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## (M)other Lands, (M)other Tongues: Resistance to the Linear in Two Postcolonial Moroccan Texts

Julia Charra  
*Bard College*

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(M)other Lands, (M)other Tongues: Resistance to the Linear in Two Postcolonial Moroccan  
Texts

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by  
Julia Charra

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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*To Muszka*

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## Introduction

The language in which literature is written often signifies its allegiances, especially in postcolonial states and postcolonial literature. Ngugi wa Thiong'o posits in *Decolonizing the Mind* that "African literature can only be written in African languages,"<sup>1</sup> and deems that African writers who write in French and English are "continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit,"<sup>2</sup> himself choosing to write in his native language, Gikuyu, after publishing in English for a long time.<sup>3</sup> Ngugi cites authors like Chinua Achebe or Léopold Sédar Senghor, acclaimed for their writing in English and French, respectively. Ngugi does not criticize Senghor, for example, for writing in French, far from it. He even writes that "the French academy was right to honour Senghor" for his literary work, which he calls a "genuine and talented contribution to French literature and language."<sup>4</sup> By calling Senghor's work "French literature," he is assigning it to a category in which it sits uneasily. He then modifies his terminology a few lines down by calling the work of these African authors "Afro-European literature."<sup>5</sup>

Ngugi's categorization of Senghor's literature as French is in line with latter's identification of his own literary production. In the introduction to Sédar Senghor's *Ethiopiennes* poems, Senghor explains why he writes in French: it "is a language with a universal vocation," he justifies. It seems like Senghor has faith in the power of the French language to explain the world in its totality. He opposes his conception of French to that of African languages, whose

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<sup>1</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Nairobi: Sunlitho Ltd. p.23

<sup>2</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o. p.24

<sup>3</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o does not, however, exclusively write in Gikuyu. His latest memoir, *Wrestling with the Devil*, published in 2018, was written in English.

<sup>4</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o. p.26

<sup>5</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o. p.27

words he describes as “naturally imbued with a halo of sap and blood.”<sup>6</sup> While Senghor’s description of French uses terms that have a religious missionary ring, the terms he uses to describe African languages are organic, tied to the body and the earth. To Senghor, the best way to write about Africa is through the prism of the French language.

Ngugi’s categorization of Senghor’s and other African authors’ work as “Afro-European literature” does indeed disturb the literary borders set up by colonial culture. Using the terms “Afro” and “European” hyphenated together does create a kind of bridge, and when describing that term, the word “hybrid” keeps coming up. His labelling of these authors’ works sets it in two distinct geographical spaces, Europe and Africa, in other words two separate points of reference. The theoretical implications of hybridity implies a cultural duality: “admitting that the concept of hybridity goes against a fantasmatic discourse on the unity of original identity, hybridity, like *métissage*, reproduce a dualistic logic, which from two identities form one new one.”<sup>7</sup> This hybridity is exemplified in the name of one of Senghor’s poetry collections, *Éthiopiennes* (*Ethiopics*), published in 1956. The title of the collection is derived from Ethiopia, and put into a form that is reminiscent of Virgil’s *Bucolics*, thus creating a juxtaposition between a classical Western form of poetry while writing about Africa.

The concept of hybridity, even though it goes beyond borders that confine literature within the same national and language boundaries, still assumes that it is made up of two core identities, thus reverting to an essentialist definition of culture. Under Senghor’s faith in the French language to convey “universal” meaning instead of all African languages, lies another

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<sup>6</sup> Senghor, Léopold Sédar. *Les Éthiopiennes*, introduction, found in the notes of Ngugi wa Thiong’o. p.31

<sup>7</sup> Sauvaire, Marion. “Hybridité et diversité culturelle du sujet: des notions pertinentes pour former des sujets lecteurs?” *Littera Incognita*. <https://blogs.univ-tlse2.fr/littera-incognita-2/2016/02/16/numero-4-2011-article-3-ms/>. Accessed March 1, 2020

problem. Not only does the opposition between French and African languages not hold because it essentializes language, it also creates a false binary. Opposing a single language (French) to the thousands of languages spoken in Africa makes no sense:<sup>8</sup> underlying this comparison lies the assumption that all African languages, despite their multiple linguistic and geographical roots, are one and the same. This dichotomy is exemplified in Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* by a phenomenon he calls the "poetics of language-in-itself". It is

the moment when language, as if satisfied with its perfection, ceases to take for its object the recounting of its connection with particular surroundings, to concentrate solely upon its fervor to exceed its limits and reveal thoroughly the elements composing it—solely upon its engineering skill with these.<sup>9</sup>

For Glissant, language severs its ties to outside objects, and becomes in itself a self-referential object. Language becomes its own point of reference, or center, of the text. This use of language reveals a desire to crystallize the world.<sup>10</sup> Like salt, language envelops and settles on its surroundings, creating a stagnating picture. I use the verb "to settle" intentionally to describe the crystallization process to create an echo between the French literary mindset of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and France's political status as one of the main imperialist and colonial powers in the world, occupying spaces through its physical presence, but also through language. Through colonization, the world becomes coated, enveloped with French presence at the expense of the cultures of the colonized. As Svetlana Boym writes, "each local culture was evaluated with regard to the central narrative of progress,"<sup>11</sup> the word "central" referring to colonial powers, that create a hierarchized worldview composed of centers and peripheries. The meaning of Boym's

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<sup>8</sup> According to Wikipedia, there are about 1250 to 2000 different African languages. "Languages of Africa," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages\\_of\\_Africa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Africa). Accessed 21 March 2020

<sup>9</sup> Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translation by Betsy Wing. The University of Michigan Press, 2010. p.25

<sup>10</sup> Stendhal. *De l'Amour*. Paris: Michel-Lévy Frères, 1857

<sup>11</sup> Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001. p.61



words is twofold, in the sense that all local cultures were indeed swallowed up by a central narrative, thus erasing the uniqueness of each culture.

Glissant notices that a new generation of authors who write in French have a desire to unsettle the French language, and to make it break through the suffocating mold established by the French literary canon. Glissant offers a new paradigm called the Poetics of Relation, in which “trajectory, even bent or inflected, no longer applies.”<sup>12</sup> In a sense, the hyphen that marks the bridge between locations in Ngugi’s term “Afro-European” literature is left behind. He mentions that the authors participating in this movement were from the Caribbean, the Maghreb, and some countries in Africa, in other words areas of the world that were colonized by France. Glissant then calls such literature “literature written in French,”<sup>13</sup> a term which I would like to oppose to others like “Afro-European” or “French literature.” The expression “literature written in French,” by not having an adjective describing and defining the word literature, separates the idea of literary creation from belonging to any particular place, and rather focuses on the language of writing. This way of designating a literature opens up the possibility for it to both reach out to and encompass the Other as well. It is not a literature that is self-referential, rather it needs the Other in order to form itself.

Calling all Francophone literature “French literature” is inaccurate. Firstly, the term assumes that the language of writing is intrinsically linked to a nation, and does not leave the possibility of dissociating place and language. Secondly, the term “French literature” used for all literature written in French assumes that all literary production that uses the French language was written by a person of French nationality, thus erasing authors who write in French because it

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<sup>12</sup> Glissant, p. 32

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p. 31

was the language they learned at school, through colonization. These authors are able to gain particular insight into the French language – mastering it perfectly, and yet often learned at the expense of their own mother tongues. These authors from the Maghreb who write in French focus on deterritorializing the French language in their narratives. They apprehend French as strangers, as if to break the long-lasting assumption of a unity between language and place.

Deleuze and Guattari notice that authors who do not write in their native tongue have a tendency to strain the language in which they are writing in order to render a feeling of strangeness and non-naturality that they themselves feel towards that tongue. Deleuze and Guattari write that “*language ceases to be representative in order to stretch toward its extremes or its limits.*”<sup>14</sup> There are two parts to this sentence. If taken at its root meaning, the word “representative” means something that is shown again several times, it is re-presented. When language is representative, it becomes familiar, natural. This is what the authors mentioned by Glissant do not do with French. They seek to “stretch” the language, a word that implies a sort of painful physicality, and has to do with the way they manipulate French in order to make it difficult for the reader to digest. Glissant’s characterization of “literature written in French” as opposed to “French literature” is a form of such a “stretch.” He is deconstructing a compressed term, thus giving room for other modes of expression to exist within the French language. He is elongating, both literally and conceptually, the possibilities of defining what it means to write in French.

Writing in French while emphasizing the fact that it is not the obvious, or natural choice to write in that language, is conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari’s image of the rhizome.

Glissant defines the rhizome in connection with its anti-colonial implications. The rhizome does

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<sup>14</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. “What Is a Minor Literature?”. Translated by Robert Brinkley. *Mississippi Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Essays Literary Criticism (Winter/Spring 1983). p.23

not imagine identity as formed by a single root, or point of origin, but rather as a “network” of intertwining roots, “spreading either in the ground or in the air” which gives the idea of a collaboration, but also of an expansion into space. Glissant opposes the rhizome to the “predatory rootstock.” The single root with one point of origin takes over, it seeks to conquer rather than to collaborate. A literature that sees the French language as Other apprehends the language as a stranger, does not seek to have language take over the elements that it describes, but rather uses the language to explore Other possibilities of being within that very language.

Why not, then, return to African languages in order to decolonize literature, as Ngugi wa Thiong’o so strongly urges? Why create inclusive spaces within the language of the colonizer, instead of reclaiming languages that were lost, or for some, not even learned? While the focus of this project is not to answer this question in its totality, briefly explaining why some Francophone authors from the Maghreb do write in French, and not Arabic, is important. I would first of all like to challenge Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s claim that the only possible way to decolonize African literature is through an exclusive return to African languages. He cites Obi Wali to support his argument, who writes that “true African literature must be written in African languages.”<sup>15</sup> I would like to draw attention to the slipperiness of the term “true,” as it can be associated with anti-rhizomic ideas that essentialize language. By making an exclusive definition for what “true” African literature can be, not only is language being essentialized to represent a place, it does so by excluding the possibility of making meaning in other languages as well.

Svetlana Boym argues that the very concept of return is imbued with a form of Romanticism; it demonstrates an impossible desire for a return to an idyllic, edenic time. I argue that Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s argument is colored by a similar sentiment. Boym writes that

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<sup>15</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o. p.24

modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history.<sup>16</sup>

I wish to nuance my argument by stating that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is not, when calling for a return to African languages in literature, expressing an ahistorical or apolitical desire to recreate an "edenic unity of time," or a pre-colonial past, but rather that he is pushing for African languages to occupy the literary space through their presence, a space too long occupied and still occupied by the languages of colonizers.

I challenge, however, the aspect of Ngũgĩ's claim which excludes the possibility for literatures to be anti-colonial while also being written in the language of the colonizer, such as French. Scholar Réda Bensmaïa presents different reactions from Maghrebi writers after their countries became independent:

some [writers] almost renounced writing; others tried to assume their acultural situation by continuing to write in French, even if they had to "mistreat" the language to make it say what it couldn't necessarily say; others, finally, tried to write in literary Arabic and some in spoken Arabic; some even in Berber.<sup>17</sup>

My project focuses on the second case mentioned by Bensmaïa: writers who used their "acultural situation" in their writing. What, then, does "mistreating" the French language look like for some of these writers, and in what ways does this "mistreatment" enable a form of postcolonial thought?

In order to investigate these questions, I will look at two novels by francophone Moroccan authors: *L'Amour Bilingue* (*Love in Two Languages*, translated by Richard Howard) by Abdelkébir Khatibi, published in 1983, and *Les Yeux Baissés* (*With Downcast Eyes*) by Tahar Ben Jelloun, published in 1991. Khatibi was born in the Moroccan city of Al-Jadidah in 1938,

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<sup>16</sup> Boym. p.55

<sup>17</sup> Bensmaïa, Réda. "La langue de l'étranger ou la francophonie barrée." *Rue Descartes*, No. 37, "L'étranger dans la mondialité" (Septembre 2002), p. 67

under the French protectorate, and died in 2009. He received his doctorate in sociology from the Sorbonne university in Paris, where he writes his thesis called *The Maghrebi Novel*. Some of his famous works include the novels *La Mémoire tatouée* (*Tattooed Memory*, 1971) and *Le Livre du Sang* (*The Book of Blood*, 1979). In 1994, he is awarded the Grand Prize by the French Academy for his work. In 1998, he is awarded the Grand Prize of Morocco, and in 2003, the Mediterranean Africa/Maghreb prize. In 2008, he receives the prize of the Société des Gens de Lettres, a prestigious French literary society, for the entirety of his work.<sup>18</sup>

The plot of *Love in Two Languages*, the first novel around which this project is centered, is more discursive than descriptive or plot-driven: switching between a narration in the first and third person, the narrator, a Moroccan man from a well-to-do family, uses the love story he has with a Frenchwoman as a bouncing board to discuss bilingualism and his difficult relation to the French language. The novel does not have a linear narrative structure. Rather, it works in snapshot-like scenes, alternating between moments where the narrator is travelling around the world, moments between the narrator and his lover, and scenes where the narrator is by the ocean and in the water. The ocean is an almost constant presence in the novel, between character and setting. It enables the narrator to have discursive meditations about love and language.

Tahar Ben Jelloun was born in 1944 in Fes, Morocco. He studied philosophy at the Mohammed V University in Rabat. After publishing his first collection of poetry, *Hommes sous linceul de silence* (*Men Under Shroud of Silence*) in 1971, he moved to France, and received his doctorate in social psychology from the University of Paris in 1975. In 1987, he published *La Nuit Sacrée* (*The Sacred Night*), which receives the Prix Goncourt, the most prestigious prize in

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<sup>18</sup> Rousseau, Christine. "Abdelkébir Khatibi, philosophe, sociologue et romancier." *Le Monde*. [https://www.lemonde.fr/disparitions/article/2009/03/25/abdelkebir-khatibi-philosophe-sociologue-et-romancier\\_1172427\\_3382.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/disparitions/article/2009/03/25/abdelkebir-khatibi-philosophe-sociologue-et-romancier_1172427_3382.html). Accessed on March 1, 2020

the French literary world. The novel is translated into over 40 languages. Ben Jelloun is also known for his nonfiction work, such as *Le Racisme expliqué à ma fille* (*Racism Explained to my Daughter*, 1998) and *L'Islam expliqué aux enfants* (*Islam explained to children*, 2002), which he wrote following the rise of Islamophobia after the 9/11 attacks in the US. Ben Jelloun was also a contributor to the daily French newspaper *Le Monde* (*The World*).<sup>19</sup>

*With Downcast Eyes* follows the journey of a young Berber girl who is born in a mountain village in Morocco, but moves to Paris with her family after her younger brother dies, poisoned by her aunt. The novel starts with a cryptic prophecy, in which the narrator's grandfather tells her of a hidden treasure only she can find. Written in the first person, the novel recounts the young girl's first interactions with France and the French language as she integrates the French school system and struggles to learn French, and deals with the feelings of strangeness that come with suddenly being thrown into a whole new environment. The narrator progressively creates a new mental landscape for herself, in a kind of limbo between Morocco and France, as she tries to form a sense of self that includes, but also goes beyond the two countries she has lived in.

For the purposes of this project, I am interested in selecting moments from *Love in Two Languages* and *With Downcast Eyes* that “mistreat” the French language, as Bensmaïa puts it. By “mistreatment,” I understand the different ways in which, from non-linear overarching narrative structures, to sentences sometimes being syntactically incorrect, or at least jarring enough to have to go over twice, Khatibi and Ben Jelloun make the French language uneasy to read. These unsettling uses of French are then heightened through the presence of language as such, by being

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<sup>19</sup> Pallardy, Richard. “Tahar Ben Jelloun”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tahar-Ben-Jelloun>. Accessed on March 1, 2020

one of the central narrative themes in both novels. For instance, in *Love in Two Languages*, the change in setting is either confusingly abrupt, or on the contrary, the reader is left wondering where they are for pages on end. In *With Downcast Eyes*, the protagonist's initial resistance to learning French has the effect of decentering French as the de-facto language of narrative.

This thesis argues that the “mistreatment” of the French language in *Love in Two Languages* and *With Downcast Eyes* deconstructs the shackles of a geographically defined literary space. In that very deconstruction caused by linguistic disturbances, one reads traces of colonial violence, which results, on the one hand, in a productive tension between the simultaneous creation of new literary spaces and modes of expression, and on the other hand in the realization that an integral part of these spaces recounts how colonial violence has sculpted the creation of these spaces.

Deleuze and Guattari write that “the primary characteristic of a minor literature involves all the ways in which the language is effected by a strong co-efficient of deterritorialization.”<sup>20</sup> My first chapter focuses on the instances of deterritorialization in the two novels, in other words the moments where location is made ambiguous. The first part of this chapter will look at moments of structural non-linearity in the novels, as is the case in *Love in Two Languages*, where the changes between settings are jarring and the lack of delimited settings confusing. In *With Downcast Eyes*, the prologue is a moment in the text that seems to happen in another realm, partly due to it being written in italics, which physically separates it from the rest of the text. I also examine how these moments of deterritorialization give the temporality of these two texts a nonlinear aspect. The second part of this chapter focuses on the ways in which the specific physical settings of the novels are marked by a form of deterritorialization. They enable a form

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<sup>20</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. p.19

of errantry for the protagonists of the novels. For example, *Love in Two Languages* is marked by the sea as the main borderless setting. In *With Downcast Eyes*, there is an overlap in the narrator's mind between locations in France and Morocco. The third part of this chapter will focus on how the various settings of the novels influence the narrators' use of language.

My second chapter will look at the moments in the novels make a connection between instances of linguistic and physical (post)colonial violence. Using Glissant's theorization of Western myth as bearing within it a filiative dynamic of violence, I explore the ways in which Khatibi and Ben Jelloun's texts do not recount violence using a linear mode of narration, but rather how they integrate the filiative patterns of colonial violence into their narration, and deconstruct that pattern from within. The first part of this chapter will look at moments of violence that emerge in the texts' postcolonial settings, through which Khatibi and Ben Jelloun establish parallels with colonial violence. The juxtaposition of colonial and postcolonial forms of violence exposes the linear and repetitive structure of (post)colonial violence. The second part of this chapter examines the moments in which the texts' protagonists resist to violence in the form of humor. The protagonists perform a simultaneous act of shielding themselves from violence while also deflecting it. The third and last part of my chapter investigates the moments in which the narrators of our texts ironically adopt a narrative structure of the Western myth of violence, only to deconstruct it from within. Using wordplay in their descriptions of violence, the texts invite a multiplicity of readings that derail the monolingual narrative of violence.



## Chapter I

### Errant Liminality

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define territorialized language as *representative*. There is a relation of equivalence between the signifier and the signified. The word written on the page serves as territory, as space (taking up visual space on the page, sonorous space through speech) for the concept it represents. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word territory as “the extent of land belonging to or under the jurisdiction of a ruler, state, or group of people.”<sup>21</sup> When a word is deterritorialized, the equivalence between signified and signifier is disturbed: words cease to mean what they do in the context of one particular nation, or only one system of interpretation. The word doesn’t have a land it is attached to. Therefore, when words are deterritorialized, they do not represent, or reproduce meaning, but displace it instead. Victor Turner proposes the idea of liminality to make explicit the relationship between the refusal of a binary mode of understanding and the creation of a space that is not defined by borders:

a new arbitrariness appears in the relation between signifier and signified - things cease to signify other things, for everything is, the Saussurean significative dualism yields to a basal non-dualism where signifier and signified dissolve into indiscriminable existence.<sup>22</sup>

Deterritorialized language refuses the Saussurean binary. The signifier, the physical container of the word, does not represent the signified in a linear manner. Rather, the signified takes on a plurality of meanings, thus changing with it the meaning of the signifier. Deterritorialized language engages in a mutual work of reconfiguration. Tahar Ben Jelloun and Abdelkebir Khatibi’s work performs precisely such a deterritorialization.

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<sup>21</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. Definition for “territory”.

[https://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=territory&\\_searchBtn=Search](https://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=territory&_searchBtn=Search). Accessed April 4, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Turner, Victor, quoted by Kalua, Feston. “Homi Bhabha’s Third Space and African Identity”, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 [Post-colonial Theory] (June 2009) p. 23

Ben Jelloun and Khatibi's novels detach themselves from the hegemonic binary that associates the French literary tradition to the act of writing in French. Their texts perform such an "arbitrariness" through deterritorialization: their structure does not follow a linear narrative track. The movements of their characters are sometimes arbitrary and aimless. The characters also create new spaces devoid of geographical attachment or reality. By creating a distinction between the progression of narratives and the spaces in which those narratives are taking place, Ben Jelloun and Khatibi's texts manifest the "arbitrariness" that associates narrative and territory. By doing this, both writers resist entering an already-existing French literary space. Instead, they create a new Francophone literary cartography, one that challenges the colonial supremacy of the French language. Both Khatibi and Ben Jelloun learned French under the French protectorate in Morocco, but they encountered the French language as Other. It was impossible for them to inscribe themselves in a literary space in which the French language and French territory were seen as one and the same, where language was a direct representative of the nation that it is associated to.

The concepts of beginning, middle and end in Khatibi's and Ben Jelloun's novels are no longer relevant. The continuity of time, space and even person is distorted. Glissant mentions three stages of narrative trajectories in the *Poetics of Relation*. These paths are comprised of a center and peripheries. In the first stage, the narrative starts in a center, then moves in a linear direction towards a periphery. The second stage involves starting at the periphery and making a journey towards a center. Glissant mentions St-John Perse as a poet belonging to the second stage: St-John Perse was French but grew up in Guadeloupe. In his book of poems *Éloges à Crusoé*, he rewrites the story of Robinson Crusoe by inverting the narrative direction: St-John

Perse longs for Guadeloupe while writing from the metropolis, to which he has returned.

Khatibi's and Ben Jelloun's novels best corresponds to the third stage:

in a third stage the trajectory is abolished; the arrow-like projection becomes curved. The poet's word leads from periphery to periphery, and, yes, it reproduces the track of circular nomadism; that is, it makes every periphery into a center; furthermore, it abolishes the very notion of center and periphery.<sup>23</sup>

Khatibi's and Ben Jelloun's texts are not "arrow-like projection[s]." The protagonist meanders through places and time in a non-linear way. The different passages do not have a linear chronological relationship to each other, and the changes in setting are either blurry or abrupt. The lack of clear temporal or chronological indications turns the novel into a space that is not defined by its attachment to a particular location. They become novels that are acutely aware of their existence as constructed objects.

The linearity that Khatibi's and Ben Jelloun's texts refuse is explained by Edward Said as rhetorical processes by which Western culture legitimized its hegemony: making cultural elements (which authors are to be read and taught in curriculums, for instance) pass as natural through the establishment of an unquestioned cultural tradition. He writes that "affiliation becomes a form of representing the filiative processes to be found in nature, although affiliation takes validated nonbiological social and cultural forms."<sup>24</sup> Nature is what cannot be avoided, what humanity doesn't have under its control. In order to justify its legitimacy, Western culture coopted a rhetoric of "nature" and applied it to cultural elements, thus conferring onto Western culture a hegemonic status. Khatibi's and Ben Jelloun's non-linear narrative structure highlights the constructedness and non-naturality of linearity in novels. A linear narrative structure, with a

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<sup>23</sup> Glissant. p. 29

<sup>24</sup> Said, Edward. "Secular Criticism," *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983. p.23

beginning, middle, and end that mimics a filiative chronological unfolding of events is precisely what Khatibi and Ben Jelloun's writing avoids.

Ben Jelloun and Khatibi's writing deconstructs hegemonic linear structure in their novels. They disturb the structures of their novels, refusing the idea that a chronological linear progression must occur. The hegemonic movement of Western culture, described by Said as a process of "affiliation" that adopts a filiative form, can be found in Glissant's description of *arrowlike* poetics. Glissant associates linear writing with a colonialist mindset, writing that

the movement of this poetics [arrowlike nomadism] can be located in space as trajectories, their poetic import being aimed at completing these trajectories in order to abolish them. These trajectories link the places of the world into a whole made up of peripheries, which are listed in function of a Center.<sup>25</sup>

By writing their novels in a nonlinear way, and unsettling space, Khatibi and ben Jelloun decolonize their writing. There is no "Center," as the characters drift between places with no particular goal or aim in mind. These movements enable the characters to create non-geographically-defined spaces of their own, in which they create their own relationship to language.

In *Love in Two Languages*, the body of the novel displays a lack of coevalness between the necessary linearity of the reading process and the non-linearity of the plot. For instance, the narrator recounts going to a variety of places in the span of a single paragraph:

he went from bed to bed, staying hard from one continent to the next: assembly-line ecstasies and multilingual whores from one language to the next. He took drugs with the Chinese, the Chinese who hold themselves upright like ideograms. They need a language like Chinese to keep them alive. There, too, he danced with Balinese, entering nearly naked a theater of shadows. One day, he went slumming in the brothels of Bangkok and Singapore. Curious, curious idioms. Later, he traversed immense forests, where the roots of some of the trees climbed back towards the sky.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Glissant. p. 28

<sup>26</sup> Khatibi, Abdelkebir. *Love in Two Languages*. Translation by Richard Howard. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990. p.45

The narrator creates a fantastical, dream-like atmosphere in this passage by compressing space and time into the physical body of a few lines. The narrator writes about these spaces as if they were right next to each other, for instance by writing “one day, he went slumming in the brothels of Bangkok and Singapore.” The temporal marker “one day” not only distorts the idea of geographical distance between the places he is going to, but also distorts time, as if the narrator were blurring the places together in his mind, thus removing the borders between them.

The uncertainty of setting that occurs with the narrator’s simultaneous presence in “Bangkok and Singapore” seems reflected in his next sentence: “later, he traversed immense forests, where the roots of some trees climbed back towards the sky.” The upturned roots harken back to the feelings of uprootedness produced by the lack of clear geographical or temporal boundaries in the narrator’s travels. The description of the forests as “immense” give a feeling of endlessness that reflect the lack of clarity as to where the narrator finds himself. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of places that really exist with fantastic places such as this forest put into question the reality of the idea of “place,” turning “Bangkok and Singapore” into fictitious places themselves. The forest is also reminiscent of Glissant’s interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome, as intertwining roots “spreading either in the ground or in the air.”<sup>27</sup> The travels of the protagonist of *Love in Two Languages* are rhizomic, in the sense that they are not anchored in a departure and arrival point, and are comprised of a mixture of places both real and fictitious.

Not only is location made ambiguous in the span of a single paragraph, it is also often unclear where the protagonist is during most of the novel, a great part of which consists in internal discourse and mental meanderings. *Love in Two Languages* is separated into parts by asterisks in the French edition and lines in the English one. Each part marks a separate scene, or

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<sup>27</sup> Glissant. p. 11

a different thought from the narrator. One of the parts starts with questions the protagonist has about his lover: “he asked her about her hometown. Why had she left it so young? What secret drama?”<sup>28</sup> The next passage, separated by an asterisk, starts with another question by the narrator: “was she asleep? He whispered her name to barely wake her up: was she still sleeping?”<sup>29</sup>. The different are linked, not by a linear progression of thought or plot, but by a consistent atmosphere of confusion created by the dismembered thoughts of the narrator.

The condensed blurring together of space and time that occurs in the passage quoted in the previous paragraph creates a confusion similar to the lack of transition between the first and third person narration in the novel, which alternates jarringly between its different sections. The last sentence of a section reads: “I was struck by panic and I went out.”<sup>30</sup> The first sentence of the following passage reads: “he walked for a long time, alone, on the beach.”<sup>31</sup> The narrative continuity between the consecutive paragraphs is cut by a change from first to third person, with no explanation as to why, even though the narrative voice remains the same. The narrator becomes the protagonist and speaks in the first person.

Sometimes, the narrative voice is even made ambiguous within the same paragraph: “He woke up in the middle of the night and jotted down: I will have met you, carried by your vertigo, to be blinded by it.”<sup>32</sup> The following paragraphs, the last two in that passage, are also in the first person. The colon is the only separation between the third and first person. In French, the narrator says “nota,” which I translated by “jotting down.” *Nota* gives the impression of taking a quick note. However, the two paragraphs that follow feel like the first person voice has

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<sup>28</sup> Khatibi. p.20

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p.22

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p.36

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p.37

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p.24

fully taken over the narrative, going beyond note form. He quotes his lover, who says “you are my Oceanic orient.” The lack of clear transition between third and first person narrator forces the reader to pay particular attention to a text that is in constant flux. The change in narrative persons refuses to give the reader a stable narrative thread to follow. It breaks the illusion of narrative continuity in the text.

The concepts of beginning, middle and end are no longer relevant. The continuity of time, space and even person is distorted. Glissant mentions three stages of narrative trajectories in the *Poetics of Relation*. These paths are comprised of a center and peripheries. In the first stage, the narrative starts in a center, then moves in a linear direction towards a periphery. The second stage involves starting at the periphery and making a journey towards a center. Glissant mentions St-John Perse as a poet belonging to the second stage: St-John Perse was French but grew up in Guadeloupe. In his book of poems *Éloges à Crusoé*, he rewrites the story of Robinson Crusoe by inverting the narrative direction: St-John Perse longs for Guadeloupe while writing from the metropolis, to which he has returned. Khatibi’s novel best corresponds to the third stage:

in a third stage the trajectory is abolished; the arrowlike projection becomes curved. The poet’s word leads from periphery to periphery, and, yes, it reproduces the track of circular nomadism; that is, it makes every periphery into a center; furthermore, it abolishes the very notion of center and periphery.<sup>33</sup>

Khatibi’s text is not an “arrowlike projection”. Instead, the structure of the novel turns upon itself. The protagonist meanders through places and time in a non-linear way. The different passages do not have a linear chronological relationship to each other, and the changes in setting are either blurry or abrupt. The lack of clear temporal or chronological indications turns the

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<sup>33</sup> Glissant. p.29

novel into a space that is not defined by its attachment to a particular location. It becomes a novel that is acutely aware of its existence as a constructed object.

In de-structuring narrative continuity, Khatibi reminds us that the presupposed “order” of a book is a construct. The text’s narrative continuity does not mimic a chronological unfolding of events as if to reproduce, through cultural production, the idea of a natural progression. Edward Said explains the rhetoric processes by which Western culture legitimized its hegemony: making cultural elements (which authors are to be read and taught in curriculums, for instance) pass as natural through the establishment of an unquestioned cultural tradition. He writes that “affiliation becomes a form of representing the filiative processes to be found in nature, although affiliation takes validated nonbiological social and cultural forms.”<sup>34</sup> Khatibi’s non-linear narrative structure highlights the constructedness and non-naturality of linearity in novels. A linear narrative structure, with a beginning, middle, and end that mimics an “arrowlike” and filiative chronological unfolding of events is precisely what Khatibi avoids.

Ben Jelloun disturbs narrative structure in ways that suggest an overlap of different periods of time. The prologue in *With Downcast Eyes* is written in italics, which visually separates it from the rest of the novel. In the prologue, the narrator’s grandfather tells her the following secret: “*there are treasures hidden in islands. Ours is in the mountains. We are people of the earth and we turn our backs to the sea. I don’t know what an island is. No matter! I learned the earth the way one learns to read and write....*”<sup>35</sup> The awkward grammatical phrasing “*learned the earth*” sounds as strange in English as it does in French (“*appris la terre*”). The lack of a connector such as “from,” or “about,” creates a feeling of visceral closeness to the land. His

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<sup>34</sup> Said. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. p. 23

<sup>35</sup> Ben Jelloun. p.11



direct association between the “*earth*” and “*read[ing] and writ[ing]*” defines language as intrinsically linked to and inseparable from one’s place of origin. The grandfather’s anchorage to land is made even more potent by his categorical dismissal of the sea: “*we turn our backs to the sea.*” The grandfather defines his sense of belonging by identifying himself with one type of geographical setting, “*the mountains,*” but also by excluding another, “*the sea.*” His sense of identity is rooted in opposition, which explains his cryptic claim: “*I don’t know what an island is.*” An island is a body of land that is defined by the water around it. His claim makes sense: he cannot understand something that can only be defined through its relation to something else.

The italics of the prologue alter the form the words, as if one were looking through a body of water. The italics make the text literally and figuratively oblique and give the grandfather’s prophecy a feeling of spatiotemporal distance. The grandfather is speaking Berber, but the reader is getting the narrator’s translated memory in French. The italics signify the presence of the Other, of another language that is present but not accessible to the eyes and ears of the reader. Something more to be said here

In *The Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida writes two statements: “1. *We only ever speak one language.* / 2. *We never speak only one language.*”<sup>36</sup> The syntactic parallelism between the two statements literalize Derrida’s statement in physically showing the paradoxical coexistence of the fluidity between languages and the impossibility to speak more than one language at once. In French, statement number 1 can even be understood as having both meanings: “*on ne parle jamais qu’une seule langue*” can mean both statement 1 and 2, depending on how one translates “*jamais,*” which can mean “never” or “ever.” In the prologue,

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<sup>36</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre ou la prothèse d’origine*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996. p. 21. All translations of Derrida are my own.

the language the reader has access to is French. The italics distort the text in a literal way and show the presence of another language hiding behind the one explicitly shown to the reader.

The italics create a deterritorializing effect on the prologue. The grandfather's claims about an absolute sense of identity are simultaneously deconstructed by the italics. The feelings of immediacy he shares with the land contrast with the impression of distance created by the italics. The italics are also a sign that the novel refutes the idea of a linear narrative. The prologue (from Greek pro- before and logos- speech) happens before the story starts. However, the narrator is looking back onto her childhood from the future, using the past tense. Her bilingual memory challenges her grandfather's claims that different identities cannot be interlocked. The movement of the narrator is neither that of an outsider looking into a strange world, nor that of an insider who only knows that world. She is in a liminal space, one which moves between past and present, between France and Morocco, while also being rooted in neither.

This liminal space exemplifies what Homi Bhabha theorizes as liminality in the context of postcolonialism, positing that the creation of a Third Space rejects the idea of an absolute or hegemonic sense of identity. Feston Kalua explains Bhabha's theory as such:

Like an irruption, Homi Bhabha's idea of liminality as 'the beyond' is not an overdetermined space but one loaded with ambiguity; it represents an act of unleashing that post-dialectical moment when people reject structures and hegemonies and occupy any one of the heterogeneous spaces where they negotiate narratives of their existences as well as of particular spaces of meanings and different identities within the postcolonial condition.<sup>37</sup>

Summarize quote above... Khatibi and Ben Jelloun's texts manifest liminality through the image of the ocean. Their narrative use the ocean as a way to signify non-linear time while creating a relation to a space that is literally deterritorialized. The ocean becomes a productive force that

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<sup>37</sup> Kalua. p.25

creates “ambiguity” in the space-time continuum of the novels. The ocean has long been used in a linear mode of representation as a trope to signify an origin or beginning, like in foundational religious texts such as the Bible<sup>38</sup> or the Quran,<sup>39</sup> or in psychoanalysis. For Freud, “the newborn who has not yet established the boundaries between his Ego and the mother’s body” lives in a state of what he calls oceanic connectedness.<sup>40</sup> Khatibi and Ben Jelloun’s texts deconstruct these tropes of linear origins, rendering them artificial. While Ben Jelloun uses the ocean as a metaphor, Khatibi makes it present as one of the settings in his novel.

*With Downcast Eyes* uses aquatic metaphors to deconstruct linear origins. Ben Jelloun’s narrator describes her childhood in a mountain village in Morocco, saying, “my past was very simple, limpid, made of repetitions, without any surprises nor startles. I bathed in this time without stirring too much.”<sup>41</sup> The narrator uses aquatic metaphors to describe her childhood. Time does not go forward in an “arrow-like movement,”<sup>42</sup> to use Glissant’s words, but folds over on itself, creating repetition. This repetition of time creates a feeling akin to the ocean: the commas give the sentence a rhythmical wave-like scansion.

The oceanic quality of the passage of time echoes Julia Kristeva’s interpretation of the Freudian concept of Oceanic connectedness. She describes the person experiencing it as feeling a kind of

belief. Belief, not in the sense of ‘supposing’ but in the powerful sense of an unshakeable certitude, a sensorial plenitude, and ultimate truth that the subject experiences as an exorbitant sur-viv-al, indistinctly sensorial and mental, in short ek-static.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> In the Bible, water is one of the first creations of God, and is thus tied to the beginning of the world in religious imagination: “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” Gen 1:1 and 1:2.

<sup>39</sup> I use a verse from the Quran in parallel with a close reading of a quote from Khatibi in a later paragraph.

<sup>40</sup> Kristeva, Julia. “A Freudian Approach: The Pre-Religious Need to Believe.” <http://www.kristeva.fr/believe.html>. Accessed April 5, 2020

<sup>41</sup> Ben Jelloun, p.104

<sup>42</sup> Glissant, p.25

<sup>43</sup> Kristeva, Julia. “A Freudian Approach: The Pre-Religious Need to Believe”

The subject “experiences” life in the Oceanic state, and is therefore immanent, just like Ben Jelloun’s narrator who “bathes” in time. The repetitiveness of time creates in the narrator a feeling of passivity. The narrator also says her past was “simple,” a word that comes from the latin roots “semel” (one) and “plo” (fold), and evokes linearity. The idea of the narrator’s past being *onefold* is contradictory to the repetitiveness with which it coexists. The young protagonist does not yet have any idea of the world that lies outside her village. The narrator is the same character, but she is looking retrospectively at her past, and is therefore able to discern a repetitive pattern in it. The narrator’s awareness of repetition in her own past shows that it is impossible to simultaneously be in an Oceanic state while writing about it. The feeling of Oceanic connectedness corresponds to a “sensorial plenitude.” The act of writing then necessarily breaks this plenitude by creating, through punctuation, a constructed Oceanic affect, thus defeating the immediacy that characterizes the very concept. The oceanic metaphors create a tension in the perception of time that characterize the narrator’s past as liminal. The past is composed of different temporal patterns and overlapping perspectives: that of the narrator as a child, and that of the narrator telling her story as a grown up.

Khatibi’s novel goes one step further in its deconstruction of the oceanic-as-origin trope. If Ben Jelloun’s text deconstructs the oceanic with aquatic metaphors and overlapping timelines, on the one hand, Khatibi’s narrator, on the other hand, is self-conscious of the effect that the ocean has on him. The protagonist finds himself aimlessly erring in the sea at several points in the novel. The idea of the aquatic beginning of the world suggests the sea as a womb. The narrator offers the analogy between language and mother through the French homonyms *mère* (mother) and *mer* (sea). Khatibi writes, “the sea forced me, not to reformulate everything, but to

liquidate within me any finality, any category of original beginning.”<sup>44</sup> When Khatibi writes that “the sea forced” him, the sea is given a quality of creative force, and yet that very force leads the protagonist to let go of concepts pertaining to “finality” and “beginning.” In other words, linear trajectories are undermined.

Khatibi’s image of the sea runs contrary to its depiction/presence in the Quran. In the Qur’an, for example, the sea is the element from which creation is formed, but it remains a passive element. In the Al-Anbya (The Prophets) chapter of the Quran, we read, “those who disbelieved [have] not considered that the heavens and the earth were a joined entity, and We separated them and made from water every living thing? Then will they not believe?”<sup>45</sup> Water is a passive element, but it is the element from which all things emanate. However, in Khatibi, the sea is active. The protagonist stays cryptic in what he means by “finality” and “original beginning.” By turning the sea into an active agent and giving it the power to push back against any form of linear narrative trajectories, Khatibi’s text brings to the surface narrative dynamics already present in the Quran, but decenters the driving narrative force by attributing it to a natural element. The protagonist is no longer in control of his movements, he lets himself be carried away by the sea.

Carried away by the sea in relation to errantry. In Khatibi, the third-person narrator seems conscious that the protagonist’s attraction to the ocean is not simply a demonstration of the feeling of Oceanic connectedness. Rather, that very feeling is both literalized through the presence of the ocean, but also deconstructed through the narrator’s analysis of the protagonist’s relation to the ocean: “since childhood, he felt receptive to the wind, to the sea. This thought of

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<sup>44</sup> Khatibi, Abdelkébir. *L’Amour Bilingue*. Paris: Fata Morgana, 1983. p.107. My translation. All future quotations from *Love in Two Languages* are taken from the original text and are my own translations.

<sup>45</sup> Quran 21:30

errantry, in love, was his great consolation. Ritual errantry that initiated him to the total presence of the visible.”<sup>46</sup> There is, in Khatibi, a form of oceanic. He is, after all, “receptive” to the ocean. However, the words “thought of errantry” in the next sentence deconstruct the idea of one-sided passivity implied by the idea of *receptiveness* and intellectualize the protagonist’s errantry.

Like Ben Jelloun’s character whose past is made of “repetition,” Khatibi’s protagonist goes through a “ritual errantry,” which gives an image of repeated temporality. This idea of errantry and ritual, however, create an oxymoron when paired together. Betsy Wing writes in the introduction to *Poetics of Relation* that “errantry follows neither an arrowlike trajectory nor one that is circular or repetitive.”<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, Feston Kalua emphasizes the importance of rituality in the creation of liminal spaces: “what prompted Turner to arrogate a cultural significance to liminality, these culturally invisible zones, is the contrapuntal character and transformative nature of ritual, which necessitates the emergence of those border spaces.”<sup>48</sup> A ritual is a ceremony with symbolic meaning that is meant to happen over and over at fixed times. The protagonist’s “ritual errantry” therefore has a double movement. He errs within the fixed context of the ritual, which repeats itself regularly in time. Both components feed off each other and help the protagonist access “the total presence of the visible.”<sup>49</sup> The meeting of both errantry and ritual is, to use Kalua’s words, “transformative.” The bend in time created by the protagonist’s errant movements in the ocean, which enable the formation of a space that is neither here nor there, neither past nor present. Rituality implies a kind of stability that errantry lacks. The marriage of errantry and rituality thus creates a liminal space that adopts the structure of Oceanic connectedness, but challenges the idea of “belief,” explained as an “unshakeable

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<sup>46</sup> Khatibi. p.37

<sup>47</sup> Wing, Betsy. Introduction to Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. p. xvi

<sup>48</sup> Kalua. p.2

<sup>49</sup> Khatibi. p.26

certitude, a sensorial plenitude” by Kristeva. The rituality of the oceanic space becomes a space that enables, or “shores up,” to use Kristeva’s words, uncertainty, a lack of direction or regularity. Mention Khatibi again.

The narrator in Ben Jelloun becomes self-conscious of her own errant condition when she sees that time, language, and place are intertwined. Unlike Khatibi’s protagonist, Ben Jelloun’s narrator wants to leave her errant state. Haunted by memories of her village in Morocco she attempts to exorcise them by practicing verb tense consistency. “I actively worked on mastering tense agreements,” she proclaims, “I did exercises and didn’t use the present. This amused me, because I knew that on the day I didn’t mix tenses anymore, I would have really left the village.”<sup>50</sup> In French, the word “tenses” or *temps* carries a double signification: verb tenses and temporality. In the original text, “temps” is plural, and could also be translated by “times.” The narrator writes of a disconnect between the language she speaks and the place she mentally inhabits. Her grammatical “exercises” bear a ritualistic quality. She has to repeat them over and over in order to achieve results and leave her village behind. This passage taps into the “transformative nature of ritual”<sup>51</sup> mentioned above. The repeated French grammatical exercises, like a ritual, transform the narrator’s relationship to both time and place, invoking other tenses than the present.

Moreover, the narrator speaks of a “concordance” of times to describe this transformative ritual. The French for “tense agreement” is “*concordance des temps*.” While *temps* signifies both verb tenses as well as temporalities, “*concordance des temps*” implies that all the asynchronous and anachronistic times came together in a mystical plane. This “*concordance des temps*” creates

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<sup>50</sup> Ben Jelloun. p.106

<sup>51</sup> Kalua. p.2

a feeling similar to Khatibi's expression "total presence of the visible." The concepts of "total" or "concordance" imply a coming-together that creates spaces which transcend time and space through constant and recurring movement.

The characters in our texts create new mental spaces that are temporally and geographically ambiguous, bearing patterns of errant rituality. The deterritorialized spaces that the characters create enable them to re-word language. In *With Downcast Eyes*, the narrator's use of the French language to shift the geography and temporality in which she exists. The novel demonstrates how the liminal space she creates through language requires effort through "exercise." By showing the effort associated to learning and speaking French while writing in French, Ben Jelloun habituates the reader to see French as something constructed, not as the natural and only way of expressing oneself.

In *Love in Two Languages*, Khatibi stages the diplomacy of languages in transitory settings. In the following passage from Khatibi's novel, it is a pre-existing setting that triggers the protagonist's realization that his understanding of French goes through Arabic, thus showing that French is not the natural or obvious language for him to speak. The setting of the airport physicalizes the constant movement of Khatibi's protagonist:

permanent permutation. He had managed to better understand it during a small disorientation, on the day where, waiting at Orly for the boarding call, he wasn't managing to read across the glass the word "South", from the back. By inverting it, he realized he had read it from right to left, as in the Arabic alphabet—his first *graphie*. He could only put this word the right way around by going through his mother tongue.<sup>52</sup>

The setting of the scene is an airport, "Orly," and foregrounds the kind of realization the protagonist is about to undergo. On the one hand, an airport is characterized by its atmosphere of constant movement, and on the other it invokes stillness, as is suggested by the protagonist's "waiting." The coexistence of stillness and constant movement is shown by the alliteration

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<sup>52</sup> Khatibi. p.27



“permanent permutation.” The beginning of each word is identical, creating a false mirror that reflects the protagonist’s permutation of French and Arabic. Furthermore, the word “permanent” is ambiguous. It could mean the “permutation” happened once, and stayed permanently, as in forever, or that the “permutation” is something that is permanently happening, like a constant back-and-forth. I take both meanings as working together. That very atmosphere of “disorientation” is what makes him see French through Arabic, and does two things. The change in directions of reading requires a constant switch in direction or “permanent permutation,” which displays a non-linear process of understanding text and language. The narrator’s explanation of the protagonist’s process to understand a word, going from *htuos* (inverted “South”) and reading it as he would have Arabic to obtain the French word shows the non-natural place that French has for him. This Using Arabic as a system of thought to understand French decentralizes French, showing how his “mother tongue” takes precedence.

Commenting on Khatibi’s politics of language, Derrida pays attention to Khatibi’s use of “mother tongue.” He admires how Khatibi is able to use the possessive “*my* mother tongue” (my emphasis): “I find this secret confident. He even affirms, which is something else, the possessive. He affirms himself possessive as if no doubt insinuated his menace: ‘my mother tongue,’ he says.”<sup>53</sup> The “disorientation” Khatibi’s protagonist experiences contrasts with the acute self-awareness of his own linguistic process that always goes through Arabic, then French. That very self-awareness is what enables the protagonist to call Arabic his “mother tongue” in what Derrida calls a “confident” tone. The ambiguous liminality created by Khatibi through the errant movements of his protagonist are not unintentional. He takes charge of his own narrative and shows how French is not his first language.

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<sup>53</sup> Derrida. p.64

In a similar manner to Khatibi's protagonist, Ben Jelloun's narrator displays a form of control over a language she invents, in a cave only she knows the location of. When she is still in Morocco, she finds a cave in which she spends time inventing a world and a language of her own. The narrator is the sole speaker of her own language, which confers upon her an autonomy

I spent hours straightening up this field of sand and rocks. When I had some time, I'd perfect my alphabet. I had a Quranic tablet, stolen of course, on which I wrote letters that were neither Berber, nor Arabic, nor foreign. They were signs that belonged to me; I was the only one to understand the keys, the meaning and the destiny.<sup>54</sup>

At this point in the novel, she does not know French yet. Her only two linguistic points of reference are Berber and Arabic. The narrator emphasizes that the alphabet she is creating belongs to her: "I'd perfect *my* alphabet", "they were signs that belonged *to me*." While Khatibi uses an already-existing space (the airport) as a mirror for his back-and-forth relationship between Arabic and French, Ben Jelloun uses a cave, a space unknown of everyone but the narrator, in order to stage the birth of a language known by the narrator only. The landscape upon which the narrator's language emerges is "a field of sand and rocks," in other words, barren land, a blank slate for new linguistic possibilities. She is also the only one to understand the "sens" of her language. The word "sens" means "meaning", but also *way* or *direction*. Like Khatibi's protagonist, who makes sense of the way he reads French through Arabic, a, Ben Jelloun's narrator is in control of the direction in which her language is going. There is a strong sense of self-determination in the two protagonists in the way they negotiate how to handle otherness in language.

When introducing Glissant's "Errantry" chapter in the *Poetics of Relation*, Betsy Wing writes that "Glissant stresses overtones of sacred mission rather than aimless wandering."<sup>55</sup> Ben

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<sup>54</sup> Ben Jelloun. p.31

<sup>55</sup> Wing, introduction to Glissant. p.xvi

Jelloun's and Khatibi's characters are not at the mercy of the non-linear and oceanic energies that characterize both novels. Rather, these narrative movements, sometimes abrupt, sometimes contradictory, are like a kind of fuel that creates spaces in which the characters can expand their relationship to language. The non-linearity of the texts, combined with the deterritorialized settings, open up ways for the characters to think about language in a non-linear way. The line of the text is no longer an arrow that shoots without looking back. Language folds over itself, thickens, making a universal and hegemonic mode of interpretation impossible.

The narrative structures and settings of the text free the characters from any pre-determined way of understanding language. The characters understand and create their own texts, unburdened by the shackles of a (n)arrow directional line. This new linguistic space, however, is not born out of thin air, but rather out of friction. Non-linearity already represents a kind of friction: that of the folding over of time, or the errant movements of the characters. The next chapter of this project focuses on a different kind of tension that plays an essential part in the creation of this new francophone literary space. I examine how instances of both linguistic and colonial violence in the texts are met with resistance.

## Chapter II

### From Reproduction to Deflection: (Post)colonial Violence and Language

Khatibi's and Ben Jelloun's protagonists are moved by their desires to create new linguistic spaces devoid of territorial borders. Structured as a *Bildungsroman*, *With Downcast Eyes* is structured as a series of discoveries. Ben Jelloun's protagonist moves from a small village in the Moroccan mountains to Paris, where she integrates the French school system and forms a new relationship to language as she struggles with her newfound bilingualism, starts to write, and makes French friends. Throughout the novel, she learns how to create a sense of self that incorporates and fluctuates between French and Berber, and France and Morocco, where she returns with her family before settling in France again. Throughout her journey, she also discovers what it is to be *othered*, whether it be in her difficulties learning French, or by discovering the existence of police violence against Arab immigrants in France.

The violence shown in *Love in Two Languages* is mostly linguistic. The novel is tied together by three main narrative threads that are woven together by the common theme of language: the narrator's own relationship to his bilingualism, his romantic relationship with a French woman, and his travels around the world. These different narrative themes come in the form of self-contained episodes separated by a blank. As seen in our first chapter, the text has no narrative continuity. The novel begins with the end of the relationship between the narrator and his lover. In the process of this deconstructed narrative, the ocean helps the narrator create liminal spaces in which to reconfigure his own relationship to language. These episodes are interlaced with moments that picture the narrator and his lover slowly growing apart due to the lover's othering of the narrator: the way in which she speaks to and about him suggest she is

fetishizing him as an “Oriental” man. Her words simultaneously invade and coopt the linguistic space the narrator creates for himself.

Decolonization is pictured as an act that must be performed over and over again, with varying degrees of success. The moments of violence in the texts are sometimes historicized. The texts depict acts of *othering* in relation to previous acts of violence under colonialism, thus bringing to light repetitive patterns that show that decolonization is not synonymous with the end of colonial oppression. The characters themselves also respond to and resist oppressive language by deconstructing it through irony. Irony becomes a shield that both protects the characters and dissects the linguistic dynamics used to attack them. Lastly, the use of irony as a response to violence is transposed into the way that oppression itself is depicted. Khatibi and Ben Jelloun’s texts recreate narrative structures that enable violence in order to deconstruct them from within, for example through the use of wordplay.

Khatibi and Ben Jelloun’s novels lay bare the ways in which language can be used as a means of oppression under colonialism. By exposing oppression as a set of historicized patterns that repeat themselves with different variations, they show that decolonization is not a linear process. Using language in order to subjugate the other is a Western pattern that goes far back. Glissant argues that Western myths have always been carriers of violence:

they suggest that the self’s opacity for the other is insurmountable, and, consequently, no matter how opaque the other is for oneself (no myth ever provides for the legitimacy of the other), it will always be a question of reducing this other to the transparency experienced by oneself. Either the other is assimilated, or else it is annihilated. That is the whole principle of generalization and its entire process.

Myth, therefore, contains a hidden violence that catches in the links of filiation and absolutely challenges the existence of the other as an element of relation.<sup>56</sup>

Glissant exposes Western mythical tradition as a self-reproductive phenomenon, where stories build onto each other and progressively create systems of violence that validate each other.

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<sup>56</sup> Glissant. pp.49-50

Through this process, language becomes a weapon. The act of rewriting and rereading stories that bear the same narrative arc progressively legitimizes and naturalizes the existence of those stories, as if they could only follow one narrative pattern. The reproduction of myths that portray the dominance of the self over the other creates a network of cultural production that inter-legitimizes itself.

Colonialism in North Africa and the Middle East in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Western nations is supported by a network of Western culture. Literature, art, and even photography, create a web of myths and representations that picture the Orient as fundamentally *other*, in opposition to the West. This system of cultural subjugation is given the name of Orientalism by Edward Said. He writes, “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate or even underground self.”<sup>57</sup> The opposition made by the West between Orient and Occident assumes that there is a fundamental and essential difference between these two geographic areas, between which there can only be a relation of subjugation. The West sees the Orient as a uniform block on which to project a multitude of myths and fantasies destined to affirm Western superiority and justify colonization. *Love in Two Languages* starts with an Epigraph where the narrator looks back on the main character’s relationship with his lover, which has ended, and wondering what made them grow apart. The Epigraph is written in free indirect speech. The narrator’s question is actually the protagonist himself wondering, “was she trying to find within him the Eden of an Orient from her childhood?”<sup>58</sup> She is trying to find, through him, something that only has to do with herself. She is Orientalizing him. To her, the protagonist is a representation of the Orient, and a medium onto which his lover can project her

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<sup>57</sup> Said, Edward. *Orientalism*, London: Routledge & Paul Kegan, 1978. p.10

<sup>58</sup> Khatibi. p.17

fantasies. This projection eliminates any possibility of mutual relation between the two lovers.

The narrator's suggestion that this might be the reason for their growing apart gives a roadmap to the reader, drawing attention to the way the French woman interacts with the narrator throughout the novel.

When the narrator of *Love in Two Languages* starts recounting anecdotes between him and his lover, a pattern similar to that exposed in the Epigraph emerges. Not only does she use the word *Orient* to define the protagonist, she also appropriates the *oceanic*, a space of reconfiguration for the narrator. The ocean provides him with a sense of liberation and lets him create a new sense of self that goes beyond both Arabic and French. His desire to create a new identity that would be devoid of territorial attachments is also replicated in his relationship with his lover. However, the narrator's transfer of his desire onto his lover shows that it is impossible for the text to create a new space that is totally devoid of the remnants of the past. It will always be overshadowed by colonialism. The narrator's lover Orientalizes his oceanic desires, something the narrator is at first not aware of: "smiling, you said to me: 'Are you not my oceanic orient?'" Look: my country walks under my feet, tracing my footsteps between yours, crossing our paths, our gait. Double errantry: we laughed, we sobbed. Two countries made love within us."<sup>59</sup> There is a schism between the lover's words and the narrator's reaction to them. He imagines his relationship as "double errantry," invoking a simultaneity of movement with no particular aim. The narrator includes his lover in the creation of new, errant spaces, devoid of territorial attachments. However, the lover uses the expression "my oceanic orient," which ties him intrinsically to territory. The expression has strong Orientalist connotations, especially when coming from a French, white woman, representative of colonialism.

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<sup>59</sup> Khatibi. p.24. The French for "oceanic orient" is "orient océanique," meaning the assonance works in both languages.

The French woman's expression is reminiscent of Said's definition of Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."<sup>60</sup> The narrator's lover stylistically "restructur[es]," appropriates and aestheticizes the narrator's concept of the "oceanic." The expression "my oceanic orient" is an oxymoron. The association of the adjective "oceanic" to the "orient" annuls the function of the "oceanic." The oceanic is a state in which the narrator is able to free himself from the shackles of language and territory. The "orient" is a very general reference to the place of origin of the narrator. The use of the adjective "oceanic" defies the very purpose of the concept if it is used to describe a place. Furthermore, the use of the possessive pronoun "my" essentializes the narrator by equating his person to his geographical origins: he *is* the "oceanic orient". The pronoun also institutes a relation of dominance over the narrator, making him her possession.

The ways in which the narrator's lover exerts her dominance are covert. Her rhetorical question "are you not my oceanic orient?" makes her statement seem like an invitation or a suggestion rather than a demeaning assertion. The assonance in [o] between "oceanic" and "orient" brings attention to the words as a poetic combination and deflects attention from fact that she is coopting and distorting the oceanic. In effect, despite using "my oceanic orient" as an endearing appellation for her lover, the French woman is distancing herself from the narrator. Instead of engaging with the oceanic at a deep level, she aestheticizes the term and turns it into a surface-level appellation based on her orientalist hankerings, continuing a colonial rapport of domination with the narrator.

In the same way that Khatibi's narrator's attempt at creating a new space is shut down by his lover, the narrator in Ben Jelloun's novel finally starts to feel at home in her neighborhood in

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<sup>60</sup> Said. *Orientalism*. p.11



Paris when it is closed down and raided by the police. The narrator describes the policemen's attack in a candid tone, discovering the existence of this violence as it unfolds before her eyes. Structured as a bildungsroman, *With Downcast Eyes* relates the coming-into-existence of violence for the protagonist. The episode of the police creates a contrast between the narrator, who does not understand why the violence is happening, and an elderly man, who sees in it a pattern of repetition going back to colonization. The narrator says:

the policemen were shouting insults. Children were running all over the place. On the sidewalk lay broken chairs, sofas, frames, pots and plates... They threw everything out with such ferocity that it seemed like we were in the middle of a war. Maybe that's what war was. We were faced with the madness of this army of policemen who were relentlessly destroying our everyday possessions. They had come to break everything. We had to be punished but we didn't know it. But what could we have done to be the targets of such violence, so early in the morning?<sup>61</sup>

The narrator recounts the police raid like a military invasion, even though she has never seen one with her own eyes. She is both discovering and trying to make sense of what she bearing witness to: "it seemed like," "maybe," and her final question, "what could we have done...?" convey her confusion and her desire to understand the scene that is unfolding under her eyes. This uncertainty is contrasted by the precision of the lexical field she uses to describe the attack, that of war, with describing the policemen as an "army" and describing her community as "targets." She mentions the word "war" explicitly twice.

The narrator's perception of the unfolding violence is confirmed a few moments later. El Hadj, an Algerian man, who just saw policemen throw a copy of the Quran to the ground, addresses the crowd of people witnessing the attack: "oh, dear God, what depravity! They still think they're in Algeria during colonization!"<sup>62</sup> El Hadj's direct comparison between the behavior of the policemen and French soldiers colonizing Algeria echoes the narrator's

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<sup>61</sup> Ben Jelloun. p.101

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* p.102

comparisons between the militarized police and the army. The narrator unknowingly references a pattern of violence much older than herself. Franz Fanon's description of institutional violence under colonial rule is strikingly similar to the narrator's description and helps bridge the gap between the narrator's impressions and El Hadj's comparison. Fanon writes,

we have seen how the government's agent uses a language of pure violence. The agent does not alleviate oppression or mask domination. He displays and demonstrates them with the clear conscience of the law enforcer, and brings violence into the homes and minds of the colonized subject.<sup>63</sup>

The "language of pure violence" used under colonialism is the same one used by the policemen during their attack, when they destroy the "chairs, sofas, frames, pots and plates." The insults and the destruction of people's homes are a linear reproduction of the pattern of violence enforced since colonialism. Fanon's conceptualization of violence as "language" explains both the narrator's clairvoyance when she describes what she sees as a war, as well as El Hadj's comparison. The signs of this "language of pure violence" are representative and linear: the violence stays the same, during the colonization of Algeria and in an immigrant neighborhood of Paris during the 1970s.

Fanon's use of the word "language" connects the repetitive and linear patterns of colonial violence with the subjugating use of language under colonialism. In *Love in Two Languages*, the lover starts to feel excluded when the narrator speaks Arabic. In return, she uses language as a way to make the narrator feel inadequate within his own language. She talks to a Moroccan maid using the Arabic equivalent of *tu* (familiar *you*), which creates a violent dissonance within the narrator as it clashes with the way they usually address each other in French, by the more formal *vous*. This episode marks the end of the relationship between the narrator and his lover:

I liked that she maintained this distance, this impeccable usage of the '*vous*.' When she said '*vous*', it was with a sovereign charm. However, the day when she said '*tu*' to a maid in Arabic, it was so savage that I felt belittled in my own dialect. That what was terribly humiliated in my childhood was now facing her. It

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<sup>63</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translation by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2004. p.4

made her tremble, all the more because she hadn't guessed that such humiliation, instead of waning, would grow between us and ravage our complicit sincerity. Clearly, from one language to another, saying 'tu' is intractable.<sup>64</sup>

The narrator starts out describing the effect which the use of the "vous," between him and the woman produces: "a sovereign charm," implying that within the seductive behavior of the narrator's behavior lies an unequal power dynamic. The term "sovereign" draws a vertical linear trajectory on the woman's speech: even if it seems as though she is on the same footing as the narrator, a well-to-do Moroccan man, her saying "tu" to the maid, a working-class Moroccan woman, reveals the ways in which colonialism weaponized language in order to infantilize the colonized. The informal "you" is usually used by adults talking to children, or friends and family. Moreover, the French for "said 'tu'" and "saying vous" are transitive verbs, "tutoya" and "vouvoyait." As opposed to just "saying," these verbs become actions that directly affect the object of the speech.

The unequal relation of power created by the woman through her selective use of "tu" and "vous" is accentuated by the fact that she is speaking to the maid in Arabic, not French. There is an overlap between the language in which the scene is occurring and the language of narration. The fact that this interaction is transcribed in French, with gallicisms like "tutoiment" (the gerund of the verb *tutoyer*, saying "tu") makes it seem like the narrator's lover transposes colonial hierarchies present in French when speaking Arabic. The use of terms specific to French when describing an interaction in Arabic finds resonance in Derrida's description of the power dynamics present in the monolingualism of the other. Derrida writes that it "would *first* be this

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<sup>64</sup> Khatibi. p.72

Due to the large number of words in this passage that are specific to French, I include the original for reference: "j'aimais qu'elle maintînt cette distance, cet usage impeccable du 'vous'. Lorsqu'elle vouvoyait, elle le faisait avec un charme souverain. Cependant, le jour où elle tutoya une bonne en arabe, ce fut si sauvage que je me sentis rabaissé dans mon dialecte. Ce qui était terriblement humilié en mon enfance lui faisait face. Elle en tremblait, d'autant plus qu'elle ne devinait pas qu'une telle humiliation, au lieu de diminuer, grandissait entre nous en ravageant notre sincérité complice. Assurément, d'une langue à l'autre, le tutoiement est intraitable."

sovereignty, this law coming from elsewhere, but first and foremost the very language of Law. And Law as Language.”<sup>65</sup> The French woman’s interaction with the maid is monolingual in the same sense that it is *arrowlike*. When the French woman is speaking down to the maid by using “tu,” the sense of reciprocity that the mutual “vous” creates is lost. The use of “tu” creates a linear trajectory that does not invite a response or an exchange, but is to be perceived as an injunction. The alliteration in “language of Law” materializes the interchangeability of both terms when coming from the mouth of the colonizer. The colonizer does not use language to communicate, but to subjugate.

The French woman’s injunction is perceived as such by the narrator, marking a the lexical field of violence. He describes his lover’s words as “savage,” as if she were, through her words, performing an act of colonization by penetrating into a linguistic territory that was not hers, and imposing her authority over the maid by establishing a linguistic hierarchy. This sense of hierarchy is heightened by the opposition between “sovereign,” which evokes metaphorical height, and “belittled” “and humiliation” which evoke metaphorical smallness. These feelings also shore up memories of the narrator’s childhood, which evoke not only the trauma the narrator experienced in his childhood due to colonialism. The narrator’s childhood memory provokes a shift in textual direction. The position of the he narrator’s lover becomes unstable. As the power dynamics shift, tension starts to build: the narrator’s lover starts to “tremble,” showing a contrast with the “sovereign charm” she previously exhibited. The tension reaches its climax when the French woman’s words end up “ravag[ing] their complicit sincerity.” The closeness between the narrator and his lover is effectively ruined.

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<sup>65</sup> Derrida. p. 69

The narrator does not brush aside this episode, but comments on its loaded affective elements. After building up tension between the narrator and the French woman, the scene ends with an ironic quip, breaking the tension: “clearly, from one language to another, saying ‘tu’ is intractable.” The narrator does not make light of the interaction, nor does he pretend that it didn’t affect him. The narrator ironically simplifies or essentializes the interaction, saying that the use of “tu” instead of “vous” was the sole reason for the reemergence of his traumatic memory, thus making the interaction seem falsely absurd. The ironic use of “clearly” is a sign that it is not the use of “tu” instead of “vous,” but the dynamics of power underlying the use of those words, that led to the narrator’s memory and the change in his relationship with his lover. Through humor, the text brings to light the mechanisms of violence all the while deflecting the violence.

The use of irony as a means of resistance in postcolonial texts has been controversial among postcolonial theorists. Glissant, for one, argues that “humor always presupposes some hidden reference, providing the humorist his superiority. Humor derives from a classicism left unspoken.”<sup>66</sup> For Glissant, humor does not deflect, but reinforces positions of superiority and inferiority in a postcolonial context, arguing that it promotes withholding rather than the establishment of a relation with the other. Scholar Adele Marian Holoch contends, on the other hand, that “humor alludes to alternative ways of articulating the world beyond a single, serious discourse, and in doing so, it opens new spaces for historically marginalized individuals to be heard.”<sup>67</sup> Glissant’s and Holoch’s analyses of humor differs in their understanding of the role played by the allegedly humoristic subtext, the part of the joke that is implied and needs to be understood in order to form this tacit mutual understanding between the one telling the joke and

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<sup>66</sup> Glissant. p.200

<sup>67</sup> Holoch, Adele Marian. *The Serious Work of Humor in Postcolonial Literature*.  
<https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5684&context=etd>. Accessed April 27, 2020. p.3

the audience. While Glissant views the humoristic subtext as an act of withholding, Holoch sees it as a method of empowerment. Her argument focuses on the opportunity humor provides for creating mutual understanding with the other. Khatibi's text uses humor as a commentary on a violent interaction that just occurred, when he writes that "clearly, from one language to another, saying 'tu' is intractable."<sup>68</sup> He ironically places the blame on the use of the words themselves, thus implying that the source of violence lies in the way "tu" and "vous" are manipulated in order to create a sense of hierarchy. Humor can also be present in dialogue, embodied through laughter as a means of resistance.

This reaction of maniacal laughter is the center of Abdelfattah Kilito's injunction in "Thou Shalt Not Translate Me." Kilito, a Moroccan literary critic, writes in *Thou Shalt Not Speak my Language* how he responded to an American woman speaking to him in the Moroccan dialect. At one point, she uses the expression *wallahila* which makes Kilito break out into laughter. He writes that

each time she tried to stop, it broke out anew. Why this laughter. If laughter required collusion and solidarity, I, too, must have laughed.

When I now try to explain the shock that triggered laughter, I can come up with only two explanations. First, *wallahila* is a purely Moroccan expression that I have never heard from a non-Moroccan Arab; it is as though using it were an exclusive right to Moroccans and forbidden to others. So how could it pass on a European or American tongue that acquired Arabic as a foreign language? Second, the American woman used this expression—how shall I say?—so innocently and with the same ease that characterized the rest of her speech. Did she realize that *wallahila* contains the word "Allah," and that she let herself so easily tread on rough terrain? She referred, probably without knowing it, to a faith that was not hers. I leave this question open.<sup>69</sup>

In this passage, laughter is hardly the source of hilarity. Kilito responds with laughter to the American woman's linguistic intrusion because of the absurd picture it creates. In a similar way to Khatibi's text, where the narrator's lover, using the narrator's native language, talks down to a

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<sup>68</sup> Khatibi. p.72

<sup>69</sup> Kilito, Abdelfattah. "Thou Shalt Not Translate Me," *Thou Shalt Not Speak my Language*. Translation by Wail S. Hassan. Syracuse University Press, 2008. pp.91-92

maid and thus makes the narrator feel humiliated within his own language, the American woman in Kilito's text is performing an act of intrusion. Kilito remarks on the "ease" with which the woman talks, and that she doesn't seem to know that "*wallahila* contains the word 'Allah'." The lack of awareness on the part of the American woman is akin to the use of "tu" in Arabic by the narrator's lover in Khatibi's text. The American woman is speaking Arabic and uses an expression that is intrinsically linked to Kilito's origins. Kilito takes the time to mention that even non-Moroccan Arabs do not use the expression *wallahila*. There is a dissonance in the fact that the American woman, as an outsider, does not even seem to notice that she is making a linguistic intrusion into Kilito's native tongue. Laughter acts as a shield against the American woman's intrusion into something so intrinsically intimate.

The performance of laughter is also a way of taking back power. Glissant's argument against using humor in postcolonial texts exposes the dynamics of power present in humor. By using laughter as a response to the American woman's words, Kilito affirms a position of power. He knows the meaning of a word that completely escapes her, and therefore is able to protect himself from the American woman's intrusion while letting her know, through laughter, that he is part of something to which she does not have the right to belong or even understand.

The texts themselves adopt humor as a narrative mode through which to view and simultaneously deconstruct (post)colonial violence. Humor becomes a mode of narration that showcases oppression in a new light. Depicting acts of violence through the lens of humor creates of a third space. Unlike the errant and ritualistic geographies that were the focus of our first chapter (the oceanic, creating a new chronotope through language), we will now try and explore how humor enables the creation of a space within conflict. When theorizing the use of humor in postcolonial literature, scholar Caroline Lee Schwenz refers to "comic spaces of non-

reality”, which “articulate comedy and laughter through spatial parameters,” thus highlighting “the importance of imagination and its ability to create alternate realities.”<sup>70</sup> This theorization of humor enables the texts to create space between violence and its effects on the characters of the texts. Humor enables a certain linguistic flexibility, especially through word play, one that recreates “spaces of non-reality.” This flexibility is in turn a way for the texts to create a new linguistic reality that brings to light the repetitive patterns of colonial violence.

Wordplay bends the meaning of words and counteracts the binarity of language, disrupting the signifier-to-signified relationship. When Ben Jelloun’s narrator arrives in Frances, she struggles with learning French. The text brings alive the narrator’s internal conflict between her mother tongue and the French language:

there was a small war, brief but efficient, between Berber and French words. I was defended with determination and courage. The Berber words did not cave in. They had formed a line of defense against the invaders. The battle was tough. I knew that because of the headache that followed. There were a few wounded, especially certain compound words.<sup>71</sup>

This passage fuses violence and humor, presenting them at different narrative levels. While the war is constructed by the narrator, the humor exists on a textual level. The words “line of defense” can be understood as a pun on the word “line,” in both a military and literary sense. Furthermore, the personification of the “Berber and French words” into soldiers fighting a war paints a picture, which, if taken literally, appears like a surrealist scene. The image of a literal war between words sounds absurd and facetious, but the association between war and language holds colonial implications by suggesting an attempt at dominance of one language by another, especially when French is made to be the attacker, as the narrator is the one being “defended” by

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<sup>70</sup> Schwenz, Caroline Lee. *The Empire Laughs Back: Toward a Theory of Postcolonial Comedy in the Literatures of Caribbean and South Asian Diaspora*. <https://etd.library.emory.edu/concern/etds/j67314160?locale=>. Accessed April 28, 2020

<sup>71</sup> Ben Jelloun. p.81



her native language. By creating a picture of war between languages but adding humoristic touches to it, the text rests in a space that is neither in reality nor out of it. Puns holds within them a multiplicity of meanings, and thus enable the creation of a discourse of relation within the depiction of violence. Recounting violence in the form of humor deflects violence from its reproductive linearity. Humor creates a multiplicity of coexisting meanings that counter the principle of violence: the total non-acceptance of the other.

Ben Jelloun and Khatibi's texts perform a double feat. They recount and expose colonial violence while also deconstructing it. While Ben Jelloun superimposes the lexical field of war to the narrator's struggle with languages, Khatibi's narrator describes war itself as a matter of language. Khatibi's narrator tells an anecdote about the conquest of Algeria, encasing it in a mythical narrative framework. Using wordplay, he deconstructs that framework from within:

remember the conquest of Algeria. In 1830, the French troupes had learned a few words from a Sabir (*lingua franca*), a mix of Italian, Spanish, and Provençal words. Don't take me word for word, but they thought they were speaking Arabic, and the Arab soldiers thought they were speaking French. What a (hi)story ! It was bound to finish badly.<sup>72</sup>

This anecdote is encased in a structure that resembles a myth, or a story passed down through generations. He tells the reader to "remember," as if he were invoking a collective memory. He finishes the anecdote by saying "it was bound to finish badly," which evokes a certain fatalism, and leaves no space for an-other interpretation of events. This literary trait of totally disregarding the other is defined by Glissant as one of the characteristics of Western myth: "no [Western] myth ever provides for the legitimacy of the other."<sup>73</sup> By evoking fatalism, Khatibi's text reproduces a Western mythical structure that the text makes implode.

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<sup>72</sup> Khatibi. p.50

<sup>73</sup> Glissant. p.49

Wordplay creates a plurality of meanings within a story of violence, and thus deconstructs the myth of linearity and affiliation that enables colonial violence. The expression “don’t take me word for word” was translated from “vous n’allez pas me prendre à la lettre.” This saying acts as a warning to take the anecdote that follows with a grain of salt. The pun “(hi)story” was an attempt at reproducing the polysemy of “histoire,” which means both *history* and *story*. This double meaning influences the reading of the main anecdote in the paragraph: history becomes a matter of language, and vice versa. While the narrator’s anecdote can be read as a bout of humor, it also portrays colonialism as both a physical and linguistic attack on the other. The word “conquest” signifies violence, the taking over of one territory by another. The chiasmus in the clauses evokes an act of violence: “they thought they were speaking Arabic, and the Arab soldiers thought they were speaking French.” The clause starts and ends with a mention of the French, starting with “they” (signifying the French soldiers) and ending with “French” (signifying the language), as if the Algerian soldiers and the Arabic language were being surrounded and attacked. This act of conquest eliminates the possibility of a mutual understanding between the two sides, which is literalized by the “lingua franca,” this pidgin that both sides confuse as being the language of the other. The “lingua franca” thus forms a mirage, a language that is a projection of how the self conceives the other.

Writing against this self-oriented conception of language that blocks any possibility of establishing a relation with the other, Derrida posits that “my language, the only one I hear myself speak and that hears me speak it is the language of the other.”<sup>74</sup> Khatibi and Ben Jelloun’s texts exacerbate the otherness of the French language while making it reflect on the way in which it carries a history of colonial violence. Their texts make references to (post)colonial

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<sup>74</sup> Derrida. p.47

violence which they deconstruct at different levels. When the characters do not engage in direct resistance against the violent act, the text does it for itself, by including, amidst the violence, a sign of otherness: either a reminder of the spaces of otherness created by the characters for themselves, or by taking that act of violence and positioning it in relation to other acts of colonial violence, thus exposing its linear structure. The texts also make their characters resist to violence with humor. Humor creates a shield by deflecting violence from its linear course. Finally, the texts adopt a narrative mode that signifies the presence of (post)colonial violence and deconstruct that narrative mode from within using wordplay. In effect, Khatibi and Ben Jelloun's texts *other* violence. They deconstruct a myth, or mode of narration, that allows violence to reproduce itself.

The depiction of the response to colonial violence varies widely in postcolonial literature. It sometimes comes in the form of lament followed by pushback, as in "Colonial Girls School," a poem by the Jamaican poet Olive Senior. The speaker of the poem recounts the violence she and her schoolmates were subjected to under colonialism. Each verse of the poem focuses on different acts of oppression the girls had to endure. Between each verse is a two-line refrain. The first of those refrains reads "There was nothing left of ourselves / nothing about us at all."<sup>75</sup> While the first line of the refrain varies, the second line of the refrain remains constant. The recurrence of "nothing," as well as the repetition of the refrain all throughout the poem, create a solemn chant-like rhythm that reads like a lament. The alternation between the verses, which recount the oppression, and the refrains, which emphasize the effects of this violence on the speaker, creates a repetitive sensation of pain and exhaustion.

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<sup>75</sup> Senior, Olive. "Colonial Girls School." <https://poetryarchive.org/poem/colonial-girls-school/>. Accessed April 24, 2020. ll. 12-13

Senior's use of repetition conveys the effects of colonial violence and can be read as *representative*, in Deleuze and Guattari's definition, meaning that the refrains are a direct consequence of the acts of violence committed in the verses. Each new refrain seems to amplify the speaker's suffering, but only to a certain point. The representative chain of violence stops in the last verse, which is not followed by a refrain:

one day we'll talk about  
How the mirror broke  
Who kissed us awake  
Who let Anansi from his bag.<sup>76</sup>

The breaking of the mirror can be likened to the breaking of the mirror-like effect created by the verses and the refrain, which answer to each other in a similar manner every time, signaling the end of a mode of *representation* and leading into action. The line "who kissed us awake" signals the end of the lethargy created by the alternation between verse and refrain. The mention of "Anansi" is another clue that the verse is the end of the poem's repetitive pattern. Anansi is a folklore figure, a mix of man and spider known for his intelligence and art of subterfuge. His stories originated from the Ashanti people of Ghana and were passed down orally. The slaves who were taken to the Caribbean continued to tell those stories, and Anansi became a major figure in Caribbean folklore. In Senior's poem, he is "let from his bag," as if he'd been captured and then liberated, and people were free to tell his stories again. Senior's poem operates a shift from describing the effects of colonial violence to a liberation from that violence. Through the invocation of myth, the text wakes up from the lethargy created by violence. The poem effectively depicts violence as linear oppression, and liberation as a separate act that follows. The multiplicity of ways to depict oppression and resistance in postcolonial linear is a sign, in and of itself, that resistance is a non-linear act that invites other narratives.

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<sup>76</sup> Senior. ll.33-36

## Conclusion

The French protectorate in Morocco lasted 44 years, from 1912 to 1956. It is the language taught in schools for decades, imprinted onto the minds of Moroccans, sometimes at the expense of their mother tongues. When Morocco becomes independent in 1956, Moroccan writers and intellectuals are faced with the same question: “*how to live in the dissymmetry of several languages and only write in one?*”<sup>77</sup> Khatibi and Ben Jelloun use their position as Francophone Moroccans to write French as the language of the other. Their texts create a new Francophone literary space that makes the “post” in postcolonialism sit uneasily.

On the one hand, Khatibi and Ben Jelloun’s texts deconstructs the association between language and territory constructed by colonial and nationalist ideology. Language no longer moves in what Glissant calls an *arrowlike* movement, which mimics the conquering of land. Instead, language becomes errant. The non-linear narrative structures of the texts make the temporal and geographical locations of the protagonists unclear. This narrative and linguistic disturbances deconstruct the colonial precepts according to which language must represent a territory. The novels constantly exhibit this *otherness* of the French language, and approach French in a way that enables the creation of a new sense of self outside of territorial borders.

Khatibi and Ben Jelloun’s texts refuse to see language as representative of a territory. They create a narrative and linguistic detachment between language and place. On the level of plot, French is in conflict with the mother tongues of the protagonists. The protagonists are constantly reformulating and explaining their relationship to French as a language with which they struggle, a language that is not natural to them, that comes from elsewhere. This effort to

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<sup>77</sup> Bensmaïa. p.67

speak French is always shown in relation to territory. When Ben Jelloun's protagonist struggles with tense agreement in French, she is trying to will away haunting memories from her childhood in Morocco. For Khatibi, the ocean enables the protagonist to have a relationship with language outside of territorial borders. These moments show the deconstruction between language and territory as a twofold process: the reflection on language simultaneously exposes the French language as other and creates spaces that welcome this lack of certainty as to the place held by French in the characters' identities.

Through their reconfiguration of the French language, our texts' protagonists show a desire to create a relation with this other language and incorporate it into their system of understanding of the world. Khatibi's protagonist attempts to create a relationship with a French woman where both Arabic and French exist in harmony. However, the novel starts by recounting the end of the relationship. When Ben Jelloun's narrator starts to feel at home in her new neighborhood in Paris, the neighborhood is attacked by a police raid. Among the moments in which the characters succeed in creating spaces that deterritorialize the French language, are also moments in which the characters' endeavors are undercut by the resurgence of oppression. The texts historicize these moments of violence by using vocabulary that is used to describe oppression under colonialism, such as the militarization of the police in *With Downcast Eyes*, or by making the narrator's lover call him her "orient" in *Love in Two Languages*.

The narrative and linguistic deconstruction that enables new possibilities of existing in the French language also reveals the ways in which oppression manifests itself in different forms, even after the end of colonialism. Khatibi and Ben Jelloun's texts put forward narratives whose relationship to the French language is an opening towards understanding language as being detached from territory. The integration of moments of violence within this process of

deconstruction shows the decolonization of the Francophone literary space as an ongoing endeavor.

By portraying moments of violence and resistance, the texts push back against a total invasion of French by the narrative. In these moments of conflict emerge the languages that the protagonists are trying to protect: Berber in *With Downcast Eyes*, and Arabic in *Love in Two Languages*. Even though the languages themselves seldom appear in the texts, they are always in the background, as though present through their absence. Leïla Sebbar's autobiographical text *L'arabe comme un chant secret* (*Arabic Like a Secret Song*) recounts her childhood in Algeria with a French mother and an Algerian father as a child who never learned Arabic.<sup>78</sup> The title of her book evokes the idea of Arabic as a song in the background, unintelligible yet always present. Sebbar's text interprets the fact that her father never taught her French as a form of resistance to the colonial, embodied by her mother:<sup>79</sup> "my father preserved his language by making it inaccessible, and with her, everything about the Algeria in which I was born."<sup>80</sup> Sebbar's text creates a contrast between the Arabic language being withheld from her by her father, and the presence of Arabic all around her as a child. Perhaps are Ben Jelloun's texts, through their rare evocations of the protagonists' mother tongues, attempting to protect them, like Sebbar's father in *Arabic Like a Secret Song*?

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<sup>78</sup> Bensoussan, Albert. "Parler ou ne pas parler l'arabe," *En Attendant Nadeau*. <https://www.en-attendant-nadeau.fr/2016/11/08/leila-sebbar-parler-arabe/>. Accessed May 11, 2020

<sup>79</sup> "My mother. She is France. I know it, I've always known it. She is the language of France. She doesn't say it but everything proves it, her gestures, her posture, her voice." Sebbar, Leïla. *L'arabe comme chant secret*. Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule: Bleu autour, 2010. My translation.

<sup>80</sup> Sebbar. p.87. My translation.

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