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From Voice to Text: Untranslated Orality in Paul Bowles's Moroccan Collaborations

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how Paul Bowles's translations of Ahmed Yacoubi's "The Night Before Thinking" (1979), Larbi Layachi's *A Life Full of Holes* (1964), and Mohammed Mrabet's *The Boy Who Set the Fire* (1974) retain untranslated elements of Moroccan oral storytelling. In each of these texts, orality is not merely evoked but structurally embedded. The translations retain paratactic syntax, rhythmic patterns, formulaic expressions, and mnemonic devices. Notably, the absence of quotation marks collapses distinctions between narration and dialogue, sustaining the fluidity of live storytelling within the written form. Bowles resists standardized literary conventions, allowing oral features to remain deliberately intact. Drawing on the concept of untranslatability from postcolonial translation theory, this article argues that this deliberate choice reflects a stylistic and cultural commitment to maintaining orality. In resisting domestication, the texts retain the spontaneity, tone, and narrative presence of the original performances, transforming the act of reading into an encounter with living, spoken tradition.[1]

KEYWORDS

Paul Bowles

Moroccan Storytelling

Orality

Postcolonial Translation

Untranslatability

Introduction

Paul Bowles is often remembered as a quintessential American expatriate whose literary and artistic legacy is closely tied to the cultural landscapes of North Africa. While best known for his fiction, often set against the backdrop of Morocco, Bowles's creative life extended well beyond the realm of the novel. A trained composer, poet, and travel writer, he also played a significant role in preserving and translating Moroccan oral traditions. From the 1950s and through the late twentieth century, Bowles collaborated with local storytellers, such as Ahmed Yacoubi, Larbi Layachi, and Mohammed Mrabet, recording their narratives in Darija (Moroccan Arabic) and rendering them into English. These translations form a unique and often contested archive, situated at the intersection of cross-cultural exchange, literary mediation, and questions of authorship and voice.

Although Bowles's translations of Moroccan oral tales have attracted scholarly interest, particularly in relation to questions of cross-cultural collaboration, authorship, and exoticism, their stylistic and structural imprint of orality has rarely been explored in depth. The significance of such features has been examined only occasionally as central to the literary and cultural impact of the translated works. Bowles did not adapt Moroccan oral stories into

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conventional English prose, opting instead for preserving their spoken quality. The selected narratives, namely Yacoubi's "The Night Before Thinking," Layachi's *A Life Full of Holes*, and Mrabet's *The Boy Who Set the Fire*, rely on simple syntax, rhythmic and repetitive phrasing, formulaic expressions, and the absence of typographic conventions such as quotation marks. These stylistic choices point to a deliberate resistance to domestication, even when conventional literary forms were within reach. The following analysis brings those formal elements to the fore, arguing that the persistence of oral form in Bowles's translations is essential to how the texts perform memory, authorship, and narrative voice across linguistic and cultural borders. Drawing on the theory of untranslatability in postcolonial translation studies, this article argues that Bowles's translations enact a strategy of cultural retention. Preserving the cadence and structure of spoken storytelling allows the English versions to sustain the performative immediacy of Moroccan oral tradition and reconfigure the relationship between orality and writing. From this perspective, the translated texts function as textual spaces in which narrative agency, memory, and voice remain actively engaged.

Reframing Orality: Untranslatability and the Problem of Oral-to-Written Translation

The translation project initiated by Bowles in collaboration with Moroccan storytellers has sparked considerable debate in postcolonial and translation studies. While the efforts brought oral narratives into global literary circulation, critical responses remain divided. Some scholars critique Bowles for cultural appropriation and editorial control. Others recognize the value of his work in amplifying underrepresented voices. A third group positions the translations in a more ambivalent space that navigates the tensions between preservation and distortion.

Among the critics, Abdelkader Sabil contends that Bowles exploited the storytellers' illiteracy and financial vulnerability, rendering them "easy to manipulate" and unable to assert editorial agency (94). Tahar Ben Jelloun similarly condemns the project as *littérature bâtarde* ("bastard literature"), accusing Bowles of turning Moroccan informants into props for a Western gaze.[2] In contrast, Karim Bejjit argues that Bowles "cannot be charged with complicity with colonialism," despite the fact that his literary projects began prior to Moroccan independence (117). Bejjit situates this claim within what he describes as an "interstitial space" defined by Bowles's "distanced and passive nationalistic sentiment," thereby positioning his works outside both colonial and anticolonial nationalist frameworks (116). Hafida Mourad, reflecting on her earlier skepticism, reconsiders the translations as a form of "activist" mediation that challenges both Moroccan state orthodoxy and postwar American narratives (165). Bridging polarized views, scholars like Allen Hibbard and Bouchra Benlemlih offer more layered assessments. Hibbard calls the collaboration "mutual exploitation," noting that while Bowles expanded his influence, the storytellers gained material benefit and exposure ("Paul Bowles" 29). Benlemlih places the texts in a liminal postcolonial zone where the line between cultural fidelity and alteration remains blurred (23).

Undoubtedly, these debates have enriched our understanding of power and authorship in the translations. Yet, two dimensions still warrant closer attention. First, the role of untranslatability remains underexplored, particularly in its relevance to oral storytelling. Second, few analyses engage with the archival materials, including audio recordings, personal letters, and editorial notes, that provide insight into how these stories were shaped across languages and media. The present article discusses both aspects and argues that Bowles's translations of Yacoubi, Layachi, and Mrabet deliberately preserve oral aesthetics. Far from signaling breakdown or loss, untranslatability functions as a stylistic and cultural choice that maintains the rhythm,

improvisation, and dialogue of Moroccan storytelling. In resisting Western literary expectations, these texts prioritize cultural presence over seamless integration.

Postcolonial translation studies emerged through a series of theoretical shifts that redefined translation from a purely linguistic undertaking into a culturally and politically charged practice. With the expansion of the field of postcolonial studies, scholars turned their attention to the ways in which asymmetrical power relations between colonizer and colonized governed the dynamics of translation (Lefevere 1992; Niranjana 1992; Spivak 1992; Bhabha 1994; Simon 1996; Bassnett & Trivedi 1999; Tymoczko 1999; Bandia 2017; Harding & Cortés 2018; Blah 2024). In this context, translation is viewed less as a neutral tool for cross-cultural understanding and more as a site where ideology, authority, and cultural values are negotiated. Postcolonial translation studies work to counteract the distortions that often emerge when non-European texts are translated into European languages. Fluency and readability are no longer default goals. Instead, retaining linguistic dissonance becomes a way to center cultural specificity and preserve the politics embedded in form. The concept of untranslatability offers a compelling framework in this regard, especially when working with oral traditions that risk being overshadowed or lost in the shift to written form.

Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Laila Lalami, and Natalie Diaz have long interrupted the linguistic continuity of colonial languages by retaining words from their native tongues. These inclusions, often italicized or accompanied by minimal explanation, do not simply reflect multilingualism. They enact a refusal to flatten cultural nuance into easy equivalence and ask the reader to dwell in unfamiliarity. Accordingly, translation becomes an invitation to pause, feel, and reckon with meaning that resists absorption. It is within this sensibility that the concept of untranslatability takes theoretical shape. In *Against World Literature*, Emily Apter describes the untranslatable as a sign of "incommensurability" (9): "a term that is left untranslated as it is transferred from language to language" (31). Apter's thinking develops out of Barbara Cassin's *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophies: Dictionnaire des Intraduisibles* (2004), which she co-translated into English in 2014 under the title *Dictionary of the Untranslatable*. In the introduction, Cassin specifies that the untranslatable ("l'intraduisible") does not denote an absolute absence of meaning or a symptom of failure; it is a persistent refusal of cross-linguistic resolution (xvii). It insists on carrying the weight of its origin. Untranslatability, accordingly, upholds the ethics of difference in both reading and representation.

The problem of oral-to-written translation poses a fundamental challenge to dominant literary norms, which often prioritize coherence, linearity, and syntactic polish over the looser structures of oral performance. Untranslatability, therefore, offers a critical framework that functions as an intentional strategy to retain features such as formulaic repetition, parataxis, parallel syntactic structures, and mnemonic cues. These choices run counter to standardized conventions that tend to subordinate clauses, eliminate redundancy, and impose punctuation norms such as quotation marks to frame dialogue.[3] Martin Lalpêkhlua Blah suggests that such formal "corrections" often enact a subtle violence, effacing the very orality they seek to represent. For him, untranslatability emerges as a decolonial tool, one that preserves the expressive contours of oral texts and affirms their epistemological value. "Untranslatability is able to uncover that which historians are incapable of," he writes, "a history outside the textual such as oral narratives. Oral literature then functions as alternative forms of knowledge and those that write orality become preservers of culture" (2). The translator accordingly adopts the role of a cultural listener, attuned to the storyteller's voice and agency.

In addition to preserving oral texture, untranslatability is a foreignizing device that draws attention to unfamiliar cultural and linguistic elements within the translated text.[4] When applied to the translation of Moroccan storytelling, this approach cultivates an atmosphere of estrangement that allows the distinct rhythms and sensibilities of the original to remain

perceptible. This is where Antoine Berman's critique of "deforming tendencies" becomes particularly salient. Berman warns against practices that erase idiomatic specificity, standardize speech, or smooth narrative complexity (286). His call to maintain formal integrity resonates with the aims of Bowles's project, where fluency gives way to fidelity to cadence, mood, and cultural ethos.

Attuned to these concerns, this study positions untranslatability as both method and stance. The translated works under consideration do not offer frictionless reading. Nor do they resolve the contradictions of oral-to-written transmission. What they offer instead is a layered experience, one that foregrounds cultural texture and narrative tension without sacrificing coherence. In maintaining the pulse and improvisation of Moroccan oral storytelling, Bowles's translations become more than literary artifacts. They offer a space where memory, voice, and form remain alive in the act of transmission.

Precarity and Preservation: Oral Storytelling in the Tangier Years

Any discussion of Bowles's translation work must return, albeit briefly, to the distinct geopolitical and cultural fabric of Tangier in the mid-twentieth century. By the time Bowles settled there in 1947, the city had long been a threshold space forged through overlapping colonial legacies, multilingual encounters, and a deliberately cultivated internationalism. The status of Tangier as an International Zone, jointly governed by European powers from 1923 until Moroccan independence in 1956, had fostered a sense of legal and cultural ambiguity that endured well beyond the official end of the protectorates.[5] What mattered most for writers and artists drawn to the city—Bowles among them—was the peculiar openness Tangier afforded: a place where the porousness of boundaries, linguistic and otherwise, made experimentation seem inevitable.

In this climate of linguistic multiplicity and social experimentation, Bowles found the conditions for a kind of translation practice that emphasized alternative narrative forms. Tangier, with its tolerance for contradiction and its distance from Western cultural institutions, enabled a mode of engagement that was as much personal as political. It is no coincidence that members of the Beat Generation, like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs, gravitated to this setting in the 1950s. Drawn by the city's permissiveness and its refusal to conform to American postwar propriety, these writers pursued styles that privileged spontaneity, fragmentation, and anti-narrative impulses. Bowles did not necessarily identify with the Beats aesthetically; however, the same conditions that attracted them—a commitment to forms of life and language ungoverned by metropolitan norms—cultivated his interest in Moroccan storytelling. The oral texts he helped bring into English were performances, acts of memory, and modes of survival.

Bowles's relationships with Yacoubi, Layachi (writing as Driss Ben Hamed Charhadi), and Mrabet were rooted in shared routines and informal encounters, nurtured by the social intimacy of Tangier. Their collaborations unfolded gradually, often beginning in casual conversation, then moving through stages of dictation and transcription before becoming English-language publications aimed at Western audiences. The translation process varied significantly across each project, reflecting the distinct narrative patterns and oral techniques that each storyteller brought. Bowles adapted his role accordingly: listener, transcriber, editor, or translator. This flexible method, driven more by relationship than by procedure, shaped the resulting texts, which carry the imprint of the voices that formed them and the contexts in which they were spoken. Bowles faced a central dilemma: how to preserve the stylistic integrity of the oral source without distorting its cultural resonance. His approach was to allow orality to remain present in the translated texts through what might appear to be departures from standard literary

form. Short sentences, minimal punctuation, repetition of phrases, and the conspicuous absence of quotation marks in dialogue all helped retain the pace and structure of the original storytelling.

As oral storytelling in Morocco declined in the mid-twentieth century, Bowles became increasingly aware of the cultural transformations threatening its survival. The spread of television and state-run radio, particularly the reach of *Radiodiffusion-Télévision Marocaine*, began to displace traditional storytelling venues. In an interview with Jeffrey Bailey, Bowles reflects: "Now practically every cafe has a television. The seats are arranged differently and no one tells any stories. They can't because the television is going" ("The Art of Fiction" 97). The communal, participatory mode of storytelling gave way to a more passive spectatorship. For Bowles, this marked a critical loss. The expressive immediacy of Moroccan oral culture risked being extinguished unless preserved through intervention. His decision to record and translate stories with Mrabet, Layachi, and Yacoubi was informed by this recognition, as well as by personal changes in his life. In 1957, his wife Jane suffered a debilitating stroke that left her with aphasia and visual impairment. The burden of her care and the disruption it brought to his writing created a distance from fiction. During this period, he turned to autobiography and translation as a space of refuge, a way to remain connected to narrative and language amid upheaval.

Unlike members of the Beat Generation, storytellers like Mrabet, Layachi, and Yacoubi found Tangier unstable, marked by economic hardship and social exclusion. Their relationship to the city was conditioned less by the freedom often celebrated in Beat literature and more by the daily realities of marginalization. While American expatriates saw Tangier as a refuge from conformity and a space for artistic reinvention, Moroccan storytellers navigated a landscape of constraint, where basic survival was an ongoing struggle. This dissonance in lived experience surfaces in the titles of their works. Layachi's *A Life Full of Holes* (1964) speaks to a reality fractured by exploitation and familial troubles, a reality the author describes as "a life full of nothing but waiting" (Charhadi 6). Mrabet's *The Boy Who Set the Fire* (1974) signals volatility and unrest, echoing a disrupted youth. In an interview with the author, he reflected: "My life in Tangier witnessed financial struggle and social hardships." [6] Yacoubi, too, conveyed disillusionment. In an unpublished 1967 poem, he writes, "they can poison you with their own food, they will try to kill you if you are still alive."[7] The metaphor of poisoned food encapsulates a profound sense of betrayal. To these storytellers, Tangier was not a sanctuary, but a precarious zone where cultural interaction coexisted with systemic vulnerability. Their narratives emerge from lived conditions of hardship and endurance.

Voices on the Page: Translating Moroccan Orality in the Works of Yacoubi, Layachi, and Mrabet

"The Night Before Thinking"

As recording technologies became increasingly accessible in mid-twentieth-century Morocco, Bowles began taping Yacoubi's tales. He later transcribed and translated them, aiming to preserve their irreproducible spontaneity. He recalls: "These complicated improvisations could not be repeated at will, nor on one hearing could they be remembered. One day as Yacoubi began to speak I seized a notebook and rapidly scribbled the English translation" ("Notes on the Work of the Translator" 8). Bowles's translation of Yacoubi's "The Night Before Thinking" captures the narration's fluid dynamic and the improvisational techniques that encourage and respond to listener engagement. The movement between live performance, tape recording, and

written transcription became essential to maintaining access to the story's original narrative flow and structure.

"The Night" tells the story of Raqassa, a woman who seeks revenge for her brother's murder by a man named Hakim. Concealing her true intentions, she cleverly persuades Hakim to marry her. Once married, she begins to torment him, only to learn that Hakim had killed her brother to protect her from a murder plot. As their conflict unfolds, they reach a moment of reconciliation and plan to build a family. However, that peace proves fragile. The couple soon relapses into conflict. The narrative concludes with the deaths of both Raqassa and Hakim, while their children follow separate, contrasting paths.

Yacoubi's "The Night" offers one of the clearest examples where orality shapes the narrative structure and continues to inform its translated form. It is a fantasy tale grounded in improvisation. The story dissolves the boundary between narration and dialogue; a fluidity Bowles preserves by omitting quotation marks that would traditionally distinguish direct speech. The result is a blended narrative voice where character, speaker, and narrator merge. This quality is particularly evident in a pivotal moment when Raqassa confronts her husband Hakim, revealing her true identity and the long-buried truth of her brother's murder. The original Darija version, preserved on an audiotape housed in the University of Delaware Special Collections, unfolds as follows:

> الله، الله يا حكيم. انت عا سميتك حكيم، وانا سميتي رقاصة. انت هو اللي قتلت لي خاي د با. قتلتي لي خاي ديال با شحال هادي، هادي ربعطاشر عام باش قتلت لي خاي د با. وانا عييت ندور عليك. ما خليتشي عليك شي مدينة. وانا عييت تندور حتى صبتك فهاد المدينة. الساعة فاش صبتك، انا ما سميتيش رقاصة، انا سميتي عكلا بنت عكلا. بالحق، انا عطيتك الاسم ديال رقاصة باش ما تعرفشي الفاميليا ديالي اشني هي. دابا يا حكيييم، انتين غير حكيم، وما انا تنجمد الما ف الارض. خلطات على حكيم مبلج مع راسو. راسو دايخ بداك الكاس د اللبن. ما تيقشعشي والو. خلطت عليه، ودارت لو غمامة. غمت لو الفم ديالو مع الوجه. . . واحد النوبة وهي دارت. قالت: تيخصني بيضة د النعام.[8]

Bowles's English rendering retains this fluidity:

> Allah, Allah, ya Hakim! So your name is Hakim and mine is Raqassa. It was you who killed my brother. A long time ago you killed him. It's fourteen years since then. And I'm tired of looking for you everywhere. There's no city I haven't looked in to find you. I said my name was Raqassa because I didn't want you to know the name of the family. My name is really Aaklaa bent Aaklaa. Now, Hakim, you're only Hakim, while I can freeze water on the ground. By that time she saw that Hakim was looking very ill from the buttermilk he had drunk. He was not seeing anything. She went up to him and threw a darkness over his face. Then she spread his mouth all over his cheeks . . . Then she stopped. I must have an ostrich egg. (24)

Within the shifts between "he," "she," "I," and "you", speech and narration converge, which creates a narrative disorientation that mirrors the pacing and emotional shifts of oral delivery. The absence of quotation marks merges the reading with the tone of the language in a suspended logic that gives birth to singular storytelling structures. In his analysis of Bowles's translation method, Hibbard observes:

> Each sentence drives the story a step closer to its logical outcome. The storyteller gives his listeners what they need when they need it. We get not a word more than necessary. …This the writer achieves in part by abandoning the use of quotation marks to indicate dialogue, so that speech, description, and the subtle intrusion of the narrator's ironic

> wit merge fluidly, creating the semblance of a seamless, integrated whole. (*Paul Bowles* 102)

Hibbard's insight underscores what "The Night" makes clear: Bowles deliberately kept the fragmented transitions and shifting narrative perspectives intact, allowing the original oral qualities to remain legible in English. Voice, pacing, and mood can be channeled through the translation movement from the spoken word to the written text.

The blurred line between writing and orality becomes particularly manifest in the untranslated farcical scenes of "The Night." One vivid example is the absurd exchange between Hakim and Raqassa about their newborn daughter:

> Ya, Hakim. My belly is heavy. What do you mean? Hakim cried. Have you already got a child in there? Are you going to have another? She said: I don't know. Hakim touched her belly, and at that moment it began to swell and rise. Bismillah er rahman er rahim! [In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful!] he cried. There's something wrong with you! . . . And when she [Raqassa] rose from the bed, a baby girl came out of her. She was very small, and all she could do was cry. This girl that had just come out had nine fingers on one hand, and one on the other. And one foot had ten toes, and the other had no toes at all. When Hakim saw this, he began to laugh. And he said: This is a good marriage! . . . That is what God has written. The boy is different, and the girl is different . . . I'd have to take the children out to sell so I could pay for it. Can't we sell them anyway? asked Raqassa. Ahaha! Yes, we can sell them. (25-26)

What begins as a comical exaggeration gradually reveals its unsettling undertone. The passage's shifting register—between the surreal, the grotesque, and the mundane—reflects the improvisational quality of oral storytelling, where tone is never fixed, and meaning emerges cumulatively. The removal of quotation marks reproduces the oral nature of the original exchange between Hakim and Raqassa. Additionally, the frequent use of "and" at the beginning of sentences creates tempo and momentum, mirroring the Arabic conjunction "و," commonly used in Moroccan speech. And it is within this interplay of humor and hardship, particularly the casual proposal of selling children, that the surreal tone of Moroccan oral storytelling takes shape. Absurdity becomes a device for exposing emotional dissonance and provoking audience engagement. This element destabilizes the reader's expectations and calls into question the genre and emotional register of the story. Bowles himself acknowledges this dynamic, noting that the narrative's impact stems from Yacoubi's "untrammeled imagination" and "the repertory of Moroccan folk humor" ("Notes on the Work of the Translator" 7).

In "The Night," a quasi-staccato cadence emerges from the repeated words and expressions. This feature becomes particularly noticeable as dialogue progresses without conventional markers. When introducing the main characters, the narrator states: "Three men sat side by side. Three. One was called Hakim. One was called Faqir. And one was called Meskine. And the three of them were sitting there. And as they sat there a woman came by, and the woman's name was Raqassa" (23). The original Moroccan Arabic version maintains the same structure: " هادو وتلاتة بيهم كانو جالسين تما وحين تلاتة د الرجال جالسين. تلاتة. واحد اسمو حكيم واحد اسمو فقير و واحد اسمو مسكين. كانو جالسين وهي دوز واحد المرا وهاد المرا اسما رقاصة."[9] These reiterated elements—"three," "one," "and," and "woman," as well as the act of sitting—evoke the refrains often heard in oral storytelling performances. In both versions, repetition establishes rhythm and builds anticipation in a stylistic choice that resonates with traditional Moroccan oral techniques. Bowles asserts: "Nothing has been deleted or added or altered; the English version is a literal translation . . . His [Yacoubi's] title [The Night Before Thinking], Yacoubi says, refers to the night when he told the story, which belonged to a carefree period of his life" ("Forward to The

Night Before Thinking" 18). This fidelity to form and tone supports Bowles's broader objective, namely to preserve the spontaneity and affective immediacy of Moroccan storytelling within a written medium.

A Life Full of Holes

The oral storytelling tradition also shapes Bowles's collaboration with Larbi Layachi in *A Life Full of Holes*, an autobiographical narrative that recounts Layachi's life through a series of vivid recollections. Unlike Yacoubi, Bowles notes, Layachi "allows himself an instant of wry humor as a comment on . . . injustice and the suffering it causes. He is committed to his originally announced purpose: to "tell them outside what it is like to be shut inside" ("Notes on the Work of the Translator" 7). This contrast between "outside" and "inside" suggests a tone of emotional restraint that reflects Layachi's life experience marked by paternal absence, maternal helplessness, poverty, and periods of homelessness. It was between these shifting domestic and public spaces that his storytelling sensibility took root. *A Life Full of Holes* documents this experience, where oral narrative and Bowles's written translation intersect to form a distinctive textual hybrid. First published in 1964, the work follows the character Ahmed through a loosely chronological sequence of seventeen episodes, tracing his growth from childhood into adulthood. After his stepfather's military reassignment, Ahmed moves from Tetouan to Tangier with his family, setting the stage for a series of hardships and encounters. These include grueling jobs, brushes with the law, intercultural exchanges, and romantic entanglements, each narrated with a frankness that retains the oral quality of the original.

Layachi's consistent use of the first-person pronoun marks a defining feature of his narrative, one that makes the storyteller's subjectivity central and draws the reader into his world. The repeated "I" structures the narrative through an intimate lens, which invites the reader to become a participant in Layachi's evolving perspective. This is evident in the opening line of "The Orphan:" "When I was eight years old my mother married a soldier" (Charhadi 9). The statement echoes the oral tradition of beginning with a personal or temporal anchor, a device that whets the audience's curiosity. However, if forging his personal identity helped preserve the oral signature of his tale, it also carried risks. Before the book's publication, Layachi—anticipating backlash for his critique of Moroccan society—adopted the pseudonym Driss ben Hamed Charhadi. His concerns proved valid. The book was censored in Morocco, and Bowles later reflected on the political implications. In a typescript note, Bowles recounts:

> During the summer [of 1964], Gallimard, planning a French edition, sent someone from Paris to gather personal data on the author [Layachi], who, after he had given the interview, began to worry about possible official Moroccan reaction to it. (There was mention in the interview during a corrupt era in a decaying country.) At this point I realized that the invented name of Driss ben Hamed Charhadi had been adopted by him not as a simple nom de plume [pen name], but as a measure of protection.[10]

This act of self-concealment signals the complex relationship between voice and vulnerability in politically fraught contexts. Layachi's pseudonym becomes a survival strategy, and the persistent use of "I" is an assertion of agency, situated within a broader context of censorship and resistance. Had the story been told in the third person, much of its immediacy, intimacy, and urgency would have been diminished.

The omission of quotation marks also reinforces the oral texture of Layachi's voice. In "Malabata," for instance, where Ahmed recounts a jail sentence for kif trading, dialogue evolves in a continuous stream, uninterrupted by punctuation:

> I heard a man singing somewhere in the jail. I said to the boy who had the bed next to me: Who's that? That's El Mernissi Ah! The one who killed all the Jews and Nazarenes? Yes. How long has he been here? It's about seven or eight months since they brought him. He's alone? Yes. They've put him in by himself. Doesn't anybody talk to him? All of us talk to him. But he won't take cigarettes or anything from the guards. Why not? I don't know, he said. He hates everybody except the prisoners. (53-55)

The absence of typographic separation between speaker and listener mimics the natural flow of oral conversation. Without punctuation, the scene is animated via contractions, repetition, and ellipses, which convey immediacy and proximity to spoken performance. Bowles's decision to keep this structure is a conscious translational gesture that reserves the informality of Layachi's voice. One reviewer observes, "Bowles has kept the language simple, even elemental. As a result, the tale is evocative of another world and another people without picturesque speech or self-conscious dialect, which would only get in the way."[11] In retaining the patterns of Layachi's voice, the translation maintains the permeability between speech and memory, pulling the reader into the story's world without the visual cues of standard prose.

Although descriptive detail does not dominate *A Life Full of Holes*, it surfaces at key moments as a feature rooted in oral tradition and rendered into prose with deliberate care. In the seventh story, "At Mustapha's Café," Ahmed recounts taking shelter at a friend's café after being expelled from home. While working as a prickly pear vendor, he describes the demands of the job with a physical immediacy that reflects oral storytelling's sensory appeal:

> I went out and got the crate and carried it with me to the place near the Spanish church where they sold the fruit. I waited until the buses came in from the country. On top of each bus there were many baskets of hindiyats [prickly pears]. [...] On my way the cactus needles kept falling down the back of my neck, but I did not know it until I got to the café. Then I found a lot of them sticking into the skin of my back. [...] That way some of the needles washed off, and the hindiyats would be cooler for the people who were going to buy them. (70)

The precision of movement in this passage evokes a tactile realism grounded in everyday labor. The level of detail does more than paint a picture; it reflects the storyteller's attentiveness to sequence and the physical world, both of which are vital to oral performance. Bowles's translation honors this attentiveness without embellishing it. The language remains stripped-down and practical, echoing the pulse of the spoken account.

Bowles comments on this quality in his reflections on the recording process, recounting a moment when Layachi asked to revise the story mid-playback:

> He [Layachi] asked me to play the tape back to him from the beginning. Halfway through, he called out: "Please stop the machine! Here I want to tell something more, if it's all right." What he inserted was not a supplementary incident; it was a sequence which would give the piece a sense of the passage of time. (*A Life Full of Holes* 9)

This interruption reveals that Layachi, as an oral narrator, possesses a developed sense of pacing and structural coherence. He returns to the sequence to improve narrative flow, guided by an

instinct rooted in oral composition. Bowles, in turn, accommodates this instinct without imposing external order, letting the structure adapt to the narrator's revisions. Their interaction underscores a collaborative process shaped by listening, adjustment, and respect for the logic of spoken storytelling. In including this moment in the final text, Bowles affirms the storyteller's authority and highlights how decisions about timing and memory persist even within the written form.

The Boy Who Set the Fire

The oral quality present in Bowles's work with Yacoubi and Layachi also characterizes his long and often fraught collaboration with Mohammed Mrabet. Their relationship, which spanned from 1960 to 1999, was marked by alternating periods of closeness and tension. Still, it resulted in a substantial body of work that cemented both of their literary legacies. Mrabet's entry into storytelling was partially sparked by Bowles's recordings of Layachi and his exposure to *A Life Full of Holes*. In an interview with Sean Gullette, Mrabet recalls Bowles presenting him with "a big machine, with big tapes and a microphone," the very moment that signaled the beginning of his recorded narratives.[12] The success of Layachi's book suggested a path to financial security, a possibility that encouraged Mrabet to take part. Mrabet went on to record twenty-seven stories, motivated by economic necessity and a deep commitment to storytelling.

When asked about his collaboration with Bowles, Mrabet paused, then said: "I have always had a passion for telling stories."[13] He describes his deep reliance on self-dialogue to shape and rehearse his stories, a habit he felt made him seem "eccentric."[14] That process, once spoken aloud, blurs the boundary between thought and performance. His reply foregrounds the storyteller's voice within the translated texts, where oral features remain vivid and intact. *The Boy Who Set the Fire* reflects this presence through its hybrid form, a written collection crafted around the rhythms and structures of Moroccan oral tradition. Composed of seventeen short stories, the book resists a single narrative arc, instead moving fluidly between realism and fantasy. Its episodes traverse bloodshed, humor, dreams, witchcraft, vengeance, and above all, the art of storytelling itself. These themes, drawn from the everyday and the surreal, underscore the collection's rootedness in a cultural imagination sustained by oral performance.

The story "Baraka" centers on a character who slips into vivid dreams each time he naps in the afternoon. "This story," the narrator admits, "is not one that can be proven, but it is certain that he [Baraka] would shut his eyes and lie back on the cushions with his head against the wall and begin to dream" (*The Boy* 18). What unfolds is a surreal journey through an expansive orchard filled with human and nonhuman presences, culminating in Baraka's awakening and his attempt to recall the dream's contours. The dream sequences become narrative interludes, spaces where time loosens and reality bends, allowing for reflection, observation, and psychological drift. What might otherwise be smoothed over in translation are instead elements well preserved by Bowles, who lets the grain of Mrabet's voice remain audible. Baraka's repeated use of the word "strange" punctuates his dreamscape with quiet wonder. The repetition sustains an oral pattern and cues the listener's attention, evoking the improvisational quality of Moroccan storytelling traditions, which, as Mary Martin Rountree notes, remain "imaginatively closer to the *Thousand and One Nights*" (400).

Just as "Baraka" draws on the surreal and introspective elements of Moroccan oral tradition, "The Saint by Accident" turns toward its spiritual and communal dimensions. The narrative centers on Bouqoudja, a man mistakenly revered as a saint after being found alone seated in a candlelit cave. As word spreads, visitors begin to arrive with offerings—coins placed on stones, chickens laid at his feet—seeking his intercession. These scenes evoke the shrine culture common in parts of Morocco, where visitors to the tombs of marabouts offer candles, flowers,

money, or animals as gestures of piety and hope. Though Bouqoudja assumes the role unintentionally, he eventually speaks with the authority of folk belief. At one point, he tells his visitors: "Have faith, and you can sleep with snakes" (*The Boy* 22). The expression echoes the Moroccan proverb "دير النية و بات مع الحية," which suggests that faith offers protection even in the face of danger. In embedding such sayings within the story, Mrabet and Bowles maintain a strong oral current, allowing the text to carry the weight of tradition while preserving the marks of a tale that might just as easily be heard beside a shrine as read on a page.

Another untranslated oral feature appears in the use of frame narratives in "Bahloul." After his mother's death, Bahloul inherits a considerable sum from his mother's former employer and uses it to open a café. While a friend manages the drinks, Bahloul entertains the patrons with stories. One tale concerns a *Djibli* (countryside man) who finds himself trapped in a room filled with bees. While Bahloul explains how the man manages to escape unharmed, the dialogue unfolds with playful interruptions and guesses from the audience:

> How could he do it? How do you think? He put on special clothes to do it. No. He opened the window and the bees flew out. No, no. He smoked them out. No, said Bahloul. How did he do it, then? First he ate a lot of majoun [cannabis paste] and smoked a lot of kif [cannabis]. Then he took off all his clothes, and got out a jar of honey he had bought in the souq [market]. And he rubbed honey everywhere over his body, over his hair and his skin, everywhere. And he took two pails and went inside the room and shut the door after him. (*The Boy* 44)

Besides the humorous quality in this rapid exchange, it captures the improvisational texture of live storytelling. The listeners' questions reflect real-time engagement, where the audience frames the flow of the narrative. With Bahloul at the center, the café transforms into a gathering place where storytelling returns to its communal roots, unfolding as a shared experience shaped by voice, presence, and response.

Through the lens of untranslatability, Bowles and Mrabet bring a performative dimension to the narrative that evokes the atmosphere of live storytelling. This quality is rooted in Mrabet's innate skill as a raconteur. For Irving Stettner, "if Paul Bowles wasn't there to translate his [Mrabet's] tales, he'd probably be telling them to a group of buddies at the nearest cafe, over a cup of mint tea, and a pipe full of kif" (4). In this way, Bahloul can be read as a narrative stand-in for Mrabet, reflecting his instinctive ability to captivate listeners. The absence of quotation marks in the dialogue between Bahloul and his audience continues the oral sensibility that runs throughout Bowles's translation work. In a letter to publisher Peter Owen, Bowles comments on this feature: "There are no quotation marks for dialogue throughout. This has evidently been done deliberately and I have left [the dialogue] unquoted. Dialogue passages are perfectly clear to follow in the text."[15] His comment reveals a key principle of the project: preserving the clarity and rhythm of oral narration without imposing formal constraints. Dialogue is present through tone and pacing. This fluidity enables seamless shifts between voices and encourages the reader to follow the story's momentum as if overhearing it, rather than viewing it from a distance.

Conclusion

This article has explored the presence of Moroccan oral storytelling in Paul Bowles's translations of narratives by Yacoubi, Layachi, and Mrabet. Drawing on close textual analysis and archival materials, it has shown how Bowles's translation method saves the tonal and structural qualities of oral performance. Across the three case studies, certain formal traits stand out, including spontaneity, direct address, rhythmic repetition, and fluid shifts between speakers. These features are maintained through deliberate stylistic choices such as minimal punctuation,

integrated dialogue, and a preference for speech-like rhythm, enabling the translated texts to retain the immediacy of live narration.

In preserving the expressive logic of spoken narratives, Bowles's translations complicate conventional ideas of authorship and fidelity. Instead of aiming for full equivalence, they foreground the significance of the narrative form itself to cultural meaning. This approach invites a reconsideration of translation as an act of listening that prioritizes cadence, voice, and context over formal clarity. The translated texts, situated between languages and traditions, offer more than access: they sustain the narrative practices from which they emerged and extend them into new cultural and literary spaces.

Notes

1. Research for this article was supported by a Fulbright Joint-Supervision Grant which funded archival work conducted in the Special Collections of the University of Delaware.
2. From Ben Jelloun's article "Une Technique de Viol" (*Le Monde*, 1972). See Works Cited.
3. One example of such imposition appears in early anthropological and linguistic records. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, researchers affiliated with institutions like the Bureau of American Ethnology in the United States collected Native American stories and songs. However, these efforts often imposed the grammatical and stylistic norms of dominant languages such as English. Translators frequently omitted parataxis—expressions like "and... and... and..." characteristic of oral narration—and eliminated repetition, a central feature of oral tradition, which they deemed redundant from a literary perspective.
4. Foreignization is a translation strategy that seeks to retain the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of the source text, rather than adapting it to the norms of the target culture. See Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Routledge, 1995).
5. The International Zone of Tangier was jointly administered by six European countries: France, Spain, the United Kingdom, Italy, Portugal, and Belgium, beginning in 1923. After World War II, the United States also played a role in the administration of the zone, reflecting shifting geopolitical interests in North Africa.
6. From Inass Essrhir's forthcoming interview with Mohammed Mrabet, conducted in 2023.
7. Unpublished poem by Ahmed Yacoubi, 1967. Special Collections, University of Delaware. See Works Cited.
8. This passage is taken from the Moroccan Arabic version of "The Night Without Thinking." The audiotape is housed in the Special Collections at the University of Delaware (Untitled [Moroccan sounds, music] w/ list of detailed contents and notes, circa 1950s-1960s. 0487_RTR_0060). See Works Cited.
9. This passage appears in the Moroccan Arabic version of "The Night Without Thinking," recorded on reel-to-reel tape and housed in the Special Collections at the University of Delaware. See Works Cited.
10. This quotation appears in Bowles's second typescript introduction to Layachi's *A Life Full of Holes*, housed in the Special Collections at the University of Delaware. See Works Cited.

11. From J.N.'s "Young Arab's Simple Tale: Peek at Another Culture" in *Publishers' Weekly*, housed in the Special Collections at the University of Delaware. The article is signed only with the initials "J.N."
12. From Gullette's interview with Mrabet. See Works Cited.
13. See the previously cited interview with Mohammed Mrabet.
14. See the previously cited interview with Mohammed Mrabet.
15. This quote is taken from Bowles's editorial correspondence with Peter Owen, housed in the Special Collections at the University of Delaware. See Works Cited.

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