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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Writing Moroccan Space: A Comparative Study of Anaïs Nin's "The Labyrinthine City of Fez" and George Orwell's "Marrakech"

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| ABSTRACT
Unlike novels and plays, Western short travel narratives about Morocco have received little scholarly attention. This paper seeks to interrogate the representation of Moroccan spatiality in two such works: Anaïs Nin's "The Labyrinthine City of Fez" and George Orwell's "Marrakech." Through a comparative approach that moves beyond conventional binary oppositions, the study explores the evolving portrayals of Morocco in Western short travelogues. It argues that Western conceptualizations of Morocco are far from uniform; rather, they are heterogeneous, marked by contradictions and slippages. In these narratives, Morocco alternately emerges as an emotional sanctuary and a visually arresting space of architectural refinement, or as a site burdened by decay and deprivation. I contend that the depiction of Moroccan spatiality in these short accounts is characterized by multiplicity and, at times, conflicting narrative perspectives. Such diversity produces a more nuanced Western attitude toward Morocco, which resists being simply categorized as purely Orientalist.

| KEYWORDS

Morocco, Spatiality, Short Travel Narratives, Representation, Heterogeneity

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

Central to colonial discourse is the act of emphasizing the fundamental distinction between the West and the rest, thereby exoticizing all that lies outside Europe, the presumed locus of modernity and human ingenuity. Morocco has often been positioned as a foil to Europe in numerous Western travelogues. Western fascination with Morocco dates back to well before the onset of colonial rule and persisted into the postcolonial era, resulting in a vast corpus of Western representations that are far from homogeneous or monolithic. For instance, in *Morocco, the Piquant: Or, Life in Sunset Land* (2015), George Edmund Holt underscores the temporal disjunction between Morocco and Europe despite their geographical proximity. He writes, "During two hours occupied in crossing from Gibraltar to Tangier, one passes from the twentieth century to the tenth, from West to East, from present to past. We are in a new world […] which has not changed from the days of Moses" (1). This statement not only frames Morocco as Europe's antithesis but also fixes it in an unchanging temporal past; a sentiment reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling's oft-cited line, "Oh East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."[i]

Similarly, William Eastlake, the American writer and film director, paints a bleak picture of Morocco as it approaches independence in his short travel account "The Last Frenchman in Fez." His French protagonist, Mr. Charcot, laments: "I apologize […] for being born, I apologize for bringing water into the desert. I apologize for making Morocco bloom." (2008: 205). These images rely on Manichean binaries that reinforce the notion of the West as the source of civilization and the non-West as its negation, which Chinua Achebe famously called "a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality." (1975:1784).

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However, not all Western depictions of Morocco, especially in short travel narratives, are imbued with Eurocentric tendencies. Some works move beyond Orientalist binaries, compelling us to reconsider the relationship between the Occident and the Orient in ways that transcend Edward Said's rigid discursive framework. As Dennis Porter argues, Said's model fails "to envisage the possibility that more directly counter-hegemonic writings or an alternative canon may exist within the Western tradition." (1994:153). Likewise, Lisa Lowe, in *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalism* (1991), cautions that constructing binary oppositions between the West and the rest suppresses the "heterogeneities, inconsistencies, and slippages" (1) within texts.

Consequently, modes of representation become fraught with cultural, historical, and political complexities. I argue that depictions of Moroccan spatiality in Western short narratives often oscillate between attraction and repulsion. Moroccan cities, such as Fez and Marrakech, embody both fascination and disdain, as evidenced respectively in the short travel accounts of Anaïs Nin and George Orwell.

Moroccan Spatiality Between Attraction and Repulsion

In Anaïs Nin's "The Labyrinthine City of Fez," the city emerges as a sophisticated, sensuous space celebrated for its narrow alleys, elegant hotels, fine craftsmanship, and vivid colors. From the outset, Nin offers a lyrical, sensory portrayal:

> Fez was created for the delight of our five senses. My first impression is a fragrant odor of cedar wood from the furniture of the Hotel Palais Jamai, a smell that reappears in the souk, or street, amidst the intense activity of the carpenters [...] Fez lies very still. It is a city of silence which makes it appear more and more like an illustration from the Bible [...] It is a life bent towards self-perfection, whose dynamic activity lies in the skill, the incredible creative activity of their hands. (2008:126)

Nin's depiction transcends the typical Orientalist gaze, offering instead a vision of admiration and intimacy. She portrays Fez as serene and dignified, likening it to "an illustration from the Bible." Her prose reflects an openness to cross-cultural dialogue, departing from the Eurocentric "authorial I/Eye" that historically fixed North Africa as an exotic space in need of *la mission civilisatrice*. Nin celebrates the dexterity and artistry of *Fassi* craftsmen:

> The beauty of this labyrinth is that it takes you into a world of crafts and arts and awakens your five senses every bit of the way. Every small boutique, sometimes as small as eight feet by eight, is a revelation of some skill. (127)

Unlike William Eastlake's depiction of Fez as barren and lethargic, Nin's account testifies to the ingenuity and vitality of its artisans. As her narrative unfolds, Fez becomes a living tableau—poetic, historical, and aesthetically rich: "Blue is the symbolic color of Fez, a sky blue, a transparent blue, the only blue that evokes the word long-forgotten and loved by the poets: azure. Fez is azure." (127)

Beyond romanticizing its material culture, Nin demonstrates deep respect for Moroccan faith and spirituality. She writes with reverence about the city's mosques and minarets:

> The minarets are numerous, three hundred or so, one for each quarter, giving the sense of protection and serenity so characteristic of the Islamic religion ... the secret essence of Fez comes to me at five-thirty in the morning when I awaken to the muezzin's call, both a lament and an invocation, a consolation and a lyrical thanksgiving. (126)

Nin's willingness to immerse herself in the sensory life of Fez, to step beyond the confines of her hotel and mingle with locals, reflects what Mary Louise Pratt calls a contact zone.[ii] As Khalid Bekkaoui notes in *Imagining Morocco: An Anthology of Anglo-American Short Narratives* (2008), Nin "actually steps out of her hotel, mingles with the natives and allows herself to be absorbed by the city's rich fragrance, colors and sounds." (6) Her perspective thus subverts colonial fears of 'going native', revealing instead a profound empathy and humility, "I fell in love with Fez. Peace. Dignity. Humility … Many people on the streets. You touch elbows. They breathe into your face, but with a silence, a gravity, a dreaminess" (1967: 71).

In stark contrast, George Orwell's "Marrakech" paints a grim and morbid picture of the city where he stayed while convalescing from tuberculosis. The narrative opens with a disturbing funeral procession: "As the corpse went past, the flies left the restaurant table in a cloud and rushed after it, but they came back a few minutes later." (2008: 134) The pervasive imagery of decay, death, and infestation sets the tone for the entire essay. Orwell's description of Moroccan funerary practices, "no coffins, no gravestones, no names, no identifying marks" (134), strips both the living and the dead of individuality, reducing them to anonymous entities.

While some critics might claim that "Marrakech" serves as an indictment of French colonial neglect, a closer reading reveals its own entanglement in, therefore reinforcement of, the colonial discourse. Orwell's language betrays a profound sense of alienation and superiority. Observing the crowds from a café terrace, Orwell describes Moroccans with dehumanizing detachment:

> The people all have brown faces—besides, there are so many of them! Are they really the same flesh as yourself? Do they even have names? Or are they merely a kind of undifferentiated brown stuff, about as individual as bees or coral insects? (134)

Such rhetoric reaffirms racial hierarchies and denies Moroccans their humanity. His wife, Eileen, further intensifies this demeaning image by imagining Morocco as "crawling with disease of every kind." (1967: 71) Ironically, Orwell himself was in Marrakech to recover from illness, yet he excludes himself from the very category of affliction his wife attributes to Moroccans.

In one scene, Orwell recalls feeding a gazelle while a Moroccan worker nearby looks on:

> He looked from the gazelle to the bread and from the bread to the gazelle, with a sort of quiet amazement, as though he had never seen anything quite like this before. Finally, he said shyly in French: 'I could eat some of that bread.' (135)

Here, Orwell's pity reinforces his sense of moral and cultural superiority, echoing the colonial gaze that sees the colonized as childlike and pitiful. His concluding remark that "most of Morocco is so desolate that no wild animal bigger than a hare can live on it" (136) collapses human and environmental desolation into one reductive image of barrenness. Like Conrad's Africa in *Heart of Darkness*, Orwell's Morocco is rendered through what Achebe (1978:13) called "a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications."

Conclusion

Short Travel narratives set in Morocco, and in the Orient more broadly, have long contributed to the dissemination of binary oppositions between the West and the non-West. As Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia observe, "the creation of the Orient as the 'Other' is necessary so that the Occident can define itself and strengthen its own identity." Morocco, accordingly, exists in Western discourse as both invention and misrepresentation.

Yet, not all Western travelogues are inherently Orientalist. Some engage with Morocco respectfully and empathetically, resisting the urge to "other" it. The contrasting portrayals of Fez in Anaïs Nin's "The Labyrinthine City of Fez" and of Marrakech in George Orwell's "Marrakech" reveal two divergent narrative positions: one that embraces cross-cultural dialogue free of stereotypes, and another that remains ensnared within the colonial gaze.

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[i] See Rudyard Kipling's "The Ballad of East and West."