Phantom Arabic, Dislocated French: Auto-Anthropological Imaginaries: Jean Genet, Abdellah Taia, Leila Sebbar, Nabil Ayouch

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PHANTOM ARABIC, DISLOCATED FRENCH
AUTO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINARIES:
JEAN GENET, ABDELLAH TAÏA, LEÏLA SEBBAR, NABIL AYOUCHE

By
Amine Zidouh

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This study combines sociolinguistics with literary, cultural and cinematographic studies in the analysis of works by Jean Genet, Abdellah Taia, Leila Sebbar and Nabil Ayouch. This dissertation’s main argument is that an understanding of the relationship between what is to be conceived as Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French is crucial to the critical repositioning and re-questioning of a significant part of postcolonial cultural production emanating from North Africa and/or the North African diaspora. This thesis intervenes in current debates in French and Francophone Studies, in Arabic and Comparative Studies, but also in Sociolinguistics (particularly as related to North Africa, the Middle East and postcolonial North African diaspora in France), and in Queer Studies (expanding the notion of queer beyond sexuality to include language, nationality, race and class). While language and identity politics tend to be viewed as fixed to the rigid geographic and cultural boundaries of the nation-state, this thesis argues that representations of subjectivity in transnational networks of cultural production tend to be dissociated from those politicized and rigid identifications. This work therefore introduces the concept of Dislocated French as a set of modalities that disturb the “normal” and hegemonic positioning of the French language. In addition, this dissertation also proposes
the concept of Phantom Arabic as a symbolic quasi “mythological” presence. One that is always already there, but one that plays a very important role in so far as being “producer of meaning” in each of the literary and filmic cases investigated. Indeed “Arabic” (in a variety of forms and modalities) holds a special place in the works of each of the authors and filmmakers scrutinized in this dissertation. Each of the authors/directors studied maintains a singular relationship vis-à-vis “Arabic”, while dislocating the very status of centrality of the French language, which in turn undergoes a process of distancing, transformation and displacement.
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This dissertation is dedicated to the best mother in the universe: Amina El Fallahi.
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INTRODUCTION

Prefatory note

Before delving into the more personal reasons for my interest in the topic of this dissertation, and how it came to bridge my love and passion for “Language” and its inherent link to literature and cinema, I would like to first address the purely academic reasons why this topic is worth scrutinizing. The main idea behind this project is that a critical understanding of the relationship between, first, what I call Phantom Arabic and, second, Dislocated French, is crucial to the critical repositioning and questioning of a significant part of post-colonial French and so-called francophone cultural production (see C. Forsdick and D. Murphy, 2003). This project is going to focus on artists who are either from or have a relationship to North Africa and the Middle East, and whose works also deal directly or laterally with the Arab “Francophonie de l’intérieur” - as Andrew Stafford calls it – inside the Hexagone. (see also Carpanin Marimoutou, “Ecrire le post-colonial depuis la langue francaise”). Both these concepts of Phantom Arabic and dislocated French work differently in each of the individual cases which will be exemplified in this dissertation, but a reading that takes their intersection into consideration is, as I will try to demonstrate in this thesis, crucial to a critical in-depth understanding of every single one of the works to be studied.

My interest in this topic stems from a deeply personal quest, one that started with my “schooling”. Whereas many kids in the world have the chance to go to school and learn things in their own language, I very quickly discovered that whatever I was speaking at
home, that “thing” which I thought was mine that I used to exist, think and dream in, was being looked down upon. At school, I was told, the teacher spoke “Arabic”, a language that was new not only to me but to all my peers, yet it did not seem to bother anyone that they had to learn how to speak and read in a new language that they would also stop using as soon as they would leave the classroom as no one in the school yard spoke it. In fact, if one did she/he would quickly be labeled as “anti-social” and would be left out of the group or even be bullied for doing so. Yet, once inside the classroom the roles were reversed and those who mastered that “Arabic” better were the ones with the most symbolic power; which of course translated into the grades they got and how the teacher treated them. Indeed, the intertwined link between language and power was something that I experienced on a daily basis, well before having read and reflected on the works of Althusser, Foucault or Derrida and on “language as the critical fetish of modernity” (Geoffrey Galt Harpham).

In addition to speaking “something else” at home and going to school to find “Arabic”, we also had to learn this other language called “French”. Of course, that would only add more complexity and more depth to the power dynamics at play.

The word “Arabic” is used to refer to the official language of more than 24 countries. Yet, this word is understood differently, and indeed sometimes contradictorily, by different people. For the layperson, “Arabic” is one language that people in the so-called “Arab world” speak. For the academics, Arabic is a language that has two facets, a high and a low variety; a discourse that seems to be mainly influenced by Ferguson’s 1959 work on diglossia. This multiplicity of discourses is indeed at best confusing, if not misleading. What is usually referred to as “Arabic” in a variety of fields is in fact what is called in linguistic terms Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). This variety differs from “Classical
Arabic” and from what some people refer to as “the vernaculars”. In a presentation entitled “Arabic is the new Latin” that I gave in March 2016 at the ACLA conference held at Harvard University I argue that in fact this “Arabic” situation resembles, to an amazing extent the late “Latin” situation in Europe a few centuries ago. MSA is referred to nowadays as the language of “education”, of a certain class, etc. Its use is also associated with a certain symbolic significance, power and prestige, the very same words and aspects that were once associated with Latin. The vernaculars of Latin are indeed what we now call Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, etc. How far is the Arabic situation from the Late Latin one? In my opinion: not far at all.

Stemming from that personal and existential dimension of my life since childhood, what attracted me to become interested in the authors and filmmakers to be featured in this dissertation is the fact that they all share a very interesting and complex relationship with language in general and with French and “Arabic” in particular. Indeed, it would merely be common sense to believe that a writer, an artist whose main craft is dealing with the aesthetic use of language, would be able to see through the “Arabic” myth. But while starting to envision their works through the very questioning of their relation with this quite singular problematic I came to realize that these artists do have a very particular and often conflicted relationship with both the French they use and the Phantom Arabic they refer to and somehow insert in their works.

While on a purely sociolinguistic level I would defend the claim that “Arabic” does not even actually “exist” and is comparable to a dead language, this “Arabic”, as a seminal myth, is always already there, present in its very absence in the minds and imaginaries of the creators that this dissertation is examining. Such a situation makes this “Arabic” a
“language” that is constantly offered to imaginary, literary and artistic transpositions, inscriptions and re-inscriptions operated in another language, French, which therefore participates in its furthermore self-distancing of the mythical “Arabic” while complicating its implied existence as a myth by the use of a language which is completely informed by its colonial/neo-colonial status (as the question of the francophonie has well demonstrated).

**Sociolinguistic situation**

Let us now turn to a reading of the sociolinguistic situation in the Maghreb - and for the purposes of this dissertation more particularly Morocco and Algeria (See among others: Bassiouney, 2009; Bouamrane, 1986; Boukous, 1995). A broad understanding of the ideologically linguistic issues in the region is primordial to the comprehension of what I call Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French. Indeed, many languages are in contact over the geographical area referred to as the Maghreb. There is also a huge discrepancy and vagueness between official discourses and real-life linguistic practices. Complicating things even further, the question of perception and hierarchizing of languages comes into play in that already complex mold.

The official language of both Algeria and Morocco, according to their respective constitutions, is: Arabic\(^1\). Both countries also consider Amazigh as a national language\(^2\). The peculiarity of the Moroccan constitution is that Article 5 clearly states that “The state works towards the protection and the development of the Arabic language, as well as in promoting its use.” The French language has no official recognition whatsoever. In fact, the very word of “French” is completely absent from both these countries’ respective

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\(^{1}\) See Article 3 of the Algerian constitution and Article 5 of the Moroccan constitution.

\(^{2}\) Referred to in the Algerian constitution as “Tamazight” and in the Moroccan one as “Amazigh”
constitutions. In the case of Morocco such an absence is even more ironic in the sense that the official website of the government offers a French translation of this document. In fact, it is even claimed that the constitution was written in French and translated into Arabic. But of course, there is no way to gain access to documentation that proves this. It does however seem very plausible in the sense that the majority of the educated elite who were “hired” by the King to produce this text were mainly francophones.

The rapport to the French language in both countries shows its complexity as early as a reading of the first articles in their constitutions. It goes without saying that whoever visits Algeria or Morocco notices that French has invaded every aspect of life; especially in the critical fields of education, administration, finance, etc. This aspect is going to be discussed further in the section devoted to Dislocated French. But on pure sociolinguistic terms; French is always already present in both of these countries. Mastering it comes with an automatic symbolic capital. Such a mastery is shaped by access to economic capital, and ends up re-enforcing the same structures of access to such capital.

Amazigh

In addition to Arabic, which is declared as an official language, and French, which as we have seen is “inexistent” in official discourses only to be omni-present in practice, a third family of languages exists in the region. Amazigh is a word that refers to both the indigenous people of North Africa and their languages. There exists at least eight (mutually unintelligible) varieties of Amazigh between Morocco and Algeria, to only name a few:

3 http://www.maroc.ma/fr/content/constitution-0
4 See Bourdieu, Langage et pouvoir symbolique (2002)
Tamazight, Tarifit, Tachelhit, Tamaceq, Tacenwit, Taqbalit and Tachawit. Such varieties have existed and evolved in the region for thousands of years. Contrary to popular belief they were also written languages with archeological inscriptions dating to 1500 years ago. Such a writing tradition has been shaken by the constant changes of conquerors and regimes in the North African region. There are today at least three different ways of writing Amazigh. Tifinagh, is the oldest and original writing system and it is the one that was “updated” in Morocco in order to be used for the standardization of “Amazigh”. These languages are also written using Arabic script, as well as the Latin one, for the obvious historical facts related to the earlier invasion of the “Arabs” and the more recent one of the French. The main reason behind such an abundance of choice relates to the language continuing to pass from generation to generation only in an oral form. This aspect is of course the result of the conscious stigmatization of these languages by the Arab conquerors. After the (sometimes violent) spread of Islam to the region, many Amazigh tribes joined the new religion. In an imposed process of assimilation they were forced to speak “Arabic”. Such a stigmatization continued until the relatively recent past. The official recognition of the language only came in July 2011. That date, for those who have good memory, is going to ring a bell called “The Arab Spring”. Indeed, the official recognition, the standardization of what the Moroccan constitution refers to as “Amazigh”, happened as a direct result of the events that were going on in the region. The state saw this as an opportunity to shift the

5 There are also different varieties spoken in neighboring countries such as Libya, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, etc.


anger of the Amazigh who, in both Morocco and Algeria, systematically happen to live in areas that are the least developed.  

Social inequality and injustice has indeed always been related to linguistic issues in both Algeria and Morocco. The situation of Amazigh is only a symptom of deeper racial and ethnic issues. Then comes the standardization and official recognition. The latter of course did not happen without drawbacks. The main one, probably due to the urgency of such a recognition, is related to the very choice of which variety to select. As I mentioned before, there are several varieties, at least three in Morocco, and even more in Algeria. So, the new institution “Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe” (The Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture), which was almost brought to life between dawn and day by a royal decision, had to come up with a standard version of the language; and quickly at that. Such a rush made these scholars come up with a sort of mix of the main three varieties that exist in Morocco. They also came up with a neo-Tifinagh script which was going to be adopted. Royal decrees pertained to the issues about the teaching of the language in the elementary educational system. Such a decision of course brought a lot of confusion as kids who would be speaking their varieties of Amazigh at home, would go to school to learn something completely different at school. Another decision was made to produce all official documents, and the names of institutions in the Tifinagh script. Ironically, other than the handful of scholars who were responsible for standardizing such a script, nobody in the whole country was able to read these signs on highways, official institutions, schools, etc.

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8 This issue is an on-going one as recent protests in Morocco (2017-ongoing) have taken root in the city of Housseima. A city that is part of the “Rif” region, which is dominantly Amazigh (where Tarifit is the main language).
A frighteningly similar situation took place in Algeria. Ibtissem Chahou writes in *La Situation sociolinguistique de l’Algerie* (2013):


Indeed, the recognition of Amazigh’s linguistic and cultural heritage happened around the same time, which as I mentioned earlier also coincides with the events referred to as the Arab Spring. Such a conflicting situation has existed in both countries for decades. The decision of both states to “do something about it” happening around the same time only speaks to the threat that they both saw in the events that were taking place in the region. But such political decisions from the rulers of both Algeria and Morocco only tells us one thing: Language is always/already political.

**Arabic**

The other “language” that exists in both the spaces referred to as Algeria and Morocco is Arabic. It is the language of education⁹. Although it is important to note that due to the constant push and pull of ideological forces that operate in both countries, it is extremely hard to offer a stable and rigid image of the situation. As Fouad Laroui notes in *Le Drame linguistique marocain* (2011):

Cependant – et c’est cela qui fait l’originalité du Maroc – même dans l’enseignement ‘marocain’, donc hors écoles de la Mission française et assimilées, certaines matières sont enseignées en français. (Tout cela varie au gré des reformes et contre-réformes qui se succèdent et c’est pourquoi

---

⁹ Note that it is only dominant in public education as most private schools are known to focus on French and now even English. There are also several French “Mission” schools which are believed to offer the best education in both countries.
il est difficile de donner une image stable et figée de la situation linguistique au Maroc. (8)

Let me try to give a short overview of what it concretely means for a young Algerian or Moroccan to grow up in such an educational system. First, one is born into a family where French is the dominant language. This is a rare situation and as I mentioned before one that is going to be related to questions of economic and symbolic capital. In this case, the kid would probably go to a French mission school where French is the language of education. Arabic is a foreign language and is not even a requirement for those who are not from Algerian or Moroccan families. This kid has the highest chances to succeed in life, as she/he goes to school to learn about the world in their own language; in this case French.

Second, a kid whose parents speak mainly Darija at home and ends up going to a private school because her/his parents could afford it. Such a person would be confronted with two new languages in school, namely “Arabic” and “French”. This shock is sometimes felt consciously and sometimes unconsciously as many kids would be made to believe that “Arabic” is the same language (or an extension of it) that they were already speaking.

Finally, a last example is provided by Fouad Laroui, when he refers to the experience of Moroccan writer Mohamed Nedali, in the following passage:

Ainsi l’écrivain Mohamed Nedali nous a affirmé qu’il avait été confronté successivement à cinq langues: le Tamazight dans la toute petite enfance, puis l’arabe littéraire à l’école en même temps que l’arabe dialectal (dans la cour de l’école, pour communiquer avec ses condisciples, puis, très rapidement, le français comme ‘langue étrangère’ – langue étrangère paradoxale, puisque les disciplines scientifiques étaient enseignées dans cette langue… Plus tard, au collège, il apprit l’anglais, cette fois-ci comme ‘vraie’ langue étrangère. (8-9)

10 This language will be discussed immediately after this section.
Indeed, these linguistic issues in North Africa are not only intellectually interesting but they also happen to impact the lives of millions of people. Let us clearly note that for every success story (like that of Mohamed Nedali, and others) that happens almost as an anomaly of the system, there are millions of failure-stories that do not make their way to the scholarly and intellectual structural surfaces. The previous quote by Fouad Laroui also sheds light on the special status that the French language has in Morocco, as a “foreign” language that is not that “foreign”. The main issue with that quotation, and with his work in general is that he falls into an epistemic flaw: that of diglossia, to which we turn now.

**Diglossia**

Charles Ferguson’s seminal work on Diglossia did indeed come with a groundbreaking idea that will shape sociolinguistic studies for the years to come. Later on, many intellectuals tried to build upon it, like Fishman in his study entitled: *Diglossia without bilingualism; or bilingualism without diglossia* (1967) where the latter made some refinements on the concept and tried to make a clear cut of when the concept was relevant, and when it was rather an instance of bilingualism rather than diglossia. More importantly I believe that although Ferguson’s study was indeed groundbreaking it came with a very important flaw in its very genesis. This is a flaw that even Fishman failed to see, or was not interested in seeing.

The debate around diglossia has at its core a division between written and oral languages. In that regard, I will turn to Bakhtin’s concepts of centripetal as well as centrifugal forces that I believe to be of utmost importance to this topic, followed by a look at Derrida’s discussions about orality vs. the written word – extrapolated mainly in *De la grammatologie* (1967) as well as Michel Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* (1966). Finally,
I will conclude by talking about Bernstein’s discussion about the role of what he calls agents of socialization\textsuperscript{11}.

To begin, I would like to push my argument and criticism of Ferguson and Fishman a little further before providing more specific examples. First of all, I would like to mention that what is referred to as “the Arab world” is a western euro-centric orientalist construct that was later adopted by dominant discourses in that region in order to create a discursive hegemony where “Arabness” is the dominant structure in the region. For the purposes of this dissertation I am focusing on Algeria and Morocco. Of course, the situation in both of them as well as in each country of the so-called “Arab-world” is inherently different. Therefore, the first criticism of Ferguson is a lack of specificity. While on the one hand he gives very specific “diglossic” examples from Switzerland (a country with a total population smaller than Casablanca); on the other hand he comments about the Arab world as being a uniform entity. I believe such analysis to be inherently flawed as it is based on a subtle form of orientalism that unfortunately still exists even today in some academic discourses. The only point that I believe Ferguson got right is his claim that some people (and there are many of them) would go as far as to claim that the “lower” variety of the language does not even exist.

The second point that I discern as a massive flaw in Ferguson’s study is the complete absence of concepts of “power” and hegemony in his vocabulary. As we have seen earlier with the standardization of Amazigh, issues of language, power, hegemony, politics are inherently intertwined. The feeling that one gets when reading his study as well as Fishman’s elaboration is that the linguistic situation where two varieties of the same language both co-exist together each one with its own domains of use is really a matter of fact, and in philosophical terms is

\textsuperscript{11} See Basil Bernstein’s \textit{Class, Codes and Control} (1971)
an a-priori truth, to use Gottfried Leibniz’s concept. More precisely, while being right on the fact that two languages do indeed make their use almost necessary in certain arenas of power, such a phenomenon is deeply related to ideological and power structures that are at play. Their use is not as clear-cut as Ferguson describes them to be. The situation is also not a “static” one. It is constantly enduring a “push and pull” between what Mikhail Bakhtin coins “the centripetal and centrifugal forces” in society. Such a process is happening literally every day; making gains in some areas and losing power in others.

For instance, a student who goes to talk to a professor at a Moroccan University at an “Arabic” studies department is not going to use “Standard Arabic” out of love for the language, or because she/he feels her identity is best expressed in it. The student is most likely to use Standard Arabic as the result of the power structures that constitute the very nature of the discourse between a Moroccan professor and a university student. Using “Darija”, is believed by some, to make the student appear “less educated” and “less smart”. Another example would be, in the work space, a new employee going to his first meeting with her/his boss in an Arabic-newspaper; while the employees of similar rank would be using Darija, but when going to talk to their boss it is most likely that a switch to Arabic is going to happen. Again, it is not because there is some sort of “space” that the interlocutor walks into thinking “now I am moving to Arabic” or “now I am back to Darija”. It is rather the power structures that shape such a hegemony. It is also those very structures that dictate which language should be used, when, and for what purposes. In addition, it is the same hegemonic structures that make some people feel that their own “authentic” language, their mother-tongue (Darija or Amazigh), is inferior to Arabic. Of course, as I previously mentioned, one needs to keep in mind that these situations are not static. There is always space for agency. But what is completely absent from the diglossia argument is that it fails to see the following: the very choice of one language over
another, one variety over another, conscious or unconscious it might be, is always already the result of power, hegemony and dominance.

**Writing Systems**

Darija is a language. Yet, it is one that does not have a “standard” written mode. Similar to the model of the Amazigh languages that we quickly looked at earlier in this chapter, it is a language that expresses itself in writing in two ways. Darija natives would use Latin script or the Arabic one in order to express themselves in their language. The history behind the development of both scripts is deeply linked to new technologies. The most common way of writing Darija\(^{12}\) is through the Latin script. The reasoning behind this is related to the digital world. After computers and the internet started becoming more and more democratized in Morocco, young people had to find creative ways to express themselves. Due to the fact that French “Azerty” keyboards were the first to be available in the country, young people started phonetically transcribing their language. For the sounds that did not exist in French or Latin languages they got even more creative. They used numbers to refer to the sounds that were hard to phonetically transcribe using Latin letters. The number 7 for example refers to the sound /ħ/, number 9 to /q/, number 5 to /x/, etc. Although there is no statistical research on the topic, this way of writing became extremely democratized in both Morocco and Algeria.

It is also interesting to note that this way of writing Darija is usually unintelligible to people from Middle Eastern countries (including Egypt). Due to the fact that this creative way of transcribing Darija came as a direct result of people using French “Azerty” keyboards, it was only common in the countries that have had a colonial history with France. It is also considered nowadays as a way of “coding” one’s language when Algerian or Moroccan

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\(^{12}\) Please note that this is also something that follows the push-pull Bakhtinian model. There are no statistics at the moment that would confirm my claim.
interlocutors wouldn’t want their message to be “received” by people other than those they target (usually in their own communities). This process is very noticeable in rap music for example, where artists would produce “lyric-videos” of their own songs using Latin script. Such videos would only be understood in Morocco and Algeria (sometimes in Tunisia as well) but would be completely unintelligible to the rest of the countries in the region.

On the other hand, there are also artists who stick to the Arabic script while producing their cultural materials in Darija. An example of that can be found in the work of Youssouf Amine Elalamy who wrote what is considered to be the first book in the Darija language. The writer explains that his choice for that script is related to a conscious attempt to “shock” people. To create a feeling of “unease” as the reader would look at the script and take it to be “standard Arabic” but as soon as she/he would start reading they would be shocked that they were actually reading Darija transcribed using the Arabic script. An interesting strategy indeed, even more so since his book was a best-seller in the country, and demanded multiple republications.

While some would look at the variety in graphic representations of the language as a negative aspect, I personally see it as a richness. Indeed, the fact that the language is not officially “standardized” offers it much more freedom and allows for further creativity which in turn contributes to the massive and rapid evolution of Darija.

There is, however, a dominant belief among many Algerians and Moroccans that their language is not “meant” for artistic production. Even worse, that it is not even “capable” of artistic production. This is again related to the dominant structures of power that dictate such

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14 Based on personal communication with the author (2014). This aspect is one that clearly shows the need for a literature in Darija. As contrary to works written in Arabic who get minimal to non-existent readership, his work was a massive popular success.
beliefs. Jacques Derrida sees the source of the fetishization of the written word as stemming from the Greek Empire\textsuperscript{15}. For him however: “Il n’y a pas de hors texte” (De la grammatologie, 220); everything is discourse. He continues by claiming that the supremacy of the written word will only reach its peak after the invention of the printer. Although Darija is a language that does indeed have a writing system, it is not considered by normative scholarship as a written language, because it does not have a history of written literature.

Such a belief is of course questioned by many contemporary artists and scholars such as Youssouf Amine Elalamy. In his book T9er9ib Nab (2006) he takes stories, folktales and writes them. He subverts the codes in two ways. First, he writes them in a language that is “supposed” to be only spoken. Second, he uses the Arabic script to write about very mundane topics, and also ones that are considered to “not exist” in the dominant Arabic discourses; such as political struggles, non-normative sexualities, etc. By doing so, the writer subverts the Arabic system. Such a subversion has many results, one of which is in fact that of creating a conscious awareness about the very “existence” and “potential” of Darija.

On the other hand, Michel Foucault looks at writing from a much wider perspective and sees it to be in nature. Writing for him is deeply engrained in everything that is in the world. He claims that even the human body has “written” information in it, in the example of how our DNA is structured. For Foucault, writing is always already there. And just like any “natural” thing it follows the rules of nature that would draw things together at times and pull them apart at other times. It is indeed very interesting to note the similarity between Foucault’s views and Bakhtin’s centripetal and centrifugal forces; what the first sees in nature the latter sees in society. As much as I agree with Foucault’s view about the need to write as emanating

\textsuperscript{15} See Of grammatology, 1967.
from nature. I still believe that natural instincts tend to alas be subject to societal and political structures of power. We saw earlier how Amazigh is a language that is “oral” in popular belief. Yet, there are documented written inscriptions of the language dating to more than 1500 years. So if one is look at Foucault’s model, yes, the will to write was there “naturally” but it was crushed by the hegemonic structures that saw in its existence a threat to Arabic.

On another level, Bernstein talks about agencies of socialization as being responsible for “shaping” what language or what “good” language is. His agencies of socialization include structures like “school”, “the family”, etc. which approach is very much reminiscent of Louis Althusser’s concept of the ideological state apparatus. Bernstein focuses on the agency of the family and he demonstrates how a kid “learns” how to use appropriate language. He also refers to the disciplining virtue that such a process has; turning the kid to a good social being. Indeed, when this view is extrapolated to the Algerian or Moroccan spheres it immediately becomes complicated. The belief, according to Bernstein’s view, is that what he calls his agencies of socialization are all working together to create one good way of speaking/writing. In the case of the countries that are of interest to this dissertation these agencies are actually competing with each other not only about “how” to properly speak a language and write in it, but about “which” one to use in the first place.

**Language as Symbolic Capital**

Pierre Bourdieu’s perspective in general and his concept of symbolic capital in particular are key to the understanding of the sociolinguistic situation in North Africa. As early as the first page of his introduction to *Language and Symbolic Power* (1982) [Based on the original French text: *Ce que parler veut dire*] The French intellectual writes: (talking about the fields of sociology and anthropology) “one accepted the core intention of linguistics, namely, the intellectualist philosophy which treats language as an object of
contemplation rather than an instrument of action and power.” (37) He continues: “To accept the Saussurian model and its presuppositions is to treat the social world as a universe of symbolic exchanges and to reduce action to an act of communication.” (38) Bourdieu makes it clear as ice that language, for him, is not an objective tool of communication. It is rather a domain where power and resistance are continuously struggling against one another16. To not take this perspective into account is to miss a large proportion of the bigger picture.

In his chapter entitled “The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language” Bourdieu starts with an interesting quote from Auguste Comte: “Language forms a kind of wealth, which all can make use of at once without causing any diminution of the store, and which thus admits a complete community of enjoyment; for all, freely participating in the general treasure, unconsciously aid in its preservation.” (43) He quickly comments on this quotation and argues that by saying that such an elusive metaphor (that of language as a common treasure) completely ignores an aspect that is primordial to language: that of dispossession. Bourdieu continues: “To speak of the language, without further specification, as linguists do, is tacitly to accept the official definition of the official language of a political unit. This language is the one which, within the territorial limits of that unit, imposes itself on the whole population as the only legitimate language” (45). This aspect of tacitly accepting the official discourses, as another way of giving up one’s linguistic rights to an official entity such as the state is something that is going to come up in numerous occasions in the analysis of several works in this dissertation.

16 See Ralph Heyndels, “Public Speech, Agoraphobis and the Aporia of ‘Lying Truly’”
The fetishizing of what Bourdieu calls “the legitimate language” is another process that is at the very heart of this dissertation. Indeed, the French intellectual was looking at a different situation, namely the French circumstance. One needs to remember that applying such concepts to the North African region doesn’t come without its flaws. At a time when Bourdieu was looking at different varieties of French with one “legitimate” version, I am looking at a handful varieties of many languages. The main two dominant “legitimate” ones are Arabic and French. The two languages are constantly exercising their power on each other, but also, and maybe even more importantly, on the two native languages of the region: Amazigh and Darija. The situation gets even more complex as we will see in my development of both concepts of Dislocated French and Phantom Arabic. The hegemonic dominance of both French and Arabic does not happen only from the institutional levels (the state, school, administration, etc.): it also comes from within the very individuals that it is oppressing. This aspect is one that has never been addressed in scholarship about the area. Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts are indeed extremely beneficial to an understanding of the situation, yet they do not offer an exhaustive understanding of it. Hence the need to propose the new concepts of Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French, two concepts which, as we will discuss further, exercise their power both at the social, political, and institutional levels, as well as at the very personal and psychological ones.

Another way through which Bourdieu’s insights are primordial to the development of this dissertation is his discussion of what he calls the linguistic capital and the linguistic market. He writes: “The constitution of a linguistic market creates the conditions for an objective competition in and through which the legitimate competence can function as linguistic capital” (55). Both these concepts are going to be key in understanding issues related to cultural
production in North Africa, its audiences, publishing, etc. These concepts are also key to the argument that I present in this dissertation of “Francophonie” as linguistic capital in the so-called francophone world, in general, and in North Africa, in particular. Bourdieu’s insights also illuminate us about questions of access. As we will see with Abdellah Taïa, the very access to the linguistic capital of French in Morocco is inherently linked to issues of economic capital.

When it comes to issues of cultural production, it is very clear that in the contemporary period, the market is going to play a huge role in what language exists where. Bourdieu gives the example of those who were defending the need to teach Latin in French schools. The latter was considered a language requirement in most schools until a very recent past. Bourdieu sees that the market played an important role in “killing” the Latin language. In this dissertation I predict that a similar process is happening to the Arabic language, as we will see in the following chapters dedicated to film and literature. Such observations are extremely important to keep in mind in order to understand why most (good) literature from the region is in French and not in Arabic.

The issue of unequal distribution of linguistic capital is also another pillar of this dissertation. But as I mentioned earlier, the reason behind the very need to come up with a new concept, such as Phantom Arabic, is because relying on other currently available theories and concepts paints an incomplete picture of the situation. Let me try to illustrate what I mean by this. Theoretically, someone in France who does not have access to “legitimate” French would be aware of such a lack. Maybe this person would not understand the complex power structures that are at work to produce his or her dispossession, on one hand, and to consider whatever language she/he uses as non-legitimate, on the other. In Algeria or Morocco, the person who

\[17\] By the way, this is also noticeable in contemporary music in Algeria and Morocco, more specifically in urban forms of musical expression such as rap and hip hop.
lacks such access would ignore that they are lacking anything. Concretely speaking, someone who does not know Arabic, or has minimal knowledge of the language, would consider that the Darija that they know is actually “Arabic”. And by being unconscious of their own ignorance, they add a layer of complexity to the whole situation. It is a fact that for those who do not speak French for example in Morocco, recognizing the language as a linguistic capital is easy to see. It is of course those who do not have such access who seem to note its power and hegemony. But things get complicated when the same ones who do not have access to the Arabic language would defend (to the death) the very same power structures that is dispossessing and oppressing them. Such a peculiar situation is why the need to propose the new concept of Phantom Arabic is crucial to understanding the power structures at play in the region at large, and in the cultural field (art, literature, cinema, theatre, etc.) in particular.

Queering Darija

Darija is native language of the majority of people in Algeria and Morocco\textsuperscript{18}. It is also the language that usually shapes the very multicultural identity of these countries. It is also a language that has many different geographical “dialects”. Speaking one, or the other, is usually going to be a marker of what region one is coming from, her/his education, social class, etc. Like any language, Darija is continually evolving. As I mentioned before, it evolves even faster than many other languages due to its non-official standardization. Words, phrases, expressions, are continuously coined, re-shaped, transformed and abandoned. It is also a language that is by definition multicultural. On the syntactic level, the main influence is that of the Amazigh languages, as Fouad Laroui notes in Le Drame

\textsuperscript{18} Please note that Darija is spoken differently between the two countries. But they are mutually intelligible. The differences are mainly due to historical elements. Such as Spanish and Portuguese presence in Morocco which influenced the language there, but not in Algeria where the main European influence came from French.
linguistique marocain (2011): “Bien entendu, la Darija marocaine est et a été influence par le substrat linguistique berbère, tant au niveau de la syntaxe qu’au niveau du vocabulaire.”

In addition, as Laroui mentions, its vocabulary has been and continuous to be influenced by Amazigh. Not only that: Darija is also a language that was influenced by diverse languages with which it came in contact. The most recent one is English, due to globalization. Then, one can easily spot words and expressions emanating from Spanish and French due to the colonial history of Morocco, and only French in the case of Algeria. Lexical features emanating from Portuguese are also to be noted, due to the colonial presence of this country in many coastal cities of Morocco. If one is to go even deeper in history it is also possible to note influences from Latin, due to the presence of the Roman Empire in many cities in both countries. Finally, it is also possible to note influences from Hebrew, due to the long history of Jewish communities in both countries. Such a (linguistic and cultural) presence is again noticed more in Morocco than in Algeria and that is similarly related to specific moments in the colonial histories of both countries.

Darija is also present all over the world through the Algerian and Moroccan Diasporas. Through that presence, it is also a language that influences other languages, such as French. It also influences contemporary Hebrew in Israel due to the presence of descendants of Moroccan Jews, some of whom continue to speak Darija until this day. There are even groups who organize a sort of pilgrimage to Morocco to honor the memory of King Mohammed V who was famous for refusing to work with the Vichy government during the colonization of Morocco. He is remembered for answering the French

19 A very easy example is words like “Wesh” that came directly from Darija. Such a word does not exist in Arabic.
government who was ordering him to “send his Jews” by saying: “I do not have Jews, I only have Moroccans”. Therefore, Darija is a language of the world today, open to contact with different cultures and languages while also influencing them.

Cultural production in both countries also predominantly happens in Darija. It is extremely hard to find a theatre piece, a film, a song\textsuperscript{20}, or any other form of art that is in another language. Literature is of course the only domain where Darija has not (yet!) made a breakthrough. But such an absence of Darija from that field relates to two reasons: First, due to the very elitist space that literature occupies in both countries (that is also related to their Colonial histories), it has been a field that was almost abandoned by the new generation of artists and writers. Examples of writers (who also for the most part happen to live in France or write for French audiences, in addition to the elites of Morocco) such as Abdellah Taïa, Leïla Sebbar, Mahi Binebine, Rachid O, etc. remain very scarce compared to the abundance of artist in the fields that I previously mentioned. For every Abdellah Taïa, there are hundreds of rap artists, digital film producers, etc.

Darija is all these things, but what it is also is a closeted language. The very topic of this dissertation stands as testimony of that. A language that is so rich on every level, from its cultural influences, to the ones it influences to the abundant creative production that it is responsible for. Yet, it is a closeted language in the sense that it does not emancipate itself from the very power structures that are enslaving it. This is what I mean by a queer Darija. A language that, while being responsible for so much richness and

\textsuperscript{20} There are of course singers from Algeria or Morocco, who would use “Egyptian” or “Khaliji” for purely economic reasons to reach larger audiences, and also ones where the entertainment industries are more developed.
capable of much more, continues to be (in the minds of many of its users) a subaltern language; a language that is sometimes considered to “not even exist”. As I will develop in the following chapter. Darija is a language that suffers from a double domination. On the one hand it is dominated by the frozen language: Arabic. And on the other, it is dominated by the colonial one: French.

The struggle continues. Through different modalities, it forces itself onto both its dominators. The example that are going to be addressed in this dissertation stand as testimony of that. The films that Nabil Ayouch produces are an example of one way through which the language resists the very power structures that are closeting it. The novels by Leïla Sebbar and Abdellah Taïa show, again through different modalities, another side of the coin. What I call Dislocated French, and Phantom Arabic are indeed the two main domains through which power is exerted and resistance is exercised.

**Quelle francophonie ?**

Before delving into the elaboration of those two pillar concepts, I would like to develop a final point that will be fundamental to their understanding. In an article written by Gabrielle Parker, entitled “L’utopie francophone. Grands desseins revus et corrigés” published in Ruptures Postcoloniales (2010), the writer goes back to the roots of la francophonie. She writes that the first known use of the words “Francophone” and “francophonie” are attributed to Onesime Reclus in France, Algerie et colonies (1880). Since their inception, the terms had a geolinguistic and geopolitical meaning. The latter wrote: “Il n’y a plus de races, toutes les familles humaines s’étant entremêlées à l’infini
The apparent progressive vision of Onesime Reclus in refusing to accept the concepts of race is only made clear when he admits that for him, any superiority in the contemporary period is going to have to be a linguistic one. Gabrielle Parker is right in claiming that the latter clearly distinguishes between two concepts: physical frontiers and moral ones. He claims that the one that mattered once was that of religion and that it is now that of language.

Referring to Algeria, Reclus writes:

1830 fut une heureuse année pour la France, qui vit s’ouvrir un nouvel et vaste horizon. (...) Car par l’Algérie, nous entamons ce vaste continent barbare, trois fois plus grand que l’Europe, cinquante fois plus grand que la France (...). Bien avant l’an deux mil, l’Europe aura soumis, bouleversé, pille, ‘retourné’, transformé, ce sol immense, dernier qui lui reste à dompter sur le globe ou les visages-pales ont l’empire.

Where to start? Every single word of the previous quote is worthy of a whole book. But the key point is that the very concept of “la francophonie” was coined by the same person who saw “Africa” as a vast and “barbarous” continent, the same person who prophesied that before the year 2000, these “barbary lands” would have been tamed. Within such a process he clearly saw the French language and what he calls the Francophonie as a key part of its success.

Indeed, as much as it saddens me to say it, time has proven him right. French is indeed the “official” language of 29 countries, 21 of which are in “barbarous” Africa. That number does not even include the countries that are considered part of the so-called “Francophone World” without having the language officially recognized in their

21 Quoted in Ruptures Postcoloniales (235).
22 Reclus O. Lachons l’Asie, prenons l’Afrique, (591-592). Quoted in Ruptures Postcoloniales (236)
constitutions, like Algeria and Morocco. Indeed, French did not come to Africa on the back of a flamingo. It came at the highest of costs: the cost of blood, of cultural dispossession, of injustice and of dominance.

Endemic to postcolonial spaces, an era of amnesia proliferates. Furthermore, a process of colonial Aphasia, as Ann Laura Stoler calls it (2011), interlaces with the former. Finally, and maybe the deepest of all postcolonial fractures, an unconscious hegemonic belief that one’s own cultures, languages, ways of seeing and being in the world are subordinate to that of the colonizer and spreads like cancer. Indeed, it is in this context that this work places itself. What I propose as Dislocated French and Phantom Arabic are the results of these fundamental endemic postcolonial processes. These two concepts are at the same time shaped by the very power structures we elucidate here and, sometimes, participate in resisting them.

**Dislocated French**

I call Dislocated French a use of the language that disturbs its normal positioning. Such a dislocation can happen through several modalities. First, such a concept refuses to adhere to the hegemonic francophone notion, where writers from France “are writers of French” and those in the “peripheries” are “francophone writers”. This concept views all writing in French to be simply what it is: literature of French expression. It does not distinguish between different writers based on their geographical location, nationality, gender, class, etc. It focuses on their relationship vis-à-vis French in both their biographical realms as well as in their fictional ones. Dislocated French writing is one that does not

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23 The very notion of the centrality of French and France is nulled through this concept of Dislocated French.
follow the hegemonic models in the sense that the writers, wherever they are from, take control of the language and make it theirs. Through such appropriation of the language, they disturb, distort, discontinue, and of course dislocate its very hegemonic centrality.

The writers and filmmakers that this dissertation scrutinizes all participate, through different modalities, in the dislocation of French. Jean Genet, of course a French writer, looked at the very French language as being “foreign” to him - since it was always outside of the realm of his unprivileged childhood. More importantly, he views it as the “language of the enemy”, one which he masters for the main purpose of forcing it to bear his messages. Ones, which as he says, testify of great suffering. By forcing his messages to “fit” in this language that he sees as foreign to himself he participates in what I call here a Dislocated French. Abdellah Taïa shares a similar experience. Growing up in Morocco in an underprivileged social class, French was always-already outside of his reach. As for Genet, its dominance however, was something that he felt and lived on a day to day basis. It is only later in life that he decided not only to learn the language but to write in it. Through his writing, which he infuses with Darija, he makes it his own. Furthermore, Leïla Sebbar is a French citizen whose native language also happens to be French, but whose relationship towards the language is more than conflictual. In it, she sees the structures that fractured her link to her own motherland (Algeria) and to her father’s language and culture. She therefore dislocated it by fantasizing about her “fathertongue” in a “mothertongue” that she links to colonial processes of domination. She also writes in French in a way that problematizes the very notion of “francophonie”. Finally, Nabil Ayouch is a dual French/Moroccan citizen, who while having grown up in a French banlieue makes movies where almost all his characters are speaking Darija. French only happens to take place in
his films in instances where its use would be considered as authentic by the audience. Through his many movies he dislocates French through its very absence, while its rare occurrences are highly significative, its appearances are always-already linked to issues of power, dominance and symbolic capital.

The idea behind the need to move beyond “francophone” literature has of course been proposed numerous times before this work. Maybe the most crucial moment is what has come to be referred to as “le manifeste des 44” (the manifesto of the 44) which was published on the 16th of May 2007 in Le Monde des livres. In “Pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français” 44 writers ask for a need to go beyond the rigid classifications of “francophone writers” (écrivains francophones) and French writers (écrivains français). The manifesto critiqued the idea that “francophone literature” was tacitly viewed as an exotic variant of its “mother literature”. They also attacked the very idea of “francophonie” as one of the last remains of the colonial era. Moving beyond francophone literature is therefore to move beyond those rigid classification as well as the very idea of centrality of the French language. Although I tend to agree with many of the basic ideas behind the need to move beyond francophone literature (for the very reasons I mentioned earlier) to a world literature in the French language, I think that this manifesto ignores the very crucial aspect

24 The complete list of the signatories is the following: Muriel Barbery, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Alain Borer, Roland Brival, Maryse Condé, Didier Daeninckx, Ananda Devi, Alain Dugrand, Édouard Glissant, Jacques Godbout, Nancy Huston, Koffi Kwahulé, Dany Laferrière, Gilles Lapouge, Jean-Marie Laclavetine, Michel Layaz, Michel Le Bris, le prix Nobel de littérature JMG Le Clézio, Yvon Le Men, Amin Maalouf, Alain Mabanckou, Anna Moï, Wajdi Mouawad, Nimrod, Wilfried N’Sondé, Esther Orner, Erik Orsenna, Benoît Peeters, Patrick Rambaud, Gisèle Pineau, Jean-Claude Pirotte, Grégoire Polet, Patrick Raynal, Raharimanana, Jean Rouaud, Boualem Sansal, Dai Sijie, Brina Svit, Lyonel Trouillot, Anne Vallaey, Jean Vautrin, André Velter, Gary Victor, Abdourahman A. Waberi.

25 Note that the very notion of “écrivains” in the masculine form to refer to both women and men writers is also something that needs to be addressed that these “44” apparently forgot to do.
of the symbolic violence that French operates in the postcolonial world. Moving from one name to the other is good on one level, but addressing the ideological power structures that make French what it is in countries such as Morocco, Algeria, and even inside certain spaces within the territory of the French nation today is fundamental. Dislocated French is therefore a concept that looks at a post-francophone literature as a valid and necessary move, but also includes in its core a critique of the power structures of the “francophonie” as a whole, and not only in the elitist literary spheres.

**Phantom Arabic**

Phantom Arabic is a concept which permits us to see “Arabic” not as a linguistic entity but as an ideological mythical/mythological system. The latter determines at least three instances. First, it disseminates an ignorance of one’s own language and culture. Second, it shapes whatever one calls “Arabic” as a higher, sometimes even, sacred entity. Third, it creates a double illusion: of knowing “Arabic” and of using that same word to refer to “whatever” the person really speaks. The instances that I just mentioned are part of the ideological system that I call Phantom Arabic and they follow a similar pattern. They participate to a somewhat large spectrum. On the one end some would claim that their language does not even exist, and on the other end of the spectrum, people who regard Darija (for example) as a separate language from Arabic, yet an inferior one. Such an ideological construct, as this dissertation will demonstrate, supersedes the opinions of not only “laypeople” but also of highly educated individuals and cultural producers.

This concept is an operative one. I therefore propose it as the beginning of a theoretical inquiry in progress, one in which the power structure and hegemony that dominate the use of the word “Arabic” today is unveiled. The apparent neutrality of such
a concept is deconstructed, as I am going to offer a demonstration in this dissertation. The main argument that we find in most works dealing with these issues is inherently flawed, hence the need for the new lens that I attempt to offer. In his book *Maghreb Divers* (2002) Alek Baylee Toumi offers to deal with the complex issues of language in what he refers to as the Maghreb. More importantly he develops an interesting duality between “le pole dominant” and “le pole dominé”. In discussing the problem of writing in French from the “Maghreb”, he identifies a group which welcomes such a process and another which either tries to resist it or engages in it because of not being able to do otherwise. He further explains that even for writers of French expression the issue of (what I want to call) Arabics (plural intended) arises.

Pursuing an idea that he takes from Algerian author Malek Haddad about feeling (sentir) and writing (écrire), Alek Baylee Toumi asserts:

*L’arabe littéraire n’étant pas la langue maternelle de l’écrivain maghrébin, il ne ‘sent’ pas dans cette langue. Si les deux premières possibilités sont à considérer dans le cas d’écrivains du Moyen-Orient, du fait que l’arabe oriental est proche du littéraire, elles sont à éliminer dans le cas des écrivains maghrébins. Inversement, les deux dernières possibilités ou l’écrivain ‘sent’ en arabe dialectal (maghrébin) sont à considérer dans le cas d’écrivains maghrébins et non dans le cas d’écrivains du Moyen-Orient. Comme la grande majorité des intellectuels maghrébins ont été formés à l’école française, ils ne connaissent pas l’arabe littéraire car on ne leur a pas enseigne.* (23)

Where to start again? This quote provides a very good example of how writers and intellectuals, even those who tend to be more “progressive” or forward-thinking, are still under the domination of what I call Phantom Arabic. The only sentence that I might agree with is the first one. Although I believe that saying “Literary Arabic” presupposes the existence of at least another one, if “literary” is juxtaposed to “classical” Arabic, in the sense of the language of the Quran and that which we consider today the standard version,
are nonetheless themselves different. But Toumi’s quotation states wrong fact after wrong
fact. First of all there is no scientific evidence that what he calls “Oriental Arabic” is closer
to “literary Arabic”. The belief that people in the Middle East speak “better” versions of
Arabic is in itself the result of the ideological myth. It would be just like claiming that
Italian is closer to Latin than other Romance languages. First, it is not true, and second,
who cares? The essential question, that of ideology, power and language are more
important than the empty and useless debates of which one is closer. The second problem
in the previous quotation is the use of “arabe dialectal” (dialectal Arabic). The latter is
problematical on two levels. First the very use of the word “dialect” comes with an
automatic presupposed power dynamic where there is a “language” and its “dialects”. Such
an aspect is ignored in Alek Baylee Toumi’s work. The latter is of course seen here just as
an example of a dominant ideology and a way of viewing and talking about the “Arabic”
question. His flawed argumentation and complete ignorance of the power perspective are
not unique to his case but rather endemic to most contemporary scholarship on these issues.
The second level that I see as being flawed is the very concept of “Arabe dialectal” which
presupposes again the existence of one “Arabic language” and one “Arabic dialect”. We
know, since Foucault for example, how naming is crucial in the discursive transformation
of reality. Substituting the Arabic hegemony with another one, by claiming that these
writers all have something that is “an Arabic dialect” in common, would be falling into the
same pit twice.

It is indeed interesting how even in a work called “Maghreb Divers” is alas not so
diverse as its title claims. Phantom Arabic is endemic not only in scholarly work but also
and maybe even more important in cultural production. The literary texts that we are going
to look at stand as a pure testimony to that. The films that this dissertation scrutinizes also offer another perspective about the way in which Phantom Arabic functions inside a work of fiction. Finally, the intersectionality of Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French is really the key moment at which this dissertation places itself. The combination of both concepts provides a new lens, one that is essential to the critical understanding of a significant part of postcolonial French and so-called Francophone cultural production.
CHAPTER 1
Dislocated French and Phantom Arabic Captivities:
Jean Genet

From the French “Prison Tongue” to Palestine and Morocco
The title of this chapter is inspired by Jean Genet’s work *Un Captif amoureux* (1986) where the protagonist recounts his sojourn amongst the Palestinian resistance/liberation fighters. Jean Genet’s relationship with language is inherently complex and intriguing on many regards. When dealing with the author’s work, one is immediately confronted with a very peculiar situation. Considered today one of the greatest writers in the French language, Jean Genet was once a complete outsider to it. Or, perhaps better said: he was actually looking at French as being completely outside of him. In fact, he went so far as to say that it is a foreign language to him. He even claims that it was only while incarcerated that he came to it. He portrays that moment as having happened when he stumbled upon Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927)26. One might argue that such an allegation is too far-fetched and that Genet is being auto-fictional while making such a claim (it is known that as a youngster, when incarcerated at the “colonie penitentiaire” of Mettray, he had “probably by chance” discovered Ronsard and that he was also found of popular novels. But a realistic inquiry into the biographical background of the writer matters not. In fact, what is of genuine significance is the way Jean Genet wants to project almost self-anthropologically (to himself and to the others, his readers) what has literally been his ingress into French as the highly educated, elitist, semantically

26 On the signification of Proust in the writer’s literary practice and imaginary, see Bertrand in *Dictionnaire Genet*, and Bendhif-Syllas, 2011

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and syntactically sophisticated, literary language it is supposed to be as it is truly what it is: French (see Julien Piat and Philippe Gilles, ed., *La langue litteraire. Une histoire de la prose en France de Gustave Flaubert a Claude Simon*).

For Genet, French is a language that was outside of his underprivileged and socially marginalized youth: “J’ignorais tout, je ne savais même pas dire les choses les plus simples. Pendant des années, je n’ai pas trace trois mots de suite sans me référer à une grammaire élémentaire que je trainais partout” (*Genet: A Biography*, 47). The very situation of how he took the path of entry into French as a “beautiful language” – which *in France as a state* means specifically: literary French\(^\text{27}\) – is extremely significative. He describes it as something that happened while he was incarcerated (at the “colonie pénitentiaire” of Mettray first, in the French prison system later); and it is also in jail that he wrote *Miracle de la rose* later published in 1946\(^\text{28}\). So, if one examines it in an objective, socio-cultural, and symbolic perspective, French is a language that was structurally “imposed” on him, as incarceration itself is of course something imposed on a subject. Even if in the particular “auto-edifying method” Genet will apply to himself, as a response to the condition he was put into, such an imposition (the carceral one and the linguistic one, deeply intricated) will be transformed into an asserted destiny and, from early on, into the self-creation of a “legend” (see Sartre, Ekotto).

One is used to the expression “mother tongue” to refer to someone’s first language, even if, concretely speaking, a person does not know her/his mother (which was actually

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\(^{27}\) See Jean-Marie Rouart in “L’importance de la littérature dans la nation française”, who refers, actually in a positive, laudatory manner, to “le pouvoir littéraire … au cœur même de l’Etat”

the case of Genet, who was abandoned when he was a 7-month old baby). Or even if one speaks a different language from that of the mother. But the seemingly notional metaphor of the “mother tongue” is that language is something one “almost” acquires in the womb of the mother. Jean Genet grew up in foster homes and orphanages, and his childhood was marked with the absence of both the mother and therefore by extension of the “mother tongue”. Even if he was exposed to popular, rural “French patois”, and to elementary and “professional training” schooling which he will later on consider as a “complot sinistre” while at the time he obviously took from it all that he could. As a runaway young vagabond, a petit thug in the making and soon within the carceral system, Genet ended up learning and speaking l’Argot which he considers (and which I agree) to be a language in and by itself. Therefore, going back to the auto-fictive narration of how he acquired the French language, one could claim that French was, for him, a “prison tongue”. It is indeed a language that is always already going to limit him, like the four walls of a cell, by virtue of its very history, and symbolic violence, which he was very well placed to note since he had so deeply experienced it.

Genet selected Proust, and the pathway was for himself subjectively and objectively “elected” by Proust. He wants us to believe that he went from being a petty thief to someone who read Proust in jail and with delight, and who learned (in a sort of miraculous epiphany) the language from him in the blink of an eye. The veracity of such story (or auto-anthropological imaginary narrative) is by itself of no interest. What matters in terms of both auto-reflexive genesis and ideology of language is that the French that Genet wanted

29 See the article “Argot” in Dictionnaire Jean Genet
30 See Claudie Peret, “Une forme de violence symbolique: l’étude de la langue française”.
to gain access to was in fact not simply any French, as he was interested precisely in its highest incarnation: literary elitist French, which ideologically speaking is *French*. Jean Genet brings a singular perspective to this dissertation as far as his way of dislocating French, appropriating it to the under-class and marginal world and “sending it back” from the latter to the symbolic centrality of so-called “high” cultural elites. Nevertheless, his perspective fits right in with the other authors and filmmakers that this dissertation scrutinizes, not only as his relationship with the French language is always quite complicated, but as this complexity is a matrix of signification such as it is the case for Taïa – who writes Moroccan Darija in French while dreaming of an “Arabic” which was never his –, for Sebbar – who mourns “Arabic” in French while having actually lost the Algerian Darija of her youth –, and Ayouch – who films in Moroccan Darija movies which are prized in France and dubbed in French. Genet writes iconastically within and from the margins, the dissidence, the otherness in the most “elevated” forms of French as it is the language of the dominant bourgeoisie and the colonial Whites whom he denounces forcefully while locating himself (ethically, politically, socially, and even socio-geographically) in the world of “The Arabs, the Blacks and the Palestinians” (to quote the title of Hedi Khelil’s book). Such complexity only gets more compelling when one considers the fact that the writer’s life was embedded in a relation with the Arab world since his very youth and when one looks at the work of the “last Genet” (Hadrien Laroche, 2010) one looks through the Phantom Arabic lens.

The French writer who never accepted France as “his” country, speaking of it as “cette sale France que je hais” (in *Lettres à Ibis*, 65), affirming “J’ai su très jeune que je n’étais pas Français …” and “je ne fais pas partie des citoyens français” ( “Entretien avec
B. Poirot-Delpech in *L’Ennemi déclaré*; who considered France as a repressive and “brutal” country\(^{31}\) who asserted that “[he had] always written against [his] country” (Neutres, 36), and who declared that “he was condemned in French”\(^{32}\) has now made of Morocco his final resting place\(^{33}\). His decision to be buried in the place where he went since he was in his twenties (as a soldier of the French colonial army), visited several times, and lived the main part of his life from 1968 to 1986\(^{34}\). Abdellah Taia published in 2010 an edited book entitled *Jean Genet, un saint marocain*. In *Jean Genet et le monde arabe* the Moroccan author and intellectual Mohammed Berrada (who was a friend of Genet) writes:

> Les relations de Genet avec le Maroc ont revêtu des dimensions symboliques imbriquées: de ses pulsions sexuelles et sentimentales à ses contemplations littéraires et à ses position politiques audacieuses, le Maroc était l’espace dans lequel il a redécouvert l’écriture qui lui était devenue impossible, à travers son amour pour la Palestine et pour la cause des opprimés et des pauvres de tous les coins du monde (45).

Such a strong connection between Genet and Morocco has been commented on and celebrated, but it cannot be completely separated from the linguistic one. To love a country, or a geographical space, is indeed to love its cultures, languages, complexities, peculiarities, and its different ways of being in the world. The language aspect is indeed always already part of that equation. Jean Genet’s very existence is inseparable from Moroccan Darija. He frequented humble people in Morocco, whose social self-proclaimed “elites” he hated. Not only did he befriend Mohamed Choukri, but also Ayachi, a shoeshine

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\(^{31}\) See “Violence et brutalité” in *L’Ennemi déclaré*.

\(^{32}\) See “Entretien avec Hubert Fichte” in *L’Ennemi déclaré*.

\(^{33}\) See Ralph Heyndels, “Larache” in *Dictionnaire Jean Gen*.

\(^{34}\) See the article “Maroc” by Stephane Baquey, as well as “Tanger”, “Mohamed El Katrani” and “Azzedine El Katrani” by Ralph Heyndels in *Dictionnaire Jean Genet*. 
boy in Tanger, Abdallah El Alioui, an hotel receptionist and Zohor Chergui, an hotel cleaning lady in Rabat, family members of his lover Mohamed El Katrani whom he met while the young man was sleeping in the street (Amina El Katrani says that the writer was “meskine”, which means “poor”), and these are only a few ones (among so many more) whom Souad Guenoun was able to interview for her photography book *L’ultime parcours de Jean Genet* (2001). All these people were not speaking “Arabic”, they were mixing Darija with the little French they knew. They were the humane but also linguistic world surrounding Genet. No scholarly attention has been paid to this very significant aspect of the writer’s emotional/linguistic environment.

Jean Genet has also traveled through other countries of the Maghreb and the Middle East, including Syria, Jordan, the Palestinian refugee camps, Lebanon, Egypt and Tunisia. In fact, parts of *Un Captif amoureux* revolve around auto-fictive narrations of his travels in the region. Therefore, Genet was exposed to the different languages that exist in North Africa and the Middle East. He even, apparently, learned to communicate in some of them, and we have a few textual evidences of this, about which I will return in this chapter. In Morocco, he is indeed famous for having been very good friends with Mohamed Choukri (who also is someone who came to both “Arabic” and French at a later moment in life) (see Choukri, *Jean Genet et Tennessee Williams a Tanger*) and other writers and intellectuals of the time (the Arabic writer Mohammed Berrada, the francographic writer Abdelkhebir Khatibi who later on dedicated to him a section of his *Figure de l’étranger*). Although there are almost no documented instances of Jean Genet speaking Darija or Arabic (with the rare anecdotal exceptions of Edward Said or Tahar Ben Jelloun) I will attempt to show evidence that in addition to his dislocated French prison - tongue he did indeed share a
conflictual relationship towards what I call Phantom Arabic, often obliterated by references to his “intérêt pour la culture arabe” (Moreno, 161).

**The Language of the Enemy**

In an interview that the author gave to Bertrand Poirot-Delpech in 1982, Jean Genet narrates the story of a grammatical choice he made in his very first book *Notre-dame des fleurs* (1943). He tells of a debate he had with an editor at his publishing house about a sentence that reads as follow: “Weidmann *vous* apparut.” He explains that the editor wanted him to put “Weidmann *nous* apparut”, a request that he adamantly refused. When asked by Bertrand Poirot-Delpech if his insistence on the “*vous*” form – which actually occupies a rhetorically strategic position in his writing in general, as commented on by Ralph Heyndels in “Nuit politique du desir: l’engagement amoureux de Jean Genet” and by Daniel Lance in *Jean Genet, ou la quete de l’ange*, 113) – was a way to distance himself, Genet answers: “*Je prenais mes distances mais en respectant les règles, vos règles.*”

What started as a question from Poirot-Delpech wondering about Genet’s attempt to distance himself vis-à-vis a certain type of intelligentsia that he knows will constitute his main readership, quickly transforms in his answer into a language issue. Genet answers that, yes, it is distancing! But he is quick to mention that it is a distancing that operates through the very rules of the intelligentsia he is addressing. “*Etranger dans son propre pays*” (Khelil, 15), he dissociates himself not only from the people he is addressing but also and even more importantly from “their” language. The same language he happens to be using while answering that very interview, as well as while writing all his work.

35 English Translation: I distance myself but within the rules, *your* rules.
Perhaps the most important point to note is that Jean Genet’s dislocation of French is a process of which he is conscious of and familiar with. It is not something that happens in a vacuum. The previous quote proves two things: First, that the conflictual rapport that Jean Genet holds towards his “prison tongue” belongs, for him, to the conscious realm. Second, that not only is he conscious of it but he also uses it to imbue the French language with certain sensibilities that, in his opinion, were not supposed to be expressed in it prior to his work. He places his own writing in a sort of radical activist modality. Not an activist modality in the political sense, although he could be viewed as an activist in his personal life. What I mean by that is actually a poetic type of activism that was extremely rare, close to non-existent, in French literature prior to Genet, with the notable exception of Arthur Rimbaud whom Genet admired greatly and who, by the way, also dislocated French dans tous les sens (including in transposing it in his Arabo-African self-imposed exile) and learned Arabic and Amharic…

Jean Genet writes in the language of the enemy. He says: “Ce que j'avais à dire à l'ennemi. Il fallait le dire dans sa langue, pas dans la langue étrangère qu'aurait été l'argot.” Again, two very important points are to be noted here. First, Genet talks about a need to address the enemy in his own language. A language that is not one’s own by virtue of being the enemy’s or the other’s. Second, Genet identifies Argot in a negative-dialectic type of fashion as being a foreign language to the enemy, and therefore being his own. It is of crucial importance to remember however that the enemy to which Genet is referring is the French intelligentsia. Genet has always been aware of a need to “be accepted” and to almost “seduce” that very intelligentsia into accepting him in order for his messages to be
heard. Those whom he also calls his “torturers”36 had to hear his message, which would have been considered as null and void were it to be written in Argot. The choice of the “beautiful language” according to Genet is due to a need to attack and assault his torturers. “In Argot they would not have listened”37 he says, hence the need to write a certain way and to become part of the very language that oppressed him, in order to combat it.

Hence Jean Genet shares with the other authors of this dissertation a very conflictual relationship with/towards the French language. He is not only worthy to be considered amongst them, but even holds the first place here as I believe him to be an exemplary instance of someone writing from the intersection of Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French; hence the reason why I include him in the opening chapter of this dissertation. Genet “Trojan-horses” the French language, the language of the elite, the “beautiful” language, and makes it capable of not only bearing his messages, ones that as he says will “testify of great suffering”38, but also and more importantly of making them “heard”, of “shouting them” in the face of his torturers/torturers. His relationship to the language of the enemy holds a significance that is very interestingly similar amongst all the authors that this dissertation considers. Such a relationship results in an a-priori dislocation of the very French in which he writes, all while being under the ideological umbrella of Phantom Arabic.

36 He uses the word “tortionnaires” in the original work.
37 “En argot ils ne m’auraient pas écouté.”
38 “témoignait de tellement de souffrances,”
Learning some “Arabic”

The intersection between Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French also plays the very role that it does (in a diversity of modalities) in the works of the other authors in this dissertation: that of being “productrice d’écriture”. It pushes Genet (as it does the other writers) to write in a language that he considers “foreign” to himself - but one whose rules he also “respects” while writing in it as beautifully as, maybe even more beautifully than, those whom he is addressing among the French intelligentsia. What is of extreme importance to remember here is the mythical relationship that Genet feels towards “standard” (educated, elitist, literary) French. The latter was totally outside of the realm of his marginalized youth, during which he was separated from it in a way that we will identify in Taïa’s relation to both literary Arabic and French, in Sebbar’s estrangement from “Arabic”, and in Ayouch’s filmic use of so-called popular/subaltern Darija within a dominantly French cinematic production.

Jean Genet’s relationship with/towards language is made even more complex when it comes to the issue of “Arabic”. In order to escape the “bagne d’enfants” (children prison) of Mettray, and to satisfy his desire for travelling “sur les routes du Sud” (Neutres 66) the very young Genet entered in 1930 the French colonial army (which he deserted in 1936, entering the life of an illegal vagabond who will be arrested and jailed several times). As a soldier in the years 1930-1933, he will end up first in Damas (after having arrived in Beyrouth), where he stayed 11 months, and later on in Meknes, where he stayed 19 months\(^{39}\). According to Albert Dichy’s *Chronologie* it is in this very period of his existence

\(^{39}\) See White, chapter 4; Neutres, 153 seq.
that his deep attachment to the Arab world started: “Il noue dans ces deux lieux ses premiers contacts avec le monde arabe auquel il restera attacher toute sa vie” (308). It should also be noted that his regiment included Tunisian soldiers with whom Genet was acquainted, and this could have been his first language contact with a variation of Darija. In the 1982 filmed interview with Bertrand Poirot-Delpech mentioned earlier, and while recounting a story about his experience in Damascus, the author is quoted saying: “comme j’apprenais un peu l’arabe” (195). This assertion is nothing but the very tip of the iceberg that represents Genet’s relationship with “Arabic”. The writer was evoking his existential experience while in Syria, a country which was at the time was being bombarded by the French army. The man in charge of the French attacks on Syria was a general named Gouraud. Genet says that he discovers what a “disgusting person” the French general was, and started having a double vision, that of the “hero” who Gouraud was painted to be in France and the absolute monster that he was seen to be in Syria. Genet writes about his escapades sneaking out of his residence to meet Syrian young men who were giving him a tour of the ruins. He writes: “Les petits gars de Damas prenaient un grand plaisir à me promener dans les ruines qu’avaient faites les canons du général Gouraud” (228). Such a narrative, especially happening after the claim he makes about “learning some Arabic”, presupposes some form of communication going on between him and his “tour-guides”.

Things get even more complex when Genet writes about his experience playing cards in the Mosque with the Syrians. He continues:

Les jeux de cartes étaient interdits par le gouvernement français. Alors j’allais jouer avec eux dans les petites mosquées jusqu’à quatre ou cinq heures du matin et, pour me faire bien voir d’eux, je disais du mal de Gouraud. Mais, peu à peu, je comprenais que Gouraud était un saligaud (228)
This passage demonstrates very clearly that Genet was not seen by the Syrians as an outsider. First, the fact that he was allowed to enter a Mosque is definitive testimony to that. Mosques, in general, are only accessible to people of the Muslim faith. In addition, as the passage demonstrates, the young Syrians would gather in a mosque to play cards. Since playing cards was made illegal by the French occupier, young Syrian people found the mosque a strategic place to do so. French solders (considered as infidels) were not allowed inside a Mosque. Therefore, the buildings provided a safe and free space, to engage in behavior that was considered to be illegal by the occupying state. The fact that Genet was let in, and allowed to join such activities is proof that he was accepted by the youngsters to not be “an infidel”. His ability of understanding and communicating in their language likely played a role in this acceptance.

However, while actually listening to, comprehending, and speaking Levantine Genet was hearing the world through the ideological symbolic signified of Phantom Arabic, as of course the youngsters from poor neighborhoods in which he was hanging out and illegally playing cards with (forbidden under French occupation!) were not speaking Standard Arabic. Also, one must bear in mind that had Genet spoken standard Arabic to them, he would never have been considered a part of their community, since speaking that language, even mastering it, never allows for group-belonging. In other terms, to these young Syrians, if a person is speaking standard Arabic to them, they would immediately look at her/him as an outsider. Due to the very fact that Genet (as a French man) was let
into their very private and “criminal”\textsuperscript{40} circle can only mean that whatever “little Arabic” he was learning, was in fact Levantine.

Another example that proves the previous point is the short text entitled “Les Femmes de Djebel Hussein” in \textit{L’ennemi déclaré} (1991). Genet this time recounts an experience in Palestine. Four women sitting around a dying campfire ask him to sit and join them. In his words: “Quatre femmes âgées, rides, étaient accroupies autour d’un foyer éteint: deux ou trois pierres noircies et une théière en aluminium cabossée. Elles me dissent de m’asseoir.” (139) First, one must note that Genet does not write “they asked me to sit” or “they signaled me to sit”, but rather he uses the verb “dire” (to say/to tell). From the very beginning of this passage one is intrigued by Genet’s understanding of these women. The textual evidence in the previous passage also demonstrates that whatever the women were speaking was not standard Arabic, as they were all “older”, and due to the contemporary situation in Palestine at the time surely “illiterate”. Genet continues to report the conversation he had with them. They say: “– Nous sommes chez nous, tu vois. Tu veux du the ? (Elles souriaient)” (139) Genet of course reports this conversation in French, but makes sure to put it between brackets, probably as a sign to the reader that he is translating precisely what was said. In addition, the fact that he writes that “they were smiling” between parenthesis “(Elles souriaient)” (139) is a way to differentiate what might be considered as body language with real linguistic speech. Had the women waved at him to sit, or talked to him using signs, he would have included such information between parentheses as he did for the fact that they smiled at him. Obviously, smiling is not

\textsuperscript{40} The word is used ironically here. The crime being: playing cards.
something that can be transcribed in a conversation and it is not something the reader would have guessed if that information was not textually included. The passage continues as follow:

- Chez vous ?
- Oui. (Elles rirent.) Il ne reste plus que les pierres pour faire du feu. Nos cavales on été brulées.
- Par qui?
- Hussein. Tu viens de France. On dit que ton pays soutient les Arabes ; est-ce qu’il sait faire la différence entre Hussein et les Arabes ? (139)

Again, Genet transcribes the events of the conversation he had with these women as a dialogue. In another instance of including information that may not be visible to the reader through text, he makes sure to include: “(Elles rirent)” between parenthesis. But what were they speaking? These older Palestinian women who have never been schooled would not have been able to speak French. There is no mention of any interpreter being present. It also worth noting that Genet does not refer to the language being spoken at any moment through this text, unlike in the interview where he recalls his interaction with the Syrian youngsters. One can surmise, however, that due to sociolinguistic and political factors the language being spoken was Palestinian. Prior to their adoption of the Arabic language in the seventh century, the inhabitants of Palestine predominantly spoke Palestinian Aramaic (which infuses until today Palestinian Jewish and Palestinian Christian literature), as well as Greek (among the social elites) and some Hebrew. Only progressively with time passing was Palestinian Aramaic Arabized, and Levantine “Arabic” became the language of the urban upper – class, while still containing many linguistic modulations of the original Palestinian. In the rural areas what is often (incorrectly) referred to as “Palestinian dialect”
predominated and it is and was still well and alive when Genet met the “women of Djebel Hussein”.

Another aspect that should be noted is that Genet is also able to discern the irony and sarcasm of the women. While sitting in the middle of nowhere next to an already dead campfire, Genet understands that when the women say “welcome to our home” they are being sarcastic. Such an understanding of the nuances of language can of course only be attained by someone who is at least at an intermediate level in the language. Genet did understand whatever was being said, or most of it. One needs also to remember, of course, that these passages from L’Ennemi déclaré are not works of fiction but are based on true events, conversations, and interviews that were collected and annotated by Albert Dichy.

**This Book will Never be Translated into “Arabic”, nor Read by the French**

Let us now turn to what is often considered as Genet’s most complex masterpiece: *Un Captif amoureux* (1986)\(^{41}\). In the English introduction to the book, the author is quoted from a radio interview he had given in 1982 to an Australian radio show in which he declares: “This book will never be translated into Arabic, nor will it ever be read by the French or any other Europeans. But since I'm writing it anyway ... who is it for?” (xvii). In this passage, Jean Genet asserts in his own words the very particular “place” of this book which will here be envisioned at the intersection of Dislocated French and Phantom Arabic.

\(^{41}\) For a contextualization, see Hadrien Laroche, *The Last Genet* (2010).
In this work Jean Genet remains faithful to the complex and at times contradictory figure that he is. He goes from showing extreme depth in his knowledge about the region, to falling in the very deep pit of Phantom Arabic. All throughout what Jerome Neutres calls the author’s “anti-memoires” and / or “memoires d’outre-tombe” Genet refers at numerous occasions to the different languages spoken by all the characters as “Arabic”. *Un Captif amoureux* is a work of fiction in which “Genet fait semblant de parler de lui” (Bendhif-Syllas, 142). Although it is supposed to be based on real-life experiences of the writer, he meant it as a fictional piece. Throughout the work, while, as Edward Said himself has rightfully analyzed in *On Late Style*, Genet is self-distancing himself from and even reversing / inverting orientalism, and in what is only apparently a paradox, he falls under the orientalist dominance of Phantom Arabic.

In a passage where the narrator recounts his meeting with a group of women thanks to Nabila, an American citizen of Palestinian descent who was fluent in French and served very often as the writer’s interpreter (White, 543), he refers to the conversation that ensued with the following words: “la discussion se faisait en arabe. Mes seuls interlocuteurs étaient les quatre murs et le plafond blanchi à la chaux. Quelque chose me disait que ma situation n’était pas en accord avec ce que j’avais su de l’Orient” (13) As I previously said, Genet’s writing is peculiar in the sense that while following many orientalist models that are at the heart of an internalization of Phantom Arabic (even by people from the region to whom he refers as “the Orient”) he also questions it. He starts by making the statement that the conversation “took place in Arabic.” He adds that he was made a complete outsider because

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42 See Ralph Heyndels, “‘Cet Orient que je voyais à l’envers’ : l’inversion de l’orientalisme chez Jean Genet”
of that. He claims that his only interlocutors were the walls in front of him. But as soon as
Genet makes that generic statement about “Arabic”, he is very quick to note his questioning
of the situation. He writes that whatever he was experiencing at that moment was extremely
different from everything he had learnt about “the Orient”. Indeed, such a passage is a
testimony to what makes Genet’s writing so different from other Orientalist writers. He
questions the very knowledge, and lens, through which he sees “the orient.” Such
questioning can and must, of course, include the issue of language.

Jean Genet’s writing is indeed different from that of other French writers of his
period by virtue of his very questioning of the ideological lens through which he, a white
European man, was seeing “the Orient.” But of course, such non-orientalism goes through
a continuous push and pull. He is capable of writing the most anti-orientalist piece, and the
most orientalist one in the same book, sometimes in the same paragraph. In a passage where
he tells of his experience reading translations of “Arabic poetry” he says: “Les poèmes,
leur traduction en tout cas, ne me causèrent aucune autre émotion que la beauté des
calligraphies. On y parlait de combats, de sinistre, mais je ne compris rien aux metaphors:
colombes, fiancée, miel.” (30) This passage is illustrative of the push-pull forces that
govern Genet’s writing. He starts by saying that reading the poetry did not have any
emotional impact on him. Then, he adds that it was in fact the beauty of the calligraphy
that impressed him. Indeed, the beauty of Arabic calligraphy is not inherent to it. Someone
who grows up writing it, for instance, will not find it beautiful. It is rather an inherently
orientalist, always already exoticizing endeavor to view it as beautiful. It is also something
that exists especially in the French orientalist tradition, in which “Arabic” was not only
painted as some uniform “thing” but also as being “beautiful”. And, as Genet notes, not for
the content of its words or messages but for the pure exotic shapes that its letters represent. The peculiarity of Genet’s case in the last passage is that he notes his inability to understand the metaphors. Therefore, Jean Genet proves the complexity of his own self, as well as his own (critically auto-reflexive) orientalism.

Numerous instances of the sort exist all throughout *Un Captif amoureux* which is a complex and “dislocated” work in its very narrative formation. While narrating a real-story that he had heard happened during the war of 1982, Genet writes about an experience that Lebanese and Palestinian truckers had to go through. He writes:

> Lors de la guerre de 1982, les camionneurs étaient libanais ou palestiniens. Un phalangiste ouvrait sa main, demandait: - Qu’est-ce que c’est ça? Une balle dans la tête ou un signe de la main. Le mot tomate, en arabe du Liban se dit banadouran en palestinien bandoura. Une lettre de plus ou de moins, équivalait à la vie ou à la mort. (109)

Indeed, the Frenchman demonstrates a remarkable critical awareness about the two languages that he refers to as “Palestinian” and “Lebanese Arabic”. Just as in the example that was scrutinized earlier, Genet suddenly sees through the Phantom Arabic myth. In the previous passage the fact of speaking one language or the other went as far as becoming a life or death issue. But Genet uses “Arabic” all throughout his work to refer to not only “Lebanese Arabic” but also to “Levantine” as well as what he calls now “Palestinian”, etc. It is as if, in critical moments, Genet consciously loses the Phantom Arabic lens. Yet his writing, which follows the very same model that we will identify in Taïa, falls under what Jacques Derrida coins as proregression. At moments Genet shows an extreme ability to lose his orientalist Phantom Arabic lenses and to see the world as it is. At other moments, he not only follows but also produces and re-produces the very language ideologies that are
part of that hegemonic orientalism (including what Ridha Boulaabi calls “l’orientalisme des Orientaux” (2013).

Furthermore, Genet’s critical consciousness can also be seen in the following passage. He comments on a short conversation he had when meeting Hamza for the first time\(^{43}\). Here is what the author narrates: “Il avait compris que je connaissais quelques mots d’arabe maghrébin. Il les employa avec moi. Il était environ midi, vers le milieu du mois de Ramadan, le mois où les musulmans ne mangent, boivent, fument, baisent, que lorsque le soleil s’est couche.” In this quotation, the writer notes a crucial element. Again, we need to remember that on a purely quantitative level Genet uses the word “Arabic” in his writing the majority of the times. There are only “moments” in the text where a careful reader might discern non-Phantom Arabic ways of referring to these different languages. In the previous quote, Genet claims, through the voice of his narrator that Hamza knew the former’s knowledge of what he calls “Maghrebi Arabic” that this seemingly contradictory statement is, in fact, not so. Throughout the entire text, Genet keeps referring to the need for translation. He also claims on multiple occasion that he does not know a single word of “Arabic.” Now he suddenly implies that he knows “some Maghrebi Arabic.” This could be argued as an unconscious knowledge that Genet had about the language that he refers to as Maghrebi Arabic. Concretely speaking, if one speaks only Darija, one would neither be able to speak to or be understood by most people in Palestine, nor would one understand them. It seems like this is something that Genet was indeed aware of, all throughout his

\(^{43}\) On this character, whom the author met for a brief and intense moment and who is at the core of Un Captif amoureux, see Helene Baty-Delalande’s article in Dictionnaire Jean Genet and Ralph Heyndels, “‘Ce point fixe qu’on nomma peut-être l’amour’ : les captivités amoureuses de Jean Genet”).
writing of this book. When claiming that he does not speak Arabic, and that he needs a translator, he is doing that from the position of considering Darija, what he calls “Maghrebi Arabic” as something different than/from whatever was being spoken in Palestine or Lebanon. Indeed, in the passage we looked at earlier, he even shows how crucial it was, even a matter of life-or-death, to speak Lebanese or Palestinian. It can only be logical to therefore surmise that Genet’s views and beliefs around Phantom Arabic were contradictory. At times, he would go as far as to notice the difference between languages that while referring to all of them as “Arabic” for most of his work, he admits to their differences being crucial; in fact, a matter of life and death in the example that he gives. The fact that his narrator textually admits to knowing some “Maghrebi Arabic” at times, and at not understanding “Arabic” at others is another proof that Genet maybe unconsciously viewed these things as being inherently different. His internalization of Phantom Arabic is therefore always-already there, yet problematized, questioned and at times critically challenged.

F. T. H.

Such a challenge, for both himself and for his readers is emphasized by the following passage. In this quotation from *Un Captif amoureux* Genet goes as far as to actually demonstrate a high level of understanding, deciphering, describing and analyzing of Modern Standard Arabic language:

F.T.H., trois conso...
Fatah, ou plutôt F.T.H. sont les trois initiales des mots Falestine Tharir (libération) Haka (mouvement). Mais afin de donner F.T.H. cet ordre est inversé

De grands gosses ont dû s’amuser.

Je reprends FA (pour Falestine = Palestine)

TH (pour Tharir = Libération)

HA (pour Haka = Mouvement)

qui, s’ils étaient à l’endroit donneraient : Hathfa. Ce mot, s’il en est un ne veut rien dire.

Dans les trois mots : Fatah, meftah, fathia, je découvre mais clandestines ces trois significations :

Fatah qui est fente, fissure, ouverture donc attente, voulue par Dieu, d’une victoire, attente presque passive;

meftah, la clef, où se découvre, presque visible, la clef dans la fente, ou serrure;

Fatiha, troisième mot né de cette racine, ouverture encore, mais coranique. Premier verset du Coran, où je pressens se montrer la signification religieuse. Derrière ces trois mots nés de cette racine qui donne Fatah, se trouveraient donc aux aguets les trois idées de combat (de victoire), de violence sexuelle (la clef ou meftah dans la serrure), et de bataille gagnée grâce à Dieu.

Ce long développement le lecteur devrait le lire comme une amusette, mais le choix et l’ordonnance du mot Fatah m’ont assez préoccupé pour que j’y cherche, car je les avais mises dedans, les trois significations dont j’ai parlé. On retrouve le mot Fatah trois fois dans le Coran. (35, 36)

All these analyses that Jean Genet delineates starting with these three Arabic letters: “فتح” are absolutely true and astonishing even to someone who has studied the language all his life. According to Ridha Boulaabi, the only scholar who has, in L’Orient des langues, (at least) dedicated three pages to Genet’s relation vis-à-vis “Arabic”, the French writer was “pas tout à fait arabophone” as “malgré le grand nombre de ses séjours dans plusieurs pays arabes, il n’a pas appris la langue” (152). But, once again, what “langue” are we supposed to conceive in that comment but Phantom Arabic, which actually Genet never “learned” because he never had to and never encountered it on an existential level. He does indeed
catch the numerous metaphors and double-meanings that exist in only these three letters. It is interesting however to note how he refers to them in his text as: “FA”, “TH” and “HA”. Genet demonstrates not only a masterful discursive analysis of the words, sounds and letters related to the name of the Palestinian movement, he also accomplishes in the previously cited passage an etymological inquiry. Not only does Jean Genet do that but he also attests to a knowledge of the Quran to conclude that the word قتح only occurs three times in the holy text. Such an assertion could not have been based on a translation, as by doing so it would have come out with incorrect results. Indeed, the word قتح refers to different things in Arabic, and it would have been translated differently depending on the meaning that it holds in each unique context. The accuracy of the number of times the word appears in the holy book is actually astonishing. Did Genet speak “Arabic?” Did he really learn the language? If not, how could he have produced such an in-depth analysis?

The question of what “Arabic” we are talking about is going to be an interesting one, as the writer does reveal for himself a real understanding of the plurality of the issues surrounding that language. It is also very clear in sociolinguistic terms that the language that he was learning “some” of to play cards with the Syrian rebels in Damascus is not the same as the one that he uses to produce his analysis in the previous quote, and even less-so that of the Quran. His knowledge of “Arabic,” although never admitted in interviews, is one that does however always surround his work, such as in the following passage from L’Ennemi déclaré:

Reprenons la question : qu’est-ce que l’arabité ? Le mot est-il l’équivalent de latinité en Europe et en Amérique du Sud ? Capte de l’extérieur, le mot n’est pas vécu, donc pas compris. Il voudrait faire état d’une unité vécue, sans se soucier qu’il risqué d’établir la différence. Il y a peut-être une judéité vécue qui s’est comme cristallisée en terre d’Islam. Arabité,
latinité, judéité sont des mots qui recouvrent quoi ? Ainsi un homme comme Abou Omar, qui est arabe palestinien, croit-il relever de l’arabité (il parle arabe, il est né en Palestine) ou de la latinité (il est chrétien) ? (88)

Although not directly referring to the language issue, Genet does indeed raise here very important issues about what “Arabness” is, as it is, especially for the dominant structure, inherently linked to the question of “Arabic”. He also admits, once again, the impossibility to grasp all the issues. He confirms his critical awareness that being an “outsider” to the languages spoken in the area will always block him from having a multifaceted grasp of the situation. This aspect is of course one that, as noted earlier, separates Genet from the Orientalist writers of his time. Although demonstrating impressive knowledge about the situation, be it linguistic, political or social of the countries that he visits, writes about, and even choses as his final resting place, he admits to his inability to completely understand them. One thing is for sure, however, which Arabic? Or French, which French? Language plays for Genet a primordial role. His proregressive writing is indeed unique in being powerfully illustrative of the problematic issues exemplified by this dissertation.
CHAPTER 2
Dreaming Phantom Arabic in French by Default: Abdellah Taïa and Leïla Sebbar

Phantom Hegemony

To write in Morocco is to write under a double-domination. Writing is, and has always been, a meta-linguistic activity. To write is to use a language, but it is also to transform and shape the latter. When one is born in Morocco, one grows up speaking, living, feeling, in one of four languages: Tamazight\textsuperscript{44}, Hassănîya, Darija and in very rare circumstances, French\textsuperscript{45}. These constitute the only so-called “mother-tongues” or native-languages of Morocco. The peculiarity of the situation becomes clear when one chooses to engage in, or to be more exact, when one is chosen by, literature. The question, then, of what language to write in raises itself. Endemic of all postcolonial territories, such a question only gets even more complicated when the domination is not that of tanks and bullets, but rather that of the mind.

What does it mean to write in a country that undergoes a double domination? Which dominations am I hereby referring to? Let us try to delve deeper in these two questions. The first question any author needs to address is that of language: which one? But such a question, apparently simple, very quickly turns into a vicious circle by bringing up other questions such as: for whom? And why? Etc. By thinking about such questions most

\textsuperscript{44} Note that there are at least three varieties of Tamazight that exist in Morocco. The language underwent a process of standardization and a “standard” Tamazight exists today and is officially recognized in the Moroccan constitution.

\textsuperscript{45} The case of the neighboring country: Algeria, is drastically different as we will see in the sections relevant to Leïla Sebbar.
authors feel a certain sense of agency. One thinks that since she/he is asking the questions, then she/he will be the one providing the answers. Their choices, therefore are ones that they consciously make and that they could assume and defend. In my opinion, however, the choice has been always-already made. My second argument is the following: When a writer in most western countries choses a language, that choice usually seems “logical” and does not have any major consequences to their work, it does not attract a lot of critical attention. The complexity of the very idea of “choice” showcases itself in the postcolonial world. In Morocco, the choice is one that seems to be always-already-made. One writes either in French or in Arabic. Countless interviews can be cited where Moroccan writers discuss which language they chose to write in. Most of these so-called choices remain between the two dominant languages of the country: Arabic, and French, and almost never about their actual native languages (Tamazight, Darija, Hassänïya, etc.).

The double-domination is that of two languages, one that is clearly that of the once military colonizer: French, and the other more complex in its very nature is that of the ideological colonizer: Arabic. Darija, Tamazight, Hassänïya are indeed relegated to the mundane areas of life. Writing is seen as a “higher” activity, an intellectually superior one, where it is “common-sense” to use languages “capable” of such superiority. The main problem with such arguments is that they presuppose the existence of attributes that are inherent to languages. How many times have we heard phrases such as “French is the language of romance”, “English is the language of clarity”, “X is a beautiful language”, “Y is such a difficult language to learn”, “Z is an easy language to acquire” etc. All such utterances are inherently flawed, and also inherently ignorant and usually western-centric. My reasoning behind this last argument is that one usually takes romance or anglo-saxon
languages as a type of norm from which they judge other languages. Such a judgement
does not need to be negative in order to be orientalist. An excess of admiration for a
language that one does not know anything about is in itself an orientalist belief. Orientalism
did not have to be “negative” or “racist” in order to be what it is. Statements such as “Arabic
is such a beautiful language” from a Swedish white man is an inherently orientalist
statement. The same of course goes for negative comments: “Arabic sounds so violent”.
First of all, which Arabic? Second, for someone who grew up hearing their loved ones
speak Egyptian (for instance) their language is that of love and not of hate or violence.
Third, such a judgement is inherently linked to geopolitical events that tend to be related
to the so-called “Arab World.” Being “beautiful” on the one hand or “violent” on the other
is not an inherent quality of any language. It is all a matter of perspective.

The same logic that I attempted to develop in the past paragraph applies for
literature. No language is inherently more “capable” of producing literature (or any other
form of art for that matter) than another. Such beliefs are in fact direct results of ideological
dominant discourses. It is indeed fairly simple to “assume” that French is a great literary
language. Hence, opting for it when one grows up to become a “writer” in countries that
are part of the so-called “francophone” world seems almost logical. It is a pre-made belief
to think that if one grows up in Morocco, and one is interested in literature, two paths seem
to be the “natural” ones: In the case of authors trying to deal with issues and topics that
relate to concepts that “seem” to be western, one would go for French. If one is trying to
engage in more “traditional” types of writing, it is of course another pre-made choice to
write in Arabic. Both languages are inherently capable of both forms. There are radical
Islamist texts written in French, just as there are atheistic masterpieces written in Arabic,
but such pre-made decisions are not based on inherent qualities of said languages rather on the dominant discourses around those languages.

Growing up imbued with, and in the middle of, these two dominant discourses, choices tend to be already-made. Such “decisions” are also influenced by several factors that are outside of the author herself/himself. Questions of publication and audience immediately raise themselves to the surface of any such a discussion. It is indeed common sense to believe that if someone opts for writing as a mode of life and as a profession they will need to earn enough money to survive and to afford the basic necessities of life in the 21st century in order to continue with their creative endeavors. Earning money out of one’s artistic endeavors is a necessity, and a legitimate way to make a living, but such an endeavor comes at a price. When an author thinks about what language should she/he chose to write in, a related question: which one would bring me enough economic benefits? This question in today’s Morocco has a very simple answer: French. Such an answer is based on several factors, mainly that the people who read books are those who can afford to read them. Such an economic capital is synonymous with cultural capital (See Bourdieu 1979) and linguistic capital. Therefore, the people who read books, and more precisely literature, happen to be educated ones. Such educated people also happen to be the ones who are able to speak French, as well as to read literary works in it. Therefore, when an author is thinking about “audience,” French seems to be another one of those pre-made choices.

The other issue is that of publication. We just saw how questions of audience seem to lead almost automatically to French, but another issue that tends to lead almost always to that same language relates to the publishing industry. One of the most notable quotes that illustrates my next argument is the famous André Gide quote: “On ne fait pas de la
bonne littérature avec de bons sentiments.” Most, if not all, literary masterpieces are going to be ones dealing with issues that in one way or another shake the social structure or the social formations in which they are created, or towards which they are addressed. Therefore, most great literature is not going to be one that simply asserts and re-produces the status-quo. To be even more specific, taking the case of Abdellah Taïa: the very issues of sexual identity and homosexuality that are at the center of many of his books can only be published in the French language, by French publishers. It would be unthinkable for most Arabic language publishers, that seem more like propaganda agencies that publishers, to give such books a space of literary legitimacy. For a book to be published in “Arabic” in the contemporary publishing industry it needs to be a holder of values, avoider of issues, and supporter of the dominant structures of power in their respective countries. Anyone who finds this statement controversial should examine a book that now most consider as the masterpiece of contemporary Moroccan literature, “الخيز الحاضي” by Mohamed Choukri. The peculiar situation around the latter’s publication is discussed in the next chapter in more details. It is a book that was banned from publication and dissemination in its original language and was published first in its English translation, later in its French one, and it “only” took eleven years, and a new king for it to be “unbanned” and finally published in its original version.

The example of Youssouf Amine Elalamy’s book “Gossip” (2004) is a rare occurrence of a work dealing with thorny issues to be published in Darija. Its publication company happens to be a very small publishing house called “Khbar Bladna” (News of Our Land) which started as a Darija newspaper project. The latter was established by an American artist and intellectual by the name of Elena Prentice who was adopted by Tangier
and takes the city as her permanent residence, as did so many great intellectuals and writers throughout the centuries before her. It is illustrative of the depth of the issues that this dissertation is dealing with. It had to be a Boston born, Dartmouth educated American person to see the desperate need for publishing companies and newspaper in Darija. The institutional domination is clearly discernible in the very lack, or scarcity of opportunities or choices. The situation translates loosely into the following: write for the west (and the self declared Moroccan “elites”) in a western language (French), or write for the east (or better said: the South) in an eastern (Southern) language (Arabic), but who is writing for the Moroccan people then?

Many of the great Caribbean writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau often talked about how it feels to write in a dominated nation. I am here to talk about what it feels to write in a doubly-dominated country. Such a domination, as I mentioned before, is inherently phantomatic, complex and not so easily discernible. Its power structures, unlike those of past ages are not those of brutal impositions, the latter being much more easily combated and defeated. By engaging in such a laborious struggle, I am here following Michel Foucault’s model when he talks about the real political task in a society, such as ours, by saying:

It seems to me that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them

(Noam Chomsky debates with Michel Foucault, 171)

The seemingly neutral literary and linguistic institutions in Morocco are far from being so. In addition, the seeming existence of the very “choices” that I discussed earlier
is in itself the result of the very structures of power that through this dissertation I am trying to unmask. To dis-locate oneself and one’s own experiences to one of two foreign languages: French or Arabic, seems to me to be inherently related to issues of power and political violence. Such power structures are only more complex to resist when they seem transparent to most. The illusion of choice, for example, is in itself one of the best ways for dominant ideologies and discourses to make their own existence unseen.

Another way through which such a domination expresses itself in seemingly neutral ways is through naming. As we are going to see in this chapter: authors who are supposedly expected to have a certain “superior” mastery of language are themselves subject to these phantom discursive dominations. By their very act of naming their own languages (Darija, in the case of Taïa), or the languages that they referring to as “Arabic,” they put themselves as supporting the very dominant discursive structures to which I am hereby referring. Such a support can of course be conscious or unconscious; hence its complexity. This situation is also unique in the world because nowhere else would two people speaking different languages who cannot even communicate properly with each other for more than fifteen seconds refer to both their languages with the same name: “Arabic.” This situation is indeed strangely reminiscent of the late Latin one in Europe to which we turn in the following section of this chapter.
In what many consider to be one of the pillar books capturing the birth of the French language as we know it, Joachim du Bellay, member of the famous Pléiade, writes the previous quote. In it, he assures that the birth of languages is a natural process. He uses a vegetative analogy that was one of his signature stylistic metaphors. But it is indeed interesting that the very same arguments that he once used against “Latin” and other languages; precisely that of the “virtues” or attributes of a language as belonging to the domain of mortals is the same one that I am using today against French as well as Arabic in Morocco. The inherent qualities that these two languages seem to have for most people are the creation of “mortals” and are very much linked to circuits of power and domination rather than belonging to the natural world. During this same time, all throughout Europe different writers and intellectuals emerged as the first theorists of their own languages. Du Bellay himself has written his book Deffence et illustration de la langue françoyse (1549) largely borrowing from Sperone Speroni’s Dialogo delle lingue (1542), published seven years prior to the Frenchman’s work, where Speroni defends the need to consider the “vernaculars” in general but more specifically the Tuscan vernacular as being at least as capable as Latin language in all fields.

Writing in French (or any other Latin language for that matter) was once seen as an inferior endeavor. Publishing companies were scarce. Educated people wrote and spoke different forms of Latin. All previous statements are very reminiscent of the same
arguments that I tried to develop earlier vis-à-vis Arabic. My main purpose in reminding
the reader of the Latin situation here lies in the fact that domination came from one source.
Latin was the only dominant linguistic structure. There were of course different varieties
of Latin and for the purposes of this dissertation we are not going to delve in much detail
about it. But the argument that I am trying to make is that, education was relegated to the
few. Access to knowledge followed the model of education. The rest of the population were
speaking different languages.

The case of French is interesting in many regards. Although being usually believed
to originate from Paris, it is in fact a linguistic and literary construction, as Bernard
Cerquiglini writes in *La naissance du français* (2013) “le français est un créole qui a
réussi.” (77) It is also one that evolves and keeps on evolving. The very same purists of
French today are actually speaking and writing a very different language from what even
Du Bellay used to write. Ironically Du Bellay did not even call French in the same way that
we do today: calling it “la langue françoys” instead of “la langue française.” This short
detour in Latin-Europe only serves to nuance the very same things that we take for granted
today. It shows that languages evolve by nature. Just like a tree, a language grows and dies,
its very seeds allowing for its own continuity in the form of other trees that are at the same
time similar and different in many ways.

Alas, the natural world is always clashing with the ideological one. The latter is
imbued with issues of power and resistance. Literature, like all arts, participates in shaping
and either resisting or reinforcing the ideological world in which we live. And just like art,
any work of literature is always already a political work, its apparent neutrality can only
be seen if it reproduces the dominant ideologies.
Old Demons, New Phantoms

The example of most western European languages today stands as proof that linguistic domination, when faced from a single and visible source can be faced and defeated. When thinking about a situation of double-domination I could not help but think of the Creole/s example/s. One could say that the example of Haitian Creole is one of a language that faced a double-domination but that still found a way to find its place in the literary and artistic spheres. The two dominators being on the first-hand French, and on the second one, English. But even in such a case one could claim that such dominations were rather visible. It is easy in Morocco to find people criticizing French, usually it is the same people who do not speak it, it is indeed much harder to find ones criticizing its use and its socio-stratifying role in society once one has tasted of its privileges. But rare are those who would criticize Arabic, or even consider it as a different language from Darija. Finally, it is even harder to find those who consider Darija as an equal language to both Arabic and French.

The Creole comparative-example therefore, although interesting in many regards, is flawed since it does not share one of the main aspects of the Moroccan situation; its invisibility. Being the language of the Quran, many people consider Arabic to be almost as holy as its holy book, claiming that it is the language in which God (Allah) chose to address people. The Quran however does not hold any instances that claim Arabic to be superior to other languages. There are indeed several instances that clearly tell that the choice of language was based on it being the language of the people that it “targeted” in that region and at that time: "We have not sent any Messenger except with the language of his people so he can make things clear to them.” (Quran, 14:4) In the previous passage, it is clear that
the choice of the Arabic language was based on it being the language of the prophet’s people. Another instance is: “We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so you people may understand / use reason” (12:2). In a final example, the Quran reads: “We have made the Qur'an easy in your language so that they may take heed it” (44:58). In all these examples, and literally in every instance that mentions “language” or “Arabic,” it is never a question of sacredness of the language, or superiority. Indeed, it is very clear that the reason for such a choice was the need for a language that is “easy to understand” for the people whom it targeted. Another verse that contradicts the claim that Arabic is the language of God is the following: “we do not differentiate between any of the messengers” (2:136). The last quote indirectly claims that all prophets (Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, etc.) are equal in the eye of God, the languages that they received their message in can therefore only be equal as well.

The belief that Arabic is superior or that it is a sacred language is definitely a purely ideological claim rather than having any sources in the Muslim religion itself. So, the very concept of Phantom Arabic that is developed in this dissertation is not directly linked to religion, as the latter is free from such a belief or such a concept. It is rather directly related to an ideological, very human, and very false, interpretation of the Quran and of the Islamic religion. The belief that such a language is superior to whatever people speak/use in daily life indeed transcend the “masses” to touch even the very writers that this chapter is going to discuss: namely Abdellah Taïa and Leïla Sebbar. Both examples are illustrative of the common sense dominant discourse that exists today in Morocco or Algeria (and in the diasporic communities from these countries and many others in France).

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46 It is a very endemic problem that is not only present in both those writers. I am solely mentioning them for the only reason that they are the only two authors discussed in this chapter.
The beliefs that are held about Arabic are indeed the results of fictions on/around that language rather than stemming directly from a religious text. Nowhere in the Quran is it said that Arabic cannot co-exist with other languages, such as Darija, or French, etc. Where does such a discourse come from then? Where does such a fiction of the superiority? What is the source of the sacrality of this language? These are questions that the following paragraphs are going to try to answer, before getting into the more textual analysis of the works of Leïla Sebbar and Abdellah Taïa.

**Phantom Idolatry**

*3in dallem nayema, o guelb el medloum 7adi*

*(The bully’s eye is asleep, while the bullied’s heart is wide awake)*

Nass el Ghiwane

Nass el Ghiwane, from whom the previous quotation originates, is a music group that officially formed in Casablanca (Morocco) in 1971. Its origins were in avant-garde political theatre in Casablanca in the late sixties and they have later kept the same themes and ways of dealing with social and political issues in their music and lyrics. They are the main band of a new artistic movement of the 70s that included many artists of whom Nass el Ghiwane were definitely the brightest and most radical. The band still continues today with different members as most of its original ones have unfortunately passed away, or left the group when it was becoming more mainstream. The particularity of this musical group, as it relates to this dissertation, is that they were formed in a time when the music industry was completely dominated by music coming from the east whose lyrics were either in different languages of Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, etc. or in Standard Arabic. Nass el Ghiwane spoke the language of the street, as the forming members all came from rural areas of Morocco or from very popular neighborhoods of Casablanca (mainly El Hay el
Mohemmadi). In addition to their lyrics being in Darija, they used traditional instruments from Morocco mashing-up between different popular styles. The main instrument that gave them their Bass-base is the “Guembri” which is actually an instrument originating in Western Africa. The Guembri was originally brought to Morocco through the colonial Atlantic slave trade and participated in the formation of one of the country’s most interesting, and once avant-garde, music traditions: Gnawa Music Nass el Ghiwane also included in their style, the Jewish heritage of Morocco, as some of their first songs were actually covers of Moroccan-Jewish songs such as “Hak a Mama.” Their composition also of course included many aspects of Amazigh and Arab music traditions. This band stands as a testimony of a multicultural, multifaceted, plurilingual Morocco. Their music could be read as the very metaphor of Darija, a language that bridges, between so many languages and cultures with which it came in contact, acknowledges them as a richness and incorporates them in a singular way that makes them hers, all while continuing to appreciate their authenticity.

Through the example of Nass el Ghiwane that I decided to open this chapter with, my purpose is to show the success that Darija has attained all-the-while not being acknowledged as a “real” language. Nass el Ghiwane never made it in the so-called “Arab World” for the two main reasons that their music was too political, and also “too Darija”. It was therefore unintelligible to speakers of others languages from the Arabic tradition. It was most definitely unintelligible to a Standard Arabic speaker. The value of their music was however noted by many artists. Cheb Khaled admitting that he started his international career covering their songs in weddings. Another example of their outstanding artistic quality is the recognition that they received from the internationally acclaimed filmmaker
Martin Scorsese, who made a documentary film about them. There is however not a single document in their honor east of Morocco and Algeria. How can a language become so different from its proclaimed source that it is closer to “the west” than to the east? Darija is definitely an interesting case in hand in that regard. Even its writing system, although also a complex issue, as we previously discussed in the opening chapter of this dissertation, stands in testimony of a need to break with the Arabic tradition. Let us turn now to that very tradition to try to locate the roots of Phantom Arabic’s tree.

I need to start by noting a crucial element here: works relating to the history of the Arabic language from a sociolinguistic perspective are not only rare but nonexistent. As reported by one of the stellar-scholars in Arabic language history Jonathan Owens in his book *A Linguistic History of Arabic* (2006) published in Oxford University Press as he says: “Arabic is blessed by a relatively large quantity of early material, in terms of the history of Western scholarship, perhaps too much. The plentitude of early material I suspect detracted from the need to incorporate later sources into a systematic history of Arabic.” (6) The point that Owens argues to be the reason for a lack of serious academic work on the question is very straightforward. When anyone writes on “Arabic” linguistics one feels that she/he is writing against a huge body of work that to many feels almost paralyzing. A second crucial element is expressed when Owens writes: “The issue of historical sociolinguistics has yet to be dealt with systematically.” (11) He also adds: “It is necessary to distinguish between linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of Arabic for purposes of interpreting Arabic linguistic history. (11) The writer makes an extremely important distinction between the work that he does in his book (*A linguistic history of the Arabic Language*) and the sociolinguistic history, which are completely different fields of
scientific inquiry. His quotations also confirm my initial argument about the lack, or non-existence, of sources dealing with the sociolinguistics of Arabic. The too-few sources that are available today, which this dissertation wishes to place itself among, deal with the extremely-contemporary period. The urgency of the situation is definitely something that many scholars are noticing but there is still much work to be done.

Let me note however that French went through a similar process. When scholars became interested in the history or the genesis of French they were faced with a similar problem. Bernard Cerquiglini writes in La Naissance du français (1993): “Si les hommes de la Renaissance se préoccupant plus fermement des sources du français, si une réflexion véritablement grammairienne s’y applique, on ne quitte cependant guère le registre de l’opinion, fut-elle éclairée” (9) He later adds:

Que la question de l’origine (le terme figure dans de nombreux titres d’ouvrages) soit explicitement posée tient à deux faits. A la fureur analogique, tout d’abord, dont est saisie l’épistémè renaissance comme l’a montré Michel Foucault. Appliquée aux langues, cette investigation porte ses fruits et révèle, par exemple, les liens de l’hébreu, de l’arabe et de l’araméen, du latin, du germanique et du persan. (…) Que la question de l’origine soit tout particulièrement posée au sujet du français tient ensuite à la situation d’une langue qui abandonne alors le statut “vulgaire” pour devenir langue poétique, langue juridique, langue enfin que l’on étudie et que l’on enseigne. On comprend que l’antiquité du français soit l’objet de nombreuses investigations (9-10)

Cerquiglini quotes Foucault in noting that a change in the epistemic structure of the Renaissance brought scholars (in all fields, but our focus here is on the language question) to reflect and write on the origins of their languages. I truly believe that North Africa seems to be going through a similar process; that of a new épistémè that is going to shake the foundations of an older rigid and unidimensional way of seeing, experiencing and being in the world. Cerquiglini is also right in noting the “vulgar” status that French used to have,
and how such a status changed thanks to the artists and the scholars that proved that it is a language able to achieve anything (and more) than its Latin dominatrix was able to. The last argument that should be noted is that there was no agreement among the intellectuals at the time, an aspect that is always at the heart of any epistemic change.

The Arabic situation is therefore not that different, except that the main epistemic model is one that has been dominant for centuries and never really questioned. Such a questioning is only beginning to happen at the linguistic level as I noted earlier, as well as in the sociolinguistic one. Most readers will be amazed that every book on Arabic is going to quote as its main source a book that was produced in 793 by Abū Bishr ‘Amr ibn ‘Uthmān ibn Qanbar Al-Baṣrī also known as Sibawaih. This scholar stands as the main linguistic grammatician of the Arabic language. His seminal work is entitled: *Al Kitab* (793), which ironically translates as “The Book”, is the first seminal study of Arabic grammar at the time. Three points need to be noted here as they are extremely important for the understanding of the very concept of Phantom Arabic:

1- Sibawaih’s very name is actually a mispronunciation of his real name Sēbōē. The latter was actually born in modern day Iran and his first language was Persian. Most so-called “Arabs” and supporter of the sacred quality of Arabic look at Sibawaih as an “Arab” and of course an “Arabic” native.

2- Sibawaih actually based all his knowledge on his local encounters with Arab travelers and visitors of his own city: Shiraz, Persia (in modern day Iran). Owens writes, in his previously cited work: “Sibawaih himself, so far as is known, never traveled personally in the Arabian Peninsula and therefore was never eyewitness to the pre-diasporic homeland of Arabic. He (...) knew about varieties of Arabic from individuals in
the Basran diaspora. Nonetheless, nearly all tribal (e.g. Qays, Banu Waail, Talmimi) and areal (e.g. Hijaz, Medina) designations found in Sibawaih are situated in the Arabian Peninsula, which allows the fiction to be associated with pre-diasporic regions.” (3)

3- Finally, and probably the most important point is that Sibawaih’s work was only written and published in 793 (177 in the Islamic calendar) which puts it almost two-hundred years after the birth of Islam and its Quran.

The past three points are all crucial in understanding that today’s beliefs about Arabic are all based on pure fiction and have absolutely no link with a physical reality; rather they are pure result of ideology. Arabic was once a “vulgar” language, with no grammar and no official status? A reality that is too harsh to believe for most people I assume. Far from me to diminish the validity of “Al Kitab” in the Arabic tradition. But it is very important to remember the facts. Since the publication of that work, most authors, until today feel what I can only explain as an ideological obligation to quote from it in most traditional Arabic linguistics books.

To write in Morocco, is to write under the mythical weight of “The Book” (Al-Kitab). Writing in Arabic is therefore linked to respecting the rules of a grammar set more than thirteen years ago. The respect for this grammar, however, is also linked to the respect of certain ways of seeing the world. Can a language that is set and frozen in the 8th century express the feelings, the different ways of being and existing in the world today in the beginning of the 21st century? What makes people today and, even more importantly, writers write (consciously or unconsciously) under the weight of a language frozen in time?
In the previous paragraphs, I tried to quickly but concisely show two things: the loopholes that exist in the belief-systems around Arabic, and by showing that I tried to underline that contemporary views and beliefs vis-à-vis that language are the direct result of an ideological fiction, rather than reality. But who said that reality mattered at the first place; as far as this topic is concerned one stands as a witness to a fiction that far exceeds reality.

**Abdellah Taïa’s Multilingual Literature**

Language is the very substance that makes any literary work possible. In fact, it is what makes any cultural creation conceivable. Yet, literary critique and issues of sociolinguistics have been for the most part two categories that were rarely combined, especially when it comes to works from the complex multilingual region of North Africa. If one is analyzing language: one is a “linguist”, a different label for a different endeavor that is believed to be very distinct from literary critique, as if the two were contradictory or incompatible. This belief, this absence, actually relies on one main idea. It is in fact considered common sense that a “writer” is going to use the language that she/he grew up with, usually referred to as their mother-tongue or native language, to produce literature (or any other cultural creation that uses language). If a writer makes a choice of a foreign language, it is believed by those same critics that this choice is conscious and therefore not truly worthy of any form of in-depth analysis. The evidence of this idea, the fact that many consider it as common sense, as the natural state of things (in the academic and literary world) is based on one main issue: What we consider today as literary critique, or analysis, etc. in the western world is in fact based on western views of what literature is and what it ought to be. In fact, to give a simple example, one does not spend much time thinking about
why George Orwell writes in English, and Voltaire in French. It is in fact common sense that these people grew up speaking, living, feeling and existing in the same language that they chose to express themselves literally or intellectually in.

These issues become more interesting, as I tried to show in the previous section when such linguistic choices stop being a matter of choice but rather of domination/resistance. When scrutinized more profoundly, this taken-for-granted idea seems to be based on the theory and ideology of the nation-state language. The latter is of course a purely western-centric way of viewing the world. The precise point that I am trying to make is the following one: Much of the critics are following consciously or unconsciously, a model that is purely western. The evidence of such illustrative seemingly stupid questions as: “why does Foucault write in French?” Or “why does Orwell write in English” become immediately less evident when one is looking at non-western literatures. There are in fact, many spaces and cultures where the concept of the nation-state language is not part of their way of seeing and of being in the world. In such spaces, a “foreign” and “colonial” language has been imposed as a pseudo nation state language. It does not need much analysis to look at many countries in Africa and know that their language is not “English” or “French” or “Portuguese”, etc. but rather that these foreign, imperial languages have been consciously imposed on peoples who spoke other languages that are bearers of thousands of years of history and culture. It is also a historical fact that the very boundaries of many of these countries are in fact the result of purely colonial endeavors, made in a conscious effort to “divide and conquer”.

The specific geographical locations that are of interest to this dissertation are by definition and have always been multilingual. The evidence of the previously mentioned
linguistic choices are by definition void when the author is emanating from a multilingual country, even such a view is not without its etymological drawbacks. Do we follow a country’s constitution to know which languages exist on its sovereign land? Do we let the state decide what language is and what it is not? The fundamental question here is who has ownership of language? George Orwell’s “Newspeak” stands as a perfect example of what happens when a state holds the sole ownership of a language. The second fundamental question is the following: is there really such a thing as a “monolingual” country? The latter might sound as if it has an evident answer, but it oftentimes happens that the things we come to believe as “natural” are the ones that have been the most deeply ingrained ideological ideas in our systems of belief.

Even a western country, say France, is by definition multilingual and that is due to many reasons. The most recent are related to its recent colonial and immigration history, but even prior to that there were, and in many cases still are, languages that are not “French” that exist and circulate in the country, to take only a few examples: Breton, Catalan, Alsatian, etc. This is of course nothing but a mere example among a myriad of ones. Such a thing as monolingualism is in fact in itself an ideology that has been, and continues to be, used by hegemonic western, colonial powers. The fact that most people believe that being “monolingual” is the norm, be it for a person or a country, is one of the biggest ideological beliefs that pass as “normal” and “natural”. The very evidence of linguistic choice is hence shaken by these different ways of looking at literature, culture and the arts.

In fact, the critics that I put in question are ones that have a very short term memory. The very languages that they idolized today were looked down up a few centuries ago. French was even lower that “vulgar latin” in terms of the common-sense hierarchy back in
the day in France. Doesn’t this sound familiar when one thinks of the situation between Darija and Arabic? In the very same ways that many critics and pseudo-intellectuals look down today on Banlieue French in rap music for example. Thinking out loud to themselves: “Such a beautiful language, being torn apart.” This tearing apart is in fact and has always been part and parcel of the artistic endeavor, on one hand, and of language evolution, on the other. Many of the writers that one looks at today as being the pillars of French literature, were people who wrote in a radically different language than what was then, in their time, considered as “the legitimate language”.

Many discourses have helped to shape the current status-quo beliefs in academia. The first one is that of the linguist, who looks at the literary work with all his background knowledge and finds in it signs of class, gender, race and other social mechanisms. The second one, is of the literary critic who follows the biographical model where every single aspect of the author’s life is scrutinized. To find everything that the author says about his “rapport” to language, trying to analyze her/his “linguistic over-conscience”. The third one is to simply consider the choices of an author as “normal” and “natural”, after all if she/he writes in French, it must be because French is the most beautiful language in the world. All these three views are valid in the sense that they offer different versions of the truth. An analysis that takes all of them in consideration is, however, crucial in the current endeavor.

Both writers that this chapter revolves around are from North Africa, a space that, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is not without its deep and complex linguistic issues. Both of them, although having gone through completely different experiences in very different social contexts, write in French. They also both share an interesting and conflictual relationship vis-a-vis both the French they write in, and Phantom Arabic. Both
are considered very successful writers and intellectuals and therefore have amassed a solid amount of critical attention so far. Yet, the perspective that is offered by this thesis is one that has never been tackled before.

_Celui qui est digne d’être aimé_ (2017) is the last book to date published by Abdellah Taïa. Its narrative style is very different from the previous books by the same author, which signals, on one hand, an evolving relation to writing and, on the other hand, as this chapter explores, a continual, conflictual, yet essential struggle with his rapport to language. The novel is presented to the reader as a compilation of three letters. Each one of them, starts with the date (Month, and year) on the first page of its chapter in addition to on top of each of its pages. The name of the narrator in each letter however is only revealed when one reaches the last page of the letter as it reveals its signatory. “August 2015” are the first inscriptions one is able to read opening the book. As if the writer wants to highlight the extreme contemporary aspect of the issues at hand.

Abdellah Taïa writes in French, a dislocated one as the careful reader is able to discern from the very cover-page of this work. In fact, the very French title “Celui qui est digne d’être aimé” could be viewed as a translation of a Darija first name, common in Morocco: Lahbih. The meaning of this first name is one that the reader discovers in the very last letter of this work. Lahbib writes to his friend Ahmed, opening by saying “Tu es Celui qui est digne d’être aimé.” (123) He continues by explaining that it was a character by the name of Simone who actually called him that when he tried explaining the meaning of his “Arabic” first name to her. Taïa writes: “Lahbib, Al-habib. Je lui ai dit tous les mots qui se rapprochent de ce prénom.” The first name Taïa gives is in Darija, or to be more precise is the Darijized version of the arabic name “Al-habib”. Many things to note here:
First, Lahbib says that Simone asks him the meaning of his name in “Arabic,” yet he feels the need to actually translate to himself his very name before continuing. Lahbib, becomes Al-habib, following the Modern Standard Arabic rule that all nouns start with “Al; ”. Such a rule does not exist in Darija. This auto-translation of one’s very name to what is in fact another language, in order to explain to oneself the validity of such a word, is in fact a very unique and intriguing psycho-ideological aspect of this example.

In fact, the claim that the translation from Lahbib to Al-habib was a dialectic-translation: made by oneself to oneself. Because, it would be unrealistic to expect “Simone” a French woman to understand such a thing. Actually, Simone was just hearing two different sounds “Lahbib” and “Al-Habib,” she could notice a certain similarity in how these two words sound, nothing more. For Lahbib himself, who one understands to be a speaker of both Darija and Arabic, it is a different story. One needs to be acquainted with both languages to understand what Lahbib is trying to do. For him, translating his name to its Arabic origin is a way of legitimizing its very meaning. For the sake of illustration: It is hard to imagine Simone trying to explain the meaning of her name to Lahbib by saying something like “Simone, Simeon, Ximena” since the very rapport of Simone, a French person, to her language and to its historical origin in Latin (although in this specific case the name has Hebrew origins) is inherently very different from that of Lahbib’s.

The fascination with Phantom Arabic as well as the very dislocation of French is in that sense, tangible from the very title of this work. A title that “seems” French, but is in fact a translation. Lahbib continues: “Elle ne se moquait pas de moi, Simone. Je te le jure. Elle etait sincere. Elle ne jouait pas avec moi, comme le fait souvent son fils, Gerard” (124) In this passage, I want to propose the following analysis: for the French reader, the specific
passage with “elle ne jouait pas avec moi” might seem weirdly written, or out of place. Why would someone who was just talking about explaining his name to a person, who appreciates its meaning to feeling the need to say that Simone “was not playing with him.” This phrase, in French does not have any actual metaphorical relevance, it might even be seen as weird and misplaced. But for the Darija-speaking reader of this work it actually makes total sense. In fact, “elle ne jouait pas avec moi” might be read as a literal translation of the Darija “Makanetch katfela 3lia” (she was not making fun of me) which definitely makes more sense than the actual French meaning of that same phrase. The very fact that this letter is signed by Lahbib and directed towards his younger friend Ahmed might lead us to think about the original version of such a letter: was it really written in French? Or is this a translated version of the (metaphorically) original document? Such speculative questions are supported by the following textual evidence: First, the letter is signed “May 1990,” Lahbib writes that he is 17 years old, addressing Ahmed who is then 15 years of age. One could argue that at such a young age, in an economically deprived social situation, his knowledge of French, if any, is very limited. Such a speculation is also based on the socio-economic data provided in this letter where Lahbib writes a flashback of his life with Ahmed in their very popular neighborhood in the Moroccan city of Sale. French, in Morocco, is a literal illustration of Pierre Bourdieu’s linguistic capital. Its uses in that country, and a-priori its acquisition or learning, are deeply informed by and articulated on access to financial capital.

Many scholars have studied the dynamic of speaking French in the kingdom and have shown it to have a special status in Morocco: a status that is both ambivalent and implied. It is, after all, neither an official nor a national language, yet it is present in all
aspects of daily life. From the moment capital and the attendant power of it appear on the symbolic scene—whether it be in the media, education, literature, or administrative apparatus—the French language is always there. So far, however, there has been little discussion about the stratifying effect the language bears on Morocco and almost nothing which puts into question the structurality of the so-called “Francophonie” in/of Morocco as the linguistic nexus whereby the wealthy participate in a system of social inequity. Stemming from a declaration made by the Abdellah Taïa claiming: “French is the language of the rich”, this chapter therefore tries to display, in addition to a study of Phantom Arabic’s role in Abdellah Taïa’s work, a look into how the author displaces the French language that he has such a deeply complex and antagonistic relationship towards.

How can Taïa, a Moroccan writer who writes in French, say something like this? Can we surmise from this statement that he is engaging in resistance to the very meaning of “francophonie”? And if this is the case, how? By which literary means does he displace, replace, dismantle, and de-construct such a problematic all the while persisting as a “French” writer, now even translated into Modern Standard Arabic, as it is the case for Le jour du Roi published (with the financing of the French Fondation Pierre Berge-Yves Saint-Laurent) by Dar Al Adab in Beyrouth (2012) and for Un pays pour mourir by La Librairie des Colonnes in Tangier (2017). These are some of the issues to be considered in and from the critical reading of Taïa’s work. This link between the French language, capital and social class in Morocco is a global issue of which Taïa’s formulation is both a symptom and an interpretation⁴⁷ and, at the horizon, what is called “francophonie” not only in

Morocco but in the entire “French” post-colonial third-world (and even in the immigrant world within the “Hexagone” itself) is to be questioned.

Such situation is exemplified by Taïa’s auto-anthropological and self-reflexive moments in many interviews that he has given about the matter: “Je n’avais pas fait mes études dans les écoles ou les lycées français qui sont réservés aux gens riches. Je venais de l’école publique où le français qu’on enseigne n’est pas suffisamment bon. J’étais incapable d’écrire correctement ou bien de développer une idée.” (I did not pursue my studies in the French schools that were always reserved to economically privileged people. I came from the public schooling system where the French that is taught there is not nearly sufficient. I was incapable of writing correctly or even developing an idea). Later, when he pursued his studies at the University, he was dismayed by the level of French demonstrated by his classmates who had studied in French schools. He continues:

Tout de suite, en arrivant à la fac à Rabat, au contact des autres étudiants qui venaient des lycées français, je me suis rendu compte que j’avais énormément de lacunes. J’avais le choix. Soit abandonner le français et en même temps le rêve du cinéma, soit m’accrocher. Ce que j’ai décidé de faire. J’ai donc banni la langue arabe. Définitivement. Je ne lisais plus en arabe. Je ne parlais plus arabe qu’avec ma famille. Et le français est devenu ma priorité, mais aussi la langue avec laquelle j’entrais en conflit. Parce que c’est une langue qui est contrôlée et qui a été conquise seulement par les gens riches du Maroc qui, pour installer une différence entre eux et le reste des Marocains, parlent en français.48

Referring to what he speaks with his family - which is of course (while he does not name it as such) Darija – as the only practice of Arabic he will pursue, Taïa claims that he banishes himself from any literary/cultural form of “Arabic” language and sets French as his priority for reasons that this very work will explore (in this instance to become a

filmmaker but there are however several different scenarios of that same decision to “go French” to be found in his auto-fictions as Ralph Heyndels (2009, 2010), Gibson N’Cube (2014) and Arnaud Genon (2016) have studied.

But even more significantly he declares in another interview:

Seuls les riches parlent le français et l’utilisent pour dessiner une hiérarchie qui les sépare du reste de la population….L’arabe marocain est la langue de l’intimité, la langue avec laquelle j’ai commencé à rêver et à laquelle je reste encoreattaché, la langue qui me colle à la peau. Même ma façon de m’exprimer en français conserve une saveur arabe comme les cicatrices que je porte. Par ailleurs, la première fois que j’ai parlé ouvertement de mon homosexualité, je l’ai fait dans ma langue maternelle.49

What is remarkable here is the explicit naming of what is to be understood when he alludes to “Arabic” which is Darija, and which he will always carry on him. Instances of Moroccan Oraliture are indeed omnipresent in Taïa’s writings and these will be analyzed in this dissertation. Just as he speaks of “Moroccan Arabic” as a scar on his body, Taïa’s writings are also marked by this, paradoxically, beautiful scar that is Moroccan orality. More than being French with a “Moroccan flavor” it is actually Moroccan Darija with a French script. Which means, as will be further-explored in this dissertation, a Dislocated French put at the disposal of a Moroccan literary linguistic practice – under the mythical sign of Phantom Arabic.

Back to our textual analysis of Celui qui est digne d’être aimé, Lahbib’s letter to Ahmed, can therefore be viewed as a translation of an original one that could have only been in Darija. A few pages later, Ahmed asks Lahbib “Tu l’aime, ton Gerard?” Although,

this phrase definitely sounds more natural in French, than the previously analyzed one, its underlying syntax is in fact Darija: “tatbeghih, dak Gerard dialek?” As it is common in Darija and unique to this language to actually use the possessive pronouns to signify a feeling of distance that the person making the utterance has or feels towards the person referred to. To illustrate even further, Lahbib was talking about his abusive relationship with Gerard, admitting that Ahmed’s intuition about the latter was right. Ahmed was worried about his friend Lahbib’s relationship with someone who is abusing him. His way of asking: “tu l’aime, ton Gerard?”, does not mean the same in French as it does in Darija. The French reader does not get the nuance that exists in the original phrase, when written/said in French that phrase can be understood to hold a positive meaning, but in Darija it actually holds a negative one. “Tatbghih dak Gerard dialek” almost bears a sense of disgust and sarcastic distance between the person speaking: Ahmed, and the one spoken about: Gerard.

This analysis confirms itself a few pages later when Lahbib says: “tu n’as jamais aimé Gérard. Surtout quand il m’a demandé de t’amener toi aussi à la villa.” (128) (You never liked Gerard, especially when he asked me to bring you along to the Villa). At a time when the French reader needs to wait a few pages to get a sense of Ahmed’s feelings towards Gerard, a reader familiar with Darija would have felt that as early as that priorly analyzed passage. Lahbib continues: “Tu as toujours dit que Gerard était d’un monde que tu ne comprenais pas, que tu ne comprendrais jamais. Tu acceptais que je te Donne un peu de l’argent que je lui volais et tu disais: ‘C’est juste. Vole-le encore et encore.’ Tu ne voyais pas que je l’aimais profondément.” (128) This passage, confirms once again Ahmed’s negative feelings towards Gerard, that I claim could be read in a Darijized version of the
previous utterance. Indeed, this aspect seems to be a signature of Abdellah Taïa’s writing: What remains missing from a reading that only takes French into consideration and ignores the semantic, stylistic and syntactic underlying systems of Darija that are inherent to his writing.

So it is in this French infused with Darija that Abdellah Taïa writes. A style that bears his signature as it is visible in many, if not all, of his literary works. As we can notice in the following passage from *L’Armée du salut* (2014) where an auto-reflexive character by the name of Abdellah encounters a French man in Tangier. The following passage, the encounter with French offers a double meaning: on the one hand, it refers to meeting someone who comes from France, and on the other hand it refers to somebody who allegorically represents the French language.

Un homme d’un certain âge (35, 40 ans) est venu vers moi. Il a touché délicatement mon épaule et m’a dit en français : ‘il faut se méfier du soleil. C’est dangereux. Tu as une crème solaire ? Il ne m’a pas laissé le temps de répondre et m’a proposé la sienne. Je m’en suis mis partout sur le corps et la lui ai rendue en le remerciant. (59)

This moment of the narrative is highly significant: not only does Abdellah meet here for the first time in that novel a “French-speaker,” but Taïa writes in French to say that the man addresses Abdellah “in French”, which is a way of dislocating the very French he uses for narrating the story whose effective referential world is not lived within French but within Darija. Abdellah, “qui parle à peine le français” (who barely speaks French) is still a child and is, as are many of Taïa’s character from a very disadvantaged socio-economic class. The narrator continues: “J’ai fait ce qu’il me disait. Il a mis sa main gauche sur mon épaule et a commencé à étaler avec sa main droite sa crème solaire sur mon dos.” (I did was he was asking. He put his left hand on my shoulder and started rubbing the sunscreen
all over my back) In an imaginary that needs to also consider the intersections of queer-sexuality and inter-linguistic performance (something the reader encounters in most of the author’s works studied in this dissertation) this first homo-erotic contact not only happens with the French but also and even more importantly in French:

Tu t’appelles comment?
Abdellah
Moi, c’est Selim
Tu es Maroccaïn?
Oui!
Pourtquoi parles-tu en français alors ?
Parceque je vis à Paris. Je ne connais pas l’arabe.
Tu veux dire que tu ne connais aucun mot arabe ?!
J’en connais peut-être quatre ou cinq…à peine.
Et cela ne te manque pas…parler la langue de ton pays, ton premier pays ?
Non, franchement non ! Et toi ? Où as-tu appris le français ? (60)

This passage is revealing on several levels. First, we understand that the French-speaker is in fact a Moroccan living in Paris. We also understand that being Moroccan and speaking only five words of “Arabic” is possible, and from the question “Where did you learn French?” we also understand that speaking French in Morocco is not the norm. The question inherently presupposes the need to go to school, and to a private school that offers French, in order to learn the language. The ability to speak proper French is unequivocally a marker of social status. The fact that Selim asks Abdellah, whom he recognizes as economically disadvantaged, about where he learned his French illustrates the astonishment of the former at the latter’s ability to communicate in the language.

The previous example is one of many whereby French is portrayed as the language of power in Taïa’s writing. The fictionalization of French is nowhere more apparent than when Abdellah, who journeys to Switzerland to visit a French-speaKing man named Jean, muses:
Le silence en Suisse est profond, opaque, sourd, horrible. Il fallait que je parle, que j’entende quelqu’un parler. Pour dire quoi, je ne savais pas. Parler pour parler. Après tout, les Genevois parlaient français, je parlais français aussi. Pourquoi avoir appris cette langue des années durant au Maroc, pas pour être réduit à ce silence en tout cas. […] je n’avais jamais pensé que le français pouvait être aussi la langue du silence. Ne rien dire et en français me paraissait complètement inconcevable. Un scandale !

That Taïa writes of never having thought that French can also be a language of silence presupposes the existence of another language of silence. Because we know the other language that Abdellah speaks is what he calls “Arabic”, we can surmise this to be the other language of silence. It is then to combat this very silence, this very oppression that Abdellah spent so much time learning French. We also understand that to exist in a society like Morocco, French was primordial for Abdellah. The fact that he speaks of learning French to exist also presupposes the non-existence of all those who do not speak the language. It is freedom that Abdellah seeks. However, a few pages later, Taïa problematizes this situation again: just when Adbellah thinks that his ability to speak French will ensure his entry to the circle of elites, a sense of disillusionment arises when he states, “Au bout de quelques jours. Je n’essayais plus de le comprendre, de comprendre son amour, sa façon d’aimer, je ne ressentais que ma propre souffrance. J’étais dans une prison, de plus en plus dans une prison. La liberté en Occident ? Quelle liberté ?”

Abdellah’s disillusionment with the French (as the character that metaphorically represents the language) only reaches its peak in the previous quotation. He knows that he cannot be himself in the language that alienates him. French, just like “Arabic” was before, becomes a prison for him. It is therefore after having flirted with the French (again in both senses) that Abdellah discovers that freedom does not speak French. That trying to find himself, to assert himself, to exist in that language—that language of the post/neo-colonial
oppressor—is not the answer. It is neither in the “Arabic” that he abandoned nor in the French that he believed was everything but silence that Abdellah finds himself. The ending of the novel, which is anything but closed to a variety of interpretations, only lets us dream of Abdellah’s language. It is for this “langue rêve”—this utopian dream-language that Abdellah aspires. This “langue rêve” which is alluded to at different occasions in several of the writer’s works would enable Abdellah to find his own meaning, but it can precisely only exist in the dream-work of his writing. Just as Abdellah speaks about “se construire dans le doute” (to build one’s self in doubt) it is on these shaky unstable, ambivalent, pro-regressive linguistic grounds that he treads. In that regard, it is highly symptomatic that the linguistic and cultural situation in which Ahmed (a fictional representation of Taïa himself) in Celui qui est digne d’être aimé, published in 2017, is literally trapped can be read as a consequential continuity of what has “happened” to Abdellah when leaving Morocco and Darija for Francophone Switzerland, France, and French in L’Armée du salut, published 11 years before.

The second letter, in Abdellah Taïa’s Celui qui est digne d’être aimé is signed by a character named Vincent, and addressed to Ahmed. In it, the former addresses the later, constantly quoting him and trying to make sense a-posteriori of the words that Ahmed has been telling him. After having met each other in a train, the two men quickly develop an attraction for each other. They end in a hotel room in Paris. After having engaged in sexual intercourse Ahmed, who was going to take a bath, is quoted saying: “Je suis dans la baignoire… Je prends un bain… Viens… Ajji… Viens…” (65) This passage represents the first instance of a language other than French in this work. Vincent quickly follows by a meta-linguistic analysis of the “strange” word he just heard: “Ajji. J’avais entendu ce mot
arabe a plusieurs reprises durant mon voyage au Maroc, sans le comprendre. À présent, je le vivais ce mot, avec toi, par toi. Et tout, dans mon corps, voulait répondre non pas en Français mais en arabe.” (65) Vincent’s analysis is beautifully worded but simply wrong from a linguistic point of view. The word “Ajjii” is a verb conjugated in the imperative form asking someone to come. It has its roots in the Arabic word “jay” (jāʼa) but the Arabic verb is not conjugated in the same manner50. In the passage, immediately following the later, Vincent asks Ahmed: “Comment dit-on en arabe ‘j’arrive’?” to which Ahmed answers “ana jay.” Once again, an answer that is simply wrong from a linguistic perspective. The most common phrase to say I am coming in Arabic is: “انا قادم” (ana qaːdim) and all other known phrases do not use the verb “jay” in fact, such a phrase, is simply non-existent in Arabic.

Yet, what seems to be more important is not the scientific or linguistic veracity of these statements, as much as the effect they have on both author and characters. In fact, Vincent quickly follows by saying:

Je me suis levé. Et j’ai parlé comme toi, par ta voix ‘ana jay’. Étais-je ensorcelé ? M’avais-tu jeté un sort puissant pendant que je dormais ? J’avais l’impression, en me dirigeant vers la Salle de bains, qu’une grande partie de moi-même était désormais sous ton contrôle. (…) Et, encore une fois, aucune résistance ne m’a traversé l’esprit. Ana jay (65)

It is very clear in this quotation that the desired effect of both Ahmed on Vincent, as well as of Taïa on his reader, has been achieved. Vincent, without any doubt, is under a “spell” after hearing these two words. He talks about being “enchanted” by hearing them, he even says that he felt his very own body react in strange ways, as if he was led by a phantomatic

50 http://cooljugator.com/ar/jay
power that he could neither control nor apprehend. This passage is indeed a metaphor for this thesis itself. The ideological hold of Phantom Arabic his expressed in two ways. First, on the character after having heard these words that he thinks are “Arabic”. Second, and maybe more importantly, on the author of this work as well.

As I demonstrated, it is pretty easy to uncover the purely linguistic inaccuracy of the statement that “Ana jay” is in Arabic. But why does Abdellah Taïa consciously or unconsciously make such a mistake. Two possible analyses seem of potential interest here. First, maybe the hold of Phantom Arabic that is being analyzed in this dissertation is actually so strong as to make even someone whose very profession is about the mastery of words simply not see through it. The second possibility, is one that gives more agency to the author and explains his choice as a sort of upside down orientalism. Taïa, might be aware of that “mistake” but chooses to use the word “Arabic” as he knows that using such a word brings to his reader a myriad of orientalist references. The latter could be in fact as an appeal to the reader’s pathos.

In crude terms, saying: “Ana jay” is Darija would definitely sound “less sexy” as this language does not (yet) have the history and even more importantly the imaginary that Arabic has. Is Taïa simply blind to these issues of language in his writing, or is he actually using them to his own benefit? Such questions on a purely auto-biographic level are impossible to answer. Who am I to be claiming one or the other? The only tangible thing that one could scrutinize and try to answer is the text. What Abdellah Taïa actually has to say about language does not matter as much as what his text says. At the end of the day, even if his erroneous use of “Arabic” in his text is a conscious way of diverting Orientalism
for his own benefit, opting for such a tactic says a lot about his personal relationship vis-à-vis Phantom Arabic.

The bathtub scene continues, and the two men are now engaging in sexual practices while Taïa writes:

Tu as dit:
‘Ana’
J’ai dit comme toi:
‘Ana’
Tu as continue:
‘Ana enta’
J’avais besoin d’aide. Tu as recommencé. Tu as prononce ‘Ana’ et tu t’es désigné du doigt. Et en disant ‘enta’ tu m’as désigné du doigt, moi.
‘Enta’ c’était moi. Tu. Toi.
J’ai cessé de me masturber et j’ai pris un peu de temps pour bien déchiffrer le message.
Tu l’as répété :
‘Ana enta’
(66)

This passage is worthy of scrutiny for two reasons: first, it is reminiscent of the previously analyzed passage from *L’Armée du salut*. It represents a switch in the power dynamic with the latter, as this one is taking place in “Arabic” (which is actually Darija) and Ahmed seems to be the one leading the way. Vincent, the French man, is submissively following the latter’s guidance. Hearing those words in “Arabic” makes him even more excited as he said: “J’ai repris la masturbation et, encore plus excite, j’ai dit exactement comme toi, tes mots. Moi. En arabe.” (67) The French man is clearly aroused by this oriental subject speaking an oriental language. Ahmed, knows that, and uses it to his own gain. The power dynamic between these two characters changes drastically as a result of that. This passage, as I mentioned, is reminiscent of the previously analyzed one in *L’Armée du salut*, the main difference being that the first sexual encounter between Abdellah (the character) in that
novel and the French man happened in Morocco a Dislocated French, whereas this one is happening in France in a Phantom Arabic.

Such a switch in the power dynamics between Abdellah Taïa’s characters follows a feeling of disenfranchisement that the author expresses in relation to both France as well as French. The language that he uses to write was seen as one that was going to “free” him from the mechanism of social and sexual oppression that he was experiencing in Morocco. But his last book, is a clear sign of an evolving position that does not see things in a naive binary: French as the language of freedom, “Arabic” as the language of oppression. The previous sexual scene that takes place in “Arabic” might be read as an attempt to experiment with the possibilities that this language has to offer. The only thing that Taïa seems to be missing is that his sexual encounter actually happened in Darija and not in Arabic. The latter is, to put it bluntly, incompatible with sex. The documentary film that is annexed to this dissertation goes a little more in detail about this specific issue. But to support my argument, Arabic (as we know it today) is held “hostage” by the religious discourse. Due to the fact that sexuality is seen as a “dirty” and “lower” thing in the so-called “Arab world”, sexuality got relegated to these other “lower” languages. This argument also explains why the very naming of the sexual act in North Africa and the Middle East is completely different from one country to another, and none of the different ways to say “sex” in the many languages that exist in the region actually follows the Arabic root word for sexual intercourse.

Back to Celui qui est digne d'être aimé, Vincent says: “Ana enta. Je parlais arabe. La language de mon pere, qu’il nous avait toujours cachee. Et j’allais d’un moment a l’autre jouir, exploser de jouissance, dans cette langue d’origine.” (67) Indeed, this passage gives
the reader a little more information about Vincent, explaining his infatuation with what he keeps calling “Arabic”. This quote, in addition to more that follow it, explains to the reader that, although Vincent is French, his father is from Moroccan origin. Having grown up in France his whole life, “shielded” from his father’s cultural background, he does not know the language. Yet, he is clearly fascinated by it. This idea of not speaking the father’s language does of course reverberate with issues that we will scrutinize in Leïla Sebbar’s work. The juxtaposition of performing sexuality and the “original language” as Vincent calls it is in many regards interesting. A dislocated Darija, in France, disguised as “Arabic” becomes the language of sexual fulfillment and pleasure. The very characters that Abdellah Taïa uses to writes are in fact Latin characters. “Ana jay” is not written as “انا جاي” which would be the way of writing that in Arabic script. That phrase, as I explained before, even if written in Arabic script would still be Darija and is simply wrong in Standard Arabic. But here the reader finds herself/himself in front of someone using the Latin script to write these “exotic” looking words and claim that they are “Arabic”. As a matter of fact, if Taïa was truly conscious of his erroneous or misleading use of the word, and if his main purpose was to turn post-orientalism upside down and use it to his own benefit why not write the actual words in the Arabic script? Such a decision is one that the writer made in one of his most influential books: *Infidèles* (2012).

*Infidèles* is the story of the daily struggles of a kid and his mother who happens to be a prostitute. Her name is Slima. His name is Jallal. He follows her, protects her, attracts her clients, grows up and becomes a man without a real father figure. A soldier who enters their life as a simple regular client becomes the only thing close to a father-figure that the young Jallal has, he says: “Deux ans pour m’inspirer d’un homme, le copier, marcher
comme lui, me tenir comme lui, tomber comme lui, inventer dans ce monde une place près de la sienne, un chemin parallèle au sien.” The novel tells the story of the solitude of the marginals, the hypocrisy of Moroccan society, its abuse and rejection of the kid and his mother. The themes of this work reverberate strongly with Nabil Ayouch’s films, in general, and with *Much Loved* in particular.

Slima, resembles, in many regards, the character of Noha in *Much Loved*. Worthy of notice is that, although both are prostitutes, they both share a very unique relationship to religiosity. Slima ends up going with her son to do her pilgrimage. She enters in a quasi-state of trance once she is in what Abdellah Taïa calls “la terre sainte”, she ends up dying there as if she has been waiting for this moment her whole life. Her son, Jallal, buries her in the same city as her prophet.

The book is organized narratively through four chapters: “Des soldats,” “Par amour,” “*Infidèles*,” and “Dieu”. The chapter immediately preceding the concluding one is the one of most interest as far as the problematic of this dissertation. While the whole book is written in French, and the chapter “Par amour” ends with the death and burial of Slima in “sacred land,” the final chapter of the book opens in a queer way:
The abrupt apparition of Phantom Arabic stands as a textual testimony of this dissertation’s hypothesis. Why would a writer feel the need, in a book written in French, to suddenly introduce a page in Arabic? Only to follow it by its French translation. Arguably all of Taïa’s writing is in fact a translation, as we are going to see when studying the film Salvation Army and its textual original: L’Armée du salut. But in opening the final chapter, which holds the same title as the entire novel, Taïa decides to introduce Arabic script to his work.

Indeed, this sudden apparition of Standard Arabic in a French novel is intriguing in many regards. Adding to the mystery is that Taïa does not comment on the Arabic text in his novel. He explains through his character, after having provided the French translation of the Arabic text on the following page, that those were the 99 names of God. He says: “Par cœur. Je les ai fait apprendre à Mahmoud par cœur. Tous. Les quatre-vingt-dix-neuf noms d’Allah. Avec la bonne prononciation. Dans le bon rythme. En arabe classique.”

(127) It is interesting to note, however, that Abdellah Taïa writes “En arabe classique” instead of simply “en arabe,” in this passage. This is, to my knowledge, the first time that Taïa uses this term instead of just calling it “Arabic”. The writer notices, or becomes aware of the difference between the list that he just provided and other moments in his writing where his characters are speaking Darija, and he calls it Arabic. For the very first time when Arabic truly enters his writing he feels the need to call it “Classical” Arabic. This might be understood as an unconscious phenomenon where a writer who is so ideologically fascinated by Phantom Arabic, actually feels that whatever he speaks in daily life is something different from the text he just provided, feeling the need to qualify it with an adjective: “Classical”.

One could claim that if Taïa’s purpose was to simply introduce these names of God, he could have only included the French translation of the Arabic text. However, in literature there are no coincidences, only choices. The writer therefore makes that choice for two reasons: First, he wants to cause an effect on his reader. Second, he is himself infatuated with that language. The effect on the reader can come in many forms. To the French reader, this exotic indecipherable script comes as a reminder of the country’s colonial and orientalist past (and present). A number of French people who do not speak Arabic are in fact fascinated by it. A fascination that turns into fetishization and that holds its root from a time when French intellectuals used to engage in a Grand Tour to the “barbary” lands. This language, associated with these exotic others, became itself an exotic entity. Its presence in a French literary work, is a reminder of the “exotic” identity and origin of the writer, making his work even more “interesting” in that sense.

Now, the more complex issue is that of the perpetual enforcement and re-enforcement of orientalist ideology. Indeed, the essential and central question not only to this dissertation but to my entire intellectual and academic endeavor is: How do those who are the very subjects of a form of oppression participate in their very subordination? More precisely, how does Phantom Arabic have such an ideological grip that it makes the very people it is oppressing consent to their very oppression? A preliminary answer of this question lies in the following formulation by P.E. Jones, in Language and Ideology (2001): ideology is “the ways of thinking in which historically transient exploitative forms of social organization are represented as eternal, natural, inevitable or rational” (227). The question of how this occurs, that is, how ideologies conceal exploitation and result in the acceptance,
the production and reproduction of oppression is related to the complex concept of Hegemony.

This concept is in fact at the center of any analysis over power and ideology, for it is commonly believed that power is in fact always synonymous with force. However, this very concept of hegemony shows that power can be applied with minimal use of power if any at all. Via Hegemony, a dominant discourse makes itself seem “natural” or “normal” subordinating all other discourses by creating a certain feeling of consent to its dominance. In that regard, force doesn’t exceed consensus. Thus, one can understand that hegemony is maintained by the dominant groups in power via teaching their ideas, values, to the population. This teaching can be done in many ways and I am not here referring only to the education system, although the latter is part of it. This teaching can be done through many forms of cultural production for example. It is a fact that, Abdellah Taïa for instance, is infatuated by Egyptian music and cinema, continuously referring to it in his novels, in his film, as well as in his interviews. The writer has also gone through the Moroccan educational system, which to put it bluntly, has as its main aim to produce passive thinkers who accept whatever they are being “taught” without much critical distance. Hegemony, as I previously mentioned, works through implementing certain ideologies and ways of viewing the world through various strategies and via various tools, the educational system is only one of so many channels through which hegemony exercises itself. Gramsci argues in *Prison Notebooks Vol. 1* (2011) that “every relationship of hegemony is necessarily a pedagogical relationship” (350). The education system is therefore one of the main pillars in propagating a certain ideology. Literature, is another one. Through his “erroneous” and continuous use of the wrong terminology, his reinforcement of orientalist beliefs, a writer
such as Abdellah Taïa is at the same time a victim and a participant to Phantom Arabic’s ideological oppression.

Through his character Jallal, Taïa writes: “Je ne réfléchissais pas sur l’arabe. Cette langue était en moi bien avant moi” (128). This passage comes a few pages after Arabic magically appears in his novel *Infidèles*: Jallal is teaching Mathis, who changed his name to Mahmoud, how to write in Arabic. He starts with the first letter of the alphabet: “Alif” (128) and as soon as he teaches Mahmoud the different shapes and forms that this letter can take, he quickly admits to the confusion of the man. The latter asks the question: “Pourquoi ? Pourquoi ces revirements incessants ? Ce côté en permanence insaisissable ? Ces multiples langues à l’intérieur d’une même langue ?” (129) To this series of questions that show the conflictual relationship that the author has with that language, he answers by writing the previously mentioned quotation: “Je n’avais pas de réponses à ces questions que je ne m’étais jamais posées. Je ne réfléchissais pas sur l’arabe. Cette langue était en moi bien avant moi.” (129) In this passage, that starts with the teaching of a language, reverberating with the previous views about the link between hegemony, pedagogy, power and dominance, Taïa writes about two extremely important aspects: On the one hand, he admits to the existence of “multiple languages inside the same language” and on the second he indirectly confesses to the very pertinence of this dissertation’s thesis when he writes: “Je ne réfléchissais pas sur l’arabe. Cette langue était en moi bien avant moi.” (129) By doing so, he confirms the ideological grip that Phantom Arabic has on him. He recognizes that he is unable to have, on this language, a critical perspective. “He does not think about this language” because “it was in him even before him”. Indeed, it does not get clearer under the sun. In this passage, Taïa provides textual proof about the validity of this thesis.
The relationship between Jallal and Arabic in *Infidèles* can be read as a metaphor for the relationship of the writer to that same language. Jallal says: “Je n’avais pas parlé l’arabe depuis mon arrivé à Bruxelles avec Mouad le Belge, mais cette langue était encore vivante et forte en moi.” (139) No need to remind you at this point that nobody “speaks” Arabic, therefore the claim that Jallal makes of not having “spoken” Arabic since he got to Brussels is a paradox. He quickly follows that by saying that this language was in fact “strong and alive inside of him.” Confirming once again the hegemonic and ideological aspect of Phantom Arabic. The chapter ends in a tragic way that is once again a reverberation of another of Nabil Ayouch’s films: *Horses of God*. Jallal and Mahmoud end up killing themselves in a suicide-bombing where they kill no one. A paradoxical fantasized ending where the two terrorists plan to commit their suicide-bombing act in a mosque, all while caring about not harming anyone. Afraid of getting caught, with the sirens of the police approaching the great mosque of Casablanca, a miracle allows them to find an abandoned cinema where they commit their act, killing only themselves, without harming anyone. The fact that Taïa writes in *Infidèles* of two terrorists who are afraid of harming people is a reminder of Orwell’s concept of Doublethink, holding two contradictory beliefs to be true. That very same concept seems to be omnipresent in Taïa’s writing vis-à-vis the issues at hand in this dissertation.

Let us turn back to Taïa’s latest book to date *Celui qui est digne d’être aimé*, we previously mentioned that the narrative format of the book included three letters, all dated and signed by different characters. The final letter in the sequence that I am hereby proposing happens to be the first one in the traditional order of things. In it, Ahmed addresses Malika (his deceased mother) and sets things straight with her. He writes all that
he was not able to tell her while she was living. The letter is dated August 2015, making it chronologically the last one of all the letters presented in this book. This aspect leads me to claim that Phantom Arabic’s hegemony is indeed at play even in apparently objective decisions by the author. It is of course a known fact that the Arabic language is written from right to left, contrary to all western languages. Arabic books, therefore, logically open in an opposite direction to Western books. My claim, therefore, is that Abdellah Taïa’s writing in Celui qui est digne d’être aimé, which seems encrypted and stylistically mysterious to the western reader, is in fact very clear to someone who is acquainted to Arabic. In fact, I argue that the logical sequence to read this novel is the following: Opening the book as if it was an Arabic work allows the reader to start with the first letter “chronologically speaking” as it is dated: “Mai 1990” and is signed by Lahbib and addressed to Ahmed. In that “first” letter the reader discover the genesis of Ahmed’s character, we learn about his daily struggles, about growing up a homosexual in a society such as the Moroccan one, his childhood and teenage years, which are indeed formative years in the development of anyone’s personality. That letter is followed by Ahmed’s letter to Emmanuel which is dated “Juillet 2005,” a letter in which Ahmed develops in detail his perspective on his short-lived relationship with Emmanuel. Ahmed’s behavior and relative betrayal of Emmanuel can be understood through the previous letter (in my order). Following it comes Vincent’s letter to Ahmed, dated “Juillet 2010” where Vincent is trying to make sense of the sudden ghosting of Ahmed, who he thought loved him. Another pathological behavior of Ahmed’s character who seems to use his lovers, get what he needs from them and, as soon as they cannot offer him what he needs, drops them to move on to the next one. The final letter (once again in my order), which is dated “Aout 2015” is
actually the first one which provides even more insight into Ahmed’s psychology in the way he writes and settles matters with his deceased mother. Phantom Arabic’s presence therefore manifests itself even in the very narrative structure of Abdellah Taïa’s writing.

### The Francophone Dystopia

This section focuses on Abdellah Taïa’s *L’Armée du salut*, both the film and the novel. It attempts to engage with the intriguing aspect of the writer and filmmaker’s work, in the sense that oftentimes critical discourse has looked at a film and its textual source of inspiration but seldom does one come across a film inspired by a novel, both produced by the same person. It should be noted that the novel was the first work to come out in 2006, whereas the film was released in 2013. The writer confessed to having made a few changes to the story, referring mainly to the names of locations that were changed, probably in an attempt to make the film more marketable. Casablanca is a city that comes with a whole “imaginary” for the Western viewer, but the specific aspects that are the focus of this dissertation remain untouched.

The novel opens with an extremely detailed description of the overpopulated house that was home to Abdellah. He writes:

> Pendant plusieurs années, mon enfance, mon adolescence, l’essentiel de ma vie s’est déroulé dans cette pièce qui donnait sur la rue. Quartz murs qui ne protégeaient pas vraiment des bruits de l’extérieur. Un petit toit pour vivre, enregistrer dans sa mémoire, dans sa peau, ce qui faisait notre vie, tout expérimenter, tout sentir et plus tard tout se remémorer. (12)

Taïa writes of the importance of this space in his life. It was extremely small for the number of people living in it. It also came with an unfair hierarchizing of bodies. The two adult males were the ones who had their own rooms. The author writes: “Longtemps notre maison de Hay Salam, a Sale, n’a été qu’un rez-de-chaussée de trois pièces, une pour mon
père, une autre pour mon grand frère Abdelkbir et la dernière pour nous, le reste de la famille: mes six sœurs, Mustapha, ma mère et moi.” (11) This hierarchy of bodies is pretty symptomatic of the dominant discourse in Morocco. The male body is more important, and therefore worthy of a better quality of life, more space, than the female body. This passage is extremely clear on that, as Abdellah (the narrator) mentions that in a house of three rooms, his older brother had one, his father had his own, and the rest of the family lived in the third one. Indeed, what he calls “the rest of the family” consists of his six sisters, his younger brother (Mustapha), himself and his mother.

Indeed, this unjust hierarchy of bodies with which Abdellah grew up, reverberates in other aspects of his writing, as this chapter is going to explore. He continues: “Les deux autres pièces nous étaient presque inaccessibles, surtout celle d’Abdelkebir. Il était l’aîné, presque le roi de la famille. Celle de mon père était a la fois le salon des grandes occasions, la bibliothèque ou il rangeait soigneusement ses livres en arabe magnifiquement relies et son nid d’amour. C’est là que mes parents faisaient l’amour. Cela leur arrivait au moins une fois par semaine. On le savait. On savait tout à la maison.” (12) Many things to note here, first, Abdellah talks about the other rooms and especially that of his older brother as being an inaccessible space. He talks about it in such a way that he almost paints it as a heterotopia, one that will be essential to his own sexual identity. When painting the picture of his father’s image, the motif to which he gives the most importance in his sentence is that of “Arabic”. He describes the existence of a central piece in his father’s room: a library. He adds that in it, were collected and “magnificently” displayed Arabic books. Indeed, the infatuation with Phantom Arabic is present since the very first pages of this novel.
By virtue of its inaccessibility, of the eroticism it represents, the father’s room becomes a heterotopia. Its content, therefore is given an immediate higher, maybe even supernatural, value. The very fact that Taïa, remembers the library as a masterpiece in this room says a lot. The fact that these books were in Arabic says even more. As Arabic therefore enters the realm of this heterotopia. It ceases to refer to a real-world “entity”, and gains an almost mythological quality to it. In addition, Taïa strangely links his description of the “Arabic” library to the fact that this space also serves as a love-nest. He therefore gives it not only a mythical value but also a sexual and amorous one. The father’s room is a heterotopia where, love, sex, Arabic, all meet in a mythological harmony possible only in Taïa’s writing.

Taïa continues by giving very detailed descriptions of his parents’ sexual life. Symptom of the lack of privacy that reigns in certain strata of Moroccan society, as we are going to further explore in the chapter devoted to Nabil Ayouch, the very act of having sex between a man and his wife is actually negotiated in front of the rest of the family. Indeed, by virtue of silently negotiating it in front of the rest of the family it becomes visible in its very “silence”. Taïa writes, talking about his father’s room:

C’est là que mes parents faisaient l’amour. Cela leur arrivait au moins une fois par semaine. On le savait. On savait tout à la maison. Pour dire à ma mère son désir sexuel, mon père avait mis au point ses propres techniques, ses stratégies. L’une d’elles consistait tout simplement à passer la soirée avec nous, dans notre pièce. Lui qui était un grand parleur, lui qui aimait tout commenter, il devenait soudain silencieux. Il ne disait plus rien, pas un mot, pas un son ne sortait de sa bouche. (12-13)

Abdellah deciphers here his father’s strategies for showing his wife his sexual desires. Of course, Abdellah’s mother in the novel has no sexual desires, which continues an argument made earlier about the bodies that matter in Moroccan society. Her body, is only there
waiting to be desired by the adult man’s body. The sexual act is of course “silent”, never named, and completely submissive for women. The mother is described in *L’Armée du salut* as being a strong and authoritarian woman, yet she endures sex in complete and utter passivity.

The loud silence of the father, in the heterotopia of his own room, might be read as a metaphor for the very Phantom Arabic that reigns in that space. Indeed, Phantom Arabic as it has come to be explored in this dissertation is “silent” in the sense that nothing is actually written in it in the works that this dissertation explores, yet it is absolutely dominant and over-arching in the works of all the writers and filmmakers that this dissertation deals with. The very silence, described here in the novel is going to be portrayed using different stylistic methods on the big screen. Let us turn for a moment to Taïa’s film by the same name: *L’Armée du salut* (2013).

The film opens with an image of a traditional pressure cooker, on a small gas-can, From the sounds that the viewer hears, one understands that the dish is at maximum capacity, a few minutes more and it risks exploding. The opening images that Taïa chose for his movie are relevant. Such images might be understood as a metaphor of a society and an ideology that are near implosion. They can also be read as representing a certain feeling of frustration and auto-violence that a person struggling with their sexuality is going through in the Moroccan context. In addition, these images might also be read as an expression of the feeling of over-crowdedness that Abdellah (the character) is experiencing while living in a small house, in a poor neighborhood, all while sharing his room with eight more people. Indeed, a lot can be said about the very opening of this film.
Immediately after those opening images, the camera pans to the left, to follow someone’s feet. The person walks very slowly and is not wearing any shoes, as if to represent a sense of sneaking. The camera lifts up while following the first character that the viewer sees on the screen: a young teenager appears. He tries to open the door that he has reached while making the least sound possible. He enters the room that he worked so hard to access. He silently looks around the room, locks it from the inside and approaches the bed. On the nightstand, the viewer notices a radio player, many cassettes and a few books, all in French. For a few long and silence seconds, Abdellah lays on the bed that, we will understand soon, belongs to his brother. The director cuts to an image of the room’s door. We notice that the pressure cooker has now been opened, which means two things: On the purely stylistic level, it means that time has passed since Abdellah entered that room, but on the metaphorical level, it might represent that by entering that room, which is forbidden to him, Abdellah has in a sense broken the rules of a society that does not allow him to exist. Therefore, by entering that room, he left the near-imploding closet in which he was living.

The door, slowly opens, as the camera is fixing on it from the outside, Abdellah tries to leave without being noticed, but he fails. As soon as he is out of the room the viewer hears a woman’s voice yelling in Darija: “You entered again your brother’s room?! What were you doing there? I swear I am going to tell him, this time he is going to kill you!” (03:40) Abdellah does not answer the woman who we understand to be his mother and silently walks away avoiding any type of confrontation. This quote is not important due to its content but it is rather its “form” that is of interest. It symbolizes in fact, the cinematic featuring of Darija in Taïa’s work. Indeed, one should keep in mind that this film is based
on a novel written in French. The suspicion, the smell of a Darija-French, that might be raised amongst certain readers when looking at Taïa’s books confirms itself in this movie. In the film, there are no questions asked and no debates to have about what language the characters speak. They all speak Darija. Not Arabic, nor French; Darija. Despite this, and keeping the themes of this dissertation in mind, the scenes where French is introduced will come under scrutiny.

“Tout, tout, tout en mon frère me plaisait et m’inspirait. Le Pain nu de Mohamed Choukri qui m’a révélé à la littérature, c’est lui.” (L’Armée du salut, 36) Abdellah’s infatuation with his brother exceed the erotic realm to the intellectual one. Taïa writes that it was Abdellah’s brother who even introduced him to literature. Yet, there is no indication as to the language in which Abdellah was introduced to the literary realm. The book’s title is written in French, so was it the French translation of Choukri’s work that Taïa is referring to? Or was it the Arabic version? Or even the English one? If one is to follow a social-realist model, it is probably the Arabic version that Abdellah read. As at that age, while belonging to a low socio-economic class, access to French is extremely limited.

Such a socio-realist analysis is however countered in the film. All the books that are seen in the brother’s room in the film are in French. In fact, the older brother is even portrayed as a Francophile who code-switches in his day-to-day language. One scene that shows that is when Abdellah enters his brother’s room to wake him up. He tells him in Darija: “the water is hot and ready for you” to which the brother, who was sleeping while

51 Although the manuscript of the book was written by Choukri in Arabic, its English version translated by Paul Bowles was in fact the first to be published, before the French, and the Arabic ones. This aspect is analyzed in more detail in Nabil Ayouch’s chapter.
holding a French book between his hand and his chest answer, in French: “D’accord! D’accord j’arrive ! Va m’attendre dans la cuisine.” This is in fact the first scene that showcases a Dislocated French in Taïa’s film. The brother dislocates French, by using it in such a context. While being from a poor family, in an underserved and over-populated neighborhood, he not only reads and listens to French, but also speaks it. His dislocation of that language is something that impresses the young Abdellah. He follows his brother’s orders. He goes to the kitchen, and after his brother joins him, Abdellah helps the latter wash his hair. The brother continues to use French throughout the whole scene, commanding the young Abdellah by saying phrases like: “Doucement!” , “Shampoing”, “Vas-y”, Abdellah remains silent until his brother commands: “peigne!” to which Abdellah answers in Darija: “Chnou??” (What??) his brother looks at him for a second and switches to Darija for the first time to say “Lmechta!” (the comb!). This scene represents many aspects in Taïa’s work: an infatuation with French, that is inspired by his very over-admiration of the older brother figure. This admiration for the brother, that becomes traced on the French language is something that Abdellah was not always conscious of, as demonstrated in the following scene.

After having traveled to Tangier, the two brothers are filmed at the beach under the shade, focused on reading their books. Both brothers are reading something. The sound of the waves is only cut short by Abdellah’s voice when he says, in Darija: “Why do you read in French?” a question to which Slimane (the older brother) answers in French: “tu n’aimes pas le français? Tu as compris ce que je t’ai dit ? Réponds ! Tu n’aimes vraiment pas cette langue” After a few seconds of silence Abdellah says, in Darija : “Talk to me in Arabic!”
Slimane continues, “tu n’aimes vraiment pas le français, yak? Abdellah says, in Darija “What am I going to do with French?” to which Slimane adds: “Qu’est-ce que tu veux dire par là?” (What are you trying to say?) a question to which Abdellah answers, in Darija: “French is the language of the rich in this country! You should not be speaking it.” In this scene, that we are still going to explore, Taïa introduces many problematics. First, by virtue of asking the question of “Why” does Slimane read in French, Abdellah presupposes that there is something wrong with such a thing. Abdellah is questioning what he perceives as his older brother’s infatuation with that language. Yet, while being critical of the “others”, Abdellah falls in the same conceptual problem that he was just critiquing in his brother. In fact, in that passage Abdellah refers to his own language as “Arabic”, while he is in fact speaking in Darija. Words such as “yak” (right?), “Mechta” (Comb), “Chnou” (what?), do not even exist in the Arabic language. As a matter of fact, their epistemological origin is not even Arabic. Yet, the young Abdellah in the film refers to whatever he is speaking as “Arabic”. The brother on the other hand, defends, without a certain sense of arrogance that he has been showing all throughout the movie, addressing people around him who he knows do not speak French in that very language. His use of French is indeed very symptomatic of a common belief that speaking French in Morocco is going to make one represent him or herself in a more positive light.

The debate on languages continues at the beach between the two brothers. After hearing his younger brother’s argument about French as being the language of the rich in Morocco, Slimane laughs at this argument. He continues: “Il n’y a pas de mal à parler

52 Yak is a Darija word that would translate loosely as “Right?”
français. Ça pourrait t’aider à réussir. Tu veux rester au Maroc ? Passer toute ta vie ici ?” to which Abdellah answers in Darija: “Of course I want to! Why would I want to leave my country?” A rhetorical question that goes unanswered by Slimane as he only adds, once again in French: “Je vais aller nager.” Indeed, the very presence of the two characters on a beach, and in particular by the Mediterranean Sea is itself an interesting metaphor. The Mediterranean has of course always represented an imaginary of interexchange between cultures and languages. The fact that this scene takes place on a Mediterranean beach is not a matter of luck, but is to be-read as an incredible allegory that Taïa offers in his film. In fact, Slimane’s very questions would prove to have precognitive powers, as Abdellah will end up not only learning and mastering French but also crossing the Mediterranean.

The very same thematics find themselves in Taïa’s novel as well. While on their train-ride to Tangier, Taïa writes: “Abdelkebir53 a lu pendant tout le voyage, un gros roman dont je n’ai pas compris le titre, Le Christ crucifié de Nikos Kazantzakis” (42). Such a quotation continues to paint the picture of the all-knowing older-brother, who is interested in literature, in French. As he reads the French translation of the Greek novel Christ Recrucified (1954). Abdellah describes his brother as being very silent throughout that train-ride, while being extremely focused on his reading. This silence is only broken by his older brother’s mention: “Je te le passerai ce roman quand je l’aurai fini… si tu veux” (44) Abdellah describes his reaction as being surprised and taken aback, he mutters: “Il est trop gros pour moi… beaucoup de pages” (44) He continues:

53 Note that the older brother’s name in the film is Slimane, while in the novel it is Abdelkebir. The choice of Slimane, does not seem to hold any critical value. I believe this choice to have been based on a choice by the producers to ‘simplify’ the names of the characters, and also to opt for a name that does not sound similar to ‘Abdellah’.
(...) Ton roman est écrit en français, non ?
Oui, ou est le problème ?
Je ne parle pas aussi bien que toi cette langue.
Ce n’est pas grave si tu ne comprends pas tout, l’essentiel est d’avancer,
de poursuivre la lecture toujours un peu plus… Et un jour, sans que tu t’en
aperçoives, tu finiras par tout comprendre. (44)

It is not every day that one reads in a book written in French something like: “But your
novel is written in French? Right?” This aspect is in fact a signature of Taïa’s writing. The
invisibility and the taken-for-granted beliefs about natural languages is suddenly taken
aback by Taïa’s writing. In addition, the fact that such mentions about French keep
appearing in the author’s work presuppose that the conversation probably did not take place
in that language. Also, the novel continues what this dissertation already started describing
vis-à-vis the movie: a continuing infatuation with the French language that is inspired by
the love, respect and even eroticism that Abdellah feels towards his older brother. At the
same time, the older-brother’s words in the novel, just as they were in film, are extremely
prophetic, as the auto-biographical persona that the character of Abdellah stands for will
not only end up understanding novels in French but even writing them.

The Mediterranean as an important space in Taïa’s work, as we have seen in the
movie, only gets even more emphasized in the following passage:

L’Espagne justement, nous l’avons perçue depuis une sorte de belvédère
(...) De l’autre cote de la Méditerranée on pouvait voir clairement des
lumières scintillantes et un sémaphore assez orgueilleux qui semblait
lancer des appels, des invitations, et en même temps mettait en garde
quiconque essayerait de traverser le détroit, les dangers serait nombreux et
les rêves deviendraient vite des cendres, des vies à jamais brisées. (51-52)

This quote reverberates the metaphor that was previously discussed in the film. The
Mediterranean is represented as a space that calls for its crossing. The lights on the other
side are at the same time dreadful and inviting to Abdellah. Yet, this feeling of crossing the
sea no matter what was not one that Abdellah seems to have. He adds: “Avoir l’Europe juste au bout de son nez, et en permanence je ne le supporterais pas longtemps, moi, j’en perrais la tête.” (52) The constant calling of the Mediterranean is such that it makes him dizzy. In addition, just like in the film, Abdellah is very clear about his intentions to stay on that side of the Mediterranean Sea. As shown in his answer to his brother’s question asking him if he would like to travel to Spain one day, Abdellah says: “Pour quoi faire ? L’essentiel de ma vie est ici !” (52) Abdellah admits that his answer back then “was sincere.” His very use of the past is in itself prophetic as it proves that his honest feelings will inevitably change.

Returning to the film, Slimane has left his two younger brothers to go to another city for the day. He left them some money and asked Abdellah to take care of his younger brother. The young boy feels that Slimane has left them to go see a girl, and feels “betrayed” by his older brother. In an attempt to achieve a sort of metaphorical revenge, he joins a French man that he met at the beach at an abandoned location. The scene is completely silent; no words are ever exchanged between the two. Once they are away from the prying eyes, Abdellah almost violently hugs the stranger. The man, although a little confused about the young men’s reaction does not push him away. The scene last for a few seconds before Abdellah lays on the ground, away from the camera’s sight, the man quickly joins him. The viewer understands that there might have been a sexual act between the two, but there is no cinematic evidence of the latter taking place.

In the novel, the passage that represents this meeting at the beach is much more detailed, as it has been previously analyzed in this dissertation. Abdellah writes: “Un homme d’un certain age (35 ans ? 40 ans ?) est venu vers moi. Il a touché délicatement
mon épaule et m’a dit, en français : ‘il faut se méfier du soleil.’” (59) Once again, Abdellah writes in French, to say that a man told him “in French” to do something. A textual proof that the other conversations when Taïa does not mention that they were in French were in fact in Darija. But what is interesting to note is the difference between this scene as portrayed in the film vis-à-vis the novel. In the film, it all happens in silence, not a single word is exchanged between the man and Abdellah. But in the novel, the two exchanged for a long time, including questions that were already addressed about the French language. Also, the book does not leave any shades of doubt about the sexual act taking place between Abdellah and the French man. Taïa writes: “Je me sens mal, mal, mal. Je suis un traître. J’ai trahi Abdelkebir.” (61) He even adds that the worst part was that he enjoyed it. He says: “Et le pire, c’est que j’ai aimé ça, être entouré par les bras forts de cet homme de 40ans qui sentait bon et qui me parlait dans l’oreille en français tout en essayant de trouver un chemin vers mon sexe, mes fesses. Je me suis donne à lui. Il ne m’a pas fait souffrir. Oui, j’ai aimé ça. Mon dieu !” (61) The sexual act is indeed very clear in the novel. Taïa also links the French language to a certain sexual enjoyment. By saying that this time, he did not “suffer” means that his other sexual relations were violent or hurtful ones. Such a "painting of sexuality is in fact shared with Nabil Ayouch’s film Much Loved that we are going to turn to in the next chapter. 

Back to the film, immediately after the beach scene with the French man, Abdellah is filmed as he is walking away from that location and back to the beach. A few images later, Abdellah calls his mother and claims that their brother has abandoned them. He claims that he left with a female server they met at a restaurant. He adds: “your talisman did not work! (…) you have to make a better one, hopefully it is going to work.” A scene
that reminds the viewer of a previous moment when Abdellah was stuffing something under his older brother’s bed. The careful viewer understands that that was in fact a talisman believed to have witchcraft power and that was going to keep Slimane in the family and prevent him from being seduced by any woman.

It is once again symptomatic of both Taïa’s writing and of Moroccan society that women are represented as evil-like characters only interested in seducing men for their own benefit. The motif of witchcraft and popular sorcery is rampant in Taïa’s writing, and reverberates with a scene that will be analyzed in Ayouch’s chapter. The phone conversation that the young Abdellah had with his mother was completely in Darija, as were all the conversations in the film so far, except the moments when his older brother uses French. That very conversation that Abdellah has with his mother about witchcraft is unthinkable in Modern Standard Arabic, as such practices are forbidden in Islam. They are extremely looked down upon, yet they are rampant in North African and Middle Eastern societies. Therefore, the very semantic field that is used to talk about such practices cannot be an Arabic one, since words related to that field in that language come to bear an automatic negative connotation. In Darija, however, they come to bear a somewhat positive, or at least neutral one. They even seem, in the conversation that he has with his mother, as normal and natural, as if all women engage in such practices to “keep” their sons/husbands/fiancées from being seduced by other women. Indeed, such a situation reverberates with the previously discussed passage about the representation of the female body in this work.

The metaphor of Tangier and the Mediterranean ends up being prophetic as the follow chapter in the book, as well as the following scene in the movie both introduce an
older Abdellah who now lives Europe. Taïa writes: “De l’autre côté, loin, si loin, seul, désemparé, affolé, perdu, déjà je criais ‘Au secours’. J’appelai le Maroc, j’appelai ma mère au Maroc. (...) Tout va bien, ma mère, tout va bien.” (75) As early as his arrival at the airport in Switzerland, Abdellah expresses a feeling of loss. He lies to his mother to comfort her, an ability to communicate one’s feeling is of notice in this passage, as Abdellah says exactly the opposite of what he thinks and feels. Abdellah immediately associates this new feeling of loneliness to Europe, as he ironically concludes the passage by saying: “Bienvenue en Europe!” (78). In the film, however, Taïa decides to opt for a different structure. The screen fades to black following the young Abdellah’s call to his mother, and fades back to an image in Morocco. A text indicates that this moment is taking place “10 years later.” The views are reminiscent of those of Morocco although no cinematic evidence at this point shows in which city the story taking place, but the viewer later is going to understand that it is in a small coastal city called Azemour. Abdellah is taking a walk with his Swiss lover, when they are invited onboard of a small traditional boat for a tour. The two accept, but as soon as they are on the water, the young man who was directing the small boat starts speaking Darija to Abdellah. He asks him: “Is that your friend?” The word in Darija to say “your friend” (sa7bek) is the same for boyfriend, so Abdellah feels what the man is trying to get into and just ignores his question. The other man continues, Darija of course: “He supports you financially? Right?” and once he notices that Abdellah is not feeling comfortable he says: “Don’t be afraid!” At this point Abdellah’s French lover feels that something is going on and asks him: “What is this man telling you?” to which the man quickly says, in French: “Azemour monsieur! Il était beau!” The man does not speak what would be considered as “correct” French, which goes hand in hand with what
this chapter already discussed as far as access to French in Morocco is concerned. The conversation continues, and the boat owner asks Abdellah, in Darija: “Where is your friend/boyfriend from?” Abdellah answers, in Darija: “He is Swiss” to which the man answers in absolute amazement: “Wow! A Swiss! You hit the jackpot!” The conversation that was already awkward hits a new stage when the guy with the boat starts subtly menacing Abdellah by asking for more money, and pointing out the fact that they are now in the middle of the ocean, where nobody can see them. He claims that the tour was worth more than 100dh and asks Abdellah to triple that. The latter quickly accepts and he notices the danger of the situation he just put himself in.

The importance of this scene is that it shows the use of Darija as a coded language. Not only coded as far as making it impossible to understand to the Swiss man, but also and maybe more importantly coded in its subtlety. The boat’s owner points out to Abdellah that he knows that they are a “gay” couple, without ever pronouncing the word “gay” or any of its non-equivalent terms (in either “Arabic” or Darija), or asking them directly if they are together. But the way he was using language allowed Abdellah, a Darija native, to completely understand what was going on. The scene takes place in Morocco after all, a country where being gay is legally prohibited. Not only do they face legal consequences, but also and maybe even more brutally, they could face “popular justice” if their sexuality

54 On the recourse to Western terminology of gender and sexuality when considering Moroccan (and more broadly Maghrebi) literary production and socio-cultural practices, in an abundant bibliography, see the introduction of Queer Maroc by Jean Zagarianis (2014) in which the author discusses Joseph Massad’s thesis in Desiring Arabs (2007). See also Frederic Lagrange’s Islam d’interdits, Islam de jouissance (2008). Several scholars have recently addressed this problematic, including Mounia Lachheb (2016), Khalid Zekri (2017), and Ralph Heyndels (2017). In Morocco nowadays, even if there are significant changes to be noticed (see Rebucini, 2013), homosexuality is still relegated to “la corporisation du non-dit” (Kharaz, 2013).
and relationship was suddenly uncovered. The man with the boat does not want the Swiss
guy to understand what is going on, so he quickly switches to French, speaking it in a
manner that makes him sound innocent and almost adorable. The boat owner is also an
interesting character in many regards. He does not express any negative views on
homosexuality per se, but he still tries to financially benefit from putting Abdellah in such
an awkward situation. The latter is of course a form of homophobia.

A somewhat similar passage happens to take place in Taïa’s novel, as well. This
passage however does not take place in Azemour, but rather in Marrakesh, and this time it
is not some random guy who causes Abdellah trouble, but the police. Abdellah Taïa writes:

Un soir, nous nous promenions, Jean et moi (…) Soudain, deux policiers
qui avaient l’air gentil pourtant, nous arrêtèrent Ils s’adressèrent à moi
avec beaucoup de violence, de mépris, en arabe: “Qu’est-ce que tu fais
avec cet homme ? Pourquoi tu l’embêtes ? Ne sais-tu pas qu’il est interdit
dans ce pays d’embêter les touristes, espèce de …? (99)

This conversation with the police did not of course happen in Modern Standard Arabic but
in Darija. Yet, once again Taïa writes that they addressed him “en arabe.” Abdellah (the
character) tries to defend himself, and claims that he is not disturbing this man because
they are friends. The police quickly reply: “Ton ami ? Ton petit ami ? Tu te crois où ? En
Amérique ? C’est le Maroc ici, pauvre con… espèce d’imbécile… Il te paie combien ?
Montre tes papiers … et que ça saute !” (100) Once again the subtlety of the Darija word
“Friend” causes the police to react violently to Abdellah’s statements. The reference to the
word “sa7bi,” just like in the movie, holds both meanings of a friend and a boyfriend adds
more evidence that this conversation took place in Darija. The police end up letting him go
when they see that he is not from Marrakesh and that he is just visiting. They know however
that the two are in a homosexual relationship as they insult Abdellah, in Darija, while he is
leaving and ask him not to forget to get paid, and to wash his ass once he’s done, insulting him by calling him a “sale pédé!” It is indeed worthy of notice that in both scenes, be it the confrontation with the police, or the one with the boat man, they all link homosexuality to the financial realm, as if, in their conceptual framing a relationship based on love or attraction is not possible between two men, and, especially, not between a Moroccan man and a foreigner. The automatic belief is that the Moroccan man is using the other financially and the foreigner is using the Moroccan man sexually. This automatic linking of homosexuality with capital, although outside of the realm of this dissertation, is something that is worth noticing and it merits further analysis.

The film, on the other hand, ends in a very peculiar way. Abdellah is spending the night at Salvation Army, and after meeting one of his new roommates who also happens to come from Morocco, he offers to split an orange with him. As a sign of being thankful to Abdellah’s gesture, the Moroccan young man randomly offers him to sing a song before they enjoy their evening meal. Abdellah choses an Egyptian song called: (Ana laka ala toul) by famous Egyptian singer Abdelhalim Hafez. The young man begins to sing that song acapela and Abdellah gets very emotional, on the verge of tears. When seeing the effect of the song on Abdellah the young man stops singing. A few seconds of silence pass and the film ends by fading to black. Abdelhalim Hafez’s song is one of love, its lyrics follow the Arabic tradition of using the masculine pronoun when addressing one’s lover.55 Such a choice is of course not without its subtle consequences, as maybe the meaning of this song that makes Abdellah so emotional is actually a literal one; using the masculine

55 The same motif is analyzed in this dissertation in the section dealing with Nabil Ayouch’s film Much Loved.
pronoun to address another man. The song talks about a love that is so strong it cannot be 
escaped. Stylistically however, Taïa knows that this ending is going to affect a minimal 
color of his spectators who actually understand Egyptian Arabic. Such a choice is 
symptomatic of Abdellah Taïa’s constant attempt to think of the so-called “Arab World” 
as a single, coherent and compatible unit. His love, or longing for a civilization that once 
was, might be read in his choice of a song that was shot in black and white, old but gold 
some would say, yet extremely different from contemporary cultural production be it in 
Egypt, in Morocco or in the rest of the countries in the region.

**In the Names of God**

Abdellah Taïa opens the previously discussed third chapter which holds the same 
name as the title of his novel, *Infidèles* (2012), by writing the following: “Par cœur. Je les 
Avec la bonne prononciation. Dans le bon rythme. En arabe classique.” (134) In this 
quotation, he refers to the previous Arabic quotation with which I opened this section. In 
his text, Abdellah opens his third chapter with the list above in Arabic, and then in its 
French translation and comments on these Arabic words on the third page of the third
chapter. In it, we understand that Jallal is talking to Mathis (who now changed his name to Mahmoud). Taïa writes: “Maintenant, il portait un nom arabe, Mahmoud, mais ne parlait pas la langue.” (135) “The” (la) language that he (Mahmoud) does not speak is Arabic. The same one that Taïa opened this chapter with. It is interesting to note, however, that when referring to “the names of God” Taïa writes that he taught him to pronounce them, in the right order, in “classical Arabic.” It is intriguing to note how, for the first time, Taïa choses to opt for “classical Arabic” to refer to the language. Such a linguistic choice seems to be based on one of two possible readings that I would like to suggest. First, Taïa might notice a certain difference in this language that he sees in front of him and that has a certain power over his very being. He notices that it is different from the previous time, when he would refer to a mundane conversation while writing and he would say “he said in Arabic”. By noticing the difference between the two languages he decides to opt for “Classical Arabic” to refer to this piece of text. Second, another potential reading might be related to the fact that as it is commonly believed, although falsely as I will show later, that the names of God in Islam are all taken from the Quran. Therefore, Abdellah Taïa might have opted for calling that language “Classical Arabic” instead of just “Arabic” in an attempt to demonstrate its sacred value. Such a sacred value does not exist when his characters are actually talking Darija, which he calls “Arabic,” suddenly changes when he is referring to what he thinks are nouns from the Quran, and therefore having a certain sanctity in his opinion.

The very sanctity of Arabic has been discussed in the opening section to this chapter from a religious perspective and proven to be the result of pure ideology. The same can be said about the names of God. As a young boy growing up in Morocco, Taïa has been
bombarded by certain beliefs about religion, God, etc. that are more cultural than having any actual religious textual source. The names of God that Taïa opens the third chapter of his novel with is no exception. In fact, the list of 99 names changes between different regions, and different religious scholars. In the list that Taïa gives, certain names have actually no presence neither in the Quran nor in the Hadiths. The names of God are therefore the result of debate between different scholars. The very concept of Phantom Arabic as will be discussed in the conclusion is one that serves many roles, the main one might be to make a certain knowledge, and therefore access to it, to be extremely hard and by that same virtue almost forbidden. The abundance of scholarship from the early centuries of Islam creates the impression that the very right to interpretation is not something that belongs to the individual but rather to the extremely small group of intellectuals (les oulémas, علماء). The very Arabic name that is given to these people would translate in English as: The knowers, or those who know, excluding automatically those who don’t know (the majority of people) from their highly regarded realms of knowing.

Access to knowledge is indeed an aspect that, as I will discuss in more details in the conclusion, stands at the very center of this discussion around Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French. Later in the chapter, Jallal is teaching Mahmoud “Classical Arabic”, and from the very first lessons Jallal notices the illusive nature of the language. He mentions that from the very first lesson, on the first letter of the alphabet: the alif, things got complicated: “Le alif en lettre isolée, au début d’un mot, au milieu d’un mot, à la fin d’un mot. Comment il s’écrit et comment il se métamorphose. Une lettre, toujours la même et jamais la même.” (135) He adds that this aspect is what made Mahmoud given up on trying to learn the language at a previous moment of his life. Taïa writes:

(135)

This is an extremely crucial moment in Taïa’s writing where he admits to being under the grip of what I call Phantom Arabic. Speaking through his alter-ego character of Jallal, he says that it is when he tried teaching the language that he started to think about it. He also adds that it is a language in which he never “reflects”. To think is indeed a conscious act of questioning and re-questioning certain pre-acquired beliefs. He even says that Arabic was a language that was there “in him, even before him”, indirectly joining the very thesis of this work. He further adds: “Je lui ai donné ce que je savais et ce que je ne savais pas.” (135) emphasizing even more the unknown and lacking aspects and perspectives from his own knowledge.

Jallal continues his teaching, when they get to the third letter of the alphabet “le tae” (136) (In Arabic: ت) Taïa writes that this letter provoked an immense fright in his friend and student Mahmoud. He says: “La forme de cette lettre, qu’il voyait comme une petite bassine avec deux yeux hallucines, le renvoyait a un passe traumatisant que j’ignorais” (136) The feeling that Mahmoud gets, although noticeable by Jallal, is something that the latter cannot comprehend. The very feeling of sudden expression of fear, as if one encountered a phantom, is indeed extremely relevant to this dissertation. The two decide to skip this letter, as it has such a negative effect on Mahmoud, but even after doing that the effect of seeing that letter was of such extreme proportions on the latter that he ended up fainting in front of Jallal. Taïa writes: “Ma main dans sa main, il a fini par
s’évanouir. S’endormir. Un quart d’heure.” The writer even adds that the same letter ended up symbolizing “the sacred and vertiginous” link that existed between the two characters.

While he was asleep, Mahmoud pronounced a term: “Taouba”, a word that Jallal did not know at the time of hearing the question what that word means. Mahmoud asks the question a second time mentioning the name of his interlocutor at its end. Taïa writes that it was the fact of hearing his name that made Jallal remember what that word meant. The latter answers: “Se repentir. Revenir au vrai, au pur, au premier.” 136 (To repent. To go back to what is true, what is pure, to the origin.) A discussion that started between the two characters over a letter, that has such an emotional impact on Mahmoud, develops into a question. One that takes as its source the word Taouba, which starts with the same letter than caused such an effect of shock on the character, finally develops into the answer that was quoted previously. An effect of shock, leading to a question, culminating into an answer: to repent.

Through its effect on the characters, the previously discussed scene is indeed very illustrative of the effect that Phantom Arabic might have on the very author of the work. Abdellah Taïa shows through his writing and development of such a scene that he is conscious of the phantomatic and sacred aspect that the language has on many of its speakers/learners. The two characters will end up committing a utopic suicide attack where they are the only two casualties. In the fourth and last chapter of the book they meet God. It is also worthy of noticing that the link between Arabic and terrorism is an interesting motif that exists not only in Taïa’s work but also in Nabil Ayouch’s film Horses of God that is analyzed in the following chapter of this dissertation. Infidèles final chapter is entitled “Dieu”, the latter is addressing the two as his children. They meet an inclusive
“Dieu” who speaks French. Not a single word in “classical Arabic” is mentioned in the last chapter of the book. The chapter seems overly excessive in its utopic nature, as if in an attempt to disguise the very serious matters discussed in the previous chapters of this work.

**Lahbib: Darija Deserves to Be Loved**

The role of Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French seems to be inherent in Taïa’s writing. The very different ways that the writer refers to Darija, or Arabic, all while writing in French, he makes his own by imbuing with his very own style and even language(s). Such a richness as far as his choice of words while dealing with Darija, Arabic, might be interpreted as an evolving consciousness vis-à-vis those two languages. But just like the writer of this dissertation is going to turn to in its next sections, Abdellah Taïa is most definitely under what might be considered Phantom Arabic’s grip. The very structure of his most recent work (*Celui qui est digne d’être aimé*) signals a new stage in his own writing. As I previously argued, the very structure of that work is intriguing. The work seems to go backward, starting with a letter that its character who goes by the name of Ahmed writes to his mother Malika, and ending with a letter signed by Lahbib and addressed to Ahmed fifteen years prior to the previous one. I previously argued that Taia wrote this book following an Arabic tradition, going from right to left. By following such a structure, Taïa is dislocating the very French that he is using, by writing in it yet making it submit to an Arabic structural format. In addition, he is under the influence of the very Phantom Arabic that makes him follow such a creative format. Finally, the very name of his work “*Celui qui est digne d’être aimé*”, as the reader understands is the translation of one word: Lahbib, from Arabic: Al-Habib, which is the name of one of the novel’s characters. By opting for such a name for his work, Taïa is actually giving his work a Darija
name, translated in French, which brings into question the very underlying strata of Abdellah Taïa’s writing. Darija is indeed absent in naming, yet always-already there in Taïa’s work. He combines three languages Arabic, Darija and French to produce the great piece of literatures from which this dissertation analyzed but a few.$^ {56}$

**Leïla Sebbar – Double Absence**

Absence has been one the main motivators for creation. It is common knowledge in hip hop culture that rap is actually the art of “making something out of nothing”. Such a belief is deeply informed by and articulated on several political, linguistic, and social factors. The writer to which this dissertation turns to is someone who follows the same model. Her creative process is deeply rooted in a lack. The latter, as I will try to demonstrate in this chapter, is actually double edged. It represents what I want to call a dialectic double absence. First, she lacks the symbolic entity that she refers to as “Arabic”. Second, she also lacks the authentic cultural background knowledge to understand the different “Arabics” (plural intended) that exist in her “fatherland”: Algeria. Such an absence, which came as an imposition from the father, as he consciously made the decision to teach his kids in “French”. Growing up in that environment, Leïla Sebbar was indeed immersed in a culture of which she did not understand the language and therefore the subtleties and peculiarities that make a community what it is. But the writer also consciously bans herself from her father’s language.

$^ {56}$ Look for instance at this reference to “Arabic” in an emotional – sexual context in Une mélancolie arabe (31): “Une voix, la mienne, a dit pour la premiere fois en arabe: ‘Je t’aime’”. What was actually said and in which “Arabic”? Certainly not in MSA when we know that this is supposed to have been pronounced by a 12 year poor kid from an underclass neighborhood ….

$^ {57}$ Both the language, the culture, and the way of thinking and being in the world.
Concretely speaking, Leïla Sebbar could have learnt both Algerian Darija and Arabic if she wanted to. She would have also noticed the differences between the two languages, and her work would have taken a completely different path, but she decided not to for two (probable) reasons. First, she knows that her creative process lies exactly in this double absence -- that of the father’s language, his culture, which in a way is also hers. Second, because time travel has not been invented yet, and even had she learnt Algerian Darija and Arabic, she would not be able to go back in time to understand all that culture that was circulating around her; coded in Algerian Darija. Therefore, Sebbar knows that it is out of lack that she writes.

This absence however is expressed in French. A language that she dislocates by her very use of it to refer to peoples and experiences that happened in another idiom. A language that is also dislocated by the very fact that it is hers, in the sense that it is her “mothertongue” but also a language towards which she has a complex and conflictual relationship as it is somehow the existence/imposition (both by the father, and the colonizer) of French that created the loss that takes the shape of a Phantom Arabic. Such a process is complex and intricate and does not take place in a vacuum but in a postcolonial, ideological space that is Algeria, as well as in the Francophonie de l’intérieur, inside the hexagon.

To illustrate this complex syndrome, let’s turn to the following quote from Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père (2003) (I do not speak the language of my father): “si j’avais parlé l’arabe, je ne pense pas que j’aurais écrit les livres que j’ai écrits et je ne serais pas devenue écrivain” (7). This quote is a compelling symptom of the very substance of the matter that this dissertation is about. We have an author who writes a book in French
that she decides to entitle “I do not speak the language of my father,” and then comments on that book (in French as well) saying that had she known “Arabic” she would not have written it, nor would she have become a writer. She is asserting that the absence of whatever she refers to when she uses the word “Arabic” is not only important but primordial to her creative process. Hence, this Phantom Arabic is indeed confirmed in its role of a productive ideological myth. In different specific modalities, that is the case for all the writers studied in this thesis. But on the other side of the equation, Leïla Sebbar wrote her whole body of work in French and therefore alluded to and/or inserted Arabic in/to a different language that happens to be a colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial one which also played an important “orientalist” role in the myth-making of that very entity precisely named “Arabic”.

Indeed, it should already be noted that the linguistic reality that Leïla Sebbar evokes under the mythical denomination of Arabic is something that is completely different from what corresponds to MSA. For sociolinguistic reasons one can assert that her father was actually using Algerian Darija, and not what she poetically and somehow also within the realm of an ideological unconsciousness refers to as “Arabic”. This is supported by a critical reading of the passages where the writer depicts her father speaking “Arabic” with her grandmother who is actually illiterate while one can only acquire MSA through a schooling process. She does not refer to some kind of phantom Darija, and it is not the real language that her father (while being literate in so-called “literary” or “classical” Arabic) was using in the particular instances that are of interest to her when she was writing. It is rather a mythical entity that Sebbar does indeed call “Arabic”. Undeniably, the word “Arabic” for Sebbar, but also for the other writers that this dissertation is scrutinizing,
ceases to refer to a very mere linguistic “reality”, but rather to an “ideological myth” which comes with its own imaginaries, nostalgias and ways of viewing the world.

Indeed, the cultural producers that this thesis looks at all have a Dislocated French and a Phantom Arabic in common. Genet “wanted to be an Arab” and spent a lot of time in the Arab world where he was actually buried. He learned informally “some Arabic” (which is something we looked at in the first chapter). Leïla Sebbar is an Arab-French born and raised as a child in Colonial Algeria from a French mother and an Algerian father but having been educated in French. Abdellah Taïa is an Arab Moroccan born and educated in Morocco but living in France, who knows “Arabic” and Moroccan Darija, and writes in a French that he pretends to be “Arabic written in French”. Nabil Ayouch is a Jewish-Arab born in France but living mainly in Morocco, who knows French, “Arabic” and Moroccan Darija, but whose “subaltern” characters speak only Darija in his films. By virtue of coming from or living for a period of time in different countries and having completely different socio-economic and educational backgrounds, the very signified of the signifier, “Arabic”, changes drastically in each case. They all refer to different things when using the word “Arabic”, nevertheless they all share in very different modalities a complex relationship with Phantom Arabic. In addition to their relation to the overarching problematic of Arabic in their works, the authors and filmmakers I have selected for this dissertation share also a series of topical post-colonial themes dealing with marginality, exclusion and alienation in the realms of the social, the cultural, the political, the gender-related and the sexual. But what is precisely addressed in this project and which has not been up to now considered in the critical studies dedicated to them is how and why the question of the symbolic status and the imaginary relation to Phantom Arabic and its various explicit and implicit
ideological meanings is productive of and anchored in their literary uses of a Dislocated French.

**Dreaming Arabic in French by Default**

Leïla Sebbar is a writer whose work presents an interestingly similar auto-anthropologic dimension as well as a conflictual relationship language to Abdellah Taïa (Gouyon, 2013). In *L'arabe comme un chant secret* (2010) she tells the story of the little girl she was, being born from a French mother and an Algerian father. She writes:


As I tried to show how Genet dislocates French in interfacing it often implicitly, often allusively, sometimes explicitly, with a fragmented discontinuous presence of Arabics (the real languages spoken by people as well as the mythical one) which he injects into French and brings into France, Leïla Sebbar produces her writing in French whose use she intends (like Genet) to return against post/neocolonial France from the very absence of Arabic. Sebbar starts the previous quote by saying that she translates Algeria into her own language
(French). The use of “translate” refers evidently to “Arabic” as the mythical language of that country whose real sociolinguistic situation is actually far more complex. She says it in a way that lets us understand that this is what she has been doing in all her work. But the writer immediately shows us the complexity of that process, and of being “in-between” a language that she does not know but which she dreams as being hers and the French which she writes about from and thanks to such a lack. “Je l’invente, Je m’invente une immense famille des deux cotées de la mer” (65) This sentence comes immediately after writing: “Je traduis mon père dans la langue de ma mère” (65).

Sebbar implies that her work of “translation” does indeed presuppose a sort of transformation and invention of the peoples and situations that she recounts. A few phrases in the quote she asks how much her father would have enjoyed this translation of him that she tries to do, but answering such a question would end her creative unrest: “La sérénité ? Je n’écrirais plus.” (71) Through this meditative reflection about her father, Leïla Sebbar is asserting the role that “Arabic” and the ideological myth it represents has on her creative process.

In a chapter entitled “Le corps de mon père dans la langue de ma mère” (My Father’s Body in my Mother’s Language) Sebbar writes:

La grand-mère est vivante, je la vois en visite, elle me regarde de ses yeux, petits et noirs, comme elle regarde ma mère, la Française. Elle parle en arabe avec son fils, le mari de la Française. Je ne sais pas ce qu’elle lui dit. Je ne saurai jamais ce qu’elle pense, lorsqu’elle me regarde ainsi je sens les yeux de l’inquisition. (23)

This passage informs the reader of the very role and effect that “Arabic” had on Sebbar. Although she does not speak nor write it, it is a “language” that has always been there in her life as a marker of her identity. This can be pursued by looking at another very
symptomatic assertion: “Si mon père m’avait laissé sa langue, l’arabe, comme héritage. J’aurai écrit en arabe. Mais je n’aurai jamais écrit à propos de mon père en sa propre langue” (p. 80)

Sebbar indirectly states here that if she could, she would have written in Arabic. This reminds us of the intricate case of Abdellah Taïa, which is both close to and different from Sebbar’s while presenting explicit and implied relations to Genet’s. As far as Sebbar is concerned, she starts by saying that if her father would have given her “Arabic” she would have been writing in that language, but as soon as she has mentioned that, she proclaims that if that were the case. First of all, she would not have her father as the secret individual that he is (as she would have understood him), and second, she also recognizes that the very book (L’Arabe comme un chant secret) would not have had a reason to exist, as Arabic would not have been a secret song to her.

Although Leïla Sebbar is not able to decipher the “code” of the language, she does however enjoy its musicality. She notes how her father’s voice changes when he is talking to the rural men outside. She also notes the differences in demeanor of the maid when her mother is talking to her in French (to which she responds by a brief “yes”) and when her father is talking to her in “Arabic”58, when the woman suddenly replies in longer sentences, peppered with laughter and emotion. Phantom Arabic is indeed a metaphorical “scar” on Sebbar, as Abdellah Taïa would say. A reminder of that can be found when Sebbar alludes to the very name she signs her book with: “Je signe mes livres avec le nom de mon père. Sebbar. Je suis la fille de mon père. Je ne veux pas être une autre fille qui écrit et signe

58 Which is actually, as we have explained, Algerian Darija.
d’un autre nom” (p. 77) “Arabic” is always already there if only in the very name that the author bears and chooses to sign her work with. Moreover, although very few words in “Arabic” are used in the text, their presence is an intriguing aspect of Sebbar’s work to which we turn.

**Transcribing Algerian Darija**

The first thing to note is that the English translation of Sebbar’s book *Arabic as a Secret Song* comes with a glossary at its end. This glossary does not exist in the original (French) version. Such a decision is intriguing in its very core as the presupposition is that those words, although being referred to by the writer as “Arabic” (while they are actually in Algerian Darija), are closer to a French readership than to an English one. Such a presupposition of proximity is linked to the colonial history of the two countries. It is also related to the fact that the way through which Sebbar writes them follows a French-phonetic model. Unlike Abdellah Taïa who in the passage that we discussed from *Infidèles* imbues his work with a complete page written in the Arabic language and the Arabic script, Sebbar follows a different model.

The presence of Algerian Darija words is something that the reader encounters from the very first page of *L’Arabe comme un chant secret*:

> Pour la femme qui lavait le linge dans la buanderie bordée de lilas et de mauves géantes violines – elle a toujours dit ‘bianderie’ lorsqu’elle a su quelques mots de la langue de la Roumia, ma mère, en insistant sur le premier ‘i’ malgré les rectifications de la Française de France (7)

Indeed, the non-careful eye might only recognize one Darija word which is “Roumia” that Sebbar writes in italics, but I actually see two Darija words. In fact, “bianderie” which is according to this passage a word that Sebbar’s mother “the French woman from France” kept on trying to correct whenever she heard her maid say it; without any success. That
word, in fact stopped being French and became part of the Darija language. Sebbar herself, although she raises awareness to the superior feeling that her mother had vis-à-vis the maid, does not note that word as “Arabic” or Darija. Proof of the latter is that while she emphasizes “Roumia”, which by doing so she raises attention to the fact that it is a word not belonging to the French language. She also does not really offer any explanation for it. Roumia is a word that takes its meaning from its antonym: Beldia. The etymology of this Darija word takes us to “Rome” as it is a word that used to refer to “those coming from Rome”, which was a metaphor for the western world. In opposition Beldia is a word that stems from “Balad” which means country. In its contemporary use, the word Roumia would refer at the same time to a western woman, but also to a North African woman who follows western ways of dressing and being. Beldia in its contemporary use refers to a more traditional way of dressing and of being.

The maid’s use of the word “bianderie” instead of “buanderie” is what I would like to call a process of dis-location of the French language whereas a collective who does not speak French adopts certain words and makes them theirs. Hence, the hard time that Sebbar’s mother in the story had with her maid, as she never wanted to learn the “correct” form. In fact, the one who was making a mistake was the “Roumia”, as the maid was sure that she is pronouncing her own Darija word correctly. Such a process is indeed common in North Africa. People using these words never think of their origins as being French. Many of them have never gone to school or never had a direct contact with French, but they would still use these words as being theirs. Such processes of Creolization have been discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation.
A few pages later, Sebbar is recounting her memory about Algerian women who would come to talk to her father (the director of the: “Ecole de garçons indigènes”), she writes: “Elles ont les yeux assombris par le khôl, on ne voit pas leurs cheveux sous les foulards noues sur la tempe.” (12) The writer does not emphasize the word “khôl”, a possible explanation is that for her that is a French term. The definition of the word does indeed exist in the French dictionary: Larousse.\(^\text{59}\) For Sebbar, writing “khôl” is a way of dis-locating “Arabic” as she brings it within the French language. By doing that she is also demonstrating how such a process is oscillative in the sense that, just as I demonstrated that certain French words find their way to Darija, the same process happens the other way around. But of course, the power structure that is visible in some of these examples is that for Sebbar “Biendrie” is a mistake, but “khôl” is a French word. The latter clearly demonstrates that the writer has internalized certain hegemonic processes.

Several words of the type exist in the text: “Saroual” (12) “Haik” (14) “Djha” (44) “Roumia et Roumiettes” (46) Sebbar does not provide any type of explanation for these words. For her, these are French words. She knows that they bear a very specific cultural meaning in her homeland of Algeria, but she writes them in French, and through French. It is also useful to note that when she uses such words, she never says that “someone said in Arabic.” Unlike the prior example of Taïa, where he would write in French saying that someone “said in French,” Sebbar follows a different dislocation model. She engages in that process while referring to the French language as: “la langue estrangère, ennemie” (48) which reverberates with Jean Genet’s own relationship vis-à-vis that language. Although

\(^{59}\) http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/kh%C3%B4l/45502
born from a French mother, Sebbar places herself as a colonial subject. Just like Genet, she looks at the French she uses as a language that exists by its very virtue of negating/excluding others; the essence of a colonial language. It is also of course her native language, but it is a mother tongue that came at the cost of her “father tongue”.

**Writing from an In-Between Space: Torment**

What makes Sebbar’s writing what it is the very perspective that she offers. A foreigner in her own homeland, where she is a “roumia” and a “foreigner”, and in France where she is regarded as an Algerian. She writes: “Et moi, dans cette histoire de corps, d’âme et de langue ? Fille d’une victime et d’une bourreau… Prise au piège. Tourmentée.” (27) In this passage, the writer refers to the in-between space from which she writes. A space that is, as the quote demonstrates, not only linguistic, but also related to her very own relationship with her body and soul. Due to the parameters of this dissertation, let us focus on what she means by that from the language perspective. For Sebbar, her mother (that I am reading her as a metaphor for the French colonial regime), has colonized the father and his language. “Elle a colonisé mon père dans la langue de ma mère” (26). The first processes of such a linguistic colonization happen through the schooling ideological state apparatus. The father, being a school director, stands as a very clear testimony of that. She adds: “Mon père a été enlevé à sa mère, à sa terre même, à son pays (…) à sa langue, aux femmes de sa langue. Il a choisi Satan. Il a perdu son âme…” (26), taking away any form of agency from the father. By writing “my father was abducted,” she presupposes that it is something that happens without his will or volition. She adds, that he was taken away from his mother, his land and his country. We know that the father was not literally taken away from them in the sense that he lived in Algeria for a long time before they had to move to
France, but the previous quote refers to a very clear feeling that Sebbar has of loss. After having been abducted the father was “forced” to work for the colonial empire. Such a colonialization process for Sebbar happens in and out of language.

Throughout Sebbar’s texts in both *L’Arabe comme un chant secret*, as well as *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, the reader understands that the father knows Darija, Arabic and French. But in the previous quote, Sebbar is clearly stating that her father was “abducted” from his language. First of all, which language? And second, how can someone lose something that she/he still knows/speaks? To these questions we turn in the following section.

**Sebbar’s Loss, Literature’s Gain**

The concept of loss is essential to Sebbar’s work. It is a process, whose stems she identifies as early as the beginning of her father’s relationship to her mother. To Sebbar, the mother played the role of the executioner “le bourreau, la bourreau ? impossible féminin a ce mot de la barbarie” (26). For the writer, although her father still knows Darija and Arabic, he lost his languages at the very moment he decided not to transmit it to his daughters. Such a decision is what she metaphorically refers to as the “loss” of his language. Indeed, deciding not to transmit it is a deeply colonial decision. By thinking that his daughters are better off in their mother’s language also demonstrates that he has internalized the colonial discourses that represent French as a language of onward movement contrasting with “les langues indigènes”, which were portrayed by the French colonial empire as backwards and inherently inferior to “la langue civilisatrice”. Sebbar reads that very clearly in her work. Of course she nuances this but she is absolutely correct
in her subtle critique of her father’s metaphorical hegemonic decision; to ban her from his language and, through that, from his culture and ways of being in the world.

Sebbar’s conflictual relationship with language does not stop at French, or at the loss of what she calls “Arabic”. It continues through how Phantom Arabic showcases itself and traverses her texts through different modalities. For the writer, Arabic is a sacred language, but it is also a violent language, a sexual one, and these are only a few of the many adjectives that Sebbar attaches to what she calls “Arabic”. So many different representations that are all governed by one main thread that I call: Phantom Arabic.

As early as the first chapter of *L’Arabe comme chant secret* entitled “Si je ne parle pas la langue de mon père”, Sebbar provides her reader with a conflictual representation of what she calls “Arabic”. She refers to her mother’s interaction with her maids: “L’échange était bref, quotidien, et il se prolongea ainsi, comme une sorte de rite, au-delà du moment où la femme put comprendre la langue de l’institutrice de France.” (7) Her father had to translate the orders that the mother used to give to “Arabic”, and she says that even after some time when the maids started getting an understanding of the foreign language (French), their interaction with the father continued, and went beyond the simple need to translate. She continues: “La voix de mon père changeait, je l’entendais plus fluide, même pour les ordres domestiques, impératifs” (7) Indeed, the writer notes a certain gentleness in her father’s speech towards the maids. Unlike her French mother whose language was more focused on giving commands, the father’s language was more “human”, but only a few lines later, the writer talks about her experience going from her house to school:

Chaque matin, avec mes deux jeunes sœurs, nous allions à pied jusqu’à l’école de filles du quartier européen, traversant l’esplanade de terre battue ou les garçons du quartier arabe jouaient au ballon – (…) Avant d’entrer
The very language that Sebbar considered as soft and gentle a few lines ago is now what she calls “la langue de la rue” and transforms into something that the Algerian kids use against her (and her sisters). It is also worthy of notice that in an attempt to understand the reasons behind the kids’ verbal abuse, Sebbar notes that they were not shouting at them because they were “girls” but because they were “the director’s girls”. In fact, through their verbal violence towards the girls, Sebbar subtly refers to some form of resistance. As these kids, who would have girls among them as we will see in a later passage, would see Sebbar and her three sisters as an extension of the colonizer. Although she is a mixed child, the fact that her father was working with the colonial power, and teaching their language was probably something that was seen as an alliance with the colonial rule.

She continues: “Dans la langue des garçons arabes qui roulaient sur les planches rafistolées comme des voitures devant les fenêtres de notre chambre, sur la route en pente douce vers la gare désaffectée, je reconnaissais la langue de mon père. Oubliant qu’il avait été comme eux un enfant dans la rue, insultant peut-être les filles des Français.” (9) In this passage, Sebbar clearly confirms the role of “Arabic” as a language of resistance. She wonders if her father did the same thing (as the Algerian kids) by insulting the daughters of the French when he was younger. She clearly mentions that such verbal violence was not a “gendered” thing in the sense that it was not based on sex that the young Algerians would do it, but more as a sort of act that they viewed (probably unconsciously) as a minimal act of resistance. She adds after the previous passage that her father never admitted to this and that she personally never dared to ask him about his adolescent secrets.
Continuing to problematize the language issue, Sebbar writes:

je n’entendais pas la même langue lorsque mon père s’adressait à la femme qui lavait le lingue. Pourtant, ils parlaient ensemble cette langue-là. La femme ne se contentait pas de dire oui en arabe comme elle le faisait avec ma mère qui, sitôt qu’elle avait l’air de comprendre, croyait au miracle de la transmission immédiate. (9)

In this passage, the writer says that she notes a difference in the way the kids were verbally attacking her and her sisters and the way her father was addressing the maid, although in the same language. She also provides a short critique of her mother who (while being in Algeria) expected the maid to understand the French language. She continues by saying that as soon as the maid would show a sign of minimum understanding, the mother would feel amazed by how French was such a universal language that the smart “indigenes” were able to understand, and of course that the ones unable to communicate in it were probably retarded. Sebbar does indeed provide subtle but pertinent critiques of the colonial mindset in Algeria through these language-ideological moments.

Going back to the issue of Arabic, Sebbar observes the spectrum of possibilities existing in Arabic, from the violent language that she had to endure in the street to the affectionate one that she heard her father use with his “people”. She even writes: “il leur arrivait de rire en arabe sans que je sache pourquoi, mais le rire étranger et familier, je l’entendais comme une invitation à partager la langue joyeuse, la même que celle des garçons que je redoutais sur le chemin de l’école des filles.” (10) For Sebbar, her father and the maid used to even laugh in Arabic. By writing that one could only assume that her father’s way of laughing changes/changed when he would be talking to her, her sisters or her mother. She even directly calls Arabic as “the language of joy”. She refers to the moments she would hear her father sharing laughter with the maid as an invitation to share
the joyful language. She quickly adds that it is the same language that she was “afraid of” on her way to school.

A few lines later however the writer provides one of the key moments in her work. She writes: “Libres, les garçons ne parlaient pas la langue de la salle de classe, ils hurlaient, comme ils hurlaient en se jetant tous ensemble, à l’ouverture du grand portail a deux battants, dans la cour ou le maître venait de siffler l’heure de l’école française.” The keyword in this passage is “Libres”, Sebbar rightfully remarks that the “indigenes” would shout in “Arabic” as soon as the “maître” signaled the end of the school day. She juxtaposes French to an obligation, an imposition that the kids had to go through. As soon as its use was not imposed on them by the “French school” they would be “free” to shout in their own language. This is another extremely critical passage where the writer attacks the French language by referring to it as an imposed one. Also, contrasting it with a language of “Freedom” which the kids would start speaking as soon as the imposed one was not relevant anymore. French, a language contradicting “freedom” and “liberty”? Who would have thought?

It is intriguing how much the writer catches all the nuances and the ideological aspect of French in Algeria but fails to note those relevant to Arabic. The imposition of a language in the classroom is not something that ever stopped existing in Algeria. After the independence, as we saw in the first chapter, it simply switched hands from French to Arabic. Metaphorically, the same passage that Sebbar writes could be used again today. The only word that would need to be changed is for “Arabic” for “French”. As a matter of fact, as soon as class is over, the kids would feel “Free” to speak their own language: Darija. They would, consciously or unconsciously, look at Arabic as a fake language that is also
imposed on them by the new educational system and whose imposition is of course linked to ideological and political reasons.

A few pages later, while painting a scene that we referred to it earlier in this chapter, Sebbar talks about the women who would come to visit the director of the school. They would need to be there either to simply inquire about how their kids are doing, or because their kid is in trouble at school, or to simply socialize. She writes: “La langue du directeur indigène est calme, chantante, ferme, sans jamais la brutalité des garçons de la rue. Il parle la langue des femmes illettrées qui viennent à pied, en charrette ou en autocar pour chercher un papier signé dans le bureau du directeur.” (12-13) The writer refers to the language of her father in this passage as: “calm” yet “firm” while being “melodious” and as lacking all “brutality” of the kids in the street. She adds, another critical moment in the textual close-reading and deconstruction that this dissertation does, that “He speaks the language of the illiterate women”. We, of course, know that illiterate women do not speak Arabic by the very virtue of being illiterate. In fact, being illiterate does not mean that someone does not have a language, it only means that someone does not have access to the standard ways of writing and speaking said language. These women can of course speak something, since they are having a conversation with the writer’s father. Yet, Sebbar still refers to whatever they speak as “Arabic”\(^60\). Even the situation of what it means to be illiterate in North Africa is a double-edged question.

\(^{60}\) She clearly writes: “il parle en arabe” (13) during her description of that scene of the women in her father’s office.
As we have seen in the opening chapter to this dissertation: Darija is a language that is not officially standardized\textsuperscript{61} and there are at least two ways of writing it that are commonly used. The original way, and probably the most common\textsuperscript{62} is to actually write Darija using Latin script, the second way is to write it using Arabic script. Even this very debate as we have seen in the first chapter is already ideologically charged. So, back to Sebbar’s work, what does it mean for those women to be illiterate? Would they still be considered illiterate if they were able to function in today’s digital world knowing only how to write Darija in the Latin script? A rhetorical question to which the hegemonic answer would be: yes, they would still be considered as illiterate. Such a dominant view is of course linked to the very concept of Phantom Arabic that is at the center of this dissertation.

Leïla Sebbar is, as we have seen in previous examples, very critical and conscious of the role that French played/plays in Algeria. Although through subtle textual dynamics she attacks its stratifying role, as well as its imposition on the lives and even political bodies of the Algerian peoples. However, she showcases absolute ignorance when it comes to the very same dynamics that exist vis-à-vis the Arabic language. Although she notes various modalities through which such a language exists. She talks about how it changes drastically between the moment her father is talking to the maids, the women who come visit his

\textsuperscript{61} There are different attempts of standardization. There are of course a huge number of textbooks especially directed to an American readership in particular and a western one in general about Darija. What I mean here is that it has not been standardized by the state. I need to quickly note that a language is not and should not be the property of a state. Therefore, for a country to officially recognize the language actually has no value as far as the language existing and being used in the real world. Please do not read my statement of fact “officially standardized” as meaning that Darija is a less of a language than the standardized ones.

\textsuperscript{62} Although I am not familiar with any statistics done on this question.
school, and the boys who violently and brutally attack her and her sisters. She notices all these varieties (and many more) but her lack of knowledge about Arabic (the language), as well as Phantom Arabic (the ideological entity), lead her to reproduce similar structures of dominance and hegemony that she notes, attacks, and resists vis-à-vis the French language in Algeria.

A few pages later, the writer describes a scene that takes place during the Eid⁶³.

“Mon père parle avec les hommes et les garçons, en arabe” (L’Arabe comme chant secret, 16) Sebbar clearly uses the same word she has been using all along throughout her writing. Then, she adds: “Il ne me semble pas qu’il donne des ordres, mais il ne parle pas comme avec les femmes dans son bureau ou la femme qui lave le linge ou les femmes de sa famille, sa mère et ses sœurs ainées que nous allons voir régulièrement dans la ville arabe de Ténès” (16) Clearly representing the language of her father as something that changes based on his interlocutors. And of course, although it is realistically impossible for the father to be using Standard Arabic with the men from his family while they are preparing for the Eid, Sebbar continues to write under the hegemonic dominant structure of Phantom Arabic. Later, she refers to when her father is talking to the women in her family, she writes:

Avec elles il parlait la langue de sa mère, oubliant l’autre langue, la langue de l’école et de sa femme. Elles étaient bavardes et parlaient aussi avec ma mère comme si elle avait dû comprendre. (…) Elles la touchaient pour mieux lui parler et la trouvaient belle, comme elles nous trouvaient beaux, nous les enfants de cette femme étrangère et du fils de la maison. (16)

⁶³ One of Islam’s holidays. In this specific one it is the Eid where it is customary to sacrifice a sheep as a metaphorical act of memory of Abraham’s attempt of scarifying his son Ishmael for the sake of God. This custom although followed by a majority of those who consider themselves to be part of that religion is however not mentioned in the Quran but there are different interpretations of the Hadiths, some of which claim that the prophet used to engage in it, hence its popularity.
In this passage, Sebbar writes in French to refer to that very language as that of “the other”. An intriguing way of dislocating the very idiom she uses to produce her work. Her father “forgets” the other language, the language of the school. A passage that could be read as a metaphor for her father’s identity as being best expressed/lived in his “mothertongue”. On the other hand, she represents what she calls “Arabic” as a language where people are “touching”, both physically and emotionally. “Elles la touchaient pour mieux lui parler” (17) could be interpreted as both the literal meaning of the women physically touching Leïla’s mother as well as metaphorically in the sense that they enchanted her and expressed their love for her in non-verbal language. This non-verbal aspect is something that Sebbar only notes vis-à-vis of “Arabic” and never to French. In addition, “Arabic” is also represented as something everlasting as one could read in the following passage: “Elles nous alimentaient de la langue inépuisable” (17). Sebbar’s continuous focus on “Elles” makes for a representation of what she calls “Arabic” a feminist language. In the sense that when they spoke French, the women would not have a voice. They would answer with very short sentences, if not just words, but when they used their own language they suddenly felt “more” free, had more agency and more fluidity in shaping their own identities as the complex female human beings that they are.

The divide between the language of “women” and that of “men” in Sebbar is a clearly noticeable motif of her work. She always refers to language as something that is shaped by gender in two ways. First, she always mentions the gender of the person producing the language, and second, she also refers that of the person being addressed. Her vision of gender, at least in these works seems to be very binary, only referring to women and men. A clear textual analysis is able to discern a third gender as that of “the boys”.
Such as the passage that we looked at already where she says: “Mon père parle avec les hommes et les garçons, en arabe.” Almost sexually distinguishing between what she calls “the boys” and “the men”. When she talks about the women, she never really writes something that would resemble: les femmes et les filles. It’s worth mentioning here that “le garçon arabe” (the arab boy, or “young male”) is actually an overloaded ideological category which is the matrix of a complex and compelling series of orientalist erotic fantasies of intricate desire and phobia (as illustrated by Nacira Guenif-Souilamas and Eric Mace, (2004) and Mehammed Amedeus Mack (2017), among others).

“Les voix arabes des femmes couvrent les voix des maîtres et des maîtresses d’école qui appelant les enfants à cause de l’organe. Les femmes ne m’ont pas vue. Je les regarde, je les entends.” (22) Sebbar concludes her first chapter with a passage where she describes getting lost by the river where she heard women speaking “Arabic”. She describes their voice as being loud, louder than that of the French teachers who were shouting at the kids and asking them to get back to school. She follows the women to the village where her father was looking for her. She describes the moment where the women were speaking to her father by writing: “Les femmes les plus vieilles s’adressent à lui dans sa langue. Elles me protègent ?” (24) Another textual proof of the non-realism of Arabic being used with elderly women who have never been to school, but what is more important to note is that suddenly “Arabic” is a language that Leïla Sebbar feels is protecting her. It is shielding her from her father’s anger. Its emotionality, especially after the elderly women have talked to him is what the writer feels protected her from being punished for having walked too far away from the house until she got lost. Arabic saved her. Both in the moment that she heard
the women talking and followed them to the village, as well as in the conversation that some of the women had with the father in order to forgive her.

In another chapter entitled “Le silence de la langue de mon père, l’arabe”, Sebbar paints the way she was educated along with her sisters as a kid. She writes: “La France des livres habite notre chambre, la maison ne parle pas la langue étrangère, l’arabe.” (40) Another subtle critique of the coloniality of French as it is able to create a space on Algerian soil where what Sebbar calls “Arabic” is made to be a foreign language on its very home ground. She also sheds light on how French also has an impact of suppressing her father’s very identity, she says: “On le félicite – le jardin, les enfants, … - dans la langue de la France, jamais dans la langue du pays ‘indigène’. Dans la maison de sa femme, mon père ne parle pas la langue de sa mère. Il est arabe et je ne sais pas qu’il est arabe.” (43) An interesting passage where Sebbar declares not knowing that her father was “an arab” because he had forbidden himself to say anything in his own language inside the household. Moments after this passage, the writer declares that she was not shocked that her father did not speak “Arabic” at the time because to her (at that moment) it was the language of the street (44). Why would he speak the language of the street inside the French house, now his house? She rhetorically writes. The “anonymous language” (45) also is nonexistent among the many books that her father was collecting in his personal library.

The feeling of loss is omnipresent throughout Sebbar’s writing, but another one is that of silence. Both of the languages, that she does not speak, which while being extremely loud is silent as far as its meanings and stories are concerned. Sebbar writes:

Longtemps après, très longtemps, mon père, en exil dans le pays de ma mère et de la langue qu’il aime, lira ce que j’écris de sa langue qui nous insulte, il ne dira rien. Comme il n’a rien dit de la maison de sa mère, de
son peuple, de sa langue, ni du pays, de son histoire, de ses histoires. Rien. C’est le silence. (47)

Indeed, the conflictual rapport with language is something that can be unearthed in the previous passage by Sebbar. She portrays “Arabic” as the language that her father loves, yet at the same time, the one that he chooses to be silent about. Even after having read previous works of the writer, she declares that he never broke that silence. The previous passage is also one that clearly showcases the feeling of lack that Sebbar endures. The feeling that access to what she calls “Arabic” would have given her automatic access to the country’s history/histories, its peoples, etc. Ironically Arabic, just like French would not have given Sebbar any access.

As we have seen previously, in Algeria, the language of culture, of the many individualities and ways of being in and of seeing the world all happen in Darija. Having access to Arabic would actually not make any more difference than knowing French. The silence of what Sebbar calls “la langue arabe” would not have been broken had she learnt that language. Maybe what would have happened if she did learn it is give her the proper critical knowledge to discern the differences with that language and the one that real people use in the real world. But of course, had she known that she would not have written the very work that I am commenting on, as the very existence of such a work relies mainly on an ideological infatuation with an ideological entity named “Arabic”. Such an obsession is actually something that can be surmised from the author’s own education which was purely French, and therefore also orientalist in its very core. Sebbar writes: “Ma mère nous a élevé en petites filles de la République française, dans sa langue, dans ses livres, elle nous transmet un savoir universel, une langue unique.” In such a statement, Sebbar acknowledges the limitations of her perspective. Everything she knows about what she
calls “Arabic” she has gotten from her mother’s books; which is of course a metaphor for French cultural production (of the time). Such books were for the most part purely orientalist endeavors, as they were directly linked to the very processes of colonization. An “other” had to be created, and Arabic as Sebbar believes it to be (the same orientalist and colonial structures of knowledge continue even today in North Africa) was part of that very process of other the peoples and cultures of North Africa in order to colonize them.

In the last quote, the careful reader is able to discern that Sebbar uses irony in her claim that her mother transmitted a “universal knowledge” to her daughters. It is obviously a “universal knowledge” that was lacking in perspective as Sebbar has been able to see from the interior. She describes how she, and her sisters were “model daughters” immediately ingurgitating all that knowledge without the slightest questioning or re-positioning. Although Sebbar is able to be critical about that time of her life today, and about the very idea of “Universal knowledge” and “Unique language”, she is unable to see through the Arabic myth. She therefore continues to reproduce the very orientalist and colonial structures of power that were imposed on the very semantics of the word Arabic.

Such structures of power are of course, as I tried to discuss in the very beginning of this chapter are double edged. By that I mean that they are emanating from two different power structures. This aspect is of course what makes the situation of Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French even more complex. “Arabic” as developed through Sebbar’s book _L’Arabe comme chant secret_ seems to be mainly influenced by orientalist and western discursive formations around it, which, concretely speaking, is an aspect that sounds more than logical in her case. She is after all someone who does not speak Darija, does not read Arabic and therefore the other side of this ideological monster is one that is impermeable
to her. In the case of Abdellah Taïa, the power structures that inform his writing are coming from both western ways of knowing, as well as eastern ones. The stance that I propose in this work is neither the former nor the latter. I tend to look at the situation in North Africa in general, and in Morocco and Algeria in particular, to be closer to the Creole situation in the Caribbean, where both western and normative ways of being, and knowing, in addition to concepts of Blackness (Negritude) were clashing with purely local concept of créolité. I most definitely feel that there is work to be done there, and this is a project that I am planning to turn to in the future.

We saw how complex the representation of what Leïla Sebbar calls “Arabic” in the previously cited work. It is indeed a central theme to her work. Both the lack, the absence, as well as the myth of Phantom Arabic is what makes her produce the very work I am hereby studying. Let us turn now to another one of her books: Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père (2003), and see through which modalities Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French appear.

**Lacking the Father Tongue**

The ideas of lack and loss are again concepts that makes its appearance as early as the very first pages. Leïla Sebbar writes: “De ces année-là je n’ai rien su. Mon père n’en a rien dit, obstinément.” (12) Although Sebbar does not mention language per se in this passage, she is asking her father questions, many of them, about a period of his life that she would like to know. The father is very silent about it, but his silence is understood to exist in the French language. Had she not had the “lack” of “Arabic” she wouldn’t have had to ask because she would have already been in the know about everything she is inquiring about. She continues: “Les livres ne dissent rien et toi non-plus…” (13) she clearly
confirms the previous comment that I made earlier. Having been raised by a French mother,
in the French language, her source for knowledge is more linked to what she calls here “the
books” which could be a metaphor of her conscious or unconscious dependence on western
ways of knowing. Her father’s history, in which she is now interested is something that
was mainly oral. Her western ways of knowing are therefore void in this case. Lacking the
very linguistic tool to inquire about such things, the father simply refuses to talk about them
in the French language.

Sebbar’s feeling of estrangement is further emphasized in the following passage:
“Peut-être la langue étrangère l’a-t-elle séparé des mots qu’il aurait choisis pour nous, ses
enfants.” (20) She once again refers to her own language (French) as a foreign language to
her father, and by extension to her as well. She continues by explaining that to her mother,
she found natural that the father would use this language, and that through its use with
one’s lover the language becomes one’s own property, but when he used that (foreign)
language with his children, it immediately lacked certain aspects according to the previous
passage. Such a lack, according to Sebbar had an influence on his way of being with his
very children. She adds: “Dans sa langue, il aurait dit ce qu’il ne dit pas dans la langue
étrangère, il aurait parlé à ses enfants de ce qu’il tait, il aurait raconté ce qu’il n’a pas
raconté, non pas de sa vie a lui (…) mais (des) histoires de la vieille ville marine, les
légendes …” (21) In this passage Leïla Sebbar clearly confirms the motif that has been
following us throughout her work; that of silence. She looks at the latter again as being
double edged. First, “Arabic” is portrayed as the language of silence in its very
unintelligibility to her, and second, “French” is also painted in the previous passage as
another language of silence. Sebbar believes that it is its own imposition on them, that
makes the father unable to talk about the stories, legends, histories of his own land and culture. All things that, in her view, he would have felt at ease talking about to his children had they spoken his language.

Whenever she inquires about her father stories, Sebbar is faced with an answer that keeps repeating itself: “Pourquoi tu remues tout ça? À quoi ça sert ? Oublie, va, oublie.” (28) Her father’s answer entails that many things. For him, although she is his daughter, he treats her as an outsider, a French woman whose history is different from his. He therefore refuses to answer her questions. He asks her to forget, an order to which she smartly responds: “Que j’oublie ce que je ne sais pas, c’est ça?” (28) As the father was indeed being paradoxical in his very command asking her to forget. How can one forget what one does not know? But indeed, issues of memory and oversight are also at the center of this work. As the story unfolds, Leïla Sebbar tries to unveil her father’s perspective about certain issues and stories that she had heard/read about, but her father’s perspectives remain inaccessible to her. The main reason being her father’s double silence; that of the French language that he feels is not an idiom capable of bearing such histories, and that of what Sebbar calls “Arabic” that he cannot use with his own daughter since he consciously silenced that language in her before its very inception.

A silence that Sebbar compares to being imprisoned in a high citadel. She writes:

Et nous? Enfermées dans la citadelle de la langue française, de la république colonial, les murs n’arrêtaient pas l’écho malfaisant des injures proférées par les garçons, la langue roulée, hurlée, était violente, obscène... Ces garçons de la rue auraient été les fils de mon père avec une autre femme ? (31)

The citadel that she uses to metaphorically refer to French becomes dislocated by the very echoes of “Arabic” that end up infiltrating that high fortress. In this passage, Sebbar also
confirms her father’s intentions by offering his girls a purely French education, a way of “protecting” them from the “savage language” as she refers to it in the previous work cited in this thesis. Such attempt at “protecting” ended up having the exact opposite effect as Leïla Sebbar ended up lacking the very knowledge to first understand what those young boys were shouting and second to be able to stand up for herself and reply. Another problem is that the very idea of “protecting” someone from a culture that is theirs (or at least one of theirs) is actually going to end up serving the exact opposite purpose than that intended. Such a process of “protecting” ended up being one of interdiction as the writer notes: “Je comprends, longtemps après, de l’autre côte de la mer, le pays natal m’est encore interdit, ou je me l’interdis” (35)

In addition to all the aspects that Sebbar links to the concept of Phantom Arabic, she, once again, follows an orientalist model in over-sexualizing the language. She writes: “ces mots étrangers et familiers, je les entends encore, violents comme des pierres jetées, visant l’œil ou la tempe, et séducteurs…” (37) The way through which Leïla Sebbar sexualizes the very language that attacks follows a very clear and easily discernible orientalist pattern. In the previous passage, Sebbar also refers to the words she hears as being at the same time “strange” and “familiar”. Strange, by virtue of not being understood, and familiar by virtue of being her father’s language. The latter is referred to by Sebbar in following pages as “the guardian of the colonial language’s fortress”. She adds: “Ainsi mon père ignorait, commandant la fragile forteresse de la langue colonial, que ses filles, qu’il croyait a l’abri de la furie sexuelle des garçons, jour après jour, (étaient) étourdies par la violence répétée du verbe arabe, le verbe du sexe…” (42) The writer once again links what she calls “Arabic” to sexuality in general and to a violent expression of it in particular. Her
experience of such expressions of sexuality remains however extremely limited and as I mentioned before seems to follow an orientalist model. One where she “imagines” or “fantasizes” (since she does not really understand the language) that the comments being made towards her and her sister are sexual ones. She feels almost threatened by those words but finds of a way of enjoying them by thinking that such comments were sexually motivated.

**Linguistic Fantasies in French: Sacred Arabic, Scotomized Darija**

The second part of the book switches from the auto-fictional model to a more creative-fictional one. The story focuses on Fatima’s son, whom the reader follows through his evolution from a young Algerian to joining a radical Islamist group. Sebbar writes about the radicalization process that the young man goes through. In her recounting of the story she, refers to certain key textual elements related to Phantom Arabic. It is interesting however that she only “notices” these when she is telling the reader about someone else’s story and not hers. She writes. Talking about Fatima’s son: “Il a suivi des cours intensifs, dans une autre école, dans la langue de sa mère, qu’il ne reconnaît pas tout à fait. Il est heureux, il apprend vite, il lit le Coran, il ne rate pas une heure d’enseignement religieux.” (65) The writer is right to note that the young man expresses a certain feeling of estrangement from the language of the Quran. She says that “it is a language that he does not recognize completely”. Sebbar therefore shows an ideological linguistic awareness of one of the main pillars behind Phantom Arabic, but it is extremely peculiar that she never shows such awareness when recounting her own story.

This part of Sebbar’s book *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* is extremely similar to Nabil Ayouch’s film *Horses of God* as far as both these works’ treatment of the
radicalization process. For both Ayouch and Sebbar, language played an extremely primordial part in such a radicalization. Concretely speaking, the non-understanding of the Quran leads these young people to believe whatever interpretations that are imposed on them by certain authority figures. The latter use the very ignorance of language as a tool to shape their own superiority vis-à-vis the kids. Such a phenomenon is going to be tackled in further detail in the chapter focusing on Nabil Ayouch’s films.

Leïla Sebbar continues:

Le maître en religion le remarque et l’invite à des réunions secrètes ou vont les meilleurs. Il écoute d’abord, il découvre la passion des militants de Dieu, leur abnégation, leur dévouement, ils travaillent, bénévoles, dans des associations de quartier, (…) Enthousiaste, il s’engage, il donne sa vie pour répandre le bien, la justice, au nom de Dieu. Lorsque le chef le désigne comme recruteur, il accepte. (66)

Sebbar summarizes in a few lines the process that I referred to earlier. One that is at the very core of the problematic of Phantom Arabic. The evolution of Fatima’s son continues until he is one of the leaders of the movement. The reader also understands that, once upon a time, Fatima’s son has tried to murder Sebbar’s father. The latter was marked on a blacklist by the Muslim brotherhood. He was considered to be a traitor as he was the director of the French school. Fatima’s son’s bullets ended up missing their target. The story gets even more complicated when the two men are joined in the same cell. They were both imprisoned in France, for different reasons. By the time of their imprisonment, Fatima’s son wanted to repent for his crimes. He felt that being joined with the man he once tried to murder was a sign from God. The following passage ensues:

Maitre, maître… c’est moi, oui, c’est moi… pardonne-moi si tu peux, avec la volonté de Dieu, pardonne-moi...’ Il parle en arabe, des sanglots dans la voix, il ne pleure pas. Le maitre pose sa main sur la tête inclinée vers lui, il lui dit, dans sa langue, doucement, les mots sont clairs : ‘Relève-toi, mon
fils, tu as obéi aux ordres du maquis, c’était une épreuve, tu ne pouvais pas faire autrement, ils t’auraient tué, je le sais, c’est Dieu qui a guide ta main, tu as rate la cible… Et aujourd’hui nous voilà réunis dans la même cellule, toi et moi… (91)

On a structural level, this passage is reminiscent of Abdellah Taïa’s style. Except here, instead of writing in French and saying that someone was speaking in French, Sebbar follows a different model. She reports a conversation that supposedly happened in “Arabic” in the French language. It is however metaphorical that these two characters who represent the extreme opposite ends of the spectrum of Algerian society at the time: A French teacher and school director who married a French woman and whose ideas and way of seeing the world faced west-ward, and an Algerian ex-member of the Muslim brotherhood who saw any presence of the foreign invader as something to be combatted to death. Both characters, representing both visions ended up in a French prison. The whole scene could be read as a metaphor of the socio-political situation in Algeria post-independence.

The following passage that Sebbar writes is one where Sebbar’s father suggests that they could use their time in this prison for him to teach Fatima’s son the French language. The former says: “Et tu sais ce qu’on va faire, j’ignore combien de temps nous resterons ensemble, ce temps nous ne le perdrons pas… Je vais faire le maître d’école. Je t’apprendrai à lire et a écrire la langue de la France.” (91) Another metaphorical passage that seems to follow the same orientalist model that I was able to discern in Sebbar’s work. In the sense that she seems to assume in the two last passages that a reconciliation between the two sides of Algerian society is only possible in the French language. A language that she obviously, as we have seen throughout this analysis, confronts to Arabic. The question to be asked then is why not the real language that the real people in these situations would have had in common: Darija.
At a time where Sebbar sees two possible futures, one in French another in Arabic, I suggest an imaginary alternative ending to her work where Darija would be the language that would bring the two characters together, and that would actually allow for a plurality of ways of being and of thinking in a modality that would neither be a Western imposition nor an Eastern one. While there are numerous studies dedicated to either Sebbar’s use of French by *creative default* (for instance, Mortimer, 1988) or lack / void / loss of “Arabic” (for instance, Bensoussan), I would like to suggest that the absence what is ignored (thus the absence of an absence) – that of the real language of the real people of Algeria—perhaps haunts the unconscious of her writing.
CHAPTER 3
Nabil Ayouch:
Can the Subaltern Speak Darija?

He who Controls the Present Controls the Past

This chapter argues that film and cinema have been, still are and will continue to be, two of the most interesting arenas to reflect on issues of language, identity and hegemony. Cinema is indeed a medium that lends itself to what I want to call a certain promise of realism”. Actors have to talk like “real-people” talk. This is an issue that might not seem that interesting when one grows up in a country like France64, or many others, where the official language of the nation is the same one that “real-people” use in “real-life” and that therefore logically finds itself on the big screen. In Morocco, in particular and in North Africa and the Middle East in general, one finds herself/himself off the beaten-track. Language, often happens to be at the center of action in literally any film produced and/or distributed in the region. Before delving into the analysis of Nabil Ayouch’s work, as most of his films are in numerous ways central to the issues at hand in this dissertation, a general overview of the current state of cinema in Morocco is needed.

64 Worthy of note is that although French is the official language according to the constitution, it does not mean that linguistic issues in France do not matter or do not exist. In fact, they do very much and French is not spoken in the same way throughout the country (See Kamal Salhi ed. French in and out of France). In addition, there are many languages that co-exist in the French territory. But the aspect that makes the most crucial difference is the following: there are many children in France, for example, who grow up speaking French. In fact theoretically speaking, if one never goes to school one would still speak French. In Morocco, North Africa and most Middle Eastern countries, if one does not get educated one never learns the official language of the nation. Whatever people speak in daily-life is not recognized let alone considered an official language.
In order to understand the development of cinema in Morocco one has to go back to the creation of what is called “Le Centre Cinématographique Marocain.” The latter, founded in 1944 under French colonial rule, went through many changes before becoming the institution that it is today. It goes without saying that since we are talking about an institution that was founded during colonization its sole purpose was to disseminate and propagate French ideas and to romanticize and embellish the French colonial empire in general and the French presence in Morocco in particular. More importantly, the French colonial film industry drew upon an Orientalizing view of not only the “Arab”, but also and maybe even more importantly of the “Berber”65 (in French: Les Berbères). The Amazigh people were constantly depicted and represented by the French colonial film industry films as savage, mysterious, exotic, pagan. Following a “divide et impera” (divide and conquer) model, the French saw in their depiction of the Amazigh people, a way of differentiating them from the “Arabs.” Amazigh culture was, although represented in such orientalist, violent and unethical ways, encouraged. The French viewed in this encouragement of the Amazigh cultures a manner of repressing and suppressing the influence of the Arab-Muslim culture, which was on the other hand viewed as too turbulent and unified.66 Issues of Amazigh identity are absolutely valid, nevertheless the French

65 Please note that this is a pejorative term referring to the Amazigh people that I refuse to use, hence the quotation marks. It is a term that was never used by the Amazigh peoples to refer to themselves but rather by the European colonisers to refer to “barbarous” populations living in North Africa.

66 It is useful to note that Morocco is one of the rare countries in the so called Arab-world, whose Muslim community consists only of Sunni fractions of Islam. Indeed the “Islamic community” as a whole was never unified. From the very earliest stages of Islam, after the death of the Prophet, its main two branches, Sunni and Shia, are on a perpetual war mode since the inception of the religion.
colonial empire was not engaging in raising them out of love for diversity, but rather out of pure Machiavellian benefit.

Among the main subjects and themes that the French colonial power tried to encourage through cinema, in order to further advance their plans to divide and conquer, is the practice of “Maraboutism”\(^{67}\). The latter is absolutely prohibited in Islam, yet it has always been part of Amazigh cultures. Films representing the Amazigh man as a Saint’s worshiper were pre-dominant. The very purpose of these colonial propagandist depictions was to create a fissure and a rupture between the Amazigh and the Arabs who, up to that moment, were living peacefully and in relative harmony with and support for one another.\(^{68}\) Such a colonial project had as its strategic vision the creation of contradictions within Morocco that would raise questions of national, religious and linguistic identity and that would ultimately turn into social-unrest, maybe even civil-war, which would therefore justify the presence of the “angelic”, peace-keeping, order-maintaining French colonial presence.

Agency was completely missing from Moroccan cinema at the time. Issues of national, linguistic and religious identity in Morocco became the “property” of the French colonial empire. He who controls the present controls the past. Following an Orwellian

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\(^{67}\) Maraboutism refers in short to the worship of saints, although the concept of sainthood does not exist in Islam. It participates in what might be called popular ways of practicing Islam and it is very common in North Africa and in the Middle East.

\(^{68}\) Proof of that was that a debate about who was “Arab” and who was “Amazigh” did not even exist at the time. The main identity-category was that of being a “Muslim.” Another proof of that is the presence of Amazigh peoples in the highest ranks of the Moroccan state. Amazigh historical figures are a significant part of Moroccan culture and history, the most emblematic example of this is that of Ṭāriq ibn Ziyâd, who commanded the Moroccan army in what is referred to as “the Islamic Umayyad conquest of Visigothic Hispania in 711.”
method, the French colonial machine created a mythical fragmented national identity that served its own purposes and justified its own being. This would begin to change after the country’s independence (1956) but only to some extent. Indeed, France’s invisible hand on its former-colonies was not one to give up so easily. In an attempt to maintain a hold on cultural production as a whole and on cinematic production in particular, France continued to financially support cinema in its former colonies (Diawara 1992). Indeed, when one knows the tactics and strategies used by the French during colonization, one would have to be really naïve to believe that any type of help coming from the French government to its former colonies was provided with the sole purpose of helping the Cinema industry in the country. In *African Cinema* (1992), Manthia Diawara explains that such assistance made “it easier for French distributors to maintain their monopoly on the African market” (31). Supporting that argument Valerie Orlando claims, in *Screening Morocco Contemporary Film in a Changing Society* (2011) that “France’s concept of film and what function it should perform in societies continues to influence national cinemas in the former French colonies.” (7)

Very soon after independence⁶⁹ the Moroccan government took control of the Centre Cinématographique Marocain (hereinafter referred to as CCM) yet the French influence over it was still present. The Moroccan king at the time, Mohammed V, had noticed the strategies used by the French colonial machine and learned a lesson or two from

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⁶⁹ Although the 2nd of March 1956 is generally viewed as the date of Moroccan independence, one should remember that Morocco was colonized by both France and Spain. That date, therefore only refers to the independence of the country from the French rule. It took until 1975 for Morocco to regain control of its southern territories. There are still two cities, Ceuta (Sebta) and Melilia that remain under Spanish colonial rule up to this day when I am writing this dissertation.
their strategy. Filmmakers during the early stages of independence were affiliated with the state and the works that they produced were logically targeted to propagate the views of the ruling class. Moroccan cinema did not change much, the only thing that changed was “who” controlled the reel.

Later on, the industrial film landscape in Morocco started changing. Under King Hassan II, who succeeded to Mohammed V in 1961, a new breed of filmmakers started seeing the light. These new directors were not considered “government agents” (Diawara 8) but, rather, artists who had a certain degree of “freedom.” Indeed, unlike neighboring countries where censorship was a systematic and legal process, in Morocco it worked a little differently. There was no official ministry, nor process of censorship in the country. Paradoxically this was not such a positive thing as there were very clear red lines that no one could cross. There were also very clear taboo topics that no one could tackle in their films in particular or in any type of cultural production in general. Indeed, the situation in Morocco under Hassan II, was one of “self-censorship” which one might argue is the worst kind of censorship. Indeed, in openly dictatorial regimes, the existence of an official “list” of topics not to deal with and things not to say might have made it easier on filmmakers for three reasons. First, everyone knew exactly the topics that were “disturbing” the status-quo. Second, anyone engaging in any sort of cultural production related to those topics was conscious of her/his engagement in resistance against dictatorship. Third, the censorship exerted from the “outside” of the cultural producer, and part of the repressive state apparatus (Althusser 1970). In the case of Morocco at the time, the shackles were of the

70 The quotation marks are needed as Hassan II was a very authoritarian King.
mind. There was no “official list,” so any filmmaker, screenplay writer, author, artist had to “guess” if whatever topic they were dealing with were acceptable by the system. In case they failed to do that, these artists “were arrested, tortured and sometimes killed” (Prime 272) during what came to be known as “the years of lead”.

Indeed, after having gone through, the colonial rule, which was followed by the Moroccan state absolute control, and last the ideological self-censorship under Hassan II, Moroccan cinema finally came recently to see brighter times. Contemporary films under the rule of the current king Mohammed VI have shown real signs of belonging to a new wave of Moroccan cinema. Although, it is essential to note that these new ideological state apparatuses, just like the French colonial ones before them do not give up that easily, as was shown in the reaction of the Moroccan government to Nabil Ayouch’s 2015 film Zin Li Fik (English and French title: Much Loved) which is precisely something that this chapter is going to deal with.

Moroccan Cinema and the Poetics of Darija
To be able to understand the depth of the language issue in general and of Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French in particular in Morocco, cinema is probably the most pertinent medium to scrutinize. In fact, Moroccan cinema could be considered as the primary locus of authentic Darija texts. In Screening Morocco Contemporary Film in a Changing Society (2011), Valerie Orlando refers to Moroccan cinema as a social-realist text, a notion that could be “redirected” towards the “linguistic” aspect. Due to cinema’s very structure and promise of realism, it is a common expectation that actors have to talk like “real-people”. When a Moroccan viewer watches Laïla Marrakchi’s film Marock (2005), she/he is not “shocked” in any way to see young Moroccan kids from Lycée
Lyautey\textsuperscript{72} speaking French. The film, which tells the story of a young Muslim Moroccan girl who falls in love with a Moroccan Jewish boy, is shot mainly in French. The presence of Darija in that film only happens when one of the main characters is talking to “subaltern” figures in the film, like the chauffeur, or the maid; which is in itself a process that is worthy of scrutiny (Zidouh, forthcoming 2018). The linguistic capital in so-called “francophone” Morocco is a clear marker of class and privilege (Heyndels 2017) and the very notion of “francophonie” as a socio-ideological apparatus and an existential reality in all France’s former colonies has to be radically questioned. This is examined further in the chapter related to Abdellah Taïa.

Such consent to the presence of a “foreign”\textsuperscript{73} language in Moroccan cinema has a logical resonance in films like Laila Marrakchi’s \textit{Marock} (2005) or Latif Lahlou’s \textit{La Grande villa} (2010) that depict a certain linguistic reality where some people in some situations would speak French almost exclusively. It is however yet to be seen that a film would feature Modern Standard Arabic (hereafter referred to as MSA) to be its main language, while MSA finds itself used in many Moroccan films in ways worthy of investigation, as will be studied in Nabil Ayouch’s work.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{72} Lycée Lyautey is a French high school belonging to the French Mission in Morocco. Studying there also comes with an automatic marker of privilege, as it is only open to French nationals living in Morocco or Moroccans who belong to a certain social-class that can afford paying for their children’s education in such institutions.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{73} French has an ambivalent status in Morocco. It is not an “official” language, nor a national one, according to the constitution yet it is the very language of that very constitution; which was drafted and published in both Modern Standard Arabic and French}
MSA has been for a long time the hegemonic language of art, literature and philosophy in the so-called Arab World. This aspect, which comes in close-second after the religious one, has definitely helped create the phantomatic aura that exists around “Arabic”. Although MSA was indeed and for a long time the language of science, literature, the arts, philosophy, etc. But this is no longer the case in a country like Morocco where MSA is not even the main language of higher education, which is in fact for the most part francophone. As far as Moroccan and more broadly Maghrebi literature written in Arabic is concerned, and for a variety of reasons whose consideration would go well over the scope of this dissertation, it is undergoing what could be considered as a crisis (Arab Human Development Report 2016), although one should underline that there are authors of magnitude writing in MSA, like Mohamed Berrada to take only one example. While one could state that the last great Moroccan literary work written in MSA is probably Mohamed Choukri’s For Bread Alone (1973) (Original Title: Al-khoubz Al-hafi), most of its dialogues using the Arabic-script are actually in Darija. In his introduction to the English translation of Choukri’s novel that he produced, Paul Bowles writes:

Because I have translated several books from the Arabic I want to make a clear differentiation between the earlier volumes and the present work. The other books were spoken onto tape and the words were in the colloquial Arabic called Moghrebi. For Bread Alone is a manuscript, written in classical Arabic, a language I do not know. The author had to reduce it first to Moroccan Arabic for me. Then we used Spanish and

74 The insistence on the use of so-called Arab World stems from the thesis that the latter is not an objective denomination, but one which is rather charged with ideology. The concept of “Arabness” itself is scrutinized in the chapter on Jean Genet.

75 Officially, French is a foreign language in Morocco like Spanish and English. Yet, most fields in higher education, be it in Universities, public higher-ed schools or in private ones, are taught in French.

76 See Gonzalo Fernandez-Perreira’s La literatura marroquí contemporanea (2006).
French for ascertaining shades of meaning. Although exact, the translation is far from literal. (For Bread Alone, 3)

Many things are to be noted in this quote. First and foremost, Paul Bowles mentions that he had translated books from “Arabic”, yet he quickly asserts that Choukri’s work was very different. The novel is in “Classical Arabic”, a language that according to Bowles himself he does not know. Although Bowles does not know “Classical Arabic”, he claims to speak “Arabic” and by that he means Darija, and that he has sufficient knowledge of it to be able to translate literary works. He continues by saying that the previous works he translated were spoken on a tape and that the words were in what he refers to as “a colloquial Arabic called Moghrebi”. Subsequently, he mentions one of the most crucial aspects of the debate on Darija and Arabic when he says that “the author had to reduce it first to Moroccan Arabic for him to understand.” Indeed in the same sentence he referred to the same language with four denominations: “Arabic, Colloquial Arabic, Moghrebi and Moroccan Arabic.” Even more significantly, his use of the term “reduce” (to Moroccan Arabic) presupposes precisely an act of reduction of either status, meaning or both. Paul Bowles therefore pursues a tradition of orientalist thinkers who “look down upon” Darija and who cannot see through the myth of Phantom Arabic.

The other ironic fact that one needs to remember when thinking of Choukri’s work is that the original “Arabic” manuscript was not published until 1982 in Morocco, only to be banned a year later from 1983 to 2000. The English version by Bowles was actually the

77 In addition to Choukri’s work, Paul Bowles translated works by Abdeslam Boulaich, Larbi Layachi, Mohammed Mrabet and Ahmed Yacoubi.

78 Moghrebi, or Maghrebi is usually a word that outsiders would use to refer to the language spoken mainly in Morocco, Algeria and in some areas of Tunisia.
first version of that book to be published by Peter Owen in 1973. The French translation by Tahar Ben Jelloun, under the title of *Le Pain nu* was published in 1980 by Maspero. It is indeed highly symptomatic that the greatest Moroccan work produced in “Arabic” was subject to a ban and was published in foreign languages before it saw the light of day in the country of its author’s origin. If anything, this speaks to the inability of MSA to bear certain meanings, as well as to the refusal of the public to “read” or “see” any taboo topics in the “holy” language that Arabic is supposed to be.

In such a troubled and complex socio-linguistic situation, the need for linguistic-realism is what pushes Moroccan cinema to be at the forefront of issues of language and identity in the country, along with the inability of MSA to be the bearer of critical meaning for the social, sexual, political, cultural and queer thematics that happen to be part of the very substance of contemporary Moroccan cinematography. Most critically acclaimed films in Morocco\(^79\) deal with the concept of the subaltern\(^80\). They feature subaltern people speaking a subaltern language about subaltern issues. Indeed, the three films by Nabil Ayouch to be analyzed in this chapter have that theme of subalternity at their center. *Much Loved* (2015) follows a group of young women who happen to be sex-workers as they go about their life in the vice city of Marrakesh.\(^81\) *Horses of God* (2012) tells the true story of a group of kids from one of the most infamous and notorious shantytowns in Casablanca, Sidi Moumen, who will go on to commit one of the main terrorist attacks in the history of

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\(^79\) One could think of films by Nourredine Lakhmari; Casanegra, Zero and Burnout. In addition to Abdellah Taïa’s Salvation Army, as well as Hicham Laasri’s Starve your Dog, The Sea is Behind, They are the Dogs. In addition to the films of Nabil Ayouch that this chapter analyses.

\(^80\) See Spivak (1988) and (Gramsci 2014).

\(^81\) Prostitution is also a central theme of several of Taïa’s novels.
the country. Finally, Ali Zaoua (2000) shows us the story of a group of young street-kids as they try to dissociate from their gang.

**Morocco’s Much Loved Eisoptrophobia**

The reception, debate (or lack of it), and censorship of Nabil Ayouch’s film *Zin Li Fik*[^82] (*Much Loved*) which will be studied here in a detail, proves that: cinema in Morocco is still a major arena of social, political and cultural contention. Among the many magical abilities that cinema has is that of confronting societies with their own realities. The violent reaction of a huge number of Moroccans to Ayouch’s film, on one hand and the official reaction of the government, on the other can only be symptomatic of a certain incapacity, reluctance and/or refusal to see one’s own reflection. Indeed, this *Much Loved* eisoptrophobia[^83] is a very interesting phenomenon from many regards. First, this is one of the most influential movies in Moroccan history, yet it is one that never came out in the kingdom. Even more importantly, the filmmaker declared that the film was not yet submitted to the CCM (Centre Cinematographique Marocain) to receive its distribution visa when it was banned.[^84] The decision to censor the film, according to Nabil Ayouch, followed its avant-premiere screening at France’s Festival de Cannes. The very act of banning the movie before its filmmaker has even submitted it for “approval” to the CCM is in itself illegal and shows the naïveté and absence of savoir-faire of the Islamist government leading the country since 2011.

[^82]: The meaning of the original Darija title is translated literally to “The beauty in you,” but the film’s French as well as International versions are titled “*Much Loved*”

[^83]: Eisoptrophobia refers to the fear of seeing one’s own reflection in a mirror.

[^84]: In an interview given just days following the aftermath of the censorship to a radio show. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6M0yO3GwKo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6M0yO3GwKo)
Indeed, so it goes that whenever a cultural product is banned, its viewership increases drastically. In this case the buzz was so dramatic that according to Google Trends “Zin Li Fik” were the most searched words in Morocco in 2015.\textsuperscript{85} In fact, the interest in the film was due to two factors: the very act of its censorship made it more appealing even to “audiences” who are not traditionally interested in cinema or who do not go to the movie theatre, as well as the fact that just hours following the ban, un-edited footage of the film was leaked and uploaded online.

In an attempt to show their French intellectual superiority, the organizers of the Cérémonie des Césars decided to nominate Loubna Abidar for her performance in Much Loved. She became the very first Moroccan actress ever nominated for “best actress” in the most prestigious French film ceremony. The decision by the board to nominate her, although respectable, was actually not based on her acting performance but was rather taken as a sign of appreciation for the courage that she had demonstrated by accepting the role in hypocritically conformist Moroccan society. She had to flee to France where she is now living as a refugee after having been subjected to violence, physical attacks and death-threats in Morocco. She even declared, not without tragic irony, that she had to wear a Burqa in order to go out in Morocco without being recognized to avoid further attacks.\textsuperscript{86} Indeed these circumstances all played in favor of the movie’s “notoriety”.

The film opens with a black screen, a few sounds and then a voice. This very black screen can be viewed as a metaphor of Morocco’s Much Loved eisoptrophobia. The fact


that we can hear someone talking but not see her gives the viewer the feeling that she/he is closing her/his eyes. This refusal to see something that is definitely there, in this case by virtue of being heard, could be interpreted as a symptom of a systematic unconscious mechanism of defense in Moroccan society. One grows up “shielded” from a given set of issues, as their very existence becomes subject to debate. Indeed, “Prostitution does not exist in Morocco” is very reminiscent of preposterous arguments such as: “Darija does not exist”. The very opening scene of the film can therefore be conceived as a metaphor for the refusal to see what is always-already there.

The first words uttered by a woman, whose name or position at this point of the movie is not known to the viewer, are in Darija. The careful ear is even able to discern that the accent is from the region of Marrakesh, which is an information that already starts putting the viewer in context. Marrakesh is in itself a city, and even more a mythical representation, that leaves a bittersweet taste to most people from the country. It is at the same time considered as one of Morocco’s most beautiful cities, most touristic as well as most “shameful” and “ill reputed” places in the country. The reputation of Marrakesh as the vice capital of Morocco is of course not in any official document but is one that is “common sense”. It is mainly based on two factors. First and foremost, the city is known for a certain “acceptance” of queer sexual practices. Indeed, it is sometimes common in other cities of the country and among certain groups to say of someone that “he is from Marrakesh” in order to say that she/he is gay. Marrakesh is indeed referred to by visitors from foreign countries as a “pink city” (a queer one) as it is a place where no bar, or club,

87 The word is used here ironically as expressing prejudicial views which are dominant in Moroccan society.
would openly declare itself as “gay-friendly” all the while being “known-as” welcoming to gay people. Second, Marrakesh is also associated with prostitution\(^{88}\). Sex-workers are blooming across the city including in “luxurious” and social high-end circles. This “aura of sin” attracts many wealthy men from the Gulf countries who, while having a lot of financial resources, are lacking in the “freedom department”\(^{89}\).

Indeed, the very concept of prostitution is of course culturally constructed. The main interesting shade of that concept in Morocco is the following: some women consider reception of monetary compensation as being part of a normative hetero-sexual relationship and not as being a sign of prostitution. Therefore, as Meriam Cheikh argues in “Échanges sexuels monétarisés, femmes et féminités au Maroc: Une autonomie ambivalente” (2009), many sex-workers who engage in a sexual relationship with one or more men regularly do not see themselves as being prostitutes. Rather, they think of themselves as engaging in very normal hetero-sexual relationship where it is common-sense for the man to “give” something in exchange for the “sex” that he “receives”; and most of the times money is seen as a relevant capital to exchange in these situations. Normative sex is conceived by a huge number of people in Morocco as an extremely patriarchal endeavor. The act of having sex is not thought as one where two people engage in a consensual relationship with each other and where both parties are in a state of mutual benefit but rather as being an act where on the one hand the “woman” gives the man, with minimal or no enjoyment at all, her body. On the other hand, the man “uses” the woman’s body to satisfy his own lust. It is

\(^{88}\) This aspect is one that started during colonialism and Marrakesh has since then continued to bear that association. See Driss Maghraoui, ed., *Revisiting the Colonial Past in Morocco* (2013).

\(^{89}\) The thematic of prostitution is also one that is common to Taïa’s writing as analyzed by Ralph Heyndels in “La prostitution sur la scène de l’écriture: Abdellah Taïa” (2016).
therefore in this context that one has to understand how certain women have no problem with receiving something in exchange for sex, since, and to put it bluntly, they are not receiving an orgasm.

Prostitution therefore begins only when the act of receiving monetary compensation is coming from people who are not “regulars”. And although many sex-workers in Morocco identify with the former category of normative hetero-sexual relationships that include a certain exchange of capital, the prostitutes in the film identify with the latter: women who are engaging in sex with strangers only for the sake of financial gain. This is an aspect that is made clear from the very beginning of the film. The opening voice is that of a woman from Marrakesh who is apparently talking to someone about men and she says: “Oh talk to me about men! They come in all kinds and sizes, there are the good ones, the sons of bitches, the rich ones, but why do you even care about this! What should be your main priority is money, that dollar sign!” This short monologue is interrupted by another young woman’s voice who speaks with a different accent, that of Casablanca, and who says: “For you, they are all the same except black guys”, a statement to which a third voice responds, “What about black guys?” The first voice proceeds in telling the story of how she ended up attending a very select birthday party of an American rapper in Marrakesh and that after going through a bad experience she could not “work” for six months. This scene eludes to a very symptomatic form of racism that exists in Morocco.

The screen finally lights-up while the woman is telling her story, and the viewer is able to, or in a sense forced to, watch what Moroccan society refuses to see. The first images are those of a girl, who looks young, probably in her very early 20s, snorting cocaine. These images unfold before the viewer’s gaze while we continue to listen to
Noha’s story. The camera’s positioning is such that the viewer might get the feeling that she/he is sitting by that very same table. In *Ten Arab Filmmakers: Political Dissent and Social Critique* (2015), Johnathan Smolin quotes Ayouch as saying “It’s thanks to the camera, thanks to cinema that I discovered Morocco” (216). It’s as if Nabil Ayouch, through this film, is opening his eyes to the subaltern situation of prostitutes in Morocco. He discovers their lives, following the very same model of the viewer who finally gets an image of what she/he has been unable to see and trying to ignore. The language of the scene is crude. It is harsh. Probably too harsh for any language other than the Darija in which it is spoken. Darija is after all considered by some as the subaltern of languages. It is after all a language that still “does not exist” according to some people (the very ones who argue that prostitution in Morocco “does not exist”). These are also the very same people who not only speak Darija, but are native speakers of it. The sex-workers speak a prostitute language. One that has no status, no recognition, one that is seen by many as an anomaly.

The prostitutes’ conversation is only cut by the sound of knocking on the door. The girls are quickly reminded by Noha that this is not the time for jokes. It is time for work, and she informs them that they need to get ready. The next scene takes place in a cab. One of the girls is still fixing her make-up. Noha explains to the younger girl, whom we saw in the opening scene of the movie, how to act as a good prostitute. She says:

I want you to fix your walk, and give me the greatest catwalk you can do, because we are going to find six kilos of whores down there. You know what, so that you don’t get too confused just follow my steps, do whatever I do. If I stand, you stand, if I dance, you dance, if I get fucked, you get fucked. Okay?\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{90} Minute 2:41
At that moment, the driver of the cab looks at Noha, without saying a word, when the latter responds to his non-verbal communication by saying the following: “Why are you staring at me? A whore talking like whores talk, what’s so strange about that?” Indeed, one could link what unfolds in this scene as a textual metaphor of Darija as a subaltern prostitute language. Noha’s reaction here is emblematic of an authentic use of Darija in Moroccan cinema. Whenever the subaltern is shot, she/he is going to be speaking Darija. Standard Arabic as it exists today is unable to bear such meanings. The description by a Moroccan prostitute to a new colleague about how a prostitute acts is so crude that saying it in any other language than Darija would not have created the needed authentic effect.

Randa, the girl who was just being taught how to act as a prostitute, is very clearly anxious. She drinks alcohol that she prepared in a plastic soda Schweppes bottle. This is actually another marker of “authenticity” as every person who goes out at night in Morocco would have drank from one such bottles at some point. The viewer is, once again, confronted with many realities that she/he refuses to see/admit: we are talking after all about Morocco, a Muslim country, where alcohol is legally forbidden. The paradox, like there are so many, is that alcohol is sold legally and actually taxed all over the country. Its buyers are not asked about any sort of I.D., not even to prove their age. It is again paradoxical that a Moroccan person is legally able to buy alcohol from a store, yet risks going to prison if caught walking in its possession while leaving that very store. The state claims that alcohol in there to be sold to “tourists.” Yet the country gets that revenue from its taxation when it is obvious that all that money does not come only from the tourists who

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91 Minute 2:44
92 Per Decree 24-66 of November 14, 1967.
visit Morocco each year. In this scene, Ayouch shows a Muslim prostitute, someone whose very existence is “forbidden” by law, drinking the “forbidden” drink and going to a “forbidden” place to engage in “forbidden” activities. Such eisoptrophobia translates very well to the very sociolinguistic situation of the country.

Such split identity that permeates Morocco is obviously a significant part of the inspiration that pushes Ayouch to make such scenes. This cultural schizophrenia operates within Moroccan society and between what the filmmaker sees and captures with his camera, and what a majority of Moroccan society “thinks” itself to be. It is in that regard symbolic that a significant part of the debate that took place during the ban of the film in Morocco revolved around what the chief of government communication at the time called “a serious outrage to moral values and to the Moroccan woman.” He even went as far as to claim that his decision to ban the film had to do with “[a need to] protect freedom of expression” which, according to him, was very different from “the freedom of absurdity and destruction on the cinematographic level.”

The previous quotation which shows the official reaction of the government to Nabil Ayouch’s film is indeed intriguing on many counts. The very claim that the government was standing up for “the Moroccan woman” is obviously beyond absurd. Much Loved is not a film about “Moroccan women,” it is about a few girls who happen to be sex-workers and whose life is being narrated in the movie. Would the government’s reaction

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94 The issue of linguistic and cultural schizophrenia in Morocco is at the center of a journalistic piece published in Morocco World News by Mohamed Chtatou. https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2017/07/223513/linguistic-cultural-schizophrenia-morocco/
have been the same if somebody made a film about Moroccan men going to a European country to engage in promiscuous sex? In that case, it would be just a film about those specific “men”, and the government’s reaction would probably be inexistent. Yet, when somebody makes a film about sex-workers who happen to be women, the film immediately stops being about the stories of those specific women but rather becomes a movie that gives a “bad image” of “The Moroccan woman”, as if the women of Morocco are the property of the state or of the social system.95

The girls are still riding the cab as the second scene of the movie unfolds. Noha starts engaging in a very interesting kind of mystical occult practices. She throws on the other two girls a powder that is supposed to guard them from the evil eye. Immediately after doing that - to which Randa does not react as she continues to drink in an attempt to ease her anxiety - Noha addresses a prayer to god, “Allah”, and begs the later to make her meet “a Saudi guy, who is cute and handsome, who has a small penis and a big wallet so that she spends an awesome night. Amen.”96 At the end of the scene, when the girls arrive to their location, Noha turns to their cab driver and asks him to pray for them. This scene provides, a significant set of data. It belongs to filmic instances that were never shot in Moroccan cinema, nor in North Africa for that matter, before a girl who is drunk, engaging in prostitution, while praying to god about making her own not-so-divine activities go as smoothly as possible. “The paradox of Noha” is again another allegory of Moroccan

95 The sociology of sexuality in contemporary Morocco in all its forms has been studied by Abdessamad Dialmy. The latter is a researcher on sexuality and identity at the University Mohammed V in Rabat, who has shown evidence that Moroccans are of course aware that prostitution exists. He is known for the phrase “we know that we do that, but we don’t say that we do that, and we don’t want others to say that we do that”.

96 Minute 3:40
society. Just like the character, the latter is full of complex paradoxical intricacies. It is a society that wants this and the other. Noha’s not so divine prayers are a symbol of the constant battle, both at the socio-psychological and the legal levels, from which Moroccan society suffers. Nabil Ayouch’s camera does, however, force the viewer to reflect about these issues. Noha represents the impossible that comes to existence. Her very being embodies a struggle between accepting who she is, and who she thinks herself to be, both versions of herself that are contradictory. Noha is also in a constant battle for existence as, according to Moroccan society, “prostitution, and therefore prostitutes, does/do not exist” (Dialmy 205). Yet, this very scene confronts the viewer with at least two “prohibitions”: first, this is a Moroccan prostitute speaking Moroccan Darija, and second, this young woman who, as pointed by the act of praying, identifies herself as being a Muslim woman. Had Much Loved been about the story of a non-Muslim prostitute it would not have caused all the outrage.

We finally get to see the cab that the girls were riding. Its color corresponds to that of taxi-cars in the city of Marrakesh. The feeling that the story is taking place in the vice city is a reminder that the viewer got a sense of from Noha’s accent and it finally materializes. The girls enter what seems to be a very luxurious private residence. We hear French for the first time. The ladies are all sitting around a few tables eating dinner when a woman who looks a little older than the median age in the room walks in, attracting the attention of all the girls. She says in French “ça va?”97, but immediately follows it with “labass?” which means the same thing in Darija. Yet, from her very accent as well as her

97 How are you’” in French.
use of French one can sense that she enjoys a little “higher” socio-economic status. She then begins explaining to them in Darija, as if she is now speaking their language, about their duties for the night. She continues: “Whoever dances gets 3000 Dh98, and whoever goes up to the second floor gets 6000 Dh, and of course in each 1000dh there is 200dh that is mine.”99 After creating a mini up-roar that lasts only for a few seconds, the girls all follow her in agreement, a sign that this is nothing new, just business as usual. The following scene shows the girls joining the party. The only people present are four Saudi men, and what seems to be a couple dozen Moroccan prostitutes. The camera pans to Randa, who is sitting in a corner by herself smoking a cigarette. When one of the Saudi men confronts her, and asks her to dance, she says that she does not know how to. The Saudi man speaks in Khaleeji Arabic, also referred to as Gulf Arabic, and Randa answers him saying “I don’t know how to dance” in that same language. The man follows his request by forcing Randa to get up, dragging her in the middle of the dance floor and forcing her to dance. When the woman is not showing any sign of ecstasy the Saudi man grabs her by her feminine parts while shouting: “I am ordering you to dance” in Khaleeji Arabic. In the heat of the moment outraged by the bullying of which she is a victim of, Randa screams in Darija this time: “Mabghitch!!” (I do not want to). She continues by insulting her assaulter, while pushing him off her. She is very quickly pushed aside by Noha who orders her to go back home.

Phantom Arabic is symptomatic in this scene. First, the woman is speaking in what is a “foreign” language to her to a man who although while being in Morocco does not

98 Dirhams; Currency of Morocco. Approximately 1$ = 10 Dh
99 Minute 5: 13
speak Moroccan. The psycholinguistic process that Randa is going through is one that presupposes the need for someone from Morocco to speak/understand other languages in North Africa and the Middle East. The common belief is that “their” “Arabic” is more “original” than “ours”. Whatever is spoken in Saudi Arabia must be the real-version of “Arabic”. It is however significant that Darija is the language that comes out of Randa’s mouth when she gets angry and feels assaulted. In such a moment of crisis and trauma Randa speaks directly from the heart, in her mother-tongue. These linguistic processes are part of an unconscious systematic mechanism; whenever someone from Morocco is going to talk to someone from the Middle East, she/he would do one of the three possible actions. First, resort to a foreign language that is considered to be neutral such as English, Spanish, etc. Second, in case the Moroccan person knows the exact language that is spoken by her/his interlocutor (for example in this case: Egyptian), she/he is expected to continue the conversation in that language. Finally, in a situation in which the person does not know the specific language spoken by her/his interlocutor, the expectation will be to speak what is referred to in linguistic terms as “Middle Moroccan Arabic”, which is in short a mix between Modern Standard Arabic and Darija.

It is noticeable that in none of the previously cited Darija would be the language to be spoken. After all, Randa is in Morocco, in Marrakesh, a place that she calls home; yet, she has to address this “foreigner” using his own language, in her own soil. She is literally taken in what Pierre Bourdieu calls “the economy of linguistic exchanges” in *Language and Symbolic Power* (2011), that is, the link between financial capital, linguistic capital and which language is to be used. Noha who pushed Randa aside asking her, in Darija, to go home, goes back to the party to entertain the very man who assaulted her friend, as she
does not want him to report Randa’s behavior to the pimp. Being now at the center of the party, Randa speaks Khaleeji. One can perceive here that in addition to being the language of the subaltern Darija is also the language of the intimate (Heyndels 2017). It can also be used in certain circumstances as a secret language. The scene continues as the viewer is now watching what seems to be a “dance” contest. The girls, one after the other, dance for the Saudi guys, while the men act as if they were in a jury. The party ends by the pool, and after a few moments of silence, while it is already day-time, one of the Saudi-men is reciting “Arabic” poetry to the third girl, Soukaina.

His recitation is very calming, and constitutes a sharp contrast with the images and sounds of extreme partying to which the viewer has been accustomed to watch up to now. We hear birds singing, in a very quiet scene. The poetry, which we understand to be of the Saudi character’s own writing, is in Standard Arabic. Soukaina is so impressed that she is now thinking that she might have feelings for this man. Phantom Arabic is indeed omnipresent even where it is the least expected: a prostitute falling in love with a man because of the intellectual superiority incarnated in his ability to recite and write “Arabic” poetry. Yet, there is more to his text that meets the ear.

Throughout all his recitations, while addressing the woman in front him, the Saudi man keeps using the “masculine” form. This, some would argue, is an Arabic poetic tradition of men addressing their lovers using “masculine” pronouns to avoid censorship. In most countries of North Africa and the Middle East, sex is something to be engaged in only inside the institution of marriage. Since many Arabic poets, in a long-standing tradition, were writing about people to whom they were not married, it was a rhetorical figure to use the “masculine” pronouns and conjugation even though addressing a woman.
This is the official side of the story. But the implied signification of this tradition is twofold. It allowed to avoid the interdiction of non-marital love. But also, and maybe more importantly, it allowed “Arab men” to share their feelings for other “Arab men” without being persecuted. At the end of the day, when accused of “homosexuality” the poet could always claim that he was “addressing” a woman and that his use of the masculine was nothing but conforming to the Arabic poetic tradition. As soon as the Saudi man is done reciting his poem, Soukaina follows by engaging in preliminaries. She seemed to be hoping for a sexual encounter that she is not going to get, as the Saudi man is not able to have an erection. He blames it on the alcohol. But this is an aspect of the man’s sexuality that is going to be discussed even further in the analysis of a scene to come. This queer way of writing/reading poetry will end up not being related to just rhetorical usage.

Soukaina who now wanders around the house after being disappointed by her catch of the night’s inability to have sex follows some erotic sounds that she hears until she gets to the slightly opened door where Noha is engaging in a foursome with one of the Saudi men and two other girls. The man is engaging in violent sexual intercourse, that includes dirty-talk, incestuous allusions and degradation. He is violently addressing Noha from behind while asking her to bring “her mother and her sister next time” before spitting on her. The gravity of the scene is one that the Moroccan viewer in particular, and the North

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100 For a description of the contemporary situation of same sex practices in Saudi Arabia see “The Kingdom in the Closet” https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/05/the-kingdom-in-the-closet/305774/

101 That term is in itself to be used with epistemological caution. See Joseph Massad, Desiring Arabs (2017).

102 This aspect of “Arabic” poetry continues to this day even in top-chart songs in North Africa and the Middle East.

103 Minute 14:35
African/Middle Eastern one in general, might find reminiscent of a “queer way” of thinking and living sexuality. Since sex (before marriage) is something that is “forbidden”, not only by religion but also and even more importantly by the state, the legal-system as well as societal norms, it is shaped by a feeling of doing something “wrong”. Even more importantly, through the very silence surrounding it, it becomes omnipresent. Sex is one of the least used words, yet one of the most present concepts in Moroccan society and all over the region. Indeed, due to these reasons, sex ends up being viewed by great number of Moroccan men and women as a “revolutionary” act, one that they share a very conflictual rapport with, one that is at the same time loved and despised, hence its violence. These unconscious processes are so deeply engrained that they become in a sense normative ways of conceiving sexuality (Khalaf and Gagon 2006)\(^\text{104}\). In what is thought of as a normal and normative sexual act, the man is expected to be an absolute dominant, treating the woman as a mere object for the fulfillment of his desires.\(^\text{105}\) This behavior in fact goes so deep that many women develop a sense of enjoyment out of the very need to submit, and to be used and abused. The very same men and women engaging in such violent

\(^{104}\) Khalaf and Gagnon develop even further the discrepancies between Arab sexual practices and the discourses around them.

\(^{105}\) See First Frédéric Lagrange’s *Islam d’interdits Islam de jouissance* (2008). The author analyzes the discourses that shape Islam as a religion negating bodies and desires from even existing. It is important to note however that in most of his work he refers to popular discourses around Islam and not to the religion itself. to Joseph Massad’s *Desiring Arab* (2007) in which he gives another perspective by analyzing western and orientalist discourses on and around Arab sexualities.
sex would not consider their sexualities as deviant or queer\textsuperscript{106} in any way. For many, that is just how normative-heterosexual sex is supposed to look like.\textsuperscript{107}

Any sex that is not under the strict confines of marriage, and for the strict purpose of reproduction, is considered as “deviant”. In fact, being a heterosexual young woman or man who engages in non-marital sexual intercourse could be seen as “queer”. All of this seems to confirm Michel Foucault’s assertion in \textit{History of Sexuality I}:

Calling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult and more costly. As I in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present. (17)

The absence, the official non-existence of “deviant” sex in “Arabic” is proof of the predominance of identical or at least quite similar mechanisms Foucault was describing in reference to a time that seems ages ago. Their workings, although manifesting differently, follow the same model and base themselves on the same arena: language. There is no sexual act in any country of North Africa and the Middle East that takes place in Standard Arabic. All sex, therefore happens outside of the “holy” institution of “Arabic”\textsuperscript{108}. Its existence becomes therefore irrelevant, secondary, and centrifugal, as if it happened in another space.

\textsuperscript{106} These concepts of “gay” and “queer”, etc. are not applicable in the same way in the so-called “Arab world” as they are in the West. See Joseph Massad (2007)

\textsuperscript{107} Sexual education is also something that is inexistent in most countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Most teenage boys learn about sexuality for their first time by going to a “prostitute” or by having sex (or usually raping and forcing themselves) on female subaltern individuals that they grow up around, like a maid for example. There are indeed amazing statistics provided by \textit{Têlêquel} magazine that claim that 95\% of the men interviewed claimed to have lost their virginity with a prostitute or a maid.

\textsuperscript{108} The word for Arabic that refers to sex is “ينسنة”. Epistemologically speaking it is a word that also means “gender” or “sex” in the biological sense. But when combined with a phrasal verb such as: “أنا أمارس” which translated into I am performing / or /I am in the action of: it would refer to the act of having sex. It is interesting to note however, although there are currently no academic references to this topic, that nobody in North Africa or the Middle East would ever refer to sex using the standard Arabic word.
outside of “Arabic”. Indeed, as Foucault writes: “we demand that sex speak the truth […] and we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness.” (69) If sex in Morocco speaks any truth, it speaks it in Darija.

The following day, Noha and Soukaina head back home. In the cab, they are only speaking Darija. These “transitions” of language happen almost naturally. In fact, the not-so careful ear might not even notice them. Indeed, there is nothing more normal than a luxurious prostitute speaking Khaleeji Arabic in Marrakesh. These transitions between languages seem to affect a very important aspect of the characters’ psychology in Much Loved. The switch between the two languages seem to follow a pattern between what society’s thinks of the subjects and how they view themselves. The Khaleeji Arabic version of themselves translates as what society expects of them to be: prostitutes. The Darija version of themselves that they evacuate however is a more complex picture. It is one that goes beyond their social-label of “prostitutes”. The use of Darija paints a picture of them as being complex emotional beings, ones capable of love as the viewer gets to see in the scene immediately following their cab-ride home. As soon as Soukaina and Noha get off the cab, they are interrupted by the sound of a man calling Soukaina. The man, standing at the corner of the building, does not look very well off. Noha, who is not very happy to see him, calls him a “bum” and asks him to leave them alone. Soukaina however goes to see him. After giving him a kiss on the cheek he asks her where she was, to which she replies: “I was working”. He answers: “This job of yours is killing me. I waited for you the whole
night” After staring at each other’s eyes for a few seconds, the man slowly starts erotically touching Soukaina. He tells her: “I want you!”. This conversation is of course happening in Darija. She answers: “Not now”, a reply that clearly does not make the man happy as he starts getting violent asserting to Soukaina: “I am telling you that I want you!” After a few more seconds of eyeballing each other the camera cuts to a black screen and then very quickly to a scene of the couple having sex.

That scene, which seems to be in public, does not take place in the same area where they were talking. The director’s cut as well as the information that we have on these shots, suggest that they went somewhere else, probably to a less populated location, as having sex in front of Soukaina’s building would have meant an automatic trip to prison. The relevance of this scene is that it shows that this act, although it is a violent one, is not rape. Soukaina’s reaction when she sees the man, how she talks to him and how she decides to follow him to an empty corner of their neighborhood might be interpreted by the viewer that she is consenting to this sexual relationship. The camera pans up while the couple is having sex. The man, obviously behind the woman, seems to be the one in charge. As soon as the action stops, Soukaina turns to face him, and without exchanging a single word for very long seconds, they kiss, and smile to each other. Immediately, Soukaina grabs her purse, takes some money and hands it to the man. Roles have been inverted. Soukaina, who has sex for a living, is giving money to this man out of what can only be interpreted as some type of ‘love’, a strange type of love perhaps, but still love. After all, what does one expect from a prostitute in Morocco? Probably not the hetero-normative fable of meeting

109 Minute 17:37
Prince charming and living happily ever after. As Voltaire wonderfully puts it in his essay “Langues” (1828):

Il n’est aucune langue complete, aucune qui puisse exprimer toutes nos idees et toutes nos sensations; leurs nuances sont trop imperceptibles et trop nombreuses. Personne ne peut faire connaitre precisement le degree du sentiment qu’il eprouve. On est oblige, par exemple, de designer sous le nom general d’amour et de haine, mille amours et mille haines toutes differentes; il en est de meme de nos douleurs et de nos plaisirs. Ainsi toutes les langues sont imparfaites comme nous.

Of interest to this chapter, however, is that Darija seems to be the carrier not only of feelings and emotions, but also and maybe more importantly of complexity and identity. Indeed, let us refer back to Randa, who was the shy girl at the party and who while speaking up to that moment in Khaleeji Arabic, immediately had to switch to Darija when she felt that she was being assaulted by the Saudi man. The conversation that immediately followed that incident, between her and Noha, when the latter took her aside also took place in Darija. Indeed, these women who definitely view themselves as more than just flesh-for-pleasure express their complexities in no-other language than Darija. Khaleeji Arabic does not seem to be the only language that the girls use specifically for “professional” reasons. Indeed, the very first time when one of the girls is heard speaking French happens following the “love-rape” scene. Soukaina who was having an argument with Randa, in Darija, switches to French for the first time when she answers the phone. She very quickly goes from screaming in Darija to talking in an almost erotically suggestive manner in French. Her interlocutor, whose name we learn is Jean-Louis, is probably Belgian, French or Swiss. The viewer understands that Jean-Louis is asking Noha to meet, but the latter says that she is very tired and promises to see him later. Their phone conversations revolve around very menial things: gifts that Jean-Louis brought her from his travels abroad and how, as she
says, “if you brought all these gifts then yes I love you.” French seems to follow the very same psycholinguistic trajectory as Khaleeji Arabic. When “behaving” in it, the women in fact do not exist. In those two languages they are mere “labels” and they can only be what society views them to be, not who they truly are.

A very sharp cut takes the viewer from a medium shot of the phone conversation to a tracking shot behind a woman. The woman is wearing a black djellaba and a pink veil decorated with flowers. We only see her from behind, as she is walking up a small alley in what seems to be the old medina of Marrakesh. A few seconds later, the viewer gets a frontal shot of her and we discover that it is in fact Noha, the same girl who was on the phone a few minutes ago discussing a prostitution deal. She is now wearing a traditional piece of clothing in addition to the veil that covers most of her head. She continues to walk in those small alleys, crossing a few people. The other women are all wearing the same clothing as well as the veil. None of them acknowledge her however. She walks until she gets to a door, in what seems like a very poor and popular neighborhood of Marrakesh. A young man is standing by that door, she greets him with kisses on the cheek, and asks him why he never calls to ask about her. He turns out to be her brother. The man is clearly not very excited to see his sister, to which Noha replies: “It is thanks to me that you can buy your cigarettes, that you wear your clothes and if I were not there you would not be here being lazy all day.” This altercation, which of course happens in Darija, gives the viewer

10 Minute 20: 46
111 Traditional dress of Morocco. The same word refers to two aesthetically different models, one which would be worn by women and another by men.
112 Minute 21: 38
an insight about a different side of Noha. The ruthless prostitute who only thinks about money when speaking French or Khaleeji Arabic is now feeling emotional. She shows clear signs of sadness because her brother never asks about her and never reaches out, and expresses anger when he is talking to her in a way that she interprets as not very respectful. Noha, whose very job entails an absolute lack of respect by her clients seems to be a completely different person\textsuperscript{113}. She is angry, feeling sad, indeed showing a deeper and more complex dimension of herself. Affect, feelings and Darija seem to go hand in hand in this film.

Noha enters the house. The walls are not painted properly, a clear sign of the dire situation in which the family seems to be living. She kisses her sister who seems to be studying on her laptop, then greets her mother and talks to her. She brought them food, she says. The mother accepts the food, without showing a sign of gratitude. She tells Noha that her son was sick, and that she had to spend a lot of money on doctors and medications. Noha grabs some money from her purse and hands it to her mother. The latter counts the money without again showing any sign of gratitude. Noha sits by her sister, who stands up and leaves. A very young child comes to kiss Noha, and hugs her as we understand that he is her son. The kid has blonde hair and lighter features, which, when compared to the dark features of Noha may lead to the conclusion that he is an illegitimate child whose father is a foreigner. She is clearly touched and emotional. She pushes her son away and goes to join her younger sister. In a very tense scene, the sister acts very cold towards her, answering with minimal words, when Noha suddenly grabs her and hugs her for a few

seconds that seem to last for an eternity. The young sister does not resist. The scene cuts to an image of Soukaina, the second main character in this film, who is in a cab. Immediately after that, the camera takes a point of view perspective. The viewer sees the world through Soukaina’s eyes for the first time. She is riding through the city of Marrakesh, paying attention to the little details in the street: children at play, old men socializing with each other. She smiles. When suddenly, the music stops, and the scene changes.

Enter the prostitute. The setting is one of a cozy-party. We recognize the same Saudi men from a previous sequence but the girls this time are fewer: it is a select gathering, one might assume. The men are discussing “politics”. The language of course has switched to Khaleeji Arabic. Soukaina interrupts one of the men to say that it’s “a real shame how you talk of Palestine. These are people who have been ripped of their own lands. We need to help them and not talk about them in such a way!”\(^{114}\) To which one of the men answers “Those Palestinians are ripping the whole world of their chance to make money”. The second Saudi man then orders Soukaina to shut up, claiming that she does not know anything about politics. An altercation between the two follows. When asked about one of their friends (Randa) who was not present at this party Noha explains that she prefers to hang out with European men. A statement to which one of the Saudi men replies: “Oh! So, she likes AIDS, I see”. The other men follow-up by auto-complimenting themselves as being the kings of the world, an opinion to which Noha is very quick to show her disagreement with in a somewhat subtle way, claiming that if they are the kings of the world, Moroccan women must be its queens. In an attempt to win the argument, one of

\(^{114}\) Minute 27: 30
them men claims that at least in Saudi Arabia they have oil, an argument to which Noha quickly replies: “of course, we also have oil in Morocco. We are Morocco’s oil!” She then continues “at a time when your oil is ugly and stinky, our oil wears nice dresses and smells of cologne.” The discussion seems to be settled. The debate is very quickly substituted with dancing as the scene continues, all in Khaleeji Arabic. But, then, Darija comes to put an abrupt end to a night that seemed so promising. Noha, Randa and Soukaina are all sitting in a room. Noha is taking part in her mystical occult rituals. She tells Randa “I will make him go crazy for you”, to which Randa answers “I don’t need your ritual to make him crazy about me”. Noha laughs at her, convinced that her rituals are working.

Noha’s rituals, which, she seems to take very seriously, are mocked by Randa and Soukaina. The scene is interrupted by a phone call, and the camera cuts to the girls on their way to a late-night party. After being disturbed by a civilian police officer that Noha has to bribe, the girls are allowed inside the club. A group of foreigners are speaking French. The first phrase that comes out of one of them is “Ce soir on baise!” (Tonight, we are fucking!), reiterated in “on nique khoya!” which is another way of saying the F-word in French in addition to a Darija word which means “brother”. His way of talking reveals a certain contempt towards the very women that he is attracted to. He only confirms his hideous status when one of the girls introduces herself to him as “Soukaina,” to which he answers: “Souka what?” the name being too “exotic” for his French self. The group of French guys are in ecstasy. They take the girls to the dancefloor. Suddenly, the camera pans to a woman who seems to be a little older than the girls we have been following so

\[115\] It is interesting to note that Noha’s occult ritual practices reverberate with those of many characters in Abdellah Taïa’s novels and film, as we saw in the previous chapter.
far. The woman and Randa keep making eye-contact. A certain attraction between the two is clearly sensed by the viewer, when the woman decides to take the first step and extends her arms towards Randa. The latter accepts the invitation and begins to dance with the woman. The music that is playing is American, very different from the music that the girls usually dance to in those parties with the Saudi men.

The lyrics of the song that is playing in the nightclub when Randa and the mysterious woman start eyeballing each other before starting to dance together are: “tell me when I will meet you baby! [...] You know how I feel now baby, can you be my hero and save me from this loneliness…”\textsuperscript{116} The song continues: “tell me how you feel, tell me how you feel, it is time to feel baby”. The pertinence of this song along with its effect on the viewer is one that we are going to explore in a scene to come. What can be characterized as the defining moment in this scene is that of a queer touch between Randa and the mysterious woman. It happens in the absence of language. Or rather it happens in the absence of spoken language, as silent queer linguistics were definitely at play in that nightclub, if only in the gaze exchanged between the two women. The director cuts to the outside of the club and the girls are all leaving in their regular cab with their regular driver. The latter helps them ditch the French men who after spending some money on them in the club were expecting a different end to their night. The ride is cut short when Noha thinks that she saw her young sister with a random man. She runs but can’t catch her. When coming back to the cab, a transvestite joins them. Noha calls her/him by her/his male name “Oussama,” to which the latter answers that she/he keeps reminding her every time to call

\textsuperscript{116} Minute 35: 16
her “Sherine.” A short conversation follows in which Noha is addressing Sherine in Darija, using feminine pronouns. The latter also refers to herself using the feminine form in Darija. It does not seem to shock anyone, except when the girls decide to poke fun at her when she says that she has decided to become a singer (once again using the feminine form, as Darija is a language, like French or Spanish that includes gender in its morphology). Noha, who now refers to him in the masculine form says that he is going to become a “prostitute” (which is a word in Darija that follows the feminine form), to which Sherine answers: “Oh no my dear! I am not a prostitute; I am a faggot! (Original darija: zamel)\(^{117}\) and a proud one.”\(^{118}\)

Throughout this interaction between Noha and Sherine, her choice of which pronouns to use (masculine or feminine) turns out to be a constant dilemma. On the one hand, Noha seems to accept Sherine and almost consider her a friend. But on the second hand she seems to continuously express dominant hetero-normative and anti-transsexual views by her constant change of pronouns. Noha’s relationship with Sherine might be interpreted as Morocco’s very relationship towards homosexuality: something which, just like the very title of this chapter suggests, is at the same time there, tolerated to a certain point, yet only accepted if it remains in the margins. In this very scene, a transsexual person is sitting with a group of prostitutes at a place to eat. The group’s attention even goes for a

\(^{117}\) The original Darija word that she/he uses is “Zamel” which is a complex term that tends to generally mean a passive gay. It is not a word that holds a positive connotation or a neutral one like the word “gay” does today in some spheres. Zamel is a word that is used as an insult and it is actually rare to find people who identify as such in Morocco. When someone does, it is out of anger or feeling of injustice that one tends to claim the very word that has been used to repress one’s identity and to claim, which seems to be what Sherine is doing in this scene. See Ralph Heyndels in Expressions Maghrebines (2017).

\(^{118}\) Minute 41: 27
second towards a character sitting just a few tables away from them: the same cop who assaulted Noha earlier for a bribe. Yet, homosexuality, just like Sherine, is “allowed” to exist as long as it only manifests itself in these known places/spaces where it is “permissible” to be.

A traumatizing scene unfolds behind the viewer. Sherine tells the girls how she does not get much business anymore, as her foreign clients seem to be interested in the younger crowds. She sees a boy, who looks around ten years old, a street-kid, walking around the restaurant in an attempt to sell some of the random products he holds in a basket. They ask him if he is hungry and they invite him to eat at their table. After a few attempts at interrogating him, he admits that he does “go with foreigners in exchange of 100dh\textsuperscript{119}” Let us be clear that “going with foreigners” does indeed translate to sleeping with them. Pedophilia is yet another issue that is there but that does not exist according to official discourses of the country. It is very courageous from Nabil Ayouch to tackle such a thorny subject, one that is almost never portrayed in any sort of cultural production in Morocco. Yet, this film’s reception has been focused on one thing: Moroccan female prostitutes, while maybe what it really was is that the censorship had nothing to deal with the “Moroccan woman” or even prostitution per-se but all the other issues that this film has tackled. The fact that the debate, the insults, the violence were all directed towards Loubna Abidar (the lead actress, who plays Noha) could be viewed as an attempt to occult the several other real issues addressed by the film. The “Moroccan woman,” if one is to look at the example of Noha in the film, is one who supports her family, including a whole

\textsuperscript{119} Approximately 10 dollars.
household where she does not even live. She seems to sponsor her sister’s studies, her brothers’ addiction to tobacco and hash, his unemployment, her mother and her son. So maybe it was not really the Moroccan woman who was the problem in this film. Maybe it is something else. Maybe it is the realistic representation of Moroccan police as corrupt, or the portrayal of homosexuality and transsexuality as half-tolerated “practices”, or even more importantly the focusing on the extremely taboo topic of pedophilia. All the latter are actually social realities represented in the film that most, if not all Moroccans know to be true. In that sense, this film is both a discursive and poetic text that visualizes a discourse that a majority of Moroccan society does precisely not want to see. Ayouch’s movie creates a discursive and poetic space for these controversial issues that the Moroccan power structure and its audience “under influence” does not want to be discussed at all.

In minute 54:00 of the film, Noha is having sex with an older French man, as the viewer understands that it is the same guy from the previous French phone conversation scene. The sex seems to be intense, yet void of any feelings. It is, however, very different from the sex scenes portrayed before, with either the Saudi man or between Soukaina and her “lover”. Sex in French, with the French, is part of a sensual sequence underlined by classical piano music which stands as a very sharp contrast to the more violent portrayal of sex in Khaleeji Arabic, or in Darija, and that divergence is only made clear when the director cuts to a small dark alley in the old medina of Marrakesh. A woman appears once again wearing the veil and traditional Moroccan clothing, and she is walking at a fast pace,

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while the piano music from the sex scene continues, when only interrupted by the woman’s knocks at a door. The viewer then sees that it is again Noha. Her mother opens and in what turns out to be a very short conversation the latter asks her to “never come back to this house”: the neighbors are all talking about you, the mother says; they all know what you do for a living. Noha answer: “Who’s your daughter? Is it me or the neighbors, mom?” The mother, firmly reiterates her orders. Noha abruptly leaves the house in the middle of the night, clearly emotionally drained. She cries.

The director cuts to a scene of Randa walking down a corridor. She stops by room 232. Before she even knows, the door opens. It is a woman. The same woman from that night in the club. The woman says “Welcome” in Darija. She invites her in. They hold hands, sit on the couch and exchange a few words before the older woman engages in soft but erotic touching. Randa, who clearly enjoys it, seems to be thorn between her enjoyment and a little sense of fear. Which fear is it though? Is it that of the first sexual experience? That of exploring her sexuality, confirming what she already felt; that she is a lesbian? A feeling that the older woman notices when she asks Randa: “Is it your first time?”121, to which Randa answer: “Yes, it is my first time”. The woman is almost surprised by Randa’s answer. She looks at her before continuing to kiss her erotically. Randa, whom the viewer knows to be a “prostitute” is claiming that this experience is her “first” one. It is to be interpreted as meaning her “first” time with a woman, but also her first “real” sexual relationship, as by giving such an answer she subtly implies that whatever she was doing as a “job” was not something she considered to be “sex”. The nuances of the words, in

121 Minute 58:30
Darija, that they chose lead to the understanding that this experience is going to be the first one where she is engaging in out of pure attraction to another person, rather than having a sole interest in a monetary transaction. This is made even more salient by Randa’s reaction when the woman remembers and goes towards her purse, takes out a sum of money and puts it on the counter, declaring: “Didn’t want to forget that! It is very important!” a statement to which Randa responds: “No! It is actually not important at all”, although the director cuts without showing us if Randa took the money or not. She is very clearly interested in this relationship with this other person, who happens to be a woman, out of emotional and/or physical attraction as she clearly does not see that as just ‘another day at the job’. This scene comes to complete the previously analyzed one at the nightclub. It was the first time that Randa and this woman saw each other. They danced to a song that says “show me what it means to feel” and here they are, a few days after their first queer touch, when they first held hands, engaging in a queer sexual and romantic act. One that took place in no other language than Darija.

A few scenes later, we meet again with Soukaina who is with her Saudi client, the same one who was reading those “Arabic” poems to her. The couple is shot by the camera while lying next to one another in bed. The man is once again not able to have an erection; he suggests that maybe watching porn on his laptop would help. He does that, but it is not of much help. He gets frustrated and leaves the bed. Soukaina, who feels bad for him takes his laptop and without doing much research she sees a folder that attracts her attention. The folder is entitled in Arabic script “Pictures of Men”. She clicks on it, only to discover what she at that point already knew: gay pornographic pictures. When the man comes back she
tries to confront him about his orientation, and the latter denies to be gay\textsuperscript{122}. When Soukaina pushes her questioning a little further she becomes the victim of a brutal attack from the Saudi man, who beats her. She ends up in the hospital, joined by all her friends. The girls are all there, as is the cab driver, in addition to Soukaina’s lover, and Sherine, the transsexual. While still wearing her make-up, Sherine appears to have lost her wig. Everyone who looks at her would know that she is a transsexual. Yet, as already argued, as long as transsexuality and homosexuality, are contained to certain spheres and domains they are tolerated, as is proof in this scene. The doctor stares at Sherine, once or twice, but we cannot tell if it is out of homophobic behavior or attraction to her. This unplanned reunion in the hospital is emphasized by the camera’s long shots of the group. It is a queer family reunion, one where all these people who have been abandoned by society, by their own families, by their own friends, are there, and against all odds, to support one another.

Toward the end of the movie, Noha is taken by the police when leaving a nightclub. The policeman, the very same one whom she bribed before and who was sitting in the same restaurant in the previously analyzed sequence, informs her that the Saudi men have filed a declaration against her and the other women. She tries to explain to him that one of the man violently assaulted her friend. After she signed a deposition the policeman asks a colleague of his to lock the door from the outside. As soon as she realizes that Noha lets him know that she does not want to have sex with him. She begs him, but the policeman forces himself on her. She cries. The rape scene is very brutal but its violence only gets even more complicated when, just a few minutes after, the police officer invites Noha to

\textsuperscript{122} Once again one should refer to that term when applied to this region with epistemological caution. See Joseph Massad (2007) and the introduction to Jean Zaganiaris’ \textit{Queer Maroc} (2014)
eat outside. They are having dinner, like a couple, and he even keeps asking her to eat as if he “worries” about her well-being. This apparently strange scene refers to the particular relationship to sex that many men seem to have in Morocco. The final scene of the film portrays the girls on a beach, accompanied by their cab driver, Saed. They had to flee Marrakesh, and go to the coastal city of Agadir to escape from the legal repercussions that they were facing due to the Saudi men’s unjust lawsuit against them. This sequence contains many moments of long silences as if this queer family is trying to make out of this “escape” a “new start”. Their loneliness is visible in this situation and in this city where they do not know anyone, yet by the very virtue of being “unknown” they are in a sense “free”. This is musically translated in the Arabic song that Nabil Ayouch ends the film with and which alludes to how a certain type of women are always alone, even while spending all their nights with company. But this conclusion of Ayouch’s film is also pointing to a metaphorical queer family reunion: one in which the characters are less surrounded but also less lonesome.

**A Ruthless Life; a Dignified Death: Ali Zaoua**

Let us now turn to Ayouch’s “first” movie *Ali Zaoua* (1999). Although he directed other movies prior to this one the latter is the first one that bears his signature, in the sense that the thematic of the subaltern which is central to his cinematography was born with *Ali Zaoua*. This film, very similarly to *Much Loved*, was the cause of much heated debate. It

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123 Saed’s character, played by Moroccan actor Abdellah Didane, is a very interesting personification of some subalterns’ ability to achieve an open-mindedness, a lack of judgment, an empathy that is very rare to find in the societies at hand. He is the women’s official cab driver, but also their protector when they need him. He never looks at them sexually, never judges them, and looks at them as human beings, respects them and their sensibilities which at the end of the day is all these girls are asking for. He is a very silent character but one whose presence is quite important in the film. In fact, it could be argued that Saed actually metaphorically represents the film’s director: Nabil Ayouch.
was also, when it came out in 1999, a revolutionary piece. It tackled taboos, used language and filmed issues, that had never been engaged with in Moroccan cinema before.

The main difference between the reception of *Much Loved*, compared to *Ali Zaoua*, is that although the former was very polemical and ground-breaking in its own way, it generated massive discussion and debate. *Much Loved* on the other hand, marked the Moroccan collective consciousness but, unfortunately, any debate or discussion around the film quickly reached a dead end. Two type of people with completely different and even contradictory versions of reality faced each other. The first group, which is also a crashing majority, believe that the decision to censor the film was good because Moroccan moral values do not allow for showing “such things” on the screen.

Any communication model is based on a few primary concepts that are universal. A message is encoded by a sender, the message which exists in context is transferred through a channel to a “receiver” who must decode first the context and then the message. The impossibility to debate and discuss *Much Loved* is therefore related to an inability to produce meaningful communication. One group, consciously or unconsciously believes that film in particular, and art in general are there to represent a certain idea of “reality”. It asserts that by doing so, a filmmaker, through his work, sheds light on certain issues, and by the very act of shedding light on them, she/he brings them to the discursive domain, which means bringing them into existence.
The impossibility to communicate emanates therefore from issues of access to cultural and symbolic capital in Bourdieu’s terminology,\textsuperscript{124} which translate into what could be called a “poverty of philosophy”. Morocco is after all a developing country. It is one where a lot of people are suffering to make it in the middle class\textsuperscript{125} and a huge number is living in poverty. Unfortunately, but also realistically, this poverty of “means” more often than not corresponds to a poverty of philosophy, as the scarcity of financial resources almost automatically leads to a lack of intellectual tools and opportunities, which leads to an inability to decipher certain messages and contexts. Ultimately, when one adds to the purely socio-economic determinations of this poverty of philosophy the traditionalist, non-interpretative and politically manipulated religious dimension\textsuperscript{126}, one is left with facing an impossibility of communication and, therefore, of discussion and debate.

Nabil Ayouch is conscious of the constant struggle of two opposite and contradictory world views. He declares, as quoted in \textit{Ten Arab Filmmakers: political dissent and social critique}, that he is “experiencing a strong sense of split identity between himself and his cultural homeland.” (216) In fact, that “sense of split identity” is not between himself and his cultural homeland, but between one group, which happens to be currently the majoritarian one in the country, and a more “enlightened” segment of society


\textsuperscript{125} Note that the very concept of middle class in Morocco is very different from that of the U.S. See “The Moroccan Middle Class from Yesterday to Today”. https://www.omicsonline.org/open-access/the-moroccan-middle-class-from-yesterday-to-today-definition-and-evolving-2151-6219-1000153.php?aid=54645

that also happens to be a silent minority.\textsuperscript{127} What should be underlined is that such “enlightenment” is not to be understood from an elitist perspective. In fact, one could state that the prostitutes in \textit{Much Loved} and the street-kids from \textit{Ali Zaoua} are in a sense more “enlightened” than the overwhelming majority of Moroccan society (including the very minister and government spokesman who decided to ban \textit{Much Loved}), as such “enlightenment” is not to be understood in traditional “educational” terms.

The very children who “act” in \textit{Ali Zaoua} are/were not professional or amateur actors but rather “real” street-kids\textsuperscript{128} who were casted by Nabil Ayouch with the help of a local association that works with them in the city of Casablanca.\textsuperscript{129} Yet, these kids who are truly in a dire social situation and are deprived of any type of institutional education show an amazing ability in dealing with crucial issues of Moroccan society.\textsuperscript{130} At first glance, one could think that such assertion complicates the claim about the poverty of philosophy, but it actually does not contradict such a statement. By the very virtue of being non-institutionalized, and of living in the very crude reality in which they do, these youngsters seem to have gained a particular and critical form of intelligence that is in a

\textsuperscript{127} See Mohamed Chtatou’s article “Morocco’s Silent Cultural Revolution” http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/moroccos-silent-cultural-revolution_38562

\textsuperscript{128} In Taïa’s film \textit{Salvation Army}, which is also studied in this dissertation, the very young Abdellah is played by a teenager who is not a professional or amateur actor either.

\textsuperscript{129} With the exception of the actor who plays the role of “Dib”, Saïd Taghmaoui who is an internationally acclaimed actor. But even in his case, he does not have a “lead” role as the main characters of the story are the three street-kids who are trying to escape from Dib’s gang, abuse and hold.

\textsuperscript{130} Moroccan writer Abdelhak Serhane has beautifully represented such “smart” street kids in his novel \textit{Les enfants des rues étroites} (2002). Vincent Ohl, Arnaud Childeric and Jeanne Truong have dedicated a photography book to Moroccan street-kids (\textit{Maroc, enfants des rues}, 2006 [Paris, Marval]). Ayouch’s film is of course part of an inter-discursive and trans-national literary, filmic and photographic genre (see Roy Armes, \textit{New Voices in Arab Cinema} (2015), p. 129) [Indiana UP]. But it is also dealing with the specific realities of Morocco, as Abdellah Taïa does in some of his novels, particularly in the first segment of \textit{Une mélancolie arabe} (2008).
way totally lacking from the majoritarian discourse. They are able to address issues that were and still are taboo and often extremely invisible in mainstream Moroccan cinema and discourse, such as rape, prostitution, homosexuality and the social-hypocrisy camouflaging them.\footnote{This tropism of social hypocrisy is a constant in Ayouch’s cinema. See Valerie Orlando, \textit{Screening in Morocco. Contemporary Film in a Changing Society} on another of the director’s films, \textit{Whatever Lola Wants} (2011, pp. 40-45). On this thematic in \textit{Much Loved}, see: Cyrielle Campo in \textit{Miroir / Miroirs} 6, 2016}

The reception of both \textit{Ali Zaoua} and \textit{Much Loved}, including when taking into account their differences, can also be conceived as a revealing symptom of the socio-linguistic Moroccan landscape. The proponents of what is here named Phantom Arabic represent also the social movement that supported the censorship of \textit{Much Loved}. Indeed, Phantom Arabic, by virtue of being something that is by definition always already nowhere, is present in its very absence as the linguistic knowledge that is missing, but that one thinks having. Such structural deficiency is embodied by a lack of symbolic and cultural capital which, in turn, transforms itself into an inability to see through issues of identity and sexuality politics. At first, when one is actually struggling \textit{for bread alone}, one does not have the luxury to “think”. Such apparent constraints could lead to a misunderstanding of the problematic at stake here.

One could argue that the reference to Mohamed Choukri’s novel would mean that access to symbolic capital is not based on financial security, stability, and even power. After all, Choukri is someone who never went to school, who grew up in staggering poverty, yet ended up being not only a great artistic and intellectual figure, but also producing what might be argued as the greatest work of Moroccan literature. But Choukri
actually shares more with Nabil Ayouch’s subaltern characters than with the silent majority of Morocco. His social marginality, which is very reminiscent of that of Jean Genet,\textsuperscript{132} has not been “institutionalized”.\textsuperscript{133} After all, the schooling system is one of the main ideological state apparatuses and its workings are ones that are deeply related to the maintenance of social and cultural legitimacy. Choukri, is therefore not to be viewed as an example for the Moroccan majority at all. He is actually a representative of the crushed subalternity that \textit{Ali Zaoua, Much Loved} and as we will see also \textit{Horses of God} all represent. As a matter of sociological process, Choukri acceded by error to symbolic capital. As Sara Ahmed argues in \textit{The Cultural Politics of Emotion} (2004), “the reproduction of life itself, where life is conflated with a social idea is represented as threatened by the existence of others: (…) queers, other others” (144). In that sense Choukri, is part of the queers of Moroccan society whose existence is considered as threatening to the dominant ideological world-view. The situation of Choukri is as such emblematic of an ensemble of isotopes that are part of both the thematic content and the reception of Ayouch’s films. The author is to be recognized as the greatest writer of Moroccan post-colonial literature, but precisely because of the “content of truth” about (and against) Moroccan society his work deploys, he is not, up to nowadays, really “assimilated” (nor actually “assimilable”) by the majority of his compatriots who are subjected to the dominant ideology of their country. The socially desperate condition, but also the ethical, cultural, and linguistic irreducible resilience, of the Moroccan subaltern

\begin{footnotes}
\item[133] The term is here used in Bourdieu’s sense. See Jacques Dubois, \textit{L’institution de la littérature}, \textit{Introduction à une sociologie}. Bruxelles: Nathan/Labor, 1978
\end{footnotes}
people that Choukri depicts in a variety of queerly ways (and which have often been
compared with Genet’s and have inspired the novels of Taïa but also, undoubtedly,
the cinematography of Ayouch), are supposed to be at the margins of Moroccan society,
but the writer brings them at its forgotten and often hidden center. Moreover, the socio-
linguistic syndrome of Moroccan society does play a significant role in that “non-
assimilation” process as this subalternity drawn to the center (of the writing, and in
Ayouch’s case, the filming) expresses itself in neither Phantom Arabic nor in French but
in the linguistic reality that those ideologies and practices of language are precisely
repressing: Moroccan Darija.

Phantom Arabic is also used here as a metaphor for the silent (but oppressive)
majority. It installs a fear of the other, a fear of the queer to the point that the very sight of
the latter on a screen of cinema is seen as the ultimate threat. If Phantom Arabic as language
ideology is a significant component of the hegemonic Moroccan system of oppression,
what does Dislocated French refer to in this very perspective? As it is the class language
of the other side of Morocco the intellectuals, the journalists, the educated-people, etc.

134 "As I read Choukri's notes, I saw and heard Jean Genet as clearly as if I had been watching a film of
him. To achieve such precision simply by reporting what happened and what was said, one must have a
rare clarity of vision."—William Burroughs, from the introduction to Genet in Tangier. The reference to
cinema is of utmost significance here, as Burroughs referring to a film that would be made by Genet opens
a cinematographic space which is precisely the one Ayouch’s work occupies.

135 Taïa, in Salvation Army, declares that as a young boy the reading of Choukri’s book made him entering
literature.

136 Choukri’s book is written in a complex form of literary Arabic mixed with dialogues in Darija. The
English translation by Paul Bowles has been put into question by Nirvana Tanoukhi (Rewriting Political
Commitment for an International Canon: Paul Bowles For Bread Alone as Translation of Mohamed
Choukri Al-Khubz Al-Hafi, in Research in African Literatures Volume 34, Number 2, Summer 2003). Said
Graiouid has positioned the novel within the overall context of the Arabic-Darija tension in post-colonial
Morocco (“We Have Not Buried the Simple Past: The Public Sphere and Post-Colonial Literature in
those who, in short, have access to cultural, linguistic and hence to symbolic capital?

French in Morocco is indeed the ultimate sign and symbol of social status. Access to it comes with an automatic privilege, which means that in Morocco access to cultural capital is only available in a foreign language. Such access leads to the possibility of encountering different world-views, different ways of being and existing in the world. In and through French, one could for instance read Foucault about how power works in society, how discourses shape reality, etc. All these are topics that, although they of course exist in works written in “Arabic”, are simply inaccessible to the vast majority of people in Morocco. The production and reproduction of the status-quo is indeed an automatic affair under Phantom Arabic. It is a mythical presence that prevents people from “knowing”, in the most Foucauldian sense of the term. “Knowing” cannot happen in Phantom Arabic. “Knowing” is therefore socially transferred to French, which is itself a dis-located one, as it is transferred from France and imposed on Moroccan society. This results in the fact that the people who “know” simply cannot communicate with those who “don’t” as they are speaking completely different and incompatible languages.

In the case of Ali Zaoua, the ability that the film had to create a debate, to raise awareness about issues and to be the source of a lot of discourses of change was related to its distribution and circulation, which were not prohibited. Thanks to the non-censorship of the film, Ali Zaoua was actually screened in most cinemas across the country, allowing for it to be seen by but restricted to people who go to the movies, which in Morocco is a very limited segment of the population. This specific sub-group of Moroccan society is precisely the one that functions in Dislocated French. By contrast, the audience of the banned Much Loved, thanks to its forbidden internet viewing, consisted of a “multitude”,


however not in Hardt and Negri’s meaning of “innumerable internal differences” (2004). Such “multitude” in this case was made out of mainly two groups: the majority, constituted by a hegemonic collective worshiping conformism, and a minority, composed of numerous internal differences and capable of critical debate and of tackling the issues that are raised in both the films discussed here.

*Ali Zaoua*, opens with a kid’s voice. During the title sequence, we continue to hear about a dream that portrays the kid as a captain of a small boat who rides the waves to meet the woman who is waiting for him. She joins his boat, he prevents her from falling, and they ride together as fast as the winds take them. The viewer hears a woman’s voice who inquires: “And then?”137, to which the young man’s voice replies: “That’s it, then I woke up from my sleep”. The woman, after a short silence, asks about his age. “Fifteen” he replies. We also learn that his name is Ali. The woman continues to interrogate the kid when the opening sequence of the film fades to black after showing its title and cuts to the first images of the movie.

These images disrupt cinematic tradition. First, some of the characters showcased on the screen break one of the silent rules of cinema as they look straight to the camera. Second, we can see a boom microphone hanging on the bottom of the screen. The peculiarity is that these microphones are normally on top of the actors and definitely outside of the frame. Third, the main character in this shot, Ali, is at the center of the image, surrounded by a huge number of men his age and others who look older than him. His position on the screen also parts from cinematographic tradition. In addition, even the

137 Minute 01:18
colors, along with the reaction of the men around Ali, seem strange from a cinematic perspective. Finally, the very voice of the woman who was interviewing Ali is heard saying: “Zoom in on him!” in French. The language used so far throughout that whole opening scene was Darija. This is one of the first and only times we are going to hear the presence of French in this film. Indeed, immediately after saying “zoom in on him” the camera starts to following Ali. The latter, who has not been looking at the camera during this entire sequence, is now staring directly to the lens. His gaze is very deep and powerful. It literally transcends the camera to pierce the viewer, Ali is forcing his presence to be noticed.

The camera zooms in slowly but steadily on the kid until we can only see him. The woman’s voice says, again in French: “That’s it, Cut!”, as the image follows the woman’s orders, and cuts to a wide shot of four young kids running and playing soccer with what seems to be a “can” instead of a ball. Although obviously in a visible dire situation they do emit a certain strange feeling of happiness. In this cinematically unorthodox opening of the film Ayouch does in fact raise consciousness to the very presence of the camera in order to give a sense to the viewer that the movie is one that is not merely about an abstract theme, but rather a very crude and tangible reality. By opening the film in the way he does, the director sheds the light on the capacity of cinema to take on issues that are part of a reality that the viewer is to be confronted with. By resorting to documentary style, where the rules of fictional cinema are broken. Ayouch places himself in the realm of consciously critical cinema.

The camera follows the children as they play with their improvised soccer ball. They reach what seems to be an abandoned building field, very dirty, full of trash, yet one
that gives, in a strange way, a sense of being “home”. The children look almost happy, which is indeed very striking as one would expect that behind such misery, happiness simply evaporates. Yet, Ayouch does indeed do a wonderful job in reminding us that these children are children, like any others. They dream, laugh, and cry. They are kids acting like kids. The bizarre joy of the moment is suddenly put to a stop with a scream. While one of the kids was celebrating a goal that he scored against his friend they hear a voice screaming: “Life!!”138. Seconds of silence follow when the kids and thus the viewers hear a reply to what seems like a slogan: “is ruthless” echoes the answer of at least a couple dozen voices. *Life is ruthless*, as the viewer comes to understand, serves as the gang’s moto. They are coming there to persuade the four kids who had tried to escape their gang affiliation to come back. Immediately after screaming their moto, a big number of street kids climb up the wall that were so far protecting Ali and his three friends. Enter Dib, the oldest one of the gang and also their leader.

Dib, performed by internationally acclaimed actor Said Taghmaoui, is a very interesting character in *Ali Zaoua*. He is deaf, from what the viewer might understand, as the result of a previous violent street fight. He is however very feared by the other street kids, be it the ones who form his gang, or the group of four that we have been following throughout the opening scene of the film. He does not “speak”, yet his presence is powerful on Ali and the other three others who were trying to escape their life under his hold.

As soon as the scream “Life is ruthless” resonates, Ali and his friends run for shelter, just seconds before stones start pouring on them. After a few seconds, that seem

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138 In Darija of course, as are all the quotes from the films in this chapter, unless specified otherwise.
like minutes to the boys, the stone throwing stops. The other gang members climb the walls surrounding the area where the kids were sheltering and begin hitting the walls with big stones, making what sounds like war music. That whole performance was in fact in preparation for Dib’s first entry in front of the camera. He actually enters very slowly and confidently, looks at Ali and his friends for a few seconds and immediately turns to the child standing next to him, staring at him. The child’ immediate reaction is to order Ali and company to go back with them. Ali responds negatively to that request, and then addresses Dib directly saying: “Dib!! We are not going back”. Dib walks closer to Ali and emits a few sounds that the viewer cannot understand as if in a trial to pressure Ali furthermore. Some of the kids who are still sitting on the wall surrounding that area start bullying Ali, making references to what we understand now was his televised interview, which we saw in the opening scene of the film. They also make allusions to Ali’s mother, who happens to be prostitute\textsuperscript{139}, as the viewer understands from the street-kids’ comments. The kids start laughing at Ali, who reacts by trying to shoot the stone that he was still holding in his hand by that time at one of the kids insulting his mother. Before he is able to do so, Ali is hit by a huge rock very violently on the head. He falls, dead.

The child who gives his name to the film, \textit{Ali Zaoua}, dies in the very beginning of the film. His three friends, Kwita, Omar and Boubker work together to organize a proper burial for him who they all held at high regard. He seems to have been the oldest one of

\textsuperscript{139} This is again a tropism we find in Taïa’s work, where in both \textit{Le jour du roi} and \textit{Infideles} the young character representing the writer has a mother who is a prostitute (See Ralph Heyndels “La prostitution sur la scene de l’écriture: Abdellah Taïa” in Revue Analyses vol. 11, n° 3, automne 2016). This is also to be encountered in Ayouch’s \textit{God’s Horses}. On can detect here what is a “realistically” represented thematic conjunction between Ayouch’s and Taïa’s work.
the four, and seems to have always acted as a care-given and protector for them. As the
viewer could notice at the arrival of Dib and his gang, Ali immediately pushes Kwita
behind him. The relationship between the two is one that actually continues after Ali’s
death, as Kwita is the one who takes the lead in the efforts to organize a proper burial for
Ali. They throw his body in a cave at the port where he used to always go. Ali’s dream was
to become a captain. He was infatuated by the ocean, always talking about going to his
island, where he could finally be free. The kids very quickly learn that they need money to
bury their friend. They engage in all types of activities, legal as well as less-legal ones, in
order to collect the cash necessary for their endeavor.

At Kwita’s initiative they decide to find Ali’s mother and inform her of her son’s
death. They find her at her usual cabaret, where after having picked up a client she takes
him to her apartment. The kids follow her to the building she lives in, and sit on the stairs
while waiting for her to be done with the client. During this time, Boubker, who is the
youngest one, goes out of the building and see another street-kid selling cigarettes whom
he recognizes. He joins him and calls him by his name. The latter responds “Leave me
alone! My name is not Nourdine”. Boubker’s gaze goes to words written in Arabic script,
marked in red paint on the little box that serves as his cigarette retail. The sight of those
words immediately makes Boubker laugh. He says to the other kid: “You did not learn
anything at your school. You went in empty, you got out empty.” The words marked on
the little kid’s box are: “At Winston’s” following the French model of calling certain stores
“Chez” followed by the first or last name of the owner. The peculiarity of the situation, and
what makes Boubker laugh is twofold. First, his friend is calling himself “Winston”, in
reference to a cigarette brand. Second, his very writing of Winston in Arabic script is done is such a clumsy way and is something that would not look natural to anyone.

This scene is worthy of analysis in many regards. The fact that even a street-kid who is in a clearly underclass situation and who is living a life that no child should have to live, is still under the mythical ideological hold of Phantom Arabic is indeed extremely symptomatic. Nourdine felt that in order to give his little box the resemblance of a “store” he had to give it a name. The name that he chose for it is logical according to the product that he sells. But he did not copy whatever is written on the cigarette packet “Winston” in Latin letters. He chose to be creative and to rename himself, as well as his store “Winston” while trying to spell that word in the Arabic script. He then followed a phonological model to write it. But of course, as Boubker’s reaction proves, the end result did not look natural at all. It is however a paradoxically unrealistic scene and a rare moment where Ayouch’s film includes what could be seen as a non-linguistically realist instance. To understand this one must put into question the ideologically false idea that kids born in Morocco, or in most countries in North Africa and the Middle East, learn Arabic when they are born. Their language, their mother-tongue, is one that is actually not “standardized”. Not until the age of 6 or 7 would the kids join the schooling system and would learn “Arabic”, and the training in the Arabic script is therefore something that only happens with schooling. It is also something that takes a little while to learn. In the film, we do not have a clear statement on Boubker’s age, but he is the youngest one in the group and looks as if he must be around 7 or 8 years old. We also know from the movie that he is a street-kid, spending his days trying to collect minimal amounts of money to survive and to feed his addiction to glue. His ability to read “Arabic” is therefore one that is not very realistic.
Moreover, it is however important to note that Boubker never tries to “read” out loud what is written on the cigarette-seller’s box, while his reaction to it proves that he understands it. But what is truly realistic however is Boubker’s mention about schooling. The other kid is only able to “write” although in a clumsy way in “Arabic” script because he has been to school. We also understand that he “left” school from Boubker’s comment when he declares “You got in empty, you got out empty”, which the viewer can understand as a hint to the fact that the boy is a dropout. This linguistic-realism “mistake” is one that could perhaps be explained in the following way. The screenplay of the film was co-scripted by Ayouch and a French screenwriter by the name of Nathalie Saugeon. The Darija adaptation of the movie is one that was done by Youssef Fadel (African Filmmaking 151). It is therefore safe to assume that the original screenplay was written in French, which brings up issues of translation that we are going to be dealing with in the next section of this chapter.

The two kids, who stayed inside the building while Boubker was talking to the cigarette seller, are attracted by the sounds emanating from Ali’s mother’s apartment. They try to have a look at what is going on through the keyhole. Omar catches a few glimpses of the woman on top of the man. They have never seen sex before. They are nervously laughing, which attracts the attention of the client, who runs to open the door and leave. Ali’s mother is standing by the door looking at Omar. The young kid is scared and asks her very politely to forgive him, mentioning her name. The woman replies: “You even know my name?” to which Omar answers that he is Ali’s friend. At that time, the lights in the

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140 French scenarist and playwright who worked with Nabil Ayouch on Ali Zaoua as well as his other film Whatever Lola Wants.
building go on, and the woman grabs Omar inside before he is noticed by the neighbors. She asks him many questions about Ali. She even shows him the room that she decorated and prepared for him. She insists on the big Radio and CD player station that she bought for him. “He won’t hear anything” she says. “He has everything he will ever need here” she continues. Omar who was there to bring the sad news of Ali’s death to his mother is unable to speak, while he is taken in a mix of sexual tension and attraction towards Ali’s mother.

The mythical presence of Phantom Arabic reappears in a following scene. As part of their effort to raise money to bury Ali, the kids are trying to sell random products in a busy red-light intersection. They approach different drivers trying to get their attention to buy something from them or just charitably give them a coin. When talking to a gentleman, Boubker’s attention immediately goes to a small book that he has on the dashboard. The book’s cover page is written in Arabic script. To be exact it is written in the Ottoman Arabic script which generally refers to a religious work. The word on top of the book is “Allah”, which confirms that it is a book about religion. The two words on the bottom of the page are not easily legible. Boubker asks the driver to buy him a necklace in exchange of the small book. The driver looks surprised that this street-kid is interested in a religious book written in Arabic but quickly decides to offer Boubker the book in question, before the light turns green and the driver goes on his way. The camera follows Boubker who is running in the middle of traffic screaming in happiness.

The infatuation of Boubker with Arabic is a kind of filmic “textual” proof of the mythical power that Phantom Arabic seems to have, even on the most subaltern subjects in Morocco. Boubker is a kid who lives outside of all institutions; he is not educated, he does
not have a family, he does not go to the mosque, he does not have access to media, nor is he a member of a trade union and last but not least he does not even live under the realm of the law. But he is the “living proof” that even someone who escapes all these agencies of ideological control from the state finds himself within the influence of Phantom Arabic.

We then understand the reasons behind Boubker’s acquisition of that book. He snatches 100dh (equivalent to 10$) from Kwita and asks him to be the one to keep the money that they are collecting for Ali’s burial. Kwita starts chasing him, in a playful manner, to get the money, and then asks Boubker if he will personally help him to bury Ali. While the former responds by promising to help, he puts his hand on his back pocket, brings out the book and says: “I swear I can even read on him, like a fqih”\(^{141}\). “Arabic” is thus always already there, even when it is expected the least, and the same could be said about religion. These kids who never went through a traditional religious education still find themselves under the grasp and hold of that religion.\(^{142}\)

Once back to the abandoned field that they call home, Omar, Kwita and Boubker are happy to see other kids playing soccer. Boubker very quickly joins them, and he is even impressed by seeing a real soccer ball. The candid happiness of the moment quickly comes to an end when they hear the scream: “Life is ruthless”\(^{143}\). Dib’s gang quickly outnumber

\(^{141}\) It is customary in Morocco to read parts of the Quran on someone’s grave after she/he was buried. Also, note that Fqih is an authority figure in the Islamic religion in Morocco and is someone who is believed to be knowledgeable about religious matters.

\(^{142}\) This is an aspect that is going to be very important when looking at Ayouch’s next film that this dissertation is going to study: Horses of God.

\(^{143}\) Note that many critics have translated the original Darija “El 7ayat M9owda” to life is shit. But I personally do not think that is the best translation of the word M9owda in this phrase. It is a word that has several meanings depending on its context. But Life is shit does not offer the closest meaning possible to what that slogan means in the film in my opinion. Hence my decision to offer my own translation.
the kids playing soccer. Some of them attack Omar, while Kwita decides to run for his safety and abandon his friends. The one who gets the worse treatment is the young Boubker. The latter, who at that time was sitting in an abandoned bus playing driver, is joined by Dib who silently rapes him. The rape scene is not filmed and is not shown in the film. It is one that the viewer understands. What confirms it even further is the following scene.

Boubker and Omar are laying on the ground, inhaling their favorite drug. They start hallucinating and imagining voices and sounds. But before they got to that moment, Boubker tells of his unfortunate experience with Dib. He says: “Why did he do that to me? I did not do anything to him? He thinks I got hurt? I swear I did not feel pain. All I felt was an urge to throw-up”, to which Omar responds: “You should have thrown up on him then!” Boubker answers: “And what about Kwita’s money? That would have given up the fact that I was hiding the money in my mouth. I almost swallowed it. But I didn’t, so that Kwita can’t say anymore that I don’t know how to safeguard money.” This scene does indeed confirm the silent/invisible rape that took place. The very silence and invisibility of that rape is a filmic allegory of how Moroccan society deals with such realities. On the one hand, Ayouch avoided filming a scene which would have probably made his film banned or censored, and by doing just that he points to the repressive system that is both responsible of such social condition and forbidding its representation. On the other hand, the non-representation of such an act is in itself a symbol of what so many kids, as well as young women, go through in a country that still treats the victim as a partner in the very crime that they were the victims of. Intermales rape is also present in Horses of God, as it is at the center of the first part of Taïa’s Une mélancolie arabe. It of course raises a series
of questions related to unconscious homosexual practices as its explanation by the “homosexuality by default” thesis is far from being conceptually satisfying. In addition, it is not dealing with by the law in Morocco, which concerns only the rape of a woman by a man. It is in itself something which is totally silenced, which is precisely a situation Ayouch denounces cinematographically in not representing it in this film. The conversation between Boubker and Omar breaks that silence as it is filmed and visible / audible on screen. In addition to this, through Omar’s comment, attention is brought to the victim of the rape, Boubker, which is not actually the case in the way the law in Morocco is conceived, as it condemns the “immorality” of the act, not the physical and mental damage produced on the person subjected to it.

Dib’s very character is one that could be viewed as a metaphorical one in the sense that his constant attempts to bring back the kids who escape his hold is one that can be put into homological parallel to the way so called Arabic “purists” want to maintain their hegemony on peripheral national and/or regional languages that pull away from the center. The fact that Dib is deaf and does not speak is actually significant in its relation to the Phantom Arabic symbolism. His de facto silence, which of course emanates from a purely physical inability to talk, somehow translates into the repressive invisibility and the silencing of his rape. But it also, if one might say, speaks loudly. It inserts within the world of the subalterns the living presence of the overall unsaid and unseen domination and

144 As Luigi Lonardo states: “At the outset, it is significant that the definition of, and punishment for, rape is provided in the section of the [Moroccan] Criminal Code that deals with crimes against morality. Punishing rape as a crime against morality rather than classifying it as a crime against the individual implies that the victim is not worthy of protection in herself, but only as a member of a larger community with shared “morals” and “values”. It suggests that the “honor” or the “pride” of the victim’s community or family is worth more protection than the sexual autonomy and bodily integrity of the victim. (“Rape Law in Morocco”, Oxford Human Rights Hub, http://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/rape-law-in-morocco/).
oppression they are the victims of and in which an “official” language that they are unable to perform and just “know about” operates. Its very muteness assumes the role of an undetectable and imperceptible mastering power. Boubker, who has been shown to have a very compelling infatuation with “Arabic” ends up being the very victim of Dib’s silent but violent language.

In an attempt to auto-heal their wounds, Boubker and Omar end up using the money that the group has been saving for Ali’s burial to buy their drugs. A few sequences later, the group is back together trying to raise enough money. The camera cuts from a scene with the kids attempting to sell their products on a busy intersection to the image of a door. The doors open and a gorgeous woman whom we recognize to be Ali’s mother appears. The camera takes her point of view perspective and we understand that it is Omar who knocked. Without saying a word, she invites him in. The following scene shows the woman gently showering him, treating him as if he was her own son. Omar cannot help but look in admiration to Ali’s mother. The two are then filmed laying in bed next to each other. The woman asks Omar to tell Ali (her real child, who passed away in the beginning of the movie) to stop whatever he is doing and to come back home. One needs to remember that by this point she still has no idea that her son is dead. Omar, who seems to enjoy his time with her even more, is trying to postpone as much as possible the moment that he has to bring that tragic news to her.

The camera then cuts to a close-up on a small book. The viewer is reminded that it is the very same book that Boubker got from a driver. Boubker opens the book right in the middle and looks at it. His eyes and facial reaction say a lot. He is not able to comprehend what is written, but treats the book with extreme care. He then closes it and holds it between
both his palms while closing his eyes and turning towards the sky. Boubker’s fascination with the book is hardly something the viewer can miss, as he continues to look at it throughout the whole scene. The significance of the latter needs to be underlined. That book is here as yet again a sign (this time “materialized”) of the mythical and omnipotent presence of a Phantom Arabic that is symbolically and powerfully overshadowing the subalterns who are unconsciously coerced to live in its obedience. A few cuts later, Omar finally decides to tell Ali’s mother the news about her son. The woman is clearly shocked by the news. Omar tries to hug her. The woman goes through a panic attack, trying to push Omar away from her.

Ayouch’s film does indeed succeed in achieving a seemingly authentic representation of the life of street-kids in the Casablanca of the time (2000). His extremely harsh depiction of reality is combined with what Joseph Gugler coins “creative dissidence”\(^\text{145}\) and is made possible by a constant interplay of reality and dream in the film. On numerous occasions the director portrays the protagonists’ dreams with animated sequences of children’s drawings. Most of these illustrate Ali Zaoua’s boat as well as his island with the two suns. Such a cinematographic decision is made in order to constantly remind the viewer of the infancy and profound humanity of the boys. These street-kids are not dangerous and criminal beings per se and they are not mere victims either. They are complex human beings, with dreams, sensibilities and emotions.

\(^{145}\) I refer here to the title of Joseph Gugler’s edited book *Film in the Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence* (2011). Gugler studies *Ali Zaoua* in that volume (339 - 348). He focuses on the “poetics of childhood” in the movie but tends to state that because the film was shot under Hassan II very dictatorial reign Ayouch had to tone down his socio-political criticism, which is actually implied in and by the film in quite creative cinematic ways.
The film’s ending offers dignity in death to someone who never found it in his lifetime. The captain who Ali befriended before being killed helps his three friends and Ali’s mother who finally decides to join them. Kwita, finds a sailor’s uniform that he has been looking for since Ali’s passing. The group build a small boat for Ali’s body. They plan to set it adrift in the ocean finally providing Ali with a chance to achieve in his death the dream that he was never able to achieve in his life. Dib and his gang are also there to watch the final scene of the movie unfold. As soon as they arrive, Dib’s main right hand screams “Life!!” asking the other kids to shout back the gang’s slogan. Only a few unmotivated voices answer back “is ruthless” while everyone seems to be touched by the fact that Ali is getting the dignity that he has always deserved. The film becomes silent as Omar leads Ali’s mother to have a last look at her son. Kwita sings a song that he used to always mumble. It is a very positive song, unlike what the gang has been teaching them to say. It goes about finding one’s family and one’s home. The film ends with the voice of Ali, an audio flashback to the opening. Ali is being interviewed and the journalist’s voice asks: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Ali answers: “I want to be a sailor! A sailor is all I want to be”.

Dis-connected Worlds; And the Impossibility to Love

On the 16th of May 2003, in the largest and most populated city of Morocco, suicide bombers committed the worst terrorist attack to ever hit the country. Fourteen young “Moroccans”146, all coming from the same shanty-town in the city of Casablanca called

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146 I am using quotes here as I will argue later in this chapter that their sense of identity is a complex phenomenon which does not follow the normative nation-state model.
Sidi Moumen, attacked five different locations in the first ever showcase of Islamist terrorism to strike the country. Prior to that day in May, terrorism was viewed by most Moroccans as a “Western” problem. The overwhelming belief was that “the country was immune to international terrorism.” (Smolin, 2013: 201) In that sense, these events played a major role in “displacing” terrorism. Do sociolinguistic issues participate in Islamic terrorism? And if so, in what way? This question will be at the core of the analysis of Horses of God (2012), the third film directed by Nabil Ayouch to be studied in this chapter. It is based on a novel written in French by Mahi Binebine entitled Les Etoiles de Sidi Moumen (2012). Although the dialectics between Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French are overarching Much Loved and Ali Zaoua, in Horses of God it actually is a main constituent. Language becomes here, in an implied manner but with moments of quasi-explicitness, a central topic that blends into the intricacies of extreme marginalization, abject poverty and terrorism. All the characters in Ayouch’s films speak Darija, which is here considered as a language (whose phonetics, semantics, lexicon, and syntax are different from Arabic), not a dialect of the latter, and an oppressed language, as have advocated Nourredine Ayouch (Nabil Ayouch’s father)147, Ahmed Najim148 and Ahmed Benchemsi149, but also, in a powerful short essay, the Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo, recently deceased and buried in the Moroccan city of Larache next to his friend Jean

147 Nourredine Ayouch is a publicist and media entrepreneur, and an important and engaged public figure of Moroccan society.
148 Ahmed Najim is the head of Goud Ayouch, an online magazine, who advocates for the use of the native language (Darija) in early childhood education, stating that Moroccan students are often baffled by the switch from Darija at home to fus’ha (classical Arabic) at school.
149 Ahmed Benchemsi is the founder of the leading Moroccan magazine TelQuel and a tireless defender of the legitimation of Darija, who now teaches at Stanford University. See his article “Darija, langue nationale” in TelQuel, 34, June 2002.
Moreover, they speak different varieties of it, which goes actually against the basic and old but still dominant “diglossia” argument, which, by the way, finds its roots in the orientalist / colonialist legacy of William Marçais (1872-1956) and which has been debated in the introduction of this dissertation.

In *Horses of God* the adolescents from the “bidonville” speak a very crude version of Darija, one that would be considered by many Moroccans to not be acceptable inside the home of an educated middle class family. Yet when the characters as well as the viewers of the film are introduced to the Islamist Imam, the latter speaks Standard Arabic at times and Darija at others, a very interesting way of code-switching that is quite different from the idiomatic conditions of the boys. They all, therefore, look at the man from a position of the subaltern, dominated by what is for them an authority figure. The use of Arabic is in this instance obviously related to an ideological myth which it actually is. Moreover, even when the Imam resorts to Darija, he does so in a very specific manner, using a variety of Darija which also demarks him from the young men. The relevance of this point is made clear examining closely the French dubbed version of the movie, as the French spoken by the Imam differs from that of the teenagers who are pictured as speaking what might be characterized as a “banlieue type of French”\(^1\). But in the French dubbed version both the leader and his followers to-be still speak the same language (French) while in the original

\(^1\) Which is of course not a value judgment. But rather, a distinct sociolinguistic variety of the language we refer to as “French” Ayouch himself was raised in a banlieue of Sarcelles (near Paris). In an interview with Liza Bear published in bombmagazine.org (March 2016) he refers to that locality as “a suburb that was isolated from mainstream French society” and in which (like in so many segments of France) “alienation persists”. On “banlieue French” see: Zouhour Messili et Hmaid Ben Aziza, “Langage et exclusion. La langue des cités en France”, in *Cahiers de la Mediterranee*, 69, 2004, pp. 23-32.
version of the movie, the Imam is actually speaking two languages and code-switching between them.

_Horses of God_ provides any critical analysis with a very particular complexity as it is a film based on a novel written in French. The movie which is of course in Darija, relates to a social reality that was experienced in that language. The process that Nabil Ayouch had to go through in order to produce this film is one that could be described as a “retro-translation”, as the literary creation by Mahi Binebine is itself a translation act. Binebine wrote in a foreign language (French), about a social reality that took place in the Moroccan language (Darija). The director then had access to a French text and decided to make a movie that would feel as “realistic” as possible, therefore having no other choice than resorting to Darija. But there is another particularity differentiating the socio-linguistic condition of the protagonists in the original language film when compared to its French dubbed version, and it deals precisely with the ideology of language/s: the Darija speaking young men from Sidi Moumen will be led to commit a horrific terrorist suicide-bombing by their alienated fascination for the “Arabic” spoken by the Islamist Imam.

As it is the case in _Much Loved_ and _Ali Zaoua_, the film opens in what seems to be a strange way, but one that is not without a significant meaning when inscribed into the argumentative economy of this chapter. Before we even see any of the characters, the screen fades from black to a few white words marked on the center of it. The viewer sees two phrases, and the top one is in Arabic script while the bottom one is in French. It might be safe to assume that the viewer’s gaze would go first to the Arabic script. Yet, the words that are marked on this screen, these Arabic letters, do not make any sense in Arabic. In fact, one needs to read the French title, written in the Latin script to understand what is
happening. The French title says: “Les films du nouveau Monde, présentent”, which is a reference to a production company that participated in making this film. The Arabic text does not say “The films of the new world”. It is actually a phonological transcription of the French sentence using Arabic script. *Horses of God* sheds light on the problematic of this dissertation before it even begins.

If Ayouch’s purpose was to include the translation in the Arabic script of the French name of the production company, he would have of course opted for a literal translation of that name. The paradox is that someone who does not read French, might still read the Arabic inscription but will not understand anything from it. Therefore, Ayouch is in fact addressing the readers of Arabic script who also know French. But again, if he would be targeting these viewers, why would he feel the need to include this Arabic phonological transcription if it is not because of the mythical impact of what is truly a figuration of Phantom Arabic?

We then hear a man’s voice. After wondering if his interlocutor is sleeping, the man asks him “What would Ghizlane think when she will hear that I died a martyr in the name of god?”. “What would she do?” answers the second voice. “Would she be happy? Sad? What would she think?”, asks the young man. His friend answers: “Heaven is full of them. 100 Ghizlane. 1000 Ghizlane.” And then silence. Throughout this whole opening sequence, the camera is not showing anything, only a black screen and a few titles that keep rolling. Suddenly, after a short silence, we hear sounds of children at play. The screen finally lights up on a group of kids playing soccer, loudly enjoying their game before a debate on the validity of a goal sparks a fight between the two teams. This cinematographic strategy is one that Ayouch used later on in his film *Much Loved*. Its purpose here is a prophetic one
aimed at drawing the viewer to the seriousness of what will be developed as the subject matter of the movie: that we are going to witness “the making of a suicide-bomber”. Ayouch wanted to make his point clear that this is not a film about innocence, but about terrorism, although he believes, as quoted in Josef Gugler’s *Ten Arab Filmmakers*, that the terrorists are also victims of their act. (231) Through his opening scene, the director is making the viewer aware that whatever will be seen is in fact a socio-psychological “study” of how one becomes a suicide-bomber.

Immediately after the brawl, while they are running to safety, the young men are followed by the camera from behind until they are facing where they actually live. The camera then lifts up and high and gives us an amazing aerial view of one of Casablanca’s most infamous shantytowns: Sidi Moumen. The location is even designated in writing: “Bidonville de Sidi Moumen – Casablanca” to emphasize to the viewers the very significance and magnitude of this area which most viewers of this movie are not supposed to have a knowledge of or will simply not recognize. This designation is only made in French this time. This use of solely French is highly significative in several ways. It tends to indicate (somehow to incorporate within the movie) the target audience of the film as being part of the French educated / privileged segment of Moroccan society (and, to a broader extend the public of the French “métropole”). Not that many people who do not belong to that social strata would not understand, as Dislocated French is “all over” in Morocco, particularly in the signage of places, which is almost always bilingual (an omnipresent sign of the former colonial and currently neo-colonial status of the country). But precisely: it is supposed to be bilingual, and here Arabic is simply omitted, which means that its absence signifies and participates to the filmic “messaging” operated by
Ayouch. The immense “bidonville” that the kids and the viewer contemplate is not even named in the official language of the state it is a part of. Or, actually, is not which then explains it is not even mentioned in that official language. It is named in French, the non-official dominant idiom, the one that in socio-symbolic terms counts, while Arabic, which ideologically supersedes the ethno-religious identity of the country, is simply absent. This “there” is not even worthy to be written in Arabic while it is under the obedience of its phantomatic presence, which is its actual absence: nobody in Sidi Moumen speaks / reads / understands “that” Arabic. Moreover, such “French only” written mention of the place could (and actually very probably should) also be interpreted as a detached fragment of Dislocated French in a contextual environment which is definitely not francophone at all: nobody, absolutely nobody, speaks French in a place like Sidi Moumen. In that sense, such indication is itself actually dis-placed linguistically “in front of” the image of a location supposedly belonging to a nation that is itself also supposed to be part of the “francophone world” or the “francosphere” (which it is, in an ideologically charged way, for those who master what Abdellah Taïa calls “la langue des riches”). Sidi Moumen, designated in French and written in Latin script, is here showed as that “there” which is exposed to the Moroccan educated / privileged viewer as a terra incognita, from where terrorism will suddenly invade the nation, as it is out or off the latter, and even not to be named in the official language of it. It is also seen through the eyes of two of its inhabitants who will become “terrorists”: their home (all what they have as a home) is the very location of their

152 This is reminiscent of the opening scene of Ali Zaoua, where French is used to create a sort of pseudo-scientific distance. As if to show that this is a film done by a Moroccan about a “culture” or a “social formation” that he does not comprehend, and that through this very movie he is trying to understand.
alienation, and nothing could better symptomize such true reality than to have it designated from the outside (and actually from above, as the image is a panoramic one) in French.

The aerial view of the shantytown then cuts to one of the kids washing his hands, obeying the orders of his older brother, who had come to his rescue during the brawl. Nabil Ayouch’s examination of the social genealogy of the young men who will end up becoming suicide-bombers begins. As soon as the two kids arrive home, the viewer is struck by the abject condition in which they live. Their mother seems to be the only one working and providing an income to the household. She is immediately featured as complaining that her boss in the factory where she works has decided to reduce her work-hours because according to him, she is becoming less productive. The film then introduces the other members of the family, and we see an older brother who seems to be suffering from a certain type of autism. Their father never says a word and is obviously overwhelmed by depression, speaking only when he has a panic-attack crisis during which he does not remember his own children anymore.

The mother welcomes them home with an array of insults. She asserts that they “stink like garbage”. The filming seems to imply that she actually loves them but that verbal abuse, which also characterizes the boys themselves as if they would have been “contaminated” by it, is something that she considers as natural and part of her stressful life. The viewer also learns about another brother of theirs who is a soldier and who has been deployed in the Moroccan Sahara. Yachine and Hamid are in fact growing up without a father-figure, and are left to navigate the cruel and ferocious world of the shantytown by themselves. The camera cuts to a scene where Yachine and a new character (Nabil) are seen looking through the garbage, probably in the hope of finding anything they could sell
for a few dirhams. Two passing kids start insulting Nabil, and his mother, who we understand to be a prostitute.\textsuperscript{153} Yachine takes his friend’s defense, as the language of the two passing kids gets extremely violent, treating the boys of being “faggots” and threatening to rape them. The verbal mistreat continues until Hamid (Yachine’s older brother) comes running with his metal chain, forcing the two assailants to run away. Neither home nor the street are protected from verbal and/or physical assault.

In a following scene Hamid is pictured, although he seems to be 14 at most, hanging out with the thugs of the neighborhood. One of them, gives him some type of “merchandise” that the viewer does not see exactly, but that one gets a sense of it being illegal. Hamid, although still a young kid, talks like a grown-up. He tells Real, who is one the local thugs, that he can definitely count on him. This whole scene happens before Yachine’s eyes, who in the lack of any role-model in his life, turns to his older brother as the last remaining source of inspiration and of hope. Talking about hope, a few images later, Yachine encounters a young girl, his age, who comes to ask him and his friend about someone called “Fouad”. Yachine’s face immediately lights up at the sight of this girl. The viewer remembers the name that was referred to in the opening scene of the movie, “Ghizlane”, which seems to be this girl’s name. Their relationship that develops throughout the movie is one of suppressed-love. They both feel for each other, but the very ideological space of the shantytown does not allow them to be themselves, nor to live their love.

Jonathan Smoling very sharply links “the lack of space for intimacy (…), the inability to develop loving human relationships with the emergence of Islamic terrorism in

\textsuperscript{153} Again, a thematic that is omni-present is Ayouch’s work which also reverberates with that of Abdellah Taïa.
Indeed, Smoling’s statement is crucially to the point. Yachine’s and Ghizlane’s problematic relationship is both the actual and significative representation of the inability to love in the shantytown of Sidi Moumen in particular, but also in Morocco as well as in the region in general. Intimacy spaces are only available with both access to financial capital and the possibility of escaping the overshadowing socio-political control. This is a society where, according to Michel Foucault’s model of *Discipline and Punish* (1975), everyone feels observed all the time, while no one is authorized to express intimacy in public. Such situation in the country, which according to Abdessamad Dialmy (2014) is “entering a period of sexual transition” – and more broadly in parts of the MENA region – is only recently beginning to change in some segments of the population (urban, middle class, educated, internet / wifi connected, mostly secular) as evidenced in several of the essays edited by Tarik Sabry and Layal Foutni in *Subcultures Transformations in Theory and Practice* (2017). But even today this evolution, which is still limited and only emergent, has certainly not reached social “territories” such as Sidi Moumen.

One of the most violent scene of the movie takes place during a wedding. One of the kids steals a bottle of alcohol and suggest that while Nabil’s mother was performing, they could use their room to drink. The boys all sound excited about that idea. The director keeps cutting between the wedding, Nabil’s mother singing, and the boys having fun while drinking in the room. Nabil himself starts dancing, in a somewhat feminine way, until he

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154 Nabil’s mother is referred to in Darija as “Chikha” which refers to a woman who performs at weddings and events, sings, a certain type of popular Moroccan music but who also very often is a prostitute, as is her case.
collapses. Yachine tries to help his friend, when Hamid violently asks him to go away, immediately pulls Nabil’s pants off, and while calling him “Tamou”, which is his mother’s name, rapes him\textsuperscript{155}. The camera keeps cutting between the rape scene, Tamou dancing erotically in the wedding, and the kids singing “give it to him” in support of Hamid’s action, before the house after the rape has occurred. Only Yachine stays with Nabil in an attempt to comfort him. The absence of spaces for intimacy combined with a machist culture of hyper “virility” leads many boys to undergo similar experiences. Something that is further analyzed in this dissertation’s section dedicated to Abdellah Taïa’s work, is that the rape somehow does not pertain to a queer significative structure\textsuperscript{156}. Although Hamid rapes Nabil, he does not consider himself to be homosexual. But whatever he thinks of himself is of course structured by homophobic rationalizations which may perfectly autocamouflage homosexual tendencies (and this could apply also to the kids who are surrounding him, chanting to support him and admiring his supposedly “commanding virility”). On the other side, Nabil’s (potentially seductive) behavior, or better said – to use Judith Butler’s terminology (1990, 1993) – its “performance” before the rape takes place could be interpreted as queerly, even if such existential dimension is “unthinkable” for the boy himself. What should be noted here is that there is no wording whatsoever of what is (and thereafter was) happening. Such silence speaks loudly. It is the silence to which attention has already been drawn when examining the rape (non) scene in \textit{Ali Zaoua}.

\textsuperscript{155} This scene reverberates with a passage analyzed in a Abdellah Taïa’s chapter where “Abdellah” is about to be raped by a group of young boys who keep calling him “Layla” which is another female first name.

\textsuperscript{156} That term is here borrowed from Lucien Goldmann. It designates both a transindividual / collective set of socially determining parameters and its singular effect exerted on and through a given individual subject. See Daglind Sonolet “Le Concept de structure significative” in \textit{Anamnese} n°6, juillet 2011.
It is the silence that the narrator, in Taïa’s *An Arab Melancholia* first segment, precisely breaks, as he also confronts, deconstructs and questions the apparent heterosexism of what he is going through while being himself the quasi-victim of that same type of rape. But, even though the incident related (or imaginary invented – it does not matter) in Taïa’s novel had of course taken place in Darija, it is narrated and intra-diegetically commented on in French, not in the “unacceptable” so called “dialect” and neither in the ideologically “sacred” Arabic, whose phantom is precisely the socio-linguistic force symbolically overarching the permanent and omnipresent social control of any form of intimacy, the compulsive coercing of heterosexual norms (Rich, 1980) and the brutal silencing of whatever could queerly present a risk to the hegemony of heteronormativity.

A few years have passed; the kids are now young men. Yachine is again playing goalkeeper in a soccer match. Everyone is screaming, when a brawl erupts after one of the opposition team hits Nabil from the back. At the very moment of the brawl, Hamid arrives there, holding his metal chain. He defends his brother and his friends before they make an escape once again. The repetitiveness of this scene, that is an exact copy of the film’s opening is there to show that nothing has changed in Sidi Moumen. The very same violence is regnant. Years have passed, the kids are now men but their environment is still the same. The only thing that might have changed is suggested by the aerial shot that takes place after the group’s escape. Sidi Moumen looks to have gotten bigger. The shanty town that consisted of a few barracks now looks like a small city. It is massive.

The monstrousness of Sidi Moumen has to deal with another very important thematic of the film. All the kids that the film follows have actually never been to the city. In a scene where the young men are sharing a joint and talking about this and the other,
one of them says: “I have some friends, they rent a place in the city.” To which Nabil answers: “You and your city! Whenever we are talking about anything you have to bring up the city”. The other kid replies: “Are you crazy! It is because it is there where you find life. Whatever you desire. Whatever you wish for. You will find right next to you. Even their weed is way better. You want work? Two steps and you’re at the port.” The city is conceived as a kind of foreign and mysterious land, almost a “magical” one. “Sidi Moumen” is in that sense not located in Casablanca, and its inhabitants do not consider themselves as living in Casablanca. They do not even think of themselves as living in Morocco. Sidi Moumen is a heterotopia, it is a counter-space. Although violently “disposed” in Morocco, it is a place where people have been so disfranchised, so abandoned and left to their own, that they do not feel any sense of belonging to the larger institution of the nearby city nor even to the country at large. Reversely, the people outside of Sidi Moumen do not think of those living there as really part of the nation. In a country where the national flag is almost everywhere, the only place it is once to be seen in the film is on the police station (thus on a building symbolizing repression and punishment). Moreover when the terrorists-to-be are shown the city by the Islamist leader who takes them in a minivan for an “excursion” in order to have them exposed to the entire semiotics of sin and betrayal of Muslim values Casablanca is supposed to represent, they do not even pay attention to the news dispatched by the radio and announcing the birth of Moulay

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157 This is actually very reminiscent of the positioning of Paris in reference to the banlieue in Mathieu Kassovitz’ film La Haine.

Hassan, the crown prince, an event that is captivating the enthusiasm of the entire nation to which they do not seem to feel any patriotic allegiance.

In fact, state presence in Sidi Moumen is only experienced in negative ways, like when the camera films Hamid making a hashish transaction which is cut short by a scream warning him and his client of the presence of unclothed police agents. Everybody runs away except Hamid, who knows that the cops are there only to be bribed. He grabs a bill from his pocket and hands it to the police officer who asks for more, claiming that the fee has changed and threatening to arrest Hamid, who decides to give the corrupt cop more money. They let him go. Indeed, this scene, follows immediately the young men’s discussion about “the city”. More filmic evidence of the totally disturbed rapport these kids experience with the “state” is showcased when the nicknamed “Pitbull”, a high-ranking police officer, is getting ready to leave. All the young men of the neighborhood join to watch in excitement the moment one of their oppressors is going away. In an effort to once again confirm his virility Hamid declares that he can hit the cop with a stone, a claim he makes just as a joke and to which one of the guys answers: “Why don’t you do it then? Are you a woman?” Hamid responds by saying: “What if I do it, would you take off your pants?”. One can once again decipher in this exchange the ambivalent relation between the culture (and cult) of virilism, what Ahmed Kharaz in *Le corps dans le recit intime arabe* (2013) calls “le mythe de l’étalon” and allusions to male same sex practice, a trope that has been encountered in *Ali Zaoua* too. The whole group starts hyping up Hamid to do it, and he ends up committing an act that he is soon to regret. In addition to referring to the insecurity Hamid entertains with his self-proclaimed hyper virility – something that is actually problematic through the heterosexist and machist dominant ideology that
permeates the entire country, and which of course rightfully draws the suspicious attention of queer critique –, this sequence not only illustrates that the only state presence in Sidi Moumen is effectuated through the oppressive / repressive (and simultaneously corrupt) apparatus, but also that its victims are not just passive ones and show signs of resilience, resistance and dissidence, even if it is expressed in and channeled through alienated forms.

The police come to arrest Hamid on the following night. The rapidity of their intervention demonstrates that it is a priority for them. When Hamid was simply ruining lives selling his drugs they never bother to catch him, but once he touched one of their symbols, it did not take long for them to intervene. Life, which was already harsh in the slums for Yachine and his family is about to get even harder. After losing their brother’s revenue from selling drugs, Yachine tries to be the one supporting their mother from selling fruits in the market. He is shocked to learn that the price that his brother, Hamid, used to buy the goods has gotten way higher. Indeed, due to his brother’s reputation, the sellers used to give him a good price, in exchange of receiving protection from him. Yachine decides to buy the goods at the new price anyway as he does not have the choice. He then discovers that his usual spot has been taken over by a new vendor, who is under the protection of another street thug. His father’s situation is only getting worse and his mother is falling into depression following her son’s imprisonment.

Things start looking a little brighter for Yachine, as his friend Nabil finds him a job at the garage where he works. Yachine learns very quickly how to work with motorcycles. The two, after fixing a small scooter, decide to go for a ride around Sidi Moumen, and this appears as one of the not so many moments of happiness in their lives. Yachine quickly asks Nabil to go see Ghizlane, to which Nabil answers “that brain of yours is still thinking
about her?”, “No”, he replies “She lives in it”. This dialogue (as are all the enunciations 
in the movie) is of course written by the director. It is one of these numerous stylistic 
instances to be found in Ayouch’s films that actually participate to a veritable poetics of / 
in Darija, to which one will return in the conclusion of this chapter. But the inscription of 
the “impossible” romance between Yachine and Ghizlane does not only pertains to such 
poetics. It also has a sociological dimension. Jonathan Smolin suggests that:

The theme of suppressed identity is further emphasized in the way that the 
film develops the relationship between Yachine and Ghizlane. Even as a 
young boy at the beginning of the film, Yachine smiles at Ghizlane, 
hoping to attract her attention. As they get older, the two continue to flirt 
with each other. Nonetheless, the social environment and geographical 
space of the shantytown make it impossible for the two to be alone 
together as Yachine is repeatedly blocked when he attempts to speak with 
Ghizlane alone. 
(Ten Arab Filmmakers, 232).

Nabil Ayouch suddenly cuts to images of the 9/11 attack in New York, then shows 
the reaction of shock of people in a coffee shop where this event was broadcasted. The 
viewer of the film hears Arabic for the first time, as it emanates from the T.V. Immediately 
after that scene, the camera cuts from the coffee shop. It is raining, and getting dark, and 
we see four figures on the screen. They are distributing flyers to the passers shouting in 
Arabic: “Joining Al-Qaeda is a religious duty. Join AbuUbaida Al Maghribi”. Most people 
do not talk to them, some ignore them while other grasp the flyers from them while running 
to get out of the rain and also to escape their presence. In addition to its political 
contextualization (linked to the media coverage of a major terrorist event and the display 
of Islamist propaganda “in action”) this sudden injection of Arabic into the movie produces 
a kind of linguistic rupture, as it obviously contrasts with Darija. It is actually an intrusion 
that infuses a powerful connotative meaning, as Phantom Arabic abruptly makes itself
present – one could risk to say: the phantom appears – and disrupts the filmic flow of Darija.

The following major scene is an aerial shot that follows Yachine who runs to meet his brother, after hearing that he was released from prison. The moment the two see each other is indeed emotional, but Hamid is a changed man. His language is different, as is the way he dresses and acts. He is very clean-cut now, wears traditional clothing and has a beard. When he sees his brother, Hamid is standing with three other men who all look like him. He very politely asks them to be allowed to join Yachine. With a much more confident and calm voice, he speaks Darija but uses its highest sociolinguistic register possible, making his speech sounds much more sophisticated than what the viewer got used to hearing him speak. While being nice and kind with his family, Hamid is putting himself at distance from it. He refuses to eat with the latter and justifies its attitude in declaring that he now has to eat with his friends after praying. This is the first mention of religion in the film.

Subsequently, Yachine and Nabil are staying late in the garage to finish some work. The owner of the garage who had been drinking that day gets inside and closes the garage from the inside. He then approaches Nabil, declares that he is handsome and asks him to kiss him. Nabil refuses the man’s request and pushes him away. Yachine tries to help his friend. But the owner of the shop goes after Nabil, trying to rip off his pants. As Nabil is overpowered by him, Yachine immediately grabs a heavy metallic tool, and without thinking hits the man on the back of the head a first time, and later continuously hits him until he is dead. Nabil asks Yachine to stay in the garage as he runs away to get some help, then comes back with Hamid and a few of his friends, who help them get rid of the body.
The young kids are now in their debt. This scene of course repeats the topic of inter-males rape that has already been commented about. Again, an occurrence of “discreet” / indirect queer dimension is both implied and repressed, as the garage owner says that he finds Nabil beautiful, evidently attracted by such physical appearance and (sex) appeal. The reference to the latter could mean it is associated to the feminine and that Nabil is “used” as a woman by default. But it could very well be that the mechanic is attracted to Nabil as a young boy. Such meta / para homoerotic libidinal economy, which has been studied by Gianfranco Rebucini in his essay on “Masculinités hégémoniques et « sexualités » entre hommes au Maroc” (2013), is pervasive in Ayouch’s filmic work. It is actually reinforced by the “homophobic” rage of Yachine which goes beyond protecting Nabil and leads him to a murder, while the intervention of Hamid and his new Islamist friends goes beyond just covering up for Yachine: at the unsaid center of the incident lays the fact that it has been an attempt at committing an inter males sodomy act, which produces both extreme anger and disgust (from Yachine’s perspective) and religious absolute condemnation to the point of justifying the camouflage of a bloody crime (from the view-point of Hamid and his friends). What is particularly significative here is once again silence and invisibility. Silence, as all of what has happened will stay unspoken, ejected from any discursive structure; invisibility, as while the film viewer has been witness to the para / meta homosexual rape attempt, the latter has not been seen by anybody in Sidi Moumen (but for Yachine) and the crime to which it has led will simply disappear with the body of the Mechanic. Nothing has happened. There is nothing to speak about. Nobody has seen anything. And (any) language is absent.
On the following day, Hamid comes to wake the two boys up, and then tells them to follow him. Nabil asks: “follow you where?”, to which Hamid replies: “We are going to see the brothers who saved you from the shit you put yourself into”. When they arrive to where they were heading, the viewer hears Arabic in the call for prayers, and Hamid even pronounces “In the name of god” in Arabic before knocking on a door. The call for prayer continues when the door opens and they are invited in. They find a whole community of people living there whose existence seems to revolve around praying. They do their ablutions and join the group in order to pray in what looks like an improvised mosque. Right before leaving, the kids are asked by another member of the community to join them inside. “Abuzubair wants to talk to you” he says. A charismatic man turns around. He is holding a book whose title is in Arabic, while standing in front of a huge library. He is wearing all black and on his forehead, the viewer can notice a black mark, which is a sign that the person puts his head to the ground, in prayer, a lot159. He invites the young men to sit, the camera pans to them, and one can see behind them a large frame with Arabic writing. Once again Arabic is noticeable in a religious context. Even if one cannot decipher what is written, the mere presence of (written) Arabic language and of Arabic transcript plays here a symbolic role. It is in itself there to impress, and it has, beyond any given legible content, a deictic function as it points to the very emblematic power of Phantom Arabic.

159 This is a mark that became a symbol of “religious” authorities. It is even one that many people try to inflict on themselves in order to create a certain look of religious authority.
Abuzubair’s language, is an interesting mixture of Darija and Arabic. For example, he starts by saying: “Guelsso” (Sit down!), which is in Darija\textsuperscript{160}, but as soon as the two men are seated he continues by stating in Arabic “Hna ghadi tl9aw tari9 ssa7i7” (Here you will find the right path). In fact, he continues code-switching throughout. He tells the adolescents that he is from the same neighborhood as them, that he did the very same mistakes that they made, that he paid a hefty price for that, but that now with prayer, all their problems are going to be solved. His use of Arabic is obviously something that is very clearly intended to impose a certain feeling of superiority on his listeners. He of course knows that he cannot speak completely in Arabic, as the kids would probably not understand everything. So, he code-switches, keeping himself efficiently understood but making sure that he talks in a way that is very different from what they are used to. Both the intra-diegetic actual behavior of Abuzubair as directed by the filmmaker and its cinematographic treatment are calculated, as the theatricalisation of the Islamist leader is objectively the way he is supposed to act and its filming itself reduplicates such formal composure (the way he looks, smiles…) and its framing (the books in the background as a sign of his knowledge and wisdom). As part of such “dramaturgy” resorting to Arabic is of primordial signification and the kids are literally ravished. But, from a critical standpoint, this can also be seen and read as the very staging of what Phantom Arabic refers to (the sacred and the salvation) and how it actually functions (as imposed from above, as a manifestation of authority and power).

\textsuperscript{160} The sound \textit{[g]} does not even exist in Modern Standard Arabic.
Very quickly, the meetings that were supposed to revolve around prayer turn into martial arts lessons, and these lessons are thought by the kids as being part of their new religious schooling. Yachine and Nabil are requested to bring their friends and after their combat training and praying they are very nicely prevented to leave the premises, and induced in staying for a collective lunch. Only one of the group insists to leave, the rest stay. While the young men are still entering the room where they were going to have lunch, the viewer already starts to hear a speech, performed in the same code-switching between Arabic and Darija already commented upon earlier. “We are a group of monotheist believers. We only believe in God, the one and only. We do not have any loyalty to the city, or the country, or even to this neighborhood. We are only loyal to God, and to his prophet, and to the believers wherever they are”, the voice says. The camera pans through the room. The young men are sitting in the back. They are the only ones who look bright, as if to suggest one of two things: either that at that moment they are still in the process of being radicalized and have not yet joined the dark side; or as if to suggest the almost magical effect that Abuzubair’s speech has on them, as if while listening to him, they finally discover a long-awaited purpose to their lives.

Abuzubair’s speech is radical and it entails a very strategic use of Arabic. During one scene, when Yachine and Nabil are laying down getting ready to sleep, Nabil asks Yachine about what Abuzubair told him earlier, to which the young man responds: “His way of talking is inspiring”. The effect of Phantom Arabic, due to its mythical status, is significantly powerful on its listeners. As the camera gets closer to Yachine, the screen turns black, and we hear the voice of Abuzubair who has the status permitting to simultaneously disrupt the silence that has recovered the attempted rape Nabil went
through along with the murder of his sexual aggressor committed by Yachine, and to absolve the latter, as he declares:

    I know what you did, but I am not here to judge you, plus the fault is not yours. You lived your whole life among sinners and thugs. They are the real criminals, not you. Would that have happened if you were between god-fearing believers? I don’t think so. But starting from now, you can cancel all your sins. Start a new life, as if nothing ever happened.

The screen fades from black to Yachine getting out of the house during dawn prayer time. He seems clearly touched by what Abuzubair has told him and becomes even more radicalized. In the following scene, he almost starts a fight with his autistic brother, as he orders him to stop listening to his radio. Paying attention to the news is going to have negative impact on your brain, he tells him. He also insists that he should stop shaving his face: “Why do you shave? Are you a woman?” The autistic brother reacts violently to that insinuation, and the fight is only interrupted by their mother. Machist misogyny combined with the unconscious questioning of masculinity has evidently found a reinforcing justification in Yachine’s mind and his brother feels in that regard under attack.

    Yachine’s radicalization progresses in such a way that it even makes his brother Hamid, who got him into it, jealous. The latter claims that the former is trying to get closer to Abuzubair. During one of the martial arts training, the two brothers engage in a real fight which requires the intervention of their coach to stop it. He even says to Hamid in Modern Standard Arabic “Don’t get angry, and you will get paradise” which is a reference to a prophetic saying. Immediately following this scene, Hamid leaves, while the camera focuses on the coach’s reaction. Radical Islamist music in Arabic begins to play. Its lyrics are anti-Semitic. After a few seconds, the viewer understand that the music is emanating from a video that Yachine is watching and which shows images of women and children
being abused by Israeli police and army, including the infamous picture of an unarmed Palestinian father trying to shield his 6 years-old child from the Israeli bullets that kill the infant. The sounds from the video continue playing while the image is now that of Abuzubair, once again giving a speech, and this time it should be noted is that it is delivered completely in Arabic, with no code-switching:

They declared a war against Islam and its followers. They talk about peace and justice. But in truth those infidels are only fooling the nation. They want to get rid of Islam’s message. They follow their Machiavellian schemes but they forgot that God is the greatest strategist. Our brothers and sister in Bosnia, in Palestine, in Iraq, in Chechnya, in Kashmir, and in Afghanistan our children are being murdered.161

The choice that Abuzubair makes in changing his communication strategy is extremely relevant. He knows the impact that speaking in Arabic solely will have on these you men’s emotions. The more violent and propagandist his message gets the more Arabic he is using.

This use of Arabic starts contaminating Yachine who, in a following sequence in which Abuzubair asks if he and his brother were assaulted by the police when trying to spread Islamist propaganda, responds in Arabic: “He who fears god do not fear people.” Yachine’s resorting to Arabic could be interpreted as the proof of the completion of his indoctrination process. Abuzubair compliments him declaring: “Correct!” He then continues to explain that the Moroccan state is at the service of “the enemies of God”, and later adds, in Arabic as well: “Death does not scare us, and we do not fear anyone but God. They know that we love death as much as they love life.” In a very symptomatic code shifting he immediately follows that declaration by saying this time in Darija: “And this is why they are scared! Because they see that our message continues to spread.” Whenever

161 Minute 1:12
Abuzubair tries to assert his power on his audience, he goes to Arabic. When he tries to be more emotional and personal or in order to show solidarity, he resorts to Darija.

The mythical power of Phantom Arabic is only made staggering clear during one of the final scenes of the movie. The young men are invited to attend the lecture of a prominent figure, someone even higher in rank than Abuzubair. We do not see this person’s face throughout the scene. The camera pans in such a way that his face is always hidden behind someone else. This man, who pronounces the most radical discourse to be heard in the movie is precisely filmed as if he were a phantom, as he speaks (mainly) in Arabic. His speech although very articulated and not containing a direct order to commit a terrorist act is extremely violent, as he quotes the prophet numerous times, finishing his speech by saying: “Oh Horses of God get ready, and to heaven run steady”. A careful ear is able to discern the film’s very title from this quote: “Ya khayl Allah”.

After this final speech is delivered, it is only a matter of time before the men accomplish their mission. Numerous moments of doubt occur, especially from Hamid, who asks Yachine to not go with them, but the latter by this time looks very different from the loving guy that he has been all his life. He is cold, determined to do what in his brainwashed mind is the right thing to do. On the way to Casablanca, to scout the locations where they are going to commit their suicide attacks, one of the young men declares with a huge smile on his face “It is going to be my first time going to the city”. This statement confirms the complete feeling of not belonging that these kids have vis-à-vis Casablanca in particular but also the Moroccan state in general. The geographical proximity is staggering as Sidi Moumen is only 8 or 10 miles from the city center. Yet the complete feeling of estrangement of these young men is impressive.
Hamid then tries to convince his little brother to not commit his suicide-mission for one last time. Yachine however seems to be more than certain. He even learns later that he is going to be the leader of this endeavor. Final preparations are made, final meals, final ablutions, final hugs, and Abuzubair says his final words, in Arabic, to Yachine: “See you in heaven!” “God willing”, answers the latter. The young men shave their faces, dress properly and leave. On their way out of the slum, they pass a group of young kids playing soccer, a reminder of the innocence they represented themselves just a few years ago. When arriving to the city, the young men are very impressed as they look around at the buildings. After reaching the first destination, the men exchange final hugs. Hamid, without saying a word, keeps holding Yachine, as if by holding his brother he is going to prevent what he now knows to be inevitable. Yachine pushes him off very violently. The fourth guy, Adil, suddenly starts crying and runs away. Yachine and Nabil walk very determinedly towards their destination. We hear laughter, music, and people enjoying life. Without a moment’s hesitation, they stab the door keeper and slit his throat. They enter a restaurant and club, la Casa de España, walk around the place for a while, looking at the people listening to music, watching the performance of the flamenco dancers. Suddenly, the Spanish music starts getting less loud, piano takes over and the camera keeps zooming on Hamid’s face who has now joined the other two in the restaurant. We hear Hamid’s voice when he as young. He is talking to his little brother, asking him to follow him. The screen goes white, then fades to black. Immediately, the camera drops from an aerial view of kids playing soccer. These are the same kids who the terrorists just passed in the car a few minutes earlier. They all run towards the edge of the precipice where they watch explosion after explosion. They are in complete shock at what was taking place. The camera circles them. The film ends,
with the words “Horses of God” written in Arabic, followed by its French translation “Les Chevaux de Dieu”. The pertinence of Arabic as a phantomatic presence and its mythical status is at the core of Ayouch’s film. At the end of the film, the title of the movie is written not only in Arabic script, but using Ottoman Arabic calligraphy, which is referring to religious scripture. The film ends, and so does its story line which is one about life and death, and about how quickly things can go wrong in a society where it is harder to love than it is to hate.
CONCLUSION

Interfaces, Ruptures and the Question:
Can the Subaltern Write?

L’inéptie consiste à vouloir conclure. (…)
Oui, la bêtise consiste à vouloir conclure. (…)
Gustave Flaubert

It would be appropriate to begin this conclusion with this quotation from Gustave Flaubert. A quote that I take as an opportunity to comment on the very role of this conclusion. Rather than being a piece of text that “ends” this dissertation, I mean it as a new beginning, one directed towards furthering the pursuit of inquiry into the very singular issues that this dissertation has raised. The duality of the two elements: Dislocated French and Phantom Arabic is by essence problematic. Its complexity lies in the plurality of power structures that are clashing in the space it forms. This dissertation stems from a truly personal quest at understanding the very clash of those same power structures that I was subjected to, since birth, without truly grasping for the longest time. This dissertation combines cinematographic works which literally exemplify and “expose” my first language, my authentic L1: Darija, with literary texts which for the most part presuppose the very non-existence of such a language. Both domains of artistic and cultural production are in a sense also “clashing”, and their contact is even more interesting when, it so happens that the person producing the literature happens to be the same producing the film. An interesting contradictory and complex process which this dissertation tries to unveil through its taking of both concepts of Dislocated French and Phantom Arabic into consideration.
Auto-Anthropological Imaginaries

Through such processes, the ideologically overdetermined (and powerful) languages such as French and Arabic are challenged in the course of their placement in colonial and neo-colonial situations. Their exchanges are constrained, limited and worked through auto-anthropological imaginaries. I have been myself, I am still hic et nunc, and I will be placed (but for how long? a cardinal question for my upcoming research) at the precise intersection of such Phantom Arabic and Dislocated French. So, vis-à-vis such auto-anthropological enterprise (see Judith Okeley and Hellen Gallaway) the very writing of this dissertation is a part of a “journey of the self” to use Catherine Russel’s terminology.

In a way or another, Jean Genet, Abdellah Taïa, Leïla Sebbar and Nabil Ayouch address questions of language from within their own self-lived “familiar” (proper, subjective, intimate) experiences. However, in doing so they also distance themselves from their existential being while articulating and inserting their personae into issues that go beyond being, toward the very French and North African social and linguistic collectivities with which their works, and mine, are dealing. Informed by the reading of Clifford Geertz’s *The Anthropologist as an Author* (1989), my ideologies of language and sociolinguistic critical analysis of their texts and films have called for a visible disclosure of the auto-anthropological imaginaries they display. Borrowing from Nigel Rapport’s and Joana Overing’s *Social and Cultural Anthropology* (2007), and Judith Okeley’s and Hellen Callaway’s *Anthropology and Autobiography* (1992), I have proposed a doubly articulated methodology. One involving simultaneously and dialectically my own reflexive inquiry of the findings I have unveiled, in conjunction with the creative works of the reflecting subjects under consideration, as they have precisely transformed their subjectivities into
the very material of their literary and film productions: Genet on and with Genet, Taïa on and with Taïa, Sebbar on and with Sebbar, Ayouch on and with Ayouch. Each one of them pointing at the economies of symbolic exchanges between Dislocated French and Phantom Arabic (and also between dislocated “Frenchness” and phantomic “Arabness”…).

**Language(s), Bodies, Affects, and the Queer**

The texts and films I have analyzed allow us to think of language(s) not as an abstraction of linguistic theories but as textually and visually transformed in fictional bodies “that matter” but also “speak”. The language(s) they use “both is (are) and refers (refer) to that which is material” (Bodies that Matter, 68), as Judith Butler puts it, connecting the materiality of language and the linguistic nature of materiality in Bodies that Matter. These fictional bodies (of the narrators and their characters) represent and simultaneously perform linguistic emotions and affects. In addition, their very singularity as subjects – often queer ones, in the sense of being, to diverse degrees, outside the realm of normativity(ies) and normality(ies) – is socially and ideologically regulated (Sara Ahmed, 2004). What I truly tried to analyze in this dissertation vis-à-vis the cultural producers hereby scrutinized is *ce que parler veut dire* (what “speaking” means), to refer to the title of Pierre Bourdieu’s famous essay on the symbolic economy of linguistic exchanges. And if there is one key “conclusion” to be drawn as far as such an economy is concerned it is that the literally physical voice (le grain de la voix in Roland Barthes’ sense) of the subaltern is only depicted as such when “speaking” (as in Taïa’s and Ayouch’s films). Thus, somehow the subaltern remains framed in the very marginalized conditions of her/his social and linguistic existence (even if it acquires a kind of poetic status). The question that raises itself therefore is: Can the subaltern write? As this dissertation has
demonstrated, in the literary texts herewith, the subaltern gets deprived of the legitimacy of such existence (which is the case due to the real repression it is enduring). It is indeed, as we have shown, simultaneously alienated by a francocentric French that can only be dislocated and orientalized and fetishized under the obedience of a Phantom Arabic that reduplicates and even aggravates its alienation. Such objective ethos determines the problematicity of expressing feelings, desires, emotions, affects and sexualities (particular queer ones).

Between the Dislocated French of the writer, the Palestinian of the young Fedayeen surrounding him, and the overshadowing Phantom Arabic, Genet’s queer desire in *Un Captif amoureux* finds itself stylistically worked through rhetorical strategies of political “dépassement”, as Ralph Heyndels identifies in “Nuit politique du désir”. As for Abdellah Taïa’s writing, it scotomizes Darija. And since “Arabic” does not offer him a hospitable linguistic space, the writer is objectively led to embrace French in order to express his queerness. Such a finding has also been confirmed by the work of Ralph Heyndels in “Configurations et transferts de la sexualité, du genre et du désir”. But Taïa’s relationship with the “Arabic” to which he refers often in his work and interviews, as well as the Dislocated French in which he is writing, is a very complicated affiliation. In one of the short stories of Mon Maroc (2000) entitled “Un deuxième père” he tells (once again) of the importance of Mohamed Choukri as his second father, he even declares that he discovered *Le Pain nu* (For Bread Alone) “en arabe” (93). In fact, he even adds that: “Ce roman (…) m’habite depuis ce jour-la. (…) Il m’a vu naître littérairement.” (94). Such an assertion, like Genet’s recounting of acquiring French in Prison reading Proust, is obviously part of an auto-anthropological imaginary. But of course, it would not matter “more” if it were a
factual one, what is really important to note is what the “book” and the “language” signifies for and about the writer. He later on will even pretend that he totally broke from (actually: banned) “Arabic”. But while writing his entire work in French he places himself and his writing under the symbolic order of not only a non-francographic, non-French, writer but one who is considered as part of the “le panthéon des grands écrivains marocains”. In addition, it is not any book, it is of course one (as we have seen previously) that was censored under King Hassan II. It is also a text supposedly written in “Arabic”. Interestingly enough, when recounting the same episode in L’Armée du salut (2006) the mention of the language has been, if I might say, discarded. In fact, this “Arabic” version of For Bread Alone, published in 1982 – after the English and the French ones – is actually written in a mélange of Darija and Modern Standard Arabic. Even the MSA is frequently infused with Darija. Moreover, the English version published by Paul Bowles is a transcription of a recorded story orally communicated by Choukri, and, as such, a pure uttered product that was likely entirely in Darija. So much for “Arabic”… and the absence of any reference to Darija in Taïa’s testimony.

Now Taïa’s assertions should be contextualized and cross-read with another short story the author has published in Le rouge du tarbouche (2004). “Le Roi est mort” narrates the day when Abdellah Taïa, this time in Paris, learns of the death of Hassan II while listening to a series of phone recorded messages. In that text the author mentions once, en passant, the expression “arabe marocain” (to designate Darija) and its linguistic incompatibility with “Arabic” – which, due to his emotional state, he does not understand: “A chaque mot prononcé, je trouvais difficilement le sens, à quoi il correspondait en arabe marocain.” (15) If we recognize that Taïa, when writing, is in a sort of creative (and thus
emotional) “trance” – which is something he refers to frequently within his writing (see the beginning of Une Mélancolie arabe and Ralph Heyndels’ “Je suis folle. Folie de l’identité, du genre et du sexe chez Abdellah Taïa”), such a mental / emotional stage is certainly not expressed in MSA, but most certainly reveals itself in a Darija that becomes transliterated into French.

Leïla Sebbar, on the other hand, dreams of the secret song of “Arabic”. The latter is not only absent from her upbringing – as she was forcefully obliged to reject what she thought was “Arabic” by her father – but it was totally absent in itself as it was (still is) socio-linguistically non-existent in Algeria: “Arabic and French [in Algeria] are native languages to no one” (Laura Reeck, article “France” of the Diaporas section in The Oxford Handbook of Arab Noveleistic Traditions (2017)). Instead of focusing solely on “the lack of Arabic” (as does Alison Rice in her beautiful Polygraphies (2012)), one could say that “Arabic” is, in this sense, doubly absent in Sebbar’s work; the phantom of the phantom. She is also confronted with the impossibility of interpreting the (often sexual) clamor of the street “Arab boys” which haunted her youth (and which she re-encountered in the “cites” of the North African immigrants excluded from and within hexagonal France). She is transfected into orientalizing it in much the same way that Mehamed Amadeus Mack, emulating the pioneering work of Guénif-Souilamas and Macé, has deconstructed in his recently published Sexagon (2016) – for instance when Sebbar refers to “the violence of the Arab speech, the language of sex” in Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père.

Nabil Ayouch offers another perspective, probably one of the most enlightened as far as the singular problematie of this dissertation. His “real life” characters have no access to French and are also simultaneously alienated from and dominated by Phantom
Arabic. They therefore try from within their Darija to investigate ways and means to linguistically explore and render feelings, including queer ones, which the repressive Moroccan hetero-nationalistic society forbids from even considering as “possible”. They also happen to be linguistically confined into what I would like to call the rage of the pejorative, which can express in many ways “queer” forms of poetical instances.

**Estrangement**

Just as a state defines itself it also defines who can and cannot belong to it. And because it constructs its citizens based on national “narratives”, it concurrently exiles both the people its narrative conceals and those who criticize such erasure. Darija is estranged in its own land(s) and repressed by the very politico-ideological combination of Phantom Arabic and French imperial / neo-colonial classist arrogance. It is not recognized as the language of “we” but is considered (and despised) at the language of “them”: those who are essentially reduced to the status of strangers in / of the “cultural artefact” (Benedict Anderson, 1983) of what should be their own nation(s) (on this distinction, see Sara Ahmed, “Multiculturalism and the proximity of strangers”, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004)). Seemingly, pluralities of people(s) in and outside France, from Senegal or Madagascar to Quebec or the Antilles, and from “les provinces” to “les banlieues” in France’s hexagon, have their own linguistic varieties (and mixings) of <French> denied recognition and legitimacy. They are ejected from within the alien territories of so called regional, local, marginal, popular, under-developed, dialectical – all terms meaning: bastard and subaltern – “non-languages” (les “dialects”, les parlers populaires et régionaux, les argots). In that sense, the native users/locutors of these supposedly “inferior” (expressively limited, reductively vulgar) idioms are actually orientalized as others in their
very homeland in order to abstractly justify the state as “a space” in which “the belonging” of the “we” that remains unspoken, or is spoken only through the claiming of the right to speak requires “that which is strange in order to be” (The Cultural Politics of Emotion, 99). This is acutely the socio-linguistic situation (or better said: the socio-linguistic ghetto) of what is designated in France as “la langue des cités” (see Zouhour Messili et Hmaid Ben Aziza, “Langage et exclusion. La langue des cités en France”). To the latter, the very status of being a language is of course denied. Such a denial comes for a combination of classist and racist (arabophobic/africanophobic) reasons, as it is either Darija and/or a variety of hybridisms of French and Darija (and other African or Caribbean languages). Such a disapproval is also related to the resistance of such ways of speaking and being in the world towards the hegemony of the “francais academique” and against Phantom Arabic (in the name of which it is also condemned to subalternity).

**Dislocated French, Phantom Arabic and the Decolonial**

What Ahmed in Celui qui est digne d’être aimé (finally) realizes is that French, far from being a “liberating” language is per se a colonial one. And, from his first novel on, Abdellah Taïa dislocates the very French language in which he is writing (or is it writing through?), bringing it within his own, Darija, while somehow remaining in the linguistic closet wherein Phantom Arabic forces him to remain. Such an auto-repression comes at a cost: that of becoming à son corps défendant a (neo) orientalist commodity. But what Ahmed declares to (his ex-lover-to-be Emmanuel) about the alienating power of francocentric French could actually be applied mot à mot equally to the repressive ideological / politico - religious dominance of Phantom Arabic:
Je dois te quitter et quitter ce qui me rattache à toi, à commencer par la langue française. (…) Comment ai-je fait pour construire un lien entre cet univers des idées sophistiquées et ma réalité marocaine si pauvre à l’époque ? Comment ai-je fait pour ne pas voir tout ce que j’étais en train de rater, de tuer, et ce qui se passait autour, en moi, dans ma vraie vie quotidienne et celle de mes sœurs ? Comment ai-je fait pour devenir à ce point aveugle, donner tout de soi à l’autre et à sa culture dominante ?

(98, 99)

Yes, as Jérémie Kouadio N’Guessan, among so many others, puts it in an essay on the “question des langues” in the Ivory Coast, French in that country is in itself “un instrument de domination culturelle”. As it is in both in both metropolitan France (and Genet has lived it in his own “socially colonized” youth) and in its former colonies (and Taïa, Sebbar and Ayouch have had to experience it in different modalities). But so is Phantom Arabic in North Africa (and in the North African diaspora) an instrument of cultural (and socio-political) dominant rule and control, in perhaps an even more perverse way. Since since its alienating nature is hidden under the pretense of being rooted in so called “precious” traditions, “sacred” values, and “heroic” anti-colonial resistance. This explains why - when the “savage” Ahmed of Taïa’s last novel – “Des sauvages, voilà ce que nous sommes (…)” (106) –, colonially domesticated as “Midou”, is renouncing in French. He is also afraid of being on the verge of having lost his “Arabic” (actually his Darija). The latter has been the scarified on the altar of both “French” and “Arab” “civilization”:

(À) cause de toi je suis devenu un autre. Je ne suis plus moi aujourd’hui. Je suis qui ? Je vis dans une nostalgie étrange. Dans le manque de cet autre que j’étais censé devenir avant de te rencontrer et qui n’est jamais advenu. A trente ans je ne parle même plus l’arabe comme avant. (…) Ma langue n’est plus ma langue. (93)

Ahmed is unable to discern it is actually not “Arabic” (which he has never spoken as it was never his language) that he has lost but the Darija of his youth when he was “poor” and “ignorant” – “J’étais pauvre. (…) Je ne savais rien.” (83), and when his French, “une langue
qui n’est pas la mienne” (104), was not “good” – which he was expressing at the time “incorrectly” as “Mon français n’a pas bon.” (84)

If there is one significant common French language link between the four authors/filmmakers reunited in this dissertation, it is that in each case (and in each auto-anthropological scenario) it is a “foreign” (or better said: alien) language. It felt on the subaltern - marginal young Genet as the language of a country he never considered as his own (in that sense Genet is an *apratide d’expression française*). It even became the linguistic prison which he will stylistically subvert from within, before becoming much later the “prisoner of love” of the Fedayeen, whose Palestinian language he literally fantasized as a the living presence of an out of reach Phantom Arabic. French was imposed on Taïa, who, because of being alienated by a Phantom Arabic on behalf of which his own mother tongue, Darija, was a priori excluded. He could never linguistically and stylistically practice that totally unrelatable Arabic (as both a writer and a queer person), and was condemned to think that his only option was French. Such a belief that his own (character) Ahmed (in *Celui qui est digne d’être aimé*) discovers as being an ideological trap and an existential (and also ethico-political) dead-end.

French also became by default the language of Sebbar. As she writes not in her mother tongue but in her mother’s tongue, as her mother tongue would have been her father’s and her country’s Algerian Darija. She was separated from the latter by both (the colonial structure and) her parents. As Danielle Marx-Scouras rightfully and bluntly puts it: “[Sebbar] treats French as a foreign language”. One could say, borrowing Derrida’s famous formula from *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre* which Katouar Harchi reutilizes in a recent essay entitled “Je n’ai qu’une seule langue, ce n’est pas la mienne”, that Sebbar has
only one language, one which is not hers. In sebbar’s case such a language is of course French, and not the “Arabic” of which she dreams, which is what Derrida so rightfully calls “l’infigurable langue de l’autre” (which is actually also the case of each of the authors reunited in this dissertation). Although she never learned it, “Arabic” haunts her writing, actually repressing the Darija spoken by her Algerian family and the people who surrounded her youth. It is again Darija that she ideologically confuses with “Arabic” when encountering in France the language of the North African diaspora immigrants, as she becomes critically conscious that for them French is still a colonial language.

For the young Ayouch, born and raised in the Parisian banlieue of Sarcelles (which he describes himself, in an interview with Liza Béar, as “racially mixed, with Jews, Muslims, Arabs, Blacks and Asians”), French (or what is considered as such by the dominant discourse) was also not part of his idiomatic environment. Sarcelles indeed belongs to a “non-franco-French France”. In the same interview the film director declares: “[I grew up] in a Paris suburb that was isolated culturally from mainstream French society, where people developed a strong sense of “us and them”. Here, we are in our sterile suburban high-rise projects, and over there, glows the City of Light.” He pursues: “This “us and them” sentiment is entrenched, even in a social context (…) The alienation persists.” Such “social context” is of course also a linguistic one, Ayouch was schooled into the francocentric French language but surrounded by an eccentric, marginalized and ostracized mix of languages that constitutes what is pejoratively designated as the “langue des cités”. It is only later on, when he was 30 year old, that he came to live and work in Morocco (he was born in 1969 in France from a Muslim Moroccan father and a Jewish Tunisian mother). He adds: “So when I arrived in Morocco, in 1999, I found a large part
of the population living on the socioeconomic fringe—that includes the children of Ali Zaoua, and later, the adolescents of Horses of God, and the prostitutes in Much Loved.”

This “large part of the population”, while cut off the centrality of Moroccan society, is still sociolinguistically inscribed in the language, which by far (and though culturally silenced) is the native tongue of the people of the country: Darija. But in Morocco the symbolic tyrannical prominence of Phantom Arabic both reduplicates and reinforces its cultural domination. Therefore, encaging in a double linguistic alienation the subaltern people who have no access to French, nor to Arabic. Only a radically decolonial perspective (in Grosfoguel’s sense) applied on both linguistic repressions and on their intricacies can assist the endeavor aimed at getting out of the dilemma and at escaping this perverse duality. As the latter produces and reproduces unspoken suffering and extracts a tremendous human cost in terms of education, legitimate social recognition, economic growth, and freedom of emotional, sexual and queer expressions and modalities of living. As it would be even more “inept” (to use Flaubert’s term again) to conclude a conclusion, I will not.
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