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The North African Desert in American Travel Writing

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ABSTRACT

This essay deals with the construction of the desert in American travel discourse since the early eighteenth century. While early American accounts of the desert were the result of unfortunate incidents of shipwreck along the southern shores of Morocco beyond Oued Noun, and reflected the experiences of bondage and salvation, later accounts framed the Sahara across North Africa in subtler and more poetic terms. The Sahara has evolved in these numerous narratives as a space of romance, intrigue and spirituality as well as locale of unspeakable violence and horror. Despite the changing circumstances and the advent of European colonialism and modern capitalism, the Sahara remains an untamed wilderness shielded by the vastness of its land and extreme aridity of the climate. Since mid-twentieth century, North African desert has become a tourist attraction and a place of pilgrimage for writers seeking inspiration and creative material.

KEYWORDS

Desert

North Africa

Travel Writing

Captivity Narratives

American Writers

Introduction

The desert has emerged as a significant topic in discussions about space representation, particularly within environmental studies, ecocriticism, and postcolonial theory. Contemporary reflections on the desert draw from multiple disciplines and address various issues, including ecological crises, shifting geopolitical dynamics, international terrorism, mass migration, and global epidemics.

While descriptions of the desert abound in geographical textbooks, encyclopedias, and travel narratives, and its vast arid landscapes frequently feature in magazines, documentaries and adventure films, the study of the desert as a distinct category has gained traction only in recent years. Traditional narratives often portray the desert as a marginal and amorphous space associated with emptiness, scarcity, and death. In contrast to urban areas or fertile plains, European accounts frame the desert as an uncharted territory explored by Western adventurers, who were often motivated by a desire to serve the empire or by a fascination with exotic and uncanny modes of life. Depictions of desert landscapes in literature have received little critical scrutiny and have not developed into a distinct poetics of spatiality in academic studies. Writings about the desert have overlooked its multifaceted nature, approaching it through the narrow lens of specific disciplines, whether in environmental sciences, literature, or history.

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The recognition of the desert as a site for interdisciplinary research began with the rise of ecocriticism, which sought to link literary representation with natural landscapes and environmental issues. Earlier ecocritical works devoted little attention to the desert compared to other topographies like the pastoral, the garden and the jungle. However, at the turn of the millennium, the desert attracted increasing interest from scholars across various fields as a category of study in its own right. David Jasper's *The Sacred Desert* (2004), for instance, provides a genealogy of the desert in Western theology and philosophy, critiquing modern literary and artistic works that engage with it.

In the American context, Catrin Gersdorf's important study, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America* (2009), challenges traditional European myths of America as a land of abundance, and highlights the role played by the desert both as physical landscape and ideological construct in shaping American identity over the past century. Gersdorf structures her study around four eco-spatial metaphors to clarify America's connection to the desert. The first metaphor is the garden, symbolizing cultivation and prosperity, which she contrasts with the wilderness, representing an untamed space that evokes the wild and generative aspects of nature. She also employs the metaphor of the Orient, both in aesthetic and ethical terms, highlighting elements of exoticism and otherness frequently associated with the Arabian desert. Lastly, the desert is analyzed through the lens of heterotopia, a socio-cultural model introduced by Foucault that describes spaces that differ from or oppose ordinary ones, functioning as sites of resistance and alternative social orders (Gersdorf).

The exploration of the desert as a symbol and space gained further momentum with the publication of Gary Nabhan's edited volume of essays, *The Nature of Desert Nature* (2020). Nabhan argues that understanding deserts requires imaginative engagement that challenges preconceived notions and stereotypes. He advocates for a shift away from dualistic thinking—such as barren versus vibrant—to recognize the paradoxes inherent in these landscapes (Nabhan). His edited volume of essays brings together the works of artists, scientists, and cultural historians on the deserts. Rather than being seen as empty spaces, deserts in this study are depicted as dynamic ecosystems full of potential. As global climate change increases the prevalence of arid landscapes, Nabhan notes, there is an urgent need to understand their resilience and complexity. Nabhan's work invites readers to rethink their understanding of deserts, appreciating not only the enchanting qualities that they evoke in sensory and imaginative terms, but also recognizing their multidimensional environments shaped by both physical conditions and cultural discourses.

Another important contribution to the study of the desert is Aidan Tynan's *The Desert in Modern Literature and Philosophy* (2020). Adopting a geophilosophical approach, it offers a profound exploration of the desert as a multifaceted concept, drawing heavily on philosophical texts, particularly the work of Nietzsche. Tynan presents the desert as a space for thought and self-overcoming within a metaphysical framework. By blurring the lines between 'real' and metaphorical deserts, Tynan challenges conventional notions of place and belonging, positioning them as rhetorical constructions that reflect contemporary ecological crises. The emergence of the desert as an aesthetic category, he argues, aligns with modernity, moving beyond Romantic notions of the sublime to explore the abstract nature of space (Tynan).

This article draws on these debates to explore the theme of the desert in American travel writings set in North Africa. It aims at highlighting the desert's genealogical discursivity as an alien and hostile territory and an arena for American subjects to confront their inner selves. As I elaborate in the following pages, American perceptions of the desert are shaped by a logic of mutual violence, evolving alongside concepts of American power and dominance. This

perspective reveals a dual effort: to penetrate and conquer the vast, hostile landscape while simultaneously confronting the risks of destruction and enchantment. Although these desert narratives are rooted in solitary experiences tied to specific temporal and spatial contexts, they also exhibit a distinct poetic and philosophical quality.

The Desert and the Specter of Captivity and Death

The oldest and perhaps most enduring images of the North African desert as a place of desolation, loss, and servitude in American literature date back to the early years of the republic. Captain James Riley's *An Authentic Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig Commerce* (1815) depicts horrific scenes of US seamen shipwrecked on the southern shores of Morocco and their captivity by desert Bedouins. The journey to freedom is fraught with indignities and disappointments. Stripped of their clothes and forced to walk long distances under the scorching sun, the captives face the full force of the desert, and soon, under the weight of poor nutrition, heat, and physical exhaustion, their bodies and spirits wither. Their salvation comes only when the walls of Essaouira come into view. Facing the Atlantic, Essaouira was often hailed as a civilized outpost on the fringe of the vast wilderness. The presence of European merchants in the city was a reliable sign of the end of their travails. In the case of Riley and a few of his crewmembers, deliverance came at the hands of a young British trader, Mr. William Willshire, whose house welcomed numerous captives he ransomed in the years that followed.[1] The shipwreck of European and American vessels was common, and the enslavement of sailors by Bedouin tribes, for all its horrors, provided them with a means of survival against the harshness of nature (Riley).

For the first half of the nineteenth century, *An Authentic Narrative* was a bestseller in America. In 1828, Riley published a revised edition that became the standard version, reprinted "every two or three years between 1829 and 1852" (Ratcliffe 197). The public's interest in the captivity of US sailors in North Africa was linked to the expansion of American trade and shipping in the Mediterranean. While the American consular presence established in the main port cities of Barbary after independence aimed to serve US diplomatic and commercial interests, relations with Barbary polities were often difficult. Since the 1780s, American merchant ships had been attacked by North African corsairs, resulting in hundreds of US marines being held for ransom in Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. Peace treaties were short-lived, and war was often inevitable. By 1816, American fleets had several encounters with Algerian and Tripolitan corsairs. The most dramatic naval conflict occurred against Tripoli from 1801 to 1805, which had a sobering effect on the US government and led to an increase in US naval power in the Mediterranean.

These political developments did not go unnoticed by the public. As several historians have noted, American newspapers provided extensive coverage of the events and publicized charitable efforts to secure the release of the captives.[2] Several personal accounts and journals of redeemed captives were published, giving rise to a new genre later known as the Barbary captivity narrative.[3] Contemporary literary writers and dramatists, emphasizing the superiority of American laws and the patriotic nature of American citizens abroad, also depicted scenes of captivity and servitude in their works.[4]

Riley's narrative takes place in a part of Barbary that was little known to early Americans. While Moroccan ports welcomed American trading vessels and friendly relations with the Sharifian Empire were established by the treaty negotiated by Thomas Barclay in June 1786, the southern shores of Morocco posed significant navigation hazards (P.H. Roberts and R.S. Roberts). Landing on the arid coast often led to captivity. A clause in the treaty stipulated that

American citizens captured by a subject of his majesty were to be "immediately set at liberty" ("Treaty"). When Riley and his shipmates were captured by Bedouin tribes, their only hope for release lay in reaching the port of Essaouira, where the Sultan's representative was obligated to act according to the treaty. The journey to Essaouira often incurred significant expenses for the captives, as they were forced to make generous promises to their captors in exchange for freedom.

The shipwreck of the brig *Commerce* is also depicted in another narrative by Archibald Robbins, a shipmate of Riley's whose captivity lasted much longer and involved even greater toil and deprivation. In the preface of his journal, Robbins states that [5]his aim in publishing his account was partly to "obtain, if possible, a small remuneration for the unprecedented privations and sufferings of which I have been the unfortunate subject" (iii). Like Riley's, the financial success of the journal was assured by numerous reprints in the following decades. It is difficult to explain the source of the avid interest of nineteenth-century American readers in these captivity tales. The vast desert territory south of Oued Noun was seen as *terra incognita*, inhabited by people driven by poverty and a nomadic lifestyle, and above all, by the cruelty of the elements that led them to act brutally against Christian sailors who happened to land on their shores. This presents an interesting contrast to earlier captivity narratives set in Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. The accounts of James Cathcart (1788), John Foss (1798), Jonathan Cowdery (1803), and William Ray (1803), for instance, provide firsthand sketches of Muslim urban landscapes and civil communities. The cultural landscape they portrayed was defined and had some degree of fixity, even if ultimately it seems at odds with early America's Puritan culture and secular institutions. In contrast, accounts set in the desert had a nebulous frame of reference; their authors relied heavily on haphazard itineraries and self-pitying narratives to construct a new *topos* for their stories. The novelty of this uncharted writing lies in the significant role the desert plays as a space of erasure and disintegration, as well as resistance and rebirth.

Soon after the publication of Riley's account, Judah Paddock's *A Narrative of the Shipwreck of the Oswego* was published. Although the incidents it relates date back to the early 1800s, the tale portrays a similar course of events and introduces an equally bleak landscape. When the stranded captain surveyed the surrounding terrain, he was overwhelmed with anxiety:

> What could I see? A barren sand, without either tree or shrub, or the least appearance of vegetation; dreary in every respect; and at a distance back, a long range of mountains extending east and west. Turning my view towards the ocean, and beholding the ship lying in the surf with her sails aloft, while thirteen of my shipmates were standing together before my eyes, the sight was too distressing for me to bear; I laid myself down on the sand, and gave vent to my grief by a flow of tears. (Paddock 19-20)

Judging by the number of subsequent editions, Paddock's narrative did not achieve the same popularity as Riley's or Robbins's accounts. The tale contains fewer dramatic incidents, and the sailors were only briefly subjected to the strains of bondage and famine. Six weeks after their captivity, the sailors reached Essaouira and were ransomed by the British consul. Nevertheless, a common feature shared with other shipwreck accounts is the depiction of the desert as a space of banishment, devoid of civil life and controlled by unruly natives indulging in various cruelties. In contrast to the homeland, the desert is portrayed as an abyss synonymous with disgrace and misfortune. Its emptiness is overwhelming and dispiriting. The combined effects of hunger, dehydration, prolonged sun exposure, and the lashings from their captors made the physical journey across the desert an ordeal. Yet, despite the meager diet and physical

exhaustion, the trauma of captivity invigorated the captives. The desert awakened their primitive survival instincts and renewed their faith in salvation. The appeal of these captivity tales lies in the American subject's ability to triumph over the harsh environment. Cast away in the remote Sahara, he endures his misfortunes with genuine fortitude and humility. The greater his sufferings, the more empathy his narrative evokes.

The uncanny experience of the desert continues to captivate generations of American readers today. Riley's account was published in a modern edition in 1965 and has recently been part of an ongoing scholarly discussion on America's early encounter with Islam[5] (Evans). In 2004, Dean King produced a fresh rendition of the narratives of Riley and Robbins, drawing on his own journey in the Sahara as he sought to retrace their footsteps on camelback. According to King, Riley's and Robbins's accounts impart valuable lessons for modern audiences about the possibility of coexistence, particularly in the tumultuous post-9/11 era (5).

Although King claims to share with Riley and Robbins a profound appreciation of the desert and has made efforts to convey a faithful narrative of their journey, the overall impression from his book leans more towards romance than a straightforward record of captivity's afflictions. The reimagining of the Sahara in modern literary narratives presents an interesting point of discussion regarding the aesthetics of representation and the evolution of travel discourse as it expands its scope and terminology into other disciplines. The next section of this article will examine how the Sahara is constructed in contemporary travel narratives and the discursive layers of modern American writing about the region.

The narratives of Riley, Robbins, and Paddock, along with those of their compatriots who faced similar challenges in Barbary, captured the attention of antebellum American readers because they offered raw personal testimonies of the horrors of slavery and the dangers of navigating the African coast. Their authors noted that, as seamen, they lacked the literary skill of established writers, but their accounts remained truthful and accurately reflected their lived experiences. In recovering the narratives of Riley and Robbins, Dean King has perhaps unwittingly altered their original meanings and reframed them in a way that resonates with the ethos of the new millennium.

The Desert as a Space of Enchantment

The reintegration of the desert into modern geographical discourse was closely linked to the European colonial process. By the early twentieth century, the Sahara had been incorporated into French and Spanish colonial empires. Its economy and social dynamics were profoundly disrupted by this change (Brower). With increased European penetration, the Sahara became connected to the global economy through military outposts, factories, villages, and monasteries, as well as through networks of communication and logistics (Porch). Military and scientific expeditions to the desert provided significant empirical data on its topographical and ethnographic aspects. The accounts of European explorers, missionaries, writers, and soldiers brought the Sahara closer to Western readers, expanding the realm of imagination in ways that, as Edward Said discusses in *Orientalism*, often reflected more European desires and fantasies than the realities of the desert.

The works of French writers and artists such as Eugène Fromentin, Pierre Loti, Charles de Foucauld, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and Isabelle Eberhardt have popularized new myths of the Sahara not as a place of banishment but as one of recreation, freedom, and inspiration. Positive images of desert nomads as custodians of ancient customs and fierce warriors have emerged to supplement the old clichés of the brutal Bedouin. In *Wind, Sand, and the Stars*, for example, Saint-Exupéry offers a vivid account of his plane accident in the Libyan Desert. Stranded for days in the vast expanse of hot sand dunes and tormented by thirst and hallucinations, he and

his companion were on the verge of collapse when an Arab Bedouin appeared. The Bedouin's name and face have been lost to history, but his generous act was immortalized by Saint-Exupéry in this poignant soliloquy:

> You, Bedouin of Libya who saved our lives, though you will dwell for ever in my memory yet I shall never be able to recapture your features. You are Humanity and your face comes into my mind as man incarnate. You, our beloved fellowman, did not know who we might be, and yet you recognized us without fail. And I, in my turn, shall recognize you in the faces of all mankind. You came towards me in an aureole of charity and magnanimity bearing the gift of water. (235)

Saint-Exupéry, a seasoned aviator who had flown the desert skies numerous times, embodies a modern type of European adventurer who, a century earlier, crossed the desert from Tangier to Timbuktu to map its contours and uncover its hidden riches, often at great peril. Unlike the straightforward narratives of US captives filled with the trauma of dislocation, these accounts convey both fascination and familiarity with the desert as a site of European intervention. The Sahara's harsh lands are, nonetheless, integrated into the imperial framework. The vast expanses of arid territory, now fully charted and divided, have transformed into familiar landscapes with recognizable names and boundaries in colonial administrative records. The colonial apparatus, securing both mobility and sustenance for the inhabitants, claims the Sahara as a vassal territory and extension of European power. When they embarked on their journeys, French writers like Loti, Saint-Exupéry, and Eberhardt operated within a pacified domain that owed allegiance to the French flag, even while maintaining its unmitigated foreignness. British and American writers who traveled within French colonial territories in North Africa enjoyed similar privileges, able to navigate remote towns and villages in the Sahara due to their status as Westerners. As Said argues at length in *Orientalism*, being a Westerner places one in a position of authority over the subjects and lands one writes about (5). This authority is grounded in the colonial machinery of control and the intellectual and ideological foundations of Western culture.

Moreover, the fluid mobility of Europeans across the North African Sahara, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, was facilitated by modern transportation and a growing tourism industry. Military campaigns during World War II and oil exploration ended the seclusion of the Sahara, opening its spaces to increasing European influence. One of the incidental outcomes of this steady penetration of the Sahara is the reconfiguration of its landscapes in modern literature into sites of frantic action, spirituality, and romance. Recent publications have highlighted significant themes dominating modern fictional narratives set in the Sahara, triggered by contemporary political events. Stories revolving around the French Foreign Legion, Cold War espionage, abduction, terrorism, and arms trafficking reveal the richness of the Western imagination and the enduring lore of the Sahara.[6]

With the notable exception of Paul Bowles, American writers have had much less contact with the Sahara than their French or British counterparts. Bowles' forays into the North African desert are made possible by pervasive French colonial institutions. His representations of the Sahara, particularly in *The Sheltering Sky* and the short stories "A Distant Episode" and "The Delicate Prey," echo the experiences reflected in André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* half a century earlier. As David Steel notes in his essay, the analogies between the two novels are numerous and highlight Gide's influence on Bowles. Certainly, Bowles's encounter with the Sahara shaped his vision and style in both fiction and travel writing. The themes of violence and death that characterize his earlier stories intertwine with the harshness and cruelty of desert

landscapes. In "The Delicate Prey," the journey of three Filala tribesmen across the desert turns into a gruesome spectacle of murder, rape, and mutilation. Similarly, the unnamed Professor in "A Distant Episode" faces traumatic scenes of humiliation and torture. After his tongue is cut out and he is taken into slavery, his sense of rationality deteriorates, and he quickly becomes a jester. When he finally escapes, his fate seems sealed as a social pariah.[7]

Like André Gide before him, Paul Bowles recognized the sinister power of the Sahara to lure and conquer the Western traveler. In *The Sheltering Sky*, his main characters, Port and Kit, flee their jaded life in New York and embark on a journey to the desert in search of solace and excitement. They soon fall victim to its oppressive hollowness, surrendering body and soul to its fateful force (Mossner).

In the early 1950s, Bowles traveled between Tangier and southern Algeria, writing short travel narratives that celebrated the spiritual and poetic impact of his journeys in the Sahara. In "Baptism of Solitude," for instance, Bowles describes the overwhelming sensation of being surrounded by the vast Sahara Desert:

> Immediately when you arrive in Sahara, for the first or the tenth time, you notice the stillness. An incredible, absolute silence prevails outside the towns; [...] you will either shiver and hurry back inside the walls, or you will go on standing there and let something very peculiar happen to you, something that everyone who lives there has undergone and which the French call 'le baptême de solitude.' It is a unique sensation, and it has nothing to do with loneliness, for loneliness presupposes memory. Here in this wholly mineral landscape lighted by stars like flares, even memory disappears, nothing is left but your own breathing and the sound of your heart beating. A strange, and by no means pleasant, process of reintegration begins inside you, and you have the choice of fighting against it, and insisting on remaining the person you have always been, or letting it take its course. For no one who has stayed in the Sahara for a while is quite the same as when he came. (71)

Jean Baudrillard, traveling across the California desert, makes a similar observation when he links the silence of the desert to its lingering visual effect:

> When you emerge from the desert, your eyes go on trying to create emptiness all around; in every inhabited area, every landscape they see desert beneath, like a watermark. It takes a long time to get back to a normal vision of things and you never succeed completely. Take this substance from my sight! . . . But the desert is more than merely a space from which all substance has been removed. Just as silence is not what remains when all noise has been suppressed. There is no need to close your eyes to hear it. For it is also the silence of time. (69)

The haunting visions of the desert are more than residues of an optical illusion; they inhabit consciousness with a disarming sensory force that no rational mind can explain. The silent gaze of the traveler instinctively replaces verbal communication to achieve communion. The energy that the Sahara imparts touches the traveler's soul before affecting his body. Its silence and emptiness evoke a mix of powerful sensations that extend beyond the immediate experience. An addiction-like urge follows this encounter, unleashing imagination and the desire for poetic expression.

Contemporary Reconfigurations of the Desert

In this final section, I discuss three contemporary American travelogues that capture the visceral experience of being in the Sahara, confronting its untamed force and seeking to unveil its mysteries. These narratives add to the imagery of male Westerners striving to penetrate its depths and observe the desert's secrets.

The first account, *The Tangier Diaries: 1962-1979*, is a journal by John Hopkins, a true heir of Paul Bowles, who experienced moments of enchantment while visiting the Moroccan Sahara during the 1960s and 1970s, when it was still under Spanish occupation. Like Bowles, Hopkins lived in cosmopolitan Tangier for many years, from which he explored the south of the country, crossing the Sahara repeatedly. His sojourns in the south inspired his writing. In one journal entry, he warns his readers: "Don't expect protection in the desert. The beauty is stark and uncompromising. There is no escaping it" (Hopkins, *The Tangier* 89).

Unlike Bowles, whose writings on the Sahara express the existential anxieties of modernity, Hopkins portrays the Sahara as a space for recreation and healing in his journal. The Sahara is a distinct aspect of Moroccan landscapes. Its emptiness and sparse vegetation mark variation from, rather than a rupture with, the topography of northern regions. The Sahara represents a social continuum with the rest of Morocco. In the south, or even in the then Spanish-controlled Sahara, the narrator connects easily with locals and quickly adapts to their way of life. Hopkins also uses the Sahara as a key setting in his novel, *Tangier Buzzless Flies*. The main character, Joseph Cabell, an American geologist hired by the Spanish government to prospect for oil in the Sahara, discovers vast reserves of water and phosphates instead, which could "turn the Sahara into a garden" (Hopkins, *Tangier Buzzless* 59). His vision of transforming the arid land into a new Eden receives no encouragement from the Spanish colonial authorities. By the novel's end, he agrees to continue the oil prospecting, wishing to remain in the desert. His attachment is spiritual, seemingly at odds with the materialist pursuits of the colonial regime. As an ardent dreamer, he believes the Sahara holds the last remnants of an uncorrupted world and must be protected from the encroachments of modern capitalist culture.

Joseph Cabell's fascination with the desert mirrors Hopkins's own connection to the land, which he visited frequently in his youth, although he captured it only through brief notes in his journal. The desert that emerges in the journal is a frontier that captivates the restless mind and infuses a sense of mysticism into the mundane life of urban dwellers. Observing his desert travel companions, Hopkins articulates sharp contrasts between desert and city life in eloquent terms:

> These people live with physical pain all their lives, while we are anguished by the mental. Their pain is assuaged by perfect spiritual assurance, while ours is aggravated by doubt. All their lives they have slept beneath the stars, where the spirit expands to fill the empty space, while our souls suffer from 'cabin fever.' (Hopkins, *The Tangier* 159)

There is a wealth of rich ethnographic detail about the desert in Hopkins's narrative of the Sahara. Set against a colonial backdrop, the Sahara features as a space increasingly marked by the encroachment of modern capitalism and its symbols of power. The stillness of the Sahara is disrupted by the sporadic establishment of colonial offices, barracks, and checkpoints. Military officers in their outlandish khaki attire move in armored vehicles, controlling the desert and policing its vast landscape with almost fanatical zeal. Nevertheless, despite its evident energy, the colonial establishment shows signs of decline. The harsh nature and enduring nomadic culture of ancestral times make the Sahara resilient.

William Langewiesche's account, *Sahara Unveiled*, set in the southern Algerian desert, offers a similar perspective on the desert's resilience. Despite the apparent intrusions of modernity, including roads, trucks, and televisions, "the Sahara remains unsubdued" (Langewiesche 4). Langewiesche approaches the Sahara with the prudence and reverence of a seasoned traveler. His aviation expertise and journalistic instinct, tempered by solid training in anthropology, shape his traveler's sensibility. Writing in the mid-1990s, during a cycle of gruesome violence in Algeria, he portrays the Sahara as a refuge from the chaos engulfing the country. Like Hopkins, Langewiesche is deeply interested in the human experience of the people he encounters along his journey. His itinerary from eastern Algeria to Niger through Tamanrasset seems driven by sympathy and curiosity rather than a fixed agenda. In a restrained, almost self-effacing tone, he shares his encounters with various native Saharans. Writing for a cosmopolitan audience, Langewiesche draws on the experiences of previous European explorers and his own to reveal what he believes is the true face of the Sahara. The result is a narrative rich in tales and anecdotes of Saharan life, reflecting the gradual changes since Algeria gained independence.

The strength of Langewiesche's account lies in the blend of ethnographic observation, historical context, and storytelling that creates a distinct narrative style. Despite the political crisis and the horrific, arbitrary massacres of civilians, Langewiesche's narrative exercises caution in voicing strong political opinions on the Algerian situation, focusing instead on the microcosmic social realities of a limited group of individuals from the Sahara. His portrayal honors their unique backgrounds and living conditions, emphasizing their role as interlocutors rather than passive informants. These interlocutors come from diverse social backgrounds and occupy different positions. As natives of the Sahara, they provide an insider's view of the desert as a homeland and a way of life, contrasting with the foreigner's often impressionistic characterizations.

One of the riveting scenes in the narrative involves the author's encounter with the respected and feared chief judge of Tamanrasset. His judicial power is bolstered by his zeal and moral integrity. His elegance, charm, and intellect make him an oddity in the remote oasis city. Langewiesche sees the judge as a courageous peer who, like a true American, takes great pleasure in his work:

> He had read widely, and had traveled, and had learned to understand himself in a world larger than his surroundings not because of his power but despite it. ... He spoke Arabic, French, English, Spanish, and a bit of Tamacheck. He woke up early every morning, and worked hard all day. He did not go home at midday, and did not take naps, and rarely relaxed. We became friends, and spent late nights talking about the larger world. (194)

His identification with the judge and their affectionate familiarity emboldened him to ask why he did not seek a better opportunity elsewhere. The judge's answer came in a circuitous way. He drove him up to see an old acquaintance, a veteran Bedouin who, through hard work, transformed the parched desert land into a vegetable farm. After a long life of challenges and losses, he felt his destiny was forever tied to his farm. Langewiesche concludes that for the judge, "the desert offered him frustration, but richness as well. He meant to admonish me. [He] and I were equals, men of the same age born into different circumstances, and he did not want my sympathy" (199).

Jeffrey Tayler's recent account, *Valley of the Casbahs*, also emphasizes the social and cultural background of the Sahara. The author, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco, experienced part of the desert in the late 1990s and became acquainted with Moroccan culture,

particularly in Marrakech. As he states in his preface, Tayler undertook the journey from Zagora across the Draa Valley to the Atlantic shores near Tan Tan because he was inspired by a dream to cross the vast southern Moroccan desert on camelback. Thesiger's *Arabian Sands* (1959) and Philip Hitti's renowned *The Arabs: A Short History* (1943) shaped his understanding of Arabian desert culture and ignited his passion for riding camels, even when vehicles were available and offered a more comfortable and economical means of transportation. Tayler may be viewed as a belated traveler and, to some extent, even a tourist posing as an adventurer. The old tradition of traveling through the Arabian desert, best described in the works of Wilfred Thesiger, T.E. Lawrence, and Richard Burton, belonged to an era of European imperial power. It must be noted that the mere thought of undertaking a similar journey in the new millennium sounds both regressive and sentimental.

Tayler's account follows a clear itinerary and offers close-up portraits of the various places and individuals he encounters on his short journey. Unlike the classic travel narratives he admires, set in a quasi-mythical Orient, his account introduces mundane scenes of rural and desert life devoid of drama and inspiration. A tone of frustration seeps into the narrative as the much-anticipated journey becomes a tedious tour marred by constant bickering with the guides. Instead of the colorful sensations one associates with distant, unexplored lands, the traveler finds only poor villages and douars lacking modern infrastructure, alongside stories of Moroccan households struggling to make a living. Nevertheless, the Sahara Tayler describes is not entirely cut off from the outside world. As he navigates the remote villages and Casbahs of the Draa Valley, he observes how echoes of world politics reach the edges of the Sahara through news networks like Al Jazeera. The gap between the temporal conditions of the native and the traveler, which earlier Western travel writers such as Thesiger, Saint-Exupéry, and Paul Bowles celebrated in their narratives, has now dissolved into a disconcerting contemporaneity.[8] In the post-9/11 context, Tayler's interlocutors, like the chief judge of Tamanrasset in Langewiesche's account, appear knowledgeable about current global affairs and can claim the present as much as the author does through the empowering medium of a TV set.

Yet even as they claim a certain covalence with the author, native interlocutors remain locked in their disadvantaged spatiality. Throughout the narrative, Tayler conveys the discontent visible in the faces of unemployed youths he encounters. Victims of a political establishment that neglects the periphery, they are objectified as subjects confined to their subaltern status, denied economic and political justice. In expressing his political sentiment, Tayler notably differs from both Hopkins and Langewiesche, whose accounts of the desert emphasize its unity, particularity, and resourcefulness. While they remain passive spectators before the Sahara, awed by its magical power and vastness, Tayler appeals to a rightist discourse to address the grievances presumably faced by Bedouin dwellers. Another prominent feature of *Valley of the Casbahs* is the centrality of the authorial voice. The subjective pronoun permeates the narrative as it meticulously details the day-to-day progress of the journey. The sense of immediacy and vivid description of the physical landscape contrast sharply with the poetic tone and concise expressions found in Hopkins's journal and even more so with Langewiesche's understated and euphemistic narration.

In these three accounts, therefore, one notes a different mode of representation and a different way of positioning and reflecting on the desert. The encounter in each of these narratives is a symbiosis of the making of the self and the physical experience of being in the desert. Despite their divergent approaches and constructions of the desert, these narratives derive their meaning and relevance from the premise that the desert still holds a vast potential for exploring not only ancient and simple modes of existence but also confronting the myths and uncertainties of identity in modern times.

Notes

1. William Willshire (sometimes spelled Wiltshire) resided in Mogador with his family from 1814 to 1844 and served his country in a diplomatic capacity; see Eamonn Gearon, *The Sahara: A Cultural History*. Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 214-215.
2. Lawrence A. Peskin, *Captives and Countrymen: Barbary Slavery and the American Public, 1785–1816*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009; David Dzurec, "A Speedy Release to Our Suffering Captive Brethren in Algiers: Captives, Debate, and Public Opinion in the Early American Republic." *The Historian* 71: 4 (2009): 735–756.
3. See Paul M. Baepler, *White Slaves, African Masters: An Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives*. University of Chicago Press, 1999; Robert J. Allison, editor, *Narratives of Barbary Captivity: Recollections of James Leander Cathcart, Jonathan Cowdery, and William Ray*. The Lakeside Press/R.R. Donnelley & Sons, 2007.
4. See Susanna H. Rowson, *Slaves in Algiers, or, a Struggle for Freedom*. Edited by Jennifer Margulis and Karen Poremski. Copley Publishing Group, 2000; James Ellison, *The American Captive: or, Siege of Tripoli*. Boston: Publisher, 1812; David Everett, "Slaves in Barbary." *The Columbian Orator*. Edited by Caleb Bingham, Boston: Publisher, 1817, pp. 102–118; Sarah Pogson, "The Young Carolinians; or, Americans in Algiers." *Essays, Religious, Moral, Dramatic & Poetical: Addressed to Youth, and Published for a Benevolent Purpose*. Charleston, SC: Archibald E. Miller, 1818, pp. 58–111.
5. See Robert Allison, *Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815*. University of Chicago Press, 2014; see also Anouar Majid. *Freedom and Orthodoxy: Islam and Difference in the Post-Andalusian Age*. Stanford University Press, 2004.
6. See Eamonn Gearon, *The Sahara: A Cultural History*. Oxford University Press, 2011; see also David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art and Culture*. Blackwell, 2006.
7. Jeffrey Meyers has noted strong similarities between "A Distant Episode" and a story written by Albert Camus a decade earlier titled "The Renegade." See, Jeffery Meyers, "Paul Bowles and Albert Camus: Theme and Variation." *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 42: 2 (2012).
8. Johannes Fabian has expounded the notion of "denial of coevalness" in anthropological discourse and has critiqued the concept of discrepant temporalities; see *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object, With a New Postscript by the Author*. Columbia University Press, 2014.

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