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ABSTRACT

This article puts geography back into the frame in its consideration of the travel texts of two gay authors and public intellectuals, André Gide (1869–1951) and Robert Dessaix (b. 1944). Gide undertook formative trips to the Maghreb from the 1890s onwards, and Dessaix, while not his first visit to the region, retraces Gide’s itineraries in the 2000s. Mary Louise Pratt, in her essay “Mapping Ideology” (1981), speaks of the “Voyage South” to describe those narratives that “involve the discovery of a false Utopia, where a cornucopia of Europe’s forbidden fruits – illicit sex, crime, sloth, irrationality, sensuality, excessive power, cruelty, lost childhood – is offered up to the questing hero”. I explore the ways Gide and Dessaix frame and interrogate travel to and around the Maghreb according to some of these terms, and shed light on their engagement with this region as a means of affirming their identity as gay men. Since Dessaix appropriates an essentially colonial author, Gide, in a supposedly postcolonial age, I also examine key questions Dessaix raises about travel and sexuality in the modern-day Maghreb.

KEYWORDS

André Gide; Robert Dessaix; travel; sexuality; sex tourism; masculinity; queer identities

When at the age of 14 I first came across this extraordinary autobiography by a Nobel Prize-winning Frenchman I'd never heard of, my whole sense of who I was changed. In France, it seemed, life wasn't like my life in Lane Cove at all. You could be eccentric, peculiar, intellectually inclined and many-sided, and still have a rich, creative life. You could do things, especially in North Africa, that we couldn't even talk about. I couldn't get to France – and North Africa – quickly enough. (Dessaix 2009)

The above citation is taken from a 2009 article in *The Sun-Herald* by Robert Dessaix (1944–), the Australian novelist, essayist, broadcaster, travel writer and public intellectual. The article bears the title “The Books that Changed Me”, and the volume provoking the above reaction is *If It Die* [*Si le grain ne meurt*], the autobiography of the highly influential French author and Nobel laureate André Gide (1869–1951). Dessaix immediately frames his encounter with this text in terms of geography and mobility – where it can take him and how it might enable his escape from Lane Cove, an area of suburban Sydney. For Dessaix, then, Gide's text itself can be said to operate as an “invitation au voyage”, to borrow from Baudelaire, that is, as a narrative that encourages him to escape, cross borders and, in so doing, affirm his identity.¹ The aim of this essay is to explore the way that the Maghreb as destination, along with the journey from/via Europe to get there, plays a major role in both men's identity formation, particularly in terms of masculinity.

In *The History of Sexuality* [*Histoire de la sexualité*], Michel Foucault writes: "It is through sex [...] that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility [...] to the whole of his body [...] to his identity" (Foucault 1978, 155–156). For Gide and Dessaix, however, it will be seen that any such sexual rite of passage coincides with – and is potentially dependent on – a geographical passage, that is, a move from one place to another. In the case of both of these authors, this is a geographical passage to the Maghreb.

In his 2008 text *Arabesques: A Tale of Double Lives* (hereafter *Arabesques*), Dessaix appropriates the figure of Gide as a travel guide of sorts. The work is an account of Dessaix's journey around North Africa (specifically Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco) and Europe, during which he follows the key itineraries that helped shape Gide's identity as a young man. I will argue that Dessaix, following in the footsteps of Gide, first of all posits North Africa as a queer space, that is, as a permissive and accepting arena in which the writer feels he can affirm his identity as a gay man. It will be seen that doing this, however, allows for a paradoxical reinforcement of a dominant European masculinity. Moreover, since Dessaix is appropriating an essentially colonial author, Gide, in a postcolonial and globalised context, that of the modern-day Maghreb, this article also bears in mind the socio-political and ethical tensions such a project is likely to face.

Queering the "Voyage South"

Before proceeding, it is necessary to qualify my understanding of the term "queer". Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's well-known 1993 essay on Henry James's *The Art of the Novel* offers an analysis of "queer" through what she terms "queer performativity", while Ken Plummer's (2003) essay sheds light on the destabilising potential of the word:

"[Q]ueer performativity" is the name of a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma. (Sedgwick 1993, 11)

[A]ll the theoretical talk over "queer" over the past fifteen years has in part been talk about a post modernization of sex in signaling a breakdown of clear and stable categories and a loss of faith in any compelling grand narrative of sexuality. (Plummer 2003, 520)

Queer performativity can be understood as a strategy that enables and compels one to make space for one's self-identification and self-expression in the light of, but also by virtue of, societal pressures. In the case of Gide and Dessaix, I will suggest that this performativity involves the queering of both their journeys and a geographical space, the Maghreb region, as much as of the narrative space they carve out for themselves to represent their experiences there. Yet the idea of "queer" as "signaling a breakdown of clear and stable categories", "queer" at once as fracture and continuity, also helps uncover the appeal travel holds for Dessaix. This is highlighted by some of the potentialities that he associates with travel in the opening citation about life in Lane Cove. In positing that the shift from Australia to France, and then to North Africa, can enable a flourishing and even a proliferation of the self ("You could be eccentric, peculiar, intellectually inclined and many-sided"), Dessaix implicitly aligns border-crossing (and indeed, continent-hopping) at once with a break from local constraints, the validation of his homosexual identity, and his transition into manhood. In his afore-mentioned autobiography, *If It Die*, Gide writes of the irresistible pull of the continent:

Africa! I repeated the mysterious word over and over again; in my imagination it was big with terrors, alluring horrors, with hopes and expectations. (Gide 1957, 243)

For the young Gide, then, in the 1890s, North Africa promised freedom, adventure and *volupté*, just as it would for a teenage Dessaix in the 1950s (and an older version of the writer in the first decade of the twenty-first century). Indeed, it is Gide's way of seeing North Africa that frames it from the outset as a queer space for Dessaix, who travels to a Maghreb that is first and foremost the site of Gide's formative sexual experiences, rather than his own.

Such a framework places North Africa in contrast with the stifling and stultifying nature of Dessaix's suburban home environment in Australia. Viewing one's home environment in these terms is by no means unusual and, as we shall see, continues to inform the rationale for travel presented throughout Dessaix's work.² Indeed, in their introduction to *Geographies of Sexualities*, Gavin Brown, Kath Browne and Jason Lim underline the perhaps obvious notion that home, if "shaped by assumptions of heterosexuality" (Brown, Browne, and Lim 2007, 3), can potentially represent a place of alienation for gay people, amongst others.³ It might be noted that Australia, despite remaining Dessaix's home to this day (he currently lives in Tasmania), is scarcely mentioned throughout *Arabesques*. In fact, although technically Dessaix's point of departure, Australia generally only appears in the text as the land of his childhood, as a place fixed in a certain timeframe that can be called upon to indicate the extent to which he has diverged from his origins. Yet it is important to highlight that Dessaix's apparent need to establish Australia as a place that must necessarily be left in order for self-discovery to occur does not simply hinge on viewing home as a potentially repellent force that would have otherwise impinged on this process of self-realisation. For Dessaix's journey to North Africa begins in earnest in France. From the outset, *Dessaix* firmly inscribes his narrative into the European tradition of travel writing; he starts off *Arabesques* with a discussion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* [*Les Réveries du promeneur solitaire*]. For Dessaix, negotiating North Africa through Gide's itineraries first of all involves aligning himself with a specifically European standpoint.⁴ As we have seen in the opening citation, Dessaix's journey to North Africa must take place via France, not only because this is Gide's very trajectory, but also so that Dessaix might engage with the traditional trajectory of the Orientalist traveller more broadly speaking – in departing from Europe. As the American poet Richard Howard writes (as cited by Linda Nochlin [1989]):

What is more European, after all,
Than to be corrupted by the Orient? (Howard 1984, 55)

Dessaix therefore recasts himself as a European subject before embarking on his journey to North Africa, ready to understand better the effects of the so-called Orient on Gide and, it might be added, the latter-day ramifications of Gide's representation of the Maghreb. Dessaix will also be able to expose himself to the consequences of treading this well-worn and extensively documented path, mindful of the social and political changes effected in the lengthy time lapse since Gide's visits. The determination to fix Europe as the journey's preferred starting point is given further credence by Dessaix's account of his visit to Gide's home in Normandy; Dessaix underlines the extent to which North Africa essentially operated a queer space for Gide (and casts it in a similar role in terms

of his own self-discovery). As the former notes, for Gide, the Maghreb promised an escape route from the stifflingly heteronormative confines of Normandy (evidently added to by the presence of his wife, Madeleine): “A visit to the sheltered valleys around La Roque, reeking of fecundity and families, gives you a good idea as well of why Tunis and Algiers might appeal to him [...]” (Dessaix 2008, 133).

Exploring the ways the European imagination began to view certain geographical locations in line with the dynamics of empire, Mary Louise Pratt speaks of the “tremendous surge of a narrative model we could call the ‘Voyage South,’ in which a European protagonist is sent to the underworld of empire to be tested” (Pratt 1981, 158). Gide’s 1902 text *The Immoralist* [*L’Immoraliste*] sees its protagonist, Michel, ultimately leave Europe to reside in North Africa, where he engages in soliciting local prostitutes – what would nowadays be considered sex tourism. When visited by friends from France, Michel remains resolute in his intention to stay in North Africa, and professes himself to be largely unapologetic for his transgressions. Using *The Immoralist* as a prime example, Pratt outlines the general characteristics of the “Voyage South” narrative:

As a rule, these Voyage South stories, at least in the modern version, involve the discovery of a false Utopia, where a cornucopia of Europe’s forbidden fruits – illicit sex, crime, sloth, irrationality, sensuality, excessive power, cruelty, lost childhood – is offered up to the questing hero, who accepts them all and then, depending on the strength of his European virtues, either extricates himself (for it is almost always a he) or disappears for good. (Pratt 1981, 158)

We see that the queering of the “Voyage South” (in Gide’s case, making his narrative one which allows for and uncovers otherwise illicit sexual self-discovery, whereas Dessaix, writing in the modern day, can perhaps more openly express himself as a gay man) therefore coincides with the assertion of a certain type of virile masculinity, attached to what Pratt calls “the questing hero”. (Given Gide’s predilection for boys in their early teens, it might also be noted that in terms of pederasty, as Naomi Segal emphasises, “masculinity belongs of right to the senior and femininity is a risk constantly run by the junior” [Segal 1998, 19].) In Pratt’s elucidation of the “Voyage South”, there is a recasting of the Garden of Eden where the European male is faced with temptation from the feminised “Utopia” he enters. He can either give in to temptation or walk away from it, and this decision will act as the measure of his European “virtues”. In either case, his masculinity will be reasserted either as a returning hero (if he should extricate himself) or a potentially sexually fulfilled male, who remains in place and holds the balance of power in colonial and economic terms, as in the case of Michel in *The Immoralist*.

Robert M. Fagley argues that Michel evades a dominant French bourgeois masculinity. Following Robert A. Nye’s analysis of French masculinity – from the Franco-Prussian War into the twentieth century – as a heteronormative pathway to maintaining bourgeois society, Fagley writes:

Honor is gained and retained through one’s social respectability and responsibility, both reflected by one’s reputation, relations, and actions [...] Both Gide and his Michel were born into a milieu where such a sense of honor was privileged, and they struggled with the possibility of damaging it through the expression of their individuality. (Fagley 2005, 81)

It is startling that Fagley’s article (and indeed his subsequent 2014 book, *Bachelors, Bastards, and Nomadic Masculinity: Illegitimacy in Guy de Maupassant and André Gide*) proceeds without an extended consideration of the implications of colonialism, as the colonial

set-up in *The Immoralist* creates a certain paradox when it comes to representations of masculinity. For even if its protagonist rejects the heteronormative thrust of French society by remaining in North Africa to indulge his homosexual passions, it is precisely the workings of empire that result in him asserting what is nonetheless a virile French masculinity in the colony. This is because colonial power relations, even in the context of homosexual desire, would appear to apportion dominance to the Western male.

In his 2014 work *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, Joseph Boone, in addressing what he terms the “implicit heterosexism” (Boone 2014, 25) of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Said 1978), sees the latter study as elucidating a practice of Orientalism that has “frequently been viewed as heteroerotic”, one where “an all-powerful, masculine ‘West’ seeks to penetrate a feminine, powerless, and sexually available ‘East’ in order to possess its resources” (xxi). Boone’s study aims to right this perceived imbalance, since “the mere possibility of sexual contact with or between men [...] has covertly underwritten much of the appeal and practice of the phenomenon we now call Orientalism” (xxi). At the same time, however, Boone is aware over the course of his study that the homoerotic potentialities of Orientalism also serve to reinforce the hyper-virile masculinity of the Western traveller, and that there is very often a feminising of the male “other” at stake. It transpires, then, that while the “Voyage South” involves the establishment of a queer space of acceptance and self-realisation for Gide and Dessaix, as we have seen, it nonetheless restages the dynamics of a dominant Western (and typically heterosexual) masculinity. For Gide, the European male’s dominance is in line with the power relations underpinning the colonialist project.⁵ But for Dessaix, however, writing in the postcolonial age, both the clash of homosexual desire and empire, and the encounter between the white traveller from the Global North and the Maghreb native, warrant further consideration on his part. This will be the basis for the final section of this article, “Postcolonial Gide”.

Double lives

It is necessary to note that Dessaix is not just travelling with preconceptions about North Africa (and France), for which Gide is partly responsible. The younger author is also travelling with a version of Gide, whom he has established from the outset as a guide for his journey. For Dessaix, then, queering the “Voyage South” also involves drawing up the figure of Gide. This takes on a personal dimension for Dessaix, as he sees his insertion of Gide into the text as a way of resurrecting the French author, of bringing him into being, since the long-dead Gide has over time become a “man who isn’t there” (Dessaix 2008, 3). Highlighting Gide’s decrease in popularity over the decades, Dessaix notes in the introduction to his book that in the English-speaking world, “this man who was once the incarnation of French thought and letters is half-forgotten” (3). The resurrection of Gide that is central to *Arabesques* does not mean that this figure can be easily pinned down, however, despite Dessaix’s concerted efforts to do so. Dessaix writes of Gide: “Just when you think you’ve grasped his essence, his double appears behind you, smiling ironically, and you lose your hold on him” (4). While Gide’s slipperiness here might suggest the difficulty of appropriating Orientalist discourse in the postcolonial era (a point to which I shall return), it also hints at Dessaix’s preconceived notion of North Africa as a space that has the potential to enable a fragmentation and proliferation of the traveller’s sense of self.

The elusiveness of the figure of Gide is carried through the work by the intertwined notions of haunting (the idea of Gide's "presence" looming over the younger author) and shadowing (an interchangeable epithet insofar as either author can be seen to accompany the other), exposing a narrative drive that extends beyond merely referencing Gide's travel texts to developing a characterisation of Gide. For instance, Dessaix almost immediately asserts that Gide "shadows me throughout the book, giving shape to my own thoughts on religion, love, ageing and why we travel" (Dessaix 2008, 3), before clarifying later in the narrative that

Sometimes it feels as if I'm shadowing him, while pretending I'm not. Now and again it really does feel as if he is shadowing me. (94)

The subtitle of the work, *A Tale of Double Lives*, purposely weaves together the lives of Dessaix and Gide, beyond alluding to the possibility of a single person leading a dual existence (an idea befitting Gide, whose perceived duality was a well-documented driving force in his literary creation).⁶ Yet, despite the evident sway Gide holds over Dessaix, their relationship remains essentially based on the idea of accompaniment rather than one of domination. Indeed, Dessaix, as we will see in a subsequent section, gradually develops a narrative strategy to distance himself from Gide. The ambivalent nature of their relationship enables similarities to be drawn between Gide's seminal 1897 text *Fruits of the Earth* [*Les Nourritures terrestres*] and *Arabesques*. In the former, the figure of Menalcas [Ménalque in the French – also a character in *The Immoralist*] operates as a seasoned older traveller who encourages his protégé to undertake a voyage of self-discovery by rejecting his roots – namely, his family and home. Ultimately, the guide in *Fruits of the Earth* encourages his protégé to reject him in turn. Dessaix repeatedly refers to the fact that Menalcas is based on Oscar Wilde, reinforcing the idea that Gide plays a similar mentoring role in the context of *Arabesques*. (Of course, it can be argued that the use of this intertext, invoking Wilde alongside Gide, also serves to induct Dessaix himself into a prestigious lineage of gay public intellectuals.) With Gide operating in such a capacity, *Fruits of the Earth* becomes a constant point of reference for *Arabesques* though never identified explicitly as lending the latter text its framework.⁷

In conversation with Danielle Wood, Dessaix speaks of the possibility of "writing as dialogue, conversation (however imagined), revelling in its own loose ends"⁸ (Dessaix and Wood 2008, 10). Dessaix's conception of writing as dialogic validates his interpellation of a long-dead author who will give shape not only to his thoughts but his journey, thus allowing for his own peregrinations to be understood as refracted through Gide's prior exploits. Playing on the notion of fragmentation from the outset, Dessaix almost immediately offers a striking image of refraction in *Arabesques*: "My encounters with Gide are a prism, as all our best conversations with friends are" (Dessaix 2008, 3). In the next section, I explore the implications that such a refractive relationship between Gide and Dessaix might have for the latter's apprehension of the North African spaces he inhabits.

Coming out in the casbah

When reading Gide's numerous texts based on his travels in North Africa, the configurations of space that appear to enable and even encourage sexual encounters with

other males, mainly teenage boys, are striking. Gide claims that his first outright admission of homosexual desire came in the company of none other than Oscar Wilde, in the backroom of an Algiers café in 1895, when he huskily professed to Wilde his desire for the young flute player in their company. This led to a sexual encounter between Gide and the young boy in a room in a hotel located on the docks, away from the more conventional tourist hotel in which the writers had taken up residence (Sheridan 1999, 118). In Gide's youth, spaces where homosexual relations are initiated and enacted are by necessity enclosed and discreet, as we see in the situation outlined above. Such spaces sought out in North Africa by these writers nonetheless unambiguously cater to the European traveller's tastes, and allow what might be seen as a prototypical sort of sex tourism to take place. In seemingly more permissive modern times, however, in which Dessaix experiences more open flirtation and solicitation in public and commercial spaces across a number of North African cities, the writer remains acutely aware of moving through the same secretive spaces that permitted Gide to acknowledge his homosexuality. Of the Algiers casbah he writes:

I found myself sitting on a step, somewhere high up towards the top of the casbah, remembering Oscar Wilde [...] I found myself recalling that singular moment [...] when, somewhere near where I was sitting over a century later, André Gide had whispered "oui". (Dessaix 2008, 10)

Negotiating the labyrinthine space of the casbah quickly becomes representative of the process of uncovering or awakening hidden selves; certainly, for Dessaix, it allows him to draw closer to Gide, if not in time, then in space. Yet this rapprochement is naturally coupled with the fact that the casbah and attitudes towards it have evolved in the period that separates each writer's sojourn. Dessaix examines a number of these shifts in a 2006 article on Algiers entitled "Secrets of the Kasbah", later reworked for *Arabesques*. Speaking of Oscar Wilde and other travellers of the (late) nineteenth century, Dessaix writes:

Where everyone headed in those days [...] as soon as they could find a guide, was the kasbah. The more adventurous still do, although it's unwise to wander around there on Fridays, I am told, when religious feelings are sharper, especially if you're wearing shorts; and it's very risky at night. (Dessaix 2006)

The reality of Dessaix's subsequent personal experience of the casbah does not, however, match up to the somewhat fearsome reputation attributed to it:

Nothing at all happened to me. In fact, I seemed to be invisible. Drifting from alleyway to crooked alleyway, through archways and up steps, pausing to glance into barbershops and dingy cafes, where men were playing dominoes, and watching cobblers cobble, men hanging their canaries outside in the sun and children kicking a football around, I emerged at the other end feeling like a sleepwalker who had suddenly woken up. (Dessaix 2006)

Dessaix's invocation of the sleepwalker here seems to operate as an image that represents the lethargic traveller who needs to be jolted into a wakeful state of curiosity. It is an image taken up by Jacques Derrida in *Counterpath*, a text on travel co-written with Catherine Malabou, which begins with a meditation on the idea of "travelling with" (the title of the series in which the volume appears):

I'm not sure that I have ever traveled, myself, with "me", in fact. With a "me" who was living or vigilant. Other than as a sleepwalker. It isn't enough to open one's eyes in order to be awake [...] I see the silhouette of the sleepwalker pass by, very quickly, commanded by a single dream: to finally wake up, which would perhaps be, perhaps not [...] a nightmare. How to explain otherwise – other than by means of this apprehension regarding the "perhaps" – the anxiety of a double, simultaneous, and contradictory desire, the desire to return home, to my place, as quickly as possible, but also to adjourn the return indefinitely? [...] [T]he question will never have been about the voyage or travel, but about "traveling-with". But with whom? (Derrida and Malabou 2004, 3)

Some of the questions raised by Derrida – including how we might feel that we have not yet travelled with a self fully open to and attuned to our surroundings, and how we might succumb to an in-between state, lethargic and anxious as we travel under the burden of our own preconceptions – can offer an insight into Dessaix's ruminations on his travels through the Maghreb. For instance, if Dessaix is travelling with Gide, so to speak, is it not that he is in some way avoiding travelling with another version or perhaps aspect of himself? Might uncovering Gide's travels somehow serve to conceal what ends up happening during his own? Does the "prism" representative of Dessaix's encounters with Gide in some way distort the former's vision? (Fully cognisant of its multi-perspectival and distortive capacities, Gide himself compares the work of art to a crystal in his 1891 text *Le Traité du Narcisse*.) Picking up once again on Dessaix's description of his amble through the casbah in the afore-mentioned article, we see that the sleepwalker finally wakes up as he emerges from the casbah; the space ultimately has the effect of revivifying him. While the casbah renders him seemingly invisible to others, it nonetheless awakens him to himself.

The transformative effect of Dessaix's passage through this space parallels the way the casbah also has the power to awaken Gide to his own sexuality, as evidenced by the encounter with Wilde. Even if moving through the casbah does not necessarily connote the same powerful sexual dawning for Dessaix, he nonetheless wastes no time in trying to establish when in the past his "casbah moment", or admission of same-sex desire, might have occurred (Dessaix 2008, 132). The casbah, then, is appropriated by Dessaix to represent the dawning of one's sexuality over the course of one's travels. Coming out in terms of the casbah does not simply denote a sexual awakening, however; it also stresses the importance of the experience of travel in any such awakening. In Dessaix's appropriation of this space, one comes out in the casbah precisely because one has come out of the casbah – it is the act of going through this particular space that triggers self-revelation and self-realisation, allowing the sleepwalker to come to his senses. In this way, the experience of the casbah reflects the intersection between travel and self-discovery with which Dessaix wholly engages in North Africa.

Travel liars

"Travel liars" is a term used by Percy Adams to negotiate elements of deception in seveneenth-century and eighteenth-century accounts of purportedly real travel defined as "a tale told by a traveler [...] with intent to deceive" (Adams 1962, 1). In *Arabesques*, Dessaix takes on board the creative possibilities offered by the lie as early as his first epigraph by citing the Brazilian writer Luís Fernando Veríssimo:

We always write in order to remember the truth. When we invent, it is only in order to remember the truth more exactly.

Dessaix's epigraph puts us on our guard when it comes to the subsequent narrative. We might also remember that his subtitle categorises the work as a "tale". Certainly, Dessaix's ambivalence towards the truth-value of the travel narrative helps create a line of defence against those who would attack it. For instance, in a 2014 article in *Quadrant*, Michael Connor acknowledges that "it is rare to find an Australian author visiting and writing about modern Algeria" (Connor 2014, 66), yet he is particularly damning of Dessaix's representation of the country. While tourists are an endangered species in Algeria – indeed, the threat of violence bubbles under the surface throughout *Arabesques* – Connor sees Dessaix's appropriation of Gide as "an elegantly stated excuse for Gide's behaviour – involving pederasty, boy prostitution and sexual tourism" (Connor 2014, 67). Connor also accuses Dessaix of ignoring questions surrounding Algerian homosexual identity, asserting that "[t]hrough homosexuality runs through his book, Dessaix is completely incurious about the treatment of gays in an Islamic country" (Connor 2014, 69). While Dessaix does not claim to give voice to local concerns regarding the expression of homosexual identity, being far too preoccupied with uncovering Gide's hidden selves over the course of his journey and, by extension, his own, Connor's assertion that Dessaix is somehow unaware of the impact of Gide's problematic predilection for boys in their early teens on the modern-day reader is entirely erroneous. In conversation with Wood, Dessaix claims that he inserted "partly – even wholly – fictionalised characters into my story who have far less sympathetic views of Gide than I do" (Dessaix and Wood 2008, 11). In *Arabesques* we are introduced to a whole host of secondary characters who act as sounding boards for Dessaix's ideas and preconceptions about Gide, travel and North Africa. In many instances, these characters undermine or call into question Dessaix's out-right admiration of Gide, and their varying inputs and dissenting voices therefore help widen the gap between Dessaix and Gide. To contextualise further Dessaix's "sympathetic" views towards Gide, we might turn to a passage from his 2004 article "Busting Out". Dessaix believes the traveller should always be able to establish what exactly excites his or her curiosity when abroad, and contends that one of the likely answers might be "a place where I can be more fully me at last" (Dessaix 2004). Dessaix uses this answer as a springboard to explore, not without a note of his trademark sauciness, the extent to which sex and travel are intertwined:

This last answer can be a euphemism for "making whoopee", but before we throw up our hands in horror and start muttering darkly about sex-tourists in Bangkok, we'd do well to remind ourselves that sexual self-discovery always has been a strong motive for travel, whether in the guise of husband-hunting, befriending the locals or openly revolting against the moral code in force at home. There is hardly a famous traveller you can mention who was not attracted by the possibility of sexual adventure while penetrating the unknown. (Dessaix 2004)

Dessaix's pre-emptive swipe at perspectives like Connor's suggests that the intersection between sex and travel deserves comprehensive rather than compartmentalising critical interventions. If Gide is a figure of controversy, Dessaix will approach him in the spirit of ambivalence rather than condemning him outright. Yet, while other characters in *Arabesques* – whether based on real-life figures or purely imaginary – are used to undermine

the motivations and actions of its focal point, Gide, admitting their presence has another important consequence. It complicates and changes our understanding of Dessaix's travel writing project, and in allowing Gide's ethics to be called into question, itself creates a new ethical problem for the travel writer. *Arabesques* relates Dessaix's travels in the wake of Gide, as we know, yet might the divisive figure of Gide, in all his doubleness, be the very one who also enables fabrication and fictitiousness to seep into Dessaix's narrative? How might we reread the first of Dessaix's two epigraphs to *Arabesques* in the light of such a possibility? And what implications does it have for the ways we might consider this book?

Peter Hulme, in conversation with Tim Youngs, sees the presence of a truth claim as central to travel writing. Establishing the distinction between literature and travel writing in terms of the difference between "made" and "made up", Hulme says that "[a]ll travel writing – because it is writing – is made in the sense of being constructed, but travel writing cannot be made up without losing its designation" (Hulme and Youngs 2007, 3). Dessaix's revelation regarding the fictitious nature of unspecified characters in his travel narrative therefore calls into question his representation of the journey he has purportedly undertaken. Did this journey actually happen at all? If Dessaix has read enough Gide, might he not simply travel on the latter's coattails instead? After all, these are Dessaix's words in "Busting Out": "In fact, theoretically, you should be able to leave home by shutting yourself in the back shed for a week with nothing but your pyjamas, your imagination and a pile of books" (Dessaix 2004). The type of imaginary journey evoked here would seem to challenge the considerable importance Dessaix accords to geographical locations, specifically the Maghreb, in the quest for self-discovery. In distancing himself from Gide by means of the above narrative strategy, Dessaix in fact ends up destabilising the account of his own travels, for one ethical impulse engenders another ethical compromise – admitting that Gide's problematic preferences are approached in this way threatens to undermine our perception of the veracity of Dessaix's travel narrative. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, rather than shattering this work's unity, Dessaix's narrative strategy serves as a nod to the very refraction that he posits as central to his project, and creates an even wider gap between himself and Gide that only further highlights the oft-mentioned slipperiness of the latter.

Postcolonial Gide

Dessaix sees travel's scope to uncover and/or affirm one's identity as going beyond mere tourism, and would appear to define the figure of the traveller precisely along these lines, as the following passage from "Busting Out" indicates:

Travellers leave home to find out if they're really who they thought they were – or their mothers or spouses or friends insist they are – or actually somebody else [...] Moving around the globe for any other reason – to shop in Hong Kong, to attend a business seminar in Singapore or take time out with the family on the Gold Coast – may be fun, relaxing, instructive or even profitable, but it's merely displacement, not travel. (Dessaix 2004)

Yet the notion of travellers leaving home "to find out if they're really who they thought they were [...] or actually somebody else" cannot be viewed in isolation, without regard for the impact on what Mary Louise Pratt calls the "travelee", that is the position of the

people inhabiting the destination visited (Pratt [1992] 2008, 225). In comparing a writer who was travelling during a period when Orientalism had yet to be called into question (and, in fact, was still fuelling the urge to undertake such journeys) with an author who is perfectly aware of Said's *Orientalism*, several key questions emerge. Firstly, how do we read Gide in the postcolonial age, especially in the twenty-first century, when we cannot overlook the Orientalist "sexploitation" arguably underpinning his travels in North Africa? Secondly, how might Dessaix go about appropriating Gide when it seems that some of his actions are increasingly indefensible, at least in modern-day terms? While we explored Dessaix's narrative strategy to distance himself from Gide in the last section, it is necessary to note that Gide nonetheless remains the driving force behind Dessaix's journey. For Gide's extensive peregrinations cast light on the motivation dear to most travel writers, Dessaix included – the desire to travel in order to discover oneself, a process that more often than not begins with the encounter with the so-called other. In "Busting Out", Dessaix discusses this motivation in detail (and perhaps further foregrounds his reverence towards masculinity, something he shares with Gide, by making reference to gay women travellers in an image whose flippancy only amplifies its scathingly misogynistic tone). He goes on to speculate that solo travel arrangements are preferable:

Travellers travel to save their souls. Not believing very strongly in souls any more, we call it self-discovery. The more extreme and eccentric forms of self-discovery aside – attempts to be the first lesbian to pogo-hop anticlockwise around Bolivia and so on – saving your soul, or at least revivifying it, kaleidoscoping it into something else, is still the best reason for leaving home. That's why, on the whole, it's best to leave home unaccompanied or with someone you can get rid of without too much trouble en route. (Dessaix 2004)

Dessaix's musings on the reasons why the traveller travels raise a number of questions about *Arabesques*. Is Gide an ideal travel companion for Dessaix precisely because, called up only by Dessaix's imagination, he can be easily dispensed with en route? Or can it even be possible to cast off a figure who haunts and (over)shadows the traveller in this way? Gide might first be encountered in Lane Cove but, as we have seen, he is also awaiting Dessaix when the latter arrives in Algeria; he haunts the casbah. For Dessaix, then, going to North Africa means an encounter with Gide and his legacy as much as its landscapes and peoples. North Africa is then in some ways an extension of Europe for Dessaix, as it acts as another site that enables this longed-for connection with Gide, and the French intelligentsia he represents.

Seeing the post-independence Maghreb in terms of Europe in this way is evidently problematic as it can act as a misguided, nostalgic attempt to fix the region in its colonial past. Dessaix is therefore keen to highlight the impact of present-day globalisation on the spatiotemporal connection he has with Gide in North Africa, as the following excerpt recounting his trip to Tunisia shows:

You can still time-travel in Sousse if you dare. For all the electric lights in the stalls, the television screens in the tea-houses, the young men in jeans and lurid T-shirts [...] and the hordes of tourists from countries the locals had never heard of in Gide's day, inside the walls of the medina you can still catch yourself dreaming that you've been catapulted back several centuries. Five minutes' walk away, outside the walls in the European quarter by the sea, you could be anywhere – Mexico, Portugal, Australia – it's twenty-first-century vacation land. There along the beachfront, as along countless beachfronts all over the world, stretch

high-rise hotels, restaurants, bars and cafés; tourists from every continent wander up and down in a daze, waiting for something to happen – to feel thirsty, see a donkey, be accosted, anything. But in the medina your imagination can still take flight, if you'll let it. (Dessaix 2008, 203)

Though he once again puts forth the medina as the preserve of the past, this nod to an Orientalising imagination does not mean that Dessaix eschews the question of reading Gide in the postcolonial age. Back in Algeria, Yacoub, a flirtatious and urbane man, whom Dessaix feels obliged to meet as he is “a friend of a friend of mine in Paris” (Dessaix 2008, 36), asks Dessaix outright the reason for his visit to the country. Reacting to Yacoub's bold inquisition, the former writes:

Was he a spy or something? [...] Or, having read Edward Saïd [sic], did he just suspect that I was there for some disreputable Orientalist reason – to salivate over the exotic Arab “Other”, ravish it, and then jet off home? Saïd's [sic] views are looking pretty one-sided, not to say wrong-headed, these days where I come from, but in Algeria they must seem right on target. (Dessaix 2008, 64)

These few lines reveal a lot about the way Dessaix sees himself refracted through the “other” he encounters in Algeria. In boldly invoking the prevalent image of the lone white male traveller as sex tourist, he attempts to undermine certain preconceptions held by Yacoub and perhaps even those held by his envisaged reader. Dessaix's interpretation of Saïd certainly falls into line with recent critiques picking up on the multifarious omissions or oversights detected in *Orientalism* (we remember Boone's claim of “implicit heterosexism”, mentioned earlier, for one). Yet, despite alluding to the large-scale recon-sideration Saïd's work has undergone, Dessaix seems to suggest that the tenets of Saïd's theory must seem relevant to the “other”: “in Algeria they must seem right on target”.

Dessaix consistently proves himself well aware of the complexities of foreign travel in the postcolonial age, and has already shown himself to be conscious of the extent to which he frequently needs to distance himself from Gide, this admittedly conflicted pederast who so fervently subscribed to an unbridled exoticism, from his fin-de-siècle musings on travel onwards. This is one of the reasons why Dessaix plays fast and loose with the truth in *Arabesques* – fabricating other characters and voices allows Gide's actions and predilections to be called into question in an ironic way. Yet this ambivalence is further complicated by Dessaix's particularly telling insinuation that Saïd's *Orientalism* aligns with the way the “other” “must” see the world. This suggests that the postcolonial subject is potentially not so much empowered by these postcolonial tenets as overpowered and even largely subdued by them. Dessaix himself is far from blameless in this passage, since he silences the “other” precisely by means of Saïd's *Orientalism*, allowing his counterpart no scope to resist or revisit this framework. Once again, then, a dominant Western masculinity marks the narrative, making the “other” submit to it, even as the “other” attempts to interrogate and undermine the dynamics of these enduring power relations.

Conclusion

In blending an account of his own travels in the Maghreb with a refracted and multi-layered characterisation of Gide, Dessaix calls into question the truth-value of the travel narrative and autobiographical and biographical narratives more generally, all the while

pointing up the escapist potential generated by the transformative capabilities of such texts. Dessaix also shows us that being haunted by prior travel texts – and even the figure of a major travel writer – over the course of one’s journey need not silence or hold back the modern-day successor, no matter how heavily he or she feels indebted to such narratives. It can, however, mean a continued silencing of the “travelee” by means of Orientalist discourse and discourse on Orientalism, regardless of the extent to which a writer might be aware of the political and economic shifts that accompany decolonisation. Moreover, retracing someone’s footsteps naturally means negotiating spaces that we might have already imagined through their accounts. Dessaix therefore never loses sight of the key role of particular spaces in the quest for self-discovery that motivates travel, and remains mindful of the way their dynamics can evolve over time. Above all, however, when refracted through Gide’s own transgressive peregrinations, Dessaix’s ruminations on questions surrounding modern queer identities encourage us to reread his predecessor’s travel narratives not only in terms of the intersection between travel and sexuality, but (post)colonialism and masculinity. Ultimately, the ironic and yet frequently reverent tone of Dessaix’s account of his travels to the Maghreb via France, coupled with the central role he gives to Gide, proves especially rich for the readers of both authors. This is because the combined narrative strategies of Dessaix not only offer us a multi-layered version of the traveller’s Maghreb by transposing the present onto the past in this way, and vice versa, but allow us to rethink some of the persistent socio-political, gender-related and economic issues represented in such accounts.

Notes

1. The title of perhaps one of the most famous French poems about the joys of anticipating travel, which appeared in the 1857 edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Baudelaire 1991: 99–100).
2. On Dessaix’s rationale for travel, and elucidation of the concept of “home”, especially in the light of being an adopted child, see Ouston (2016: 409–410).
3. “Home [...] is taken for granted as a place of comfort, a retreat from the world, a place to be oneself. For many lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and trans identified people, however, home can be uncomfortable and alienating, shaped by the assumptions of heterosexuality that are present in their social relations with parents, siblings, neighbours and others in and around the home” (Brown, Browne, and Lim 2007, 3). Tim Youngs, in exploring reactions to travel by Lucy Bledsoe and Rebecca Brown, also identifies a distinct pattern in travel writing where “gay travellers find themselves more at home when they are abroad” (Youngs 2013: 140).
4. In a recent interview Dessaix describes what is nowadays an increasingly ambivalent relationship with Europe (Ouston 2016: 412–413).
5. For instance, while Gide was in French Equatorial Africa from 1925 to 1926, certain village chiefs came to him for help regarding colonial abuses of power, thus breathing new purpose into his journey and accompanying travel account. In his narrative, Gide began to posit himself as a saviour figure willing to campaign against a number of injustices (Gide 1929).
6. André Gide writes of this duality in a journal entry dated 2 December 1929: “Is it my fault if your God took such great care to have me born between two stars, the fruit of two races, of two provinces, and of two faiths?” (Gide 2000: Vol. 3, 84).
7. We might also think of the possible links between the two titles: the curvilinear representation of fruits, flowers and foliage invoked by the term “arabesque” can certainly be understood to be an allusion to *Fruits of the Earth*.

8. The title of this interview, "The Arabesques of Paradox" no doubt also calls upon the word "arabesque" precisely because it denotes an undulating, curvilinear design that itself revels in its own loose ends.

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