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Memory, City, and the Poetics of the Historical Novel: An Interview with Mohamed El Ftouh on *Diwan Al-Ahali*

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ABSTRACT

This interview offers a sustained critical engagement with Mohamed El Ftouh's debut novel *Diwan Al-Ahali* (2023), a 508-page historical narrative centered on the city of Tetouan and the collective memory of its people across several generations. Across a wide-ranging series of exchanges, El Ftouh articulates a poetics of historical fiction grounded in what he terms the "aesthetic wager" of the novel, namely its capacity to interpret and fill the silences of the historical archive without falsifying it. The conversation traverses key critical questions: the relationship between fiction and historiography, the city as novelistic character, the function of detail in narrative realism, the Andalusian-Morisco heritage as a structural rather than ornamental presence, the politics of memory in a post-colonial Moroccan context, and the ethics of representing the marginalized and the forgotten. The novelist reflects on the craft decisions that shaped his work, while resisting the reduction of the novel to either historical testimony or ideological statement. The interview contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about the Moroccan novel, the literary cartography of the Moroccan north, and the narrative construction of urban and collective memory in contemporary Arabic fiction.

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Novel

Historical Fiction

Narrative Memory

Tetouan

Diwan Al-Ahali

Arabic Literature

The following interview was originally conducted in Arabic. It has been translated into English by the interviewers.

Introduction

Mohamed El Ftouh is a Moroccan novelist whose debut novel *Diwan Al-Ahali* (2023) constitutes a significant contribution to contemporary Moroccan Arabic fiction. Published by a Moroccan press, the novel spans 508 pages and follows the intergenerational history of a family from Tetouan, a city whose Andalusian-Morisco heritage, colonial history, and cultural depth have remained largely marginal in both Moroccan and wider Arabic literary criticism.

What distinguishes *Diwan Al-Ahali* within the current landscape of the Moroccan novel is not only its ambition of scale, a multigenerational saga structured around the voices of multiple narrators, but its deliberate negotiation of the tension between fictional imagination and historical responsibility. El Ftouh refuses the role of the prescriptive historian while equally refusing the alibi of pure aestheticism. His novel occupies what the critic Abdullah Ibrahim has called the space of historical fiction: a textual practice that employs the archive as a resource rather than a constraint, and that mobilizes narrative to give voice to histories of displacement,

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famine, colonial encounter, and cultural resistance that official historiography has systematically marginalized.



The city of Tetouan functions in the novel not as backdrop but as protagonist: a palimpsest of Andalusian memory, Moroccan modernity, and colonial rupture. This is consistent with a broader tendency in postcolonial Moroccan fiction to recenter peripheral urban spaces, the Rif, the north, the medina, against the centrist cultural geographies that have historically dominated both Francophone and Arabophone literary production in Morocco. *Diwan Al-Ahali* can thus be read as a contribution to the literary cartography of Moroccan regionalism, a movement that asserts the specificity of local cultural memory against both colonial and post-independence homogenizing narratives.

The following interview, conducted for Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, moves from El Ftouh's beginnings as a writer through questions of scale and form, the relation of fiction to history, the place of Tetouan and the family within the text, and on to character, time, detail, and language, the colonial experience, the sources behind the book, and, finally, its reception and the horizons of the work to come.

The Interview

Brahim Barhoun: Let me start away from the book. Age, profession, credentials: none of that reaches the person. Who is Mohamed El Ftouh underneath what a résumé would report?
Mohamed El Ftouh: First, let me thank you, and thank the journal and the research laboratory, for opening this conversation around the novel. Now, to your question, which is the hardest kind precisely because a résumé cannot answer it. What data records stays on the surface. It says nothing of the core. And introspection, the attempt to reach one's inner self, is difficult for any writer asked to introduce himself from the inside. So I will put it simply: I am a child of storytelling who refuses to grow up. Childhood is the spiritual, mystical time of every writer, and I have never left it.

BB: Where did the writing itself begin? What form came first?
ME: Again in childhood, in early adolescence. The first form was the letter, letters to my father, who had emigrated, and to neighbors and friends. Youth brought a wave of poetic and romantic feeling. Then came short, open, hybrid pieces still hunting for a voice. Out of those grew the first real attempts to write a story, and to write the self, memory, the world.

BB: And what turned those attempts into an actual novel? You mentioned you were nearly fifty.
ME: I was. And I put a question to myself before I began: am I ready to write a novel? What would I add? If I write it, what makes it a proposition and not just another book? Behind that question stood years of wide reading, steady writing, and slow reflection on Arab and world literature. I will admit, too, that writing on social media and literary sites helped me find my path and my narrative voice.

BB: Was there a decisive influence, a particular writer or book that shaped that voice?
ME: No single name, no pivotal book. It happened by accumulation. Every stage of life had its own authors and its own enchantments, and with the years, with maturity, one simply grows more practiced in books, in technique, in language and its beauty.

BB: Let's turn to *Diwan Al-Ahali* itself. Did you choose this subject, or did it choose you? And behind that, what does the novel mean to you as a way of standing toward the world?
ME: The novel is a stance toward the world, with an ethical horizon and an aesthetic wager. It is the imagined arena where the writer's struggle against fate and against the flaws of existence plays out. So it is a cognitive, cultural, and aesthetic stance at once, reaching to hold human experience. To call it a stance means, of course, a conscious choice about how to engage that experience through narrative.

BB: Give us the book in brief. What does it recount at its core, and where did the title come from?
ME: It tries to represent, through fiction and interpretation, the tragedies of Tetouan's people across particular historical moments: their exile and instability, the sense of impermanence, the weight of time, their fragmentation. And their refusal of ruin, their steadfastness against horrors, whether famine, natural disaster, epidemic, or war. In short, it gestures toward the pioneering role of the city and its people in collective life, civic, cultural, civilizational. As for the title: diwan means, among other things, a council or assembly; al-ahali means the people of the city. The title carries both.

BB: That word *diwan* does a lot of work. There's the real place in Tetouan, and there's the poetic charge the word holds in Arabic. Was the doubling deliberate?
ME: Fully deliberate. Beyond council and assembly, *diwan* also names a salon, a body of scribes, and, as everyone knows, a collection of poems. So the title yields the sense of a cultural salon, with all its civilizational resonance. Tetouan, with its deep Andalusian-Morisco-Mediterranean heritage, has long been known for pioneering cultural, literary, and artistic work.

BB: How would you want it read, then: as a book about memory, a book about history, or an open narrative experience?
ME: Before anything, as a work of fiction with an aesthetic and interpretive dimension. When it touches history or memory, it does so to throw light on the human condition, on human fates and their crises. Moving between past and present, the novel keeps its eye on what existence and time do to a person. It leans toward sensation and the warmth of longing rather than cold historical knowledge, trying to make an alternative human reality, one a little more beautiful and less brutal than the one we are given.

BB: Some readers might call it a foundational novel in the strong sense, a text that hands a community an identity-forming story. Would you accept that description?
ME: I can't claim it. This is my first narrative proposition, with all its gaps and limits, and I won't call it foundational to any project, not now. It is a modest suggestion among the visions of other Tetouani writers. And yet I do think it stands as a narrative identity in its own right, a narrative truth reaching for a second articulation of historical existence through an intense engagement with language, guided by an interpretive vision drawn from knowledge, culture, and values.

BB: For a first novel, 508 pages is a long breath. Did the material force that length on you, or was it a decision made in advance?
ME: Not planned at all. The work imposed its own length as it branched and extended during the writing. Behind any novel, layers of knowledge and sensibility surface and press themselves on the writer. This one began with a single chapter, "Al-Ghali," a grandson who sets out to write his family's history after recording a conversation with his grandfather. When I saw the story widening to take in ancestors across different times, places, and characters, well past what one grandson's wish could hold, I stopped for a long while and went back to reading novels and history, until the final form arrived.

BB: That long breath is often tied to the epic novel, the kind that tries to hold a whole society. Do you place yourself in that lineage consciously?
ME: I do. Most of what I read pulls that way, and even in film I prefer the grand narrative, long stories of long stretches of time, tangled events, human fates. It has always drawn me. Perhaps it is in the great sagas that we come nearest to grasping humanity's endless struggle against everything that threatens its existence, material and symbolic.

BB: Did you ever think of breaking the material into volumes rather than one continuous book?
ME: A novelist friend suggested exactly that when he read the manuscript. The thought never occurred to me on my own, though I knew the difficulty. It was an adventure, like putting out into a great sea. A wager. I chose one complete, continuous novel, so as not to lose that single emotional surge I felt all through the preparation and the writing.

BB: And the practical craft problem underneath scale: how did you keep historical detail from swallowing narrative pace? How do you stop the detail becoming a weight?
ME: That is a challenge for any novelist, to hold narrative material and artistic form in balance without one crushing the other. Writing a novel is laborious enough; keeping that harmony between historical sensibility and the sensitivity of the artistic focus is more exhausting still. With detail specifically, the guard against excess is sustained reflection. If a detail will burden the narrative, there is no harm in withholding it. The work is to watch them so they never turn dissonant or excessive. Their presence has to serve the content, or it has no business being there.

BB: This is maybe the central tension in the book. Where do you draw the line between fiction and historical fact? Is the novel a way of writing history, or a path running alongside it?
ME: First and last it is an artistic, fictional, interpretive work. Even as a form of social representation, it uses history to serve its aesthetic wager above all. Through its own vision the novel has to win its battle with the historical dimension, pull it onto its own ground, and refuse to stop at merely repeating what happened. History books are full of what occurred; the novel has to tell us, through fiction, how it happened, and what else might have. That is where the novelist makes up for the historian's shortfall. It makes the novel a path parallel to history, not a species of it. The novel has its mechanisms; history has its tools and methods. This is close to what Abdullah Ibrahim means by historical fiction: the novel interprets history without falsifying it, fills the silences the historian left, and, through its aesthetic dimension, reaches past history to gather in the forgotten and the marginalized. It is a way of democratizing a history that has fixed its attention on great events rather than on humanity's ordinary, permanent struggle and estrangement.

BB: You mention filling silences. How do you handle the archive's gaps, the periods where the documentation simply isn't there? Is fiction restoring something, or inventing it?
ME: It fills the void. Life, they say, will not tolerate emptiness. Think of early man before the vast blank of his surroundings, that terrifying void that drove the cave dweller, at the edge of nothingness, to take an ember or a stone and draw the beasts around him on the wall. That is where the necessity of fiction comes from. If creative imagination does not fill the void, meaninglessness will. The novelist completes the blank the historian leaves, mainly through fiction, and that fiction is never separable from his own knowledge, culture, and interpretive strategy.

BB: There is a risk on the other side, though: that a reader takes the book as literal testimony. And I want to fold in a related question, because the two sit together. Does a post-colonial consciousness, the reclaiming of the narrative from colonial discourse, run through your writing of Tetouan's history?
ME: As a novelist, I don't dwell on what a reader might extract, because the text resists any single ready-made reading. It is not a literal transcription of history. Where it meets historical events, that comes from respect for the time of their occurrence, nothing more. Following Ibrahim's line of thought, I was not writing the history of Tetouan but a narrative moment drawn from it, from a literary and aesthetic standpoint. My task was not the prescriptive historian's, nor the researcher's countering colonial discourse. It was simply the novelist's, faithful to his craft.

BB: A reader may reach for *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a family traced across time. How do you see that comparison?
ME: A surprising question. The reader is free to compare, but for my part I would be ashamed to set my book beside so towering a work. I read García Márquez more than twenty years ago and have forgotten much of it. Still, one distinction matters: Macondo is an imagined place on a riverbank; Tetouan is a living, material city. What might link the two in atmosphere, strange diseases, misery, isolation, floods, the unavoidable meeting with death, perhaps belongs to what Unamuno called the tragic sense of life. In that sense the frame of my novel is the tragic destiny of the human being, the power of fate over human lives.

BB: There's a structural device worth naming here. The book doesn't restore memory in its official form; it re-articulates it through a tape recorder and through several voices, Sheikh Mahfouz with his oral, fragmented telling, Al-Ghali directing the narration, Tawfiq listening and reassembling. Transferring the authority of narration from official history to the people: was that an epistemic and political choice as much as an aesthetic one?
ME: It was. The novel presents itself as an epistemic and, yes, political stance that works to reorganize the world and give it meaning within an ethical horizon. To your point exactly: the book wins out over official history through Tawfiq's decision to write the novel from the audio archive between the grandson Al-Ghali and the grandfather Mahfouz, rather than finish his academic thesis. The victory runs through a governing idea that re-articulates existence, gathers the scattered, orders it, gives it coherent form. Its authority brings the vanished voices back to life and breathes into the bare skeleton of history.

BB: And how do you verify historical accuracy without letting the novel harden into a reference work?
ME: History sits in the novel only as background serving the narrative, while I still respect the accuracy of the facts, which is not hard to check against history books and their sources. No one needs to doubt the date the Spanish armies entered during the War of Tetouan, the fourth of February, 1860. But the novel passes over such facts lightly. It does not halt at them as though they were the main station. It moves past them into the human concern, carrying us from the flatness of objective data to the warmth of human feeling.

BB: The city is clearly more than a setting. Start with what it is to you personally, existentially, and how that feeling became a reason to write.
ME: One of the things that pushed me to write was a kind of debt, to give back some of what Tetouan has given me, its human, existential, cultural, aesthetic gifts. The city is those memories that never leave me be. It is a wound left open. It is the material, symbolic, aesthetic space where I question and search for myself through language, through writing. An intense and complicated existential condition.

BB: So how does it cross over, in the novel, from setting into an active force in the telling?
ME: Beyond its living architecture, the squares and arches and alleyways and fountains, the city is a symbolic cultural field in which the self recognizes and questions itself. The novel says at one point that cities resemble their people and people resemble their cities. There is a spirit behind everything material in a city, one we feel without being able to fix. The city grants no peace to whoever loves it, least of all to the writer, who drags it out of its static state into a dynamic, meaningful one by giving it cultural, human, intellectual depth. To make it active is to move it from silent nature to speaking nature.

BB: Would you go so far as to say Tetouan is a character, with a voice and a dramatic arc of its own?
ME: Yes, that is what I was after. I tried to hand the city the role of protagonist, to make it a character and an open memory. Mohamed Berrada once wrote of it that Tetouan is a city that does not die, that it rediscovers itself with each new generation. That is the sense I wanted, the city as a living, vital element in the narrative, in its aesthetic and its dramatic dimensions both, so as to catch that secret in it that does not surrender itself easily.

BB: You track the city through its architectural and urban change. How does that physical transformation become a narrative language for social and political change?
ME: The city's urban shifts demand shifts in the form and scale of the narrative. Moving through nineteenth-century Tetouan, the novel took a framework resembling the period in its social and political life, the old walled medina with its gates and its close, cohesive interior spaces. With the Protectorate, the building of the colonial city, and the rise of mixed neighborhoods outside the walls, that change had to register in the social order and its values too.

BB: And why the family as your way into all of this? Why read the city through one lineage?
ME: First, to reflect the tight, solid identity between family and city. Then to follow the family's fates in migration, in its passage from stability out toward the unknown, where nothing holds and chance rules. And finally to show how the city becomes an active being that shapes the successive characters across generations and answers them back.

BB: Are you drawing on personal memory there, or on a wider collective representation? And were you conscious of the old idea that the family, in literature, works as a mirror of the larger social order?
ME: Umberto Eco wrote that memory is the soul, and since we are speaking of the city, memory here is that collective "we" that fuses the shared identity, where the personal blends into the general. It is a dialectical representation reaching to make a new memory, one aware of time and resistant to erasure. As for the family's analytical function, I do not treat the novel as a mere prescriptive tale that carries reality across as it is. It holds knowledge and value structures and works to persuade through its discourse. It mirrors our psychological, intellectual, social preoccupations, and at the same time it must be seen as a narrative truth in itself, not just a reflection of the writer's biography.

BB: The extended-family novel has a long lineage, Mann, García Márquez, Mahfouz. Do you write with that tradition, or against it?
ME: As I said, the pull of grand narratives comes from no single author but from the openness of narrative experience in all its variety. What the extended-family novel offers in particular is the chance to trace human tragedies and weigh fates in their link to what came before and what carried them onward.

BB: And the tensions inside a family, across generations, between the sexes, between what's inherited and what's new, how do you hold those without the book collapsing into an ideological statement?
ME: That rests on the artistic vision, on the narrative wager's ability to give aesthetic form to all that conflict, so the crystallization, in meaning and in structure, becomes an absorbing, persuasive discourse rather than sliding into prescriptive didacticism.

BB: Where do your characters come from, reality or invention?
ME: From the space between the two. They came from the spectres of reality and are, at the same time, imagined, shaped through language. They moved from the level of reality to the level of creativity, of imagination and interpretation, though their origins run back to the tangle of human reality. They are neither transplanted whole from life nor conjured out of nothing. They are generated beings that live in the middle zone, in the expanse of literature, hybrid things, shadows and human echoes remade through imagination. Characters that create the illusion of the real without being it.

BB: Is there something specific to the Tetouani character as it comes through in the work?
ME: What marks it is the blend of Andalusian-Morisco origin with a deep Moroccan spirit. Pride in a distinctive identity alongside national belonging. Cultural, artistic, literary, scientific depth. A history of pioneering across many fields, founding schools and institutes and cultural clubs. Civility, moderation, openness, a love of beauty and of the arts. The historian Mohamed Daoud caught this character precisely when he wrote that the city knew how to live with dignity and good repute, that little was enough for it, that its work was precise and ordered, and that its people were therefore safe, at peace, content.

BB: Do you grant your characters autonomy inside the narrative, or do they stay under your control throughout?
ME: The writer, great deceiver that he is, is still subject to the authority of writing. Creation has its own secret magic. There are things that surface for a writer only in the act itself, a state

of devotion in which ideas and images clarify and reveal themselves. Generally the writer makes his characters and sets their contexts and outcomes. But it can happen, through the sheer force and openness of writing, that events and characters pull him into territory other than what he assigned them, imposing themselves, charting a changed path, still under his watch.

BB: Are there characters who hold views far from your own? How did you give them internal credibility without identifying with them?
ME: Their credibility rests on what I call sincere creativity, the innocence of creativity as against its naivety, and the two differ greatly. Innocence goes with the force and commitment of what one writes. I write in sincerity, not pretence. As for characters whose views don't align with mine, that is nothing but faithfulness to literature and to life in all its multiplicity. We do not write about ourselves. We turn our experience into narrative material that represents human society in all its branches and variations.

BB: How did you handle the movement between periods without the narrative coming apart? Did you build a linear or a non-linear structure, and what's the artistic reason?
ME: Through the plot and a careful fit of form to content. I did not lean on straight chronology; I tried for a different, interwoven temporal structure, moving from Al-Tahami's moment in the early nineteenth century to the narrator Tawfiq's in the early 1980s. A living, dynamic form that holds attention. This layering of time answered a layering of narrators, which forced me to invent artistic patterns keeping step with the complicated pace of a life that is never simple or single. I was conscious of that challenge, and afraid of it.

BB: What sort of events do you use to mark those transformations, the grand ones or the everyday?
ME: Both, each serving the shifts in its own way. The novel swung between the macro and the micro, the universal and the particular, in events and in ideas alike. Between great events, tragedy, drought, epidemic, war, mass displacement, the sheer weight of existence, and the toll life takes on the soul in its finest fractures: alienation, fragmentation, vulnerability.

BB: Ricoeur separates lived time, narrative time, and cosmic time. Which of those governs your novel, and how do they braid together?
ME: In much of what I write I am preoccupied with time and its weight on a person. What frames the work is something I would call existential time, the time that bears down on a human being powerless before it, time like the sword of Damocles, marking the fragility of life and threatening every security. Against that predicament, the value of narrative, as Ricoeur suggests, lies in giving meaning to existence by ordering the chaos of being inside a text.

BB: And the great hinge-moments, colonialism, independence, economic upheaval: how do you deploy them without the novel turning into a cold panorama?
ME: The wager is that in deploying those changes the novel summons a time other than the time of historical events, the narrative time, the time of discourse. When the wager is artistic rather than cold documentary, when history is only a means and never the end, the novel itself becomes the goal of the telling.

BB: The density of detail is one of the first things a reader notices. Is that an aesthetic choice, or a wish to hold memory against disappearance?
ME: Detail breaks the world into small pieces, describing characters, spaces, objects, states, and that is what makes a narrative convincing and tangible. It calls on all the senses. Behind

detail lies alert attention, the capacity to observe and reflect and work with awareness. In that light, detail becomes an aesthetic means of guarding memory against everything that threatens it with erasure, everything that strips a person of his humanity.

BB: Barthes ties the reality effect to certain details, the ones that give a text the illusion of actual presence. Do you read your own detail that way?
ME: Here I'd separate two things. The presence of reality through its material objects is one thing; the presence of characters as human subjects with complex inner lives is another. In both cases the novel has to create the illusion of the real, has to dissolve the distance between writer and reader, immerse the reader, make the awareness that this is only an imagined story fall away. Barthes is right that the detail works as a marker of the real, but the novelist's engagement with it is not merely rhetorical. It is also an ethical act, a resistance to the erasure of the particular.

BB: Does the function of detail change between an ordinary day and a pivotal historical scene?
ME: The difference is in content and intention. For an ordinary day the aim is to render a small unit of time by breaking the narrative down from within, into its close, pulsing pieces. For a historical scene the description opens wider, drawing if it must on cinematic technique, on visual capture and spectacle, but without slipping into prescriptiveness.

BB: How do you find the right register for a book that reaches into the past without collapsing into easy nostalgia?
ME: Writing in a register that evokes the past has to be governed by a clear vision. Evoking the past need not come coupled with longing for it or a wish to return. The question is always the purpose of the evocation. Gratuitous nostalgia, empty sentiment, has no place in serious narrative. Summoning the past in a nostalgic register has to be framed by a literary and philosophical background rooted in existence, not in raw lament. The evocation should work as a reflection on life as time wears it down, on the impermanence and uncertainty that mark the human condition.

BB: Who are you writing for, primarily, the reader who knows Tetouan or the one meeting it for the first time? And is there a gap in reception between the local reader and the wider Arab one?
ME: For the reader in general, the one who knows the city and the one who does not. We would not have known Cairo had Mahfouz not carried us into its worlds, nor Lisbon without Pessoa, nor St. Petersburg without Dostoevsky, nor Prague without Kafka, nor Barcelona without Zafón. The novel holds a shared human element that makes us love cities and grow attached to them. The universality of a text lies, in the end, in its locality and its particularity.

BB: How do you handle the pull between classical Arabic and the colloquial, the space in between, in dialogue and in narration?
ME: I write in what Abd Al-Rahman Munif called a median language. I write with the spirit of the character, the worker, the farmer, the young man, the woman in love, the mystic, but not necessarily in their daily speech. I embody the spirit of the character's language rather than the mark of their schooling or class. I may keep some local colloquial words when I find no equivalent in classical Arabic, words carrying a cultural charge that resists translation. The novel conveys the spirit of its characters; it does not simply talk in their dialect.

BB: Does the Andalusian heritage, as language, voice, memory, run through the fabric of the book? And how do you keep it from turning into archaeological ornament?
ME: The Andalusian-Morisco heritage is a fundamental part of Tetouan and of its people's character, so its presence in the novel is natural, logical, real. It is not called in arbitrarily to furnish the book; it is fused into it. The architecture of the whole old medina reflects it. And what the detail offers, the houses, bathhouses, streets, customs, crafts, cooking, dress, song, sweets, the social gatherings, all of it is a living means to anchor that heritage aesthetically, as an act of self-confidence, a way of holding a civilizational and psychological balance against dissolution and standardization.

BB: Tetouan lay under Spanish Protectorate. How does that colonial experience surface in the novel, and how does it press on the characters' sense of themselves?
ME: The colonial experience is a moment of psychological and civilizational clash, and not only under the Protectorate. There was also the War of Tetouan in 1860, after which Spanish troops stayed in the city two years. That is the event the novel takes up in its social dimension, thousands of the city's people leaving their homes toward the unknown in a dramatic scene. It resembles Napoleon's campaign in Egypt, a local community suddenly facing the modern, organized machinery of a foreign military power.

BB: Do you think Moroccan literature written in Arabic carries a particular charge, reframing the colonial narrative in the language of the self?
ME: Against Western ideologies of a colonial, unjust, arrogant cast, ones that tried to press their own image onto reality and history, the Moroccan writer's task is to preserve the self's narrative in the self's own language and spirit, exposing the aims and the flaws of those ideologies. And not only that. Against global cultural upheaval, the policies of capitalist globalization, the digital revolution, the local writer carries a mission of literary, epistemic, and artistic resistance, to keep the cultural self from every attempt at distortion and erasure.

BB: And the European characters themselves, do you treat them as an embodied "other," or as a passing presence in the social space?
ME: They enter the novel in several ways. Most prominently through a group of Italian archaeology students and their professors who came to Morocco in the early 1990s, and their friendships with Tawfiq and his circle in Martil and Tetouan. Less prominently through some Spanish settlers in the 1920s. And very briefly through the European community in Tangier and an early meeting with an English doctor around 1840. Probably the most significant European presence, narratively, is Tawfiq's relationship, as a university student, with the Italian woman Umberta, rendered through dialogue and a few erotic scenes.

BB: What did you build the historical background from, documents, oral testimony, family archives, some mix of them?
ME: Throughout the preparation and the writing I kept going back to check historical information and its background. I read what I could reach, in print or online, from history and social-history books. I recall works by Mohamed Daoud, Hasna Daoud, Abd Al-Aziz Al-Saoud, Azzou Hakim, Al-Nasiri, Pedro de Alarcón, and Charles Jarety, among many others. I also listened to elderly people who had lived through the Protectorate, and studied photographs and documents from the period.

BB: Was that archival work woven through the writing, or did it stand apart as a preparatory phase before you began?
ME: It ran alongside every stage, from preparation and research to revision, and through the moment of writing itself, whenever the need came up.

BB: Tetouan stays less present in modern Arabic literature than Fez or Marrakech. Do you read your novel as filling that absence? And can a novel's documentation actually shift a city's collective consciousness?
ME: I remember walking the city's streets with a friend, through the Sidi Talha neighborhood, and coming on two young men outside a small bookshop talking about Mohamed Anqar's novel *Barrio Malaga* with real excitement, recognizing their own neighborhood and history in it. Something similar happened with Al-Bashir Al-Damon's *The Bed of Secrets*, which the city talked about for a long time and which was later made into a film. As for *Diwan Al-Ahali*, I was told that people in the Sania Al-Raml neighborhood, where I come from, bought it and passed it around among themselves. I think people look in novels for something that resembles them, that speaks of their past, their city, a love they cannot quite name. That is where the novelist comes in, embodying their intuitions, standing with their longings.

BB: How was the book received, inside Tetouan and beyond it?
ME: Beyond Tetouan I have only scraps, apart from hearing that the novel reached places I had not expected, Bahrain, Canada, Sweden. Within the city it was celebrated at a symposium organized by *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* and the LLCIS Research Laboratory at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, held at the Iklil Cultural Centre, with an audience of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral students alongside intellectuals and cultural figures. A second gathering followed in Al-Mdiq, run by the Cultural Action Association at the Cultural House. A third came from the Union of Northern Writers, part of the first Moroccan-Spanish Book Day, which brought me together with the novelist Fadila Al-Wazzani, moderated by Dr. Mazzwar Al-Idrissi.

BB: Has any critical reading changed how you see the work, or contested the way you rendered a particular character or period?
ME: Up to the time of this conversation the novel has not had a published critical study that would move me to reconsider it, and I have met no objection to the way any character or period is represented.

BB: What can the novel not say, for all its breadth? Where do its limits fall against historical study, anthropology, autobiography?
ME: If we take reality and history as one great, infinite text, then the novel, however wide, cannot contain the world or say everything about it. Historical study and anthropology belong to the human sciences, with their objective method. Autobiography centers on the self, bounded by the writer's own life. The novel is a broader fictional and aesthetic practice, freer to hold and to exceed all of them, a vessel that takes in everyone to voice its own vision of the world, and yet it stays smaller than the greatest text of all, which is life itself.

BB: Where are you going creatively after this?
ME: I am finishing a second novel, one that moves to a different historical period, different atmospheres, different contexts.

BB: Last question. When a reader closes the book and sets it aside, what do you want left in their hands, a feeling, a question, an image?
ME: Something of meaning, against the meaninglessness that is everywhere.