

CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

ISSN: 3085-5411
Journal Homepage: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

Cultural Revolution and Publishing Activism: An Interview with Kenza Sefrioui on *Souffles*, Memory, and Contemporary Morocco

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss2.8082

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Received: 16-10-2025 Accepted: 04-02-2026 Published: 27-02-2026

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ABSTRACT

This interview examines Kenza Sefrioui's multidimensional role as scholar, journalist, publisher, and cultural activist, focusing on how her work interrogates Moroccan cultural identity and transformation through the lens of *Souffles* (1966-1973). Sefrioui highlights key contributions of *Souffles* to cultural decolonization and interdisciplinary dialogue, emphasizing the journal's theory of political and cultural revolution. She addresses translation as a means for transnational solidarity, explores the diverse heritage of Moroccan identity, and discusses the impact of state repression during the Years of Lead. The conversation connects these historical insights to pressing contemporary challenges in publishing—linguistic barriers, readership issues, and calls for collective engagement. Drawing from her experience co-founding *Éditions En toutes lettres*, Sefrioui positions publishing as a militant, democratic practice for expanding access to scholarship and fostering debate.

KEYWORDS

Souffles

Moroccan Literature

Publishing

Cultural Activism Engaged Scholarship

About Kenza Sefrioui: Kenza Sefrioui, born in Paris in 1979, lives in Casablanca. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from Sorbonne IV University. Her dissertation on *Souffles magazine (1966–1973): Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc* (*Souffles* Journal (1966-1973): Hopes for a Cultural Revolution in Morocco) was published in 2013 by *Éditions du Sirocco*, won the *Prix Grand Atlas*, and has since become a reference for research on Moroccan Francophone literature, particularly those exploring the journal *Souffles*. From 2005 to 2010, she worked as a literary columnist for *Le Journal hebdomadaire* and has also written for *Tel Quel* and the *Economia.ma* website. She currently writes for *Enass.ma*. In 2013, she co-edited *Casablanca œuvre ouverte,* with its companion *Casablanca poème urbain,* a collection exploring contemporary Casablanca writing. Her 2017 book *Le livre à l'épreuve, les failles de la chaîne au Maroc* (*Books under Scrutiny: The Flaws in the Chain in Morocco*) examines flaws in Morocco's book industry. In 2018, she co-authored *Casablanca, nuit d'artistes* (*Casablanca, Artists' Night*) with Leïla Slimani. Sefrioui co-founded *En toutes lettres* with her husband, Hicham Houdaifa, focusing on the social sciences and investigative journalism outside mainstream media. She was one of the co-founders of the association *Racines*, which was banned in 2018, and which promoted cultural development, advocated for cultural policies, and fostered debate on arts and culture in Morocco and Africa.

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Chakib Amghar: You are a journalist, editor, scholar, critic, publisher, and activist. How have these multiple roles shaped your trajectory and your vision for the *Souffles* project?
Kenza Sefroui: Thank you for your invitation. I began my career as a literary critic at *Le Journal hebdomadaire*, which was censored in 2010—a significant loss for Morocco's intellectual press and freedom of expression. My time there inspired me to become a publisher, just two years after defending my PhD on *Souffles*. In 2012, together with my husband Hicham Houdaifa, we founded *En toutes lettres* to continue our commitment to investigative journalism. For me, *Souffles*, *Le Journal hebdomadaire*, and *En toutes lettres* are linked by a shared approach to thinking about Morocco, particularly regarding democracy and freedom of thought. Before writing *La revue Souffles 1966-1973: Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc*, I was writing a PhD in comparative literature at La Sorbonne University in partnership with INALCO (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales) in Arabic because I have a *licence*, the equivalent of a bachelor's degree, I guess, from this National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations. While writing my PhD, I experimented with several writing methods simultaneously. I was writing my PhD while I was a journalist. So, you can imagine the interplay between academic writing and journalistic writing. This was extremely difficult because I had just come from university and had to learn to write for the press, whose requirements differ substantially from those of academic writing. When I became accustomed to journalistic writing, I loved it. While writing my PhD, I had to return to the strict academic traditions of writing, with its precision, structure, and references. Afterward, when I wrote the book based on this PhD, I had to present the same content under the same exigencies, but in a more accessible way. Several academic figures despise the term 'vulgarization,' but I think 'vulgarization,' if used appropriately, is really needed, and for me it is a question of democracy. The academic world has the responsibility to engage more actively in publications and conferences, particularly for tenured researchers in privileged positions. In the field of humanities, you cannot work in isolation from society. There is a need to abide by the social contract with those whose taxes finance their positions. The annual statistics from the King Abdulaziz Al Saoud Foundation for Human Sciences and Islamic Studies indicate a significant gap between the number of PhD holders and the number of books published. According to the Foundation's most recent report, only 1.18% of PhDs resulted in published books.[1] This gap must be bridged. Returning to your question, after I wrote my book to share ideas with a wider audience, I became a publisher to help my colleagues and fellow authors publish accessible books. In doing so, I aimed to stimulate debate and promote its content.

CA: Absolutely. Publishing your PhD research made it accessible—I likely would not have found your book otherwise. You mentioned solidarity with the *Souffles* generation as one of your motivations. How did this research affect you personally?
KS: Music, energy, and panache from my father first connected me to this generation. I never found the journal in our library as a child. After Morocco's independence in 1956, these young people felt joy but soon faced a repressive political climate. Optimism turned to disillusionment; some were arrested or exiled. I remain inspired by their fearless defiance of the political order, a spirit I admire today.

CA: The *Souffles* generation stood out for its revolutionary tone, language, literary experimentation, and artistic expression. In your book *La revue Souffles 1966-1973: Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc* (*The Journal Souffles (1966–1973): Hopes for a Cultural Revolution in Morocco*), you did important archival work. What challenges did you face? How did these challenges change your understanding of the journal's direction?

KS: Regrettably, the General Library in Rabat didn't preserve the journal's collection. We can be grateful to the American universities of CUNY and Seattle, along with Thomas Spear and Anne George, for digitizing the entire run of *Souffles* in the 1980s. The journal became available online at the National Library of the Kingdom of Morocco only in 2010. But now, inexplicably, *Souffles* issues have been removed from all digital resources on the National Library's website. My research was driven by a commitment to recognize the journal's significance today. Most researchers have focused on modernity in Maghrebian Francophone studies. There are numerous biographies of Abdellatif Laâbi, Mostapha Nissaboury, Tahar Benjelloun, and Abdelkebir Khatibi. My book addresses both the journal's path and the consequences of this experience. These consequences include the 1972 ban, the arrest of key members and militants, the trials, exile, and the new series in Arabic and French that were published in France by militants in exile to inform about the repression in Morocco. Such events reveal the vision that guided the journal, even in its literary phase. The book aims to rekindle this memory and bring it to the forefront of public debate in civil society.

CA: What distinguished *Souffles* from other magazines of its era, particularly *Lamalif* and *Intégral*?
KS: While I cannot speak comprehensively about all the reviews from *Souffles*' era, nor do I wish to minimize their impact, I can say that *Souffles* succeeded in directly involving leading figures from Moroccan literature, art, cinema, and civil society as founders or active participants. *Souffles*' young contributors established extensive national and international networks before the emergence of the internet. They gathered over 100 notable figures worldwide—most of whom remained influential in their communities for decades. It stood apart from other publications because it was a militant project, based on participants' voluntary contributions and sustained primarily by member subscriptions. My earlier research on Egypt's *Apollo* magazine examined how collective dynamics shaped the content and vision of a literary forum through collaboration among individuals. This informed how I approached *Souffles*: when I began my PhD and worked at *Le Journal hebdomadaire* during the IER (Instance Équité et Réconciliation) hearings, I recognized *Souffles* as an evolving publication characterized by collaborative group practices and learned to pay attention to the passage of time and to changes in the political, social, and cultural situation nationally and abroad between each issue.

CA: The *Souffles* collective was influenced by Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and the radical poetry of Aimé Césaire, yet rejected the essentialist approach of Léopold Senghor's Négritude. How did the journal theorize the relationship between decolonization as a political process and what you call *révolution Culturelle*? Did Laâbi and others see these as sequential, simultaneous, or dialectically related?
KS: For *Souffles,* culture was inherently political, not mere entertainment. Culture shaped political vision and was essential to decolonization. The journal did not view political and cultural revolutions as separate or strictly sequential; instead, it theorized that they were interconnected, emphasizing that decolonization required both political action and cultural transformation. Laâbi and others argued that effective political decision-making depended on the cultural perspective from which decisions were made.

CA: The journal's embrace of Arab identity and Amazigh heritage was significant, given the contemporary debates on national identity. Did the editorial board develop a coherent theory of Moroccan identity, or did they strategically maintain productive ambiguity?
KS: Alongside Arab and Amazigh identity, the *Souffles* collective also addressed Jewish heritage, notably through Abraham Serfaty, a major contributor, whose writings were remarkable. The collective's main position was to reject monolithic definitions of identity—

whether Pan-Arab, Islamic, or otherwise—and instead to advocate Morocco's plural, culturally distinctive makeup. They deliberately kept their conception of Moroccan identity open, actively resisting any single, fixed narrative.

CA: In your article "Rayonner: Traduction et mise en présence des langues dans la revue marocaine *Souffles* (1966-1974)," you addressed the role the journal played in challenging essentialist definitions of identity by foregrounding Amazigh identity, especially through poetry and translation. How did the journal bring together orality with its experimental poetry and modernist aesthetics?
KS: The poets associated with *Souffles* emerged from the specific contexts of their time. Through translation, they were able to engage with intellectual, cultural, and artistic production from across the globe, expanding beyond local and national boundaries. Translation functioned as a bridge, enabling connections that fostered transcolonial solidarities with other Third World countries. The poets were acutely aware of former and contemporary colonial centers—such as Paris, London, and the United States—that informed their practice of seeking artistic collaborations with figures including the Black Panthers, Palestinian poets Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al-Qassim, and Syrian poet Adonis. In facilitating these collaborations, translation allowed voices to circulate across borders, strengthening their transnational engagements.

CA: Building on this idea of connection, several critics point out that Laâbi's translations are intertwined with his activism. By translating Palestinian poetry from Arabic into French, he has expanded its reach to new audiences, thereby amplifying its impact. Recently, the translation of his own French-language poetry into English has made his texts more accessible to Anglophone readers. This increases the reach of his activist work and message.
KS: Following your remark, the impact of Laâbi's translations is undeniable: more than fifty years of translating Palestinian poetry and no less than four generations of poets. Yet he waited a long time for his poetry to be published in English translation. Few publishing houses assume the economic risk of publishing poetry, especially in translation. Additionally, French-speaking Moroccan authors face reading biases linked to colonial history and Orientalist representations, which can hinder or influence the publication of their works outside Morocco.

CA: Based on your view that current monolingualism among intellectuals represents a regression, how do you perceive the politics of bilingualism and translation that *Souffles* adopted more than 50 years ago? How does it relate to contemporary debates on language?
KS: Times have changed. Previously, privileged individuals with access to higher education debated in languages and were often bilingual, even when they wrote in a single language. Today, although most of the population has access to schooling, the failure of public education means that many lack proficiency in Arabic and French. The discussion of languages also exhibits a significant populist bent. At *En toutes lettres*, we welcome young journalists and civil society activists to courses on investigative journalism and the values of social justice (equality between men and women, secularization, participatory democracy, individual freedoms, and media and information education to combat hate speech and conspiracy theories). We always allow participants to choose the language of their final written product. While their spoken English is strong, their writing is often poor. Outside of the upper classes, who studied in English or American schools and who are not our public, most participants were not educated in English and struggle to produce strong, coherent work in English. Everyone has a right to participate in the debate, but we must analyze the underlying problem. The true divide is not between French and Arabic, but between those with no language mastery and the elite, who can master several languages and their respective writing systems. We keep focusing on the wrong

problem; the real issue is the educational system. We can achieve real progress in language and social equality only by addressing problems in our educational system. This challenge is urgent and demands our collective commitment now.

CA: *Souffles* was pioneering in its embrace of interdisciplinarity. The collaborative work among its poets, novelists, artists, filmmakers, playwrights, and intellectuals revolutionized Moroccan cultural production. Why does the contemporary artistic scene lack this interdisciplinary perspective?
KS: I do not know the reason exactly. However, I have observed that when I organize literary debates, few artists attend, even among those in the same field. We need to create a collective environment in which the spirit of sharing and curiosity takes precedence over individualism. To advance this, I encourage artists and writers to collaborate on cross-disciplinary events, emphasizing the value of collective participation. This collective mindset was one of *Souffles*' key assets: its members united to realize their vision, setting aside ego for a shared purpose.

CA: *Souffles* asserted an African dimension by welcoming African poets and thinkers to its pages. The double issue 16-17, released just after the Palestine issue, focused on Africa. In what ways does this act of continental solidarity influence or challenge the complex relationship between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa today?
KS: To illustrate this connection, there is an intriguing book titled *Maghreb Noir* (2023) by Paraska Tolan-Szkilnik, particularly chapter two, which examines *Souffles* in relation to Angolan writers and poets. Rabat was the hub for African solidarity in the 1950s and 1960s, as numerous literary figures and revolutionaries, such as Marcelino dos Santos, Mario de Andrade, Amilcar Cabral, and Aquino Bragança, resided there before Algiers became the new Mecca for revolutionaries. These historical ties help explain why *Souffles*, building on cross-continental connections, considered itself part of this continent and, therefore, created strong fronts of solidarity with a place they felt they naturally belonged to. With this sense of belonging, they had the audacity to initiate debates about the relationships between North and Sub-Saharan Africa.

CA: How do you interpret the Maghrebian collaborations, especially between Morocco and Algeria, considering the current strained relationship between the two countries?
KS: The relationship between Morocco and Algeria has grown increasingly fraught due to the political climate. The 1960s generation enjoyed genuine Maghreb unity, particularly in culture. Writers and their works moved freely. Today, the borders are closed, and the political atmosphere is hostile. Consequently, we are missing critical opportunities to exchange ideas, value our cultural distinctions, and foster creative collaborations.

CA: In January 1972, Laâbi and Serfaty were arrested. After gathering oral testimonies from former contributors about this period, what did you learn about the actual mechanics of repression, such as surveillance, infiltration, and the decision to ban the journal? Additionally, how naive or aware were *Souffles*' contributors regarding state monitoring?
KS: Contributors were not entirely naive about state monitoring. Although some may not have fully grasped all the risks, most understood the dangers but proceeded out of commitment to their cause. Testimonies suggest that awareness of surveillance and potential repression was present, yet their belief in the legitimacy of their struggles made them accept these risks.

CA: Laâbi was imprisoned, tortured, and sentenced to ten years (he served eight and a half). His prison writings—*Chroniques de la citadelle d'exil*, *Le Chemin des ordalies*, *L'arbre de fer fleuret*, *Histoire des sept crucifiés de l'espoir*, and *Sous le bâillon, le poème*—are crucial documents of Morocco's Years of Lead. How did imprisonment transform his literary practice?

Are there continuities between his pre-prison experimental poetics and his prison poetry's space of resistance through the vital act of writing?
KS: Your question addresses a dense and intricate body of work. Laâbi's literary trajectory reveals numerous influences, with imprisonment radically redefining his poetics. Incarceration did not merely affect his health and writing; it triggered a profound transformation in his craft, as seen in the stark modes and themes of his prison works. However, these writings represent only one facet of his broader oeuvre. Notably, I regret that anthologies often overlook his *Souffles* poems, which are essential to fully tracing his poetic evolution.

CA: Your book's chronology extends to 1973, a year after *Souffles* was banned in Morocco. What happened in that transitional period between 1972 and 1973? And more broadly, when did *Souffles* transition from being an active political project to becoming a historical archive that scholars like yourself would later recover?
KS: After *Souffles* was banned in Morocco in 1972, Moroccan leftist militants launched *Anfâs silsîla jadîda* in August 1972. In January 1973, *Souffles nouvelle série* briefly reemerged in Paris; however, only three or four issues appeared before publication abruptly ceased in 1974. This turbulent transition—from the Moroccan edition's demise in 1972 to the Paris-based conclusion in 1974—serves as a sharp boundary for my book, which concludes its chronology in 1973. That date marks the shift from *Souffles*' active life to its enduring legacy. Later, an acquaintance handed me the final issue, revealing that intense internal divisions over the Western Sahara had shortened the Paris experience.

CA: As co-founder of *Éditions En toutes lettres*, how do you assess current challenges in the publishing industry? How did *Atlantis*—the publishing house of *Souffles*—shape the publishing industry in Morocco?
KS: *Atlantis* was the product of its time, laying the foundation for Morocco's modern publishing industry. In the 1960s and 1970s, modern publishing barely existed; reviews drove literary circulation. Only in the 1980s and 1990s did private publishing houses, regulated by market forces, emerge. When we founded our company—with legal registration, employees, and tax obligations—we embraced this formal, profit-driven model. Yet, at our core, our project remained militant: we intentionally used publishing to advocate for freedom of expression and to draw attention to underrepresented social and cultural issues, striving to inspire progressive change.

CA: The creation of *En toutes lettres* was in response to the closure of *Le Journal hebdomadaire* in 2010, which was due to the economic blockade imposed on the newspaper. How do you cope with the financial challenges?
KS: We face ongoing financial struggles, highlighting a critical gap between our ideals and practical realities. Low readership, driven by the high cost of books for most people, limited purchasing power, linguistic barriers, and a lack of a public policy for public reading (we have no more than 240 libraries in the whole country!), remains a major challenge. To address these, we finance our activities by organizing journalism and civic consciousness training programs for students and young people from civil society, which generate some revenue. These programs also provide publication opportunities and encourage participants to contribute fresh perspectives to our collective books. In this way, we connect our cultural projects to real societal needs while sustaining our operations.

CA: Is there any cooperation with the Ministry of Culture?
KS: I sought a subvention from the Ministry for Asma Lamrabet's book *Islam et femmes: les questions qui fâchent* (*Islam and Women: The Thorny Questions*), but I never received the funds at the contract signature, then I had to submit the file with the supporting documents five times (each time I was asked for new documents that were not contractually required), and finally received the money after Covid-19, as if it was part of the support fund for publishers. Because of these delays and difficulties, I no longer pursue ministry support. I now believe that subsidies should be directed toward the construction of libraries for individuals who cannot afford to purchase books. Instead, I find more satisfaction in organizing small independent book fairs and collaborating with foundations, booksellers, and readers, where I see meaningful impact and a stronger sense of purpose.

CA: Your publications are primarily in French. Do you publish in languages other than French?
KS: Yes, we also publish in Arabic. For example, our translation series includes works such as Patrick Boucheron's *Mā yastaṭīʿuhu al-tārīkh* (*What History Can Do*), Abdelwahab Meddeb's *Islam*, *Kawniyyat al-Islām* (*The Universality of Islam*), and Chadia Arab's *Nisāʾ al-farāwila* (*Strawberry Women*). We have also published Mohammed Sammouni's *Aqniʿat al-taṭarruf* (*The Masks of Extremism*) in Arabic. However, publishing in Arabic remains challenging due to the limited number of bookstores and the absence of a comparable network. Arabic books circulate widely at international book fairs in Cairo, Beirut, and other Gulf cities, which we do not participate in *Aqniʿat al-taṭarruf*.

CA: Given the low number of public libraries in Morocco and the small percentage of Moroccan authors' publications compared to foreign books, the cultural landscape may seem gloomy. In your view, is there any light at the end of the tunnel? What initiatives are required to redress the balance and promote our local cultural productions?
KS: Improving the situation calls for all of us to work together. At *En toutes lettres*, we do not merely discuss partnerships—we actively build them by partnering with scholars at universities in Fes and Beni Mellal and by working alongside associations in Tangier. We secure funding as partners and support each other's projects. Solving Morocco's reading crisis is more than any single author chasing personal acclaim; it is a shared endeavor. Real, lasting progress thrives when publishers, editors, writers, associations, and educators unite with a common purpose. Every successful book is the result of this collaboration. Think of authors like Mohamed Choukri and Driss Chraïbi, whose works live on because they touched readers who were part of this collective effort. Let us build these connections together, creating a vibrant and collaborative cultural landscape for Morocco.

Notes

1. See http://www.fondation.org.ma/web/article/694. Accessed 10 Jan. 2026.