Untranslating the Maghreb: Reckoning with Gender in Literature and Film from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia

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Greta K. Bliss

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Judith E. Preckshot, Adviser
Hakim Abderrezak, Co-Adviser

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I. Maghrebi Women, Untranslating: An Introduction

Toutefois, si d'autres publics attendent de nous des témoignages journalistiques qui nous feraient reprendre une nouvelle version du rôle traditionnel de la pleureuse (du style « lamentez-vous, ô femmes esclaves et prisonnières ! »), grâce à Dieu, nos improvisations ou notre recherche sur les contradictions, sur les mystères de notre condition, ne se feront pas ainsi sur commande… Nous ne nous avançons pas au-devant d'une scène ; nous cherchons seulement comment vivre, chez nous et ailleurs.

Assia Djebar, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent* (85-6)

"في الالفية الثالثة، ثمة عصور أخرى، بلايص أخرى، عيشة أخرى...أحنا ما حناش سراب..."

[Subtitle on U.S. DVD:] In the third millennium, there are other epochs, other places, other lives…we are not a mirage…

Bedwin Hacker/Kalt in *Bedwin Hacker* (Dir. Nadia El Fani)

NADIA. *Qu'est-ce que tu connais de moi? De mes origines? Rien. Pour toi tout ça c'est de l'exotisme!*

Nadia to Jean-Philippe in *Une Porte sur le ciel* (Dir. Farida Benlayzid)

Definitions: Untranslation and Reckoning with Gender

Although each of the quotations above comes from a very different text and context, a common theme emerges as they articulate their respective viewpoints. Djebar resents Western readers who clamor for testimonies of women's suffering; El Fani's female hacker heroine shatters the notion of Tunisia as an empty "mirage" through which European stereotypes are projected; and Benlayzid's Moroccan protagonist chastises her French boyfriend for his ethnocentric, "exoticist" understanding of her spiritual renaissance. Each of these utterances represents a similar critique: a female-gendered Maghrebi narrative voice refuses to participate in the mistranslation of its/her culture in the West. As such, each one of these epigraphs exemplifies the performance of what I call an "untranslation."

Broadly speaking, untranslation refers to the range of mechanisms by which a text intervenes in its immanent role as a cultural translation.[1] In this coinage, the prefix un- does not refer to a reversal of the classic practice of translation, in which a written text is converted from one language into another, for instance from Arabic to French, or from Berber to English. In the context of the Maghreb, where writers and filmmakers are fluent in multiple languages, the traditional understanding of "translation" does not suffice, cannot comprehend the constant trafficking between and among cultures and cultural codes. Moreover, writers and filmmakers have multiple ways of describing and understanding the "translations" they do in their work.[2] In this study, I treat "translation" as a metaphor to describe two distinct dimensions of cultural translation: first, the switching, mixing, and transfer between or among languages that characterize sociolinguistic life, and hence literary and cinematic production in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia; and, second, the transmittal of cultural meaning via literary and cinematic work from the Maghreb to the West.[3] Untranslation at once marks and troubles the immanent

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[1] My notion of "untranslation" differs from the use of this term by scholar Laura Lomas in her study of the nineteenth-century Cuban journalist, revolutionary, and migrant José Martí, in *Translating Empire: José Martí, Migrant Latino Subjects, and American Modernities*. Martí wrote Spanish-language essays and translations of Anglophone texts that critiqued United States expansionism and anti-Latino prejudices. Lomas uses the term "untranslation" to refer to her methodology of "retransfer," that is, translating Martí's Spanish-language works "back" into English. Realizing the potential of translation as critical and creative practice, Lomas's "[u]ntranslation enjoins a North American audience to recognize its historical relationship to Latin America through the eyes of the anticolonial Latino migrant" (30-31). As far as I know, Lomas and I are the only scholars to have used the term "untranslation" in a postcolonial studies context.

[2] For example, Abdelkebir Khatibi, who writes in French, describes translation as follows: "[Francophone] Maghrebian literature is a translation from French into French, and not, as one tends to think, a transcription of the native language into French" (158).

[3] I understand "culture" as the special combination of linguistic, economic, ethnic, historical, generational and religious experiences that make it a unifying site of human experience. By extension, texts that cross borders between classes, genders, religions, and even individuals could be considered "translational," though here I want to concentrate on those texts that cross from "the Maghreb" to "the West."

translations that occur in both of these situations. Refusing to participate in "translation as usual," an untranslational text puts its readers or viewers on a different track. Yet while the texts quoted above help to illustrate the central concept of untranslation, such clear articulations of resistance are not the only ways in which untranslation happens. It is never "pure." Rather, it works as a negotiation between translation and non-translation, representation and interference. As such, untranslational texts are works of literature and cinema that both enjoin and initiate untranslational critique between cultures. I define "culture" in broad terms such as "Maghrebi" (which includes "Algerian," "Moroccan," "Tunisian"); "French," "Western," "Arabo-Islamic," and "non-Western." As I will discuss below, I also use categories such as "the figure of Maghrebi woman." These terms are not stable; the choice to use them is a heuristic one but also a gesture of critical mimicry—since cultural translation works, problematically, as a representation of an entire society.

If Maghrebi women's texts suggest the untranslation, it is with good reason. The rapid growth of Maghrebi women's literature and film as a sub-genre of French and Francophone literature points to a larger dynamic in world culture markets as a whole. The success of Maghrebi women's literature is, in part, a function of the enduring Western desire for Orientalist "knowledge" about the Arabo-Islamic "other."[4] This knowledge is very often (though not, of course, exclusively) gathered via examinations of the condition of Arabo-Islamic women. Problematically, the literary or cinematic figure of Maghrebi woman is often reduced to a kind of "native informant," or cultural

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[4] Here I use "other" in the Saidian sense, as used in *Orientalism* (325).

translator," in keeping with the gendered Western construction of "the Orient."[5] The

translations produced are not only wrong; they also tend to reinforce the patriarchal

exchange of women as symbols of dominant cultural values.

Readings that view the Maghrebi woman author or filmmaker as a native recall

nineteenth- and early twentieth-century epistemologies formed within academic

disciplines, including literature, science, and colonial ethnology. The importance of

translation—and the translational function of objects such as literature, artifacts, and

images—emerges throughout Edward Said's *Orientalism*.[6] Consider, for example, Said's

discussion of how the *Société asiatique*, a French learned society (est. 1822), understood

the objects in their museum to function. Commenting on the appearance of the word

"truchement" in the *Société*'s 1922 program, Said links its perspective on cultural

products as intermediaries with Orientalist translation, interpretation, knowledge, and

power:

> *Truchement* derives nicely from the Arabic *turjaman*, meaning
> "interpreter," "intermediary," or "spokesman." On the one hand,
> Orientalism acquired the Orient as literally and as widely as possible; on
> the other, it domesticated this knowledge to the West, filtering it through
> regulatory codes, classifications, specimen cases, periodical reviews,
> dictionaries, grammars, commentaries, editions, translations, all of which
> formed a simulacrum of the Orient and reproduced it materially in the
> West, for the West. (166)

Similarly to cultural artifacts in a colonial museum, Maghrebi literary and filmic texts are

still susceptible to being read, in the West, as "translators," "intermediaries," and

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[5] Said uses the term "native informant" critically to describe one of the ways in which the figure of "the
Muslim" is viewed/used in Western discourse: "At best, the Muslim is a "native informant" for the
Orientalist" (301).
[6] See Said's *Orientalism*, including but not limited to pages 20, 40, 44, 52, 63, 118, 121, and 165-66.

"simulacra," not just of individuals, but of entire cultures. Because Maghrebi literary and

cinematic "intermediaries" are always working between spaces of asymmetric power and

influence, mistranslation is bound to occur. Often, these works' significance is

(mis)shaped by the cultural norms of the dominant power, i.e. those of the West. They

have thus often been "reduced to anthropological or cultural case studies" (Bensmaïa 6).

The figure of Maghrebi woman is an example of a Western "simulacrum" *par*

excellence. In Orientalist epistemology, "woman" serves normatively as a translational

shorthand for values of an entire culture.[7] Fedwa Malti-Douglas gives an economical and

satirical account of the kind of questions that Western cultures ask, with clockwork-like

predictability, of/about "Arab woman":

> The Arab Woman is a most fascinating creature. Is she veiled? Is she not
> veiled? Is she oppressed? Is she not oppressed? Were her rights greater
> before Islam? Are her rights greater after Islam? Does she have a voice?
> Does she not have a voice? Book titles and book covers in the West tell
> part of the tale: behind the veil, beyond the veil, veiled women, partially
> veiled women, voices that have been heard, voices that are waiting to be
> heard, and on and on. (3)

If the "book titles and book covers in the West tell part of the tale" then their contents

promise to tell—translate, render legible—the rest.[8] But when that text is a novel or film

that contains an untranslation, particularly an explicit one, it gives us pause—not only

about its immediate utility as a cultural translation, but also about the assumptions and

the intentions we bring to our reading.

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[7] This mode is further reinforced by dominantly patriarchal modes of signification governing all the cultures involved. See Section 2.

[8] See also Richard Watts, *Packaging Post/Coloniality*, for an analysis of how cultural meanings are conveyed via the paratexts (notably the images on the covers) of works of Francophone literature. Watts also discusses the gendered and Orientalist aspects of cover art on Maghrebi women's texts, treating (for example) the various manifestations of the "self-conscious traffic in cultural identity" in images appearing on the covers of original and translated works by Algerian francohone writer Malika Mokeddem (169).

My choice to study women's texts may seem to repeat the gesture of establishing "truth" about "Arab women." This is not the intention. Rather, my choice of these texts is analytic. The combination of their authorship and subject matter, as texts "by and about Maghrebi women," makes them the most charged with the immanent "baggage" of gendered cultural translation. Certainly, the untranslations developed in this study are inextricably bound up with neo-Orientalism, as well as with oppositional critique against Orientalist translations. The works I study all go some way toward refuting Western stereotypes of Maghrebi women and replacing them with alternative representations. Yet what is more important, and what I aim to demonstrate, is that these texts effectively unmask, disrupt, and critique the *ways in which Western translations of the Maghreb happen*. Thus, the choice to study women's texts in particular is not because these texts are the *only* way to talk about untranslation—nor the only way to talk about gender!—but rather because they manifest the problem of gendered cultural mistranslation.

In this study, I aim to show some of the ways in which Maghrebi women's fiction untranslates both the Maghreb and, more importantly, the symbolic and economic relationships between the Maghreb and the West. By deploying untranslational plots, themes, figures and tropes, Maghrebi women's fiction is creating an alternative mode of reading, intervening in critical debates in postcolonial, feminist, and translation theory. In the present chapter, I highlight the historical and theoretical background (or intertexts) of this movement. In Section One, I trace the historical terrain of language, colonialism, and translation in the Maghreb. In Section Two, I introduce the theoretical background to untranslation by exploring key ideas in postcolonial translation theory and poststructural

feminisms. In Section Three, I present the geneaology of "Maghrebi-Woman-as-Translation" as my project's central problematic, which I examine in light of postcolonial feminist theory. Section Four demonstrates how untranslation is both textual (generated by the text) and critical (generated by the reader). Following two brief literary examples of untranslation in novels by Tunisian writer Fawzia Zouari and Algerian writer Maïssa Bey, I introduce the ensuing chapters on Djebar (Chapter 2), El Fani (Chapter 3), and Benlyazid (Chapter 4).

1. Translation and Language in the Maghreb: A Brief History

The history of colonization is also a history of translation.[9] Colonized spaces are inherently translational spaces because they are subject to the linguistic and cultural idioms of the occupying power. Colonizing powers have always deployed translation—formal and metaphorical, linguistic and cultural—as a key tactic in imperialist strategy. In other words, translation is not only "about" representation. Rather, it becomes an integral part of the colonial or imperial enterprise. During France's colonial domination of Algeria (1830-1962), Morocco (1912-1956), and Tunisia (1881-1856), French language, culture, and bureaucracy consistently "translated" (transformed, transmitted, and interpreted) the space of the Maghreb into French terms. By spreading French language

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[9] See, for diverse examples of—and approaches to—the historic role of translation in imperialism, Eric Cheyfitz's *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from the Tempest to Tarzan* (1997), Lydia Liu's *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (2004), Tejaswini Niranjana's *Siting Translation: History, Poststructuralism, and the Colonial Context* (1992), Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Shaden Tageldin's *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt* (2011), and Lawrence Venuti's *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (1998).

and culture through education (in the form of schools for Europeans and a small minority

of native elites) and legal bureaucracy, France systematically marginalized and, in some

places, eradicated manifestations of native culture. In the place of, or superimposed upon,

extant modes of social organization and education, French language and culture carried

out the work of the so-called *mission civilisatrice.*[10]

The epistemological and physical violences of colonial translation brought about a

deep transformation in the sociolinguistic dynamics of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. At

the time of the French invasion of Algiers in 1830, local languages included classical

Arabic and regional Maghrebi Arabic (forms of *darija*) as well as the large family of

Berber languages, which constitute a first language (mother tongue) for millions of

Maghrebi people, especially in rural areas (the major Maghrebi Berber languages are

Tashelhit, Kabyle, Atlas Tamazight, Riffian, Shawi, and Tuareg). For those in the elite

and middle classes, the transformation of the colonized self into the terms of French was

hard to resist, not only due to its violences but also due to its "seductions" (Tageldin). In

the Maghreb, as with other regions of the world colonized by France, embracing French

language, culture, and discourse was rewarded with access to education, social prestige,

networks of capital, and legal representation (sometimes, some form of citizenship and

voting was also offered to select groups). For most people living under French

colonialism, absorbing the occupying power's linguistic and cultural idioms was a means

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[10] For historical discussions of the use of culture in French colonial practice, see, for example, Raymond Betts's *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914*; Alice Conklin's *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (1997); Frederick Cooper's *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (2005); David Prochaska's *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône, 1870-1920* (1990); Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978); and Benjamin Stora's *Histoire de l'Algérie coloniale (1830-1954)* (2004).

of obtaining more material safety and security, as well as social power. Yet fluency and literacy in formal French was (and still is) reserved for a small, mostly urban elite and middle class; the vast majority of people were not considered eligible for education in colonial schools. Simultaneously to the introduction of French, the colonial regime officially classified Arabic and Berber languages as *foreign* within the French-run education and legal system.

However, although French became a dominant Maghrebi language, it never eradicated the Maghreb's other languages. Indeed, the use of these languages was, and remains, a means of resistance against French linguistic hegemony. (At the same time, anticolonial nationalism was also expressed in French—see Section Three). During the national liberation struggles, Arabic was widely and popularly used as an idiom of resistance against French. For example, the motto of the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale was *"one religion, Islam, one language, Arabic, one nation, Algeria"* (Saadi-Mokrane 54).[11] Since decolonization, Arabization, intended as a means of "cultural decolonization and social equity" (Berger 2), made Modern Standard Arabic the official State language. In Algeria, the FLN-run government made Arabic-language state education free and accessible for all.[12] Since 1956 (Morocco and Tunisia) and 1962 (Algeria), many generations of school children have been educated in literary Arabic such that it has, in turn, become a dominant language in law, government, and the

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[11] This slogan was a reformulation of the saying "Islam is our religion, Arabic is our language, Algeria is our country" by Sheikh Ben Badis, a leader of the 1930s Ulema (nationalist) movement. Badis, an accomplished scholar of literary and Qur'anic Arabic, was fluent in French but also saw the potential of Arabic as a conduit for a unifying cultural nationalism to counter French hegemony (Berger 3).
[12] For more on Arabization, see Berger, Ennaji.

technological sciences.[13] Arabic-language literature was also promoted during

Arabization. Arabophone education permitting, some Maghrebi writers, including Rachid

Boudjedra, Tahar Ouattar, Abdelhamid Benhedouga, Leila Abouzeid, and Ahlam

Mosteghanemi, chose to write in Arabic. Others who had not been educated in literary

Arabic, such as the Francophone writer Kateb Yacine, refused to continue writing novels

in French and turned to theatre written in popular dialects. According to Lucette Valensi

in her article on post-Independence literature in Algeria, "writers of Arabic . . . were

honored for giving the most authentic expression of the Algerian people and were

promoted to the role of censors" (144).[14]

Yet even as Arabic has become a dominant language in law, government—and, at

times, culture—French remains the most powerful Maghrebi language in many contexts.

Historically detested as the language of the colonizer, vocally rejected in the wake of

national liberation, French nonetheless remains a *lingua franca* –or even a "vernacular" –

of sorts (Valensi 145). French may be heard (particularly in elite and/or highly educated

circles) in the form of *argot* in daily speech or as *français soutenu* in formal settings.

Moreover, French, which is still commonly taught as a first foreign language in state

schools, is a dominant language in contexts including business, education, law, politics,

and (along with English) diplomacy with the West. France is the primary trading partner

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[13] This leads to some counterintuitive results. For example, in Morocco, some of the most vocal supporters of Arabization also send their children to private French schools (Sadiqi 46-47). People in underprivileged settings, whose spoken languages include Berber languages and *darija*, are alienated from the power of both French and formal Arabic. Rural and working-class speakers therefore fall through the cracks. Some activists have criticized Arabization "as a political means of distancing the lower classes from powerful French" (Fatima Sadiqi 46-7). Meanwhile, others might suggest that the continued hegemony of French is a good way of distancing everyone from Arabic.

[14] For a fuller account of censorship in Algeria, see Gafaiti, "Between God and the President."

of all three Maghrebi countries; often it "is the primary supplier, purchaser, and foreign investor," engaging the Maghrebi in relationships in which France is the main beneficiary (Boukous 134). The continued economic prestige and power of France in the Maghreb puts the "post" of postcolonialism under erasure. In Morocco, as if fulfilling the prophecy of France's colonial discourse, French is viewed (and, it must be underlined, *experienced*) as a "langue de *distinction*" and an "*ouverture* sur le monde," "the world" thus defined as a space where the French language has prestige and power (Laroui 74 emphasis in the original). Tunisia's linguistic makeup tells a similar story. While Tunisia is more diglossic than triglossic (since only a tiny percentage of the population speaks a Berber language), according to the 2007 report of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, 63.1% of Tunisians are Francophone.[15] The Maghrebi culture industries, especially in publishing, also reflect the continued power of French. According to Richard Jacquemond, "[i[n the *Maghrib* countries, . . . books written in French (whether imported or locally produced) still represent close to 50 percent of the total book sales" (140, italics in original).[16] While many Maghrebi authors have written in Arabic since decolonization, Francophone literature continues to outweigh Arabophone literature.[17]

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[15] This is compared to between 13 and 19% of Moroccans who are full or partial speakers of French, and "plusieurs millions" Algerian French-speakers (20), estimated to be at 11.2 million in 2008 (2010 OIF report).

[16] For a comprehensive description of publishing in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia from the perspective of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, see its 2006-2007 report (141-146). This report gives insights into the status of literary publishing in the Maghreb and the relationship between French and Arabic literary publishing.

[17] Lucette Valensi details the history of French and Arabic literature since independence in her article "The Scheherazade Syndrome." Valensi argues that "[w]riting in French was stigmatized as a symptom of cultural alienation, of dependence on French culture and the French market; it was seen a sign of contempt for the local audience and as an elitist attitude. It is true that, for Algerian writers, France remains the only place to find legitimation . . . But this was not their primary goal" (145). For more, and alternative views on French vs. Arabic in publishing, see Saadi-Mokrane 56-7 and Tageldin "Which *Qalam* for Algeria?"

The deep linguistic influence of French colonization is most obvious in Algeria, which France claimed and colonized the most deeply of all its colonies (1830-1962). Djamila Saadi-Mokrane suggests that, "[g]iven the circulation of the French language [in Algeria today], some might say that Algeria is the second-largest Francophone country, after France itself" (54). Indeed, although Algeria is expressly not a member state of *La Francophonie*, increasing numbers of businesses and professional opportunities require French (Mandraud). Thus the influence of French in Algeria, taught as the first foreign language from fourth grade onwards, has actually expanded since decolonization. The reasons for this go beyond a mere taste for the prestige associated with French, as suggested by the language of the OIF's 2007 report, which cites the "engouement actuel pour le français dans le monde arabe (notamment en Algérie)" (30). Similarly, Isabelle Mandraud's 2012 article in *Le Monde*, "La langue française, "butin de guerre", prospère en Algérie" presents Algerian French as having organically taken on a life of its own:

> Le "butin de guerre" cher au grand écrivain algérien Kateb Yacine, qui décrivait ainsi la langue française au lendemain de l'indépendance de l'Algérie, a été bien conservé. Journaux, affiches publicitaires, enseignes commerciales, jusqu'aux commentaires des matches de football sur les radios, ou dans les conversations, où il se mélange parfaitement à l'arabe parlé, le Français [sic] est partout présent dans les rues d'Alger.
>
> La capitale s'apprête à accueillir dans l'effervescence le président François Hollande, en visite d'Etat les 19 et 20 décembre, quelques jours avant la fin de l'année du cinquantenaire des accords d'Evian.
>
> Pas une langue officielle, mais pas tout à fait non plus une langue étrangère, le français a suivi, ici, tous les bouleversements de la société. Autrefois réservée à quelques privilégiés durant les cent trente années de colonisation, la langue de Molière s'est paradoxalement développée… après l'indépendance.

Alongside the expanding claims of *Francophonie* upon the Maghreb, translation, or, perhaps more accurately, "code-switching" between languages is quotidian for most Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians, particularly in urban areas. This pluralism maps onto a range of historical and contemporary inequalities and hierarchies, engendering what Moroccan writer Fouad Laroui describes as a *drame linguistique* (in the Algerian context: a drama that Hafid Gafaïti qualifies as "explosive" ("Monotheism" 19)). Laroui's term "drama" covers a situation of both "richness" and "diversity" which nonetheless poses "de redoutables problèmes en ce qui concerne *l'enseignement* et, plus généralement, *l'acquisition du savoir*" as well as provoking "des conséquences sociales et psychologiques graves" (137, italics in original).

Since decolonization, various sociolinguistic combinations of both formal French and Modern Standard Arabic have tended to dominate and delegitimize the Maghreb's other major (spoken) languages: Berber languages and Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian forms of *darija*. In particular, those for whom Berber languages are the primary spoken (maternal) language are often the most disempowered. Sociolinguists of the Maghreb describe it as a space of cultural and linguistic *mixité*, characterized by diglossia or triglossia (between Arabic, Berber, French, and other European languages). Speakers' cultural identities, education, ambitions, and loyalties map onto their layered identification with different languages. In linguistic terms, Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians live in a setting where *code-switching* is the norm.[18] Those with the most

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[18] Drawing on Meisel, (1989), Penelop Gardner-Chlors offers a definition of "code-mixing" as "the fusion of two grammatical systems," and "code-switching" as "the pragmatic skill of selecting the language according to the interlocutor." Code-switching could also describe the switching between two monolingual

education, resources and power also have the most liberty to code-switch at will. From a

sociolinguistic perspective, code switching "reflects social differences and tendencies

within the same society and language combination . . . just as it reflects those *between*

different societies and different language combinations (Gardner-Chlors 21). The

distribution of languages in Morocco is not equal across social classes. The least

privileged members of society, lacking formal competency in French and/or Arabic,

cannot choose freely between languages; nor can they gain access to numerous social and

professional realms.

Code-switching is not only a matter of richness and exchange; it is also an

expression of epistemic violence. This is the view of Moroccan literary critic Abdelfattah

Kilito in his *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language* (originally published in 2002 under the

title *Lan tatakalama lughati*). Drawing on work by the ninth-century Muslim philosopher

al-Jahiz, Kilito imagines the situation of the bilingual as one who is constantly

"mistreating" both languages (26). The bilingual speaker does not possess, but is rather

possessed by, two "antagonistic" languages, themselves locked in a constant battle of

"mutual injustice and belittlement" (23). As suggested by Laroui's notion of "linguistic

drama," this situation has clear psychosocial ramifications; the bilingual "is in constant

movement, always turning, and since he looks in two directions, he is two-faced" (Kilito

23). This situation of "turning back and forth" between languages and idioms—which

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systems in the course of a speech event. Sociolinguists do not agree on the definition of either occurrence,
since they use different terms and methodologies. Gardner Chlors-points out that, in practice, there is much
overlap between code-switching and code-mixing (13). We could imagine that, in a multilingual situation,
people do both.

generates critique through a kind of linguistic two-facedness—often underlies the untranslational gestures found in Maghrebi women's texts and films.

In sum, to understand the Maghreb's linguistic makeup is to understand a situation of immense cultural richness and linguistic expertise, but also one of tensions, hierarchies, and violences. Thus, the "clouding" of translation statistics in the Maghreb cited by French translator of Arabic Richard Jacquemond takes on a particular kind of significance (140). Maghrebi "translation"—and, for that matter "untranslation"—cannot operate or be measured through an essentialist view of language. Multilingualism brings both ownership and at-homeness in the spoken languages, as well as alienation in both, a condition that Jacques Derrida explores at length in *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*.[19] (Such explorations also point to the instability or insufficiency of language itself—to the uneasy recognition that "everything is translation" (Khatibi 158).) Untranslation helps to establish a deeper understanding of the Maghreb's cultural expressions, particularly against the backdrop of colonial translation. Building on the critical positioning of most postcolonial translation theory, I view translation as a force that Maghrebi texts must work both with and against. Following the cue of postcolonial translation theorists, I suggest that untranslation is not only a critical perspective *on* Maghrebi fiction, but also a force inhering *in* that fiction. It is an expression of, and a bid to work against (or *tout contre*, as Assia Djebar would put it[20]), translation's overwhelming propensity for epistemic violence.

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[19] For examples of writing on the subject of at-homeness/alienation in one's languages, see, for example, Derrida, Khatibi, Kilito.

[20] See "Preface," *Femmes d'Alger.*

2. A Translational Tale: Postcoloniality, Poststructuralism, Feminism

My theory of untranslation builds on the theories of Edward Said in *Orientalism,*

in which *formal* translation (among other epistemological and disciplinary forms) plays

an integral role in the Western construction of the category "the Orient." Invoking and

developing this model in *Siting Translation* (1992), Tejaswini Niranjana explains the

colonial impulse inherent in (post)colonial translation, which she, in turn, broadens to

cover numerous literary, cultural, and institutional forms:

> In creating coherent and transparent texts and subjects, translation
> participates—across a range of discourses—in the *fixing* of colonized
> cultures, making them seem static and unchanging rather than historically
> constructed. Translation functions as a transparent presentation of
> something that already exists, although the "original" is actually brought
> into existence through translation . . . Translation is thus deployed in
> different kinds of discourses—philosophy, historiography, education,
> missionary writings, travel-writing—to renew and perpetuate colonial
> domination. (Niranjana 3).

Similarly to Niranjana, my project begins from the broadly dualistic Saidian model of

dominator/dominated and the view of translation as a possible site of "resistance" against

domination and hegemony. I also consider models of translation as "seduction"

(Tageldin), "surrender" (Spivak), and, at times, as a negotiation between these models. In

all cases, however, the dualism colonizer/colonized remains as a historical condition.[21]

Yet even as colonial translation has historically "fixed" colonized cultures and

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[21] At the same time, however, my work is informed by new developments in postcolonial translation theory, notably Shaden Tageldin's theory of translation as a form of "seduction" that disguises its violence as a mutually desirable outcome for both seducer and seduced (see Chapter 2). The limits of this binary or "oppositional" model have been pointed out in work that both invokes it and points to its limits. See, for example, Spivak, Gandhi, Liu, Tageldin, and others.

"perpetuate[d their] domination," Niranjana also underlines that "the "original" is actually brought into existence through translation." Thus colonizing translation always already contains the seeds of its undoing, and the "original" can always be contested.

Translation is, variously, a form of epistemic violence, desire, resistance, critique and innovation. Many theoreticians of translation return to the classic practice of literary/textual translation in order to show how it can either reinforce or disturb extant dynamics of power (Venuti *Scandals* 158). Yet scholars differ on the ideal methods of combating "relations of domination and dependence" through translation. Lawrence Venuti promotes "foreignizing" translational methods over "domesticating" ones. *Foreignizing* translations privilege the idioms, grammar, and syntax of the translated (con)text. In a foreignizing translation, the translating language is modified to allow space for the expression of the alterity of the original. By contrast, *domesticating* translations transform the original text into the idioms and norms of the translating language. Foreignizing translations are the more ethical, according to Venuti, because they allow foreign texts in translation to be "written, read, and evaluated with greater respect for linguistic and cultural difference" (*Scandals* 7). Nonetheless, while translators should aim to make foreignizing translational choices, Venuti suggests, translations always "inevitably perform a work of domestication" (*Scandals* 6). Translation's inherent epistemic violence stems from the fact that "a translation always communicates an interpretation, a foreign text that is partial and altered, supplemented with features peculiar to the translating language, no longer inscrutably foreign but made comprehensible in a distinctively domestic style" (*Scandals* 6). In practical terms, this

means that the translator must make his or her choices with an acute awareness of the conditions of production of the original text, as well as the asymmetries of power between the translated and translating cultures (Venuti "Translation, Community, Utopia" 483).

Within French studies, a good example of work that uses translation as both a metaphor for, and indicator of, historicity in cultural exchange is Richard Watts's book, *Packaging Post/Coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World.* Watts examines the paratexts of Francophone works in order to measure how they indicate "the changing understanding of the colonies and postcolonies" (4). He qualifies translation as a preeminent "trope" of analysis that allows him to get at "the shifts over time in these cultural translations as [historical] markers" (4). Watts argues that while earlier works of colonial Francophone literature "tended to present the text as culturally foreign, exotic, or different," which had the function of making it "recuperable" (what he calls "adaptive translation"—Venuti's "domesticating" translation), the more contemporary paratextual style is one that "tends to translate more literally and leave inviolate the text's 'right to opacity' (Glissant)" (Watts 20). Preserving opacity, essentially refusing to render "transparent" in translation, is one of the methods of untranslation in the works I study.

In their call for preserving difference in translation, Venuti and Watts echo the thinking of Gayatri Spivak in her 1993 essay, "The Politics of Translation." In this essay, Spivak insists upon the need for translators to respect "the rhetoricity of the original" (202). As a specialist in translating between European and non-European languages

(notably English and Bengali), Spivak is interested both in the metaphoric power and practical mechanics of translation. Transmitting the "rhetoricity" of the original text in a foreignizing translation is a challenge because it involves an encounter with radical difference. For this reason, it is tempting for a translator to use extremely "domesticating" methods (Venuti). In Spivak's terminology, this would mean privileging the demands of the "logic" over those of "rhetoric." The result would be a translation that "jump[s] from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections" (202). Such a method fails to render the encounter with alterity that a foreign text should engender, which Spivak describes as the "uncanny" "experience [of] contained alterity in an unknown language spoken in a different cultural milieu" (202). This uncanniness arises from the productive tensions between logic and rhetoric. Spivak argues that translators— *particularly* those working across the vast power differentials from less powerful world languages to European languages—must preserve, rather than gloss over, these tensions. "Rhetoricity," the Spivakian equivalent of foreignizing translation, preserves the "jagged relationship between rhetoric and logic," thus "work[ing] in the silence between and around words" or terms (203).

Though allowing space for rhetoricity may be difficult, Spivak is unwavering in her advocacy of this method, because "without a sense of the rhetoricity of language, a species of neo-colonialist construction of the non-Western scene is afoot. No argument for convenience can be persuasive here" (203). "Convenience," that is, methods of translation that domesticate source texts to match Western systems of logic about the Other, result in what Spivak calls "translatese," a style of translation that fails to account

for rhetoricity by flattening the cultural and linguistic nuances of the original text, "so

that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose,

something by a man in Taiwan" (204). Instead of difference-flattering translatese, Spivak

advocates what she calls an intimate "surrender" to the text:

> First then, the translator must surrender to the text. She must solicit the
> text to show the limits of its language, because that rhetorical aspect will
> point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards
> off, in its special manner. Some think this is just an ethereal way of talking
> about literature and philosophy. But no amount of tough talk can get
> around the fact that translation is the most intimate act of reading. Unless
> the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, she
> cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text.
> ("Politics of Translation" 205)

Framing this theory in terms of her own experience of a translator from Bengali to

English,[22] Spivak imagines this "surrender" as as a form of "erotics" rather than "ethics":

"Paradoxically, it is not possible for us as ethical agents to imagine otherness or alterity

maximally. We have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical"

(205). During translation, ethics, or "the good-willing attitude 'she is just like me' is not

very helpful" because of its domesticating impulse.[23] By contrast, "erotics" begins with

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[22] Spivak also translates European languages (for example between French and English), but she qualifies this as involving a very different set of concerns.

[23] Spivak playfully compares translation with friendship between two different individuals. To the extent the two friends are not like each other, friendship "is more effective as a translation" –rather than an attempt to turn the other into the self (205). "Mere reasonableness will allow rhetoricity to be appropriated, put in its place, situated, seen as only nice. Rhetoricity is put in its place in this way because it disrupts. Women within male-dominated society, when they internalize sexism as normality, act out a scenario against feminism that is formally analogical to this. The relationship between logic and rhetoric, between grammar and rhetoric, is also a relationship between social logic, social reasonableness, and the disruptiveness of figuration in social practice. . . . [Furthermore,] rhetoric points at the possibility of randomness, of contingency as such, dissemination, the falling apart of language, the possibility that things might not always be semiotically organized" (209).

the assumption of the *difference* of—rather than automatic presumption of identification with—the Other.

Spivak likens her notion of surrender in translation to a kind of reading; in this sense, my notion of untranslation is a development of Spivakian translation. Spivak develops the metaphor of the "reader-as-translator" or "RAT" in the final section of her essay (222). The RAT embodies "sympathetic reading as translation," which is "not a surrender but a friendly learning by taking a distance" (222) or "a certain kind of clandestine postcolonial reading, using the master marks to put together a history" (224). Spivak's notion of reading as translation opens the door to a mode by which Western readers might read and interpret Maghrebi texts as cultural translations that complicate the very process of cultural translation. If literary and filmic texts are the primary—if not the only—space of encounter between two cultures, then untranslation, as a mode of critique, draws attention to the historical conditions of this encounter. Similarly to the figure of Spivak's "clandestine" RAT, the untranslator "sniffs out" how a text speaks (or refuses to speak) to us as a cultural translation, and tries to think about why that is. Along the way, untranslation calls us to account for how a text—or our reading of it—may risk performing a kind of "translatese."

The theories of translation discussed so far involve calls to account for and transmit "difference" in translation through "surrender" and through "foreignizing" translational methods. These themes imply that translation, if carefully practiced, *could* transmit something meaningful about the original—whether we understand "original" as culture or text. This maxim, which is arguably the motivating principle or desire behind

the very practice of translation itself, is central to the foundational essay in Western translation theory, Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator." First published in 1921 as the preface to his own German translation of Charles Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, the essay makes a strong case for translation as a "mode" of writing that "is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language . . . to shine upon the original all the more fully" (79). Quoting the German translator Rudolf Pannwitz, Benjamin articulates an ethics of translation that is often invoked by late twentieth- and early twenty-first century proponents of foreignizing translation:

> "The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language" (Pannwitz, ctd. in Benjamin 81).

The notion of attentiveness to "the primal elements" of the original language in "the foreign tongue" anticipates Spivak's idea of conveying the "rhetoricity" of the mother tongue. It also resonates with Venuti's idea of carrying difference over in translation to create a "foreignizing" effect. In his call for the language of translation to be "powerfully affected by the foreign tongue," Pannwitz implies the importance of recognizing cultural difference.

At the same time, however, Benjamin's essay—including the words he borrowed from Pannwitz—is punctuated by terms that could be problematic in a postcolonial context of global south-to-global north translation. For one thing, in the embedded

Pannwitz quotation, the notion of "expanding and deepening" our own language by "penetrating" the "primal elements" of another language has problematic resonances with imperial discourse (i.e. exploration and discovery through Western epistemological idioms). Moreover, Benjamin's philosophical/theological notion of a "pure language" that is "concealed in concentrated fashion in translations" (77), and of the essential reciprocity between all languages, seems to contradict Pannwitz's foreignizing ethic. For example, Benjamin's allusion to the story of Babel, "the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language" (77), which he claims not only for the poet but also for the translator-philosopher, could be seen as a universalist "Judeo-Christian" idiom that is not sufficiently attuned to the asymmetries of translational situations between European and non-European languages and cultures (Tageldin 25).[24]

That said, what some postcolonial scholars have found useful in Benjamin—and what I find useful for theorizing untranslation—is his radical questioning of the hierarchical relationship between original and translation. Benjamin's revolutionary valorization of translation over the original has two important consequences for postcolonial translation, as brought out in subsequent studies of "The Task of the

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[24] The debate over the relative merits and disadvantages of messianism in Benjaminian philosophy is the subject of a wide-ranging debate both within and outside of postcolonial theory, which lies beyond the scope of this project. See also Niranjana, De Man, Derrida. Among the complicated and rich questions coloring the debate, as I see it, are two important factors: (a) Benjamin wrote his essay in a historical context of translating between two European languages; his critical object was not imperialism yet the conditions of his essay's production *include* high European imperialism and his own ideological loyalties and consciousness as a Marxist and (b) fittingly, there is debate over the way in which key terms in Benjamin's original German-language essay have themselves been translated (or mistranslated) and understood (or misunderstood) in English.

Translator," notably in Tejaswini Niranjana's *Siting Translation* (1992).[25] First, Benjamin

elevates the status of the translator (and of a translation) to one of creativity and

philosophical subjectivity. Second, he destabilizes the notion of the essential meaning of

original. For Niranjana, Benjamin's notion of "pure language" is a "fiction" invented for

heuristic purposes (156). Rather than positing the actual existence of a "whole,"

Niranjana argues, Benjamin's "concern with fragmentation" (which he constructs through

the metaphor of languages making up the pieces of a broken amphora) throws into the

relief the inherent "instability" of the original, which is "either shattered continually or

was never 'whole' to start with" (156). What Niranjana finds useful here is both the

critique of representation and the idea of historical contingency: translation becomes

disruption. Similarly, when a text voices resistance to its immanent use as a cultural

translation, it interrupts the asymmetric traffic in power that south-to-north cultural

translation has engendered. It does so by questioning the notion that cultural translation

by the colonizer can (logically or ethically) represent an essential and fixed truth about

the (post)colonized other. Benjamin's emphasis on the lack of "fixity" in the original both

underlines the impossibility of essentializing the original and restores historicity to the

translated culture, thus reversing constructions of the Orient that would deny its lived,

historical "coevalness" (Fabian) as well as its historical constructedness.

Niranjana sees history as exercising a progressive influence on translation and

vice-versa. The meaning of an original text is not immediately graspable, assimilable, or

fixable because history changes. For Benjamin, the meaning of an "original" is best

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[25] Niranjana builds on readings of Benjamin by Jacques Derrida ("Des Tours de Babel") and Paul de Man ("Conclusions").

expressed / released in successive translations, which express the original's insights in terms of historical ""now-time" (*Jetztzeit*)," that "constellation of past and present [that] shatters the continuity of teleological history" (Niranjana 119). Thus, by formulating "the task of the translator" as "finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original" (76), Benjamin invokes the metaphor of translation as interpretation, a historically grounded practice that further potentiates the meaning, value, and impact of a text at any given time (Niranjana 116-18). This "historical impact" is felt thanks to the inherently interpretive, historically grounded nature of (good) translation. By theorizing the translator's role as interpreter, as philosopher, Benjamin reverses the traditional hierarchy between original and translation: "translation, ironically, transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering" (Benjamin 75). Despite the apparent finality of such language, Niranjana argues, Benjamin's text constantly returns us to history and to the fact that translation is never really finished: "all translation is . . . somewhat provisional" (Benjamin 74 ctd. in Niranjana 117). When read in the context of Benjamin's long-term work on history, Niranjana argues, "The Task of the Translator" at once reserves and constantly holds open the possibility of a "secondary rendering" (and a tertiary one, and so on) (Niranjana 117). In the context of works of cinema and film by Maghrebi artists that are circulated and interpreted in the West, one can see how this theory of constantly changing translation could encourage Western constructions to change over time, rather than forever "fixing" the Maghreb as the romanticized ethnographic "past" of Europe (75).

The potential for deferral of meaning in poststructural and postcolonial translation

theory is echoed in the feminist translation theory of Lori Chamberlain, Gayatri Spivak,

and others.[26] In "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation," Lori Chamberlain

examines the gendering implicit in the inferior positioning of translator/translation versus

author/original. According to Chamberlain, this structure may be read in terms of the

separation of producers (men) and reproducers (women) upon which patriarchy depends:

"the reason translation is so overcoded, so overregulated, is that it threatens to erase the

difference between production and reproduction, which is essential to the establishment

of power. Translations can, in short, masquerade as originals, thereby short-circuiting the

system" (66-7). Emphasizing the authority-destabilizing function of translation,

Chamberlain builds upon Derrida's extended metaphor of translation as "marriage":

> . . .[the] translation contract [is the] hymen or marriage contract with the
> promise to produce a child whose seed will give rise to history and
> growth. A marriage contract in the form of a seminar. Benjamin says as
> much, in the translation the original becomes larger; it grows rather than
> reproduces itself—and I will add: like a child, its own, no doubt, but with
> the power to speak on its own which makes of a child something other
> than a product subjected to the law of reproduction. (Derrida 191)

While Derrida's theory of the "child" produced by translation could be read as a mere

perpetuation of extant authority, he carefully specifies that, like the figure of the "child,"

translation is bound to be "something other than" what might be expected. Derrida's

double-reading of the hymen metaphor "implies that translation is both original and

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[26] Gayatri Spivak and Hélène Cixous, among others, have also articulated this affinity. For more on the figure of the feminine in Derrida's work, in which "a certain textuality of woman is established," see Spivak's essay "French Feminism" (199). Spivak also treats the relationship between feminism and deconstruction in "Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiations." Here Spivak discusses the relative merits and pitfalls of "see[ing] the figure of woman as a sign for indeterminacy" (143) or "another name for [the] irreducible double bind" of phallogocentrism (147).

secondary, uncontaminated and transgressed or transgressive" (Chamberlain 70). Indeed,

as Chamberlain explains, Derrida "subverts the very concept of *difference* which

produces the binary opposition between an original and its reproduction—and finally

[makes] difference undecidable" (Chamberlain 69, emphasis in original).

Such tensions and blurring between original and translation are important for

untranslation for (at least!) two reasons. First, if translations can "masquerade as

originals," then we are back to the dangerous power of translation—as representation—to

distort, classify, and control, as in Orientalist discourse. In this mode, the power of

translation "to speak on its own" makes Derrida's "child" a tyrannical figure, "renew[ing]

and perpetuat[ing] colonial domination" (Niranjana *Op Cit.*) However, to take Derrida's

child metaphor further, this is where the question of a translation's historical agency

comes in: if translation is a child, who are its parents? And what bearing does this lineage

have on the ways in which the child might voice "something other than . . . the law of

reproduction"? Literary and filmic translations and untranslations do not only fix, but

also may destabilize Western views of "the Maghreb" as an "original" text.[27] The "child"

that is a translation turns its critical gaze back upon the (re)productive "parents"!

Chamberlain's feminist reading of Derrida's gendered model of translation recalls

and rearticulates the close philosophical relationship between Western (particularly

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[27] At the same time, I am not entirely in agreement with Chamberlain in her claim that Derrida renders
"difference undecidable." It seems to me that Derrida's language carves out a space in which the child-
translation, unfettered from the bounds of any philosophical system, including deconstruction, could
potentially stake claim to a (decided) position of difference. Derrida underlines that the child must have the
"power to speak on its own, to utter something other than what may be expected of it." One wonders what
this "something other" might be. In the case of Maghrebi fiction, which often treats and speaks of
Manichean historical oppositions, the "power to speak on its own" may, tactically or otherwise, be
expressed oppositionally (e.g. in a strategically essentialist position).

"French") feminisms and poststructuralist philosophy. Gayatri Spivak has also worked on these affinities in the essay "French Feminism in an International Frame." The philosophical convergence between poststructuralism and feminism requires a transformation of the site "woman" into something other than a "representative" object of exchange of "culture" more generally. This transformation modifies the normative (structuralist) view, in which "culture" functions as a "general exchange of women, constitutive of kinship structures where women's object-status is clearly seen as identified with her reproductive function" (Spivak "French Feminism" 207). Spivak notes that "if women had indeed been symbolized, on that level of generality, as *users* of signs rather than as signs, the binary opposition of exchanger and exchanged, founding structures of kinship, would collapse" (Spivak *In Other Worlds* n. 45 392).

"French" feminists also work through psychoanalytic theory to problematize the "phallogocentrism" of the function of "the feminine" in patriarchal *langage*. Luce Irigaray (born in Belgium) and Hélène Cixous (born in Algeria) tackle the question of how women might theoretically become "users" of signs *outside* the phallogocentric regime of mimesis and representation. Irigaray argues that the symbolic reification[28] of the feminine in masculine economies of meaning is rooted in language's "specularisation" of woman as the inverted, negative Other. Phallogocentric accounts of the normative human subject as masculine depend on this feminine "Other."[29] According to Irigaray's reading of Freudian and Lacanian theory in *Speculum de l'autre femme* (1974), the phallic arrangement of language—and of the story of language itself—

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[28] "Le marché aux femmes" in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977) 167–85.
[29] Similarly, Orientalism depends on the Oriental "other" to stabilize the idea of the Occidental "self."

perpetually places woman in a secondary, supportive position in relation to human subjectivity, construed as male: "[la femme] ne dispose pas d'une mimétique spécifique de l'origine, mais doit *s'inscrire dans* le procès masculin, phallique, du rapport – répétition, représentation, reproduction – à l'origine" (Irigaray 94, emphasis added). Irigaray's language recalls the normative account of the relationship between original and translation: like a woman who must "inscribe" herself in relation to a male economy of signification, translation is traditionally gendered as an inferior (and therefore inevitably failed[30]) copy of, or support to, an "original" (read: masculine) text or meaning. The result is that, within language, the only "representation" woman can create is not of herself, but rather of man: "si besoin en est, elle [la femme] le représentera [l'homme]. Son corps « phallicisé » en étayera, et rappellera, le cours, en défendra le change, en garantira l'enjeu . . . " (87).

The double-bind of phallogocentrism leaves little issue for women's self-representation. In what seems like a riposte to Simone de Beauvoir's formulation "on ne naît pas femme, on le devient," Irigaray instead proffers the negative conditional: "La femme, comme telle, ne serait pas. N'existerait pas, si ce n'est sur le mode du *pas encore* (de l'être)" (207, emphasis in original). Female subjectivity, were it to exist, "would" have to be articulated from a place of radical difference, outside of extant language. Irigaray's notion of the "speculum," appropriated to reflect the female sex back to the female eye, implies—but does not guarantee—that women's self-representation in literature and film *might* be an approximative medium through which to *begin* to carve

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[30] "De n'avoir ni « vérité », ni « copies », rien de « propre », cette sexualité (dite) féminine . . . ." (Irigaray, *Speculum*, 97, emphasis in original).

out a feminine *langage*: "c'est dans les (encore) *entres* du devenir de l'être, ou des êtres, que quelque chose de son aspécificité pourrait se repérer" (207, emphasis in the original). Irigaray's continued use of the conditional mood emphasizes the impossibility of such an outcome. Her argument performs the double bind encountered by anyone attempting to describe how a "reflection" of woman "could" be articulated outside of phallogocentric language.[31]

Hélène Cixous approaches the problematic of representation differently with her notion of "écriture féminine." In *La jeune née*, as Cixous recounts her desire to escape the hierarchies of European colonialism as a Jewish *pied-noir*, she seems somewhat more optimistic than Irigaray. Cixous infuses women's reading and writing with a potentially transcendental power; the literary realm could provide an egalitarian space, "un lieu qui n'est pas obligé économiquement, politiquement, à toutes les bassesses et tous les compromis" (*La jeune née* 131-32). Cixous insists that writing "n'est pas obligé de reproduire le système," but is essentially a way to invent and construct "un ailleurs qui peut échapper à la répétition infernale" (132). Contradicting Irigaray's insistence on the double bind of language, Cixous suggests that feminine writing *already exists*. It can be practiced by both male and female writers, but its essential innovativeness is, necessarily, a function of its outsider status. Similarly to Irigaray, Cixous privileges marginality as a first step in generating a new representational space. She makes this clear in "Le Rire de la Méduse:"

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[31] Irigaray's transcendental notion of a hypothetical "specular" language, as a site of enunciating (impossible) feminine subjectivity, seems to recall (if oddly and uncannily!) Benjamin's idea of the never-attainable "pure language" that would express all languages perfectly.

> Impossible de *définir* une pratique féminine de l'écriture, d'une impossibilité qui se maintiendra car on ne pourra jamais *théoriser* cette pratique, l'enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu'elle n'existe pas. Mais elle excédera toujours le discours que régit le système phallocentrique; elle a et aura lieu ailleurs que dans les territoires subordonnés à la domination philosophique-théorique. Elle ne se laissera penser que par les sujets casseurs des automatismes, les coureurs de bords qu'aucune autorité ne subjugue jamais. (Cixous 45, emphasis in original)

Cixous's idea of feminine writing resonates with Chamberlain's notion of translation as a means of refusing to "reproduce" (masculine) meaning. Cixous theorizes feminine writing as a site of radical creation, voicing a difference and alterity. It refuses to be immediately fixed, commodified, and theorized by phallogocentrism. Cixous's definition depends on deferral: she suggests that *defining* feminine writing would effectively mean it no longer exists: indeed, its existence is qualified in terms of "excess" and marginality ("les coureurs de bords").[32]

In different ways, Chamberlain, Irigaray, and Cixous work on the key structural barriers to representing woman—a problematic that recalls (post)colonial translation. Indeed, Irigaray and Cixous both imply a *conceptual* overlap between historical colonization and the metaphoric "colonization" of language by patriarchal discourse. Both writers refer to Freudian theory, in which the female psyche is infamously "le continent noir." Cixous plays upon the racist trope of imperialism in "Le Rire de la Méduse:" "Ton continent est noir. Le noir est dangereux. . . . et l'horreur du noir, nous l'avons intériorisée" (41). In a similarly comparative rhetoric, Irigaray calls Freud's theory of penis envy a "[p]ostulat de l'impérialisme phallique" that leads the female child

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[32] Moreover, although one could posit feminine "writing" as a metaphor for non-literary forms of activity, feminine writing formally understood *as writing and reading* would be reserved for elite (literate and scholarly) women.

to turn away from her mother's body (which, according to Irigaray, *could have been* the model for the female sex/self) to "impose" upon herself an impossible but irresistible mimetic desire for powerfully defined/defining male symbols. (69-70). By comparing two different systems of domination—colonialism and patriarchy—Cixous and Irigaray compare two distinct (if overlapping) historical situations.[33] Concepts such as "the black continent" of female sexuality and "phallic imperialism" are not only an allusion to Freudian theory but also to its historical context of (and intertextuality with) high European colonialism.[34]

In fact, these comparisons are both constitutive and symptomatic of the complex, ongoing historical affinities and tensions between feminist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial modes of critique. The overlap between these fields marks the entrenched way in which entire cultures ("Western," "Oriental," "Muslim," "French," "Algerian," "American," etc.) continue to be "translated" (i.e. represented, constructed, stereotyped across cultural, geographic and linguistic frontiers) via the figure of woman. If "woman" is normatively conceived as an object of exchange *within* a culture, then this figure also readily serves as an object of exchange *between* cultures. If the symbolic figure "woman" is viewed normatively, as a reproductive vessel of meaning, and if translation is also viewed normatively, as a reproduction of the original, then woman, too, can be viewed (normatively) as a site of cultural translation. A central question motivating this dissertation is: in practice, what is the range of outcomes possible for this figure, woman-

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[33] To go a step further, they also reveal the "imperial phallogocentrism" of their own critical language!
[34] Ranjana Khanna explores this point thoroughly in *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (2003).

as-translation? How does she/it function, and how could she/it function? Is it possible to conceive of woman-as-translation operating otherwise—untranslationally? And, if she/it could, how would untranslation come about?

3. The Genesis of Maghrebi "Woman-as-Translation"

This dissertation attempts to unpack the question of how literary and filmic portrayals of Maghrebi women might function as untranslations. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the history of this figure. The first widespread European circulation of the literary figure "Maghrebi woman" coincided with the French colonization of the Maghreb. It existed in the writings of (mostly male) European colonizers, including members of the military and clergy, as well as civilian settlers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The early twentieth century in particular saw the advent of a new sub-genre of literature termed "Algerianist." Inspired by Naturalism, Algerianist novels were classified by metropolitan intellectuals as belonging to the wider genre of the "colonial novel" (Dunwoodie 132-33). Colonial novels functioned as documentary ethnography, helping normalize and promote colonial domination along the way.

In *Writing French Algeria,* Peter Dunwoodie characterizes the figure of Maghrebi woman within Algerianist literature as "a central element when encoding the exotic décor – an element of the natural world, passive, compliant, bereft of any civilized language" (80). For Algerianist authors, Arabo-Islamic women characters encode the European "domestication" of the Maghreb, itself coded as an empty, exotic, savage space that potentiates exploration and self-discovery by a "radically self-reliant" white male

protagonist (143). Such literature also figured Arabo-Islamic women as both the signs—

and the victims—of Muslim and Berber culture (Dunwoodie 146). The overtly

ethnographic presentation of this material masked its Orientalist and colonialist function.

According to Dunwoodie, graphic, sadistic literary portrayals of cruelty against Muslim

women by Muslim men masked French fears about "a nascent Islamic nationalism" that

would threaten French hegemony (145). Algerianist and colonial novels cultures thus

tended to "denigrate both Islam and Berber culture via an insidious strategy of

contamination (by juxtaposing superstition, tradition, degradation, and violence)"

(Dunwoodie 145). As such, these novels were emblematic of Gayatri Spivak's pithy

formula about "white men saving brown women from brown men" ("Subaltern" 93). By

making Islam the scapegoat for male violence against women, French colonial novels

handily deflected attention from—and also provided an alibi for—the violence of

colonial domination. Here, Maghrebi woman-as-translation was a site not for expressing

any historically embodied female subjectivities, but rather for transmitting colonial

knowledge under the guise of scientific, ethnographic information.

Over fifty years after the first Algerianist texts appeared, Maghrebi writers of

North African Arab, Muslim, Berber and Jewish origin who had gone through the

colonial school system began producing literary and critical works in French. Among

them were a few women authors.[35] Many such works toed the line of colonial institutions

and of the colonial novel. Djamila Debeche's 1947 work *Leila, jeune fille d'Algérie*—one

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[35] "Far fewer women than men were educated in the colonial system. The colonial endeavor did not merely reinforce differential education for boys and girls, it actively refashioned it, and placed new pressures on social gender dynamics" (Khanna, *Algeria Cuts* 77).

of the first Francophone novels to be written by an Algerian woman—is a case in point.

In the author's preface, she "call[s] for expanded colonial education" and "point[s] out

the social utility of her work" in terms that constitute an "affirmation of the colonizer's

project" (Watts 143). Structurally, this phenomenon represents a kind of translation of a

colonized self. Desiring assimilation, "seduction" (Tageldin), this self has internalized

dominant colonial norms and values. In this way, colonial self-translation also recalls the

Althusserian concept of "interpellation," in which subjects are constituted only by

accepting the terms of the "ideological state apparatuses" that name them.[36] In the 1950s,

however, as anticolonial activism took root among Algerian intellectuals, Francophone

literature began to promote political change. Writers such as Albert Camus and the *École

d'Alger* and Frantz Fanon (who formulated the idea of "combat literature") expressed

anti-colonial resistance. What Jarrod Hayes characterizes as a first generation of

Maghrebi "combat literature" included work by male novelists such as Rachid Mimouni,

Mouloud Feraoun, Albert Memmi, and Kateb Yacine (Hayes 2). Part of what made this

literature "combative" was its use of the figure of woman as an allegory for nationalism.

For Frantz Fanon, exposing the European "desire to possess/control" colonized women in

all colonial contexts (form North to West Africa) became an effective way of unmasking

European hegemony. In Kateb Yacine's 1956 novel *Nedjma*, woman could be viewed as

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[36] However, critics have shown that some texts were already articulating an anti-colonial position. For example, in *Colonial Myths: History and Narrative*, Azzedine Haddour argues that critics do not adequately appreciate the figurative potential of certain pre-1950s texts by writers such as Jean Amrouche. Haddour takes as an example Jean Amrouche's 1944 presentation of the essay "L'Éternel Jugurtha" in which "Amrouche not only prefigures the Manichaeanism of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, but also influences his student Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*" (36). Such texts were not simply an imitation of colonial society, but also shaped conceptions of anti-colonial resistance.

a "translational" figure *par excellence*, not for French colonial discourse but for Algerian

nationalism. The illegitimate child of a French woman and an Algerian man, Nedjma has

been read as an allegory for the painful becoming of the new Maghrebi nation. Yet some

critics argue against reducing Nedjma to representing one system of meaning or the other.

miriam cooke argues that because Nedjma is the object of so many different claims, and a

fearful character in herself, she represents "neither nation nor ideal woman" (cooke

Women and the War Story 131).[37] Thus Nedjma could be construed as an early

untranslational figure: though *Nedjma* translates a nationalist message, its central figure

engenders competing readings both of "woman" and "Algeria."

Following the decolonization of Morocco and Tunisia in 1956, and of Algeria in

1962, Maghrebi literature gradually shifted its thematic focus from processing the trauma

of colonialism and celebrating the Revolution and nationalism to addressing political and

social reform in the new state. This unfolding history was accompanied by reflection on

international imbalances of power in the postcolonial age. Examples of the post-

independence generation of writers (many of whom have continued to write to the

present day) are Tahar Ben Jelloun, Driss Chraïbi, Abdelkebir Khatibi, and Boualem

Sansal. Jarrod Hayes argues that these new generations of writers should still be viewed

as producing "combat literature." He terms their form of combat a "queering" of the

nation—that is to say, challenging, and formulating alternatives to, oppressive forms of

normativity in linguistic, religious and nationalist discourse. Hayes's notion of "queering

the nation" resonates with Réda Bensmaïa's notion of literature and film as a site for

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[37] cooke capitalizes neither her first nor last name.

creating "experimental nations." Both scholars consider the ways in which literature challenges and creates new identities, and both treat the first works of some women—notably Assia Djebar—as playing a role in this reflection. Indeed, women had an important role to fill in translating the "political and ideological weight" of decolonization and postcolonial identity, not least of which was a reflection on women's role and rights in postcolonial society.[38]

Starting in the 1950s, Maghrebi women began to publish literary works. Notwithstanding the pre-independence works of Taos Amrouche and Djamila Debeche (along with those whom Déjeux calls "romancières juives")[39] in Algeria, the first significant female Francophone author was Assia Djebar, who debuted with the novels *La Soif* (1957) and *Les Impatients* (1958). From 1958 to 1978, Djebar went on a "trajet d'écoute" during which she wrote two more novels and directed two films. In the post-Independence atmosphere of Arabization, Djebar, who had been attacked for the bourgeois themes of her first two novels, also set her attentions to learning literary Arabic. A historian by training, she worked on documenting and recording oral histories of anti-colonial resistance by Algerian women. Ultimately, Djebar turned back to French,

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[38] In this way, Hayes suggests, new generations of writers carry forth the energy of the *littérature engagée* of the 1950s and 1960s. The two authors differ on the role of women in this movement. In his reading of Assia Djebar's film *La Nouba du Mont Chenoua,* Bensmaïa suggests that concentrating on women and gender "would be to considerably restrict the film's political and ideological weight" (84). While Bensmaïa thus guards against the ghettoization of "women's literature," his analysis also creates a binary between "political and ideological weight" on the one hand and "an exclusively profeminist bias" on the other (Bensmaïa 84). By contrast, for Hayes, women figures and writers are involved in "queering" or "writing women into the Nation in feminist ways" and drawing them "out of the Nation's closets to disturb and challenge the foundation of national unity on the exclusion of women" (Hayes 196).

[39] Jean Déjeux, p. 2. In the context of a wider-ranging study, it would be interesting to analyze pre-1970s texts by women. Déjeux classifies French-born writers such as Nina Bouraoui and Tassadit Imache as Maghrebi but does not specify the identity of Maghrebi-born Jewish writers. Although my study on women and translation will tend to focus on writers of Arabo-Islamic heritage, it must be underlined that the body of work by Maghrebi authors includes important works by Berber, Christian, and Jewish Maghrebi women.

and, beginning with the short-story collection *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* in 1978, went on to write over a dozen more French-language novels. Djebar is the first major figure in what I would call a "feminine body" of Maghrebi literature and film including works by Algerian-born Leïla Sebbar, Malika Mokeddem, Leïla Marouane and Maïssa Bey; Moroccan writer Fatema Mernissi[40] and director Farida Benlyazid; and Tunisian novelists Fawzia Zouari and Hélé Béji and director Moufida Tlatli, to name just a few.

French critic Jean Déjeux (d. 1993) is one of the earliest (and most frequently cited) scholars to codify Maghrebi Francophone literature as an academic sub-field—that is, to "translate" Maghrebi literary works into the *langage* of the Western academy. His articles and bibliographies on Maghrebi literature were published in France from 1957. His seminal work of classification, *Littérature maghrébine de langue française*, came out in 1973.[41] Along with the work of others who were constituting this field both in France and the Maghreb (e.g.Charles Bonn, Abdelkebir Khatibi), Déjeux's texts marked the beginnings of the Western institutionalization of Maghrebi Francophone literature. This institutional "translation" contributed to increasing the readership and study of Maghrebi literature in Europe, and, later, in the U.K. and the U.S.—trends that would also

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[40] Mernissi's first name is transcribed as Fatima or Fatema, depending on the text's year and language of publication (English or French).
[41] I focus here on Déjeux because this emphasizes the "disciplinary itinerary" of Maghrebi literature via French, via France, to the Western academy, and how this body of work was "translated" (formalized and accorded legitimacy), at least in part, because of its academic recognition within France. Examples of other foundational scholarly works include Abdelkebir Khatibi's *Le Roman maghrébin* (Paris: Maspero, 1968), as well as a host of articles and books in French, English, and translated from Arabic. For comprehensive listings of such works, Anne-Marie Nisbet's bibliography (1982) is an excellent resource for pre-1982 works.

contribute to its becoming a firmly established sub-field within French studies.[42]

Déjeux's literary-historical approach had the paradoxical effect of both marking the

literariness of Maghrebi literature and putting an evolutionary, social scientific spin on it.

Déjeux later became one of a first generation of scholars to focus on Maghrebi women's

writing per se in the early 1990s. (In the United States, a parallel example is Winifred

Woodhull's 1993 *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization, and*

Literatures.) His text *La littérature féminine de langue française au Maghreb* (1994)

comprises chapters treating the different countries of the Maghreb, the use of the first

person (Déjeux's argument about the use of the first person is intriguingly "translational"

in itself), women's motivations for writing, choices of language, and a complete appendix

of published Maghrebi female authors to date.[43]

Since the 1990s, the combination of increased interest within Western academe,

and increased production by the writers themselves, has made Maghrebi women's

literature increasingly central (rather than marginal) to Francophone Maghrebi studies. It

has also meant a more frequent use of literature as cultural translation. Perhaps the

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[42] The ethical problems with such "legitimation" are of course issues of inclusion and exclusion contingent on history: politics, the academy, fashion and the market. The continuing readership and market for this literature in France and abroad is relatively much higher than in the countries of the Maghreb themselves, all of which have high rates of illiteracy, forcibly amounting to lower readership levels of French-language books, not to mention different policies and practices concerning language education, business, bureaucracy and globalization in which Arabic, French, English, Spanish, and Berber languages coexist and compete for legitimacy. Many scholars discuss this issue. A particularly good perspective on Maghrebi languages in relation to postcolonial dynamics is found in Madeleine Dobie's article, "Francophone Studies and the Linguistic Diversity of the Maghreb," as well as Valérie Orlando's latest book, *Francophone Voices of the "New" Morocco in Film and Print: (Re)presenting a Society in Transition*.

[43] Déjeux classifies many French-born but ethnically Arab or Berber writers, such as Nina Bouraoui and Tassadit Imache, as Maghrebi rather than French, foreshadowing how French bookstores would continue to codify or translate as "other" French authorships that are either ethnically or nationally non-metropolitan, non-*français de souche*.

earliest North American scholarly text anticipating this trend is Anne-Marie Nisbet's *Le personnage féminin dans le roman maghrébin de langue française, des indépendances à 1980 : représentations et fonctions* (1983). Published almost a decade before Déjeux's and Winifred Woodhull's works, Nisbet's text has perhaps been overlooked in critical histories of the field because she bases her analysis not on female authors but rather on the function of female characters in novels by male authors Driss Chraïbi and Rachid Boudjedra, as well as the work of Fatema Mernissi. Anticipating the intensive scrutiny and interest that Maghrebi women's texts in the West would draw, Nisbet likens the literary figure and body of the Maghrebi woman to a "pillar" or "pivot" through which meaning (sense) is translated, a site that undergirds and "connects several levels of meaning: social, political, and psychological" (102). Nisbet argues that "[a]ny alteration to the status of women triggers a total upheaval" in society (102).

In Nisbet's analysis, what makes the figure of woman powerful is, paradoxically, its representative/reproductive role within a larger economy of meaning, coded as masculine. This paradox means that, within patriarchal economies of meaning, the figure of woman is not expected to function as a locus of change, but rather to remain in place and convey received wisdom; the "mechanisms of representation" are "played out on the figure of woman" (Khanna 12). "Woman" moderates and measures (homo)social relationships of power. Yet Nisbet's formulation also points to the potential *power* of the figure of woman, recalling Luce Iragaray's challenge in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un:*

> --de même que les marchandises deviennent, à leur corps défendant, dépositaires, quasi autonomes, de la valeur du travail humain, ainsi, en étant miroir de/pour l'homme, les femmes deviennent-elles, quasiment à

> leur insu, le risque de la désappropriation de la puissance masculine:
> mirage phallique (182).

Irigaray's notion of woman as "risk" is key. Just as the figure of woman is also a site of contested meaning, functioning as the symbolic bearer of "competing masculinities" (Gandhi 98) or "competing virilities" (Shohat 270), it is also a powerful site of subverting this very role whenever she/it threatens to perform not her reproductive role but instead to produce something other.

Scholarship by postcolonial feminists suggests that a range of epistemological "risks" would govern the representation of Maghrebi woman in literature, film, and scholarship. In *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Leela Gandhi traces the shared genealogy of postcolonial studies and feminism whose "most significant collision and collusion . . . occurs around the contentious figure of 'third-world woman'" (83). Building on the work of a range of postcolonial scholars including Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Bill Ashcroft et al., Sara Suleri, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gandhi explains how the Western feminist study of / on behalf of "third-world woman" hides some disturbing realities. Located at the nexus of a tangle of interconnected binary hierarchies (colonized/colonizer, man/woman, white/black), the figure of "colonized woman" becomes an ultimate, idealized position of victimhood, symptomatic of Western theory's "sentimental and often opportunistic enamourment with 'marginality'" (84).

The consequence of this assumption is that the figure of "third-world woman" is often posited in the West as an eternal victim in need of rescue and liberation by Western

critical intervention. Yet, rather than having any actual liberatory consequence, such projects of representation ("they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Gandhi 86)) often perpetuate and reinforce the Western critic's position of privilege and power, thus "silencing" the woman who was supposed to be "speaking." The colonized woman provides a stable "Other" for the white Western woman "self." Gayatri Spivak's work, for example in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" constantly returns to this problematic. Even when working from "our most sophisticated research, our most benevolent impulses," Spivak argues that Western academic feminists are always tempted to view the third-world woman as misguided, unthinking, a victim who needs to be "*corrected* by our superior theory and enlightened compassion" ("French Feminism" 207, 186, emphasis in original).[44] The notion of "temptation" is also key to the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha. Trinh works on the ways in which the "'native woman'" becomes an exotic object of consumption for "ideological tourism," constantly "required to exhibit her ineluctable 'difference' from the primary referent of Western feminism" (Gandhi 84-5).

Late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century Western scholarly projects that treat the category of "third world women" thus become a vestige of Orientalism. Even though the terminology has changed, such projects are always already inherently neo-Orientalist (Gandhi 84). (To me this seems quite a fair charge—particularly if we are talking about Orientalism in its broadest sense of the Western construction/study of non-Western

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[44] Spivak inhabits an interesting and (in the West) generally under-recognized position of being an elite scholar from the global South who writes about both her own representation as well as that of women living in poverty. Her essays feature reflections and anecdotes on this status, which informs her work on the problematic of the undifferentiated "third-world woman." See, for example, "French Feminism" 186.

cultures.) At the same time, critiques against Western liberal feminist epistemologies can also contain blind spots. Leela Gandhi argues that

> Trinh, Talpade Mohanty and Spivak each idealise and essentialise the epistemological opacity of the 'real' third-world woman. By making her the bearer of meanings/experiences which are always in excess of Western analytic categories, these critics paradoxically re-invest the 'third-world woman' with the very iconicity they set out to contest. This newly reclaimed figure is now postulated as the triumphant site of anti-colonial resistance. . . . If these proposals for change are somewhat suspect, it is also worth noting that each of the critics under consideration is guilty of the sort of reversed ethnocentrism which haunts Said's totalising critique of Orientalism. In refuting the composite and monolithic construction of 'native women', Spivak et al. unself-consciously homogenise the intentions of all Western feminists/feminisms. (88)

Gandhi's exploration of the Gordian knot of representation, with its constant push-and-pull between representation and non-representation, between the need to recognize but also not homogenize power blocs and subaltern positions, is vitally important for untranslation. Indeed, in its broad conceptual definition, untranslation is subject to all of these problems. On the other hand, close readings of texts and of the contexts they engage could go some way toward restoring specificity to the debate.

Interestingly, Gandhi's chapter on postcolonialism and feminism does not propose a way out of the double/triple bind of the representation of "third-world women" as a kind of Orientalism. Rather, Gandhi shifts her analysis to a critique of the "competing masculinities" that provide the historical conditions for the emergence of this contested figure. Tracing the history of how women's voices are alternately invoked and occluded as the objects/symbols of competing and aggressive masculinities (both colonial and nationalist), Gandhi brings her exploration to a close with a "denunciation of aggressive

[colonial] masculinity" (101), citing texts by Mahatma Gandhi, Oscar Wilde, and

Virginia Woolf. Gandhi argues that these texts invite a "shared critique of chauvinist

national and colonial culture" whose "full potential awaits theoretical elaboration" (101).

Gandhi closes her critique of "both sides of the fence which separates postcolonialism

from feminism" (88) by insisting upon—rather than rejecting—some common ethical and

political concerns of anticolonialism and feminism. Yet by closing her chapter with a

critique of colonial and chauvinist masculinity (the "competing virilities" that provoke

the emergence of the figure woman-as-translation), Gandhi somewhat elides the question

of what/how/whether the Western scholarly study of non-Western women's texts can

ever be ethically sound or useful. In some ways, this gesture would seem to leave the

controversial figure of woman exactly where it was in the first place, as the "medium

through which competing discourses represent their claims; a palimpsest written over

with the text of other desires, other meanings" (Gandhi 90).

The "palimpsestic" role of women—not only as textual figures/images but also as

historically embodied people—is precisely the problematic identified by Ranjana Khanna

in her 2008 book *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present.*[45]

Studying the context of colonial and postcolonial Algeria, Khanna shows how women's

subjectivity and voice are "cut," that is, figured as absence or silence as a "gendered

violation" (6). Often, instead of being figured in art, history, literature and film, Khanna

argues, women as historical subjects show through as a supplement to a central fact or

history, coded as male. As an opening example, Khanna examines the silencing of an

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[45] See also Ann Donadey's article "The Multilingual Strategies of Postcolonial Literature: Assia Djebar's Algerian Palimpsest" in *World Literature Today* 74.1 (2000): 27-36.

Algerian women between French and Algerian men. Khanna suggests that by becoming

more attentive to the many ways in which women are elided and silenced, some form of

restitution may be possible. Thus, she argues, "the figure of woman haunts, cuts through,

and indeed exposes what Theodor Adorno called "the damaged life," moments of justice

even as they seem to be elided by the mechanisms of law and language that are present

and that seek compensation and closure" (7). In thus invoking Adorno's notion of the

"damaged life," Khanna carves out space for continued, more critical scholarship on /

"about" Algerian women, despite the problems associated with it and the damage it may

cause. For Khanna, the benefits of such scholarship could potentially outweigh its risks:

> In order to conceive of a new form of political reason, supplements (and in
> my example, Algerian women) need to be listened to at the margins for
> what their presence or absence implies. This listening involves not simply
> putting women at center stage, or equating their voices with empowerment
> for the good. Its purpose is more to understand the nature of liminality that
> comes into view when one attempts to see force fields and frameworks
> and the cuts into them, and to understand what that means for the political
> reason that seeks justice outside the mechanisms of the virile wars that
> have characterized Algeria's modern history. (42)

Khanna's conclusion about "listening" as a substrate for a more equitable politics recalls

Djebar's 1980 theorization of listening, or *trajet d'écoute* (*Femmes d'Alger* 7). For both

Khanna and Djebar, a kind of "marginal" listening, a listening that is attuned to its own

difficulty, could work as a corrective to critical readings that would tend triumphantly to

equate textual representation with actual liberation (e.g. by a Western critic on behalf of a

Maghrebi woman). In her reading of the first story in *Femmes d'Alger*, Khanna performs

such a reading as she traces "the emergence of the modern Algerian woman into

subjectivity is, in this very story, enacted through citation, but through a citation that

performs the very difficulty of citationality" (Khanna 164). Drawing attention to the way in which the text "cites" its subject recalls the methods of foreignizing translation, which insistently draw attention to the epistemological and ethical "damages" that may be incurred in the transfer of knowledge across languages and cultures.

4. Untranslation in Action

My definition of untranslation is based on the representational dynamics in Maghrebi women's literature and film. It is also informed by key theoretical concepts. In theorizing untranslation, I follow Khanna's notion of "listening" for the female literary subject's "citationality" and Spivak's theory of "surrendering" to a text's "rhetoricity."[46] Similarly to Spivak's "rhetoricity," with its attention to the tension between "logic" and "rhetoric," Khanna's "citationality" concentrates on working *at* the difficulty, the traps, of representation. I would suggest that such thinking moves postcolonial feminist scholarship in the right direction. My reason for saying this is that both Spivak and Khanna ascribe great importance to a text's own part in how it is read—they both imply we must actively listen to a text's "voice," even if it is very quiet. Khanna and Spivak propose methodologies that attend to, and insist upon, texts' silences, gaps, and refusals.[47] Similarly but also somewhat differently, the concept of "untranslation" has

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[46] Both of these terms have a certain resonance with Assia Djebar's description of the pitfalls and ethical hurdles to transmitting and translating Algerian women's oral stories and histories during her "trajet d'écoute" (Preface of *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*). See Chapter 2.

[47] Both scholars use textile metaphors to describe their view of representation: Khanna writes of "looking at the cuts through representation, sometimes sewing them together and other times acknowledging the pertinence of the gape" (6-7), while Spivak suggests that "by juggling the disruptive rhetoricity that breaks the surface in not necessarily connected ways, we feel the selvedges of the language-textile give way, fray

been generated by Maghrebi women's texts, particularly those that use silences, gaps, and refusals—as well as some very loud words!—in order to problematize their own immanent role as cultural translations that are consumed in the West.[48]

Let us consider two such literary examples of untranslation. The first example is a scene from the 2002 novel *La Retournée* by Tunisian writer Fawzia Zouari. The novel's title immediately evokes physical, metaphorical, and moral senses of "turning back." Many aspects of the novel's storyline evoke the "turning back" of untranslation, in which a text turns back upon its own presumed translation, or delivery, of cultural content (thus recalling the saying *traduttore traditore*, to translate is to betray). At the outset of the story, the narrator, Rym, and her young daughter, Lila, return from their home in Paris to Ebba, Rym's childhood village, in order to attend Rym's mother's funeral. Some of Rym's more conservative relatives do little to hide their disapproval of her. They see her as a "*retournée*," a woman who betrayed both family and community when she left the village fifteen years earlier. However, as Rym endures both social censure and a sort of reverse culture shock, she also reconciles with her maternal aunt Zina. As a result, Rym learns that her brother-in-law Toufik and her sister Keltoum are threatening Zina with total disinheritance and eviction. Because Rym's mother was unable to read, Toufik had tricked her into signing her entire estate over to him, and Toufik's corrupt associates in local government turned a blind eye to the illegal transaction (106). Rym, Zina, and other

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into *frayages* or facilitations" ("Politics" 202). Spivak expands the metaphor of the "text-ile" in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, where she treats it as object of study, methodology, and a metaphor for a new epistemological approach.

[48] Maghrebi films and novels are also consumed in the Maghreb, but my problematic is the dynamics of their consumption (marketing, etc.) in the West.

allies eventually triumph against both Zina's disinheritance and local "disinheritance" in the form of exploitation and corruption of the region by the local tourist industry. Paralleling Rym's emotional reinvestment in the Ebba community, she also goes through a sort of reverse self-translation of her cultural identity. As Rym "turns back" toward the identity she had abandoned, the polysemy of the book's title *La Retournée* becomes increasingly apparent.

La Retournée's most dramatic scene of untranslation is articulated as part of this identitarian "return." When Rym decides to stay longer in Ebba in order to help Zina, it means she must temporarily take her young daughter, Lila, out of French nursery school. Rym reflects bitterly on the immanent cultural mistranslation that will be projected onto her by the female director of her daughter's French primary school:

> J'ai écrit personnellement à la directrice de l'école maternelle de Lila. Une formule du genre: « ma fille est empêchée de regagner l'école pour raison familiale». Il faut comprendre. Mme Marchal mettra cela sur le compte de mes origines. Les mains croisées sur sa longue cape blanche qui ressemble à la blouse [d'un] infirmier, la moue dégoûtée des mauvais jours, elle conclura à l'insouciance atavique de mes coreligionnaires, au peu d'entrain qu'ils manifestent à instruire leurs enfants, les filles surtout. Cela confortera ses convictions sur ces Arabes qui sacrifient volontiers aux impératifs communautaires et familiaux. (115)

By having Rym reflect critically on the probable interpretation of her decision, Zouari troubles and diverts the moralistic and Eurocentric didacticism of the French school director. Madame Marchal will, we are told, likely invoke the education of "Arab" children—and especially "leurs filles"—as an alibi for cross-cultural disapproval. Yet Madame Marchal's implied disapproval of Rym is rendered ironic by a number of factors. First of all (as the novel shows elsewhere), Rym's desire to stay in Tunisia is

driven largely by her daughter's enthusiastic embrace of life in Ebba. Lila is receiving a

rich education of cultural immersion as she gets to know her Tunisian relatives, learns to

speak Arabic, and absorbs a new kind of local and national history. Lila's thoughts about

Madame Marchal (whose name connotes the power and militarism of a *maréchal* or field

marshall) generate a sort of meta-narrative or trans-diegetic encounter between *La

Retournée* and its French reader. By anticipating how Rym's letter will "translate" into a

series of French idioms about Arabo-Islamic cultures (religion, family, tradition,

education—and above all ("surtout") the place of women in the transmission of "origines

. . . atavique[s]"), the text ironically invalidates all of these assumptions. Meanwhile, the

comparison between the clothes of the teacher and a nurse supplants the conventional

Western fixation on Arabo-Islamic women's dress. Indeed, the allusion to a nurse's

uniform—traditionally a feminine symbol of caring compassion, but also a highly prized

form of professionalism and ambition for Western women in terms of gender roles—

points to the paternalistic role of the Institution (educational and religious) in general,

with its attendant (biopolitical) assimilation of national and (post)colonial subjects.[49] The

figure of Mme Marchal, with her thinking about Rym's "origins" and "ces Arabes" with

their "insouciance atavique" and the "peu d'entrain qu'ils manifestent à instruire leurs

enfants, les filles surtout » seems to ratify Chandra Talpade-Mohanty's critique of the

Western feminist "representation of the average third-world woman as 'ignorant, poor,

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[49] The invocation of Mme Marchal as both a teacher and a nurse (and, through her married name, as a military figure) also recalls the historic use of such institutions as an integral part of French cultural domination. Madame Marchal makes use of a discourse that enables her to retain the upper hand, to retain power; Rym wrests this power from Marchal's control by way of critique. Here, the words of Michel Foucault seem relevant: "le discours n'est pas simplement ce qui traduit les luttes ou les systèmes de domination, mais ce pour quoi, ce par quoi on lutte, le pouvoir dont on cherche à s'emparer." *L'Ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 12.

tradition-bound, domesticated, family-oriented, victimised'" (Talpade Mohanty ctd. in Gandhi 86). By ascribing such an attitude to Mme Marchal's, Zouari troubles the self-representation of Western women as being inherently superior, "educated, modern" with "the freedom to make their own decisions" (Talpade Mohanty ctd. in Gandhi 86).

Zouari's scene of untranslation mimics gendered Orientalist discourse, thus creating a damning critique of a certain French translation of Maghrebi culture. Rym's acute awareness of inter-cultural translation between the Maghreb and France (which, she infers, will negatively impact both her and her daughter in the eyes of the French institution), also points to the problematic nature of this gendered overdetermination of Maghrebi and Western cultures in translation. The scene shows how the figure of woman *tout court* becomes a shorthand for cultural values. In this *mise-en-abîme* in which a French woman's narrative is recounted via a Tunisian female protagonist, both figures become sites of intercultural (un)translation—but not in the same way. The caricatured French woman stands in for the West's anticipated (mis)translation of Rym as representative of Maghrebi culture in general. Mme Marchal imagines the Maghrebi woman (but, pointedly, not herself) as a self-sacrificing transmitter of cultural values. Rym's hypothesizing about Madame Marchal's interpretation of her letter suggests that (mis)translation, in the form of an appropriation of the female figure, can cut both ways. The reversal remains locked in an oppositional structure, but the choice seems justified given the historical context to which the novel alludes. While the French teacher remains in a position of institutional power, Rym's narrative about how Marchal will "read" her is a shocking reversal. For the French reader, the scene enjoins a forceful untranslation.

My second example of a literary untranslation, Algerian writer Maïssa Bey's 2005 novel *Surtout ne te retourne pas*, operates on a more allegorical level. The fragmented, non-linear form of the novel disturbs the hierarchical relationship between original and translation. With Bey, the "original" is the mysterious origin and identity of the protagonist. The "translation" is the novel's narrative, which repeatedly destabilizes and fragments the possibility of this origin or identity, leaving the reader to piece together some semblance of a whole. In this way, the novel strongly resonates with Walter Benjamin's view of translation and questions the possibility of representing an "original." The novel self-consciously portrays its heroine's truth as being indirect, uncertain, risky, historically contingent, and mediated by others. By deferring the story's truth into an unresolved, unknown future, Bey recalls the ways in which Benjamin shifts the burden of interpretation to the translator-reader, who must "[find] that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original" (76). Yet Bey creates a novel that "conceal[s] in concentrated fashion" the fictional, ever-deferred "language of truth" (77).

Surtout ne te retourne pas is set in the aftermath of a real-life natural disaster: the 6.8 magnitude earthquake that struck the town of Thenia, 60 kilometres east of Algiers, on May 21, 2003. The catastrophe killed, injured, and left homeless thousands of people. Told from the shifting perspectives of at least one principal narrator, the central plot focuses on an amnesic earthquake survivor's gradual quest to recover her past. This past is composed of forgotten, hidden, unacknowledged and invented fragments, which resurface as narrative sequences whose veracity (or lack thereof) is repeatedly suspended.

The protagonist lives among others displaced by the earthquake in one of hundreds of temporary settlement camps, hastily erected but which become permanent in the wake of the disaster, thus refiguring her own cultural and geographic terrain. Her story is rendered multiple as it is punctuated and conditioned by stories of her possible family of origin, which includes adopted and biological family units. Along the way, Rym becomes the frame for short-story-style vignettes of other characters, all fellow earthquake survivors.

While the title's injunction not to look back captures the *heroine's* embrace of her amnesic identity, Bey's elliptical style engenders a constant desire to "look back"—or re-read—in order to discover the heroine's true identity—on the part of the *reader*. Thus the text generates a tension between the desires of the heroine to avoid painful truths and the desires of the reader to uncover these truths, a tension whose force emerges strongly in a scene that stages a refusal to recount another woman's victimization. In this scene, the protagonist is talking with Dounya, a woman whom this segment of the text presents as the heroine's true mother. Dounya, who served 20 years in prison, is just about to relate the story of the night that she killed the protagonist's father (here, the "je" is the amnesic protagonist and "elle" is Dounya):

> --À toi, à toi seule je vais raconter ce qui s'est passé cette nuit-là.
> C'est à ce moment-là que je me suis levée. Que je me suis approchée. J'ai tendu la main vers elle. Elle s'est levée à son tour. Elle a hésité quelques secondes.
> Nous nous sommes regardées. Intensément. Comme si nous venions de nous découvrir.
> [. . .]
> J'ai posé ma main sur sa bouche.
> --Non. Non. Je ne veux pas savoir. Tais-toi. Plus tard. Plus tard. (220-21)

Although *Surtout ne te retourne pas* has permitted its reader to "know" the background of

this story (one page earlier, the protagonist summarized her mother's suffering with the

formula "Mon père a battu ma mère ma mère a tué mon père" (219)), this intimate scene

of reconciliation between mother and daughter involves a silencing whose meaning is

ambiguous. This silencing could be read as a censoring of the mother by the daughter.

Yet the scene's refusal to pursue the mother's story *in this moment* also works to resist an

immanent cross-cultural translation of Algerian woman-as-victim. As such, it strongly

resists the sort of translation suggested by critic Stéphanie Khayat (from *Nice-Matin*) in

the quotation of her review on the novel's back cover. Crystallizing numerous elements

of gendered Orientalist cultural translation, Khayat's words are supposed to sell the book

by engendering desire for cross-cultural "discovery": "Un texte . . . qui nous emporte à la

découverte de l'Algérie et de ses femmes de lumière soumises à la violence des

traditions." Khayat codes Algerian women as light, a source of luminous and innocent

truth—the complete opposite of Algeria's "violent traditions." I argue that the scene in

which the daughter cuts short the mother's story can be read as a refusal of this sort of

reading. Although the protagonist does temporarily silence Dounya's story, the rest of the

novel (and, moreover, Bey's *oeuvre* as a whole) does not shy from dealing with gendered

violence and suffering. This scene, which appears at a climactic moment in the plot,

therefore functions as an exception, an interruption. It is a moment in which a female

character's trauma, which was just about to be revealed, is suddenly made unavailable for

export. The protagonist's use of the pronominal verb *nous découvrir* stands in direct

opposition to Khayat's use of the transitive form of *découvrir*—Bey would transport "us"

(Khayat addresses readers in France) to "discover" Algeria *via* the figure of its victimized, tradition-bound women. In addition to reinforcing the novel's overall aesthetic of *différance*, this scene reminds us that domestic violence cannot be ended through representation alone. What happens "later, later" is not silenced forever but rather deferred; it will occur beyond the appropriative gaze of a reading *à la Khayat*.[50]

The deferral that is voiced in this scene also points to the fact that in *Surtout ne te retourne pas,* untranslation does not occur solely as a function of what is represented/not represented "about" Algerian woman. Untranslation is broadly enacted through the novel's repeated destabilization of the notions of truth and origin. While the narrative hints that protagonist does eventually "look back" and recover a *possible* past, the novel never really resolves the mystery of her origin. Instead, it ends on a note of cyclic uncertainty, and even obliteration. As the novel closes, narrator addresses a litany of questions to an unseen, unknown psychiatric doctor. The narrator's relentless questioning has an ambigiously dual effect: on the one hand, it places the identities of all the other characters—as well as that of the narrator herself—in doubt. On the other, the narrator's incredulous tone reaffirms her experience, challenging the psychiatrist's "scientific" suggestion that she fabricated her stories a way to cope with life traumas. Yet in the very last line, the metaphor of the destructive earthquake returns, reaffirming the *impossibility*

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[50] Moreover, in my reading, this scene does not attribute the violence endured by Dounya to "the violence of [Algerian] traditions" but rather speaks to a more "universal" issue of gendered domestic violence within patriarchy. The narrator's gesture of silencing is thus framed as one of compassion and of respect, a gesture that could potentially bring forth a similar attitude in the reader.

of origin/truth. Addressed in the voice of the/*a* female protagonist to a psychiatrist whom

she addresses as "vous," the narrator interrogates her condition:

> *... une superposition de lieux, de temps, de faits, un peu comme un décalage causé par l'addition de deux chocs successifs, par la conjonction de deux « événements indépendants de ma volonté » ? C'est bien ça ? Et je devrais vous croire ? Wahida n'aura vécu que le temps d'un été ? C'est bien ce que vous voulez me faire admettre…. et Dadda Aïcha ? Nadia, Mourad ? Tous ceux qui sont dans ma mémoire, dans mon histoire ? Que deviennent-ils ? Et Dalila ? Pourquoi n'ai-je aucun souvenir de Dalila qui m'a servi de mère ? Qui pourra m'expliquer ? Je ne sais pas. Je ne sais pas. Et cette maison qui ne me reconnaît pas, que je ne reconnais pas. Et maintenant cette vague immense qui fonce, qui déferle, qui…*(222-23, italics in original)

The fact that the narrator's *destinataire* is a psychiatric doctor addressed as "vous"

ironically makes the psychiatrist into an interdiegetic proxy for the reader, now cast in the

position of knowledge and power associated with medical psychiatry. Yet even as the

protagonist, figured as an ever-unstable "je," seems to give her power over to the

doctor/reader, she has also undermined the latter's authority and capacity to know

everything: "*Vous savez tout. Vous connaissez tous les personages. Alors c'est à vous de

me dire. C'est à vous maintenant de démêler les fils. [. . .] La science connaît tout,

même si elle ne peut pas tout prévoir. Vous le savez bien, vous*" (222, italics in original).

Yet as the narrator's enumeration of proper names suggests, the psychiatrist can never

truly "know" the meaning or significance of all of the characters created, transiently, over

the course of Bey's novel. The consequences of this critical interrogation of both

connaissance and *savoir* are seismic. We are never sure if the "je" is only one; the

novel's epigraph is Rimbaud's "Je est un autre." The fact that Bey plays with and against

the object "knowledge" through the filter of supposedly "known" facts (for example of

the identity of the Algerian feminine "je") recalls Spivak's metaphor of translation as a style of reading. The Reader-as-Translator must continually search for and contextualize a text's meaning—yet s/he must also ultimately surrender to the text's "rhetoricity" or "spacey emptiness" (Spivak "Politics" 202).

Yet if *Surtout ne te retourne pas* delivers "spacey emptiness" in abundance, it also provides much to reckon with in terms of untranslation. The novel's repeated metaphors of reading and writing emphasize and guard open the possibility of interpretation (even if that interpretation may seem doomed to fail). For example, in the wake of the earthquake, its survivors are said to be searching for meaning, trying to "déchiffrer la trace scriptuaire de leur douleur [. . .] Pour redonner un sens au présent dans un lieu qui n'est plus" (64). Some look to the idea of destiny (a religious belief in predetermination that contrasts with the inability of science to predict outcomes): "On leur dit: *Mektoub.* C'était écrit" (63); others find themselves facing the total impossibility of deciphering "*ce qui est lisible et ce qui ne l'est pas*" (64, italics in original). Bey transforms the earthquake into a metaphor for reading, shaking the Maghrebi heroine loose of predetermined translations. Bey's treatment of predetermination (spiritual and temporal) does not amount to an annihilation. Rather, it salvages subjectivity as a possibility that inheres in the wreckage of historic trauma. As the narrator walks, dazed, through the streets, she comes across an object whose banality belies its significance: "Une enseigne se balance. Mouvement lent, régulier. Accompagné d'un léger grincement. À droite. Puis à gauche. À droite. À gauche. Je voudrais tant pouvoir déchiffrer les mots. Je m'approche. Tout près. MATÉRIAUX DE CONSTRUCTION. Je sais. Je sais encore lire" (18). As she deciphers this

sign (in all senses, particularly since "enseigne" is gendered as feminine in French), its wobbling back and forth represents not only the tension between "looking forward" and "looking backward" but also the work of (un)translation. The narrator's uneasy positioning between the fault lines of history thus absorbs her—and us—in a challenging project of reading for meaning. Bey both provides the "construction materials" to piece together a story and makes us acutely aware of that story's historical contingency.

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Untranslations to Come: Chapter Overview

The following three chapters of this dissertation analyze literary and cinematic untranslations that are both similar to and different from those by Zouari and Bey. As in the example of Zouari's critique of the French teacher's stereotypes, my methodology begins by working through the more explicit and thematic ways in which authors and filmmakers both foreground and question cultural translation. Next, taking my cue from Bey, each chapter theorizes how Maghrebi women's texts, through the deployment of various aesthetic, structural, and thematic tropes, generate models for untranslational reading.

Chapter Two examines two works by Assia Djebar, the 1978 film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* and the 2002 novel *La Femme sans sépulture*. Although both of these texts function as cultural translations, they are troubled not only by Djebar's reflections on representational ethics but also by the women's voices that she represents. As a canonical Francophone woman writer from the Maghreb (she is the only Algerian woman author to have been elected to the Académie Française), Djebar's literary and

filmic *oeuvre* exerts translational influence, shaping the field not only for other Maghrebi

women artists, but also Western perceptions and expectations about their work. The

chapter begins by examining changes in the Western reception of Djebar's work. While

most critics have cast Djebar as a successful yet ethical cultural translator whose work

resists both colonial and patriarchal stereotypes, others have taken issue with the theme of

female victimhood in her work and its potentially neo-Orientalistic implications.

In examining *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* and *La Femme sans

sépulture*, I argue that while Djebar initially problematized the ethics of "translating"

woman characters, she ultimately allows her work's historiographical and literary aims to

win out. This shift is indicated by the changing aesthetic perspectives in Djebar's

treatment of the story of Zoulikha Oudai, an Algerian resistance fighter, between the

1978 film and the 2002 novel. In particular, *La Femme sans sépulture* figures a shift from

a narrator who keeps a respectful distance from her research subjects to one who is in

total and intimate complicity with them. Working through theories of (post)colonial

translation by Gayatri Spivak and Shaden Tageldin, I suggest that this shift represents the

adoption of a kind of "persuasive listening." The narrator of *La Femme sans sépulture,* in

particular, uses a kind of "translational seduction" (Tageldin) to fulfill her aims while

also possibly eclipsing her subject's resistance to representation. In closing the chapter, I

put the novel's "translational seduction" in dialogue with Djebar's embrace (in her 1999

memoir *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*), of what she calls "Orientalité," a kind of neo-

Orientalism cleansed of its historic associations with colonialism and hegemony. On the

one hand, the symbolic effect of Djebar's "translation" is to mute her subjects' reluctance

to be placed on a representational "stage"; instead they become complicit in their own

telling for Francophone readers in Algeria, France, and beyond. On the other hand, I

argue that it is important to put this reading in the context of Djebar's lifelong and

painstaking meditations on the ethics of representation. Djebar's *oeuvre* as a whole

constitutes a substantial exploration of the stakes of cultural translation.

In Chapter Three, I examine a completely different way of representing women

from that proposed by Djebar with a discussion of *Bedwin Hacker*, a 2003 thriller by

Tunisian director and screenwriter Nadia El Fani. This film features a female hacker who

overtly challenges European cultural hegemony. The heroine, Kalt (portrayed by Sonia

Hamza), uses her pseudonym ("Bedwin Hacker") to interrupt European television

programming with messages written in Tunisian Arabic. Later, as a corrective to

mistranslation by the French authorities, Kalt also hacks in French. El Fani makes

cultural and linguistic translation central to the film's political stakes. For example, El

Fani's use of Tunisian Arabic script, accompanied by a playful cartoon camel, at once

invokes and critiques Orientalist stereotypes of the Maghreb and the Arab "other." Kalt's

non-translated Arabic broadcasts also stand against post-9/11 hysteria in which Arabic

language, along with the figure of "the Arab," became a sign of terror and an alibi for

U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. In treating the theme of Arab women, El Fani

refuses to broadcast what she calls stories of "failure," preferring instead to feature strong

women characters who certainly "break stereotypes" about Tunisian women as

oppressed, pious, and tradition-bound (El Fani and Barlet). As a bisexual woman hacker

and computer genius, Kalt embodies what could be perceived normatively as a modern identity *par excellence*.

Bedwin Hacker's cultural untranslation both invokes and moves beyond mere opposition to stereotypes. The film is driven not only by narrative, but also by its use and quotation of various screens, particularly televisual images. In effect, the cinematography of *Bedwin Hacker* constitutes a kind of visual hacking of capitalist visual culture. In the chapter, I compare El Fani's "untranslational hacking idiom" to Guy Debord's notion of *détournement,* in which images produced by mass culture are quoted in order to subvert the values they usually disseminate. Through close readings of sequences in which quoted T.V. images untranslate not only Tunisian culture—but, more importantly, the veracity of the Western TV image itself—I argue that El Fani does not just exercise what Kalt broadly dubs "resistance" but also calls into existence the "other epochs, other places, other lives" to whom Bedwin Hacker draws our attention. Thus, a film that was supposed to be "a radiography of marginal Tunisian culture" (El Fani and Barlet) also becomes a critical radiography of the ways in which Western culture represents both itself and others as truth. El Fani's use of a female protagonist as a critical site through which to convey a familiar constellation of postcolonial, feminist, and anti-capitalist ideas is an interesting kind of radiography that is ridden with tensions. As a character, Kalt seems to fit in more with "European" terms or standards than with Tunisian ones. Even as El Fani objects to European stereotypes, she seems to ratify certain stereotypes about what constitutes "modernity"—notably a woman protagonist who lives an entirely secular life, free of sexual taboos. Yet El Fani also points to the fact that it would be

dangerous to view Kalt as "inauthentic." El Fani insists on Kalt's realism as a part of a subculture that fully claims its Tunisianness. This chapter also examines *Bedwin Hacker's* mixed and paradoxical reception in Europe and North America. The fact that El Fani had trouble receiving funding from both Tunisian and European film commissions points to the fact that she fails to fulfill—i.e. resists—a range of conventions.

If El Fani pushes her cultural translation far in the direction of a modernity conceived of as Western-dominated (or, alternatively, essentially Western), Farida Benlyazid's 1989 film *Une Porte sur le ciel / Bab al-sama' maftouh* takes an almost opposite tack in which a modern woman embraces her modernity through traditional religious expression. In Chapter Four, I examine how Benlyazid transforms her heroine's embrace of Sufi Islam into a vocal untranslation of Western cultural influence. Nadia, the film's heroine, returns from Paris to Morocco to be with her dying father. Upon hearing verses from the Qur'an sung at his funeral, Nadia begins a spritual transformation and decides to reject all things French (including her boyfriend). As she dedicates herself to a full exploration of her Sufist cultural roots, she undergoes a series of revelations that inspire her to turn the palatial family home into a *zawiya*, a traditional shelter for women and girls. Implicity, the film suggests that Nadia's spiritual relationship with God is what provides her with the means to to bypass temporal inheritance laws and secure the *zawiya's* future. What makes the film unique in both Maghrebi and Western cinema is the fact that its heroine draws her personal strength and her feminist social justice project not from what might be considered a "Western" secular model (as with *Bedwin Hacker*), but mainly from the texts, philosophy, and spiritual practices of Islam and Morocco.

Une Porte sur le ciel's combination of feminist themes with intimate, ethnographic-style portrayals of Moroccan women and religious rituals have brought the film enduring popularity among Western spectators, who often see it as an "authentic" view of Moroccan culture. More than twenty years since its release, Benlyazid's film remains an exemplary work of Islamic feminist fiction and "a mainstay in film festivals and classes devoted to women in the Arab or Islamic worlds and to international and transnational feminisms" (Gauch). Based on this history, *Une Porte sur le ciel* performs a kind of ethnographic role. However, I also argue that the film does much to resist and refuse the notion of cultural translation (or ethnography) as being an unproblematic and transparent way of representing reality. If Benlyazid enacts a kind of voluntary self-ethnography of elements of Moroccan culture, it is a form of ethnography that both refutes ethnography's Eurocentricsm and reinscribes aspects of its elitism. Interrogating the film's use as a cultural translation of Moroccan women's traditional or spiritual roles in both popular and scholarly venues, I argue that Benlyazid sets up a number of points of resistance to her film's immanent use as a cultural translation. Drawing on select theories in ethnography and postcolonial feminism (Mahmood, Pandolfo, Spivak), this chapter identifies the explicit and subtle ways in which *Une Porte sur le ciel* both performs translation and problematizes its own use as transcultural artifact.

All three of these chapters represent and theorize diverse thematic and aesthetic forms of untranslation. The contradictions haunting the Djebarian *oeuvre* solicit an untranslational reading that can attend to the resistance of the female figures it represents; El Fani proffers a postmodern "hack" of the figure of Tunisian woman, and along with it,

of the Western media's self-reinforcing feedback loop; and Benlyazid imagines a sort of strategic critical ethnography that questions the motives and the possibility of cultural translation.

In the course of designing this dissertation, I chose to focus on texts by Djebar, El Fani, and Benlyazid not because they "represent" three different countries of the Maghreb but rather because each calls attention to the immanence of cultural translation in the context of three very different histories and three different sets of thematic concerns. As such, these chapters are intended collectively to give a sense of the range of ways in which untranslation can function. Djebar, El Fani, and Benlyazid suggest that untranslation is not a movement limited to cinema or to literature, nor to texts privileging a particular language or aesthetic, nor by the adoption of a religious or a secular perspective. Instead, what these texts collectively capture is how "the feminine" is changing the dynamics of cultural translations between the Maghreb and the West. By attracting attention to the moment at which the representation of the Maghrebi heroine crosses cultural borders—that is, the moment of translation—these texts also demonstrate the complexity of what Bedwin Hacker terms "resistance." Through a range of historically different textual resistances, Zouari, Bey, Djebar, El Fani, and Benlyazid invite us to consider and to work out more realistic and ethical ways in which to approach Maghrebi women's literature and film—whether in the movie theatre, the library, the bookstore, or the classroom.

II. Persuasive Listening: Translation, Djebarian Narrative, and Orientalism

> *—Face aux journalistes, déclare enfin Hania, quand ils viennent m'interroger sur Zoulikha, j'ai l'impression, en déroulant des mots… (elle passe soudain à la langue arabe, qu'elle a plus raffinée), en parlant de Zoulikha, il me semble que, à mon tour, je la tue!*
> (Djebar, *La Femme sans sépulture* 50)

> *Certes, l'écriture littéraire, parce qu'elle s'accomplit sur un autre registre linguistique (ici le français), peut tenter d'être un retour, par translation, à la parole traditionnelle comme parole plurielle (parole des autres femmes), mais aussi parole perdue, ou plutôt,* son de parole perdue.
> (Djebar, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent* 77)

Introduction: Assia Djebar as Translator

Despite having declared her incompatibility with the role of a "porte-parole" for all Algerian women in *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980), the writer, filmmaker, and historian Assia Djebar is widely considered to occupy a preeminent position as a cultural translator of (and therefore a kind of spokesperson for) Algerian women. Traces of Djebar's translational influence abound, not only in her multiple prizes and transnational presence, but also in Western critical receptions of the author: "Djebar writes . . . Arab women's voices" (Ghaussy 461); Djebar "convert[s] and translate[s] [women's] oral histories in dialectal Arabic and Berber into written histories in French" (Hayes 184-5); "Djebar uses her education and privilege to make women's voices heard"

(Steadman 197); "Djebar skillfully reveals women's voices and expressions" (Taylor 108); and "Portraying Algerian women as victims of dual oppression—French colonialism and Maghrebian patriarchy—Djebar claims subjectivity for herself and her Algerian sisters by reappropriating language, history, space and the gaze" (Mortimer 213). Marked by her preeminent place in literary criticism from the earliest to the most recent works on Maghrebi women's literature,[51] Djebar's reception within Francophone and Anglophone academes has been field-forming to such an extent that the sub-field of "Maghrebi women's literature" and its canon could well be dated in terms of *anno Djebari*.

Assia Djebar herself has traced her intellectual and artistic outlook to her "généalogie féminine" (Djebar, *Ces voix* 38) in Algerian Muslim and Amazigh ("Berber"[52]) culture as well as to her education under French colonialism. Each one of her texts further elaborates the paradox of a literary-historical aesthetic "se nourrissant et s'autodétruisant d'un amour-haine algéro-français" (191). At the same time, a unique and paradoxical tension haunts Djebar's work through the underlying presence of a voice of resistance that seems to challenge her project of representation itself: its ethics and its very possibility. Yet doubting voices pale in comparison to stronger narrative currents such as the urge to write, the need to address flawed historiographies, and the call of what

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[51] Jean Déjeux's work *La littérature féminine de langue française au Maghreb* (1994) and Winifred Woodhull's *Transfigurations of the Maghreb* (1993) set a pattern in this regard.

[52] Djebar usually uses the term "Berber" in her work, and the term is current parlance in Maghrebi countries. However, many North African people prefer the general term "Amazigh" to signify indigenous people and culture and "Tamazight" as a general name for the six main indigenous language groups.

Jennifer Bernhardt Steadman characterizes as "global feminist" ideals in her 2003 article

"A Global Feminist Travels: Assia Djebar and *Fantasia*."

The two passages quoted in the epigraph suggest this tension, while also evoking

some of the most frequently discussed issues in Djebar's work. Both citations treat

problems of representation, but each pulls in a slightly different direction. In the first

quotation, Hania's speech seems to resist its own telling; in the second, Djebar's literary

voice justifies and defends its attempt to capture the words of other women ("des autres

femmes"), *even though the words are lost*. In both cases, the languages invoked (Arabic

and French) are placed in parentheses, as if to contain some explosive power. Even from

within the confines of parentheses, the two languages work at cross- purposes: "[l']arabe

raffinée" of Hania distances itself from the language of literary representation (French),

while "ici le français" stays intact. Parenthetical yet central, Arabic becomes accessory to

translation, while French, as the target language of Djebar's texts, wins out. As if to

mourn what is lost in translation, the idea of death and loss also haunts both of these

passages. Despite the fact that the descriptions both imply loss through "translation" – the

French verbal noun here signaling the transfer of something from one place to another –

the text marches on in its bid to "return to" Algerian women's collective speech. The

epigraph also indicates a pattern in Djebar's work around the subject of representation.

On the one hand, Djebar gestures to the ethical dangers of representing "other" Maghrebi

women.[53] On the other hand, her work presents itself as accomplishing the translation

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[53] In *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, Djebar registers disgust with the cliché of representations of Arabo-Islamic women as victims—and with the West's thirst for such images:

(figured here as a "transfer") of the occluded histories of Algerian women, and even as achieving a sort of liberation.[54]

In the first quotation in the epigraph, Hania's language switch could be understood as a warning to the novel's informants and addressees (Djebar as researcher, writer); Hania's fellow informants or fictional characters; and readers, reviewers, and critics) that any complicity with "journalistic"-style dissemination of an intimate and occluded history would amount to treachery: translation is betrayal, *traduttore*, *traditore*. Journalism is not the only target of Hania's mistrust: elsewhere in the narrative she critiques the lack of respect shown in representation qualifying as "matière (elle hésite) « artistique », comme ils aiment dire" (53-4). Hence the fiction writer is also tinged with ethical suspicion. And yet, insists Djebar: literary writing can tempt, attempt ("peut tenter") to return or literally carry the reader back, "par translation" (*f. lat*. transfer, displacement) back to women's words, taking him/her across space and time. Moreover,

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Serions-nous tentés de dire – comme autrefois ceux qui chantaient: « C'est la faute à Voltaire, c'est la faute à Rousseau!», dire à notre tour, et fort inconsidérément: « C'est la faute à Khomeyni, c'est la faute des islamistes tous ensemble, qu'ils viennent d'Arabie Séoudite, du Soudan et d'Afghanistan, et tant qu'à faire, c'est la faute de l'islam tout entier qui, en ce siècle, piétine dans son désir de faire face à la modernité!»

Serait-ce la réponse schématique et, je le sais bien, médiatique en Occident? Pour ma part, je n'ai guère le goût de m'installer dans le rôle de la victime intellectuelle: ni le tchador sur la tête, ni à la main le mouchoir des pleureuses, image trop facile du « pleurons ensemble sur la condition des femmes musulmanes!». Dans ce cas, comment verser dans une telle déploration, au coeur d'une Europe qui, en 1995, laisse Sarajevo cernée depuis trois ans et la Tchétchénie massacrée impunément en moins de six mois? (246).

[54] Elsewhere in *Ces voix*, Djebar writes: "Pour ma part, je l'ai noté dans *L'Amour, la fantasia*, ce fut « *comme si soudain la langue française avait des yeux, et qu'elle me les ait donnés pour voir dans la liberté*, comme si la langue française aveuglait les mâles voyeurs de mon clan et qu'à ce prix, je puisse circuler, dégringoler toutes les rues, annexer le dehors pour mes compagnes cloîtrées, pour mes aïeules mortes bien avant le tombeau… »

[. . .]

J'ai souvent senti que me passait la main, que me passait « leurs » mains elles-mêmes, le peuple innombrable des tatoueuses, des tisseuses, des potières, elles dont les doigts ont celé, durant des siècles, leur vérité singulière dans des dessins immémoriaux!" (*Ces voix qui m'assiègent* 84, emphasis added).

(French) literature may be the only way to effect this transfer precisely because it translates women's words, via artful reconstruction, into "un autre registre linguistique."

Representing women whose voice history has failed to register - "subaltern"[55] women - is a matter of intense debate in postcolonial studies (Gandhi 1-3). Gayatri Spivak famously argued the impossibility of the subaltern "speaking" through representation. For Spivak, the status of a subaltern is defined by the very exclusion of her or his voice from representation. And yet, as writers and academics in the postcolonial field well know, representation persists in professing affiliation with subalternity, and Djebar's texts are no exception. Indeed, even though Djebar periodically reflects on the difficulties of her task (which Spivak characterizes as the "circumscribed task" of representation (308)), I maintain that Djebar's texts persistently claim to translate and represent the voices of subaltern Algerian women. In *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, Djebar defines "écrire" as "« transmettre, enseigner, communiquer »" (26). Yet ethical problems associated with the notion of transmission linger on in Djebar's work. To borrow a useful formulation from postcolonial theoretician Leela Gandhi, these problems can be summarized as "the complicated relationship between the knowing investigator and the (un)knowing subject of subaltern histories" (2).

Djebar has written of an intellectual and ethical calling to her project to transmit. She recalls women's words from her own life, and detects subaltern voices through the

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[55] The definition of "subaltern" is a subject of extensive debate in postcolonial studies. My own use of "subaltern," to designate a person existing outside (current) hegemonic power structures, is textured here because Djebar and Hania (at least in the two quoted passages above) would disagree about the stakes of the concept: for Hania at that moment, Zoulikha's subalternity is more Spivakian, since Zoulikha is occluded ("killed") by attempts at representation; for Djebar, however, the subalternity of Zoulikha makes her a suitable candidate for literary representation which, although difficult, *must* be attempted.

historical archive. Reflecting on her writerly career, Djebar evokes "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"

(29). She describes her ambition to translate, write, and assume these voices not simply

as a possibility, but as an obligation:

> 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.
> Peut-être même, pendant longtemps, me suis-je sentie portée le plus souvent par des voix non-françaises . . . pour les ramener, elles, justement en les inscrivant et je *devais, obscurément contrainte*, en trouver l'équivalence, sans les déformer, mais sans hâtivement les traduire…
> Oui, ramener les voix non francophones – les gutturales, les ensauvagées, les insoumises – jusqu'à un texte français qui devient enfin mien (29, emphasis added.)

"Writing" voices, finding their "équivalence," heeding a drive to "translate," to "bring

back": writ large, translation is at the heart of Djebar's work, whether as literal process or

expressed as a dynamic of transfer, displacement, representation, or "equivalence." That

Djebar uses the term "ramener les voix" suggests a belief in her ability fully to transfer

these voices to her texts.

Literary critics have drawn upon diverse notions of translation in evaluating

Djebar's work. The majority of these qualify Djebarian translation as an ethical success.

In an article on *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (1999), responding to Djebar's critique of a

linguistic and cultural "autodévoration collective" during the Algerian Civil War (or war

against civilians), John Erickson lauds Djebar's literary "translation" of "the unrealized

dream of Algeria" (96) for its capacity to "pierce the cover that hides an invisible layer of

meaning beneath it" (106). Critics also comment on the feminist aspect of Djebar's

translations. In *Time Signatures* (2006), Alison Rice describes Djebar's originality in

reconstructing the history of women in early Islam, in *Loin de Médine* (1991), in terms of

translation: "When Djebar treats of religion in her writing in French, she is . . . engaging

in translation in its etymological sense of displacement, of moving, of going from one

society to another, not only in words but also in mindset" (124). In Rice's view, this

mobility is what allows Djebar to construct a powerful "feminist criticism of Islam" that

still "remains within the religion and exposes its truth" (126). Laurence Huughe's article,

"The Problematics of the Gaze in the Work of Assia Djebar," although not strictly

speaking about translation, attributes translational power to Djebar's use of silence and

difference that could be said to *resist* translation. Paradoxically, however, rather than

expanding upon what Huughe calls Djebar's resistance to a "totalizing view," the critic

argues that the author's "elliptical and polyphonic" style, with its insistence on

fragmented details, "makes it possible to piece together, like a puzzle, an authentic image

of the life of Algerian women of the past and present" (872). In the absence of an

authorial totalization, the *reader* can fill in the blanks, connoting a secondary

totalization. In Huughe's view, Djebar's fragmentary aesthetic permits us not only to

acquire an "authentic image" of Algerian women (872) (connoting a reliable translation

of their lives and voices), but also to share in their subjectivity because it is "the type of

writing . . . most adequate to translating reality as it is perceived by the female gaze"

(872). Huughe concurs with many other critics who attribute a kind of fragmentary

realism to Djebar's translations of Algerian women (Bensmaïa, Donadey, Mortimer,

Steadman). Building on the notion of the fragmentary, Soheila Gaussy asserts that Djebar emulates *écriture féminine* and thereby "re(dis)covers woman; voices the protest of Arab women[,] escapes the confines of the harem[,] gives body to the oral accounts of women[, and] inscribes woman's unspoken name" (Ghaussy 461).

What is this embodied voice (Ghaussy), which Djebar restores, via translation? By her own account, Djebar's Algerian women hail from the autobiographical and the historical, the living and the dead, the rich and the poor, literate and illiterate, and Algerian, Berber, Muslim, and French influences. As the laureate of multiple international prizes, including her 2005 election to the Académie française, Djebar has doubtlessly earned her reputation for creating magnificent literary and filmic works that convey her subject across frontiers of time, space, class, and gender. Having lived, studied and worked for extended periods in Algeria, France, and the United States, Djebar has transported herself across borders and cultures. Many perceive that Djebar's texts have functioned in an analagous way with regard to Algerian women.

Not everyone celebrates Djebar's success with unfettered enthusiasm. While the majority of critics, from a range of ideological perspectives, seem to concur that Djebar is both ethically and mimetically successful in her translations, others have been more circumspect in their reactions. Writing of the representation of Algerian women in *L'Amour la fantasia*, Winifred Woodhull regrets that "even as it offers itself as an instrument of Algerian women's liberation, Djebar's text reinscribes a pessimistic view of her Maghrebian sisters that many feminists, such as Fatima Mernissi, contest, emphasizing not their mutiliation and dispossession but rather their capacity to speak and

act on their own behalf today" (Woodhull 1993, 84). More recently, scholar Carine Bourget attends to the problematic marketing of Djebar – and its influence over the sometimes wrongheaded Western fascination with her work, citing "un marché friand d'histoires tragiques de femmes arabo-musulmanes opprimées" (Bourget "Réédition" 101).

Other critics have worked to expose a related problem, which they have characterized as Djebar's insidious self-translation into Orientalist or French colonial perspectives. Analyzing Assia Djebar's acceptance speech on the occasion of her election to the Académie française, Shaden Tageldin proposes that, having drawn attention to French colonial culpability, "Djebar [now] takes up French feminist arms against Arab-Islamic Algeria, [which she] tacitly define[s] as a male culture in which female "origins" are silenced and unfree" (Tageldin "*Qalam*" 473). Such moments of coinciding with dominant French narrative on Algeria complicates the author's oft-cited claim of having made the French language her "butin de guerre" (Djebar, *Ces voix* 69-71). Treating the irony of this position in Djebar's 1995 novel *Vaste est la prison*, Andrea Flores Khalil contends that "Assia Djebar's use of history . . . articulates not the Algerian history one may anticipate but the effect of an inescapability of the narrator's French subjectivity in recounting it. In this novel, the contemporary self (the narrator/archivist/writer) is conditioned by a symbolic "captivity" within the French literary and intellectual traditions" (236). Arguably such analyses are testament first and foremost to the dominance of East-versus-West politics and discourses, which no one can fully escape. Nonetheless, given that Djebar's work translates between spaces considered "East" and

"West," these critiques help to illuminate the historical conditions under which Djebarian translation is formed—and to understand its symbolic effects.

In the proceeding sections, I consider the textual conditions for, and effects of, Djebar's translations of Algerian women in two different works: first, briefly, in the film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (1978) and second, in the novel *La Femme sans sépulture* (2002). These texts constellate around a particular historical period when Djebar interviewed women in her extended network of family and friends in and around the region of her hometown, Cherchell (which she calls by its Roman name, Césarée). In both of these texts, Djebar treats the story of Zoulikha Oudai, an Algerian *mujahida* (freedom fighter) who lived in Cherchell and who died during the Algerian War of Liberation (1954-62). After joining fellow resistance fighters in the *maquis* (the Algerian wilderness) in 1956, Zoulikha disappeared following her capture and probable torture at the hands of French soldiers in 1957. Her body was never recovered.

La Nouba and *La Femme* share a common narrative approach: Djebar devotes a great deal of attention to depicting the scene of transmission between the author-narrator[56] figure of a listening interviewer, on the one hand, and her interviewees, on the other. This author-narrator gathers stories from Algerian women, material that will subsequently be featured in film and literature. In both *La Nouba* and *La Femme*, Djebarian tropes of listening and framing work to authorize the translational narrative. However, there is also a key difference between the two texts. In *La Nouba*, the work of

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[56] Other critics (e.g. Donadey) use this term to describe the primary narrator of *La Femme sans sépulture*, denoting the historical proximity of the figure to Assia Djebar herself. Moreover, *La Femme* strongly suggests the autobiographical register.

listening is more open-ended and the narrator-protagonist keeps an interpretive distance from her subjects, whereas in *La Femme*, the narrator works to establish intimacy and enlist the women she interviews in constructing her interpretation. The result, in *La Femme sans sépulture*, is a problematic kind of "persuasive listening," which both conceals the power of the narrator and authorizes her interpretations and transmissions of the interviews. In revealing the asymmetric power dynamics conditioning the representation of secondary characters, I propose to undertake a constructive "untranslation" of Assia Djebar's texts to reveal a process of translation between languages, characters and cultural spaces that is fraught with ambiguities. I ultimately argue for closer attention to how the Djebarian ethic of listening is itself mediated by personal experience, linguistic competence, and ideology.

1. Listening Pathways in *La Nouba*

There are two main ways in which listening, as a primordial step in the chain of transmission, enters Djebarian narrative. The first type occurs organically and in a naturalized manner: the figure of the narrator, as a little girl, adolescent or young adult, is portrayed incidentally listening to, or overhearing, the personal and fictional stories told by elderly grandmothers, aunts, mother, and other women. The second mode of listening is figured as a deliberate act for the purposes of tracing family or regional history: the narrator consciously solicits material, visits interviewees, and sits with women with the express purpose of collecting stories that will later find re-expression in Djebar's distinctive blend of history and fiction.

In *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* [*Noubat Nissa' Djebel Chenoua*] (1978), Djebar incorporates both of these modes of listening, reconstructing the scene of listening as the source, or origin, for the film itself. The feature-length film, part-documentary and part-fiction, includes authentic war footage and sound recordings of interviews with women, interspersed with a fictional plot revolving around the daily life of a nuclear family: Lila, Ali, and their daughter Aïcha. The figure of Lila is partially autobiographical, evoking Djebar's own *trajet d'écoute*, that is, her history of listening to women's stories since childhood, as well as her subsequent mission to collect women's oral histories as a young adult. The fictional figure of Lila is a woman in her thirties who has returned from France to her childhood home in a hamlet near the Chenoua region along the Algerian coast. While there, she travels around in a Jeep (as Djebar did on her own trip to her home of Cherchell, near Chenoua) and visits extended family, speaking with female relatives whom she interviews along the way. Djebar has reflected on the work for her film in fond terms: "Those were the two or three happiest years of my life, in which I really tried to get to know my "sites of memory," which became a process of getting to myself again, finding myself again!" [57] This was possible, Djebar explains, because

> [t]his was the only period in which I was able to work and create in immersion with my own environment: writing of space and of listening, in the landscapes of my childhood, my ear immersed in the dialectical Arabic of conversations; the return of the Berber in such a burst of suffering as that of a woman in "Mont Chenoua," a monologue, ultimately in French, of a woman who strolls through a territory in which past and present echo one another. (Djebar in Hillauer 303)

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[57] These were Djebar's words during her 2000 acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade on October 22, 2000 in Frankfurt. (Qtd. in Hillauer 303)

Djebar places emphasis both on the personal pleasure and the professional efficiency of being "in immersion" with her research space. It is in her home, or what she considers "my own environment," that Djebar can be closest to the women she wants to represent, "ultimately in French."

La Nouba is also the first Djebarian work in which Zoulikha appears. "Appears," though, is perhaps not the right word, because Zoulikha actually emerges from the film as sound, rather than visually, in the stories told by woman interviewees to Lila, the protagonist. Depending on each speaker's relationship with Zoulikha, she is signified first as "my mother," then as "my sister," and, later in the film, as "Zoulikha" as the protagonist learns more of her story. Remarkable for the diegetic and mimetic emphasis it places on sound and listening, *La Nouba* heralds the role of listening in the Djebarian *œuvre*. In the Preface of *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980), Djebar will seize upon listening as the *modus operandi* for her previous twenty years' work, which she calls "un trajet d'écoute" (7). Since then, Djebar's tendency to foreground listening has not waned, and numerous critics have underlined its relevance to the writer's methodology, ethics, and feminist perspective (Donadey 131, Khanna 242).

Lila's husband, Ali, is a veterinarian who has been injured in an accident and is confined to a wheelchair. While he stays in the home all day with their daughter, Lila comes and gœs as she pleases. It is rare for the couple to venture out together, but once Ali has healed enough to move from a wheelchair to crutches, the pair travels by car for Ali to give veterinary advice to a cattle owner. Walking around an old building that had

served as a French military prison during the war, Lila silently remembers her own

suffering in prison when she was tortured at the hands of the French. She also remembers

the story of Zoulikha. As Lila keeps silent, the camera settles on a close-up of her

shoulders and face while her off-screen voice asks:

> Should I tell him about Zoulikha's death and my days spent in prison? In order to tell him I have to free myself from those memories. The tombs surge up from the seas. And memories of prison from darkness. Zoulikha was tortured and killed. Her sister told me that…her body was left in the village. But nobody was allowed near it. But on the second night the body disappeared. Maybe a partisan buried her in the forest…(Lila, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*)[58]

Lila then looks beyond the camera and the sequence cuts to the object of her gaze: a

forest. She concludes: "Well, that's another way to give a woman a tomb." Twenty-four

years later, in *La Femme sans sépulture,* Djebar will give another sort of tomb to

Zoulikha.

The listening motif developed throughout the film is reinforced partly by

narrative, partly by images, and partly by Djebar's use of sound. Listening is *visually*

displayed at numerous junctures in *La Nouba*: when Lila is listening to her women

interviewees, when she listens to the music being made by groups of young people by the

sea; when Aïcha hangs on each word as Lila recounts traditional local tales and stories of

male and female heroism; and when Lila remembers and returns (via flashback shots) to

her own memories of listening to her grandmother's stories, late at night, on a big four-

poster bed. Djebar's sound editing also puts the audience into a state of attentive

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[58] The sound-track of *La Nouba* is in Algerian Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, and occasionally Tamazight (Berber) languages. This particular quotation is in Arabic, but has been given English subtitles by the U.S. non-profit media arts organization and film distributor, Women Make Movies.

listening: the voice-over gives the effect of a time-lag between the introduction of new

diegetic images and the soundtrack that may (or may not) provide some narrative

explanation. In a sequence of shots of Lila travelling around the countryside, reaching her

destinations, and being greeted by her mother's relatives, Lila remains mostly silent.

Meanwhile, we do hear some direct sound: voices of children and pleasantries between

the women (and Lila herself) as they greet each other. Yet Lila rarely speaks in the direct

sound from these scenes, except to ask questions. Lila's voice emerges the most clearly

elsewhere, outside the moments when she is listening to women.

Throughout the film, there are certain lines that become thematic to Lila's internal

monologue. In these lines, she repeats observations, processes stories she has heard, and

begins to establish her own voice. These sounds become another sort of anthem, or

chorus, for *La Nouba*, which is already a highly "musical" film in its construction and

arrangement. (A *Nouba* is a traditional Maghrebi women's song form of Andalusian

(Spanish, Muslim, and Jewish) origins, arranged in five parts.[59]) Early in the film, when

Lila is commencing her visits with women, the camera zooms in to a mid-shot of Lila

arriving into a small cottage. At this point, we clearly hear the non-simultaneous sound of

Lila's off-screen voice, saying "I'm not looking for anything. I only remember that I was

looking. I'm not looking for anything. But I'm listening. Oh, how I love to listen!" These

words connote an odd tension between "looking for" (searching for something which one

expects to find) and listening (opening oneself to receive something unexpected). Lila

hints that she *may be* looking "around" ("I only remember that I was looking"), but this

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[59] See also Rice and Bensmaïa for analyses concentrating on the musical structure of this work. See also Bart Moore-Gilbert 96-97.

mode of inquiry is opened up by by the fact that she is "not looking for anything" *in particular*. The lines still privilege listening as Lila's principal means of investigation. Later, as she returns to see another group of women, Lila's off-screen voice airs similar thoughts. With the protagonist and other figures in the frame, we hear: "Open the door, say hello…don't say anything, just listen. Is it the past or the present that's whispering?" In *La Nouba*, the open-ended nature of listening allows Djebar to produce a filmic "universe" that Réda Bensmaïa describes as "an apparently chance juxtaposition or dissemination of dispersed fragments" (84). According to Bensmaïa, Djebar's film "invites us to contemplate . . . a world in progress, in gestation" (84) and thus helps resist the likelihood of the work being "reduced to [an] anthropological or case stud[y]" (84). In this way, *La Nouba* offers a translation of coming into being that does not claim to represent Algerian women once and for all. Rather, the film emphasizes the live and dynamic nature of culture and language, through representation.

And yet, Djebarian listening in *La Nouba* is not *merely* open-ended and may not *fully* avoid the lure of "anthropological" readings. Regardless of the claim not to be searching anything in particular, Lila is in Algeria "looking for" something: others' stories and a way to come to terms with her own. Lila insisting on her own silence as she arrives in someone's home is not simply a matter of ethics or *politesse*; it is also a deliberate methodology that recalls the methods of contemporary ethnography. Djebar, an historian and social scientist by training, explicitly compares her field-work for *La Nouba* to social science methods in *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*:

> J'ai travaillé trois mois ainsi, parce que je voulais d'abord saisir le son, la voix, enregistré [*sic*] la parole et la langue du vécu, en particulier du vécu féminin. Petit à petit, ce projet s'est réalisé.
>   Je travaille au cinéma de cette façon-là, c'est à dire que je commence comme ferait un ethnologue ou un sociologue.
>   Cela me permet d'entrer dans un groupe social que je connais déjà, dans lequel je me mets à vivre, non pas de temps en temps comme une journaliste, mais vraiment avec eux (178-9).

Striking in this description is its multiplication of professional or disciplinary terms: Djebar attempts to work like an ethnographer or a sociologist *in the beginning*, but, she also claims she would not work like "une journaliste." She describes the research phase for *La Nouba* in terms of best practice in certain social science disciplines: "je me mets à vivre avec eux." Although the distinction Djebar makes between the approach taken by a "une journaliste" and her own may be apt, she does not recognize a contradiction between *actually* living with (as in "being one of") a group *versus* living with them as an "un ethnographe ou un sociologue" for a limited period of time. In any case, Djebar's translation of her research findings ("la voix [et] du vécu féminin[s]") into film and literature, rather than social science "case studies," neatly shatters these disciplinary boundaries, and her emphasis on participating in community life helps to explain why listening becomes such a touchstone of her methodology.

The aim of this ethnographic or sociological method is to transmit memories that have been repressed or will soon be lost from community memory, forever eclipsed by official History. *La Nouba* alludes to this problem in a scene depicting Lila driving through the countryside in her Jeep. At the same time, a voice-over gives a further iteration on the theme of listening: "I'm not looking for anything…but I'm listening…to

the sound of…broken memory." In her memoir, Djebar indicates how she translates

"broken memory" through listening:

> Je commence des entretiens libres, j'essaie de me rendre compte non seulement de ce que disent les gens sur leur présent et leur passé, mais de la façon dont ils le disent, de la façon dont une femme va employer telle expression ou telle autre, quand elle évoque un souvenir, quand elle développe une expérience passée, douloureuse ou non.
>
> Finalement, le contenu pour moi devient moins important que son rapport à sa mémoire, que sa voix qui défaille à certains moments. Pourquoi se remet-elle à pleurer pour une petite chose, alors que la même paysanne va raconter sobrement qu'elle a perdu quatre garçons, une autre me montrer, le regard sec, les cicatrices de ses tortures ou des traces assez terribles rappelant la guerre quinze ans auparavant?...
>
> Comment la langue qu'elle utilise alors, qu'elle soit langue berbère ou langue arabe, mais la langue la plus simple, la plus dépouillé, la ramène à ses souffrances, à ses passions, à ses joies…et c'est alors une langue que je partage. (*Ces voix* 179)

Here, listening becomes empathy, and empathy is important because it allows the listener

to record *everything* – including affect, resistance and silence. It is to the ineffable quality

of the interviews she conducted that Djebar will return in the *Ouverture* (Preface) of

Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement (1980), yet with remarkably less specificity:

> *Je pourrais dire: « nouvelles traduites de… », mais de quelle langue? De l'arabe? D'un arabe populaire, ou d'un arabe féminin; autant dire d'un arabe souterrain.*
>
> *J'aurais pu écouter ces voix dans n'importe quelle langue non écrite, non enregistrée, transmise seulement par chaînes d'échos et de soupirs.*
>
> *Son arabe, iranien, afghan, berbère ou bengali, pourquoi pas, mais toujours avec timbre féminin et lèvres proférant sous le masque.* (7)

Djebar implies and critiques the victimization of women in various regions of the (Third)

world, categorizing the voices of women living in many different cultural, linguistic and

religious contexts as a muffled "sound" coming from beneath a mask. The passage

implicitly vilifies powerful—that is, hegemonic and patriarchal—*langages* worldwide. At

the same time, it assumes both an essentialized oppressor (men) and generalized victim ("their" women), then proffers a universalist response. The formulation "arabe, iranien, afghan, berbère ou bengali, pourquoi pas" has a generality about it that now seems misplaced in light of Gayatri Spivak's work on "attend[ing] to the alterity of women whose selves are, or so we think, only too easily imagined" (Spivak, "Revisited" 160). Given her stated aims not to "speak for" other women but rather, in close solidarity, "right next to" [*tout contre*] them (*Femmes d'Alger* 8), Djebar seems to disregard questions that might point her listening/speaking in a more productive direction. Spivak proposes such questions in "French Feminism in an International Frame:" "not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me? Is this part of the problematic I discuss?" (207). In Djebar's defense, one could justifiably cite poetic license, responding that in Djebar's 1978 work (and in its 2002 reprint[60]), Spivakian critique is not the objective. Yet Spivak's intervention helps us untranslate readings that risk repeating a homogenizing gesture by viewing Djebar's work as a translation of Algerian (and Third World Muslim) women. Given these concerns, Djebar's completion and publication of *La Femme sans sépulture* in 2002 seems almost a palliative or correction to the notion of other voices that "seem too easily imagined." In *La Femme*, Djebar will transmit the history of *one particular woman*— Zoulikha—and of those who remember her.

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[60] Cf. Bourget "Réédition"

2. Framing for Listening

The *Avertissement* and the incipit of *La Femme sans sépulture* emphasize the

historiographical transmission of women's voices across the matrix of fiction. Djebar

immediately qualifies the text as part-documentary, part-fiction "avec un souci de fidélité

historique" (9). According to the *Avertissement*, this mix of genres will aid in the faithful

transmission, or translation, of Zoulikha's life: "J'ai usé de ma liberté romanesque,

justement pour que la vérité de Zoulikha soit éclairée davantage, au centre même d'une

large fresque féminine – selon le modèle des mosaïques si anciennes de Césarée de

Maurétanie (Cherchell)" (9). This allusion to antique imagery recalls Djebar's re-readings

of paintings by Delacroix and Picasso in *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*

(1980).[61]

The tone shifts from the visual to the sonorous register in the epigraph, the final

lines of Louis-René Des Forêts's *Poèmes de Samuel Wood* (1988).[62]

> Si faire entendre une voix venue d'ailleurs
> Inaccessible au temps et à l'usure
> Se révèle non moins illusoire qu'un rêve
> Il y a pourtant en elle une chose qui dure
> Même après que s'en est perdu le sens
> Son timbre vibre encore au loin comme un orage
> D'où on ne sait s'il se rapproche ou s'en va. (Qtd. in Djebar, *La Femme* 9)

The first three lines of this quotation communicate the difficulty—impossibility, even—

of "illuminating" the voice of Zoulikha. Yet such illustration remains possible within the

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[61] It also foreshadows Djebar's allusion, throughout *La Femme sans sépulture*, to a mosaic in the Cherchell museum depicting Ulysses being drawn to the coast by the song of three sirens, depicted as creatures whose top half is woman and bottom half is bird.

[62] Des Forêts 73. The poet died in 2001, the same year that Djebar finished composing *La Femme sans sépulture.*

sonorous realm: something from Zoulikha's voice has remained ("une chose qui dure").

This lasting element, "vibrating" in the air of time and space, is barely tangible, but still

present. Making this distant voice heard across time and space is a near-transcendental

endeavor, because that voice is inaccessible to "temps" (time, the temporal world) *and*

"l'usure" (use, for mundane purposes, or usury, with the aim of personal, financial gain,

but also wear, wear and tear[63]). *La Femme sans sépulture* resists the corrosive qualities of

time and space by listening for a nearly-eclipsed voice. Throughout the novel, the author-

narrator describes herself as, among other things, the one who listens, "« l'écouteuse »"

(238).

The *avertissement* and the epigraph share another quality: the mechanism by

which they frame. Recalling Jacques Derrida's description of the relationship between

work (*ergon*) and frame (*parergon*),[64] Djebar's *avertissement* and epigraph—like her

épilogue—work both to demarcate and blur the lines between the world of the reader and

the world of the novel (Derrida 72-3). The theory of the *parergon* suggests that a kind of

translation can invisibly be at work in the novel in general. In Djebar's work, the *parerga*

subtend her implied hypothesis that truth can be transmitted through (French) language:

true translation *is* possible between the historical figure Zoulikha and a variety of other

subjects including Djebar, other figures in the text, and readers. Furthermore, Djebar's

use of French – and citation of French poetry—suggests a link between Derrida's notion

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[63] Certainly it is interesting to speculate on *why* Djebar waited so long to revisit this story in its entirety.
Was it partly to avoid the charge (by Hania) of being a "journalist," hungry for a profitable "scoop"?
[64] *La Vérité de la peinture*, 1978.

of the *Parergon* and Richard Watts's theory of the *paratexte*.[65] Djebar's framing texts are effective because, through their use of French, they effect a "domesticating" translation between the Francophone reader and the Algerian contents of the text. As a result, the contents of the work can circulate more freely, "passe-partout," fit in, more easily in its space of reception. Nonetheless, while one could speculate at length on how Djebar's framing devices might exert translational power upon the "average" French or "Francophone" reader,[66] here I am more interested in deciphering how they impinge upon the novel's subject matter. In *La Femme sans sépulture*, the subject matter is not only Zoulikha, but also all those characters whom the author-narrator visits.

Over the few weeks between her arrival in Cherchell region in spring, 1976, and meeting with Zoulikha's relatives, the narrator of *La Femme sans sépulture* first reconnects with her own long-lost cousins and aunts. The narrator reports that "j'avais d'abord vécu deux semaines dans les montagnes . . . Le soir . . . je reposais chez des cousines, . . . chez le demi-frère de ma mère . . . d'autres fois dans des hameaux perdus, chez quelque tante d'alliance" (14). Like Lila in *La Nouba*, the narrator did not come to Cherchell "looking for" the story of anyone in particular. It is in speaking with her female relatives that the narrator first hears of Zoulikha: "Si souvent, dans maints et maints récits de mes hôtesses, le même nom était revenu: Zoulikha... Zoulikha... « Comment, tu ne la connais pas? Elle est de ta ville! » « La mère des maquisards! » la surnommait une autre" (14-5). Like a good cousin or niece – and a good ethnographer – the narrator pursues the

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[65] See my Introduction and Chapter One for a fuller discussion of Watts's reading of Genette's theory of the paratext in *Packaging Postcoloniality*.
[66] For my purposes, a heuristic category.

story by visiting Zoulikha's daughters. Hania, the elder, still lives in Cherchell, and Mina, the younger, teaches French at a middle school in Algiers. Hania, a widow, lives in Zoulikha's house with the youngest sibling, a brother who is about to be married and whom Hania raised after Zoulikha's disappearance in 1957. Another son was killed during the war. Thanks to her interlocutors' opennenes, the narrator-author rapidly comes to know the most important details of their family history.

La Femme sans sépulture is remarkable for its multiple manifestations of intimacy in the relationship between the author-narrator and her subject. This closeness recalls Djebar's claim in *Ces voix qui m'assiègent* to having lived with ("vivre avec") her subjects during her research for *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*. Whether as authorial figure in the *Avertissement* or the *Épilogue*, or as narrator-character in the story, "the visitor's" manifest (and implicit) desire is to (re)establish intimacy and closeness with the people and place of her narrative. This intimacy has the effect of validating her solidarity with protagonists like Zoulikha and authorizing her translation of their stories. It also allows for a narrator who is at times confesses in the Prelude and Epilogue of *Une Femme sans sepulture* her remorse about the time-lag between Zoulikha's death (1957) and her meeting Zoulikha's family (1976) and completing and publishing her story (1981-2001). And yet, Djebar's language demonstrates the confusion of both the narrator and the women in ascertaining her identity and belongingness. At various times, either the narrator or numerous other characters of the story attribute to her a variety of monikers, including "« La visiteuse », « l'invitée », « l'étrangère », ou, par moments, « l'étrangère pas tellement étrangère »" (235). In the *Épilogue*, the author-narrator asks

whether "tous ces vocables me désigneraient-ils donc moi?" (235). Ultimately the narrator claims to have returned to Cherchell as "la fille prodigue" (242). In claiming this position, she boldly announces her belonging as an Algerian daughter, yet also suggests her distance and foreignness as one who flouted social codes by leaving.

3. Persuasive Listening

By playing on a change in verb tense, the *Prélude* to *La Femme* plunges the reader back in time: "Histoire de Zoulikha: l'inscrire enfin, ou plutôt la réinscrire... // La première fois, c'était au printemps de 1976, me semble-t-il. Je me trouve chez la fille de l'héroïne de la ville. De ma ville . . . " (13). This transition is not lived easily. The narrator is immediately called upon to explain why she has come to request interviews with Zoulikha's daughters "late" - almost twenty years after their mother's death. In this first meeting with Zoulikha's younger daughter, Mina, the visitor is immediately charged with neglect, a complaint the narrator does not attempt to hide. Rather, she reports Mina's accusation three times over: "—Je vous attendais!" (13); "—Je vous ai attendue des années, et vous ne venez que maintenant!" (14); and "Je t'ai attendue toutes ces années!" (15). Undeterred if embarrassed, the narrator meets this reproach with a brief admission of guilt and a request to begin the process of telling history, which ultimately meets with success: "—Je suis là; en retard peut-être, mais là! Travaillons!... // Elle et moi, nous avons enfin commencé: histoire de Zoulikha" (14). But despite her dismay at the narrator's belated arrival, Mina changes her mind quickly. The formulation "elle et moi, nous" signals this rapid change of heart, from a position of reproachful resistance to one

of near-collaboration with the narrator. This early scene foreshadows the friendship that will develop between Mina and her visitor over the course of the next few days in the spring of 1976. After only a few days' conversation and shared experiences, Mina will come to refer to the narrator as "ma nouvelle amie" (94), a designation soon echod by her sister, Hania (99, 100) and the narrator herself (137). Moreover, as we will see, this reconstruction of the narrator's first meeting with Mina foreshadows the dynamics by which the narrator will gain the confidence of all her major informants/protagonists. In *La Femme sans sépulture*, differently from *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, friendship, sameness, solidarity and "complicité" (79) with the interviewees become vital conditions of the narrative itself. The apparently consensual nature of this complicity underpins the ethical success of Djebarian listening. It also authenticates the author-narrator's subsequent reconstruction of events, making the figure of the narrator a sort of internal *parergon* or paratext to the narrative as a whole.

The text's explanation of this rapid transition from "elle et moi" to "nous" is revealing. Algerian customs of hospitality could have been invoked, but Djebar includes no "anthropological" information/data of how the guest ("l'invitée) is made to feel at home. Such an explanation could invalidate the narrator's welcome and mark her as outsider. Instead, she explains her relatively smooth transition from outsider to insider status in terms of real or implied desire[67] on the part of her hostess: "Elle m'interpelle à nouveau, mais en arabe dialectal. Sa phrase, avec ces mots amers, sursaute toutefois

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[67] For this observation and the direction in which it takes my reading of *La Femme sans sépulture*, I am indebted to Shaden Tageldin's analysis of the "English lessons" in Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* (Tageldin 257-62).

d'une secrète douceur, tremblée, prête à couler en larmes. Douceur que je perçois ainsi,

peut-être à cause de la sonorité andalouse propre à l'arabe raffinée des citadines d'ici"

(15). In transitioning from French, which both women speak in their professional lives, to

their shared mother tongue of Cherchelli Arabic, Mina also permits the narrator to be

"translated" from outsider to insider. That the French-language narrator seamlessly

recounts this transition further evidences both her cultural belonging and her authority as

cultural translator. It is the narrator's bi-cultural knowledge and mobile identity that

allows her immediately to take command of a situation in which Mina's "secrète douceur,

tremblée, prête à couler en larmes" becomes both historical justification and ethical

imperative for the narrative's existence.

The intimate and affective language of this opening scene is reminiscent of what

Shaden Tageldin calls a "translational seduction" (*Disarming Words* 243). In the colonial

context, according to Tageldin, translational seduction is a process by which the

colonized is led to believe she desires her own subjugation by the colonizer. The

dynamics of translational seduction, Tageldin explains, are insidious. The colonized and

the colonizer each play their roles in perpetuating an asymmetrical relationship

masquerading as an egalitarian one, thereby effacing the epistemological, linguistic,

cultural, and territorial violence of colonial domination (248). Although the action of *La

Femme sans sépulture* takes place in the post-Independence context, the contours of

colonial-era domination are still present. The "framings" of Djebar's novel constitute a

form of translational seduction in which the author-narrator becomes doubly, painfully,

and strangely implicated. The figure of the narrator, who appears initially as "l'étrangère"

(*LFSS* 48), "la visiteuse" (78, 100, 137), or "l'intervieweuse" (49), is denoted as a

foreigner. When visiting Cherchell (although she had previously stayed at the homes of

aunts and cousins), she checks into a hotel and, in addition to her interviewing work and

social visiting, takes time to visit the region's tourist attractions: notable among them are

classical and antique monuments (113-14). To varying degrees, her mobility, education,

interests and income level place her in an asymmetrical relationship with the middle- and

working-class Cherchelli women she visits. The narrator is French-speaking, educated in

French-colonial schools, and has lived and worked in France. She represents an already-

consummated "self-translation," having internalized the French idiom of colonial era,

forever coloring her Algerian selfhood "d'un amour-haine algéro-français" (191 *Ces*

voix).

A second degree of "translational seduction" comes into play as the narrator

interacts with and, more importantly, depicts her relationship with the other characters.

The narrator has already been interpellated, by history, and the characters around her, into

positions historically associated with colonialism—"étrangère," "visiteuse,"

"intervieweuse." Now, *the narrative itself* turns the seductive force of cultural

domination upon the narrator's new acquaintances. The other characters in *La Femme*

react at first with mistrust but are very soon won over by the narrator's "disarming

words" (Tageldin). In spite of herself, the narrator, once seduced, now uncannily

becomes one who will seduce, who must seduce, in order to extract the information she

desires.

Among the secondary characters of *La Femme sans sépulture*, Hania's voice mounts perhaps the most pointed critique of representation—at least, against representation of a certain kind. In an extended interview and discussion with the narrator, Hania airs misgivings that suggest the opposite of the meaning of her name, "l'apaisée." Hania's discomfort at speaking with "journalistes," and her mistrust of producers or experts "en matière « artistique », comme ils aiment dire" who would represent Zoulikha's story (50, 53-4) is based on her observation that in such media "il n'y a pas d'abord le respect" (54). At this point, the narrator intervenes, asking "Le respect pour la fidélité?" (54). Hania does not answer directly, but pursues her critique: "Le respect, répète Hania. Je pense, moi, que ma mère, pas seulement comme héroïne, comme simple femme, on la tue une seconde fois, si c'est pour l'exposer ainsi, en images de télévision… (elle réfléchit), une image projetée n'importe comment, au moment où les familles entament leur dîner au ramadhan…" (54). For Hania, then, the problem with mass media representations seems to be that she does not wish for her relationship with – and memory of–her mother to become an object of mass consumption. But the representation of this sacred memory which, once out in the world is no longer under the protection of those closest to Zoulikha,is not the only problem. Even *speaking* of Zoulikha can bring Hania untold pain, a feeling that she is hurting, betraying, even killing, her mother: "il me semble que, à mon tour, je la tue!"(50).

Given Hania's discomfort around the memory of Zoulikha and her scruples about its representation, it is surprising that Hania does, ultimately, share her memory of Zoulikha's life and final days with the narrator. Although not strictly speaking a

"journalist," nor an insensitive movie director (like one who, the previous year, had asked Hania to act the part of Zoulikha in a film (53)), the narrator nonetheless occupies a dubious position. Having come to the Cherchell region precisely to gather material for a documentary-fiction film on women's resistance during the War of Liberation, the narrator comes dangerously close to embodying the very adversary that Hania invokes. Given the narrator's role as a producer of texts that could easily be consumed in the world, outside of context, whether by an Algerian sitting down to Ramadhan dinner or a North American academic, Hania's "declaration" to the narrator about her misgivings "face aux journalistes" (50) carries an energy that potentially delegitimizes the ethics of the narrative itself.

And yet, the structure and the content of the narrative works constantly to demonstrate that *this* narrator, and *this* representation, is different: more intimate, more sensitive, more loyal, and more legitimate. For Hania, the figure of the narrator is *like* a journalist, but not quite; *like* a cynical director, but not quite. In the following passage, just before she declares her discomfort "face aux journalistes," Hania tries to work out exactly who the narrator is:

> De la fenêtre de sa cuisine, Hania observe, à présent, la scène. *Cette étrangère* qui revient de si loin, d'horizons inconnus, mais qui, tout de même, les semaines précédentes, a parcouru les sentiers, les hammeaux que Zoulikha a habités les derniers mois de sa vie.
> Hania se rappelle que l'une des tantes de *la visiteuse* est morte dans la maison mitoyenne; cette voisine morte jeune, sans descendance . . .
> Voici que *cette nièce de la voisine* tuberculeuse – *cette inconnue*, au visage aigu et non fardé, seuls les yeux couleur noisette, noircis de khôl, et qui a une façon lente de vous fixer – déclenche, par son arrivée, des tornades de souvenirs. (50, emphasis added)

Djebar's free-indirect description of Hania's feelings signals the tension between trust and mistrust, intimacy and strangeness in the relationship between the Cherchelli resident and her would-be translator. Economically signified as "étrangère," "visiteuse," and "inconnue," but also "niece de la voisine," the narrator possesses an uncanny quality that for Hania is both *heimlich* and *unheimlich.* Hania tries to "read" her *intervieweuse,* who is, on the one hand, intelligible as a neighbor by family connections, and, on the other unreadable and therefore anxiety-producing:, a "stranger," an "unknown," who wants to know Hania, to represent or "fixe" her. That Djebar accords narrative space to a literary character's discomfort over her own impending (self-)representation strangely recalls Freud's formulation about the uncanny effects of fiction: "We react to [the creative writer's] inventions as we would have reacted to real experiences ; by the time we have seen through his trick it is already too late and the author has achieved his object. But it must be added that his success is not unalloyed. We retain a feeling of dissatisfaction, a kind of grudge against the attempted deceit" (Freud 251). Hania's subsequent skepticism about journalists and documentarians registers a residual grudge, *lack of appeasement*, or dissatisfaction that both occurs in the "real time" of the novel's action *and* lingers in the resulting narrative.

La Femme sans sépulture ultimately "[brings] to light" everything that Hania felt "ought to have remained secret and hidden" (Freud 225). That the narrative is able to authorize this illumination, despite Hania's voice of resistance, is a function of the way in which the story is told. Like each of the narrator's early encounters with her interviewees, the above passage admits of an ethical barrier to representation, but also begins to

construct a progression from the *unheimlich* to *heimlich*, ultimately resolving in the

solidifying of trust and friendship between the two characters. This trust retroactively

necessitates Hania's revelation and justifies the text's production: it can no longer be

perceived as an encroachment. In the above passage, the primary signifiers for the

narrator become progressively more *heimlich*, from Hania's implied perspective: first,

"étrangère;" second, "visiteuse;" and third "nièce de la voisine." Each signifier gets

closer to Hania and moves the narrator closer to the status of someone who is acceptable

and desirable as a confidante. Only minutes after her disclaimer about "journalistes," it is

Hania herself who delivers the *coup de grâce* against her own resistance:

> --Avec toi, reprend Hania en disposant dans l'assiette de l'invitée des
> carrés gluants d'amandes et de miel, avec toi (elle hésite, repasse au
> français), si je parle d[e Zoulikha], je me soulage, je me débarrasse des
> dents de l'amertume. Oh, je sais bien, les autres femmes de la ville,
> aujourd'hui, pensent que je suis fière de Zoulikha . . . Elles pensent, celles
> de Césarée, que j'exhibe mon orgueil devant elles, elles qui sont restées
> presque toutes calfeutrées. Tremblantes certes, mais à l'abri... Zoulikha,
> non! S'approfondit en moi un manque, un trou noir que je n'ai pas épuisé!
> Ô toi qui as mis si longtemps à revenir, continue-t-elle d'une voix
> vacillante, toi, la nièce de Houria, morte à côté de chez nous, tu as fait, à
> ce qu'il paraît, presque le tour du monde, mais que te reprocher, tu nous es
> revenue, n'est-ce pas l'essentiel? (52)

The words and actions in this passage bespeak forgiveness, welcome, and intimacy

between Hania and the narrator. As sweetly as the honey and almonds of the traditional

Algerian pastries she serves, Hania names her guest twice: first, in the standard "toi" of

Arabic and then in the intimate "toi" of French. Having initially passed from French to

Arabic when talking of journalists, Hania now transitions back from Arabic to French.

Hospitality is marked by the ultimate welcoming gesture: speaking the other's language –

Hania speaks what she perceives to be the interviewer's language, and, simultaneously, translates herself into the language of the novel. The sweetness of Hania's discourse is further accentuated by the revelation that not only is she willing to speak with the narrator, she also wants to do so because, she now recognizes, "je me soulage, je me débarrasse des dents de l'amertume." Finally, her new confidante, though a stranger, is uniquely close. "Les autres femmes de la ville," Hania explains, for want of heroism during the war are neither capable nor worthy of understanding her, nor of being associated with Zoulikha. The visitor, by contrast, is promoted to a role of absolute intimacy. She is the only one who will see that Hania's behavior is not due to "orgueil" or false pride, but rather to the never-ending "trou noir" that Zoulikha's death provoked.

Hania's name, *La Femme sans sépulture* tells us, means "l'apaisée." When we first meet Hania, she is simply an empty signifier of this state, but her interactions with the narrator change everything. Since losing her mother, along with hopes of recovering the body, Hania suffers periodic states of mental and physical illness, including a long-term amenorrhea (64-5). The days of the month when Hania is most ill, she stays in bed all day and "s'écoute, silencieuse, comme dans une méditation sans fin" (64). In place of her menstrual period (and thus ovulation, which could potentiate new life), Hania is left with nothing but "une sorte d'hémorraghie sonore" (65). The arrival of the narrator, and the "tornades de souvenirs" that she stirs up, put an end to this state of limbo. Hania's transformation is foreshadowed by the subtitle "Voix de Hania, l'apaisée" (56). Djebarian listening intervenes so that Hania's "hémorraghie sonore" is interrupted and channeled into anamnesis. As such, the text promotes the narrator not only to the status of Mina's

friend, but also her confessor, healer, or analyst. Scholar Jenny Murray argues that, over the course of *La Femme sans sépulture*, Hania completes a mourning process that had been cut short: "the symptoms of Hania's neurosis are eased by telling the story of Zoulikha's life and death" (184). Yet, in the narrative's terms, this happy result is not a coincidence: the amelioration in Hania's health comes as a direct result her interaction with the narrator. Before she forgave the narrator (52, above), "Hania avait . . . évoqué Zoulikha, mais dans le désordre" (47). But now that her doubts about "journalistes" and "matière « artistique »" have been vanquished, Hania seems not threatened, but healed, by the narrative. As the relationship between Hania and her "nouvelle amie" (94) strengthens, the asymmetry in their power to have influence on the story is diminished. Hania "s'instaure chroniqueuse" (94), signalling not only the end of psychic and narrative disorder, but also full consent to be a participant in transmitting the story of Zoulikha, presented as a part of authorship in "la parole collective" (*Ces voix* 77). Moreover, at the very moment in which Hania's role is transformed "dans une précipitation visible" from interviewee to storyteller, the narrator claims Hania's fervent desire to transmit a true story: "apaisée vraiment et désireuse de faire un effort de fidélité" (94). Simultaneously the burden of this process is removed from the narrator, now characterized eternally patient, listening, and having no desire or particular expectations: "celle qui écoute, qui ne désire rien, qui attend" (94).

Zoulikha's younger daughter Mina (Amina) undergœs a similar transformation, the dynamics of which also suggest a "translational seduction" by the narrative in which resistance of doubts are swept aside. Although Mina transitioned fairly fast at the

beginning of the narrative from curtness to friendship with the narrator, she, too, resists the idea of speaking about Zoulikha's life and death because the subject causes great pain. Thus, even as Mina has accorded trust and friendship to her new confidante, textual hints remain that the narrative project – to uncover and recount the story of Zoulikha – may not be salutary for all concerned. For example, Mina flees the room when her older sister begins discussing Zoulikha with the interviewer (51). Despite such shows of resistance, *La Femme* constructs a very clear progression in the two women's relationship that ultimately fully implicates Mina in the project of her own representation. In an extended interior monologue told in Mina's voice, Zoulikha's younger daughter decides that the visitor, "cette femme, ma nouvelle amie" (94) has seen something that no-one else could see (95). Again, the notion that the narrator desires nothing in particular is reiterated: "Elle ne demande rien. Elle écoute" (95). Yet this perception of the narrator is undermined by a later description of her as "la quêteuse" (165) and "celle qui, patiemment, a interrogé" (203).

The narrative explains Mina's trust in the author-narrator in terms of their growing friendship. As Mina and the narrator undertake a number of activities together such as road trips, home visits, and tours of touristic sites, the narrator reports on the growing "complicité des deux amies" (70). Even as this complicity seems to waver with Mina's fear of revealing and, through retelling, reliving too much, each new adventure brings closeness. On a road trip to visit La Dame Lionne, the two friends are "à nouveau[,] complices" (99), and Mina chooses to tell the story of her disappointed love affair with a male friend, a fellow student whom she later discovered was homosexual.

The precursor to this confession is intimacy sealed in French, their language of communication: "Elles en sont au tutoiement; à la confiance. Tu peux t'arrêter, ne plus raconter. Je suis là... pour toi! Elle semble dire cela, l'écouteuse, par ce simple frôlement du poignet. Mina, encouragée, poursuit" (102). Yet even having told a story that gives her pain, Mina seems relieved, saying "je n'ai parlé de cette histoire à personne" (109).

As with Hania, in *La Femme sans sépulture* the relationship between Mina and the narrator is constructed as being both unique and intimate. The two women come to resemble each other, to the extent that the narrator asks "sont-elles devenues inséparables?" (137). While it is initially the narrator who is known as "la visiteuse," as the narrator is eventually accompanied by Mina wherever she goes, a shared tourist outing now renders them "les deux visiteuses" (137), and the narrative begins to describe their actions in the feminine plural (138). The establishment of a relationship in which the two women *begin to resemble each other* obscures the initial relationship of interviewer and interviewee. The descriptions begin to imply that Mina resembles "la visiteuse" more than she resembles her own mother, sister, or other women of her home town. In contrast to the narrator, the Algerian women Mina and Hania have known for years are portrayed as insufficient interlocutors. In a scene where Hania makes the difficult decision to go downstairs and join Mina and the narrator, Hania's internal monologue justifies her decision to go downstairs and beginning telling Zoulikha's story: "Les invitées de la ville . . . peu importent les mots, leurs formules convenues de salutations, de bénédictions, d'invocations . . . seulement bourdonner, chuchoter, se diluer les unes avec les autres . . . Seulement s'ausculter, à plusieurs, semblablement

immobilisées dans un destin sans interstices !" (89-90). The passage describes the oral recycling of Zoulikha's story within the family and local community as having a suffocating effect upon Zoulikha's memory: "des parents, des parents par alliance, qui vous barrent la lumière, qui vous privent du repos, du répit, du silence!" (90). By contrast, as Hania mentally prepares herself to speak to the narrator, the decision is portrayed as one that will bring a transcendent level of closure not only for Hania, but also for Zoulikha, honoring her memory by bringing it to light, paradoxically bringing appropriate silence by breaking the silence toward the narator: "Vers toi, ma mère perdue, ma Zoulikha vivante, je descends les escaliers! Oui, pour toi, là où vibre cette lumière crue qui dénude, qui brûle, pas celle qui asphyxie" (90). The transmittal and transfer of Zoulikha's story to the literary page is felicitious, its effects—defined in opposition to that of the local oral culture—libratory, healing, and transcendent.

The closeness between the narrator and the two sisters lays the groundwork for involving them in the project of representation. The secondary characters' consent to this project is established perhaps nowhere more clearly than in a scene in which Mina and the narrator are returning by car from a visit with Lla Lbia, who told them the story of Zoulikha's dangerous escape from Cherchell to the *maquis* (the Algerian wilderness), from where she was able to continue her struggle:

> Ainsi, reprend [la narratrice] . . . cette dernière nuit de Zoulikha à Césarée, comme elle a été mouvementée! On pourrait, ajoute-t-elle, craignant soudain que Mina, rivée au volant à ses côtés, ne désire, comme les autres fois chez Hania, s'éclipser par suite de trop d'émotion, pourrais-je, répète-t-elle, revenir à ce dernier récit de Lla Lbia et le faire défiler comme une scénario court, rapide, intense? Tu le permets?
> --Certainement, répond Mina avec calme . . . (167)

In a clear case of asking for permission, the narrator is not only asking for help in interpreting Zoulikha's story, but for something much more powerful: direct consent for her project of representation. In multiple respects, Mina is not in a position to resist, not only because of the confinement of the car. In addition to the two women's friendship, which by now is extremely solid, the phrasing of the narrator's question gives the appearance of complete freedom on the part of its *destinataire*. And yet, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Roland Barthes's reading of *Sarrasine* in *S/Z*, there is really no space for Mina's resistance at this moment, possibly not in the putative "real," historic moment, and certainly not at the textual level of the event. Strictly speaking, the text "allows" for Mina to escape from the question and from the "scénario court, rapide, intense," yet it also delegitimizes that option, should Mina try to take it, by placing the burden not on the narrator who raises the question but rather on the woman who would be subject to "trop d'émotion" (167).

Moreover, like a perfect *parergon*, this question both reveals and conceals the narrator's desire to enlist Mina's help in the representation of her mother. The slippage in the visitor's question from the second to first person singular makes the question *seem to* apply to an action that will be undertaken exclusively by the author-narrator herself. Yet in giving consent for the narrator to continue, Mina will effectively be implicated and

involved in the "scénario" because, at that moment, she is literally the captive audience of the text in its first, oral iteration. In this regard, Mina's "decision" recalls the phenomenon of textual entrapment that Barthes explicates in his structuralist reading: "Sarrasine n'est nullement libre de refuser l'avertissement de l'Italien; car s'il l'acceptait et s'absentait de poursuivre l'aventure, il n'y aurait plus d'histoire. Autrement dit, Sarrasine est contraint par le discours . . . la liberté du personnage est dominée par l'instinct de conservation du discours" (Barthes 129). That Mina responds to her friend's request with the "calm" that the latter desires effectively gives the narrative "la preuve psychologique" (Barthes 141) that is necessary for Mina to place herself in a representation which, under other (previous) circumstances, she would have avoided. She effectively gives consent to respond within the narrative's terms, to "se leurrer [elle]-même" (Barthes 141). As if to prove her *bonne volonté* as the narrator begins to set the scene for the cinematic shots that would reconstruct Zoulikha's story, Mina responds and fills in with rapid fire. The narrator "commence" (168), "poursuit" (169, 170), "continue" (171) while Mina chimes in with enthusiasm and edits for details: "[elle] précise" (168), "rêve" (170), "interrompt" (171).

When the women approach a particularly frightening part of the story (in which Zoulikha's guard has been arrested by the French and an alert could lead to her own arrest), the narrator asks once more for consent: "puis-je continuer? Demande la conteuse, précautionneusement" (170). At this moment, Mina's calm consent transmogrifies into an excited desire to continue: "Je suis comme les enfants, remarque Mina, surprise d'elle-même, je m'aperçois que le plaisir est plus grand d'écouter une

histoire dont on sait pourtant tout à l'avance!" (170). While Mina openly describes herself as a child, the author-narrator has a private editorial thought "qu'elle gardera pour elle seule" (170). Just as the narrative at this moment reinscribes the asymmetrical relationship between the two women (the narrator as adult and Mina as child), it simultaneously absorbs Mina as translator of the story, just as the *narrator* desires, now safely under the auspices of *Mina's* desire. A few moments later, Mina is reported to interrupt the narrator "avec vivacité," saying "laisse-moi continuer" (171) because she knows the story so well. At this point, Mina is *apparently* fully in charge, no longer succumbing to any sort of pressure, nor to a feeling of being unable to escape: "Sur quoi, Mina gare sur un terre-plein la voiture, arrête le moteur, et, les yeux brillants, plonge totalement dans la suite des événements" (172). For the rest of the reconstruction, it is Mina's desire that moves events forward. The narrative event is so successful that even though, at the end of the day, Mina regrets that Zoulikha's escape from the French that day could not have brought about a happy ending to the whole story, "elle . . . refuse de s'attrister" (180).

Having regained her "child"-like energy as she imagines with the narrator a cinematic reconstruction of Zoulikha's adventures, the character of Mina has also completed a course of anamnesis, for which the narrator has been both analyst and host. It is only once this ultimate threshold is reached – the apparent sharing of narrative authority - that Mina comes to be able to share the last untold story of the text: the last time she saw her mother alive. In this scene, "Lorsque Mina, fillette, voyagea au maquis chez sa mère" (199-215), we learn how, as a twelve year-old girl, and at Zoulikha's

request, Mina went up into the *maquis* (the Algerian wilderness) to be reunited one last time with her mother. It was the last time she would see her. This story is preceded by and conditioned upon the blurring of Mina's and the narrator's positions. Whereas, before, the narrator was the listener, Mina now takes on this role as she listens to herself remembering:

> Mina garde sur les lèvres un sourire distrait. Plonge-t-elle dans le passé? L'interrogation de son amie va-t-elle rester suspendue? Puis elle se met à parler ou, plutôt, se prépare à *s'écouter* parler . . . Non, le souvenir de ma mère, je le porte comme un cercle fermé sur lui-même . . .
> Comprendra-t-elle, cette amie, que l'on ne peut se souvenir tout contre une bouche d'ombre...
> [. . .]
> Elle [Mina] répond enfin à celle qui, patiemment, a interrogé. (202-3, emphasis added.)

Alternating between third- and first-person singular, this passage, written in free indirect discourse, reveals the perspective of Mina. "L'interrogation de son amie" – that is, the narrator's questioning – does not remain suspended because, here, Mina takes on her own self-interrogation, and her interior monologue about whether or not to share her story is shared with the reader. Thus, no sooner has Mina wondered "comprendra-t-elle, cette amie [?]" than this thought has been translated into narrative, which proves by its very existence, that indeed the narrator fully understands Mina's feelings and can translate them into the literary text. The effect of coincidence between Mina's and the narrator's goals and desires is further reinforced by the citation of the formulation "tout contre," recalling Djebar's description of her approach to transmitting women's voices in the Préface of *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* ("Ne pas prétendre "parler pour". ou

pire "parler sur", à peine parler *près de,* et si possible *tout contre*[68]" (8)). Just before the

story of Zoulikha is finally revealed through the *mise-en-abîme* of the title "Voix de

Mina" (204), the narrator introduces one more piece of evidence that Mina is a willing

and active participant in the representation: "Enfin, elle commence, tandis que celle qui

l'écoute fixe les longs doigts, un peu frêles (ceux de la main droite, comme si Mina

désirait plutôt écrire que parler) . . . " (203). Not only does this parenthetical description

indicate Mina's *desire* to tell the story of Zoulikha; it also suggests that Mina's first

choice would be for the story to be related in written form. The narrator-writer, who will

transcribe and transmit the story, fulfils Mina's (inferred) wish.

4. Studying Césarée (Cherchell) and *Orientalité*

    The general pattern established in the acquaintanceship of the narrator with Hania

and Mina is repeated both in the stories of Zohra Oudai (Zoulikha's sister-in-law) and Lla

Lbia (La Dame Lionne, Zoulikha's friend and comrade in Cherchell) and in the narrator's

relationship with the town of Césarée (Cherchell) itself. As the narrator meets Zohra and

Lla Lbia, the framing of the narrative incrementally exempts the narrator from any charge

of forcibly extracting the story *and* signals the desire of other characters to tell her their

story (79, 80, 110, 118-19). Thus, by the end of the text, the narrator has formed good

relationships with each of the secondary characters and has translated the story of

Zoulikha from several different perspectives. This experience generates a sense of

intimacy between the secondary characters and the narrator. She comes to identify with

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[68] The quotation continues: "première des solidarités à assumer pour les quelques femmes arabes qui
obtiennent ou acquièrent la liberté de mouvement, du corps et de l'esprit"

each woman, feels ownership over the stories she collects—and ultimately reestablishes a sense of belonging in Césarée. This sense of belonging – the narrator to Césarée, Césarée to the narrator – comes to occupy a diegetic position that is almost as important as the history of Zoulikha itself—the putative objective of the text. For example, when asking Lla Lbia for further details about one of Zoulikha's stories, the narrator couches her request in these terms : "ne m'en veuillez pas: cela concerne autant l'histoire de ma ville que la vie de Zoulikha" (123). It is through the history of Zoulikha that the narrator reclaims her belonging in/to/of Césarée. One night, as the narrator falls asleep, she feels haunted by "la sillhouette de Zoulikha" (120). In this "demi-rêve" or "hallucination," the narrator is transformed: "il me semble que mon corps, ainsi étendu, est devenu la ville elle-même, Césarée . . . telle que celle-ci existait du vivant de Zoulikha" (120). Zoulikha, meanwhile, becomes a figure that seems to haunt the characters of *La Femme sans sepulture,* floating in and out of their narratives. Her voice is described as inhabiting, or speaking through, the voices of other characters, including the narrator.

Critics have characterized *La Femme*'s structure as a "mosaic" of voices (Donadey 67, Hiddleston 166) because Djebar has woven the narrative around the theme of a mosaic that is invoked in the *Avertissement*, the *Épilogue*, and in the main body of the text, particularly in a central chapter, chapter six, "Les oiseaux de la mosaïque" (*LFSS* 113-27). This mosaic is from Dougga, Tunisia,[69] but in 1976, according to *La Femme sans sépulture*, it was in the Cherchell museum, which the narrator visits. The piece, a richly colorful antique mosaic, depicts a famous episode from the *Odyssey* in which three

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[69] Dougga is also the origin of the antique stele in Djebar's novel *Vaste est la prison.*

sirens imperil Ulysses's ship with their seductive song. The sirens take a hybrid form; they are half-woman, and half-bird. Drawing upon her reading of this image in the *Épilogue*, Djebar imagines Zoulikha as one of the sirens (Fig. 1): "elle s'est, pour ainsi dire, envolée... Femme-oiseau de la mosaïque, elle paraît aujourd'hui, pour ses concitoyens, à demi effacée! Or son chant demeure" (236).

At the beginning of the text, the narrator invokes the old name of her home town – Cherchell – as "Césarée, pour moi et à jamais" (13). Given the dynamics of "translational seduction," and the fact that for the French, the Roman heritage of Algeria was seen as a justification for the so-called *mission civilisatrice* of French colonization (Lorcin), it is significant that the author-narrator's preferred name for the town is its Roman one. The text's organization around the naming of Césarée and the narrator's reading of the mosaic suggests two narrative aims: first, to emphasize Algeria's Roman heritage; and second, to create a sort of teacherly visual aid upon which to construct for the narrator's view on the sociopoligical problems faced by contemporary Algerians, notably women. When Mina and the narrator are together at Dame Lionne's house, the narrator expresses her teacherly energy in the following terms:

> [au musée] je n'ai stationné que devant une etrange mosaïque dont je ne me souviens plus! Savez-vous – je m'anime, *je prends un ton presque pédagogique* en direction de l'hôtesse - , trois femmes représentées sur cette fresque d'il y a près de deux mille ans, ce fut comme si elles s'étaient éveillées aujourd'hui, sous mes yeux fascinés! . . . Des femmes, celles de Césarée! De longues pattes d'oiseaux prêts à s'envoler au-dessus de la mer – (117, emphasis added)

The figure of the mosaic transforms the narrator's *trajet d'écoute* into a scene of pedagogy. In conclusion to this lesson, during the *Épilogue*, the author-narrator imagines

herself as the Greek hero Ulysses and Zoulikha as a siren. It is perhaps still in this tone

that the author-narrator opines:

> Je suis revenue seulement pour le dire. J'entends, dans ma ville natale, ses
> mots et son silence, les étapes de sa stratégie avec ses attentes, ses
> fureurs... Je l'entends, et je me trouve presque dans la situation d'Ulysse,
> le voyageur qui ne s'est pas bouché les oreilles de cire, sans toutefois
> risquer de traverser la frontière de la mort pour cela, mais entendre, ne
> plus jamais oublier le chant des sirènes! Elle sourirait, elle se moquerait,
> Zoulikha, si on lui avait dit qu'on la comparerait, elle, aux sirènes du
> grand poème d'Homère. (236)

The reason that Zoulikha would mock the notion of herself being compared to a siren is

that she did not imagine herself that way. While this final statement attributes courage

and perspicacity to the Djebarian narrator, it also manifests the cleavage between the

narrator's positionality and that of her interlocutors. The voice of resistance to Djebarian

transmission occupies an ironic position in this translation of Zoulikha, the Algerian

heroine, into one of Europe's favorite Greek myths—a representation, the passage

reveals, with which the heroine herself neither agrees nor identifies.

If Zoulikha is given a literary tomb and eulogy in *La Femme sans sépulture*, it is

on Djebar's terms. The author-narrator's attitudes – as well as her cosmopolitan mobility

as someone who has carried out "presque le tour du monde" (52) – are transferred onto

the women she translates. The image of Zoulikha flying, which returns throughout *La

Femme sans sépulture*, recalls Djebar's formulation in the Preface of *Femmes d'Alger*,

"ne pas oublier que celles qu'on incarcère, de tous âges, de toutes conditions, ont des

corps prisonniers, mais des âmes plus que jamais mouvantes" (8). With the trope of

flying, the notion of liberation by translation into French returns. Critiquing what is

depicted as the willful ignorance of the citizens of Cherchell, the novel's closing implies

that it is only through representation in the pages of *La Femme sans sépulture* that

Zoulikha's value will be known, because "dans ma ville, les gens vivent, presque tous, la

cire dans les oreilles: pour ne pas entendre la vibration qui persiste du feu d'hier. Pour

couler plus aisément dans leur tranquille petite vie, ayant choisi l'amnésie" (236). In the

juxtaposition between the author-narrator as "la fille prodigue" (242) and "les gens . . . la

cire dans les oreilles," a problematic notion of Maghrebi women's literature is

formulated: only by transporting the figure of Algerian woman *out of* her own culture,

and *into* the culture of French-language literature, can she be liberated.

In emphasizing the colonial dynamics of Djebarian representation, I do not mean

to censure her work, nor to reduce the author-narrator of *La Femme sans sépulture* to one

and the same as a colonizing army or brutal seducer. Such a reduction, especially from

where I sit, would be historically and ethically untenable. Rather, what I am suggesting is

that seemingly anodyne gestures such as "listening" or "translating" may "seduce" the

reader by masking a certain level of epistemic violence underpinning the humanistic

narrative of transmission and translation. While it may be true that Assia Djebar the

person may well have formed and maintained friendships with, and fully respected the

wishes of, her *Cherchelli* associates, the *Avertissement* in *La Femme sans sépulture*

reminds us that Djebar the *author-narrator* has also "usé à volonté de [s]a liberté

romanesque" (11). I am proposing that rather than accepting this conventional disclaimer

for historical fiction at face value, we remain attentive to the potentially less desirable

impacts of "artistic liberty" upon the symbolic economy of intercultural understandings

that are reached partially—if not largely—through the creation, circulation, and reception of literary texts. My argument has been that *La Femme sans sépulture* gives an example of how literature, even as it may in some ways be seen to be *liberating* women's voices, might *inadvertently* also be impinging upon the liberty—and the autonomy—of the historical subjects being represented. The author-narrator of *La Femme sans sépulture* listens to and leaves resistant voices intact, but it perhaps does not fully hear them. In the next section, I will consider how the elision of translation-resistant voices may be a function of the relationship between Djebar's fiction and Orientalism.

The narrator's relationship with the mosaic of Ulysses and the sirens is an important instance of framing that is seen not only in *La Femme* but also throughout the Djebarian œuvre. Examples include the Delacroix and Picasso paintings *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartment*, the stela of Dougga in *Vaste est la prison*, and the accounts of the Orientalist painter Eugène Fromentin in *L'amour, la fantasia* (Fromentin makes a further appearance in *La Femme sans sépulture* as someone "[qui] avait connu cette tribu" (18)). Such artefacts, whose current place in French intellectual and popular culture is intimately tied to European Orientalism (Said) and French colonization of the Maghreb, occupy a paradoxical position in Assia Djebar's work. On the one hand, they serve as symbols through which Djebar "writes back" critically to the French Empire (e.g. *L'amour, la fantasia*)—that is, the writer does not leave these artefacts intact, silent, or unanswered. But on the other hand, Djebar's recurrent citation of these works could be seen as an example of her "incarceration" (Flores) in a Western colonial idiom, a "way in" (Spivak, "Revisited" 158) to her subject via the lens of Orientalism.

Such criticisms of Djebar's work are not implied exclusively in her fictional

works. On the contrary: Djebar directly treats the genesis of Algerian women's literature

tout contre[70] Orientalism in her memoir, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*: "De même que chez

les peintres immortalisant l'Algérienne, ne m'intéresse pas leur orientalisme, mais

davantage leur orientalité, de même, dans toute œuvre produite par une femme comme

par un homme, en Algérie comme en Australie ou en Finlande, importe avant tout le

degré de nécessité" (86). Djebar sees a universal "necessity" in Orientalist painting

because, in her view, the "orientalité" inscribed in the images of Algerian women

actually inaugurated their exchange with each other and with the Other: "L'orientalisme

ne serait ni francophone ni anglophone, il aurait tué la voix... Il était avant tout regard

venu d'ailleurs : il rendait objet – objet de désir, mais objet – l'être qui tentait de parler,

de s'essayer à parler à l'Autre, à l'étranger..." (28). Djebar thus refashions the concept of

Orientalism from a situation of pure objectification, into an exchange of desire, recalling

Tageldin's notion of translational seduction. The desire of the Orientalist spectator is, in a

sense, justified by the desire of/by his "object." While Djebar's description clearly—and

critically—insists on the notion of objectification (she thrice reiterates the "object"), it

also hints dangerously at the *reciprocity* of desire in the Orientalist encounter. Djebarian

Orientalism, thus *partially* cleansed both of its asymmetry and its political and historical

directionality ("ni francophone ni anglophone"), is no longer simply part of the machine

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[70] "Ne pas prétendre "parler pour", ou pire "parler sur", à peine parler *près de*, et si possible *tout contre*"
(8). As writers or readers, Djebar warns, we should not claim to speak "for," "on," or "about" our subject,
but rather, if possible, *very close to* or *up against* [*tout contre*] them. This, she tells us, is the "première des
solidarités à assumer pour les quelques femmes arabes qui obtiennent ou acquièrent la liberté de
mouvement, de corps et de l'esprit" (*Femmes d'Alger* 8).

of colonial domination, but rather a somewhat more anodyne and even universal model

for a productive dynamics of encounter between different cultures. In a later passage,

Djebar explicitly locates an origin of Algerian women's literature in the gendered

encounter between the Algerian woman and the Western male gaze of Orientalism:

> Oui, devant ces attentes, ou ces éclairs d'attente, la dame algérienne se
> met à croire au Royaume, celui-là même où un homme regarde la femme
> avec ferveur naïve du soufi contemplant en chaque créature le miracle de
> Dieu. Devant cette nouveauté-là, l'Algérienne pourra rêver au rêve. Mais
> les voyageurs, hélas, repartent. Alors de cet initial déclenchement, on ne
> peut quelquefois que mourir. Haoua (resuscitée par Fromentin) reçoit le
> coup de sabot du cheval à la face et en meurt.
> Peintres voyageurs – moins d'une dizaine en un siècle – ils t'ont
> vraiment rencontrée, Eve algérienne pas encore renaissante dans une
> lumière que serait celle de la liberté.
> 3. Ainsi, les filles, les cousines, les héritières, vingt jours ou vingt ans
> après, qu'importe, pour ne pas « se taire à sou », pour fertiliser ce premier
> regard, écrivent.
> Je dis que cette écriture, frileuse, fragile, palpitante d'incertitude
> comme un pigeon la patte engluée sur le fil, une aube froide d'avril, *je dis
> que cette écriture procède de l'ébranlement obscur du modèle face au
> peintre*. (81-2)

In this passage, Djebar radically departs from Said's original theory of Orientalism, "a

Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said

3). Instead, she finds something valuable—and seductive—in the Western representation

of Algeria: a provocation, goad, spur—even an inspiration—to the self-figuration of

Algerian women.

Perhaps more significantly, it is just at the moment that Djebar locates the origin

of the figure/figuration of Algerian woman in Orientalism that she (surprisingly)

withdraws it from its association with Algerian "généalogie féminine" (38): While the

"chœur d'aïeules . . . transperce [la femme algérienne], mais ne la pousse pas en avant car

il ravive ses échardes," (82), the French painter's gaze is fruitful: "le regard disparu du peintre lui servait d'aiguillon pour se dresser, ou pour défier. . . . la parole de la Tradition" (82-3). And yet this uncomfortable presence of Orientalism within Djebar's thought cannot be divorced from the well-known fact that she draws *precisely* on the voices of her "aïeules" as an "aiguillon" or spur for anti-colonial critique. For example, elsewhere in *Ces voix*, Djebar flatly rejects the notion that Algerian women writers should function as native informants: "je vais m'éloigner volontairement d'une certaine critique qui, le domaine féminin sitôt approché, se contente de commentaires ou sociologiques ou biographiques, recréant ainsi à sa manière un harem pseudo-littéraire" (85-6).

This paradox invites a hypothesis: both the neo-colonial and anti-colonial aspects of Djebar's work are expressed in the writer's relationship with "la parole traditionnelle comme parole plurielle" (*Ces voix* 50). That Djebar favors "la parole traditionnelle" over "la parole de la Tradition" (*Ces voix* 83) is the result of her decades-long journey of careful listening—and, of course, her persuasive interpretation thereof. Djebar's aesthetics and ethics of listening – for the "parole des autres femmes" (*Ces voix* 83) – contains the seeds both of Orientalist praxis—and its undoing.

Conclusion: À l'écoute de l'écouteuse

If Djebar seems wedded to a neo-colonial aesthetic as the "way in" to her subject, it is in the Djebarian ethics of listening that the binds of Orientalism are potentially undone, untied, and resisted. Where Djebar departs from Orientalist epistemology, where

she as a writer seems closest to "se dresser" and "défier" (*Ces voix* 82-3), is where in her

work opens up spaces of radical listening. Djebar's remarks in the Preface to *Femmes

d'Alger* do not mark the end of her *trajet d'écoute*. Her subsequent texts recycle, re-tell

and, ultimately, re-listen to, the stories she gathered – and her part in them - during this

period. The results of listening for *La Nouba*—and during the author's early life—

reappear in Djebar's 1985 historiographical novel *L'Amour la fantasia*, and in subsequent

works, notably *Vaste est la prison* (1995) and *La Femme sans sépulture*. Djebar's idea of

a "journey of listening" should be revisited for two reasons: (1) it is a foundational ethical

and methodological motif of her œuvre and (2) it is the principal idiom in the Djebarian

œuvre that counterbalances the Orientalist gaze.

The French philospher and musicologist Peter Szendy compares listening to

translation in his work *Écoute: Une histoire de nos oreilles*. Drawing on Walter

Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" as well as Paul De Man's reading of it, Szendy

reverses the customary (gendered) hierarchy between originals and translations.

Translations are hence endowed with their own, creative, generative power, and originals

unmasked in their originary dynamism and instability: "[l'originel] se voit *mobilisé*,

contraint de laisser entendre cette instabilité qui aura été la sienne. L'originel ne se donne

à la lettre que depuis la traduction qui l'entame et l'emporte" (74). Interpretive and

symbolic power is shifted from the original (or thing) to the translation (or

representation). In terms of musical arrangement or literary *version*, translation takes on a

progressive character. Yet Szendy's reading of Benjamin also tends to reverse the

hierarchy between original and translation without disturbing it, thus revealing the

inherent *violence* of the relationship between original and translation: "La traduction ne serait pas restitution de l'originel; elle en dirait au contraire *la souffrance à la lettre*, en l'arrachant à l'attache ou à l'ancrage, à la pesanteur de son sens. Cette « ultime essence » littérale, il revient à la traduction, selon Benjamin, de la « détacher » du sens pour la dire" (73, emphasis in original). The verbs *arracher* and *détacher* recall the ways in which Djebarian translation tends to pull the figure of woman from its cultural moorings (e.g. the description of Zoulikha "flying away") *even as it claims to* "ramener" (*Ces voix* 29) women's voices with "fidélité historique" (*LFSS* 9).

By way of conclusion, I would like to draw on the more musicological side of Szendy's thought, of a musical "arrangement" as "[une] *écriture de l'écoute*" (Szendy 74), or the closest we can get to the notion of *écouter écouter* (170). For her part, Djebar has produced multiple *écritures de l'écoute* that include resistant voices from figures like Hania and Mina. And yet, the fact remains that there is a *breakdown in listening* in *La Femme sans sépulture.* Troublingly, this seems to occur at the moment when the narrator stops truly listening and begins translating. By describing Djebar's narrative "appeasement" of resistant voices, my own *écriture de l'écoute* has attempted to "saisir les traces de quelques ruptures, à leur terme[,]" (*Femmes d'Alger* 8) in the Djebarian project of transmission – and to suggest a "way in" for future listenings.

III. Hacking Translation: Encoding Protest in Nadia El Fani's *Bedwin Hacker*

> *KALT.   Ici, il faut l'envie et le courage de résister.*
> -- Bedwin Hacker *(2002)*

> *The class that can express its desires, rather than represent them, is the*
> *class that escapes the violence of the law. That which cannot be named,*
> *cannot be identified, cannot be changed, cannot be convicted. Abstraction*
> *without authority or authorization opens the free virtuality outside the*
> *law. For contrary to the repetitive chant of the state's witting and*
> *unwitting apologists, there is always something, and something other than*
> *violence, outside its law.*
> *--McKenzie Wark,* A Hacker Manifesto *(2004)*

Introduction: The Thrill of Untranslation

In 2002, Tunisian director Nadia El Fani completed the production of her first

feature-length film, the spy thriller *Bedwin Hacker.* The film's plot follows a bisexual

computer genius, Kalt (Kalthoum), as she hacks into European TV stations.[71] Using

international satellites, Kalt broadcasts an eclectic series of messages that challenge

Eurocentric and Orientalist discourse while calling for peaceful protest. Flickering

screens, Tunisian Arabic script, digital Maghrebi-style music, and an anthropomorphic

cartoon camel distinguish her hacks. Up until the end of the film, when her servers are

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[71] The choice of name for the protagonist, Kalthoum, has an interesting resonance with that of Umm Kulthoum (a namesake of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter), arguably the most enduringly famous and popular female singer in the Arab world (Egypt 1898-1975). An electrifying figure who came to represent Arab political and cultural unity, Oum Kalthoum was featured in the soundtrack of a popular soap opera series that was televised across the Arab world during the month of Ramadan in 1999-2000. Ferid Boughedir, who describes "cette chanteuse dont la voix, à elle seule, a assuré la cohésion culturelle du monde arabe après la défaite de la « guerre des 6 jours » de juin 1967" (104), examines the polysemy of the word "Oum" in Arabic. It means "mother" but also recalls the word "Oumma" for "nation arabe," raising the question of whether El Fani is imagining a different sort of "unifying mother" in the figure of Kalt.

destroyed, Kalt manages to stay steps ahead of security forces in both France and Tunisia.

Skillfully improvising with limited equipment and a small budget, the hacker not only

makes her audience conscious of "Other epochs, other places, [and . . .] lives," she also

untranslates misconceptions about their experiences and histories (*Bedwin Hacker*). In

Bedwin Hacker, hacking operates as the trope by which El Fani articulates the film's

feminist, anti-capitalist message. Hacking is a metaphor for El Fani's interruption of

viewers' expectations; a means of sociopolitical critique; and a cinematographic

aesthetics. From the film's refusal of sexist and orientalist stereotypes to its caricature of

authoritarian power, *Bedwin Hacker* not only untranslates Western images of the

Maghreb but also challenges the dominance of TV images in mediating reality.

Bedwin Hacker's heroine, portrayed by Sonia Hamza, shatters numerous

Orientalist conventions through her modern "Western" dress, her bisexuality, and her

engineering and hacking skills. This sketch of Kalt's identity may suggest El Fani has

merely inverted stereotypes, or grafted a readily translatable "European" identity onto her

heroine. Yet the film insists upon the Tunisanness of Kalt and her friends through visual,

dramatic, and narrative representations of their attachment to Tunisia's social spaces and

geographic places. Not conforming to either stereotype and uninterested in settling down

professionally or personally, Kalt follows her own itinerary "march[ing] to the beat of

[her] own drum" working between Tunis and Midès, a small town in Southern Tunisia

near the Algerian border (*Bedwin Hacker*). Sociable and outgoing, Kalt enjoys the

companionship of her *tribu* or "tribe," a group of male and female friends and family

members including a singer, a nightclub bartender, a doctoral student, and Kalt's

adolescent niece and apprentice, Qmar. Kalt's flesh-and-blood *tribu* is rounded out by her

own online avatar, a jeans- and t-shirt-clad cartoon camel that appears on the screen,

either individually or as part of a group, with each hacking episode. The camel, like the

desert vista on the poster for the film's release in France, both mimics and pokes fun at

(neo)colonial views of Tunisia as merely an empty and exotic desert space suited only to

providing an exotic locale for the European tourist industry or for marketing Western

products.[72]

True to the spy thriller genre, which pits the lone hero(ine) against more powerful

(evil) individuals or institutions, *Bedwin Hacker* has its villain. Kalt's archenemy, Julia

(portrayed by Muriel Solvay), is a French secret service agent. Codenamed Agent

Marianne, a name that, since the Revolution, has become the emblem of the Republic,

Julia would claim to embody the French Revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and

fraternity. Yet as an agent of the State, Julia's role is to enforce a highly circumscribed,

conditional liberty, extended only to segments of the population holding French

citizenship. Over the course of the film, through a series of conversations and flashbacks,

we discover that Kalt and Julia have a relationship that predates the current confrontation.

Not only did they study computer science together at the prestigious École polytechnique

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[72] There is a particularly strong connection implied with the figure of Joe Camel, a human-like camel featured in U.S. advertisements for Camel cigarettes from 1987 to 1997. Beyond the character's association with popular American Orientalism, an article by *New York Times* writer Stuart Elliott suggests the connection between its function in the popular imagination and its genealogy in French colonial history: "Joe Camel was actually born in Europe. The caricatured camel was created in 1974 by a British artist, Nicholas Price, for a French advertising campaign that subsequently ran in other countries in the 1970's. Indeed, Mr. O'Toole [president and chief executive of the American Association of Advertising Agencies in New York] recalled a visit to France many years ago during which he glimpsed Joe Camel wearing a Foreign Legion cap. The inspiration behind Mr. Price's cartoon was the camel, named Old Joe, that has appeared on all Camel packages since the brand's initial appearance in 1913." Thank you to Jess Boersma for suggesting this connection.

in Paris, but they were also lovers and partners in hacking projects. Kalt was ranked

number one in her cohort when the jealous and duplicitous Julia stole Kalt's ideas and

attempted to blackmail her. Julia offered Kalt an apparently obvious choice: Kalt could

either join the secret service as an in-house hacker and thereby obtain French citizenship,

or she could refuse to do so and be sent to jail. Instead, Kalt returned to Tunisia, leaving

behind, in her words, "nothing." Julia's colleagues at the Direction de la Surveillance du

Territoire (DST) include Zbor, a young agent who performs his professional duties

without serious conviction, and the "Chief," a comical curmudgeon who is out of touch

with the new-fangled world of internet crime, preferring instead to reminisce bitterly

about fighting against the Front de Libération National during the Algerian War of

Independence.[73]

Chams (portrayed by Tomer Sisley), a journalist for the French press, completes

the main protagonist group. Chams represents the paradoxical and stressful position,

relative to French nationality, in which many Maghrebi immigrants and French children

of immigrants find themselves. Culturally and linguistically French, educated and raised

in France in a family of Tunisian origin, Chams continues to live and work in France

while he awaits the processing of his application for citizenship. Although he has studied

Arabic, he is not fluent in Tunisian Arabic (*darija*). Indeed, when Chams visits Tunisia,

people make fun of his Arabic. First, the customs officer asks if he just came from the set

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[73] First established in 1944 as a domestic intelligence agency, the purpose of the Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire was to prevent counterespionage and terrorist threats. In 2008, the DST was reorganized under the umbrella of the newly named government agency Direction Centrale du Renseignement Intérieur.

of a "Mexican soap opera."[74] Later, Kalt's friends mock him for speaking "CIA" or a

formal written Arabic--that is, the "Modern Standard Arabic" (MSA) that is studied in the

West.[75] Although the film initially presents Chams as Julia's boyfriend, Kalt soon

seduces him when she meets him—coincidentally—during a visit to Paris. Unaware of

the true nature of either woman's work, Chams spends much of the film pursuing Kalt,

believing (mistakenly) that Julia is unaware of his dalliances. As it dawns on him that

Julia is monitoring him, Chams tries to do the right thing by supporting Kalt. Ultimately,

however, he is neither a villain nor a hero, but rather an unwitting object of exchange

between two women. Notwithstanding his sexual infidelities, Chams always tries to do

the right thing. However, at the end of the film, after Kalt has been caught, he confirms

his cowardice and *mauvaise foi* when he meekly returns to Julia and follows her back to

France. Chams, whom El Fani described in an interview as "celui qui, comme la plupart

des gens, croit qu'il est libre mais se trompe" becomes the medium through which Julia

gathers the evidence to track down Kalt and by which Kalt discovers Julia's role at the

DST (El Fani and Barlet, "Casser les clichés"). If Chams unwittingly contributes to

Kalt's downfall, in the end it is a very simple clue, a tourist postcard from Midès, that

betrays Kalt's location. In the final, climactic standoff of the film, Kalt manages to

initiate one last transmission before her equipment is destroyed. Although Kalt has lost

the final battle, she has won the hearts and minds of her public. *Bedwin Hacker* thus ends

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[74]Mexican soap operas, dubbed with Modern Standard Arabic rather than local dialects, are broadcast widely in the Arab world.
[75] MSA is also studied and even spoken in parts of the Middle East, and it is actually an official language of instruction in schools and institutions of higher education in the Maghreb, along with French. However, educated Tunisians can switch between Modern Standard Arabic and *Darija*, something that Chams cannot do so easily.

on a bittersweet note, suggesting optimistically that the forms of protest initiated by Kalt have gathered force and will have revolutionary outcomes.

Bedwin Hacker is an intensely political film that innovatively borrows from, and builds on, extant filmic conventions of region (the Maghreb) and genre (cinematography, narrative style, and aesthetics). In the process, El-Fani shatters both traditionalist and neocolonial expectations about Tunisian women through her portrayal of Kalt. Thanks largely to its approach, "pioneer[ing] a high-tech theme in Arab film" (Gugler 285) while challenging stereotypes of Arab women, numerous critics and scholars have classified *Bedwin Hacker* as "innovative" (Bivona 28, Gauch 30, Gugler 285). Though it borrows from popular genres, *Bedwin Hacker* has its own aesthetic signature, which is most strikingly captured in Kalt's hacking broadcasts, with the use of Arabic, Kalt's dromedary avatar, and *raï* music-inspired digital leitmotif.[76] El Fani's representation of these episodes works through a *mise en abîme* that Florence Martin describes as a "series of embedded screens" (135). Cinematographic framing techniques including montage, discontinuity editing, collage, and quotation give the effect of what Martin describes as an aesthetics of encounter, connection, or "transvergence" between the self and Other (140). El Fani simulates the effects of static interference, and unexpected cuts and visual

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[76] *Raï* is a style of popular and folk music that originated in the Oran region of Algeria. A blended music genre from its inception, *raï* mixes traditional Bedouin melodies with influences from European, African and Arab musical traditions. Since its emergence in the 1930s, *raï* has a long tradition of being an innovative and contestatory art form, though it has also been periodically recuperated by dominant powers. Popular throughout the Maghreb, where mostly male singers traditionally protested against poverty and societal oppression by government and Islamist forces, *raï* reached the height of its popularity in France during the late 1980s among *Beur* (Franco-Maghrebi) populations and white allies. Since 1990 *raï* has been increasingly performed by women as well as men. *Raï* remains popular to this day and continues to change as it incorporates new musical influences, such as electronic music. For more on the history of *raï* see *L'aventure du raï: musique et société* by Bouziane Daoudi and Hadj Millani (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

jumps between TV, computer, and cinema screens alternately disorient and reorient the viewer. The narrative is strung together across leaps and bounds of satellite signals and cyberspace that El Fani dramatizes. *Bedwin Hacker*'s aesthetic of disruption and protest represents Kalt's heroic quest and communicates the film's hacking idiom. El Fani's performance of hacking is a politics in itself, inviting "reflection on the transnational media flows and civilizational discourses in which it intervenes" (Gauch 30).

Meanwhile, translation, imagined broadly as a sort of mobility between codes, is central to Bedwin Hacker's activities. Code writing, code switching, and encryption play a key role in the hacker's work, all of which depends on her fluency in a range of languages including computer codes, Arabic, French, and "Netlish," a modified form of global English used in electronic communications (Apter 226). El Fani's vision of the work of the hacker demonstrates some of the ways in which programming code opens the possibility of contestatory forms of intercultural communication that have been traditionally policed by what Apter calls "the military-industrial-academic complex" with its conditioning of "class, religious, and ethnic warfare" (Apter 240). By pointing to the high stakes of translation along with hacking, El Fani theorizes translation as a form of hacking and a means of political intervention. El Fani's rhetorical use of translation—to untranslate—is inextricably linked to activism through hacking, or "hacktivism, [. . .] a combination of grassroots political protest with computer hacking" (Jordan and Taylor 1).

Complicating a universalizing fantasy of translation through image-based technologies that seem to lend credence to the belief that "everything is translatable," *Bedwin Hacker*'s layering of linguistic, informational, and visual codes insists on the

historicity and situatedness of language, image, and code.[77] Challenging the approach of

European news outlets, with their officially transparent "information" (Benjamin), El

Fani invents a world where TV culture can be redirected in order to reveal hidden

inequalities, inspire mass protest, and sow the seeds of historical change. On the visual or

"haptic" (tactile) level (Martin), El Fanian untranslation works by disrupting the normal

experience of media consumption in which (inter)cultural expectations are both generated

and fulfilled by media content in a continuous, seamless feedback loop. By staging the

interruption of this loop, *Bedwin Hacker* suggests that media images are not transparent,

natural or neutral. Images destined to convey a particular message are transformed into

something else, inviting the undoing of the very message they were intended to convey.

In this way, the mechanism of untranslation in *Bedwin Hacker* recalls Guy Debord's

notion of *détournement*, that is, the rerouting or hijacking of dominant discourse or media

in order to inspire a critique of the system that produced it.

    This chapter examines three vital, interrelated dimensions of untranslation in

Bedwin Hacker: reception and genre; play with translation and non-translation as means

of resistance and intervention; and the hack as an aesthetic technique. Part One discusses

the ideas that engendered *Bedwin Hacker* and the film's reception and construction

among popular and scholarly audiences. Part Two examines how the film uses translation

as a metaphor for culture, thus laying the ground for El Fani's hacktivist intervention.

Part Three describes *Bedwin Hacker*'s untranslational hacking idiom. In this section, I

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[77] This tension underlies Emily Apter's cautious language in the opening lines of her chapter on code in *The Translation Zone* (2006): "Everything, apparently, is translatable, it seems, because of advances in technological literacy" (226).

show how the film's formal hacking episodes—cinematographic hacks—call out for political action by playing with, and cutting across, the film's intra- and extra-diegetic levels. El Fani's hacking idiom expands the critical capacity of untranslation, pushing it into the realm of activist politics and direct action.

1. Untranslational Itineraries: Context, Reception, and Genre

Nadia El Fani was born to a French mother and a Tunisian father in Paris on January 1, 1960 (Hillauer 390). She grew up between the two countries and frequently cites their combined influence on her political and artistic outlooks. Having completed her high school studies in France, she mastered cinematography over the course of a decade through work with directors including Alexandre Arcady, Nouri Bouzid, Romain Goupil, Roman Polanski, and Franco Zeffirelli (Gugler 290-91). In 1990, she formed her own production company, Z'Yeux Noirs Films. As a director, producer, and screenwriter, El Fani produced early short films and documentaries dealing with social themes including gender, sexuality, and history. Since *Bedwin Hacker*, El Fani has produced and directed three other full-length films, all of which were documentaries. The first, *Ouled Lenin* (2007), tells the story of the director's father, Bachir El Fani, and his involvement in the Tunisian Independence movement as an anticolonial resistant and member of the Tunisian Communist Party. The next full-length documentary, *Laïcité, Inch'Allah* (2011), calls for the acknowledgment and tolerance of secularist individuals and communities in post-Revolutionary Tunisia. Her third documentary, *Même pas mal* (2012), co-directed with Alina Isabel Pérez, responds to the controversy around, and violent censure of,

Laïcité, Inch'Allah. In this film, with Pérez, El Fani (who was undergoing chemotherapy at the time) documents her "double combat . . . contre les islamistes et contre son cancer."[78] Although El Fani accepts Tunisia's identity as a Muslim country, she is an outspoken opponent of "islamisme," which she views as anti-democratic.[79]

Bedwin Hacker, produced in 2002, is El Fani's first feature-length film, and her only long-format fiction film to date. This digital, 35 mm, 103-minute film was produced by Z'Yeux Noirs (Tunisia), Soread 2M (Morocco), and Canal+ Horizons (the African branch of Canal+). *Bedwin Hacker* was released in French and Moroccan cinemas in 2003. Beyond private showings and its circulation as a "cult" film among university students, it was not screened in Tunisian cinemas until 2006 (Gugler 290). Indeed, due largely to its open and insistent portrayal of personal and social freedoms such as female homosexuality, bisexuality, and the consumption of alcohol, the film's reception in the Maghreb and the West has been paradoxical, with both Tunisian and Western interests profiting from different aspects of its content. Josef Gugler's description of the film's itinerary reveals the hypocrisies inherent in the film's use (and abuse) as a cultural translation at the service of Tunisian and U.S. diplomatic and political objectives:

> *Bedwin Hacker* was the opening feature at the Carthage Film Festival in 2002, but the film was not selected for the competition, and El Fani was

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[78] "FESPACO 2013 – Nadia El Fani: Même pas mal / No Harm done." *Blogspot.com.* African Women in Cinema Blog, Feb. 8 2013. Web. Mar. 2, 2013. This film won first prize at the Fespaco Festival in Ouagadougou in March 2013. "La cinéaste franco-tunisienne Nadia El Fani reçoit le 1er prix du meilleur documentaire au Festival Fespaco à Ougadougou" *Prochoix.org.* Prochoix News, Mar. 3 2013. Web. Mar. 10, 2013.

[79] Barlet and El Fani (2011) 299, 301. Eschewing any sort of compromise in which religious liberty would wait until the establishment of other political liberties, the filmmaker declares that the fight for secularist laws must be part of the fight for democracy: "pour moi, tout est urgent, tout avance de front en même temps. Tout est lié. La liberté de conscience est la première des libertés pour avoir la liberté politique" (303).

not invited. The release in Tunisia was delayed until 2006. The Tunisian authorities take pride in the film—outside the country. Tunisia's woman ambassador to France screened it at the French parliament. The Tunisian embassy in the United States showed it when Ben Ali visited President Bush in 2004. The French international television channel TV5 transmitted *Bedwin Hacker* to the Maghreb as part of its Africa programming but did not transmit it to the Arab world beyond. (Gugler 290)

This scenario highlights three important points: first, the film was censored in Tunisia under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali because of its scandalous representation of Tunisian subcultures. Second, outside of Tunisia, Tunisian officials used the film diplomatically in order to reinforce Tunisia's reputation among Western powers as an exemplary liberal Arab country in which personal freedoms (seen almost exclusively in the form of women's personal and family status) are protected. Third, relying on the film's irreproachably progressive gender themes, the Tunisian diplomats felt safe to mock their American sponsors by screening it, even though it was outspokenly critical of Western hegemony. (Arguably it is precisely these gender themes that enabled the screening of the film in a U.S. context, such that gender issues have the power to mask less palatable elements of geopolitical relations.) One can almost imagine the tense atmosphere in the room as Tunisian and U.S. diplomats ceremoniously watched a film that, ultimately, pointed to the hypocrisies of both. (Meanwhile, the Tunisian government continued oppressing civil liberties at home, while the United States and France kept supporting Ben Ali's regime.[80])

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[80] For an account of UNITED STATES-Tunisia relations, see Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb.*

Such anecdotes about *Bedwin Hacker*'s release highlight how it can carry

different meaning for different audiences. Unlike El Fani's subsequent documentaries,

whose polemical messages were ostensibly aimed at Tunisian audiences (but which,

because of their secular thrust have instead been censored in Tunisia while becoming

extremely popular in the West), *Bedwin Hacker*'s way of speaking to its various possible

audiences—whether figured intradiegetically or not—is far from straightforward. The

film is critical of multiple perspectives and interpellates at least three main categories of

spectator, as Josef Gugler observes:

> [. . .] Tunisians, Western viewers, and, distinct from both, Maghrebi immigrants in the West. Tunisian audiences may see El Fani calling on them to challenge Western dominance of the global media, to embrace the emancipation of women, to resist the lure of emigration, and to reject the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali. [. . .]
> Western audiences are called upon to understand and support efforts to curb the global domination of Western media corporations, to recognize the modernity of the Arab world and jettison their preconceptions about Arab women, and to extend sympathy to the plight of immigrants. First- and second-generation emigrants from the Maghreb . . . will see the film proffering various forms of resistance, and they will hear a call to return to their roots. . . . (Gugler 286)

Gugler's overarching point about the film's "various forms of resistance" and how they

"call" differently to different spectators, is well-taken. For example, the figure of Chams

represents the Maghrebi immigrant viewer to some degree, and his family is embedded in

the film as spectators of Kalt's hacks. Audiences across the African continent hear about

and support Kalt's activities, a fact El Fani signals to film viewers by having DST

personnel worry about favorable reviews of Bedwin Hacker in an online African news

source. Yet it must be underlined that the film figures the so-called *Français de souche*

(i.e. white French nationals) as the main *destinataires* of Bedwin Hacker's transmissions because, intradiegetically speaking (within the film's world or storyline), they would constitute the majority of TV consumers who are affected by Kalt's hacks. Some respond positively to her call (youth on the streets of Paris); others, negatively (security personnel). For the purposes of untranslation (as a critique of power asymmetries), the most notable target audience consists of those residents of France whose national, ethnic, racial, and material "belonging" is not called into question and thus whose rights are putatively stable, established, and protected.

Indeed, *Bedwin Hacker'*s largest historical audience belongs to this last group, which might be called (as Gugler does) the "Western audience." Notwithstanding a dozen cinema screenings in Morocco and the film's delayed and small-scale release in Tunisia, its major release was in *French* cinemas in 2003, and the majority of its critical and academic receptions since then have occurred outside of Tunisia and outside of the Maghreb.[81] The film has made frequent appearances on the International film festival circuit, winning numerous prizes.[82] It circulates widely in North America; following its U.S. release by Cinéma Libre in 2003, a zone 1 DVD of *Bedwin Hacker* is readily available for a low price on Amazon.com and can be ordered both in DVD and streaming

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[81] My focus is on the Western reception because this is my methodological focus in asking how untranslation works. Untranslation, which at first blush may appear to be a simple center/periphery discourse of "writing back" to the former colonizer, invites reflection not so much on the culture being translated but rather the interpretive lenses being used to do it.

[82] The particular set of concerns mapped out by Gugler for these viewers (sympathy for immigrants, a more progressive view on Arab women—which dovetails with a sometimes paternalistic desire to see Arab women "liberated"—and excitement about "modern" themes in Arab cinema) plays very well in International film festivals, whose audiences tend to be sympathetic to—even if not fully embracing—the political concerns of the film. Still, that is not to say that *all* Western viewers of this film would already agree with it. In a future version of this project, it would be ideal to be able to add empirical data about who purchases and rents this film, if such data were available.

formats on Netflix.[83] The marketing and distribution of *Bedwin Hacker* in the U.S. may

be linked to its popularity among academics and in the field of Maghrebi and

Francophone Studies. While reviews by journalistic and popular film reviewers have

been mixed, academic texts on the film are overwhelmingly positive, and it has garnered

a steady stream of interest among Western academics. As with many Maghrebi women's

texts that reach a certain level of international attention, the cultural, institutional, and

diplomatic itinerary of *Bedwin Hacker* reflects the way in which the figure of Maghrebi

woman functions as a cultural translation, buoyed by the translational function and zeal

of Western academe.

     If the historical conditions of cultural production, marketing, and reception have

made Western audiences the *de facto* targets of this film, what are they being sold? What

does the film say, cinematically speaking, about the Maghreb – and about Western

understandings of it? Given the close relationship between the material and historical

existence of untranslational texts (as well as the enthusiasm for Maghrebi woman authors

in the West), it is useful to consider how El Fani has presented the project to her

audiences. In an interview with Olivier Barlet at the 2002 Cannes film festival, just after

the film's completion, El Fani explained her aim to produce a filmic "reflection on the

power of information technology and television" that would also speak directly from

South to North:

> . . . J'avais envie de dire qu'au Sud de la Méditerranée on trouve des
> esprits libres. Nos images ne sont pas diffusées au Nord et il en ressort un

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[83] Interestingly, the U.S. DVD seems to be the only one still in production—on Amazon.co.uk and
Amazon.fr, one can order *Bedwin Hacker* on DVD but only as a Zone 1 import.

> malentendu terrible qui fait croire aux gens qu'on est des arriérés et qu'on ne vit pas en 2002.
> BARLET: *Donc une volonté d'inverser le rapport Nord-Sud.*
> EL FANI: Absolument. Et cela à travers ce qui aujourd'hui parle le plus aux gens, avec des images purement occidentales : la télévision.
> BARLET: *Il y a aussi l'idée que les immigrés peuvent avoir un pouvoir dans une société.*
> EL FANI: [. . .] Notre histoire au Maghreb est complètement imbriquée à la France, et notre culture est qu'on le veuille ou non très francophone. En France, on a pas la réciproque, comme si on [n']avait pas besoin de nous alors que main d'œuvre, tourisme, culture nécessitent l'apport maghrébin… Notre apport est refusé.

The terms of El Fani's and Barlet's conversation here recall a particular type of untranslation that would consist primarily of an inversion of Western stereotypes. Barlet's suggestion of "inverting North-South relations" seems problematic; rather than "foreignizing" the extant binaries of European modernity ("arriérés" vs. moderns), El Fani's emphasis on bringing an "apport" to European audiences seems to map onto a "domesticating" system of translation that subtends a periphery-to-center movement. And, because TV is a "purely occidental" medium, it alone will allow a privileged "prise de parole." In this schema, Tunisia's modernity is to be *proven* in the terms recognizable to Europe: the figure of the hacker, the use of technology, the figuration of television as a privileged medium all seem to say: "we are just as modern as you, and that is the reason why we have something to contribute to you." And yet, what *Bedwin Hacker* actually *does*—arguably prefigured in El Fani's description—is not quite so simple. As I will discuss, the film does not merely fetishize a "purely Western" modernity. El Fani's comment on the "imbrications" of Maghrebi and French histories reveals the instability

of the term "pure"—and, by extension, points to a deconstruction of Eurocentric

modernity.

One of El Fani's key tactics for developing the notion of Tunisia's belonging

within and contribution to "modernity" has been by representing invariably strong,

outspoken female protagonists.[84] El Fani's shorts and screenplays return repeatedly to the

question of women's freedom in Tunisian society and to a vindication of minority or

marginal viewpoints and experiences. For El Fani, various struggles against Orientalist,

reactionary and binaristic discourses on Tunisian society coalesce in the representation of

women; liberated women characters are, in part, "proof" of modernity. El Fani is opposed

to representing female victims, because she does not wish to create "des constats

d'échec." El Fani speaks of her desire not only to educate Maghrebi audiences ("banaliser

la liberté d'une femme est le meilleur moyen de l'imprimer dans la tête des gens au

Maghreb"), but also to challenge the expectations and desires of Northern audiences who

would like to see cinematic "proof" of Orientalist expectations about Maghrebi women:

> On attend de nous des films formatés. Jamais en Tunisie on ne m'a dit que
> Kalt n'était pas une femme tunisienne alors que je l'ai souvent entendu
> dans les commissions de financement européennes. Ce n'est pas toujours
> dit de façon explicite mais c'est là. Cela m'a été dit clairement dans des
> débats publics. Je m'habille avec des pantalons de cuir et assez rock et le
> fais autant à Tunis qu'ici. Nous ne sommes pas "la Tunisie", mais en
> faisons partie. Il n'y a pas qu'une seule Tunisie et je ne vois pas pourquoi
> nos films devraient représenter obligatoirement la majorité des Tunisiens.
> Musique, danse, couscous, médina… J'ai eu envie de reprendre ces
> thèmes mais de façon décalée : les femmes sont dans la médina mais s'y
> retrouvent à se saouler et manger une soupe de pois chiches en pleine nuit,
> Kalt installe une antenne moderne en plein désert, le père boit avec les
> femmes dans la fête [,] etc. Il s'agit de casser les clichés en montrant que

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[84] What Netflix might call a "strong female lead;" a label that in itself points to the fact that it is not the
norm.

> c'est aussi possible et présent dans notre culture. C'est un racisme à
> l'envers de refuser à notre culture sa modernité.[85]

El Fani combats "inverse racism" by representing a sub-culture that has been ignored and

marginalized both in dominant domestic discourse and international narratives about

Tunisia. Her comments about the resistance encountered from European finance

commissions (the film received no funding whatsoever from France) point to the

compounding of pressures faced by Tunisian filmmakers to produce "formatted" films—

that is, normative, unoriginal films that fulfill normative desires and expectations about

who Tunisian women should be—on both sides of the Mediterranean. An innovative film

like *Bedwin Hacker* could both contribute to, and signal, a change in this scenario. The

numerous prizes won by *Bedwin Hacker* and its continued popularity in the United States

point to the reciprocal relationship between art and history. Of course, the film's

popularity could also point to more questionable recuperations of its content, its

diplomatic use being a case in point.

El Fani's linking of "personnages féminins . . . plus que libres" with the "combat"

for liberty at home and for recognition of Tunisian "modernity" abroad is also echoed in

scholarly accounts of the film, which treat (for example) the representation of a bisexual

female hacker as an essential part of its innovativeness. According to Josef Gugler, in

Bedwin Hacker, Tunisian "women are very much in control of the world at large—they

are not victims, they are not engaged in a struggle against victimization, and they are not

enclosed in a domestic world" (285). Florence Martin commends the film for expressing

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[85] Emphasis in the original. The "inverted racism" that El Fani critiques here is not European, but a
Tunisian "racism" or opposition toward the idea of "modernity" because it is essentially European, Other,
and therefore undesirable.

a form of feminine dissent beyond "the bedroom, the home, the country" while also featuring "the first female gay character in a Tunisian – indeed a Maghrebi – feature film" (151). Rosalia Bivona applauds El Fani's courage in broaching "sujets tabous tels que la force féminine, l'homosexualité, la liberté d'opinion" (38). And in *Arab Cinema: History and Identity*, Viola Shafik credits *Bedwin Hacker* with "destabilizing the borders of the real and of sexual difference . . . [in an] entirely postmodern vision" of a "mysterious Tunisian hacker . . . who turns out to be a bisexual woman" (256). Both explicitly and implicitly, these critics link the feminist identity of the protagonist both with modernity and with freedom of expression.

Yet the linking of broadly feminist concerns with "modernity" could also be viewed as problematic if "the modern" is defined in rigid terms. According to Shafik, "[m]odernism, crystallized in the idea of female liberation, is what Tunisian film has been promoting" (247). The theme is a source of pride for Tunisian filmmakers, both male and female, and remains "one of their national cinema's main trademarks" (247). Citing the work of Tunisian filmmaker and critic Sonia Chamkhi, Shafik argues that this tradition was once innovative but has led to the "stagnation" of the national cinema (247). Shafik critiques a prevalent theme in Arab film that recycles hackneyed and stereotyped representation of oppressed, victimized women subject to oppressive, violent men. She argues that the "the women's question" (247) has been instrumentalized by the Tunisian government as evidence of its (undeserved) progressive reputation. The purported success and productivity of Tunisian female filmmakers is emblematic of the country's exceptionalist discourse as a modern, woman-friendly Arab State. Contesting this image,

Shafik cites the case of Lebanon, a similarly-sized country whose woman directors of feature-length films are both more numerous and more productive but whose cinema is, she infers, less entrenched in the "East-West nexus" because it is less dominated by what she characterizes as a counterproductive form of "victim feminism" (252). While the adoption of a feminist perspective may have allowed Tunisian directors to claim a "free space . . . from society and official censorship, particularly in the realm of sexuality" (251), Shafik notes that it also obscures "the increasingly limited space for intellectual expression" and the "despotic character of the country's political system . . . with its severe human rights violations" (251).

In fact, Shafik sees *Bedwin Hacker*'s success as being grounded not so much in its message about women's liberation, but rather in its adoption of a generic shift, that is, El Fani's "reconnection" with, and adoption of, a popular genre. Unlike "Arab *cinéma d'auteur*" whose "search for an identity has been willingly or unwillingly caught within the East-West nexus . . . emphasiz[ing] (presumably) cultural differences between North and South" (252), popular film is "capable of representing the mixed, impure, contradictory, fragmented, and globalized realities of the Middle East and North Africa for its audiences" (254). Florence Martin detects similar qualities in *Bedwin Hacker,* remarking that it "could be read as a reflexive piece on the state of Tunisian cinema— perhaps even culture" due to El Fani's insightful mixing of "France and Tunisia, the national and the transnational, the tangible and the virtual" (133).

Much of the film's potential "reflexivity" owes to its positioning among genres. Despite its commercial classification as a thriller, *Bedwin Hacker*'s resistance to easy

generic classification recalls Shafik's language about the popular genres' ability to represent a world that is "mixed, impure, contradictory, fragmented" (254). This language could go some way toward describing what *Bedwin Hacker* does to the notion of genre itself. *Bedwin Hacker* is not really classifiable, but rather breaks with expectations; and just as it articulates a new relationship between regions and social [i.e. gender] categories, it also does so between genres and disciplines. By straddling a unique combination of genres, and metaphorically alluding to its own historical and material conditions of production, *Bedwin Hacker* challenges, subverts, untranslates—in a word, hacks—the terms of its own generic classification.

This new classification, however, resists definition. Despite its place in the category of "Tunisian 'women's cinema'" (Shafik), *Bedwin Hacker* has been characterized as a "genre film" (Barlet and El Fani 2002) and is most frequently associated with the label "spy thriller" (Hillauer 398, Martin 39, Gugler 279). Some critics consider the resulting mixture of genres groundbreaking in itself. *Bedwin Hacker* is qualified as the "first Tunisian film with a high-tech theme" ("Bedwin Hacker," *Mizna*) and "the first Tunisian feature film to acknowledge female homosexuality and bisexuality" (Gugler 279). Meanwhile, for numerous popular admirers, corporate and academic disseminators, and critical detractors, the film is simply a "thriller."[86] Conversely, scholarly discussions of the film, beginning with El Fani's own assessment, point to its hybridization of genre: "Ce n'est pas un thriller pur dans la mesure où le

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[86] Allocine.fr and IMDB.com both describe the film as a thriller, and a Google search for the film most often comes up with the formula "contemporary Tunisian thriller." The Fine Arts Center at the University of Massachussetts Amherst calls the film a "sexy and savvy thriller." http://www.umass.edu/fac/calendar/asian/events/BedwinHacker.html. Web. Accessed March 10, 2013.

rythme est cassé régulièrement, mon propos étant de montrer la Tunisie : c'est une radiographie de marginaux tunisiens" (Barlet and El Fani, 2002). For Josef Gugler, the film "has the qualities of a thriller at times" (285); Dale Hudson notes that it has been described as a "cyber-thriller" ("Surveillance and Disinformation Hacked"); and Viola Shafik praises the film for having "borrow[ed] narrative structures from popular film forms, most notably detective films and thrillers" (256). Florence Martin concurs, arguing that:

> [. . .] *Bedwin Hacker* veers away from cinematic genres, notably the spy thriller genre (à la James Bond). Some elements persist: police-escorted car rides, high-tech gadgets, a hacker operating from a hideaway in the desert. But these signs are turned on their heads and signify something else altogether . . . The film, under the guise of a light parody of the spy thriller, seems to have a political dimension. (147-8).

Gugler, Hudson, Shafik, and Martin point to El Fani's successful borrowing, adaptation, or *use* of a genre film format to get across a political point. At the same time, they underline the complexity of the relationship between *Bedwin Hacker* and the popular genre of the thriller.

Thrillers in themselves are not a pure or rigidly defined form. In *Thrillers*, a work devoted to an exploration and classification of that genre, Martin Rubin points out that, as with any notion of genre, "the thriller is an imprecise concept, widely applied and difficult to pin down. . . . [I]t spreads itself over several acknowledged genres, such as spy, detective, police, and horror" (Rubin 181). Other critical discussions of the thriller genre also reflect this capaciousness. In *Engaging Cinema*, Bill Nichols describes the world of the thriller as one "where individuals must strive to achieve goals against severe,

life-threatening odds and, often, a time limit." The genre is characterized by a sense of continuous "threats and challenges to the individual vs. individual skill and determination" (Nichols 249). The thriller's durability is in part due to the fact that it has been expanded—and appropriated—by a range of different movie genres and types. Rubin dubs this phenomenon "*hybridization*, the mixture of forms, which is a significant dimension of all major genres" (Rubin 262). Films "in which hybridization rather than categorization is emphasized—that is, where a mixture of genres is foregrounded, even flaunted, and functions as an essential part of the film's system of meaning" (Rubin 262—63). Rubin's analysis of how recent Hollywood movies using "ostentatious and expressive hybridization" contribute to a new making of meaning is important for understanding how *Bedwin Hacker's* engagement of genre becomes part of its untranslational movement in *revealing, disrupting, and transforming* its role as a cultural translation. Significantly for untranslation, the thriller often concerns "threats to the social order vs. heroes who can overcome them" (Nichols 249). The key point at which *Bedwin Hacker* seems to diverge from classical Hollywood traditions concerning thrillers and spy thrillers is in its representation of the relationship between the protagonist on the one hand, and a normative "social order," State, and institutional values on the other. In contrast to the spy thriller, in *Bedwin Hacker*, the law-abiding policewoman becomes the villain, whereas the outlaw is the heroine.

Indeed, because of its central hacking theme and empathy with the figure of the outlaw, *Bedwin Hacker*'s strongest genre affinity is not with thrillers, but with a more recent category of Hollywood genre films that have be classified as "hacking movies," a

thriller sub-genre. As Dale Hudson remarks, the film is "often contextualized as an anomaly—a first Arab sci-fi flick, a first African cyber-thriller." However, the fact that *Bedwin Hacker* has more often *not* been described as a hacking film, but simply "a thriller" may be a function of the label as "Tunisian women's cinema." Classifications that fail to account for *Bedwin Hacker*'s cyber-centered storyline return us to El Fani's comments: the assumption here is that the trappings of modernity are exclusively Western. At the time of *Bedwin Hacker*'s release, hacking films were perceived as inherently Western, the assumption being that only the West could be technologically modern enough to produce hackers. Yet much about *Bedwin Hacker* suggests its affinity with the hacker genre. In their studies of hacker culture, Paul Taylor (1999) and Douglas Thomas (2002) discuss Hollywood-produced hacking movies, including the influential *War Games* (1983) and *Hackers* (1995)*, as well as *Sneakers* (1992)*, Die Hard II* (1990)*, The Net* (1995)*, Pi* (1999), *The Matrix* (1999) and *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995)*. Thomas contends that in "in almost every case," any legal infringement perpetuated by a hacker is portrayed as a justifiable means to an end:

> [Hackers are] positioned as "minor criminals" in relation to a greater sense of criminality of [*sic*] injustice that is being perpetuated either by government, the military, or corporate interests. In particular, the hacker's criminality is never marked by *intention.* In no case does the hacker perceive him or herself that way, and in no case do we, as an audience, identify any criminal intention. . . . In films where hackers serve as central protagonists, much like the real-life ethic of hackers, they never work for large-scale personal financial gain, instead preferring to gain satisfaction from exploration, pranks, personal amusement, or designing ways to better their local conditions. (Thomas 51)

While hacking movies retain certain narrative and emotional qualities of a classic thriller ("tension, anxiety, anticipation, suspense" (Nichols 249)), they diverge from it by routinely pitting their hacker protagonists against corrupted state powers including the police, the government, and the military. Refuting the claims of oligarchs upon media, hacking films champion anarchy as resistance. In hacking films, the anarchy created by hackers is portrayed as both acceptable and desirable.[87]

However, despite the potentially sympathetic identification with hackers that hacking movies could inspire, Thomas raises the concern that such portrayals can create alienation between the hacker's larger social mission on the one hand, and the broader population on the other (54). If the distinction between hackers and society "rel[ies] exclusively on a model that is purely *technological*," hackers can "become instruments within the broader discourse of the technological" thus diluting the sense of community that might otherwise be formed with average people (Thomas 54-55, emphasis in original). Ironically, "the investment of power and authority in technology, often as a result of fear of the *human*, also awakens a concomitant fear of the technological" (51). According to Thomas, popular North American narrativizations of hacking work have resulted in "a binary opposition between the inside and the outside that serves to define the boundaries between hackers and society" (53-4), which precludes a more nuanced "relational" or "social" understanding of hacking activity (55). Paul Taylor echoes these concerns, noting that hacking movies could counterproductively reinforce collective

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[87] For a discussion of hacking as a form of anarchy and resistance to oligarchy, see Vaidhyanathan, *The Anarchist in the Library: How the Clash Between Freedom and Control is Hacking the Real World and Crashing the System.*

paranoia about the hacker threat. He objects to the unrealistic portrayal of hackers in

movies primarily because "over-reliance upon fictional portrayals of hacking by the

authorities has contributed to helping to create a generally fearful and ignorant

atmosphere surrounding computer security" (10). On the other hand, in *Hacktivism and

Cyberwars: Rebels with a Cause?*, a 2004 collaborative work by Paul Taylor and Tim

Jordan, the authors nuance the view that hacking is doomed to be seen as an over-

technical, antisocial activity. Identifying the overlap and differences between hacking and

"hacktivism," or "online direct action," Taylor and Jordan point to how hacktivism has

redeemed hacking as a viable, sympathetic form of political activism that could

potentially resist recuperation by mainstream state and capitalist narrative and rejection

by the public.

  Bedwin Hacker imagines such a possibility.[88] Unlike the stereotype of the hacker

as a lonely computer geek or terroristic outlaw, El Fani portrays Kalt as a force to be

reckoned with *because* she uses language and technology *not* to terrorize but to dispel

myths and invite activism (whose shock value and illegal methods are nonetheless still

treated as terroristic by the State). Bedwin Hacker's friends and supporters follow her

activities online, on their mobile phones, TV, and in online media. *Bedwin Hacker*'s

narrative about and images of the hacker become relatable, proposing an alternative to

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[88] And yet, historically, the governmental use of hacking films, regardless of whether they represent
hackers as terrorists or as high-spirited "anarchistic youths," suggests that the popular appeal of the hacking
hero can easily be recuperated by the State to be cited as an anti-example. As a hybridized hacking movie /
thriller, *Bedwin Hacker* could be said to contain the same potential use as an object of scrutiny by security
personnel. Gugler's account of the film's diplomatic itinerary makes one wonder if the audience at the
White House screening of the film may have viewed it less as an advertisement for Tunisia's treatment of
women than as a resource for educating the Pentagon on the next big threat(s) from the Arab world:
technology, hacking, and online activism.

Taylor's reading of fictional portrayals of hackers. Meanwhile, conventional popular cinematographic techniques are used to foster identification, sympathy, and complicity between the heroine and the audience, including close-ups of Kalt, point-of-view shots, and, of course, the script, which has the villains say villainous things, and the heroine utter heroic things.

In creating a *female* hacker, El Fani also contradicts social dynamics of hacking as a stereotypically male pursuit (Jordan and Taylor 118). The *mise-en-scène* of this transgression comes to light as an interesting relationship between the level of insider knowledge possessed by the film's two audiences (the intradiegetic audience and the extradiegetic audience). At first, the gender of the hacker is not really clear for either audience. Yet, while we quickly discover that Kalt is a Tunisian woman, her fans in Europe and North Africa (other than Kalt's closest friends) never discover her true identity. In having these audiences assume the Bedwin Hacker is a man, and continue to refer to "him" by the male pronoun (partially a reflection of the male-gendered camel avatar), El Fani ironically shows European gender norms. While the gender-neutral (i.e. masculine) Bedwin Hacker untranslates the European view of the Maghreb, those watching *Bedwin Hacker* must also untranslate their own normative expectations about women, hackers, and the Maghreb, in a film that combines all three of these figures.

Finally, El Fani hacks genre by pointing to the meager resources underpinning *Bedwin Hacker*'s production. Many elements of the film point to a confluence between its conditions of production on the one hand, and its protagonist's working conditions, on the other. Just as Kalt works with limited resources in the desert to construct her own

server base and broadcast equipment, so El Fani worked with a meager budget to produce

an original film. Cybelle McFadden is right to underline the special quality that this gives

the film, rather than simply overlooking it: "While El Fani would have liked to include

expensive shots done with helicopters and cranes, the form that emerged from limited

technical means resulted in an aesthetic that significantly reflects the content of the film .

. . the "low-tech" quality of the film actually enhances its content" (McFadden 6).

Nonetheless, such arguments did not hold much sway with the mainstream press. The

low budget of the film was most probably a principal cause of its tepid, sometimes

scornful, and frequently condescending, press reviews in publications including *Le*

Monde, Le Canard enchaîné, Tunis hebdo, and *Monsieur cinéma* (Bivona 31-32). Rosalia

Bivona underlines that the film's shortcomings must be seen in the context of a film that

was produced on less than 25% of what is considered the minimum budget for films (2

million euros as opposed to *Bedwin Hacker*'s half a million) and in the context of African

film production in general, which is drastically underfunded and whose markets are

"crushed" by U.S. and Western film industries: "Nul ne prendra Bedwin hacker [sic] pour

un chef-d'oeuvre, mais pourquoi a-t-il été si tièdement accueilli? Parce qu'il est mauvais?

Non, parce que presque personne ne s'intéresse aux projets modestes" (32). Echoing

Bivona, Hamid Naficy's theory of "accented" cinema points to particular ways in which

"Third World and postcolonial" films must be read in the context of their production.

Indeed, El Fani's plot is the only one, among the untranslational texts discussed in this

study, that explicitly targets global economic and political inequalities. I argue that what

the text performs constitutes an invitation to read it in a particular way, fitting not only to

the vague category of "cultural context" but also – more importantly – to the material context in which it was produced. Kalt's innovation with limited resources points to, and resonates with, the film's mode of production and authorship, recalling Hamid Naficy's contention that "accented" cinemas are united by a common factor: their filmmakers are limited by "liminal subjectivity and interstitial location in society and the film industry" (10). From the outset, El Fani points to, marks, and celebrates her film's economic liminality as being among the reasons for its capacity for resistance.

This self-conscious confluence of authorship, economics, and ideology is perhaps nowhere more apparent than during the film's opening credits, which feature a close up of a rectangular, makeshift homemade antenna being raised on a metal pole. After Kalt's male friend and colleague insists that she take the honor of pressing the "on" switch, the antenna emerges slowly out of its camouflage housing, a wooden rain barrel sitting outside Kalt's desert hideaway. As the camera follows the antenna's skyward journey with a low-angle close-up, the intradiegetic soundtrack features a laborious mechanical whirring sound, evoking the antenna's improvised construction. As part of the rolling opening credits, we read the director's dedication of her film, in French and Arabic, "to my grandmother, Bibi, who inspired in me the courage to resist." Thus captured in the sign of the makeshift antenna, "resistance" is announced from the first moments of the film as its overarching *raison d'être*. From the outset, "resistance" is strongly associated with the clever and courageous marshalling of modest resources. During this series of images, the concurrent use of French and Arabic (along with English subtitles on the Region 1 DVD) draws the viewer's attention to the deliberate and explicit translation and

transmission of the importance of the idea of "resistance" through the languages of the film's likely viewers. Here, translation–represented in the conventional and economical figure of the subtitle—becomes a key part of this resistance, suggesting that modest resources do not—and must not—amount to silence.

2. Translation as Interference in the Computer Age

Throughout *Bedwin Hacker*, translation/non-translation emerges quickly as a central terrain upon which battles for representation and power are waged. Translation also serves to demarcate the battlegrounds of Kalt's hacking project. El Fani establishes the power of translation early in the film, during the first two depictions of hacking. In both scenes, the hacker has not yet been identified and, although hacking is represented visually, it is not yet articulated as such. Instead, translation (figured as a relationship between English, French, Arabic, image, and sound) thematizes those problems of representation and global media domination in which Kalt aims to intervene, undoing the certainty of translation and the power it conveys.

In an opening, pre-credit sequence, which lasts only thirty-one seconds, El Fani plays on the trope of subtitling to effect an untranslational "hack" into dominant discourses about the location of power. [89] By virtue of the fact that these first few seconds precede the opening credits, they exist independently of any previous intradiegetic frame of reference. The images shown, including a mushroom crowd and a speech by U.S.

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[89] Hamid Naficy notes that "subtitling is . . integral to both the making and the viewing" of "accented," or minor, cinemas (123).

President Harry Truman, allude to the Allied war strategy and narrative of progress on the atom bomb at the end of the Second World War. The camera focuses exclusively on a TV screen on which a black-and-white documentary is playing. The limits of the TV screen are limits of the film frame. Immediately, an extradiegetic musical soundtrack provides an auditory link to the film's digital production values. Electronic buzzing music and tones, which announce the film's high-tech hacking theme, incongruously accompany quoted images from a black-and-white televised newsreel. The first image is of ominous, black, billowing smoke from an explosion or fire. The frame then cuts to a sequence featuring United States President Harry Truman, surrounded by an entourage of military and government personnel, walking toward the camera. French subtitles, which translate the documentary's (presumably English) original soundtrack, announce the time, place, and event: Truman inaugurating the Tennessee Valley Authority dam in 1945. The soundtrack of the documentary – which we cannot hear, but whose content is translated through the subtitles – is Truman speaking about the discovery of nuclear power, "cette nouvelle force." The footage, which suggests the power of the atom bomb that would soon be dropped on Japan, presents Truman addressing a small audience about the relationship between power and responsibility: "nous avons désormais cette terrible responsablité. Et nous remercions Dieu d'avoir été choisis…plutôt que nos ennemis. Nous venons de découvrir la source de l'énergie solaire: l'énergie atomique. Cette incroyable source d'énergie peut nous permettre de vivre la plus grande époque de tous les temps."

In these opening moments, the film viewer – like the intradiegetic documentary viewer – is subject to the normative, official function of translation, that is, the effect it creates of presenting transparent, reliable access to otherwise unknowable information. At the same time, El Fani's filmic world reveals translation's capacity to function differently, as a medium of radical resistance and change. Because the television on which the documentary is playing has been muted, we never hear Truman's voice. Rather, we just "see" his words as translated, glossed, revealing the "inessential" nature of what Walter Benjamin called "information" that is merely "transmitted" ("The Task of the Translator" 69-70). By contrast, El Fani's *mise-en-abîme* already performs a more "essential" translating function, for she is re-reading the essence of Truman's meaning critically, and in a new historical context. This moment of *Bedwin Hacker* also gives a sense of the unique ways in which the medium of film can both question the effects of translation as a merely transparent or "transmitting" form, and reappropriate it as a critical space. Because the film's storyline is yet to be told, this opening scene is disconcerting and makes the viewer pay attention to the way in which information is filtered through, and conditioned by, multiple layers of translation, which include "the visual image, the musical sound, the verbal sounds of speech, sound effects, and the graphic form of credits" that Christian Metz identified as the five major means of film communication (Eberwein 192). The black and white footage settles on a long shot of Truman at a podium in the center of the screen, still surrounded by his entourage, with the dam in the background. Truman's speech, which is, chronologically speaking, the earliest linguistic layer of this scene, is in English. However, on a muted T.V. screen,

Truman's silent gestures, accompanying his speech, are overlaid by informational French subtitles translating that speech. For the North American DVD viewer (*Bedwin Hacker* is distributed in the U.S. by Cinéma Libre films), a chronologically third, and even more recent, layer of linguistic translation comes into play through English subtitles. Meanwhile, the real-time, intra-diegetic soundtrack, consisting of the sound effect of keystrokes on a computer keyboard, disrupts the supposedly transparent mechanism of the subtitle layer. It is this soundtrack that gives clues about what is going on in the "real time" of El Fani's film. The keystrokes we hear could almost be imagined as a re-subtitling of the film, recalling translation as a critical rendering of meaning.

Next, as an unidentified female voice begins to speak and a hacking episode begins, El Fani further destabilizes the translational flow of the subtitles. Just after Truman is pictured on the TV screen thanking God for favoring the United States with the nuclear bomb instead of its enemies, a woman's voice says, in French, "ennemi à droite," hits what is presumably an enter key, and a two-dimensional, cartoon-like image of an anthropomorphic, jeans-and-tee-shirt-clad camel pops out in brilliant color onto the right side of the screen in a leap-frog pose, partially obscuring the view of the documentary footage underneath. When Truman announces the discovery of "solar energy," the woman's voice says "ennemi à gauche," and the same camel image reappears, this time on the left side of the screen. Finally, as Truman triumphantly announces the greatest era in human history, the off-screen woman's voice draws the viewer's attention to the addition of the same camel image: "Attention…en voilà un derrière." A last, forceful keystroke propels the expanding graphic of the camel forward

until it obscures Truman, now surrounded by applauding spectators. Then, everything

behind the camel—including the applauding engineers and military officers—fades to

black, and the frame cuts to the color image of a desert ravine, accompanied by energetic

electronic *raï* music. The film's bilingual opening credits begin.

In this visual *mise en abîme*, the screen becomes a translational palimpsest in

which the image of the cartoon camel constitutes an untranslational gesture of dissent,

refusal, and reinterpretation. The placement of the camel to both the right and the left of

Truman as he talks of the United States' "enemies" suggests an ironic rendering of the

contemporary positioning of Arab states, characterized monolithically as enemies of the

United States and the West (and vice-versa). By making Truman's "enemies" pop up all

around him, the hacker both announces a position that is opposed to Truman and

playfully challenges his rhetoric. While Truman's words align the Allies with "God," the

discovery of the atom bomb, and its devastating use against Japan with "the greatest era

of all time," the sudden appearance of a simply-drawn, colorful cartoon camel seems to

put these claims into question. Challenging the notion of the atom bomb as a measure of

civilizational progress, El Fani (re)fuses the sense of "the greatest era of all time,"

visually transposing different time frames—that of the atom bomb, and that of the

information age—to destabilize this notion. Meanwhile, the comical, digitized, color

image of the cartoon camel invokes and satirizes the binary between technological

progress and Orientalism. Finally, the transition marking the end of the sequence, from

the black-and-white image of Truman to the color image of a Tunisian desert ravine,

suggests that what qualifies as the "greatest era" depends largely on where one is situated in the world and in history.

The visual hacking of Truman's speech suggests that translation—figured, here, as subtitles—cannot fully convey history. The "factuality" of translation-by-subtitles is revealed to be a misleading conceit. While the TV subtitle appears to retain objectivity because it is traditionally perceived as "informational," uncritically relaying what is being said by Truman, the camel and the female voice-over function metaphorically as an alternative visual and aural translation of Truman's words. Hence the documentary's framing title: "Le président Truman nous parle de cette nouvelle force" is redirected to speak of a *different* kind of power. By interrupting this broadcast with images of a cartoon camel, the mystery hacker rejects the documentary's "translation," or interpretation, of World History. The interruption, as El Fani crafts it, undercuts Truman's message to the world and invites the documentary viewer to see the world's history from a new temporal, geographic and ideological perspective. The simultaneous commentary on Truman's discourse reframes history as a text that is still being written, or overwritten, perhaps elsewhere than the West.

A similar untranslational episode occurs in another early scene in the film, in which Kalt uses her mobile device to hack, undetected, into the computer of a French police station. The scene forms part of an extended plot sequence in which Kalt has decided to fly to Paris to bring back her friend Frida, Qmar's mother, a musician and activist. Kalt judges Frida to be in danger after French riot police storm a sit-in demonstration in support of rights for undocumented immigrants. Having just met on a

street of the eighteenth arrondissement, the women are stopped for identification by a police patrol. When Frida can produce none, both she and Kalt end up at the police station, where a plainclothes police officer processes the two women at a work station. Kalt uses a ruse to buy time while she uses her mobile device to hack into the police identity database, fabricating a false identity for Frida as "Niece of the King of Morocco. VIP," thereby procuring the two women's release, along with groveling apologies from the detaining officer (El Fani thus satirizes the imbricated complicity of social constructions including gender, class, race, nationality, and wealth).

In ways that both differ from and complement the earlier disruption of Truman's subtitles, the scene foregrounds translation as a transaction across a significant power differential—and as a key terrain of intervention. In this case, the intervention is articulated along two main axes: first linguistically, through narrative themes, and then visually, through the positioning and coding of actors and objects in the scene. As two uniformed officers roughly conduct Kalt and Frida to their seats across the desk from the agent, a linguistic tension is immediately apparent. While the agent speaks only French, the two women, seemingly unperturbed by their arrest, are deep in discussion about their personal and professional lives in Tunisian Arabic. Irritated by their apparent nonchalance, he chastises them: "Ce n'est pas la peine de baragouiner. On a des traducteurs," establishing an opposition between *baragouiner / traduire*. The overt threat "on a des traducteurs" becomes a caricature of translation in its most violent, domesticating form. The women's speech is marked as Other. The infinitive verb

baragouiner is believed to originate from a Breton noun meaning "bread and wine."[90]

Roughly translated into English, the term is used in French to mean "to speak gibberish."

Its etymology recalls centuries of linguistic colonization not only of Africa but of

outlying areas of France during the nineteenth century (Weber), when *baragouiner*

signified the supposed primitiveness of the habits and language of provincial people.

Meaning "these people want and need only bread and wine" (not meat or spices), the

word referred to the lack of sophistication, or base nature of the populations being

incorporated. "Baragouiner," which marks both the women's foreignness and their

unwillingness to be "tamed," is opposed to "translation," which marks the officer's desire

to make the women submit to State power. Either by coercion or by translation, they will

be made to speak the official language, thus becoming legible to, and controllable by,

disciplinary power. Meanwhile, "baragouiner" also carries a gendered, homophobic play

on worlds, since the French slang word for lesbians is "gouines."[91] By remaining in

contact with each other through *darija*, the two women mark their complicity in a

linguistic relationship whose homosociality relies on the exclusion of the police agent. In

both cases, the *baragouiner/traduire* opposition that the police agent enacts can be

mapped onto the foreignization/domestication binary conditioning approaches to

translation.

Never actually realized *as* translation, the officer's threat communicates a broader

menace: an omniscient form of State power, with its systems of surveillance rooted in

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[90] In this etymology, "bara" is the Breton word for "bread" and "gwin" is the word for "wine." See the article "Baragouin," Le Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé, *Centre National des Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales*. Web. Feb. 18, 2014.

[91] Thank you to Michelle Scatton-Tessier for this insight about the French slang word "gouines."

extensive information networks and technologies. The scene reveals that "On a des traducteurs" is not a linguistic threat, but a disciplinary one.[92] A police computer, its monitor turned away from Kalt and Frida, is featured prominently in the frame. A mid-shot, followed by a series of shot-reverse-shots, shows the officer on one side of the desk, in front of the computer, and Kalt and Frida on the other, behind the monitor's plastic casing and unable to see the screen. The officer, having demanded Kalt's passport, first checks on his computer to determine whether Kalt has a right to be in France. Having confirmed this, he invites her to leave, but she stays with Frida, flashing him a look that makes clear her lack of intimidation. The computer between them is ostensibly a natural sign of the police agent's untrammelled power, signifying his mastery of, and unlimited access to, a truly "informational" form of technology. After the two women switch into French (yet still marking their resistance by critiquing the agent's manners), the computer becomes the main disciplinary resource. Demanding identification papers, he positions himself in front of the computer, ready to verify their identity, or "translate" it as either legal or illegal.

The computer metonymically replaces translation as a threat. It is the fetish-like object that the policeman touches and appears to control, connecting him to the French State's information networks with its ever-growing databases that recall the global and globalizing ambitions of imperial *translatio*. The two women, seated behind the computer's opaque plastic casing, are apparently excluded from, and subject to, its power. Kalt and Frida sit, as if ready to be read and interpreted according to a

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[92] Here, I use "disciplinary" in the sense developed by Foucault in *Surveiller et punir*.

predetermined set of terms, in a reversal of the desire within consumer society to be

treated as "more than just a number." But El Fani makes this system break down. Frida,

who has provided no documents, presented an opaque and untranslatable identity that

puts her at risk of detainment and deportation. Meanwhile, when the officer enters Kalt's

passport identity into the data system, it is apparently intelligible, translatable, and raises

no alarm. Yet Kalt is already translating Frida's identity into an identity that, through its

recourse to the special privileges of aristocracy (although in fact antithetical to the

discourse of equality in the French republican nation-state), raises no alarm.

In this scene, the unidentified, undifferentiated person of Maghrebi (or simply

non-Western) origin is viewed first with suspicion as an interloper, an individual whose

financial and cultural impoverishment will be a potential drain upon French-owned

resources. The scene reiterates a theme established in an earlier scene featuring a pro-

immigrant sit-in, in which immigrants and French supporters from a variety of

backgrounds sit together in a church playing music. Opening with a low-angle focus on a

large, homemade sign (a white sheet suspended high on the wall and prominently

displaying the painted words "NON À L'EXCLUSION"), the camera then pans down to

the demonstrators seated on the floor, playing music, only to have the scene interrupted

seconds later with a chaotic scene of violence as riot police rush in to break up and arrest

the demonstrators. Shot using a hand-held camera representing self-reporting by one of

the demonstrators, the amateur-style footage of the scene conveys the effect of direct

action and the eyewitness account. After the peaceful demonstration descends into a

scene of violence and chaos, the frame cuts to a small TV screen inside a living room in a

Tunisian home. Here, we find Kalt, Qmar, and Frida's husband watching a Tunisian news broadcast that has picked up the footage as one of its stories. The footage features Frida holding her lute as she narrowly escapes arrest but does not completely avoid a police baton. Seeing this footage is what had brought Kalt to France to convince Frida to return home.

Having drawn the viewer's attention to translation as a form of surveillance, El Fani now deploys counter-translation to undermine it. The event which follows – Kalt hacking into the computer using her mobile phone – functions as an untranslational act because it militates against the threat of the state-sponsored translation undergirding "exclusion." During the scene, many shots feature a medium close-up of Kalt sitting directly behind the computer's monitor. Even though the agent is supposedly the sole person with access to the screen and keyboard, the scene's shots encode a different narrative in which Kalt quickly forms a much more intimate, albeit fleeting, relationship with the computer. In an unexpected transgression of stereotypical assumptions about the relationship between the apparently docile, disciplined Maghrebi body and the French State, Kalt uses a disembodied, virtual method to hack the system that was designed to exclude her. At the moment of Kalt's hack, she tells Frida (in Arabic) to "go!" in order to create a distraction. Just after this, a key frame tells an interesting story. The partially open frame, featuring a medium-close shot of Kalt halfway between a blurred Frida – being dragged back to her seat– and the hacked computer–encodes El Fani's untranslational hacking idiom. The figure of the Tunisian heroine is *seemingly* at front and center, but in fact the computer monitor occupies the right half of the frame. Soon

afterwards, we see a close-up that "shows" Kalt's hacking program loading.[93] As Frida's identity is recoded from illegitimate to legitimate, Kalt's identity is cinematically recoded into one of subversion. At the same time, the officer's reaction to the discovery that Frida is a member of the Moroccan elite reveals international complicity between elites worldwide, lending a internationalist and populist twist to Kalt's resistance of the French State.

The police computer, which had *embodied* the threat of translation, is now transformed by the figure of the female hacker (with the help of a quasi-prosthetic technological device) into a site of resistance and protest. As the progress bar loads, the computer – the technological object—is emptied of its original meaning. Just as Kalt hacks the computer, the woman-computer interaction confers an untranslational power upon the figure of the Tunisian woman, for it is at this moment that we get the first real clue that Kalt is a hacker. By embedding the computer screen in the cinematic one, and by effecting a cinematographic, shared-frame coupling of the figures of woman and machine, El Fani symbolically hacks into a series of dominant narratives about modernity, technology, and the identities of undocumented migrants. Challenging the stereotype that undocumented migrants—especially women—have neither the skills nor the resources to access modernity and technology, El Fani's hacker uses a combination of intelligence and relatively meager resources to outmanoeuvre the seemingly unassailable power of the French information State.

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[93] Represented in the icon of the early twenty-first century progress bar.

While many of the hacking scenes in *Bedwin Hacker* depict Kalt working in a "disembodied" way (anonymously, virtually, and from a remote location), this scene is characterized by the proximity of the hacker to her tools. Indeed, the proximity of the human figure (traditionally thought of as the subject, or agent) to her tools (thought of as objects), becomes a veritable fusing when Kalt plugs her phone into the police computer. The resulting body, half-woman, half-machine, suggests a "hybrid" of the type theorized by scholars such as Donna Haraway, Brian Massumi, and Bruno Latour. When Kalt connects with the police computer, she "changes the game" in a way that recalls Latour's notion of the "quasi-object." In an extended metaphor about soccer ball as quasi-object, Brian Massumi explains how the movements of the ball, over time and successive matches, change the focus of the game, ultimately leading to innovations in the dimensions of the field and the rules of the game. In a similar way, the apparent "objects" in this scene (the phone and the computer) take on an unexpected life of their own. El Fani's scenario suggests—both problematically and hopefully—that a similar transformation can play out for the objectified human body. By hacking the system, the figure of Maghrebi woman—previously an object—becomes a subject. Its function as a signifying body is transformed. The body of the Maghrebi heroine assumes an entirely new and unexpected form, capable of calling new identities—not only Frida's, but also its own—into existence. Yet, at the same time, the transformation tends to reify the problematically divisive effects of a purely "technological" discourse identified by Taylor and Thomas. Kalt's expertise in the technological domain generates some level of complicity with its discourse, separating her from her community. This separation is clear

in the contrast El Fani creates between Kalt and Frida. While Kalt masters everything via cellphone and computer, Frida's only instrument is a lute, a symbol of tradition par excellence. [94] While Kalt masterfully navigates the structure she hacks, Frida is shown open-mouthed, nonplussed, unable to understand or participate in her own liberation—beyond obeying Kalt's instructions.

Still, if Kalt functions as an-object-turned subject or *quasi-object* (in Latour's terms), what does this *quasi-object* produce? Donna Haraway's theory of the "cyborg" may be instructive here. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway begins by defining a cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (149). In El Fani's film, the body of the hacker, in police custody, effects an imperceptible transformation that allows her to evade and foil State surveillance, under its very eyes (as it were). Thus, El Fani imagines a cyborg body that subverts the State's claim to determine or exclude its subjects' position through a pronouncement on their bodies' legal status (Haraway 163). Kalt's action in the police station may help to clarify what Haraway may mean by the idea of "simulat[ing] politics" (Haraway 163). As transnational hacker and Maghrebi heroine, the fictional figure of Kalt works to "recod[e] communication and intelligence to subvert command and control" (Haraway 175). She/it disturbs the possibility of surveillance, not only by the police agent, but also by the film viewer. Our mastery of the plot at this point in the film barely surpasses that of the police agent. It is only later, via an exchange involving Agent Marianne, that the viewer may connect with certainty the identity of the woman who

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[94] Thank you to Judith Preckshot for pointing this out.

interrupted the pre-credit Truman documentary, "the hacker from the eighteenth [arrondissement]," and Kalt, who masterminds a series of illegal broadcasts via European satellite TV.

As an untranslational heroine, Kalt's mission to resist surveillance is not only technological and identitarian, but also epistemological. By resisting the worldview of a system of absolute surveillance that would claim to speak for, or translate, everyone, El Fani's protagonist seems to embody what Haraway characterizes as the wider "struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly" (Haraway 176). The substance of El Fani's untranslational hacking idiom, which works against "perfect communication," becomes more evident in the TV-based transmissions that follow. Kalt's hacking broadcasts first refuse translation, then reinitiate it according to *her* terms, triggering a series of visual and real-world mass protests.

3. Toward an Untranslational Hacking Idiom

By narrativizing linguistic translation, *Bedwin Hacker* expresses cultural difference and political dissidence. However, what makes El Fani's untranslational idiom particularly effective is her use of cinematic methods that express the language on the figural level of the hack. The hack borrows from and quotes language, but also requires a strongly visual (digital) element to make its effects known. *Bedwin Hacker* therefore underlines that in any linguistic, visual and symbolic gesture which performs cinematic untranslation, there is a constant and essential slippage. In cinema, the linguistic cannot

exclude the visual or aural, and vice-versa.[95] In *Bedwin Hacker*, the staging of

translation/non-translation as a *linguistic* form of resistance points to some of the film's

more innovative uses of *visual* translation/non-translation. The cinematic expression of

hacking enhances El Fani's style, and becomes what I call her "untranslational hacking

idiom."

Indeed, as the storyline represents Kalt's hacks, El Fani performs visual hacks

within the cinematic frame. This *mise en abîme* or layering makes hacking the film's

central message, a privileged motif that is framed within the more commonplace

cinematographic language or narrative material of the film. Thanks to their visual and

narrative framing, many hacks cross diegetic levels and gesture towards the extra-diegetic

audience. Key shared characteristics constitute the hacking motif and make the hacks

recognizable as a sequence, or even as part of a conversation. These shared elements

include linguistic play and resistance, various iterations of the cartoon camel, themes of

protest, and editing techniques that create an intra-diegetic aesthetic of disturbance:

interference, obscuring, or distortion of an anticipated T.V. image, using effects including

flickering, close-ups, slow motion, use of Arabic script and other writing, in addition to

innovations in the soundtrack. El Fani accentuates the *mise en abîme* of each transmission

by representing the TV image(s) over which it is broadcast. Through visual quotation, we

see images of sports, news, advertising, documentaries, and business broadcasts. Other

visual cues, including occasional representation of the TV frame (still tube-shaped in the

early 2000s) as well as its screen (finely spaced, barely visible horizontal lines create the

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[95] See also Metz's theory of the five interrelated levels of communication in cinema (see above).

glass-like effect of a traditional television screen), mark each hacking episode. By

invoking the material, visual, auditory, and linguistic aspects of the media that surround

us (TV, film, animation, and computers), El Fani enacts a particular version of "culture

jamming," that is, of a communication style that satirically "turns the original purpose of

a cultural artefact or piece of communication back on itself to create the opposite

outcome: a semiotic version of ju-jitsu" (Jordan and Taylor 82).[96]

Such "jamming" of TV images recalls French Situationist Guy Debord's notion of

the spectacle. In particular, El Fani's cinematographic language suggests Debord's

theories of how the spectacle could provide fertile terrain for *détournement*, the

subversive and ironic rerouting of dominant discourse. Debord (1931-1994) begins his

manifesto-style text *Société du Spectacle* (1967) by associating modernity with the

ascendance of the visual: "1. Toute la vie des sociétés dans lesquelles règnent les

conditions modernes de production s'annonce comme une immense accumulation de

spectacles. Tout ce qui était directement vécu s'est éloigné dans une représentation" (15).

For Debord, the importance of spectacle lies not so much in the images and events that

constitute it, but rather in the fact that it expresses "un rapport social entre des personnes,

mediatisé par des images." (Debord 16). By quoting and interrupting the TV, making it

merely background to a more urgent message, El Fani critiques this "coeur de l'irréalisme

de la société réelle. Sous toutes ses formes particulières, information ou propagande,

publicité ou consommation directe de divertissements, le spectacle constitue le *modèle*

présent de la vie socialement dominante" (Debord 17). In *Bedwin Hacker*, this "image de

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[96] For a more extensive discussion of culture jamming, see Strangelove's *The Empire of Mind: Digital Piracy and the Anti-Capitalist Movement*, 104-115.

l'économie régnante" (21) is rendered ironic, while its basic infrastructure is hijacked to

diffuse a message about what is being left out. As Kalt says, "On perturbe un peu les

programmes, on en diffuse d'autres…" By showing "other programs," Kalt and *Bedwin*

Hacker not only interrupt the functioning of the spectacle, but also reveal the colonial

genesis of its "empire," a fact to which Debord's language alludes. Debord's allusion to

"le soleil qui ne se couche jamais," evokes the discourse of the British empire, but in his

evocation this sun never sets on modern passivity, "l'empire de la passivité moderne . . .

qui recouvre toute la surface du monde et baigne indéfiniment dans sa propre gloire"

(Debord 21).[97]

It is my working hypothesis that El Fani suggests a way to untranslate the self-

perpetuating function of the spectacle and the passivity it engenders, not only through the

filmic *mise en abîme* of Kalt's intradiegetic "hacks," but also through other gestures of

hacking the cinematic screen. Of course, cinema could in itself be considered a

"hackable" medium thanks to the processes involved in its very production. Cutting,

pasting, and editing make film particularly adaptable to a "hacked" aesthetic. This fact is

readily apparent in the history of film, from movements such as surrealism and

expressionism to New Wave and Auteur cinema. Such styles, which elaborated a range of

aesthetic and political ideas, often drew attention to their own createdness through

processes including focus, editing, jump cuts, quotation of images and text, and special

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[97] A well-known motto about the vast British empire presented it as a territory "on which the sun never sets" Debord uses the metaphor of a light-like "glory" that radiates outwards, bathing the world. Similarly, the French viewed their *mission civilisatrice* as having an "illuminating" effect on the "darkness" of heretofore uncolonized regions and peoples. Those affected, in turn, "reflect" the influence of the dominating power, recalling the theorization of Louis XIV's sovereignty as the "sun king."

effects, thereby underlining the principle of cinema as art rather than merely another narrative medium with claims to realism. Unique aesthetic signatures often worked to articulate a particular artist's aesthetic and/or political vision (as in auteur cinema). In popular genre films geared to the general public, including *Bedwin Hacker*, these techniques are still used, but in a way that tends to emphasize narrative continuity and create the illusion or effect of realism (as opposed, for example, to *auteur* cinema that would be more likely make the viewer reflect on film as a work of art). However, there are moments in *Bedwin Hacker* where the narrative or aesthetic continuity is disrupted, or where the director breaks with certain conventions of popular (read Hollywood) film. Since these moments are not part of the film's *formal* hacking episodes, they do not coincide with representing the *heroine*'s hacks. Rather, there are some barely perceptible "winks" (in the sense they flow fairly continuously within the narrative) or directorial gestures that insert a "hacked" aesthetic into a cinematographic language that is otherwise basically unsurprising because "popular" (as Viola Shafik terms it). These moments often coincide with a politically important moment in the narrative, marking and articulating it as an appeal for political activity. There are two types of digital/cinematic subversion: (1) the formal hacks effected by Kalt and broadcast over the TV and (2) cinematographic hacks, such as the moments where El Fani disrupts the continuity of the narrative in some small way, using standard techniques including cuts, special effects, and/or noticeable shifts in lighting, focus, or camera angle.

The second hack in *Bedwin Hacker* is the first to attract the full attention of the DST. It is, not coincidentally, also the first one to use non-translated Tunisian Arabic. As

if to anticipate the enunciative quality of her work, Kalt initiates the hack from her house

in Midès with an imperative exclamation in both Arabic and French of "Let's go!"

("Yella, on y va!"). The code-switching between human tongues (Arabic and French)

anticipates the code-switching between human and computer languages (spoken

languages vs. information technology codes). As Qmar begins to enter, in single key-

strokes, the username "B E D W I N H A C K E R," we see a close-up of her index

fingers working at a bilingual keyboard whose keys bear both Arabic and Roman letters.

The camera then cuts back to Kalt's and Qmar's simultaneous displays on their computer

screens as they upload the encrypted hacking program. The next frame shows what

European TV viewers see: a soccer match, with players from both teams rushing toward

the goal posts. By choosing to interrupt a soccer match, Kalt anticipates the attention of

the intradiegetic spectators' eyes riveted on the action, not only on soccer field, but also

in homes across the satellite viewing area, where a televised soccer match is a hugely

popular event. The image flickers to black, the soundtrack bleeps, and, while the film's

digital leitmotif begins to play, the camel flashes onto the screen. Half a second later, just

after a goal is scored, the screen flickers between black, scenes of the soccer match, and

the camel, while an Arabic message in white font begins to scroll across the flickering

background, from right to left. El Fani uses a rapid dissolve technique to create the visual

flickering effect of the hack, partially obscuring the quoted image of the running soccer

player, having just scored a goal, his arms outstretched in jubilation. The soundtrack

enhances the effect of interference by layering the *Raï*-inflected digital leitmotif with the

seemingly random sounds of bleeping and static. The noise of the hack creates a static-

like effect, partially blocking out the sound of the sportscasters' commentary and the noise of the cheering crowd by its own noise similar to that of a poorly-tuned radio. Into this chaotic mix of visual and auditory signifiers, the only subtitle or explanation to appear is in Arabic:

"في الالفية الثالثة، ثمة عصور أخرى، بلايص أخرى، عيشة أخرى...أحنا ما حناش سراب..."

While the French cinema release and the U.S. DVD release include subtitles ("In the third millennium, there are other epochs, other places, other lives…we are not a mirage…"), no such means of translation is provided for the message's intradiegetic viewers. European TV viewers – including Agent Marianne and her colleagues—are thus faced with the sign of untranslated Arabic. Agent Marianne's first response is to rule out the "Islamist track," noting that the transmission does not begin with the "usual formula, Allahu Akhbar." Since the message cannot fit into post-9/11 expectations about the terroristic implications of an unauthorized Arabic message interrupting European TV, the viewers (intradiegetic and extradiegetic) are left guessing. Yet the message itself (for which the extradiegetic non-Arabic speakers are given a privileged insight through subtitles) conveys some important clues about its stakes and purpose.

As already suggested, though, in *Bedwin Hacker*, the hacking occurs not just at the thematic level (i.e. the heroine is a hacker), but also more generally at the level of language and sociohistorical code. Kalt's most coherent series of hacks during the film are characterized by a recurrent motif: the scandal of Arabic on the Western TV screen. While some scholarship has pointed to the film's uncanny prediction of the mediatized nature of the Arab Spring (McFadden among others), it should be born in mind that

Bedwin Hacker's historical conversation is probably more closely related to another key historical event, its release coming only a year or so after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the U.S. These events were not only technologically reliant and mediatized online in unprecedented ways, they also made seemingly "domestic" (Western) technologies like airplanes and the internet into objects of terror. El Fani's *mise-en-scène* of Arabic both alludes to and parodies clichéd images of Arabic—with subtitles—borrowed from the Al-Jazeera network to be shown on stations like the BBC or CNN, depicting Islamist outlaws such as Osama Bin-Laden claiming responsibility for terrorist attacks or threatening to attack or kill Western targets. In these images, the Arabic language, its difference marked through subtitling, represents the Arabo-Muslim Other. Similarly to the jets hijacked by Al Quaeda operatives on 9/11 (and on previous dates in other locations), Arabic here becomes the sign of hijacked "Western" media capabilities (video, internet) previously perceived to have been the property and sole purview of the West. After all, "for the first few years, the World Wide Web was mainly a European project" that was soon dominated by the U.S., but in any case the locus of power remained in the West (Monaco 624). However, technologies of mass communication have now become a means of physical and epistemic violence both by agents of the State in the West and by those wanting to attack Western targets.

Bedwin Hacker stages and reappropriates the representation of Arabic and the Muslim world in the West by staging the accessibility of technology to an Arab protagonist. The broadest definition of the hacker is of one who "attempt[s] to make use of technology in an original, unorthodox and inventive way" (Jordan and Taylor 6). Kalt

certainly does this, but she accompanies it with an "original, unorthodox and inventive" use of Arabic, particularly making a spectacle of Arabic on TV screens in the West. Recalling the itinerary of the cartoon camel that interrupts Truman first on the right and then on the left, El Fani has the image of Arabic script—which reads from right to left— perform a role that is markedly different from its customary citations within the Western visual space, where Arabic is frequently "quoted" selectively as a symbol of Islam and/or terrorism (the two often being paired in brief news-format "citations"). In Kalt's hands, technology and language are restored their full range of meaning as mutable objects that can be reimagined, repurposed, reconstructed, improvised. El Fani's vision of hacking proves that the same is true of the Arabic language. Because of Orientalist fictions that posit the West as technologically advanced and the Orient as backward and undeveloped, many in the West would not expect Arabic and technological expertise to go hand-in-hand. This blindness is what makes Kalt's hacking surprising and effective—and *Bedwin Hacker* innovative. As if to underline this point, El Fani has one of the film's villains— Zbor of the DST—make a joke about "our first Arab hacker." At the same time, El Fani shatters Islamophobic associations between Arabic and terrorism. Instead, she imagines Arabic script and information technology as a way of inviting mass protest in the Maghreb and Europe—a prescient statement in 2002, given the unfolding of the Arab Spring a decade later. Meanwhile, El Fani's staging of hacking as a socially *connective* activity deconstructs the binary between hackers and larger populations. In *Bedwin Hacker*, technology breaks out of its vacuum as a private, behind-the-scenes conversation between a lone hacker (or hacker team) and the security forces, for Bedwin Hacker's

relational tactics serve to appeal to the public and invite them into the conversation. The only technology users who end up being marginalized, isolated and having conversations in dark rooms (literally shown as dark by El Fani) are agents of the DST.

Moreover, despite the lack of translation, the general untranslatability of the non-translated Arabic message ("In the third millennium, there are other epochs, other places, other lives…we are not a mirage…") in a European context actually heightens its expressed insistence on the existence of "other epochs, places, and lives." The effects of the message are both constative and performative. Those who cannot "read" Bedwin Hacker's message will nonetheless *experience* it – the message effectively plays on the sign of non-translated Arabic, somatizing the existence of other epochs, places, and lives during the third millenium A.D. The notion that an Arabophone "we" are not a "mirage" directly challenges the neocolonial view of North Africa as an empty, desert-like space, devoid of civilization and subjectivity, pending inhabitation, cultural imprinting, or, in the case of modern-day Tunisia, tourism, by European powers. Instead, the allusion to other epochs, places, and lives represents the Maghreb as inhabited and dynamic. Moreover, the references to time (both "other epochs" and "the third millennium") are significant. Partially a sign of the message's Maghrebi provenance,[98] the evocation of the Gregorian calendar instead of the Islamic one also points to a kind of historical self-translation that could be viewed both as a compromise and a demand. Even as it could be interpreted as a concession to colonial epistemology, the preposition situating Tunisia

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[98] Mostly adopted during the colonial era, the Gregorian calendar continues to be the standard temporal frame of reference in the Maghreb for secular purposes including business, news, commerce, and government.

"in" the "third millennium" also insists upon a *different* third millennium or "other epoch," identifying a third-millennium history that is both concurrent to and distinct from the European one. Epochal alterity is unfolding, and must be recognized, within this frame of reference. Thus, at first glance a *refusal*—marked by its refusal to self-translate linguistically—the message is also a kind of cultural self-translation and an affirmation of the *simultaneity* (or "coevalness," to borrow from Johannes Fabian) of Tunisian history. Yet even as this notion of epochal simultaneity is upheld, the time in which history unfolds is disturbed by the digital-cum-TV medium of Bedwin Hacker's message. Even as the message claims a place within the spectacle of Western modernity, it also performs a *détournement* of that very spectacle (Debord). What had just moments earlier given the impression of completely "live action," "reality," or truth in the form of sports (with its usual around-the-field advertising placards) "en direct," is in fact shown to be *not as direct* and *not as alive* – by comparison—*as* the message that has suddenly arrived, as if from nowhere, at the speed of satellite signals, to interrupt the action on screen. Instead, a new message, an incursion of another language and the "we" it represents, comes to outperform the spectacle of modernity, through a language that had supposedly been one of European modernity's own inventions, its property: the language of digital culture and the virtual realm.

The message's use of the personal pronoun "we" subtends and implies its opposite, "you" (or, perhaps, "I" and "they"), bringing forth the powerful rhetorical effect of linking Kalt with her intended audience. As if to underline this point, El Fani economically portrays a range of audience responses during and after the hack. Whereas

Chams's French-Maghrebi family enjoy the hack's playfulness and strangeness over their evening meal, the cantankerous DST chief reacts in a stereotypically prejudiced way, alternating between alarm and incredulity. As Julia/Agent Marianne reads him a newly issued translation of the message (presumably "just in" from another office), the Chief scoffs at its meaning, sarcastically saying "how philosophical" and implying that the message cannot be considered a "text"—that is, neither linguistic nor worthy of interpretation. The Chief's dismissal of the message's philosophical substance ironically heightens its potential.

Philosophical or not, the message—and the reactions to it—is inscribed in a narrative in which translation is a decisive factor. The DST, floundering in its inability to crack Kalt's encryption code (which Julia, somewhat predictably, describes as "hieroglyphs"), the DST opts for the next best thing: a campaign of disinformation. They send out *communiqués* to the press dubbing the hack a "technical error." Translation continues to mark the play of events, whether as a linguistic function or as a decoding process. The DST's characterization of Kalt's message privately as "hieroglyphs" (hence indecipherable) and publically as an "error" (hence negligeable) also recalls the perennial problem of viewing the Arabic language—even in a message coming from the Maghreb—as outsider speech. To the agents of the DST, Arabic—like Kalt's encryption—appears obscure, uncrackable, outside the time, space, surveillance and order of European telecommunications systems. Again, the dynamics of such a reading is both spatial-geographical and temporal-historical. Refuting the message's philosophical content—that is, its insistence on shared but different temporalities—the DST agents

attempt to minimize the hacker's force by characterizing "his" words as ancient, non-modern, the antithesis of contemporaneous. If the DST is to win its war of words, the hacker's message must at all costs be perceived to *not* deserve access to the Third Millennium.

As her subsequent messages reveal, Kalt makes a tactically urgent decision concerning translation, for in a style closely resembling previous hacks, she now broadcasts an Arabic (Tunisian *darija*) message with her own French subtitles to forestall the possibility of a mistranslation---that is, non-translation, combined with mischaracterization—by the DST of her intended meaning:

”مانيش غلطة فنية...باقي ماشي فرد ثنية...خطوة خطوة...كان ماتحبوش صوت البوت ...البسو بلغة واخرجو بيها بدوين مازلت حية...“

"Je ne suis pas une erreur technique…je poursuis ma route[99]…pas à pas. Si vous n'aimez pas le bruit des bottes, portez des babouches et sortez dans la rue. Bedwin est toujours en vie."[100]

This time, Kalt's message goes beyond highlighting the existence of other places and people by calling for political action. Kalt requires a form of physical demonstration in support of Bedwin Hacker (still out there, alive) and against the DST. At the same time, however, it is perhaps worth noting a discrepancy between the Arabic message and Kalt's

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[99] The original Arabic word, *thaniyya*, translated into French as "route," in Arabic means "narrow pass" or "mountain trail" (*Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*). This choice of word recalls the scene from the opening credits during which a group of children, including Qmar, are seen returning home from school at the end of the day to the village outside of Midès, making their way along a path carved into the hillside of a desert ravine.

[100] The U.S. DVD English subtitles add a futher variation that is neither in the Arabic nor the French, by specifying "wear your babouches *tomorrow*" (emphasis added), perhaps anticipating the fact that this is what happens next in the film's plot (i.e. people in Paris go out in the streets wearing their babouches the day after Kalt's transmission).

French subtitles, which call for a more specific form of protest than does the "original" (simultaneously displayed) Arabic message. Whereas the Arabic version of the message tells viewers to "wear your babouches [*balgha*, traditional leather slippers] and *go out with them*," the French version instructs viewers more specifically on a destination: "wear babouches and *go out in the street*" (emphases added). Perhaps ending up in the street is implied in the *darija* version of "going out," whereas the French verb "sortir" might connote going out at night for fun, which would not carry the same protestatory connotations. By calling specifically for French viewers to "go out in the street," Kalt demonstrates familiarity with the culture of French *manifestations* or street protests. In this way, El Fani also has her protagonist demonstrate an acute awareness of the high stakes of choices and interpretation in translation—hence the simultaneous, controlled self-translation of her own message in *darija*.

Whereas Kalt's first message proclaimed and protected alterity through a gesture of resistance to translation, this one, as with all subsequent messages, provides its own French "subtitling." Mimicking the status of subtitles as authoritative information, El Fani articulates a key movement of untranslation between refusal to translate on the one hand, and insistence on accurate (because *un*authorized) self-translation, on the other. Kalt's self translation—a vital component of untranslation—is both expedient and a matter of self-defense. The decision *not* to translate, as for the subsequent decision *to* translate, is tactical: while the first transmission attracted attention, the second one calls directly for support. In order to communicate, not with her adversary but with her potential allies on French soil, Kalt uses her own bilingualism to make her message more

transparent. At the same time, after an initial broadcast in untranslated Arabic, this second message suggests that language is not perfectly aligned with political ideals because Kalt makes both French and Arabic capable of carrying a progressive political message. Untranslation is never *only* linguistic, although a foreign language will always return us to the basic linguistic need for—and meaning of—translation.

Indeed, even as Kalt appears to adopt the DST's language, she does not accept its discourse. By self-translating into French, she seeks not to communicate *with* her adversaries, but rather, *around* them, as indicated by the message's somewhat elusive language. Moreover, even though the message is apparently translated—because expressed in Arabic *and* French (and, on the DVD, in English)—it retains a measure of opacity and resistance to translation (in the sense of resistance to transcendent interpretation). It is significant, for example, that Kalt does not choose a predictable "thesis" or manifesto such as "down with anti-immigration policies!" or "Are you watching, Julia? It's me, Kalt!" Rather, having appeared to recycle her adversary's language with the negation "I am not a technical error," the rest of the message ups the ante by calling for a seemingly innocent, even arbitrary, kind of action: to come out in the street wearing *babouches*. Babouches, traditional leather or fabric slippers worn widely in the Maghreb and well-known in France, make a sudden and unexpected appearance in Kalt's message, most spectacularly on the feet of the cartoon camel that accompanies it, as he dances across the screen, striking a disco/victory pose from left to right. Despite appearances to the contrary, therefore, the referents in the message are *not* spelled out in black and white. Instead, the language metaphorically contrasts the discipline and noise

of boots (associated with military and the police) with the peacefulness of *babouches*

(associated with regular people, men and women, in France and in the Maghreb, going

about their daily business). The message calls for viewers, whether or not of Maghrebi

origin, to wear –or adopt—this footwear as a symbolic performance of solidarity that

could even be viewed as a sort of self-translation into a Tunisian idiom.[101] Even the

imperative mood of the command is expressed as a matter of choice: "*if* you do not like

the sound of boots*, then…*" The message's polysemy enhances its subversive show of

resistance. The invitation is both intimate and everyday, creating a code, inviting a pact.

By setting the terms of the conversation, Kalt's hacking series sets up a

détournement of the spectacular realm as Guy Debord defined it: "Le spectacle n'est pas

un ensemble d'images, mais un rapport social entre des personnes, médiatisé par des

images" (Debord, *Société* 16). According to Debord, spectacle divides and alienates

people. Even as it creates the illusion of shared values and experiences, the spectacle

makes populations less conscious of their potential solidarity with others in the

community and more isolated from one other (30). The television is among those media

classed as functioning in spectacular collusion with capitalism:

> 28. Le système économique fondé sur l'isolement est une *production circulaire de l'isolement*. L'isolement fond la technique, et le processus technique isole en retour. De l'automobile à la télévision, tous les *biens sélectionnés* par le système spectaculaire sont aussi ses armes pour le renforcement constant des conditions d'isolement des « foules solitaires ». Le spectacle retrouve toujours plus concrètement ses propres présuppositions. (*Société* 29-30, emphasis in original)

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[101] Interestingly, this gesture could arguably be seen as a *reversal* of capitalist recuperation of the *babouche* as a *Western* fashion statement. Thus one can also see how it could, subsequently, potentially be recuperated as a way to sell mass-produced *babouches*!

By hacking into TV signals to create a community of resistance, Kalt both calls attention to and undermines the isolating effects of a spectacular society that is constituted by its illusory relationship in and through television as the reflection of its own reality. In the same way she adapts computers to uses for purposes other than those intended for these consumer objects, El Fani seems to take aim at this very medium. She "jams" its spectacular creation of society in the cinematography used to convey Kalt's hacks.

In its place, an untranslational hacking idiom is formed. Thanks to shared characteristics of each hack, Kalt effectively diverts the spectacular function of the TV to create her own language. Over the course of the film, three hacking episodes in particular work as a visual series by repeating particular features, including Arabic script, translation, a black background, and the cartoon camel. Moreover these hacks quote TV images in a way that gives the effect of a progression. By multiplying the number of TV screens in each hack, each screen reproducing a different television station, El Fani gradually increases the frame's visual and auditory intensity, underlining the increasing urgency of Kalt's call. In the first hack to feature both Arabic and French (discussed above), El Fani uses discontinuity editing to simulate the effect of *all* European TV channels being interrupted simultaneously, reproducing a rapid series of TV screens. As the frame flickers between images, the soundtrack, layered with Bedwin Hacker's digital leitmotif, evolves into a babel of European languages, including newscasters' voices repeating the secret service's press release. El Fani disturbs the aesthetic of clarity and authority that is traditionally associated with the news genre. The rapid cutting between quoted images of TV channels suggests that one program could easily stand in for

another. The overall effect is a kind of static or noise, both visual and auditory, that dominates the senses. The clip's noisiness – the combined sound of national news channels, mainstream entertainment, and commerce, becomes associated with the sound of military or police "boots" –the antithesis of the soft pads of babouche-clad feet.

The final formal hack of the film—which is broadcast right before Kalt's operation is put out of action—repeats a *détournement* of the spectacle's visual noise, intensifying it still further in a quick succession of frames that function as shorthand for French satellite TV. The frames preceding the hacking broadcast do not even allow us to see each station in detail. Rather, they display simultaneous images of 20 TV channels, laid out in a sort of tiled pattern that fills out the frame. The numbering of the channels— between 1 and 33—alludes to the advent of satellite TV with its proliferation of viewing options and concomitant illusion of choice and freedom of speech. However, the fact that all of these screens are French also recalls the dominance and economic resources underpinning such major companies as Canal with its multiple French, European, and African stations and subsidiaries (Canal+ CanalSat, etc.). One of the last images we see before the hack displays the imperative command "VOTEZ." However, Kalt's vote is both excluded from—and wants to change the rules of—participation in the democratic nation state. This questioning of the legitimate bounds of democracy is underlined by shots of Qmar's computer screen. Seen just before she and Kalt launch the hack, the monitor displays the login page of a hacking website titled "Zoulou hackers," featuring a visual emblem of a traditional large, human-height Zulu shield, with spears crossed in front of it. Qmar, who has just obeyed Kalt's instruction to speak in Arabic (to avoid

detection by Julia, who has by now caught up with them in Midès), tells us that the website and satellite is located in "Afrique du sud." Thus the last hacking episode of the film imagines and formalizes a relationship of solidarity between the current situation of the Maghreb and the history of revolt/fight for freedom….. in South Africa. The potential significance of this relationship is fleshed out in the dialogue, as Julia tells Kalt that she would need "authorization" to broadcast alternative content. When Kalt states her utter lack of desire for authorization, she empties authority of its interpellative power. Her rebuttal epitomizes the hacker's quest that Suzanne Gauch has described in Kalt's case as an attempt to "seek modes of empowerment that claim rights in excess of those allotted . . . by the authoritarian state" (39). Instead, Kalt hacks to shatter that state's logic.

As suggested above, however, El Fani's untranslational hacking idiom is not expressed only in the formal hacking episodes she represents. Other *détournement*s occur within the visual fabric of the narrative. One such cinematographic hack is a depiction of a total blackout in the central business district of Paris. Qmar, working online in Midès while Kalt is in Tunis, has transmitted a hack interrupting TV programming to invite viewers to dial a special telephone number. At one minute to midnight, a computerized female voice commands, speaking Tunisian Arabic for which French subtitles are provided: "dial 01 60 50 40 30 20, then dial 666." The viewers respond: we see images of young people at home and on the darkened streets reaching for their cell phones; we hear the beeping as they dial the number. Because this number goes to the central telecommunications exchange of the central business district of Paris, it leads to a (controlled) meltdown of the system and a total blackout of the skyscrapers. In the next

frame, the skyline of La Défense starts to go dark, transformed from sparkling towers of

capital into silent, disarmed shadows. The skyscrapers of a central business district must

be one of the more obvious manifestations of what Debord would describe as the

"positivité" of the capitalist spectacle, which "se présente comme une énorme positivité

indiscutable et inaccessible. Il ne dit rien de plus que « ce qui apparaît est bon, ce qui est

bon apparaît . . . par son monopole d'apparence" (*Société* 20). The skyscraper of an

economic district is by its very nature a spectacular reminder of how capitalism visually

monopolizes social space. The skyscaper is a fetish object, repeated in numerous forms as

a celebration of a society's status as belonging to the technologically developed global

culture: "Le langage du spectacle est constitué par des *signes* de la production régnante,

qui sont en même temps la finalité dernière de cette production" (*Société* 18). This fact

was not lost on the hijackers of September 11, 2011. Indeed, one cannot watch the scene

in which El Fani depicts the blackening of La Défense without being eerily reminded of

the images, on constant replay, of the destruction of the World Trade Center.

What is different here is that Kalt does not destroy the towers nor murder their

inhabitants. Indeed, the emphasis throughout *Bedwin Hacker* is on peaceful but resolute

protest, phrased as civil disobedience and direct action. As with major hacking attacks

against banks, Kalt's hacking of La Défense has serious economic consequences (the

DST chief rants that business losses are in the millions). However, unlike dominant

discourse about the economic evils of hacking, El Fani tends to emphasize what might be

gained by such an event. The tenor of the event is accompanied not by screams,

explosions, and crashes, but by a soft, musical shimmering sound (simulating a flute with

strings) that fades to peaceful silence (the muted sounds of city traffic at night

continuing) as the image of the towers goes dark. The film's emphasis on peace is

reaffirmed at multiple moments in the film, perhaps most notably in Kalt's penultimate

hack, when she broadcasts the sound of her friend Frida singing *raï* music in rehearsals at

a Roman amphitheater in Tunisia. The song consists of melodious variations on the

Arabic greeting, "Salaam aleykum," literally, "peace be upon you." (In this hack, the

sound, broadcast along with the camel, plays over a slow-moving close up of television

footage of riot police beating young protestors). Thus Kalt's spectacular negations

constitute not a violent or sadistic infliction of pain and death, but rather an erasure of the

visual and auditory noise created by the constant humming of financial transactions, or

the screams and yells issuing from a protest being violently broken up by police.

One could of course object that El Fani simply replaces one negative image with a

positive one, making it easily recuperable by that same system. It is virtually impossible,

argues Debord, to move beyond the spectacular realm since it is one of the fundamental

constituents of modern society. The best one can hope for is artistic *détournement* and

continuous moving toward critique, phrased in the idiom of this same spectacular realm:

> 203. Sans doute le concept critique de *spectacle* peut aussi être vulgarisé
> en une quelconque formule creuse de la rhétorique sociologico-politique
> pour expliquer et dénoncer abstraitement tout, et ainsi servir à la défense
> du système spectaculaire. Car il est évident qu'aucune idée ne peut mener
> au-delà du spectacle existant, mais seulement au-delà des idées existantes
> sur le spectacle . . . (*Société* 194-5)

A possible example of such an aesthetic, which would break with current ideas of

the (Maghrebi film) spectacle, occurs during a conversation between Julia and Chams. In

this scene, disruptions in the scene's lighting, soundtrack, and focus signal Bedwin's success in calling for popular protest. In Chams's apartment, the couple, sharing breakfast after spending the night together, discusses favorable press reactions to Bedwin's activity. Chams reads aloud the conclusion of his latest online article: "Alors dans ce formidable ordre mondial il existe encore des troublions. Voilà plutôt une bonne nouvelle. Qu'ils diffusent des messages de paix est plutôt rassurant, mais qu'ils s'expriment en arabe justifient-il qu'on les taxe d'erreurs techniques?" After chastising Chams about his bias ("juste un peu partisan") and extolling the merits of order over liberty, Julia saunters over to the window and peeks through the curtain at the street below, only to behold signs of the very demonstration for which Bedwin had called: people going about their daily life in the street—wearing *babouches*. Chams joins her, observing that "eh donc le petit dromadaire à la télé ça marche, hein?" only irritating her further. In this brief moment, the continuity of the scene being played out between Chams and Julia is disrupted, or "hacked," by a sudden change in the lighting, focus, and soundtrack accompanying the images. The cut between the frame of Julia in Chams's apartment and the close-up of *babouche*-clad feet in the street below seems almost like an extra-diegetic insert. In contrast to the shot of the characters in the apartment, the marching feet are filmed in a high-angle close-up. The focus, lighting, and color of the sequence are also noticeably different to those of the domestic interior scene. Whereas a bluish light (filtered through the curtains) bathes the apartment and the characters, also clothed in a blue bathrobe (Julia) and t-shirt (Chams), the *babouches* worn outside are orange, brick red, and yellow. The outside footage is not bleached by bright, white light,

but gives the effect of warm, golden sunlight—a lighting effect that might be more commonly found in Northern Tunisia than Northern France. Two other important cues convey the effect of a hack. The first is the quality of the digital image. As opposed to the smooth effect of the digital footage that constitutes the majority of the film's narrative, the image of the *babouches* repeats the horizontal "ribbed" effect of a TV screen that was used as part of the *mise en abîme* of Kalt's TV hacks. Moreover, *Bedwin Hacker*'s digital music leitmotif plays rhythmically over the image of the feet. Over the sound of the leitmotif, Julia's comment, and Paris street noise, we can only barely hear the feet walking, for the wearers are, as Bedwin requested, not wearing boots, but demonstrating visibly, and silently. The image of these anonymous feet, peaceful but determined--and numerous enough to worry Julia-- is an understated aural and visual cue, or litotes, that calls the spectator's attention to a movement that is gathering force and calling to the world.

The "call" of such moments is not only intradiegetic (strengthening Bedwin's call within the storyline of the film), but extradiegetic (using appealing images of popular protest to create identification with the film's viewers). The feet are anonymous—they could be the feet of anyone, and seem to launch a kind of "call" from the screen to the film's spectators. Moreover, the image makes a kind of transhistorical demand, a return to France's revolutionary histories and traditions of protest. Many of the legs belonging to the feet are wearing basic work jeans, rather than business trousers or chic fashion items. It seems that the protestors are taken from among the widest segment of the population, the working class. In this way, the scene recalls other protests in the streets of

Paris, from the 1848 Revolution and the Paris Commune in 1871[102] (when the population tore up cobblestones to erect barricades and use as weapons against government forces) to that of October 17, 1961 by around 300,000 Maghrebi immigrants (who peacefully demonstrated in the streets of Paris, coming from shantytowns, working-class neighborhoods, and suburbs to demonstrate in central Paris, only to be violently suppressed and subjected to an orchestrated massacre by the security forces under the direction of police chief Maurice Papon).[103]

In this way, one might consider how El Fani constructs a cinematic appeal that is *trans*diegetic (a combination of intra-and extra-diegetic). Transdiegesis, which might also present a new way to think about the notions of culture jamming and *détournement*, troubles not only spatial but also temporal and historical boundaries in the "post"-colonial era. The "hacking" aesthetic, once so closely aligned with the technical domination of the West, becomes in this film a means of rephrasing the language of resistance. Released about eight years before Tunisia's Revolution, *Bedwin Hacker* is one text among many calling for protest and change. In invoking the recent Revolution, I do not want to imply a teleological or triumphalist reading of this film; rather, I want to highlight El Fani's long-term involvement in networks of civil resistance. The film depicts and calls for a form of protest that disturbs global flows of information and power (Cf. Gauch). By staging the sudden *détournement* or diversion of Western security and communications interests

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[102] Thanks to Christophe Wall-Romana for this idea.
[103] The dead numbered in the dozens, although the actual numbers are disputed by historians and the French government. The official commission in 1998 reported the number of dead at 48; other estimates put the figure as high as 200. Injuries and arrests numbered in the thousands. For a fuller account of these events, see Brunet, House et MacMaster.

towards a society mistakenly believed to be in a wintry slumber, El Fani delivers a prescient critique of the term "Arab Spring." In this regard, *Bedwin Hacker* should be read more as a critical response to the historical and cultural fallout from September 11, 2001, rather than a determination of events to come.[104] The devastation that this event would bring upon the Middle East and on Muslim minorities in France helps to explain why El Fani repeatedly described the project as "un film d'urgence" (Bivona 33), a new sort of "resistance film," akin to "resistance literature" at the end of the colonial era, but whose historical character is markedly different.

As if to sign her own take on the untranslational hacking idiom she creates, El Fani deploys a very striking image in the final seconds of her film. As the credits roll, the camera shows a close up of the heroine's face, smiling directly into the camera. This defiant gesture toward cinematic conventions that *avoid* an actor looking into the camera self-consciously dissolves the boundary between the world of the story and the world into which *Bedwin Hacker* is projected. Sonia Hamza's (Kalt) complicit smile, even after the seeming defeat of the hacker at the end of the movie, seems to invite the audience to continue the work she has started. Thus, it becomes difficult to read the ending of the film as a failure. Instead El Fani leaves Kalt's future open, and her project, to be continued. Julia has no jurisdiction over Kalt, who continues to share her techniques with her young protégée (Qmar). Kalt and Qmar remain in Tunisia, from where they will continue to produce new versions of the mysterious "Pirate Mirage," a Tunisian woman who covers her tracks "like no-one else" (Julia, *Bedwin Hacker*).

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[104] In this way, my reading of the film's historicity differs substantially from Cybelle McFadden's.

Conclusion: Untranslational Hacking as At-Tension

In discussing her goals for *Bedwin Hacker*, El Fani spoke of her desire to present "a radiography of marginal Tunisian culture," suggesting an almost self-ethnographic approach. However, with her adoption of the hacking idiom and a protagonist who uses Arabic strategically as a language of difference, the director immediately resists and complicates the flow of fiction as an easy, transparent, intercultural translation. Instead, she invents a filmic language that mimics the aesthetic of hacking and destabilizes the flow of knowledge and information between the Maghreb and the West. In attacking hegemony in the world's telecommunication systems, El Fani shows how cross-cultural translation is conditioned by informational capital. In item 29 of *A Hacker Manifesto*, Mackenzie Wark describes this problem as follows: "Information, like land or capital, [has become] a form of property monopolized by a class, a class of vectoralists, so named because they control the vectors along which information is abstracted . . ."

Bedwin Hacker goes far in challenging the "vectoralist" class by combining feminist, postcolonial, and anti-capitalist critiques. It links the gendered and situated phenomenon of untranslation in the Maghrebi women's text with larger countercultural movements including culture jamming, hacking, anarchy, protest, and demonstration. *Bedwin Hacker* is both part of and contributes something unique to these movements. It *performs*, but does not *define*, the "resistance" to which it aspires. Ultimately, El Fani's film is made powerful as an untranslational text, not due to choosing "for or against" translation, but rather to staging a strategic movement between definition and non-definition. Generating this tension, and maintaining our attention to it, is an effective way

for countercultural movements to remain critically vibrant without being recuperated by

the very systems they hope to reform.

IV. Ethnography and Its Limits: Farida Benlyazid's *A Door to the Sky*

JEAN-PHILIPPE. Mais enfin je suis là. Je ne demande qu'à comprendre!
NADIA. Mais comment veux-tu comprendre? Entre deux avions, tu n'es qu'un touriste.

[. . .]

NADIA. Je t'écrirai.

KIRANA *to Nadia*.
الدنيا بحال شي مدرسة. ربي جَعَلَها باش يمْتَحْنَا
[English subtitle:] The world is like a school. God created it for us to study.
[French subtitle:] Le monde est comme une école. Dieu l'a créé pour nous examiner.[105]

Introduction: Untranslating Ethnography

Farida Benlyazid's 1989 film *A Door to the Sky / Une Porte sur le ciel / Bab al-sama' maftouh*[106] insists upon cultural difference in ways that both recall and contradict

Nadia El Fani's untranslational hacking idiom in *Bedwin Hacker*. Whereas in *Bedwin*

Hacker, El Fani uses Arabic and a high-tech theme to critique capitalist modernity by

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[105] The English subtitle is a mistranslation of Kirana's line in Arabic (and hence an example of *domesticating* translation, which makes the original conform to the values of the target language and culture); the French subtitle is more loyal to the original sense (closer to a *foreignizing* translation, which retains the "strangeness" or "foreignness" of the original sense, thus challenging the values of the target language). In English, the original line in *darija* (Moroccan Arabic) literally translates as "The world [or: "life" in the sense of earthly existence] is like a school. My lord [God] created it to test us." My thanks to Dr. Mohammed Elmeski for his transcription and translation of the original line in Arabic and for his insightful comments on the contextualized meaning and connotations of Kirana's advice.
[106] Published English and French transliterations of the Arabic title باب السما مفتوح vary considerably; my transliteration attempts to reproduce the Arabic pronunciation as closely as possible; the ' after *sama* represents standard transliteration of the letter ع or 'ayn, a voiced pharyngeal fricative.

"jamming" its terms from the inside, *Bab al-sama''s* protagonist, Nadia (played by Zakia

Tahiri), enacts an abrupt refusal of Frenchness as she sees it, choosing instead to

reconstruct her identity in light of Moroccan Sufi practice and religious concepts. The

film's title (which can also be translated as "A door to the heavens"[107]) underlines

Nadia's rejection of the idiom of liberal secularism and her embrace of a religious

path.[108] Drawing upon select Moroccan, Muslim, French, and Western references, Nadia

defies dominant patriarchal customs by valorizing traditions of woman-centered social

and spiritual leadership and philanthropy. Featuring a utopic vision of communal life in

an Islamic women's shelter, the film shatters Orientalist constructions of the harem (as a

feminine space exisitng solely for male heterosexual pleasure thus beckoning to the

Western gaze). Ella Shohat suggests that by "offering a positive gloss on the notion of an

all-female space," Benlyazid "counterpos[es] Islamic feminism to Orientalist phantasies"

(Shohat "Post Third-Worldist Culture" 205). Sufism is the animating principle of the

storyline, and the film's function as a cross-cultural untranslation flows largely from this

fact.

　　　　Yet the untranslational qualities of the film are also located in its invocation of,

and response to, Western ethnological desire. While the figure of Nadia may seem at first

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[107] While Sama' (as an indefinite noun) translates more directly as "sky," "Al-sama'" (the definite noun used in this *idaafa* structure) may be translated as "sky," "Rapture," "heaven," "heavens," "God's place." The French term "ciel" renders more closely the double valence of "sama'," than the English term "sky."
[108] According to Florence Martin in *Screens and Veils*, the film's title alludes to a "recurring phrase in the Qur'an in which the gates of heaven open up for the righteous and remain closed to liars," (Bouchta Farqzaid "Codes et cinéma dans 'Une porte sur le ciel'," in Benlyazid et al., *L'Oeuvre cinématographique de Farida Benlyazid* 17, Ctd. in Martin 69). Martin also discusses intertextualities between Benlyazid's film and a novel by Latifa Al-Zayyat, *Al Bab as maftuh / The Open Door* (1960), in which Al-Zayyat creates a parallel between the heroine's self-liberation from the domestic sphere and patriarchal order with Egypt's victorious struggle against the French and British over the Suez Canal (Martin 69).

glance to be a site of access to Moroccan cultural identity, she/it remains embedded in a

cinematographic and historical matrix that both resists and variegates the mechanism of

South-to-North cultural translation. If, as I argue in this dissertation, Western audiences

traditionally and problematically view the figure of Maghrebi woman as a convenient

shortcut to anthropological knowledge, Benlyazid's film challenges this assumption in

both overt and implicit ways. *Bab al-sama'* does not dismiss the ethnographic gaze

altogether. Instead, it transforms this gaze into what I heuristically call a "self-

ethnographic" mode that is both productive and problematic. Self-ethnographic because it

is both a representation of a Moroccan heroine's "self;" self-ethnographic, too, because

the film both refutes and responds to what is portrayed as a Western desire for proper

knowledge and understanding of the heroine's culture. The film's self-ethnographic

effect/affect is evident not only in certain "translational" cinematographic gestures (for

example dialogue, subtitles[109]), but also in the film's conception—and reception. In

interviews and other writings, Benlyazid has pointed to an ethnographic aim within her

artistic work, a mode that she sees as complementing larger sociopolitical goals. Whether

expressed as authorial intention, narrative theme, or immanent mode of reception, the

ethnographic gaze is among the forces shaping *Bab al-sama' maftouh* as cinematographic

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[109] The source of the subtitles is unclear; I have not yet been able to find their exact origin or mode of production, but I suspect the French subtitles were part of the initial production and editing processes, likely by an in-house subtitler for one of the production companies, including France Media, Satpec, CCM, and Interfilm. Tingitania Films produced and distributed the DVD that I bought in Morocco in 2011. The English subtitles for the U.S. DVD were likely produced in-house by Arab Film Distribution. The difficulty of finding individual subtitlers' names, even though their decisions can drastically alter our understanding of a film, is symptomatic of the lack of recognition for translators in general. This results in a kind of "invisibility" of linguistic subtitle translation decisions, which could go far in the direction of a "domesticating" translation, akin to Spivak's "translatese," *or* which *could* be highly foreignizing (though this is more rarely the case).

text and defining its context. Although there is a strong movement within postcolonial literary studies *away from* "anthropological" or "ethnological" reading practices (Bensmaïa 6, 149), I suggest that *Bab al-sama' maftouh* invites a critical and creative reappropriation of this mode of reading. Rather than dismissing ethnographic reading as being entirely and essentially anathema to the ethical and political concerns of postcolonial reading, I aim to indicate some of the ways in which *Bab al-sama'* forces a critical re-engagement with the ethnographic gaze.

The film begins by symbolically rejecting the desires of a caricatured European ethnographic gaze, figured in the naïve request of a Frenchman. This gaze, figured in the film as a desire for "understanding" by its only European white male character, Jean-Philippe, is articulated through his beseeching speech and gestures, only to be categorically rebuffed by Nadia in the following terms (here I quote the Arab Film Distribution English subtitles):

JEAN PHILIPPE: Yet I'm here. I just want to understand!

NADIA. But how can you understand on your first visit, you can only be a tourist.

Despite his stated desire to know or "understand" Nadia's conversion, Jean-Philippe finds himself not only confused but also rejected. However, despite this initially uncompromising gesture of refusual to accord a "translation" of its female protagonist, the film seems gradually to step back from this position, supplanting Jean Philippe's gaze—labeled as naïve and exoticist—with a self-ethnographic gaze on its own terms. Benlyazid's self-ethnographic gaze explicitly bases its own evoluation—and the knowledge it transmits—in and upon the idioms of Moroccan, Muslim, and Sufi texts and

traditions. It is within this context that Nadia, a bicultural protagonist, pursues her own cultural rebirth and spiritual renaissance. This process is inextricably bound up with her philanthropic project and version of social justice (which in Nadia's viewpoint is totally opposed to Jean-Philippe's rather more specular approach).

Constructed out of idioms that defy easy translation within a Western secular space, Benlyazid's protagonist resists reduction as a cinematic "native informant" in a similar way to the figure studied by Gayatri Spivak in *Toward a Critique of Postcolonial Reason.* While the typical native informant, "a figure who, in ethnography, can only provide data, to be interpreted by the knowing subject for reading" (49) Benlyazid attempts to push her viewers beyond seeing the figure of Maghrebi woman as something that willingly and unknowingly "feeds anthropology" (142). Instead of either dismissing or going headlong into anthropology, the film invites suspicion of it, yet still participates in a certain systematization of cultural knowledge via fiction film. As such, *Bab al-sama'* at once participates in and problematizes "the production of the native informant" (30) in Maghrebi women's letters and cinema.

By critically invoking, then rejecting as "exoticism" or "tourism," yet finally supplanting a Frenchman's naive quest for "understanding," Benlyazid's script echoes disciplinary upheavals in contemporary anthropology. Since the second half of the twentieth century and the gradual shift toward postcolonial methods in Western academic disciplines, cultural anthropology has made a concerted effort to reform its interpretive methods, often with reference to innovations launched within literary studies. Increasingly, ethnographers seek to encounter—and transmit the knowledge of—non-

Western cultures on the terms of these cultures themselves, rather than through a

Eurocentric lens that is associated with nineteenth-century colonialism and its legacies.[110]

This long history conditions the emergence of research such as U.S. anthropologist

Stefania Pandolfo's 1997 monograph *Impasse of the Angels,* which mixes methodologies

of ethnography, oral history, storytelling, literature, and religion. These innovations

surface in tandem with a greater focus on the "native informant" as a *participant* in

shaping ethnographic interpretation, rather than merely an object to be interpreted by the

knowing investigator. Pandolfo credits the inspiration for her work's poetics to the

storytelling practices and knowledge of the rural Moroccan culture in the Wâd Dra'

valley that she has studied from 1984 onwards. She presents this methodological decision

as the response to a story told to her during her very first trip to the field, a story in which

a Frenchman, masquerading as an erudite Eastern scholar named Qobtân Slimâne, came

to the region, befriended local people, and gathered information. After falling ill, he

abruptly left the region. When French military convoys appeared some time later, people

saw Qobtân Slimâne again, only this time he was dressed in a French officer's uniform

(1-2). The man who tells Pandolfo this story clearly points to the link between a Western

scholar's search for cultural knowledge and the military power that made colonial

domination possible. Reading the man's story "as an ironical warning, a challenge,"

Pandolfo pursues her project, but aims to "explor[e] the possibility of an ethnography

internally altered by the place and voice of others" (3). Pandolfo's use of the word

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[110] Within the United States, the field's self-critique has been manifest in the work of anthropologists, ethnographers, and historians from Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead to Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, and George Marcus.

"internally" here—as well as her retention of "others"—is important; she does not mean to erase or transcend alterity; rather her methodology is an attempt to put internal/external and self/other on a more equal (less aymmetric) footing in the production of ethnographic knowledge.

With *Bab al-sama' maftouh*, Benlyazid attempts to make the fictional figure of Nadia—and especially her suspicion and initial refusal of Jean Philippe's quest for understanding—"internal" to the ethnographic aspects of the film. I say "aspects" because I do not want to suggest that this film is a work of ethnography, but rather that it performs an *immanently* ethnographic role when viewed outside Morocco. Non-Moroccan spectators, seeking "to understand" Morocco via the fictional figure of Nadia, are led into a fictional world whose full expression depends on retaining and elaborating a very particular set of cultural idioms. The film gestures toward cultural translation for its audience, through the pointed use of dialog, image, sound, and intertexts. However, the film works as a self-translation only up to a point. The film highlights—at times, quite vociferously—the limits of cultural translation.

Within the rhetoric of the film, an omniscient, omnipotent God incrementally and definitively emerges as Nadia's supreme source of knowledge and understanding. Benlyazid uses a variety of techniques to enjoin the viewer to see Nadia's world through Nadia's eyes. Nadia's Sufism encourages her quest for understanding and knowledge (of God, of the world, of life), but it also reminds her of the limits of this quest, phrased as the eternal distance between divine and human knowledge. Through episodes of mystical revelation, prayer, and conversation about religion, the viewer is led to witness narrative

events through the filter of faith. Benlyazid's framing creates an interesting parallel

between the opacity of Moroccan "cultural" idioms and the impossibility of absolute

knowledge. Nadia's encounter with the world and with God is reminiscent of Djebar's

idea of radical "listening," but also of Spivak's "Reader-as-translator" who must always

"attend to the rhetoric which points to the limits of translation" (Spivak 221). The

"rhetoric" of *Bab al-sama' maftouh* is a religious spiritual idiom. It points not only to the

limits of post-colonial, cross-cultural translation, but also to the limits of human

knowledge *tout court.* [111]

Yet even as the film insists on the limits of translation—phrased in terms of the

limits of human knowledge and performed in the terms of cultural alterity between

Nadia's world and Jean-Philippe's world—the film as a whole could be read as an effort

to translate, explain, and "inform" the viewer about Morocco via the lens of Nadia's

cultural identity, beliefs, and experiences. Gestures of cultural translation are discernible

in the film's ongoing engagement with viewers outside the protagonist's cultural world,

expressed in forms of translational glossing and explanation (subtitles, scenario,

dialogue). Moreover, the initial rejection of Jean-Philippe and the knowledge system he

represents is complicated by the film's relative blindness to questions of history, class

status, and economic privilege. [112] Moroccan and Western critics alike have criticized the

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[111] For one engaged on a spirtual quest, as Nadia is, this idiom also gives generous latitude to the individual
to interpret God's world as s/he sees fit.

[112] Given the film's overtly progressive plot and narrative, this paradox should be examined as part of a
holistic understanding of the ways in which the film responds to the problem of cultural translation. While I
do not believe it is fair to attack a work for what it fails to mention or do (particularly as a Western reader
of a film produced in the global South), it is important to follow up on the question of elitism in the film
because, in some ways, the class bias of this perspective contradicts what the film attempts to do in
revealing the imbalance of power in the European ethnographic gaze.

film's elitism to varying degrees. Through narrative and visual cues, the film reveals and yet leaves intact an oversimplifying ethnographic treatment of what might be called its "subaltern" characters. One result of this elitism is that the figure of the protagonist, in reclaiming self-sovereignty via the ethnographic role, ironically ends up repeating the gestures of the translational gaze it sought to correct.

This chapter is arranged in four main parts. In Part One, I provide background on the film, including a plot summary, filmmaker bio, and the film's critical reception, thereby examining various paratextual[113] modes through which the film functions as a cultural translation. In Part Two, I examine "the breakup scene" (in which Nadia rejects her French boyfriend, Jean-Philippe) that encapsulates the film's overtly untranslational content. Part Three demonstrates the cultural knowledge that the film transmits as Nadia supplants Jean-Philippe as its first "investigative" figure (one who comes looking for answers). As the heroine continues her spiritual quest, the European gaze (that had initially attempted to translate her) remains present but is held partially in abeyance through various narrative and cinematic resistances to translation. Part Four returns to the problematic function of Nadia as a self-ethnographic figure, manifested notably in the limited and at times dismissive potrayal of the voices and experiences of the non-elite characters in the film.

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[113] Here I am using the term "paratextual" in the way that Richard Watts uses it. Drawing on Foucault and Genette, Watts argues that the "paratext" (which he defines broadly as the physical elements and sociohistoric conditions surrounding a book's publication, circulation, and reception) is a prime site and determinant of intercultural translation. A fuller discussion of Watts and untranslation appears in Chapter 1.

1. Critical Translations

Raised in the elite setting of a palatial old house in Fez, Nadia (played by Moroccan actress, writer, director and producer Zakia Tahri[114]) is bicultural, having been born to a French mother (who died during Nadia's childhood) and a Moroccan father. Years later, upon learning that her father is gravely ill, Nadia returns from her Paris home to Fez to be at his side. After her father succumbs to his illness and passes away, Nadia spends several days in a state of shock and depression. Endeavoring at first to quell her pain with spirits and cigarettes, she eschews the exhortations of her sister to participate in traditional women's mourning rituals. But Nadia eventually surrenders to the comforting effect of the the Qur'anic verses sung by the funeral singer Kirana (played by Chaabia Laadraoui), which have an unexpectedly profound effect upon her. Thanks to the gentle guidance of the wise and tolerant Kirana, Nadia feels called to embrace Islam and to re-find the Moroccan part of her identity. As part of this transition, early in the film, she abruptly abandons her French life, career, and boyfriend, Jean-Philippe. Adopting a spiritual practice that she had eschewed but now adopts, along with traditional practices of dress and behavior, she stays in Morocco to establish a *Zawiya* or religious retreat and shelter for abused or abandoned women and girls. After an extensive process of research, prayer, and meditation punctuated by mystical revelations, Nadia successfully overcomes the remaining legal, social, and financial obstacles that stand between her and her goal of creating a safe house and spiritual retreat for women. A vision shortly before Laylat al-Qadr (the night of Power or Destiny, commemorating the first Qur'anic revelations)

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[114] Thanks to Florence Martin for this information in *Screens and Veils* (68).

guides Nadia to a trove of buried treasure in the courtyard, thus assuring the future and

financial security of the shelter. Many years later, when Nadia is still co-director of the

shelter with Kirana, she enters a second phase of uncertainty and self-questioning

precipitated by two successive encounters: first with Bahia, a *Beur* woman who comes to

the shelter following her release from prison; and second with Abdelkrim, a depressed

young Moroccan artist whom Nadia is called upon to heal. Despite Abdelkrim's initially

obnoxious behavior, Nadia forms a friendship with him, much to the disapproval of the

other shelter residents, who do not want a man in their space. Despite these challenges,

the couple falls in love and marry. Soon afterwards, Nadia ventures out into the world

with Abdelkrim. The film's poetic and mystical dénouement suggests Nadia's continued

orientation toward—and quest to move closer to—a "door to the sky." The film ends with

a montage of the young newlyweds walking up a hill in the countryside, praying,

embracing, and marveling at nature, while the camera tilts skywards.

As a fictional figure, Nadia's trajectory over the course of the film recalls the

etymological roots of the verb "to translate:" "to transfer" – to move or carry something

(or someone) from one place to another, from one form to another. Nadia moves from

Paris, by airplane, to Fez. Once there, the protagonist "translates" herself from a secular

identity to a religious one. At the film's end, she goes through another radical

displacement as she physically and spiritually moves from a quasi-institutional

relationship with God to one that seems personal, intimate, and endlessly open.

Simultaneously, the film's articulation of translation-as-displacement operates at a

metanarrative and paratextual level. The wide diffusion and continued renown of the film

in Morocco and beyond since its release in 1988 means that the figure of Nadia has

traveled great distances in time and space.

This theme of displacement and transformation also has biographical resonances

with Farida Benlyazid's life. *Bab al-sama' maftouh* is her first feature-length film and

the second full-length Moroccan film to be directed by a woman filmmaker (Dwyer 328-

29). It is also one of only two Moroccan feature films to be both written and directed by a

woman (Carter *What Moroccan Cinema?* 245). Born in 1948 in Tangier to a Spanish-

speaking mother and an Arabic-speaking father, Benlyazid (also pronounced / transcribed

as Belyazid and Benyazid grew up with bicultural sensibilities and as a practicing

Muslim (Carter 244). She married young, had children, and then became interested in

pursuing higher education, over her husband's objections. In 1970, she went to France

with her two young children after having won a then hard-to-obtain divorce in order to

have permission to take her children with her (Carter 244).[115] In 1974 she earned her

degree (*licence es* lettres), going on to film school in Paris between 1974-76. She worked

for a few years in France, notably producing a made-for-TV documentary entitled

Identités de Femmes (1977) before returning to Morocco to collaborate with established

male filmmakers (Carter 244). During her forty years of artistic activity, she has written,

directed, produced, managed or collaborated on shorts, documentaries, and TV films, and

founded two independent production companies along the way (Martin "Bab" 124).

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[115] Reforms to the Moroccan Family Code *(Moudawana)* in 2004 meant that women could now legally initiate a divorce for reasons of irreconcilable differences; in the law's earlier form (1958-2004) a woman (or her relatives) could ask for divorce but it was much harder to obtain and required legal proof of various forms of neglect or abuse by the husband. The right to repudiate a spouse, however, remains the sole prerogative of men. See "Assessing the Impact of the 2004 Moudawana on Women's Rights in Morocco" by Beth Malchiodi.

Benlyazid is both an artist and an activist, engaged in promoting Moroccan cinema in

adverse historical and economic conditions. She has earned a reputation for being a "true

free spirit" and a "fiercely independent filmmaker" who sees cinema as an essential

medium of cultural pride and political awareness for Moroccan society (Martin *Screens*

67).[116] A renowned script-writer, she has authored essays, articles, a novel, and

successful films (such as Mohamed Abderrahman Tazi's immensely popular situation

comedy and social satire, *Looking for the Husband of My Wife*, about a man who rashly

repudiates his wife then loses her to another man as he attempts to engineer the legal

steps required to remarry her). Benlayzid also wrote the script for her own *Bab al-sama'*

in 1983-84. She filmed it on location in Fez between 1986-87, and the film was released

in Morocco in 1988 (Carter 244-45).

Since 2000, Benlyazid's work reflects her long-term aim to represent and engage

with diverse facets of Moroccan society. While she welcomes international dialogue

about her work, she professes a desire to make films that can speak to the Moroccan

public in the twenty-first century. She is particularly resolute about the need to appeal to

younger generations who are shaping the development of the country and in whom she

places great hope for the future.[117] Since 2000, she has so far directed two feature-length

films based on novels (*Casablanca* (2002), an indictment of political-financial corruption

and *La vida perra de Juanita Narboni* (2005), on the life of a Spanish woman in Tangier)

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[116] Benlyazid has had a productive but at times tense relationship with the state-funded CCM (Centre Cinématographique Marocain) over questions of resource distribution and artistic freedom. See Carter for a more extensive discussion of the CCM's history through 2006 and Valérie Orlando's *Screening Morocco: Contemporary Film in a Changing Society* for a discussion of twenty-first century Moroccan film production. Florence Martin also provides a rich overview of Benlyazid's work in *Screens and Veils*.
[117] Unpublished interview with Benlyazid in Fez, June 11, 2011.

and a 52-minute documentary co-directed with Abderrahim Mettour titled *Casanayda /*
Casa ça bouge / Casa Is Rocking (2007). The latter recounts the story of a Moroccan
musical, artistic, dance, and fashion youth subculture that promotes the use of *darija*
(Moroccan Arabic) rather than *fusha* (formal Arabic) in writing and other social and
cultural realms (Martin 67). Featuring a hip-hop-infused soundtrack and interviews with
leaders of the movement, the film speaks to Benlyazid's ongoing commitment to speak
with and to Moroccan youth about their own generational potential. She aims to inform
and to instill a sense of cultural pride about the multiple unique cultural strands that make
up Moroccanness (Martin 67).

Benlyazid has often commented that Morocco's younger generations need to see
diverse aspects of their own culture reflected in cinema, a preference that resonates with
her aim to use creative fiction as a site of (positive) self-reflection. This gaze could be
described as self-ethnographic.[118] It is of note that the production notes for the film *Cane*
Dolls, directed by Jilali Ferhati in 1981 and for which Benlyazid wrote the screenplay,
describe the film as a "fiction ethnographique pleine de sens" (Carter 149). Benlyazid
states that Western visual forms dominate the Moroccan cultural landscape and tend to
(at best) render invisible, or (at worst) devalue and render abject, what it means to be
Moroccan and/or Muslim (Carter 149). Indeed, this was one of her principal motivations
for the conception of *Bab al-sama'*: "I want to display my own culture and its subtleties. I
want our children, whom the curvaceous film stars haunt, to draw their identity from it. I

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[118] In some traditional academic quarters, this would be called "sociology," especially if for consumption
by a domestic audience, but given the new directions in anthropology to include both domestic and foreign
research subjects *and* the "intercultural" problematic of my own research, I will continue to refer to
anthropology (the field), and ethnography (the methodology and –work produced).

wish that the whole world could discover in it something other than stereotypes and preconceived ideas" (Benlyazid "Why Cinema?" 209). Even though *Bab al-sama'* is a work of fiction, Benlyazid seeks to create in it a space of discovery, a corrective cultural mimesis for both domestic and international audiences.[119]

While audiences have not always appreciated *Bab al-sama' maftouh*, the mixed reaction it has provoked among its myriad audiences in Morocco, France, and North America point to its complicated relationship with "preconceived ideas" about Moroccan culture. Combining the highly charged themes of woman and religion, privileging a thematic and aesthetic view of Moroccan Sufism, *Bab al-sama'* is a filmic, fictional rendition of what Benlyazid describes as her own "personal inspiration" as a practicing Muslim (cited in Hillauer 338). Writing about the conception of her film, Benlyazid recalls her initial unwillingness to represent such intimate subject matter: "I had written a very personal script and I did not want to show it to anyone" ("Image and Experience: Why Cinema?" 208). The film's religious message has, evidently, been the primary site of its critical controversies. In *What Moroccan Cinema?* independent scholar Sandra Gayle Carter provides the most extensive Anglophone account of Moroccan responses to the film. Following its release in Morocco, *Bab al-sama' Maftouh* "created a huge hue and cry," with multiple critics expressing consternation about Benlyazid's representation of Islamic practice in Morocco (245). Criticisms included the charge that Benlyazid had violated religious orthodoxy with her "folkloric" depiction of Nadia's special healing

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[119] Similarly to Nadia El Fani's relationship with her work in *Bedwin Hacker*, there are tensions within and between Benlyazid's political and aesthetic goals and the content of her films. In El Fani's case, there was a tension between, on the one hand, the motivation to present an "x-ray" or realistic representation of the culture both to Tunisians and foreigners, and, on the other, a desire to counteract stereotypes.

powers and visions (as a *shareefa* or female descendant of the Prophet, Nadia fulfills a

role more traditionally occupied by men) or her recording of Qur'anic singing in too

"musical" a style, a practice forbidden in more austere interpretations of Islam (252).

Some Moroccan critics felt that Benlyazid's representation of Islam was not a "realistic"

or "true" representation of Islam as it is/should be practiced in Morocco (253).[120]

Benlyazid's decision to represent vistas of the old city of Fez and to depict traditional

Moroccan Sufi and folk practices, such as the use of music and dance to attain spiritual

clarity, has also led to the charge of self-Orientalizing by some of her compatriots.

According to one Moroccan graduate student's blog, the cinema critic Hamid Tbatou

"believes that the film folklorizes (and Orientalizes) the Moroccan Culture through

architecture, exotic places such as hammams and souks. The film provides images that

please and flirt with the [sic] western expectations, and presents Islam as little more than

magic."[121] At the same time, other Moroccan critics have praised Benlyazid for creating a

film that reflects the real tensions in Morocco between Western, Eastern Islamic, and

traditional Moroccan influences. For example, Mohamed Belfquih appreciates that "this

film . . . interrogates that which is sacred in us . . . we live a certain duality: on one hand

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[120] Continuing her discussion of the film's relative *vraisemblance*, Sandra Gayle Carter refutes this charge: "While 'true' (perhaps 'orthodox') Islam is not supposed to be suffused with magic and ritual, in reality 'most' Moroccans still participate in the ritualistic aspects because that is what they have grown up with, what appeals to them, and satisfies their needs. Perhaps very strict observers, very devout or very educated people do not follow the uniquely Moroccan traditions but adhere to a more rigid and austere form of Islam, but 'most' people practice culturalized religion, Moroccan-style Islam, which includes saint-worship, belief in djin, magic, visions, the evil eye, and even *zawiyas*" (253). Carter's list combines both controversial or "culturalized" practices along with more standard ones: the belief in *djinn* (the devil) could actually be considered quite orthodox, as could the use of *zawiyas*, a word that refers to a small mosque or prayer room (or, in Sufi tradition, a refuge).
[121] This account of Tbatou's thought is featured on the blog of a Moroccan graduate student in cultural studies, Youness Abeddour. "Farida Benlyazid's *A Door to the Sky* (1988)." *MrMorocco*. February 9, 2011. Accessed September 15, 2013.

we have our acquired culture, our intellectual knowledge, and on the other hand this socio-collective mental space. And Belyazid has taken up juxtaposing these two oppositions which coexist in us" (cited in Carter 249-250). Finally, Egyptian filmmaker and scholar Viola Shafik argues that "Benlyazid posits a clear alternative to Western feminism by pointing out that "'progressive' institutions such as shelters for battered women have a long tradition in Islamic culture and that female self-realization can take place in a traditional framework" (207). Hinting at the film's ethnographic aspect, Shafik notes that Benlyazid enacts "a reevaluation of the knowledge and rites of Sufi mysticism that form part of popular belief in the Maghreb" (207).

Scholarly responses by scholars located in Europe and North America have been diverse, too, but often for different reasons. Negative assessments run the gamut from those taking exception to Benlyazid's "propagandistic" rejection of the Western perspective, to her representation of religion as a solution to social problems. Some critics characterize the film as being too polemical or too clichéd. In a 1995 review in *Der Tagesspiegel*, critic Silvia Hallensleben asks "A woman's happiness combined with spiritual awakening: an expansion of opportunities or regression? Utopia or simply propaganda?" (Hillauer 341). Others have been disappointed by the limitations or blindess of the heroine's elite class status and Benlyazid's relative neglect of the subaltern subjectivities that the film only superficially treats (Gauch 111, 116-17; Hamil 78, Martin 125). At the same time, many have appreciated the film's generally feminist message, its innovative thematic portrayal of Moroccan women's historical role within Islam as one of liberation, and its express (if compromised) challenges to Eurocentric and

Orientalist stereotypes. *Bab al-sama'* has often been described as an "Islamic feminist"

[122] text, "drawing its strength from within the Arab-Islamic culture rather than from any

preestablished Western model" (Hamil 76). Reading in a different vein, Florence Martin

sees in Benlyazid's text a contribution to a universalist project of humanist emancipation.

Borrowing Evelyne Accad's term, she describes *Bab al-sama'* as "femi-humanist," based

on her view of Benlyazid's protagonist as "a human spiritual exemplar growing and

flourishing out of the particular regional context of Morocco" (Martin "Bab" 125, 127).

By contrast, in her detailed philological analysis of the film's prevalent intertexualities

with the Qur'an and Islamic philosophical texts, Carine Bourget sees Benlyazid's vision

as an original and productive valorization of religion that resists assimilation in a

universalist, or Western-liberal-feminist, discourse. This religious focus makes the film

thematically unique in relation to other Maghrebi cinema, particularly in woman-directed

films (Bourget 756, 760). Bourget also hints that the film thwarts translational attempts:

"Les éléments intertextuels les plus saillants sont le Coran, des poètes soufis et des chants

arabes, et posent donc *un défi au spectateur* qui n'est pas familier avec la culture arabo-

musulmane, d'autant plus que *les sous-titres sont incomplets*" (752, emphasis added).

The "incompleteness" that Bourget identifies in the subtitles is material and

metaphorical; it extends beyond the linguistic elements (script, subtitles, depictions of

text) in the film. Indeed, any aspect of Nadia's life represented in the film could become a

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[122] For more definitions of "Islamic feminism" which lay out the complications, multiplicities and instabilities inherent in this unifying concept, see works by Margot Badran's "Féminisme islamique: qu'est-ce à dire?", miriam cooke's *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature*, Asma Lamrabet's *Aïcha, épouse du prophète ou l'Islam au féminin*, Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, Nawal El Sadaawi's "Women, Religion and Literature: Bridging the cultural gap," Monturiol i Virgili's *Femmes d'Islam: Autodétermination*, and Amina Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*.

challenge not only for "those unfamiliar with arabo-Islamic culture," but also for those

unfamiliar with elite Fassi (originating in Fez) cultures….What the viewer *does* with this

challenge can result in a reading that either resists translation or embraces mistranslation.

It is perhaps due to the film's numerous intertextual references to the Qur'an,[123]

but also to a range of Islamic, Arab, Sufi, and Persian texts (Shabistari and Atar, Persian

poets, Ibn Arabi, a Sufi mystic and philosopher, and Al-Ghazali, a Persian jurist and

philospher) along with Western anti-establishment texts (Marx, Angela Davis, and

Rimbaud) that certain Western audiences have reacted to it with unfettered hostility.

Benlyazid recounts that while reactions to the film on U.S. university campuses have

been generally positive--or at least "polite," which is perhaps a behavior related to the

strength of multicultural discourse and the principle of religious freedom in the United

States—reactions at festivals and university campuses in France (a space where Islamic

religious expression is relatively less-well tolerated) have often been scathing

(unpublished interview with Benlyazid, Fez, June 11, 2011). While some object to the

political content, others have criticized what they perceive as a lack of nuance in the film.

In a 1995 interview with Benlyazid, Rebecca Hillauer, author of the *Encyclopedia of*

Arab Women Filmmakers, confronted the filmmaker with the following charge: "The

portrayal of women in the film is very clichéd. Tradition and modernity confront each

other, ruling out any blend and thus a more sophisticated perspective" (339). To this

charge Benlyazid responded, with remarkable calm: "I wanted to explore the world of

women that has been hidden for so long and laden with stereotypes and ignorance . . .

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[123] Bourget: "L'intertexte qui domine le film du début à la fin est le Coran, principalement sous la forme de récitation coranique mélodique . . . " (754).

that's why I talk about them. I don't want to create stereotypes. Women play an

important role in Islam as well, especially in the realm of spirituality" (Hillauer 339). [124]

Numerous contradictions are apparent among these critical assessments of the

film. While some assert that the film speaks and valorizes an Islamic idiom, others insist

that Islam is insulted when reduced to a type of "magic." While some maintain that the

film represents Islam as a fruitful form of liberation for a woman, others claim that this is

nothing more than unrealistic propaganda. Some critics (West and East) think that the

film vindicates by representing central, authentic aspects of Moroccan culture, thus

resisting Eurocentrism. Others opine that, on the contrary, the film panders to Orientalist

and exoticist expectations. What emerges from the complex tensions between these

accounts (beyond the obvious fact that interpretation depends heavily on the historical

subject-position of the viewer) is that, in *Bab al-sama'*, something of great value is at

stake: the representation of culture.

Yet the location of the viewer is not the only deciding factor on how the film will

be read. In her 2011 article on *Bab al-sama'*, Suzanne Gauch draws attention to the

internal contradictions and tensions of the film itself. She also argues that the film

indicates a potential (if insufficient) interpretive lens for seeing past its apparent

contradictions and hypocrisies:

> . . . the themes and aesthetics of Benlyazid's film become entangled in the
> very categories of understanding that they attempt to circumvent . . . *A
> Door to the Sky* places on display the beauties of Fez's old city and

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[124] In another context, talking about her film *Women's Wiles*, Benlyazid again reflects on her desire to produce work that confronts stereotypes: "The image that people in Europe have of the Orient and especially of Arab women is one-dimensional and false. The media is to blame. They always show Arab women as victims, passive, trapped, without a will or mind of their own" (Hillauer 342).

traditional arts, while at the same time feeding old Eurocentric stereotypes of the "Orient" as mysterious, hiding and hidden, and ultimately unknowable. Even as it takes as its object perception as reframed by the visual arts, it never successfully defines a style of filmmaking that would do away with narrative film's reliance on images of women and non-Western others to model insight and understanding. Yet while Benlyazid employs the strategy of drawing in viewers with the familiar, the apparent, and urging them on to new insights, her film also follows the Sufi premise that all forms of communication are veils, time and again exposing readings as misreadings, insights as misperceptions. (125)

According to Gauch, the very depiction of figures and objects that *could* be coded Orientalist—including Maghrebi women—inevitably leads to their reification as exoticist objets, regardless of the professed aim of the text. Yet Benlyazid forges ahead, infusing her filmic vision with what Gauch calls its "Sufi premise."[125] While I do not necessarily concur with the entirety of Gauch's argument—notably her occasionally Gordian evaluative criteria[126]—I wholeheartedly agree that the film's internal tensions should be viewed as productive. Benlyazid effects a number of discursive turns that encourage viewers in the Global North to encounter and struggle with cultural difference in the context of an original, religious, woman-themed storyline. The film may be read as an untranslational text precisely because, at multiple levels, it stages and puts into play the

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[125] This description of a textual dynamic in which cliché mimics a stereotype in order to dismantle it, partially describes the movement of untranslation—see Introduction.

[126] Interestingly, if Orientalist figures and Eurocentric dichotomies haunt Benlyazid's text, they also seem to haunt Gauch's otherwise brilliant essay. Nadia's family's friend, the Sufi mystic Bâ Sassi, is "mysterious" (124); the depictions of Nadia's flashbacks and trances are characterized as "magical realist" (108); the film is not sufficiently in line with the "concrete" or the "realities" of Moroccan life (119); Gauch registers disapproval (on behalf of an implied Moroccan audience) that Benlyazid uses a "Western medium" to represent a sacred experience; and the film's ending is critiqued not only for being pastoral, atemporal, and prehistoric *but also* for featuring a couple whose "devoted interactions and freedom from family obligations would present them as a Westernized, modern couple to Moroccan viewers" (129). Although Gauch authorizes this comment by citing renowned Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi, the reduction of a putative "Moroccan audience" to a mass that could not include devoted couples who eschew family obligations seems to me to foreclose too many other interpretive possibilities.

tensions between representation and non-representation, between translation and

resistance to translation, between inviting and barring the Eurocentric gaze.

Nonetheless, because the film's feminist Islamic reputation—combined, of

course, with its status as a woman-directed film—*Bab al-sama'* is prone to being viewed

in the West as a ripe bundle of cross-cultural knowledge ready to be unpacked by both

scholarly and popular audiences. Attesting to its appeal to Western feminist audiences in

particular, Suzanne Gauch notes that the film "remains in European and North American

distribution and has become a mainstay in film festivals and classes devoted to women in

the Arab or Islamic worlds and to international and transnational feminisms" (108).

However, perceptions of the film as a user-friendly epistemological resource is not

limited to arthouse cinemas and universities; it was also recommended as essential

viewing in the 2005 edition of the *Lonely Planet* travel guide (!) for travelers wanting to

understand Moroccan culture from the inside (Gauch 108). Along similar lines, the online

Michelin Travel Guide describes *Bab al-sama'* as "depict[ing] a moderate Islam where

bodily needs are in harmony with spiritual desires."[127] Thus while Benlyazid has, in her

oeuvre as a whole, aimed to present individual stories in complex, particular and unique

terms,[128] *Bab al-sama'* continues to function, for better or for worse, as a cross-cultural

point of access to and quasi-ethnographic knowledge about the referents / constructs

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[127] This description on the *Michelin Travel* website is found under the site for Morocco. See the subheading "Cinema" from the "Culture" section.

[128] In "Farida Benlyazid's Moroccan Women," Sandra Gayle Carter argues that Benlyazid "accentuates[s] that there exists no homogenous "woman" nor need to conceive a reductionist object "woman,"" but rather that she "authors multi-dimensional Moroccan women very much grounded in locale, class, age, and both personal and cultural historicity" (344).

"Moroccan culture," "Islamic feminism," "Maghrebi women," and so on. This is one of the reasons why it is necessary to look carefully at how this film portrays culture.

Having traced the critical reception of the ethnographic content of *Bab al-sama'* *maftouh*, I aim in the rest of this chapter to identify some of the salient ways in which the text operates alternately to resist and invite translation. In particular, I wish to unpack some of the ways in which this work may be viewed as a "fiction ethnographique pleine de sens" (Carter 149). The shifting countours of the ethnographic gaze in Benlyazid's work point to a variegated interpretive framework for encountering Maghrebi texts-as-cultural-translations as they circulate in the world. My approach is inspired not only by Benlyazid's texts and their critical reception, but also by a growing body of work within contemporary anthropology[129] that (a) productively examines the relationship between ethnography and literature and (b) responds to the worldview (or idiom) of ethnographic subjects by reforming the way in which ethnography is written.[130] As scholarship within anthropology provides fruitful terrain for theorizing untranslational reading practice in cinema, so too could untranslational cinema shape ethnography. This is not to suggest that fiction is anthropology, bur rather that fiction—like the subjects of ethnography—

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[129] Here I oppose contemporary, twentieth- and twenty-first-century anthropology to colonial-era anthropology. I say this because I have become convinced that charges about "anthropological reading" within literary studies lack specificity, making "anthropology" a "straw man" and a metaphor for something else (such as Orientalism or neocolonialism). This is not to dismiss the disciplinary genealogy of anthropology – a history whose colonial beginnings are well-known to contemporary ethnographers and postcolonial literary scholars alike—but rather to call for greater specificity in how we as literary scholars engage with the terms and methodologies of anthropology/ethnography. We cannot claim that anthropological reading is "reductive" if we, in turn, are reducing anthropology to its colonial form(s). It seems to me that this would be akin to an anthropologist labeling a neocolonial interpretation of culture "literary" (after all, literature and literary scholarship have plenty of their own colonial entanglements).

[130] See Abdessamad Dialmy's *Féminisme Soufii: Conte Fassi et Initiation Sexuelle*, Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Stefania Pandolfo's *Impasse of the Angels: Scenes from a Moroccan Space of Memory*, and Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*.

demands to be encountered on its own terms. Such a demand appears to animate the breakup scene of *Bab al-sama' maftouh*, which I will discuss next.

2. It's Not Your Culture, It's Mine

The breakup scene between Nadia and her French boyfriend, Jean-Philippe, symbolizes *Bab al-sama''s* break with European epistemology and the Western gaze. The scene is both brief and economical, taking three minutes, or about 4% of the film's total running time. Through Nadia's abrupt rebuffal of Jean-Philippe, Benlyazid teaches "viewers in the global North that they must break with [Western frames of reference] if they wish to understand Nadia's transformations" (Gauch 122). At the same time, the scene transmits a promise to remain in contact with the French (or Western) Other, albeit on a new set of terms. Reversing the normative dynamics of anthropology, the Western investigator is symbolically unseated from his/her position of interpretive sovereignty. Momentarily barred from presumed scopic and geographical means to knowledge, the figure of the European spectator (as embodied in the character of Jean-Philippe) is enjoined forthwith to "listen," and to "read." In the rest of the narrative, these metaphors of indirect access (listening and reading being one step away from the experience itself) condition the Western spectator's position and the terms of his/her access to knowledge. Nonetheless, as Suzanne Gauch observes, the scene is not merely oppositional. Rather, Nadia's choice to "turn toward Islam as determined by something other than a rejection of or act of oppositional resistance against secular Western culture" suggests a creative, substantive desire, or calling, toward her new life (122). Other critics view the breakup

scene as symbolizing "Nadia . . . distanc[ing] herself from the French elements of her identity" (Martin "*Bab al-sama' Maftouh*" 123). Viola Shafik describes Nadia's cultural break as a radical and polarizing one, but one that also shifts the terms by which the character may be understood: "[Nadia] reconciles only with her Moroccan heritage, but cuts her relation to France abruptly and thoroughly, leaving a wide fissure between tradition and modernity as absolute contradictions, at least on the material level. Hence, her search for identity concentrates on metaphysics" (Shafik 207).

As an untranslational heroine, the fictional character of Nadia is invested with symbolic meaning beyond the story she represents. The perceived radicalness and essentialism of her break with France and embrace of Morocco and Islam condition Western scholarly reactions to the film. Recalling Anne-Marie Nisbet's discussion of Maghrebi woman as a "pivot" (see Chapter One), Florence Martin describes Nadia as a "pivotal character," a site of confrontation and reconcilation between the dyads "France-Morocco," "mother-child" and "father-child"; "initiator-initiate"; and "secular-believer" (71-78). Nadia's "pivotal" nature becomes most evident in moments of abrupt change in narrative such as the rapid shift in her outlook and habits following her father's death. At the beginning of the film, when Nadia first arrives in Fez, she speaks with her sister in French, is dressed in chic-punk Western clothes, and "appears as a hybridized postcolonial subject eager to claim and protect her own brand of hybridity" who nonetheless debuts her return to Morocco by "adamantly refus[ing] to have her French, secular identity translated into a Moroccan, Muslim one" (Martin 72). But by the time she meets with Jean-Philippe, the now-orphaned Nadia has undergone a rapid, grief-ridden

and spiritually driven metamorphosis in which she has turned away from alcohol and cigarettes and toward the guidance of Kirana. Combined with Kirana's affection and mentorship, Nadia's own intense, investigative personality leads her to adopt numerous forms of research, including intense letters of sadness and confusion to Jean-Philippe. Thus, by the time he arrives in Fez, Nadia is already on a new trajectory, the contours of which she displays through changed dress codes and behaviors.

Seeing Nadia's transformation as "pivotal" also highlights her potential as site of untranslation. When Nadia rejects Jean-Philippe, she also calls upon the Western viewer to transform his/her interpretive stance. The breakup scene symbolically overwrites European epistemological claims upon the Moroccan female body whether as object of desire or as a means of access to and knowledge about Moroccan or Islamic culture. Nadia comes to the realization that her life and Jean-Philippe's life are incommensurable. Within North American culture, this sentiment is often conveyed in the classic breakup formula "it's not you, it's me;" Nadia's message to Jean-Philippe extends this idea to include cultural identity "it's not your culture, it's mine!" That is to say that Nadia's transformation is not supposed to be understood as being *about* the West, but rather about Morocco and Islam. It is at this moment that the film most strongly (and didactically) intervenes in its own immanent interpretation as a text of cultural translation. In overt and ideological terms, the scene (a) stages an explicit cultural mistranslation, (b) symbolically resists translation on French terms, and (c) communicates that any cultural translation forthwith will take place only in terms to be decided by the protagonist. Nadia's refusal of Jean-Philippe is simultaneously a moment of creation and plenitude. The European's

desire for translation on his terms is supplanted by a sense of the fullness of the new

existence Nadia has chosen, its richness and opacity underlined by image and sound

throughout the film.[131] In the close reading that follows, I will demonstrate the ways in

which Benlyazid directs gestures, script, décor, lighting, image, and sound to code the

cultural and ethical positions and desires of Nadia and Jean-Philippe as opposed and

incommensurable. Through these codes, Benlyazid communicates a rapid shift in the

balance of power and influence between the two characters, ultimately interpellating the

Western spectator to take a position of *un*translator (or perhaps non-translator) rather than

translator.

The Western spectator, reflected in the figure of Jean-Philippe, appears initially as

witless outsider or even arrogant interpreter, well-intentioned and "sollicitous" (Gauch

122) though he may be. Disturbed by Nadia's letters of sadness and confusion, Jean-

Philippe has flown over from Paris and is staying at the Hotel Mérinides, a luxury hotel

overlooking the medina.[132] From the moment he appears on screen, he is associated with

the luxury of this hotel that caters to foreigners and affluent Moroccans. He is thus coded

as Westerner/outsider/other and is opposed to the more "authentic" Fassian life to which

Nadia has access. Typically for such hotels, the Mérinides communicates its

cosmopolitan luxury partially through its décor. It combines post-modern architecture

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[131] The film supplants "negative" gestures of refusal with positive gestures of redefinition, of plenitude, as Nadia draws upon her environment, history, experiences, texts, and community to formulate a new story. Through these contexts, the dialectical oscillation between negation and affirmation returns and repeats. This oscillation is thematized, notably, in portrayals of reading and writing and in exchanges with knowledgeable subjects.

[132] The Hotel Merinides still exists in Fès today. The hotel features the name in French and Arabic in gold lettering above the entrance. The Marinids were a Sunni Islam dynasty of Berber descent that ruled Morocco from the 13th to the 15th century.

and furniture with high-quality "local color" excotic décor, such as extensive quotation of traditional blue-and-white *zillij* (Moroccan tiling), Byzantine-inspired carved doorways, and doormen dressed in an archaic red-and-gold uniform of royal servants. The lobby is, in other words, an iconic (and ironic!) space of cultural mistranslation. The scene begins with a wide-angle shot of the lobby, taken from deep within the space. In the foreground, Jean Philippe is seated in an armchair, facing the hotel entrance, away from the camera. A high-angle, over-the shoulder shot reveals that he is reading a French-language newspaper. The depiction of reading constitutes a biting segue from the end of the previous scene, in which Kirana had told Nadia that, rather than isolating herself in doubt and misery, she must "read and understand the Qur'an." [133] By contrast, the film (or at least Nadia's perspective in it) casts Jean-Philippe, whom we later learn is a photojournalist who documents the misery of war-torn and impoverished populations, as an "armchair" revolutionary, one who does not live beside those he photographs, except when he is photographing them. In a letter that is related as a voice-off later in the film, Nadia reduces Jean Philippe's professional practice to one of mere representation rather than productive intervention. As Jean-Philippe views the world through the prism of photojournalism, which suggests both distance from and proximity to his subject, the first shot of him portrays him as both *in Fez* and *not in Fez*: he is overlaid by the intradiegetic sound of "elevator"-style Jazz music, a form of American/cosmopolitan/globalized art.

After a couple of seconds, Nadia enters the lobby in the distant background, dressed head to toe in her traditional white mourning clothes. Jean-Philippe notices her

immediately and rushes to greet her. Yet although Nadia is happy to see him, when the smiling Jean-Philippe takes her face in his hands to kiss it, she rebuffs him, saying "non, pas ici!" and looks around self-consciously. Slightly taken aback but not yet deterred, Jean-Philippe takes a different —ill-considered—tack. He teases Nadia about her appearance. Adopting an air of conspiratorial mockery, he paws at the corner of her headscarf and guffaws "on dirait une nonne." His attempt to play on what may have in the past been a shared inside joke for the couple only serves to alienate and insult Nadia, confirming her suspicions about the life and the man she will soon reject. Nadia, irritated and embarrassed, checks the arrangement of her clothing, tells him he shouldn't have come, and walks away.

The behavior Benlyazid had Jean-Philippe adopt casts him as the enemy, and his unsuitableness is phrased as a presumptuous mistranslation of Nadia into terms of French *laïcité*. By telling her that she looks like a nun, Jean-Philippe both "others" her and, with his misplaced attempt at humor, conflates religions and treads clumsily on the sensitive territory of grief and mourning—thereby suggesting his unsuitability as a point of reference for the empathetic European viewer. The turning back of the Eurocentric gaze is marked not only by the buffoonish behavior that Benlyazid has Jean-Philippe adopt, but also by the actors' eye movements. While Jean-Philippe's attention remains fixated on the woman he desires and wishes still to possess, Nadia looks around, looks away, averts her gaze, and walks away from him, leaving him at a loss to understand. Visually, too, Jean-Philippe's visual field is portrayed as lacking as Nadia walks between Jean-Philippe and the camera and off the screen, literally outside the frame, leaving behind a

confused and abandoned man. He must effectively chase her down for an explanation in the following sequence.

By portraying the character of Jean-Philippe in this moment as an ill-informed, insensitve outsider, Benlyazid recalls Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig's analysis of the power of representation as a kind of mimesis that reverses, rather reinforces, the traffic in cultural knowledge. In his interpretation of wooden figurine representations of white colonialists by the Cuna (an indigenous people of Panama), Taussig challenges previous anthropological readings in which this practice was interpreted as evidence that the Cuna thought about white people as gods. Instead, Taussig argues, the use of these figures by the Cuna constitutes a vital message for the anthropologist: "The important point about what I call the magic of mimesis is the same – namely that 'in some way or another' the making and existence of the artifact that portrays something gives one power over that which is portrayed" (Taussig 13). Responding to "the power of the copy to influence what it is a copy of" (250), Taussig reflects on his reaction to the wooden statues in the following terms:

> For if I take the figurines seriously, it seems that I am honor-bound to respond to the mimicry of myself in ways other than the defensive maneuver of the powerful by subjecting it to scrutiny as yet another primitive artifact, grist to the analytic machinery of Euroamerican anthropology. The very mimicry corrodes the alterity by which my science is nourished. For now I too am part of the object of study. The Indians have made me alter to my self (8).

Although the historical contexts of Cuna sculpture are very different from those of

Moroccan cinema, I find that Taussig's analysis resonates with Benlayzid's portrayal of

the Frenchman. If we stop to entertain Benlyazid's caricatural (yet not entirely

unsympathetic) representation of a French man, we will discover that it has powerful

implications for any subsequent use of Nadia as a conduit for ethnographic knowledge.

Having pursued Nadia to the hotel's poolside terrace café area, Jean-Philippe is

now in disarray. His protestations—and Nadia's responses—emphasize the growing

chasm and strained communicative possibilities between them:

> JEAN-PHILIPPE. . . . deux secondes, bon Dieu! Ben pour toi je laisse tout
>   tomber, je prends le premier avion.
> NADIA. Mais tu comprends pas. Mon père vient de mourir; je ne peux pas
>   être vue ici.
> JEAN-PHILIPPE. Bon, donc viens dans ma chambre.
> NADIA. Non, je peux pas.
> JEAN-PHILIPPE. Enfin qu'est-ce que ça veut dire? J'aurais pas dû venir;
>   tu peux pas t'asseoir, tu peux pas monter dans la chambre?
> NADIA. Bon, d'accord, montons dans ta chambre.

While Nadia signals Jean-Philippe's inability to interpret her actions by stating "you

don't understand," he, utterly lost, can only ask her for clarification. By having Jean-

Philippe ask what everything means, Benlyazid further underlines his inadequacy as a

cultural translator. He cannot comprehend the reason for Nadia's new-found modesty and

lack of comfort in his presence; he cannot recognize her funeral dress; and he does not

know the cultural reasons why she should not be seen in public, let alone talking with a

"strange" (foreign, non-family member) man. [134] At the same time, Nadia's gestures and

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[134] Nadia, markedly still impatient and ill at ease, finally agrees to speak with Jean-Philippe in his hotel room because she considers it less inappropriate than being seen speaking with him outside. (Suzanne Gauch argues persuasively that Nadia "constructs a disapproving gaze for herself" (122).

words reinforce the fact that *she cannot be seen.* For the film's viewers, particularly those who had identified with Jean-Philippe's perspective, Benlyazid's cinematographic gaze now transmits a paradoxical message: the Western viewer understands that is is both a transgression to "see" Nadia but also that s/he still does not truly "see," and, perhaps like Jean-Philippe, does not understand.

Although Nadia finally agrees to a private conversation with Jean-Philippe, she refuses to reestablish the emotional intimacy they once had. This refusal, which comprises a statement about the impossibility of cultural translation, is cruel from Jean-Philippe's perspective. But the film seems to justify it as a matter of necessity for Nadia. The moments shot in the hotel room and balcony not only communicate the impossibility of understanding between the two characters, but also they represent Nadia's refusal as spirtually weighty. In the first frame, filmed from the perspective of the room's balcony, the two characters are shown in long shot through the shiny glass of the sliding doors. The framing of the shot, filtered through a clean, highly reflective glass window, underlines the division between the two characters, while also implying an *irresistible* shift in favor of Nadia's perspective and reason. While Nadia stands facing the camera and leans against a desk on the left, Jean-Philippe reclines on the bed to the right, propped up on one elbow as he speaks to her. Benlayzid's use of light, angles, and reflection emphasizes the difference between the two. While Jean-Philippe is partially obscured by the reflection of Fez's medina, glowing bright in the mid-day sun, Nadia is still clearly visible through the glass, in the natural light that fills the room. The actors' lips move, suggesting a conversation, but the closed door prevents the transmission of

sound. While both characters look sad, reproachful, and misunderstood, their body

language suggests that Nadia is setting the tone of the discussion. Contrasting the

auditory effect of the figures' conversation, which is muffled by the glass, the soundtrack

delivers the rising sound of what is likely, given the direct lighting, the noon call to

prayer.[135] As the volume of the call to prayer increases to overwhelm the soundtrack,[136]

Jean-Philippe crosses the boundary between his own, reflection-obscured space, into

Nadia's space. He tries to touch her, but she escapes towards the balcony door.

Throughout, the rising sound of the call to prayer constitutes the only linguistic idiom of

cultural explanation. Its accessibility is unidirectional (Nadia understands and Jean-

Philippe doesn't; he is "frozen out" by it).

As Nadia fully opens the sliding door, she reveals the whole hotel room, including

Jean-Philippe. While her back is to the camera in the foreground, we now see Jean-

Philippe in an over-the-shoulder view from Nadia's perspective, which underscores the

viewer's perspectival sense of identification with Nadia's position and reverses the

positions Nadia and Jean-Philippe occupied relative to the camera in the lobby. While

Jean-Philippe is, relatively speaking, at a greater distance from the camera, framed within

the impersonal space of a luxury hotel room, Nadia is in the foreground, in the space of

the warm sunlight and sound of the Fassi medina. From his position inside the room,

Jean-Philippe reproaches Nadia for acting like a stranger, to which she rejoins "en

l'occurrence, c'est toi l'étranger." The French word "étranger," which can mean both

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[135] I think it is the *Dhuhr* (noon) prayer because of the intense overhead lighting conditions. Delete note
[136] Each muezzin times the beginning of his call to prayer slightly differently based on the exact location of
the mosque relative to the sun, which creates the rising crescendo of voices. Each call is differentiated by
the muezzin's vocal interpretation.

"stranger" and "foreigner," emphasizes the placement of the one (Nadia) as being at home and the other (Jean-Philippe) as foreign. The dynamics of translation are now fully reversed: where Jean-Philippe had sought to translate Nadia (the foreigner) into French terms (for example, with the domesticating translation of her clothing), Nadia now points out that it is *she* who occupies the domestic space. Nadia entirely "others" Jean-Philippe as he had done to her, translating him as a stereotype as he did to her.

While French-speaking viewers may have initially identified with Jean-Philippe's wish to "bring Nadia back" to her French identity—and with his desire to reestablish intimacy—this scene shrilly rejects his desire, on both counts. The sightlines, the dialogue, and the actors' gestures suggest that Nadia experiences Jean-Philippe's affect as variously hurtful, inappropriate, and insulting. Benlyazid's rendering of this scene seems to be geared both to alienate and humble European and North American viewers. If we believed our view as film spectator to be omniscient, if we saw our access to Nadia's story and point of view as intimate, this scene briskly defeats such notions. Nadia not only refuses the possibility of translating her decision, she also admonishes Jean-Philippe's general attitude—and his cultural self—his as a vestige of colonialism: "Qu'est-ce que tu connais de moi? De mes origines? Rien. Pour toi tout ça c'est de l'exotisme! . . . Tu es tellement parisien!" The label is not a compliment; in the film's vocabulary, "Parisien" and "étranger" are much more damning insults than "nun." In fact, in some ironic way, Nadia reappropriates the "theme" of Jean-Philippe's labeling of her: she embraces traditionally pious behaviors of chastity (coded here as lack of female

sexual desire) combining them with traditional mourning rites limiting women's circulation in public and, especially, their association with unrelated men.

As the film forecloses the possibility of translation on Jean-Philippe's terms, it opens a new kind of translational relationship. In the next frame, the two characters stand side-by-side on the balcony. The possibility of (foreignizing) translation is reopened as Nadia begins to define the terms by which she will henceforth communicate. The mid-shot frames both characters equally, standing apart. Their intimacy has vanished, and the terms of their communication with each other has irrevocably changed. With their backs to the camera, they look out over the balcony wall at the medina. For a few moments, they are silent, accompanied only by the sound of the call to prayer and birdsong. As Jean-Philippe turns his head toward Nadia, his profile shows agitation, then sadness and surrender as he lights a cigarette. Nadia, breaking the silence with sparing and deliberate words, delivers the *coup de grace.*The reason for Nadia's decision is also the only term by which she will agree to explain/translate herself:

> NADIA. Écoute. Écoute l'intemporalité de l'Islam..[137]
> [Silence.]
> NADIA. Je ne veux plus du dieu argent. Pour vivre il faut rêver. Rêver
>   que tout est possible.[138]

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[137] Translated in the English subtitle as "Islam does not change," which has a different valence. Critics disagree on this statement about Islam's timelessness/eternity and/or unchanging nature. For Carine Bourget, "Nadia se réfère au fait que l'appel à la prière, tout comme le Coran, n'ont pas changé depuis l'avènement de l'islam [*sic*]" (754), whereas for Suzanne Gauch, these lines are testament to the fact that "the Islam [Nadia] embraces is amaterial and atemporal and at times clichéd" (111). "L'intemporalité" can express the notion of timelessness (ahistoricity) but also timelessness as in eternity, and timelessness as "not belonging to the temporal realm." Nadia's refusal of Jean-Philippe is driven by a desire to better understand this realm, to connect with it.

[138] Like the separation and displacement of the two actors in the previous shots, their choreographed turning in this segment of the scene—back and forth, towards, away from each other, from the city and the hotel— recall Abdelfattah Kilito's argument about translation in *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language.* In his close reading of a text by the 9th-century Islamic writer Al-Jahiz, Kilito argues that "to speak is to turn, with the attendant associations of the two directions, two sides, two locations" (22). As demonstrated by a scene in

By the conclusion of the scene, the figure of Jean-Philippe has been rapidly transformed into distant, humbled interlocutor. In the remainder of the film, Jean-Philippe will function as an off-screen character, an invisible foreign observer who nonetheless remains symbolically barred from the scopic realm as Nadia communicates with him only via letters. It is important to note that from the moment Jean-Philippe says, belatedly, "je ne cherche qu'à comprendre," his voice is never heard again. No longer a speaker, Jean-Philippe is now a listener. The last time we see him, he is (still) silent and now cautiously distant. The final moments from the scene underline this change. When he accompanies Nadia out of the hotel and back to her car, he walks apart from her as they circumvent a low row of flowering planters. Rather than kissing or touching Nadia's face, Jean-Philippe now touches her amicably on the arm and opens the door for her. Nadia kisses Jean-Philippe on the forehead, telling him "je t'écrirai." She gets into her car and drives away. Though crestfallen, Jean-Philippe shows his acceptance by letting her go.

Nadia's promise to Jean-Philippe is nothing more than a letter, depicted formally on only one or two occasions in the rest of the film.[139] While the diegetic event of writing

which a gifted interpreter speaks first to one group and then another, "to speak a language necessitates turning to one side. Language is tied to a location on the map or to a given space. As for the bilingual, he is in constant movement, always turning, and since he looks in two directions, he is two-faced" (23). Nadia, disavowing her bilingualism, no longer content to be two-faced, has chosen to look one way; Jean-Philippe can only look the other. And in reprimanding his "exoticism," Nadia has effectively told him "Tu ne parleras pas ma langue!" In the translator's foreword of Abdelfattah Kilito's *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, Waïl Hassan comments on the various potential translations of the book's title into English (xxiii-xxiv). Whereas Hassan chose to imitate the archaic language of injunction "thou shalt not" which he argues captures the dual meaning of the original Arabic *Lan tatakallam lughati* "you will not," the French translator of the work used the French future simple "Tu ne parleras pas ma langue," conveying both the constative and imperative mood.

[139] The first time after the breakup that we see Nadia writing a letter, the recipient is unclear. It is possibly to Jean-Philippe, or possibly to her female Moroccan lawyer. The second time, she is definitely writing to Jean-Philippe: we hear the sound of Nadia's voice reading the words of the letter.

to Jean-Philippe is limited, the entire film arguably constitutes this "writing." Yet the

seemingly gentle gesture of writing "back" to Jean-Philippe contains a forceful,

corrective message.[140] The future simple expression, "je t'écrirai," implies the corollary

"tu me liras," the future indicative's borrowing of the imperative mood. Jean-Philippe is

interpellated into the role of Nadia's silent interlocutor. Their communication will be

unidirectional; since she writes to him later in the film, but she never receives

correspondence from him. He will still be granted access to Nadia, perhaps even given an

opportunity to "understand," but the invitation is partial and asymmetric. Jean-Philippe's

"reading" of Nadia, and of the cultural reasons for their relationship's end, will be at her

discretion, and on her terms. It is only when Jean-Philippe consents to these terms—

through his silencing and withdrawal—that he is dismissed with a measure of tenderness

and an open-ended promise about further communication to come.[141]

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[140] Nadia's promise of "writing back" to Jean-Philippe recalls Salman Rushdie's concept of the empire "writing back" to the center. Originally appearing in the title of Rushdie's brief article "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance" in the London *Times* in 1982, the phrase was taken up in academic publications and became a formative concept within postcolonial studies, notably in the 1989 critical anthology *The Empire Writes Back:Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, edited by Bill Ashcroft et al.

[141] Jean-Philippe's culturally insensitive behavior toward Nadia seems at odds with what would likely be the sensibilities of someone who has worked all over the world as a documentary photojournalist, seeking and gaining first-hand representations of other cultures—in their most crisis-ridden moments— (and not only from the safety of luxury hotels). Nadia reveals these exposures when she recounts, later in the film, "les reportages que tu faisais pour la télé. Les hordes d'enfants affamés qu'à travers la terre, les hécatombes, les bombes, la folie dans le sang." As implied here, the oppositional logic of the film's plot at this moment seems to require that Jean-Philippe be made into a sort of "straw man" against which a subsequent, more subtle cultural (un)translation may work. The scene is effective; Jean-Philippe's behavior is sufficiently offensive—and Nadia's grief sufficiently strong—that the violence of her words against him seem justified. Yet Jean-Philippe's comment seems so odd in the circumstances that it may betray a private form of humor shared by the couple in their former intimacy (whether in private or around other secular people). In *Bab al-sama'*, the religious idiom is earnestly restored, not as the butt of a racist/anti-religious joke, but rather as Nadia's means of self-ethnography, and, ultimately, the animating principle behind her "writing back" to Jean-Philippe. Still, one wonders if this untranslation could have been achieved without so "essentializing" and vilifying Jean-Philippe, and what the ramifications would have been for untranslation. Thank you to Mária Brewer for raising the question of the treatment of Jean-Philippe.

3. The Believer as Self-Ethnographer

The breakup scene has two important outcomes for cultural translation: first, the Eurocentric gaze—symbolized in the figure of Jean Philippe—is chastized and duly rejected; second, Nadia symbolically supplants the demands of this gaze with her own quest to "understand." In contrast to Jean-Philippe, whom the film portrays as having a fervent but misguided desire to "understand," Nadia is depicted as being well-equipped (socially, culturally, linguistically, intellectually, and spiritually) to develop a fuller understanding of the world (an understanding that is transmitted, indirectly and incompletely, to Jean-Philippe and the film viewer). Nadia's ability to undertake her journey depends on the guidance of a qualified mentor, the funeral singer Kirana. Nadia's and Kirana's classic teacher-initiate relationship, in which Nadia develops her role as a *Sherifa* (she comes from a family that is historically said to descend from the Prophet) (Martin 75-78), generates the plot's early stages, establishing it as a modified *bildungsroman.* Their conversations often provide spoken explanations for, or translations of, the heroine's decisions and motivations for the benefit of the viewer. What Gauch fittingly describes as the "film's educational aspirations" (130) manifest in numerous ways, from the opening dedication to Fatima al-Fihriya (the 9th-century Fassi wealthy woman who founded the city's mosque and university) to its rich intertextualities with religious and philosophical Muslim texts.

Bab al-sama''s "educational" theme is strongly modeled and delivered via the personal story of Nadia. Benlyazid repeatedly portrays Nadia engaged in scholarly and spiritual methods of discovery, including writing, reading, discussions with her mentor,

meditation, and prayer.[142] Through these tropes of learning and discovery, I suggest that

the figure of the protagonist becomes a *self-ethnographic* apparatus for the foreign

spectator*:* as it (re)discovers its cultural self, its "culture" is being discovered by the

spectator. Within such a scenario, the film's mechanism of cross-cultural translation has a

performative effect: as the film states "this is so" culturally for the fictional character, so

that cultural knowledge becomes "real" for the film viewer. However, this mechanism is

also subject to resistance. As I aim to demonstrate, it is in some of Nadia's most intimate

educational moments—embodied religious experiences—that the protagonist also

presents opaque *resistance* to cultural translation. This is particularly true of the kind of

knowledge Nadia is represented as acquiring when she prays, meditates, dreams, and

enters a state of trance. This section begins by identifying some of the most apparently

"translatable" aspects of Nadia's story; I will then go on to analyze key representations of

spiritual practice, which both respond to and resist ethnographic rendering.

Nadia seems eminently translatable in her role as a student of Islam and Sufism.

Through Nadia's scholarly activities, Benlyazid can point to the fact that "the figure of

the scholar, the judge, the interpreter is central to the practice of Islam" (Martin 70).

Moreover, the film reveals that Nadia is a *Sherifa*. Thus, "Nadia also appears as a late-

twentieth-century element of the potent Muslim matriarchal lineage that gave birth to

such eminent figures as Fatima al-Fihriya, founder of al Qaraouine Mosque in Fez in the

tenth century, to whom the film is dedicated" (Martin 70). Martin argues that "the title

would then hint at the role of women as scholars and interpreters of the sacred text, as

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[142] The "Studious and/or spiritual" nature of her quest reflects the Sufi and Islamic perspective of the narrative.

well as the act of interpreting itself—an issue constantly evoked in the exegeses of the Qur'an" (70). What Martin describes as the film's "open door" of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning about religious duty) "guides the spiritual content of the filmic narrative, its structure as well as, literally, its visual language and its space" (70). For Nadia, this role is defined both by the texts with which she surrounds herself and also in early conversations with Kirana about the nature of knowledge and existence.[143]

In the first of her conversations with Kirana, Nadia is in a state of shock following the death of her father. However, in spite of her initial resistance, she has experienced a sudden and unexpected religious calling after hearing Kirana singing Qur'anic verses. Nadia plays the role of the new initiate, still doubting and unfamiliar:

> KIRANA. The world is like a school. God created it for us to study [sic; the original *darija* line reads "My lord (God) created it to test us"
> الدنيا بحال شي مدرسة. ربي جَعَلَها باش يمْتَحْنَا].[144] And he gave us the knowledge to choose the path to study. May God guide us to righteousness.
> NADIA. And how do you know there's something after death?
> KIRANA. When you came into this world, did you know it existed? So, tell me. Yet you are still here.
> Why do you doubt? It is as if this doubt condemns you to shutting yourself up in a room all alone.
> The words of Allah are like a key that opens everything. You must read and understand the Koran.

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[143] Kirana, a respected figure in the Fez community and *hajja* (a woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca), is in demand at funerals across Europe and Africa and is a well-traveled person. Yet Kirana—whose knowledge and wisdom as a believer never seems to falter—tells Nadia that nothing can compare to their home country of Morocco. Kirana thus both reinforces the sense of Morocco as home—defined against a cosmopolitan identity—and underlines its prestige as a center of Islamic and Sufi learning. Kirana also references local figures and saints (such as Moulay Abdeslam, a Maghrebi (Moroccan) saint who is reputed to have inspired great respect among well-reputed Mashreqi theologians).
[144] I am indebted to Dr. Mohammed Elmeski for this transcription and translation of the original Arabic.

The subtitles in the English DVD *mistranslate* Kirana's comparison of the world (*dounia*) with a school (*madrasa*). The Arabic original and French subtitles actually mean "the world is like a school and God created it *to test* us" and not "God created it *for us* to study" (emphasis added).[145] The nature of this discrepancy—between a world being created for the benefit and edification of humans (in the English subtitles) and a world created by an omniscient God to *assess* human faith and goodness (in the Arabic soundtrack and French subtitles)—suggests that the English subtitles perform a culturally domesticating translation, appealing to the humanistic values of a secular Anglophone viewer.

Yet, even with this mistranslation, Kirana's metaphor is one that bridges cultures and permits translation between the secular and religious realms. In the translations of both sets of subtitles, as well as in the Arabic original, the world is presented as a school, that is, an educational and hierarchical space, in which translatable and/or testable human knowledge is transmitted and gathered. The cinematography echoes this sense of the world as the camera, creating identification between Nadia's and the viewer's perspective, pans horizontally from a terrace, where the two women are talking, then out across the internal gardens of the house, and back to Kirana's face. As the frame moves, it reveals a paradisiacal scene: the lush green foliage of low fruit treees, accompanied by a soundtrack of the strong, rising trills of birdsong.[146] By offering up the world visually in this way and describing it as an edenic space for God and humanity, the camera both presents Nadia with the possibility of learning the world anew, and invites the viewer to

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[145] Also see footnote on the first page of this chapter.

[146] The horizontal pan also sweeps over the figures of three servants. I discuss this below (Section IV).

see it in a similar way. Yet the riddle-like question that Kirana poses next is quite

unequivocal about Nadia's place in the world. By asking whether Nadia knew of her own

existence before she existed, Kirana reminds her that an individual's knowledge cannot

surpass God's. Throughout the film, Kirana utters the view that humans are inevitably

bound by their historical existence. Nonetheless, the word of God gives the believer

access to the *possibility* of better understanding the world. Thus she recommends study

of one text in particular, one that is new to the secularized Nadia: the Qur'an.

Kirana's advice to "read and understand the Qur'an" expressly points to the

foundational importance of this text and echoes the film's privileging of a scholarly

approach. By recommending the reading of the Qur'an, Kirana also grants potential

access to deeper cultural knowledge to the film viewer, who could, theoretically, take the

steps to accompany Nadia on her *ijtihad* as a believer (Martin)—or, failing that, to

accompany her as a scholar (Bourget). The injunction to "read the Qur'an" points doubly

to the action of reading. This repetition emerges thanks to the meaning of the word

Qur'an, which comes from the Arabic verb *qara'a,* which translates literally into English

as "he read" or "he recited."[147] Thus very early in the film, the script establishes reading

(aloud) as a performance that constitutes a privileged path to spiritual enlightenment.

Reading is also linked with the effect of transmitting knowledge for the subtitle-reading

film viewer.[148] However, even as this scene hints at the potential for cultural

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[147] For a rich discussion of the association between the Qur'an and the verbs associated with it, see Bourget 754.

[148] (It is worth highlighting here that the formal act of reading can only be undertaken by the literate, whereas reciting can be learned aurally and transmitted orally. The latter is the manner in which the Prophet Mohammed, who did not know how to read, transmitted the Qur'an.)

understanding via scholarship (acts of reading and studying), *Bab al-sama'* also differentiates between and hierarchizes various texts and their use. Reading the Qur'an, Kirana advises, will permit Nadia *as a believer* to understand the world through a Muslim idiom, as opposed to one of the "condemnation" to secular "doubt" from which she more recently hails. The contrast between the invocation of the Qur'an in this scene and Jean Philippe's newspaper in the next implies that Nadia will find much greater enlightenment and "understanding" than Jean-Philippe.

While the Qur'an figures as the central intertext of *Bab al-sama' maftouh*, Benlyazid, whose "films and scripts bear the unmistakable mark of a woman of letters" (Martin 66), also alludes to numerous other Islamic and Western texts (Bourget 754). The film's other intertexts emerge in conversations between characters, images of engraved quotations, and depictions of Nadia reading and writing. Tropes of scholarliness—scenes of reading, research, and general bookishness—serve to depict Nadia as culturally rich, multiple, and complex, while underlining her identity as a Sufi *Sherifa*. For example, she reads the works of two prominent scholars within Sufism: Mansur al-Hallaj (c. 858 –922 AD), a Persian Sufi mystic, writer, and martyr, and Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (c. 1058–1111 AD), a Persian Muslim theologian, jurist, philosopher, and mystic. These texts give shape to Nadia's spiritual development. While Nadia is still struggling to find her path early in the film, she reads al-Hallaj. While the mystic al-Hallaj was condemned as a heretic and executed for his proclamations about attaining oneness with God, al-Ghazali was known in his time for bringing mutual recognition and respect between contemporary Sufism and orthodox Islam. Kirana

recommends that Nadia switch to Al-Ghazali: "[al-Hallaj's] thoughts still enlighten us,

but Allah doesn't ask us so much," referring to Al-Ghazali's martyrdom to a violent

execution. Benlyazid also creates associations between Nadia's life path and canonical

Western texts, ancient and modern. For example, on a night when Nadia is out on her

terrace contemplating the night sky, an eccentric French-speaking (elite) resident of the

shelter utters the maxim "rien ne se perd et rien ne se crée," a reformulation of a classic

precept from the Greek philosopher Anaxagorus and later attributed to the French

scientist Antoine Lavoisier (1743- 1794), when he was guillotined during the Terror

(1794).[149] Here, the quotation of a "Western" maxim challenges the traditional division of

knowledge between Occident and Orient by alluding to an era when Greek and Islamic

philosophers and theologians regularly exchanged ideas. Meanwhile, the quotation itself

seems to call forth a Sufi understanding of God's power as the sole driving force behind

everything in existence. In Lavoisier's saying, nothing creates itself or destroys itself; in

Sufi philosophy, God alone is capable of creating or destroying matter.

But perhaps the most explicit staging of the act of reading as a potential means of

understanding happens when the camera enjoins the viewer to read a text. Here, again,

stark divisions between cultures, religions, and languages, are called into question as the

film alludes to texts not by Arabs but by canonical Sufi *Persian* writers, Mahmood

Shabistari (1288-1340 AD) and Farid Attar (also known as Abu Hamid bin Abu Bakr

Ibrahim, or Attar of Nishapur c. 1145-1221 AD). In each case, the texts appear thanks to

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[149] The rest of the saying, "tout se transforme," is omitted from the film script. One wonders if what happens next in the film takes care of this "transformation," or if Benlyazid determined that the concept of transformation would not suit this moment in the film.

close-ups during two scenes that take place in Nadia's bedroom and study (the texts,

appearing in French translation on decorative plaques which had likely belonged to

Nadia's father, remind us that Nadia knows no Persian and indeed that she struggles in

written languages other than French or English). According to Carine Bourget (citing

Whinfield), the first text, from Shabistari, is an extract from *Golshan-el-riz* (*La Roseraie*

du Mystère, his best-known text), in which he expounds on the notion that the world is a

mirror of God. The second example is a visual citation of Farid Attar's portrayal of a man

seeking "divine union" (Bourget 759). In both cases, these poetic plaques for which

Nadia is "friande" (Bourget 759) appear not in Persian (their original language—Nadia

does not read Persian or Arabic), but in French translation, one of Nadia's two main

spoken languages (along with *darija*) and her only reading language. Thus the film

presents the French-speaking viewer with crystallized examples of the Sufist perspectives

that Nadia ultimately adopts.

The camera invites us to share in reading key texts that are supposed to illuminate

Nadia's story. We read Shabistari over the shoulder of Bahia, a French Muslim ex-inmate

who briefly stays at the shelter. The frame pauses for about a minute on the text. Urging

the viewer to read, the shot shows a partial close-up of Bahia's bespectacled head in the

left foreground, such that the viewer is incited to read with her. Silently, she/we read(s)

the text:

> Le non-être est un miroir, le monde est une image, et l'homme est l'oeil de
> l'image dans laquelle la personne est cachée. Tu es l'oeil de l'image et lui
> la lumière de l'oeil. Qui a jamais vu l'oeil par lequel toutes les choses sont
> vues? Le monde est devenu un homme et l'homme un monde. Il n'est pas
> de plus claire explication que celle ci [*sic*]. Quand on regarde

> attentivement dans la racine de la matière il est à la fois ce qui est vu, l'oeil qui voit et la chose vue.

In this scene, Benlyazid stages a microcosm of the situation that Shabistari discusses. As Shabistari's text interrogates the potential of the human eye to see truth (God) in the world, the reliability of the cinematic image to convey this world is also called into question. Here, the gaze of the camera is associated at once with Bahia's (unbelieving) eye and with the eye of God. While Bahia, an unbeliever, sees (but does not see) the world and the text before her, the gaze of the camera—metonymically invoking the all-seeing gaze of God—captures every eye/I at play in the frame while also pointing to the viewer's own act of looking.

Benlyazid later has us read another plaque, this time from Farid Attar. In this scene, we are not close enough to read the plaque ourselves, yet here, reading is modeled and performed by Abdelkrim, with whom Nadia will soon fall in love. The frame shows Abdelkrim in a medium shot reading the plaque out loud, in French, as he stands in front of Nadia's desk: "Dois-je considérer comme convenable l'égarement de l'atome parce qu'il n'a pas la force de supporter la vue du soleil? Si l'acmé se perd entièrement dans le soleil de l'immensité il participera parce que simple atome à sa durée éternelle." This reading complements Abdelkrim's earlier statement to Nadia that he aims not to "be someone important" in the world, rather, like the "simple atom" that is both an integral—and unremarkable—part of the universe, he just wants to be "there." Gazing intently into Nadia's eyes after his reading, he insists that the world has been made "pour moi, pour

toi," which Bourget reads as an allusion to Qur'anic verse XXXI saying that everything on earth was subject to man by God (759).

Notably, what Bourget calls the "anthropocentrism" of Abdelkrim's words resonates with the earlier mistranslation of Kirana's words in the English subtitles (in which the world was created "for us"). In effect, this moment of the film announces a transformation in Nadia's attitude to her place in the world. As she falls in love with Abdelkrim, much to the disapproval of the women at the shelter, she is called upon to move away from her role in an institution that would "test" her, and toward a role in which the world invites a more individualistic, mystical path of learning and spiritual practice. In the next scene she is shown, reading once again, but this time from a treatise on love by the Arab Sufi philosopher Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240 AD), in which he interprets love as as a manifestation of God's attributes (Bourget "Traditions"). Soon afterwards, Nadia is shown carassing flowers in the garden when Kirana approaches. Nadia tells her, "I'm kissing the jasmine. I love the flowers, the earth (al'ard), the sky (as-sama'). I love you, I love the universe, everything God created." Benlyazid thus not only emphasizes the notion of the human as living *among* rather than *above* God's creations, but also infuses Nadia's departure from single life with sacred meaning and justification.

Each of these examples—lines uttered by characters, texts displayed by the camera, subtitles, intertextualities—seem to open the possibility of cultural translation, giving the curious viewer clues about how better to understand Nadia's world and her engagement with it. Read in the ethnographic mode, the film's intertextualities could serve as broader "context," helping the viewer interested in seeing the film as a cultural

translation. Still, as Bourget's remark about the "challenge" presented by these intertexts shows, such translation is dependent on a number of conditions being fulfilled. Although a viewer could take advantage of the camera's long take of Shabistari's plaque in order to *read* it, the text itself is densely philosophical and theological; it defies human logic and plays with the very notion of understanding. The tension between the apparent transparency or obviousness of the written text on the one hand, and the slippage of its meaning, on the other, could generate various results, from a posture of radical *listening* to one of aggressive domesticating translation, or misinterpretation. The function of the film's many texts and intertexts, as aids to cultural translation, is therefore unpredictable and must be viewed as caught in cultural and philosophical "rhetoricities" to which the average European viewer (or, for that matter, the average Moroccan viewer) has little access. The esoteric nature of the intertextual "translations" provided in the film are a both a condition and a result of their inscription in "the Sufi premise that all forms of communication are veils, time and again exposing readings as misreadings, insights as misperceptions" (Gauch 125).

Perhaps the episodes of *Bab al-sama' maftouh* that most strongly resist translation are those in which forms of linguistic glossing—auditory or visual text—either remain elliptical or disappear entirely. The disappearance of explanatory prose coincides with moments in which characters are absorbed in the one of the most intimate forms of religious practice: prayer. In an earlier scene, Kirana, encouraging Nadia to pray, advises her to persevere in this form of mediation: "Fasting is for God, but prayer brings us closer to ourselves. Like they say: those who know themselves know their Lord." The notion of

prayer as an unmediated connection between the self and God is central to Islam, and the emphasis on a believer's inner experience expresses Sufist thought. Incomplete subtitles and inaudbile soundtacks often restrict the possibility of linguistic explanation or translation during scenes of prayer. Thus Benlyazid depicts prayer as a private act undertaken for God. Here, the limits of translation coincide not only with the philosphical impossibility of transcendent (human) interpretation but also with the Islamic interdiction on the representation of God as an image or animate figure, since such representaiton is considered to be blasphemous. In the sequences in which Nadia is shown praying, sometimes alone, and sometimes with other residents of the shelter, no indication is given of what the worshippers are thinking or saying. While the filmic image shows each woman's movements and gestures, the soundtrack transmits only silence punctuated by muted, softened sounds. Implying the peacefulness of the women's prayer, the soundtrack transmits only the soft, intradiegetic sound of the persons bowing, kneeling, and standing at the end of prayer. No words are heard or spoken, beyond occasional soft whispering uttered by each woman as part of her praye, and no subtitles appear on screen. Even though these shots visually represent prayer, they also depict its effects as sacred, beyond representation.

The film's portrayal of prayer coincides with a modification to Nadia's self-ethnographic function. Whereas Nadia functions in other scenes as an agent of explanation and inquiry, in the scenes of prayer she functions more as a pious example of a believer, herself moving closer to truth, to virtue, and self-knowledge. The notion of cultivating the self through prayer recalls anthropologist Saba Mahmood's re-reading of

the Aristotelian concept of *habitus* in her study of the Egyptian women's piety

movement, *Politics of Piety*. In her chapter on "Postive Ethics and Ritual Conventions,"

Mahmood opposes Aristotle's definition to the more widespread understanding of the

concept popularized by Pierre Bourdieu. According to Mahmood, whereas Bourdieu sees

repeated behaviors, which become unconscious habits, as reflections of predetermined

social structures and pressures, Aristotle illuminates the conscious and deliberate

development of a person's *habitus*. For Mahmood, the Aristotelian tradition places

greater emphasis on the self-pedagogical ethics of habitus:[150]

> […] habitus—unlike habits—one acquired through assiduous practice,
> takes root in one's character and is considered largely unchangeable. What
> is noteworthy is that *habitus* in this tradition of moral cultivation implies a
> quality that is acquired through human industry, assiduous practice, and
> discipline, such that it becomes a permanent feature of a person's
> character. (136)

In following Kirana's advice to pray five times a day, Nadia effectively shapes herself as

a spiritual subject. As Mahmood reads participants in the women's piety movement

according to their own terms of engagement, so Benlyazid makes Nadia the agent of the

ethnography she is creating. Nadia, as "both the agent and the locus of her own spiritual

metamorphosis" (Martin 71), also becomes the agent and locus of a complex (yet

fictional) self-ethnographic world.

Mahmood's argument also helps to illuminate the political significance of

Benlyazid's representation of religious practice. In particular, Nadia's cultivation of her

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[150] As Mahmood points out, Aristotelian thought influenced both early Islamic and Christian thinkers, including Al-Ghazali, who is often mentioned in popular pamphlets about "how to become pious" (137-38), Mahmood compares Aristotle's *habitus* with Ibn Khaldun's notion of *malaka*, which has often been translated as "habit." Mahmood suggests the term "habitus" would be a better translation. (Coincidentally, in an earlier scene, Kirana recommended Al-Ghazali to Nadia during their conversation about prayer.)

spiritual *habitus* constitutes an extended rebuttal to Jean-Philippe's flippant remark about her resemblance to a "nun." For Jean-Philippe, the suspicion was that Nadia's transformation was merely one of outward appearance—he was effectively teasing her for a kind of "dressing up," or practicing Muslim transvestism. He was also accusing her of capitualating to a conservative social structure. In contrast, Benlyazid tells the story of Nadia's changing identity as the result of a painstaking quest involving both conscious steps and divine intervention. The film emphasizes the authenticity of the link between external practice and internal piety. In this way, the integration of prayer into the life of *Bab al-sama' maftouh*'s protagonist tends to invite a reading similar to Mahmood's interpretation of Aristotle's habitus, which "forces us to problematize how specific kinds of bodily practice come to articulate different conceptions of the ethical subject, and how bodily form does not simply express the social structure but also endows the self with particular capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world" (139). By showing Nadia and other women donning traditional Muslim dress and engaging in regular prayer, Benlyazid reforms the ethnographic gaze of the camera along analogous lines. For viewers not experienced in performing prayer and accustomed to thinking of prayer as a religious obligation, prayer scenes divorced from a larger storyline would appear transparent: "Nadia is Muslim, therefore she has to perform Muslim prayer." Instead, the film insists on prayer as central to the film's narrative: *Bab al-sama'* tells the story of a holistic, generative relationship between external religious expression and the protagonist's internal journey toward increased faith and piety. Nadia's process of self-education comes gradually as a result of seeking out and practicing new behaviours. In

turn, this leads her to sense of herself as more fully ethical, which in turn increases her

motivation to pray regularly, and so on. By creating prayer scenes that are at the same

time both visible and veiled, thus escaping external surveillance, Benlyazid challenges a

top-down social scientific understanding of religious identity in which both religiosity

and religious identity are imposed upon subjects from without. Yet even as subtitling and

other "textual" explanations are eschewed in these prayer scenes, the camera remains,

leading to a clear tension between surveillance/non-surveillance, and suggesting the

continuity of a self-ethnographic gaze.

The other category of religious experience that Benlyazid portrays brings some of

the most dramatic and climactic moments of the narrative: those sequences in which

Nadia experiences mystical revelations and visions, placing her on a plane of experience

apart from other figures in the film. In the most dramatic of these sequences, Nadia is led

to discover hidden treasure in the garden, thereby securing the future of the shelter. At the

instructions of Bâ Sassi (the deceased family friend and mystic who has appeared to

Nadia in nighttime visions), Nadia first arranges for the sacrifice of a calf and a night of

celebration with music, chanting, and singing. According to Bâ Sassi, the resulting

"perfumes and trances" will restore the house's sacred destiny in that it belongs to the

descendants of the Prophet and is now being transformed into a traditional spiritual

retreat and shelter for women. When Nadia is reluctant to participate in the ritual, Kirana

reminds her that the night of celebration will provide a chance "for the poor to eat their

fill." Men and women come to the house to take part in a night of festivities. As the

rhythm of the music rises late into the evening, men play drums, sing, and dance. The

women dance, too, some of them falling into faints and healing trances. Standing some distance away from the gathering, her body language suggesting a simultaneous sense of alienation and weary curiosity, Nadia herself unexpectedly enters a trance state. She hallucinates that the deceased Bâ Sassi is the main singer of the group of male musicians. Then she sees a vision of him digging under the palm tree. Finally she faints, and, when Kirana revives her, Nadia repeats that they must dig under the palm tree. The bodily surrender of the fainting episode means that, in this instance, Nadia ultimately joins the women from whom she initially distanced herself. The position of self/ethnographer thus seems to be one of oscillation between the position of insider and outsider.

Following Nadia's prediction is the film's most dramatic plot twist, which portrays the heroine's success as the result of a divine intervention in which the agents of God descend to earth. On Laylat al-Qadr (the Night of Destiny, the anniversary of the first night that Qur'anic verses were revealed to Mohammad), when the other women go to the mosque, Nadia stays home. In a darkened garden, she kneels by the palm tree and prays. The sound of insects chirping is accompanied by the voice of a nearby male worshipper reciting off-screen Chapter 97 of the Qur'an, which the English subtitles translate thus: "Truly we revealed it on the Night of Determination. How will you know what the Night of Determination is? Better is the Night of Determination than a thousand months. On this night, the angels and blessing descend by the dispensation of their Lord, settling all affairs. It is peace until the dawn of day." Nadia rises, and begins to dig. Even after she has dug a large hole, she discovers nothing. Looking downcast, she sits on a wall to rest. Still the soundtrack plays the rising sound of prayers echoing from all over

the city. Suddenly, Nadia (facing the camera) is illuminated by a blinding white light from above and behind the camera. She stands and looks skyward, praising God's name. The sounds of prayer grow louder as Nadia falls to her knees. After the light fades, and Nadia recovers her composure, she looks behind her to discover a box of priceless jewels. The box has appeared in the previously empty hole, thus justifying and "settling the affairs," both financial and theological, of the Zawiya's existence.

As discussed in the Introduction to this chapter, some critics have called sequences depicting Nadia's visions a form of "magical realism," implying that the rest of the film is "realistic" while the scenes of mystical revelation are not. Others have objected to the "folkloric," "Orientalist" or even "exoticist" content of scenes depicting traditional rituals and Sufi mysticism. Still others imply that the representation of these elements lacks sophistication. For example, Gauch refers to the film's "sometimes clumsy . . . magical realist interludes" (108). I want to suggest that this effect of "clumsiness" could be read alternatively. During vision and trance scenes, Benlyazid invokes the connection between the human and the sacred while symbolically honoring its representational limits. The absence of transitional narrative (auditory or textual) during the scene in which Nadia experiences her most dramatic mystical revelation means that it arises "clumsily," that is, suddenly and without a smooth transition. The only "explanation" given comes in the form of Qur'anic verse, prayer, and religious language. When the vision occurs, the frame does not directly show the light—implied to come from heaven's God-given luminosity—but rather its effects upon Nadia. While the portrayal of a *Sherifa* participating in mystical practice (often in spite of herself) has been

read as a weakness of *Bab al-sama'* (depending on the critic, the objections may be aesthetic, religious, or narrative), I argue that the film's use of these features underlines the limits of translation as a normative secular, narrative, or religious project.[151]

4. The Asymmetries of Ethnography Return

As discussed earlier, Nadia's early promise to write to Jean-Philippe, along with her instruction to him to "listen," make Jean-Philippe a constant (if remote and silent) interlocutor for what happens in the rest of the film. Suzanne Gauch interprets the figure of Jean-Philippe as exerting a kind of visitational pull upon the narrative (122): "he continues to haunt the periphery of the film, his absent gaze evoked each time Nadia writes to him, retroactively explaining her actions" (Gauch 122). Certainly the absence-presence of Jean-Philippe's demand to "understand" the cultural reasons behind Nadia's rejection of him, extends well beyond the moments in which Nadia "speaks to" him in her letters. Though Nadia does much to resist the Eurocentric gaze, her self-ethnographic gestures could be read as a capitulation to its demands to explain herself. Yet in the main, the spectre of Jean-Philippe is symbolically and incrementally expunged from the narrative as Nadia fulfills her destiny as a *Sherifa*. Nadia becomes a practicing Muslim, resists patriarchal laws, experiences visions, assures the future of the shelter, helps the poor and the sick, and ultimately marries and goes out into the world to continue her earthly journey toward heaven's door. By the end, Jean-Philippe no longer figures in the narrative in any recognizable form. Indeed, if a pernicious ethnographic gaze haunts the

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[151] Thank you to Hakim Abderrezak for helping me to develop this idea.

narrative, it is perhaps not so much in what the film transmits about Nadia, but rather in the way it depicts her relationship with other female characters who condition her earthly development as a spiritual heroine: among them are, on the one hand, her social peers and, on the other, the numerous residential servants who keep the house-turned-shelter running, along with the women who take up residence there.

Bab al-sama' maftouh presents only three women who are (or become) Nadia's social peers. The most developed of these is Kirana, the professional funeral singer and *hajja* whom Nadia invites to become her spiritual adviser-in-residence and shelter co-director. Kirana is a voice of reason and wisdom when Nadia is floundering, scared, or confused. The other two characters are cast as elite "modern" women who work or live in the European part of Fez: the female lawyer, a friend who advises Nadia that a legal solution to the issue of sustaining the Zawiya financially is not feasible given Morocco's traditional inheritance laws ; and Nadia's married sister, Layla, who clashes with Nadia for much of the film, believing the Zawiya project to be both unrealistic and unseemly. The disputes with Layla, in which Nadia prevails, are instructive: on one occasion, Layla wants to fire a servant who has inadvertently become pregnant, but Nadia retains her. The woman, along with her growing son, becomes a resident and staff member at the shelter. The sisters' other fight is about the shelter itself. Although Layla is initially angry at their brother Driss for his plan to sell the house, she ultimately ends up siding with him against Nadia when he threatens legal action. Layla, a "modern" married woman living a mostly secular lifestyle, is portrayed as mostly motivated by greed and fear. While Layla enjoys an apparently egalitarian relationship with her husband, he has the final decisions in their

household's financial decisions. In contrast to the secular and legal path of her lawyer friend and the financial and social power of her wealthy sister, the film shows Nadia's project as being successful *because she follows a spiritual trajectory.*

However, what *Bab al-sama'* reveals but does not explore is that Nadia's elite social status underlies her freedom and success. Because of Nadia's comfortable financial position, high level of education, and binational status, she is free to choose one identity over another at the outset of the film, to get the shelter up and running long before the arrival of more celestial riches, and to leave the shelter with Abdelkrim in the end. The couple's discussions about their future together focus on the philosophical and spiritual rather than the material; indeed, they seem to have no concerns whatsoever about their future subsistence. Benlyazid sees the film's ending as figurative: Nadia and Abdelkrim pursue a path of *spiritual* subsistence, or "research," instead of going to their own house and "buying a fridge" (unpublished interview with Benlyazid in Fez, Morocco, June 11 2011). By contrast, the women whom Nadia leaves behind at the shelter would never be able to consider such an option because their financial resources and limited educational background would not allow it.

The film's treatment of the viewpoint of its non-elite women women characters ranges from compassion, to objectification, to erasure. When Nadia's father dies and she returns to the house, she is joined by female relatives who have traveled great distances to be there. The household staff, who probably knew Nadia's father better than many of these women, continue to work and to serve the mourners. They themselves are not given time to mourn. With the exception of a few key figures, this staff remains nameless for

the entirety of the film. The pregnant servant whom Nadia "rescues" is shown frequently but never named, even though she becomes a second-in-command in running the shelter. Moreover, the women in the film that might be classed "subaltern" rarely speak. Rather, these figures who populate the house and keep it running come to function as part of the décor.

The depiction of servants as part of the décor is particularly apparent during the first conversation between Nadia and Kirana in the courtyard of the house, when Kirana recommends reading the Qur'an. As Kirana utters the lines "Why do you doubt? It is as if this doubt condemns you to shutting yourself up in a room all alone," the camera follows Nadia in a head and shoulders shot as she walks down one of the tiled walkways on the interior courtyard. In the background, on the other walkway, a servant is bending over a piece of laundry, scrubbing it vigorously. The frame foregrounds Nadia, in sharp focus in her white mourning clothes (presumably laundered by a woman like her servant). She is looking at Kirana, who is off screen. Nadia's back is turned to the working woman, who is shown in a long shot. The juxtaposition of words and images create an interesting contrast: while Nadia has the choice to "shut herself up in a room and doubt," the woman behind her is obligated to work long hours that make Nadia's leisure possible.

The following frame in the scene reinforces this disjunction. The camera now pans horizontally away from Nadia, from right to left. It follows the path of Nadia's gaze panning across the courtyard and toward Kirana. As this gaze moves, it skims over two other servants, also depicted in a long shot. The first woman, whose neck and head is obscured by the low-hanging branches of a fruit tree, is rythmically sweeping the tile

floor. The other woman enters the frame, carrying a cup of liquid, perhaps to the woman working on the laundry, or perhaps for a visiting guest. As the panning frame settles on a mid-shot of Kirana, who utters "The words of Allah are like a key that opens everything. You must read and understand the Koran," the camera has moved past the working bodies of three servants who likely cannot read. Even as the beginnings of Nadia's spiritual journey are conditioned on her ability to "read" widely and understand the world, the camera seems to suggest Nadia's continued "illiteracy" in—or obliviousness to—certain sociocritical contexts.

The founding of the shelter and the increased population within the house is portrayed as bringing about a certain measure of equality with regard to work. Women and residents are depicted collaborating in cooking, gardening and cleaning; the women speak freely to each other across class lines. However, two women in particular never engage in housework beyond light pruning. These two women are Nadia and the eccentric intellectual resident at the shelter, who, along with Kirana and Bâ Sassi, becomes one of Nadia's three main interlocutors. Despite the nature of Nadia's philanthropic project, the camera's gaze never seems to show her gaining much awareness for the asymmetry between her status and that of the women who prepare dinner, bring her drinks, open the door, and do heavy work in the courtyard. Of course, the visual marginalization of domestic staff is an accepted convention in films treating the evolution of an elite protagonist. But what makes this phenomenon notable in *Bab al-sama' maftouh* is that there is a stark contrast between Nadia's overt messages about social justice—and her lack of critical examination of the relationship between the social

classes contained in the house. This incongruity is complicated further by the way in which the camera alternately maps, and maps onto, the ethnographic gaze.

From the moment of Nadia's arrival in Fez and the break-up with Jean-Philippe soon afterwards, the film sets up an oppositional relationship between modernity and tradition, France and Morocco, capitalism (money) and spirituality. Nadia tells Jean Philippe that she has had enough of the "dieu argent." She thus articulates her embrace of religious faith as, in part, a rejection of Western capitalism. When she finally obtains the riches needed to sustain the shelter, this comes about as a result of worshipping God, rather than as a result of worshipping money. Nadia's rejection of capitalism and embrace of a spiritual solution is further articulated in a long letter to Jean-Philippe. In this letter, she justifies her decision to think differently about, and react differently to, the suffering of others. The content of the letter is transmitted to the film viewer via Nadia's off-screen voice, while the frame shows her sitting on the ground under a tree with a pad of notepaper and a pen in her lap. Explaining why she had to leave her life with Jean-Philippe, she writes:

> . . . Je ne voyais plus dans notre vie que les reportages que tu faisais pour la télé. Les hordes d'enfants affamés qu'à travers la terre, les hécatombes, les bombes, la folie dans le sang. . . . Non, non, et non. Mon impuissance me torture et le confort me débecte. Non. La mauvaise conscience occidentale à l'heure des repas, merci. Je n'ai pas besoin d'un écran de télé pour rencontrer la misère. . . .

In this letter, Nadia creates a convincing case against the representations of victimhood by the Western TV media. She points out that the onslaught of TV potrayals of horrific suffering around the world does not lead to any sort of substantive action, but rather to

"bad dinnertime conscience." No longer willing to be tortured by her powerlessness, Nadia has decided to abandon what she dismisses as merely spectral compassion in favor of what she considers a more direct and effective approach: taking action locally.

Yet an interesting tension emerges between Nadia's critique of the representation of the poor on the French "TV screen" on the one hand, and Nadia's own blindness to non-elites, on the other. In the next frame, as we hear Nadia's off-screen voice continue to read the post-scriptum to her letter, Benlyazid creates a juxtaposition of words and images that is particularly jarring. This sequence shows Nadia in an extreme long shot. She seated in an outside bay of the house under a large window, facing the vast internal garden. Nadia is viewed through an ornate iron fence and through the luxurious green foliage of small trees. To the right, a shelter resident is seated on the ground, behind the railings, facing the camera, and playing a Spanish guitar. Nadia's voice begins to read her post-scriptum over a soundtrack of birdsong and the melancholy melody of the guitar:

> Post scriptum: J'ai retrouvé dans mes notes de lecture un texte d'Angela Davis sur la religion où elle cite Marx: "la religion est, pour une part, l'expression de la détresse réelle, et pour une autre, la protestation contre la détresse réelle. La religion est le soupir de la créature opprimée, l'âme d'un monde sans coeur comme elle est l'esprit des conditions sociales d'où l'esprit est exclu. Elle est l'opium du peuple."

Just as Nadia reads the line "l'expression de la détresse réelle," the unwed mother whom Nadia had saved earlier by permitting her to stay and work in the house enters from the right of the screen, carrying a tray with drinks. After handing a glass to Nadia, she walks to the right of the screen, gives a glass to the guitar player, and walks back off screen, still carrying her tray.

If we identify with Nadia, this shot depicts a truly beautiful, almost utopic moment. With the soothing but melancholy music of the guitar, the luxurious gardens, and birdschirping, the lines from Davies seem all the more moving. From Nadia's perspective, the arrival of the servant with refreshments only heightens the paradisiacal effect of the decor. Yet simultaneously, the scene presents an uncanny juxtaposition between the internal voice of an elite character, reflecting on Marxian philosophy, and the silence of a non-elite figure. One wonders if Nadia's invocation of religion as the "opium of the people" only applies to her social inferiors. As Nadia's off-screen voice utters words expressing concern and interest for the real distress of oppressed people, the servant glides silently in and out of the frame. The shot, which stays still, is not altered by the movement of the servant, from whom no sound, voice, nor even a sigh, emanates. The diegetic energy of this scene is focused on Nadia's voice and her reflections on the world. While her letter proclaimed that one does not need a "TV screen" to encounter poverty and misery, the gaze of the camera—subsequently projected onto the cinema screen—complicates the hierarchy of the dualistic relationship she proposes between representation and direct action.

The visual representation of impoverished and victimized others—to which Nadia objects in her letter—is also associated with the quasi-ethnographic gaze used by Jean-Philippe in his professional life. Through the soundtrack of the letter, we discover that Jean-Philippe, who had earlier articulated his desire to comfort and "understand" Nadia, works as a TV news reporter. Nadia's letter to Jean-Philippe implies the inadequacy of this approach for representing—or constructively helping—those it represents: "Je n'ai

pas besoin d'un écran de télé pour rencontrer la misère." Nadia operates differently, meeting and working directly over an extended period with those she helps. Yet, as we have seen, the figures of servants and non-elite shelter residents in *Bab al-sama'* are mostly denied a voice and allotted only marginal visual space. In a sense, then, the development of Nadia's self-ethnographic knowledge emerges in tandem with the relative invisibility of those who make her (self-)inquiry possible.

Nonetheless, there are rare moments in which the non-elite women at the shelter speak. Two such episodes coincide with an abrupt "speaking out" on their part. Here, the women's disapproving voices create a conflict whose need for resolution moves the storyline forward. The most striking cases of these figures speaking are when they express opposition to the way in which Nadia is running the shelter. The women react vocally and with vehmence against the presence of two outsiders in the shelter space: Bahia and Abdelkrim. Bahia, a woman of Maghrebi origin born and raised in France and recentlyreleased from prison, has nowhere to go and is brought to the shelter by Nadia's lawyer friend. Bahia speaks no Moroccan Arabic and is an atheist. After Bahia refuses to pray, the working women at the shelter shun her, objecting to her physical appearance— her tattoos and "style" (which the film codes as queer, since Bahia has short hair and dresses in a masculine way)—and are outraged by her rejection of belief. The women gossip about Bahia and effectively go on strike, citing Bahia's suspected atheism as they refuse to cook dinner. One woman says "Whoever does not fear Allah is a danger for the community." Although Nadia attempts to retain Bahia over dinner, Bahia leaves the shelter of her own volition. Implicitly siding with Rimbaud (as she reads from *Une*

Saison en Enfer to Nadia), Bahia both rejects and disparages the women's way of life.

Bahia's comments resonate with the earlier remark of Jean-Philippe, since she compares

the shelter to a convent and makes fun of the residents as "les bonnes soeurs." Yet this

time, Nadia tolerates these comparisons and seems to take the remark to heart, her face

betraying a note of sad contemplation as if Bahia had said something that she feared were

true.

The next major episode of the women speaking out is provoked by the

encroachment into the shelter of Abdelkrim. After the women object to his visits to

Nadia, he eventually manages to sneak back into the shelter one last time to propose to

Nadia. When he is caught, the woman who raises the alarm loudly voices her distress

and anger: "I've already told you, you can't come in. It's a woman's shelter. It is a sin for

you to come in. . . . Help, women! He has escaped! He has escaped!" The women rush

up to Nadia's bedroom, scolding her and Abdelkrim: "What's this? Why did he come

into the shelter? What is this abuse of the law? It's a lack of respect! This isn't nice!" As

soon as Nadia announces their marriage, the women, led by Kirana, transition into

uttering celebratory *youyous.*

Benlyazid's handling of these resistant voices in *Bab al-sama'* displays a

combination of tolerance and dismissiveness. While the script begins by contesting the

women's objections in religious terms, it ultimately gestures toward a sociological or

ethnographic understanding and classification of their anger. When the women object to

Bahia, other (relatively more elite) figures such as Mina (a senior member of kitchen

staff) and Kirana utter lines that frame tolerance in religious terms, referring to God's

omnipotence over earthly affairs. When one woman criticizes Bahia's atheism, Mina

says, "May God enlighten you! God is pleased by the sight of His creatures. Each one is

the way his Creator wanted him to be." And when Kirana goes to scold the women for

"gathering" and gossiping against Bahia, she deals with the situation in similar terms:

> KIRANA. This place was not made for screaming. Anyone who would
> like to pray would find it very hard to concentrate.
> WOMAN. This is the shelter, and no-one should defile it.
> KIRANA. Allah is above everything here. This is the house of God. And
> whoever enters it willingly shall leave it willingly.
> WOMAN. You're right.
> KIRANA. Then stop all that gathering. May God guide you.

Later, however, when Nadia and Kirana are talking together about the women's

objection to Abdelkrim's visits, Kirana's explanation of the situation combines a

religious explanation with a more "objective," earth-bound one:

> KIRANA. What I wanted to say, and don't get angry, is that the
> women don't want Abdelkrim to come into the shelter.
> NADIA. Why do people see Islam through the narrowest door?
> Islam is love! You read Ibn Arabi.
> KIRANA. Yes, but everyone understands it according to his own
> mind and era. Islam does not change, but its interpretations are numerous.
> *How do you want them to understand, poor things*. And if you think about
> it, you too are following a path with no issue, even if you think you're
> right. Why don't you see him outside? No-one would misunderstand.
> Think about it. (emphasis added)

Kirana's comment about the "poor things" who cannot possibly "understand" suggests an

"expert" reading of the women as objects—rather than producers—of knowledge. These

"poor" women are treated as a known—and pitied—quantity, rather than knowing

subjects. Whether they are objects of *scientific, social scientific* knowledge and/or objects

of context-based Islamic hermeneutics, their knowledge at this moment is devalued by

women with a greater level of education. Kirana does finish by reminding Nadia that within the rules of the shelter—as well as within traditional rules about seeing a person of the opposite sex without being married—her relationship with Abdelkrim has "no issue." Nonetheless, the exchange between Nadia and Kirana is an exchange between educated elites during which they codify the law-based objections of their social inferiors as unfortunate, but understandable, ignorance. The implication of Nadia's and Kirana's conversation is that they themselves possess "understanding," while the women who objected to Abdelkrim's presence in the shelter could not possess such insight (and therefore that their objection to his presence can only be read as irrational, rather than a violation of trust and of the shelter's code of ethics). When Kirana scolded the women over their treatment of Bahia, she did not invite a debate with them about historical context; she saves this insight for conversations with Nadia.

In these conversations, Benlyazid's script productively insists upon interpretation of "Islam" as "love:" the notion that tolerance among humans is the only pious reaction to human frailty, given God's omnipotence. Yet what is eclipsed by Nadia's comment that "Islam is love" is that the shelter rules excluding men exist not only for orthodox religious reasons (coded here as intolerant), but also for a very practical earthly reason. The shelter is a woman-only space because, earlier, this had been deemed the best way for women escaping domestic abuse to heal and to feel safe. An earlier scene had shown an angry husband violently pounding at the door, demanding to be let in so he could forcibly remove his wife, while Kirana and passersby on the street advise him to leave his wife alone and find his own way back to God. As the end of the film nears, Nadia appears

to have forgotten the reasoning behind the no-man rule (indeed, Nadia is always the exception to the rule). Beyond Kirana's gentle suggestion that Nadia should see Abdelkrim "outside," the effect of dismissing the women's criticism as a lack of "love" essentially justifies Abdelkrim's intrusion.

What all of this implies is that *Bab al-sama''s* / Nadia's self-translational ethics—representing herself and her culture—go somewhat awry as they respond to an elite imperative to retain interpretive mastery across asymmetries of power. While the figure of Nadia acquires sovereignty over the translation of own subjectivity, the representation of this selfhood in turn comes to dominate those subaltern subjectivities that make up the film's larger social fabric. Toward the end of the film, then, as Nadia becomes exasperated with the community she helped to create—and which created her—the "haunting" of Jean-Philippe's ethnographic gaze takes on a new form. The subaltern subjectivities that Nadia wanted to encounter beyond the gaze of the camera are now inadvertently reified as objects of her knowledge and as distant objects of the camera's gaze. The non-elite women at the shelter are portrayed as being capable of practicing folklore and traditional religion, but few of them are capable of developing a sovereign scientific or religious-philosophical-ethical perspective as does Nadia. Concurrently, Kirana and Nadia explain and these women "of the people" for an exterior ethnographic gaze. Yet, as a whole, the ethnographic gaze "haunting" the film at the end is different from the one encountered at the beginning. Whereas Jean-Philippe's gaze was overtly European and exoticizing, Nadia's self-ethnographic gaze becomes a reflection of the power of another, domestic, elite.

Conclusion: Untranslation *versus* Ethnography, Again

This chapter has explored some of the ways in which *Bab al-sama' maftouh*, when viewed as immanently ethnographic fiction, provokes reflection on the tenuous and complex relationship between cinematic fiction and ethnography. From the film's initial rejection of an "exoticist" stance to its citations of al-Ghazali, Marx, and Ibn 'Arabi, *Bab al-sama'* engages in the politically charged terrain of how cultures are differently represented, experienced, and understood through regional and religious idioms as well as individual expression. The film's oppositional terms are announced early in the film through the failed relationship of Jean-Philippe and Nadia. After Nadia cuts herself off from her European "side," the oppositional model is quickly supplanted by a creative one, associated with spirtual life and social justice. As a self-ethnographic figure (which I explained in terms of Nadia's promised "writing" to Jean-Philippe), Nadia rejects French secularism as a means of liberation, finding a more fruitful liberatory potential in religion. The dénouement of the film, with its allusions to the heavenly realm, combines a traditional "happy ending" of heterosexual marriage with the theme of a spiritual journey to justify the protagonist's choices. By fulfilling her spiritual destiny as a *Sherifa*, Nadia resists patriarchy, flouts inheritance laws, establishes a successful shelter, and marries the man she loves. At the same time, the film obscures the asymmetric class relations that allow Nadia to pursue her own itinerary toward a "door to the sky."

The narrative and thematic qualities of *Bab al-sama' maftouh* recall another narrative form not previously treated in criticism of the film: Fassi traditions of women's oral storytelling. With *Bab al-sama',* Benlyazid has created a kind of filmic fable or

tale.[152] The storyline of *Bab al-sama'* combines the perspectives of a highly educated

Muslim elite with traditional practices deemed "popular" or "folkloric." As discussed

above, the film tends to maintain an elite perspective while alternately valorizing and

dismissing the ethical perspective of its less-elite characters.

Moroccan sociologists and anthropologists confront this issue of interpretation

across asymmetries of power when studying material deemed "folkloric," which includes

women's oral storytelling traditions. In the Introduction to his 1991 study *Féminisme*

Soufi: Conte Fassi et Initiation Sexuelle, a structural study of a traditional tale named "Le

Conte d'Aïsha,"[153] Moroccan sociologist and ethnologist Abdessamad Dialmy

interrogates the ethical problem of studying and interpreting popular tales. In addressing

the potential ethical pitfalls of his research subject, he characterizes the choice as a

feminist one, arguing that the figure of "la femme" (the feminine) can serve as a site for

egalitarian critique. Dialmy insists that despite its pitfalls, such scholarship could help to

show how storytelling realizes the socially equalizing influence of the feminine voice,

which is obscured in more orthodox texts ("discours faqih"):

> L'existence d'une culture savante, celle des intellectuels
> dominants, est responsable de l'émergence d'une culture populaire. Celle-
> ci ne se conçoit pas sans l'autre, sans le mépris de l'autre, sans sa
> dominance.

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[152] In future iterations of this chapter, there may be an interesting line of inquiry to pursue here with Jacques Rancière's *Film Fables*. "Deleuze and Godard both repeat Jean Epstein's dramaturgy, they both extract, after the fact, the original essence of the cinematographic art from the plots the art of cinema shares with the old art of telling stories [*l'art des histoires*]. Cinema's enthusiastic pioneer, its disenchanted historiographer, its sophisticated philosopher, and its amateur theoreticians all share this dramaturgy because it is consubstantial with cinema as an art and an object of thought. The fable that tells the truth of cinema is extracted from the stories narrated on the screens." (6).

[153] Which, coincidentally, Benlyazid adapted for cinema in her 1999 film *Keid Ensa / Ruses de Femmes / Women's Wiles.*

> Est-il alors possible, au niveau de ce travail [sociologique et ethnologique], de ne pas adopter une attitude intellectualiste et folkloriste?
>
> Le seul fait de travailler sur une forme particulière de la culture dite populaire implique-t-il automatiquement l'impossibilité d'une écoute véritable? Celle-ci est-elle nécessairement prisonnière de l'impérialisme des sciences humaines? L'intellectuel, même dans ses tentatives les plus théoriques et les plus savantes, n'exploite-t-il pas ce qu'il nomme et crée comme culture populaire à des fins métacognitives, voire politiques?
>
> Une des leçons essentielles qui s'imposent lors d'une écoute de l'oral est la transmutation des rôles des acteurs sociaux. Au niveau du conte par exemple, nombre de personnages prennent la parole, contestent, emportent des victoires alors que, dans la réalité, ils sont contraints au silence. Tel est, nous semble-t-il, le cas de la femme. Constamment objet dans le discours fiqhique, la femme n'y prend jamais la parole pour exprimer son être de femme . . . La femme-faqih défendrait la polygamie, la répudiation, l'inégalité des sexes devant l'héritage. Il en va autrement dans le conte. Tout d'abord, il est une pratique féminine, une pratique exercée, au sein de la famille traditionnelle, davantage par les femmes que par les hommes. La femme ne conte pas des "histoires" inventées par l'homme et qu'elle se contenterait juste de transmettre. Il faudrait croire que la teneur même du conte est une création féminine, ou tout au moins, une reproduction critique, contestataire de l'idéologie dominante, masculine. (7)

Dialmy sets up a dialectical relation between "dominant" and "popular" culture in which the dominant *creates* the "popular" or subaltern category. With *Bab al-sama' maftouh*, Farida Benlyazid creates a Fassi "reproduction critique" for the end of the twentieth century: that is, her film comprises ethnographic aspirations, but its "reproduction" of a given fictional "reality" is characterized by a "double critique" against both Western Orientalism and a patriarchal understanding of religion (Khannous 15). Thanks to the mixing of its constitutive elements (intellectualism, the "popular" or "folkloric," combined with an explicit rejection of the human sciences' imperialism of the human sciences at the outset), *Bab al-sama'* seems to share the goals outlined by Dialmy (who happens to be a Fassi as well). His identification of the feminine as a site of liberation is

not so much essentialist as rhetorical: storytelling itself, he suggests, becomes a site of resistance against dominant narratives.

Nonetheless, as this chapter has attempted to show, the feminine figure, even when she/it is *highly* untranslational with regard to culture, can also be a site where epistemological violence repeats itself. Early in the film, this violence is presented as justifiable as it is directed against the would-be Orientalist ethnographer, Jean-Philippe. Later in the film, however, the filmmaker's gaze repeats violences against certain aspects of Moroccan "culture," grist to the mill of both Orientalist and elite "understanding." What *Bab al-sama' maftouh* suggests, through its engagements with cross-cultural, cross-class translations, is that (a) the sympathetic study of the "folkloric" cannot, in and of itself, resist repeating epistemological violence; and (b) the fictional figure of Maghrebi woman is not, in and of itself, *necessarily* a contestatory site. Thus *Bab al-sama' maftouh* contains important implications for the project of untranslation, particularly if it is seen as a kind of "alternative ethnography." Viewing texts by and about Maghrebi women as cultural untranslations can only ever be a heuristic critical gesture. *Bab al-sama'* is a fictional text that remains a world unto itself, a world whose complexities uncannily echo—but never perfectly translate—those of human culture. At the same time, my reading of *Bab al-sama'* as self-ethnography suggests that the untranslator must remain attentive to the ways in which overtly resistant, untranslational texts may repeat the violences of the very gaze they attempt to combat.

Conclusion: The Task of the Untranslator – a Curious Compromise?

This dissertation has explored three different modes of literary and filmic untranslation: reading against the grain of translation as "persuasive listening" (Djebar, Chapter Two); hacking the spectacle of global capital (El Fani, Chapter Three); and reappropriating visual ethnography within a spiritual idiom (Benlyazid, Chapter Four). The more dramatic untranslational moments in these novels and films function as overt initial "refusals" to participate in cultural translation. Such refusals include Hania's perspective on the transmittal of Zoulikha's story as a kind of betrayal (Chapter Two); Kalt's use of Tunisian Arabic to interrupt European media broadcasts (Chapter Three); and Nadia's categorical rejection of Jean-Philippe (Chapter Four). In some respects, these refusals speak for themselves, yet they do not foreclose the possibility of cultural translation. Instead, each refusal seems to lay the groundwork for a subsequent, alternative "translation" that critically re-reads culture (both Maghrebi and Western). As such, untranslation helps us to understand how a text develops a unique set of terms for handling the translation of culture. In my conclusion to this study, I want to turn away from the problem of how Maghrebi women are translated, and, instead, focus on the readerly figure to whom untranslation appeals: the Western spectator, reader, or scholar. Borrowing a leaf from Benjamin's book, then, I ask, what is "the task of the untranslator," and what are its iterations in Djebar, El Fani, Benlyazid, and beyond?

By reading Maghrebi *women*'s texts in particular, this project has also sought to frame the task of the untranslator as one of "reckoning with gender." As discussed in Chapter One, untranslation critically intervenes in how the figure of "Maghrebi woman"

functions normatively as a point of (post)colonial translation between the Maghreb and

the West. In addressing cultural translation, this study keeps in play questions such as

"not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does

she name me? Is this part of the problematic I discuss?" (Spivak "French Feminism"

207). By drawing our attention to such questions, women's novels and films destabilize

the interpretive sovereignty of the "I" in the Global North.[154] As I explained in my

discussion of the gendering of translation and representation (Chamberlain, Irigaray), the

figure of "woman" may stand in as a symbol for the "unimaginable other" (Spivak

"Politics of Translation" 200). This framing recalls that feminist critique is not

exclusively intended for women-authored, women-themed texts. Indeed, while I have

made the heuristic choice to focus on women's texts (because the figure of woman

constitutes a powerful site for untranslational reading), untranslation does not have to be

bound by biological or social conceptions of sex or gender. In future iterations of this

project, it might be productive to consider how the figure of woman enjoins and

intervenes in cultural translation in male-authored novels and films such as Yacine

Kateb's landmark 1956 novel *Nedjma*, as well as in more recent male-authored works

with female protagonists, such Boualem Sansal's 2005 novel *Harraga*. By the same

token, given that cultural translation is a central theme within postcolonial literature and

film, untranslation could serve as a more general critical model for reading. The basic

task of the untranslator is to ask, "how does a text intervene in its own immanent role as a

cultural translation and subsequently set new terms for the translation that ensues?"

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[154] Like "Maghrebi women," the "I" of the global North is an ethically unsatisfactory but heuristically useful category of persons, in which I include myself.

In Chapter Two, I answered this question by tracing a surprising development in the figure of the Djebarian translator. Initially Djebar presents cultural translation, figured as the "transmittal" of women's oral histories, as a kind of feminist solidarity that must be predicated on a radical and open "listening" to "muffled" voices *(Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* 7-8). While the 1978 *film La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* elaborates this open-ended approach to listening, the 2002 novel *La Femme sans sépulture* marks its breakdown. In *La Femme*, the narrator's overwhelming desire to tell the story silences Zoulikha's daughters' reluctance to do so. This silencing of voices—which, paradoxically, coincides with their fictional transmittal—is the result of what I call "persuasive listening." The ensuing "seduction," naturalized and justified through a narrative of mutual desire (Tageldin), dissolves Hania's and Mina's fears (along, perhaps, with our own), transforming them into willing and avid participants in their own translation. Chapter Two closed with a discussion of the "*Orientalité*" that underlies both Djebar's *oeuvre* and its translational function in the West. Since Djebar's novels and films continue to work as a translational "way in" to the Maghreb, I suggest that the untranslator's task is to remain attuned to Djebar's earlier ethics of "listening," as well as to the "listening of listening" that this would likely require (Szendy).

In contrast to Djebar, who leaves intact the figure of Maghrebi woman as a viable, but somewhat passive and desiring (i.e., Orientalist) site of cultural translation, El Fani explicitly breaks with this framing by creating a female protagonist who has no difficulty in representing herself—and remains almost completely in control of how and when that representation happens. Kalt shatters literary and filmic conventions. With her,

untranslation is a matter of hacking into cultural norms (not only cultural stereotypes but also mass media and global flows of capital) in order to reverse and change them. *Bedwin Hacker* (2003) uses both interdiegetic and transdiegetic gestures to appeal to—and create—the viewer-untranslator. At first, we may identify with the film's intradiegetic "police" viewers. Like them, we are momentarily disoriented, or even shocked, by the film's "hieroglyphic" images of non-translated Arabic. Yet if we are initially lost about how to react, El Fani quickly enjoins our identification with those intradiegetic viewers who respond positively to Kalt's calls to protest. Meanwhile, signs like the symbolic name of Agent "Marianne"—and Kalt's interruptions of the TV information loop—teach us that the task of the untranslator is not merely a matter of "not believing everything we see on TV," but also recognizing that conventional signifiers of "liberty" within Western culture (the atom bomb, endless TV stations, French citizenship, universal translation) can also be tied up in our society's self-sustaining "spectacle" (Debord). The task of the untranslator is to promote and understand the spectacle of culture and its *détournements*; we are to read, with something other than fear, Kalt's blackout of the skyline of La Défense.

Indeed, El Fani's untranslation becomes troubling through its critical association with liberal subjecthood. Beyond encouraging a fantastical identification with Kalt (who embodies the ideal of total liberty), the film also conjures up the average well-meaning liberal citizen, who "comme la plupart des gens, croit qu'il est libre mais se trompe tout le temps" (Barlet and El Fani). Chams is a journalist for the far-left *Libération* but Kalt's friends imply that he may as well work for the politically conservative newpaper *Le*

Figaro. Chams's *mauvaise foi* inhabits not only the average spectator but also the film as a whole; the terms of *Bedwin Hacker*'s untranslation remain inextricably bound up in the very modernity it critiques. Falling short of actual hacktivism, the untranslator "replaces politics with textuality" (Gandhi 156) and stays focused on bringing out the critical "at-tensions" of El Fani's film.

In Farida Benlyazid's 1988 film *Bab al-sama' maftouh/Une Porte sur le ciel*, the figure of the untranslator also undergoes some interesting and paradoxical identifications. Benlyazid's ideal untranslator—which coincides with my analytic voice in most of Chapter Four—is overtly called upon to identify with, and remain in intimate visual proximity to, the self-ethnographizing figure of Nadia. Here, the untranslator-ideal, working *tout contre* (in Djebar's sense of "close to and up against") the figure of Nadia, learns to appreciate what is important to this fictional Moroccan heroine. Nadia pursues a complex, difficult, and illuminating religious and scholarly path that ultimately leads her to a better understanding of her readopted culture as well as to personal, spiritual, and sexual fulfillment. Along the way, she reveals to the film viewer an ethnography of Moroccan culture on her terms. Nadia untranslates Orientalism, but then, in a final bid to navigate the increasingly trying complexities of her own cultural microcosm, she repeats and reveals the asymmetries of power bound up with an ethnographic perspective.

At the same time, however, there is another, less-than-ideal untranslator implied in *Bab al-sama'*: the unaware, "exoticist" translator identified in the figure of the French boyfriend, Jean-Philippe, from the film's outset. Jean Philippe is apparently dismissed, but he is never quite expunged. As I argued in Chapter Four, although Jean-Philippe

seems to disappear from the film's diegesis, his presence—and his desire for translation—endures. This fact is confirmed when he suddenly "reappears," years later, as the unseen, off-screen *destinataire* for Nadia's long letter of explanation. By fulfilling her promise to "write to" Jean Philippe, Nadia retrospectively frames the entire film as a sort of meta-textual "writing back" to him. As such, Nadia's initial rebuffal of Jean-Philippe's desire to "understand" is not merely a refusal; rather, it becomes an integral condition of the narrative itself. The film's enduring popularity in the United States, where it is seen as an authentic source of cultural translation (some twenty-five years since its release, and counting) tends to reinforce this interpretation.

In this way, Jean-Philippe—curious and well-meaning, but also dreadfully insensitive and *naïf*—might be viewed as an historical precursor to Nadia El Fani's twenty-first century Chams; and, I would hazard, to the figure of the untranslator. This is not to suggest that these figures are identical or unchanging (they aren't). Rather, my tentative hypothesis is this: the "straw man" of poor translation that is invoked in these texts—and in my interpretations of them—is gradually being transformed within, and by, the texts themselves. The naïve, would-be translator is offered the task of the untranslator. Although *Bab al-sama' maftouh* encourages its viewers to dislike—and distrust—Jean-Philippe for his insensitive behavior at the film's outset, Benlyazid keeps him present as the guy who once said, "I just want to understand!" Taking Jean-Philippe at his word may not be ideal; historically, it has been dangerous. However, it is my hope that the historical compromise—or gamble—of writers and filmmakers like Djebar, El Fani, and Benlyazid will pay off, by making untranslators of us all.

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