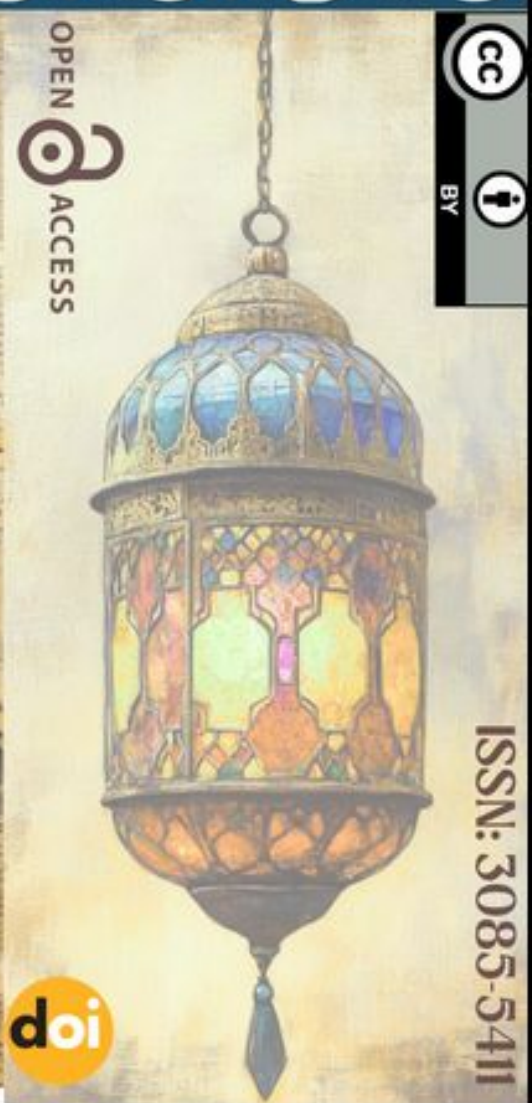
CONFLUENCE
Journal of
Multidisciplinary Studies

CONFLUENCE

Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

Vol. 2
Issue 1
2026



OPEN ACCESS
CC BY

ISSN: 3085-5411
doi

Indexed in the Moroccan Scientific Journals Portal (IMIST – CNRST)
https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

EIC: Brahim Barhoun

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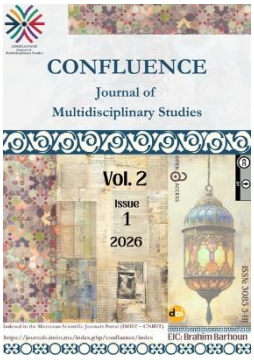
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ISSN: 3085-5411
Journal Homepage: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

Editorial

Volume 2, Issue 1 — January 2026

Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

As *Confluence* enters its second year, we do so with gratitude and renewed intellectual energy. The journey since the inaugural issue has affirmed what we deeply believe: that scholarship at the intersection of disciplines, geographies, languages, and cultural forms is necessary.

This second issue continues to honor the journal's foundational mission. *Confluence* hosts conversations that travel across academic and cultural borders and foreground voices that challenge established canons and reflect on the pluralities of experience shaping our worlds. In this issue, we bring together twelve contributions. They span critical essays, an author interview, and book reviews. Each scholarly piece offers a unique lens into ongoing debates around identity, memory, representation, education, and language politics.

The issue opens with essays that revisit cultural crossings, aesthetic experimentations, and the legacies of transnational literary figures. Allen Hibbard gives us a compelling portrait of Brion Gysin as an "outsider within an outsider movement," and situates his experimental work in Morocco within broader Beat and countercultural currents. From there, Inass Isrhir and Sawsan Malla Hussein take us further into the realm of translation and orality. They analyze Paul Bowles's Moroccan collaborations with attention to untranslatability, voice, and performative storytelling. Jawad El Annabi then revisits *Orient Express* by John Dos Passos and reveals the ways the American modernist's Mediterranean travel writing anticipates critiques of empire and Orientalist spectacle.

Three articles turn to questions of memory and cultural identity and foreground marginalized voices and alternative archives. Chakib Amghar's close reading of Abdellatif Laâbi's carceral poetry shows the imprisoned body becoming a locus of memory and resistance in postcolonial Morocco. Ikram Ben Talha and Brahim Barhoun explore the construction of "Moroccan Female-Other Archives" by Fatima Mernissi and Mhani Alaoui via literary activism. They draw attention to the silences and resistances embedded in women's narratives. Chaimae Belahrache and Brahim Barhoun take up Mizrahi Jewish identity and deterritorialization in the work of Ronit Matalon and offer a critical intervention into Zionist historiography and Arab-Jewish memory.

Contemporary sociolinguistic and educational questions appear in three pieces that explore the intersections of language, pedagogy, and digital transformation. Fatima Azzahraa El Yamlahi examines the strategic use of Anglicisms in Moroccan brand naming practices and reveals the ways global prestige and local identity intersect in commercial discourse. Mustapha El Hadri revisits

two influential theories of syllable structure in Moroccan Arabic. He draws on data from the Northwestern dialect to highlight the limitations of existing frameworks. Ibrahim Ben Khajjou, Ibrahim Belmir, and Ahmed Ibrahimi round out this section with a wide-ranging review of digital learning ecosystems and call for human-centered, ethical frameworks to guide the future of AI-augmented education.

We are also pleased to feature an interview with Malian writer and publisher Samba Niaré, conducted by Niapégué Sanou. Niaré reflects on the creative and political responsibilities of writing in national languages, the role of women in Malian literature, and the continued work of decolonizing literary production from within the continent.

Two timely book reviews close the issue. Brahim Barhoun reviews *The Jewelers of the Ummah* by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, a work that poetically and politically challenges colonial narratives separating Jews and Muslims in North Africa. Eric Calderwood offers a richly textured reading of Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla's *Al sur de Tánger*, a genre-bending reflection on Moroccan culture, memory, and literary representation.

The work gathered here represents the kind of critical engagement *Confluence* seeks to cultivate: scholarship that crosses boundaries and resists easy categorization. From poetic resistance and oral storytelling to algorithmic ethics and postcolonial re-readings, these contributions speak to what intellectual exchange can be when it remains open and rigorous. We are grateful to our contributors and peer reviewers for making this issue possible.

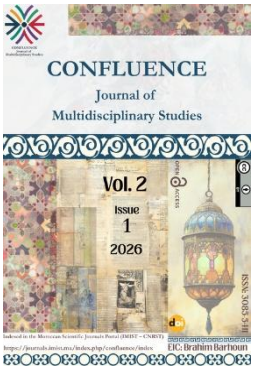
Disclaimer and Conflict of Interest Statement

The views expressed in the articles published in *Confluence* are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial board or affiliated institutions.

This issue includes contributions from members of the editorial team, including the Editor-in-Chief. All such submissions were subject to the journal's standard double-blind peer-review process and evaluated independently to ensure fairness, objectivity, and the highest standards of scholarly integrity.

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest.

Brahim Barhoun
Editor-in-Chief
Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
Abdelmalek Essaadi University
January 2026



CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

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

Brion Gysin: Beat Outsider in Morocco

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.7690

Allen Hibbard, Professor Emeritus at Middle Tennessee State University, is the author of two books on Paul Bowles (*Paul Bowles: The Short Fiction* and *Paul Bowles, Magic & Morocco*) and edited *Conversations with William S. Burroughs*. His collection of short stories, *Al 'Abur ila Al- 'Abbassiya*, has been published in Arabic. His biography of Alfred Chester is under contract with Oxford University Press. He now lives in Taos, New Mexico, where he writes and watches the sun rise over the Sangre de Christo Mountains and set over the mesa.

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Received: 17-09-2025 Accepted: 07-01-2025 Published: 19-01-2026

Brion Gysin: Beat Outsider in Morocco

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ABSTRACT

A nomadic polymath who spent considerable time in Morocco and was a champion of Jajouka, Brion Gysin, this essay proposes, can be considered as "an outsider in a movement [the Beats] that defined itself by outsidedness." A survey of Gysin's wide range of production in diverse media and genres—painting, film, calligraphy, cut-ups, permutation poems, and novel (*The Process*)—reveals that his work participates in an esthetic and values associated with the Beats: Experimentation with new forms of expression, an iconoclastic spirit, and a firm commitment to radical freedom. While Gysin himself admitted that his inability to stick with just one mode of artistic production, his multifaceted and unrestrained talent remains a source of enduring fascination.

KEYWORDS

Gysin

Beats

Tangier

I, the Man from Nowhere, negotiated like a Tangier Space Draft on a Swiss bank.

Brion Gysin, *Minutes to Go*

There is a fairly well-known photograph of "William Burroughs and Friends [Orlovsky, Corso, Ansen, and Sommerville]," dated 1961, taken, according to the caption, at the Hotel Muniria in Tangier. (Figure 1)



Fig. 1 William Burroughs and Friends: Orlovsky, Corso, Ansen, and Sommerville at Hotel Muniria in 1961.

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I have long seen the photo, with Paul Bowles seated a bit uncomfortably in front, as a visual depiction of Bowles's relationship to the Beats: He did not really fit into this group; still, they came to Tangier essentially because he was there. Until recently, while perusing *Ports of Entry: William S. Burroughs and the Arts*, which contains the photo, I had given no thought to the identity of the photographer. In a parenthetical phrase, Robert Sobieszik writes that the picture "most likely was shot by [Brion] Gysin but directed by Ginsberg" (33). Whether or not Sobieszik's conjecture is true, it is wonderfully suggestive, providing us with a figure that aptly characterizes Gysin's relationship to the Beats. He is there, present at the legendary scene in Tangier, memorialized by this photo; yet, he is elusive, not in the picture (unlike Bowles). Instead, he is snapping the shot, capturing the scene for posterity. Gysin thus can be thought of as an outsider in a movement that defined itself by its outsidedness. His sympathies, clearly, are with outsiders, "whether in the guise of artist, immigrant or heretic, not to mention the added markers of racial or sexual difference" (Weiss, x). When Gysin is associated with the Beats, it is generally due to his close relationship with William Burroughs and the legendary role he played in introducing Burroughs to the Cut-Up method at the Beat Hotel in Paris from 1960 to 1961. As Jason Weiss writes in his introduction to *Back in No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader*, Gysin has been "peripherally associated with the Beat Generation writers, mainly by intermittent points of convergence and especially his long friendship with [Burroughs]" (xix). This collaborative connection has eclipsed other fascinating dimensions of Gysin.

What happens when we turn the camera around, shifting our focus from the scene shown in this photo to the alleged photographer? What connections might we make between Gysin, the Beat Movement, and Beat Aesthetics, as inherently slippery as such terms are?



Fig. 2

Gysin was an amazingly talented man whose work resists and defies categorization, not fitting neatly within any movement, genre, or style. Even his nationality is difficult to pin down. (Figure 2) Of Swiss ancestry (a fact he often amplified), he was born in England in 1916 to parents with roots in Canada. His father died eight months after his birth, in the Battle of the Somme. Within a year or two, his mother returned to Canada. From the backwaters of Alberta, where he "lived on the reservations with the Indians,"[1] he headed off to boarding school at Downside, near Bath, in England, later spent time in France in the 30s, took refuge in New York City during WWII, then in 1950 migrated to Tangier, like many others, at the invitation of Paul Bowles, a year after the publication of Bowles's widely acclaimed first novel *The Sheltering Sky*. He had met Bowles (as well as Bowles's wife Jane) in Paris, in the summer of 1938. That move to Tangier, when he was in his mid-thirties, was central to Gysin's work and life: "I owe [Bowles] a tremendous amount, I owe him my years in Morocco, really. Because I wouldn't have gone there if he hadn't suggested it at that particular time."[2] Gysin landed in Morocco before the country's independence, before the hippies and beats had boarded the Marrakech Express and descended on the place. In December of 1950, he opened the 1001 Nights bar, which featured the Master Musicians of Jajouka, until it closed several years later. In Tangier, too, Gysin met Burroughs, an instance of "magical happenstance" that had a profound influence on both men. Gysin stayed in Morocco for the better part of 23 years. He died in Paris in 1986 at the age of seventy.

Not much constrained by social norms and expectations, Gysin produced varied, sometimes contradictory responses from those who encountered him. (Figure 3) A web search for Gysin, Beats, Tangier turns up an article with this blistering description: "He [Gysin] was . . . . a bad human being - he used to say that Man is a bad animal. Snobby, always on the financial hustle, disloyal to his most loyal supporters, inclined to run after a trend just when the trend was passing, divisive, right-wing, he was the very sort of mid-century fag that he despised."[3] His notorious misogyny alienated (potentially) half the human race. At the same time, some (one being Ira Cohen who held Gysin in the highest esteem) spoke of his generosity. In the opening paragraph of a review of books about Gysin, in *Beat Studies*, Jennie Skerl provides us with a condensed portrait of the artist, with all his contractions:



Fig. 3

> Brion Gysin was a many-faceted outsider personality whose artwork was also multi-faceted—literary, visual, electronic, musical, performance, and unclassifiable (the Dream Machine). The charming raconteur, wit, mythmaker, magician, influential multimedia avant-garde artist, and a friend of many other writers and artists was also paranoid, hypercritical, trouble-making, angry and bitter—bitter because his reputation and income did not match those less talented than he or that of his more successful friends such as William S. Burroughs and Paul Bowles. He was a misogynist and mother-hater, but also an enthusiastic participant in the "princess circuit" of wealthy women patrons and had a life-long close friendship with his "pseudo-sister" Felicity Mason. He was an inspiring friend, mentor, and lover, but also capable of sustained enmity and malicious games. William Burroughs famously said that Gysin was the only man he ever respected, but he also acknowledged that many people loathed him. (1)

This curated overview of Gysin's work begins with a brief consideration of his painting, an abiding passion throughout his life. When not yet 20, in 1935, he was invited to participate in a group show of surrealist painters in Paris. His work was removed from the show, apparently at the direction of André Breton, an outrage Gysin never forgot. Near his death, suffering from emphysema, relying on an oxygen bottle, he worked on "Calligrafitti of Fire," which he called "THE picture of my lifetime."[4] (Figure 4)
His art was exhibited in Paris, Tangier, Belgium,



Fig. 4 "Calligraffiti of Fire"

Rome, and London, alongside work by noted contemporaries Mark Tobey, Franz Kline, and Cy Twombly, winning admiration from many, including Alice B. Toklas. Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, and Roberto Matta.

For those not acquainted with Gysin's painting, I share just a few samples. Among my favorites (and pertinent to the focus of this paper) are his somewhat abstract representations of Moroccan scenes: "Jama al Fna" (Figure 5) and "Night in Marrakech." (Figure 6) Painters and artists, Gysin said in a *Rolling Stone* interview with Robert Palmer, should attempt to discover, reveal, represent, and challenge "fate in their lives and in their art."[5] A painting "must be all paint and all spirit," he wrote. "Both the surface and the depth must be so organized that the eye is seduced further and further into the picture then back in counterpoint to the rhythms of interest over the entire surface . . . I demand what might be called a spiritual dimension in painting."[6]

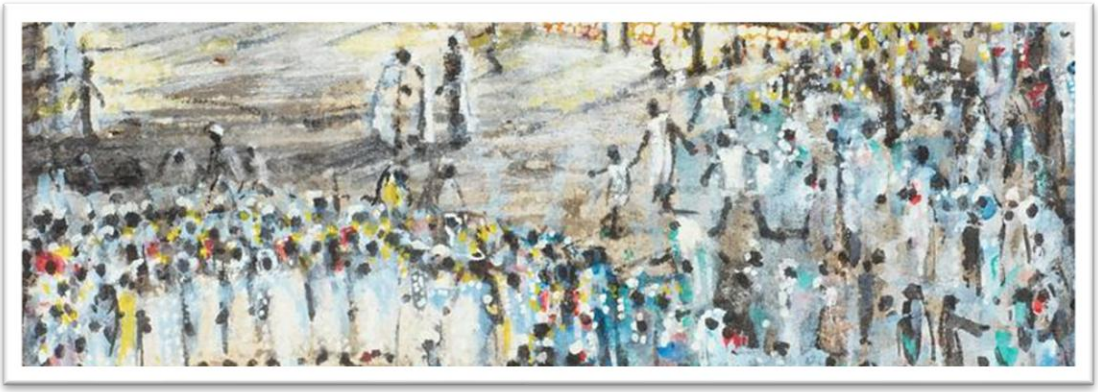


Fig. 5 *Jama al Fna*



Fig. 6 Night in Marrakech

Gysin's calligraphy is an important visual dimension of his artistic production, one that lies in the space between word and image. (Figure 7) No doubt his exposure to Arabic in Morocco was largely responsible for this direction of his artistic expression, which he began to explore in the late 1950s. *Art Voices* proclaimed that these innovative "texts" embodied "the same expressive quality as the masterpieces of Islamic calligraphy." While visual, these works also evoke the sense of writing, even though the calligraphic images contain no discernible meaning. Calligraphy, especially in Arabic and Chinese traditions, is viewed as a legitimate and vibrant art form.[7]



Fig. 7 Gysin Doing Calligraphy

Gysin's calligraphy was featured in early cut-up work, first in Minutes to Go (Figure 8), then as cover art for *The Exterminator* (Figure 9).

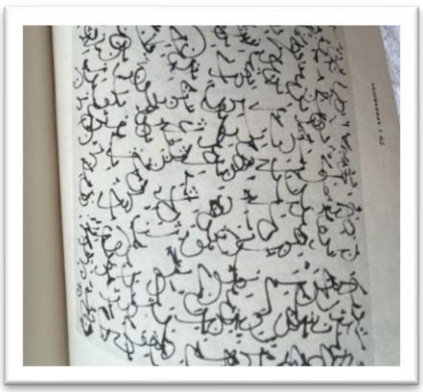


Fig. 8 Calligraphy-*Minutes to Go*

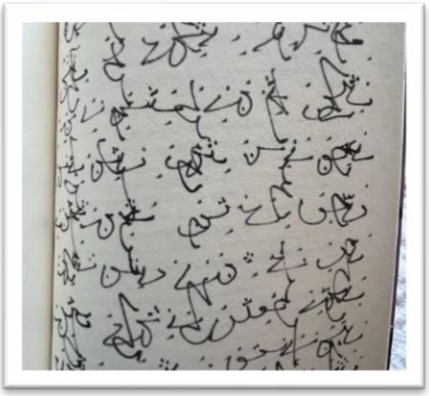


Figure 9 Cover- *The Exterminator*

The story of the Beat Hotel and cut-up is legendary. There are many descriptions of the cut-up technique. Here is Gysin's own description, from the opening pages of Minutes to Go.[8]

Pick a book, any book cut it
cut up
prose
poems
newspapers
magazines
the bible
the koran
the book of moroni
lao-tze
confucius
the bhagavad gita
anything
letters
business correspondence
ads
all the words

slice down the middle. Dice into the sections
according to taste
chop in some bible pour on some Madison Avenue
prose
shuffle like cards toss like confetti
taste it like piping hot alphabet soup. (2-3)

Rather than retell or critique that scene at the Beat Hotel (a huge task, one that many scholars have already taken on), my purpose here is to reflect on Gysin's relation to the Beats, as thescene moves from Tangier to Paris.[9] Briefly: The philosophy behind the cut-ups seems to coincide with Beat principles. That is, Burroughs and Gysin saw in the method a way to radically disrupt established narratives, subverting systems of power and control. Temporally, geographically (Paris, Beat Hotel), stylistically, and philosophically—the cut-ups surely belong within a Beat Context.

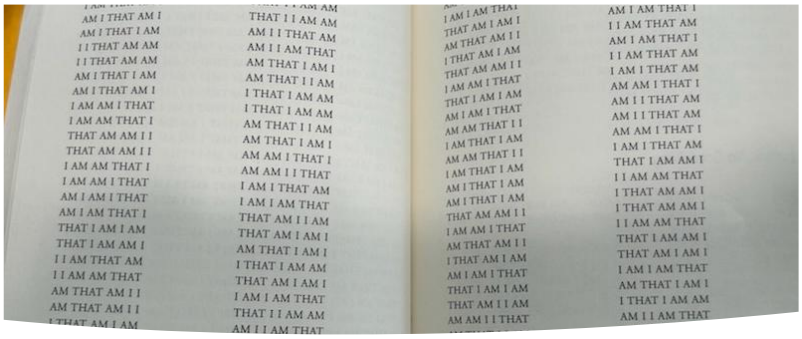


Fig. 10 "I am that I am"

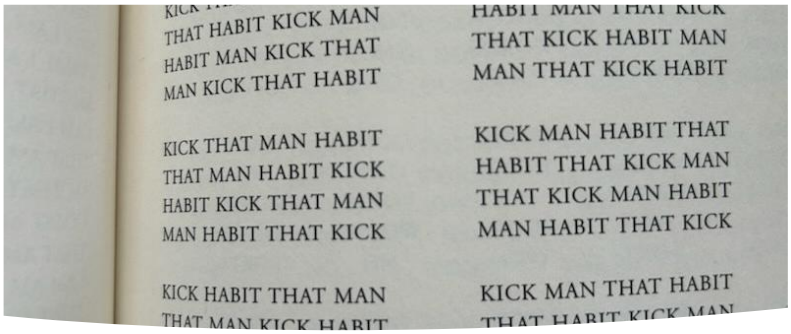


Fig. 11 "Kick that Habit Man"

Appearing first in *Minutes to Go*, Gysin's permutation poems, experimental and often witty, are yet another dimension of his creative output.[10] One of his best-known permutation poems is: I AM THAT I AM (from Exodus 3:14). [There are 605 permutations in the version in Weiss's collection.] Any alteration of the order of the words resulted in a different meaning. For example, I AM THAT[,] AM I becomes a question. (Figure 10) Other permutation poems: "Junk is no good baby," "No Poets Don't Own Words," and "Kick that habit man. (Figure 11)

KICK THAT HABIT MAN
THAT HABIT KICK MAN
HABIT MAN KICK THAT
MAN KICK THAT HABIT

KICK HABIT MAN THAT
HABIT MAN THAT KICK
THAT KICK HABIT MAN
MAN THAT KICK HABIT

KICK THAT MAN HABIT
THAT MAN HABIT KICK
HABIT KICK THAT MAN
KICK HABIT THAT MAN

KICK MAN HABIT THAT
HABIT THAT KICK MAN
THAT KICK MAN HABIT
MAN HABIT THAT KICK

KICK HABIT THAT MAN
THAT MAN KICK HABIT
HABIT THAT MAN KICK
MAN KICK HABIT THAT

KICK MAN THAT HABIT
THAT HABIT KICK MAN
HABIT KICK THAT MAN
MAN THAT HABIT KICK. (Weiss 89)

It has a kind of beat vibe.

The last work considered here is Gysin's novel *The Process*, written in Tangier in the 1960s, coincidentally around the same time Alfred Chester was writing his amazing novel *The Exquisite Corpse*, also in Tangier. Jimmy Fazzino's *World Beats: Beat Generation Writing and the Worlding of U.S. Literature* contains a rich and comprehensive discussion of the novel which rightly argues that the work challenges and unsettles geographic, gender, national, and racial boundaries. *The Process* is yet another example of Gysin's amazing vision, this time displayed in the form of a novel. Its scenes in the Algerian Sahara might make us think of Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky*. Its comic qualities call to mind works by Tom Robbins or Thomas Pynchon. Its zany deployment of African American motifs and themes is reminiscent of Ishmael Reed (*Mumbo Jumbo*). The convoluted plot has a global reach that takes us from Tangier, to Jajouka, home of the Master Musicians in the Rif, into the Sahara, to Cairo, Tunis, Switzerland, to Finland, to Malamut (a play on Alamut, site of Hassan I. Sabbah's medieval citadel in northern Iran) a fictional place on the Bulge of the west coast of Africa.

The novel features an assortment of characters. Our pot-smoking protagonist is an African American, Ulys. O. Hanson, III (or Hassan Merikani), of Ithaca, New York, whose North African ventures are sponsored by a foundation grant for a project titled "The Future of Slavery"; Hanson's intimate Moroccan pal Hamid (clearly based on Mohamed Hamri) who hails from Jajouka, accompanies him from beginning to end; Thay Himmer VII is "last White Rajah-Bishop of the Farout Islands" (124); Mya Strangleblood-Himmer, of the Barefoot Indian Tribe in Saskatoon, has inherited millions from her first husband and marries Thay, her seventh husband; there are Amos Africanus, manager of the Hotel Africanus (The Continental) in Tanja, and his twin sister Freeky Fard who wishes she had her brother's parts as well as her own; Prince Pio; Himmer's Swiss lawyer Rolf Ritterolf; and a Finn, Olaf Pesonius, Thay's Little White Reindeer. These characters relate their own stories, in their own voices, recorded on a UHER Tape recorder which Hanson (a.k.a. Hassan) carries around with him. The narrative includes parodies of Franz Fanon and Aldous Huxley, spoofs on Scientology (dubbed "grammatology"); a cameo by Gieseking, the famous pianist; mushroom-induced hallucinations; Sufi thikrs in the desert; and allusions to *The Odyssey* (Odysseus, Calypso). The narrative elements all are somehow related, it seems, to the Emerald seal of the Sahara, "Beginning and Ending of words," (126) handed over to Hanson by Himmer at the Café de Paris in Tangier bestowed on him by a sheikh in Cairo saying that it was to be given to a man not named Hassan.

The novel, which Gysin characterized as "intercultural contacts . . . and intercultural penetration" (Geiger, 228), is a fantasia of sorts, incorporating aspects of magical realism (Marquez and Rushdie) and postmodernism (along the lines of Brautigan, Pynchon, Reed, and Alfred Chester). Might it also be considered a beat novel? A less self-indulgent, funnier, more innovative version of *On the Road—On the Road in Morocco?*

In March of 1967, while Gysin was putting the final touches on *The Process*, his friend Robert Fraser showed up in Tangier with the Rolling Stones, who were enjoying immense popularity at the time. Gysin travelled with the group to Marrakech. He introduced Brian Jones of The Stones and then jazz musician Ornette Coleman to the master musicians of Jajouka. "[T]he initial promotion of their music," writes ethnomusicologist Philip Schuyler, "was, at bottom, a labor of love, the work of one man, Brion Gysin, with the help of Mohamed Hamri" (149). "Pipes of Pan" (a phrase that runs like a refrain through Burroughs' cut-up novels), Gysin's lyrical description of pagan, pre-Islamic rituals centered around the Goat god, appeared in the first issue of *Gnaoua* in 1964. The piece concludes:

> Pan leaps back on the gaggle of women with his flails. The women scream and deliver one tiny boy, wriggling and stumbling as he dances out in white drag and veil. Another bloodcurdling birth-yodel and they throw up another small boy. Pan flails them as they push out another and another until there are ten or more little boy-girls out there with Pan, shaking that thing in the moonlight. Bigger village dragstars slither out on the village green and shake it up night after night. Pan kings them all until dawn. He is the God Pan. (Weiss 124)

A kind of anthropologist, Gysin was drawn to, and at times participated in, traditional cultures that were threatened by modernity, recognizing that this music and practices accompanying it were in danger of becoming extinct.

Brion Gysin, immensely fascinating and talented, shared with the Beats a compulsion to experiment, an iconoclastic spirit, and a dedication to radical freedom. "The purpose of his art, from painting to *The Process*, was Liberation," writes Robert Palmer (Intro, *The Process* xx). Nomadic by nature, Gysin crossed borders, working in a range of media and genres, moving as he did from one mode of expression (painting) to another (writing). While we might now be in a position to recognize and appreciate his multifaceted interests—his unbridled pursuit of fresh impulses, emanating naturally from his being like spokes on a wheel, Gysin himself, especially toward the end of his life, looked back on his career with disappointment, seeing "a life of adventure, leading nowhere."[11] You should never do two things," he wrote. You should hammer one nail all your life, and I didn't do that; I hammered on a lot of nails like a xylophone."[12] In Gysin we see manifest both the perils and exhilarating possibilities of nomadism. At times, he stood in the spotlight, basking in the attention; other times he stood on the outside of the picture, looking in on the scene, snapping the shot, perhaps wishing he was visible, prominent, front and center.

Notes

1. Michael Zwerin, "Brion Gysin: The Dreamer and His Dream Machine. *Paris Metro*, Vol. 3, No. 17. August 16, 1979; cited in Geiger, p. 17.
2. Brion Gysin. *Brion Gysin/Terry Wilson, Here to Go. Planet R-101*. San Francisco: Re/Search, 1982, p. 26.

3. Joe Ambrose, "Outside Books #2, Tangier Beat Generation" https://outsideleft.com/main.php?updateID=354
4. Brion Gysin letter to W.S. Burroughs, August 28, 1985, Burroughs Communications; cited in Geiger, 305.
5. Gysin in Robert Palmer, "Rolling Stone Interviews William Burroughs," *Rolling Stone* May 11, 1972. In Allen Hibbard, *Conversations with William S. Burroughs*. Jackson: U of Mississippi Press, 1999, 67.
6. Brion Gysin, "On Painting, "Manuscript, Courtesy Theo Green/Inkblot; cited in Geiger, 123.
7. Quoted in Geiger, p. 127.
8. For a more in-depth discussion of the nature of representation in Islamic art, see Oliver Leasman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame Press, 2004.
9. For another dovetailing account, see Burroughs' description of the method in William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind*. New York: Viking, 1978. pp. 30-32)
10. In his section of *Two Assassins* (Moloko, 2023), the marvelous collaborative work with Farid Ghadami, Oliver Harris traces the deterioration of the collaborative relationship between Burroughs and Gysin from Burroughs' "Minutes to Go from Alamut" (1960) to Gysin's "A Quick Trip to Alamut" (1973). See also my discussion of the collaboration between Burroughs and Gysin in "The Collaborator: Intertextuality and Authorship," in *William S. Burroughs in Context*, ed. Oliver Harris, Davis Schneiderman and Alex Wermer-Colan. Cambridge U Press, forthcoming.
11. There exists, apparently, a 23-minute BBC recording of the poems, *The Permutation Poems of Brion Gysin*.
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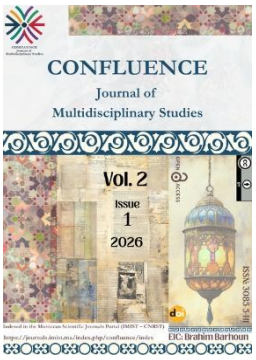
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CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

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

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

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.6108

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Received: 01-10-2025 Accepted: 11-01-2026 Published: 19-01-2026

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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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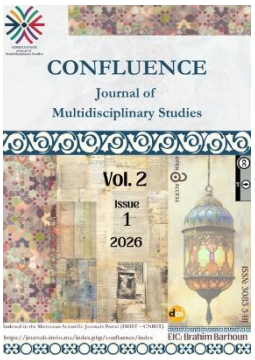
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CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

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

The Romance of Observing Conflict: John Dos Passos's *Orient Express* and American Orientalism

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.6092

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Received: 29-09-2025 Accepted: 25-12-2025 Published: 19-01-2026

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how John Dos Passos's *Orient Express: A Travel Memoir* (1927) reframes the Mediterranean as a site of modernist tension where history, politics, and identity intersect. Set against the geopolitical instability of the 1920s, Dos Passos's journey transforms travel into an exploration of postwar consciousness, capturing the Mediterranean as a landscape of ruins and revolutions rather than romance. Through a fragmented, impressionistic style, he attempts to expose the moral ambiguities of observation and the privileges of American mobility while simultaneously participating in them. Engaging with Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, Susan Nance's analysis of American consumerist fantasies, and Douglas Little's definition of American Orientalism, the paper situates *Orient Express* within a lineage of U.S. writers who turned eastward to negotiate their nation's expanding global presence. Dos Passos is ultimately both a participant in and critic of the American gaze, crafting a travelogue that anticipates later disillusionment with empire and modernity. In essence, this is an argument that Dos Passos's Mediterranean journey functions as a modernist experiment in seeing where the observer's struggle for authenticity mirrors America's uneasy encounter with its own power.

KEYWORDS

John Dos Passos
The Mediterranean
American Identity
Travel Writing
The American Gaze

Introduction

The Mediterranean, a historically layered and complex region, was especially steeped in conflict, geopolitical upheaval, and cultural friction during the 1920s. Aaron W. Godfrey writes in his review of Abulafia's *The Great Sea* that "the dominance of the Sea's populations was like the Sea itself, constantly shifting direction" (608). In the same vein, the aftermath of WWI rendered the Mediterranean basin the main arena of political instability; empires declined, and new national identities emerged. The vacuum left by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to various nationalist movements and colonial powers trying to fill it. The Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922), for example, was marked by palpable conflicts over territorial and ethnic claims that reshaped the region's geopolitical landscape. The Russian Civil War (1917-1922) further exacerbated the Mediterranean's instability, leading to the exodus of White Russian émigrés, the vast majority of whom relocated to Mediterranean cities (Koenker 427). Soviet ambitions and ideological confrontations also significantly shaped the region's status quo.

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The 1920s also mark a period of American expansionism that appears, on the surface, contradictory. On the one hand, the U.S. had reaffirmed its hemispheric dominance through the longstanding Monroe Doctrine; on the other hand, it was starting to reimagine itself as a global power, gradually moving

beyond the Western Hemisphere. This shift towards a more outward gaze was obviously not innocent. As John Bassett Moore writes, the Monroe Doctrine began as a call for mutual non-intervention but, by the early twentieth century, had become a "distinctively American" justification for extraterritorial presence (32-33). Edward J. Renehan observes that "the methods and motivations of American diplomats deploying and defending [the Monroe Doctrine] have certainly changed," evolving from protective isolationism to opportunistic interventionism (110). As the Mediterranean itself was going through a period of friction between old empires and new nationalisms, the American presence beyond its borders signaled both ambition and uncertainty. The U.S. was not only recalibrating its role abroad but also grappling with its implications.

During this tumultuous period, John Dos Passos decided to embark on a journey through the Mediterranean, seeking to capture the essence of a region in constant change. His unusual travelogue, *Orient Express: A Travel Memoir* (1927), offers a unique American perspective on this space, its different regions, people, and ideologies. His itinerary – Venice, Athens, Batum, Constantinople, Baghdad, Tehran, Jerusalem, Cairo, and the Syro-Arabian desert – functions not merely as a string of exotic destinations but as a literary map of the Mediterranean's geopolitical fault lines. His journey is by no means arbitrary; it is organized around various schisms. The fact that he moves East rather than South or West is also not coincidental. The East, for Dos Passos, is not only the geographical Orient but a symbolic site of crisis, history, and ambivalence. His route parallels the fall of empires and the emergence of new political orders, and, more importantly, mirrors his own dislocation as an American individual attempting to reimagine the self and his identity through engagement with distant lands.

This article argues that John Dos Passos's *Orient Express* transforms Mediterranean travel writing into a modernist reflection on American identity, ambivalence, and authority in the aftermath of empire by aestheticizing the experience of political suffering and historical decay. Tracing his eastward journey across zones marked by conflict and ruin, Dos Passos constructs the Mediterranean as a romantic continuum of civilizations while simultaneously rendering it a fractured stage on which the American observer negotiates his position between privilege and disillusionment. Through fragmented narration, strategic political detachment, and recurring metaphors of motion, ruin, and spectacle, Dos Passos both participates in and critiques the Orientalist gaze, translating violence and instability into aesthetic form and exposing the uneasy boundary between witnessing suffering and consuming it as experience. The article ultimately contends that Dos Passos's "romance of observing conflict" marks a pivotal moment when American modernism turned outward, using the Mediterranean as a mirror through which to confront its own historical anxieties and ideological contradictions, as well as the ethics of looking.

Preludes and Departures: A Young Mind on the Move

To read Dos Passos is to read an author who was never quite at home. Born in 1896 out of wedlock to an affluent Baltimore lawyer and a Virginia woman of genteel Southern lineage, Dos Passos spent his formative years moving across countries, languages, and identities (Ludington 2-3). He was initially named Jack Madison, adopting the Dos Passos surname only after his parents' eventual marriage (Ludington 3). From an early age, he was immersed in a transatlantic upbringing – living, studying, or traveling in the U.S., England, France, Portugal, and Italy – a lifestyle that helped nurture in him what Blanche Gelfant calls a sense of

"homelessness" as he moved from place to place "always going somewhere but never finding home" (Gelfant 134). Granville Hicks similarly emphasizes how Dos Passos's cosmopolitan education and early travel experiences, particularly in Europe and the Mediterranean, fostered a restless intellectual temperament that would later manifest in his writing and politics (85-86). This formative condition of rootlessness – geographical, emotional, and ideological – would become the core of Dos Passos's literary persona: an observer always in motion, rarely at rest, and never quite at home in the world he documented.

Dos Passos had homes, and he *was* an American, but he had no stable sense of belonging. In *U.S.A.: The 42nd Parallel*, he writes from the "Camera Eye,"[1] "I wished I was home but I hadn't any home" (*42nd Parallel* 197). This self-conscious admission of lingering displacement finds earlier resonance in his prose reflections in *Orient Express*, not through narrative continuity, of course, but through a recurring existential orientation. Watching the world slip by from the window of a train, he writes, "I feel as if I were a spy behind the lines of an enemy country" (*Orient Express* 43). This internal pause – quiet and disoriented – is symbolic of his fragmented selves: not quite at home in motion, not quite absent. This reflective persona, as a traveling recorder of details, has one foot in the real and the other in narrative performance, a reminder of what Susan Nance calls "playing Eastern" (16). This contradiction is at the heart of Dos Passos's personal life and travel writing alike.

Educated at Choate and later Harvard (Chamberlain 191), Dos Passos's elite schooling did very little to dampen his anti-elitist leanings. He studied architecture at Harvard but drifted toward literature, art, and politics. While there, he began publishing in the *Harvard Monthly*, revealing a growing hostility towards the mechanization of life (Hicks 86). In his editorial, "A Humble Protest," he declared war on industrial modernity, which he called "a silly claptrap of unnecessary luxuries" that destroyed "the arts of life and the arts of creation" (Hicks 86). The Dos Passos of the 1920s was not the conservative writer he would become in the 1950s; he was instead a man disgusted by war, which might explain his obsession with documenting conflict in *Orient Express*; he was also skeptical of capitalism and enamored with revolutionary ideals as Alfred Kazin writes, "Dos Passos certainly came closer to Socialism than most artists in his generation" (220). This almost-Socialist, wide-eyed young man would go on to volunteer in WWI as an ambulance driver – alongside Hemingway and E.E. Cummings – and see firsthand the bureaucratic carnage of modern warfare (Chamberlain 192).

The accumulation of his skepticism toward modernity, intensified by his wartime experiences, is perfectly exemplified in *Orient Express*, where he becomes a chronicler and critic of postwar civilization as well as a participant in it. He writes, "Thousands of lives have been given and taken… a generation levelled like gravel under a steamroller to break the tyranny of Things, goods, necessities, industrial civilization" (38). This line, excerpted from a longer contemplative paragraph in *Orient Express*, encapsulates Dos Passos's grim view of the modern world, a world consumed by materialism and violently reordered by ideologies that promised liberation. His witnessing of post-revolutionary Russia, with its broken ideals and hollow victories, serves as an archetype for his portrayal of a reckoning with the twentieth century's betrayals. In *Orient Express*, Dos Passos does not merely observe the aftermath of revolution; he chronicles the cost of trying to remake the world through grand narratives. His anti-capitalist ideas are not abandoned, but tempered by a sense of futility, by a realization that, whether under capitalism or communism, people remain crushed beneath the gears of industry.

However, for all his sharp critiques of modernity and the systems that feed it either in the Mediterranean or in the U.S., Dos Passos rarely turns the lens on himself. The very ability to observe, to move freely across borders and revolutions, is enabled by his American passport, his Harvard education, and his inherited social mobility – privileges that allow him to contemplate the ruins of the Old World from a somber and safe remove. This contradiction in

Orient Express, also part and parcel of most American travelogues, always remains an evident irony. As Nance argues, "Eastern personae were… vehicles for satire, tales of the surreal, masculine posturing, feminine power, or stories of magic and plenty presented by an authoritative person seemingly foreign to the United States" (28). While Dos Passos mourns the flattening of generations "like gravel" (38), he himself floats above the destruction, restless but untouched, critical yet protected. In this way, his cynical, satirical perception of the decline of a world overrun by materialism carries with it the very luxuries he claims to detest.

Before his Mediterranean journey, Dos Passos's post-war publications show how much the war had affected him. *One Man's Initiation* (1920) and *Three Soldiers* (1921) were grim, angry novels that did not romanticize the battlefield (Hicks 87). "Tyranny, exploitation, and purposelessness" – these were the words Hicks used to describe what Dos Passos observed in war, not heroism or sacrifice (87). What Dos Passos brought back from the frontier was not necessarily trauma in the conventional sense, but something more complex: a permanent sense of cynical irony and of the violence programmed into every human encounter. *Orient Express*, then, functions as the literary reconciliation of his lived experience and the rest of the world; it is an account "of a man whose sympathies are constantly broadening" (Chamberlain 193).

When Dos Passos set out on his 1921 Mediterranean journey that would become *Orient Express*, he was in his mid-twenties, at the height of his revolutionism. The world was disoriented, and so was he. He had not yet become the disillusioned anti-communist who would defend the Vietnam War decades later (Maine 16). At this moment, he was still writing with a head full of socialist ideas, a heart full of revolution, and a passport that let him drift from Venice to the desert with ease. This is part of what makes the travelogue so significant to the career of a voice that defines American literary exploration in the 1920s. Dos Passos, the revolutionary leftist who rejects materialism, is also Dos Passos the privileged observer, whose American nationality gives him access to otherwise closed-off zones of conflict.

Even as an American citizen, Dos Passos was deeply interested in Madeira as his grandfather emigrated from it in 1830 (Ludington 1). He visited Madeira three times and described it as "a tiny town buried in a deep gash in the mountains… I could spend a century in Madeira" (Gonçalves de Abreu xv). His close connection to this island shows that his selective Mediterranean affinities cannot be ignored. This specific town, obviously, was not just part of the Sea for him; it was a site of ancestral nostalgia, layered histories, and contradictions. In *Orient Express*, however, his tone is strikingly different. Almost every page contains a portrayal of some rotten, destroyed, decrepit, poor, or unsightly scene. This contrast, stemming from personal investment and emotional resonance, shows how Madeira resists his broader disillusionment with the Mediterranean world. It also ultimately highlights his uniquely American Orientalism. Said did not have him in mind as he wrote, "The Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact" (21). Dos Passos is inside it, but he simply cannot see it.

Gelfant argues that Dos Passos is "obsessed with the elusiveness of identity… a young man dislocated in his society, self-questioning, uncertain, unnerved, and estranged" (134). The same sense of estrangement is present in *Orient Express*, not only in what is represented but in what is omitted. The narrative voice he employs rarely offers reflection or clarifies emotion; instead, the reader is offered a plethora of scenes and images to interpret. Even as a young man, and therefore relatively naïve, Dos Passos produced an account far removed from traditional romantic tourism: a fragmented travelogue by an American author trying to break free from the certainties of his national identity.

In addition to maintaining a uniquely idiosyncratic voice, Dos Passos's work is significant for how closely it mirrors the disillusionment of his generation. His postwar writing – not that there was much of it before the war – reflects what his contemporary Malcolm Cowley describes as a "period of transition from values already fixed to values that had to be created" (xxii). This

was a well-educated generation, driven by an obsession with finding meaning but haunted by displacement, thus earning the apt label "The Lost Generation." In the 1920s, Dos Passos mingled with the likes of Hemingway and Fitzgerald – even developed a close friendship with the former (Coggin) –, but unlike them, he did not write about Paris as an expatriate haven. He opted instead to write about Batum, Baghdad, Tehran, and the desert as gateways through which his modern American imagination would clash with empire, the East, the Orient, conflict, and poverty.

The East-bound American Observer

Before Dos Passos sets foot in the Mediterranean, his sense of direction is given importance from the beginning. The opening chapter is titled simply "Eastward," and the route he aims to take is immediately wrapped in poetic observation: "The Madeira is all drunk up […] the wind is carrying spring eastward […] to quicken the thrusting sprouts in weedy cemeteries in Stamboul" (4). This movement eastward is not merely physical but also symbolically significant: the East is already a surreal, exotic destination, laden with the remnants of empire, war, and death. His reliance on images of the East from the beginning underscores his literary intention to use the space and the concept to create his own version of the Mediterranean, his own imagined place of contradiction and collapse.

Dos Passos's focus on the East highlights an unconscious portrayal of the imaginative East-West division, the notion of a split Mediterranean, which is not a terribly novel idea, as it is deeply rooted in Western thought. As Edward Said famously argues, Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3), and part of that restructuring has always involved drawing clear lines in the literary sand: East versus West, Islam versus Christianity, civilization versus backward barbarism. Dos Passos is evidently unable to entirely escape this intellectual paradigm, even if he challenges it with irony and a modernist detachment from the powers that be.

The style Dos Passos adopts in *Orient Express* – poetic, descriptive, and highly observational as it is – gives the reader the sense that they are embarking on a fictional narrative rather than a record of personal travel. He writes in the early pages, "The eastbound American goes back through the portals of doom into the empty restaurant where in the arctic stillness a lone waiter stands beside a table teetering like a penguin" (5). This is an interesting persona he had created to describe a fellow traveler he was observing while waiting for the train: the east-bound American, an indirect reference to himself. At this point in the narrative, he is describing the beginning of his travel before reaching the Mediterranean. The words he chooses to use to describe a restaurant in Ostend significantly shape the reader's perception of what is to come. The "portals of doom" foreshadow the war-torn countries he is about to visit. His Orient is not the typically exotic space depicted in British travel narratives, but a complex and unstable zone of suffering, survival, and division.

This figure of the east-bound American represents both a continuation and an interruption of the Orientalist gaze. On the one hand, he participates in the cultural tradition of traveling abroad to discover the exotic, the unknown, and dangerous other, to participate in "that American tradition of extravagant and sumptuous creativity" (Nance 26). And again, this might be an unconscious endeavor on the part of Dos Passos, as Douglas Little defines American Orientalism as a subconscious version of British and European Orientalism, marked by geopolitical fantasies and anxieties that seeped into American popular culture and thought from Europe (13). Susan Nance further confirms this as she argues that Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries consumed Orientalist literature as part of a dream of escape, a fantasy of leaving behind industrial modernity for a land of romance and sensuality (6). The

Orient offered a space to enact specific American dreams, even to fulfill "the promise of consumer capitalism" (Nance 114). On the surface, Dos Passos is quite aware of this and occasionally mocks it in the travelogue. When he refers to Venice as "the Coney Island of Coney Islands… built for goggle-eyed westerners out of the gaudy claptrap of the east" (6), he simultaneously participates in and critiques the American consumerist appetite for Eastern spectacle.

At the same time, he is clearly influenced by the political realities of the post-WWI zeitgeist, which further complicates any simplistic East/West binary. His Mediterranean, his Orient, is not an entirely imaginary stage but a real, war-torn geography: a space of revolutions, famines, and failed empires. This leads him away from the romantic picture that Said critiques, the "living tableau of queerness" watched but never involved (Said 103-104), and towards a grittier realism. In *Orient Express*, the Orient serves as more of a site of crisis rather than just fantasy, filled with what he calls "roads […] under the terrible bloodrange moon of Asia" (13), a description in a section titled "Massacre" preceding another titled "Assassination." This is a landscape lit not by mystical glow but by symbols of violence and displacement. His grotesque description is more than a stylistic departure from romanticism; it reflects an ideological discomfort with Western voyeurism. This East cannot be watched from a distance, as this portrayal shows how encroaching and unsettling it is.

This tension between aesthetic detachment and political awareness is where Dos Passos tries to situate himself. This does not mean that he consistently employs the same narrative voice. Little notes that by the 1920s, the U.S. was inheriting Britain's role in the region, both economically and ideologically; even as it pretended to be anti-colonial, America projected power eastward (Little 21). Dos Passos is not necessarily going along with this American sentiment, at least not overtly or even consciously, but neither does he stand entirely outside of it. The east-bound American travels to the Mediterranean with the gaze of a literary documentarian battling his own demons. However, he is also followed by the specter of his American national identity, epitomized in his passport. He is, after all, always perceived by the locals he encounters as an American, as a representative of an imposing superpower.

Although his style is admittedly poetic and tends to elicit feelings from the reader rather than being matter-of-fact and guide-like, it allows for the tone of authority that Dos Passos ultimately aims for. In other words, it makes it easier for him to indirectly establish himself as the knowledgeable traveler amongst the vast number of novice tourists, especially when one considers the rarity of his commentary. Edward Bliss Reed writes in *The Yale Review*,

> Dos Passos has the modern restlessness, and his book is kaleidoscopic, one sensation following another in rapid succession. […] These descriptions are authentic; the writer can put a mood in words – the sense of infinite calm one has at times in the East, the feeling that the life one sees is but a pageant and a dream. (605)

The term "Kaleidoscopic," meaning complex and constantly changing, aptly defines what Dos Passos does in the narrative. He sees the Mediterranean and the East as a fragmented and rapidly shifting place, and he mirrors that image through an equally multifaceted style. This literary style is one of the tools he uses to be perceived as authentic and, eventually, to command authority through his discourse. Authenticity, or rather the ability to "put a mood in words," aligns with Michel Foucault's idea that discourse shapes and controls the interpretation of reality (Foucault 217).

Reed's reference to the East as "infinite calm" or "a pageant and a dream" reflects the typical romanticized perspective, similar to Dos Passos's portrayal. Nevertheless, Dos Passos's definition of the East is more nuanced and dynamic; it goes beyond a stationary setting of

ancient cultures and beautiful landscapes. He walks that fine line between maintaining a link to reality and unconsciously conjuring his American-ness. The following comparison serves as a good example of this nuance: as mentioned before, he compares Venice to Coney Island, a traditional American destination for entertainment and amusement. By doing this, he underscores the city's superficial appeal to tourists; he is also attempting to uncover the grittier, more "authentic" reality of "tidewater smell, rotting piles and mudflats" (6). Dos Passos further compounds that by using the term "Midway of history", a clear reference to the Midway Plaisance in Chicago,[2] which suggests that the city has been turned into a historical spectacle, a gaudy repackaging of what used to be, masking the true essence of Venice and the Mediterranean.

The East-bound American in the Crossfire

Orient Express is filled with references to ongoing and past conflicts and wars, emphasizing Dos Passos's intense awareness of, if not obsession with, the political and social turbulences in the countries and nations he visits. This is perhaps due to his recent struggles in the war. His travels through the Mediterranean revolve almost exclusively around the visible and invisible scars of war that are omnipresent throughout the text, from the ruins of old civilizations to the contemporary turmoil that defines much of the 1920s geopolitical landscape. Using his unique style and detailed descriptions of the cost and political complexities of these conflicts, Dos Passos attempts to challenge, in his own way, conventional, romanticized perspectives.

Dos Passos's vivid descriptions are, of course, based on the decrepit reality of the Mediterranean so soon after WWI. It is his unwavering interest in them throughout the narrative, however, that stands out as the author's driving force. He writes in the early pages, "perhaps most of [the people of Batum] went in the war under the grinding wheels of so many invading and occupying armies, the Russians, the Germans, the British, the Turks, the Georgian Social-Democrats and lastly the Red Army" (29). This tallying of successive colonial powers not only emphasizes the ever-changing, cyclical nature of war and conflict, but, more importantly, shifts the focus to the area's identity as an eternal battleground where the oppressor and liberator tend to change places every decade or so. The phrase "grinding wheels" compounds the extent of his fixation on war: it is crushing, inescapable, and impersonal.

Although Dos Passos tries to focus on, or at least highlight, the nuance of conflicts and cultural differences in the Mediterranean, he seldom engages in conversation about them. When a Greek girl asks him why he would want to learn Turkish and ends her question with, "you must side with the Greeks; you mustn't learn Turkish" (12). The question remains, why didn't he provide a direct answer to that obviously subjective question, and thus keep the dialogue going? He chooses instead to pontificate to his readers in the following paragraph about his reasoning as opposed to relaying his answer to the girl. "There was something in that wave of the hand of the soaring of minarets and the cry of muezzins and the impassive eyes of the elderly Turkish gentlemen in white vests sitting so quiet beside rejoicing Greeks in the Jardin de Taxim. There are reasons for learning Turkish" (12). By not engaging with the girl's request directly, he eludes the political and cultural implications of subjectivity, of favoring one group over another in a space known for historical tensions. Instead, he creates an ambivalent, poetic explanation that allows him to maintain his veneer of objective observer. Through these narrative choices, he ultimately seeks to create a persona for his readers: the objective chronicler of the heterogeneous, conflict-ridden Mediterranean.

Beyond that, by ending the passage with "There are reasons to learn Turkish," Dos Passos hints at a more profound understanding only accessible to him, which he chooses not to divulge.

This adds to his persona as the worldly, knowledgeable, east-bound American, but it remains a vague assertion that shows his hesitation to fully engage with the intricacies of the region's clashes. This retreat into abstraction is a recurring element throughout the travelogue as he avoids direct confrontation and instead offers his readers a romanticized, albeit indifferent, representation of the Mediterranean.

In "observing" the Greco-Turkish conflict and its aftermath, Dos Passos cannot help but manifest and ultimately critique his own American-ness and what the U.S. stands for in the world arena during this period. He quotes another Greek voice, "The news must be sent out, continues the archbishop; the world must know the barbarity of the Turks; America must know" (19). The archbishop's petition for the U.S. to be informed draws attention to the significance of American public opinion and foreign policy in influencing international narratives. By including this quote, Dos Passos portrays the U.S. as a powerhouse during the post-WWI period while also revealing the underlying assumption that America serves as the primary arbiter of moral authority in global conflicts. This is an excellent example of how the travelogue attempts a poetic documentation of change in the Mediterranean, while also actively shaping the perspectives and potential actions of a powerful American society.

On the other frontier of the Greco-Turkish conflict, Dos Passos offers an almost cinematic description of the Turkish side, emphasizing an instant of religious intensity and not necessarily political or cultural points of view:

> His body erect, his eyes staring straight into the sunlight, his hands raised level with his beard in the attitude of prayer, the new mollah shouted a prayer full of harsh ringing consonants and brazen upward cadences. … [the Ameen] shook the great dome as the domes of the churches must have shaken with the shout of the fighting-men of Islam the day Constantine's city was carried by assault and the last Constantine killed in his purple boots. (16-17)

The depiction of this scene shifts the reader's attention from the polarizing political discourse of the Greeks to the firmly established cultural and spiritual traditions of the Turks. This subtle choice by Dos Passos brings one back to that nuance and ambivalence previously mentioned. As opposed to what the archbishop would like this east-bound American to believe, he chooses to ground this scene in the history of Constantinople, the history of Islam, and of the Mediterranean.

To his credit in this specific context, in portraying the Turks in this religious light, Dos Passos indirectly challenges the American tendency to reduce global conflicts into juxtapositions between good and evil, enemy and ally. He introduces his readers to a nuanced version of conflict and urges them to consider the various historical forces at play. In this way, he leads his audience towards a sentiment of self-reflection, of how American individuals perceive themselves and others in the context of global encounters and conflicts. Axel Korner writes in *America Imagined* that "Analyzing images of the United States in comparative perspective provides a key to the ways in which societies reflected upon their own past and future, how they experienced change, interpreted history, and fashioned ideas about selfhood and otherness" (3). Dos Passos not only complicates conflict but also critiques the image America holds so sacred of its global place; he attempts to defy the way America imposes its own historical narrative on foreign conflicts.

The Desert Frontier

After his time in Iraq and Baghdad, Dos Passos sets out for Damascus, but instead of crossing the desert in a motor, he joins a caravan. This decision is neither incidental nor simply

adventurous; it is an act of narrative defiance against speed, modernity, and ease. He makes a conscious choice to immerse himself in the hardships of the desert, in a premodern mode of travel that draws on both Orientalist myth and American frontier nostalgia. The journey, which unfolds in increasingly brief and fragmented diary entries, reflects a tension between his effort to observe like a detached American intellectual and his growing emotional, physical, and symbolic entanglement with the desert. His thirty-seven-day crossing becomes not only the longest continuous stretch of observation in *Orient Express* but also a pivot around which themes of identity, adventure, morality, and disillusionment revolve. That he chooses to document each stage as a numbered day betrays a need to anchor experience in measured, almost scientific increments – even as the space he moves through has always been imagined as a landscape that resists logic, progress, or conclusion.

Edward Bliss Reed aptly describes the part of the travelogue that covers this journey as "perhaps the best in the book; he had never been so happy, he says, as in the desert with men of the desert. Truly the spirit of adventure will not down" (605). As Reed and, probably, most readers have deduced, Dos Passos displays an undeniable tone of genuine enjoyment and appreciation for adventure through his literal and metaphorical exploration of conflict, death, and identity in this section about the cultural and historical significance of crossing the desert. From an Orientalist perspective, this is what Edward Said would call "imaginative geography and its representations" (49). Even though Dos Passos is not a typical Orientalist author with an oeuvre devoted to Othering the East, his narrative, in this context, does align with Said's idea of a literary construction of Eastern geographies through fantasy. His images of the desert hinge on his American-ness and that mythical frontier, where crossing the desert represents the discovery of the last uncharted territory, echoing traditional themes of conquest that the author would not directly accept based on the persona of detached observer he attempts to sell throughout the travelogue.

Before delving deeper into Dos Passos's portrayal of the desert, it is important to consider another significant American encounter with it, William Langewiesche's *Sahara Unveiled: A Journey Across the Desert* (1997), a narrative that both complements and complicates Dos Passos's vision. While written decades apart and set in different regions of the broader desert expanse – Dos Passos crosses the Syro-Arabian desert, and Langeweiesche traverses the central North African Sahara –, they are symbolically and thematically connected through the American literary imagination of the desert as "a place of desolation, loss and servitude" (Bejjit 3).

Sahara Unveiled documents Langewiesche's journey through the Sahara Desert overland from the Mediterranean coast of Algeria to the Sahelian borderlands of Niger, following a southbound trajectory that slices through some of the most remote, politically volatile, and environmentally inhospitable terrains on the African continent. His route crosses the then conflict-ridden Algeria and onward into Niger's arid expanse, tracing the ghostly remnants of colonial roads, oil routes, and nomadic paths. Karim Bejjit writes, "Langewiesche approaches the Sahara with the prudence and reverence of a veteran traveler … [with an] unassertive and euphemistic narration" (9-10). The reverence here is an informed approach to an often-misunderstood space by authors and tourists alike. In this sense, Langewiesche constructs his own stark, practical, and dangerous desert. He frequently breaks from "euphemistic" descriptions to detail suffering, politics, and decay. He acknowledges, "Almost as far. Fight as I might, the desert would overwhelm me" (155). Where Dos Passos treats fatigue as part of a soothing rhythm of camel travel, only to be interrupted by the real drudgery of travel, Langewiesche views it as an existential challenge. Even though his "narrative displays caution in voicing any strong political views" (Bejjit 9), the Sahara seems to be a battleground of postcolonial failure and climate extremity.

The difference in tone and circumstance does not mean that the two authors have opposing views of the desert, as their common narrative ground speaks to a continuation in American literary exploration and consciousness. Dos Passos, writing in the early twentieth century, views the desert with a degree of reverence shaped by the American frontier myth. His is a desert where "men of the desert" (Reed 605) represent a noble simplicity, untouched by capitalist excess. Langewiesche, on the other hand, writes of a world in which such myths have evolved. He presents his interactions with locals in a subdued "almost self-effacing tone," prioritizing these human encounters over any detailed engagement with the surrounding landscape (Bejjit 9). For him, the Tuareg are not exotic sages but embattled survivors of oil geopolitics and fractured states. He quotes the Tuareg rebel Mano Dayak's *Touareg, La Tragédie* [3], "Colonization hurt us enormously, but we have known worse since then" (204). The desert, in this account, has already absorbed the violence of empire, and it remains. His reverence stems from the way the resilience of the natives shapes the greatness of the space.

Dos Passos's diary tone constructs a kind of passive witness: he is not the doer, but the one to whom things happen. Langewiesche compounds this by translating the tragedies of others and consequently questioning his own position as an outsider bearing witness. Dos Passos's desert adventure partially remains within the structure of a romantic narrative while observing war and conflict. Langewiesche adds to that tradition with his account of war, water shortages, and conflicts over oil. He writes, "It was as if the Sahara had refused to be reduced to oil" (16). The terrain resists its reality and insists on being harsh and uneven. Both texts betray the same American impulse: to write a desert, to narrate its silence, and to find in it a reflection of the self.

Susan Nance examines how the representation of the East in American popular culture was deeply connected to the rise of consumer capitalism. She also rightly critiques the reductionist application of Edward Said's Orientalism in the American context, highlighting the nuanced relationship between the East and the U.S. as rooted in consumerism rather than in typical imperialist aspirations.

In combining both Said and Nance's approaches to the topic, one could easily see a pattern emerging in Dos Passos's narrative, especially in the desert. He constantly alludes to the influence of *Arabian Nights* on his perception not only of the East but also of the Mediterranean in general. He writes, "Trebizond, one of the capitals of my childhood geography, a place of swords and nightingales and purple-born princes in a garden where trees grew rubies and diamonds instead of flowers…" (27). He juxtaposes his imaginative, nostalgic expectations with the stark, deserted reality of present-day Trebizond. "The real Trebizond […] defies inspection; amid rumored 'reprisals' against the Greek and Armenian population of the town" (Makayran and Toghramadjin 97). Later during the desert adventure, he comically uses the same *Arabian Nights* imagery, "Rode with the fat sheikh, who kept producing legs of chicken out of his saddlebags" (100). The influence of the East on American identity and the tendency to imagine and construct geographies are clearly important driving principles in Dos Passos's desert adventure, thus exposing his unconscious American-ness even further.

Right before embarking on his desert odyssey, Dos Passos sets the tone for one of the main themes of the adventure. He hears some shots fired and hears an Arabic word that, in his opinion, sums up all that was happening,

> the word dead, Miut, I recognized because coming up from Baghdad we passed the body of a Hindoo boy beside the road lying on its back with a stony smile, and Jassem had come back to the car from looking at it, had shaken his beard and said, Miut, and we had driven on. (96)

This stark reminder of mortality and the chilling detachment with which it is described foreshadows the image of the desert Dos Passos will cross, construct, and reconstruct: a space where death is an omnipresent companion. Although this may seem at face value as a concise introduction of harsh realities, it is also a romanticized version of what would otherwise simply be a trip from point A to point B. Starting the journey with death, in an oddly similar style to how it is done in *Arabian Nights*, glamorizes the danger surrounding crossing the desert, venturing forth into the perilous unknown.

Despite his choice to paint the journey as a perilous endeavor haunted by the specter of death, Dos Passos creates moments of idealistic romanticism in the desert, using the old American premise of finding freedom and simplicity in a nomadic existence rather than the complexities of modern life. He sends his valuable watch by plane instead of taking it with him through the desert; he has very little money on him: "I tried to explain that I was fakir, a poor man, and had no floos of any sort, but he would not believe me" (107); and he enjoys the fact that he has no responsibility, "like being a dervish or a very small child" (101), as he puts it. However, as stated above, Dos Passos's shift in tone and demeanor after a while reveals a central theme throughout the text: the romantic notions of adventure, freedom, and discovery are constantly undermined by the physical realities and psychological fatigue of the journey.

This alternation between romance and reality in the desert as experienced by an east-bound American is also evident in his interactions with his fellow travelers, particularly when he assumes, or is assigned, the label of the 'Hakim,' wise man. This status, which denotes power and authority, places Dos Passos on the pedestal of a figure of influence, much like his own country on the world map. Even though it is unclear where the title comes from, it is definitely ascribed to his American identity in one way or another. He confirms this by sarcastically lamenting, "That's the hell of being a Hakim and sitting in a crimson tent. Everything you do has political significance" (107). His attempt at downplaying his revered status and creating the impression of himself as an outsider, humorously rejecting the label of wise man, falls a bit short and instead highlights the nuanced dynamics of identity and power in a foreign land; his musings instead remind one of Orientalist bromides like that of 'The White Man's Burden.'[4]

Both *Orient Express* and *Sahara Unveiled* are built around the voice of the outsider, but it is the nature of that displacement that distinguishes Dos Passos from Langewiesche. Dos Passos positions himself as a passive traveler, someone merely swept along by others' movement. Yet paradoxically, the figure he becomes in the desert is not just a man among men, but "the Hakim," a symbol of knowledge and quiet authority. This performance of reluctant authority reflects what Nance identifies as a recurring pattern in American cultural representations of the East. She argues that Americans "played Eastern" not necessarily to dominate but to indulge in self-fashioning, to project ideals of abundance and leisure (21). Interestingly, many perceived these ideals to be aspects of Eastern life, while "the same vision [was] promised by the consumer capitalist ideology that would come to define the American dream" (Nance 2). In this tradition, Dos Passos becomes a character in a transnational fantasy: the American who sheds modern anxiety in the perceived simplicity of the East, of the desert. Even when he mocks the Kiplingesque tropes of imperial travel writing—calling the crowd at a station "characterless natives out of Kipling" (82)—he remains within the same visual economy. He may look down on Orientalism, but he does not quite escape it.

He employs this literary reference to avoid directly reducing the people in front of him to Orientalist stereotypes. He continues by seemingly critiquing Kipling's reductive vision of colonized people by arguing that Persian pilgrims, who, upon crossing "the magic line of British dominion," lose their "dignity of feature and gesture" (82). To him, they become mere "featureless natives out of Kipling" (82). Being featureless and characterless, in Dos Passos' American eyes, is a direct consequence of their engagement with British imperialism. This

further highlights his ambivalence through suggesting an underlying tension between his own romantic perception of these people and the colonial lens through which Kipling has historically depicted them.

Langewiesche, on the other hand, moves among people with names, faces, and traumas. He does not pretend to be above the political scene unfolding around him. Instead, he frames his presence in terms of tense proximity. "We Americans are not afraid to get our hands dirty!" says a Texan oilman he met through a native. By portraying this encounter with an individual who apparently epitomizes American brashness, he mocks it and also highlights his own role in observing suffering. The comment is powerful because it is true: Langewiesche is not a detached philosopher of the desert; he is immersed in its filth, its futility, and its postcolonial fallout. His subjects are Tuareg nomads, broken trucks, and Saharan survivalists; there is no crimson tent or dervish metaphor.

Both writers, however, embody American exceptionalism in one way or another. Dos Passos does so by attempting to refuse it but failing. Similarly, Langewiesche's deeply journalistic stance still relies on his position as a Western observer with mobility and exit routes, unavoidably insulated.

Conclusion: Mapping a Mirage

Dos Passos's *Orient Express* is a travelogue that serves as a fractured mirror of the 1920s Mediterranean world, filtered through the disillusioned, politically sensitized gaze of a postwar American observer. His writing is both poetic and unsteady, personal and distant, romantic and grounded in reality. At every stage of the journey, Dos Passos is in pursuit not only of experience but of meaning. What emerges is less a map of the lands visited than a meditation on history, identity, and contradiction. As this article has shown, the Mediterranean for him was not simply a sea or setting; it was a crucible where empire, revolution, and memory collided, and where a modernist American writer could test the limits of detachments, empathy, and narrative control.

The symbolic core of this article has been the desert. It is here, in his thirty-seven-day caravan, that Dos Passos seems to find something resembling clarity, or perhaps a mirage of it. His embrace of slowness, suffering, and danger in the desert reveals his desire to escape the tyranny of Western speed, of American consumerism, and of historical fatigue. And yet, even in the heart of the desert, his metaphors betray him. Bandits are filtered through Buffalo Bill, and sheiks resemble the characters from childhood fairy tales. His East is never quite free of the American gaze; his American exceptionalism remains an inescapable lens.

Endnotes

1. The "Camera Eye" in Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* is a stream-of-consciousness narrative device that captures his personal, subjective impressions and memories. For further reading, see Donald Pizer, "The Camera Eye in *U.S.A.*: The Sexual Center," *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 26, no.3, 1980, pp. 417-30.
2. "Midway Plaisance." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation,17 Apr. 2024, https://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Midway_Plaisance.
3. In this work, Dayak outlines the Tuareg people's plight and grievances against the Niger government. Mano Dayak was a prominent leader who played a significant role in the Tuareg rebellion during the 1990s. For further reading, see Baz Lecocq, "Unemployed Intellectuals in the Sahara: The 'Teshumara' Nationalist Movement and the Revolutions in Tuareg Society," *International Review of Social History*, vol. 49, 2004, pp. 87–109.

4. The concept of "The White Man's Burden" originates from the 1899 Rudyard Kipling poem. It was originally written to encourage U.S. colonial intervention in the Philippines after the Spanish-American War. The idea posits that white Europeans, and by extension Americans, had the responsibility or burden of civilizing "backward" non-Europeans.

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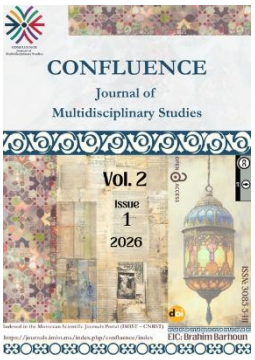
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CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

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

The Body of the Condemned: Memory and Resistance in Abdellatif Laâbi's Carceral Poetry

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.6122

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Received: 11-09-2025 Accepted: 13-01-2026 Published: 19-01-2026

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ABSTRACT

The Years of Lead represent one of the darkest periods in Moroccan postcolonial history. This era, however, has generated a rich corpus of carceral literature that gained prominence in the 1990s due to the relatively open political climate that tolerated dissenting voices and allowed the revisiting of the nation's troubled past. Abdellatif Laâbi's carceral poetry, while part of this broader corpus, stands apart for its immediacy and distinctive corporeal poetics. Through close readings of his key carceral texts, particularly "Tu parles ou on te tue," "Soleils aux arrêts," *L'arbre de fer fleurit*, and "Lettres à mes amis d'outre-mer," this article examines how Laâbi deploys the body as a dual site of memory and resistance, drawing on Fanon's concept of the "colonized body" and Foucault's notion of the "carceral archipelago." The article argues that Laâbi's carceral poetry constructs a new political imagination, positioning the imprisoned body along two interconnected axes: as a living archive that preserves Morocco's collective memory and contests official historiography, and as a locus of resistance where solidarity, agency, and secular mysticism enable transcendence. This dual articulation of embodied memory and resistance moves beyond pursuing vindictive justice to forge a reconciliatory vision, at once rooted in the past while projecting new horizons toward future democratic possibilities.

KEYWORDS

Carceral
Laâbi
Poetry
Corporeal Poetics
Body
Collective Memory
Resistance

Introduction

Morocco's Years of Lead continue to mark the nation's collective memory. Alongside the documented cases of systematic persecution and forced disappearances exists a literary archive that resists historical erasure. The Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi stands among the most prominent voices who emerged from this period of state violence. His writings constitute not retrospective testimonies composed after release, but rather a literature produced under the material constraints of imprisonment itself, marked by the immediacy of corporeal duress and aesthetic defiance. His carceral poetry epitomizes what could be termed "corporeal poetics," a mode of literary production wherein the imprisoned body functions simultaneously as the surface of state violence and as an agent of creative defiance, historical witnessing, and political subjectivity.

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While Laâbi's carceral corpus has garnered significant critical attention for its place within his broader lit

erary trajectory, poetic representations of imprisonment have received comparatively less scholarly focus. Notable studies include Andy Stafford's "Poésie dans les prisons du roi-Dialectique du solaire dans l'œuvre carcérale d'Abdellatif Laâbi" (2021) and Camille Lotz's "La ville carcérale ou le tombeau de la mémoire: étude des premiers recueils d'Abdellatif Laâbi et Tahar Djaout (1960-1980)," both of which explore memory, civic consciousness, and metaphorical representations of carcerality. The corporeal dimension of his work remains, however, relatively underexplored, with two noteworthy exceptions: Victor Reinking's "Reading the Body Politic in the Prison Writings of Abdellatif Laâbi" (2016) and Anna Cavness's "Inscriptions of the Sovereign Body in Abdellatif Laâbi" (2013). While these studies valuably attend to the materiality of violence in Laâbi's work, they tend to treat the body as descriptive content rather than as an analytical framework, missing how his corporeal poetics systematically interrogates the disciplinary mechanisms undergirding state violence.

A critical lacuna persists: How does Laâbi's carceral poetry deploy the body strategically to interrogate not merely the material conditions of imprisonment but the deeper disciplinary logic seeking to produce submissive subjects with docile bodies? While scholars have examined what happened to imprisoned bodies, less attention has been paid to how Laâbi's poetics theorizes the body itself as a site where power relations are both imposed and contested. This distinction proves crucial insofar as it shifts perspective from documenting carceral violence to grasping poetry's potential to uncover the underlying systems that engender such violence. This article thus highlights both the materiality of the prison experience and the embedded disciplinary apparatus operative in Laâbi's carceral poetry through sustained textual analysis.

Through close readings of four key carceral texts—"Tu parles ou on te tue," "Soleils aux arrêts," *L'arbre de fer fleurit*, and "Lettres à mes amis d'outre-mer"—this article contends that Laâbi's carceral poetry constitutes a distinctive corporeal poetics operating along two interconnected axes. First, it positions the condemned body as a living archive that preserves Morocco's collective memory, bearing witness to atrocities the state sought to obliterate during the Years of Lead and contesting official historiography. Second, it reimagines the body as a locus of resistance where solidarity and agency enable transcendence of spatial restrictions and physical violence without forsaking corporeal materiality. This dialectical articulation of embodied memory and resistance moves beyond vindictive justice toward a reconciliatory vision rooted in past accountability while gesturing toward future democratic possibilities.

This analysis draws upon two intersecting theoretical frameworks: Frantz Fanon's theorization of the colonized body and Michel Foucault's concept of the "carceral archipelago." Fanon's insights illuminate the troubling continuity between colonial corporeal subjugation and postcolonial state violence—what this article conceptualizes as the shift from "the body of the colonized" to "the body of the condemned." This transition exposes how Morocco's postcolonial state reproduced the disciplinary mechanisms it ostensibly overthrew, generating profound disillusionment among Laâbi's generation. Foucault's "carceral archipelago,"[1] read alongside Fanon's corporeal critique, illuminates the dual function of Laâbi's poetry: it documents the immediate materiality of eight-and-a-half years of detention while simultaneously exposing the systemic disciplinary mechanisms through which postcolonial state power operates. The convergence of these frameworks elucidates how Laâbi's corporeal poetics challenge not only physical confinement but also the "unbreakable system" itself (*La brûlure* 41).

The article proceeds through four sections. Following this introduction, the second section traces the biographical and historical context that defines Laâbi as a "carceral poet"—his

formative experiences, the *Souffles* years, his imprisonment during Morocco's Years of Lead, and his sustained engagement with confinement. The third section constructs a theoretical framework, elaborating on Fanon's and Foucault's concepts while situating Laâbi within, yet not reducible to, Moroccan traditions of prison literature, a categorization, while accurate, risks obscuring the destabilizing force of his poetics. The analytical core follows in sections four and five, examining how the body functions as an archive, a repository of memory, testimony, and alternative historiography, and a locus of resistance, generating solidarity, reclaiming agency, and ultimately gesturing toward transcendence. The conclusion reflects on Laâbi's enduring carceral legacy and examines how his corporeal poetics gains its contemporary relevance in a world marked by systemic violence. This study intervenes in postcolonial literary criticism, carceral studies, and Moroccan Francophone poetry by demonstrating how Laâbi's corporeal poetics carries testimonial weight and critical force. By refusing to separate memory from resistance and testimony from aesthetics, Laâbi's carceral poetry offers methodological insights for reading carceral literature beyond documentary paradigms. As states worldwide expand carceral systems to silence political dissent, detain migrants, and criminalize resistance, Laâbi's poetry speaks with particular urgency to our present moment, exposing what totalitarianism seeks to disavow. The imprisoned body, therefore, challenges state attempts at suppression and effacement, persisting as an irreducible site of dignity, imagination, and defiance.

Biographical and Historical Context: The Making of a Carceral Poet

What persecution sought to obliterate has, with time, been both commemorated and celebrated. Abdellatif Laâbi's life embodies this poetic justice. The radical vision that once landed him in a prison cell—first in Casablanca and then in Kenitra—would eventually bring him back to his home city, Fes, in 2019 to visit a primary school named in his honor, where students embodied the future he had fought for. This recognition not only signals the state's shifting attitudes toward its dissenting voices but also attests to his sustained presence within Moroccan public life. Born in 1942 during the French protectorate and World War II, Laâbi's childhood unfolded in the alleys of Fes, where he first encountered French at the Franco-Muslim school. He would later recount these formative years in his memoir Le fond de la jarre.[2] As a young man, Laâbi sought new avenues to broaden his experiences and his knowledge beyond the confines of his social entourage. He moved to Rabat, where a new era of his personal, academic, and activist career began. He continued his secondary school education at Moulay Idriss school, then enrolled at the Faculty of Letters at Mohammed V University. As a university student, Laâbi became an ardent reader of Fanon's works, particularly *Les damnés de la terre*, a text that resonated deeply with his personal history and Morocco's collective postcolonial history (*La brûlure* 31). The book marked an epiphanic moment in his intellectual consciousness, catalyzing a profound shift from a relatively simplistic worldview to a more nuanced understanding and way of thinking. In 1962, he became a French teacher at Al Laymoune high school in Rabat. The following year, Laâbi co-founded the Moroccan University Theatre, where he met Jocelyne, his future wife, whose family had emigrated to Morocco in the 1950s. The couple married in 1964.

Laâbi launched his career as a co-founder and chief editor of the French-language Moroccan journal *Souffles* (1966-72), where he published his early poems—namely "marasme" (1966) in the first issue, "mémoire-corps" (1966) in the third issue, "oeil juin 67" (1968) in the double issue of 10-11, "Mobilisation-tract" (1969) in the double issue of 13-14, "Nous sommes tous des réfugiés palestiniens" (1969) in the fifteenth issue, and "Les singes électroniques" (1969) in the double issue of 16-17. Initially serving as a venue for French-language experimental poetry, *Souffles* expanded its scope to include literary and cultural content, as well as visual art.

The journal also fostered a politics of bilingualism and translation before the creation of Anfas, its Arabic-language companion, in 1971. Laâbi's work in *Souffles* gradually shifted beyond the cultural field into political activism, a transition that led to the banning of the journal and his arrest in 1972. He remained eight and a half years behind bars before his release on the 18th of July,1980, following an international campaign led by his wife, Jocelyne, and relentless pressure from European intellectuals and leftist organizations. This phase was marked by the publication of important poetic texts, namely *L'arbre de fer fleurit* (1974), *Histoire des sept crucifiés de l'espoir* (1980), and *Sous le bâillon, le poème* (1981).

Although prison imposed a rupture with the outside world, it also offered Laâbi an opportunity to reflect on his ideological, political, and literary orientations. This paradoxical nature of confinement was captured in a letter he sent to Jocelyne on November 22nd, 1975:

> Tout ce que j'ai pu lire dans les livres ou voir à l'écran, tout ce que j'ai pu imaginer auparavant diffère beaucoup de l'expérience concrète elle-même. Il y manquait une dimension qui se trouve être justement la plus saillante. C'est cette interminable confrontation avec soi-même, ce monologue exceptionnel qui donne une matérialité particulière au corps, à la pensée, cette émergence à l'intérieur de soi comme d'un nouvel espace, d'un creuset où passé, présent et avenir entrent en collision provoquant des éclatements sourds, un flot d'images, un chœur de rumeurs, des cascades de mouvements. (*Chroniques* 84)
>
> [Everything I was able to read in books or see on screen, everything I was able to imagine beforehand, differs greatly from the concrete experience itself. There was a missing dimension that is the most salient one. It is this interminable confrontation with the self, this exceptional monologue that gives a particular materiality to the body, to the thought, this emergence within oneself as of a new space, of a crucible where past, present, and future collide, provoking muffled bursts, a flood of images, a choir of rumours, cascades of movements.][3]

Despite the harsh conditions of his detention, prison became a unique theatre of observation where Laâbi restored his intimacy with the self and delved into the mystery of the human. The physical barriers of the cell did not prevent the Moroccan poet from exploring his inner world; in fact, he took advantage of the ample amount of time he had in prison to engage in a fearless encounter with the self. This was a phase of productive reflections that questioned all the restraints that could bind his ideas, his writings, and, most intimately, his body. This particularly embodied carceral experience, rooted in the specific historical moment of the Years of Lead, necessitated a theoretical framework capable of grasping not only the materiality of confinement but also its generative possibilities for poetic resistance.

Theoretical and Critical Framework: Body, Memory, and Resistance

Situated at the intersection of philosophical, moral, religious, and aesthetic approaches, the body persists as a multifarious object that does not abide by fixed meanings, becoming radically indeterminate at the very moment we attempt to define it (Gil 86). Its presence across disciplines and its production of diverse arrays of meanings necessitate a nuanced grasp of its complex networks. Isaac Bazié argues that the body operates within a dual framework in literary representations: as a self-contained sign unaffected by external semantic determination and as a metaphor for cultural and social contexts, generating multiple interpretations through its

referential dimensions (15). Laâbi's French-language texts employ corporeal poetics as an essential paradigm to apprehend his postcolonial vision. His texts, often symbolic, do not suffice to present the body as a physical or personal entity of the individual. Rather, the body serves as a metaphor that conveys thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about cultural and political conditions at local and global scales.

Laâbi's postcolonial poetry carries the hallmarks of a stigmatized body, signaling a crisis in negotiating both the colonial legacy and the post-colonial challenges. Colonial discourse constructs the colonized body as an eroticized, inferior Other. Its metaphoric articulation operates through the exclusive lens of Western categorizations of normality vs. abnormality and centrality vs. marginality. In response, Laâbi's corporeal poetics defy these binary categorizations, offering alternative responses that underscore cultural difference and imagined alterity. Drawing on Fanon's conception of the body politic, an influence evident from his formative university years, Laâbi finds particular inspiration in two foundational texts: *Peau noire, masques blancs* and *Les damnés de la terre*. In the first book, Fanon exposes the destructive violence inflicted by "white masks" on "black skins," especially in chapter five entitled "L'expérience vécue du Noir," where racialized representations of the black *malédiction corporelle* [corporeal curse] trigger disaffecting and disturbing bodily responses.[4] In the second book, Fanon uses the body to epitomize the anti-colonial struggles of Algerian people, resonating with the broader transcolonial struggles across the Maghreb and Africa.[5] Building upon Fanon's corporeal framework, Laâbi deploys the body as a dual terrain, interrogating both the colonial enterprise and the unfulfilled promises of the postcolonial state. His poetry from the *Souffles* era enacts textual violence, merging hallucinatory images with visceral language and echoing, in manifest ways, the Fanonian concept of redemptive violence. The body thus operates as a fundamental hermeneutic vector and generative force that drives his poetic imagination. Within this framework, the colonized body becomes a cultural signifier and a metonymic marker of difference—a body in constant search of its being and its raison d'être.

Yet, this search was interrupted by a bitter historical irony: the postcolonial state reproduced the very colonial apparatus of corporeal subjugation it had previously condemned. The reconfiguration from the colonized body to the condemned body thus marks more than a temporal shift; it represents a critical recalibration dictated by the imperatives of the Years of Lead. Laâbi's incarceration exposes a troubling continuity: power had merely changed oppressors while maintaining the same architecture of domination. This shift imposed a new corporeal reality that refuses to reduce the body to a mere victim of violence, reimagining it instead as an active agent that produces creative resistance, collective memory, and transcendent solidarity. Laâbi's corporeal poetics are best understood through the dialectical lens of what Bergman-Rosamond et al. label as the "forces of ruination and renewal" (13). In the preface of Laâbi's book *Rue du Retour*,[6] Breyten Breytenbach—a South African poet who was also a political prisoner (1975-1982), overlapping significantly with Laâbi's own incarceration—asserts that the carceral writings of the Moroccan poet are descriptions of an ordeal that torments and purifies the body, illuminating life while converting it into transcendent lightness (iii). Breytenbach's remark aligns with Laâbi's poetic works, reflecting a profound understanding of the inherent dynamics of crisis that inform his corporeal poetics: questioning what is taken for granted, underlining the duality of destruction and reconstruction, and perceiving crisis as an illuminating experience and a transformative period that opens new avenues of saying and seeing. It is as if the South African poet were reading these lines from Laâbi's poem *L'arbre de fer fleurit*:

puisque la poésie

pour se purifier
pour se soumettre à l'ordalie
doit passer par les cimes de tes yeux
puisque mon souffle
rebondit d'une autre poitrine?
J'écris
et ma main vient de loin
pour imprimer sur la rouille de mes barreaux
les paroles illuminées du poème (276-85)

[since poetry
to purify itself
to submit to the ordeal
must pass through the peaks of your eyes
since my breath returns
from another breast?
I write
and my hand comes from afar
to etch upon my rusted bars
the luminous words of the poem]

The corporeal elements—the eyes, the breast, and the hand—are fundamental constituents through which the underlying forces of crisis are embraced, and the power of verse is revealed.

A terminological clarification is necessary at this point. The terms "prison" and "carceral" are used strategically in the article to demonstrate the different manifestations of imprisonment and resistance. "Prison" designates the concrete temporal and spatial experience, while the term "carceral," following Foucault's concept of "carceral archipelago," refers to the mechanisms governing the state's disciplinary apparatus. As Foucault argues, "the carceral archipelago assures, in the depths of the social body, the formation of delinquency on the basis of subtle illegalities" (*Discipline and Punish* 301), extending prison logic beyond physical walls to structure social relations and political subjectivity. Framed this way, Laâbi's carceral poetry enacts a double movement: it both records the prison material conditions and critiques the embedded structures that inform its "unbreakable system" (*La brûlure* 41). His intervention thus resists both the physical confinement and the carceral logic that strives to produce compliant subjects with docile bodies.

The Body as Archive: Collective Memory and Historical Witness

Laâbi's carceral poetry emerges from a rich tradition of Moroccan prison literature, including Tahar Ben Jelloun, Aziz Binebine, Rachida Yacoubi, Ahmed Marzouki, Abdelhak Serhane, Saïda Menebhi, and Fatna El Bouih. Yet it distinguishes itself through a distinctive corporeal poetics: rather than producing testimony about the imprisoned body, Laâbi's poetry inscribes memory onto the irreducible materiality of the body itself, collapsing the distinction between testimony and the body that produces it. The body transforms into an archive that preserves collective memory, functioning simultaneously as a site of memory and resistance.

Whether recounted in direct testimony or mediated through literary works, Moroccan prison writings fashion a distinct corpus that engages in "memory revisiting" (Orlando 275), offering new perspectives on the construction of negated memories systematically manipulated by

official historiographic accounts. Laâbi's reconstruction of this *mémoire refoulée* [repressed memory] moves from "my body" to "our bodies," insisting that, under severe conditions of violence and dispossession, individual bodily sufferings cannot be separated from collective bodily memory. The body as archive thus goes beyond the limitations of single, isolated testimony to forge communal memory and collective historiography. The shift from individual to collective memory manifests vividly in Laâbi's rendering of his fellow detainees' suffering. When Laâbi portrays the corporeal and psychological pains that Serfaty's sister, Évelyne, endured at the hands of her merciless torturers, he establishes solid sites of shared corporeal experiences. In doing so, his corporeal poetics do not speak for her but speak with her. In a poignant poem entitled "Tu parles ou on te tue," the speaker bears witness to her tragic death, rejecting any attempt to bury her memories along with her body:

> de tous ceux qui ont cru
> qu'avec le temps
> ton petit cadavre
> n'obstruerait plus l'horizon de leurs forfaits
> de tous ceux
> proches ou lointains
> qui oseraient t'oublier (35-41)
>
> [of all those who thought
> your little body
> would cease to bulk up the list of their crimes
> of all those
> near or far
> who would dare to forget you][7]

In this torment, the body stands as a key means of structuring commemoration against past historical cover-ups. By placing the body on the discursive site of collective memory, an alternative space of Moroccan history is jointly recounted, contesting the state's single narratives. Contrary to all attempts that aim at infusing a systematic memory suppression among detainees, the speaker defiantly announces: "Mes morts / sont trop vivants en moi" (49-50) [My dead / are too alive within me]. As such, the poet is placed as a guardian of memory, generating a collective voice for the new generation that did not live in that historical era and for those who lived it but could not speak about it. By expanding Laâbi's personal experience to include his fellow prisoners, the body becomes a living archive that exposes the embedded structure of violence and narrates untold stories of prisoners who lived through and resisted it, leading to the construction of a collective memory that remedies how the nation recollects its past.

Laâbi's poetry played a vital role in capturing the complex nuances of the Years of Lead. Marked by their immediacy, his poems were among the first texts that offered an alternative voice to the state's dominant discourse. After his release from prison in 1980, Laâbi's mind was beset by daunting corporeal questions: What does it mean for a body to be free after eight and a half years behind bars? What can he offer to Moroccan people as a poet whose corporeal festering wounds are still unhealed? Laâbi's Rue du Retour opens with an epigraphic poem in which the body fluctuates between remembering and forgetting, moving forward and looking back, and hoping and fearing. The overall narrative begins with the experience of liberation but repeatedly returns to the re-enactment of the most tragic moments of imprisonment—the body is remembered in its solitude and in collective solidarity. These recurring corporeal flashbacks

attest to the sustained presence of the condemned body even after its release. In this sense, the body becomes the archive inscribed with the lingering effects of carceral trauma. The released body thus serves as a living reminder that collective memory cannot be separated from its condemned body and its scars.

Laâbi's texts testify to the brutalities he endured in prison, yet they eschew personal vindictiveness or any exclusive desire to settle old scores with his former persecutors. Instead, Laâbi opens new horizons for a new Morocco, documenting and ruminating on this dark period of the nation's postcolonial history. The resurrection of eclipsed memories and the restoration of historical knowledge to the realms of public fora, therefore, give these recollections a performative dimension: the capacity to reconstruct the past, question the present, and shape the future. This reconciliatory vision anticipated, though only partially, the state's tendency to reconcile with its past, which would materialize decades later. In 2004, King Mohammed VI established the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC) to investigate human rights violations committed during the Years of Lead and to rehabilitate their victims. The official attempts to negotiate this transition, however, functioned within political tactics that did not strike a balance between the damages suffered by the victims and the circumscribed justice offered by the state. Despite the restraints and challenges of this institutional experience, Morocco remains a rare case in North Africa and the Arab World where the silence of the archives has not only been broken but critically revisited. The ERC remains a powerful symbol of the opportunities and challenges surrounding the transition from traumatic pasts toward redemptive possibilities for the future. In this light, the commission serves as both a site where competing politics of memory are negotiated and an index of the ongoing tension between official historiography and alternative carceral testimonies. Laâbi's texts thus embody both a multi-voiced Moroccan narrative of witness and a narrative of reconciliation, preserving traces of memory while moving forward to construct a more democratic Morocco based on liberty, justice, and dignity.

These sites of memory provide a healing experience that enables the poet to restore hope, which seems to be the only viable way to overcome violence and emerge from the carceral experience feeling totally free. As Laâbi confirms, memory operates within the body itself: "Quand ma mémoire devient houleuse s'agite et que ses flots viennent se fracasser contre les rivages de mes yeux" (*Chronique* 136) [When my memory grows turbulent and stirs, and its waves come crashing against the shores of my eyes]. By inscribing collective memory onto the body, Laâbi transforms it into a site of social and political critique that contests both official human rights discourse and sanctioned historiography. His poetry hence constructs a political imagination that transgresses power relations and establishes spaces for dissenting voices. In doing so, Laâbi's verse exalts a higher vision of the self while bearing witness to the victory of pen over sword and retention over amnesia.

The Resisting Body: Solidarity, Agency, and Transcendence

The modalities of corporeal memory and resistance operate through dialectical praxis: the body remembers through resistance, and resists through remembering. In this way, memory becomes an act of resistance precisely when the disciplinary apparatus demands forgetting. Laâbi's poetic investment in Morocco's carceral past establishes a new historical consciousness that questions the state mechanisms of selective memories. In addition to his dual commitment—an ethical duty to ensure the veracity of the recounted events and a poetic duty to maintain the aesthetic tone of his verse—Laâbi's poetry functions as a site of contestation, seeking to breach not only prison walls but also what he depicts as an ostensibly inviolable system of control (*La*

brûlure 41). His survival within the extreme and abusive conditions of detention was partly due to a solid *esprit de groupe* among detainees. Laâbi realized that his resistance could not have been concretized without a collective spirit of solidarity. This explains his tendency to inhabit his comrades' bodies in some of his carceral poetic texts. In "Tu parles on te tue," for example, the speaker voices his support for Évelyne and reiterates that he will not abandon either her or his fellow inmates: "Je ne peux pas abandonner mes morts" (43) [I cannot abandon my dead]; "je ne veux pas abandonner mes morts" (46) [I do not want to abandon my dead]; "je ne peux pas t'abandonner" (160) [I cannot leave you]. Laâbi understood that his stay could be prolonged. Consequently, he used all the means at his disposal to strengthen bonds with his fellow prisoners. In this sense, Laâbi's carceral experience was a "self-discovery through knowing the other … realisation of one-ness and none-ness, and thus (nonetheless) of our shared brotherhood" (Breytenbach iv). The dialectical movement of "one-ness" and "none-ness" allows suffering bodies to recognize their mutual vulnerability, thereby forging strong ties of "shared brotherhood." Through this practice, Laâbi fosters a sense of community that challenges the very tenets upon which the purportedly impenetrable system is built.

Laâbi's corporeal poetics gives form to this solidarity by attending to the bodily suffering of his fellow inmates, as his portrait of Evelyne demonstrates: Evelyne / un corps minuscule hâve et ride / d'enfant empêché de grandir (63-66) [Evelyne / a tiny body gaunt and lined / of a child forbidden to grow]. This refrain is followed by detailed descriptions of Evelyne's systematic physical tortures at the hands of her pitiless tormentors. Her reaction to these cruelties attests to her dogged spirit in the face of unforeseen calamities:

> –On parle toujours
> –On finit par parler
> Impossible qu'on ne parle pas
> Tu n'avais pas parlé Evelyne
> et tes tortionnaires terrorisés
> sont devenus fous (153-58)
>
> [–They always talk
> – They all talk in the end
> –Impossible not to talk /
> You did not talk Évelyne
> and it terrorized your torturers
> and drove them mad].

Despite long sessions of torture, lasting hours and days, Evelyne holds to her silence against all pressure, even after being threatened with killing: "tu parles ou on te tue" (1) [Talk or be killed]. Although the vibrant dynamism of Laâbi's poems resides in language, the ruthlessness of corporeal violence at times surpasses the capacity of words to convey thoughts and feelings. In *Rue de Retour*, Laâbi describes how "the pain which pounds through his body has reached such a pitch that it evades all possibility of understanding or intuition" (40). Evelyne's speechlessness enacts what Catherine Coquio describes as "suspension du langage" (339) [suspension of language]—the breakdown of signification before traumatic experiences, unveiling a profound crisis of language. This crisis is born of recurring doses of humiliation, deprivation, and brutality—amplified by the collapse of spatial and temporal boundaries, which ultimately suffocate life itself.

This asphyxiation narrows the field of language and causes inmates to lose the ability to give full expression to their thoughts. The recurrence of the word "parler" suggests a redundancy

through expressive repetition, which emphasizes the preponderance of the unspeakable. When language fails, the screams of the body become the most appropriate way to communicate the unspeakable. The carceral-poet transforms this experience of pain into a different form of counter-violence: a heightened form of awareness that elevates suffering into an act of agency. Therefore, the failing verbalization of the experience is compensated by Evelyne's corporeal language, powered by a ubiquitous sense of solidarity among her fellow prisoners who endure similar physical and psychological wounds. Evelyne's refusal to look away from the instrument torturing her body enacts defiant corporeal agency. Her protesting body engages in active practice of resistance, contesting the idea that equates the tormented body with impotence. It also challenges the capacity of the carceral disciplinary system to transform prisoners of conscience into docile bodies. The body, therefore, elevates Evelyne to the realm of the divine, transcending the physical barriers of the walls and hence echoing Laâbi's universalizing corporeal vision.

This shift of corporeal resistance toward transcendence culminates in Laâbi's meditation on the body's agency within confinement. In "Soleils aux arrêts," the speaker fancies liberating the bodies of political prisoners:

> Un homme est en prison
> Il n'attend pas
> il n'a pas de temps à perdre
> Il se fait peintre et poète et musicien
> Il invite le papillon des mots
> à la transe qui fait pousser des racines
> Il réfute le sobriquet des couleurs
> pour que le blanc de la toile
> libère ses démons tapis
> Il ravive le cri du silence
> pour orchestrer la symphonie du don
> Délivré du corps (187-98)
>
> [A man is in prison
> He does not wait
> He has no time to waste
> He makes himself a painter a painter and a poet and a musician
> He summons the butterfly of words
> to a trance that deepens into roots
> He refuses the facile names of colors
> so the canvas's whiteness might
> release its hidden demons
> He awakens the cry of silence
> to orchestrate the symphony of the giving
> Delivered from the body]

This poem, dedicated to the Moroccan political prisoner Abraham Serfaty and to the South African leader Nelson Mandela, reveals the poet's profound understanding of the universality of the corporeal mystical experience. The phrase "'Délivré du corps" presents a striking paradox: how can a poetics, deeply rooted in corporeality, advocate for the deliverance from the body? This contradiction paves the way for readers to grasp Laâbi's transcendental insight:

though the body learns, stretches, and suffers mutilation, it resists creatively to perform its agency—the poet becomes painter and musician. Through these creative transformations, the body transcends material constraints without denying corporeal reality; it transcends prison walls while remaining grounded in bodily experience. This tension pervades Laâbi's carceral texts as a dialectical movement alert to the materiality of the body and yet profoundly invested in corporeal transcendence. Central to this transcendence is the collective dimension of suffering and resistance. The poem depicts prison as a collective experience, conveying the suffering of other inmates and grieving for their pain and loss while drawing hope and power from their shared struggle.

This dual nature of corporeal transcendence—transcending without departing—requires consideration of its inner workings. The limited mobility within the bars compels the poet to reconsider the imperfections of the body and its fears, ultimately seeking new ways to rise above its apparent limitations. The search for corporeal agency finds its solace in "secular mysticism" (Reinking 151). Undeniably, the poet sometimes invokes religious figures such as Al Hallaj and Jesus Christ. Yet, his primary anchor of creative energy comes from his attachment to the universal values of liberty and justice. Despite the physical and psychological violence of incarceration, Laâbi manages to cope with its harsh circumstances, emerging as a wiser and more forgiving human being who holds no grudges against his tormentors. In choosing this reconciliatory path, Laâbi does not evade the agonies of the imprisoned subjects, nor does he negate the disgraces of the perpetrators. His carceral poetry strikes a balance between the stark tenor of his messages and the lyrical moments of his poems, highlighting the brutal immediacy of the carceral experience while providing a testing ground for radical thought and creative boundless ferocity. Laâbi's poetic reflections on the carceral experience do not deviate from the bitter realities of these contexts. Yet they do not present these realities within the exclusive parameters of raw, brutalized experiences. The amalgamation of the real and unreal becomes a necessity to convey the severity of carceral endurances, which reality alone cannot capture.

This transcendent vision translates into a collective solidarity that connects Laâbi not only with his fellow prisoners but also with his family and friends beyond the walls. His poem "Lettres à mes amis d'outre-mer" exemplifies this, as the speaker transmits messages of hope and resistance to his friends:

Je ne suis plus seul
L'épreuve m'a ouvert
à la voie des rencontres
Mon corps a appris
à se tendre et à se ramasser
comme une plaque chauffée au rouge
pour supporter les mutilations
et résister
transformer la douleur, l'humiliation
en leurs justes contraires (120-29)

[I am no longer alone
This ordeal has opened me
to the path of encounters
my body has learned
to tense and gather itself
like a plate of iron heated to red
to endure mutilations

and resist
to transform pain and humiliation
into their precise opposites].

Laâbi's carceral poetry embodies unwavering human resilience in the face of unexpected adversities. It creates windows of hope out of extreme conditions by defying the disciplinary agendas of repressive apparatus, which aims at instilling despair among prisoners of conscience. The resisting body, consequently, subverts the agendas of the state apparatus by exposing the limits of the carceral system and twisting the dehumanizing conditions of the cell "into their precise opposites." The articulation of inflicted corporeal pain transfigures ostensible powerlessness into an act of agency and strength. The poet seeks to undergo a corporeal transcendence, conveying the splendor and value of human tenacity, undeterred by all attempts at demoralization and dehumanization. The transcendental bearings take different forms of agency, including the visionary who has the potential to grasp the present and explore the future, the artist who can craft his own arms, and the firm believer who has his divine values that bolster his strength in times of crisis. By embracing this transcendental spirit in his carceral poetry, Laâbi animates numerous verse meditations that connect him with people, both within and beyond prison walls: "Mon peuple marche / et j'existe / rebelle" (*Chronique* 146) [My people are on the march / and I exist / rebel]. Written from Kénitra prison, *Chronique de la citadelle d'exil* establishes links between the self and the outside world, speaking with others, for others, and about others. The poet forcefully articulates his broader, collective project of liberation, planting seeds of hope at the very center of the citadel, initially dedicated to slowing death.

In times of uncertainty, the poet recalls his unrivalled gifts and secretive weapons to rebel against the spaciotemporal boundaries of confinement. Inspired by his transcendental individual and collective experiences, Laâbi grapples with the crisis of corporeal immobility, exposing carceral cruelties and negotiating collective resistance. His carceral poetics, therefore, combine the horrors of the cell with the radicalization of hopes, maintaining a profound attachment to life. The body, although mortified, tortured, and incarcerated, prioritizes a forward-looking perspective that advances human rights, justice, hope, and reconciliation. In taking this perspective, the body does not abandon its resistance; it only changes its strategies of resistance by abandoning itself temporarily to fuse with "a new body politic" (Reinking 148).

Conclusion

The body of the condemned reveals the limitations of the abusive carceral system and dislocates the dominant state order, making a powerful poetic statement through human resilience and creative resistance, often powered by a spirit of solidarity within and beyond the bars. The body becomes part of a collective mystical experience that lines up with Laâbi's unaffected spirit to confront, rather than escape, the forces of darkness. This transforms the body into a vehicle of testimony, bearing witness to physical dispossession and emotional displacement. Laâbi's poetic voice, which reckons with fences and freedom, articulates a relentless engagement in pursuit of justice and hope by writing poetry-as-resistance. His testimonies speak to those who have short memories and, consequently, counter state-sanctioned amnesia. Laâbi's voice remains indispensable in the recollection of corporeal torments, the reconstruction of the past, and the shaping of the present and the future, especially within a framework of competing historiographies. This practice of maintaining memory traces and disclosing artistic artilleries

serves to dispute state violence and its systematic policy of disremembering. This twofold capacity for testimony and resistance unveils the body's generative potential.

Thus conceived, the body of the condemned becomes a generative space that undertakes a double task: an archive that preserves Morocco's postcolonial collective memory against the "politics of amnesia" (Slyomovics 57) and a site for creative resistance that contests the mechanism of the carceral system through solidarity, agency, and transcendence. These two dimensions function dialectically to produce Laâbi's body-centred poetics. This poetic approach refuses to separate testimony from aesthetics, revealing how the violated body retains its generative power. His vision becomes clear as he constructs this historical consciousness that demands accountability while forging a reconciliatory path: a new Morocco unfolds—attentive to its past while moving steadily towards the future.

As prisons continue to multiply globally, detaining political activists, imprisoning asylum seekers, and silencing dissenting voices, they provide evidence of the ongoing violence wielded by state control mechanisms. In these and other contexts where zones of brutality and imprisonment continue to proliferate, Laâbi's carceral poetic legacy posits itself as a vivid reminder that under severe conditions of dehumanization, the imprisoned body stands as an irreducible site of human dignity, creative agency, and political imagination. This embodied resistance refuses to be manipulated, silenced, or annihilated; it survives to witness, preserve, and attest to the unyielding human capacity for resistance.

Laâbi's emphasis on collective and corporeal memory introduces a shared space where personal and political histories intersect, questioning the limitations of institutional initiatives such as the Equity and Reconciliation Commission. His poetry proposes instead a more authentic reconciliation reimagined through memory, solidarity, and transcendence—transforming traumatic pasts into a history that illuminates rather than haunts. Close examination of his corporeal poetics reveals how poetry can foster social healing without abandoning its critical vigilance. As Morocco continues to negotiate its past, a new generation of readers learn about the Years of Lead through Laâbi's poetry. The primary school that bears his name reflects this transformation from a persecuted dissident to a celebrated national figure—a transformation that maintains the body of the condemned in a vigilant position, acknowledging this state recognition while carrying its scars forward; an approach that fosters reconciliation while maintaining critical vigilance against new forms of violence and forgetting.

Laâbi's carceral poetry creates a space for memory to be preserved and resistance to be enacted, opening new possibilities for political and creative expression that transcend its historical moment to speak urgently to our present. This is perhaps the most enduring lesson of Laâbi's carceral corpus, emerging not from abstract theorization but from the lived reality he transformed into art: that resistance, anchored in bodily suffering yet channeled toward transcendent solidarity, can transform pain and humiliation "into their precise opposites," forging pathways from trauma toward reconciliation, from silence toward voice, and from destruction toward reconstruction.

Notes

1. The "carceral archipelago" concept appears in Part 4, Chapter 3, "The Carceral," pp. 297-308.
2. Abdellatif Laâbi, *Le Fond de la jarre*, Gallimard, 2002.
3. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
4. Frantz Fanon, "L'expérience vécue du Noir," *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 109-158.
5. Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Maspero, 1961)

6. *Rue de Retour* is Jacqueline Kaye's English translation of Laâbi's original work, *Le chemin des ordalies*. The title page designates this work as a novel, the cover page labels it a récit, and its content is largely autobiographical, depicting his carceral experience.
7. Translated by Nicholson-Smith. See "Tu parles ou on te tue," In *Praise of Defeat*, 30.

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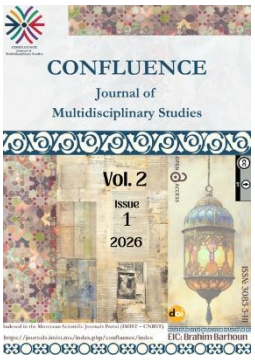
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CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

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

Moroccan Female Other-Archives: Literary Activism in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* and Mhani Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street*

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.6111

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Received: 04-10-2025 Accepted: 15-01-2026 Published: 19-01-2026

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ABSTRACT

Despite Moroccan women's significant contributions to national independence and literature, their writings did not receive serious academic attention in Morocco until the 1980s. This article builds on the premise that such neglect has delayed crucial discussions about the role of Moroccan female narratives in mirroring social challenges and reshaping discussions on gender identity. It foregrounds the works of Fatima Mernissi and Mhani Alaoui as two authors whose narratives challenge the silences of official history by reconstructing alternative archives of Moroccan female identities through the lens of gender and race. Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* and Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street* both reflect a sense of literary activism that reconstructs marginalized identities and neglected histories, including those of dadas, harem girls, and pioneering women such as Aicha Chenna, Qaida Tamou, and Meryem Fassi Fihri. Drawing on archive theory and postcolonial feminist criticism, the article analyzes how the implicit sub-narratives in these works of fiction serve as what Brahim El Guabli calls "Moroccan-Other Archives." While Moroccan women's writings have been significantly discussed in Arabic, French, and Spanish scholarship, they remain underexamined in Anglophone criticism. By reading Mernissi and Alaoui side by side, this article highlights how Moroccan women's writings not only reclaim silenced histories but also reimagine cultural memory and identity in ways that resist reductive categorizations of the female experience.

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Literature
Women's Writings
Other-Archive
Fatima Mernissi
Mhani Alaoui
Literary Activism

Introduction

Despite their supposed late entry into the literary scene, Moroccan women have been writing for over two generations. While many scholars, including Suellen Diaconoff, often point to the 1980s as the moment when a female literary tradition began to emerge in Morocco, earlier critics, such as Rachida Benmassouad and Zuhur Kiram, turn to Malika El Fassi, who started publishing as early as the 1930s. However, it was only in the 1980s that Moroccan women's writing began to receive serious academic attention. Although this body of literature has become central to Arabic and French literary criticism, it remains understudied mainly in Anglophone circles, in part due to the late emergence and lack of visibility that gave rise to

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what Diaconoff refers to as "the myth of the silent woman" (61), the idea that Moroccan women lack a voice in literature.

Fatima Mernissi and Mhani Alaoui insert themselves into this dialogue as two writers who challenge lacunae in history by threading sub-narratives at the margins of the plot, yet reimagine historically dismissed identities. In her recent article on Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*, Valérie K. Orlando observes that Mernissi seems to "disturb the fine lines between fact and fiction in order to distance Moroccan women from the Orientalist imaginaire to which they have been subjected in the West" (123). Anne Donadey and Carine Bourget argue that Mernissi's mixing of fictional and real characters risks undermining the impact of the rising feminist consciousness. However, this article demonstrates that including fictionalized historical female names that have been overlooked in history actually creates a subnarrative of feminist literary activism in *Dreams of Trespass*.

Similarly, Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street* pays close attention to the systematic erasure of female names and reinserts them in the world of fiction. Alaoui's narrator points out that "the streets of Casablanca often bear the names of ancient male Arab heroes, poets, and explorers. [...] But not once had Nadine ever seen the name of a woman on a Casablanca street" (54). Besides addressing the issue of naming, Alaoui's text comes as a reaction to a form of violence and trauma that has long excluded the question of race and gender from grand historical narratives. This technique of providing alternative archives in the form of fictional testimonies is not new to Mhani Alaoui. In his analysis of Alaoui's first novel, *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms*, Brahim Barhoun contends that Alaoui's narrative uses myths and facts not only to "reimagine Moroccan history and mythology through a feminist lens" but also to "reassert literature's capacity to function as a space of ontological reparation, affective remembrance, and insurgent imagination" (55). This emerging trend of writing at the intersection of memory and history calls for a close examination of how fiction can stand as an alternative archive that does not "undermine truth, but rather expands the possibility of achieving it through narrative works" (El Guabli, "Imaginary Testimony" 76).

The present study approaches Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* and Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street* as sites of expression that produce a discourse about the Moroccan female experience and gender consciousness in a postmodern context. It brings together two main theoretical lenses: postcolonial feminist theory and archive theory. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reflections on subaltern historiography are particularly relevant because they help delineate how race and gender, as well as colonial and patriarchal discourses, contribute to the continued epistemic erasure of women's voices in Moroccan historical narratives. For as Spivak emphasizes, "if in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (82–83). In parallel, El Guabli's concept of Other-Archives offers a complementary way of understanding how writers such as Mernissi and Alaoui intervene in these gaps by producing alternative archives grounded in memory and unfinished histories. Together, these two approaches help demonstrate how both authors recover histories that have been overlooked or fragmented; in the case of Mernissi, through the fictional reimagining of women's voices inside the colonial harem, and in the case of Alaoui, through the significant attention given to naming, race, and the legacies of servitude in Morocco. Although the two works emerge from different contexts and generations, they both unsettle conventional understandings of the participation of "harem" in history and women's lived experiences in postcolonial Morocco.

By reframing women's presence in both literature and historiography, Mernissi and Alaoui demonstrate how fiction can function as a tool for activism and civic engagement. Their rejection of a "gender-unaware history" and their insistence on reinscribing women's names and roles into narrative memory produce a mode of writing that this article identifies as literary

activism. Literary activism, as used here, refers to the deliberate use of narratives to challenge patriarchal historical accounts and render women's experiences and contributions visible in both literature and history. The article employs narrative criticism to show how, in their attempt to write against a patriarchal and colonial background, Moroccan women writers engage with fictitious archival writing that highlights their roles as leaders, active citizens, and, for some, such as Mernissi and Alaoui, feminists. Their writings revive identities that might currently be viewed as forgotten or archaic, particularly those of "harem," "female warriors," and "Dada," and examine their evolution over time in Morocco. In doing so, they respond to Spivak's call to rethink how the subaltern can be heard, and they echo El Guabli's invitation to reimagine the archive as a space open to alternative and marginalized histories.

The article addresses the urgent need to reread such "forms of sources that provide access to uncomfortable histories, which lie outside the purview of classical official archives" (El Guabli, "Rethinking Archives" 209). It contributes to postcolonial feminist archive studies by showing how Moroccan women's writings create alternative archives that highlight the lack of visibility of Moroccan women's roles in the national cause and their contributions to gender empowerment in Morocco. While the first section of this article situates Moroccan women's writings within the historical and political contexts of national resistance and media, the second turns to Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* as an alternative archive that reclaims silenced identities and challenges Orientalist imaginaries. The third section focuses on how Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street* intervenes in historical questions of race and gender. Both texts offer crucial insights into how Moroccan women's writings engage in an intertextual generational effort to reconstruct memory and history.

Contextualizing Moroccan Women's Literary Activism

Moroccan women played a significant role in the history of national resistance as activists and leaders who fought alongside their male counterparts for the country's independence (Sadiqi 33–34). One of the earliest manifestations of women's nationalist contributions was through traditional media, particularly radio and journalism, where women began to assert their presence and reimagine their place in a society long shaped by patriarchal norms (Guessous 58). According to Nouzha Guessous, the introduction of radio into Moroccan households has redefined narratives around gender identity and national independence. Initially, most radio programs in Morocco were in French and presented by male journalists, but Guessous points out:

> Then, there were voices of women presenters or hosts of radio programs aimed at women. There was Saiyda Layla [Malika Meliani], the first journalist to launch, as early as 1958, radio programs tailored for women, addressing them and discussing issues relevant to women in a language they could understand. (58)

Saiyda Layla's voice on the radio became a familiar presence in many Moroccan homes, and even in Mernissi's fictional memoir, *Dreams of Trespass*, the radio emerges as a space that empowers female awareness and aspiration. Although Mernissi notes that her father and uncle controlled access to the radio cabinet, the women of the harem consistently found ways to listen when the men were away (17). Likewise, in Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street*, journalism plays a central role in the plot, as the publication of a newspaper article about a single mother serves as the inciting event that sparks action and transforms the main female character from a passive to an active individual.

The birth and affinities of Moroccan writings stemmed from these radio broadcasts, newspapers, and translations of world literature (Sryfi 375; Akbib 68). Through these early forms of public expression, women started articulating a national identity that included the female experience while simultaneously constructing a new consciousness around gender. Short and long forms of fiction made a significant contribution to disseminating and fostering a collective political, nationalist, and cultural consciousness by using the space of journalism. Gonzalo Fernandez Parilla points out that:

> First-row protagonists of political events, such as the charismatic ʻAllāl al-Fāsī (1910–1974), were at the same time active promoters of political parties and journals, as well as practitioners of the new literature emerging in them. (347)

Right from its inception, Moroccan fiction served the dual role of providing a space for circulating ideas that strengthened the fight for independence and of establishing the literary imaginary of national identity. Therefore, tracing the evolution of Moroccan literature, and by extension Moroccan women's writings, cannot be done in isolation from the question of activism. It is crucial to note that while the role of Allal Al Fassi in the fight for independence as an activist and writer is prominently discussed, the significant contribution of his sister, Malika Al Fassi, is less prominent in scholarly discourse. Malika Al Fassi started publishing as early as the 1930s. Her works, including *Al-Dahiy*a (The Victim) and *Mudhakkarat Dar al-Faqiha* (Diaries of the Faqiha's Home), address pressing social issues such as rape, child marriage, and domestic violence (Benmassouad 62). Al Fassi was also "the only Moroccan woman among the 66 politicians who signed the 1944 document demanding Morocco's independence from French colonial rule" and presumably the last person to see King Mohamed V before his forced exile to Corsica Island (Al Jazeera n.p.). Her presence was instrumental to the nationalist movement, yet her story and writings remain largely inaccessible in academia today.

Another important female writer and activist from the same period as Al Fassi was Amina Luh, who published her first novel, *Al-malika Khanatha* (Queen Khanatha), in the 1940s. Benmassouad points out that Luh's novel serves as an early example of a rising feminist consciousness, offering a stark commentary on polygamy and women's rights (62). However, an understudied aspect of the novel is its portrayal of an alternative fictional archive based on the life of Khanatha Bint Bakkar, one of Sultan Moulay Ismail's wives. At the time of its publication, the publishing committee considered Luh's text an essential narrative that weaves together historical and imaginative elements (Al-Qamari 293). The presence of sub-narratives that recollect and sometimes reimagine the non-documented histories of Moroccan female figures sustains the idea that Moroccan women's contributions to literature transcend literary creativity into literary activism. However, there is minimal to nonexistent engagement with how these fictional writings serve as reconstructed testimony that fills gaps in historical archives.

Writing from two different generations, Mernissi and Alaoui intervene in a cross-generational effort to revisit and document uncomfortable histories from a female perspective. Mernissi's account provides a tacit history of how an entire feminist movement from within the walls of the harem developed side by side with the nationalist movement. An example is the confrontation between Lalla Mhani and the Mother over the importance of harem life. Lalla Mhani asserts:

> 'We live in difficult times, the country is occupied by foreign armies, our culture is threatened. All we have left is these traditions.' This reasoning would drive Mother nuts:

> 'Do you think that by sticking together in this big, absurd house, we will gain the strength we need to throw the foreign armies out?' (72)

Mernissi shows how the harem is beyond just a reflection of victims of patriarchy and that it is much more politically aware and gender conscious than Orientalist imaginaries and locally rooted narratives portray. In fact, the subnarrative suggests that an unorganized, independent harem movement laid out female expectations from the nationalist movement at the time, which can be summed up in access to education, rejection of polygamy, and freedom. Highlighting this tacit contribution is crucial to understanding the role of Moroccan women in history, despite the role culturally assigned to them.

While Mernissi's account focuses on redefining how Moroccan women experienced the nationalist movement from within the harem, Alaoui examines how contemporary society reflects a modern harem in which systematic exclusions based on gender and race persist in new, more implicit forms. In this sense, voices like Mernissi and Alaoui emerge as powerful interventions not only in literary studies but also in national identity archives. In a recently published interview, Alaoui describes her relationship with writing, especially regarding her work *The House on Butterfly Street*, as a form of "thinking with and through history, challenging its norms, accepting that collective memory can be a tricky, unreliable companion" (El Abdelaoui 10). The subnarrative of *The House on Butterfly Street* probes internalized microaggressions on gender and race that have continued from colonial harem times and metamorphosed in the modern context. Jamal Biddoun, who plays the character of a journalist in the novel, poses the question:

> Do you know why bastard is not a nice word?
> Because it unloads all the blame on the child, and the mother. [...] and neither will survive that word, or ever escape from it. There are other terrible words– maid, dada, 'abid, slave, slut, homo, illegal, migrant.' (76)

The labels Biddoun criticizes represent intergenerationally oppressed identities in the novel and, by extension, in Moroccan society. Alaoui immerses her main character, Nadine, in a series of events that force her to reevaluate her internalized racist practices when she engages with her dada and maids and confronts the slavery origins of these names. Nadine must also come to terms with the story of rape and the "bastard" child of her husband. Nadine's character transformation arises from the multiple tensions and confrontations she faces regarding how harem structures, which historically defined conventional roles for women, remain present today and continue to limit women's ability to participate in society fully. Once Nadine breaks free from these structures, she becomes more engaged in empowering women.

Reading Mernissi's and Alaoui's texts together presents a crucial opportunity to examine how both writers use history and fiction to reimagine stories of identity groups whose lives have been concealed from history. Besides providing alternative female archives, both texts offer a critical lens into how Moroccan women make sense of historiographical gloss-overs and contemporary social change. Thus, the present article argues that both authors assume the position of literary activists and contribute, at once, to the reconstruction of national literature and history.

Reclaiming Historical Silence: Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*

A question that preoccupies Mernissi throughout much of her work is the invisible boundaries that a patriarchal social order imposes on Moroccan women (Loudiyi). In *Dreams of Trespass*,

this theme is centrally reflected in the recurring obsession with physical space and the separation of genders. Mernissi uses the private world of the harem not only to capture her childhood memories but also to reflect on broader societal structures that restrict women's access to public life. "WHAT EXACTLY is a harem?" asks the seven-year-old narrator (43), a question that leads to a series of reflections that are both personal and political.

In her research on "The Challenges of Translating Third-World Women in a Transnational Context," Sanaa Benmessaoud remarks that Mernissi's depiction of women's spaces replicates Western stereotypes (184). Abdellah Elboubekri, on the other hand, reads her narratives as an active attempt to challenge orientalist fantasies (31). Regardless of Mernissi's intentions, what is of particular interest to the present discussion is a subnarrative in *Dreams of Trespass* that has received far less critical attention. While the young Fatima attempts to understand her identity as a girl growing up in a confined domestic space, a parallel narrative unfolds, offering crucial insights into how harem women experienced Morocco's struggle for independence alongside the struggle for women's rights. Mernissi's narrator recalls:

> Several years before, Mother had fought Father, first about the fabric that the veil was made of and then about the haik, or traditional long cloak that women wore in public. [...]This drove Father crazy: 'It is so transparent! You might as well go unveiled!' But soon the small veil, the litham, became the fashion, with all the nationalists' wives wearing it all over Fez to gatherings in the mosque and to public celebrations, such as when political prisoners were liberated by the French. (105)

An essential component of women's liberation at the time was the question of the veil and how traditional women's attire was no longer fit to keep up with the modern promises of post-independence Morocco. Mernissi's account offers details on how the harem negotiated the veil and how they wore it at significant events, such as the liberation of political prisoners, mosque gatherings, and the women's march after independence. Nevertheless, little is known in official archives about the discussions within the harem structures that led to their emancipation. The limited access to women's historical contributions within and outside the harem walls recalls Spivak's idea that women's political and intellectual labor is rarely preserved in state-sanctioned narratives (82–83). In this sense, Mernissi's account not only carves out space for emphasizing the active role of women in colonial and postcolonial Morocco, but also engages in what El Guabli considers the practice of "unearthing a different history" ("Moroccan Other-Archives (New Texts Out Now)" n.p) that reimagines Moroccan women's debates and experiences behind the walls of the harem.

Additionally, while the nationalist movement has historically received significant attention, official narratives on Moroccan women's reactions to it and on whether it fully integrated their needs remain scarce. As such, *Dreams of Trespass* functions as an Other-Archive, transforming intimate memory into a historical resource and offering new insights into women's perspectives on the nationalist movement. With the promising start of girls' access to education, illiterate mothers also saw literacy as an opportunity to assume a more active role in society. In *Dreams of Trespass*, young Mernissi explains that:

> [Her mother] had asked to go to literacy classes–a few schools in our own neighborhood were offering them–but her demand had been turned down by the family council. 'Schools are for little girls, not for mothers,' Lalla Mani said. 'It is not in our tradition.' 'And so what?' Mother retorted. 'Who is benefiting from a harem? What good can I do for our country, sitting here a prisoner in this courtyard? Why are we deprived of education? Who created the harem, and for what? Can anyone explain that to me?' (165-166)

The above passage provides an excellent example of how women's literature can bridge gaps in historiography caused by limited official archives. El Hamel points out that "we may never get a closer or accurate picture of the concealed reality of the harem because of the lack of written literature on this taboo subject" (302). Although these stories are largely absent from historical archives today, writers like Mernissi, who experienced these times, offer an alternative perspective for revisiting this history. The mother's protest in the above passage highlights an oversight: while the nationalists were creating a new generation of educated girls, they overlooked mothers and grandmothers. Katja Žvan Elliott, who wrote a book about the modernization of patriarchy in Morocco, adds another layer to this equation: "But being 'educated' or 'aware' (wa'iya) is frequently associated only with being able to read and write, which is understandable considering that most of the girls' mothers never attended formal education" (146). While academic scholarship focusing on Mernissi's theoretical research, biography, and fictional memoir is not scarce, given that almost all of her works have been translated into several languages, less attention is given to how the subtexts of these narratives reconstruct histories that highlight women's contributions to reframing gender identity in postmodern Morocco. Another example is the fictitious story of a Moroccan female warrior during the fight for independence, as told in her chapter, "Tamou's Horse." Mernissi recounts the arrival of Tamou to the harem:

> Tamou was a Riffian and a war heroine. Morocco was full of admiration for the Rif people, the only ones who had kept on fighting the foreigners long after the rest of the country had given up, and here was this woman, clad as a warrior, crossing the Arbaoua frontier into the French Zone all by herself to look for help. Moreover, because she was a war heroine, certain rules did not apply to her. She even behaved as though she did not know about tradition. (51)

While the story may include fictionalized elements, the descriptions of Tamou in *Dreams of Trespass* strongly resemble the figure of Qaida Tamou, the mother of Morocco's first post-independence prime minister, present in scattered narratives in Moroccan newspapers, including Alyaoum24 and Al-Massae. According to both newspapers, Qaida Tamou played a critical role in the nationalist movement, particularly in the Rif region, and is remembered for her bold decision to remove her son from *msid* (Qur'anic school) and enroll him in an elite French mission school, a decision almost unheard of for Moroccan mothers at the time. By showing the capacity of fiction to preserve erased histories, Mernissi's Tamou illustrates the mechanism of El Guabli's Other Archives. Mernissi's Tamou challenges dominant portrayals of Moroccan women as silent or passive during the fight for independence and offers a portrait of an assertive, strategic, and politically aware woman who shapes the nation's future through both education and activism. That said, the fictionalization of Tamou does not replace historical truth; instead, it creates an imaginative archive that preserves the possibility of women's participation where official documentation is scarce or absent.

Despite her historical significance, official archives on Qaida Tamou's life are minimal. A few references to her appear in Naima Lahbil's *Qui est Si Bekkai?*, a historical essay written by Tamou's granddaughter, as well as in oral accounts available on YouTube and in popular songs that continue to circulate her memory. In this context, Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* takes on a new significance. Her fictionalized character, Tamou, can be read as part of an effort to reimagine and preserve the stories of women like Qaida Tamou, who may not be fully visible in national archives, yet whose influence was formative. Mernissi's narrator states:

> [Tamou's] presence on the farm, with her tattoos, dagger, aggressive bracelets, and constant horseback riding, made the other women realize that there were many ways to be beautiful. Fighting, swearing, and ignoring tradition could make a woman irresistible. Tamou became a legend the moment she appeared. She made people aware of their inner force and their capacities to resist all kinds of fates. (53)

In Mernissi's narrative, Tamou is portrayed as a woman with a presence that commands respect and actions far from marginal. Her account gestures toward a broader, often neglected archive of women's leadership rooted in memory and storytelling. Whether or not the story Mernissi tells is historically "true" is, perhaps, beside the point. Tamou's presence in the harem farm serves as an active factor of change, as her way of leading herself redefines the rest of the harem's notions of beauty, power, and leadership. Mernissi's reconstruction of Tamou's character aligns with Spivak's emphasis that recovering the itineraries of subaltern women requires writing a subaltern historiography that does not leave out the impact of power structures on the woman and the silencing equation (Spivak 82). *Dreams of Trespass* stands as an alternative archive that documents the contribution of women not in abstract terms. However, in bold writing, they demonstrate how they fight against patriarchal ground rules of silencing and participate in thinking about, protesting for, and achieving national independence.

Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* is teeming with historical names and figures who played a crucial role in shaping a female nationalist and feminist consciousness during Morocco's fight for independence and who have been historically relegated to the background. In her dissertation on Moroccan women's writings, Ana Gonzalez Navarro asserts that this process of naming and studying women's experiences of colonial Morocco helps "re-signify the very conception of the national struggle, which usually tends to include only the activities of men, leaving aside other types of actions that often fell upon women" (186). This article extends this argument by exploring women's experiences in unconventional archives, which may not be factual but are imaginative interpretations of what the facts could have been.

Naming the Modern Harem: Alaoui's *The House On Butterfly Street*

The first few chapters of Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street* implicitly pose the old question that Shakespeare's Juliet once asked: "What's in a name?" (Shakespeare 2.2.43). While Juliet's question suggests that a name is nothing more than a label with no symbolic value, Alaoui prompts a deeper reflection on how names can embody legacies of slavery, harem notions, and microaggressions. *The House on Butterfly Street* is a story full of mystery and carries several subnarratives. The plotline begins when Nadine receives a newspaper clipping inside an envelope that tells the story of a single mother and her child (25). What piques Nadine's curiosity is why the journalist disclosed the child's name (27).

Alaoui devotes significant narrative attention to names, not just as markers of identity but as testaments to the lived experiences and legacies of diverse lineages. She writes, for instance, about names historically associated with enslaved women and how their roles in contemporary society reveal that slavery, though no longer legal, has taken new forms. She also addresses the experiences of women of African descent in Morocco and how efforts to change or erase their names function as acts of cultural and racial denial. Her first chapter, *Caretakers*, introduces her immediate circle, which includes her daughter, Al, Dada Amber, and servants Jeanne Ba and Ghalia. Alaoui's narrator comments:

> Amber's last name, Draa, was a made-up one, for no one, not even she, knew what her real last name was. An ancient woman, known as 'Dada,' she was in her seventies, or in

> her hundreds possibly. Not even the authorities, who had delivered her ID card, knew her real age. She was the daughter, and granddaughter of slaves–of Dada Yacout, her mother, and Dada Yasmine, her grandmother. (18)

Although Amber is a free woman, the narrative refers to her as "Dada." The narrator is conscious of how Amber's name is typically associated with enslaved people and that, although slavery has ended, Dadas still exist in modern Morocco. Amber's lifelong service to the same family and her presumed old age make her life no different from Mernissi's descriptions of life in a colonial harem. By placing Dada Amber in the immediate environment of the novel's main character, Alaoui not only sheds light on the internalization of the legacy of servitude but also provides an alternative archive that unearths the experiences of dadas in Morocco's recent history. Alaoui carefully connects the threads of naming practices and the legacy of servitude to build an imaginative archive that accounts for gaps in official documentation about the history of Dadas. In this sense, *The House* can be seen as "a larger fictional testimonial reference for all those members of society who experienced enslavement" (El Guabli, "Imaginary Testimony" 90). In his conclusion for *Moroccan Other-Archives*, El Guabli notes a growing interest in revisiting the experiences of Dadas in recent literature, citing the work of Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Le Mariage du Plaisir* (The Pleasure Marriage), and Nouzha Fassi Fihri's *Dada L'Yakout* (214). This rewriting of historically marginalized female identities brings about a significant shift in how women engage with writing and express their identities.

Although the main narrative of *The House of Butterfly Street* takes place in modern times, Alaoui employs flashbacks to explore the house's history as a harem. Alaoui links Amber's lineage to the Dadas who inhabited the house when it was her grandfather's, Mohamed Raiss, and seizes the opportunity to comment on the end of slavery in colonial times:

> Even though the household was filled with women who belonged to him, Mohamed Raiss had only one legitimate wife, Daouia Raiss–Maryam Pena's formidable mother-in-law. Despite the decree declaring slavery illegal, Daouia was unfazed and showed the world that, in all that matters, she agreed with her husband, especially so in matters of servants who could be sold as slaves, or used in the kitchen or in the master's bedroom. (185)

Alaoui's recollection of the harem serves a double purpose: first, it uncovers the continuity of the servitude system before, during, and after colonial Morocco; and second, it provides commentary on how the colonial project to end slavery in Morocco failed to take into account the needs of formerly enslaved people. Amber inherits her position in the family from her mother, Dada Yacout, and her grandmother, Dada Yasmine. In this regard, the narrative does not only serve as an alternative archive that fills a historical gap, but also as a form of writing that subscribes to Spivak's "unlearning project." Spivak asserts that "in seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* 'unlearns' female privilege" (91). In *The House*, Nadine undergoes a similar process of self-introspection as she gradually comes to terms with the reality that Ghalia's son is her husband's. Another character whose life resembles Amber's is Jeanne Ba, a Senegalese migrant whose name Nadine changes to Zahra. Despite being a maid and not a slave, Jeanne's struggles are not any different, for she is stuck in the house on Butterfly Street and performs the same role as traditional Dadas. Her passport is also locked in Nadine and Kamal's safe "lest it be stolen from her, or lest she run away" (40). It is in this sense that the house on Butterfly Street stands as a fictional space carved out of history, testifying to the

development of the harem from colonial to modern. El Hamel comments on these modern forms of slavery and servitude by stating that such "memories will linger as long they get left out of contemporary narratives of Moroccan history" (11). Alaoui's novel inscribes itself as a form of literary activism that imaginatively fills the gaps of silence in histories, especially when it comes to the experiences of identity groups that were and remain taboo to discuss.

It is crucial to point out that the main narrative throughline that Alaoui's novel scrutinizes is the issue of rape and single mothers. However, as in the case of Mernissi, the sub-narrative emphasizes the significant contributions women make to society. Names that Alaoui's subnarrative brings forth include Fatima Zahra Fassi Fihri's lesser-known sister, Maryam Fassi Fihri, who constructed the Andalous Mosque and Medersa, and the late activist Aicha Chenna, who served as a mother figure to all single mothers in Morocco (90). Nayla, one of the fictitious characters whom Chenna saved in the story, observes:

> You know, we're not so different, you and I [...] Women's bodies enslaved in castles and fortresses, the *kasbahs* and *kssars* of North Africa, to serve in the masters' homes, to raise the children, to serve the masters' needs [...] how can we make peace with it without understanding the roles we've been made to play? (93-94)

At the heart of Alaoui's novel is a strong reflection on the roles that characters have been made to play and their disillusionment with oppressive structures that reinforce and internalize sexism and racism. Examining the continuity of these implicit cultural microaggressions requires a close analysis of women's accounts of these experiences. In the absence of sufficient archives on the female histories of the colonial harem experience and its remnants today, this article argues that fiction serves as a striking other-archive and contributes to shaping gender discourse in Morocco.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates how Moroccan women's writing engages in literary activism by filling a historical gap in gender discourse in Morocco through a close reading of Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* and Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street*. With the continuous emergence of Moroccan women's fiction that challenges what El Guabli calls a "gender-unaware history," it becomes imperative to analyze how some of these writers reimagine missing histories by looking at the harem from a female perspective and criticizing continuous forms of slavery and women's oppression. Writing, for many Moroccan women, is a means of claiming space, challenging silences, and reshaping both national and gender identity. As El Guabli puts forth, "Rewriting history has become synonymous with exercising the right to citizenship in Morocco. Being a Moroccan citizen today means being able to reimagine the country's post-independence history, which has been mired in repression, disempowerment, and silence" (*Moroccan Other-Archives* 7).

By giving visibility to critical female figures and erased narratives, Moroccan women writers continue to challenge patriarchal frontiers and reclaim a history of the present in which women have long been sidelined. Just as Mernissi utilizes narrative space to highlight forgotten stories of women's contributions to the national struggle for independence, Alaoui extends her social critique to the visible absence of female figures in Morocco's contemporary scene, except for Rabi'a Al Adawiya, who, "in the eighth century, [was] stolen as a child, sold as a slave, only to rise to become one of the greatest thinkers and religious leaders of her time. A person of power" (75). In doing so, Alaoui explores the lineage of names and how it uncovers important histories related to the legacy of slavery and its new codifications in modern society. Although Mernissi's

works, including *Dreams of Trespass*, have long been at the center of postcolonial feminist discourse, it is important to reread these narratives to recover inaccessible parts of history. On the other hand, discussions of Mhani Alaoui's work in academic circles beyond book reviews and Barhoun's recent article on her *Dreams of Maryam Tair* remain scarce, which is perhaps due to the relative recency of her publications. On these grounds, creating more space for women's fiction in Anglophone academic circles is urgent, as this literature serves not only as a creative aesthetic project but also as a critical literary and historical intervention.

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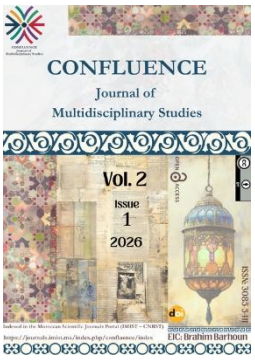
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CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

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

Against the "Ingathering": Mizrahi Renaissance and the Politics of Deterritorialization in Ronit Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps*

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.6109

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Received: 10-09-2025 Accepted: 25-12-2025 Published: 19-01-2026

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ABSTRACT

Ronit Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps* exposes the marginalization and displacement of Mizrahi Jews in Israel by challenging the Zionist narrative of the "ingathering of exiles." In a Eurocentric society that favors the Ashkenazim, the novel explores the struggles of an Egyptian Jewish family with social exclusion, economic hardship and cultural silencing. Matalon constructs a counter-narrative to prevailing nationalist discourses via her disjointed storytelling, linguistic hybridity and opposition to Zionist mythmaking. Using postcolonial theory and Mizrahi feminist critique as a framework, this article reads Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps* in relation to Ella Shohat's discussion on Mizrahi identity, Zionist exclusion and the erasure of Arab Jewish heritage. This article examines Matalon's portrayal of deterritorialization and Mizrahi agency, challenging traditional power structures and cultural narratives. In order to unsettle the Zionist deracination and fabrication of the Arab Jewish exile, this article situates Ronit Matalon's fiction within the Mizrahi Renaissance movement and argues that her work reclaims and rewrite the Mizrahi/Sephardic experience.

KEYWORDS

Mizrahi Renaissance
Egyptian Jews
Mizrahim
Sephardim
Deterritorialization

Introduction

Ronit Matalon is a prominent literary figure, having won several prestigious prizes in a predominantly Ashkenazi, Eurocentric literary field. Her fiction often employs a stream-of-consciousness style, combining juxtaposed events and non-linear timelines without a clear structure or plot. Her narrative is composed of fragmentary moments drawn from her own memories, her family's shared recollections and the larger experiences of displaced Mizrahi communities. She also writes in a memorial style, where characters and storylines feel displaced and disjointed. This literary strategy enables Matalon to subvert prevailing narrative paradigms within Israeli literature. Her distinctive approach positions her novel, *The Sound of Our Steps*, within a register of literary, cultural and political revolt. Embedded in her novel are her Egyptian Jewish roots and the perspectives of Mizrahi Jews, who are often excluded from the cultural and literary mainstream despite their significant presence in Israeli society. Her narratives

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articulate the sense of uprootedness and hostility experienced by Mizrahim in Israel, a society in which Ashkenazi history and culture are institutionally prioritized.

Matalon's distinctive writing style is further characterized by her use of linguistic and cultural hybridity. She repudiates linguistic homogenization, blending Hebrew and French with Egyptian and Palestinian Arabic dialects in *The Sound of Our Steps*. This linguistic choice unsettles the hegemony of Hebrew within Israeli literature while affirming cultural plurality. Matalon's work offers a more inclusive definition of Jewishness, elevating the marginalized languages of the Palestinian and Mizrahi/Sephardic communities. This subverts the homogenizing trends that are explicitly present in the Israeli national narrative, instead reframing Jewish identity beyond national homogeneity.

Ella Shohat's theoretical framework on Mizrahi identity and her criticism of Zionist discourse's relabeling and marginalization of Arab Jews within Israel are closely aligned with Matalon's approach to the Mizrahim and their political fight for recognition. Matalon's novel engages with Shohat's intervention and unveils the occlusions that structure the social positioning of Palestinian and Mizrahi Jews. This article places Matalon within the larger tradition of the Mizrahi literary renaissance by means of a close textual analysis of the novel's narrative techniques, examining how its fragmented storytelling, multilingual elements and treatment of themes of homeland and exile confront dominant Israeli literary conventions. This article further examines how Matalon creates a counter-narrative that questions rigid representations of Jewish identity in Israel, highlighting her portrayals of familial disintegration, economic precarity, and the psychological effects of displacement.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on *The Sound of Our Steps* mainly interprets Ronit Matalon's novel with attention to Levantine identity and post-Zionist critique. For example, Lital Levy situates Matalon's fiction, particularly *The Sound of Our Steps*, within a second-generation Mizrahi literary corpus aimed at creating "a different and unfamiliar kind of Hebrew literature" (212). Levy primarily examines Matalon's role in the "linguistic turn" in Israeli Mizrahi writing (213). A key aspect of *The Sound of Our Steps* is its incorporation of "Levantine" languages and cultures, using "the speech of her characters" to challenge "language as representation altogether" (Levy 220). Levy further explains that the text constitutes a "meta-linguistic discourse," where Matalon intertwines "immigrant Hebrew, 'ivrit tiknit,' Egyptian colloquial Arabic, spoken and written French, and the idioms of political pamphlets and garden manuals—all thrown into a kind of internecine struggle" (221).

In addition to sociolinguistic readings, literary critics, particularly Hannan Hever, position Matalon's work against the backdrop of Mizrahi marginality and the politics of canon formation in Israeli literature. Hever contends that Matalon's narrative strategies resist hegemonic Ashkenazi norms and destabilize dominant Zionist historiography. Yochai Oppenheimer similarly identifies a formally disruptive quality in Matalon's prose, arguing that its fragmentation mirrors the fractured status of Mizrahi subjectivity within the national literature. Meanwhile, Rachel S. Harris argues that Matalon disrupts "Levantine aristocratic positioning" and subverts the concepts of home and homeland (116). She asserts that Matalon's "characters experience a constant movement. This unsettled migration disturbs the expectations of rootedness, but movement too becomes a kind of paralysis and not a redemption" (116).

Naama Tsal foregrounds the home's centrality within the novel's thematic structure. She states that its "constitution, and the ongoing anxiety of its collapse form the central axis along which that last novel progresses and from which the narrative is spun" (306). For Tsal, this

portrayal of domestic space is integral to Matalon's "post-Zionist criticism" (306), since the novel's focus on the unstable home challenges Zionist constructions of identity. Likewise, Tamar S. Harris states that Matalon's novels are media for intellectual exchange with other critics and theorists, thereby framing her fiction within a network of relational dialogue. She notes that "Matalon's writing displays a deep awareness of post-structuralist and neo-Marxist thought, and her stories … maintain an intimate exchange with Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes, among others" (293). In their article entitled "An Autobiography of Her Own," Tammy Frade Galon and Adia Mendelson-Maoz argue that *The Sound of Our Steps* constitutes a feminist autobiographical text in which Matalon illustrates the "marginal place of women" in Israel (227). They add that "Matalon combines her dialogue with autobiographical material to express her social and gender criticism" (227).

What remains largely unexplored is Matalon's role in the Mizrahi Renaissance movement and her fiction's engagement with Mizrahi agency, resistance and political activism. Existing literature overlooks how *The Sound of Our Steps* revindicates Arab Jewish cultural heritage and disrupts the Ashkenazi-centered Israeli literary canon. It also fails to adequately address her contribution to the Mizrahi political struggle to reassert autonomy and claim the liberation of not only the Sephardim/Mizrahim but also the Palestinians. Matalon's efforts to re-center North African and Middle Eastern identities within Israeli literature go neglected. Critics have not fully engaged with the novel's anti-Zionist political drive, its depiction of 1960s-70s Israeli political activism or its deliberate de-centering of Ashkenazi perspectives, which are either absent or filtered through the standpoint of Egyptian Jewish characters. This gap in the literature undermines the novel's broader socio-political commentary and its significance in reshaping Mizrahi literary and cultural trajectories. This article fills this gap by framing Matalon's work within the broader Mizrahi plight for self-representation and demonstrating how her fiction serves a role in political critique for decolonizing Israeli literature.

Ronit Matalon and the Mizrahi/Sephardic Renaissance

Matalon disrupts conventional writing forms and defamiliarizes language in her fiction in an act of subversion against the mainstream culture and literature endorsed by Israeli hegemony. Though she writes primarily in Hebrew—the language associated with the occupying power according to her political stance—Matalon intentionally incorporates words from Egyptian Arabic, Palestinian Arabic and English to challenge her readership and unsettle the traditional Zionist-Israeli narrative. Tamar S. Hess argues that Matalon mixes Hebrew, Arabic, French and English to develop a distinctive linguistic "formula or nusaḥ" that replicates the Levantine linguistic mix, a style echoing the speech patterns of "immigrants and second-generation, Israeli-born speakers" (295). Likewise, Shohat upholds that

> Arabic/Hebrew syncretism has emerged even in the realm of Hebrew literature. Arabic is a notable presence within Hebrew fiction written by Jewish-Iraqi authors such as Ezra Haddad, Sami Michael and Shimon Ballas, all of whom shifted, in Israel, from writing in Arabic to writing in Hebrew... At times, the texts explicitly cite Arabic vocabulary translated into Hebrew in parentheses or in footnotes. In other instances, the expressions in Hebrew implicitly evoke Arabic—usually colloquial Arabic—an evocation 'audible' for the Arabic speaker even 'through' the Hebrew. (Shohat, "Invention of Judeo-Arabic" 32)

Matalon uses a similar linguistic approach to empower the stances and accounts of marginalized and immigrant communities within Israel, especially those of Palestinian, Mizrahi and Sephardic backgrounds.

Matalon's novels are both controversial and celebrated within the Israeli context for their juxtaposed narrative style and for addressing sensitive political, cultural and racial issues. Hess contends that Matalon's works explore pressing challenges in Israeli society, including "the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza … [and] inner-colonialism" (295). She presents a wide range of characters and perspectives, including Zionist, anti-Zionist, pro-Palestinian and pro-Nasserite viewpoints. In fact, Matalon offers a cynical portrayal of society and unearths the tensions and intersections among these differing ideologies and cultural backgrounds. Hence, Matalon "should be read within the Mizrahi context of Israeli culture, within the frame of post-colonial thought and of political critique" (Hess 295).

Her characters exhibit ethnic, social and political identities defined by fluidity and ambiguity. Hess argues that "questions of ethnic identity, immigration, cultural strata and social and financial class ... are explored in her work through the prism of shifting Levantine identities" (297). These shifting identities often appear in her politically active characters whose views mirror Israel's polarized political landscape. Her characters voice the contrasting nationalist movements, from left-wing versus right-wing, Zionism versus neo-Zionism, to Mizrahi mobilization versus Ashkenazi dominance. This exploration of multiple narratives in Matalon's work allows for greater dialogue on the overlapping dimensions of Sephardic identity within the political contexts and social dynamics of Israel.

In her fiction, Matalon reflects on her identity in relation to immigrant parentage from Egypt, marked by the privilege of Israeli birth yet burdened by the weight of familial history. This dual position enables an exploration of marginalized suffering within a narrative space that brings Mizrahi immigrant experience into contact with broader societal discourses. Matalon articulates the ambiguity of her national and cultural identity, stating, "[t]he fact that I am the daughter of immigrants but not an immigrant myself must not be obscured—that is to say: I am already someone who acts by force of a sense of place and of Hebrew, someone who is already a native inhabitant—or at least partly one" (*Read and Write* 48). Her novels become arenas where dominant forces of power clash with the immigrant quest for agency and the aspirations of indigenous Palestinians for return and self-representation.

Matalon's literary input aligns with the Mizrahi/Sephardic cultural renaissance in Israel during the 1970s and 1980s, a period characterized by a renewed interest in the heritage, traditions and identities of Arab Jews. This movement was a response to the Euro-Zionist narratives that have shaped Israeli society since the establishment of the state in 1948. It was initiated by a group of young Mizrahi and Sephardic activists in Israel who called themselves the "Black Panthers," taking inspiration from the American movement of the same name. The "Black Panthers" of Israel undertook the mission of delegitimizing the imposition of a collective Jewish identity and unsettling the Zionist notion of "Mizug Galuyot," which refers to the forced assimilation of Israeli Jews into a unified national melting pot. They sought to expose the social and cultural inequalities embedded within Israeli society and to reclaim their erased histories and identities. Once in Israel, Shohat observes that "Arab-Jews, trapped in a no-exit situation, have been forbidden to nourish memories of at least partially belonging to the peoples across" the neighboring Arab countries, noting that "the pervasive notion of 'one people' reunited in their ancient homeland actively disauthorizes any affectionate memory of life before the State of Israel" (Taboo Memories 222-3).

The systematic occlusion and censorship of pre-exodus histories, cultures, and expressions of longing prompted the young "Black Panthers" in Israel to assert and celebrate their identities

publicly. The activism of the Israeli "Black Panthers" empowered the Mizrahi community to embrace cultural identity and claim a rightful place in Israeli society (Elia-Shalev xiii). The influence of this movement was far-reaching. In fact, Mizrahi filmmakers, writers, novelists, critics and artists found a space to express their unique voices and artistic visions. Their work portrayed the experiences and legacies of Arab Jews, offering a counter-narrative to Israeli media, which often highlights the Ashkenazi perspective while either erasing or stereotyping Mizrahi perspectives.

Matalon, a key literary figure of the Mizrahi Renaissance, played a crucial role in shaping dialogue around Mizrahi identity and introducing minority stories into the canon of Israeli literature. Works like *The Sound of Our Steps* and *The One Facing Us* easily make her "one of the dominant voices that took an active part in this change" (Tsal 305). This cultural renaissance was a vital step toward asserting the agency of Mizrahi and Sephardic voices and defending their heritage at a time when the contributions of Arab Jews were often sidelined. This project of cultural reclamation in literature defines the movement, evident in the works of other Sephardic women writers such as Chochana Boukhobza, who renegotiates Tunisian Jewish exile in Paris (Belahrache and Barhoun, "Diaspora and Belonging" 3), and Ruth Knafo Setton, whose protagonist undertakes a "reverse exile" to recover Moroccan Judeo-Islamic heritage (Belahrache and Barhoun, "A Sephardic Female Odyssey" 74). Mizrahi Renaissance figures like Matalon aimed to address the gaps in cinematic, literary, artistic and musical representations of the Mizrahim/Sephardim.

In her article "The Invention of the Mizrahim," Shohat critiques the way Zionism suppresses Jews from Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds and universalizes their experiences and identities into one unified categorization, highlighting the erasure of diverse cultural narratives and the imposition of a singular identity that ignores the unique experiences of Mizrahi Jews. She suggests that this standardization of Jewishness serves to divorce Mizrahi Jews from their Arab and Muslim cultural roots, instead aligning them with a Eurocentric, Westernized Israeli identity:

> In the case of Middle Eastern Jews, the Euro-Israeli separation of the 'Jewish' and 'Middle Eastern' parts has ideologically facilitated the actual dismantling of the Jewish communities of the Muslim world, while pressuring the Oriental Jews in Israel to realign their identity according to Zionist Euro-Israeli paradigms. My point is not to idealize the situation of the Jews of Islam, but to suggest that Zionist discourse has undermined comparative studies of Jews in the Muslim world in relation to other minorities. ("Invention of the Mizrahim" 6)

Shohat contends that this process of cultural erasure forms part of a broader effort to "repress the 'Middle Easterness' of Mizrahim" and to present Jewishness and Arabness in irreconcilable opposition ("Invention of the Mizrahim" 8).

Matalon's fragmented narrative style mirrors the fractured identities of her characters, who, like the Mizrahim Shohat describes, are caught between their Arab Jewish heritage and the pressures of integration. Shohat's observation that Mizrahi identity is "a Zionist 'achievement,' one which marks a departure from previous concepts of Jewishness" ("Invention of the Mizrahim" 14), resonates with Matalon's portrayal of characters who struggle to reconcile their pasts with their presents. Shohat suggests that "existence under Zionism has meant a profound and visceral schizophrenia, mingling stubborn self-pride with an imposed self-rejection" ("Invention of the Mizrahim" 15). Applying Shohat's framework, this article examines Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps* to contest the sociopolitical constructs that define Mizrahi identity and to revindicate the multifaceted experiences of Mizrahi Jews. Shohat's assertion that

Mizrahi identity is "dynamic, mobile, less an achieved synthesis than an unstable constellation of discourses" ("Invention of the Mizrahim" 16) synchronizes with Matalon's emphasis on hybrid identities.

Unhomely Home: Between Ruin and Repossession

In *The Sound of Our Steps*, Matalon frames the protagonist's home as a dilapidated "shack" (Matalon 7) that resists all attempts at domestication. This crumbling house, which Lucette, the Egyptian Jewish mother, fails to repair, symbolizes the insecure status of the Mizrahim and Sephardim in Israeli society. Despite Lucette's efforts to fix her home, it remains an uninhabitable space that is in constant need of reconstruction. Tsal observes that the home in the novel is marked by "profound absence and lack; it is a fragile site, easily crushed by the external world, a patch in need of stubborn reconfirmation, to be remade again and again" (Tsal 307). The novel's depiction of Lucette entering her home reinforces this sense of fragility and disarray:

> In one wide-angled glance, from the semidarkness of the hallway, she took in the shack and the area around it, she registered, noted, and classified what she saw: a slight change in the placement of the vase on the oval table, shoes left on the carpet, a cup on the coffee table, someone slouching on the sofa, a squashed cushion, a chair out of alignment. Even before she put down her bag, she stood with it in the hallway, her eyes narrowed, jaw clenched, collecting evidence, coming up with evidence of collapse, of breakdown, of the chaos of our home's disintegration. (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7)

This precarious domestic space is a concrete manifestation of Lucette's own psychological and social instability.

After a long day, Lucette returns to the house, determined to claim her space in an external world that is alienating and hostile. In contrast, her home, despite its physical deterioration, represents a space where she can assert her authority and exercise a degree of agency over her surroundings and family. In fact, "the concept of 'home' is a major motif, and is presented as the antithesis to the Zionist space" in Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps* (Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel* 12). For Lucette, the act of repairing and maintaining the house is not merely a practical necessity but a symbolic effort to reclaim a sense of ownership. Lucette's homecoming is an act of reclamation:

> would trumpet her entrance, her return. She proclaimed it ... Her entrance was an effort to awaken the house to her, to rouse her heart in response. She restored it to herself after the hours of exile, of not-home, of not being able to scream ... [she] took command of her domain, declared her sovereignty, banished whatever needed banishing, at least until order was restored, until her repossession of the house had been established. It only seemed that her yelling had any substance, that it said something. I could have said it was a cry of despair, but no: it was a cry of furious longing. That's what it was: the fury of longing. (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7)

Her home becomes a site of both repossession and decay. In other words, Lucette's continuous efforts to restore her home manifest a more profound desire for belonging in an unwelcoming world.

Lucette is never fully satisfied with her existence in Israel, and she is constantly struggling to fix the superficial and external parts of her life to become less estranged. She obsessively repairs her home, appearance, children and clothes, unable to tolerate disorder and filth. She condemns "any disturbance of the right and proper order" when she returns home. Outside, she projects a presentable and restrained image to appeal to the Ashkenazi masses. She wears "her good clothes, not fancy at all but good or proper" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 1), ensuring to look appropriate when she steps out of the house. Meanwhile, she conceals her Mizrahi maternal persona that she reserves for her children at home. This compulsion is reflected in Lucette's insistence on aimlessly changing the color of her shoes: "When they were brown, she dyed them black. When they were black, she turned them brown. The brown didn't turn out too well, the black showed through. She gave them to the shoemaker, Mustaki. ('How are you, ya Mustaki?')" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 1). The act of dyeing the shoes is less about necessity and more about asserting control. The narrator elaborates: "a few times she gave them to Mustaki and then didn't wear them ... I think she didn't do the repairs to wear the shoes but to put things right, to clean up another corner of the world, to keep up her war against the disintegration of things" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 1). Her desire to reshape her surroundings stems from a sense of loss and emptiness in the Israeli host society.

At work, she represses her frustration, hunger and impulses to scream. Yet, the moment she enters the house, she experiences emotional catharsis by releasing the tension and anxiety that she has restrained during the day. Lucette "burst through the front door, starved after long hungry hours of not-home, of longing for home, of keeping up appearances out in the world, which was not-home. The weariness corroded her like acid, a weariness of body, but more than that, the weariness of keeping up appearances, of not-home" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7). This sudden outpouring of emotions illustrates the extent of her efforts to keep her Sephardic maternal identity masked. She develops two identities: an Ashkenazi-conforming persona and an Egyptian Arab one at home with her family. At home, her suppressed urges manifest in intense outbursts: "she threw a plant or a vase … Or she smashed the dirty cups in the sink and bled from the splinters. Or she kicked the leg of the table, hurting her toe. Or she tossed a pot off the stove … Or she screamed" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7). These episodes of purging reflect the toll of her daily physical and her struggle to maintain cohesion in an isolating society.

Mizrahi socio-political conditions are evident in the novel, demonstrating the impossibility for Arab Jews to thrive in a socio-economic culture that reduces them to the labor and working class. Discussing a potential burglary, Lucette states: "no, that's not right, the keys were in the plant pot next to the front door. We weren't worried about burglars. She wasn't worried, so we weren't either: 'What are they going to take? The tiles off the floor? Let them. We'll put down new ones'" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 1). This indifference reflects the family's limited resources and marginal social position. The mother's nonchalant attitude about replacing tiles highlights the difficulty of escaping generational poverty in a country that keeps immigrants trapped in a cycle of economic hardship. Despite her efforts to improve her living conditions, Lucette and her family remain impoverished, barely making ends meet. Once inside, she sees "scenes of devastation, a desert. The thirsty lawn, the shriveled rose beds" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7). This persistent social inequality is further illustrated in Lucette's modest livelihood and her humble "shed provided by Amidar (a state-owned housing company) in a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Petach Tikva" (Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel* 122). The simplicity of their living arrangements and the limited resources at their disposal not only reinforce their financial hardships but also mirror the broader socioeconomic barriers that prevent their social mobility.

Beyond economics, Lucette also expresses her rebellion against the outside laws and regulations. She transforms into a Mizrahi rebel, revolting against the social and political structures that seek to subdue her and her community. Her frequent declaration that "it's the end of the world" when she steps "inside" her home (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7) reflects her frustration over "outside" politics. Her disdain for the legal and social systems imposed on her is made explicit when she voices her mistrust of local authority: "She hated the law and whoever made it. The law is whatever happens to suit him, she thought, and she said what she thought, too: 'Your law is just what suits you, mister'" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7). Her rhetoric aligns with the broader resistance movements led by Mizrahi groups against Israeli authoritarianism. In fact, the country's "socioeconomic and demographic [imbalance] … brought about a growing antagonism among peripheral groups toward the core elites. Some Mizrahi Orthodox rabbis" became popular "in poor neighborhoods, becoming political spokesmen who publicly challenge Israel's relationship with … the rule of (secular) state law" (Hirschl 56).

The Flight of the Shack: The "Wandering Jew" and Deterritorialization

The mother persistently seeks to recreate a sense of familiarity for herself and her children, embedding Egyptian customs deeply within the home. Everyday practices like food preparation, linguistic choices and domestic rituals form an enduring link to her cultural roots. For example, when Lucette feels anxious or restless, she turns to Egyptian "tea with milk," a ritual that offers a sense of solace:

> Tea with milk is what she drinks when she can't drink a thing, not a thing. Tea with milk is the sign of emptiness, which has at its heart a longing for comfort, a kind of babying that she usually denies herself but now will accept … Tea with milk is a rare moment of consent. Her consent to weakness, softness, motherhood. She is most a mother when she's drinking tea with milk, dunking a slice of yesterday's dry bread in it, fishing out the soggy bits of bread with her fingers. Tea with milk gives her a sense of the true proportions of what she has and, mainly, what she doesn't have. She admires austere modesty, but as a matter of style, not substance, really not substance. (7)

Tea with milk and leftover bread, prepared the Egyptian way, are both her signature drink and a source of comfort. In such moments, Lucette allows herself an authenticity that remains suppressed in her interactions beyond the domestic sphere.

In embedding this ritual of tea with milk in her narrative, Matalon asserts that for the deterritorialized subject, cultural memory replaces physical territory. She unsettles the ideology of the "New Jew," an idealized figure who dismantles ties with the diasporic past. Placing Lucette, an Arab Jewish woman, in a foreign Israeli Ashkenazi context, Matalon problematizes conventional notions of territory, belonging, and identity.

Lucette becomes a "Wandering Jew" in Israel, the very nation that promised a permanent home for Jews everywhere. Her Egyptian Jewish identity is erased, beginning with the forced change of her name into an Ashkenazied version: "despite the practiced, almost natural use she learned to make of it, [it] never lost its strangeness, its twisted smile, just as her Hebraized name. (It was Lucette, but when she arrived in the country they told her, you're Levana. For years she would turn around whenever someone called her Levana, looking for the person with that name)" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 10). This depiction resonates with the figure of the immobilized "Wandering Jew" in the Francophone diaspora, like the father figure in Chochana Boukhobza's novel, whose exile in Paris is defined by "static, involuntary confinement" rather

than liberation (Belahrache and Barhoun, "Diaspora and Belonging" 9). In her coerced transformation into the "New Jew," Lucette is forced to deny her Egyptian Jewish roots and replace them with an artificial, state-sanctioned identity.

The family is also landless and on the verge of homelessness, which challenges Israel's claim of offering a homeland to a people without land. Mendelson-Maoz contends that the difficulties of "coping with questions of identity and memory render the [Matalon's] characters homeless. They endlessly engage in reconstructing their identities through writing and photographing in a process that … stresses how impossible it is to be at home and to feel at home and how impermanent identities are" (Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel* 102). For instance, the mother's inability to tend to her garden and the failure of her plants to grow subvert the Zionist ideal of the ingathering of Jews to settle, build and make the land thrive. Her garden, "*Elgnena,*" is portrayed "as a penal colony, a forced labor camp—for her, for her fellows. *Elgnena* as a sanatorium" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 26). Emphasizing her mother's "non-gardening" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 26) skills, the narrator recounts her continuous yet futile attempts to nurture plants. The mother exclaims: "I don't understand why I never succeed with these roses" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 25). Lucette's persistent but fruitless attempts to cultivate her land delineate displacement and unfulfilled belonging. Thus, Matalon counters the paradox of claiming a homeland while simultaneously displacing others, exposing the tension between the ideological promise of rootedness and the lived reality of exclusion and instability.

Following her failed attempts to cultivate her garden, Lucette seeks the help of a Palestinian gardener, Mustafa, who is widely employed by the Jewish residents of the neighborhood. Unlike Lucette, Mustafa is able to grow and sustain plant life. Upon assessing her garden, he reassures her, "the soil is good, there's nothing wrong with the soil, very good soil" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 156). His words suggest that the issue does not lie with the land itself but with the one attempting to cultivate it. The soil responds to Mustafa—a Palestinian—but rejects Lucette's efforts. Frustrated, she tells Mustafa, "'You see?' She pointed in despair at the wilted bushes, bending down and turning the soil over with her fingers: 'It's all because of this lousy soil, sand and more sand, *mafish fayida*, there's nothing to be done with it'" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 156). The land metaphorically recognizes its rightful caretakers, reinforcing the deeper themes of uprootedness and land ownership. In fact, in the Zionist imagination, "cultivating the Land of Israel—making the desert bloom—" signifies both a bond with and a claim to national territory; thus, the failure to grow trees and flowers, even in a small backyard, takes on symbolic weight, underscoring displacement and disconnection" (Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel* 125). This sense of foreignness and exile is further intensified when the narrator imagines the shack flying "high above the orange welding shop, the health clinic, above the thorns that covered the rectangle of land we left behind us, going up in flames at last, above the neighborhood and the shacks" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 48). The symbolic act of detaching from the ground evokes both a yearning for escape and the impossibility of rooting oneself in a hostile environment. Hence, Matalon affirms the image of the Mizrahi Israeli Jew as a constantly dislocated and dispossessed figure in Israel, emphasizing the impossibility of establishing oneself in an occupied territory.

As a Levantine, Lucette constantly uses the Egyptian dialect to express the intensity of her emotions. In this case, language becomes an alternative to geography for Lucette, who insists on using Arabic when addressing her children and other Mizrahi Jews. One of the most significant expressions she employs is "ya bint" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7), a term she reserves exclusively for her daughter. The term is a legacy passed down from Lucette's mother, Nona. "Ya bint" symbolizes maternal love and endearment of mother and daughter. The narrator, Lucette's daughter, recalls this tradition when she greets her mother upon her return

home: "Did you miss us, ya bint, did you miss us? (Her mother, Nona, called her 'ya bint,' daughter. She sometimes called herself ya bint when scolding herself for something, but tenderly: 'Yallah, get up already, ya bint, do something'" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7). This linguistic practice preserves Lucette's Arabness in her household, enabling her to resist Hebraization and sustain a connection to her diasporic past. In contrast, she employs Arabic to convey feelings of hatred and remorse. She refers to her husband, Maurice—also Egyptian—as "*elthaaban*" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 48), the Arabic word for snake. Maurice "was 'like a snake,' in Arabic, which was much more snakelike: '*elthaaban*.' 'The *thaaban*,' she said, 'when you cut off its head the tail goes on playing,' she said: 'That's *elthaaban* … '*El-lisan elhilweh*,' she sighed" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 48).

In the Egyptian Jewish household, Lucette and her family uphold a strong connection to their cultural roots through language, music and media. They sing Arabic songs, listen to Arabic radio and speak in the Egyptian dialect, which becomes part of what Lucette calls "our mentality" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 10). The grandmother, Nona, for example, often sings the same "Umm Kulthum song," much to her friend's annoyance (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 63), and listens exclusively to an Egyptian radio station, "Kol Yisrael's" Arabic broadcast, where "Amm Hamdan" gives "his daily sermon … 'Ikhwani, ya wlad masr eltayyibeen' ('My brothers, the good sons of Egypt') (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 83). Resistant to change, she relies on the Egyptian dialect in her daily interactions. When speaking to her daughter, she mostly uses Egyptian: "Yallah ya binti, enough, it's the middle of the night, nuss ellayl" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 83), while simultaneously ridiculing her grandson's broken and incomprehensible Arabic: "what did you say? Just say it in Hebrew, because of the Arabic you talk I can't understand a word. It's as broken as the Arabic of the Greeks in Cairo" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 117). She also reflects on the loss of her daughter's vitality and true self following their "emigration" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 112). She laments: "'I left the real, sweet Lucette behind in Egypt.' … 'The real Lucette stayed in Egypt'" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 112). Similarly, Lucette insists on watching only Arabic television, with "Arabic news" always playing in the background (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 128). This cultural immersion extends to Maurice, the father, who affectionately calls his daughter "ya omri" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 128). Their daily language choices and adherence to Egyptian traditions enable the family to maintain a cultural identity intact within their home.

Another instance of expressing Levantine roots occurs in a surreal scene where the narrator describes the metaphorical "flight" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 45) of the shack, which lifts off the ground and floats into the air. This fantastical event is orchestrated by the mother, who is referred to as "*elmuhandis*, the engineer" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 45), a term that denotes her role as both the archetype of the powerful man in Egyptian cinema and the symbolic guide for the family. The mother, "*Elmuhandis* is lifting the shack above the Nona's quarter-shack trapped between Amsalem's half and the *amm*'s quarter with the cows, and a special multipurpose cloud that screened the Friday afternoon Arabic movie with the character of the important man in the suit who was always called *elmuhandis*" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 45). This imagery emphasizes the role of Egyptian culture within the family dynamics. In using the metaphor of the floating shack and the mother as "*elmuhandis*," Matalon bridges the past and present, the real and the imagined.

The Family's Activist: Dispossession, Protest and Loyalty

Maurice, the father, is the epitome of the Mizrahi working and struggling class in the novel. Matalon uses his character to offer social commentary and voice the issues associated with the

Mizrahi movement in Israel. He emerges a militant and outspoken activist, haunted by the trauma of his family's forced exodus to Haifa. His upbringing in Cairo, Egypt, shapes his personality and radical convictions in Israel. These formative years spent on the streets of Cairo heavily contribute to developing his political discourse and intellectual and ideological beliefs. Maurice

> grew up in the street, from a child he hung out in the streets of Cairo. Cafés and cafés. His mother, poor woman, was an aristocrat …. His sister was highly educated … she was as beautiful as Laila Mourad, the actress …. He learned in the street, he learned in the cafés from those people who were communists, all day long politics, he didn't want to come here to Israel. I wanted to because of my brothers, and he came. As soon as we got off the ship in Haifa he got that obsession with the *Mizrahim* into his head, from the minute we landed. Discrimination. He was right, but he didn't do anything sensibly, he spoiled everything. (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 40)

His education, journalistic pursuits and political stance are rooted in these café sessions, where he is exposed to a culture of intellectual debate and protest. His reluctance to leave Egypt further signals his deep attachment to his homeland, a sentiment that continues even after his relocation to Israel.

Unlike his children, Maurice identifies strongly with the dispossession of Mizrahi Jews in Israel and aligns himself with their cause, while maintaining an affective and political affiliation with the broader Arab world, particularly Egypt. In the novel, he is "a political activist dedicated to fighting the Ashkenazi establishment's discrimination of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews, while abandoning his responsibility for his family" (Mendelson-Maoz, "Memory and Space" 3). He dedicates his journalistic work to exposing and discussing the community's hardships and advocating for social and economic transformation. His frustration with their Mizrahi marginalization leads him to reject personal advancement and social mobility in favor of sustained solidarity with the Mizrahi collective. His commitment drives him to establish a political organization named "Suhba" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 40), to which he devotes himself with near-religious fervor. "Suhba" becomes the platform through which Maurice openly confronts systemic discrimination against Mizrahim.

Maurice's solidarity with Egypt makes him an outcast in Israeli society. His empathy for Egypt during its war with Israel is a betrayal according to his daughters. Following Egypt's defeat, he experiences profound shame and outrage, identifying with the Egyptian soldiers and the humiliation of the Egyptian public. His anti-Israeli reaction sparks tension within his own household. He denounces the Israeli media for its dehumanizing portrayal of Egyptians. His response is steeped in anger:

> It wasn't the mother's kind of boiling … it was the dull rage of the final, empty sobs of a baby who despaired of its mother's coming, of a fatuous expectation, his face turned blue in humiliation. He repeated this word several times—'humiliation' … 'What a humiliation. They humiliated them like dogs, worse than dogs' … I really am in mourning for … the way they keep on showing how the Egyptian soldiers ran away without their shoes, they show it again and again, humiliating the other in his defeat. They can't see that there's a tomorrow, that you have to talk to the people you humiliated. Some leadership. (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 148)

His views ultimately ignite a heated argument with his daughter, Connie, who is outraged by his stance. Horrified by his sympathy for Egypt, she lashes out at him: "You're an Arab, not a Jew, that's what you are, an Arab. Get out. Pick yourself up and get out of here, you traitor"

(Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 148). Her reaction exposes the entrenched nationalist ideology that Maurice repudiates, while also revealing the internalized fractures that shape Mizrahi identity within Israel.

In Matalon's fiction, it is evident that she experiments with the taboo and censored. When describing the family's relocation from Egypt to Israel, she deliberately uses the term "immigration" instead of the Zionist term "Aliyah," a bold and politically charged decision for an Israeli writer. The Zionist apparatus frames Jewish exodus as "Aliyah," a term laden with biblical and ideological weight. "Aliyah" means ascent or elevation to the Land of Zion, eschewing the experience of its violent uprootedness and erasing the dispossession endured by Mizrahim, Sephardim and Palestinians. Mendelson-Maoz asserts that Matalon uncovers the "clash between *aliyah* and immigration … *aliyah* … forms a pedagogical narrative of Zionist thought and education that defines the successful enterprise of settling in Palestine and building a new society. The *immigr-ation* narrative is a specific realization of this general idea" (Mendelson-Maoz, "Memory and Space" 3-4). Her choice of the term "immigration" aims to denounce the romanticization of exodus, foregrounding instead the reality of forced displacement. Matalon expands on this in her article, writing, "only a handful of writers dared to use the term 'immigration' instead of the Zionist 'Aliyah' as an act of revolt. In my view, the moment when 'immigration' fully replaces 'Aliyah' marks a significant shift. Using 'Aliyah' rather than 'immigrant' erases the hardships of immigration, framing it as a temporary step toward complete assimilation, rather than acknowledging the struggles of the process" (*Read and Write* 45-6). Similarly, in the novel, Lucette's exodus is a "catastrophic … emigration" that removes her "femininity" (Matalon 12). Maurice also adopts the same terminology, challenging the Zionist rhetoric: "after immigration to the land of our fathers and settling in it, I never severed my connections with the country, even when I was abroad" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 41). His use of "immigration" instead of "Aliyah" signals his opposition to the national myth that idealizes Jewish settlement while concealing its violent consequences.

Like her linguistic defiance, Matalon also refuses to erase Egypt and Palestine from her narrative. Lucette maintains a close and trusting relationship with Mustafa, the Palestinian gardener, despite the anti-Palestinian hysteria propagated by the Israeli state. Even when other Israeli neighbors fire Mustafa out of fear—buying into the state's portrayal of Palestinians as "knife-wielding" criminals—Lucette remains loyal: "Let them fear for their ass if they want to. The only one I'm afraid of is God" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 156). She refuses to submit to anti-Palestinian paranoia and acknowledges Mustafa's humanity. Their relationship transcends the typical employer-worker dynamic, and it evolves into a bond of mutual respect and trust. Lucette admires Mustafa's intelligence and eloquence, telling him, "You should be a lawyer, *ya* Mustafa, with brains and a tongue like yours, a *muhami*" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 156).

Conclusion

Ronit Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps* documents the ongoing struggle of Mizrahi Jews to reclaim their voice, identity and place within a racist and repressive society. Matalon exposes the contradictions inherent in the Zionist portrayal of Jewishness and diaspora. The novel projects a Jewish reality marked by ostracization, dislocation and cultural occlusion. Its fragmented narrative form and linguistic hybridity reflect the characters' divided identities, caught between Arab Jewish heritage and the pressures of conformity within an Ashkenazi-dominated Israeli society. Matalon's work interrogates Euro-Zionist paradigms and advances a Mizrahi counter-narrative that calls into question dominant formulations of Israeli national

identity. The portrayal of Maurice, Lucette and their children reveals the fissures within Israeli identity, questioning the rigid binaries of East and West, Jewish and Arab, home and exile.

At its center, *The Sound of Our Steps* seeks to humanize Mizrahi experience while foregrounding forms of everyday resistance. Maurice's political commitment and Lucette's efforts to preserve Egyptian identity within the confines of a decaying shack reflect broader Mizrahi demands for dignity and recognition. Matalon's delineation of Egyptian Jewish immigrant characters dramatizes the psychological and emotional traumas of living in a society that demands conformity while denying cultural authenticity. The interweaving of emigration, diaspora, and belonging enables Matalon to dismantle systemic inequalities faced by Mizrahim while underscoring their cultural richness and resilience. Through her work, she asserts that identity is not monolithic but a dynamic, ever-evolving interplay of history, culture and personal experience. Hence, *The Sound of Our Steps* is Matalon's re-examination of Eurocentric meta-narratives and affirmation of the silenced diversity and multiculturalism in Israeli fiction. Matalon's work is a vital part of the Mizrahi Renaissance, a movement that seeks to reclaim the past and reimagine a more inclusive and equitable Jewish future.

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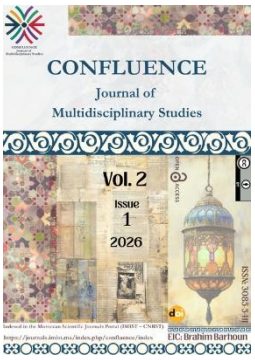
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CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

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

Global Appeal, Local Identity: The Rise and Role of Anglicisms in Moroccan Brand Naming Practices

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.5022

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Received: 05-06-2025 Accepted: 10-10-2025 Published: 19-01-2026

Global Appeal, Local Identity: The Rise and Role of Anglicisms in Moroccan Brand Naming Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the growing prevalence of anglicisms in Moroccan brand names, analyzing their linguistic structures, functional motivations, and cultural implications. Utilizing a corpus of 297 brand names registered in Morocco from 2010 to 2020, the research categorizes anglicisms into four distinct types: pure, pseudo, hybrid, and adapted. The study categorizes brand names according to morphological processes, including compounding, derivation, blending, and abbreviation, and examines how these forms contribute to linguistic creativity and brand positioning. Particular attention is given to the phenomenon of transliteration and the adaptation of English phonology into Arabic script, revealing how hybrid forms often serve to enhance consumer accessibility while simultaneously projecting prestige and modernity. The findings indicate that while pure anglicisms are most prevalent, pseudo and hybrid forms significantly contribute to localizing global influences. Results suggest that the adoption of English in Moroccan branding is not primarily driven by lexical gaps in native languages, but by extralinguistic motivations such as social prestige, global appeal, and the desire for linguistic innovation. The analysis also demonstrates that brand designers often exploit the symbolic value of English to craft names that resonate both locally and internationally. Ultimately, the study sheds light on how Moroccan brand designers strategically leverage English to align with consumer aspirations and respond to market dynamics within an increasingly globalized environment.

KEYWORDS

Anglicisms
Morphology
Global Branding
False Anglicisms
Adapted Anglicisms

Introduction

With the spread of technology and the world becoming a "Global Village," as put by the futurist marketer Marshall McLuhan, space and time had shrunken, converting different societies into a single community. Many companies started to opt for an international market or at least were inspired to be globalized, clearly trusting the selling power of English despite the product's country of origin and the nationality of the target audience. However, scholars such as Haarmann, Kelly-Holmes, and Piller argue that the use of foreign-language display in advertising is symbolic in that the foreign language, such as English, evokes associations with the country where it is typically spoken, and these associations are transferred to the product (Haarmann 11; Kelly-Holmes 45; Piller 170).

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The widespread use of English-derived names, such as *Beauty Rose*, *Gold Skin*, and *British Dreams*, exemplifies how Moroccan companies adopt global branding strategies to evoke aspirational meanings such as sophistication, modernity, and cosmopolitanism. As noted in international marketing literature, successful global brands must project a consistent image while simultaneously appealing to local consumer aspirations. In the Moroccan context, English operates not merely as a linguistic choice but as a symbolic code that signifies international quality and lifestyle elevation.

Our analysis of Moroccan anglicized brand names demonstrates how global branding transcends language and enters the realm of emotional and cultural capital. Many of the brand names in the corpus are not translations but carefully crafted labels that rely on the prestige of English to project a global aura. This strategic use of English aligns with consumer behavior research suggesting that buyers in emerging markets are increasingly drawn to products perceived as "global," equating them with trustworthiness and modern standards (Strizhakova et al. 342). Moreover, the presence of pseudo-anglicisms and hybrid formations in Moroccan branding reveals a localized form of global branding, one that reinterprets English forms through cultural filters to balance international appeal with domestic resonance. This dynamic suggests that global branding in Morocco does not simply imitate Western models but rather adapts and recontextualizes them to fit the semiotic expectations of local consumers.

Literature Review

Anglicisms in Advertising

The use of English as a foreign language in global media, particularly in commercial advertising, has garnered considerable linguistic attention. One of the first scholars to tackle this issue is Haarmann in his pioneering work devoted to language contact phenomenon in Japan. He maintains that certain languages activate specific stereotypes, which are based on human beings' need for social identification. He further demonstrates that certain ways of stimulating deliberate stereotypes in advertising is through the use of different linguistic codes (11). Hence, in Japanese advertising, the strategic deployment of such codes reflects a broader trend of internationalization in commercial discourse. According to Haarmann, different languages conjure different feelings or associations. For instance, French invokes elegance, sophistication, refinement, and fashion; Italian activates associations with tasty cuisine and sporty elegance, and German symbolizes good quality and prestige (29).

In the same vein, Bhatia suggests that the role of English in discourse domains, such as product naming, is a useful source for adding "positive effective features" such as modernity, westernization, innovation, internalization, standardization, safety, protection, domesticity, independence, informality, efficiency, competence, organization, sophistication, quality, utility, physical and mental fitness, tradition, innovation and futuristic trends, among others (35). Therefore, he argues that English is used, among other things, to produce a favourable psychological effect upon targeted audiences. Similarly, Piller maintains that English is used not only to express future and success orientation but also to represent fun and sophistication (135). Martin observes that English in French advertising is generally considered as a symbol of modernization, efficiency, and/or reliability (375).

The employment of English in commercial names and trademarks of Spanish companies has proved to be an effective strategy, which is used to symbolize status, efficiency and modernity (González et al. 45). Rodríguez Díaz states that "the use of foreign graphs and signs associate the product with the prestige of foreign countries in Spain" (174). English is used to highlight

the American qualities of the product, which are usually linked to positive connotations due to the economic supremacy of the USA (171). In the fields of fashion and beauty, Balteiro and Campos examine the prevalence of false anglicisms and demonstrate that English is used extensively (239). They conclude that the prestige and attraction of English lead speakers to follow what they consider an acceptable trend, not only in terms of what they have received from English, but also through parallel coinages; the only justification for which is probably their "Englishness", that is, the iconic power of English as a trendsetter (249).

Rodríguez-Medina investigates the use of anglicisms in TV commercials of cosmetics, hygiene and personal care products. She analyses 531 TV commercials across four Spanish TV channels (Tele5, Antena3, LaSexta and Disney Channel) and confirms a significant presence of pure anglicisms, English-Spanish code switching, pseudo-anglicisms and Anglo-American imagery and music in the advertising of products related to cosmetics, hygiene and personal care on Spanish television (57).

Similarly, Luján García examines the presence of anglicisms in the Spanish internet forum *Enfemenino*, focusing on the domains of beauty, fashion, and leisure. Her findings indicate that pure anglicisms are frequently used, whereas adapted and pseudo-anglicisms appear less often. García points out that these forms are employed to signal modernity and prestige associated with English, to fill lexical gaps, and to reflect the increasing cultural influence of Anglo-American norms in Spain (277).

Krishna and Ahluwalia explore bilingual consumer preferences in India, examining whether company origin (local vs. foreign) and product type (luxury vs. necessity) influence attitudes toward advertisements in English versus Hindi. Their study suggests that anglicisms in non-English-speaking countries serve as symbolic markers of modernity, internationalization, prestige, and superiority (692).

A substantial body of research has been dedicated to the use of English loanwords in the field of economics. Several in-depth studies on this subject are doctoral dissertations, including those by Cece (2016), Vélez Barreiro (2003), and Diéguez Morales (2003). Beyond these theses, a number of scholarly articles also examine the presence of anglicisms in economic language. For instance, Orts Llopis and Almela Sánchez-Lafuente provide both an analysis and a descriptive account of the influx of English terms into Spanish economic discourse during the Global Systemic Crisis (35). They later expand on this work in their 2012 publication, where they propose a system for selecting, analyzing, and explaining a representative set of real-world lexical data. Additionally, González Cruz, from a digital media perspective, sheds light on how the presence of anglicisms has expanded beyond traditional advertising to permeate informal, user-generated contexts such as online forums and e-commerce platforms. His findings illustrate how English-derived terms are appropriated by everyday users, reinforcing the symbolic prestige of English even in grassroots, non-institutional communicative spaces (335).

In particular, El Yamlahi and Cortés de los Ríos present a metonymic analysis of Moroccan cosmetic brand names, highlighting the semantic relationship between the brand and the product through cognitive linguistic mechanisms. This research underscores how anglicized names are strategically crafted to suggest qualities such as purity, prestige, and efficacy associations often culturally mapped onto the English language (149). This study also introduces a Moroccan-specific typology of brand name formations that is directly relevant to the present manuscript's classification system (e.g., blends like *Bioty* or compounds like *Moroccan Sense*).

Building upon that foundation, their 2023 work extends the analysis to food and hygiene products, demonstrating how consumer perceptions of safety and innovation are linguistically encoded in pseudo-English formations such as *Cleanox* and *Maxiclean*. These names not only mimic English phonology but also evoke implicit messages of global quality standards (155).

El Yamlahi and Cortes de Los Rios reveal that the creation of anglicized Moroccan fragrance brand names frequently relies on cognitive operations such as metaphor, metonymy, and conceptual blending, which serve not only linguistic but also persuasive and symbolic functions. Many Moroccan fragrance brands employ English-derived terms to evoke abstract qualities, such as *Secret*, *Romantic Rose*, *Poetic Perfume*, or *Fresh Storm*, which trigger metaphorical associations tied to sensuality, mystery, and emotional depth (153). These names function metonymically as well, allowing the brand to stand for broader lifestyle aspirations or identity categories. For example, *British Dreams* evokes an idealized, foreign lifestyle without directly referencing a product attribute, while *Gold Skin* metonymically links luxury and skin care through the symbolic value of gold.

Corpus and Methodology

The Corpus of Moroccan Anglicized Brand Names

The corpus of this thesis consists of brand names that are drawn from the Moroccan database: (OMPIC) Office Marocain de la Propriété Industrielle et Commerciale[1] released between the years 2010-2020. The corpus was selected taking into consideration the following procedure:

- The brands should be either English mixed with one of the varieties spoken in Morocco (Standard Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, Tamazight, or French) or entirely English.
- The brands should be creative in nature; therefore, brand names literally indicating the product were disregarded.
- The selected brands were only based on physical goods (Kotler and Armstrong 481) (i.e. products whose purchase results in the ownership of something tangible) and this decision is based on the last statistics of Moroccan's consumption expenditure on products and services, where physical goods take the biggest share, 66.8%[2].

The data collection process was conducted manually. Out of approximately 1,545 brand names examined, 495 names (32%) were written entirely in English or in English combined with another language. The remaining 66% were created in French, Arabic, or a combination of both, while only 2% appeared in Spanish. Initially, the corpus was deliberately kept open-ended to allow for the flexible selection of brand names that would yield meaningful insights for the purposes of linguistic and morphological analysis.

To ensure representativeness and diversity within the corpus, the study adopted the three-category product classification proposed by Copeland, which is based on consumer buying behavior (129). This typology distinguishes between convenience goods, shopping goods, and specialty products, depending on the level of time, planning, and cognitive effort consumers typically invest in the purchasing process. This framework was also applied in a more recent work by Pérez-Sobrino (197).

- Convenience goods: low-priced products that are bought with little planning and little effort.
- Shopping goods: items that involve more planning and a higher shopping effort.
- Specialty products: (Expensive commodities e.g., Cars, and diamonds).[3]

The final target sample is 297 (60%) brand names containing one or more of the criteria listed previously. Of these, 96% of the corporations have a Moroccan origin but 4% of them,

although founded in Morocco, were not founded by a Moroccan; therefore, in the selected corpus we have foreign names like *Jane*, *Rexon*, *Benson*, and *Silia*, etc.

Even if the corpus in hand cannot be considered exhaustive, we tried to guarantee the variety and representativeness of our corpus, so we included brand names belonging to different product types. For the purpose of the study, the samples were organized into categories and analysed accordingly. This resulted in seven subgroups (drinks, food, personal care, cleaning products, cosmetics and perfumes, clothing and footwear, household appliances)[4] within the two general groups of convenience and shopping goods.

Method Used for the Identification of Anglicisms

The presence of English in Moroccan brand naming discourse is explored as both an innovative and persuasive linguistic tool. This analysis aims to: (i) identify the most productive lexical elements; (ii) highlight the dominant word-formation processes; and (iii) examine instances of morphological deviation or violation. To accomplish these objectives, the collected brand names were systematically categorized according to their word-formation patterns, following the frameworks proposed by Plag (15) and Lieber (22).

Anglicisms were selected and examined using the typology proposed by Furiassi, Pulcini, and Rodríguez-González, which distinguishes between five categories: loanwords (non-adapted/ pure), adapted anglicisms, false or pseudo-anglicisms, hybrid anglicisms, semantic loans, and calques (6). The main criterion adopted to discern a false anglicism from a genuine one was the presence or absence of the word in the latest online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (March 2016). This approach follows the recommendation of Busse and Görlach**,** who note that "possible pseudo-anglicisms need to be confirmed with the help of dictionaries and native speakers" (29). In the context of this study, we consider only direct lexical borrowings:

Non-adapted or pure anglicisms: English word loans in their original form with no adaptation "a word or a multiword unit borrowed from the English language with or without minor formal or semantic integration, so that it remains recognizably English in the recipient language (RL)" (Furiassi et al. 6).

Adapted anglicisms: words or multi-word units borrowed from English with morphological integration into the structures of the target language. Both, the source language (SL) term and the target language (TL) term, are close in meaning (Furiassi et al. 7). Therefore, adaptations tend to affect the morphology rather than the meaning of the words.

False or *pseudo-anglicisms*: English-looking words that do not exist in English. Concerning the classification of false anglicisms, we will consider the typology given by Furiassi, who classified them into autonomous compounds, autonomous derivatives, compound ellipses, clippings, semantic shifts, and generic trademarks (52). Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study, we will group them into the following categories: autonomous creations (compounds, blends and derivatives), abbreviations (ellipses and clippings), morphological changes and semantic shifts (eponyms and toponyms).

Hybrid anglicisms: A mixture or combination of two words from different languages, one being necessarily English.

Discussion and Results

This study aims at identifying the presence of anglicisms in Moroccan brand names in order to describe them, determine their frequency and infer the causes of their incorporation. The evident categories in the corpus, in decreasing order of frequency are pure anglicisms (55%), pseudo-anglicisms (26%), hybrid anglicisms (12%) English-Arabic, English-French code switching

and adapted anglicisms (7%). It is significant that, in term of tokens, pure anglicisms are considerably high, while adapted anglicisms are the least used ones. Hybrid anglicism, on the other hand, was the only type that showed a significant variation in terms of tokens between convenience (8%) and shopping goods (14%). The table below summarizes the frequency and percentage of the different types of anglicisms detected in convenience and shopping goods:

Table 1- Frequency of Occurrence of Anglicisms in Convenience and Shopping Goods

	Pure	Pseudo	Hybrid	Adapted	Total
Convenience goods	87	37	11	11	146
Percentage	60%	25%	8%	8%	100%
Shopping goods	87	35	20	9	151
Percentage	58%	23%	14%	6%	100%
Total	174	72	31	20	297
Percentage	55%	26%	12%	7%	100%

Source: Data collected by the author.

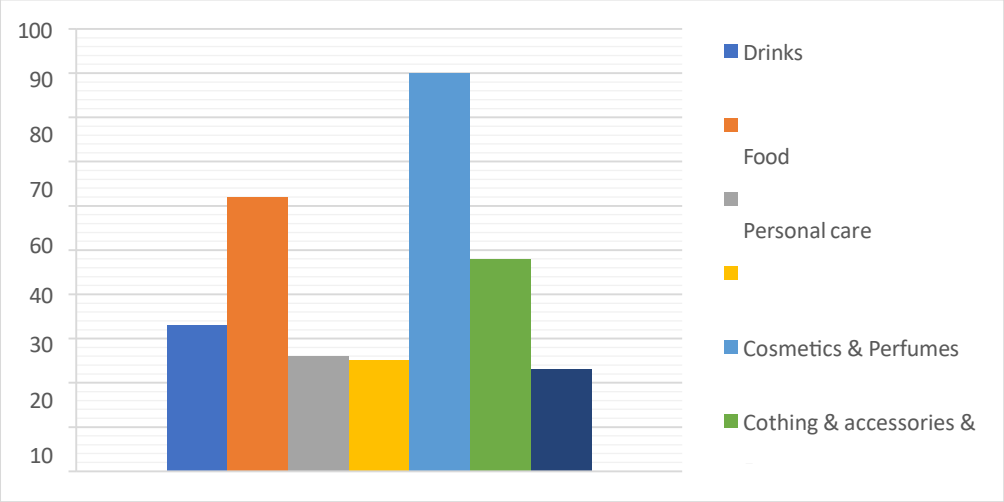


Fig. 1 - Graphic Representation of Frequency of Anglicisms per Product Type

As illustrated in Figure 1, English was used in brand naming across seven distinct product categories, with a total of 297 anglicisms identified in the corpus. The highest concentrations were found in brands related to cosmetics and perfumes (90 instances), followed by food products (62), clothing and footwear (48), and drinks (33). In contrast, categories such as personal care, cleaning products, and household appliances showed the lowest frequency of anglicisms. Notably, the adoption of English in these brand names does not stem from a lack of lexical equivalents in the native languages. Rather, other motivating factors play a more

significant role, most notably, the pursuit of social prestige, perceptions of modernity, aspirations toward international recognition, and the desire for lexical and semantic creativity. These findings are consistent with González Cruz, who argues that "the prestige and sense of modernity associated with English and the important role this language seems to play for linguistic creativity and lexical innovation" are key drivers behind the integration of English into brand naming practices (350).

Pure Anglicisms

A total of 55% of the anglicisms identified in the corpus fall under the category of pure anglicisms, making them the most frequent type of English borrowing among both convenience and shopping goods. This finding underscores a clear preference among brand designers for adopting English terms in their original form rather than adapting them to local linguistic norms.

In the analysed data set, the majority of brand names consist of multi-word units. While the distinction between lexical compounds and syntactic phrases can sometimes be ambiguous, brand names typically function as unified conceptual entities that encapsulate a specific product identity. Therefore, for the purposes of this analysis, these combinations are treated as compounds. The following table presents the grammatical categories of pure anglicisms that have been retained in their original form, without orthographic or morphological modification.

Table 2 - Grammatical Category of Pure Anglicisms per Product Type

	Nouns	Adjectives	Noun + noun	Adjective+ noun	Adjective + adjective
Drinks	Aloe, Breeze, Captain, Effect, Iceland, Pulp, Energy	Cool, Original	Bullfighter, fuze Tea, Gold Orange, Green Cola, King Fruit, Mountain Juice, Star Soda	Fresh Corner, Fun Cola	
Food	Coconut, Morning, Peanut, Passion, Power, Tagger, Tango	Classic, Crunchy, Golden, Nice, Sweet	Wafer Peanut	Delicious Cake, Top Cookies	
	Magic, Titan	Premium, Twisty	Gold Ice, Ice One, Star Ice, Tip Top	Big Star, Golden Globe, Happy Rolls	
	Master, Top	Spicy	Fun Chips, Planet Chips, Leader Chips	Best Chips, Good Chips, Super Chips	
Personal care		Clean, Clear, Lucky Super, Soft	Baby Joy, Baby Premium, Flower Power	Easy Day, Fine Care, Happy Baby, Happy Soap, Soft Soap, Super Baby, Top Care	

Cleaning products	Comfort, Lotus	Good			Clean Fast, Soft Clean
Cosmetics & Perfumes	Beauty, Glamour, Status, Secret, Status, Kiss	Pristine	Gift Morocco, Gold Skin, Morocco Mint, Beauty Rose, Crown Perfumes	Natural Health, Fresh Storm, Green Inspiration, Ideal Skin, Poetic Perfume, Top Four Moroccan (Organics, Elixir, Nature, Oil, Pure, Secret, Sense, Treasure, Wonders), Perfect Beauty, Essential Organic Offerings, Perfect White, Pure Argan Elixir, Good Man, Happy Baby, New Brand, Romantic Rose	
Clothing, Footwear & Accessories	Harmony, Partner's. Cobra	Comfy, Imperial	Lone Wolf, Polo Speed, Harmony Textile, Afrika Shoes, Arts Shoes, Desert Flyer, Holi Dots, Rexon Comfort Shoes, Star Shoes, Comfort Socks	Extreme Sport, Active Underwear, Big Boss, Bling Duck, Tidy Shoes, Super Star, Best Socks, Golden Socks	
Household appliances	Los Angeles, Washington, Gold		Beauty West, Gold Star, Four Seasons	British Dreams, Happy Dreams, Pure Touch, Silver Moon, Pure Rest	

Source: Data collected by the author.

As illustrated in Table 2, compound nouns represent the most dominant grammatical structure among pure anglicisms, accounting for 59% of the entries. This is followed by simple nouns at 30%, while adjectives make up the remaining 21%, making them the least used category. The prevalence of compound structures in brand naming can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, single-word lexical items are increasingly difficult to protect as trademarks due to saturation across trademark classes, and they often lack the semantic flexibility to convey novel or differentiated product concepts. Secondly, compounds align with the principle of linguistic economy, offering a concise yet impactful means of communication that facilitates brand recognition and memorability.

Through the use of compounds, brand designers gain the flexibility to combine semantic elements in suggestive and innovative ways, crafting brand names that are not only meaningful but also culturally resonant and commercially effective. This creative capacity is emphasized by Benczes, who observes that "compounds represent one of the most creative processes of the English language: the ability to create and understand compound expressions that have been formed by utilizing the endless possibilities of metaphor and metonymy" (1). In this context,

most compound brand names in the corpus adhere to conventional English word formation patterns, further reinforcing their perceived authenticity and alignment with global linguistic standards.

Table 3 - Compound Anglicisms Used with Higher Frequency in Our Corpus

Words	Compounds
Gold	Gold Orange, Gold Chips, Gold Ice, Gold Skin, Gold Star
Star	Star Soda, Star Ice, Big Star, Star Shoes, Super Star
Fun	Fun Cola, Fun Chips
Happy	Happy Rolls, Happy Baby, Happy Soap, Happy Dreams
Baby	Happy Baby, Super Baby, Baby Premium
Chips	Fun Chips, Planet Chips, Best Chips, Good Chips, Leader Chips, Super Chips
Ice	Gold Ice, Ice Rolls, Ice One, Star Ice
Clean	Clean & Clear, Soft Clean, Clean Fast
Moroccan	Moroccan Organics, Moroccan Elixir, Moroccan Nature, Moroccan Oil, Moroccan Pure, Moroccan Secret, Moroccan Sense, Moroccan Treasures
Pure	Moroccan Pure, Pure Touch, Pure Rest, Pure Argan

Source: Data collected by the author.

It is worth noting that among the 297 brand names analysed, only four verbs were identified: *Boost*, *Fly*, *Splash*, and *Fix*. This limited use of verbs suggests a strong preference for nominal and adjectival constructions in Moroccan brand naming practices. Additionally, the conjunction ampersand (&) appears in several brand names, such as *Learn & Earn*, *Yan & One*, *Clean & Clear*, and *Jewelry & More*, reflecting a stylistic choice aligned with global branding trends. The corpus also contains inflected constructions, notably in possessive forms such as *Partner's Underwear*, *Moroccan's Secrets*, *Maxi's*, and *Argaia's*, which emulate English grammatical patterns and contribute to the perception of authenticity.

Moreover, references to geographic locations, particularly American cities, are recurrent. Names like *Los Angeles* (appearing three times), *Miami*, and *Washington* are employed to evoke cosmopolitan or aspirational imagery. The brand *British Dreams*, for example, invokes connotations of tradition, luxury, and European refinement through its allusion to the United Kingdom. In several cases, full English phrases are used as brand names, including *Source of Beauty*, *Bones of Glory*, *My Stone*, *My Shoe*, *Birth of Beauty*, and *Secrets of Morocco*. These phrases consistently maintain standard English syntactic order, and thus are classified as pure anglicisms in this study.

All of these elements fall under what are commonly termed "luxury loans." Unlike necessity borrowings that fill lexical gaps, luxury loans serve extralinguistic purposes, primarily projecting prestige, modernity, and international appeal. As Rodríguez González aptly notes, "the prestige of English in today's world has contributed to the fact that most anglicisms are used in their original form" (295). These findings reinforce the argument that the adoption of English in Moroccan brand naming is driven less by linguistic need and more by symbolic and socio-cultural motivations.

Pseudo Anglicisms

In the language of advertising, linguistic creativity serves as a key strategy to attract and engage consumers. Within the corpus analyzed, one of the most prominent techniques for creating new brand names involves autonomous creations, including compounding, derivation, blending, and to a lesser extent, abbreviation. These processes reflect a deliberate manipulation of English lexical elements to generate innovative brand terms that, while English-looking, are not part of standard English usage. As Marchand observes, such formations often referred to as false borrowings or pseudo-anglicisms can be viewed as a form of "word-manufacturing," wherein foreign linguistic material is reassembled in creative ways within non-Anglophone contexts (52).

The findings of this study confirm that a substantial portion of pseudo-anglicisms in Moroccan branding are the result of such autonomous linguistic innovation. These brand names are constructed using English-derived morphemes, yet their composition, semantic development, and contextual adaptation occur entirely within the Moroccan market. Consequently, they are classified as autonomous creations, as they originate in a non-English-speaking environment while borrowing selectively from English to project modernity, trendiness, or scientific credibility. This phenomenon reflects not just imitation, but a localized appropriation of English for strategic branding purposes, thereby contributing to the unique linguistic landscape of Moroccan commercial communication.

Table 4 - Morphological Processes Involved in the Creation of Pseudo-anglicisms

Autonomous creations			**Abbreviation**
Compounding	**Blending**	**Derivation**	**Clipping**
Gold Haircare, Hairsave, Magix Duo, Floridays, Trendy Spirit	Tastea, Ichoc, Paradice, Pure N'Ice, Chocolove, Chocoglaze, Chocochips, Cleanox	Besty, Biggy, Freshy, Kidy, Maxiplus, Ecoclean, Maxiclean, Maxijavel, Super Baby, Supersoft, Superk, Superrobot, Comfies, Crispies Ecoclean	Chocoup, Chocolove, Chocoglaze, Chocolove, Happy Choco, Excelo, Ichoc, Cleanox
Richbond, Poly Crown, Dolidol Prestige, Dolidol Premium	Argai's, Argarom, Argonair, Cosmac, Orientaluxury, Skineal, Bioty, Nappy, Accestory,	Bioargan, Bionoble, Biocosmetics, Bioenergy, Maxibio, Aerosoft, Aerolatex, Gigadorsal, Multiflex Superlove	Diam Kids, Green- Tex, Comfortflex, Infinityflex, Multiflex

Source: Data collected by the author.

Autonomous Creations

New words are created by combining parts of two separate words. For instance, *Orientaluxury* blends the English adjective *oriental* with the noun *luxury*, resulting in a coined term that evokes associations of authenticity and luxury. *Accestory i*s another example of a pseudo-anglicism which combines the stem "*accessory*" with the English noun "*story*." Similarly, *Paradice* combines *paradise* and *ice*, producing a term that invokes both indulgence and freshness, typical of frozen dessert branding. Argan is a word that is used in our corpus to make many brand names in cosmetics, see for instance, *Argai <argan + Gaia>, Argarom <argan + aroma>,*

Argonair <*argan* + *air*>. The above-mentioned examples illustrate cases of autonomous creations resulting from the merging of two source words that overlap phonologically and/or graphologically, producing English-looking words that have no actual meaning in English. Interestingly, a number of blends in our corpus are based on close similarity between source words or their fragments e.g., *Tasty* <*taste* + *tea*>, *Pure Nice* <*nice* + *ice*>. Another example is the case of *Bioty*, which is a word play that combines the prefix *bio-* and the noun *beauty*. Obviously, certain classes of goods, such as food and cosmetics, exploit blending as a naming strategy more often than others. The clipping of lexical material in blends together with the bewilderment call for more processing effort, make consumers, who have figured out the intended meaning of the referent, experience satisfaction and develop a positive attitude toward the product (Lehrer 115).

Other candidates for autonomous creations are compounds, which are created by combining two words together. For the sake of illustration see *Trendy Spirit*, formed by analogy with free spirit, which is featured in the OED as a noun compound meaning a person who does what they want with enjoyment and pleasure and does not feel limited by the usual rules of social behavior; by the same token, trendy spirit would mean a person who wears what they want following their own fashion. In the case of compounds, many anglicisms either occur as two separate words, e.g., *Poly Crown, Trendy Spirit, Giga Dorsal, Dolidol Prestige, Dolidol Premium* or as one-word *Hairsave, Haircare, Richbond, Floridays*. Although compounds with hyphens are very common in the English language, only one case with a hyphen in between was found (*green-tex*). The processes of derivation from loanwords are also interesting in that they reveal the richness of lexical productivity. There are two main types of the addition of affixes to the words. The first type is the addition of a prefix such as *Multiflex, Superrobot*, and *Aerolatex*. The second type is the addition of a suffix such as *Besty* and *Freshy*. However, the results of our analyses suggest that prefixation is more widely used than suffixation. The various affixation patterns can be classified into the following categories:

Table 5 - Derivation Processes in Pseudo-anglicized Brand Names

Affixation	Meaning	Example
Prefixes -super -maxi -bio -multi -aero -eco -giga	 Intensification Intensification Life Intensification Purity Ecology Intensification	 Superlove, Superrobot, Superbaby, Superk Maxibio, Maxijavel, Maxiclean Biocosmetics, Bioenergy,nBioargan, Bionoble Multiflex Aerolatex, Aerosoft Eco-Clean Gigadorsal
Suffixes y-	Diminutive/ affectionate	Besty- Freshy- Kidy- Jumpy-Biggy

Source: Data collected by the author.

In this regard, one of these processes is the attachment of diminutive derivational suffixes to anglicized bases; see, for instance, *Besty, Biggy, Freshy, Kidy*. The suffix -y can be added to nouns to form adjectives, however, in the examples at hand, apart from kid, which is a noun, the rest are already adjectives and adding the suffix -y does not change the word class of the existing word. Other interesting cases are the brand names *Comfies* and *Crispies*, which were formed from the adjectives comfy and crispy changing final y into -ies. In fact, these brands go against English word formation processes because adjectives do not have a singular and plural form. Consequently, the irregularities shown before are unlikely to be connected with the unfamiliarity with basic English morphology; but they are probably used by the brand designer as an effective method to catch the consumer's attention, and to create memorable brands.

Bio- is another illustrative case. Derived from the Greek word *bios*, meaning "life," it is commonly used as a scientific prefix and appears frequently in pseudo-anglicisms, particularly in the branding of cosmetic products. Examples include *Biocosmetics*, *Bioargan*, *Bionoble*, and *Bioenergy*. These formations imitate scientific language while conveying associations with nature, health, and innovation. In line with this, we support Rodríguez Medina's view that pseudo-anglicisms "are very useful to create English-looking pseudo-scientific words to name products" (162). The designated suffix will provide a consistent, readily available, and recognizable mechanism for consumers to correctly identify these products as made from natural ingredients, such as argan kernels, and also as environmentally friendly, a concept that refers to products that treat nature and animals fairly.

The prefix *maxi-* is added to the noun javel derived from the name "Eau de Javel" (bleach in French), to adjective clean, to preposition plus, and even combined with bio as in *Maxibio*. The meaning of this prefix is "large, long," which gives rise to the correlation metaphor MORE IS UP/ GOOD IS UP. In the case of *Maxijavel* or *Maxiclean*, the brand will convey not only associations to hygiene but also to efficiency. Consequently, instead of using the adjective clean alone, which is associated to hygiene, adding the prefix-*maxi* carries additional meaning to the original words resulting in a new one, which means impressive results after using the products. Furthermore, other prefixes, such as *super-*, *multi-*, and *giga-* together with *maxi-* can be grouped in what is referred to as evaluative prefixes used as a scaling device, or what is referred to in cognitive linguistics as strengthening operations.

Abbreviations

In the abbreviation category there are two possibilities: clipping of a bound form, or shortening, that is, elimination of one of the initially constituting parts of a compound. However, analysis revealed that there are no instances of compound ellipses in the corpus. Clipping is "a reduction of a word to a shorter form. It is a cutting off one or more syllables of a word" (Kvetko 47). Linguistic economy, i.e. the use of shorter words to achieve brevity is one of the motivating factors behind this mechanism. Interestingly enough, this category does not seem to contain as many items as the previous one, see for instance *Choco* < chocolate, *Excelo* < excellent, *Ox* < oxidant, *Diam* < diamantine, *Tex* < textile, *Flex* < flexible. Interestingly, most of these abbreviations are used to make compounds.

Adapted Anglicisms

The process includes borrowing a word or multi-word meaning with orthographic, phonological and/or morphological integration into the systemic structure of the TL. The anglicisms belonging to these areas are developed around orthographic and phonological integration, either through transcribing the English pronunciation or through the transliteration[4] of words that originate in Latin script.



Fig. 2. Examples of Adapted Anglici

With regard to words that transcribe English pronunciation, several orthographic alterations were observed in the corpus. For example, the brand name *Spidy* appears to be a phonetic rendering of *Speedy*, while *Dil* replaces the English *Deal*, with the letter <*e*> or the digraph <*ea*> being substituted by <*i*>. A particularly illustrative case is *Compfort*, a shoe brand that transcribes the American pronunciation of *comfort* by inserting an additional <*p*> to reflect phonological emphasis. These alterations are not arbitrary but reflect deliberate attempts by brand designers to bridge the gap between English pronunciation and local phonetic expectations, thereby enhancing accessibility and attracting consumer attention.

Moreover, these spelling modifications may also be influenced by the linguistic hierarchy in Morocco, where French holds the position of a second language, while English is still considered foreign by much of the population. As a result, consumers unfamiliar with English tend to pronounce English words using French phonological rules. For instance, if the word *deal* were retained in its original English spelling, many Moroccan consumers might read it as */dəal/* instead of */diːl/*. Such mispronunciation risks undermining brand identity and positioning, which are critical to effective marketing. Therefore, these phonetic spellings serve not only a functional purpose facilitating correct pronunciation but also a strategic one: reinforcing brand clarity, recognition, and appeal within a multilingual consumer environment.

With regard to transliteration, a substantial number of instances were identified, constituting approximately 80% of the adapted anglicisms in the corpus. These brand names often appear hybrid at first glance but are, in fact, monolingual expressions rendered across two different scripts—Roman and Arabic. For example, "فاين كير" is a direct transliteration of *Fine Care*, "سبلاش" *corresponds* to *Splash*, and "بريز" to *Breeze*. In each case, the English phonology is retained while the script shifts to Arabic, allowing the brand to maintain its global identity while being phonetically accessible to a local audience.

Interestingly, some brands are presented solely in Arabic script, such as "جود بيرست" (Good Burst), which conveys a sense of vitality or energy. However, the Arabic word "جود" also means "generosity," introducing a layer of semantic ambiguity that enriches the brand's connotation. In this example, the brand designer leverages both English and Arabic meanings, producing a bilingual semantic resonance that enhances consumer appeal. As Pollard and Chan (88) argue that transliteration offers a unique benefit: it allows the target reader to approximate the original

foreign term phonetically, even if semantic alignment is only occasionally achieved. Over time, consumers grow accustomed to these transliterated names, and they begin to feel less foreign, thanks to their presence in the familiar Arabic script. This strategy not only facilitates recognition and pronunciation but also contributes to the naturalization of English-derived brand names within Moroccan linguistic and cultural contexts.

Hybrid Anglicisms

One of the strategies used in the creation of new brands is through combining English and Arabic or English and French words. In this category, we should distinguish two types of hybrid anglicisms: (a) English-induced compounds, in which one of the elements is borrowed from English (and sometimes adapted), and the other element is a native one; or (b) English-French compounds in which one of the elements is borrowed from English, and the other element is borrowed from French. The former is easily spotted in the corpus, see the following table:

Table 6 - Frequency and Examples of Hybrid Anglicisms

English – Arabic	English – French
19 (61%)	**12 (39%)**
Anissa Cosmetics, Sahara Secrets, Beldi Soap, Clean Dar, Zahra Clean, Rania Clean, Aya Cosmetics, Atlas Cosmetics, Assia Cosmetics, Izil Moroccan Beauty, Jawhara Cosmetics, Sedki Cosmetics, Zaman Cosmetics, Qurban Perfumes, Superior Oud, Chabi Chic, Super Hejla, Imperial Khzama, Luxury Caftan.	Citruma, Lelemon, Macao, Marocake, Maxis'Javel, Nettop, Learn & Earn Cosmetique, Mademoiselle Splendid, Nature Biocosmetique, Maroc N' Roll, Body Actif, Pretty Linge.

Source: Data collected by the author.

As can be seen in the table above, 61% of the brand names combine elements from Arabic and English. It is interesting to note that the hybrid Arabic + English duplicates its counterpart English + Arabic. In this way, from a communicative point of view, it seems more efficient for hybrid anglicisms to start with Arabic or adapted terms, as this makes them more familiar to the Moroccan consumer. Friedrich rightly observes: "instead of one language with an already tired set of combinations, one ends up having two codes available which makes for an entirely new set of possible combinations" (24). Moreover, most of the Arabic lexical items used in combination with English are nouns, especially, Moroccan nouns of founders "*Aya, Jawhara, Assia, Qurban,*" animals "*Hejla,*" plants "*Khzama*" "*Oud,*" mountains "*Atlas,*" and traditional Moroccan clothing "*Caftan.*"

In fact, probably one of the most interesting features is that contrary to adapted anglicisms, in which the English words are transliterated into Arabic, in the hybrid category we have observed that the Arabic words are written in Latin script and they look like pseudo-English words. This may be explained by the fact that there are major differences between the two languages; for example, Arabic texts are written and read from right to left, using a cursive script, compared to English which is written using Latin script and read from left to right. The differences make the combination of the two languages difficult, if not impossible.

The use of French in promotional business genres is a common feature of the Moroccan consumer landscape. However, its combination with English needs further examination. Twelve instances of English- French code switching was found in the corpus. In this category not only English French compounds were spotted, but also blending was used in almost half of the brands, e.g.*Nettop <nettoyage + top>, Marocake <Maroc + cake>, Citruma <citrus + Maroc>.* According to Haarmann, different languages conjure different feelings or associations. For instance, French invokes elegance, sophistication, refinement and fashion, whereas English is

associated to modernity, internationalization, protection, innovation and quality, among others (Haarmann 29). Gerritsen et al. report that advertising agencies generally claim that they incorporate English in their advertising because it provides the product with a modern, innovative image (348). Hence, combining the two codes generates a load of positive values.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from this study that brand naming is an extraordinary field that provides abundant data for the compilation of lexical innovations and creativity. Furiassi, Pulcini, and Rodríguez-González classification of anglicisms proved to be a very effective system of classification when applied to our corpus of anglicized Moroccan brands (6). It is evident from the above discussion that the results confirm a clear preference for pure anglicisms; however, English-Arabic, English-French code switching, pseudo-anglicisms and, to a lesser extent, adapted anglicisms were also used in creating brand names related to convenience and shopping goods. Furthermore, the rapid introduction of new products to the market might be forcing the companies to exploit English words, which result in more pseudo and hybrid anglicisms. The most conspicuous manifestation of anglicization, as can be seen in the analysis and discussion, occurs at the lexical level in the form of compound nouns.

More specifically, our qualitative analysis suggests that it is not the lack of lexical equivalents in the native language that motivates these anglicisms. Other factors play a crucial role, such as social prestige, modernity, international appeal, linguistic economy, attention-getting, and, above all, a tool for lexical and semantic creativity. The flexibility and richness of English morphology to coin new terms play an important role in the frequent use of English in Moroccan brands, and this is evident in the high number of lexical compounds and blends.

The results of our analyses indicate that pseudo-anglicisms are the result of two processes, namely autonomous creation and abbreviation. An impressive number of blends are involved in the creation of pseudo-anglicisms, especially their playful character, considering that a number of blends in our corpus are based on a close similarity between source words and their fragments (e.g *Tastea, Bioty, Prad'Ice, Pure N'Ice, Nappy*). It is also noteworthy that the tendency to use pseudo-scientific terms stemming from English, sometimes using prefixes and creating lexical items resembling English word-formation, orthographical rules (i.e., *Biocosmetics, Bioenergy, Bioargan, Bionoble, Eco-Clean*).

The reasons behind the frequent use of anglicisms in Moroccan brand names in our corpus were also examined. The findings reveal that English elements are employed to convey an aura of exclusivity, sophistication, and high prestige, aiming to persuade consumers that the products are of superior quality. This is unsurprising, given that English is often associated with values such as success, leadership, royalty, and wealth, which dominate the branding landscape. Alongside vitality and hedonic orientations, a nature-oriented appeal is another recurring value expressed through English. The influence of English varies across product types, as different industries emphasize different values in their naming strategies.

In sum, the English language is increasingly asserting its presence within Moroccan society, particularly through the domains of advertising and brand naming. These sectors act as significant catalysts for linguistic change, fostering the integration of foreign elements and encouraging the creation of new lexical items and semantic innovations. Brand names, initially introduced through commercial advertising, often transcend their original function and enter everyday discourse. For instance, products such as *Kleenex*, *Always*, and *Colgate* have become generic terms in Moroccan Arabic, reflecting a broader process of lexical assimilation and the symbolic prestige associated with English-origin terms.

Notes

1. In the context of advertising, the spread and impact of the English language and Anglo- American culture all over the world is widely documented. An array of publications continually provides abundant evidence of the increasing influence of English (Bhatia, Haarmann, Kellerhals, Martin, Piller 2003, 2006, Schiemichen, Furiassi 2010; Furiassi et al. 2012).
2. Other scholars attempted to deal with code-switching between colloquial Moroccan Arabic and French; and borrowing from French and Spanish using a sociolinguistic approach (see Bentahila, Bentahila and Davies, 1995, Sadiqi, Ennaji 1991, 2005, among others).
3. VOID.fr - Agence de production digitale. "Trademarks." *Office Marocain De La Propriété Industrielle Et Commerciale*, www.ompic.org.ma/en.
4. "High Commissioner for Planning: Collection and Dissemination of Statistical Data on Morocco." *Maroc.ma*, 3 Aug. 2017, www.maroc.ma/en/electronic-services/high-commissioner-planning-collection-and- dissemination-statistical-data-morocco.
5. It is relevant to mention that specialty products were scarce (only two brand names of luxury cars), and this is due to geographic and economic factors like the location and professional status of the Moroccan consumer. However, this category is not analyzed since we cannot base our findings on analyzing only a couple of brands.
6. A translation strategy in which the translator represents the sounds of the source language word using the target language writing system (Catford 66).
7. Our results align with those of previous studies on anglicisms in print media (González et al., Balteiro and Campos, Luján García, González Cruz, Rodríguez Medina, Tejedor Martínez).

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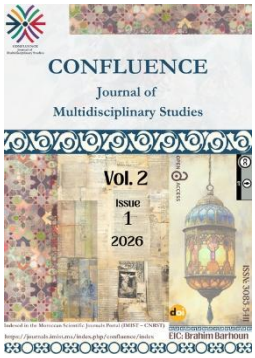
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CONFLUENCE

Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

ISSN: 3085-5411

Journal Homepage: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

On the Syllable Structure of Northwestern Moroccan Arabic

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.6448

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Received: 06-10-2025 Accepted: 10-01-2026 Published: 19-01-2026

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical examination of two influential analyses of syllable structure in Moroccan Arabic (MA), namely those proposed by Benhallam and Boudlal. Though differing in theoretical orientation—derivational and prosodic respectively—both frameworks have been widely cited as representative accounts of MA syllabification. The present study revisits these proposals in light of phonological data from the northwestern dialect of Moroccan Arabic (NWMA), a variety that exhibits distinct patterns of vowel distribution, schwa occurrence, and consonant clustering. The re-examination is conducted through a rule-based and representational comparison of the two frameworks against attested NWMA forms, relying on descriptive data and morphophonological generalizations rather than corpus-based frequency analysis. The analysis demonstrates that neither framework, in its current form, adequately accounts for these features. Benhallam's rule-based model fails to capture the interaction between syllable structure and morphological templatic organization, while Boudlal's prosodic approach overgenerates abstract entities of doubtful empirical status. By systematically exposing these limitations, the paper contributes to current theoretical debates on Arabic syllabification by clarifying the conditions under which derivational and prosodic models succeed or fail when applied to morphologically driven syllable structure, particularly in underdescribed dialects such as NWMA.

KEYWORDS

Syllable Structure
Phonology
Morphology
Moroccan Arabic

Introduction

Research on the syllable structure of Moroccan Arabic (MA) has produced a substantial body of work over the past four decades, reflecting a diversity of theoretical orientations and analytical frameworks. Two of the most influential and representative contributions are those of Benhallam and Boudlal. Both scholars have proposed systematic accounts of syllabification in MA, yet they do so from markedly different theoretical standpoints. Benhallam's analysis is firmly rooted in Rule-Based Generative Phonology, relying on sequential derivations such as the Onset and Rhyme Rule and the Coda Rule. In contrast, Boudlal reinterprets the process within a Prosodic and Optimality-Theoretic framework, introducing the concept of semi-syllables to capture patterns that seem to challenge the Sonority Sequencing Generalization.

Although these studies have laid valuable groundwork for understanding MA phonology, their empirical base is largely drawn from central and western urban varieties, leaving other regional dialects—such as that of the northwestern area (NWMA)—underrepresented.

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The limited attention paid to the northwestern dialect in this literature is rather incidental: most researchers happen to originate from areas where the more 'standard' central Moroccan Arabic is spoken. The phonological behavior of NWMA presents a number of characteristics that set it apart from the dialects typically discussed in the literature, particularly in the distribution of full vowels and schwas, and in the formation of consonant clusters. The predominance of full vowels, the restricted and morphologically governed occurrence of schwa, and the relatively permissive cluster patterns in NWMA raise serious questions about the applicability of existing accounts.

The present paper does not aim to propose an alternative model of syllabification, nor to adjudicate between the frameworks proposed by Benhallam and Boudlal. Rather, its primary goal is to assess critically how far these two influential analyses can be extended to NWMA. It will be shown that both encounter empirical and theoretical difficulties when applied to this variety. Benhallam's derivational model, while procedurally straightforward, does not capture the complex interaction between syllable structure and the templatic organization of morphology in NWMA. Boudlal's prosodic approach, on the other hand, invokes abstract prosodic units—semi-syllables—whose status remains questionable both descriptively and theoretically.

The discussion that follows, therefore, seeks to highlight the limitations of these proposals and their implications. Recognizing these limitations points toward the eventual need for a revised model—one that can accommodate the morphophonological particularities of NWMA while maintaining theoretical consistency with the broader typology of Arabic syllable structure. Developing such a model, however, lies beyond the scope of this study. The aim here is rather to demonstrate that the two major analyses of MA syllabification, though representative and insightful, cannot be straightforwardly extended to the northwestern dialect without substantial reformulation.

A Note on NWMA

NWMA refers to the variety, or cluster of closely related varieties, spoken in Northwest Morocco**.** The region comprises cities such as Tangier, Tetouan, Chefchaouen, and Larache, along with their surrounding suburbs. The variety does not diverge significantly from other MA varieties in terms of segmental inventory. Apart from some minor phonetic differences (El Hadri, Fares), the 31 consonant phonemes proposed in Harrell are the same. As for vowels, like other varieties, NWMA has three full vowels in addition to a controversial schwa. It is not the objective of this paper to discuss the status of the schwa, even though it is worth mentioning that NWMA is characterized by a considerable predominance of full vowels. In many instances where schwas are attested in other varieties of MA, NWMA instead employs full vowels, as illustrated in the following table:

1.

MA	NWMA	GLOSS
mədd	madd	'to hand'
drəb	drab	'to beat'
ʈərʒəm	ʈarʒəm	'to translate'
ɣədda	ɣadda	'tomorrow'
ʃəft	ʃuft	'I saw'
qərd	qird	'a monkey'
gəlb/qəlb	qalb	'heart'

Additionally, some of the cases where schwas are used are limited to those where the use of a full vowel would result in homophonous cases, which casts a serious doubt on the epenthetic status of the schwa since the cases in (2) below are minimal pairs:

2.

ktəb	'he wrote'	ktab	'a book'
gləs	'he sat'	glas	'sitting'

Morphologically, NWMA, like CA and other varieties of MA, exhibits what is known in the literature as the Root-Pattern system. In terms of derivation, it "consists of a system of consonantal roots which interlocks with patterns of vowels and (sometimes certain other consonants) to form words" (Ryding 45). The consonantal root expresses a concept, and different meanings are derived by vowel-internal changes. The following table illustrates the Root-Pattern system for the root 'ʃrb' (drink), and provides a comparison between CA, MA (Central-Western), and NWMA:

3.

CA	MA	NWMA	Gloss
ʃariba	ʃrəb	ʃrab	'he drank'
ʃuriba	ttəʃrəb	ttəʃrab	'it (ms) was drunk'
maʃruːb	məʃrub	mə/aʃrub	'a drink'
ʃaːrib	ʃarəb	ʃarəb	'drunk'

Unlike derivation, inflection in Arabic (Classical or any other MA variety) is generally characterized by affixation. Tense/aspect, number, gender, and person are all expressed by either prefixes or suffixes, except the broken plural. Another point to make here is that NWMA, like other MA varieties, has lost case morphemes. Except for the genitive case, realized phonetically by a suffix in CA and MA and by a lexical clitic 'dyal', there is no phonetically realized form for the nominative nor the accusative cases in MA. The following table exemplifies and compares some inflectional paradigms in the three varieties for the root 'ktb'(write):

4. Table 1 Dialectal Variations

		CA	**MA**	**NWMA**	**Gloss**
Aspect	perfective imperfective	kataba jaktubu	ktəb jəktəb	ktəb jəktəb	'he wrote' 'he writes'
Person	perf.sing	katabtu/ katabti kataba	ktəbt ktəbti ktəb	ktəbt ktəbti ktəb	'I wrote' 'you wrote' 'he wrote'
Gender	masc. fem.	maktab maktaba	məktəb məktaba	maktab maktaba	'office (masc)' 'library (fem)'
Number	masc. fem.	makaːtib maktabaːt	makatib məktabat	makatib maktabat	'offices(masc)' 'libraries (fem)'
Case	nom. acc. gen.	maktabun maktaban maktabiː	 məktabi	 maktab dyali	'office (nom)' 'office (acc)' 'my office(gen)'

Furthermore, the variety under study is phonologically the closest to Classical Arabic. The remarks made above about the vowel system, including the schwa, suggest that NWMA is remarkably the most conservative of MA varieties. The predominance of full vowels, as a case in point, may be attributed to this sociolinguistic factor, which also explains the existence of the schwa itself in MA. The presence of the schwa can be regarded as a result of language contact between Arabic and Berber, and possibly with European languages historically used in the region. This assumption is supported by the absence of schwa in varieties spoken in areas lacking Berber and European influence, such as the Middle Eastern dialects.

The effects of these facts are clearly apparent in the lexicon of NWMA (and other MA varieties). Most lexical items in the variety are Arabic underlyingly, but may be subject to some variations that make them sound different on the surface. Some of these variations may affect the syllable structure of these words. In addition, the variations are not only synchronic but also diachronic. Consequently, any linguistic study of MA varieties, or of Arabic varieties more generally, should take diachronic factors into careful consideration.

Syllable Types in NWMA

Assuming that the syllable is recognized as a phonological unit, and based on extensive works on the syllable structures of many languages, the CV syllable is considered the most unmarked type (Jakobson). Evidence for this comes from a number of observations. All languages have CV syllables. There are even languages, such as Hua (Blevins) and Senoufo (Zec), which have CV syllables only. Moreover, no languages disallow CV syllables even though they disallow other forms of syllables. For example, there are no onsetless syllables in Yokuts and no codas in Tahitian (Steriade), but in both languages, there are CV syllables. The naturalness of the CV syllable is further supported by evidence related to language acquisition: the CV syllable is claimed to be the first syllable to be produced by infants (Topintzi).

NWMA is no exception. The universal tendency for syllables to have onsets is satisfied in NWMA by the insertion of a glottal stop, as is the case in Classical Arabic (Fares). It may be argued that the cases in which the glottal stop is inserted are mostly borrowed from Classical Arabic, as the examples below show

5.

amir	ʔamir	‘prince’
idara	ʔidara	‘administration’
ummahat	ʔummahat	‘mothers’
rais	raʔis	‘president’

But there are other cases which clearly show that the glottal stop insertion applies even in words that do not have origins in Arabic, as in

6.

ʔatay	‘tea’
ʔara	‘give me (imp)’

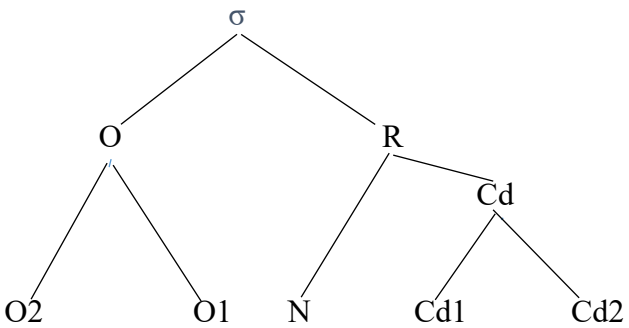
where it is evident that the glottal stop is part of the segmental inventory of NWMA. This being said, it seems that NWMA, like CA, doesn’t permit onsetless syllables at least phonetically. So I will assume that the basic syllable type in NWMA is CV. Other syllable types, such as CVC, CCVC, CVCC, CCVCC … are derived by rule. The table below illustrates all the syllable types found in the language under investigation:

7. Table 2 Types of Syllables

Syllable types	Examples	Gloss
CV	ʒa	'he came'
	ma	'water'
CVC	ʒab	'he brought'
	bir	'a well'
CCV	bra	'he recovered'
	mʃi	'go (imp)'
	dwa	'medicine'
CCVC	mʃit	'I went'
	ktəb	'he wrote'
	ʕwar	'blind'
CVCC	ləft	'turnip'
	ʒibt	'I brought'
	ʃadd	'closed'
CCVCC	ʃrabt	'I drank'
	ʃfənʒ	'dough nut'
	nʃudd	'I close'

Metrically, then, the syllable in NWMA can be represented by the following template (Fudge; Selkirk; Harris; Van der Hulst; Durand; among many others):

8.



However, this template must be constrained so that it does not predict ill-formed outputs. Some of these constraints are claimed to be universal (9a), while others remain language-specific (9b):

9.

a. Onset and coda may branch respecting Sonority Sequencing Generalization (SSG)
b. Open syllables cannot have a schwa in the nucleus

By virtue of (9a), CCV, CCVC, CVCC, and CCVCC are possible outputs; and by (9b), a *Cə and *CCə are filtered out.

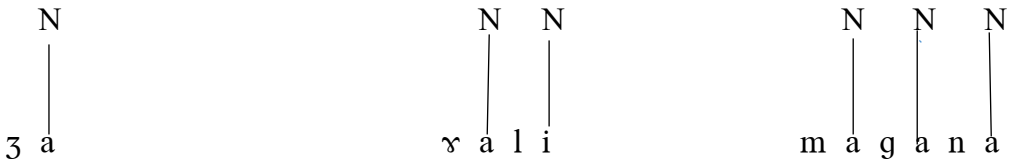
The preceding template captures a monosyllabic structure in which syllable boundaries are aligned with word boundaries. In polysyllabic contexts, however, the identification of syllable edges is considerably more intricate, as it necessitates specifying the phonological principles that regulate the mapping of individual segments onto the corresponding syllable nodes within the template.

Syllabification in NWMA

As stated above, CV syllable types are the most unmarked in NWMA. This fact must be captured by the principles of syllabification. One of these principles stipulates that vowels are naturally assigned to an N node, resulting in the following structures:

10.

a. b. c.



‘he came’ ‘expensive/dear’ ‘ a watch’

Sonority plays a major role in defining the range of segments that are syllabic in a language and delimiting the contour of the syllable. Assuming the sonority scale in (11), only segments that have the highest sonority value in the scale can fill the nucleus of syllables.

11.

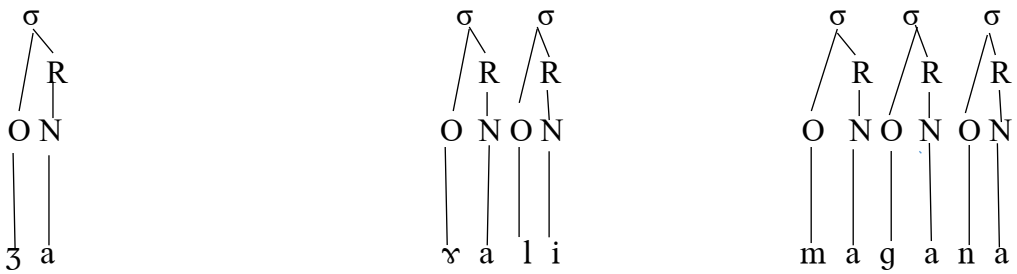
vowels liquids nasals fricatives stops
most sonorous least sonorous

(Steriade)

The Nucleus node is assigned to the Rhyme node. The unassigned consonants are assigned to the onset node, and then both onset and rhyme are assigned to the higher node:

12.

a. b. c.



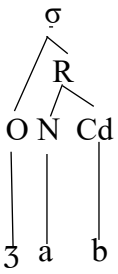
The workings of this principle (traditionally dubbed the Onset Rhyme Rule in works such as Benhallam (among others) do not only predict the right output but also implicitly filters out undesirable ones such as *ʏal-i and *mag-an-a. Such outputs are possible at least theoretically given the fact that there are languages which allow onsetless syllables like Japanese, Diola-Fogney, Ponapean and English (Itô; Kager).

This leads to considering syllable edges, which are not always coextensive with word edges. Let us first consider some monosyllabic CVC cases where syllable edges do coincide with

higher-level edges (viz, word edges). These cases are normally syllabified by adjoining the final unassigned consonants to the coda to produce a branching rhyme:

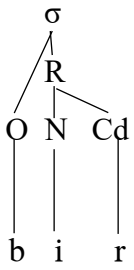
13.

a.



'he brought'

b.

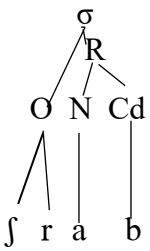


' a well'

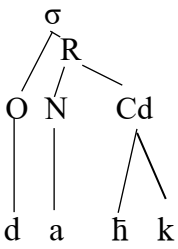
Since the forms in (13) are monosyllabic, their structure appears straightforward. The consonants that remain unassociated to the right of the nucleus are incorporated into the rhyme as codas, thereby yielding closed syllables through the application of the Coda Rule (Benhallam). Consequently, the application of the Onset and Rhyme Rule followed by the Coda Rule derives well-formed outputs. Furthermore, permitting the Onset and Coda Rules to apply iteratively makes it possible to generate cases involving complex onsets and codas. As in the examples below:

14.

a.



b.



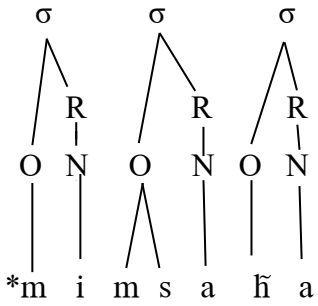
However, the syllabification of polysyllabic words is not as straightforward as the cases in (13-14), especially in words where different syllable types co-occur. A word like 'təmra' (date. sg. fem) is intuitively syllabified as 'təm.ra'. The same thing applies to 'kəfta' (diced meat) or 'mimsaħa' (eraser): 'kəf.ta' 'mim.sa.ħa'. The question now is, if the onset rule is allowed to apply iteratively, how can outputs like 'tə.mra' 'kə.fta' 'mi.msa.ħa' be blocked? The iterative application of the onset rule is triggered by the Onset Maximization Principle (OMP), also dubbed Onset First Principle (cf. Selkirk; Itô; among others), which stipulates that 'if a segment may belong to both the coda of the first and the onset of the second syllable, it belongs to the onset of the second syllable'. The OMP is constrained by another principle, namely SSG (cf. (9a)), stipulating that in a syllable, sonority increases toward the peak and decreases toward the margins (Selkirk; Blevins; Zec). In addition, other language-specific phonotactic constraints prohibit schwa light syllables as outputs (cf. (9b)). Hence, the following counter-intuitive syllable structures:

15.

a.



b.



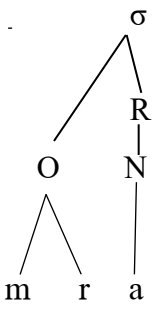
Cases like (14) do not seem to constitute a problem for OMP since SSG is not violated neither in the onset nor in the coda. Cases in (15), however, seem to cast a doubt on the validity of SSG, which is a universal principle since the onset cluster 'ms' in (15b) violates it. For the cluster 'mr' in (15a), even though sonority is respected, the resulting Cə syllable is a violation of the phonotactics of the language.

Benhallam's proposal blocks generating outputs like Cə, though no reference is made to the phonotactics of the language, by the Schwa Insertion rule, which applies to every sequence of two unsyllabified consonants after the application of the Onset Rhyme Rule. Additionally, the Coda Rule assigns the first consonant of 'ms' to the coda of the preceding syllable, thereby violating OMP.

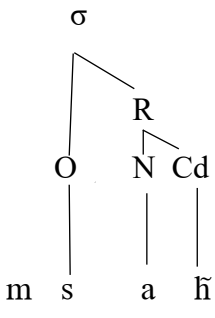
One solution to propose is 'resyllabification', whereby the onset 2 is resyllabified as the coda of the previous syllable. Another solution is to constrain OMP so that the iterative application of the Onset Rule is blocked if the resulting structure contravenes the phonotactics of the language. This works when there is a preceding syllable. If not, the same onset cluster may be found in word-initial position, in which case onset 2 will be licensed as in (16a), since there is no violation of sonority; or not licensed for breaking sonority but at the same time will fail to resyllabify, resulting in a stray or unsyllabified consonant as in (16b).

16.

a.

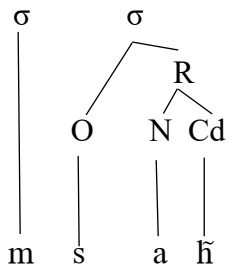


b.



The third solution proposes that consonants that fail to be licensed will constitute an appendix, yielding the following structure for (16b):

17.



Appendix—also dubbed semisyllable—are adjoined to prosodic words instead of being affiliated with syllables. By allowing a constituent to skip immediate membership in the next higher prosodic level, appendices/semisyllables violate the Strict Layer Hypothesis (SLH), which maintains that each level of the prosodic hierarchy is fully contained within the level dominating it (Selkirk; Nespor and Vogel; Hayes). According to Selkirk, mismatches between morpho-syntactic and prosodic boundaries are captured and accounted for along with a set of structures defined in the following Prosodic Hierarchy:

18.

The Prosodic Hierarchy

Utt Utterance
|
IP intonational phrase
|
PhP phonological phrase
|
PWd prosodic word
|
Ft foot
|
σ syllable

A weaker version of the SLH in which violation of strict layering is allowed is opted for in the literature, as it turns out to be independently motivated in the prosody of languages. Cross-word resyllabification in languages such as Spanish (Harris; Nespor and Vogel) and Italian (Face) constitutes a clear case of violation of the SLH as syllables are not fully contained in the words. This is referred to as the Weak Layering Hypothesis (WLH) (Itô and Mester).

Semisyllables have been adopted to account for clusters of consonants that violate the SSG. Cho and King argue that what seems to be a case of SSG violation in Georgian, Polish, and Bella Coola can be explained by adopting semisyllables as entities in phonology. Féry's semisyllable analysis of word-final syllables with extra consonants in German makes the same claim. Semisyllables in her account are proposed to account for apparent cases of SSG violations in the CVCC word final structure. In Moroccan Arabic, the same proposal is made by Boudlal. He claims that MA does not allow complex onsets and analyzes syllables with two-consonant clusters by assigning the first consonant to a "minor syllable."

Several points can be made based on the foregoing discussion. First, cluster licensing in a domain does not necessarily apply in other domains. As seen above, the fact that onset clusters

are permitted or non-permitted word-internally does not mean that the same thing will be observed at word edges. This further implies that syllabification should be position-sensitive. Second, licensing a cluster in one domain but not in another would be a costly inconsistency and hence non-explanatory. Another equally important remark is that NWMA (like other varieties of MA) appears to be insensitive to SSG, as the discussion of cases above demonstrates. A consideration of the following data (adapted to NWMA from Lahrouchi 4) shows clearly that there are no sonority restrictions imposed in cluster formation.

19.

ʃra 'he bought'	rʃa 'he bribed'	ktab 'book'
sna 'he signed'	nsa 'women'	kdub 'lies'
mra 'woman'	rma 'he tossed'	ʃkun 'who'
blaʕ 'swallowed'	lbas 'clothes'	xbar 'news'

A logical consequence of this is to ban clusters altogether and claim that the stray consonants make minor syllables, following Boudlal's proposal, even though this solution results in a violation of SLH. Besides, this solution implies that we will end up having two types of syllables: a 'full' syllable and a minor one, which is costly. Adding a minor syllable would unnecessarily complicate the grammar and may even lead to questioning the nature of the syllable and its status as a prosodic category.

Furthermore, the principal shortcoming of these proposals (Benhallam and Boudlal's) lies in their foundational assumption that syllabification occurs after the completion of all morphological operations. This assumption presupposes that the phonological composition of a word solely determines its syllable structure and syllabification. While this view is valid for languages such as English—where, for example, plural formation depends entirely on the phonemic sequence of the base and its affix, thereby dictating syllable number and configuration—it does not hold for Arabic. In Arabic, syllable affiliation is primarily constrained by morphological structure and only secondarily by the phonological concatenation of segments. In this respect, syllable structure constitutes an integral component of the morphological template. Consequently, when speakers of Arabic select a particular derivational category, they simultaneously select the associated syllabic configuration. For instance, speakers of MA or NWMA who opt for the causative pattern of a verb inherently produce a disyllabic form, whose syllabic composition is predetermined within its lexical representation. This holds not only for Arabic but also for other templatic languages, such as Hebrew and Yokuts.

A natural consequence of this is to contend that syllable structure assignment in Arabic is lexical (underlying) and not phonetic, as the above-mentioned works claim. When a root and pattern are combined, a word is formed together with its syllable structure. Roots are consonantal while patterns are vocalic. Both are represented on separate levels or tiers to avoid the crossing of association lines. The CV slots constitute a separate tier (CV-tier). The two segmental tiers are represented above and below the CV-tier. The CV-tier determines segmental quality and segmental length, where long segments are represented with double slots. The CV-tier also determines syllable membership (Cs representing syllable margins and Vs syllable peaks, Gussenhoven and Jacobs).

One hypothesis is to assign root consonants (radicals) a heterosyllabic status at the lexical level, so that they make onsets to syllables yet to be formed, depending on whether there is a following vowel or not. If there is one, a CV syllable is formed. If not, these consonants remain stray. At the post-lexical level, where more affixes/clitics are added, consonants are equally

heterosyllabic joining with following vowels, if any. Otherwise, they remain stray. In the case that an affix or clitic begins with a vowel, resyllabification applies. This implies that 'semisyllables' cannot be avoided, nor resyllabification. In addition, the problem of consonant clusters, and long segments (geminates and long vowels) will still have to be resolved.

Conclusion

In conclusion, adopting Benhallam's approach would necessitate accounting for the stipulation that two distinct sets of syllable structure assignment rules operate in Moroccan Arabic: one governing full vowels and another governing schwas (cf. Boudlal). Similarly, permitting consonant clusters at syllable margins would contravene the universal Sonority Sequencing Principle (SSP). Boudlal's alternative proposal, which sought to resolve the issue of sonority-violating clusters by prohibiting clusters altogether, ultimately required the introduction of semi-syllables—a theoretical device that undermines the robustness of the syllable as a prosodic unit. Moreover, the autosegmental framework (cf. Gussenhoven and Jacobs), which more effectively captures the interaction between syllable structure and morphology, offers a relatively more convincing analysis. Nevertheless, even within this framework, the recurrent need to invoke semi-syllables in order to address consonant clustering suggests that the locus and timing of syllabification in Arabic require further theoretical reconsideration.

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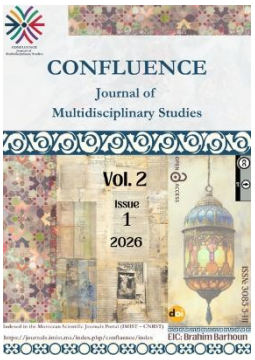
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CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

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

Beyond Personalization: A Framework for Ethical, Equitable, and Human-Centered Digital Learning Ecosystems in the AI Era

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.6156

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Received: 06-10-2025 Accepted: 17-01-2026 Published: 19-01-2026

Beyond Personalization: A Framework for Ethical, Equitable, and Human-Centered Digital Learning Ecosystems in the AI Era

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ABSTRACT

The article thoroughly explores the core aspects of digital education platforms in the 21st century, providing a detailed account of their reforms, processes, and the ways technology facilitates education. The article first argues that technologies such as AI, data analytics, and immersive technologies significantly transform current education models, thereby leading to adaptive, learner-centered ecosystems. The paper primarily reviews recent empirical and theoretical research that emphasizes the significance of personalization, gamification, and the use of constructivist and connectivist theories, as well as their implementation in platform design. These are substantiated by instances of how AI-powered algorithms enable instant feedback, difficulty-level adjustment, and predictive modelling, thereby increasing learner engagement and retention. Even though AI algorithms open new educational opportunities, the article also points to issues they raise. The paper considers privacy concerns, disparities in infrastructure, algorithmic bias, and the moral side of ideological and automated decision-making in education, given these critical infrastructure issues. Furthermore, the article argues that teachers will be the ones to foster the development of empathy, ethics, and social learning, even in AI-augmented classrooms. Consequently, by integrating extensive research from the tech, cognitive, and ethical fields, the article argues for a digital education that is not only sustainable but also characterized by innovation, inclusiveness, transparency, and access. Digital learning will become the norm, the research declares, only if not just technical skills but also pedagogical and ethical frameworks exist to steer the worldwide implementation.

KEYWORDS

Process of Learning
Digital Education
Artificial Intelligence
Learning Analytics
Gamification
Ethics in Education

1 Introduction

The combination of mobile technology and data-driven strategies is, in fact, changing the educational system of the 21st century. As a result, the teaching paradigm is shifting to personalized instruction that accounts for the individual cognitive styles of each learner (Patero 2). One major factor that has contributed to such a change is the employment of AI-based

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simulations and virtual laboratories, which are more efficient in conceptual understanding and long-term retention of knowledge than traditional lectures; however, they are also impeding students' critical thinking skills.

In fact, cutting-edge analytical instruments can collect very detailed interaction data, such as time of engagement and assessment scores, that reveal diagnostic insights which, in the majority of cases, are profound, concealed, and ignored by conventional evaluation metrics.

> AI-based learning analytics tools such as Coursera and EdX track a variety of metrics, including quiz performance, time spent on tasks, and engagement with specific content. (Madhu et al. 6).

Adaptive AI-based learning pathways can figure out how challenging a task should be and change it on the fly, thus giving the student control and a great incentive from within (Quraishi et al. 3). However, these digital educational tools' scalability is essentially limited by economic inequalities and lack of infrastructure, especially in less urban areas where poor connectivity calls for efficient public-private partnerships and well-thought-out policy strategies.

This transformation basically means moving away from pre-designed models and towards personalized, constructivist-based digital ecosystems tailored to the individual learner's progress using advanced models. According to Upadhayaya (12), gamification and flipped classroom techniques are linked to increased student engagement; nevertheless, there is a question of the long-term effectiveness of such approaches and the risk of prioritizing technological novelty over substantive learning (Quraishi et al. 12). Intelligent tutoring systems can be a great help in enhancing administrative efficiency and also assisting learners with disabilities (Chetry 3). However, such systems cannot replace the teacher, as the teacher remains the primary source of emotional intelligence and serves as the ethical guide. The ongoing use of these platforms, therefore, is hinged on addressing institutional problems in equity, algorithmic ethics, educator agency, and alignment with digital competency frameworks.

The main point of this integrative review is that AI-powered and adaptive digital education can fully realize its potential only through a deliberate and well-balanced combination of the three core pillars: (1) a pedagogically, grounded design based on constructivist and connectivist theories of learning; (2) proactive ethical governance to tackle problems such as algorithmic bias, privacy, and fair access; and (3) the essential, redefined role of the human teacher as a mentor and moral guide. By doing this, the paper closes a significant gap in the integration of the literature that has primarily focused on technological, pedagogical, and ethical aspects separately.

As a critical narrative review, it introduces a new and holistic framework for "sustainable digital education." Basically, it provides a basis for moving the discussion beyond techno-optimism by presenting a synthesized analysis of the "Digital Education Paradox," which the review then transforms into practical, stakeholder-specific directives for researchers, policymakers, developers, and educators to work together to create more inclusive and effective learning environments.

2 Foundations of Digital Education Platforms

2.1 Definition and Core Characteristics

The worldwide transformation in education is characterized by a shift from conventional e-learning sources to technology-powered learning environments that incorporate AI-driven algorithms and adaptive data analytics. Scholars note that these complex systems deploy interconnected dynamic models to modify instructional methods based on ongoing student data.

To successfully incorporate complex technological systems into teaching, a strong conceptual framework is essential. Mishra and Koehler's Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework provides a key model, arguing that effective technology integration requires an interdependent understanding of content, pedagogy, and technology, rather than treating each as a separate domain (Mishra and Koehler 1017).

This perspective aligns with ongoing findings from John Hattie's meta-analyses of visible learning, which indicate that technology has the most significant impact when it supports high-effect-size pedagogical strategies—such as providing feedback and teaching metacognition—rather than functioning as an end in itself (Hattie 223-227).

Simultaneously, they employ intelligent tutoring systems that provide instant feedback and enable the predictive forecasting of future educational requirements.

> Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a powerful tool in education, with notable advancements in intelligent tutoring systems (ITS) and adaptive learning platforms. Recent studies emphasize the effectiveness of AI-based ITS in enhancing student performance (Madhu et al. 2).
>
> The table below provides a summary of participant responses on learning with adaptation and artificial intelligence. It was found that a higher response, i.e., 79% (n=166) of the respondents agreed (neutrally agree; agree; strongly agree) that Adaptive learning technologies help me stay engaged and focused during my learning sessions. (Upadhayaya 9)

In their attempt to keep students at an optimal level of challenge by adjusting content difficulty in real time, these platforms are consistent with models of cognitive scaffolding, which, in turn, serve to motivate students and help them retain knowledge in the long term, mainly when AI-powered virtual labs are used as the medium of instruction (Chetry 2). Based on social constructivist theory, these technology-based learning solutions provide uninterrupted interaction and the collective construction of knowledge, thus offering enormous potential for outreach regardless of a user's social or economic background, since the additional cost per user is negligible (Gillet et al. 8; Madhu et al. 9).

On the other hand, achieving educational equity requires addressing infrastructural gaps between urban and rural areas, as well as data governance problems, with the objective of lessening algorithmic bias and ensuring the confidentiality of students' data (He et al. 2; Zhang and Leong 7). Additionally, the presence of detailed accessibility options and modular architecture in the design of educational technology supports universal inclusivity and allows pedagogical autonomy for teachers, who are then at liberty to configure settings such as inquiry-based or project-based modules to suit their needs (Naamati and Schneider 3; Buhaichuk et al. 11).

It is worth noting that these provisions function as system-upgrade tools rather than replacement strategies; that is, the role of the human educator, who provides ethical guidance and higher-order cognitive skills, remains essential alongside the automation of bureaucratic procedures (Chetry 1). Therefore, the integration of AI personalization engines with immersive VR/AR interfaces and secure blockchain credentialing signals a radical change in how academic achievement is recorded and engaged with over long periods, as opposed to conventional means (Ahmad et al. 6).

2.2 From Static Tools to Adaptive Ecosystems

Over the last two decades, the integration of technology and pedagogy has been a recursive process, as evidenced by the change of digital education from mere multimedia experiments to complex, interconnected platforms. The changes back then were primarily confined to tightly controlled, offline formats and were also negatively affected by a general lack of infrastructure; hence, digital resources were given a secondary role in traditional teaching methods (Wang et al. 12). In a sense, this initial phase has set up the mobile computing revolution that has since removed the difference between formal and informal learning environments by allowing "anytime, anywhere" access as well as by the increasing independence of learners (Upadhayaya 3). The initial integration of information and communications technology (ICT) into education was met with both hope and skepticism. A key visionary of this digital era was Seymour Papert, who envisioned the computer as a tool that could empower children to become active constructors of knowledge rather than passive consumers. His constructionist approach, exemplified by the LOGO programming language, embeds an explicit pedagogical focus into digital tools, prioritizing learner agency (Papert 19-23).

However, such ambitious visions for digital learning often struggled to align with the realities of educational systems. Critical historian Larry Cuban has systematically documented a recurring cycle of high expectations followed by disappointment in the history of educational technology. He warns that new tools often reinforce traditional, teacher-centered practices rather than transforming them—a trend illustrated in early e-learning by reports of "lack of adaptability" and "low engagement" (Cuban 133-145). The use of gamification and game-based mechanics, therefore, has become the most transformative factor in the field through the combination of educational goals with motivational systems in order to keep engagement going.

First, games can motivate students to integrate knowledge from different disciplines and apply it to decision-making; second, students can test how game outcomes change with the choices they make (Upadhayaya 2).

Education 5.0 signaled a change of the educational paradigm in the 2010s to a highly interdependent technological ecosystem that unites the use of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and blockchain for secure credentialing together with immersive VR/AR environments, all enabled by cloud-hosted infrastructure with its scalability and flexibility (Ahmad et al. 6; Rahman et al. 45).

Many of these changes, as illustrated by the Xueersi Online School, bring about remote participation possibilities never seen before, yet their worldwide implementation is still dependent on sociocultural technical proficiency and the fair distribution of high-speed connectivity (Zhang and Leong 4; Getenet et al. 6). The present academic debate calls for a combination of constructivist and objectivist theories to provide a balance between personal liberty and guided developmental structure in these modular, interoperable frameworks (Gillet et al. 4). Actually, the movement toward more immersive and self-governing systems is, basically, raising the question of a very significant moral problem: the matter of including fairness standards and privacy protection measures in the very first phase of the design in order that the past could not be disadvantaged again and that algorithmic biases could not be mixed with the historical ones (Ahmad et al. 10; Naamati and Schneider 13).

Period	Phase	Key Characteristics	Enabling Technologies	Limitations / Challenges
2000s	Static Tools / E-learning 1.0	Predetermined content, online access, and low interactivity.	Educational websites, basic LMS (e.g., Moodle), offline multimedia resources.	Lack of adaptability, low engagement, dependency on infrastructure.
2010s	Interactive Platforms / E-learning 2.0	Social interactions, collaborative learning, basic personalization.	Forums, wikis, interactive videos, early mobile apps.	Limited personalization, underutilized data, widening digital divide.

Around 2020	Adaptive Ecosystems / Education 5.0	Personalized learning, real-time data, emerging AI, gamification.	Basic AI, learning analytics, VR/AR, cloud computing.	Algorithmic bias, ethical concerns, unequal access to advanced tech.
Present → Future	Intelligent & Immersive Ecosystems / Education 6.0	Fine-grained adaptability, experiential learning, co-creation, generative AI, enhanced security.	LLMs, multimodal AI, federated learning, blockchain, immersive VR/AR, edge computing.	Data privacy, ethical governance, teacher training, interoperability.

Table 1 - Evolution of digital education

3 The Transformative Role of Digital Platforms in Modern Learning: From Consumption to Co-creation

3.1 From Transmission to Co-creation in Digital Learning Environments

The ongoing work in binary artificial intelligence and immersive learning worlds that incorporate adaptive analytics represents a digital technological leap for the education sector. These changes signal the redefinition of an educational architecture from the teacher-led paradigm to a learner-focused one which is characterized by substituted students' independence and the group-based investigation activities (Gillet et al. 5). These changes imply the retreat of the one-size-fits-all methods of Education 1.0 and the coming into the age of the learner-participation model which assumes that learners are not consumers but co-constructors of (Ahmad et al. 5). Moreover, the initial level of exercises and thematic follow-ups can be adjusted day-by-day if not in real-time basis, based on the gradually obtained performance data and click-stream logs in order to challenge students just the right way (Patero 3; Yazdani Motlagh et al. 2). Besides, some algorithms are enabled to anticipate the path forward by, among others, using the tracings of past interaction and the numbers of completed tasks as the indicators of the pace of the instruction and the mental operations complexity (Ahmad et al. 11).

Moreover, motivation structures that gamification integration effected refresh through, among other things, fitting the curriculum goals to the intrinsic reward systems thus providing the motivational mechanisms within the thematic quests and iterative problem-solving (Syifa et al. 7). The possibilities that are open by the present technologies for the educational world also include the linguistic adaptability where, at the same time, the language of instruction and level can be changed for the proficiency groups that exist within a class of students thus facilitating, for instance, the learning of English as a Foreign Language.

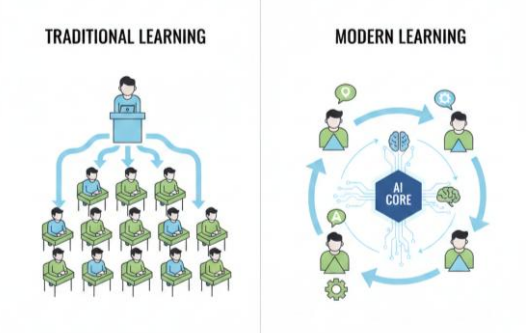


Figure 1 - Conceptual visualization of the shift from a teacher-centered transmission model to a learner-centered co-creation model in digital education.

3.2 Learner Engagement in the Digital Age: From Passive Presence to Active Immersion

The architectural framework of learner engagement within digital educational ecosystems is a complex brain that calls for a revolution in our teaching methods, from static to dynamic, real-time, and often AI-monitored. The emotional aspect of learner engagement, which is closely connected to behavior and cognition in the digital learning environment, requires a complete shift in educational paradigms from traditionally static ones towards the continuation of live, dynamic, and AI-maintained educational frameworks. Student behavioral engagement, the main feature of which is focus and continuous work on the task, is getting more and more popular through AI-powered tracking of the historical interaction data (Karimah and Hasegawa 8). Meanwhile, the emotional and intellectual parts of the educational process find their way into gamified structures which naturally relate externally motivated rewards like leaderboards and merit badges to intrinsically motivated mastery goals and self-determination (Subiyantoro et al. 6). To this, the systems are adapted to AI intervention that can decrease the overload or the feeling of boredom resulting from retuning the difficulty of the task in light of new, up-to-the-minute performance metrics (Syifa et al. 14). Besides, bonding through real-time virtual labs and non-real-time debate forums enables students to feel part of a community which is one of the main psychological factors of user's persistence in online platforms (Buhaichuk et al. 4). The user's immersion propelled via virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) elevates the mode of learning to more eloquent and effective, multisensory, and ultimately geared towards emotional memorization given the alignment of these tools with the prescribed syllabus and not as gimmicks (Syifa et al. 4). The perpetual engagement loops' effectiveness is, in addition to that, hinged on the usage of expansive data analytics able to foretell disengagement that provides room for timely interventions to be taken (Ahmad et al. 14). Besides this, modules targeting ease of accessibility and automated translation are effects of inclusivity efforts (Sun 3) yet the working of these extremely automated surroundings is still dependent on human-AI hybridity: teachers, who are the ones to understand the nuances – for instance, external life events – that even the most advanced algorithmic pattern recognition cannot at the moment (Wang et al. 6). Hence, the appropriate use of these engagement configurations is the ethical challenge embodying the thorough equilibrium of the detailed data-intensive surveillances and the safeguarding of users' confidentiality, thereby pointing to the capacity of the edge processing frameworks to guarantee the needed trust for learners' sustained engagement (Karimah & Hasegawa 2; Ahmad et al. 14).

4 Integrating Educational Theories into Digital Platform Design

4.1 Constructivism in Action: Digital Environments as Knowledge Construction Platforms

The paradigm of digital constructivism calls for a significant shift from passive consumption of content to active co-construction of knowledge. In this process, learners combine their previous experiences with new digital situations to create their own understanding (Näykki et al. 14). Complex AI-driven systems promote this change by acting as cognitive tutors that facilitate the learner's independence through scaffolding—showing the expert solving the problem and then gradually stepping aside (Madhu et al. 6).

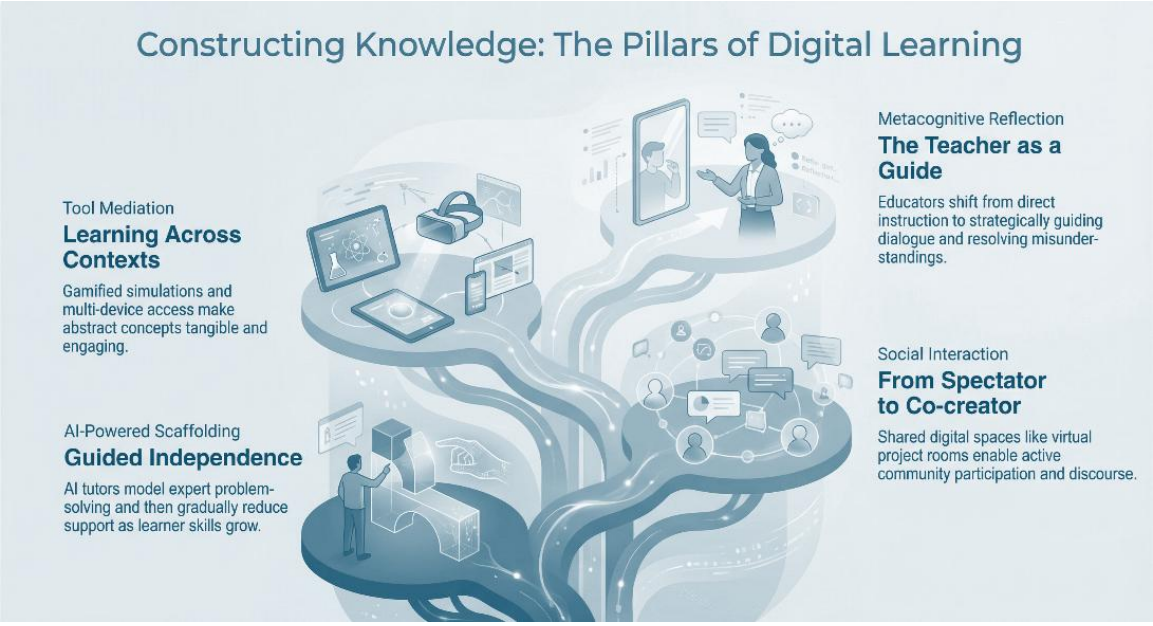
Social constructivist pedagogies heavily influence some features like virtual project rooms and shared document interfaces which provide discourse among participants and the subsequent

change, from being mere spectators, of their learner identities by the process of becoming active community co-facilitators (Kwon et al. 14). The use of gamified, context-rich simulations in areas like engineering or ecology serves the skill transfer process to a great extent by making the otherwise abstract concepts not only understandable but also engaging through the provision of a meaningful disciplinary context. However, this is conditional upon the game mechanics not overtaking the pedagogical objectives (Upadhayaya 12).

From a technological perspective, distributed architectures facilitate multi-channel representations across different devices, thus enabling conceptual change through cross-contextual referencing (Dillenbourg 11). Nevertheless, the question of the effectiveness of such a practice hinges on the issue of hardware inequities that need to be eliminated for everyone to access the technology and the matter of implementing data governance in a way that is not only transparent but that also ensures learner autonomy as this is a precondition for the automated tracking that is necessitated by adaptive scaffolding (Wang et al. 6-14).

In the final analysis, this movement is reshaping the role of the teacher as a social negotiator and metacognitive guide who, by means of AI pattern recognition support, strategically arrives as a problem solver to initiate dialogue and resolve group misunderstanding instead of giving direct instruction linearly (Kwon et al. 4; Näykki et al. 3).

Figure 2 - ***The Pillars of Digital Constructivism: Tools, Social Interaction, and Guided Learning***



4.2 Connectivism in Practice: Networked Learning Ecosystems in Digital Education

Connectivism, as a learning theory, radically transforms the concept of learning from a centralized to a decentralized model that primarily depends on the skills of discovering, linking, and merging information from various sources. Such sources may be people or non-human nodes, e.g., databases and artificial intelligence (O'Connell 5). Digital learning platforms are the realization of these ideas as they merge synchronous and asynchronous features, going from a live co-editing session to a non-volatile resource repository that supports distributed cognition and communal knowledge building. Intelligence has been used to make the end of these human-centric networks visible through the deployment of recommendation algorithms that help create

relational links between peers with similar research trajectories, thus enabling learners to discover the most appropriate node at the point of their need (Madhu et al. 8).

The effectiveness of such participatory information ecologies is, however, dependent on the availability of sophisticated data analytics to locate the influential bridges that connect the different clusters, thus ensuring that the flow of knowledge is not only equitable but also that systemic gatekeepers are not emerging (He et al. 2). The modular openness of these platforms may lead to the merging of the boundaries between formal and informal learning. Nevertheless, the fact that there is dual mediation through algorithmic filtering and personalized content flow poses significant ethical risks mainly the possibilities of the formation of "echo chambers" or the continuation of data-driven biases (Madhu et al. 8). The tension between students independently following their own pace and being exposed to different points of view is, thus, a central argument for the requirement of strong digital citizenship skills. These skills, among others, include ethical communicative norms and the skill to critically assess AI-recommended sources (O'Connell 5). Furthermore, securing sensitive relational metadata and alleviating privacy concerns should thus be the absolute priority on most people's lists, as these networked environments employ technological diversity and cross-disciplinary collaboration to mirror the intersectional complexities of professional expertise (Emejulu and McGregor 9; Zhou et al. 11).

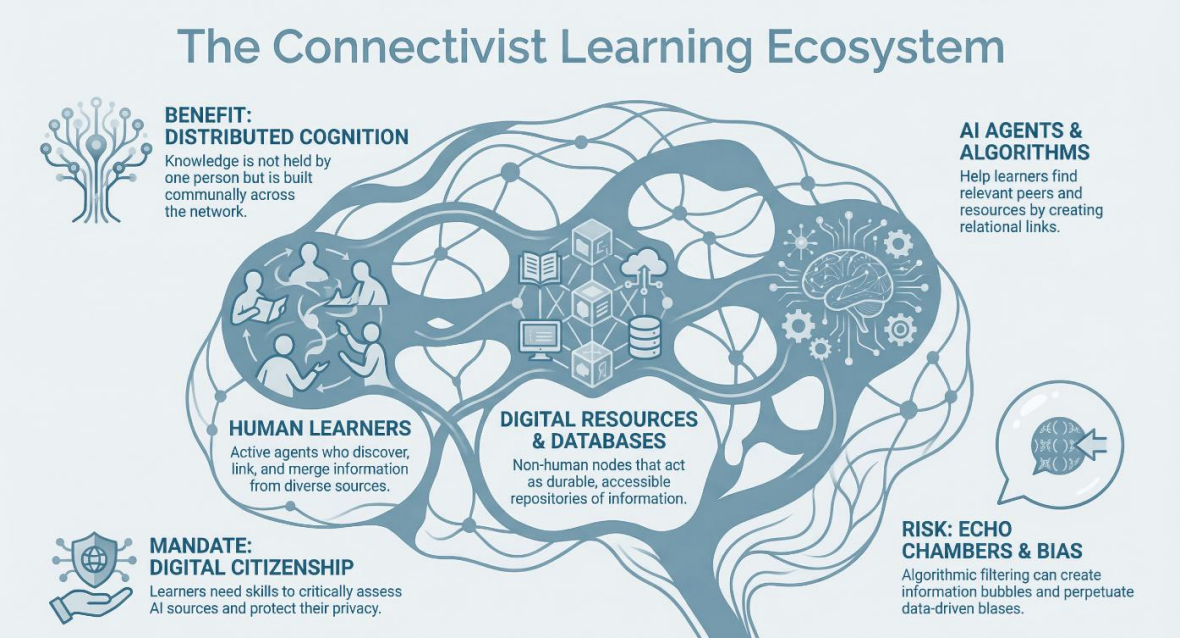


*Figure 3 - **Navigating the Connectivist Ecosystem: Distributed Cognition, Algorithmic Mediation, and Digital Citizenship***

5 Behind the Interface: The Core Technologies Powering Modern Digital Education

5.1 Artificial Intelligence in Learning Processes: The Evolution from Tool to Partner

The educational institutions affected by the shift had to move from traditional, static teaching models to more advanced, data-driven systems capable of adapting to students' needs in real time and involving complex algorithms. Besides natural language processing (NLP) and reinforcement learning, the use of machine learning allows these platforms to merge a vast variety of students' engagement metrics and evaluation scores in a very short time to both change the sequencing of the curriculum and its difficulty level (Tanwar et al. 6). Predictive

analytics benefit from neural network structures that identify possible future performance patterns, thus allowing educational institutions to supply pre-emptive instructional measures, such as providing collaborative assignments to students that are at a loss for engagement (Madhu et al. 4).

It is a point worth noting that this change denotes a shift from teacher-led traditional differentiation method towards personalized learning that can be done on a large scale by automated systems, where virtual assistants powered by natural language processing (NLP) offer individualized feedback and keep track of language proficiency through emotion recognition and behavioral profiling (Tanwar et al. 2-8). Apart from that, the use of automated grading and neural network-driven dashboards contributes to learners' metacognitive skill development by tracking their growth across different skills over time and thus providing both learners and instructors with practical diagnostic insights (Yazdani Motlagh et al. 8).

Nevertheless, the quality of this highly detailed personalization raises several ethical concerns. Among these concerns is the issue of algorithmic bias in datasets used for training that may result in the perpetuation of socio-cultural disparities and the necessity for transparent data governance as a means to gain the users' trust (Tanwar et al. 7). The question of the effectiveness of these intelligent systems, in the end, depends heavily on the readiness of the infrastructure. The use of distributed computation or edge processing models that enable fair service provisioning and maintain a constant system response time regardless of different socio-economic conditions is therefore essential (Madhu et al. 4).

AI Technology	Core Function	Pedagogical Applications	Examples in Digital Platforms
Natural Language Processing (NLP)	Understands, interprets, and generates human language.	▪ Automated essay scoring & feedback ▪ Conversational AI tutors (chatbots) ▪ Language learning & pronunciation support ▪ Sentiment analysis in discussion forums	ChatGPT, Grammarly, Duolingo's AI tutor, sentiment-aware LMS plugins
Machine Learning (ML)	Learns from data patterns to make predictions or decisions.	▪ Personalized learning path recommendations ▪ Predictive analytics for at-risk students ▪ Adaptive content difficulty adjustment ▪ Automated grading & rubric alignment	Knewton, DreamBox, Coursera's course recommender, intelligent tutoring systems (ITS)
Learning Analytics	Collects, analyzes, and visualizes learning data.	▪ Engagement tracking & dashboards ▪ Competency mapping & skill gap analysis ▪ Real-time intervention triggers ▪ Cohort performance benchmarking	Tableau dashboards in LMS, Brightspace Analytics, Moodle reports, early-alert systems
Computer Vision	Interprets visual data (images, video).	▪ Proctoring & exam integrity monitoring ▪ Emotion/engagement detection via webcam ▪ AR/VR content interaction analysis ▪ Handwritten assignment digitization & grading	ExamSoft, Affectiva, Google Lens in education, VR lab simulations
Reinforcement Learning	Learns optimal actions through trial and error in dynamic environments.	▪ Adaptive simulation environments (e.g., science labs) ▪ Game-based learning with dynamic difficulty	PhET Sims (AI-enhanced), Codecademy's adaptive coding challenges

		▪ Behavioral nudging & motivation modeling	
Generative AI	Creates new content (text, images, code) based on patterns.	▪ Auto-generating practice questions ▪ Creating personalized learning materials ▪ Simulating dialogues for role-play ▪ Designing interactive scenarios & case studies	ChatGPT for content generation, DALL·E for visual aids, AI lesson planners

Table 2 - Overview of key artificial intelligence technologies and their pedagogical applications in digital education platforms.

5.2 Data-Driven Insights: How Learning Analytics and Visualization Transform Educational Practice

Learning analytics and data visualization are the main components of the complex digitized education platforms' technical infrastructure, which are able to convert the diverse raw data–such as assessment results, conversation logs, and duration of activities–into pedagogical insights that can be put into practice, through processing that is either in real-time or quasi-real-time (Ahmad et al. 7). The systems create sophisticated conceptual maps and multi-layered timelines that combine the completion of the task with the qualitative feedback given to each learner, thus making it possible to track minute performance changes and adjust the instructional tactics accordingly (Madhu et al. 3). The professional dashboards use heatmaps to locate the areas where the most mistakes have been made and radar charts for bringing to light the specific sub-skill proficiencies, whereas the trend lines and early warning signals help the teachers to follow the cohort comparisons and to be alert of the possible disengagement (Ahmad et al. 7).

Predictive modelling that is supported by regression analysis and neural networks is the next instrument in the chain of descriptive abilities that can be used to determine the future achievement trajectories and the probability distributions of the outcomes; thus, it allows for quick, data-driven facilitation of the intervention process (Madhu et al. 4). Besides that, the inclusion of behavioral part through the login distribution plots and the interaction network graphs shows the patterns of the social engagement and points out the students that are connecting different sources of information within the collaborative projects (Aziz and Hossain 6). After assigning these interactions to models such as Universal Design for Learning, educational platforms ensure their compliance with accessibility standards and the policy's directions (Ahmad et al. 7).

Although there is the possibility for macro-level institutional overviews and micro-level snapshots to overcome infrastructural divides by means of local graphical simplification, the necessity of implementing strict anonymization and the actions taken to lessen the algorithmic bias are still of the most significant importance in order to maintain trust of the stakeholders and to prevent the situation where the existing socio-demographic disparities will be reinforced (Naamati and Schneider 3; Aziz and Hossain 6). In the end, integrating quantitative grade trends with qualitative sentiment analysis on dual-axis graphs yields a comprehensive diagnostic framework capable of uncovering discrepancies between high achievement and decreasing motivation (Patero 2).

6 The Digital Education Paradox: Extraordinary Opportunities, Significant Challenges

6.1 Designing for All: Accessibility as Foundation for Inclusive Digital Learning

The quest for systemic inclusion through digital education platforms demands, among other things, a complex integration of infrastructural, pedagogical, and socio-cultural factors to ensure that heterogeneous learner populations have efficient access to adaptive technologies. Fair access is much more than just geographic connectivity, as it must be entirely consistent with Van Dijk's multi-level model, which emphasizes the interdependence of motivation, material resources, digital literacy, and actualized usage (Aziz and Hossain 5, 23). The comprehensive model implies that simply investing in high-speed infrastructure without simultaneously providing the necessary hardware and student-oriented ICT strategies to avoid social exclusion is nonsense (Aziz and Hossain 23).

Besides, the adoption of universal design standards—being a good example of this are the naturally integrated speech-to-text units, automatic captioning, and WCAG-compliant adaptable layouts—is a prerequisite for the cognitive and linguistic inclusion of learners coming from different backgrounds without the need of segregating them into separate service streams (Naamati and Schneider 2). Although AI-based personalization has the potential to improve pedagogy significantly, it also raises ethical concerns about the privacy of sensitive behavioral metadata and the possibility of "filter bubbles" limiting one's intellectual horizons (Aziz and Hossain 2, 23). Therefore, the inclusivity of platforms, on the one hand, relies on the presence of strong anonymization measures and, on the other hand, on the existence of participatory co-design models which take in the feedback of the marginalized groups for the continuous enhancement of the navigation and activity structures (Ahmad et al. 13; Qolamani et al. 5). In theory, a shift to a digitally equitable learning environment would signal that access is not something that can be relegated to a feature of second-hand importance but, instead, it should be regarded as the basis that permeates the entire procurement, design, and deployment lifecycles.

Standard / Guideline	Purpose	Key Requirements	Implementation Examples in Platforms
WCAG 2.1 / 2.2 (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines)	Ensures web content is accessible to people with disabilities.	▪ Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, Robust (POUR principles) ▪ Text alternatives, captions, keyboard navigation, color contrast, readable text.	▪ Alt text for images, closed captions for videos ▪ Keyboard-only navigation support ▪ High contrast modes & resizable text ▪ Screen reader compatibility (ARIA labels)
UDL (Universal Design for Learning)	Framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people.	▪ Multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression. ▪ Flexible content delivery, varied assessment methods.	▪ Content available in text, audio, and video ▪ Choice in assignment formats (e.g., video, essay, presentation)

			▪ Adjustable difficulty levels & personalized pathways
Section 508 (U.S. Federal Requirement)	Requires federal agencies to make electronic and IT accessible.	▪ Compliance with WCAG standards ▪ Accessible software, hardware, and documentation.	• LMS compatibility with assistive tech (e.g., JAWS, NVDA) • Accessible PDFs and documents • Accessible multimedia players
EN 301 549 (EU Accessibility Standard)	Harmonized standard for public procurement of ICT products and services in Europe.	▪ Based on WCAG 2.1 ▪ Covers software, hardware, and documentation.	• Platforms comply with public tenders in EU • Accessible mobile apps and web interfaces • Support for sign language videos
ATAG (Authoring Tool Accessibility Guidelines)	Makes authoring tools themselves accessible and supports production of accessible content.	▪ Accessible authoring interfaces ▪ Prompts and supports for creating accessible content.	• Built-in accessibility checkers in LMS content editors • Templates that enforce alt text and heading structure • Guidance for inclusive content creation
ISO/IEC 40500 (International Standard)	International adoption of WCAG 2.0.	▪ Same as WCAG 2.0 principles and guidelines.	• Used globally for certification and compliance • Integrated into procurement and development cycles
Platform-Specific Features (Inclusive Design)	Beyond compliance—proactive inclusion.	▪ Multilingual interfaces, cultural relevance, cognitive load management.	• Auto-translation of interface text • Simplified UI modes for cognitive accessibility • Customizable avatars and representation options

Table 3 - Key accessibility standards and guidelines with examples of their implementation in digital education platforms.

6.2 Protecting the Digital Learner: Privacy and Security in Connected Education Systems

The increase in data-centric digital educational platforms calls for a careful blend of technical security, ethical management, and user transparency to ensure that the teaching process remains unaffected in its core. AI-driven adaptivity, in particular, depends heavily on the gathering of identity markers, educational profiles, and behavioral traces. However, the risk of dealing with student-sensitive information is why there should be advanced encryption protocols, multi-factor authentication, and role-based access controls to prevent unauthorized exploitation

(Ahmad et al. 8-18). Adherence to law through frameworks such as GDPR underscores the necessity of consent management and data sovereignty, where segmented storage and federated learning models enable data locality while allowing analytical updates to be shared globally (Gillet et al. 3; Madhu et al. 9).

Moreover, the possibility of algorithmic bias in the case of predictive models calls for frequent checks and model explainability features so that the automated interventions do not become a new source of educational inequities and do not wrongly identify the needs of students (Madhu et al. 5). The use of blockchain technology in implementing decentralized management is a potential solution for the problem of permanence of academic records and secure identity verification. However, issues related to interoperability with the old institutional databases are still there (Ahmad et al. 8). To fight against the ever-growing danger of cyberattacks, the adoption of proactive defense measures by institutions, such as penetration testing and intrusion detection, should go hand in hand with the launching of well-rounded digital literacy programs that put educators and students in the position of security vulnerability detectors, e.g., phishing (Naamati & Schneider 4). In the end, the maintenance of stakeholder trust is dependent on the strict observance of data minimization policies, which guarantee that only the necessary metrics for the immediate instructional goals are collected and at the same time allow thorough granular opt-out controls to give the user the possibility not to be exploited by the commercial sector (Ahmad et al. 8; Madhu et al. 9).

7 Education 6.0: Future Pathways for Technology-Enhanced Learning

One of the significant developing AI capabilities is the functional extension of education, focused digital platforms beyond personalization and adaptive sequencing mechanisms. Advances such as these bring expanded multi-source data integration, richer human-computer interaction modalities, and learner behavior modelling. Large language models (LLMs) combined with domain-specific training to generate educational agents capable of engaging in complex pedagogical dialogue are among the primary ways research is moving (Tanwar et al. 2). One of the major changes that came because of this coupling is the capability of huge language models (LLMs) combined with domain-specific training to generate instructional agents which can have deep educational discussions (Tanwar et al. 2). AI professionals are no longer limited to providing short, form feedback or procedural assistance, as these agents can now deeply involve learners in iterative reasoning cycles, checking conceptual understanding, challenging ideas, and changing inquiry paths on the fly. Supported by disciplinary knowledge graphs connected through semantic search capabilities, they can provide context-aware, user-friendly information retrieval that can be used directly in problem-based learning scenarios, whereas the other emergent application is to use multimodal AI systems that receive and integrate text, speech, images, and video inputs to form unified analytic frameworks (Yazdani Motlagh et al. 8). In the case of digital educational platforms, this enables AI to follow a learner's oral explanations and, at the same time, written assignments and visual project artifacts, thus arriving at a composite understanding profile. AI-powered learning analytics may reveal inconsistencies between verbal skills and written expression or uncover diagrammatic communication skills that are not identified by text alone—only by assessments. The integration of these supports the learner's holistic expressive spectrum and, thus, more tailored instructional adjustments. Adaptive simulation setups, such as those that use reinforcement learning, are another direction for fast and deep integration (Tanwar et al. 2). In this case, the platform settings can change due to the learner's actions, thereby altering the parameters in the simulated ecosphere or engineering tasks, so that, to move forward, the learner must apply the previously encountered principles more extensively and deeply. In this way, reinforcement-

driven adaptivity shifts the focus from predetermined paths to emergent scenario modelling, in which learners' unanticipated strategies influence the simulation logic. Therefore, the difficulty level remains the same, even though the actual results of the trials are unknown, and it is the genuine problem-solving situations that users have encountered in their professional practice that are reflected.

Another potential tool for involvement or engagement monitoring that is being looked at is the use of real-time sentiment analysis in collaborative spaces (Yazdani Motlagh et al. 8). Through the use of NLP and tonal detection for both textual and audio parts, groups can be very far from the show of morale or even the hidden frustration of the participants. Yet, the platforms can already sense these emotions through changes in the group. The reason for this is that the early signs are already visible, enabling facilitators to make prompt decisions about changes in group composition or activity framing. Nevertheless, these abilities could. It would be seen as a threat to people's privacy if emotional monitoring is carried out involuntarily and in secret. Hence, ethically constructed tech protocols always call for the presence of unambiguously delineated opt-in stages (Naamati and Schneider 3).

On top of that, state-of-the-art AI instruments are used to create federated learning structures that not only keep the system scalable but also comply with very rigorous data privacy requirements (Ahmad et al. 8). Here, the model gets training at different local nodes without making the data available centrally, hence allowing global efficiency to be enhanced. At the same time, sensitive educational records are stored in a system compliant with the jurisdiction's regulations. If a company has different locations and the laws regarding data sovereignty are pretty different, it is still possible for federated updates to deliver equally improved personalization algorithms without the risk of violating local governance requirements (Gillet et al. 3; Madhu et al. 9). One of the places that generative design algorithms are gradually entering is the simplification of the process of the automatic creation of educational materials either by the teachers' inputs or by the inferred student understanding levels (Yazdani Motlagh et al. 8). Given the outlines of the topic or the content difficulty levels indicated by the analytics dashboards, such a system can write tailored short learning modules that combine text, visuals, and interactive quizzes, aligned with the platform pedagogy standards. Though the obvious efficiency benefits are there, the availability of resources will be accelerated. Still, the origins and accuracy of the generated content require a thorough inspection; by incorporating verification processes, the newly created elements in the repository become a means of facilitation rather than a factor in aggravating the existing issue of conceptual rigor. The interaction of learners with VR and AR educational environments is being transformed by the incorporation of the latest AI into transformative media experiences (Malerbi et al. 11).

8 Conclusion

The shift from standardized pedagogy to AI-driven, adaptive learning ecosystems represents the most profound transformation in twenty-first-century education. These platforms, which integrate machine learning, immersive simulation, and big-data analytics, fundamentally reconfigure how learning is arranged, delivered, and experienced. By providing individualized learning paths that adjust in real-time to a learner's needs, they promote sustained engagement and more profound understanding through dynamic difficulty calibration and immediate feedback. Furthermore, incorporating simulated environments and gamified elements enables learners to tackle authentic, real-world problems through direct, experiential interaction.

However, this review establishes that the mere availability of such sophisticated technology is insufficient. Its transformative potential is entirely contingent upon integration within a framework that prioritizes equitable access, ethical governance, and sustained human agency. Without this conscious foundation, these tools risk exacerbating existing inequalities, infringing

upon privacy, and marginalizing the educator's role. A critical barrier is infrastructural disparity; deliberate policies are required to ensure universal access to high-speed internet and appropriate devices, alongside comprehensive digital literacy initiatives.

To translate this understanding into equity-focused action, stakeholders must adopt precise, multi-level strategies. Policymakers and administrators must enforce equity-first infrastructure policies and legislate mandatory algorithmic-transparency and bias-audit requirements for all adopted platforms. For developers and researchers, instituting an "ethics-by-design" principle is non-negotiable. This entails embedding privacy-protective architectural features, such as federated learning, and employing participatory design cycles that involve educators to ensure pedagogical soundness. Educational institutions and teachers, as the primary agents of pedagogy, must pursue procurement of interoperable tools and allocate resources for professional development that builds data literacy and the capacity to orchestrate effective human-AI collaboration.

Concurrently, the research agenda must advance through targeted investigation. Longitudinal studies are imperative to distinguish lasting impacts on deep learning from transient engagement effects. The development of robust, empirically validated bias-mitigation frameworks for adaptive algorithms is essential to prevent the perpetuation of societal inequalities. Further empirical work is also necessary to define the most effective human-AI partnership models, delineating how technology can optimally support—not replace—teachers' professional judgment and their indispensable role in providing empathy, ethical guidance, and psychosocial support.

In summary, this review contributes a unified framework that realigns the digital-education agenda. The path forward lies not in pursuing fully autonomous teaching machines, but in deliberately designing hybrid, human-centered ecosystems. Success will be measured by the practical synthesis of advanced personalization with universal access, algorithmic power with transparent governance, and digital efficiency with essential human mentorship. Ultimately, by ensuring these platforms are grounded in equitable infrastructure, embedded with ethical design, and enhanced by pedagogical partnerships, digital education can fulfil its promise of a more inclusive, effective, and equitable learning world for all.

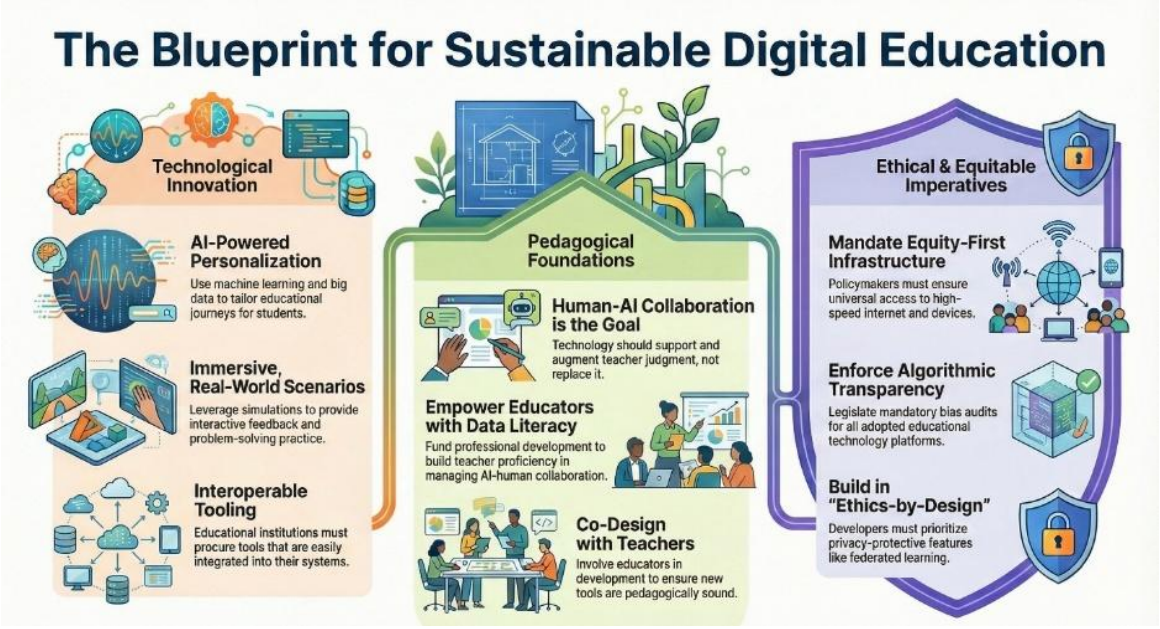


Figure 4 - ***The Tripartite Blueprint for Sustainable Digital Education: Integrating Technology, Pedagogy, and Ethics***

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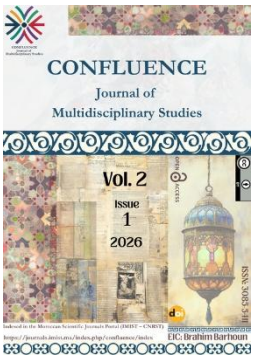
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CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

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

Language, Culture and Identity: An Interview with the Malian Writer and Publisher Samba Niaré

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.6132

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Received: 15-10-2025 Accepted: 12-01-2026 Published: 19-01-2026

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ABSTRACT

In this conversation, Samba Niaré shares his professional and intellectual journey, from teacher to committed writer and resilient publisher. He explores his dedication to promoting Malian literature and national languages alongside French, and reflects on his trilogy *Kanuya Wale*, the first Malian novel written in Bambara, which examines social, cultural, political, and gender issues. He also discusses the coexistence of Islam and tradition in Mali, the role of women, and linguistic decolonization through the production and dissemination of knowledge in African languages, while still leveraging Western languages.

KEYWORDS

Malian Literature
Linguistic Sovereignty
Bilingualism
Women and Society
Kanuya Wale
Samba Niaré

Note: This interview was recorded in French and translated into English, with assistance from AI tools and a final review by the author.

About Samba Niaré: Samba Niaré is a teacher by training, having taught at primary, secondary, and vocational levels. He also worked as a reading facilitator with the Association for Reading, Education, and Development (ALED).[1] His passion for promoting literature and combating illiteracy led him to become a playwright, novelist, and publisher.

Niaré believes that rejecting or neglecting African languages in favor of Western ones is suicidal. Instead, he sees the coexistence of Western and African languages as a blessing for Africans and African literature, highlighting his commitment to multilingualism in Mali. In 1996, he put this conviction into action by publishing *Kanuya Wale*,[2] which became the first novel in Bambara,[3] all while continuing to write in French. The Fulfulde[4] translation of *Kanuya Wale* received the ECOWAS[5] Prize for Excellence in African Languages.

He has written around ten plays, including *L'âne et le miel*, *Le Salaire de l'indifférence*, *Graine de chef*, *Tonjonw*, *Filankafow*, and *Le Costume sacré*. Many of his plays have won first prize in various national biennials in Mali.

Niapégué Sanou: Could you tell us about your background and your body of work?
Samba Niaré: One letter sums me up: the letter "E." I am an *enseignant* (teacher) by training, an *écrivain* (writer)—primarily a playwright by chance, and an *éditeur* (publisher) by necessity. My teacher training began in 1966 in Diré, in what was then Mali's sixth administrative region, Gao. It was a fast-track program for training primary school teachers. After finishing my training, I went back to the region of Gao and taught primary school in Ansongo for four years. Later, a transfer took me to Sikasso, where I also taught. Afterward, I requested another transfer and was assigned to Kati in the Koulikoro region, where I continued my teaching. Once I arrived in Kati, I knew I didn't want to stay a primary school teacher until retirement; I had other ambitions.

I sat for the entrance exam to the *École Normale Supérieure*.[6] I used my academic vacation to prepare and was admitted to the first-year literature program. My studies were interrupted by student strikes, but classes eventually resumed. I graduated in 1985 with a Master's degree in Modern Literature, then taught in several high schools.

After a while, I realized I wanted to go further than teaching. That's how I ended up at the National Directorate of Arts and Culture, known then as DNAC and now as the National Directorate of Cultural Action.[7] I worked there for five years as Head of the Literature Division, which brought me into close contact with the world of arts and culture.

A few years later, I decided to leave the civil service willingly to dedicate myself to something else. That "something else" turned out to be publishing, after I received training in Africa and Europe, mainly in France. Today, I run a small publishing house that faces significant challenges, but these difficulties don't deter me from persevering.

Our publishing house, called EDIS,[8] now works with around three hundred authors, primarily academics, that is, thesis authors, whose works we've strived to revive. We created a special program to collect, edit, and publish academic theses, believing these works form the foundation of knowledge and don't deserve to remain unheard. We built an entire policy and program around the distich: "*que valent donc les thèses dès lors qu'elles se taisent?*" (What value does a thesis have if no one ever reads it?) After about ten years, we successfully gathered authors willing to entrust us with their manuscripts. We also searched for other "lost" manuscripts, beneficial for both the authors and for Mali. Some of these authors lived thirty, forty, or even fifty years ago, and some have since passed away. Today, we are proud to say we've ensured these theses are no longer silent. Additionally, we publish everything from fiction and reference works to dictionaries and comics in our main languages—the official languages of Mali—which were previously called national languages. That, broadly speaking, sums up my work as a publisher.

My career as a playwright grew alongside my teaching career. From a very young age, I was deeply interested in theater and made it one of my professional niches. Today, I can say, with modesty, that I've written more than a dozen plays, some of which I published myself at my own expense, because I believe theater shouldn't be limited to stage performance; otherwise, it could disappear, as has happened with many great playwrights before us.

My plays were primarily performed during the National Weeks of Culture[9] and, more prominently, at the National Artistic and Cultural Biennial.[10] I'm proud to be among the few authors who have consistently received the top rankings at five different biennials, between 1980 and 2001. One of my plays was awarded first place in 1980. In 1982, after some controversy and pressure on the jury, another of my plays was moved from first to second place, although I still consider it to have been the true winner. In 1984, another of my plays ranked first again. In 1986, I chose not to compete due to pressures on authors. In 1988, I presented another play that once again ranked first. Later, in 2001, I presented yet another play that also received first place. If I exist today as a playwright, it's essentially thanks to my participation in the artistic and cultural biennials. In 2003, I was asked once again to help revive the biennial, as I had already distanced myself somewhat from civil service. For five years, together with other state officials, I managed the permanent secretariat of the Artistic and Cultural Biennial under the direction of Minister Cheick Oumar Sissoko. However, to this day—thanks to God and consideration—I've never really stepped away from the cultural world. Today, I continue to make my modest contribution to the development of Malian theater and the advancement of culture in general. I was awarded two medals by the Malian authorities: the Medal of the National Order of Merit and the Medal of Arts and Letters.

I'm especially proud to have written *Kanuya Wale*, the first Malian novel published in Bambara. I first wrote it in French and then translated it into other national languages, including Bambara, Fulfulde, Songhai, and Tamasheq. The Fulfulde translation won the ECOWAS Prize for Excellence in African Languages. I also wrote another novel titled *Why It Does Not Snow Here*, a long novel of more than three hundred pages. It's quite a unique work that carries a project I hold dear, a project I consider vital for the future, not only for Mali but for all of Africa. Finally, I've written other shorter works and continue to write.

NS: You describe writing as something that stemmed from your teaching career, yet there must still be another particular factor. We know that in Mali, or in other African countries, being a writer isn't like practicing other professions. When someone becomes a writer, there's usually a particular reason or motivation. What else made you decide to become a writer?
SN: I didn't *decide* to become a writer. I became a writer almost by accident, maybe even out of necessity, because, as I mentioned, my teacher training immersed me in the world of theater and, by extension, culture. At that time, we needed plays, and everything I saw being performed around me didn't satisfy me. Out of necessity, and perhaps due to a small inner calling—a sort of "cultural instinct," so to speak—I began to write. Nothing compelled me; it was simply a passion. I've always found myself, even now, within the sphere of culture. That's how I began to write plays and novels.

It was nothing more than that. I can't explain it otherwise. It wasn't something I planned or trained for. I simply wrote and produced. My works were performed and read, and that gave me immense satisfaction. It made me realize I could be useful, both as a teacher and as a writer, that I could communicate with an audience through my writing, an audience that could access my words even when I'm elsewhere, perhaps even when I'm no longer in this world. That's every writer's dream. It reminds me of something a Chinese sage once said: "If you want to be useful for eternity, either plant a tree or write a book." I made both choices, as I planted trees when I was a teacher, and now I write. My choice to write wasn't determined by anything else.

The difficulties writers face here are the same as elsewhere. Perhaps they are even greater for us because our population isn't highly literate. We live in a country where, after sixty-five years of independence, the literacy rate in French doesn't even reach thirty-five percent. That shouldn't prevent writers from continuing to write. Those difficulties are real, but I've added another dimension to my struggle—if I may call it so—the struggle to ensure that reading doesn't remain confined to the school environment.

We learn to read at school, but it's beyond the school that what was learned should continue its journey—in the family, in the street, in society, and in everyday life. The mistake we often make, as do many intellectuals, is that once we obtain a degree, we stop reading. If we were to reassess many people's capacity to produce, to engage in dialogue, or to understand their world, I bet that many of those who earned their degrees five, ten, or twenty years ago would fail if they hadn't continued reading. They slip, without realizing it, into what I call "post-literacy illiteracy." This problem also affects our esteemed researchers. Once they've written and defended their thesis, many stop reading and producing. They begin to believe they are at the top, while in fact they've already fallen to the bottom. Everything they once learned fades away progressively, without their awareness. Unfortunately, in Africa nowadays, we meet great intellectuals who no longer read, no longer produce, but are content to remain in administrative or political positions. Their countries no longer benefit from their knowledge or skills because those abilities have gradually been eroded, worn away, and lost.

NS: You've been writing since the 1970s, if I'm not mistaken. The majority of your works are in French, but when you wrote *Kanuya Wale*, you decided to make it accessible in Bambara and other national languages. Why that decision?
SN: My first piece of writing dates back to when I was nineteen, well before the 1970s. Unfortunately, I lost it. When I was nineteen, I wrote a collection of fantasy tales. At that time, people used to tell us we had to be home before noon because the djinns would be wandering around at one o'clock. The same was said for the night, that djinns roamed at night. These stories were often told to us, and I gathered and wrote them down. The first person who was supposed to read that text lost it, unfortunately. But it's all right; it remains somewhere in a corner of my memory. That's how my early writing began.

As for *Kanuya Wale*, it was an express commission from a publisher—and there's an entire story behind it. That publisher is actually the one who inspired me to become a publisher myself. When he saw my work, he said to me, "Instead of continuing to write for others, write for yourself and make sure that you, too, become a publisher." I am deeply grateful to him. He has since passed away—may his soul rest in peace. He was like an older brother, warm, supportive, and encouraging. I wrote the entire text—believe it or not—in just one week. The three volumes were produced in a single week. At that time, my second son was still very young, barely eight years old. He would often try to see me, but I would isolate myself at night to write until morning. In one week, I produced those three small books and handed them to the publisher, who was astonished. He said to me, "We had agreed that you would write this text in Bambara, not in French." I replied, "But I cannot write as well in Bambara as I can in French." We then asked a friend to translate it, and that's how it became what it is today. Gradually, I worked with people who had linguistic expertise in other official languages, and the work was translated into at least four of them, which have now been designated as official languages. These translations were distributed widely, and we still have other versions on our machines, awaiting completion in additional official languages.

NS: As *Kanuya Wale* was made accessible in at least four national languages, one may wonder whether this shift was deliberate or shaped by circumstance. Can we say that the work ended up being published in these languages by accident?
SN: It wasn't accidental; it was rather necessary. The editorial policy of the publishing house at that time was focused on the promotion of national languages. This is also my goal; if you look at our emblem, it clearly states: "Promotion of official languages and French." We didn't wait for the State to declare national languages as official. By the way, as if by fate, I had the privilege of participating with other Malian experts in the final drafting of that constitution, which officially recognized and elevated the national languages to the rank of official languages. My mission is twofold: to promote the official languages without rejecting French, and to practice bilingualism productively.

It's a real mistake for academic works to stay confined to academia. Every written work, especially scientific research, should be accessible to everyone, from the grassroots to the top. Researchers collect their material from oral traditions and from local communities. Why, then, after defending a thesis, should that knowledge remain inaccessible to the very people who provided it? It would be better to ensure that once such academic work is completed, there is a restitution of that knowledge at the community level, not in French, English, or Arabic, but in the languages that those communities understand. After all, they are the ones who contributed to the research and who made it possible.

NS: While you stress the necessity of writing in national languages, this choice inevitably raises concerns about readership and visibility. Nowadays, we see that many writers who write in their national languages aren't very well known. Also, their works risk being forgotten or disappearing altogether. Isn't writing in one's national language a risk or obstacle to recognition and success?

SN: On the one hand, no; but from another perspective, perhaps yes, if one believes that fame can come only from abroad or from foreign languages. Fame doesn't come from the language used but from the relevance of the subject chosen. You might be right, however, in saying that writing in French or another international language can make one more visible. That is true. But if that visibility comes at the cost of ignoring our own people—those who don't speak those foreign languages—then we would be making a serious mistake. Someone must always be a pioneer. I'm not claiming to be one; I don't have that pretension. But I believe that those who, after writing in French or English, return to their mother tongues, such as Wolof, Swahili, or others, deserve to be considered pioneers.

It would be a mistake to limit ourselves to internationally dominant languages. Over time, our own languages will inevitably cross borders and spread elsewhere. Take Fulfulde, for example. It isn't spoken only in Mali. The same applies to Songhai and to Bambara; these are cross-border languages. Therefore, we have every reason to adopt a productive form of bilingualism that allows our populations, especially those who didn't have the chance to attend school, to understand us.

Going to school is both a privilege and an opportunity. Even though the laws require everyone to go to school, not everyone can. Sometimes, it's necessary to return to one's mother tongue. However, even then, people must still go to school, not necessarily to learn French, but to learn how to read, write, and transcribe their own languages correctly. That, too, requires a structured program. It is a challenge that our governments must face so that knowledge isn't confined only to French or English. French and English have gone through centuries of evolution to reach their current level of development. It would be tragic to stifle our own languages and prevent them from evolving. This responsibility falls on linguists, policymakers, and writers, who must not neglect or underestimate the value of languages that have survived for centuries.

When we were colonized, we were subjugated both physically and intellectually. Now we must free ourselves from that yoke so that we are not continuously accountable to our former colonizers, nor perpetually dependent upon them. We are the heirs of great predecessors who wrote in languages that most people didn't speak or understand, because it was the elite, not the masses, who received formal education. Today, we must ensure that those who didn't have access to classical education can still learn and share knowledge through the languages they understand.

NS: You said that you are in favor of bilingualism, and you spoke about intellectual decolonization, which reminds us of the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. He began writing in English and later abandoned it to write only in his national language. Ngũgĩ encourages all African writers to write in their own languages. Do you agree with those who call for abandoning French completely and using only the national languages that have now become official?

SN: Not at all. We must not do that. This reminds me of a remark made by Léopold Sédar Senghor,[11] a conviction for which he was often criticized and even misunderstood. He was right. We cannot abruptly abandon a language in which we have been colonized for more than one hundred years. It is impossible to reject French overnight. The process must occur gradually. In fact, we have already begun this process for a long time. Inevitably, we will one day move

beyond it. It may not happen with our generation, but future generations will progressively free themselves from this linguistic domination and will ensure that our languages not only survive but also become true vehicles of knowledge.

I had the pleasure of reading a PhD dissertation written ninety-nine percent in Bambara, employing scientific terminology. The thesis is seven hundred pages long. It is available on our shelves, and we will do everything possible to make sure that this thesis doesn't remain silent and becomes widely known. We also had the honor of producing a six-hundred-page monolingual dictionary in Bambara. This challenges anyone who says research can't be done in our own languages. This belief stems from the intellectual suffocation we have endured since the beginning.

We were prevented from thinking and writing in our own languages. Nevertheless, there was one remarkable exception, a French teacher whose name I have forgotten. He was assigned to Saint-Louis in Senegal. He began teaching in French but soon realized that his students didn't understand him. He then decided to learn Wolof and introduced bilingual instruction. When the authorities discovered this, they thanked him and repatriated him to France. However, he later returned willingly and died in Senegal, among the very students to whom he had wished to teach both Wolof and French, using one language to open the door to the other.

NS: You mentioned your participation in the drafting of the new constitution, relating it to the issue of languages. Since French remains the working language, does it not mean that French continues to hold the status of the official language in practice?
SN: Yes, I did mention the finalization of the constitution. The constitution now officially recognizes the national languages as official languages, but it designates French as the working language. However, this doesn't mean that French remains superior. The constitution is very clear: national languages are elevated to the rank of official languages and will progressively be introduced as working languages, just as French once was.

The bilingualism that exists today shouldn't be perceived as a problem. It is not a contradiction; rather, it is a form of support and enrichment for our country. It is beneficial for Mali to have both a language with international visibility and languages that our people understand. French, in a way, will help us become aware of the importance of our own languages. Perhaps unconsciously, French has made us realize the necessity and inevitability of using our national languages, which have now become official languages.

We must also understand this from another perspective: We can't develop fully while depending on someone else's language. Look at the examples of China, Russia, the Arab countries, even France and the United States, India, or Japan, whose language evolved partly from Chinese, if I'm not mistaken. None of these nations developed using a foreign language. It is therefore illogical, linguistically and scientifically, to believe that we could develop fully using someone else's language.

Such a transformation will take generations. It cannot happen overnight. However, over time, our languages will evolve and will accompany progress. In five, ten, or twenty years, we will likely find ourselves at the forefront of using our national—now official—languages in administration, education, and research, while still maintaining a complementary relationship with French. Our cultural wealth is now double. A Malian citizen today should feel proud to realize that his culture is doubly enriched through both his mother tongue and the French language. French citizens, on the other hand, are nourished by only one linguistic culture. We, however, have the advantage of being nourished by both. Our culture is not hybrid; it is strong because it draws from two sources.

NS: If national languages are now officially recognized, the next question concerns how far this evolution might realistically go. Can we deduce that you hope one day Bambara, or another national or official language, will become the country's working language, replacing French?
SN: Progressively, yes. Political use and social necessity will make it happen over time. However, that is another matter entirely; it will occur as history dictates. Today, Bambara is spoken from Kayes to Tinzawatene. But a responsible State like ours—one that is conscious, cautious, and under multiple pressures—cannot afford to declare, "From today onward, only Bambara or only Fulfulde will be the official language." Doing so would expose the country to deep divisions, fierce rivalries, and possibly fratricidal conflicts that could destroy national unity. Therefore, the State must proceed gradually and with wisdom.

NS: This gradual approach, nevertheless, may seem paradoxical for some people. You say that choosing only Bambara could provoke hostility between communities. But why can we accept French and not one of our own national languages, such as Bambara?
SN: We didn't *accept* French. It was imposed upon us. That is very clear. French was imposed through colonization. I recall a striking remark by a French official—I forget his name—who once said, "Frenchmen, calm down, for if it were not for Africa, France would be speaking German today." What does that mean? It means colonization. French was imposed upon us, and we are now trying to free ourselves from it gradually, not through rejection or brutality, but through reason. A responsible and conscious State cannot afford to act recklessly by rejecting French outright. That would amount to political suicide. I fully support and approve of the State's current approach, which aims to progressively achieve linguistic autonomy.

This process must begin with education, which needs to be completely restructured. No country today, after so many years of colonization, could reasonably declare, "We are cutting all ties now." Such a rupture would be too brutal and would backfire catastrophically. The current policy is a wise one. It will be up to future generations to continue in this direction through the production of literary works, through reading, through cultural exchanges, through research, and through initiatives such as the one you are undertaking now. The goal is not to glorify English, French, German, Russian, or Chinese. The goal is to promote our majority languages, the languages spoken by our people, our thirteen official languages.

NS: Let's now move on to your work, *Kanuya Wale*. In Bambara, *Kanuya Wale* means "an act of love." Of course, one shouldn't judge a book by its title; is it the reason the content of your novel doesn't directly address love, but rather deals with structural, cultural, and even physical violence? Why did you choose that title?
SN: That is an excellent question. It may be what one could call a literary device. The translation isn't mine, but the French title was. The Bambara translator chose the expression *Kanuya Wale*, and I fully agreed with him. An act of love—what does it mean? Love isn't necessarily physical or carnal. It isn't limited to what one feels for a romantic partner. Love encompasses everything around us: our children, our parents, our work, and everything that makes us live and feel useful to one another. That is what I wanted to express through the title. An act of love is a moral, social, and human commitment.

Look at how the novel ends. The apprentice driver could have made the same mistake as his older brother by marrying the young girl born after her mother's ordeal. Yet he didn't take that path. He saw her as a sister, someone he needed to love as a sister, to accompany in life, and to help find her own freedom. That young man, who begins as an inexperienced boy, gains wisdom through life's hardships. His experiences awaken in him a more mature, moral, and human sense of love—love that transcends desire. That, too, is an act of love. You also see characters who are close, not physically or carnally, but spiritually and emotionally. Loving

without possession, without domination; that is what I wanted to convey. That, in essence, is the deeper meaning of *An Act of Love*.

NS: After reading the three volumes, we notice that the issues in *Kanuya Wale* can be grouped into two main categories. The first concerns patriarchy and violence against women, and the second deals with what one could call "modern slavery" and "savage capitalism in large cities." Regarding the first issue, the reader encounters themes revolving around the condition of African women in general and Malian women in particular, such as polygamy, early marriage, and girls dropping out of school because of marriage. As for "savage capitalism" and "modern slavery," we see a wealthy class exploiting the poor, such as the case of drivers who don't want their apprentices to become drivers one day, forcing them to remain apprentices indefinitely. Why did you decide to expose these important social issues?
SN: Writers are often guided by their characters. They are taken in by their evolution. Characters are fictional beings, but in the author's mind, they live and breathe. They have their own lives, even their own histories, though they may not exist physically. That is the reality of writing. Authors—I believe this is true for most of them—are both masters and slaves of their characters. At times, they try to guide them, to give them direction, but then the characters take on lives of their own. Chance, or perhaps intuition, makes the characters appear almost metaphysical. So, the author isn't entirely the master of the game. We may plan to make a character behave a certain way, but in relation to other characters, that behavior can change completely. That is what happened in *Kanuya Wale*. It is part of the creative process, what I call literary destiny.

NS: Can we say that you have become an advocate for women and for underpaid or unpaid workers?
SN: I wouldn't say "advocate." Perhaps it happened by chance through the interplay of the characters. As I said earlier, we are the products of the situations we depict. Even if we disagree with certain things, the evolution of our characters leads us to confront them.

The issue of domestic workers, for example—whom people still call "maids," a term that makes no sense—is a real one. Domestic workers today, especially in cities, often play a greater role in families than their female bosses themselves. That is a social reality. As soon as the sun rises, everyone leaves for work, and the household is left in the care of this girl, who may have received little or no formal education and who often works under difficult conditions. When you return home, you find your children bathed, your house clean, and your food cooked, all by a person for whom you may have little or no regard. That is inhumane.

How can one eat without the person who cooks, or live in a clean house without the one who maintains it? Even if you pay her, that doesn't make her your slave. Our families taught us to respect our mothers, and above all, to respect domestic workers. They are the children of other families. What they earn is often barely enough to live on. Yet, they must eat, survive, and live with dignity. While they are under your roof, they are your responsibility. You must make them feel their humanity, make them feel that they exist, that they are someone's child, passing through your home for a time. Even if you are not a believer, there is always a divine gaze upon you, reminding you: "Be careful. If you mistreat that child, if you mistreat that woman, one day you will face the consequences."

NS: In addition to these social issues, the reader notices that your novel also addresses culture, especially traditional knowledge and the peaceful coexistence between Islam and traditional beliefs. For example, in Benkoro, the village of the main characters, Islam and tradition coexist

harmoniously. Most people are Muslims but still celebrate traditional festivals, use local names, and resort to traditional remedies.

However, in contemporary Mali, as in many African countries, traditional names are becoming increasingly rare, even in remote villages. Most people now have Arabic or Western names that they consider "Islamic" or "Christian." Why did you choose to give your characters local names instead of these Arabic or Western ones?

SN: I will tell you a story. Before I understood the meaning of my first name—Samba in Fulfulde, which, in the Fulani tradition, is given to the second-born son—I was secretly ashamed of it because I didn't understand its meaning. Once I understood it, I embraced it with pride.

Islam came to us; we didn't go to Islam. We preexisted it. The same applies to modern medicine. Before the French arrived, before colonialism, how did people live, eat, or heal themselves? Did they have pharmacies or imported recipes? No. Civilization evolved, and other influences arrived, sometimes provoking misunderstanding or rejection.

Let me take the almost anecdotal example of Seydou Badian Kouyaté,[12] a writer, a statesman, and a development expert. He is almost unknown as a medical practitioner, yet his doctoral dissertation focused on the traditional treatment of yellow fever. That thesis has since been overlooked.

We need to think about the knowledge and way of life that existed before colonization. We shouldn't reject that knowledge but instead seek to understand and integrate it with what came later. Just as we have done with languages, we should do the same with traditional science. If we develop our pharmacopoeia,[13] some may react negatively, but that is due to the way we were educated. Fortunately, there are now faculties of traditional medicine, with trained specialists who continue to advance this knowledge. The intellectual and scientific suffocation we experienced came from colonization.

We must remain true to our culture without rejecting what we have learned through contact with others. Unfortunately, today, many people reject their own culture, even their names. They believe that their baptismal names must sound Arabic. Some have even gone so far as to change the pronunciation of their names completely. For example, instead of saying Boubacar, which already has an Arabic connotation, they "Arabize" it into Abu Bakr—an unnecessary mental drift. Arabs would never "Africanize" their names. We always tend to believe that what comes from outside is better because we were never taught to value what we have.

NS: Since, in the novel, we don't find the familiar Malian names such as Mamadou, Amadou, or Bourama, but rather Dadjuru,[14] Sata,[15] Falako,[16] Seriba,[17] and Soci,[18] can we say that your choice of character names was intentional?

SN: It was both a cultural and a literary choice. On the one hand, it reflects my cultural roots. On the other hand, it comes from my background in dramaturgy, where the names I give to characters carry symbolic meaning. In my plays, characters' names always have meaning, and I follow the same approach in my novels. Instead of using common names that carry no particular meaning, I choose names that identify the characters through their meaning. I rarely use family names; I prefer first names that speak for themselves.

NS: Besides culture, your novel also portrays peaceful Islam. In Benkoro, Muslims of different interpretations coexist peacefully. Is such an Islam still possible in Mali today, where most people are Muslims, given the current context marked by terrorism and hate speech among Muslims themselves?

SN: Let's begin with the meaning of the word Benkoro; it means "ancient agreement" or "old covenant." There is a deep symbolism behind that name. Regarding Islam, I am not a theologian,

but I try to understand it. If Islam were false, how could it have survived for centuries and millennia? It is because the falsehood isn't in Islam itself; it is in the interpretation people make of it. If something endures for centuries, it must contain truth. I see Islam, like Christianity, as a humane religion, a faith that has stood the test of time. The problem lies not in religion but in those who try to manipulate it for political ends. Humanity today has reached extraordinary levels of development; we have gone to the moon, to Mars, yet we still behave as if we lived in the Neolithic age. That is where the real problem lies. It lies in political opportunism and the manipulation of faith for power.

NS: Now, let's focus on the main characters in the three volumes, respectively. In the first volume, *Dajuru*, the reader sees Sata being mistreated and abandoned by her husband. Yet she remains patient and never seeks divorce or justice. From a feminist point of view, a woman shouldn't remain inactive under such conditions. Do you think Sata should be considered a model or a bad example?
SN: The names themselves hold meaning. Dadjuru means "rope of the mouth," that is, a promise or a commitment. Sata means "destiny" or "fate." Let me reveal something: my first book, which had little success, was a collection of lectures I gave around 1976 about women. We shouldn't think that only African or Malian women face mistreatment. The history of women's struggles is universal. Everywhere in the world, human relationships are built on compromise. The history of couples is full of sacrifice, and most of those sacrifices are made by women. Without women, no great man would exist. No artist, writer, or statesman would have achieved greatness without a woman's support, even if she was sometimes taken for granted.

Nevertheless, some feminists idealize life too much. Life isn't ideal. It is full of ups and downs. Every relationship, every marriage, requires compromise. When a problem arises in a couple, it's too easy to shout, "Women's rights are not respected." That is true in some cases, but it isn't the whole story. Balance is essential. A man must acknowledge his strength and dominance, and a woman must assert her worth. Without both, there can be no harmony. I often tell young men, "Respect women. Respect your wives. Without them, you would be nothing." A woman gives life. She could end a man's life in a moment if she wished, while a man could spend a lifetime trying to destroy her. That is the power of women, and that is why they must be honored.

NS: In the second volume, *The Apprentice*, you highlight the condition of unpaid or underpaid driver apprentices who are condemned to remain apprentices forever. Likewise, this volume portrays the infernal life of many other underpaid workers in the city. This issue remains current in Mali. What are your thoughts on that?
SN: I don't have recent data, but I know that there are Malian organizations that have long fought for the rights of domestic and informal workers. Not all households treat their workers inhumanely. There has been some improvement. Domestic workers today often choose families carefully. They look for good employers. Yet, in families with limited or unstable income, workers must adapt to what the household can afford. They receive free food, housing, and care when they are sick. That, too, must be valued.

We must try, as much as possible, to treat humanely those who make our daily lives easier. The State should also intervene to ensure fairness in labor relations. In the past, kindness was part of our social code, but today, everything is being monetized.

Many seasonal workers come to cities to earn a dowry or to help their families, then return to their villages. What seems a small sum in the city can make a great difference in a village.

Our economic realities are not the same as those of other nations, so comparisons are often misleading. Despite our struggles, Mali remains a resilient and profoundly humane society. We may be down, but with faith and perseverance, we'll rise again.

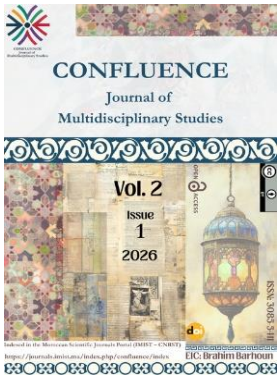
NS: In the third volume, *Firiyatow, The Widows*, Mamuru's wife, refuses to observe widowhood after his death from AIDS, which resulted from his infidelity. Her refusal violates tradition. Do you think her resistance came too late, since her husband was already dead?
SN: Her refusal was symbolic. She wanted to draw attention to her husband's behavior. Everyone knew about his infidelity, yet no one intervened. Her refusal to observe widowhood was a way of saying, "Let this not happen again." She wanted men to understand that women are human beings, not objects. If we exist, it is because of women. We owe them respect. She also recognized that her husband, despite his flaws, sometimes showed restraint out of respect for her. So, she said to herself, "If I refused widowhood out of anger, I must also accept it out of respect, for the good moments." It was her way of honoring him, but also of warning others—men, women, and religious leaders—that women should never again be trampled upon.

NS: After addressing past works and enduring themes, it is natural to turn to your current creative projects. Are you currently working on a new play or novel? If so, what will the main themes be, given Mali's current context?
SN: Yes, I am working on a play that I hope to finish by the end of the year. I will not reveal anything, except that it is purely political. Draw a parallel between a football club manager and a political party leader. This club leader has spent more than 40 or 50 years and cannot even have 1000 supporters. Make the parallel with political parties and leaders.

NS: Finally, since we are in the era of artificial intelligence, which affects how writers create, as a publisher, do you think this will increase fake authors—people who claim to be writers but only copy and paste from machines?
SN: This shouldn't be a concern. Our publishing house recently reviewed a book written by researchers—I will not name them, though they now hold high positions in the State. The book, in two volumes, discusses digital good and digital evil; the second volume focuses on artificial intelligence. After reading both volumes, especially the second, I learned a great deal. Whatever the power of artificial intelligence, it will always remain below human intelligence. There is no danger as long as there is human contact. If I don't interact with AI, if I don't ask it questions, will it produce anything? No. There can't be "fake authors," as long as the human mind is present. Artificial intelligence should operate only within the vision and the limits set by human intelligence.

Notes

1. ALED stands for *Association pour la Lecture, l'Éducation et le Développement*.
2. *Kanuya Wale* means "An Act of Love."
3. Bambara is the most widespread language in Mali.
4. Fulfulde, also known as Fula or Pulaar, is a language spoken in about twenty countries across West and Central Africa, from Senegal to Sudan.
5. ECOWAS stands for the Economic Community Of West African States. It is a regional organization of many West African countries, founded in 1975
6. *École Normale Supérieure* (ENSUP) is the Malian high school teacher training college in Bamako.
7. The National Directorate of Cultural Action (Direction nationale de l'action culturelle, DNAC), now known as the National Directorate of Cultural Action, is a Malian government institution responsible for developing national cultural policies, stimulating artistic and literary creation, promoting the arts and literature, and fostering international cultural exchanges.
8. EDIS stands for *Édition et Distribution* (Publishing and Distribution).
9. The National Week of Culture (Semaine Nationale de la Culture, SNC) in Mali is a major cultural event that celebrates Malian heritage nationwide.
10. The National Artistic and Cultural Biennial of Mali (Biennale Artistique et Culturelle du Mali) is the country's largest cultural event, taking place every two years, bringing together all the regions for artistic competitions aimed at national cohesion and the promotion of cultural heritage.
11. Léopold Sédar Senghor was the first president of Senegal. He was a prominent poet, one of the pioneers of Negritude. Having served in the French Academy, he was one of the strongest proponents of French, which he viewed as a tool of civilization.
12. Seydou Badian Kouyaté was a Malian novelist, playwright, essayist, and politician who wrote the national anthem of Mali upon its independence. He studied medicine in France.
13. In Mali, the term "pharmacopoeia" most often designates traditional drug-making.
14. Dajuru literally means "the rope of the mouth, that is, promise."
15. Sata means "fatal."
16. Falako means "deputy Imam or muezzin or Imam's assistant."
17. Seriba derives from "Seliba" through rhotacism (the change of /l/ to /r/), meaning "big festival, especially Eid al-Adha."
18. Soci means "family ruiner."



CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

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

The Jewelers of the Ummah:
A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World,
by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay. London/New York: Verso, 2024. 656 pp., ISBN: 978-1-80429-311-9.

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.7899

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Received: 30-11-2025 Accepted: 14-01-2026 Published: 19-01-2026

Book Review

The Jewelers of the Ummah:
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Within contemporary political theory and historiography, few works challenge the foundational categories of the modern nation-state with the remarkable ferocity and intimacy found in Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's *The Jewelers of the Ummah: A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World*. This substantial 614-page volume constitutes a significant evolution in Azoulay's ambitious project of "unlearning imperialism." Situating her inquiry alongside foundational critiques by scholars such as Ella Shohat on the displaced figure of the "Arab-Jew" and Yehouda Shenhav on the epistemological trap of "methodological Zionism," Azoulay aligns with these intellectual traditions but radicalizes them. While she previously established this theoretical framework to critique the violence inherent in archival preservation and museum practices, she turns her gaze here toward the ruptured history of the Maghreb. With a specific focus on Algeria, she argues that colonial powers weaponized the categories of "Jew," "Arab," and "Muslim" to destroy a shared life-world that existed for many centuries. The text refuses a simple historical account of what transpired; instead, it purports to be a "potential history," a theoretical resurrection of the "Jewish Muslim" world that French colonialism and Zionist nationalism aggressively sought to extinguish and which Azoulay insists she continues to inhabit.

Azoulay's central thesis posits that the separation of Jews from their North African environment was neither natural nor inevitable. She contends that the transformation of the "Jewish Muslim"—a figure integral to the *Ummah* (the Islamic community)—into the "French citizen" or the "Israeli" constituted a violent "amputation." This powerful term suggests that the migration of Jews from the Maghreb involved a forcible dismemberment of the body politic of the region: "In 1962, … the Jews who 'formed an ummah with the believers [Muslims]'in Algeria, were severed from that ummah" (2). Azoulay explicitly refuses to accept this severance or to view it as a closed chapter of history. She claims to actively inhabit this world in the present, performing its continued existence through the very act of writing.

The ingenuity of *The Jewelers of the Ummah* resides in its bold rejection of standard academic exposition. Across sixteen open letters, Azoulay eschews the detached voice of the historian, choosing alternatively to address "elected kin" and deceased intellectuals directly. Such a deliberate choice collapses the imperial linear temporality that typically separates the researcher from the subject. The epistolary format summons the dead to create a provocative space where the past remains fluid and open to intervention. This methodology accounts for what Azoulay terms "unlearning the hermeneutic mode" (3) of engaging with canonical thinkers. She refuses to interpret their texts from a scholarly distance and brings them, instead, into conversation about the ongoing anticolonial struggle.

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The emotional anchor of the work lies in the opening letter to her father, Roger Lucien Azoulay, whose spectral presence dominates the early chapters and whose silence about Algeria shaped Azoulay's entire childhood. In a letter titled "Abba, Why Didn't You Call Me Algeria?" (33), Azoulay performs a posthumous diagnosis of her father's condition, which she terms "colonial aphasia" (39). His desperate assimilation into French culture and his subsequent migration to Israel manifest symptoms of profound displacement. Azoulay's father died an Israeli citizen, a French citizen, but without Algeria , a reality she considers a tragedy of colonial success. The letter draws on a booklet Azoulay prepared from an interview with her father before his death, stories he told "without emotion, as if … talking about someone else" (44), yet which contained fragments of a world he could not properly grieve.

It is here that Azoulay introduces the devastating impact of the Crémieux Decree of 1870. She considers the law, which imposed French citizenship on Algerian Jews, a "document of cultural genocide" (282). The formulation reframes what historians typically celebrate as emancipation into an act of violent erasure. The decree effectively seduced the indigenous Jewish population into accepting French citizenship as a granted gift, thereby omitting "the theft from Jews of their heritage, world, and traditions" (102), and forcing a wedge between them and their Muslim neighbors. Azoulay writes with piercing clarity about the linguistic silencing that accompanied this shift, noting particularly how the Arabic language, the mother tongue of her ancestors, was excised from their mouths to make room for the colonizer's French.

If her father's narrative represents the success of colonial erasure, Azoulay locates a powerful antidote in the "mass refusal of the colonial [citizenship] deal" (197) performed by the generation that preceded him. She contrasts her father's assimilation and shame regarding his Arab roots with the defiance of her great-grandmother, Marianne. Though Marianne was forced to bear a French name, she subverted the "colonial contract" (197) by naming her own daughter Aïcha, a choice Azoulay interprets as a declaration that "Islam is my culture, alongside my Jewish faith." (198) By reclaiming this name for herself— "*I call myself Aïsha*" (197)— Azoulay rejects the binary imposed by both French and Zionist projects. She effectively reverses her father's legacy; where he "*was ashamed of his family for still being shrouded in Arabness, for failing to be shed of all their* Jewishness (198)," she actively resurrects the Jewish-Muslim identity he was too paralyzed to pass down.

The discovery of a name that embodies the interfaith world she seeks to resurrect becomes emblematic of Azoulay's effort to reconstruct a genealogy of the anticolonial acts through which her ancestors resisted their forcible conversion. This genealogy is anchored in the material basis of the book's title. The "jewelers" in question were the Jewish artisans of the Maghreb, whose craft formed connective tissue within the broader Islamic society. Azoulay postulates that jewelry making was part and parcel of a "social and religious fabric of mutual care, [of] a world that artistry helped bind together" (9). It created objects that circulated between communities and bound them in networks of commerce, aesthetics, and mutual reliance. The artisans did not operate in a segregated Jewish vacuum; their diverse products, including amulets and talismans, were worn by Muslim women and were believed to possess a cosmological power that defied strict theological boundaries: "With their crafted amulets they brought rain" (8).

Azoulay provides concrete illustrations of this interdependence. She describes how the production of gold threads—essential to the elaborate embroidery that characterized Maghrebi textiles—required "one Jew and one Muslim" to sit on opposite sides of the same bench and work in "coordinated choreography" (p. 389). The image crystallizes her broader argument about the inseparability of Jewish and Muslim lives in the pre-colonial Maghreb. The craft itself physically necessitated collaboration, making the subsequent colonial project of separating

these communities a violent disruption of material production processes. The destruction of the artisan class was a clear prerequisite for the integration of North Africa into the global capitalist market. The influx of mass-produced European goods rendered the handcrafted jewelry obsolete and severed the economic ties that held the "Jewish Muslim" world together.

Azoulay's engagement with the intellectual giants of the twentieth century provides some of the book's most rigorous theoretical friction. She directs significant scrutiny toward Frantz Fanon, the psychiatrist and revolutionary whose writings on the Algerian War of Independence are foundational to postcolonial studies. In a letter addressed to him, Azoulay challenges Fanon for his "*democratic aphasia*" (151) vis-à-vis the Jewish population of Algeria. She interrogates his clinical work at the Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital, observing that Fanon frequently referred to Algerian Jews as "Europeans" in his medical notes. Such a categorization, Azoulay argues, reveals a significant blind spot in Fanon's revolutionary vision. "It is not clear to me how much you understood that this *Arab* that you were talking about was not necessarily Muslim but could be Jewish too" (119), she writes. The implications of her critique are substantial. If Fanon, the great theorist of decolonization, could not see the indigenous Jew beyond the categories of settler or European, then the anticolonial movement itself was complicit in the erasure of the "Jewish Muslim" identity. The National Liberation Front (FLN), in demanding that all Algerians choose between the French and the Algerian nation, left no space for those who were both Jewish and indigenous to the Maghreb.

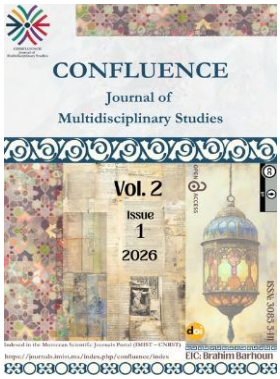
Beyond Fanon, Azoulay applies a similarly rigorous critique to Hannah Arendt. She challenges Arendt's dependence on European political traditions, arguing that Arendt's vision of "human solidarity" was fatally "narrowed by relying only on "the words of statesmen, political theorists, and political philosophers" (429) rather than the ancestors of the colonized. Azoulay accuses this Western tradition of fabricating a "Judeo-Christian" alignment to conscript Jews into a civilizational war against the Islamic world. In a striking passage, she contends that the Zionist project transformed Jews into "neo-Jews, or perhaps more accurately neo-Christians" (422), forcing them to abandon their specific history in the Maghreb to become part of a "racial capitalist Christian project" (422). For Azoulay, the "repair" offered by Europe—the nation-state—did not solve the Jewish question but rather mutated it, turning the survivors of genocide into "conscience-less colonizers" (419) who perpetuate the very imperial violence they once fled.

A pivotal component of Azoulay's theoretical apparatus is her redefinition of citizenship as conversion. The terminology suggests that becoming a citizen of the republic demanded a spiritual and ontological transformation that implied the erasure of one's previous self. She extends this analysis to the State of Israel, considering the Israeli passport and citizenship regime mechanisms of entrapment. The acceptance of Israeli citizenship completes "the double project of conversion" (422), sealing the individual within a nationalist identity that requires permanent hostility toward the Arab world. Azoulay details her own rejection of this identity, describing her attempts to claim Algerian citizenship, in political rather than legal terms, as a reclamation of the amputated self. She challenges the nation-state's monopoly on granting rights, arguing that true decolonization needs the abolition of the borders that separate the "Jew" from the "Muslim." Her children and grandchildren, she insists, have "the right to be with our ancestors" (162), a right that imperial citizenship systematically denies.

Despite the sheer force of Azoulay's argumentation, the text presents certain analytical challenges. The reliance on the concept of "refusal" drives the narrative yet occasionally flattens the historical agency of the subjects involved. Azoulay explains the transition of North African Jews into French or Israeli society almost exclusively through manipulation and colonial syndrome. She writes, "I propose to call them converts" (1), a label that implies a loss of authenticity and agency. This framework struggles to account for the diverse motivations of

North African Jews, many of whom actively embraced French culture or Zionism for the sake of social mobility, safety, or modernity. To treat these historical actors in the victim role primarily of a colonial swindle is to deny them the complexity of their own political choices, however fraught those choices may appear in retrospect. Furthermore, the reconstruction of the "Jewish Muslim" world relies heavily on a potential that risks idealizing the pre-colonial past. Azoulay acknowledges that Jews in the Maghreb occupied a specific position within Islamic social hierarchy, one structured around religious difference distinct from racial ideology. However, her narrative occasionally glosses over the structural inequalities that existed under the *dhimmi* system. A more granular historical analysis might complicate the binary between the harmonious "Jewish Muslim" world and the fractured colonial present.

In the final analysis, *The Jewelers of the Ummah* erupts in the fields of Middle Eastern studies and postcolonial theory as a vital intervention. Excavating the figure of the "Jewish Muslim," Azoulay offers a powerful counter-narrative to the "clash of civilizations" model. The book demands a high degree of engagement, asking us to suspend our faith in the imperial archive and to listen instead to the silence of the amputated limb. Azoulay's work unfolds in a restorative mode. It seeks to repair the broken threads of a world where Jews and Muslims once lived within a single, complex political body. The book's uncompromising stance may indeed alienate some historians. Nevertheless, the text succeeds in its primary mission: to open a crack in the wall of history through which we might glimpse a different future.



CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

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

Al sur de Tánger: Un viaje a las culturas de Marruecos,

by Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla. 6th ed., Madrid: La Línea del Horizonte, 2025. 176 pp., ISBN: 978-84-17594-93-0.

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.7897

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Received: 16-12-2025 Accepted: 15-01-2026 Published: 19-01-2026

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First published in 2022, Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla's *Al sur de Tánger* is a gem of a book. It is also a slippery object of study. At first blush, the book's aims and approach seem simple enough, but upon closer inspection, and with each re-reading, the book reveals complexities and ambiguities that add to its richness. The book opens with a first-person narrator describing his first trip to Morocco, on a ferry from Algeciras to Tangier. While crossing the Strait of Gibraltar, the ferry runs into stormy waters that almost lead to a shipwreck, but the ship weathers the storm and safely carries the narrator and his fellow passengers to Tangier. As the narrator looks back at that fateful first journey across the Strait of Gibraltar, he observes that it changed the path of his life, linking him irrevocably to Morocco.

Judging from the book's opening paragraphs, a reader might reasonably assume that the book's narrator and author are one, and that the book represents Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla's personal reflections as a scholar and writer who has spent more than four decades working in Morocco. And, undoubtedly, there are areas of overlap between the narrator and the author. Yet the relationship between narrator and author is not what it appears to be at first glance, and the narrator slowly reveals himself to be an unreliable source of information. A careful reader might suspect that some kind of trickery is afoot when, in the book's third chapter, the narrator makes up a Moroccan saint, "Sidi Bellarech"—whose name, translated into English, would mean something like "Saint Stork." And a little later, the narrator gives a new account of his first trip to Morocco, providing details that contradict the story that is told at the beginning of the book. Such inconsistencies appear sporadically throughout the book, lending an air of mystery to the narration but also generating a relationship of distrust between the reader and the narrator. Put simply, the reader does not know what to believe, and the narrator underscores, and delights in, this feeling of doubt. These tensions come to a head in the book's final chapter, where the narrator tells us, "Often, the borders between memory and imagination get blurry, and what is lived [lo vivido], what is read, what is dreamed, and cinema get mixed up" (161).1 Soon after making this remark, the narrator confesses that some of the stories that he has shared about his life are fiction, just as the imagined communities created by nation and religion are fictions—powerful fictions, but fictions nonetheless.

The book's reliance on an unreliable narrator is not an idle bit of literary gamesmanship; instead, it is intimately linked to the book's main themes. Indeed, the ambiguous relationship between the narrator and the author points to other ambiguities that run throughout the book:

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the blurry lines between reality and representation, between past and present, and between self and other. In all cases, Fernández Parrilla's book suggests that the categories that we use to anchor our lives and to make sense of the world often turn out to be fragile, contingent, and unstable.

Let's take, for example, the tension between reality and representation. The narrator introduces this theme early in the book when he alludes to one of the most famous cinematic representations of Morocco, the classic American film *Casablanca* (1942). The film *Casablanca* made the city of Casablanca famous, and yet, as the narrator is quick to point out, the inspiration for *Casablanca* was actually Tangier. Building on this illusion, the narrator observes, "We often go to Morocco in search of something that we have seen in movies but that perhaps doesn't exist, that maybe has never existed, and that prevents us from seeing the real Morocco. Understanding this game of mirrors, of reality and fiction, is key for being able to see another Morocco" (27).[2] From this quote, we might deduce that the aim of Fernández Parrilla's book is to help readers move beyond the misleading representations that have shaped how many Spaniards—and, more broadly, people from Europe and the United States—have viewed Morocco in order to give them access to a different Morocco, a "real" Morocco, which is obscured by films like *Casablanca* and other forms of media. Here, Fernández Parrilla is following in the footsteps of Edward Said, who famously argued that Orientalism is a mode of representation that structures and delimits what Europeans have known, said, and seen in Morocco and other parts of "the Orient." Yet Fernández Parrilla's book eventually lands on a more original, and provocative, claim: namely, that the clear-cut distinction between representation and reality might not hold, and that it is difficult to disentangle the "real" Morocco from the "represented" Morocco. Indeed, the narrator seems to nod in this direction in the book's final pages, where he notes that the line between fact and fiction, life and imagination, often gets blurry.

Fernández Parrilla's response to this quandary is to widen the field of representation, welcoming in Moroccan voices that have not received the attention that they deserve from audiences in Spain (and elsewhere). In fact, *Al sur de Tánger* is, among other things, a love letter to modern Moroccan culture and an annotated guide to the Moroccan books, movies, songs, artworks, and cultural figures that have left a mark on the narrator, shaping his view of Morocco.[3] For this reason, the book is often punctuated by moments of slippage between physical spaces and literary texts. In one passage, the narrator's description of the *medina* (old city) of Fez moves seamlessly into a discussion of Abdellatif Laabi's *Fez es un espejo*, the Spanish translation of Laabi's autobiographical account of a childhood in Fez in the 1950s. In another passage, the narrator's discussion of cannabis cultivation and consumption in Morocco flows directly into a discussion of Muhammad Zafzaf's *La mujer y la rosa* (*Al-Mar'a wa-l-warda* in the original Arabic), a novel that depicts drug culture in Morocco and Spain in the 1970s. In the two passages mentioned here, the narrator's attention moves from Morocco proper to its representation in Moroccan literature. But sometimes the movement goes in the other direction, from representation to lived experience. One such example is in the chapter titled "*Las gaviotas de Tánger*" (The seagulls of Tangier), where an allusion to Zoubeir Ben Bouchta's play *Pies blancos* (*Aqdam bayda'* in the original Arabic) leads to a story about an encounter between the narrator and Ben Bouchta in the playwright's home in Tangier. In all of these examples, there is a two-way street between reality and representation. And what emerges from these examples is a sort of symbiotic relationship, in which literature nourishes lived experience, and vice-versa.

Just as Fernández Parrilla's book blurs the line between reality and representation, so too does it blur the line between past and present. In fact, the book is chock-full of palimpsests, where the traces of the past subtend, and seep into, the present. Such moments capture the

narrator's attention, as he works to illuminate layered histories in which different time periods and actors are superimposed on each other. Along these lines, the narrator notes that one of the cemeteries that serves Madrid's Muslim community today, the cemetery in Griñón, traces its roots back to the cemeteries that were created for the burial of Moroccan soldiers who fought in the Spanish Civil War (95). And, in a similar vein, the narrator observes that Tangier's bullfighting ring (*plaza de toros*), designed by Francisco Rodrigálvarez in the 1950s, would eventually serve, in the late twentieth century, as a make-shift detention center whose inmates included many undocumented migrants trying to make their way to Spain (23). The present, as these examples eloquently show, rests on the unresolved remains of the past.

Some of the palimpsests in Fernández Parrilla's book point to histories of violence, like the cemetery that bears the memories and remains of the Spanish Civil War. But others are more playful. For instance, in a ludic chapter titled "*Los churros que vienen de África*" (The churros that come from Africa), the narrator traces the roundtrip journey of the Spanish *churro*. As the narrator explains, Spanish settlers brought the *churro* with them to Tetouan, Tangier, and other cities in northern Morocco in the twentieth century. Today, Tangier and Tetouan still boast a vibrant *churro* culture, and the fried treat is making the return journey to Madrid and other Spanish cities, where many *churrerías* are now owned by Moroccans who immigrated to Spain in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Language is one of the arenas where the narrator explores the overlaps between past and present. In fact, among the many kinds of memory that are at work in this book is one that could be called "etymological memory." Fernández Parrilla (or, at least, his narrator) suggests that words themselves are carriers of memory and sites where people, on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar, experience the conflation of past and present. To illuminate this point, the book has some delightful philological excursuses on words like *moro*, *sidi*, *ghurba*, *beldi*, among others. In these passages, the narrator shows how words from Spanish, standard Arabic, or Moroccan Arabic have traveled across the Strait of Gibraltar, creating new meanings along the way. "Sometimes words travel badly," the narrator observes (91).[4] But even when words travel badly, they produce interesting results, as Fernández Parrilla shows. His chapters about words and etymology are pure candy for language nerds (like this reviewer). And they are also evidence that travelers—be they Arabists or Arabic words—are not in total control of their itineraries.

What makes Fernández Parrilla's book most compelling is also what makes it difficult to describe. The book straddles various genres—memoir, travel narrative, cultural criticism, autofiction. It is also a wonderful introduction to modern Moroccan culture, surveying some of the major figures, events, and cultural movements that have shaped Moroccan history over the last century and offering lucid commentaries on famous works of modern Moroccan literature, including Muhammad Shukri's *Al-Khubz al-hafi* (perhaps the most frequently cited work in the book). But the author is equally at ease with personal anecdotes as he is with literary analysis, and his book exudes warmth and humor. It is a deeply personal book written by a deeply knowledgeable student of Moroccan culture. And the fact that the book is already in its seventh edition shows that it has struck a chord with many readers, in Spain and beyond. The forthcoming Arabic translation of *Al sur de Tánger* will extend the book's reach in Morocco and will represent another leg in the two-way relay that has inspired and sustained the book and its author.

Notes

1. "A menudo, las fronteras entre el recuerdo y la imaginación se desdibujan, y lo vivido, lo leído, lo soñado y el cine se confunden" (161). All English translations are mine.
2. "Solemos ir a Marruecos en busca de algo que hemos visto en las películas, pero que tal vez no existe, que puede que nunca haya existido, y que nos impide ver el Marruecos real. Entender ese juego de espejos, de realidad y ficción es clave para poder ver otro Marruecos" (27).
3. For a full list of the works cited in Fernández Parrilla's book, see biblioaecidmadrid, "Las referencias bibliográficas de *Al sur de Tánger* de Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla, localizadas en la Biblioteca Islámica," *La reina de los mares*, 30 September 2024, https://reinamares.hypotheses.org/80954.
4. "A veces las palabras viajan mal" (91).