

queer speeches language breaches

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The short story “Speech Sounds” by African-American writer Octavia E. Butler first appeared in *Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine* in 1983. At some point in the near future a pandemic has damaged its survivors’ language capacities, leaving them mute, illiterate or deaf. Living amid the ruins of a North American civilisation, they are subject to aggressive, sometimes murderous impulses only thwarted by what crippled communication still has to offer. In his introduction to this issue of the magazine, Isaac Asimov commented: “To some people who don’t read science fiction there is the feeling . . . that the field is made up simply of a collection of stories in which writers predict the technological wonders of tomorrow . . . On the other hand, there are also people who, through a surfeit of disaster movies, think of science fiction as a litany of terrible destructiveness . . . Actually, science fiction is committed neither to marvels nor to disasters. It deals with *possible situations*.”¹

Like “Speech Sounds”, Tarek Lakhrissi’s practice derives from and feeds into language and its performative dimension: what it does and does not allow. In his poetry he addresses language—its self-evidence and its limitations—via iterative resort to English, Arabic and French. Sometimes accomplished, sometimes faltering, these ventures into translation and transition aim to put pressure on language through subjective, marginal experience constantly re-spectivised and reworked by different voicings. As Lakhrissi’s hesitant, groping identities unravel, they are supplanted by cross-cultural subjectivities that accept the fragility of affect, give expression to bodily multiplicity and form critical points of

view that challenge the normative constraints imposed on those who speak and those who are spoken for. Poet, queer and Arab, Tarek Lakhrissi has his roots in a language at once cultivated, inherited, assimilated, familiar, foreign and vulnerable; and whose repetition, as in a learning process, also exhausts it. His narratives are the bed in which endless amorous frolicking is played out between speech’s power of command and its liberatory re-articulation; in which the invitees are in turn slang, popular culture and theoretical allusion.

In “Caméléon Club”, his first solo exhibition, he adopts science fiction as a tool for putting forward “possible situations”, in this case a queer futurity² that avoids the trap of simply reproducing the present. In ambiances pervading the gallery space this vision summons a potentially utopian future of disidentification³ of under-represented minority bodies: rejection of stereotyped labelling, together with political and artistic exposure of their differences and the circumstances of their existence. In this future beginning to make itself heard from the “linguistic, sexual, biological, geographical [and maybe affective] margins”⁴, the question of one’s own desire and that of the other looms large.

In *Out of the Blue*, the film he made during his residency, Lakhrissi shows young queer/non binary people of color in a cinema in Noisy-le-Sec, playing the parts of those left to fend for themselves after the mass

1. Isaac Asimov, in *Asimov’s Science-Fiction*, 15th December 1983. <https://www.unl.edu/english/docs/englishweek17/engl200-speechsounds.pdf>

2. See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

3. See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

4. Marie Canet, *Juntos en la Sierra. Speech Act, Identité, Globalisation* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2018).

kidnapping by extraterrestrials of society's dominant classes. Stunned but seemingly spared by the abrupt apparition of this alien threat, Mejda, the main character, embarks on a strange initiatory quest. Working with relatives and friends from his video-making milieu, Lakhrissi creates a chosen family whose feminist heritage has it striving to abolish the distinction between art, the personal and the political. Via their scotching of the bodily constraints of their time, he triggers a politicising process that clashes with accepted notions of what the body can and must do when coupled with images and other people.

In Lakhrissi's work this concept of the chosen family, which enables a specifically chosen queer system of relationships, embraces a trans-temporal community, and in the course of performances and installations calls up figures from the past, among them such artists and intellectuals as Audre Lorde, Aaliyah, James Baldwin, Félix González-Torres, Gloria Anzaldúa, Édouard Glissant and José Esteban Muñoz. His contemporaries find their place in interviews with him that give them free rein to enrich their host's work conceptually and poetically. Guests so far include Lalla Kowska-Régnier, Olivier Marboeuf, Léonora Miano, Karim Kattan, Joao Gabriell, Léopold Lambert and, in the "Caméléon Club" exhibition video, Rim Battal.

Originally signifying "odd", the term queer came to be used as an insult towards sexual and gender minorities and then, at the beginning of the 1980s, was co-opted and given a new meaning by the very people it had been maligning. As self-designation and semantic victory, it is now a focal point where political demands, theory and concrete practices of otherness converge, diverge, clash and are overlaid.

The club is another focus for queer practices and bodily transfiguration: a historical space-time for the expression of deviant individualities and illicit desires. Its setting offers

a utopia, a hanging garden of radical and mutant difference, a platform for demands that contaminate the real world. The stage set up in the heart of La Galerie for a program of encounters, workshops, concerts and performances encapsulates this idea of generative metamorphosis. This locus for different life modes and time frames will enable production of a situated corpus of freak knowledge⁵ by calling attention to a space for self-determination and working together. As Lakhrissi sees it, the point is to provide a place "where timely construction of community can institute a new, queer language in the age of globalisation."⁶ This space can also be claimed by anyone—friend, ally, activist—needing a point of assembly. On this stage, the nucleus of "Caméléon Club", you won't have to change your skin so as to conform and melt into the crowd; instead you'll create for yourself a shifting metamorphosis as various, complex and hybrid as the language proposed by Tarek Lakhrissi.

5. See Renate Lorenz, *Art Queer. Une théorie freak* (Paris: Éditions B42, 2018).

6. Marie Canet, *op.cit.*