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Towards a Counter-History of the Maghreb: Rewriting the Precolonial Past in the Works of Driss Chraïbi, Tahar Djaout, and Assia Djebar

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Allison Grace Becha entitled "Towards a Counter-History of the Maghreb: Rewriting the Precolonial Past in the Works of Driss Chraïbi, Tahar Djaout, and Assia Djebar." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in French.

Anne-Hélène Miller, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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**Towards a Counter-History of the Maghreb:
Rewriting the Precolonial Past in the Works of Driss Chraïbi, Tahar
Djaout, and Assia Djebar**

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Allison Grace Becha
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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers how certain Maghrebi authors have rewritten the distant precolonial past and medieval history in their works as a way to challenge the repressive national narratives that proliferated in 1980s and 1990s Morocco and Algeria. These repressive narratives emerged in Morocco with the authoritarian reign of Hassan II from 1961 until his death in 1999, and in Algeria as a result of one-party state in Algeria, the politics of Arabization, and a period of fundamentalist Islamism from the 1990s to the early 2000s. In Algeria in particular, the politics during the *décennie noire* led to the persecution and assassination of intellectuals, including those advocating for political and linguistic recognition of the indigenous Amazigh. The authors considered in this thesis, Driss Chraïbi, Tahar Djaout, and Assia Djebar resituate the indigenous Amazigh as essential to understanding the history of the Maghreb—its ancient past, its experience of colonial repression, and its present situation. In this way, I suggest that these authors write “counter-histories,” adapting the term from Michel Foucault’s lectures at the *College de France*. Rather than focus on the colonial and postcolonial contexts which have been central to postcolonial criticism, this thesis makes a new contribution by studying the representation of the distant precolonial past in Maghrebi literature. Rewriting the precolonial past provides Maghrebi authors possibilities for narrating the rich and diverse history of the Maghreb and for creating a different vision of collective identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial criticism about Maghrebi literature has tended to focus on the colonial and postcolonial contexts, even though the rewriting of the distant precolonial past, dating back to antiquity and the medieval period, emerged as a later trend in the works of some Maghrebi writers as a way to challenge repressive national politics. In his influential text *Experimental Nations: Or, the Invention of the Maghreb* (2003), scholar and novelist Réda Bensmaïa reflects on the relationship between postcolonial Maghrebi literature and politics. He poses a series of general questions about the uses of literature, based on the concerns of Algerian writers at the time of independence: “What kind of literature should one promote? Is literature the best medium to use? And what can its contributions be to efforts to build the country, to construct the nation?”¹ In many ways, the centuries of linguistic and cultural exchange in the Maghreb were overtaken by the urgency at the time of independence to create a national literature that would shape the works to follow. This concern has informed scholarly approaches to the literature of the Maghreb and the focus on colonial and postcolonial contexts. However, Bensmaïa ultimately reveals how postcolonial Maghrebi authors tended to defy expectations in their continued use of French, the fundamentally literary quality of their writing, and their experimental approaches to linguistic, territorial, and national belonging.

In a later critical study about the same phenomenon, *Writing after Postcolonialism: Francophone Literature in Transition* (2017), Jane Hiddleston argues

¹ Réda Bensmaïa, *Experimental Nations: Or, the Invention of the Maghreb* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), 5.

that writers had to contend not only with the legacy of colonialism, but also with the repressive tactics of the new, nationalist governments. In order to consider contemporary politics and the place of literature in the nation and the world, Hiddleston writes that authors had to “step outside of contemporary society... and reassess their ability to challenge orthodoxies and contribute to the creation of alternative local cultures.”² As Hiddleston’s work demonstrates, postcolonial criticism, which exploded in popularity in the 1990’s and 2000’s, must no longer focus primarily on the colonial historical past in the literature of the Maghreb. We must recognize a shift that took place in the literature as a way to challenges to national regimes—literary acts of resistance that include the rewriting of history as a means to consider an alternative, collective past.

In this thesis, I explore a neglected trend in Maghrebi literature that emerged in the wake of the repressive national politics of the 1980’s and 1990’s. I argue that the three authors whose works I examine—Driss Chraïbi, Tahar Djaout, and Assia Djébar—rewrite a distant, collective past of the precolonial Maghreb. In the novels I explore in this study, the reader is given an important counter-historical perspective on the present, by means of an exploration of a neglected, even suppressed past. The medieval period and medieval historical characters figure in the works of many Maghrebi writers, who often use their to address the arrival of Islam beginning in the area beginning in the seventh century. The three writers I examine are notably different in that they use the narrativization of precolonial and in particular medieval history to address the history of

² Jane Hiddleston, *Writing after Postcolonialism: Francophone Literature in Transition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 2.

the indigenous Amazigh.³ In this case, they highlight a core problematic of the arrival of Islam, since it was brought by a conquering people who established themselves in the region. The goal of my project is to demonstrate that the appearance of medieval history in Maghrebi literature serves not only to challenge the totalizing discourses of colonialism and nationalism, but also to narrate the rich and diverse history of the Maghreb. The works by Chraïbi, Djaout, and Djébar that I examine in the following pages resituate the indigenous Amazigh as essential to understanding the history of the Maghreb—its ancient past, its experience of colonial repression, and its present situation, in which the continued burial of historical reality continues to serve political purposes.

Colonial and National Discourses

Many scholars have explored the extent to which certain colonial discourses worked to bury the history of the Maghreb, rendering it not only inaccessible but also inessential, as the French asserted their authority and the superiority of European civilization. To reference a prominent example, high school teacher and colonial figure Louis Bertrand championed the ideology of the “Latins of Africa” in Algeria starting in 1895, exemplifying the type of authority that results in the burial of indigenous history. By promoting a “trans-Mediterranean ethnicity” that would connect southern Europeans racially and spiritually to their Roman ancestors in Africa, he ignored the indigenous

³ See James McDougall, *Berbers and Others: Beyond Tribe and Nation in the Maghreb* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 18. Amazigh, or Imazighen (plural), refers to the ethno-linguistic minority commonly known as the Berbers, the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa. Berber derives from the Greek and Latin *barbaroi* and *barbari* (speakers of an unintelligible language), picked up later in Arabic as *barbar*. Throughout this project I chose to use Amazigh/Imazighen rather than Berber(s) unless quoting other sources. Tamazight refers to Berber languages, and Tifinagh to the new alphabet derived from ancient Lybic writing.

Amazigh and Arab chapter in the history of the Maghreb.⁴ Therefore, the attempts to recapture the precolonial history through literature represent a continuity and resistance that both predated and outlived the French presence in the region. By going back to a time when French colonialism was not the principal point of reference for the region, the writers move away from the overdetermination of colonialism to consider a past and future of the Maghreb that is not dependent on its relationship to Europe. In terms of nationalism, the politics of Arabization in the Maghreb and the unilateral assertion of an Arabo-Muslim national identity in Algeria have contributed to political repression and stifled the plural and complex history of the region. In particular, during the 1990's civil war in Algeria—also known as the *décennie noire*, or black decade—activists, journalists, academics, and intellectuals were violently suppressed and sometimes killed, including many whom were fighting for political and linguistic recognition of the Amazigh. Two of the authors considered in this thesis vehemently opposed the politics of Arabization and were directly impacted by the *décennie noire* violence. Tahar Djaout, an Algerian journalist and novelist of Amazigh descent, was assassinated in 1993. Assia Djebar, whose corpus consistently deals with issues of language and political repression, wrote *Le blanc de l'Algérie* to commemorate three of her friends who were intellectuals killed during this time.

⁴ See Patricia Lorcin, "Rome and France in Africa: Recovering Algeria's Colonial Latin Past," *French Historical Studies* 25, no. 2 (2002): 315-321.

Counter-History

Part of what produced this return to precolonial history in contemporary writing on the Maghreb was the localized forms of power, violence, and repression during the colonial period and during the *décennie noire*. Real individuals suffered and lost their lives, which had lasting impacts on their communities, and on the writing that emerged to expose continuities in these violent periods of history. The active revealing of colonial testimony on the part of Algerian women, a prominent part of Assia Djebar's *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985), speaks to violence that was perpetrated in a specific historical and colonial context and rewrites real women's acts of resistance to expose that violence. Djebar's novel *Vaste est la prison* and Djaout's *L'invention du désert* both incorporate precolonial Amazigh history because it was excluded from national narratives at the time they were writing. In this way, the rewriting of precolonial history in literature acts to reclaim that history after it had been suppressed, forgotten, or buried underneath more official versions of colonial and national history. I read these as "counter-histories," adapting a term from one of Michel Foucault's lectures delivered at the *Collège de France*. He elaborates the notion of counter-history, lending voice to the perspective of the oppressed:

'Nous n'avons pas, derrière nous, de continuité ; nous n'avons pas, derrière nous, la grande et glorieuse généalogie où la loi et le pouvoir se montrent dans leur force et dans leur éclat. Nous sortons de l'ombre, nous n'avions pas de droits et nous n'avions pas de gloire, et c'est précisément pour cela que nous prenons la parole et que nous commençons à dire notre histoire.'⁵

⁵ Michel Foucault, *'Il faut défendre la société': Cours au Collège de France (1975-1976)* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 62. Translation from Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 70.

‘We do not have any continuity behind us; we do not have behind us the great and glorious genealogy in which the law and power flaunt themselves in their power and their glory. We came out of the shadows, we had no glory and we had no rights, and that is why we are beginning to speak and to tell of our history.’

Foucault explains a transition in the writing of European history at the end of the Middle Ages, which occurred towards the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. History writing had before then relied on the Roman model, which assured the perpetuation and intensification of sovereignty, power, and the rule of law.⁶ A new form of history would challenge the narratives of European official history and would represent the perspective of the vanquished rather than the victors. It sought to show how rulers’ power was born out of the injustices of battle. Moreover, Foucault describes the function of this new history: “la nouvelle histoire qui apparaît va avoir à déterrer quelque chose qui a été caché, et qui a été caché non seulement parce que négligé, mais aussi parce que soigneusement, délibérément, méchamment, travesti et masqué” (the new history that emerges will have to unearth something that had been hidden, and that had been hidden not just because it was neglected, but also because it was carefully, deliberately, cruelly, misrepresented and masked).⁷ In the face of localized violence and power, the writers turn to an excluded history to establish a counter-narrative. However, as we will see with Driss Chraïbi’s *La mère du printemps* and *Naissance à l’aube*, the rewriting of precolonial history can have ambiguous historical outcomes and meanings, marked more by indeterminacy and multiplicity than unity and domination.

⁶ Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société*, 59.

⁷ Foucault, 63.

Literature and the Challenge to State-Controlled Language

Literature has served as an important medium for introducing these perspectives, particularly when archival sources and national discourse fail to capture them. Turning to literature allows writers to rewrite and sometimes invent details about the distant past and represent the perspectives of people long gone. This type of literature can ultimately challenge national discourse, because this distant past is not the one upon which the contemporary national context was founded; it was rather excluded from that discourse. Edward Said, speaking about humanists working in the United States, refers to their “responsibility for maintaining rather than resolving the tension between the aesthetic and the national, using the former to challenge, reexamine and resist the latter.”⁸ In following with Said, this type of narrative is used for resistance and challenging the control of language, bringing to mind the state’s nationalization and officialization of languages, which has implications for legitimizing certain historical narratives over others. For example, in Algeria, Tamazight, or Amazigh language, only gained recognition as a “national” language in 2002 and as an official language in 2016, and its institutionalization in schools and courts still has a long way to go.⁹ In addition to the political and linguistic repression, nationalization and officialization of languages imply choices about who controls the language and how it is used, all of which weigh on what histories get told. It is therefore important to examine how literature provides an

⁸ Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 78.

⁹ Ricard Gonzáles, “Across the Maghreb, the Imazighen are pressing for rights and cultural recognition,” *Equal Times*, 5 February 2020, <https://www.equaltimes.org/across-the-maghreb-the-imazighen?lang=en#.Xm5fgy2ZPLa>.

innovative medium for authors to state their case and contest officially sanctioned uses of language.

I begin in Chapter One by examining two works by the Moroccan author Driss Chraïbi: *La mère du printemps* (1982) and *Naissance à l'aube* (1986). Chraïbi began writing in 1954, just before the end of French colonialism in Morocco in 1956. The reign of monarch Hassan II in Morocco, which is an important historical reference for Chraïbi, lasted from 1961 to 1999. During this period, contestation of the regime led to the imprisonment and torture of certain intellectuals and critics.¹⁰ These two works reflect on the arrival of Islam in the Maghreb and ultimately, at the end of *Naissance à l'aube*, Chraïbi rewrites the triumph of the Amazigh with the establishment of the Almoravid dynasty in 1055. These novels are thus particularly rich examples for studying different notions of history and rethinking the cultural and linguistic encounters that occurred with the Arab conquest.

In examining the novels of Chraïbi, I highlight how Amazigh notions of cultural identity became infused in Muslim identity, incorporating their ties to nature and the land of the Maghreb. I also elaborate on how violence towards women in the text might stand in for the suppression of the oral tradition of history passed down to the Amazigh. Despite ambiguous methods of ensuring cultural survival, we see how the Amazigh persisted through centuries of conquest and colonization. Both texts open with an epilogue set in the 1980's about Raho, an Amazigh character who satirizes national

¹⁰ See Hiddleston, *Writing after Postcolonialism*, 6-7 for an overview of contemporary national politics in Morocco as compared to Algeria and Tunisia.

politics and administrative holdovers from the colonial period. But, at the same time Raho affirms his Amazigh identity, his ties to the land, and his personal practice of Islam, all of which demonstrate continuities with the precolonial past and characters featured in the rest of the novel. The writing of this history seems to challenge the authority of the Moroccan state and assert the ties of the indigenous Amazigh to the past and present of the Maghreb.

In the next chapter, I focus on the different spaces for examining Amazigh identity found in Tahar Djaout's *L'invention du désert*. Djaout, an Algerian of Amazigh descent, was a prominent journalist and novelist, he wrote against fundamentalist Islamism and the authoritarian tendencies of the military-controlled, one-party Algerian state. Before his assassination in 1993, he published *L'invention du désert* (1987), which reflects on Amazigh history and identity. The narrator, a journalist writing about the Almoravid and Almohad dynasties, becomes obsessed with Ibn Toumert, a medieval historical figure known for being a fundamentalist Islamic reformer, focusing on this specific detail rather than broader history of these dynasties. Toumert appears in multiple episodes in the present, following the narrator as moves through Paris. Taking a different approach than Chraïbi, Djaout fictionalizes time, place, and history by interweaving the past more explicitly with the present. This reproduces what Raji Vallury has called the dispersion and dismemberment of North Africa, rather than its glory.¹¹ I assess how this

¹¹ Raji Vallury, "Walking the Tightrope Between Memory and History: Metaphor in Tahar Djaout's *L'invention Du Désert*." *Novel* 41, no. 2-3 (2008): 329.

text presents different geographical and metaphorical spaces to explore this past and its implications for the postcolonial nation.

Lastly, I show how the renowned Algerian writer Assia Djebar took up the questions of the authoritarian state, official discourse, and the politics of Arabization in *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (1995). By referencing Dante, she incorporates medieval concepts of vernacular language as a way to commemorate her friends killed in the violence of 1990's Algeria, trying to imagine how they would speak to her if they were still alive. In this final chapter, I more explicitly address the issues raised by Benmaïa concerning language, as well as the politics of Arabization, and Djebar's other writings on language. In particular, I consider the question of Amazigh identity and the history of the Maghreb in Djebar's *Vaste est la prison* (1995). Overall, these texts, shaped by similar political concerns, suggest a different way of looking at history that presents a challenge to the authority of state discourse in the post-independence context.

CHAPTER I
HETEROGENOUS HISTORY: CUTURAL SURVIVAL IN
QUESTION IN DRISS CHRAIBÏ'S *LA MÈRE DU PRINTEMPS* AND
NAISSANCE À L'AUBE

Driss Chraïbi's *La mère du printemps* (1982) and sequel *Naissance à l'aube* (1986) reflect on the Arab conquest and westward spread of Islam to the Maghreb during the seventh century, as well as their implications for the survival and cultural identity of the indigenous Amazigh. His fictionalized narrative of the conquest centers on the character Azwaw Aït Yafelman in *La mère du printemps*, but Azwaw becomes one of the recurring characters in *Naissance à l'aube*. Appointed as the spokesperson for his tribe's councils, Azwaw takes drastic measures to ensure the tribe's survival and perpetuation after the Arab conquest. Realizing that the only way to protect the tribe's identity is to accept the invasion and adopt Islam as a religion, Azwaw imagines what will become of them over the centuries, employing metaphors of nature to talk about their transformation and regeneration. However, Azwaw is a contradictory character. Though he pledges his friendship to the Arab general Oqba ibn Nafi and seems to genuinely convert to Islam, he betrays Oqba by using the call to prayer to send coded messages to other Amazigh tribes. His punishment is to have his tongue cut out, a dramatic and symbolic punishment that poses questions about the transmission of history and identity: does this process occur through language, or through the survival and perpetuation of a people through their descendants? Azwaw's violence towards women, and in particular his sexual violence towards his wife Hineb and daughter Yerma, complicates rather than glorifies the continuation of his family line. As women uphold the oral history of the land in *La mère*

du printemps, we can see how Azwaw harms the transmission of the oral history about the land, which goes against his own affinity for the land and has negative implications for the survival of his language and a people.

The juxtaposition of two different fates for humanity, as I discuss below, is an important element of Chraïbi's novels. Azwaw seemingly adopts Islam and accepts the messianic vision of Islam, which ends with God; however, at the end of *La mère du printemps*, the same character asserts that only the land will remain at the end of time, thus demonstrating faithfulness to his Amazigh identity and his ties to the land. These two visions exist alongside each other, and even if rife with contradictions, show how Amazigh cultural understandings became infused with their practice of Islam, modifying the religion to represent different conceptions of space and time. By engaging with medieval history, Chraïbi considers the past and outcomes of the Arab conquest, including the complex linguistic and cultural encounters that transformed both the Arabs and the Imazighen. Amazigh cultural survival is thus heterogenous and ambiguous, speaking to historical violence and silencing, but also to a different way of looking at history; in this way, we can read the text as a counter-history.

Cultural Survival

La mère du printemps begins with a dedication that is intended to inform our reading of the text:

Ce livre est dédié à l'Oum-er-Bia (la Mère du printemps), le fleuve marocain à l'embouchure duquel je suis né. Je le dédie également aux Fils de la Terre, les Berbères, qui en sont les héros; à l'Islam des premiers temps : l'exil qui l'a vu naître du désert et de la nudité, tout comme à l'Islam de l'apogée : Cordue ; aux Indiens d'Amérique parqués dans des réserves et que l'on interroge à présent

comme autant de doutes salutaires dans les certitudes de la civilisation ; aux Palestiniens, aux Celtes, aux Occitans, aux peuples dites primitives, à toutes les minorités qui, somme toute, sont la plus grande majorité de notre monde et dont je suis le frère.¹²

This book is dedicated to the Oum-er-Bia (the Mother Spring), the Moroccan river at the mouth of which I was born. I dedicate it also to the Sons of the Land, the Berbers, who are its heroes; to the Islam of the first times: to the exile that saw it born out of the desert from nudity, much like the Islam at its pinnacle: Cordua; to the Native Americans rounded up in reservations, which we question at present in the same way as many salutary effects arising from certitudes of civilization; to Palestinians, to the Celts, to the Occitans, to people deemed “primitive,” to all of the minorities who, after all, are the biggest majority of our world, and to whom I am a brother.

This dedication serves as a “prise de position politique” as well as a gesture of solidarity with other minority groups who had been relegated to the sidelines of history through various forms of oppression. Given this dedication, we might expect to find a more straightforward narrative about the survival of the Amazigh through centuries of colonization. And yet the text seems to deny us a simplistic reading of this history, especially in the presentation of Azwaw as a character. Azwaw gives the appearance of respecting the two councils that make decisions on behalf of the tribe, including the council of elders. He is described as their “porte-parole,” the spokesperson or executor.¹³ However, in forming a third council, he acts more unilaterally to place his own men in power. Furthermore, he goes mad and decides to kill a group of oppositional preachers by having them chained to the stilts of a port where rising tide will drown them. This example of Azwaw’s power shows his willingness to take drastic measures to accomplish

¹² Driss Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 9. All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

¹³ Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps*, 98.

what is best, in his mind, for the protection of his tribe. Following this episode, he learns more about Islam and the Arab conquerors, and he begins to conceive of an idea for the tribe's survival.

Azwaw learns two essential aspects of the Arab conquest: the Arabs' search for water coming from an arid desert climate, and their capacity for converting tribes to Islam. He asks some of the men he sent to battle to speak before the councils about what they had witnessed in Amazigh territories that had already been occupied. Boucchous relays that the Amazigh no longer bore arms, even if they still waged battle at home, in their hearts, while they slept. He tells Azwaw that: "Il n'y a plus de Berbères. Ni même d'Arabes [...] Il n'y a plus que des musulmans" (there are no more Berbers. Nor Arabs either[...] There are only Muslims).¹⁴ Raho recounts that Arabs did not need to bring offerings or exert themselves in order to bribe the tribes; in bringing Islam, they assimilated the tribes not only into one community, but also into one history. The monotheistic nature of their religion formed them into this community, but in the absence of religious authorities, also made it so that each person was a preacher in their own right; even Raho expresses his desire to become Arab for these reasons. Azwaw therefore proposes his plan to the three councils: "nous ne livrerons aucun combat" (we will not fight any battle).¹⁵ He explains his decision in terms of his desire to save his people, especially with the understanding that even those who had resisted the arrival of Islam ended up embracing the religion. According to him, the Arabs were different from other

¹⁴ Ibid, 126.

¹⁵ Ibid, 132.

conquerors ,who were merely interested in the land and its riches, and who would only endure for one or two centuries. The new conquerors “s’intéressent surtout à l’homme, à ce qu’il est, à ce qu’il peut leur apporter” (are interested above all in man, in what he is, in what he can bring them).¹⁶ He remarks on their desire to create one single community, the *Ummah*, which would accomplish what he always wished for his own community, its multiplication and perpetuation over time.

Natural Metaphors

It is through Azwaw’s plan for survival that we will examine certain metaphors of nature, different visions of time and space, and the desire for cultural continuity in *La mère du printemps* and *Naissance à l’aube*. Azwaw declares his strategy:

Nous allons occuper le terrain du temps. Nous allons entrer dans ces nouveaux conquérants, dans leur Islam, leurs mœurs, leur langue, dans tout ce qu’ils savent faire avec leurs mains et dire avec leur cœur. Dans tout ce qu’ils représentent de jeune, de fort et de beau.¹⁷

We are going to occupy time’s terrain. We are going to get inside these new conquerors, inside their very soul, into their Islam, their customs, their language, into everything that they know how to do with their hands and to say with their hearts. Into everything that is youthful, strong, and beautiful.

This quote demonstrates Azwaw’s long-term plan for his people: they will survive and maintain their own cultural identity, passing it along to the Arab conquerors. Ziad Bentahar interprets this quote as a rewriting of the narrative of Arab victory and the conversion to Islam, as the Amazigh would prevail through literal and cultural

¹⁶ Ibid, 134.

¹⁷ Ibid, 138. Translation from Ziad Bentahar, “How the West Was Won: The Arab Conqueror and the Serene Amazigh in Driss Chraïbi’s *La Mère Du Printemps*.” In *Vitality and Dynamism: Interstitial Dialogues of Language, Politics, and Religion in Morocco’s Literary Tradition*, ed. Kirstin Ruth Bratt, et al. (Leiden: Leiden UP, 2014), 27.

miscegenation, assimilating the colonizers rather than the colonizers assimilating them. For Bentahar, this serves as a new contribution to the field of postcolonial studies, because rather than reading Amazigh identity in terms of Arab victory in which they inherit a crossbred cultural identity, they instead bring their own cultural identity to Islam, which nuances concepts of mimicry and hybridity as a postcolonial reading.¹⁸ In Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, he describes colonial mimicry as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite."¹⁹ This desire leads to strategies for appropriation of the colonial subject, lending itself to ambiguity between the colonizer and colonized subject. The colonized subject can adapt to imitate the colonizer's mannerisms, habits, and ideologies, a process in which the colonizer is deeply implicated via the structuring the "difference" of the colonial Other and by inducing the Other to perform sameness. Moreover, Bhabha's hybridity refers to how formerly excluded subjects enter into mainstream colonial discourse and disrupt colonial power and dominant culture.²⁰ Bentahar's reading gives the Amazigh a more active role in assimilating the colonizers and make their own contributions to Islam, going beyond the concepts of mimicry and hybridity by giving them more agency.

However, it is important to highlight how Azwaw uses the natural metaphor of "la mauvaise herbe" to describe how his people, like weeds, would take over a field at the expense of other plants (Arab and Muslim identity). Azwaw continues, asserting: "Nous

¹⁸ Bentahar, "How the West Was Won," 27-8.

¹⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 86.

²⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 114.

avons le temps. Nous aurons tout le temps de l'éternité [...] [n]ous en viendrons à bout avec notre mauvaise herbe et les racines des épineux que nous sommes. La terre rajeunit à chaque printemps, le fleuve aussi, l'Océan. Pourquoi pas nous ?" (We have time. We will have all the time of eternity [...] we will manage to overcome at the end with our weeds and roots of thorns that we are. The earth grows younger every spring, as with the river, the ocean. Why not us?).²¹ This metaphor speaks to a cultural and historical renewal by analogizing this process to that of nature. In this regard we can see how the metaphor of nature works to infuse an Amazigh cultural identity and ties to nature into the narrative of continuity. This constitutes a more "rhizomatic" approach to culture and identity, one less rooted in hierarchy and chronological time, and imbued with multiplicity and heterogony. The rhizomatic approach is also anti-genealogical, opposing linearity and having no beginnings and ends.²² We see how the Amazigh cultural identity is tied more to nature than genealogy and linearity in *La mère du printemps*. Azwaw even asks his tribe to commit to his plan of survival by mixing drops of their blood in the Oum-er-Bia River, suggesting the renewal and continuity of the tribe as tied to the same renewal and continuity of the river.

In this last part of the novel, the Imam Filani has taken over the narration to recount the arrival of Oqba and his first meeting with Azwaw. This is where we learn the tenuous nature of Azwaw's conversion to Islam. Azwaw declares that he has converted, and that this is why he did not bear arms against Oqba; but Oqba is not convinced, and

²¹ Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps*, 138.

²² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie: Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

replies: “Je suis insensible à tous les vents, même à celui du désert [...] Et toi, tu n’apportes que des mots de vent” (I am insensitive to all winds, even those of the desert [...] you only bring words of wind).²³ He continues: “je connais tous les vents comme je connais les hommes, qu’ils viennent du désert, de la montagne, des plaines ou de la mer. Tu n’es *pas* musulman” (I know all the winds just as I know men, whether they come from the desert, the mountains, the plains or the sea. You are no Muslim).²⁴ Oqba explains that he does not believe that Azwaw is Muslim because he used verses from the Qur’an for political purposes, defending his own decision not to wage battle. Azwaw ultimately asks for Oqba’s friendship, to which Oqba consents, but with the warning that “en Islam, l’amitié est sans parjure” (in Islam, friendship is without false oath).²⁵ Oqba’s words set up the betrayal that Azwaw commits in sending coded messages to other Amazigh tribes through the call to prayer. We learn shortly thereafter that the Imam Filani, the narrator, is no other than Azwaw himself, thirty years later, reflecting on the events occurring after Oqba took over the tribe’s land. By giving Azwaw the task of performing the call to prayer, he equipped him with a means to communicate messages to his people. Because of his messages coded into the call to prayer, he was able to warn Kusaïla of Oqba’s approach, and Kusaïla ambushed Oqba and his men, killing everyone except the Aït Yafelmans. As a punishment, Azwaw’s tongue was cut out. In the thirty years after his punishment, Azwaw he became something of a scholar of Islam, and had

²³ Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps*, 204. Translation from Driss Chraïbi, *Mother Spring*, trans. Hugh Harter (Washington DC: Three Continents Press, 1989), 112.

²⁴ Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps*, 205 (emphasis in the original). Translation in Chraïbi, *Mother Spring*, 112-13.

²⁵ Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps*, 206. Translation in Chraïbi, *Mother Spring*, 113.

crossed the earth in search of his son and daughter who had been taken from him at Oqba's arrival. In order to reflect on whether he resists an imposed identity, and whether he achieves cultural survival, I will now turn to an analysis of the concept of occupying time.

Occupying Time

In terms of *La mère du printemps* and *Naissance à l'aube*, it is important to address the concept of time. Azwaw restates several times his intentions to occupy time, and the novel presents an intersection of two different visions of time and the fate of humanity. In the last lines of *La mère du printemps*, the Imam Filani's final reflections juxtapose these two different visions of time, one based on God, and the other on nature: "Quand il ne subsistera plus rien, il subsistera la Face Sublime de Dieu.' C'est ce qu'affirme le Coran, qui chante dans mon cœur. Les peuples passeront comme une caravane le long du temps. Et, au bout du temps, il y aura toujours la terre, la lumière et l'eau de mon pays" ("When nothing else exists, the Sublime Face of God will subsist." That is what the Koran asserts, and it sings in my heart. People will pass by like a caravan all through time, and, at the end of time, there will still be the earth, the light, and the water of my country).²⁶ We cannot say for sure if the Imam Filani adopts either of these views on the end of time or whether he adopts them both, but his insistence on the land and the water of his country recalls Raho's epilogue, which is placed at the opening of the novel, where Raho prostrates himself on the ground and says "quand il ne subsistera plus aucun os, aucune dent de mon peuple, toi, tu subsisteras. Toi, ma terre. Personne ne

²⁶ Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps*, 214. Translation from Chraïbi, *Mother Spring*, 118.

te vaincra. Personne ne te fera mourir” (And when not a bone or a tooth of my people subsists, you will still be here. You, my earth. No one will subdue you. No one will make you die).²⁷

The end of the novel also directly refers back to Chraïbi’s “avertissement” to the readers, where he claims that his book is a work of fiction rather than a work of history: “Il reste que ce qui n’a ni changé ni vieilli depuis le fond des âges, c’est la terre. Et j’ai toujours eu la folie de la lumière et de l’eau. Si ces deux éléments viennent à manquer, l’histoire des hommes tarit...” (What has neither changed nor aged since the beginning of time is the earth. And I have always had a madness for light and for water. If these two elements should ever cease to be, the history of man would run dry...).²⁸ These quotes present us with a few possibilities. Firstly, Chraïbi’s voice as an author, Raho’s voice as a character in the 1980’s in an epilogue placed at the beginning, and Azwaw’s voice as a character from the seventh century during the conquest of Islam all bear resemblance and construct a cultural identity centering on the land. This leads us to question whether Amazigh identity is fragmented, because it is represented by three different voices in three different time periods, or whether it in this way shows continuity over time. Does Azwaw succeed in his survival plan because Raho echoes his words and sentiments about ties to the land, and how the land would outlive the people—putting emphasis on this outcome for the end of time rather than the subsistence only of God? Or does Azwaw change and genuinely adopt Islam? If we refer back to the issue of naturalistic images of

²⁷ Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps*, 43. Translation from Chraïbi, *Mother Spring*, 18.

²⁸ Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps*, 11. Translation from Chraïbi, *Mother Spring*, vi.

regeneration, to the rhizome, and disengagement with genealogical history—blood being mixed with water, and the rhizome’s state of in-betweenness, lack of beginning and end, and array of connections—we see an emphasis on indeterminacy and the multiplicity of nature.

A Space and Time of Renewal

In responding to these questions, it is also important to highlight Azwaw’s reappearance in *Naissance à l’aube*, a continuation of Chraïbi’s novels on the Amazigh. Azwaw reappears as “le maître de la main,” the Master of the Hand, capable of reviving the dead with the touch of his hand. His tongue is still cut out and he needs a translator, Boutr, to convey a message to Tariq Bnou Ziyad, an Amazigh who had been converted to Islam during Oqba’s conquest and who continues the conquest into Andalusia. Reading his lips, Boutr translates Azwaw’s message to Tariq, which begins with a straightforward Qur’anic recitation, before Azwaw transforms the words: “Lis ! Lis au nom de l’arbre. Il y a des racines et il y a les branches. Les branches s’effeuillent en automne ; certaines d’entre elles deviennent du bois mort et il en naît d’autres pour les remplacer, nourries de la sève qui monte toujours des racines” (Recite! Recite in the name of the tree. There are roots and there are branches. The branches’ leaves fall in autumn; some of them become dead wood and from those are born others to replace them, nourished by the sap that still rises from the roots).²⁹ Here we have a rewriting of the passage of the Qur’an that details the prophet Muhammad’s first revelation, “Recite

²⁹ Driss Chraïbi, *Naissance à l’aube* (Paris, Seuil, 1986), 136-7.

in the name of your lord who created—from an embryo the human...”³⁰ Tariq understands this as a sort of “contre-Coran,” and the rewriting underlines the regeneration and reinvention of the Amazigh people as well as a reinterpretation of the religion. He recites these rewritten verses to remind Tariq of his Amazigh heritage, and Tariq does indeed feel “l’*écho à l’intérieur de ses os*” (the echo inside of his bones), suggesting semi-conscious recognition of the Amazigh cultural identity.³¹ The end of *Naissance à l’aube* perhaps supports this idea of renewal, because one of the descendants of Yerma (Azawaw’s daughter), Abdallah ibn Yassin, ends up reconquering the Maghreb and the better part of Spain to found the Almoravid dynasty, which would last almost a century: “l’espace d’un renouveau, un infime printemps de l’éternité sidérale” (the space of a renewal, the infinitesimal spring of sidereal eternity).³² Christina Civantos brings up questions about this quote: “What does it mean to say that a dynasty known for its strict interpretation of Islam was a time and space of renewal, a small springtime within the eternity of space?”³³ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, sidereal time relates to the rotations of the earth relative to the distance from fixed stars, but also the study of stars more generally.³⁴ In keeping with Civantos’s interpretation of the word, I suggest that it refers to the eternity of space. The fact that *Naissance à l’aube* ends with the triumphant founding of an Amazigh dynasty, even one that we know did not last more

³⁰ Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland: White Cloud Press, 1999), 96.

³¹ Chraïbi, *Naissance à l’aube*, 137.

³² Ibid, 186. Translation from Christina Civantos, “The Migration of a Hero: The Construction and Deconstruction of Tariq ibn Ziyad,” in *The Afterlife of Al-Andalus: Muslim Iberia in Contemporary Arab and Hispanic Narratives* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017), 134.

³³ Civantos, “The Migration of a Hero,” 134.

³⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary* online, s.v. “sidereal,” accessed 15 March 2020, <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.utk.edu/view/Entry/179318?redirectedFrom=sidereal&>

than a century and was known for fundamentalist Islamist reformism, gives us a different vision of an endpoint of time in terms of Chraïbi's narrative. This endpoint shows the arbitrariness and insignificance of specific events in history, especially when juxtaposed to the time of space or the stars. While we are invested in a certain telling of history and view some events as side details of the history, based on our own present, this relativity means that perhaps we could attach as much importance to the founding of the Almoravid Amazigh dynasty as the ultimately more determinative Arab conquest. If we have two visions of time in *La mère du printemps*, one of the face of God being all that remains at the end of time, and one where only the land remains, here we leave off with a space of renewal and a spring of time. If Azwaw's vision succeeds at all, it is perhaps in this kind of space and time of both renewal and regeneration that exists even in this tiny space of history and eternity. He might not succeed in ensuring the continuity of an isomorphic Amazigh cultural identity, but he succeeds at least in the perpetuation of his people even as they take on and influence a new, cross-bred cultural identity.

Oral History and Counter-History

It is nonetheless important to remember that the novel presents another form of transmission and cultural survival that Azwaw in many ways suppresses. Azwaw's wife Hineb, a young girl who had fled the Arab invasion from the Aurès in present day Algeria and who had ended up receiving hospitality from Azwaw's tribe, fails to conceive. Dada, a woman in the tribe on the council of women, helps protect Hineb from Azwaw's violence by giving her advice. Dada ultimately suggests to Azwaw that he is impotent and that is why Hineb could not conceive. Hineb eventually gives birth to

Yerma, Azwaw's daughter. He repudiates her, however, for not being able to breastfeed. She returns to Azwaw much later in the narrative and gives birth to his son, Yassin. But before she returns, Azwaw has incestual relations with his daughter Yerma, although Yerma does not bear him any children.

This episode with Yerma perhaps indicates that as much as Azwaw might want to, he cannot merely reproduce himself as a way to perpetuate his people. Before Hineb returns, Dada opposes Azwaw before the tribal councils, and he bluntly kills her; we do not get any details on how he kills her, just that he orders other tribe members to take away her body. But the women in the story are shown as having political power as a part of the council of women, a council that included Azwaw's mother and grandmother, and furthermore they help maintain the tribe's history and pass it down through the oral tradition. Therefore, Azwaw's suppression of women perhaps contributes more to silencing than to ensuring the survival of the culture, especially since he himself integrates more to Islam, adapting it to maintain his own Amazigh roots. Yet, the inclusion of oral tradition indicates yet another way that the text presents an alternative narrative of history, qualified as "true history."³⁵ In the middle of *La mère du printemps* when Oumawch begins to tell the history of the Earth, he prefaces it by saying:

'Ma mère me l'a raconté voilà longtemps, très longtemps. Et ma grand-mère l'avait raconté à ma mère. Et ainsi de génération en génération en remontant le temps. Et ainsi notre mémoire ne s'est pas perdue. Je vais vous dire la véritable Histoire : celle de la Terre. Et je vous dirai ensuite comment s'est *légendée* l'Histoire des hommes, qui a pris tant de place depuis, faite de bruits et de vents, et qui peu à peu a remplacé l'Histoire de la Mère nourricière, jusqu'à l'effacer comme un vêtement décoloré. Allez, chant, ma musique, chante !³⁶

³⁵ Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps*, 92.

³⁶ Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps*, 92. Translation from Chraïbi, *Mother Spring*, 47.

‘My mother told me this a long, long time ago. And my grandmother had told it to my mother, and so it was from generation to generation through time. That way our story has not been lost. I am going to recount to you the true History: that of the Earth. Then I will tell you how the History of men who have taken up so much space afterward and made so much noise and wind, that bit by bit has replaced the history of the Life-Giving Mother, effacing Her like a discolored garment, took the form of *legend*. Now sing, my music, sing!...’

He goes on to sing that at the beginning, there was the Earth, and nothing surrounded her; but in a series of seven creations, she gave birth to the sun, the inhabitants of the earth, birds to ensure the continuity of the sun and stars until the end of time, the waters of the springs, the rivers, the seas and clouds, nursing them all. No one contradicts Oumawch or laughs at him; Azwaw believes in the creation of the world in this way because his mother had told it to him as a small boy. The history of legend, characterized by noise and wind, has erased the rich history of the oral tradition and the emphasis on the land. If we compare the use of the words “bruits” and “vents” to Oqba telling Azwaw that he brings only words of wind, we can perhaps see how Azwaw, in devising a political plan for survival, is implicated in taking part in the history of legends and silencing women and the history of the oral tradition.³⁷ His views on the end of time become mixed with visions of God and visions of the land; but he ultimately believes that people and tribes will eventually disappear. For him the continuity perhaps would exist in the people’s affective disposition to the land: “même quand je serai mort, je garderai dans mes os ma folie de l’eau et ma folie plus grande encore de la lumière de mon pays” (‘even when I am dead, I’ll keep my obsession with water and my even greater obsession with the light

³⁷ Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps*, 112.

of my country in my bones’).³⁸ This connection to the land does not seem to belong to Azwaw alone, but his whole community. In speaking of his death and in other passages of the death of humanity, and the idea that only the land will remain, he is insisting on the literal or biological survival of the Amazigh and of their ties to the land, leaving out the importance of oral tradition and history of the Earth passed down by women in terms of the transmission of their cultural identity as tied to the land.

In conclusion, Chraïbi’s text is rich for assessing the nature of survival and the transmission of history and cultural identity. However, by asserting a heterogenous approach to space and time, and by highlighting the idea of regeneration and renewal, we see how Azwaw’s plan presents a counternarrative about the survival of the Amazigh in the Maghreb in resisting the totality of the narrative of Arab conquest and victory in the region. This narrative shows how Amazigh identity could change, adapt, and continue even in assimilating Islam. At the end of *Naissance à l’aube*, with the arrival of Abdellah ibn Yassin and the establishment of an Amazigh dynasty, we are tempted to read this conclusion as a victory for the Amazigh. However, the narrator reminds us that this event exists in a space of renewal, a tiny moment in history, but one which makes us confront the meaning of history and historical details within a larger vision of time and space. This form of rewriting goes against dominant ways of looking at and narrating history through the eyes of the victors and with bias towards the circumstances of the present. The juxtaposition of different visions of time, including the messianic vision of Islam versus the vision of the survival of nature after the death of humans, shows us the heterogenous

³⁸ Chraïbi, *La mère du printemps*, 112. Translation from Chraïbi, *Mother Spring*, 74.

nature of history which involves complex cultural encounters. Overall, if we pay attention to the difference that the text asserts between the history of legend and the history recounted by oral tradition about the land, we can see how Chraïbi's novels function as a form of counter-history by opposing the victory implicit in the arrival of Islam in the Maghreb and by complicating the narrative of the cultural survival of the Amazigh.

CHAPTER II

MAPPING THE TERRITORIES OF THE SELF: AMAZIGH IDENTITY IN TAHAR DJAOUT'S *L'INVENTION DU DÉSERT*

In Edward Said's collection of essays *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, the titular chapter shows how "the closeness of the world's body to the text's body forces readers to take both into consideration."³⁹ Challenging the tendency in recent critical theory to emphasize the limitlessness of interpretation, Said instead argues that we must reconstitute the place of the text in the world. Geography, history, space, and time are pervasive concepts that pass between the boundary between reality and literature, but are written in different ways in history and fiction. In this chapter, I use the example of Tahar Djaout's *L'invention du désert* (1987) to map out the various spaces—which cross the boundary between the real and fictional—that the narrator presents for reflecting on Amazigh identity. I pay particular attention to the narrator's attempt to recount the history of the Amazigh in North Africa, using the desert as an allegorical space for exploring conceptions of identity. I also focus on his experience of exile abroad. The second part of my analysis pertains to the imagining of the nation in both *L'invention du désert* and in scholarship relevant to this text. We see how the blending of space, time, and narrative voice in the novel disrupts the totalizing discourse of the post-independence Algerian nation that proliferated at the time that the novel was published.

Ibn Toumert

The narrator of *L'invention du désert* is a writer living in what he describes as a

³⁹ Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and The Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983), 39.

“cold city” abroad.⁴⁰ He sets out to write the history of an Amazigh dynasty that presided over North Africa from the 11th to the 13th century, but abandons this project to write about Ibn Toumert, the puritanical Islamic leader who founded the Almohad dynasty that replaced that of the Almoravids. The narrator has a “dark fascination” with Ibn Toumert, an eccentric figure who crosses North Africa and takes justice into his own hands when it comes to the vices of the people he encounters.⁴¹ Ibn Toumert becomes a preoccupation for the narrator, accompanying him as he moves through Paris, even appearing in various scenes on the Paris metro, at the Champs-Élysées, boarding flights on Air Algérie and Royal Air Maroc.⁴² The narrator compares Ibn Toumert’s battles and peregrinations across the region to his own journeys across the Middle East and North Africa. The blending of details from the narrator’s life with those of Ibn Toumert’s is significant for later parts of the novel, where the narrative becomes destabilized and the reader is no longer sure whether the experience recounted belongs to the narrator, to Ibn Toumert, or to an ancestor.

Raji Vallury provides a critical insight into the significance of the narrator’s task of writing about the Almoravid dynasty, or in other words, the history of Algeria. Vallury suggests that the narrator is in fact writing the “history of dismembered North Africa,” a perspective on the “dispersion and destruction” of the Almoravids as opposed to their “glory.” The narrator therefore tries to place the Imazighen in what Vallury describes as

⁴⁰ Tahar Djaout, *L’invention du désert* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 26.

⁴¹ Julija Šukys, *Silence is Death: The Life and Works of Tahar Djaout* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 57-8.

⁴² Djaout, *L’invention du désert*, 53.

the “spatio-temporal configuration of the Maghreb and Algeria,” with the ultimate effect of “extending the linguistic, geopolitical, cultural, and historical delimitations of Algeria towards more expansive territorial horizons.”⁴³ This expansion defies the traditional boundaries of the Algerian nation, promoting a more inclusive vision of history and space than that permitted by the discourses of imperialism and nationalism. In the second part of the novel, the narrator’s reflections on Ibn Toumert become punctuated with stories about pilgrimages to Mecca taken by the narrator and his ancestor across the Algerian and Arabian deserts.

Desert Space

To flesh out the desert allegory, I refer to descriptions of the desert and the narrator’s experience of subjectivity in this space:

Le désert brouille l’idée de saison : il n’y a qu’un temps devenu anonyme à force de torpide constance, un temps d’une blancheur insoutenable, une bouche immense qui mange toute forme avant même qu’elle ne s’esquisse. Les vraies ruines du monde sont là ruines qui ne sont même pas débris mais poussière uniforme et mouvante... Il n’y a rien à récupérer, les signes du monde sont défaits. Je ne descends pas au sud pour m’évader ou pour chercher des sensations inédites. C’est plutôt une manière pour moi de regarder vers l’intérieur, car le désert m’habite et m’illumine depuis des temps indéterminés.⁴⁴

The desert blurs the idea of the season: there is only time that has become anonymous by the force of torpid constancy, an untenable time and brightness, an enormous mouth that eats shapes before they even become detectable. The true ruins of the world exist here not even as debris, but as uniform, moving particles of dust... There is nothing to be retrieved; the signs of the world are undone. I do not drive down to the south to evade myself, nor to seek out new sensations. It is rather a way for me to look inwards, towards the interior, because the desert has inhabited me and illuminated me for an indeterminable amount of time.

⁴³ Vallury, “Walking the Tightrope between Memory and History,” 329.

⁴⁴ Djaout, 27.

Here, the desert exists as a space where time and history have collapsed, leaving behind no defining traces. The narrator seeks out this space in order to withdraw from society and look inwards. But at the same time, the desert lives within him and has shaped his own sense of self. The narrator muses that when driving towards the desert, “[O]n sent se réduire la distance entre vivre et mourir, entre la plénitude et l’anéantissement, la compacité et le vide” (One feels the reduced distance between life and death, between plenitude and annihilation, between density and nothingness). These dichotomies represent the journey out of society and into the desert; we can read them as a drive into a space where the distinctions between life and death cease to exist. The vocabulary used to render society stands in sharp contrast to the vocabulary used to describe the desert – plenitude versus annihilation, density versus nothingness.

There are many other instances where the vocabulary used to evoke the desert relies on negation. For example, when the narrator arrives in the Sahara, he remarks that, “Il n’y a aucun centre ici, aucune temporalité. C’est le repos (la mort? du sablier” (There is no center here, no temporality. It is the rest (or death?) of the hourglass).⁴⁵ We can see here how the desert disrupts notions of temporality and space, posing a challenge to the centered narratives of nationhood, society, history, and culture. It is a place where the narrator can reflect on Amazigh identity in the sense that this identity was excluded from the construction of an Algerian national identity. The desert is a place where dominant narratives reach their limit of influence. The narrator at one point asserts that the desert is “la marge sans limites qui chasse le Texte hors son étendue” (the margin without limits

⁴⁵ Ibid, 28.

that hunts the Text beyond its bounds).⁴⁶ Here, the “Text” most likely refers to the Qur’an. Yet, in rethinking Said’s ideas, we see how the desert—as either as a worldly or metaphorical phenomenon—acts on the text. In the same way, the desert becomes a vast, endless margin, like the margin on a page, that runs off of the Text; it is in this space that commentary is written that can gloss the Text. The desert gains diegetic capacity and crosses boundaries between the world and the text.

The creation of the desert as a dynamic space for challenging the centeredness of the nation relates also to his experience as an immigrant and exile from the nation. The narrator reflects, “[Ê]tre immigré, ce n’est pas vivre dans un pays qui n’est pas le sien, c’est vivre dans un non-lieu, c’est vivre hors des territoires” (Being an immigrant is not to live in a country that is not one’s own, it is to live in a nonexistent place; it is to live outside of territories).⁴⁷ In the third part of the novel, we can no longer determine the landscape in which the narrator situates himself, whether he is in Paris or in the desert. In contrast, exile always refers back to the concrete place from which one is exiled, showing the significance of the narrator’s continual references to the innocence and purity of his childhood in a Kabyle village.

Real and Imagined Exile

The fourth and last part of the novel is almost entirely comprised of reflections on growing up in the village. Through the narrator’s descriptions, we get a sense of the

⁴⁶ Ibid, 80-1. Translation in Réda Bensmaïa, “Postcolonial Nations: Political or Poetic Allegories? (On Tahar Djaout’s *L’invention du désert*),” in *Experimental Nations: Or, the Invention of the Maghreb* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), 74.

⁴⁷ Djaout, 53.

contrast between the Europe he experiences in exile and the Europe he had dreamed of as a kid, when he had learned the French language and read books about distant countries. The child-narrator frequently anticipates the day that he will depart to Europe, imagining how the “Le soleil serait immobile... La mer serait une flaque bleue qui couvre la moitié du monde” (The sun would be immobile, the sea would be a blue puddle that covers half of the world”).⁴⁸ He also decides that he would want to travel alone and carry his suitcases by himself. He tries to think about what it would be like to return to the village after having been abroad, imagining the elegant clothes he would wear. As he grows older, he begins to understand more about exile. He remembers opening his mother’s wardrobe and going through the fabrics and cloths. He contemplates how “Tout le labeur de mon père était là. Tout son trésor d’exil” (All the labor of my father was there. All of the treasure of his exile”).⁴⁹ It is during this period that the child begins to learn songs about the bitterness of exile. The narrator reproduces the lyrics of an Amazigh musician:

Oiseau encagé,
Regarde comme mon cœur saigne;
Dans l’exil nous errons,
Attendant l’heure du retour.⁵⁰

Caged bird/ look how my heart bleeds/ in the exile where we wander/ waiting for the hour of return.

There are other points of time where the narrator refers to the native region of his childhood. He remembers learning that even his own country was vast, containing unknown things like camels and palm trees. Nonetheless, he had already imagined

⁴⁸ Ibid, 180.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 182.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 182-3.

Europe since his childhood, and could not help but desire “des paysages de routes droites et d’arbres réguliers” (landscapes of straight roads and orderly trees) and “une belle chambre pour dormir” (a beautiful bedroom for sleeping).⁵¹ People from his village had even promised him that his generation would be able to “vivre de la plume” (live by their pen).⁵² We see the contrast with his imagined departure when the narrator describes the actual experience of leaving:

Un jour le temps m’arracha à tout cela. Matin gris froid des vrais départs. L’angoisse se creusait un chemin vers mon âme. Moi, j’essayais de fuir à reculons vers l’enfance. J’escomptais y déceler des embellies pour égayer l’hiver de vivre. J’escomptais y trouver la clef pour rendre sa liberté à cet enfant qui étouffait en moi et qui réclamait à grands cris de sortir. On se donne l’illusion de revivre en entreprenant des voyages à rebours, mais on ne fait en vérité que rendre sa mort plus imminente. Car quel cimetière le passé !⁵³

One day time detached me from all of this. The grey, cold morning of real departures. Anguish dug a pathway to my soul. As for me, I was trying to flee back towards my childhood. I counted on finding there happier moments to brighten the winter of living. I counted on finding the key to give back liberty to this child, who suffocating within me, insisted at the top of his voice that I go. We give ourselves over to the illusion of living again when we undertake backwards journeys, but in reality it only makes death more imminent. Because what a cemetery, the past!

He shortly thereafter reflects on how he no longer had “une mémoire intacte où se reposer des voyages. Tout a subi la déflagration du temps et les avaries du naufrage” (...an intact memory where he could rest from his journeys. Everything had undergone an explosion of time, or the damages of a diving accident).⁵⁴ In the last pages of the narrator’s story, we learn that he has gone back to his village, though it is unclear whether

⁵¹ Ibid, 163, 184.

⁵² Ibid, 163.

⁵³ Ibid, 188.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 189.

this homecoming is fictionalized or real. In any case, the place to which he tries to return may never be accessible in the way in which he remembers it. “Home” may be a part of the cemetery of the past that has nonetheless shaped his identity. As the narrator imagines the dispersion of the Almoravid dynasty in North Africa, and narrates his journeys through the desert and exile in Europe, we see how these real and imagined spaces of the world intersect and influence notions of the self. In the second part of this essay, we see how this form of blurring of memory, space, and time pertains to the complicated dynamic between exile and the nation.

Exile and Nationalism

In order to relate the experience of exile to nationalism, I refer here to Said’s assertion of the inextricability of the two concepts:

Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, and customs; and, by so doing, it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages. Indeed, the interplay between nationalism and exile is like Hegel’s dialectic of the servant and the master, opposites informing and constituting each other. All nationalisms in their early stages develop from a condition of estrangement.⁵⁵

Said, significantly, uses the example of Algerian independence to demonstrate how during the colonial era a certain national group felt exiled from their way of life and native land. In the context of post-independence Algeria, the people were united by the idea of having emerged victorious from the fight against colonialism, which legitimized the assertion of a national identity centered around shared community a shared space. However, the assertion of a national identity had the effect of displacing the rightfulness

⁵⁵ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000), 176.

of the Amazigh claim to their own culture, space, and history, because the framing of national identity was consolidated around a homogenizing Arabo-Muslim image of the nation. This was largely in reaction to how French imperialism had reconfigured the ethnic makeup of Algerian society. Patricia Lorcin shows how the French favored the Kabyles (an Amazigh group in the Kabylia region) over the Arabs, and largely ignored the presence of other populations, including the Turks, Kouloughlis, Andalusians, and Africans in Algeria. The Jews were an exception, as the Crémieux Decree of 1870 allowed Jews to become French citizens, excluding Imazighen and Arabs, who had a second-class indigenous status. The French favored the Kabyles because of their secular tendencies, but also because they thought the Kabyles might have been Christian going back to the time of St. Augustine. This idea has its ties to nineteenth-century racial theory, because Kabyles would have been considered ethnically closer to the French than the Arabs.⁵⁶

Said discusses how the renegotiation of space, including the space of the nation, always creates a frontier between the self and the Other; one therefore never truly escapes a dynamic between inclusion and exclusion. What is interesting about Said's analysis is that he poses a series of questions that demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between national belonging and exile:

Nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation. How, then, does one surmount the loneliness of exile without falling into the encompassing and thumping language of national pride, collective sentiments, group passions? What is there worth saving and holding on

⁵⁶ Patricia Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, prejudice and race in colonial Algeria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 2-3.

to between the extremes of exile on the one hand, and the often bloody-minded affirmations of nationalism on the other? Do nationalism and exile have any intrinsic attributes? Are they simply two conflicting varieties of paranoia?⁵⁷

While Said construes exile as the state of being cut off from the way of life of a national group, it is important to show, as we have seen with Djaout's novel, the re-imagining of community and space occur from within and outside the boundaries of the nation in the novel. Considering the complex dynamic between exile and nationalism suggests the possibility of creating a "Third Space" in line with Homi Bhabha's thinking, like the invented desert in Djaout's novel, where real and imagined histories may intersect. Bhabha describes the "Third Space" as "unrepresentable in itself;" it "constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew."⁵⁸ Therefore, in *L'invention du désert*, these real and imagined histories accommodate a mode of experience where the individual and the collective become blurred concepts. This seems to be the space where Djaout can contest history and the dominant narratives of an Arabo-Muslim national identity to include his own people.

Critical Perspectives

Keeping in mind this complex interplay of exile and nationalism, we now take a closer look at how Réda Bensmaïa, Raji Vallury, and Jane Hiddleston have interpreted the space of the nation in Djaout's novel. Bensmaïa points to the impossibility of defining

⁵⁷ Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 177.

⁵⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*,

the territories that Djaout presents in his text and to the uncertainty of time and location where the stories take place, as well as whose story is being told. If, like Bensmaïa, we interpret Djaout's novel as a complicated (and perhaps empty) allegory for the construction of the modern nation, we see the relevance of Homi K. Bhabha's understanding of imagined communities, drawing on Benedict Andersen's *Imagined Communities* as a way to talk about the rise of nationalism:

[T]he space of the modern nation-people is never simply horizontal. The metaphoric movement requires a kind of 'doubleness' in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a centered causal logic. And such cultural movements disperse the homogeneous, visual time of the horizontal society."⁵⁹

In the same way, the national allegory in Djaout's novel enables a movement that breaks with homogenous, horizontal time and space of the nation. This type of movement disrupts the centeredness of the nation even in the process of constructing it. Bensmaïa even shows us how the "progressive emigration towards the dizzying desert" goes against "homogenous time," citing the following passage from *L'invention du désert*:

Mais un beau jour, les bornes capitulent devant le sable, l'eau s'enfonce loin dans la terre tel un scorpion apeuré, l'horizon s'abat comme une vieille clôture – et l'errance sans balises reprend. Les jours et les nuits se confondent, les hommes et les bêtes fusionnent... C'est pourtant à lui de trouver l'eau, la parole qui revigore, c'est à lui de révéler le territoire – de l'inventer au besoin.⁶⁰

But one fine day, the boundaries surrender to the sand, the water sinks deep into the earth like a frightened scorpion, the horizon collapses like an old fence – and the aimless wandering without landmarks is taken up again. Days and nights merge, men and beasts fuse... Nevertheless, it is up to him to find water, the word the reinvigorates; it is up to him to reveal the territory – to invent it as needed.

⁵⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 141.

⁶⁰ Djaout, 122. Translation in Bensmaïa, "Postcolonial Nations: Political or Poetic Allegories?," 75, modified.

The metaphor therefore allows for this kind of displacement or transport of meaning that goes against the notion of homogenized territories and linear time. The fictional world does not adhere to the same logic as the “real world,” and thus the process of narrating fictional history can be seen as a form of contestation of “real history.” Bensmaïa also speaks to the effect of negating the conventions of this latter history: “No places of memory, then, and no landmarks; no more ancestors, either, or symbols or allegories to wrap it all up and make a beautiful story, to offer itself up as a beautiful totality... the Algeria of today ‘is not a place of *history!*’ It is rather a place in the process of becoming, a place to be made, constructed, (re)written.”⁶¹ For him, the making of this place requires that certain commonplaces be torn away from their history, and that Algeria be torn away from the conventions of the modern nation. This resituating of the cultural and political elements of Algeria might have the effect of creating a territory that, according to Bensmaïa, would more closely resemble a true history of Algerian independence.

Raji Vallury has substantially engaged with Bensmaïa’s article, and in her analysis she reasserts the significance of metaphoricity for writing the nation and providing multiple narratives of national history as opposed to destroying the concept. She shows how the desert allegory eschews the prescriptive idea of the nation by relying on metaphor. Referencing Paul Ricoeur, she highlights a tension that operates between identity and difference, one that ultimately creates new possibilities for redescribing the world, as Djaout does in his text. This analysis shows how metaphor is used to redefine

⁶¹ Bensmaïa, “Postcolonial Nations: Political or Poetic Allegories?,” 80-1. Emphasis added.

being in the world.⁶² While the narrator struggles to find a form to write the history of the Amazigh, metaphor seems to offer a quality of doubleness and movement that addresses the complexity of history and contradictions of the nation. Metaphor therefore provides a solution not only to centered and constructed narratives, but also to the empty void of the desert. Unlike Bensmaïa, Vallury suggests that even if this writing of difference and invention of new territory never comes to fruition, it still “makes possible a new mode of narration, an alternative cartography of the nation,” that results in new ways of connecting the present to the past.⁶³ Furthermore, this writing of difference recalls Said’s reflection on the renegotiation of the space of the nation which creates a frontier between those included and those excluded. It is ultimately this oscillation between the two poles in the production of a sense of belonging that may blur, as we have said before, the private and the collective. The effect is not the total effacement of the self nor the construction of an unbending narrative of nation. Rather, an opportunity is created for reinventing and rewriting history and identity. Djaout’s narrator therefore achieves a form of narration that relies on metaphorical devices and the “interweaving of the desert, the sea, and the sky... [to] save the nation from the potential madness, cacophony, and void of the desert.”⁶⁴ Moreover, Vallury shows how the “alternative mode of subjectification... occurs when subjects remove themselves from an allocated space to open one that did not exist before. Such disruption of the sensible field of experience

⁶² Vallury, “Walking the Tightrope,” 328.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 334-5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 337.

exhibits an aesthetic power not unlike that of the metaphor.”⁶⁵ Overall, Vallury’s article shows a path towards uniting the aesthetic and political function of texts to attain a more nuanced understanding of fiction, history, and the world.

Hiddleston’s approach to *L’invention du désert* relies much more on the signification of the act of writing and its function of fragmenting the narrator’s subjectivity. As the narrator continues writing, “he finds less that he rediscovers the present through the past, than that he becomes disoriented, separated from himself... [evoking] the disjunction between the Parisian cold and the heat of the desert.”⁶⁶ She then describes how “the recapturing of the past through writing is not a reassuring return to an origin but a painful and unsettling contact with another reality that leaves the narrator ill at ease in the present.”⁶⁷ In particular, she highlights the unknowability of the past that does not result in “an improved alternate reality, but a multiplication of perceptions that confuse and unsettle him [the narrator].”⁶⁸ The basis of her argument seems to be that “[i]f the narrator believes that writing has the power to create alternative landscapes, then, if it is a source of invention of other worlds, in *L’invention du désert* that world is never fully conjured.”⁶⁹ She also likens the naïveté of the child narrator in his reading and imagining of Europe to the narrator’s utopian ideal of inventing the desert through writing in order to imagine the future of Algeria. This reading seems to highlight the *mise*

⁶⁵ Ibid, 339.

⁶⁶ Hiddleston, “Rewriting Algeria, past and present: history and cultural politics in two novels by Tahar Djaout,” in *The Fiction of History*, ed. Alexander Lyon Macfie (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 154.

⁶⁷ Hiddleston, “Rewriting Algeria,” 154.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 155.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

en abyme of the narrator's story within Djaout's text, therein highlighting the instability of both narratives. Hiddleston suggests that the narrator in the present "is distraught and alienated by the attempt to narrate his childhood, as creative activity is a painful process, it is naggingly compulsive, resists completion, and throws up a multitude of sensations and traces that never cohere to provide either personal or national identity."⁷⁰ What is interesting about her interpretation is that she arrives at a question about whether the narration can ever totally conform to that which is personal or that which is national.

This argument does not consider the displacement and movement created by metaphor, nor the complex dynamic between the individual and the collective; in a sense, these categories do not need to be mutually exclusive, because the boundaries of inclusion can be constantly renegotiated. Hiddleston's ultimate conclusion is that the text "uncover[s] the limited potential of the writing process as a space for the creation of an alternative national identity, and remain[s] modest about the ability of the novel to herald an improved national community by means of creative activity."⁷¹ However, what the novel does accomplish is the creation of doubt about Algerian national history. While I agree with this analysis, especially in the importance of alternative histories for challenging official versions, I think that it misses the richness of the text's metaphors and how they mirror a displacement or movement of meaning. Overall, we have seen how nationalism and exile are never truly discrete concepts, how the boundaries between the individual and the collective are mediated, and how metaphors defy homogenous

⁷⁰ Ibid, 156.

⁷¹ Ibid, 160.

space and time. The role of writing and creation might not entirely modify the dominant versions of historical events, but we can see how it opens up the horizon for alternative versions of history.

In conclusion, the geography and history of North Africa, the dispersion of a Amazigh dynasty, a conceptualization of desert space and time, and exile abroad informed the narrator's notions of self. This cartography of self helps us understand how the narrator's search for the location of Amazigh identity is mediated through experiences with the world. However, his perspective often challenges the narratives of history, space, time, and identity surrounding the unified vision of the nation. This suggests a fragmentation that comes with different experiences of space and time – the village when the narrator is a child, versus exile in the North. This fragmentation is further complicated by the imagination of the desert and Europe, and therein the implications of metaphorical space intersecting with real space. This intersection is particularly significant for examining the contradictions of the nation, a concept is constructed across a horizontality of belonging that does not always hold up given the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion it creates, the construction of difference in some form, and the destabilizing relationship between the individual and the collective. Because Amazigh identity did not fit within the assertion of an Algerian national identity that largely excluded them, metaphorical space provides an alternative realm for asserting a reality sometimes absent from sanctioned histories.

CHAPTER III

THE AFTERLIVES OF LANGUAGE: REFLECTIONS ON ASSIA DJEBAR'S *LE BLANC DE L'ALGÉRIE* AND *VASTE EST LA PRISON*

In this chapter, I address the localized violence of the *décennie noire* in Algeria through two works by Assia Djébar that attempt to recapture the voices of her friends and imagine how they would speak to her if they were still alive. Her works propose a form of language to commemorate her friends that highlights the linguistic plurality of Algeria and go against the state's Arabization programs. Referring to the first chapter of *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (1995), I examine Djébar's use of Dante Alighieri's *De vulgari eloquentia* and how she incorporates the idea of vernacular language as a way to commemorate those killed in the violence of 1990s Algeria. I also refer to her reflections on history and language in *Vaste est la prison* (1995), and especially to the final sections of the work in which she refers to the *décennie noire*, or black decade.

In this chapter, I engage more explicitly with the politics of Arabization in Algeria and Réda Bensmaïa's elaboration on vernacular and vehicular languages. I explore the idea of the afterlives of language in terms of how language can persist after someone's death, the language used for commemoration and funerary rites, and the ways that this type of language can go beyond state-sponsored use. Furthermore, I look at how Djébar's proposition for a different kind of writing, and identification of a linguistic community, connects to Dante's theorization of language. Does this constitute an attempt to shape history through the codification of a certain type of language, or by proposing a historical counter-narrative?

The Language of Commemoration

Le blanc de l'Algérie begins with Djébar recounting her intentions about the book; namely, she wishes to speak of the deaths of three of her friends who were Algerian intellectuals, relaying her friendship with them and describing how they died and their funerals. Lastly, she wishes to show “ce que chacun de ces trois intellectuels représentait, dans sa singularité et son authenticité, pour les siens, pour sa ville d’origine, pour sa tribu” (what each of these three intellectuals represented, in their singularity and authenticity, for their own people, for their home city, for their tribes).⁷² In highlighting their singularity and authenticity, she honors them in their own unique ways, specifically through their voices as the mark of singularity, and the roles they played in their own communities. She refuses the idea of polemicizing or lamenting them in a literary style; rather, she seems to recollect the sound of their voices, to imagine how they would speak to her even after death, emphasizing the liveliness of their voices before they died. However, in her preface she also points out how the funeral liturgy delivered in traditional style broke down, especially in remembering the funeral of Kateb Yacine, as certain groups chanted Amazigh or feminist slogans. Jane Hiddleston summarizes:

When the Imam starts speaking in classical Arabic, the crowd shouts out against the inappropriate nature of this language, since they perceive it as a symbol of the Islamist desire for monolingualism that oppresses speakers of Berber dialects, namely Kateb himself.⁷³

⁷² Assia Djébar, *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 11.

⁷³ Jane Hiddleston, “Political Violence and Singular Testimony: Assia Djébar’s *Algerian White*,” *Law & Literature*, 17, no. 1 (2005): 9.

Hiddleston also goes into the context of the political violence of the *décennie noire* and shows what was at stake in the conflict between the *Front de Libération Nationale* and Islamic terrorists, and in particular how both attempted to suppress dissent. For the FLN, it was through a stringent policy of Arabization, whereas for the Islamists, it was through the creation of a new Islamic community.⁷⁴ Therefore, Djébar underlines a certain negotiation of the politics around language that occurred at the site of these funerals. She pushes for new rites and rituals in these circumstances: “l’écrivain une fois mort, et ses textes pas encore rouverts, c’est autour de son corps enterré que s’entrecroisent et s’esquissent plusieurs Algéries” (once the writer has died, and his texts not yet reopened, it is around his body that several Algerias intersect and sketch themselves).⁷⁵ The nation, according to Djébar, seeks its own ceremonial in different forms from one cemetery to another.⁷⁶ This process contrasts with the urgency spelled out in Réda Bensmaïa’s introduction regarding the immediate aftermath of independence: Bensmaïa asserts that for artists at the time, “each creative act is a matter of life and death, because each of their gestures, each of their choices, lays the foundation for things to come.”⁷⁷ He sees the urgency of forming a national identity at the time of independence, whereas Djébar focuses on the context of the political violence of the 1990s, which failed to deliver on the promises of independence and decolonization. Her text instead shows how the public

⁷⁴ Hiddleston, “Political Violence and Singular Testimony,” 1.

⁷⁵ Djébar, *Le blanc de l’Algérie*, 12.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Réda Bensmaïa, “Nations of Writers,” in *Experimental Nations: Or, the Invention of the Maghreb* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), 14.

mediated language over the graves of its intellectuals rather than the intellectuals shaping a national language after independence.

The Poetics of ‘White’

Djebar’s first chapter of *Le blanc de l’Algérie*, “La langue des morts,” details the way she talked to her friends, the particularities of using French together, and the Arabic intonations she heard in their voices. According to Edwidge Tamalet Talbayev, recapturing their voices, or imagining how they would speak to her after death, even in a more affectionate or friendly manner than permitted by formalities while they lived, she does not necessarily succeed in representing the voices exactly as they were.⁷⁸ She continues to feel their presence even after death, resistant to letting them go entirely. At the beginning of the second chapter, she elaborates on the color white, the three days of white which perhaps refer to the days of mourning; the white of dust present on the days following death, which infiltrates them; the dust of forgetting, the white fog of death. She then mentions the forgetting, or erasure that stems from public elegy:

Pas le blanc de l’oubli. De cet oubli-là : les mots des éloges publics, des hommages collectifs, des souvenirs mis en scène. Non : car tous ces mots, bruyants, déclamés, attendus, tout ce bruit les gêne, mes trois amis; les empêche, j’en suis sûre, de nous revenir, de nous effleurer, de nous revivifier !⁷⁹

Not the white of oblivion. Of that oblivion: oblivion of oblivion, even beneath the words of public eulogies, collective tributes, dramatized memories. No, because all these words, noisy, declaimed, expected, all this noise embarrasses my three friends; and, I am sure, prevents them from coming back, to offer us their light touch, to bring us back to life.

⁷⁸ See Edwidge Tamalet Talbayev, “Whiting out Algeria: On the Limits of Assia Djebar’s *Le Blanc de l’Algérie* as Post-Traumatic Liturgy,” *Countertext* 4, no. 2 (2018): 212.

⁷⁹ Djebar, *Le Blanc de l’Algérie*, 56. Translation in Assia Djebar, *Algerian White*, trans. David Kelley and Marjolijn de Jager (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 51.

Both Hiddleston and Edwidge Tamalat Talbayev reflect on these ‘poetics of white.’ Talbayev points out that the rites of state-sponsored funerals co-opted the deaths of those killed as a result of political violence, erasing them and relegating them to “the white of oblivion.”⁸⁰ For Hiddleston, white is not only the color of mourning – especially for the generation of Algerian intellectuals – but also the color of the blank page, blank because of the Islamic terrorists’ attempts to undermine literary or intellectual resistance. Algeria is also white because it has been emptied of its richness and vitality.⁸¹ Hiddleston also notes Djebbar’s anxiety about the capacity of language to represent atrocities, though Talbayev works more to expose the limits of the idea of representing her friends’ voices and creating another form of language to oppose “coercive political forms.”⁸²

Djebbar, Dante, and the Vernacular

I take a different approach in this chapter by resituating Djebbar’s reference to Dante and comparing it to her treatment of language in other works. After referring to the kind of erasure that occurred in state-sponsored tributes, and considering how this prevents her friends from coming back and bringing life to their loved ones, Djebbar writes that she asks for nothing except that her friends continue to haunt her. It is at this point that she introduces Dante and his concept of the vernacular:

Il y a déjà six siècles et demi, un nommé Dante, exile à jamais de sa ville de Florence, appellera cette langue « le vulgaire illustre. » « Nous le disons illustre parce que, illustre, illuminant et illuminé, il resplendit » [...] Ainsi, mes amis, quand ils me parlent et si je pouvais au moins saisir un peu de leur langue ‘liée par la poésie’: Dante compare ce langage des chers absents qui, pour nous approcher, défient la frontière réfrigérante de notre vie, derrière laquelle nous

⁸⁰ Talbayev, “Whiting out Algeria,” 215.

⁸¹ Hiddleston, “Political Violence and Singular Testimony,” 3-4.

⁸² Talbayev, “Whiting out Algeria,” 216.

*nous alourdissons, Dante compare cette langue—qui ressemble à la vôtre, lorsque, impalpables, vous me revenez—‘la panthère parfumée’, l’animal mythique des bestiaires médiévaux.*⁸³

Already six and a half centuries ago, a man called Dante, permanently exiled from his city, Florence, was to describe this language “the illustrious common speech.” “We call it illustrious because, both illuminating and illuminated, it shines forth” [...] So it is, when my friends speak to me, if I could catch at least a little of their language “linked with poetry”; Dante compares this language of the absent dear to us, who in order to approach us defy the freezing frontier of our lives behind which we take on weight, Dante compares this language—which is like yours when you come back to me intangibly—to the “perfumed panther,” the mystical animal of medieval bestiaries.

In Book I.xi of Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia*, his argument about language becomes clear. He has hunted language in vain so that it could be employed for Italian secular institutions and to revive the Italian poetic tradition. Moreover, in searching for the Italian vernacular, he must find a dialect that is accessible to all speakers, even those of minor varieties.⁸⁴ In describing the differences between languages like Latin, which he qualifies as a *gramatica* (grammar), and the vernacular, he holds up the vernacular as the illustrious, more “noble” language, “[first], because it was the language originally used by the human race; second, because the whole world employs it... and third, because it is natural to us, while the other is, in contrast, artificial.”⁸⁵

There is a larger connection with Djebbar’s poetics of white and Dante’s text, which appears in the section where he discusses the unsuccessful hunt for the vernacular.

⁸³ Djebbar, *Le blanc de l’Algérie*, 56. Translation in Assia Djebbar, *Algerian White*, 52, modified. Italics in the original.

⁸⁴ Steven Botterill, “Introduction,” in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, ed. and trans. Steven Botterill, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), xxiii.

⁸⁵ Dante Alighieri, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, ed. and trans. Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 3.

He takes up his hunting equipment once again, and states that he seeks a language to which all others can be compared: “Likewise with colors, all are measured against white, and held to be brighter or darker as they approach or recede from that color.”⁸⁶ He goes on to analogize the actions of Italians across different cities: “the most noble actions among those performed by Italians are proper to no one Italian city, but are common to them all.”⁸⁷ Furthermore, among the actions common to all Italians is the vernacular speech that he hunts, which “has left its scent in every city, but made its home in none.”⁸⁸ In a similar way, Djébar searches for a vernacular that would commemorate her friends and that belongs to all people but transcends their own speech.

In her analysis of a passage in which Djébar cites Dante, Karla Mallette argues that Djébar’s themes are exile, death, and the nation, and that what Djébar seeks is “the language that her dead might use in order to continue to speak to her: this will be the tongue both of history (the language that allows the past finally to speak) and of the future.”⁸⁹ Mallette also notes that Dante’s panther was to represent the literary future of Italy, though for Djébar it was to represent the past, the voices of intellectuals who haunt her.⁹⁰ In any case, it is evident that in introducing the concept of the vernacular in this transhistorical framework, Djébar considers both the past and future of language in

⁸⁶ Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, 39.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Karla Mallette, “Dante as Poet of Exile and Resistance,” *Like Doves Summoned by Desire: Dante’s New Life in 20th Century Literature and Cinema, Essays in Memory of Amilcare Ianucci*, ed. Massimo Ciavolella and Gianluca Rizzo (New York: Agincourt Press, 2012), 119.

⁹⁰ Mallette, “Dante as Poet of Exile and Resistance,” 120.

Algeria. Here we must acknowledge the implications for the linguistic past and future, which Mallette outlines:

As *grammarians*, Dante grants Djébar a vocabulary to depict linguistic complexity and, crucially, migrations between tongues. Dante sketched a linguistic map of the world in which no region possessed a single, unifying language. So too, in Djébar's telling, Algerians live their lives (culturally, socially, even psychologically) between languages.⁹¹

Gayatri Spivak has pointed out how Djébar's French shares more with Edouard Glissant's creolization than with the French of other Francophone writers because of the importance of Arabic for her writing. According to Glissant, creolization results from the relations between cultures or elements that produce different identities.⁹² For Spivak, Djébar's reference to Dante in *De vulgari eloquentia* further highlights this creolization in terms of how it appears in his work, as he understood Italian as consisting of varieties of creole.⁹³ For the sake of this chapter, I find it important to mention both the linguistic plurality and creolization in Djébar's work, and to connect them to the early contexts of antiquity and the Middle Ages which gave rise to the linguistic situation in Algeria. Spivak notes that the languages of power in Algeria: "Latin, Arabic, Turkish, and now the confected Arabic that is the 'national language' of Algeria."⁹⁴ Going back to show the historical situation of colonization and the complex interaction of languages relates as much to the past of Algeria as to the present, and perhaps the future. Even in *Vaste est la*

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 161.

⁹³ Gayatri Spivak, "How to Teach Assia Djébar: An Afterword," in *Approaches to Teaching Assia Djébar*, ed. Anne Donadey (New York: MLA, 2017), 161. See also Gayatri Spivak, "World Systems and the Creole, Rethought," in *Creolizing Europe: Legacies and Transformations*, eds. Rodríguez Encarnación Gutiérrez and Tate Shirley Anne (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 26.

⁹⁴ Spivak, "How to Teach Assia Djébar," 161-2.

prison, the narrator delves into considerations of language going back to antiquity, and the book in the end considers the violence of 1990s Algeria, as we will see. These concerns are not removed from each other, but rather show how the historical linguistic situation challenges the narrative of colonization throughout history and the contemporary political situation.

Djebar's more pressing concern, however, is to preserve the voices of her friends, voices which she compares to the "fragrante douceur" (fragrant softness) of the perfumed panther, which the animals in the medieval bestiary followed.⁹⁵ Rather than seeking in the vernacular a new, more lively Italian cultural language like Dante, Djebar wishes for the vernacular to signify the individual's trace in their voice and their idiomatic language. She fears losing their voices to oblivion, which speaks to her personal desire not to lose the voices of the people whom she holds dear, but also to the fear that their voices and opinions would be suppressed or coopted. Even if there are limitations in her desire to create a different language to commemorate them, this work serves as an important reminder to call out the mechanisms of localized violence and power, and to negotiate—if not to insist on—the diversity of the linguistic and political community and the voices that shape them.

Categorizations of Language

Réda Bensmaïa gives us another pathway to reflection on the cultural arena of languages in the Maghreb. Moving away from the false dichotomy of Arabic and bilingualism, and high versus low languages, he articulates that Maghrebi authors were

⁹⁵ Djebar, *Le blanc de l'Algérie*, 56.

not dealing merely with one or two languages, but rather with four different types of languages: vernacular, vehicular, referential, and mythic.⁹⁶ Bensmaïa references Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* to elaborate these categories.⁹⁷ Vernacular is composed of several different languages; the example he gives is of mother tongues of rural communities, such as Arabic, Kabyle, or Tourag, which then overlap with what he describes as a nomadic or deterritorialized language, which is neither Arabic, French, nor Kabyle. This language stems from various sources and words that had emigrated from other languages.⁹⁸ Bensmaïa qualifies the vehicular language as a national language. For example, the national language in Algeria was French for quite a long time, which was then replaced by Arabic, and later in certain economic settings by English. In short, the vehicular is the language of economic and political powers, defined in this case by the interplay of French, Arabic, and English. Bensmaïa highlights how Henri Gobard's work demonstrates the capacity of vehicular languages to destroy vernacular languages.⁹⁹ A referential language emerges from oral or written references in proverbs, sayings, literature, and rhetoric. Here it is unclear whether he includes Kabyle as a vehicular language, however: "All the vernacular languages carry within them pieces of the past, as do the three main vehicular languages: Arabic (in the poems and texts of Emir Abdelkader, for example), Kabyle (in the poems of Si Mohand in Kabylia), and

⁹⁶ Bensmaïa, "Nations of Writers," 16.

⁹⁷ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1975).

⁹⁸ Bensmaïa, "Nations of Writers," 16.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 17.

French (the works of francophone writers, historians, archivists, etc.).”¹⁰⁰ The last category is the “mythic language” which, to quote Deleuze and Guattari, “acts like a last resort, a verbal magic whose incomprehensibility is understood as irrefutable proof of the sacred.”¹⁰¹ In Algeria the mythic language would be literary Arabic, which he qualifies as “the language of religious and spiritual reterritorialization.”¹⁰²

I find these categorizations particularly useful, because they show how diverse the linguistic situation can actually be, and they offer a strong contrast to the politics of Arabization and the efforts assert a monolingual identity for Algeria. Furthermore, by showing the damage that vehicular language can do to vernacular language, this theory illustrates the importance of Djébar’s upholding of the vernacular of her friends’ language in terms of both the linguistic past and future for the nation. In attempting to restore the history of languages in the region, as Djébar does in *Vaste est la prison* with Tamazight, we see both a refusal to comply with the politics of Arabization and also an effort to pass on the legacy of language to the future.

The focus on the accessibility of different types of languages appears in *L’amour, la fantasia* as well. Speaking of the situation just before colonialism, the narrator details the four different kinds of language at the disposal of young women in the region. While men were legally allowed to have four wives, young women had four languages:

nous disposons de quatre langues pour exprimer notre désir... le français pour l’écriture secrète, l’arabe pour nos soupirs vers Dieu étouffés, le libyco-berbère quand nous imaginons retrouver les plus anciennes de nos idoles mères. La quatrième langue, pour toutes, jeunes ou vieilles, cloîtrées ou à demi émancipées,

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 17.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 18.

¹⁰² Ibid.

demeure celle du corps que le regard des voisins, des cousins, prétend rendre sourd et aveugle, puisqu'ils ne peuvent plus tout à fait l'incarcérer ; le corps qui, dans les trances, les danses, ou les vociférations, par accès d'espoir ou de désespoir, s'insurge, cherche en analphabète la destination, sur quel rivage, de son message d'amour.¹⁰³

we have four languages to express our desire... French for writing in secret, Arabic for our muffled sighs towards God, Libyco-Berber when we imagine finding the oldest of our mother idols. The fourth language, for all, young or old, cloistered or half-emancipated, remains that of the body that the watch of neighbors, cousins, supposedly renders deaf and blind, since they can no longer completely incarcerate it; the body which, in the trances, in dances, or shouting, by access to hope or despair, rebels, seeks in the illiterate a destination, on a shore, of its message of love.

The perspective on the different kinds of language, and in particular the kinds of language accessible to young women, shows a reflection on what ways language can escape or go beyond its sanctioned uses. Much like in Bensmaïa's analysis, it is not so much which languages, but which types of languages, are used in official discourse versus as vernaculars.

Vaste est la prison and the Transmission of Berber Language

In Djébar's *Vaste est la prison*, a narrative about Isma and her infatuation with a colleague gives way, in a middle section of the book, to a rendering of the history of the Roman conquest of Carthage. In turning to this history, the narrator details the discovery and rediscovery of the Libyco-Punic Mausoleum of Dougga in Tunisia and the efforts of various European travelers from the seventeenth century through the nineteenth century to decipher the bilingual inscription on the monument. A transcription of seven lines had been copied and brought to the British Museum depicting the writing on the mausoleum;

¹⁰³ Assia Djébar, *L'amour, la fantasia* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1985), 254-5.

at a certain point in time the monument had been disassembled, with parts brought to Europe. In a chapter titled “*Le Secret*,” the narrator reveals that while throughout the nineteenth century, scholars believed that the inscription concerned a forgotten, lost language, the research of paleographers confirmed that this old African language (“vieil africain”) was in fact Libyc, the same as “barbare,” later known as “berbère,” spoken by the Amazigh people, the indigenous inhabitants of the North Africa.¹⁰⁴ Djébar writes that for the nineteenth-century scholars, “cette écriture étrange s’animait, se chargeait d’une voix au présent, s’épelaît à voix haute, se chantait” (‘this strange writing came alive, was a voice in the present, was spoken loud, was sung’).¹⁰⁵ The scholars were in fact right that this language persisted in the present, having both preceded and outlived the Phoenician language and culture in the region. However, the narrator notes that at that same time in the nineteenth century, the indigenous Amazigh people would have known the language only as an oral dialect, with no written form. In other words, if the Europeans discovered that the written language was also spoken, the Amazigh were poised to discover that the spoken language was also written. This episode in the novel therefore contrasts the experience of discovery of Europeans with the continuity of the language and the knowledge of the indigenous Amazigh.

At the end of these passages, we learn that the results of restituting this language are mixed, in the sense that the narrator feels disconnected from the language. However, keeping in mind this ambivalence, this passage presents interesting possibilities in terms

¹⁰⁴ Assia Djébar, *Vaste est la prison* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 145. Translation in Assia Djébar, *So Vast the Prison*, trans. Betsy Wing (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999), 147.

¹⁰⁵ Djébar, *Vaste est la prison*, 145. Translation in Djébar, *So Vast the Prison*, 147.

of the interplay of language, history, and knowledge in the Maghreb. These passages foregrounds the region's plurilingualism rather than Arabic/French bilingualism, destabilizes the speech/writing binary, and addresses the status of different kinds of knowledge about the history of the region. By focusing particularly on the precolonial history of the Maghreb, these passages demonstrate the resistance and flexibility necessary for the language to survive multiple centuries of occupation with continuous linguistic and cultural exchange:

Si ce supposé « dialecte » d'hommes qui parlèrent tour à tour punique avec Carthage, latin avec les romains et les romanisés jusqu'à Augustin, et grec puis arabe treize siècles durant, et qu'ils continuèrent, génération après génération, à garder vivace pour un usage endogamique (avec leurs mères, leurs épouses et leurs filles essentiellement), si ce parler remontait jusqu'à plus loin encore ?¹⁰⁶

Suppose this so-called of men who spoke by turn Punic with Carthage, Latin with the Romans and the Romanized up to Augustine, and Greek, then Arab for thirteen centuries, continued, generation after generation, kept alive for endogamic use (mainly with their mothers, their wives, their daughters.) Suppose this speech, this language [...]went back even further!

There is a contradiction between how the language survived multiple centuries—in part by adapting to the various local idioms present in the region—and the political and linguistic precarity at the time that Djébar wrote, with the culmination of violence of the Algerian civil war in the 1990s. On a personal level the 'Berber question' was complicated for Djébar; it was the language of her ancestors, and while she could understand it, she could not speak it. However, Fazia Aitel indicates that Djébar began to engage more with the Berber question in her public appearances throughout her career.

¹⁰⁶ Djébar, *Vaste est la prison*, 145. Translation in Djébar, *So Vast the Prison*, 147.

Aitel translates an acceptance speech Djébar delivered in Frankfurt in 2000 for the *Prix de la paix des libraires allemands*:

I also believe that the language of my origins, that of the Maghreb as a whole, I mean the Berber language, that of Antinea, queen of the Tuareg who were long governed by a matriarchy, that of Jugurtha, the ultimate symbol of resistance against Roman imperialism, this language that I cannot forget, which rhythm I inhabit even though I do not speak it, is the way which, against all wishes, I say within myself “no”: as a woman, and above all, I think, as a writer.¹⁰⁷

Djébar later in her speech credits Berber as her language of resistance, which had shaped both her personality and literary career.¹⁰⁸ Yet, to go back to *Vaste est la prison*, Aitel also suggests that the fact that the middle section about precolonial history is bookended by autobiographical content might indicate a more personal struggle with the place of the language in the narrator or Djébar’s own history. In *Ces voix qui m’assiègent* (1999), she recounts her relationship to Berber language: “Les multiples voix qui m’assiègent – celles de mes personnages dans mes textes de fiction –, je les entends, pour la plupart, en arabe, un arabe dialectal, ou même un berbère que je comprends mal, mais dont la respiration rauque et le souffle m’habitent d’une façon immémoriale (I hear the multiple voices that besiege me – those of my characters in my fictional texts – for the most part in Arabic, in a dialectal Arabic, or even in a Berber that I understand badly, but whose hoarse breathing lives immemorially within me).¹⁰⁹ Her inability to speak the language does not prevent her from identifying it as a fundamental language that lives within her

¹⁰⁷ Fazia Aïtel, *We Are Imazighen: The Development of Algerian Berber Identity in Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2014), 207.

¹⁰⁸ Aïtel, *We are Imazighen*, 207.

¹⁰⁹ See Assia Djébar, *Ces voix qui m’assiègent* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999).

and through which her characters speak to her, which relates to the importance of how her friends would speak to her if they were still alive.

Interestingly, at the end of *Vaste est la prison*, there is a return to the context of the political violence in 1990s Algeria. The last section, “Yasmina,” brings the novel to a close with the image of the title character in a ditch. The narrator recounts her mourning during this general period: “pleurer si souvent des amis assassinés, ces précédents jours : sangloter chaque matin, persister à marcher, à danser le soir, cœur durci : jours mauves, sanguinolents et zébrés de l’exil ; une jeune fille – condisciple de ma fille, il y a peu – est abattue” (sobbing every morning, but continuing to walk, dancing at night with a hardened heart – days of exile, mauve, streaked with blood...; a young girl, who went to school with my daughter not long ago, has been killed.)¹¹⁰ The reason for the young girl’s death was that she refused exile, staying in Algeria as a teacher, but also in order to proofread for an independent newspaper.¹¹¹ The circling back to the context of political violence, and the mourning of Yasmina, connects to the desire to uphold a vernacular language for commemorating those killed during the 1990s. The fact that the history of Tamazight (or Tifinagh, the new alphabet derived from ancient Lybic writing), appears before this narrative, suggests that Djébar searches for a kind of language that constructs an alternative history and opposes official discourse, even when this language proves elusive or difficult to trace, as with Dante’s vernacular.

¹¹⁰ Djébar, *Vaste est la prison*, 343. Translation from Djébar, *So Vast the Prison*, 353.

¹¹¹ Djébar, *Vaste est la prison*, 353.

In conclusion, Djébar uses Dante's conceptualization of the vernacular to oppose state-sponsored commemoration of her friends killed during the *décennie noire* violence. This connects to different ways of remembering or searching for vernacular language and a history excluded from dominant narratives. We have seen the importance of evaluating different types of language in terms of their capacities to resist sanctioned uses. The important factor is not so much which language to use, as creolization is an important part of the linguistic landscape in the Maghreb, but rather the function of the language in question. Although elusive, the goal is to aspire to certain forms of language that, common to all, transcend the speech of individuals.

CONCLUSION

In this project, I have outlined some of the ways in which post-independence Maghrebi texts present historical counter-narratives. In the works I have examined, Driss Chraïbi, Tahar Djaout, and Assia Djebar deal specifically with the context of political repression in the 1980s and 1990s. They incorporate precolonial and Amazigh history as a way to reflect on the Maghreb beyond the contemporary political situation, in the sense that post-independence nation was built on a different history than the distant past. The more relevant history to the post-independence nation was the victory over French colonial rule, which allowed for the creation of a homogenizing national identity. These texts counter that history by showing the interplay of language, history, and knowledge from centuries past. The texts foreground plurilingualism and complex cultural encounters rather than Arabic monolingualism and the assertion of a unilateral Arabo-Muslim identity.

This speculative mode of writing about the past represents a different way of looking at history and at the transmission of culture and language. In the absence of definitive historical narratives about these kinds of transmission, these writers turn to literature to give voice to a certain perspective absent from other sources. Chraïbi, for example, imagines a medieval Amazigh character and his plan for the survival and regeneration of his people. He ultimately connects this context to the 1980s, where echoes of Azwaw's words can be heard in Raho's reflections in the present, evidencing both transformation and continuity in the Amazigh cultural identity. Djaout looks for other spaces to reflect on the Amazigh identity outside of the space of the modern nation,

and in so doing crosses the boundaries between real and imagined places, including the desert. Meanwhile, the focus on the vernacular in Djébar's texts shows that this form of speech can perhaps say something that official discourse cannot: it can speak for her loved ones even after they have died. In the context of mourning, the commemoration of specific individuals intervenes in the cultural public discursive space of the contemporary moment to oppose the type of language used in public ceremonies. Out of concern for the locality of violent encounters, and the need to process them, these writers therefore turn to literature to represent historical realities that fall outside of official discourse.

Rewriting the precolonial past gives these writers another tool to oppose the consolidation of an exclusive national language, history, and identity; it allows them to reassert the centuries of history and of linguistic and cultural exchange that have shaped the past, present, and future of the Maghreb.

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