous and contemporary commentary on bareback sex treats it like a “pathological behavior” (Dean 9, 48) and any other interpretation would promote an egregious lifestyle that “goes against the grain of society” aiding the disease and preventing its just and future elimination.<sup>78</sup> But many literary and queer critics agree that in order to understand barebacking, we need to treat it like any culture and approach it anthropologically, gaining insight into its language, rites, traditions, and mores. Such an approach allows us to comprehend better how Dustan and Rémès mold their literary depiction of barebacking and life with HIV/AIDS. By approaching it anthropologically, one affords these authors the ability to create a literary seropositivity where the text is always “positive,” not knowing “pre-”AIDS world.

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<sup>78</sup> Tim Dean discusses the desire to criminalize all bareback behavior in his introduction to *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (2009). However, as he notes, this does nothing to explain the reason for this subculture’s and community’s existence. Rather, it continues to mark bareback sex as a disorder that promotes the spread of a life-threatening disease. In doing so, we lose the ability to interrogate the bonds of kinship that created this culture and unify it in the face of legal, cultural, and medical challenges that want to end it.

The term barebacking proves to be an interesting choice of language for this sub-community because of the allusions it draws to the activity.<sup>79</sup> The term implicitly evokes masculinity since it originates from horse-back riding. The equestrian origins of the word highlight the image of the American cowboy, rugged and strong. He who is so masculine does not need the comfort of the saddle; rather the cowboy is raw, one with nature and with his beast in the pursuit of justice, law, and order. Riding bareback offers no protection against the rough nature of this activity, but the cowboy is not looking for protection. The cowboy is in essence a perfect example for the bareback community to channel. He is commonly lawless, a vigilante outside of the norms but whose gender performance is categorical and static. I suggest that barebacking is at the very least the appropriation of an idealized masculinity into queer culture. The term engages a larger discourse on masculinity and rebellious nature among both communities.

Ultimately, my goal is to demonstrate how members of the bareback community in both Dustan's and Rémès' texts reproduce biologically, and how barebacking is key to this reproductive process. Unprotected sex creates consanguinity among the men engaging in this action that negates the need for women. Men reproduce among themselves, physically sharing their blood and genetic material to breed a new progeny made in the essence of the seeder. The works included in this section will demonstrate how the protagonists' "contaminated" seed breeds new definitions of masculinity in a queer literary universe that reproduces via a viral transmission.

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<sup>79</sup> It is worth noting that the French queer community adopted the English term and use it the same way.

### **Turbulent Trajectory: AIDS and Autopornography in the work of Guillaume Dustan**

As a gay, French bourgeois man, Guillaume Dustan is not writing from the literary periphery, but rather from the epicenter, continuing a nineteenth- and twentieth-century tradition of bourgeois literature that chronicles life. What is at the periphery of his social reality is his sexuality but he brings it to the fore in his novels by guaranteeing two things: that the characters present in the novel are gay and that they are all seropositive. There are notable exceptions that allow the reader to draw some conclusions about Dustan's portrayal of women or heterosexuals, but none of them question the integrity of his gay, seropositive utopia.

Dustan holds an important place in queer canonic literature as the editor of *Le Rayon Gay*, the first French journal solely dedicated to LGBT studies publishing other prominent queer authors like Monique Wittig and Erik Rémès. His texts are autofictive which becomes a troublesome sub-genre of the autobiography in that it is perceived to encourage risky sexual behavior because it comes from a personal albeit fictionalized place. Ahmed Haderbache in "Homo et sexualité pendant les années SIDA" remarks that Act-UP and other activist associations viewed Dustan's (and Rémès') texts as a promotion of unsafe sex: "L'autofiction que va générer les années sida chez de nombreux auteurs va être mal perçue par les association telles que Act-UP" (195). Haderbache claims that this form of autobiography promotes such behavior because of its contents. He quotes Philippe Mangeot who chastises Dustan and Rémès for the content of their novels: "Guillaume Dustan ou Érik Rémès proposent une petite religion de la prise de risques" (195), simply because the authors are presenting an intimate recounting of their seropositive lives where these risks are on display. While the overt discussion about their sexual practices can be perceived as approbation for bareback sex, I suggest that the authors are curing their social and literary illness the only way they know how. Unsafe sex is their

novels is how they reproduce life and lineage, it is how erase their seropositivity by making everyone seropositive.

Dustan's first three novels form what he calls his *autopornographie*, the chronicle of his gay life. His novels progressively move from a myopic view of his world to an increasingly larger panorama of the queer French world. *Dans ma chambre* (1996) is an exploration of his sexuality but within the confines of his bedroom, a metonym for French gay culture of the 1990s. For Dustan, defining his masculinity is concomitant with explaining his sexuality. He demystifies the bedroom by putting it center stage in the novel, indirectly dialoguing with Foucault about the premise that sexuality is confined to the bedroom and the function of procreation. The author plays with the traditional concept of the bedroom and sexuality as a whole and queers a "sacred" space, defining procreation via bareback sex.

He begins to expand the world of which he is a part in his second novel *Je sors ce soir* (1997), a narration of the events that took place once he came out. Dustan expands his literary world from the bedroom to a queer space, a token gay club, chronicling, according to him, the typical activities of a gay French man in the nineties. In this space, only men are present and mingle; these exchanges are the elements at play when discussing queer masculinities in late-twentieth century queer French literature. In a world like that of the gay club, a microcosm, multiple performances of masculinity interact but no masculinity is privileged or deemed the norm. The club becomes a locus of expression and transmission facilitating the theoretical space needed for a subculture of unsafe sex to breed.

The final novel of the trilogy, *Plus fort que moi* (1998), is an intimate portrayal of the sadomasochist world. It depicts sadomasochism as Dustan opens his body up for sexual

exploration, intimately describing the details of his orifice penetration.<sup>80</sup> His body is now the universe occupying his novel, that is the queer male body since the novel is an exploration about the different pleasures of the body coming from extreme, non-traditional methods. All of French queerness is represented, or “swallowed up,” by sex acts that bring to a closure the gradual expansion of his queer literary universe. Therefore I suggest that the novels together create a gay utopia, and, I might add, an HIV positive life and world.<sup>81</sup>

As a writer, Dustan is part of a recent tradition of queer French authors who expose their sexuality as literature. Renaud Camus’s *Tricks*, Hervé Guibert’s *A l’ami*, and Cyril Collard’s *Les nuits sauvages* are all literary or cinematic reactions to queer marginalization. Dustan positions himself on a different spectrum of AIDS writing for he is an author that is living with and in AIDS, whereas Camus, Collard and even Guibert are “ante”-AIDS not only chronologically, but also socially, culturally and sexually. The most interesting case among them is Guibert’s. His corpus of texts is reacting to the onset of AIDS, the crisis linked to its initial outbreak in France. He juxtaposes seronegativity (the rest of the world) and seropositivity (himself).

As stated earlier, Dustan writes from the present, a presence with AIDS: “tout le monde est séropositif” (*Dans ma chambre* 47). Dustan sets himself apart because in his literary universe, there is no before or after. In his texts, there is only a continual presence of AIDS and its ubiquitous nature, no cure in sight and no need for one either.<sup>82</sup> His works create what I called earlier a “seronormativity,” even a seropositive hegemony.<sup>83</sup> The virus is part of his routine: “Je vais me brosser les dents, c’est le rond hygiénique du soir, AZT, dents, verrures, je

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<sup>80</sup> “J’ai senti sa main se faire avaler par mon cul. J’ai joui à l’instant même” (35).

<sup>81</sup> A world “complete with its own laws, population, and modes of representation” (Schehr, *Writing Bareback* 187).

<sup>82</sup> I must note that in both Dustan’s and Rémès’s texts, there is a small discussion about their “conversion.” However it is down-played, linked to adolescence, and inconsequential to the author’s primary goal of talking about sex. There is no nostalgia for those days where he was negative. This is in stark contrast to the nostalgia of previous AIDS writers like Guibert.

<sup>83</sup> Later we will discuss how Rémès continues this work under a seropositive hegemony.

me rebranlerai peut-être, je l'espère, après tout ça" (38), taking its place next to other daily chores. He has always been HIV positive, allowing him to forge a unique masculinity and sexuality with it.

The premise of this chapter is that queer masculinity is constructed via a procreative narrative of HIV transmissions akin to the procreative model of heterosexuality where a male penetrates and seeds a receiving female. Therefore to discuss masculinity in the queer male context is to discuss sex. Ahmed Haderbach writes: "En effet, il [Dustan] nous fait plonger dans un monde où le sexe est le maître des rapports entre les gays," (199) Haderbach's claim aligns with how Dustan views sex: "Le sexe est la chose centrale. Tout tourne autour" (75). To unpack the complex maneuvers that define queer masculinity in Dustan's texts, one has to start with intercourse. Sexual exchanges become the dominant narrative of existence in this world. Not only is "being" attached to it, but also AIDS and masculinity since they are a product of this action in a world where only men exist. In his article "Writing Bareback," Lawrence Schehr astutely points out that within Dustan's corpus of texts there is a "removal of the feminine" (188). This removal creates a new space for masculinity that is not simply juxtaposed to femininity or female sexuality. Indeed masculinity is often defined traditionally in opposition to femininity but Dustan is avoiding this binary and creating a performance that is not dependent on femininity; one that avoids talking about queer sexualities as the opposite of masculinity, a.k.a feminine.

In *Dans ma chambre*, Quentin, Dustan's ex-boyfriend, looks for his mother's lost agenda supposedly left at their apartment. Her agenda is a synecdoche for her existence. By losing it, Quentin eliminates the remaining feminine element from the text. Furthermore, in *Plus fort que moi*, Dustan sneaks away from his teacher, a woman, at a school play in order to engage in his



first sexual experience. Schehr interprets this scene as the birth of Dustan's homosexual desire since the abandonment of the feminine becomes psychologically linked to his first sexual encounter (190). By abandoning or erasing the female, Dustan defines masculinity without an opposite, only a "same." There is no referent of the feminine in this universe especially when the most reductive definition of masculinity is that which is not feminine. When one eliminates the feminine from the novel, it allows for a theoretical abandonment of binaries and an attempt at a clearer definition of what masculinity is.

Furthermore, apart from a few mentions of his father (*Dans ma chambre* 38-39, *Plus fort que moi* 11-12), archetypical "males" do not exist either.<sup>84</sup> The brief rare examples of the feminine and the paternal/masculine are proof of two worlds coming together within the text: Dustan's queer, HIV+ literary reality that is void of heteronormativity and that of the actual social reality of France at the time (represented by the mentions of the mother and father in the text). Echoes of the French social climate resonate in his text but are largely dominated by the universe he creates; a universe where expression and reproduction stem from same-sex intercourse that promulgates the same expression.

Bareback sex is the key to understanding how Dustan engenders a queered masculinity.<sup>85</sup> Sex is assumed to be unsafe: "Tu sais, personne ne met plus des capotes, même les américanes [sic], maintenant tout le monde est séropositif, je ne connais plus personne qui soit séronégatif" (*Dans ma chambre* 47). Kinship is established via the sharing of blood, a consanguinity that is based on a sharing of the virus over the actual genetic link—the semen. The only figure who is HIV negative is the protagonist's new boyfriend Stéphane, but the latter actively participates in

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<sup>84</sup> It is worth noting that Dustan's prologue of *Plus fort que moi* opens with a discussion on his father who ultimately leaves: "Il m'a laissé" (11). This parallels the work done in my first chapter on paternity.

<sup>85</sup> I use queer to simply mean "unorthodox" and I do not wish to convey that Dustan's construction of masculinity is uniquely "gay," but rather a part of a larger corpus of masculinities discussed in this project overall.

the rituals required to belong to the bareback tribe: “Il m’a dit Baise-moi sans capote” (68).

Being seronegative requires that the person follow certain etiquette, in particular Stéphane: “Il est persuadé qu’il est séropo de toute façon.” Therefore Stéphane has to earn his way into the clan by accepting the possibility of seropositivity as well as practicing the proper customs necessary to start his induction into the community.

This scene with Stéphane is poignant because he accepts the reality of what barebacking will produce, offering his negative status like a virgin sacrifice.<sup>86</sup> The scenario is procreative in essence. The ultimate goal is to passively (i.e., not on purpose or by vicious intent) populate this HIV+ world mimicking the human reproductive process that allows French citizens to populate the republic. In the queer republic, the effort resides in breeding the virus. Thus, when Dustan learns the test results, he has in a sense suffered a miscarriage with Stéphane, and he feels a loss: “La semaine d’après, le test est négatif. Je me dis que j’ai bien fait de ne pas jouir dans son cul. Et puis je me sens seul. Déçu. Et puis seul” (69). His failure is marked by disappointment and solitude. The feeling echoes Bruno’s in Michel Houellebecq’s *Les Particules élémentaires* who is described as overwhelmingly “alone.”<sup>87</sup> Other examples in Dustan’s texts are, “Je suis resté seul, en cendres, froid, mort” (*Plus fort que moi* 11), and in the middle of a dance floor at a gay club in *Je sors ce soir*, “Et tout d’un coup je flippe, je me sens seul” (42). Each novel of his trilogy contains this moment of isolation when his queer universe isolates him in a certain way. Generally speaking, in both Houellebecq’s and Dustan’s texts the protagonist fails at a certain sexual quest that initiates his solitude. This is not to suggest that Dustan is not disappointed that he did not infect Stéphane; rather he feels he did not live up to his queer role of procreating more

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<sup>86</sup> Much like losing one’s virginity, seroconversion can only happen once. Dustan thus draws a link between Stéphane’s seronegativity and his possible conversion and the heterosexual concept of *dépucelage*.

<sup>87</sup> To add to the similarity between Houellebecq and Dustan, the latter describes his solitude when he discovers that his father has left.

seropositive French men. Dustan is not maliciously looking to contaminate partners; on the contrary, he is looking to create a network of relationships via his serostatus. He adopts the same model of procreation as that of heteronormativity, and when the symbolic miscarriage occurs, he becomes depressed.

In fact, he views his seropositivity as a mixture of responsibility and power: “Depuis que j’étais seropo, je me voyais comme un pistolet chargé. Le sperme remplaçait les balles. Avec ça, j’avais le pouvoir” (*Plus fort que moi* 70). The image described is that of a cowboy riding bareback on his steed, protective of his town. His serostatus is his protective weapon, one that keeps his community alive, safe from extinction, where sperm replaces the bullets of his “gun”. By claiming that he has the power (and echoing the cowboy mentality), he is reinscribing himself into a larger model of masculinity where the penetrator has the power and the penetrated is a receptacle, passively awaiting the penetrator’s deposit. I am not disagreeing with queer theory and gender politics on the correctness of who is “active” and who is “passive” in regard to intercourse; rather, I want to underline the similarity between Dustan’s HIV model and that of heteronormativity. His “pistolet chargé” reiterates masculine hegemony and phallocentrism, however this time in a uniquely queer setting. This is a poignant and provocative quote because queer identity and HIV/AIDS are socio-culturally thought of as purely anti-masculine for both dismantle the gender hierarchy. However, by portraying his illness as a weapon of power, he is reclaiming a masculine status of domination. But this domination is strictly contingent upon a seroconversion, a purposeful spreading of a disease. The ethical question that comes from this is not one at the fore of either Dustan’s or Rémès’ texts; rather, the seroconversion comes from a communal agreement, a consensual decision that keeps their kin alive.

Dustan is attempting to reclaim a traditional masculinity by reestablishing a procreative model that allows the members of his utopian community to continue as a group. Dustan admits that the incestuous nature of the queer community is not self-sustaining.<sup>88</sup> His boyfriend Stéphane remains negative and this explains why he feels a deep displeasure when Stéphane's test comes back negative since it exemplifies a failure in this queer procreative model. The recurrent "sans capotes bien sûr" (94) reminds the reader that this is the norm and that, when condoms do come into play, they negate the sex act: "J'ai débandé complètement" (*Dans ma chambre* 78) and "Je n'arrivais pas à jouir à cause de la capote" (*Plus fort que moi* 36), preventing the procreative act from occurring.<sup>89</sup> When he does have safe sex, it is unfulfilling and echoes earlier discussions of solitude and loneliness in his novel: "On s'est baisé (safe) [...] mais le résultat c'est que je m'étais senti seul" (*Je sors ce soir* 77). The condom represents a queer contraceptive for Dustan. The physical barrier does not inhibit his pleasure, it inhibits his sero-hegemony, which explains why he would feel "seul" if he cannot continue to find others to bring into his community.

The desire to spread a viral seed comes from within the community. What Dustan finds attractive is the possibility of reliving his contamination/seroconversion: "J'ai branché un mec qui avait Bze sans kpote comme pseudo," thus ensuring that he is either remaining in his subcommunity of HIV+ men or possibly expanding this community by converting someone who understands the risk. This idiosyncrasy is a trait of a strong subculture. If the bond that ties this group together, as Dean suggested earlier, is rooted in the ritualistic and tribal heritage, than one can see how Dustan's desire to sleep with only HIV+ men only reinforces the bonds of the

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<sup>88</sup> "Je vis dans un monde merveilleux où tout le monde a couché avec tout le monde" (70).

<sup>89</sup> Erik Rémès will echo the same sentiment in *Serial Fucker* when he writes: "Pour les barebackers, les capotes empêcheraient de bander" (9) and later, "La sexualité est immédiate. Le préservatif tue même l'essence de la sexualité qui est immédiateté" (41).

community. To this desire, he adds, “Ce qui les intéresse, c’est de se vautrer dans le foutre empoisonné, c’est une baise romantique et ténébreuse” (133), which highlights the collision discussed earlier between the social reality at the time of writing and the textual reality of his work.<sup>90</sup> The quote sparks the comparison between life and death echoing conceptions of HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s and also the fine line walked by those who partake in this subculture.

The combination of life and death Dustan’s quote brings to light is also characteristic of *jouissance*. As such, it holds an important place in the context of HIV/AIDS discourse since the non-reproductive, pleasure-driven, and fatal nature of same-sex intercourse (under the threat of AIDS) makes gay sex appear a “noxious form of the *Other’s* jouissance” (*Beyond Sexuality* 127), and thus explains the homophobic rhetoric driven by society. Dustan, like other queer authors chronicling bareback life, is taking the life force that commonly is associated with sex and underlines the imminent death drive that one now assumes in this subculture. But more interesting is that Dustan’s texts then re-shift the death force back to life. Normally sex is assumed to give life, but situated in the context of AIDS it socially translates to death. However, within the queer literary universe of Dustan’s texts, seropositivity equates life as a member of Dustan’s HIV+ French Republic, since the lack of positivity means the textual effacement from his world.

Therefore, Dustan is focused on bringing life to his world. His sexual diary, *Plus fort que moi* becomes a catalog of breeding. He positions himself as the stallion and uses his sero-pedigree to impregnate others: “Il voulait que je lui jute dans le cul [...] Vas-y! Remplis-moi! Il m’a dit” (156). His sexual partner is eager and yearning for Dustan to finish, and once he is

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<sup>90</sup> The pun of “un beau ténébreux” that Dustan reconfigures to “une baise ténébreuse” cannot be overlooked. It also highlights the mysterious nature of minitel-based hookups of which *Dans ma chambre* (and later *Plus fort que moi*) barely scrapes the surface.

done, he moves on to another: “J’en ai rempli un autre [après],” siring a litter of barebackers and seropositive men that have inherited his pedigree and will breed it for future generations within the universe of his text. This is how Dustan creates immortality in his novel: “Jamais je ne vieillirai” (*Je sors ce soir* 60), especially when confronted with the reality of the mortality of HIV/AIDS (or the human condition) that is constantly looming in the background: “Ça fait quatre ans déjà que je pense que je vais mourir l’année prochaine” (*Dans ma chambre* 40).<sup>91</sup> Therefore, to live forever in the HIV+ world of his novel, he will spread himself out over an entire empire. Dustan imagines himself building a French seropositive queer empire, leaving a legacy and lineage of his heritage.

On one particular evening, Dustan finds himself at a sex club, an interesting locus of sexual practices because it is a place where safe and unsafe practices cross. It is a place where sexual cultures collide and subconscious wars ensue. Upon viewing a man in a sling, passively waiting for penetrators, Dustan explains, “J’ai pas de capote. Il a dit C’est pas grave” (*Plus fort que moi* 142). The man in the sling understands not only the risk, but more importantly for the subculture of barebacking, the customs, rites, traditions that can go hand-in-hand. But this does not hold true for others as Dustan suggests: “Un mec est arrivé. Il s’est approché pour mater. Instinctivement, je me suis plaqué contre le cul du mec pour empêcher l’autre de voir qu’on baisait sans capote. Il a vu quand même. Il est parti” (142). The two worlds collide and while there is no exchange, there is a physical reply: walking away. There is no verbal judgement but there is definitely a conflict between various queer codes that intersect in this backroom.

The simple fact that Dustan continually underlines “sans capotes ou non” (149) tests the ground of those he interacts with. His old boyfriend Dennis is someone whom Dustan does not find appealing anymore due to the former’s fear of being HIV+: “Dennis a fini par me dire qu’il

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<sup>91</sup> He similarly notes in *Je sors ce soir*: “Je ne pense pas que ça fait sept ans que j’attends de mourir” (90).

était inquiet parce qu’il attendait les résultats de son test et qu’il avait fait des conneries” (148). Dennis and his boyfriend Ben had unprotected sex (nothing shocking in this novel), but Dennis only recently found out that Ben was ill. Dustan wants nothing to do with this discussion and finds Dennis’s worries unacceptable. Dennis’s fear earns him Dustan’s disdain. Dustan immediately changes the subject: “Pour changer d’atmosphère, je lui ai demandé ce qu’il avait fait comme bon coup dans les mecs qui étaient là,” but shortly thereafter tells the reader, “bien que je n’aie pas trop confiance en lui pour ce genre de choses, à mon avis nos critères n’étaient pas les mêmes” (148-149). The rejection of Dennis as a member of the kin lies in Dustan’s “nos critères n’étaient pas les mêmes.” Dennis fails to gain entry to this bareback tribe because of his classical interpretation of HIV as death. The fear of HIV (as represented by Dennis) and the acceptance of living with it (personified by Dustan) misalign.

The same rejection is reproduced in *Plus fort que moi* when talking about his partner Stéphane: “Ma séropositivité. C’était aussi pour ça que j’avais quitté Stéphane. Le résultat, négatif, du test qu’il n’avait jamais voulu faire avait coupé les amarres” (159). He admits to never being able to bring himself to loving Stéphane solely because of the fact that Stéphane is not positive. Stéphane is not a part of the tribe, the kin that shares his blood. He may partake in the actions, but Dustan ultimately recognizes that this is not enough because Stéphane lacks the one thing that unites them all—the virus. His blood is not the same as that of the others whom Dustan has converted or re-contaminated.<sup>92</sup> In fact Dustan later explains, “Je pensais que je ne pourrais plus aimer qu’un autre séropo” (159). His exclusionary practice divides the gay community between positive and negative. The serostatus of an individual will never prohibit Dustan from engaging in sex, since after all he is the phallic center of the virus in a sense

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<sup>92</sup> Issues of HIV re-contamination or super-contamination are lightly talked about in Dustan’s trilogy indicating that he likely did not associate any fear to the either possibility.

(“pistolet chargé”) but the status will stop him from welcoming an individual into his world and life.

Dustan is also protective of his queer HIV+ French republic and wants to ensure its future. He knows his actions correlate to the population’s growth. He reinscribes the cyclical lifestyle that the barebacking community creates: “Je vais finir par mettre du sperme dans le cul de tout le monde et par me faire faire pareil” (*Dans ma chambre* 152). This quote is in part provocative because Dustan talks not only about spreading his sperm but also about it being spread in him thus reinforcing the reciprocal nature of this community; however, the quote is also dark and heavy. It is the self-realization of the human condition: “Si je reste ici, je vais mourir,” but he quickly dismisses the existential claim admitting: “La vérité, c’est qu’il n’y a plus que ça que j’ai envie de faire” (152). He understands the intrinsic value of barebacking and how it translates into his queering of the normative value of procreation. This allows his text to demonstrate a construction of masculinity that is based on a normative model (biological reproduction), but configured for the bareback community that reclaims the masculinity that both AIDS and heteronormative society took away.

Guillaume Dustan’s *autopornographie* trilogy is an expansive look into a queer, seropositive literary world where masculinity is reclaimed through a queering of the biological reproductive process. Dustan positions himself as a paternal “patient-zero” who populates his queer republic with seropositive men who will continue his bloodline. HIV/AIDS is a disease that theoretically immobilizes the biological functionality of masculinity, attacking the dominant gender at its center (its seed). What is remarkable is that the subculture of barebacking has afforded Dustan the ability to explore literary life via a pathological death sentence. A contemporary of his, Erik Rémès, will attempt the same but through much more vivid



exploration of sexuality and sex acts that will define his being and place in French society as a whole.

**(Sero)Positively Masculine: Erik Rémès and Serial Sex**

“[Le sexe] est fusion”  
Erik Rémès, *Serial Fucker*

Erik Rémès, a trained clinical psychoanalyst, ruffled literary feathers when he published *Je bande donc je suis* in 1999, a novel that investigates the life of a serial barebacker and his sexual extremes. As discussed in the first chapter, Rémès inscribes his existence into a sex act (“je bande”), eroticizing the French philosophical legacy.<sup>93</sup> The premise of his work is predicated on a sex act, one that is repeated over and over again in the novel with each partner he shares. For Rémès, desire, sexuality, and AIDS are all a part of a longer twentieth-century narrative that parallels the century’s sexual evolution: “Peut-on parler du désir à la fin du vingtième siècle sans parler de sexualité donc de sida?” (123). AIDS becomes a unique component of queer sexuality in Rémès’s texts because all action in the novel revolves around forms of subcultural sexual acts that express his being. This expression then becomes the construction of his masculinity much like with Dustan before him in the queer AIDS tradition. Rémès will come to define a queer, HIV+ masculinity in two ways: by alluding to a self-populating, blood-sharing community much like Dustan and by authenticating masculinity through the survival of a set of physical ordeals.

Rémès, like Dustan, understands the taboo of writing about bareback culture and taking the *autofictional* route to describe his lifestyle. The candid diary of Berlin Tintin’s exploits represents a *bildungsroman* of sexual acceptance as a gay French man who is HIV+. His first novel, *Je bande donc je suis*, chronicles the hero’s journey from youth to adulthood; from shame

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<sup>93</sup> He later reprograms the Cartesian logic, “cogito ergo sum” with “seropo ergo sum” (180), queering French logic.

to acceptance; from seronegativity to seropositivity. Berlin Tintin's psychological and moral growth parallels the extremity of his sexual pleasures as he grows to accept himself as a gay French man who pushes the boundaries of normative culture. Rémès is different from Dustan in that he talks about the heteronormative world and how its existence creates his shame. However, like Dustan's narrator, as Tintin grows into his serostatus and sexual pleasure, he erases heterosexuality and the seronegativity from the novel submerging himself and the reader into a seropositive literary world.

*Je bande donc je suis* juxtaposes two worlds—heteronormativity and the “other.” The novel highlights Berlin Tintin's journey from one of these worlds to the other and his emotional and psychological response as he transgresses normative boundaries and rejects heterosexual hegemony. After his sexual initiation into the world, he starts to uncover the possibility of his queer sexuality and its consequences.<sup>94</sup> This is where the subculture of barebacking comes into play in his novel as it solidifies a community that defies normative sexual behavior in every sense.

Rémès constructs masculinity around two notions—seroconversion and survival. Like Dustan writing before him, Rémès looks at the bareback community as a tribe that shares a blood-line that is passed down from one man to another through a ritual of seroconversion. What sets Rémès apart from Dustan is how he portrays a queer masculinity that imitates a common depiction of the warrior male whose masculinity is reinforced by the physical struggles he has survived and overcome. Rémès' writing is violent and aggressive when depicting sexual exchanges that border on abuse and “deviance,” but that consistently leave a battle scar to show he survived.

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<sup>94</sup> He writes, “Ce fut l'accès la toute première fois. L'accès au logos, à l'existence,” (23) after his first sexual encounter with another man, who is coincidentally “other” because he is Arab.

In order to analyze these two elements, let us first look at how Rémès constructs a relationship between sex, AIDS, and Berlin Tintin's existence and how that relationship translates into an interaction with the reader. For Rémès, writing becomes the setting of another sexual act—reading: “Comment provoquer en lui le désir de lire, voire d'en jouir?” (74). His book is a laundry list of sexual exchanges with various, anonymous partners but the greatest one of all is not listed because it happens at the time of reading. In theory Rémès is trying to elicit a response from the reader of his novel but more importantly the response he wants is not intellectual, but physical pleasure. By mixing the role of the reader, he recodes his text in a Barthesian manner, formerly *lisible*, where the pleasure is simply in the act of reading about his conversion and his acts. However, if Tintin's existence, “je bande donc je suis”, further evolves into his “accès au logos,” then his “existence” is purely fabricated. The symbolic order encompasses the “logos” for it is language, words that interact with the reader, sexually. If Tintin, as he says, is a product of the logos, then his text is *scriptible* to the reader who now is a part of the *jouissance* of the text. The Cartesian logic then is further transformed into “Il bande, donc nous sommes” for our participation in the text is based on Tintin's sexuality. Furthermore, the *writability* of the text is enhanced if one engages the reader as the actor and rescripts Tintin's adage to “Nous bandons, donc il est,” that is to say that our textual *jouissance* is what creates Tintin's existence. We arrive at this point through a sex act with Berlin Tintin, via the foreplay of his stories and the final *jouissance* as he comes to accept himself as a gay French man who is seropositive.

The reader is therefore made a part of Tintin's worlds, both the HIV- world filled with shame and guilt and the HIV+ world that underlies his journey to self-acceptance and moral growth. But the question does arise of whether or not the reader needs to be seroconverted in

order to accompany Tintin since there is a heavy emphasis placed on the subcultural aspects of HIV positivity and queerness. Nonetheless, the novel is quick to abandon heterosexuality: “Car oui, un bon hétérosexuel est un hétérosexuel mort, ah! ah!” (108). One can read this quote simply as heterophobic; however for now, it better shall serve to show how heterosexuality cannot exist in Tintin’s world. As he effaces his attachments to the normative world, he also effaces that reality by seroconverting it.

The seroconversion in this novel plays a dichotomous role dividing his two lives. Indeed, death and life play a central part as his conversion marks both an end and a beginning: “Pourtant après mon hécatombe virale, je ne pensais plus pouvoir ressentir une quelconque satisfaction” (58). Tintin’s seroconversion becomes a sacrifice from which he ultimately gains something. He inscribes death onto his HIV status not solely because it is medically justifiable, but also because it marks the end of a former reality. He ends his life metaphorically to be reborn by erasing his past and only having a present and future with AIDS: “Je savais dès le début qu’un jour je mettrais fin à tout cela, à cette vie-là, pour en recommencer une autre, une toute nouvelle vie, belle et fraîche” (59). Tintin erases his past and creates a constant positivity, a constant presence of AIDS where there is no “before.”

Life and death thus become a leitmotif in the novel, on one hand due to the obvious medical and physical implications of having HIV/AIDS, and on the other because it creates the necessary background for Rémès to explore queer sexuality and masculinity. One can argue that life for Tintin did not start until he was HIV+. More crucial for this *roman d’apprentissage*, his pre-HIV life preceded his journey because the virus is the indicator of change: “Ma séropositivité a provoqué une remise en question profonde, mais, là encore, belle dans son carnage” (63). Therefore death becomes a precursor to seropositivity and in Rémès’ novel, cultural logic is

reversed from seronegativity meaning death to seropositivity meaning life, a birth that allows for a new exploration of life. Death becomes a sexual impetus because it can be overcome with bareback sex that forges the possibility of new life through seroconversion. HIV/AIDS is synonymous with death, and death drives Berlin Tintin to the extremes of sexual practice: [L]a mort c'est excitant. La mort fait bander, la mort fait jouir" (109). "La mort" becomes synonymous with bareback sex and his serostatus, with the possibility and perceived inevitability of death.

Rémès takes control of death, claiming ownership over it so that he can dictate its meaning. This is how he finds so much pleasure in it: "Après tout, être condamné à mourir, c'est être condamné à vivre, donc à jouir" (58). He continues to associate death with sex and sex with life. Sex, life, and death blend into one and lose their natural opposition. They all ultimately bring the reader back to the title of the work, *Je bande donc je suis*. There is no escaping the sexual nature of both HIV/AIDS and the queerness that Rémès promotes in his novels since physical *jouissance* is predicated on life and life, ironically, is predicated on death i.e. HIV positivity.

With seropositivity becoming synonymous with death and life, the previous quote concerning straights is all the more interesting. Some friends take Berlin to a brothel for an S&M night "chez les zéteros" (108) where he relishes the chance to push the limits of normative sexuality. He and his women friends become aggressors and active partners, flipping gender roles. His girlfriend Malicia "fiste Jean-Luc Eurostar à deux mains devant un parterre de zétéros abasourdis" while he and his other girlfriend Métale "latte[nt] la gueule à un esclave hétéro." This sexual role reversal allows the previously marginalized (women and gay men) to dominate the sexual encounter much to the amazement and bewilderment of the straight onlookers. Their

supremacy is unhinged in this scene as peripheral sexual practices take main stage. Their final dismissal comes from Tintin “Un bon hétérosexuel est un heterosexual mort, ah! ah!”

This quote can be understood in two ways: first, one can look at it as a complete abandonment of heterosexuality and the institutions it entails.<sup>95</sup> This would be logical for a queer author who wants to privilege his subculture to make it more mainstream. However, I also suggest that this quote subtly engages with the previous discussion on life, death, and HIV status. “Un hétérosexuel mort” can also be read as a straight person who is now positive. If death equates seropositivity and vice versus, then Rémès is not simply saying “death to all straights,” but rather his quote can be read as “a good heterosexual is an HIV positive one.” Furthermore, in *Je bande*, seropositivity is a uniquely queer status. Any heterosexual who is labeled “poz” is in turn queered, ultimately calling forth the superficial meaning of the quote (“death to all straights”) and the effacement of heterosexuality from the novel. The quote then underlines the depth to which Tintin queers the universe of the text; dead heterosexuals are seropositive heterosexuals but seropositivity is a queer phenomenon in this novel. Therefore, “un hétérosexuel mort” is an oxymoronic queer heterosexual. Tintin takes heterosexuality and seroconverts it further populating his text-based queer universe with it.

It is easy to forget that this level of queer positivity was not a part of Tintin’s life earlier due to the radicalness of his post-conversion lifestyle. In order to understand his structure of masculinity, one also needs to understand the evolution of Tintin’s self-acceptance, because his rejection of homosexuality was largely due to overarching, dominant socio-cultural narratives about masculinity. Berlin Tintin discovers his HIV status at nineteen, an age when he is still having trouble accepting his queerness. His serostatus weighs heavily on him: “J’en avais très

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<sup>95</sup> Institutions like heteronormativity, masculine hegemony, the patriarchy, and gender normativity that reinforce the dominant social structure.

souvent marre de le porter, ce corps VIH d'enculé, aliéné à mon être et cette putain de séropositivité bien plus pesante qu'une machine à laver" (52). His reaction gives context to the future position he will take regarding serpositivity.

In the first chapter we saw that Tintin is torn between a side of him that embraces his same-sex attraction (most notably with his step-father) and one that rejects it because of his mother's feminization of his character. Shame is a strong emotion Tintin feels in the first part of this novel, however it shapes his journey. After all, shame and its abandonment are part of the *apprentissage* his character undergoes as he moves from one stage of his life to another. Each year of his twenties leads him to realize that in some way, he needs to let go of the narratives of the past and accept himself and his place in queer French society. Each year of his life beyond his infection is marked by a self-reflective comment about how he needs to accept his new life: "Il serait temps pour moi de l'accepter" (54) and also, "Il faudrait bien que je m'assume un jour totalement, ne plus me cacher ma vérité, que j'accepte de devenir moi" (58). This last quote positions Tintin within a larger French context where he needs to assume a role in society ("je m'assume"), a token republican concept of how the individual views his relationship to the state.

In *Queer French*, Denis Provencher discusses the importance and socio-cultural uniqueness of the French verb and concept "s'assumer" and the authentic image it conveys of the person who assumes an identity. Note that Tintin states, "Il faudrait bien que je m'assume," eclipsing any American politics of coming out of the closet or attempted "sortir du placard."<sup>96</sup> This may appear as a small nuance but it highlights a unique French component of queer sexuality. Instead of declaring that he needs to declare his sexuality overtly or come out of the

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<sup>96</sup> Both "faire le coming-out" and "sortir du placard" are French attempts at adopting an American social and cultural process that does not work in the French context. Provencher demonstrates that French gays and lesbians have a tendency to prefer "assumer mon homosexualité" as it holds more purpose for the individual and French society.

proverbial closet, Tintin chooses to take up a role in society as a queer male. Since the concept of being “in the closet” does not translate well into French society the dualism of being in and out does not work well for them. Rather, the emphasis is on whether or not one is fulfilling his or her duties as a citizen of French society. Moreover, in doing so, Berlin becomes an authentic character who reflects the normal sociological “coming-out” process in France. The sociological interviews that Provencher conducted show an overwhelming support and preference for the notion of “s’assumer” to describe the process through which queer French citizens go through adopting a new identity. For one of the interviewees, Fabrice, “on s’assume quand on a plus d’expérience avec la vie en étant officiellement gay” (as quoted in Provencher 112). Berlin echoes this statement when he states “un jour totalement.” In doing so he insinuates that it will not happen now, but over a longer process that allows his experience to catch up. For right now, there is still an “opprobre” (*Serial Fucker* 9) that looms over Tintin’s shoulders and thus prevents him from “assuming” his sexuality. Jean-Louis, another interviewee in Provencher’s study writes that “Quelqu’un qui s’assume [...] c’est quelqu’un qui n’a pas honte de ses opinions et de son caractère et de ses caractéristiques” (112). A viewpoint further reiterated by Sandrine who states that “‘S’assumer’ veut dire être bien dans la tête, dans sa sexualité et vivre normalement” (113). This French process strikes a unique contrast to the dualism of the American expression being “in” or “out” of the closet. It is more about the identity a French person creates with respect to society than basic notion of publically or privately gay.

Tintin’s insistence that he must accept himself (“que je m’assume”) foreshadows the trajectory his novel will take from shame and clandestine sexuality to the complete assumption of his sexuality at the end of the novel: “J’ai aimé assumer ma vie [...] J’ai aimé mon virus [...]



J'ai aimé la vie, ce qu'elle m'a donné, ce qu'elle me donnera encore" (*Je bande* 239). Rémès's text illustrates the *roman d'apprentissage* of a youngster going out into the world to seek his fortune by juxtaposing his early naivety and shame of the queer world with his expertise and fulfillment by the end: "Je ne regrette rien. J'aimerai toujours la vie." In doing so, Rémès reaffirms Tintin's trajectory and masculine affirmation as the character constructs himself through sex acts, asserting new queer models of masculinity.

Like Dustan earlier, the bareback culture in Rémès' text mimics that of a primordial tribe performing rituals, rites and customs whose bloodline is secured by purposeful transmission. Tintin is a member of this community, unknowingly converted to it by Didier, a former lover. He is initiated into this tribe. From the early stages of his conversion, Tintin knows he is a part of something bigger, an obligation to explore and expand the queer universe of the novel: "Car je sais bien que cette mise en abîme de mon être portera un jour ses fruits" (59). The fruits of his labor become the population of converts he brings into the community. Like the reproductive nature of Dustan's trilogy, Rémès creates a biological necessity where his sperm inseminates the queer community. In *Serial Fucker* Rémès humorously discusses "les députés de droite" and a proposed law that would prohibit "l'insémination du Sida" (9-10). Insemination is defined as the biological process of introducing sperm into female reproductive organs with the purpose of reproduction. However, the statement in this case supports the claim that Rémès (and Dustan before him) fill the lack of biological reproduction with that of seroreproduction and the spreading of the virus.

In *Serial Fucker* the narrator is echoing the overall reproductive narrative that comes forth in *Je bande*. Insemination is not a word used in discussion about AIDS, but its infiltration into this novel reinforces the classical gender role and function of masculinity prescribed in these

non-normative novels. Insemination for Rémès allows for the spreading the virus so that it becomes the communal trait passed on like ancestral genes, from generation to generation or orgy to orgy in this case. The tribe creates a bloodline that becomes intimately linked to any discussion on HIV/AIDS since the disease is epidemiologically attached to all hemotransfusions. Blood becomes sacred in this community, as the narrator desires to continue his sexual practices to secure his lineage: “Alors, je continuais imperturbable, ma quête phallique du Saint-Graal” (59). The allusion to the holy blood of Christ solidifies the importance seroconversion has in the novel and for the bareback community. The transubstantiation of wine to blood in Christianity allows followers to imbibe the blood of Christ, to consume him in an attempt to seek redemption. Each time the wine is consumed it is an act of remembrance, “Do this in memory of me,” that reinscribes Christ’s death. Seroconversion mimics the process as blood is transubstantiated into the blood of HIV life and each seroconversion reiterates Rémès’s initial. By passing on the virus, the narrator is in theory asking his partners to “Do this in memory of me.” It is also worth noting that the common false etymology of Saint-Graal, *sangréal*, further echoes the concept of a royal bloodline that is preserved and passed down from “l’anus éclaté” to “l’anus éclaté.”

The entire bareback community is a “cocktail à base de sang et de sperme” (217), a mixture where blood represents the genealogical link and sperm the necessary element of creation. The bareback community becomes self-sufficient through blood and sperm creating their own queer family. In fact, the family unit becomes an important aspect for Tintin in *Je bande* considering his tragic and troubled childhood as an orphan whose adoptive parents were all but supportive and loving. At a bareback orgy he attends during Christmas, the narrator gazes at the men around him, noting: “Nous étions toutes des grosses putes assoiffées de suc, membres de la même famille, unis par le même feu, brûlant de souche commune. Un lien de sperme et de

sang, indéfectible” (*Serial Fucker* 12).<sup>97</sup> The community has become more intimate and forms a family unit, united by their serostatus transferred by sperm that draws their familial bonds closer together.<sup>98</sup>

The queer, HIV+ family unit mimics its heterosexual counterpart in that their bloodlink is the strongest bond they have, their most intimate circle. The family becomes the referent for the entire bareback community especially at family gatherings like bareback orgies: “Ce meeting, c’est une vraie réunion de famille” (*Je bande* 83), where specific sexual pleasures (fellatio, fisting, penetration, etc...) replace traditional activities. The queer family supplants the traditional family model and becomes the main source of homocultural norms such as barebacking rituals and even more extreme forms of sexual practice.

Population only becomes an issue when one realizes that reproduction comes from a conversion, a negative host. The narrator realizes this and promotes unsafe sex: “Je suis pour la libre circulation du virus” (110) and he does so not as a deviant behavior, but because safe sex represents a personal choice that necessitates serious interrogation and reflection by both parties; but this reflection is already assumed for Tintin who strives to populate his world with other HIV+ men: “Berlin Tintin ne les comptait plus ceux qu’il avait maintenant contaminés. Et un et deux et trois: sida! Ainsi Tintin agrandissait la grande famille des sidéens” (115). He posits himself almost like an alpha male breeding to ensure its continuation and dominance while paying no attention to the breeding partner, as now the bodies all come together, a machine of seroproduction : “Les corps se suivent et se ressemblent, s’enchâssent, s’assemblent, s’emboîtent, et s’encastrent” (85).

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<sup>97</sup> In regard to *Serial Fucker*, Rémès is the main protagonist unlike in *Je bande* where Berlin Tintin takes up the role. Therefore I will refer to the main protagonist at the narrator simply to avoid confusion between author and text.

<sup>98</sup> “Tous les invités sont présumés séropositifs” (*Serial Fucker* 9) and later “Tout le monde est séropo” (13). *Serial Fucker* differs from *Je bande* in that there is no conversion point. In *Serial Fucker* the narrator is always HIV positive normalizing the serostatus at the start and marginalizing anything else.

In both texts, Rémès is able to queer virility via his virus and more importantly via the creation of a family unit that the subculture of barebacking unites. He sets himself apart from Dustan in that he constructs and reinforces a classical definition of masculinity by invoking a common masculine status—the warrior who survives a physical ordeal. In his study *Unlimited Intimacies*, Tim Dean suggests that men seek to prove or concretize their masculinity by means of physical tribulations: “In bareback subculture, as in the military or college fraternities, masculine status is achieved by surviving a set of physical ordeals, including multiple penetrations, humiliations, piercings, tattooings, brandings, and infections” (52). The ordeals that Dean outlines are common cultural engagements among men that echo larger male-dominated institutions.<sup>99</sup> “Multiple penetrations” highlights the warrior soldier’s surviving battle, “humiliations” echoes the fraternal hazing of college fraternities, “piercings, tattooings, brandings” arouse images of tribal rites of passage. Masculinity is culturally and historically achieved, in part, from surviving a challenge that permits man to wear a metaphorical badge of honor that is admired by male counterparts. It becomes a part of the currency that increases the value of a male in the heterosexual market.

The bareback community is one of the institutions that provides a trial to the men who participate in it. Surviving AIDS (both in the form of serostatus and as simply not dying from the complications of AIDS) becomes a norm in the bareback community and provides the implied “physical ordeal” necessary for men to prove their masculinity. The reason for this is the presence and promotion of safe sex. Dean explains that safe sex emasculates gay men by removing the “risk” these men are naturally inclined to take: “The prophylaxis afforded by condoms is reserved for those who can’t handle the real thing. Rather than offering protection, condoms make a man and his masculinity vulnerable to doubt or derision” (53). What Dean

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<sup>99</sup> These activities are not bound to gender as women can share in them too.

points out here is how protection ironically creates vulnerability while culturally men are not supposed to be vulnerable. Therefore, the bareback community views condomless sex as another way to solidify their masculinity, “the endurance of which proves one’s mettle.” (Dean 52). Therefore, according to Dean’s analysis of condoms, seropositivity represents a war scar that permanently testifies to one’s masculine fortitude. This concept is highlighted by Tintin because his serostatus takes up such a prominent role in the novel and defines not only who he is, but what he is: “mon virus c’était la vie, seropo ergo sum” (*Je bande* 180). The presumed suffering is transformed and reappropriated to represent his drive (“Il n’y a pas d’éros sans pathos,” 186) and the foundation for his masculine performance. His construction of masculinity revolves around the disease, (“Il m’a d’abord détruit et puis construit,” 181), and it becomes so intertwined with the disease that he is not able to live without it and the assumed suffering that comes along with it: “Je ne pouvais vivre sans mon pathos” (179). His virus becomes his best and longest relationship—meaningful, fulfilling, and passionate.

Both at a pathological and psychological level, bareback sex represents an unrepeatable possibility—that of seroconversion. The physical ordeals of masculinity are largely repeatable (piercings, tattoos, beatings, killings) and thus provide multiple occasions for men to “authenticate their masculine prowess” (Dean 52-53), but “bug chasing” (and bareback sex for that matter) are akin to imitating the initial conversion, attempting to repeat what is exclusively unique. The act of going from seronegative to positive theoretically can only happen once as current medical advancements only serve to lower viral load instead of eradicating the virus altogether. Thus bareback sex is a queer attempt to “authenticate” masculinity by providing multiple challenges to the participants. Safe sex represents an escape, an easy way out that diminishes the bravery of the queer man engaging in it. Having bareback sex blatantly asks the

question: “Are you man enough?” to engage in this type of sex, or “does the fear of becoming HIV+ hold ‘you’ back?” The challenge must be answered especially when masculinity becomes the wager. Queer men are thus theoretically forced to take up the challenge or risk their masculine status.

What Dean’s research shows is that there is a perception in the bareback community that extreme forms of pleasure reinforce and solidify classical definitions of masculinity. The imaginary badge of honor affords males the opportunity to explore “deviant” practices because morality does not play a role when it comes to surviving a larger challenge. That said, the bareback community and its marginalized forms of sexuality create a perfect space for participants to survey new masculinities. *Je bande* is a novel about extremes where the Tintin’s desires surpass normal intercourse and carry him to violence and extreme practices, but this is the challenge against which he will measure his masculinity. He says to his then boyfriend Thierry, “J’ai beau être excité par les choses extrêmes, subversives et violentes” (214), moving towards a more violent sexual practice with Thierry, thus forging a sort of trials and tribulation of queer sexuality, the survival of which will earn him another badge to wear as a warrior of queer masculinity.

Berlin pushes the limits of normative sexuality by engaging in riskier, more non-normative sexual practices, not simply because it is different, but because these practices are an exploration of his sexuality and criteria for his masculinity. He engages in fisting, sado-masochism, catheter play, and scatology in order to push his own limits and therefore bear more as a man (“Ces pratiques sont aussi une manière de franchir tes limites,” 215) because a man is not held back from fear. Rather, he is free to take on even the forbidden: “C’est une forme de liberté, une transgression des interdits.” Tintin is like a savage warrior determined on taking the

most extreme paths to solidify a form of queer masculinity. His sexuality becomes violent, “Je suis un garçon violent” (*SF* 76) militant, “J’ai tailladé le cul avec les ongles pour être certain de la fertilisation” (152). He takes prisoners in this battle invoking a warrior-like attitude in regard to the war he has declared on normativity, boundaries, and limits (156-157). He takes to heart Dean’s claim that traditional masculinity thrives on the survival of challenges, and aims to be the most radical of all (76).

This militant and violent approach to intercourse demystifies the queer sex act, stripping it of any theoretical or philosophical quality: “Ne chercher que le plaisir, l’assouvissement de la chair. Aux suivants” (97). The narrator transforms his sexuality into a corporeal pleasure principle that privileges the act and the “challenge” to secure his manhood. One can notice a recurring theme in his sexual diary (“aux suivants”) that undermines the importance of the other and recenters the exchange on himself. By interrogating the repeated “Le sida, aux suivants!” (59, 99, 115, 119, 120), one understands the list of challenges the narrator is attempting to barrel through in order to ultimately legitimize his masculinity in the face of those who seek to deprive him of it.<sup>100</sup> In the beginning of *Je bande*, Tintin describes himself using feminine-associated adjectives and nouns like “grossesse” (21), “folle” (25, *SF* 101), “feminine” (25), “cochonne” (*SF* 112) but slowly shifts away from this association the more he solidifies his queer masculinity via his seropositivity.

His aggressive attitude is expected if he is to take up the warrior-like charge where he bears a weapon of mass destruction, an “agent viral de l’armée du saccage” (114). His virus is his weapon against the challenges and trials that face him. He will survive his test and authenticate his masculinity in front of a reader who remains shocked at the sexual carnage he spreads across the pages. Faced with the possibility of relapsing into a passive positive status

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<sup>100</sup> Tintin’s mother is a large source of the character’s feminized depiction.

where he simply deals with the disease and imminent death that was equated with HIV/AIDS at the time, Tintin chooses to fight, win and survive: “Le virus est une arme, et son porteur un criminel potentiel” (109). It is important not to simply reduce this situation to Rémès/Tintin talking about the gravity of HIV transmission to anonymous partners via safe or malicious ways; rather it serves the greater meaning of aligning his virus, his weapon with his greater task of sexing the world. Tintin becomes a queer Hercules whose labors are penance for being driven mad by the virus and whose reward for completion is immortality. Tintin finds immortality much like Dustan in that it resides with the reproduction of the bareback community. Ultimately, Rémès showcases a different queer construction of masculinity than his predecessor, Dustan, by framing Berlin Tintin’s life with HIV/AIDS as a challenge requires surviving a physical ordeal.

Like Dustan, Rémès forges a queer masculinity via a reproductive model invoking the blood and seminal ties that barebacking shares with those who partake in it. The family image is strong in both *Je bande donc je suis* and *Serial Fucker*, allowing the reader to see how Rémès reclaims virility through his virus, by spreading its seed. Rémès’s texts differ from Dustan’s in that the former also presents his sexuality traditionally alluding to typical authentication processes men go through to secure their masculinity via some sort of physical ordeal. What brings the two authors together is their portrayal of masculinity through what is normally considered an emasculating disease. Let us not forget that both authors are writing from a position of posteriority, meaning that they are writing after AIDS and after its battle with the mainstream in France. At the onset and throughout its medical course, the disease represented paternal law and judgment made pathological—a plague brought on by abandoning and threatening heteronormativity and masculine hegemony. It was a consequence of a deviant



behavior that threatened the dominant narrative of the time. What the two authors showcase is the reappropriation of this condemnation and how they created their own homonormative narrative centered on seropositivity.

The virus is a means for them to explore greater concepts; both authors live through the AIDS virus, meaning that their experiences pass through specific sociocultural filters such as French, male, queer, and finally seropositive before forming an identity. By considering HIV/AIDS as an equally important descriptive category as Frenchness and queerness, the authors are giving it equal space in how it affects identity construction. This transforms HIV/AIDS from a virus and disease to a qualifying normative characteristic. It becomes a social construct that identifies its members.

As such, one recurrent theme in both queer authors is the concept of solitude.<sup>101</sup> Much like Dustan, Rémès writes about Berlin Tintin expressing remorse for initially thinking he is the only one affected by the disease. This is the reality of the disease, however. Dustan feels lonely when his boyfriend remains negative and he positive. Tintin, in a similar fashion, curses the morbid reality of the disease: “Cette putaine de solitude” (68), when he recounts the story of how his boyfriend Didier’s former partner was abandoned by his family because of his serostatus. The reality of AIDS is that it separates, alienates, and ostracizes, and this comes to a full confrontation in the novel when the social climate of the 1990s French culture butts heads with the queer universe present in the novel. And it is this confrontation that tears him apart from his literary universe: “Je n’aime pas trop la solitude” (99). It rips him from his seropositive utopia forcing him to confront that which is outside of his bareback community.

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<sup>101</sup> In fact, it’s important to remember that the theme of solitude has been present in all three authors studied thus far: Michel Houellebecq, Guillaume Dustan, and now Erik Rémès. One can then extrapolate this focus on loneliness to postmodernism possibly, suggesting that isolation is a constant in narratives from authors writing under this particular historical condition.

And like Dustan who engages in a self-inflicted isolation at times, Tintin pulls himself away for a moment from his community as he slowly becomes aware of the repetitive process that bug-chasing, barebacking and unprotected sex in general produces: “Alors je reste seul et réfléchis [...]. Je veux être solitaire, ne voir personne, ne pas parler pour ne rien dire” (162). These isolating moments are caused by the conflict between the author’s seropositive world and the outside world that has marginalized him. The reality is that his virus and his sexuality have troubled his existence: “D’avoir touché de si près la mort, m’a profondément troublé.” When both he and Dustan find social reality leaking into their text, it catalyzes a reaction resulting in isolation that stands out in the novel considering the lengths to which the protagonists go to have social interaction.

The similarities Dustan and Rémès share continue to evolve. In the first chapter, I described the function of and fascination for the “Other” as the virile paradigm when it is juxtaposed against the protagonist. Within these queer texts, the performance of masculinity is definitely queered and applied to same-sex desire and practice; however, the observation of masculinity still exists and it is still “other”. In Dustan’s *Je sors ce soir* and Rémès’ *Je bande donc je suis* and *Serial Fucker*, the narrators only talk about the physical components of masculinity when referring to the unknown other who is set apart from the rest of the men in the novel. While in Barcelona, Tintin remarks of an army procession, “Ils sont si beaux et virils” (54), but this is the only time he will notice the virility of the Other as his world only deals with others in relation to the main actor, himself. Once back in France, within the confines of his bareback community, the other disappears and his sexual partners become barebackers like him, never qualified as virile. In fact, the other in Dustan’s *Je sors ce soir* makes him feel less confident about his body, something that does not come up in any of the remaining novels of his

*autopornographie*: “Le body-builder s’approche, blanc et bronzé. Il est tellement bien foutu qu’il pourrait sans problème être en couverture de Honcho ou de Mandate. Du coup—je me sens mal, trop maigre” (19).

It is worth noting Daniel Hendrickson’s and Marc Siegel’s interpretation of the body-builder/muscle man as a hyper-masculine entity whose “body does not only indicate strength and virility, it can also indicate health” (“The Ghetto Novels of Guillaume Dustan,” 108). It is possible that for both authors their protagonists are manifesting an interiorized anxiety that juxtaposes the muscular healthy appearance to the skinny HIV dying one. As Dustan continues to circulate around the bar, his complex gets worse, “Je me sens petit, pas assez musclé” (21), because of the others that represent a cultural, masculine other: “Je n’ai pas confiance en mon corps” (22). He then steers clear of these individuals to continue his queer narrative of masculinity uninterrupted by the physical representations of masculinity or virility.

Both authors operate in two colliding universes, i.e., that of their text and that of the society within which they are writing. Set within the context of a bareback community and the implications of condom-less sex, their texts queer the traditional function of masculinity allowing it to recode the biological responsibility for each protagonist so that he can fulfill his classical duty. The virus becomes a genetic link that binds all barebackers together, their common trait passed on partner-to-partner, mutating, shifting, and evolving along the way. This is a remarkable feat considering that anal intercourse and other non-vaginal, non-heterosexual forms of intercourse deny the value “of productivity, futurity and vitality conventionally symbolised by the act of heterosexual vaginal penetration” (Best and Crowley 84). Anal intercourse and other sexual practices are Sadean in nature because they serve pleasure over reproductive function meaning that the act denies the reinvestment of the male’s seed. Both

Dustan and Rémès redefine non-vaginal intercourse as the duplication of a productive model, one that demonstrates a futurity for the HIV positive French gay male and promotes the invention of new sexualities. Both Rémès and Dustan echo Foucault to a degree since the latter argued “that sexuality should be about the creation of new possibilities, not the ‘liberation’ of some mythical essence” (Best and Crowley 96). According to Foucault, extreme sexualities are a way to shift the teleological reproductive function of the genitals to one that is a locus of new possibilities, new sexualities, new sexual practices, and new identities. Dustan and Rémès’s works testify to the founding of a new sexual body that justifies extreme sexual practices.

This chapter sets itself apart from most critics like James William, Hugues Marchal and to a degree Daniel Hendrickson and Marc Siegel who tend to focus on Rémès and Dustan’s sexual exploits and bareback promotion as a means of destabilizing heterocentric French society.<sup>102</sup> While this is an accurate way of understanding both the position of a queer identity and a seropositive one within the French literary landscape, I believe that analyzing the symbolic act of barebacking enables us to draw larger conclusions about the literary representation of HIV positive queer masculinities. Rather than simply suggesting that bareback sex is a subversive queer practice that destabilizes the heterocentric French society, my analysis explains how and why the destabilization is able to occur through a reappropriation of queer masculinity. Furthermore, what this chapter has shown is that AIDS has gone from the private to the public sector in France largely due to the perceived threat it posed to masculinity and masculine hegemony in this culture. From the onset, AIDS was an emasculating disease, but what these authors have shown is that despite public opinion, a sub-community has embraced the illness and reclaimed a masculinity lost because of the contraction of the virus. Indeed contracting

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<sup>102</sup> James S. William, “Resurrecting Cocteau: Gay (In)visibility and the Clean-up of French Culture” (2006) and Hugues Marchal, “Chroniques de la vie sexuelle” (2003).

HIV/AIDS is depicted as a passive action where the penetrated is infected by HIV+ fluid. Even at a theoretical level, HIV/AIDS contraction is a passive engagement since the body is being infected as the virus penetrates through the protective antibodies of the immune system. Both the physical, medical, and theoretical passivity associated with AIDS underlines the extent to which the disease displays the vulnerabilities of masculinity which “should” be the impenetrable, fortified, active gender.

As postmodern masculinity remains the central theme of this study, an examination of HIV/AIDS highlights the central argument behind the postmodern movement as well as how it pathologically exemplifies it. While postmodernism enacts the dismantling and decentering of explanatory narratives, HIV/AIDS does the same as it undermines the narrative of both classical masculinity and human immunology. Furthermore, bareback sex has proven to be as laudatory as it is condemnatory for its promotion of community and re-appropriation of gender roles through a queer model.

In both chapters thus far, technology has had but a small presence in the novels of Houellebecq, Rémès, and Dustan. For example, in the first chapter, I briefly discussed Bruno in *Les Particules élémentaires* surfing for sex over the Minitel. In chapter two of this project, Dustan used the Minitel to find other seropositive men, demonstrating how it was used to both replace geographic cruising and provide the necessary clandestine approach the sub-community of barebacking needed to exchange sexual desires. Finally, in Rémès’s texts (*Je bande donc je suis*, *Maître des amours*, and *Serial Fucker*) demonstrate the presence of a new communication model—the Internet, that allows him and others to reconfigure the landscape that dictates queer identity politics. He writes in *Serial Fucker*, “Il est facile de trouver un plan No [sic] capote. Une bonne pratique du Net et hop! En quelques mois, Internet est devenu le media du bareback,”

(14). What then remains after the Minitel is this final electronic frontier, this “media du bareback” or rather, a media of everything; a library of sexual desires and expressions that have afforded everyone the cyber space to express his or her own gender construction. The Internet, in essence, can be viewed as a democratic space of conflicting views and competing values that allows the sharing of information. While true that this is an idealized vision of what the Internet and other New Media offer (since recent debates have threatened the legitimacy and anonymity of the Internet). The overall consensus remains that the Internet provides a new platform where discussions about masculinity and sexuality are taking place is, undoubtedly, also current.

My next chapter will explore the way discussions of French masculinity are occurring online. It analyzes how users and consumers create new expressions while questioning if the expressions remain truthful to larger socio-cultural constructions of French and Francophone masculinities. Furthermore, the chapter will establish what it means to read online and the implications of studying an online corpus that is permanently and rapidly changing. How does the medium used for this expression affect the actual content of the author’s expression? How do authors present or create their literary persona differently from their online presence? Are there multiple personalities at play? How does his/her agenda change? What linguistic phenomena come into play as authors shift from different audiences with different cultural norms? The next chapter will feature Moroccan author Abdellah Taïa as someone whose contribution to Francophone masculinities is not purely literary, but also digital. It discusses how the author constructs a queer Moroccan masculinity and explores how this construction shifts as Taïa takes to the Internet where he is able to explore different identities and roles in a more clandestine fashion.

Chapter 3: *Digital Masculinities: Self-Representation in French Digitextualities*

“AdopteUnMec.com est un site de rencontres décalé  
où seules les filles peuvent aborder les mecs !  
Pour que les mecs puissent parler aux filles  
il faut qu'elles les aient mis dans leur panier.  
Au supermarché!”  
-www.adopteunmec.com

On July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013 *Le Figaro* published an article online that solicited a strong reaction from its daily readers. The article's title posed a candid question that sits at the heart of this project: “Où sont passés les hommes?” (Roquelle). The author continues her “investigation” of the social climate that is “erasing” French masculinity, concluding that “l'identité masculine est en plein chambardement,” a common trope that has continually sensationalized gender studies and masculinities over the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>103</sup> With the proliferation digital interfaces and media technologies, more and more discussions are occurring on a wider variety of platforms that allow media to be continually accessed, viewed, and commented on. The immediacy of online media allows those who interface with digital technologies to not only produce an instant reaction but also reach a larger audience. These advances create a new form of interaction, one that assumes a certain amount of visibility. Views, likes, retweets, reposts, shares, etc, are all examples of a continual process of diffusion that define the essence of the Worldwide *Web*. It is important to look at how these tools are used and engaged with so as to highlight why the burgeoning field of digital literature and digitextualities merit our attention when studying how French masculinity and masculine sexuality are constructed “digitally.” This chapter aims to study two components: one, the viral, digital media that surround social issues of

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<sup>103</sup> The article is a part of an “enquête” series for *Le Figaro*. I find it both peculiar and interesting that the evolution of gender roles is a part of a “special investigation” for the newspaper. Does this mean the public should be worried about the social function of males? If so, what should we worry about and why are shifting gender roles sufficient enough to merit a “special investigation” eliciting a response that assumes that the results will be shocking and scandalous?

French masculinity and sexuality; and two, the digital representation of a contemporary author, Abdellah Taïa.

Let me expand on these two components briefly so as to underline why they both add to a larger discussion about French postmodern masculinities. By questioning the content and usage of certain viral French videos that surfaced in recent years, one can view this medium as a corpus that sheds light on the future portrayal of French masculinities in a digital era. My analysis will document the reception of these new media platforms and their diffusionary practices as a means of polemicizing a social topic.<sup>104</sup> By delving into this digital corpus, I interrogate the reading practices of virtual space, emphasizing on the one hand its literary intertextuality and, on the other, its digital novelty. This chapter then serves as a unique conclusion to this study bringing together a traditional and a new literary analysis of the same issue and author. At the same time, I hope to set up a framework that will aid in understanding the second part of this chapter where I reexamine the themes of the first two chapters (paternity/parental unit and queer constructions of masculinity) in both the literary and digitextual works of Abdellah Taïa. The latter gives this project some insight into how an author can separate his own political engagement from the fictional world his works create while at the same time embracing the mobility that digital technologies afford him that his literature does not.

The second part of this chapter will discuss the self-(re)presentation and identity associations of contemporary French author Abdellah Taïa, who engages with the polemics of French masculinity and sexuality both from a queer and North African perspective. We will not only come to better understand the use of digital media and the impact of the platform on signifying practices, but also examine some of the features promoted by this kind of platform,

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<sup>104</sup> I do not intend to study the effects of the various New Media technologies that exist and how they have possibly shaped outcomes of social issues; rather I bring to the fore the platforms and their contents as part of a larger corpus one can study and evaluate regarding French constructions of masculinity.



including how Taïa's self-managed webpage and Facebook page allow him to shift the priority of his associated identities by changing how he depicts himself. The latter part of this chapter questions the essence of French universalism as the author's online presence will highlight the degree to which various communities are privileged or promoted over the concept of a universal French collective identity. It will highlight the footprint digital authors are leaving as their voices become fragmented and associated with certain tags, searches, and hyperlinks. The following question then becomes foundational to this chapter: How do these digital technologies and media shape our understanding of French postmodern masculinities? I argue that studying these new literary forms is critical for the discussion of French masculinity and to a larger degree, for the notion of Frenchness itself. By teasing out the implications of interacting with a digital interface, we can better understand how it both mimics traditional literary practices while distinguishing itself from them. In addition to the discussion surrounding Taïa's literary and digitextual work, this chapter also aims to highlight the value this unique interface brings to reading practices and its potential for the future of digital humanities and literary investigation.

### **Digitextual Theory: New Media and Their Practice**

New Media theory provides important tools for understanding users' interaction with the exponential growth of technological advancements. In her introduction to *New Media Theory: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*, Anna Everett writes: "Digital media technologies [...] are revolutionizing our sensory perceptions and cognitive experiences of *being in the world*" (ix). Her comment strikes at the heart of the French philosophical tradition from Descartes to Camus and Sartre, given her reliance on two major philosophical concepts: "being" and "the

world.” These two concepts imply the Cartesian *cogito*,<sup>105</sup> and therefore Everett’s approach meshes French philosophical thought with new virtual traditions and literary landscapes. This raises the question of how users exist in a virtual network where the world is not real or tangible. Furthermore, their existence is predicated on the mediation of digital technologies. The assumption, however, is that this world does exist and that a user’s participation in it establishes an engagement between the two parties. A virtual *cogito* is born: “I click, therefore I am.” The reaction, feedback, and engagement that digital technologies provides, creates a response that establishes our existence. Users’ participation with these media forges the digital landscape that will be studied. By discussing why we interact with these technologies we can then examine how we read with these technologies.

Existence predicates a world because we have to exist somewhere, but while the French philosophical tradition has dealt with the physical and metaphysical worlds, the late twentieth century engages with the digital world(s).<sup>106</sup> This engagement is one that meshes both the physical and the immaterial world by predicating the digital world’s usage of the sensory feedback humans receive when clicking, tapping, and exploring the endless links and pathways where websites and their advertisers or content creators lead their viewers. This translates into an attempt to justify the physical engagement with the virtual world. While the content is not tangible, it virtually placates our senses because of the interaction and tactile feedback we receive from the digital exploration we embark upon on our laptops, desktops, and hand-held smartphone devices. Everett’s idea of “click fetish” stems from our consumption of “new-media

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<sup>105</sup> About the multiple queer variations of the *cogito* asserted by Rémès that also inscribe being (albeit sexual being) into the French literary landscape, see chapter two.

<sup>106</sup> It would be interesting to explore to what degree the digital world is meta-physical, that is “beyond” the material, natural world. For now, I consider the digital world to be intra-physical, a burgeoning space that resides in-between the purely metaphysical and the physical. The concept of “intra” aligns well with the digital world since there is a physical component via both the machine that houses the technology and the human touch that initiates the interaction but also a non-physical component that defines the virtual idea.

discourses and practices” (14). The physical presence of the mouse and its virtual siblings, the onscreen arrow, bar, hand, and circle “operate through new media’s lure of a sensory plenitude presumably available simply, instantaneously, and pleasurable with any of several click apparatuses.” In doing so, one mixes the physical and virtual worlds that inundate our senses, transforming us into what one might call “posthumans” or “cyborgs.”<sup>107</sup>

Everett’s fetishization of “clicking” is further supported by Robert Darnton’s 2014 preface to his “First Steps Toward a History of Reading” from the *Australian Journal of French Studies*. Darnton’s original text looks at what “we” read and what that reveals about the reader. In his 2014 preface, he updates his conclusions for a digital era: “Readers everywhere sense that reading is being revolutionized. They sense it through the tips of their fingers when they touch electronic screens—a *Fingerspitzengefühl* unlike the tactility of books held in one’s hands” (152).<sup>108</sup> The information is transformed via a touch, and Darnton underlines the same human-technology relationship Everett stated in her introduction to *New Media Theory*: “They hear it with the click that takes them instantly from one text to another. They see it as they connect cursors with icons and when they search for information stored in clouds rather than libraries.” The touch mixes the physical and the virtual by taking what was once solely physical (the book, libraries, etc...) and revolutionizing its experience. Nonetheless, Darnton’s analysis also differs from Everett’s. He focuses more on the end experience of reading, specifically reading digital media, and on how it is constantly revolutionizing the reader’s experience with “the text,” a

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<sup>107</sup> Everett points out that the ongoing technologization of the human body is linked to an evolutionary discussion—a digital evolution. It’s prudent to argue that those who engage with our increasingly technological world are no longer just human. Different theorists have discussed our evolution as cyborgs (Donna Haraway) or posthumans (Hayles, Judith Halberstam, and Ira Livingston) however both outcomes involve a discussion about subjectivity and identity which further complicates “who” is interacting with these platforms. If digitexts are the next corpus to be studied, who is the subject? If it is cyborg or posthuman, to what degree does any identity founded on digitextual masculinity then shift if we are no longer solely human?

<sup>108</sup> My intra-physical concept of digital media being both physical and virtual coincides nicely with both Darnton and Everett’s theories regarding digital reading.

perspective that will become important for the later half of this chapter as we explore how Abdellah Taïa utilizes this medium.

The media revolution means that the content, the text, has changed; and in addition, both format and experience, specifically our experience with the “text,” is changing. Darnton explains: “The physical foundation of texts and the sensory experience of deciphering them are undergoing a transformation greater than anything since the time of Gutenberg” (152). Twenty-eight years after the initial publication of his piece about reading, Darnton echoes Everett, as they both believe that reading the Internet has become a fully sensorial project. Darnton and Everett’s concept of a sensorial experience when engaging with digital media highlights the why of user engagement but not the “what” regarding user action i.e.: is it passive consumption of a material or is an an active engagement of the material. What are we are doing—using or viewing this medium? Each action creates something different; the former is an outcome-based action, something with an end result, while the latter implies passivity. This becomes important as we try to understand what digital users are doing when they discuss or read about masculinities online.

Dan Harries asks interesting questions regarding our practices with digital media, in particular how we are to distinguish this change from previous media shifts involving television, cinema, radio or even the novel: “Do I ‘view’ the Web in a way taught to me by television? Am I using the Internet in the same way that I would ‘use’ any application on my computer? Or am I literally ‘watching the Internet’ in a way that combines both viewing and using media?” (171). Harries’ distinction between using and viewing, or rather, his combination of using and viewing, underlines what users are “doing” while surfing the Web. This distinction becomes useful later in this chapter when the discussion shifts to how major French socio-sexual polemics take digital

form and how they are explored and argued via digital media. By emphasizing the active nature of using and viewing content, we are giving a digital responsibility to anyone who can click, but also attempting to understand how and why a user clicks.

The screens the user interacts with become “*loci* of an assortment of media activities and experiences” (Harries 171), which allow users to create novel experiences. Harries thus echoes Darnton’s claim that digital literature is a constantly evolving practice. He creates the term “viewsing” (173) that combines viewing and using. I agree with the distinction Harries makes, but thus far each theorist has spoken only about the users’ experience and the actions that initiate a chain of experiences. To add to this discussion, I suggest that we also consider what comes after the initial click—the content and how we “viewse” it.

The justification of the Internet’s content as literature is important to my argument in the current chapter. Too often the content of digital exchange is devalued because of its volume, lack of peer review, and general editing practices whereas the published book remains privileged. As Darnton writes, “Streaming, texting, and tweeting do not signal the extinction of books and libraries” (153), rather they render reading more complex and varied, adding a new depth to how and what we read while infinitely expanding the content of the library from which we read.

Thus a discussion about digital media literacy has to go back to its roots, i.e.: what reading means. In the first edition of “First Steps Toward a History of Reading,” Darnton brings to light what looking into the history of what people read means when one attempts to construct a history of reading. This proves fruitful because reading is part of the action one engages as one surfs the Web’s endless content. Darnton claims that “Most of us would agree that a catalogue of a private library can serve as a profile of a reader, even though we don’t read all the books we

own and we do read many books that we never purchase” (159). A user’s browser history is a glimpse into the private world of interest not for malicious intent, but rather to establish a history of Internet reading.<sup>109</sup> In doing so we start to answer the “how” and “what” of browsing the endless library of the Internet.

Equally important to the “what” and “why” for Darnton is the “where.” By extrapolating from this to Internet reading practices, he raises an interesting issue. “The ‘where’ of reading is more important than one might think, because by placing the reader in his/her setting it can provide hints about the nature of his/her experience” (162). The “where” for Internet browsing becomes an “everywhere.” Mobile devices and the ubiquitous nature of digital technology in Western culture make the “where” more interesting since the “where” can be anywhere and at any time.<sup>110</sup> The portability of devices that allow access to the Internet brings the reader from the traditional “boudoir to the outdoors” (163).

Going back to Everett, her “click fetish” is based on the categorical privileging of the human body over virtual landscapes. She writes that “the click fetish, then, signifies the persistence of the body despite the powerful rhetoric of the posthuman in new media configurations” (15), echoing postmodernism’s previous discussions of philosophical thought and the human body, for example in Lyotard’s *L’Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps*. Everett’s notion of “click fetish” is based, in part, on Lyotard’s *métafonction* which highlights the human faculty of changing levels of referentiality. For Everett, these levels of referentiality are analogous to the Internet and the endless hypertextual, web-based links created by digital media.

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<sup>109</sup> The history of reading is a very French topic. Many French literary historians have interrogated its history in an attempt to answer the question of why readers “read.” Daniel Mornet’s essay “Les enseignements des bibliothèques privées” shows us that a study of private collections can reconstruct the social layers of cities (Darnton 159).

<sup>110</sup> Class is still a component that needs to be taken into account regarding access to technology. Unlimited access to technological access is still a privilege that is predominantly only available to a certain socio-economic strata in the West. While there are utopic movements that would spread this access, they are not the currently reality.

Therefore, if thought is inseparable from the phenomenological body, as Lyotard contends, then “click pleasure is predicated on an urge to retain the primacy of the body, and to rescue it from the phenomenological scrap heap in much of the nature-versus-science debate of our technological era” (15). Our digital interaction is predicated on our corporeal self, the reality from which we interact with the digital world. This brings the virtual and the digital back from the abstract to the real, the body, which will be the site of the discussion below on French masculinity.

The relationship between medium and message becomes more complex as the two continue to shape how digital media’s message is received.<sup>111</sup> Because the videos and digitexts studied below are online, their consumption is not only immediate but, more importantly, their consumption also engages the digital reader more because of the infinite paths hyperlink connectivity can take a reader. But how does reading and reacting to a book differ from consuming its digital counterpart? It comes back to the active and passive nature of Harries’ “viewsing” concept. Not only does the digital reader consume, but he or she can react with a public outcome, posting, sharing, tweeting, commenting, etc...continuously constructing an online reaction that is “viewse”able by other readers. It renders public the readers’ previously private reaction and makes that reaction something to which others can react as well. Reading is traditionally solitary because of its silent and private nature (Nelles 45), but social media are revolutionizing it (and to a degree undermining it) because they permit a digital endorsement through sharing: “Sharing articles (or other readings) on Facebook, impl[ies] some kind of endorsement; you’re suggesting that your friends read something because you consider it worth-

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<sup>111</sup> Does it suffice to cite McLuhan’s axiom, “The medium is the message”? Peter Lunenfeld writes, “McLuhan insists that the content of communication (the message) is determined more by the way it is sent (the medium) than by the intentions of the sender” (130). But McLuhan’s statement also underlines that the medium is only as interesting as the message it is able to transmit. Accordingly, the merit of analyzing both *Google* and *YouTube*’s role in same-sex marriage is in part based on the fact that their “message” is a current polemic in France.

while” (45). Videos did not bring about social change or mobilize the French people in and of themselves. It is both the message and the medium that initiates and facilitates the result.

Videos are a part of a larger web of digital activism that has created a different interaction between literature and reader. Nicholas Carr agrees that while content stays the same, the apparatus changes the experience of reading (104).

The readers’ experience changes, as there is a supposed constant connectivity and streaming of information that supplements reading. Everett’s comment cited above regarding the endless hyperlink possibilities of the Internet not only attests to the infinite library sources users have, but also indicates the dramatic shift in reading and reacting because of the simultaneity of digital reading’s nature. While we read we are simultaneously streaming other data and other readings. This is important because it stresses how reading is changing with newer technology and the ability to “always be connected to the Internet” (Austin 21). Furthermore, it also underlines why digital media theory is crucial to understanding current French politics regarding masculinity and masculine sexuality because recent debates on these topics have in part been expressed, fought, and won via this media. Similar to the use of Facebook and Twitter in the Arab Spring movement, part of the success of social equality movements like *le mariage pour tous* is due to the immediate nature of digital media that allows users to react and publish their reaction to garner support or provoke opposition. Studying New Media theory also helps us comprehend the dichotomy between an author like Abdellah Taïa’s literary and digital works while understanding why the author is intentionally playing with in terms of reading response online versus in his novels.



### **Gender and Sexuality in the French Social Media Landscape**

From the theory of digital media to its application, this chapter examines not only the intersection of digital media and its effects on gender construction but also postmodernism and masculinity. It differs from the previous two because both the medium and the content are postmodern. If postmodernism, according to its most basic understanding, is an attempt to focus on the periphery, to *decenter* the narrative in order to understand its margins, then the Web is the most postmodern entity in existence today because it has no center. Since the nature of the Web is always changing, refreshing, updating, any attempt at defining the center of the Internet would be in vain. Let me therefore suggest that we can reach a better understanding of French postmodern gender construction through postmodernism's own expressive format—digital media. In order to demonstrate the use of digital media and social media in the French context, we will examine two digital polemics that contain reactions to the shifting constructions of sexuality, family, marriage, and ultimately gender.

Two thousand thirteen marked a large shift in the French sociocultural landscape as protests for and against gay marriage took to the streets. Quickly named “mariage pour tous,” the debate surrounding a possible new law grew rapidly in the streets through protests, on television with political debate, in the newspapers via editorials, and finally online by means of numerous outlets like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, and Google campaigns. France has had a tumultuous relationship with the idea of gay marriage and its place in the larger framework of the republic. As discussed in the first and second chapters, gay rights took the national stage in France during the eighties and became more visible during the AIDS crisis in the mid-nineties. By 1999, some in France saw the PACS as a possible way to appease the social demands of same-sex couples, but as Éric Fassin underlined in *Liberté, égalité, sexualité*, the PACS, to a

certain degree, undermines the authority and dominance of heteronormative relations by legitimizing same-sex relationships.<sup>112</sup> Conversely, the PACS can also be seen as a heteronormalization of homosexuality and queer relationships, meaning that the end result is still a reinforcement of a heteronormative relationship.

During the presidential elections of 2012, François Hollande promised that he and his Socialist Party would open marriage to all consenting adults. By May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the law was officially implemented and found to be in accordance with the Constitution. However, the entire “mariage pour tous” constitutional spilled into the general population by means of mass media and the Internet’s immediate diffusionary practice.<sup>113</sup> I turn to two viral Internet videos as example of this digitized debate, whose publication and circulation reflect French republican values, while providing some of the loudest voices in the online debate. The first is a Google ad for its new feature/application called “Google Hangouts” and the second is a viral YouTube video entitled *Rassurez-vous*. Both are examples of the shift of media practice to more immediate forms of communication that solicit responses not only from a larger national population, but also from a global population as former geographic or national boundaries are erased from the digital landscape and are immediately crossed with a click.

Both videos hit the global queer blogosphere and immediately became examples of how discussions of sexuality, gender, and rights have shifted to online formats that allow multiple reactions and interactions from various readers/viewers. These interactions were epitomized by

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<sup>112</sup> Please refer to chapter two for Fassin’s argument regarding the implementation of the PACS.

<sup>113</sup> The debate is still ongoing. In a recent France 2 interview (see [http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2014/09/21/interview-sarkozy-jt-france2-delahousse\\_n\\_5856588.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2014/09/21/interview-sarkozy-jt-france2-delahousse_n_5856588.html)), former President Nicholas Sarkozy accused the government of current President Hollande of humiliating families and humiliating people who love the family: “On a humilié la famille, on a humilié un tas de braves gens qui n'avaient jamais pensé à défiler de leur vie et qui se sont sentis blessés parce qu'on touchait à leur amour de la famille” by introducing legislature that permits same-sex couples to marry and adopt (Boudet). What is interesting about Sarkozy’s comment, aside from the staunch homophobia, is that it refers to the importance of the family (chapter 1) and the expected dominance of heteronormativity (chapter 2).

the Google Hangouts advertisement that features two French men getting married. The implications of the technological giant Google producing and sharing this type of ad highlight the medium's ability to interact successfully with what many would consider a social justice issue. In May of 2013, Google made its stance on LGBT rights clear, especially in France, with its publication of a commercial featuring two long-time French partners. In the ad, which, as already mentioned, promotes Google's new video conferencing technology *Google + Hangouts*, viewers are treated to the emotional journey of a gay French couple.

The ad was made in collaboration with the organization "Tous Unis Pour l'Égalité," a militant group supporting same-sex marriage rights in France. Their mission statement reads: "Le collectif «Tous Unis Pour l'Égalité» s'est créé afin de soutenir les principes d'égalité de loi en faveur du mariage pour tous. Car nous considérons qu'il est du devoir d'une nation d'offrir les mêmes droits à tous ses citoyens" (Tous Unis Pour L'Égalité). This organization is unique in that it proposes to create social change through Internet activism by marrying couples via videoconferencing: "Nous proposons à tous les couples qui le souhaitent, de manifester leur soutien au mariage pour tous en se mariant, symboliquement, sur internet grâce au système de visioconférence hangout." The idea was to create a large body of political support by marrying same-sex couples in France via Google's services. As a result, the mediation of digital technologies subverted France's previous law preventing same-sex couples from marrying.

Publically protesting against French law is nothing out of the ordinary by French standards. In fact, it is common for many French citizens to oppose their government but in this particular case, it was the format of the protest that made this campaign unique. "Tous Unis Pour l'Égalité" puts a technological twist on new forms of social protest and social activism; it updates French activism for the digital era.

The *YouTube* ad for *Google Hangouts* guaranteed a viewership, both French and international, and served both as a marketing strategy for Google's services as well as a social commentary on the French political landscape at the time. It opens with the story of two males who met in 1976 and have lived together for almost 40 years. The two males display a stoic perspective, claiming to have seen a lot of change in their country: "En quarante ans de vie commune, nous avons vu notre pays changer, évoluer." They seem to place themselves outside of past debates, before diving headfirst into current polemics as the voice-over continues: "Mais il y a un sujet sur lequel la France n'avance pas. C'est la reconnaissance de notre couple, de son histoire, et de notre amour." Their language emphasizes the idea that they are the same as everyone else and thus deserve the same rights. During the opening narration, the ad features pictures and clips of them, framing their relationship in a normative perspective by highlighting the similarity of every day affairs regardless of sexual orientation. The ad sharply contrasts the suggested, innocent love between these elderly men with the reality of the French protests at the time. It features one protester saying, "L'État n'a pas à participer à la normalisation de l'homosexualité," echoing the popular discourse that suggests the French government has no say in establishing new social norms. What the couple's story does is to create a heteronormative framing. The opposition to gay marriage, the opponents' discourse, and their platform become the marginalized group in the ad.

It is worth noting the obvious positive-negative framing the ad uses to support same-sex marriage ("mariage pour tous") and devalue the anti-gay marriage movement ("manif pour tous"). Each narrative scene with the couple or the pro-gay marriage group is set to calm music with heavy piano keystrokes. This creates an unambiguous opposition to the "manif pour tous" with its violent images. The opinions of those featured opposing gay marriage are muffled by

their cohorts' protests where the emphasis is on the chaotic background that makes it even harder to hear the speakers and their remarks. Moreover, the speakers' testimonies are then photo-montaged or simply cut by scenes of the violent reality of protests: fights, riot brutality, homophobic slurs, police-enforced resistance, etc. The style of the montage emphasizes the previously discussed injustice of the law as regards same-sex couples who do not have marriage rights in France.

The solution proposed by *Google Hangouts* is for people to use their videoconferencing application to get married. The ad goes on to feature multiple couples being married by a mayor ("bourgmestre") in Belgium where same-sex marriage is legal. The goal of the ad is to demonstrate how the videoconferencing software provided by Google helps resolve the current injustices in France. It closes by anchoring the entire clip on the French national motto: "Dans ces débats, on parle beaucoup de l'égalité, beaucoup de la liberté, assez peu de la fraternité," thereby inserting this current debate back in the context of the duties of a French citizen and his/her responsibilities vis-à-vis his/her fellow citizens. It is a brilliant tactic that makes sure same-sex marriage is not perceived as a minority affair but as a larger issue based in the equality implied by French citizenship.

The ad does an excellent job of showing the potency of viral marketing and social activism. With over 118,000 views on *YouTube* in a year, not counting the numerous *Facebook* shares, or blog embedded views, this ad is a great example of the endless rhizomatic effect the Internet can have in regards to a specific social issue.<sup>114</sup> What remains to be studied, which is outside the scope of this project, is the impact of the ad via the various media and social media

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<sup>114</sup> The site [www.jezebel.com](http://www.jezebel.com) reports over 28,000 views of their article on this story (Accessed: June 28th, 2014) and a tertiary Google search reveals that other major Anglophone news outlets like *The Huffington Post* and *Business Insider* have picked up on the French social ad. The multiple outlets showcase the apparent infinite limits of Internet activism, collecting global support for an issue.

outlets, for it will help us understand how such a combination of marketing and activism can shift public reactions. It would be an exaggeration to attribute the shift in the French socio-sexual landscape to this ad or others like it; however, it does prove to be a strong example of the evolution of traditional activism. Furthermore, it brings the discussion of sexuality and masculinity in France into the digital era.

Another example of this polemic in full digital perspective is the clip “Rassurez-vous” by Mike Fédée. The clip is a single cut of Mike poetically reassuring the viewer that gay marriage will not vastly change the day-to-day lives of French citizens. Fédée starts each “reassuring” sentence with the anaphora “Rassurez-vous;” this rhetorical technique deliberately emphasizes the non-threatening impact of gay marriage in France through repetition. Mike starts the video with, “Rassurez-vous, dans ce débat pour le mariage pour tous, personne n’a perdu. Nous sommes tous gagnants car nous pourrions mieux vivre ensemble.” His claim of living better together echoes the previous Google + ad and the lack of fraternity in the current debate. What Mike proposes is that a state where gays can get married is a state that fulfills not only the qualities and duties of liberty and equality, but also fraternity. He continues, “Rassurez-vous, si je me marie demain, vous deviendrez pas moins homme ou femme,” replying to the suggestion that giving gays equal rights will blur the lines between gender roles and sexuality. This statement also brings us back to the heart of the discussion of masculinity. “Moins hommes” echoes *Le Figaro*’s earlier “enquête” about men becoming less manly where author Sophie Roquelle asks: “Où sont passés ces mâles dominants qui régnaient en maîtres sur nos sociétés occidentales depuis la nuit des temps?” Fédée’s “moins hommes” brings together the queer narrative and the rumored “crisis of masculinity.”

Mike continues, “Je deviendrai juste le mari du mien” underlining the simplicity of the impact gay marriage will have. Mike tries to reply to the most common criticisms of gay marriage and its proposed social impact, even including the religious outcry when he states, “Rassurez-vous, je ne vous demande pas de ne plus croire en votre Dieu, je vous demande de croire en nous.” His language again reflects the larger symbolic French concept of *fraternité* and privileges the duty of fellow citizens of the Republic over duties to religious belief or self-interest. As with the *Google* + ad, the content of Mike’s message brings the viewer back to Frenchness (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*) and away from communitarianism so as to emphasize the commonalities all citizen share—their French identity.

These developments bear on the argument deployed in the second part of this chapter, that is Abdellah Taïa’s online engagement as an author and public intellectual. Taïa’s online work is tied to these examples of French queer activism by the common thread of bringing to a fore the duties of citizenship instead of the repression of minority sexualities. Google, Mike Fedée, and later Taïa, are advocating a social activism that underlines the commonalities among citizens. By doing so, they create new expressions of masculinity that will become foundational to Taïa’s goals in his online presence. We will later discuss how Taïa uses the same media to promote Moroccan sexualities and socio-cultural changes.

Since both the Google ad and *Rassurez-vous* campaigns emphasize *fraternité*, they underline a powerful principle that sits at the core of French identity. Their main point is not to justify the normalcy of same-sex marriage or relations; rather, both ads seem to call upon a deeper relationship the French are supposed to share with one another, especially when Fedée later says, “Nous sommes ni plus ni moins que vous, nous sommes autant que vous,” thus also echoing the mandate of equality. The discourse in this video aims to justify same-sex marriage

via the political motto that has driven most post-Revolutionary social change: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. As Étienne Balibar claims, there is a correlative effect between the double unity of man and citizen (13); a contradiction, or “antinomy” as he states, of citizenship where the rights of man are presumed to be the same as the rights of citizens, when in reality they are not. Balibar thus coins the term, *égaliberté*, to demonstrate that while equality implies freedom, freedom does not guarantee equality (67). In fact, tracing the concepts of rights, citizenship, and equality to their origin in 1789, Balibar writes “La *Déclaration* dit en fait que l’égalité est identique à la liberté, est *égale à la liberté* [...] C’est que je propose d’appeler [...] *la proposition de l’égaliberté*” (68). However, Balibar points out that while the *Déclaration* equates the two principles (*égalité, liberté*), these are not applied in reality; they remain just an ideal (59). Therefore there is a gap between the universal ideal (*les droits de l’homme*) and the actual application of “*les droits du citoyen*.” Essentially, Fédée’s remark equates “*homme et citoyen*,” where Balibar notes that the two are separate in reality. Fédée assumes that *égalité* is a right of man, when in fact it is more the right of citizens. This does not, however, take away from the social claim both ads are making for gay marriage, rather the ads would benefit from framing their claims from a citizenship perspective because citizenship is the base for political claims regarding rights.

Moreover, the video underscores a commonality rather than a difference; the French are brought together, to a degree, by way of this tripartite motto since that is what French citizens have in common. Rather than focusing the entire discourse or social justification on accepting gay marriage or gays for who they are, both ads are constructed in such a manner that they underline the commonality that cannot be divided—belonging to the Republic as the nation. The



ads want to underscore the importance of Frenchness and the duties the French have towards one another as citizens.

Fédée's video also touches on a larger component of the *mariage pour tous* debate—i.e. children - when he says, “Rassurez-vous, j’aimerai mon enfant.” Those who oppose same-sex marriage in France claim that a child is best raised by a mother *and* a father. They argue that protecting the integrity of the French heterosexual nuclear family is necessary to the integrity of French social order. The social organization *Manif Pour Tous*, constructed in opposition to the *mariage pour tous*, states on its website “Le peuple de France doit se lever pour ses enfants, son avenir...et notre humanité, constituée homme et femme” (*Manif*). This language attempts to defend a heteronormative family structure via a transhistorical religious model or even a secular anthropological model that emphasizes the separate roles men and women provide in rearing a child. These models demonstrate how the structure of a society is based on the biomechanics of reproduction. The previous quote links same-sex marriage to the possible downfall of society: “Nous avons la responsabilité de préserver notre état civil, notre société,” which in turn assumes that we understand the symbolic structure of society and its future as heterosexual.

*La Manif Pour Tous* appears to represent a large portion of the French population. Its Facebook page has almost 50,000 likes, and Facebook Insights (Facebook's statistic measuring application) indicates that the most represented group of individuals who “like” the page are Parisian 18-34 years olds.<sup>115</sup> What is commonly thought of as a conservative movement, possibly representative of an older population, turns out to have a strong following among young people. Of course one needs to take into account the technological literacy this group has when compared to others, but the fact still shows that the opposition to same-sex marriage is diverse and considerable.

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<sup>115</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/LaManifPourTous/likes>

I bring up *La Manif* because it shows how the debate about same-sex marriage has taken to digital pathways to emphasize its presence on Facebook, Twitter, and a maintained website. The previous examples serve to show to what extent issues of masculinity and queer sexuality are diffused via digital technologies and how they have taken center-stage. The next step is to examine similar developments through a particular example to see how both literature and digitextualites reflect and inflect each other in the works of one specific author.

### **“A Boy to be Sacrificed”—Abdellah Taïa and Maghrebi Masculinity**

An analysis of masculinity and masculine sexualities in the texts of Abdellah Taïa puts the hexagonal authors previously studied into a different perspective and also provides some background to the discussion about the online, political side of Taïa’s work. Abdellah Taïa is one of the first Maghrebi authors to explore and discuss same-sex love in his *autofiction* in an attempt to promote cultural awareness and open dialogue about homosexuality in the Arab world.<sup>116</sup> As an accomplished author, his texts emphasize constructing or reconstructing a Moroccan heritage devoid of the Western transgressive influence that typically paints Morocco as a colonial escape for indulgent activities. Living now in Paris, he writes from a “telescopic” point of view (Morse) much like Tahar Ben Jelloun and Abdellah Khatibi, expatriates whose writings also construct a literary presence in their homeland but from a distance. Both Ben Jelloun and Taïa privilege this expatriate viewpoint because there is no literary production within the country itself, due mainly to the Islamist regime. In a duo interview from 2013, Ben Jelloun and Taïa explain how Morocco and the Arab world suffer from a lack of readership. Ben Jelloun

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<sup>116</sup> Another author of interest is Rachid O., a Moroccan author, who like Taïa, writes about same-sex love in Maghrebi Francophone literature. He is the author of *Chocolat Chaud* (1998), *Plusieurs vies* (1998), *L’Enfant ébloui* (1999), *Ce qui reste* (2003), and the recent *Analphabètes* (2012). Unlike Taïa, Rachid O. leads a private life, having no public or media interaction. He also does not publically assume a Moroccan heritage or family ties as he goes by the last name of “O,” orphaning and theoretically detaching himself from Morocco.

elucidates, “Il y a un problème de lecture dans le monde arabe en général, et qui ne peut pas être dissocié de la crise politique que nous vivons, ni de la crise culturelle et identitaire, car tout est lié.” Therefore, to write from France allows them to supplant the lack that is sitting at the heart of Moroccan culture. For Taïa, writing about Moroccan society is an obligation he must fulfill since the current socio-political state does not produce anything from without.

In this section, I will examine Taïa’s works *L’Armée du salut* (2006), *Une mélancolie arabe* (2008), and *Le Jour du roi* (2010), the latter having earned him the prestigious Prix de Flore. These texts allow for an exploration of Francophone postmodern masculinity by highlighting the symptoms Taïa’s literary corpus shares with those of Houellebecq, Dustan, Rémès and their “condition.” I will discuss what Taïa’s depiction of paternity and queer sexuality brings to the discussion about postmodern masculinities to demonstrate how the concepts outlined in my previous analyses transcend specific cultural contexts and are a reflection of postmodernity itself.

Taïa’s creative energy comes from a place of trauma. The opening pages of most of his books frame the discussion of what we might call a queer Moroccan identity. *L’Armée du salut* opens with the narrator, Abdellah, listening to the sexual moans of his parents intercourse that eventually were overcome by the shouts and screams of domestic abuse as the two parents lovemaking turned to hate during the night. This memory is the basis for the protagonist’s sexual awakening, as it serves as a link between family, sexuality, and violence. His subsequent novel, *La Mélancolie arabe*, links trauma and sexuality again as the protagonist is on the verge of being raped by a gang of Moroccan youths only to be saved by the muezzin’s call to prayer. Upon escaping his kidnapper’s home, disappointed at the lack of recognition of his queer sexuality, he decides to electrocute himself, stopping his heart, and reinforcing the connection

between violence and sexuality that has come to inform Taïa's construction of a queer Maghrebi sexuality.

Since sexuality is connected to trauma in each of these key events of his adolescence, it is important to examine the starting point from which he frames both the construction of Moroccan masculinity and (queer) sexuality in each text. In a Maghrebi context, masculinity is first learned in childhood. Indeed, in both *L'Armée du salut* and *La Mélancolie arabe*, the only "men" the narrator describes are his father and his brother, the latter more than any other character. Furthermore, both figures have a notable impact on how the protagonists form their concepts of both Moroccan masculinity and sexuality.

Let us first examine Taïa's *Le Jour du roi* (2010) in an attempt to draw a transcultural link between this novel and that of Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires*, as both texts deal with paternity and masculine sexuality, symptoms of postmodernism discussed earlier. The novel's plot centers on two best friends, Khalid and Omar, who share a strong bond as friends and adolescent lovers.<sup>117</sup> However, one day at school, the principal declares a competition. The best student will be chosen to shake the hand of King Hassan II. Omar is jealous of Khalid's victory in the competition, attributing it to the political status of Khalid's family. At the heart of the novel is a deep questioning of familial responsibilities and masculine performance.

In this novel, Omar's father becomes the antithesis of a dutiful Moroccan father.<sup>118</sup> His mother leaves the family, breaking his father, described as the soul of the family as he fulfilled

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<sup>117</sup> Omar narrates, "J'ai éteint la lampe, et je l'ai rejoint dans le petit lit vert. Cela ne l'a pas réveillé. Il avait l'habitude. De moi. De mon corps. De nous. Deux. Un." (44). The novel opens with the two of them positioned as "one" and as the plot unfolds, they become more and more separated until the end when they come back together in a semi-sexual ritual where they undress and exchange underwear. The ritual represents an exchange but also a unification. Khalid states: "Je serai Omar à ta place. Tu seras Kahlid à ma place" (138). Later Omar states: "Je m'appelle: 'Khalid...Khalid...Khalid'" (180), completing their corporal exchange.

<sup>118</sup> This dynamic nature (between presence and absence) of the paternal figures plays into all of Taïa's novels, paralleling to some degree what happens in Houellebecq's and Rémès's texts. In *Une mélancolie arabe*, Abdellah

his Moroccan role: “Mon père était l’âme de la famille. Le moteur de la famille. Le sang” (34). This creates a normative benchmark against which he positions his father’s current comportment. The quote brings to light how Omar believes his “father” is the center of the Moroccan family from which other family members branch off, but most importantly, are always tied to. The reader therefore learns the role paternity plays in the novel as the protagonists explore the limits of sexuality in Moroccan culture.

However, after the departure of his mother, the father completely abandons his role. He leaves his position as the head of the family and becomes obsessed with finding his wife, attributing her abandonment to supernatural events: “On disait dans le quartier qu’elle avait jeté un sort puissant à mon père. Un sort préparé par le sorcier le plus puissant de la ville. Du Maroc peut-être” (36). The father goes on to take counsel from Morocco’s most powerful warlock, Bouhaydoura, hoping to break the spell and find a supernatural way to solve his dilemma. His discussion with the warlock illustrates the normative framework with which he views the world. The father explains: “Un homme n’est rien, un homme est vide, nu, risible, sans une femme” (53). He establishes a heteronormative paradigm that does not correspond to the reality of the novel, since the text underscores a deviation from the heteronormative family. The father continues and explains how he wants his wife to only belong to him: “Elle est à moi. Elle est moi. J’aime qu’elle ne soit qu’à moi, qu’à moi...,” and asks the warlock “Un homme, c’est ça, non? Non?,” expressing his desire to see the normative paradigm confirmed. He is correct in assuming that a man’s masculinity is inherently tied to his marriage and his wife in Moroccan culture, since hegemonic masculinities are firmly solidified by the institution of matrimony

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works on the set of a movie entitled *Made in Egypt*: “Le sujet, la recherche d’un père” (72). The film is a *mise-en-abyme* of the larger postmodern symptom of absent fathers that Taïa’s novel itself expresses.

(Smith 36). The father's desire for his wife, the heteronormative culture, becomes a subliminal suppression of the queerness the novel exhibits, but it ultimately fails to do so.

The father's attempts are futile, as Bouhaydoura replies, "Vous avez tort," to which the father, a symbol of the patriarchy, says "Je ne comprends pas." He does not understand because the "ça" ("Un homme c'est ça non?") no longer exists in the reality of the novel because the novel constructs a certain future where the father is no longer the leader but is replaced by his son Omar, as the latter states: "Aujourd'hui, c'est moi l'homme. Un homme pour mon père" (35). Omar supplants his father, becoming more of a man than he is, thereby queering the family model, and creating a space and place for queer sexuality since he has taken the place of the patriarchy and heteronormativity. Bouhaydoura's reply ("Vous avez tort") shatters Omar's father's world and breaks down the legitimacy of normative gender roles in the novel since the father is said to be "wrong" to assume that a man is nothing without his wife.

Omar is present at this exchange, understanding what is being discussed about what it means to be a man. At the end of their visit with the warlock, he says "Je l'ai saisie enfin" (56) which is presented in opposition to his father's previous "Je ne comprends pas". The question is what does he finally understand? The "le" stands for the socio-cultural shift in the position of the patriarchy. Omar understands, like Houellebecq's Michel and Bruno, we are at the end of a paradigm: "Nous étions à la fin. Dans la fin du monde tel que je l'avais connu. La fin de ma famille" (57). In fact, it is the end of "la famille" which allows for new iterations of gender performativity and roles to have a place. This echoes Houellebecq's "la fin de l'ancien règne" with which he opens *Les Particules élémentaires*. When Omar says "Je l'ai saisie enfin," he understands that while his father thinks a man is made by the presence of a women/wife, he (Omar) knows it is not the case.

Omar's father is a paternal invalid and Omar is aware that there is nothing to learn from his father. Omar therefore wants to distance himself from his father's behavior. He remarks: "Ce n'est pas un bon exemple pour moi, cette conduite" (31). Omar knows that he is supposed to learn something from his father, which is how to be a man, but he also knows that his father no longer maintains his role as head of the household: "Il ne faut pas que je devienne comme lui [...] Déchéance d'un homme." Therefore, he proceeds to create, with his close friend Kahlid, a queer Moroccan masculinity that is based not on tradition, but on experience.

To a degree, the abandonment of Moroccan patriarchy is foreshadowed in *Le jour du roi*'s first chapter about Omar's dream to visit King Hassan II. The interaction that unfolds during the dream highlights how masculinity and paternity are mutating. The dream starts with Omar being honored with the privilege of kissing the king's hand,<sup>119</sup> but the process becomes haunting, violent, and his dream undermines the power the king exemplifies as the Father of Moroccans. In his dream, as Omar approaches the king, the latter asks, "Comment je m'appelle?" to which Omar replies, "Hassan II...Le roi Hassan II du Maroc" (10). By naming the king, Omar gives him a presence and some importance. However, this does not satisfy the king: "Il me dit: 'Non. Mon nom de famille? Quel est mon nom de famille?'"

The insistence on establishing a familial heritage for the king is an example of a quintessential figure whose paternal link is erased. Omar is not able to produce a reply, "Je suis toujours muet" (11), and he continues to search for an answer ("Je creuse dans ma tête un trou,") but the king becomes persistent: "Mon nom de famille? Vite, vite...mon nom de famille? Vite, j'ai dit..." and this persistence turns to violence: "Il s'est rapproché de moi. Ses deux mains sont autour de mon cou, qu'il serre de plus en plus fort." Faced with the absence of familial

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<sup>119</sup> "Baiser la main de Hassan II: c'est le rêve de presque tous les Marocains. Je suis devant ce rêve qui se réalise" (16).

recognition, the king becomes physically violent with Omar, attempting to eliminate the threat Omar's ignorance poses to the symbolic order.

The choking causes Omar to faint. He is woken by a woman who whispers, "Va vers lui, va vers le Roi, c'est comme ton père. C'est ton père" (12). The dream takes a turn for the comical as attendants of the ceremony all start to laugh at Omar's misfortune. His disorientation and confusion lead him to scream: "Non, non il n'est pas mon père. Le Roi n'est pas mon père" (13). This negates the symbolic power of the king and his role as father of Moroccans. If the king has no lineage nor family, he has no claim to rule over his people, he loses his sovereignty and power. Omar therefore is able to create a space for his masculinity and sexuality since the king has theoretically fallen in this dream. However, this does not come without a fight. In his dream, he is immediately threatened for not knowing the king's name: "Plus tard ton châiment sera pire, pire que tout" (14).

By declaring that the king is not his "father," Omar is risking his entire cultural and sexual identity. At the end of his dream, the floor opens up, consuming him in an interminable fall during which he is accompanied by a voice that repetitively claims: "Bye-bye...Tu n'es plus marocain...Tu n'es plus marocain...Bye-bye...Tu n'as plus de père...Bye-bye...Tu n'as plus de père...Bye-bye...Tu n'as plus de Roi..." (22). His ignorance of the king's "nom de famille" creates a chain reaction that threatens his nationality and masculinity. The chapter ends with Omar wondering "Qui suis-je?" But this menacing voice that iterates "bye-bye" and seeks to portend Omar's future should be interpreted in a manner that eliminates the aforementioned variables (nationality and paternity) and promotes new Moroccan masculinities instead. By erasing the socio-sexual and cultural dominance of "fathers" and of the king, Taïa creates a literary world where Omar and Khalid redefine "Moroccanness" and their own sexuality.



The result is a literary space where two Moroccan protagonists explore their sexuality, not in an explicit sense, but rather in a sense that justifies a queer Moroccan identity. It is worth noting here that I hesitate to use the word “gay” since I do not wish to impose a Western influence on Moroccan identity. It is safe to say that the term “queer” in its purest, non-normative representational form, definitely corresponds to the scope of Taïa’s project. What I am attempting to avoid here is giving in to a Western theoretical impulse to talk about this work as an example of gay Moroccan literature when we cannot impose that sexual identity on the protagonist. This does not mean that his work does not fit into the larger framework of postmodern masculinities that I suggested at the start of this chapter. Taïa’s literature merits its own place in the larger continuum of masculinities studied in this dissertation that for they serve to enhance the discourse on crisis that Houellebecq, Dustan, and Rémès spoken about as well as discuss queer Maghrebi masculinities. For a large part of this analysis, queer will be used to refer to both “non-normative” behavior as well as simply “same-sex” relationships.<sup>120</sup>

Omar’s remark, “Ce n’est pas un bon exemple pour moi, cette conduite” (31), echoes Bruno’s “Je n’ai rien à transmettre à mon fils” but from a different point of view. However, Omar is on the receiving end of Bruno’s comment, understanding that there is nothing to be learned from the father. As the space for exploring Moroccan sexuality is left open, Omar avoids defining his sexuality and labeling it. In fact, the novel posits the lovers’ identities within their desire for one another. Omar reflects: “Je ne suis ni garçon, ni fille. Je suis dans le désir” (179). The quote breaks away from a heteronormative tradition which seeks to label males as either heterosexual, i.e. “garçon” or homosexual, i.e.: “fille.” For Taïa’s characters, what counts is the moment of desire, “le moment du désir” (179), a transformative place from which he rewrites all of Moroccan sexuality. Omar says to himself in a moment of reflection, “Je vais le [désir]

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<sup>120</sup> This point will later become a topic when discussion digitextual Taïa and how he constructs an online persona.

précéder, l'annuler, l'exploser, le réécrire." Desire is no longer defined by the power of the patriarchy since the latter is no longer present in the novel; rather, Omar and Khalid's relationship is a testament to a rewriting of queer Moroccan sexuality, even of Moroccan sexuality overall.

Taïa is an important author for this study because he brings a non-French perspective to the previous symptoms of postmodernism discussed in earlier chapters. This comes to light in another of his autofictional works, *Une mélancolie arabe*. The novel's main protagonist, Abdellah, retraces his life and recalls his interactions with Maghrebi men. This text is unique and distances itself from his first book, *L'Armée du salut*, in that it encompasses Arab men only. It avoids the common Francophone trope that treats Morocco as a sexualized land of escape, free of inhibition for Europeans. Rather, the narrative moves from the particular to the general/national as the reader is progressively led from Hay-Salam, the narrator's neighborhood, to Rabat-Salé, his home city, and finally to Morocco itself.

The title of the novel opens up an interesting perspective on the concept of melancholia. While nostalgia emphasizes an emotional longing for the past, melancholia refers to a depressive present possibly linked to a specific past. The title elicits a response from the reader, an expectation that the novel will come to define melancholia, in particular Arab melancholia. The title also shares a connection with Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires*. Houellebecq's novel and in general his writing, is often characterized by a present displeasure with the status quo. Such displeasure suggests that there likely exists a postmodern form of melancholia that pits contemporaneity against its history. In fact this link is strengthened by the title of Taïa's first chapter, "Je me souviens." This remembrance initiates a comparison between anteriority and presence for the reader. It recalls how Houellebecq opens *Les Particules élémentaires* by

explaining how the reader has arrived at "une période nouvelle dans l'histoire" (8). Furthermore, the protagonist of *Une mélancolie arabe* is remembering what came before—what Houellebecq called “la fin de l’ancien règne” (10) where now “l’ancien règne” is the Moroccan heteronormative discourse that the author “queers” by placing same-sex relations at center-stage, away from the periphery of Maghrebi literature.

Taïa further juxtaposes the pre/post versions of “l’ancien règne” at the start of the novel. The narrator writes, “J’étais dans ma deuxième vie” (9), leaving the reader guessing what came before and what caused the current rupture. What is difficult to analyze is the fact that the novel contains no “before” as it starts with “dans ma deuxième vie” and continues from there. The concept that the protagonist has two lives is reminiscent of Érik Rémès’ double life of pre- and post-seropositivity. In Rémès’ novel *Je bande donc je suis*, Tintin’s pre-seropositive life is marked by the heteronormative paradigm of his judgmental family. His “deuxième vie” is distinctly marked by the absence of heterosexuals and seronegative men. While Taïa does not write that radically, the narrator is enacting a paradigm shift from the first page, one that permits a queer Moroccan expression within the overarching theme of melancholia.

What makes Taïa’s novel different from Rémès’s and Dustan’s is that the former has to constantly balance the reality of clandestine queer sexuality with the dominant normative society of Morocco, whereas the French authors construct a purely queer world. However, when reality and normativity come to the surface, the protagonist is left as isolated and lonely in Taïa’s novel as in Dustan’s. Abdellah and his friend frequently masturbate and spend the nights together in the same bed. They are both discovered by the friend’s father who chases Abdellah away, forbidding him to ever return. Abdellah then wanders through the streets, contemplatively reflecting: “Je ne suis pas comme les autres” (13). The scene is a stark reminder that while he

attempts to carve a queer space within the Moroccan cultural landscape, it is still dominated by traditionalism.

But this does not prevent the clandestine from coming forth. As Abdellah roams the streets, he encounters gangs of youths that help him explore his sexuality. In stark contrast to the alienation he felt earlier with his friend's father, in this group of teenage boys he remarks: "J'étais comme eux, absolument comme eux" (14). He links himself to a queer sexuality *à la marocaine* by way of a cultural ceremony called *nouiba*: "On faisait la *nouiba*: chacun se donnait à l'autre. On baissait nos pantalons et on faisait l'amour en groupe" (14). The Arabic word jumps out from the page reminding the reader that this act is unique to Abdellah's culture and that the expression of his sexuality is unique to Morocco and not represented in the French context; that he is tied to Morocco even though his sexuality distances him from it socially.<sup>121</sup>

The use of *nouiba* also highlights Taïa's tendency to use the term *zamel* more so than any other queer-identifying term.<sup>122</sup> Later, I will explore this term and others in the digitextual world, but here in Taïa's novel, the term serves to remind us that we are not establishing a sexuality-based identity like Western "gay" or theoretical "queer." Rather, *zamel* is how Abdellah is denoted. In other words, the author avoids "pédé" but chooses *zamel*, demonstrating to what degree the French language cannot represent his culture. Traditional Western queer terms do not appear in the novel for the reader never reads about "les gais" or "les pédés." Rather, Abdellah talks around the topic ("L'amour interdit," 110) demonstrating what the French language can and cannot represent for him. This stance differs from some current criticism on

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<sup>121</sup> In *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections* (ed. John C. Halway), Jarrod Hayes argues that the use of *nouiba* in Abdelhak Serhane's *Messaouda* (1983) shows that Arabic, unlike French, has a word for "fucking and getting fucked" (87) and that this notion is unique to Maghrebi dialects of Arabic. I would argue the same since Taïa's use of the word demonstrates that notions of egalitarian same-sex intercourse are culturally prevalent in the Maghreb, more so than in the French vocabulary.

<sup>122</sup> "Je restais avec eux même quand ils m'insultaient, me traitaient d'efféminé, de *zamel*" (14). The term reappears throughout the novel and also in *L'Armée du salut*.

Taïa that assumes that what is being negotiated and constructed in terms of gender or masculinity is, by default, gay, as in, for example, “The process of asserting a gay identity in the context of a society where the existence of such an identity is often denied” (Smith 35). While it is true that the existence of a sexual identity based in same-sex love does not occur, it would be mistaken to impose the term “gay” on a text that is attempting to chisel a place for the expression of queer sexuality in Moroccan society.

Coming back to the use of *nouiiba*, the term becomes important to this analysis because it is a cultural ceremony where the participants express both activity and passivity. This is important to note because, socially-speaking, no Arab would question the masculinity of the penetrator, only that of the one who is being penetrated.<sup>123</sup> Sophie Smith explains that “A normative masculinity displayed through penetration of the socially inferior Other in order to express its dominance, representing the physical manifestation of a rigid dichotomy whereby the penetrated is relegated to the status of non-man or, at best, ‘less-of-a-man’” (37). This ceremony therefore erases sexual hierarchies, allowing all participants to be the penetrators and the penetrated. Smith places the emphasis on the fact that in Arab countries, importance is placed on the sex act, not the partners engaging in the act, so ultimately “desiring another man is not problematic in Muslim cultures” (38).

Furthermore, the ceremony echoes the ritualistic practices of bareback communities represented in Rémès’s *Je bande donc je suis* and *Serial Fucker*. What draws the group together is the practice of a private ritual that initiates members to a subculture: for Rémès, a subculture of barebacking and for Taïa, a subculture of peripheral sexualities. Abdellah further unites the gang by casting aside his former intimate friend whose father chased him away earlier, claiming,

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<sup>123</sup> See Abdelhak Serhane’s *L’Amour circoncis*, Casablanca: Editions Eddif. 1996

“[Il] ne faisait pas partie de notre bande. Il était à part...” (14). Therefore the novel places same-sex activities in the center, casting aside those who do not participate in it or in the “bande.”

Taïa is attempting to create a place for Moroccan queer sexuality that allows males to construct a public masculinity that is not heterosexual and more pertinently, not *zamel*. He seeks to construct his own “veritable identité” that transgresses Moroccan socio-cultural knowledge where he is simply feminized and labeled a *zamel* (17). This comes to light when Abdellah is bullied by an older boy, Chouaïb, who threatens to rape him. In the face of many insults and a stigma of feminization (Chouaïb chooses to call Abdellah “Leïla”) Abdellah tells the reader:

J’ai voulu un moment lui donner mon vrai prénom, lui dire que j’étais  
garçon, un homme comme lui... Lui dire qu’il me plaisait et qu’il n’y avait  
pas besoin de violence entre nous, que je me donnerais à lui heureux si  
seulement il arrêta de me féminiser... Je n’étais ni Leïla, ni sa soeur, ni  
sa mère. J’étais Abdellah, Abdellah du Bloc 15 et dans quelques jours  
j’allais avoir 13 ans. (21)

Abdellah chooses to break from the repetitive classification he endures from Chouaïb and Moroccan society as a whole by asserting his own identity that implicates masculinity and queerness while still considering himself a part of Moroccan society.

When Abdellah states “un homme comme lui,” he is breaking away from traditional Moroccan cultural thought that marks the passive man as *zamel* and transforms him into a woman because of this passivity. In fact, Abdellah later comments, “Je voulais lui dire et redire qu’un garçon est un garçon, et une fille est une fille,” (22) which may appear essentialist, but he quickly follows with, “Ce n’était pas parce que j’aimais sincèrement et pour toujours les hommes qu’il pouvait se permettre de me confondre avec l’autre sexe” demonstrating that women are not

the only ones permitted to like men. He continues to reclaim his identity from feminization (*zamel*) by stating “J’étais Abdellah, Abdellah du Bloc 15” giving himself a place and a presence in the greater Moroccan landscape. Because Chouaïb calls him a *zamel* and Leïla, Abdellah feels he is losing the identity he has constructed thus far. However, by stating his name, he is not allowing himself to be overcome by Moroccan socio-sexual labels despite Chouaïb’s attempts. For the latter, Abdellah must be feminized, he must be Leïla because in Moroccan society, a man who wants to be penetrated (i.e. Abdellah) does not exist (Smith 44).

He reflects on how the feminization of his body denies him his individual identity: “De détruire ainsi mon identité, mon histoire” (21), invoking a past where he has established himself as a Moroccan male. Being called “Leïla” is now negating his masculinity’s presence, its power, and its rightful claim. But he turns these thoughts and reflections into a speech act as he lashes out at Chouaïb, “Je suis Abdellah...Abdellah Taïa” (24). By naming himself out loud, he rebels against the cultural standard that Chouaïb has imposed on him. Abdellah not only names himself but, by giving his last name, asserts a lineage, a heritage, and familial identity.<sup>124</sup> This interruption, this out-of-character exclamation does not go unnoticed as Abdellah remarks: “Il était surpris. Dans mes yeux, il lisait enfin autre chose que la peur et la soumission” (24), a reflection how there is some recognition of a queer Moroccan masculinity that is not feminized. Moroccan values play into Chouaïb’s reaction for his surprise is recognition of the cultural respect Taïa’s true name evokes. Chouaïb “lisait autre chose,” and this “autre chose” is that Abdellah is indeed masculine and that the other’s faulty attempts at feminizing his victim fail. The quote highlights a shock and an understanding of the possibility that masculinity in Morocco can have a queer expression.

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<sup>124</sup> A familial identity that King Hassan II was lacking in Taïa’s text *Le Jour du roi*. In this scene, Abdellah creates and establishes a familial identity through his name.

Much like Rémès's and Dustan's books, Taïa's novel establishes a form of masculinity through a physical kind of sexuality. The physical act of sex and the biological presence of the HIV/AIDS virus concretizes Rémès and Dustan's masculinity through its transmission, whereas for Taïa what becomes transmitted is generational: child to parent, past self to present self, etc...<sup>125</sup> What draws the three authors closer together is their use of the queer "other" which captures a masculinity, perhaps an ideal, that interrupts the text's discourse on newer masculinities. Just as Dustan walks around the bar in *Je sors ce soir*, pointing out to his reader the "beau viril homme" (93) around him, Taïa stops the reader, drawing attention to Chouaïb, "le beau, l'homme, le patron" (16). In fact, up until Abdellah's claim to also be a man, the reader only has Chouaïb as an example of Moroccan masculinity, but then Abdellah starts to create his own, thus ending this first "Je me souviens" section of the novel. Later, while working on the set of a film, Abdellah finds himself staying at a local hotel where he meets Karabiino, "un garçon de chambre" about whom Abdellah remarks, "Ce garçon n'était pas comme moi" (83). On the surface, we conclude that Abdellah means that this boy is not queer, but a deeper look also allows us to interpret the statement to mean that Karabiino is another example of masculinity, previously suggested as the "masculine other." Abdellah remarks, "Ce garçon de 17 ans réinventait l'homme pour moi," referring to a certain, indescribable appeal in Karabiino that captures Taïa's attention.

The first section of the novel "remembers" what was impossible for queer iterations of masculinity in Morocco and positions traditional masculinity against the *zamel*. However, Abdellah's speech act against his would-be rapist breaks this impossibility of a queer Moroccan masculinity and creates a literary space for his own depiction of masculinity. Entitled "J'y vais," the second section of *Une mélancolie arabe* now places the proposed queerness at the center of

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<sup>125</sup> This evokes Taïa's epistolary project *Lettres à un jeune marocain*. Each author writes to a younger generation. Taïa writes to his nephew about the Taïa family's past and the death of the author's father.



the novel and moves heterosexual discourse to the periphery, even in the midst of a heavily heteronormative community. This is where Taïa is going (“J’y vais”), to the new center of discourse in his text.

Taïa’s construction of masculinity in his literary works is best explored in his first mainstream novel *Armée du salut* (2006). In this text, Taïa uses his family to explore his masculine sexuality and to further construct a literary example of a postmodern masculinity. He frames the novel by claiming that his own sexual consciousness is a product of his family: “Dans ma tête, la réalité de notre famille a un très fort goût sexuel, c’est comme si nous avions tous été des partenaires les uns pour les autres” (15). The incestuous nature of the quote echoes Rémès’s relationship with his stepfather, and suggests that the bonds of family are strengthened through a sexual sharing that, in this case, is more hypothetical or imaginary than real.

The novel sets itself apart from Taïa’s other books because it sexualizes Abdellah from the beginning. The “goût sexuel” that he notes about his family underlines that Abdellah has always been aware of *a* sexuality, “a” sexuality simply because it has not been performed or constructed yet. It is still passive and inquisitive but is a source of meaning, not shame: “Si la sexualité est omniprésente, elle n’est pas culpabilisante” (Parris 661). What quickly comes to the surface of the text is the role his older brother, Abdelkébir, played in the formation of Abdellah’s queer identity. His brother represents more than just an older fraternal figure; he supplants the father in terms of inter-generational socio-cultural education: “Il est plus que mon frère” (33). The brother represents a static Moroccan concept of masculinity and normativity for Abdellah to study: “Mon frère est là depuis le début.” He is the point of reference for Moroccan masculinity for Abdellah : “ Il est l’homme grand que je voudrais être un jour.” Critics like David Parris agree on the importance of Abdelkébir in the overall construction of masculinity for Abdellah:

“Le rapport avec le grand frère est un élément-clé dans l’identité masculine du narrateur” (662), but to what degree and how that operates in Abdellah’s queer universe is still being negotiated in the novel.

The reader understands that Abdellah cannot grow up to be like Abdelkébir, to assume the same socio-cultural gender role as his brother because there is no queer Moroccan masculinity for Abdellah. Their culture considers Abdellah to be a *zamel* rather than a man, and this relegates Abdellah to the periphery. To create a queer Moroccan masculinity, Abdellah consumes the quintessential representation of masculinity present in the novel—his brother—thereby creating a queer manifestation of the Moroccan ideal. To do so, he explores the bedroom of his brother: “En son absence j’entrais par la fenêtre dans sa chambre [...] Je baignais dans l’odeur forte d’Abdelkébir, son odeur d’homme” (35). He establishes an ambiance of masculinity (odeur d’homme), and discovers a pile of dirty clothes:

Sous sa bibliothèque il cachait des slips qui avaient une odeur particulière et étaient tachés de blanc à l’intérieur. Je mis du temps avant de comprendre. C’était son sperme. (35)

This is where the queer confronts the normative, as Abdellah no longer allows the two to be separate: “Moi, même le sperme de mon frère je le connaissais. Je le touchais, je l’étudiais, je le reniflais [...] Ce sperme venait de lui. Il était lui.”<sup>126</sup> Abdelkébir’s sperm symbolizes the normative body that Abdellah becomes obsessed with. He contemplates eating it, consuming it to create queer masculinity based on the model his brother represents. Such a desire and such an action brings the normative world that Abdelkébir represents together with the queer world Abdellah is trying to construct.

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<sup>126</sup> This exchange shares strong similarities with Erik Rémès’ *Serial Fucker* where the author discusses consuming the blood and sperm of his father. It is another example of how the queer seeks to consume the normative in an attempt to assume a new masculinity.

The confrontation between the queer and the normative comes to an end as the homoerotic nature of Abdellah's relationship with his brother disappears. The brother ultimately leaves the house to marry: this is not viewed positively by Abdellah but rather as a betrayal of the attempted queering of normative masculinity: "C'était une trahison, non de sa part, mais de la part de la société" (37). Abdellah underlines how Moroccan society forces the queer individual to be marginal, on the periphery, as his relationship with his brother is eventually undermined by the overarching cultural obligation to marry. The homoerotic nature of their relation is stripped away by Abdelkébir's marriage: "Abdelkébir n'était plus mon frère d'avant" (38).

Taïa's novels examined thus far demonstrate the same symptoms of postmodernity that were previously discussed in the Houellebecq's, Dustan's, and Rémès' novels. In the *Le Jour du roi*, the patriarchal influence is weak, undermined, and surpassed by a queer relationship between two boys in love. *Une mélancolie arabe* and *L'Armée du salut* contribute to a (queer) reaffirmation of identity and masculinity in the face of social labeling as a *zamel*, a term that inherently denies masculinity. His works place queerness center stage while remaining conscious of the social implications Moroccan customs and laws create. What comes to the fore in this study of Taïa's novels is how this author's literary construction of masculinity shares many similarities with the hexagonal texts studied earlier. Postmodern masculinities ultimately transgress cultural barriers and continue with their evolutionary transformations. This reinforces my argument that postmodernity is more accurately explored through symptoms rather than definitions, justifying why these texts are postmodern even though postmodernism is not an endpoint. Abdellah remarks at the end of *L'Armée du salut* that what he thought would be the end of his struggle was only just the start: "Je me trompais. J'allais évoluer longtemps encore"

(153). His attempts to reconcile queer sexuality with Moroccan culture and Islam is portrayed as an on-going process.

Morocco and Islam are tied together as the latter has shaped the country's social, cultural, and legal landscape. The sexual politics of Moroccan society and culture are rooted in Islam. This religion is not necessarily absent from Taïa's novels; it is embedded in the culture he lived daily. One need only recall that what saves Taïa from the gang rape by Chouaïb and his friends is the muezzin's prayer call: "Le muezzin de la mosquée du quartier a commencé à appeler à la prière d'Al-Asr [...] Chouaïb a crié à ses copains 'Arrêtez! Arrêtez! On va attendre que le muezzin finisse son appel'" (*Mélancolie* 27). To which the narrator remarks non-ironically, "Il était visiblement un bon musulman," because of the respect Chouaïb shows for his daily devotional. Islam's presence in the text reminds the reader of the socio-religious implications of the time. The protagonist even chimes in saying, "J'étais un bon musulman moi aussi. Je me sentais sincèrement comme tel à l'époque" (28), describing how he *was* a good Muslim at the time. His use of "à l'époque" highlights two possibilities regarding his current belief in Islam: one, that he no longer considers himself a Muslim or two, the other that Moroccans do not consider him as a good Muslim because his sexuality has no place in Islam as it transgresses Islamic law.

But the protagonists of both *La Mélancolie* and *L'Armée* do not allow Islam to "closet" them nor do they allow it to hinder their search for defining a queer masculinity. He keeps Islam away from sex: "Je ne mélangeais pas Dieu et le sexe. J'aimais les deux séparément," avoiding the religious conflict militant Islam can create. Taïa gives a presence to Islam in his texts to acknowledge its effect on Moroccan culture. Both religion and society have marginalized him to the periphery of Moroccan community. As his protagonists continue to

negotiate their sexual identity (“J’allais évoluer encore longtemps”), it will be interesting to see where he takes the depiction of Islam and sexuality. His most recent novel *Les Infidèles* (2012) deals, in part, with militant Islam emphasizing what harm extremism brings to society. This is how Taïa calls for a more tolerant Islam that denounces the violence of extremism against non-Muslims through a novel that describes the journey of the protagonists (a mother and son) under the influence of militant Islam. One cannot highlight enough the importance of Islam in Taïa’s life, for *Shari’a* Law defines Muslim identity in Morocco, governing family and marital domains. As Sophie Smith suggest, it “becomes symbolic of a Muslim identity and cultural authenticity in a world where traditional ways of life are persistently being destabilized and replaced” (39). The novel strikes a chord with Taïa for it outlines his relationship with Islam and therefore Moroccan culture, since the two are so inherently connected. The novel is an attempt to both correct false Western conceptions about Islam and allow current Moroccans to reexamine their faith.<sup>127</sup> Questions about sexuality, masculinity, and Islam will be further developed in the next section about Taïa’s digitextual work.

### **Digitextual Taïa**

While the works of Abdellah Taïa are often categorized as autofictional, he strongly contests the notion that he, the author, is present in his texts portrayed as Abdellah.<sup>128</sup> He never implies that his creative works are his life or that we get to know him better through them. In fact, the opposite is true: he sees himself to be more present in the digitextual world. How does the virtual Taïa oppose the textual one, then, if the execution and framing of his online presence differs fundamentally from his fictional writing? In fact, this section will interrogate what Taïa’s

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<sup>127</sup> See Taïa’s 2012 *Daily Motion* interview titled “Les Infidèles.”

<sup>128</sup> Conversation with author via email May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

priority is online: his queer identity, his Moroccan identity, or his expat identity by dissecting how he controls his online presentation. This section therefore takes into account that Taïa is aware of what can be accomplished online, how he can depict himself and use the digital platform to proliferate or change the reception and interpretation of his own identity.

Unlike the other writers discussed so far, Taïa is a younger author who does not content himself with traditional literature on paper and therefore looks for other medias to allow him the mobility to present himself solely as a man, a Moroccan, a son, a brother, a gay expat, or any combination of these “identities.” I will later investigate in this section how Taïa therefore navigates these identities and shifts his register as his audience changes. Thus, by examining his digitexts as well as the online peritext, I will show how these multiple discussions modify his identity as a queer Moroccan man who seeks to negotiate the cultural matrices of sexuality, religion, and culture.

I use the term “digitextual” to refer not only to the online, digital corpus that Taïa creates, updates, and interacts with, but also to the corpus of texts that surrounds him, with which he interacts, but are not necessarily of his creation. I believe these two types of texts allow Taïa to mold how he is perceived as an author and public intellectual in a much more contemporary, even “postmodern,” way that breaks away from the traditional manner authors project themselves into the public eye.

When discussing digital presence and digitextual writing, one needs to take into consideration the intended goal of the writer as well as how this goal is framed by the digital platform. According to Everett’s notion of click fetish outlined earlier and Robert Darton’s *Fingerspitzengefühl*, the immediacy of digital platforms provides an almost instant reaction that is only superseded by the next “click.” What is at stake therefore is not only the way Abdellah

Taïa the author uses the medium to create a digitextual corpus, but also the reader and media's reaction to this corpus and how this reaction is typically framed. The point is to see how the media reacts to Taïa, how it projects "labels" onto the author, and how these labels reflect the author's intended self-portrayal in this media.

In 2006, Abdellah Taïa published an open letter to his family, initially entitled "Lettre à ma famille" but more commonly known as "L'Homosexualité expliquée à mère," in the progressive Moroccan weekly *Telquel*.<sup>129</sup> What makes this letter unique is that it was first published online and became Taïa's first digitextual piece. The subsequent weekly issue of *Telquel* featured Taïa, his life, and the subtitle "Homosexuel, envers et contre tout," reframing the impact of the letter by featuring Taïa himself rather than his letter. In the letter, the author fully assumes his queer identity and reveals it to his family, becoming the first Moroccan author to publically declare his homosexuality. This first publication online has led Taïa to privilege the digitextual mode, allowing him to distinguish his literary works from his online authorship.

In the message to his family, Taïa fully assumes a queer identity and attempts to reconcile his sexuality with his Moroccan identity in a direct fashion that his literary texts, on the contrary, tend to circumvent. He opens the letter by stating, "C'est la première fois que je vous écris. Une lettre pour vous tous."<sup>130</sup> The epistolary form is his first chance to avoid ambiguity, to leave no question unanswered for his family and his reader. Taïa places the emphasis on the opening line, "C'est la première fois que je vous écris," to demonstrate how this will be the first time he writes

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<sup>129</sup> There is a discrepancy concerning the date of publication of Taïa's letter. In his online journal published by [www.selwane.com](http://www.selwane.com), he references the letter in an entry made in 2007 therefore indicating the letter had been published prior. Denis Provencher in a forthcoming publication on Taïa entitled *Abdellah Taïa's Queer Moroccan Family and Transmission of Baraka* shares the same 2006 date I discuss above. Many online sources refer to a 2009 publication from *Telquel*. I believe this 2009 source is when the letter was retitled from "Lettre à ma famille" to "L'Homosexualité expliquée à ma mère" to echo Taïa's Moroccan predecessor Tahar Ben Jelloun and his *Le Racisme expliqué à ma fille*.

<sup>130</sup> The letter currently can be found on the website of *Asymptote*, a digital International journal devoted to translation of contemporary writing.  
[http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Nonfiction&id=32&curr\\_index=&curPage=search](http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Nonfiction&id=32&curr_index=&curPage=search)

to them truthfully. This will be the first time Abdellah puts everything on the table.

Furthermore, his use of “je vous écris” not only places a family as the direct recipient of the letter he is writing, but also as the object of what is being written. “This is the first time I am writing *you*” in the sense that his family is the object since this letter will now rewrite the construction of his a family with an openly queer son.

The letter takes note of his dual presence in Morocco and abroad when he admits: “Je sais que je suis scandaleux.” His novels have made public a rather intimate affair of Moroccan society, but he will not hide from it. He will not allow Moroccan queers to be simply labeled *zamel*: “Je m'expose en signant de mon vrai prénom et de mon vrai nom. Je vous expose avec moi.” He rejects the *zamel* and instead embraces Abdellah and Taïa and admits that in doing so he implicates his entire family. But he does so not just for himself; Taïa speaks for all Moroccan queers by using “nous.”

Taïa is tired of hiding behind the curtain of normativity in Moroccan culture. He is attempting to step out of clandestinity and into the spotlight of media attention: “Exister enfin. Sortir de l'ombre!” In a similar move as Rémès's queering of the Cartesian *cogito*, Taïa ties his existence to his queerness. The shadows of Moroccan culture have hidden the *zamel* and now he wishes to bring a queer discussion to the limelight. His use of the verb “sortir” (three times in the letter) connects his digitextual narrative to a larger “coming-out” story where something that has been imprisoned is finally freed. And in doing so, he will not hide the truth of the situation: “Dire la vérité, ma vérité ! Etre : Abdellah. Etre : Taïa. Etre les deux. Seul. Et pas seul à la fois.” The truth is his homosexuality, but more interestingly, he places the emphasis on his being Abdellah Taïa and not one or the other where Abdellah is the *zamel* and Taïa is the good Moroccan man who marries a woman for social acceptance. His last name connects him to a



greater heritage because it implicates himself, his family, and therefore the whole Moroccan culture. By declaring himself to be Abdellah Taïa, he brings his family and the entire country into his coming-out tale: “Je vous expose avec moi. Je vous entraîne dans cette aventure, qui ne fait que commencer pour moi et pour les gens comme moi.” He positions himself against his family because he understands that their support will likely not come. In his online journal from 2007, published by Selwane.com he writes, “Désormais, c’est moi contre ma famille” indicating that he is pitting traditional Moroccan society (i.e. his family) against himself, the public representative for queer Moroccan sexualities and masculinities.

The public nature of Taïa’s letter in *Telquel* is quite shocking because of how Islamic countries avoid discussing what they perceive as deviant sexualities; as Sophie Smith and Stephen Murray both suggest, the “enduring silence serves as a collective denial” (Smith 39). By denying homosexuality any public discourse or perception, Arab culture is assuring that subversive behavior does not destabilize its socio-sexual norms. Abdelhak Serhane succinctly states on this subject, “Puisqu’on n’en parle pas; elle [l’homosexualité] n’existe pas!” (159).<sup>131</sup> This only highlights the gravity of Taïa’s letter as it brings a taboo subject, his sexuality, and his family, to the public stage. The silence is an expected and important part of Moroccan culture since the public recognition of a person’s preference for same-sex acts is fraught with intense shame. Smith argues that this social silence regarding homosexuality “functions as a vital tool in protecting the established social system in place from a direct challenge to its norms” (40). However, Abdellah’s letter is such a “challenge.”

The letter falls in line with other queer narratives that seem to avoid the American concept of “coming out of the closet” and embrace instead a socio-cultural role within society:

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<sup>131</sup> Taïa shares the same sentiment as Serhane in a 2008 *Daily Motion* video about his novel *L’Armée du salut*. In it he states “Je viens d’un pays donc musulman, le Maroc, où l’individu n’a pas beaucoup de liberté, ne peut pas exister.” Taïa’s emphasis on individuality highlights to what extent social homogeneity is expected of Moroccans.

“Mon homosexualité, que je revendique et assume.”<sup>132</sup> The use of the verb “assumer” has already been discussed in chapter two as a way for queers to find a place in society more so than simply “coming out” of hiding. Abdellah uses “assumer” as a way to convey his obligation to his country as a Moroccan who is no longer hiding his sexual preference. At that moment, he takes up the role of the only Moroccan to publically “come out,” showing how one can be Moroccan and queer. In the previous section, it was suggested that the author constructed a queer masculinity by consuming the Moroccan heteronormative model or by rejecting his own place as a *zamel*. Abdellah Taïa, the author/person, states his determination to abide by the Moroccan ideal previously occupied by his brother Abdelkébir: “L'idéal marocain, moi, à mon petit niveau, je le réinvente.” It is no longer sufficient for him; he breaks away from its archaic social construction (“Je le dépasse”), reinventing it, creating a space for a queer Moroccan expression of masculinity that can sit next to the previously dominant one personified by his brother.

Both Taïa’s printed texts and digitextual presence are constantly balancing between his queerness and a Moroccan culture that does not accept queerness. Until this point, they have not been reconciled. He understands that some things must be given up, “Pour vous [his mother] je ne suis sans doute plus un bon musulman.” The struggle between his own sexuality and his mother’s approval is also highlighted in an earlier digitext published in 2007 by Selwane online. He titles the Tuesday entry of this online journal, “Homo, maman, homo.” In this entry he divulges a little more about the relationship between his mother, his sexuality, and his religion. He writes:

Ma mère (75 ans) m’a appelé ce matin, très tôt. “Rappelle-moi

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<sup>132</sup> See Provencher, *Queer French*. Ashgate Publishing, 2007 for an analysis regarding the use of the verb *assumer* in coming-out narratives.

ce soir, mon fils.” Je viens de le faire. Je tremble. Mais je ne vais pas pleurer. Elle a dit: “Tous les jours je parle à Dieu de toi et je Le prie de te guider, de te ramener au droit chemin.” Elle n’a pas pleuré. Je n’ai presque rien dit, comme d’habitude. Je savais à quoi elle faisait illusion.

His mother’s comment about “te ramener au droit chemin” parallels his assumption from the previous letter where he claims he knows he is not a “bon musulman.” The intersection of Islam and his sexuality still are incomprehensible for his mother, an idea furthered by Taïa’s “Je savais à quoi elle faisait illusion.” As for his mother, M’Barka, she cannot give a presence to his homosexuality by referring directly to it. As Smith and Murray stated earlier, if one does not talk about it, it cannot exist. His mother denies her son’s sexuality by not acknowledging it and furthermore he does not explicitly acknowledge it either during the call or even the journal entry. He can only pretend and guess (le non-dit) to what she refers.

But his ultimate goal is to still reinvent Moroccan masculinity by breaking away from what in his eyes constitutes the tyranny of normativity. By addressing his mother and admitting that he is likely not a good Muslim in her eyes, he implies that in his eyes he actually is; that he has been able to internally reconcile his queer identity with Islam and therefore Morocco. As cited above, “L’idéal marocain [...] je le réinvente,” which I interpret as him reconciling his queerness with his Moroccan heritage.

His letter confirms this dissertation’s main point, that somewhere in the twentieth century a rupture has occurred, a postmodern shift. Taïa recognizes this rift and how the gender landscape in Morocco is changing forever: “Je ne suis pas le seul au Maroc, ma mère. Quelque

chose a commencé dans ce pays. Une réelle rupture par rapport aux générations précédentes.”<sup>133</sup>

Since Taïa’s father is dead, he addresses his letter to his mother, M’Barka, who represents the fulfillment of a Moroccan woman’s duty as she now anchors the family while remaining mindful of her religious obligations. When he addresses sections of the letter to his mother, he is addressing it to all of Morocco, since she represents the normative religious citizen whom he seeks to convince of a more tolerant Islam. In a sense, his mother is a synecdoche for all of Morocco because when he talks to her, he is talking to all Moroccans of the same mindset.

There is no doubt a conflict between the normative and the queer as Taïa writes about the cultural forces that try to normalize his discourse. In the letter he writes, “On essaie de nous intimider. De nous ramener à un soi-disant ordre moral, nous faire revenir à nos soi-disant valeurs fondamentales.” His use of “on” reflects the status quo in Morocco, the expected gender performance of the “bon musulman” each Moroccan man and woman is expected to enact. The collective “on” exists, and it is upset: in fact in 2012 El Jadida University organized a day of discussion of his texts, causing an enormous uproar that resulted in large demonstrations against the author, his works, and his homosexuality. Protesters claimed: « L’université est pour les étudiants et non pour les homosexuels. » Another critic said: « C’est une honte de voir l’université ainsi en train de mourir » (Mantrach). These protests demonstrate the powerful presence of the “on” Taïa speaks of in his letter and how it seeks out to reestablish Moroccan normativity in the face of a perceived threat.

Ultimately, Taïa brings the letter back to his family, the vital core of Moroccan society, and issues a challenge to his relatives that echoes the work the character Abdellah did in *Une Mélancolie arabe*: “Je rêve qu’un jour si quelqu’un m’insulte devant vous, en disant : ‘Ton fils,

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<sup>133</sup> In the same letter Abdellah writes, “Le monde traverse une crise sans précédent en ce moment” which furthers his claim that he writes in a transitional period, in a moment of shift of the fundamental nature of social paradigms.

ton frère est zamel...’, vous répondiez : ‘Non, il n'est pas zamel, il est mathali.’” This term is recent in Arabic and comes from the term “mathali/mithili (depending on the dialect) al-jins”, literally “same-sex.”<sup>134</sup> His family in doing so would deny the position gay Moroccans have traditionally occupied in their country and instead would promote a neutral, possibly progressive terminology that would afford Moroccan men the opportunity to construct a masculinity that is not explicitly feminized. As Abdellah said in *Une Mélancolie*, “Je suis un homme.”

The introduction of this new term is symbolic of the larger struggle being fought regarding homosexuality in Morocco. If fully adopted (which is more and more the case among academics and major news outlets), it will provide a neutral ground for queer Moroccans to shape their own identity and further distance themselves from the social stigma attached to *zamel*. Linguistic conflicts are social conflicts because social reality is embedded with meaning. The shift from *zamel* to *mithli* opens up a new way to talk about the social world for Arabs, as the new term implies a “neutral” nature of sexuality with no moral consequence. It is an egalitarian term connoting the sameness of homosexuals rather than the difference and feminization implied by *zamel*. It also ties Taïa to the previous discussion on the Google and YouTube videos that sought to highlight sameness and Frenchness over the perceived threat of queerness and otherness. Notice how the French couple in the *Google Hangouts* video emphasized *fraternité* and Mike Fédé explains “Nous sommes autant que vous.” Both social media clips as well as Taïa attempt to create a sameness that appeals more to the French socio-cultural model of citizenship over communitarianism.

The digitextual presence of Taïa is inherently clearer and more precise than his fiction regarding how he wants to label his work and himself. His *Homosexualité expliquée à ma mère* is an example of his publically declaring his “homosexuality” and assuming a public role as a

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<sup>134</sup> جنس + مِثْلِي

“gay Moroccan.” This describes Taïa’s online engagement and what media outlets say about him. The words “gay,” “pédé,” even “homosexual,” are not a part of the literary lexicon in his novels. I argue that while he is writing in French, those terms do not exist in Moroccan culture. There was only *zamel*, and now *mithli*. To use a French word would be to impose a cultural concept that does not exist in Arabic. The use of a French term would apply an identity that Taïa is possibly trying to avoid associating with the protagonists of his fiction.

Shifting gears and exploring how Taïa depicts himself and talks about himself online is therefore intriguing because it shows what his intended goals are for himself as a public activist as opposed to a silent novelist. What are we to make of the prevalent use of the term “gay” in every interview or feature article about him one reads online? “First open gay Moroccan writer” (Maybury), “Possibly the only openly gay author from his native Morocco” (Morse), “Gay Moroccan Author” (Xtraonline), “Morocco's only openly gay filmmaker” (Frosch), “Taïa is one of the first Moroccans to come out publicly as gay” (Dehghan), “Abdellah Taïa came out as a gay man” (Brooks).

It can be suggested that Anglophone articles and interviews are imposing a Western sexual identity on an author who does not necessarily self-identity with being “gay,” however, there are a few instances where the term does come up in Taïa’s own self-identification. By drawing attention to the differences between Anglophone and Francophone articles, I wish to highlight the evolution of Taïa’s sexual identity as he became more visible as a public queer Moroccan author, and how the digital platform is used to construct slightly nuanced versions of himself. In fact during the period from 2007 to 2013, the mention of the word “gay” online in reference to Taïa was only associated with Anglophone journalistic pieces. *Q-zine*, an electronic magazine targeting the West African LGBT community, is one of the few Francophone

examples to the contrary: “Abdellah Taïa, un écrivain Marocain gay” (Ncube). In fact, the author only uses the term gay throughout her piece on Taïa: “cet écrivain ouvertement gay,” “la défense des droits des gays musulmans,” “la condition des gays arabo-musulmans,” “sa tentative de donner une voix aux sans-voix, aux gays musulmans marginalisés.”

In contrast to Anglophone authors, French critics and journalists employ the word “homosexuel” when discussing Taïa. The *Nouvel Observateur* wrote that “L’affirmation de son identité, marocain et homosexuel, Abdellah Taïa l’expérimente depuis plusieurs années,” (Dryef). In 2014, while reviewing his recently-released cinematic adaption of *L’Armée du salut*, Isabelle Regnier wrote in *Le Monde*: “Homosexuel, Abdellah Taïa a fait son coming out dans la presse marocaine en 2006.” The same newspaper featured another article about the film, describing it as “le récit de formation, âpre et cruel, d’un jeune homosexuel marocain” (Mandelbaum). There is a strong tendency in the French press to discuss Taïa and his work by utilizing the variations of “homosexuel” or “homosexualité.” I bring this comparison to light because it demonstrates how media outlets are categorizing Abdellah and his work. The French use of “homosexuel” provides a semi-neutral ground that draws attention to same-sex matters without complicating the discussion with the sexual identity politics that are often associated with the term “gay” in the West.

In 2009, the popular gay magazine *Têtu* covered Taïa’s *L’homosexualité expliquée à ma mère* with a general article about the situation of queer Moroccans and Taïa’s literary work. The author, Marc Endelweld, conveniently quotes excerpts of Taïa’s letter to explain to the reader that Taïa is a homosexual while only once using the following phrase: “qui révèle son homosexualité.” None of the language in the *Têtu* article was out of place until the author wrote of the similarities between Abdellah Taïa and Guy Hocquenghem in regard to each author’s

public coming-out: “À la lecture de ces mots [those of Taïa], on ne peut s’empêcher de penser à la longue lettre que l’écrivain et militant français Guy Hocquenghem avait publiée dans *Le Nouvel Observateur* du 10 janvier 1972. Il y annonçait publiquement qu’il était gay”

(Endeweld). The use of the word “gay” stands out simply because of its rarity when Taïa’s homosexuality is discussed in articles in the French language.<sup>135</sup> It problematizes the symbolic strategies involving labels such as “gay” as opposed to “homosexual” and it raises the question of why the author chose “gay” for Hocquenghem and “homosexuel” for Taïa. Was the linguistic variance an innocent switch, the author intending both terms to be interchangeable? This would be a surprising equation considering that the magazine is written for a queer audience.

Furthermore, does the use of “homosexuel” for Taïa mimic the use of *mithli* in Arabic for the author? Having the two adjectives in the same article but describing two men of different nationalities creates an important juxtaposition between the two sexual identities of the authors. Why aren’t both authors considered “gay” by the article’s writer? Why is Hocquenghem not considered “homosexuel”? What political or historical reasons motivated the author to use different qualifying terms? While it is possible the author uses the two interchangeably, I suggest that there is a stronger tendency in French to describe Taïa using “homosexuel.

This begs the question of why French texts prefer “homosexuel” or “homosexualité”? Has “gay” not yet penetrated mainstream media even though it may be used and preferred in a common, familiar context? I would contend this may be the case since the examples that surround Taïa unequivocally choose these two terms over other adjectives or perhaps there is a linguistic barrier that prevents journalists from associating non-French queers as “gay.”

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<sup>135</sup> Gay has a strong sexual identity connotation associated with it that is largely different than a non-normative behavior that one usually associates with the clinical term homosexual/homosexuality. I am not arguing that Hocquenghem would deny he is gay, I am simply trying to find a logical conclusion as to why, in 2009, an author would choose to nuance the terms when they have come to be synonymous with both the behavior and sexual identity. If Hocquenghem is gay, what makes Taïa not for Endelwald?



However, the contrary is true of English-language media outlets that unequivocally prefer the term “gay” since the word “homosexual” often gets too muddled with juridical, legal, and medical controversies that have invested the term with a certain pejorative/negative connotation.<sup>136</sup>

Thus Taïa’s media portrayal, and the queer-identifying terminology it mobilizes, is interesting considering that both “gay” and “homosexuel” are terms he never uses in his literary writing. With time, Taïa has adopted a more ambivalent use of the term “gay” with his Anglophone audience in interviews since 2013.<sup>137</sup> This may signal a shift in Taïa’s acceptance of a “gay” identity that will further develop his queer Moroccan sexuality. At the very least, it means that the author is conscious of queer terminology in the American context.

These considerations on the national cultural context of discourses on sexual orientation raise an important question about the role of France in the author’s career. To what degree is Abdellah Taïa the token brown boy who was saved by the country of human rights? Melyssa Haffaf, in her paper “Masculinités mélancoliques: du radjel au queer” suggests that Taïa is often portrayed as the immigrant other saved by the Republic from the ravages of anti-homosexual laws in Morocco. It is true that Abdellah left his home country in 1999 to pursue advanced studies in French literature. This positions France as a sort of sort of safe haven for persecuted minorities. Taïa is writing as an expatriate, an outsider, in the same tradition as his Maghrebi predecessors, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Mouhamed Choukri, Abdelkebir Khatibi, and Rachid O. There is an advantage to writing from a distance that definitely provides these writers and Taïa with the opportunity to reflect on their situation. That advantage is the ability to observe and comment

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<sup>136</sup> See Lawrence Schehr’s *French Gay Modernism* (2004), namely his introduction where he discusses his use of “gay” versus “homosexual” regarding late-nineteenth century and early twentieth century French texts.

<sup>137</sup> See bibliographic references for Aida Alami, Jason Napoli Brooks, Rebecka Bülow (*The Believer Magazine*) for interviews with Taïa where the author explicitly describes himself as gay.

without being implicated in their country's evolution. However this position comes with scrutiny as some judge the validity and authenticity of these authors' claims when they write from the safety of Western lands.<sup>138</sup>

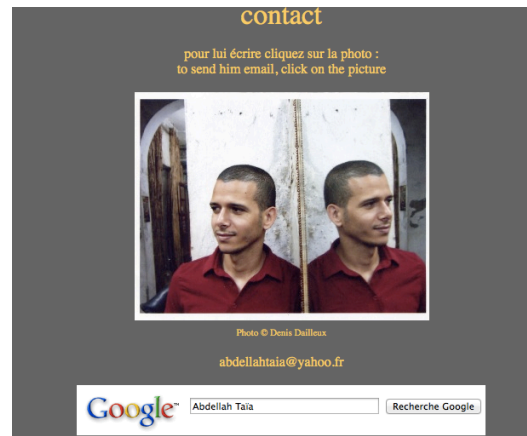
Taïa therefore places himself at the intersection of social, cultural, and sexual discourses within his digitextual presence. While the argument can be made that these articles that describe Taïa are just a digitized version of a physical article, I argue that the ability of digitextualities does not stop at the article itself but rather, the surrounding "recommended" articles, or the "see also" that appear along the sides and at the bottom of the page provide an interesting "interdigitextuality." For example, the *New York Times* articles features "More in the Middle East" at the end of Taïa's article; *Yabilaadi* features "dans le même thème" after its discussion of Taïa's visit to a Moroccan university; *Le Nouvel Observateur* suggests "Aller plus loin" at the bottom of their article on Taïa as the first openly queer Moroccan writer. What these areas suggest/recommend for any article, not just Taïa, tap back into both Darton and Everett's supposition that digital media provide an endless click that takes the reader further and further into the world about the text. These recommended "readings" or articles further enhance the depiction of Taïa as they develop the reader's comprehension of topics like Morocco, homosexuality and Islam, other interviews with Taïa, other texts by Taïa, etc. These digitexts create an entire image surrounding Taïa simply because of what the media is capable of producing.

Thus far this analysis has been largely centered on how digital medias talk about Taïa and how he interacts within these medias to mold his self-presentation. Enlarging the scope and examining how Taïa creates his own media and presentation allows us to understand what his

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<sup>138</sup> See Mehammed Mack, "Untranslatable Desire: Interethnic Relationships in Franco-Arab Literature," *Comparative Literature Studies* (2014).

priorities are online as well as what he wants digital readers to gather from his sites. His website is strikingly bland and its address (abdellahtaia.free.fr) indicates the author does not own a unique domain for himself. His current site is an extension of the free website users get when they subscribe to a cable telephone company. The site contains no identifying adjectives one might assume he would include on his website like, “Site de l’écrivain gay Abdellah Taïa.” There are only images of his movie poster and the covers of all his books. At the bottom of the page is a contact button to write the author but that is all. However, and this is one of the more interesting “digitextual” features of the page, there is an embedded search link for Google with his name in it “Abdellah Taïa,” all one needs to do is “click.”<sup>139</sup>



I find this feature remarkable because it highlights the infinitely rhizomatic and intertextual effect the Internet can provide for information about authors. This also demonstrates how Taïa wants readers to learn more about him through his digitextual representation.

This embedded search sends the interested reader to a results page that lists the following as the top three results: his Wikipedia entry, his own website, and his Facebook page. By embedding the search in his website, he is passively approving the digitextual discussion that he creates and that is created around him online. His Facebook page becomes a point of interest for this analysis because of its interactive nature and because it is something Taïa actively controls

<sup>139</sup> Image from www.abdellahtaia.free.fr

regarding his self-presentation online. The first thing one notices is his “About” section that reads: “Page officielle de l’écrivain Abdellah Taïa.” A straight forward depiction of his occupation and the page’s purpose; however the English description qualifies Abdellah, reading “Moroccan Writer Abdellah Taia Official Page.” It becomes interesting to notice that the English version denotes his nationality “Moroccan” while the French text simply states his occupation. The difference between the two plays on the linguistic qualifiers both languages use regarding Taïa and what he wants used about him.

A tertiary glance at the photos on his Facebook page reveal a neutral priority that does not privilege his Arab, queer, or expat identity. There is nothing particularly “queer/gay” about the photos he chooses to use on his Facebook page.<sup>140</sup> In fact, most are simple photos that present him in no particular fashion or associated with a specific identity. This may indeed be his priority, to sit equidistant from each qualifying identity in order to continually shift his self-depiction as the polemics he is involved with (queer Moroccan politics, Islam, and terrorism) are argued in the public domain. This is the power of the media, for it allows Taïa’s control over his presentation and association via his website, Facebook page and other digital outlets he controls. He is aware of what can be done online and takes full advantage of this resource to position himself as a public intellectual who negotiates the boundaries between sexual, social, and cultural identities.

What we learn from Taïa’s digitextual presence is that the queer lexicon used to define him as an author differs from the literary world he creates in his texts. But what motivates him to write both his literary and digitextual works? One could assume that it is for the queer Moroccans of the future to liberate themselves, to show them they are not alone in their silence. Taïa’s motivation for writing is an internal struggle with the cultural world he occupied. In a

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<sup>140</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/pages/Abdellah-Taïa/9350092897?sk=photos\\_stream](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Abdellah-Taïa/9350092897?sk=photos_stream)

sense, this struggle serve to reattach himself to Morocco, to justify himself as being a part of Moroccan culture in spite of the fact that most of that culture has been rejecting him.

The analysis has permitted us to nuance how Taïa's works fit into the larger body of French and Francophone queer narratives and Maghrebi Francophone texts by understanding how he positions himself as an author and how others position him as well. Ultimately, masculinity for Taïa deploys itself within the same postmodern context as it does for Houellebecq, Rémès, and Dustan's protagonists. The various symptoms of this shift as performed in these authors' writing allow them to overcome cultural barriers to highlight how literary depictions of masculinity are not in crisis, but in mutation.

Finally, the discussion surrounding masculinity in the digitextual format highlights how the medium is able to provide a deeper means of expression for the author in question. Traditional literature allows authors to reflect and inflect in their writings larger social and cultural transformations that happen to manifest themselves in the protagonists of the novel. The digitextual practice is the next step, an evolution of expression where the author can continue to shape or reshape a message that his or her previous work could not or did not, a persistent "refreshing" of the relationship between the reader and the (digi)text. As Taïa said in an interview with *Sampsonia Way* online magazine: "Now that I have the possibility to speak, I'm not going to stop" (Edgar). The literary and the digitextual provide a means for Taïa to speak, and not stop, because they keep his presence in multiple circles alive, thus allowing him to continually interact with different publics and different readers.

To conclude, Taïa's literary and digitextual work is summed up perfectly by Jacques Rancière's *Politique de l'esthétique*: "Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his 'natural' purpose by the power of words" (39).

Masculinity is at the core of Taïa's textual and digitextual work as he writes to create a literary and cultural space for the Moroccan queer to reclaim a masculinity often feminized socially.<sup>141</sup>

The work Taïa does, both textually and digitextually, underlines the different cultural matrices at play for the author as he is able to elaborate on the identities founded in each text (queer sexuality in *Une Mélancolie arabe* and *L'Armée du salut*, Moroccan cultural identity and Islam in *Le Jour du roi* and *Les Infidèles*) to help compose the enigma that is his identity as a public intellectual, a role where he assumes the responsibility of advocate and critic for those who identify with him.

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<sup>141</sup> This does beg the interesting question of why is femininity always presumed as negative for a male?

## Conclusion

My objective throughout this dissertation has been to present masculinity as an evolving category that can be studied from various angles and with different lenses. By narrowing my approach to one that frames masculinity within a postmodern context, I am focusing on a specific performance of masculinity that exhibits certain qualities that can be aligned with postmodernism. Certain iterations of masculinity fit well within the postmodern context as both masculinity and postmodernism evade larger qualifying narratives. By examining how these masculinities are produced in French literature through the lenses of paternity, disease, and digitextualities, one then can better discuss the shifts in the meaning of masculinity within French literature during the 90s and early 2000s. This dissertation served as an example of how one can explore a discourse of crisis of masculinity through the lens of postmodernism. Ultimately, the masculinities that are performed and brought to the fore of each novel anchor themselves on traditional notions but stand in opposition to heteronormative models.

My intent has been to show that across the spectrum of late twentieth and twenty-first century French literature, authors have been transforming the depiction of masculinity and masculine sexuality through new literary configurations. Masculinity is not simply evolving and typical literary representations are not simply changing. Rather, we need to apprehend how and in what sense these evolutions or changes are occurring and what brings them together. Postmodernism becomes the *fil conducteur* that links all the chapters. What is more postmodern than the dismantling of dominant social institutions that have helped define masculinity in the past? The first chapter documents the weakening of the patriarchal institutions and of masculine hegemony as the authors examined reconstruct paternal-filial relations. The authors discussed in the second chapter deconstruct heteronormative reproduction by proposing a reading of two

queer French authors who re-appropriate the biological reproductive model to populate a queer universe devoid of heterosexuality. In the final chapter, I examined the classic literary model itself and its medium by shifting the study to digital representations of masculinity and masculine sexuality, showing how the immediacy of this medium facilitates new expressions of masculinity.

### **Symptoms of Postmodern Masculinity**

My goal with this dissertation has been to provide a unique and original way of examining postmodern French masculinities. Therefore, I chose to approach postmodern literary constructions of masculinity from a “symptomatic” perspective that investigates the major outlines of postmodernity and highlights how the selected authors express symptoms of the postmodern cultural turn. These symptoms unify the texts of this dissertation for the goal is to show how in a varied corpus of French literary texts, postmodern masculinities are not unique to a specific author or ethnicity; but indicative of a larger epistemic shift in regard to gender performativity. The symptoms outlined below are indicative of a shift in the literary depiction of French masculinities.

The protagonists in Michel Houellebecq’s *Les Particules élémentaires* and Érik Rémès’ *Je bande donc je suis* interact with their fathers or father-figures,<sup>142</sup> in such a way as to reveal the weakening of traditional paternal roles in late-twentieth century texts and well as the impact of these new forms of relationships on the construction of masculinity and sexuality within both heterosexual and queer paradigms.

Michel and Bruno are products of absent fathers, of a disruption in the patriarchal dominance that has come to define and maintain masculine hegemony. It must be acknowledged

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<sup>142</sup> There are more examples of this relationship in Houellebecq’s other works.



that their presence may not have guaranteed any proper upbringing for the sons; however, the common denominator throughout these texts is the absence of the father and the way in which that creates a space to abandon socio-cultural obligations of masculine performativity. These two protagonists make no attempt at reconstructing a normative masculinity, thereby alienating themselves further from their own paternal duties. As Bruno so aptly states, “Je n’ai rien à transmettre à mon fils.” This quote summarizes the paternal-filial relations presented in Houellebecq, Rémès, and Taïa’s works. It is not simply that Bruno and Michel do not want to be fathers, rather they do not understand how nor do they see the importance of such a role. The use of the word “rien” certainly highlights the absolute negation of any socio-cultural norms being passed down from either of Houellebecq’s protagonists. The same is true for Taïa’s Omar in *Le Jour du roi* who supplants the paternal role for himself, i.e.: he becomes his own father. Family lineage loses meaning and gender roles become fluid in these texts as the absence of the father implies a rejection of normative structure.

In Érik Rémès’ *Je bande donc je suis*, the protagonist’s construction of his masculinity and predominately masculine sexuality, is directly the product of his relationship with his stepfather. The protagonist has no biological father and his adoptive father dies early in his life leaving him under the influence of his stepfather. Rémès’ text plays a unique role when compared to Houellebecq’s because it reinforces the effect the lack of paternal presence has on masculinity and masculine sexuality. It also highlights to what extent the presence of a father (in this case stepfather, who also happens to be a lover) can initiate or concretize a son’s expression of masculinity. Sex with the stepfather became the means for Berlin Tintin to construct his own queer masculinity, since father-son relationship takes a back seat to their responsibilities as lovers.

For Tintin, what is passed down socio-culturally is not norms, but an anti-normative model rooted in his incestuous relationship with his stepfather. It is here that the term “queer” comes to its fullest meaning, as the relationship between the two characters is not simply queer in the sense of same-sex love; it is also queer because it deviates from the normative familial roles. Rather than passing along gender norms that reinforce masculine hegemony, Berlin’s stepfather passes along “queerness” as deviance from the norm, to him. The rest of Rémès’s *Je bande donc je suis* and his later *Serial Fucker* demonstrate how Tintin executes this principle of deviance. *Je bande donc je suis* serves as an example of a queer variant of normative behavior that is based on a father-son socio-cultural dialogue. Rather than reinforcing heteronormative and masculine hegemony, Tintin imposes a queer hegemony in the text. One can document this erasure of heteronormativity and the rise of queer hegemony by the fact that Rémès’s text contains no heterosexual relationships once Tintin’s parents are dead and he seroconverts. Instead, readers notice the construction of a purely queer universe that is populated solely by HIV+ men.<sup>143</sup>

Like Houellebecq’s protagonists Michel and Bruno, Tintin is a product of his father’s influence. Both Michel and Bruno have no desire to either have children because they have nothing to pass along. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, Houellebecq’s narrator describes how the protagonists are products of a generation that is materialistic and narcissistic. For the parents of Michel and Bruno, there is no “later,” only the now, and therefore Houellebecq juxtaposes their lifestyle with that of the grandparents who end up raising Michel and Bruno. The opening pages of Houellebecq’s text serve in opposition to the new order, a reminder of what was. These pages

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<sup>143</sup> Rémès makes mention of seropositive women in both *Je bande donc je suis* and *Serial Fuckers*; however, preference is given to the presence and importance of HIV+ men.

also serve as a point of comparison so that the reader can position the new comportment of both proceeding generations.

Paternity and masculine sexuality are also present in my study of the literary works of Abdellah Taïa. As shown in chapter 3, *Le Jour du Roi* is a strong example of how paternal figures continue to influence the enactment of postmodern masculinities as the lack of a paternal figure triggers the rest of the narrative. Omar's father, previously the "âme de la famille. Le moteur de la famille. Le sang" (34) is now reduced to nothing because his wife has left him: "Un homme n'est rien [...] sans une femme" (53). Rather, it is Omar who takes his place: "Maintenant, c'est moi l'homme" (35) and positions himself as the start of a new lineage, one that ignores his father's past and starts with his.<sup>144</sup> This correlates strongly with Omar's vivid dreams of King Hassan II. Omar loses his familial identity in the dream, unable to produce his family's name when the King inquires.

By removing both the literal, biological father and the mythical, royal father, Taïa's novel creates a space in which Omar, much like Berlin Tintin, Michel and Bruno, can perform new masculinities not hinged on larger socio-cultural norms but rather placed at the core of the functioning and production of the literary text. For Omar in Taïa's text, the absence and subsequent erasure of the biological father produces a template upon which he can inscribe his Maghrebi masculinity, much like Berlin Tintin did in regard to his French masculinity.

In all of these texts, the lack of paternal presence forecloses the possibility for socio-sexual norms to be passed on from father to son. This enables the protagonists of the novels to create a space in which they explore new masculinities outside of a larger traditional French literary framework. I am not claiming that Taïa or Rémès' characters are gay because their

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<sup>144</sup> In *Une Melancolie arabe*, Taïa creates a new queer lineage for himself as he opens the novel stating that he is currently in his second life. This second life then is where he starts to express what both Moroccan masculinity and queer Moroccan sexuality are.

fathers were missing. Rather, I am suggesting that their fathers' absence catalyzes a chain reaction within the postmodern French text, as it becomes a consistent symptom throughout these narratives. In their absence, a queer masculine presence appears that replaces the dominant narrative in Rémès and Taïa's texts.

But the absence of paternity is not the only symptom of postmodernity uncovered in these texts. My analysis of HIV/AIDS novels shows that heteronormativity too is undermined. HIV/AIDS is the disease of postmodernity *par excellence* in that it performs a kind of deconstructive work by challenging the narrative of immunological safety: it takes the system that is intended to protect the body and allows it to be recoded in order to harm it. Guillaume Dustan and Erik Rémès' queer literary corpus allows us to see how these authors recreate the reproductive model, effectively negating any sort of biological advantage to heterosexuality. Guillaume Dustan's *autopornographie* is an expansive depiction of how the queer HIV+ literary world grows, from *Dans ma chambre* where the reader is limited to the world of Dustan's bedroom to the queer nightclub of *Je sors ce soir* that expands to the larger cityscape of *Plus fort que moi*.

The spatial movement within the *autopornographie* shows that Dustan's literary oeuvre goes from the particular (his bedroom) to the more general, encompassing all of France. This setting allows his queer universe to grow and to engross a larger population with each text. As the world within the text grows, so does the need for HIV+ inhabitants. Thus Dustan, like Rémès, will seek to populate this world with other seropositive men via the seroconversion of the men he sleeps with. This queers the human biological reproductive model as the men in the novel are not birthed via a normative cycle; rather their place in the novel is withheld until their seroconversion or attempted conversion. What this means is that seropositivity itself gives

presence to the men in the novel. One may argue that interactions with seronegative characters in Dustan's novel exist, and I would agree; however, I add to this claim by demonstrating that the failed seroconversions ultimately are scenes wrought with emotion and loneliness that reinforce Dustan's entire premise for creating a uniquely-queer, seropositive literary world.

Rémès differs from Dustan in that he approaches his queer universe from a more aggressive standpoint, hinged on violent sex acts that serve to haze and test the queer initiates in the novel. Rémès puts more emphasis on seropositivity by adapting the principle of French universalism and seroconversion. The bareback culture present in both of Rémès' texts is based on various violent rites of passage that bring the subculture closer together. Like in Dustan's books, those who are included, (sero)converts, are the only ones to occupy a space in Rémès's world. Berlin Tintin, the protagonist of both novels, seeks to use the violent, war-like perception of HIV/AIDS and the subculture of barebacking to reinforce the tribal/community-based world in his texts. The seroconversions included in each of Rémès's texts show how the author avoids creating a hetero/homo divide by eliminating any mediation between existence and sexuality. Seropositivity in Rémès's novel indicates queerness, which ultimately equates existence/presence: "seropo, ergo sum."

I have detailed the variables of postmodern masculinity while underlining how the performances in each novel align with larger postmodern concepts. However, what draws all the previous authors and their texts together is the notion of the other. Houellebecq, Rémès, and Dustan all mention "l'autre" but this "autre" is designed in stark contrast to the masculinities associated with the protagonists, and I proposed in chapters one and two to call this other the "virile other," as the reflective counterpart to the masculinities exhibited in these texts. The recognition of the virile other always results in a pause, a textual highlight that interrupts the

narrative and forces the characters to reflect on the unique qualities of this man. The virile other is a semblance of the past, the result of a juxtaposition illustrated by the way Houellebecq positions the lifestyle of previous generations against the lifestyle of Bruno and Michel. It is not meant to serve as the paradigm of French masculinity; rather, it is more of a benchmark from which one could suggest postmodernism has evolved these masculinities.

The virile other also solidifies my suggestion that we are not dealing with postmodern masculinity ultimately, but postmodern *masculinities* as various constructions of masculinity, traditional and atypical, are represented in these texts. Furthermore, this “other” creates an exciting theoretical quagmire for if the “other” is virile, what then is said about absence and presence of paternal figures in his life? No assumptions can be made, as these texts do not highlight traditional constructions of masculinity, only admit to its presence. However, I do not think their presence in the text weakens my suggestion that the patriarchy is losing trans-generational influence. The presence of the “other” in each text strengthens the claim that other masculinities are now being enacted because of the fact that there is no single one that occupies the center of the postmodern narrative.

Thus far, the summary of symptoms regarding the postmodern condition of masculinity discussed here has largely focused on metropolitan authors. Houellebecq, Rémès, and Dustan represent authors who write from within a French culture and as a possible reflection of it. The final chapter of my dissertation proposed that a non-French author, writing from unique intersectional identities of ethnicity, religion, and sexuality, exhibits the same symptoms of postmodern masculinity. The chapter interrogated the literary and digital works of Moroccan author Abdellah Taïa in order to highlight how Moroccan masculinities face the same postmodern inquiries regarding patriarchal power and queer identities. This chapter is distinctive

because it demonstrates how these postmodern symptoms are translocational and not unique to French socio-cultural habits. Furthermore, the various media scrutinized in this chapter makes it even more distinctive because the analysis not only incorporates the textual, but the digitextual enhancing the transnational postmodern links between the Moroccan and French formations of masculinity in French texts. The digitextual analysis demonstrates to what degree Taïa can separate the literature he writes in which he creates an expression of Moroccan (queer) masculinity from his own persona as a public intellectual promoting a more tolerant Morocco. These two artistic paths permit Taïa to navigate various methods of giving voice to a culturally marginalized group.

Critics often explore the novels of Abdellah Taïa as examples of same-sex love in Maghrebi literature of French language, at most qualifying the texts as queer. The digitextual categorizes Taïa in an immediate way as the “Gay Moroccan author” which leads to an interesting contrast between what the textual and the digital are capable of producing for him and the reader. As Taïa may play with the “dit” and the “non-dit” of his texts, the digitextual do not as the latter is composed not only of his digi-writing but also all of the writing that surrounds him, labeling him in order to qualify his position.

Ultimately, his texts and the digital media that surround him do create a space in which queer Moroccan masculinities can be expressed in a more socio-culturally acceptable manner that does not feminize their sexuality. Just as Dustan and Rémès reclaim their masculinity by reappropriating a heterosexual biological model, Taïa reasserts and reclaims a queer Moroccan masculinity by rejecting the *zamel*, a label that prohibits masculine performativity.

Through the scope of this study we were able to look at how Francophone postmodern masculinities take shape in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and how three

different variables were at play, creating a literary space in which these masculinities were performed, enacted, or assumed. By examining both French and non-French expositions on paternal-filial relations, queer construction, and digital media, these variables demonstrate a larger commonality that can be used as a specific lens to understand masculinity and masculine sexuality in a post 1980s climate.

My dissertation differs from other studies on French masculinities or French literary depictions of masculinity in so far as it approaches the topic through a specific understanding of how narratives reflect postmodernism. Lawrence Schehr's *French Post-modern Masculinities*, published in 2009, discusses how French masculinities have shifted in late twentieth-century French literature. Schehr's book examines a different literary corpus that he qualifies as postmodern. In this dissertation, I chose to engage more directly with some traits and events of postmodernism instead of using it to denote a timeframe, therefore analyzing the text first and then highlighting how its components reflect the rebellious and subversive nature of postmodernism. Furthermore, in addition to exploring traditional examples of literature I also looked at how the Internet provides a medium for authors like Abdellah Taïa to nuance their construction of sexuality and masculinity, thereby allowing the discussion of French masculinities to move forward in a new way. This dissertation is guided by the principle that the exploration of *masculinities* permits a better understanding of the evolution of late twentieth and early-twenty first century gender roles and sexuality. It is the very fact that masculinity is not homogenous that makes it postmodern.

Other critical studies regarding French masculinity include the monumental *Histoire de la virilité*, three volumes that historicize French masculinity from antiquity to the twenty-first century. The third volume of the series, coincidentally entitled *La Virilité en crise*, is dedicated



to retracing the supposed “threats” of the twentieth century that place virility in crisis. The editor of this volume, Alain Corbin, takes additional precaution to tease out why this anthology examines virility as opposed to masculinity. For Corbin and his contributors, virility is the concept upon which most of patriarchal hierarchy is based. Corbin writes:

Car si l’on veut faire l’histoire de structures inégalitaires, d’origine archaïque mais toujours présentes, dont la transmission dans la longue durée suppose la transformation de l’histoire en nature, alors il n’y a guère qu’un mot qui convienne, dans notre langue, à l’objet d’un tel projet: c’est bien celui de “virilité.” (8)

The text is a chronological examination of the historicity of virility from a socio-historical perspective but lacks the possible contribution that the inclusion of a literary analysis could make. Furthermore, the emphasis on virility in the anthology (and crisis of it) positions any analysis in comparison to an ideal, an ultimate form of masculinity, and therefore negates the possibility of newer constructions of masculinity being accepted or even possibly becoming the new norm.

Other French texts on masculinity include Thierry Hoquet’s *La Virilité*. Hoquet like Corbin, focuses on separating virility from masculinity: “Mais on pourrait se dire que, s’il y a bien deux mots, c’est qu’il y a donc deux notions que [...] la philosophie doit distinguer” (14). The emphasis on separating the two terms is a key component in my first chapter in which both masculinity and virility play an important role. In particular, Hoquet’s analysis of the attractiveness of virility is useful: “Il y a dans la virilité quelque chose qui séduit et qui fait peur. Comme un charme qui attire irrésistiblement et une violence contenue qui suscite la crainte” (11). This statement underlines Houellebecq’s and Dustan’s vision of the “virile other” that was

discussed in chapter one. While the text nuances the distinction between masculinity and virility and defines the many aspects of virility, it does so from a philosophical perspective and does not ground its discussion about masculinity and virility in sociological, cultural, or literary documents. Furthermore, the text also avoids contemporary perspectives that actually focus more on masculinity than on virility. By shifting the focus from virility to masculinities, I am creating a discussion around multiple representations of postmodern masculinities rather than positioning them all against the concept of virility.

The analysis of Michel Houellebecq in chapter one brought forth a new way to understand sexuality and gender roles in the author's literary universe. While a lot of work has been done on the male protagonists of his novels as well as the women with which these protagonists interact, there are not a lot of studies discussing the relationship between masculinity and sexuality in his novels and how the two affect each other's construction.<sup>145</sup> Murielle Lucie Clément has thoroughly dissected the familial relations of Houellebecq's characters in *Houellebecq, Sperme et sang* (Harmattan 2003). However, one is left to wonder how these dysfunctional familial relationships affect character development in the novel, which I hope to have shown in my own analysis of his text.

My dissertation also expands on the minimal literature surrounding Rémès's and Dustan's works. Many critics treat Rémès's and Dustan's texts simply as a glimpse into the queer worlds of French literature. While critics like Schehr, Hendrickson, and Siegel discuss the queer literary universe and how HIV/AIDS works its way into their novels, no critic analyzes what the queer, seropositive world depicted in the two authors' novels can bring to a discussion

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<sup>145</sup> See Douglas Morrey, "Sex and the Single Male: Houellebecq, Feminism, and Hegemonic Masculinity" *Yale French Studies* 116/117, 2009.

about masculinity or gender in contemporary French literature.<sup>146</sup> I moved away from typical sexuality-based analysis and focuses more on the construction of masculinity in both authors' novels. Of course sexuality is a component, but I examined how it figures into a larger discussion about the literary portrayal of (queer) masculinities.

Furthermore, the critical work regarding Abdellah Taïa is growing, however most critics analyze his literary corpus in terms of foreignness and queerness. I see Taïa as an author who combines both the paternal issues treated in chapter one and the queer issues in chapter two from a Francophone perspective but the topics themselves are still postmodern. Most critics of Maghrebi sexuality focus their analysis of Taïa (and others like him, namely Rachid O.) on how these sexualities are negotiated in French through French literature. My analysis of both his literary works and his online engagement displays how we can understand Maghrebi masculinity from the same postmodern symptomatic approach as Houellebecq, Dustan, and Rémès.

With the consideration of new media in the final chapter, my study has come full circle as I finished where I started, proposing that there is not a crisis in masculinity, but rather a shift, a change both at the heart of society and in several texts of late-twentieth century French literature. What my project hoped to accomplish is not a redefinition of French masculinity through literature but rather to highlight its cultural evolution as illustrated in some instances of literary practice.

### **The Future of French Masculinities**

The scope of this dissertation allowed me to apprehend how postmodernism can be understood and examined from a symptomatic position that highlights how it is a "condition"

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<sup>146</sup> Lawrence Schehr focuses a lot of his analysis on Erik Rémès and the author's explicit encounters as a means of understanding how the queer HIV universe reacts to advancements in HIV/AIDS treatment.

rather than a “movement.” What has come to light is that the range of texts and authors whose works exhibit these postmodern symptoms is far larger than might be expected. There are a number of other texts that further the overarching claim of this dissertation: that one can understand new shifts in the construction of masculinity from a postmodern, symptomatic perspective. While investigating the delicate paternal-filial relationship in Michel Houellebecq’s *Les Particules élémentaires*, I noted how the plot of his other texts place a large importance on the role of the protagonist’s father and how the absence of this character triggers a larger chain of events that sets the course of the plot. His novels *Plateforme*, and *La Carte et le territoire* are both examples of this narrative where the father’s death catalyzes a reaction that produces multiple performances of masculinity and masculine sexuality. These two texts, in conjunction with *Extension du domaine de la lutte* which deals uniquely with masculine performativity, would produce a larger understanding of how Houellebecq constructs one iteration of postmodern masculinities.

My interest in literary depictions of paternal roles also led me to revisit Annie Ernaux’s *La Place*, a text that provides a useful terrain to explore the link between masculinity and paternity but from the view of a daughter. Like the start of Michel Houellebecq’s *Plateforme*, Ernaux’s narrative opens with the death of her father, providing a point of reflection for the novel as she retraces the life, from childhood to adulthood, of her father. Her novel adds an interesting point of view to my own perspective since it highlights the different roles he had as son, father, and grandfather. This autobiography provides an opportunity to place literary depictions of fatherhood into the larger framework of the twentieth century and further widen the scope of my analysis to include texts by women authors.

It is Ernaux who then led me to Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* when she reviewed the work for *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 2009.<sup>147</sup> After the death of his father, Eribon returns to Reims in order to retrace his childhood (Noudelmann) (Marie-Claire Barnet) (Taïa, *L'Armée du salut*) (Taïa, *Le Jour du roi*) (Taïa, *Lettres à un jeune marocain*) (Taïa, *Une Mélancolie arabe*)ood. The book is in part a reflection on the role the father played in Eribon's construction of his political, philosophical, and sexual identities. Eribon's text is representative of a queer French iteration of masculinity that would help progress the claims of this dissertation. As a prominent public intellectual, Eribon's work provides a social reflection of society that is more sociological than literary. An analysis of his text would help develop any relationship I wish to draw between social and literary realities during the same time period and from the same symptomatic perspective.

However, paternity is not the sole symptom I wish to explore further. As I investigate the prominent literary works of Abdellah Taïa, I discovered that his recent novel *Les Infidèles* is of significant interest to this topic. The novel retraces the lives of a Moroccan prostitute and her son who work together and explore their country and religion. This novel, like *Le Jour du roi*, is an example of how Taïa is stepping away from autofictional queer narratives, opting to use his work as a means to discuss the relationship between Islam and Morocco. However, true to his literary roots, Taïa still positions the reader's perspective from that of a sexual minority or sexual outcast—the prostitute. An analysis of this novel would elucidate the complex relationship between Morocco, its religion, and its sexualities that Taïa implicates his protagonists in.

Moreover, since Moroccan masculinities are a part of this analysis, it would be prudent to frame Taïa's work within a larger Moroccan and possibly Maghrebi context of masculinity by exploring the works of Tahar Ben Jelloun. Like Hervé Guibert to Erik Rémès and Guillaume

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<sup>147</sup> See Ernaux's review entitled "Fils de la honte" *Le Nouvel Observateur*. October 22, 2009.

Dustan, Ben Jelloun's novels, *Réclusion solitaire*, *Au Pays* and *La Plus haute des solitudes* help situate the literary tradition Taïa immerses his novels in. These texts offer a unique view into Maghrebi fatherhood, exploring how gender roles shift in narratives about immigration as the protagonists try to balance religion, society, and their masculinity. Ben Jelloun writes about France and Morocco and this dual perspective can help clarify how issues of paternity and masculinity can exceed socio-cultural boundaries and how widespread postmodern categories have become.

In *Masculine Migrations*, Daniel Coleman argues that narratives of migration, including those of Ben Jelloun and some of Taïa's texts, are "ideal site[s] in which to explore gender in moments when it is unstable and in crisis" (xii). As the Moroccan paternal role is destabilized by the economic, quasi-imperial role that France's industry for migrant workers plays, masculinity becomes the "forfeited gender" within the family.<sup>148</sup> These Maghrebi migrant narratives are considered narratives of loss—a loss of sexual identity, supremacy, and potency.<sup>149</sup> Confronting Ben Jelloun's literary texts (*Réclusion solitaire*, *La Plus haute des solitudes*, *Au pays*) to Taïa's work would allow the analysis to replicate the tension between heterosexual vs. queer constructions of masculinity through paternity in a Maghrebi context.

As stated earlier, an expanded analysis would also benefit greatly from the inclusion of the works of Hervé Guibert on *l'écriture de soi*. Much has been said about Guibert, his style, his writing and his contribution to both French literature and HIV/AIDS literature, but looking at his work from the perspective of postmodern masculinities would help contextualize the onset of the disease and the literary reaction to it, thus framing Rémès and Dustans as post-Guibert writers

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<sup>148</sup> The same concept is used by Hannah Roisin in *The End of Men* and also the *Radio France* series regarding masculinity in France. It appears that when one attacks the "bread-winner" role of men within families or relationships, it threatens masculine domination.

<sup>149</sup> "Je laisse mon sexe chaque fois que je dois sortir en ville ou aller à l'usine," Ben Jelloun, *Réclusion solitaires*. (Paris : Denoël, 2001) 68.

whose literature distances itself from Guibert tradition. It would also help contextualize the queer narrative and how queer masculinities were previously navigated.

Guibert's texts (*À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, *Le Protocole compassionnel*, *L'Homme au chapeau rouge*) mark the start of a French literary legacy regarding HIV/AIDS. Guibert's focus on the discovery of the disease and the degradation of the body under siege contrast with the way Dustan and Rémès celebrate the infected body. Death is assumed, rather than recounted or awaited as in Guibert's texts, marking an evolution of the narrativization of masculinity and *virality* in HIV/AIDS French literature from Guibert to Dustan to Rémès that helps bridging the mid-eighties and the early twenty-first century. The inclusion of Guibert would also confirm the importance of autofiction as a mode of construction of queer masculinities and in the development of HIV/AIDS literature as a genre.

A final contribution that my project makes is the exploration of new(er) media formats in the ongoing discussion of masculinity in France. I have asked the following questions: "What do we read?" and "How do we read?", focusing on the possibility of a technology-driven interactive shift that transforms our reading protocols. In addition to the examples provided in my dissertation, various popular French microblogs hosted on Tumblr can help in understanding how digital and social media are reconstructing our notions of masculinity, providing a platform of expression that justifies any construction of masculinity, and paving the way for future studies on French masculinity and gender. Will gender remain binary, i.e., man and woman or will it become pluralized into multiple variants? In fall 2014, former President Nicholas Sarkozy claimed that President Hollande and his socialist government were "humiliating families and humiliating people who love the family"<sup>150</sup> by allowing same-sex couples to marry and adopt.

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<sup>150</sup> From a recent interview on France 2 where the former President indicates he feels no alternative but to run again for the presidency after Hollande's term. See *The Connexion* "Sarkozy to Return to Politics," September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014.

Sarkozy's comments reminds us precisely of what is at stake for normative hegemonies when related cultural and technological changes push the limits of dominant norms of gender and sexuality. The dynamics of change and resistance at work within society find a privileged expression in the literary texts I have examined in my study.



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