

Tactile Labyrinths and Sacred Interiors: Spatial Practices and Political Choices in Abdelmajid Ben Jalloun's *Fí al-Tufúla* and Ahmed Sefrioui's *La boîte à merveilles*

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Twenty-first-century CE editions of travel guides to Morocco include maps of the city of Fez that differ in an important respect from maps in twentieth-century CE editions. The new guides contain detailed maps of the old city of Fez, founded in the eighth century CE and long one of the cultural capitals of the Maghreb. In 1912, the French formally colonized Morocco,¹ and with their typical enthusiasm for *The Civilizing Mission*, they began to rationalize lands that had nominally been under one Muslim dynasty or another for over twelve centuries. In other parts of the Arab World, such as Cairo, old city walls through labyrinthine towns were demolished and replaced with Hausmannian boulevards. However, in Morocco, the French typically built a new city alongside the old, as in the case of Fez: a new French city, mappable, designed from a plan, just across a narrow valley from the labyrinth of the old Moroccan city.

The travel guides used to advise visitors that there was no sense in providing a detailed map of the old city in Fez. Such maps as existed generally showed the two main routes through it, several notable plazas and culs-de-sac, the Qarawiyyín mosque-university, and the gateways to the mappable city outside the old city's walls. The rest of the old city was filled in on the maps with grey halftone. With the advent of satellite photography, however, mapping the old city has become commonplace, and newer travel guides contain detailed maps.²

This represents a last step in a long process of dominion over the Maghreb by the Western gaze of legibility and mappability; there is no longer even one place, even at the center of the high culture that once sustained Fez, that cannot be brought under the gaze of the Western reader. In another way, this represents a small triumph

of the old city's resistance to the Western gaze; after all, it's the center of a booming tourism industry that has helped to develop the region's moribund economy. Mapping the old city did, however, put many of the local, human guides out of business.

This study examines two semi-autobiographical novels whose child protagonists experience the labyrinth of old Fez directly: for each of them, learning to map the labyrinth is an important part of his coming of age. Abdelmajid, the narrator of Abdelmajid Ben Jalloun's *Fí al-Tufúla* (*In [My] Childhood*),³ comes to Fez in late childhood, having grown up in Britain, where a very different organization of urban space holds sway. He finds the labyrinth bewildering and alien, and he ultimately adapts by learning to map the strange culture of his "homeland." In Ahmed Sefrioui's *La boîte à merveilles* (*The Box of Wonders*),⁴ the narrator Mehdi grows up in Fez and thus finds the labyrinth less troubling. Yet as Mehdi grows up, he learns that his family are strangers to Fez: they are Amazigh or "Berber" people who have come from the mountains to the city to make a better life.

Both novels were published in the period when Morocco, after years of increasingly violent struggle, succeeded in wresting independence from France.⁵ Both novels are set in the 1930s, before the struggle had begun in earnest; neither undertakes any significant discussion of colonization or its effects. Both novels make a number of political choices in their portrayal of colonial Fez and its spatial practices: both show a tension between Western notions of legibility and mappability and the organization of space in traditional Moroccan culture. Both come out firmly on the side of modernity and Western spatial organization, though *Fí al-Tufúla* is significantly more open about this than *La boîte à merveilles*. If these novels represent an embryonic "national literature,"⁶ rather than atomistic works of personal remembrance, the nation they portray looks to the West, though it is grounded in traditional culture. It should be noted that narratives of childhood are common in Moroccan literature: Ben Jalloun and Sefrioui inaugurate a long tradition. Author, editor and political prisoner Abdellatif Laâbi and essayist and academic Fatima Mernissi have both published accounts of their childhood in Fez, for example.

Labryinthine Space in *Fí al-Tufúla*⁷

Fí al-Tufúla describes in great detail first Ben Jalloun's childhood in Britain, then the difficulties he had adjusting to his "native" Morocco, then his gradual embrace

of that culture through his secondary studies at the Qarawiyyin. Much of the significance of the text stems from the autobiographer's status as an outsider. This enables him to provide a critical ethnography of traditional culture in colonial Morocco.

Subsequent critics have pointed out the elitism inherent in his critique. Hamid Lahmidáni, writing in 1985,⁸ argues that the use of Ben Jalloun's childhood persona is at best disingenuous.⁹ Young Abdelmajid finds the ordinary practices of traditional culture and its material poverty alien and troubling: *Fí al-Tufúla* thus represents the point of view of a narrow, Westernized elite. Muhammad Berada, whose 1987 novel *Lu 'bat al-Nisyán* (*The Game of Forgetting*)¹⁰ is one of the finest achievements of Arabic-language Moroccan literature, writes in his Arabic translation of Abdelkébir Khatibi's *Le roman maghrébin* (*The Maghrebian novel*)¹¹ that: "The dominant perspective, the interpretations and the commentaries that the writer's adult awareness presents are a romantic, nationalistic point of view ..."¹²

Young Abdelmajid's perspective on urban spatial organization echoes the work of the French cultural geographer Henri Lefebvre on abstract space. Lefebvre's primary interest in his writings on space lies in the relationship of spatial practices, which "structure lived reality, include routes and networks, patterns and interactions that connect places and people, images with reality, work with leisure,"¹³ to the social practices of (sub)cultures. Lefebvre argues that in Western Europe spatial practices underwent a transformation from space structured by monuments to abstract space, wherein natural features and human interactions were subordinated to an abstract grid. The dominant feature of abstract space is *legibility*: the city is open to the gaze of anyone who is able to read it. For Lefebvre, this transformation and all spatial practices serve the needs of political power: the transition to abstract space went hand-in-hand with the increasing domination of capitalist modes of production.¹⁴ In Manchester, Abdelmajid experiences abstract space first-hand:

When we rode the streetcar, I took to staring out the window, contemplating the city whose energy and animation grew and grew as we advanced through the commercial and industrial avenues. It could really give one the idea that the city itself had also awakened with its inhabitants, for my eye could not rest anywhere except on tireless, ever-increasing activity that really tempted me to get up and move around, to work; but I didn't know what I might devote myself to.¹⁵

The gridlines of the city are open and readable to Abdelmajid: he "reads" these avenues and is inspired to get up and work. Manchester's spatial practices transform

him into an abstract worker on an abstract grid. This abstraction is further echoed in the language of the passage: when he writes “It could really give someone the idea,” the Arabic text uses the word *al-mar*, not a personal pronoun like “me” or “you,” but an impersonal noun used where an English speaker might say “one.”¹⁶ But later, once Abdelmajid “returns” to Morocco, his tendency toward abstraction is challenged by the significantly different urban practices of colonial Fez:

We quickly entered the city to pass through its narrow streets ... Is this the city that my uncle had been saying from the first day that it exemplified the truth of the country? The people must not be able to walk in the street without bumping shoulders. We entered at night, and saw the pale, sad streetlamps as if they were lamps left in place after a funeral.¹⁷

Abdelmajid cannot “read” Fez; the streets are too labyrinthine and narrow, the buildings present neither façade nor windows, and the light is too weak. People are forced to bump shoulders personally rather than become abstract workers. Traditional Moroccan cities are organized according to the principles of what I call *labyrinthine space*:

- A resistance to legibility and mapping, arising from the lack of central urban planning or a bird’s-eye viewpoint
- The need for cultural or linguistic competency rather than literacy: in order to find one’s destination, a guide rather than a map is needed
- Reliance on the tactile and on a more direct link to the human body, rather than on the visual and an abstract link to a mathematical grid
- The presence within the labyrinth, hidden from view except to those who have earned the right to guidance, of a sacred interior space subject to the gaze of all who can enter

In *Fī al-Tufūla*, the sacred interior space is the *Qarawiyyin*, the only place in the whole city that impresses Abdelmajid.¹⁸ He matriculates at the university, but he does not stay long as a student of the traditional curriculum. Rather, he becomes tangentially involved with a group of nationalists, and from there with a group of nationalist poets and writers. He creates within his family’s home a sacred interior of his own; this in turn enables him to create a “map” of the Moroccan writers of his day, which he publishes as an article in an Egyptian journal. Applying the principles of abstract space to writers raised within the labyrinthine gives Abdelmajid discursive

and even political authority among his peers: he becomes the man one needs to impress in order to become a notable writer. I argue that this is in effect an act of colonization: by rendering the space of Moroccan writers legible and mappable, Abdelmajid is applying abstract space to his “native” land and thus gaining power for himself. At the same time, however, he creates from a group of individual writers an embryonic Moroccan national literature, and thus indirectly serves the cause of unifying Moroccan resistance to European colonialism.

The Sacred Interior in *Fí al-Tufúla*

The sacred interior is a space where the gaze prevails: in the family home, everyone can see the garden or fountain within from their balcony, and anyone on a balcony is visible to everyone else. The sacred interior is *legible* space, especially when compared to its labyrinthine exterior. It is possible to view and read people in such a space because they have already passed the test of belonging to the tactile labyrinth. While the prevailing logic of the sacred interior is visual, there are also other senses, such as hearing, smell, and touch, involved in the sacred interior; the gaze is less one of reading than one of mutual recognition, and often of family relations.

The twin spaces of the tactile labyrinth and sacred interior are not without precedent in the study of Moroccan literature. The critic Abdelkebir Khatibi, in his influential 1967 work *Le roman maghrébin*,¹⁹ proposes the labyrinth and the grotto as two of the spaces that define Moroccan literature in the post-independence period. Writing on the work of Algerian novelist Kateb Yacine, Khatibi argues:

Kateb makes use of two spaces that mythology makes use of: the grotto and the labyrinth, and one sociological space: the street. Against the rigid compartmentalization of the colonial city, Kateb reacts by a powerful theatricalization of the Arab street. A tragic space par excellence, it is the spectacle of violence, the foyer of revolution. If the familial space constitutes a refuge of values, the street by contrast activates a series of explosive behaviors.²⁰

For our purposes, however, two spaces serve quite adequately to mark off the social practices of the Moroccan city. In the autobiographical narratives of personal, urban, and national history examined in this study, the settings are entirely urban, so the grotto is too naturalistic a space to be entirely relevant. While the sacred interior within the Moroccan labyrinth has many naturalistic aspects, and informs and

is created by social structure, it is an arranged naturalism that exists within an urban interior; furthermore, many of the sacred interiors encountered in Morocco have at best tenuous links to nature. As for the distinction Khatibi makes between the labyrinth and the street, the mythological and the sociological, upon close examination these will be seen to collapse into a single space. The street of the old city is itself the labyrinth.

Moreover, the tension between abstract space on the one hand and traditional spaces on the other is one that goes back to the very beginnings of Arabic literature and geography. The French scholar André Miquel, writing in 1967,²¹ traces in great detail the changes in the understanding of geography and the impact of this understanding on human culture during the third and fourth Islamic centuries. An extremely reductive summary of Miquel's argument would state that in the third Islamic century, al-Jāhiz and other writers imported more or less uncritically the Greek concept of *klima* (*iqlīm* in Arabic) directly into their writings on geography. The Greeks divided the Northern Hemisphere into seven "climes" based solely on latitude and claimed that the varying degrees of solar radiation in each clime were the determining factors in shaping the human cultures of that geographical area. As time passed, however, and the Islamic empire became increasingly Persianized, writers began to shift the meaning of *iqlīm* until it came to have the same meaning as the Persian word *keshvar*, which denoted a city and its surrounding hinterlands. Human cultures became understood less as a result of insolation than as one of particular geographical circumstances: within the new *iqlīm*, people shared linguistic and cultural unity. More than a thousand years ago, the imposition of an abstract grid from without was resisted by a more localized pattern of localities that required acquaintance with local conditions in order to understand them. It is no accident, argues Miquel, that geographical works increasingly incorporated travel narratives as time passed.²² In the Modern Standard Arabic of Fī al-Tuḥūla, the word *iqlīm* corresponds to the English "region," i.e., a locality rather than a cell in an abstract grid.

Labrynthine Space in *La boîte à merveilles*

Before analyzing the sacred interior space in both novels, let us first explore the tactile labyrinth of Fez as depicted in *La boîte à merveilles*.²³ In this quotation, young Mehdi, following his mother and her friend, momentarily loses them in a crowded, narrow street.

Unknown arms lifted me from the ground, made me pass above heads, and I finally found myself in a free space. I waited for a good time before I saw surging from the crowd the two immaculate haïks. The scene renewed itself several times during this trip. We crossed streets without names or particular aspects. I was attentive to the advice of my two guides; I applied myself to staying away from the donkeys, and inevitably bumped the knees of passersby. Each time I avoided an obstacle, another one presented itself.²⁴

The extent to which the urban environment of Fez structures itself around illegibility and anonymity is evident in the language of the passage as well as in the events it describes. Instead of “people lifted me from the ground,” Sefrioui has Mehdi say, “Unknown arms lifted me from the ground.” This makes use of the French partitive article to describe an indeterminate number of arms, disconnecting these arms from the individuals who might have used them and transforming the arms into anonymous lifting machines, then further emphasizing this by describing the arms as *inconnus* (unknown). After passing over equally anonymous heads, Mehdi finds himself in “a free space,” a bit of irony that only serves to underscore the crowded, tumultuous spectacle of the very narrow street. This free space is not a public square or a broad avenue, marked off by street signs and sidewalks, but rather a temporary zone where the density of people and donkeys is low enough for him to have a moment where he isn’t about to be trampled underfoot.

When he looks back for his mother and her companion, he does not see the two women, or the two individuals, emerge from the crowd, but rather *les deux haïks immaculés* (The two immaculate haïks). The women have been replaced by their garments, the sort of all-concealing drapery familiar in Western images of the Muslim world, garments which are immaculate, devoid of signifiers that might differentiate one woman from another, which is of course precisely the point of such drapery. In Moroccan public space, the purpose of the spatial practice of full drapery for women is to implement the social practice that women aren’t to be gazed at by anyone other than their intimates. The very word *haïk*, a French transliteration of the colloquial Arabic word *hayk*, provides an encapsulation of this trope of illegibility and anonymity, for the word is foreign to Sefrioui’s French audience, marked off in italics, and wouldn’t mean anything at all without the context that surrounds it. The word would be foreign and to a certain extent unsignifying to even a reader familiar with both colloquial Arabic and Moroccan social and spatial practices – the plural of *hayk* in Arabic is *huyúk*²⁵ – and Sefrioui’s pluralizing of the word in the French manner by adding an *S* only serves to illustrate the unreadability of this passage.

Similar scenes are repeated several times, varying iterations of the same unreadable conclusion. The streets have neither names nor architectural characteristics that make them stand out as readable. Whereas the streets of a Western city operate according to a logic of visibility, with clear lanes marked off for pedestrian and vehicular traffic, the streets of Fez are narrow, winding, and filled with all manner of traffic; they are a shared, crowded space in which the inhabitants are largely unreadable to one another. Instead of a clear gaze out through broad avenues, Mehdi is confronted with one anonymous obstacle after another.

What allows Mehdi to make it to his destination in one piece is the presence of a guide, here in the person of his mother and her friend. Even from underneath their anonymizing *haïks*, the women are able to navigate the streets because the way is familiar to them; their knowledge allows Mehdi to get to the tomb, whose location is on no map. In the Moroccan city, to find the true path a stranger must consult with one of the locals, who will in turn guide the stranger to a destination, as in this scene, where Mehdi, his mother, and her friend go to visit Si El Arafi, a *fqih* or religious scholar, in an unfamiliar quarter of their own city:

We had hardly any trouble finding the house of Si El Arafi. The people of the Seffah quarter, proud to be the neighbors of such an illustrious man, pressed forward to give us information. A child of my age was offered to accompany us. He guided us through a labyrinth (*un dédale*) of streets increasingly narrow, increasingly dark, increasingly burdened with piles of trash and stray cats. We finally ended up in a small plaza drenched in sunlight. The child who accompanied us pointed his right index finger toward the central door, stuck the left index finger into his nostril and went away without saying anything.²⁶

At first glance, it might not seem that foreign to a Westerner simply to find the right neighborhood and ask for directions; indeed, such a scene plays itself out in Western cities many times every day. But there's a fundamental difference between the spatial practices and social structures that sustain the Moroccan city and the spatial and social practices of the Western city. In Fez, there is no map: whereas a visitor to a Western city could use a good map, a telephone directory, and literacy skills to find a spiritual advisor at a particular number on a particular street without needing to ask anyone, the visitor to Si El Arafi must ask the residents of the Seffah quarter to guide him.²⁷ And just as the Western system implies a host of spatial and cultural practices – from literacy in a standard dialect, to the use of an abstract, bird's-eye view to represent the city, to the set of cultural practices that make it

seem advantageous to register one's self or business in the directory – the system used by Mehdi's mother to find her way also entails a set of cultural practices that find resonance in the spatial practice of the city. The visitor needs to speak the local dialect of Arabic, something that requires assimilation to the urban culture of Fez; Mehdi's mother is a *montagnarde* and thus most likely a Berber and not a native Arabic speaker at all. The visitor needs to be someone who can approach the locals without antagonizing them; without their guidance, the visitor would be lost in the maze of streets (*dédale de rues*). The visitor needs to be someone whom the locals consider worthy of meeting the *fqih*; if it were French soldiers, or bureaucrats, or Catholic priests, the locals might simply pretend not to know where the man who is the pride of their neighborhood resides – or pretend not to understand the question.

We can see the anonymity and illegibility of the urban streetscape of the Maghreb not only in the cultural practice of guiding that is derived from it, but in the language of the passage, as well. Sefrioui describes the neighborhood as a labyrinth, yet even in doing that he has to use a Western word, derived from *Dædalus*, the mythical inventor of the labyrinth – a man who was able to build himself wings to give himself a bird's eye view of Crete and a clear line of flight away from the island. This need serves to emphasize how foreign even the act of verbally mapping out the twisting pathways of the quarter of the Moroccan city can be. This is underscored further by the repetitive vagueness of the passage; the streets become narrower and narrower, more and more shadowed, more and more full of obstacles that block or threaten the anonymous path for the decidedly ailurophobic Mehdi. Though Si El Araf's house itself is well-lit, the path to it can only be drawn by the guide, who can only engage in a bit of silent sign language before he departs.

The Moroccan city, like any city, requires literacy to find one's way, but in a Moroccan city, a cultural literacy is required, based not so much on absorbing the right signs but rather on presenting them correctly. The tactile nature of the labyrinth and its connection to the body is further emphasized by the mute actions of the child pressed into service as a guide; rather than tell the visitors where to go, the child uses one finger to point and sticks another one up his nose, using not words but gestures to indicate the path. The body, not the abstract gaze, is what traverses the tactile labyrinth.

The Sacred Interior in *La boîte à merveilles*

The Fez in which Mehdi grows up contains not only tactile labyrinths but also sacred interiors. Throughout the narrative, Mehdi describes a number of sacred interiors that help to shape his social development. He already has the cultural competency to gain access to some sacred interiors, such as his family home, by virtue of his birth. He gains access to others, such as the tomb of a local saint, through the guidance of his parents. Yet other spaces, such as the schoolroom, provide him with the cultural competency to go further, and one space – the titular box of wonders – he creates for himself to ease the stress of adaptation to his social and spatial environment.

Moroccan spatial and social practices pervade young Mehdi's life. His family becomes "more Fassi," more urbanized, by purchasing a newfangled kerosene lamp to light the house: "All the 'best' people see by the light of oil,"²⁸ his mother says. The resulting brilliant light sustains the household by drawing mother, father, and son together over the dinner table:

The seer who was called 'Auntie Kanza' came up to admire our new acquisition, and wished us all sorts of prosperities. My mother glowed with happiness. She must have found the life worth living and the world peopled with beings of infinite goodness. She crooned, fed with tenderness a stray cat foreign to the house, laughed about nothing.²⁹

His mother's social transformation from a rural immigrant to a proper Fassi woman is complete with the spatial transformation of the family's dark apartment into a sacred interior. Sefrioui's text further emphasizes this transition by having Mehdi's mother shine with happiness, mirroring the new lamp that has brought her such status that the seer comes to grace them with her presence. Mehdi's home, an interior to which he has access because of his status as a family member, is now a sacred interior, providing him with that much more comfort with respect to his status as an inhabitant of Fez.

As a young boy, and an only child at that, Mehdi demands a great deal of his mother's attention. His mother, however, has a number of pressing emotional needs of her own, not least of which is the anxiety produced by being a foreigner among the ladies of Fez. When the pressures of daily life get too much for her, she goes with her Fassi friend Lalla Aïcha to the tomb of the local saint, Ali Boughaleb,³⁰ in order to pray. Since Mehdi's mother has nobody else to watch him while she is out with her friend, she somewhat reluctantly brings Mehdi along; he follows them

through the labyrinthine streets of the city until they arrive at the tomb and pass through its gates:

We soon found ourselves in a courtyard that seemed immense to me. At the center sat in state four clay urns filled with water. Beyond this courtyard the zaouia opened up. On each side was a square room that led to the bier of the saint, two doors leading to the pilgrims' rooms ... Arriving in front of the bier, Lalla Aïcha and my mother began to call with great cries for the saint to come to their aid. Each was unaware of the other's words, each exposed to him her little miseries, struck the wood of the bier, whined, pleaded, wished ill upon her enemies. The voices rose, the hands struck the wood of the bier with more energy and passion. A sacred delirium took over the two women. They counted all their ills, exposed their weaknesses, asked for protection, claimed vengeance, admitted their impurities, proclaimed the compassion of god and the power of Sidi Ali Boughaleb, in calling for his pity.³¹

It is evident in this quotation that the function of the sacred interior is to perpetuate a societal consensus through a gathering of those qualified to enter the space. Moroccan cities such as Fez have few large, open, publicly-accessible spaces, which makes the courtyard seem so large to Mehdi. By its very nature as a saint's tomb, the space serves as a holy site and links the mundane to the transcendental; the intercession by the saint on behalf of the petitioner serves to contain death and provide continuity between the lost Golden Age and the present. The process of praying to the saint unbinds the individuality of each woman. Each is taken over by a *sacred delirium*, brought out of herself and into an eternal consensus by her spatial relationship to the tomb of Ali Boughaleb.

When Mehdi begins to go to the *msid*, or Qur'anic school, the entire educational paradigm is centered around the shining light of the instructor and the undifferentiated murmurings of the students who are rote-memorizing the verse of scripture the master has given them. This educational paradigm, the *halqa* or circle of learning, has many of the attributes of the sacred interior. The master appears to be dozing, yet he reaches out and whacks a few students more or less at random when he hears a voice in the chorus mispronounce one of the words of the sacred text; this arbitrary discipline reinforces the students' cultural credibility by picking out – at least in theory – the voice of the stranger and singling it out for punishment. Only when reciting their verses correctly do the students belong within the sacred interior of the school.

Later, the master tells the students that as part of the celebration of the lunar New Year, "Our *msid* must be lit at midnight."³² The students work hard over

several days to whitewash the walls of the schoolroom and to place small oil lamps around the walls and ceiling. On the night of the New Year, the students and their parents, all in their best clothes, gather in the illuminated schoolroom to celebrate:

I was no longer the unique prince in the vest; I was becoming a member of a congregation of young lords, all richly dressed, singing under the direction of a king of legend ... This morning, the most ordinary objects, the most deprived beings, mixed their voices with ours, demonstrating the same fervor, abandoning themselves to the same ecstasy, claiming with the same gravity as us, the grandeur and the compassion of God, creator of all living things ... After the recitation of the Qur'an, we sang hymns. The parents of certain students sang with us. They had come to accompany their children. They perhaps didn't have the same task as we: they were celebrating the Achoura at the *msid* like they did in their own childhoods.³³

This ritual not only forms the children into a group within the now even more sacred interior of the schoolroom but also brings the generations together in a consensus of tradition and worship. Because the children have passed their oral examinations by successfully reciting the Qur'an without standing out from their peers, they are allowed the fine clothes and parental admiration that transforms them into a congregation of young lords instead of a diverse group of children of tradesmen and immigrants. The social boundaries between them are erased by the bright light of the many lamps; the resemblance to the newly-illuminated apartment after the purchase of the kerosene lamp is no coincidence.

Further extending the status of the schoolroom as sacred interior is the collective effort that has been undertaken to transform it for the holiday. The oil for the lamps, a considerable expense for any of these poor families, was brought in bowls and bottles by the students from their parents' kitchens. The chalk for the whitewashing was brought by one of the parents, who was a whitewasher by trade, and the students had taken a collection to put new straw mats on the floor for the occasion. Gaining the cultural competency and credibility represented by the memorization of the Qur'an, then, is not the only factor involved in gaining access to the sacred interior; the very process of creating the sacred interior involves the sort of consensus and cultural competency that structures it.

Mehdi is a rather nervous child whose mother is too busy to assuage all his anxieties. In her absence,³⁴ Mehdi hits upon a rather novel solution that makes use of Moroccan space and spatial practices. He accumulates a number of shiny objects –

buttons, beads, a glass bottle-stopper – and stores them within a small box that he keeps in his bedroom. This is the titular box of wonders: whenever Mehdi feels anxiety and can't get his mother to pay attention to him, he retreats to his room, opens the box and holds the objects therein up to the light. He has created a sacred interior for himself, one that serves as a kind of fetish that takes him away from the anxiety of being a child in a world of adults.

At night, the house fell back into silence. I took out my Box, emptied it on a corner of the mattress, looked at my objects one by one. This evening, they did not speak to me; they lay inert, sulky, a little hostile. They had lost their magic power and had become cagey, secretive. I put them back in their box. Once the cover was back on, they woke up in the darkness to give themselves over to fastidious and delicate games. They did not know in their ignorance that the insides of my Box of Wonders could not resist my contemplation. My innocent glass stopper grew, enlarged, attained the proportions of a palace of dream, ornamented with light and precious drapery. The nails, the porcelain buttons, the pins and the beads were changed into princesses, slaves, young men; they went into this palace, played sweet melodies, fed upon fine treats, had a go at the swings, flew into the trees to snack on the fruit, disappeared into the sky on the wing of the wind in quest of adventures.³⁵

Mehdi's experience in this rather furtive and erotic exploration of his box of wonders subtends a hybrid space whose attributes come from both the sacred interior and the space of fairytales that interests Mehdi. Before his gaze illuminates them, the objects in Mehdi's box lay, or in French, *gisaient*, the word used for a corpse lying in a tomb, relating back to what he has seen of the saints' tombs and how his mother and her friend invoke the saint as a guide. Mehdi has absorbed the storytelling conventions of his culture well enough that he's able to people a sort of story with the dreamed-of elements of his box of shiny wonders.

The Façade in *La boîte à merveilles*

A fundamental transition toward the role of storyteller takes place when Mehdi and his mother pass the façade of the French colonial office:

To our left stood a monumental gateway decorated with nails and hammered bronze of very fine work.

- Wow! Tell me whom that house belongs to?
- It’s not a house; it’s an office for Christians.³⁶
- I see Muslims going in.
- They work with the Christians. The Christians, my son, are rich and pay well those who know their language.
- Will I speak the Christians’ language when I’m bigger?
- God preserve you, my son, from all contact with these people whom we don’t know.³⁷

The gleam of the façade attracts Mehdi, who wants to know more about whoever might exhibit such a wonderful spatial practice – in a traditional Moroccan city, buildings typically turn inward, presenting blank walls, usually entirely without windows, to the street – but his mother turns him away from this. For Mehdi’s mother, the façade, like the French, is something to be avoided; for Lefebvre, it is the Western means of organizing space in a nutshell:

A façade admits certain acts to the realm of what is visible, whether they occur on the façade itself (on balconies, window ledges, etc.) or are to be seen from the façade (processions in the street, for example). Many other acts, by contrast, it condemns to obscenity: these occur behind the façade.³⁸

This is the only mention of the French in *La boîte à merveilles*, but we can see the effects of the French and of Western spatial practice on Sefrioui himself, who in this autobiographical narrative describes his own origins as a montagnard child in Fez in the late colonial period. While there’s nothing overtly nationalistic at all in Sefrioui’s narrative, the effect of Western culture is most evident in the fact that *La boîte à merveilles* is written in French rather than in Arabic, and Sefrioui was indeed paid well by French patrons, if not necessarily by the French government. To further understand the extent to which Sefrioui’s identity was influenced by Western, abstract spatiality, just look at his conception of his childhood subjectivity: “My memory was a blank slate (*une cire fraîche*, “a fresh wax”) and the smallest events were there engraved in unerasable images. I still have this album to brighten up my solitude, to prove to myself that I haven’t yet died.”³⁹ The spatial relationship of author/narrator to subject is here the Western trope of legibility; once the events of his childhood engraved themselves upon the fresh tablet of his memory, this tablet would then be readable – and it would also replace the tomb as a symbol of the absent presence of death. He can map himself out from a bird’s-eye perspective, something

which is not at all native to Moroccan culture and which allows him to view his life from a perspective that makes him a narrator in the Western sense.

The Sacred Interior in *Fí al-Tufúla*, Again

Abdelmajid's young life is not entirely structured by the abstract urban grid. His family is Moroccan and Muslim, and while his father has molded himself into a Western businessman, he remains fundamentally Moroccan, especially in structuring his family life. This manifests itself in his spatial practices and the social practices they engender. Early in the narrative, Abdelmajid's mother grows ill and dies, yet despite his son's obvious pain, his father refuses to let him see his mother's body. The Petronous family, their neighbors and Abdelmajid's caretakers throughout much of his mother's illness, cause a conflict when they insist that five-year-old Abdelmajid be taken in to see his mother's corpse lying in state, even though it goes against traditional Moroccan sociospatial practices. That he has been allowed to enter into a forbidden spatial relationship renders his father and nursemaid *tá'ih*,⁴⁰ a word that means "lost," or "distracted," with the more poetic implication that they have become lost in a *tíh*, or labyrinth. His transgression of normative spatial relationships has caused his Moroccan family to react in a manner he expresses spatially, in terms of blockage. Because his family is so confused, Millie Petronous takes him outside to the park, under the light of the full moon, and tries to console him:

Its light filtered along the branches and lit up the lawn. The lofty shadows of the trees spread out underneath them on the ground. The scene seized me with its glory and tranquility, but Millie turned me away from it with her speech. I heard her say: 'Don't be sad, little one. This is life; your mother hasn't gone away, and won't go away, because she was a good woman. So she'll remain with us in spirit, and God will reward her for her goodness and she'll live in the Blessed Gardens. Don't fear for her, and try not to be sad. Look at the sky; heaven is there, behind the moon and behind the stars. If you want to see her, just wait for the full moon, then look at it. Don't you see her there, looking down at you, smiling, happy? Look; don't you see her?'⁴¹

Essentially, Millie adapts Abdelmajid's spatiality to a Western context by moving his perspective from the particular and tactile to the abstract and visual. In the first movement of the scene, Abdelmajid leaves the house in order to experience his grief in a naturalistic setting. He has essentially inverted the sacred interior of Moroccan

space by moving out to the English lawn, creating something closer to Khatibi's grotto in the circle of trees. He has performed a kind of hybridity between Western and Moroccan space by creating a space where the tactile bodies of the trees and their capacity to block the light of the moon generate a labyrinth on the lawn. Millie's repetition of the verbs *rá'á*, "to see," and *nazara*, "to look/gaze," underscore the extent to which the mother in the moon as a source of solace depends on a clear line of sight to the moon above. Abdelmajid's full moon takes the place of the reader of the map of the city, looking down from a bird's-eye view to help him decode what is a confusing text for a child of any nationality: the culture of adulthood.

Before Abdelmajid can step into a soothing place, however, he meets the influence of Millie, who instead imposes Western spatial practices upon him. She has him concentrate on the abstract gaze of the moon rather than the tactile trees, using language to turn him away from the space he has created. She emphasizes the link between the moonlight and his mother's gaze, no less abstract since his mother is dead, and continues to emphasize the lines of sight and the visual, mapping aspects of this manifestation of grief. Thus, Millie's speech to a certain extent replicates the violence of Western colonization of the Maghreb; though of course she is only trying to help a young boy for whom she cares assuage the grief brought on by the death of his mother, it is undeniable that she imposes her own, Western spatiality upon the hybrid coping mechanism into which he has transformed the grove of trees.

Political Spaces in Moroccan Literature

As noted above, for Lefebvre, sociospatial practices are essentially political in nature; a close reading of Miquel's argument would demonstrate that this was true in the Abbasid era as well. The spatial organization Abdelmajid imposes on the confusing streets of Fez and on the writers he has become acquainted with is essentially an act of colonization, imposing Western abstract space on the labyrinth of colonial Morocco.

An analogous argument for *La boîte à merveilles* is a little less direct: perhaps the text concerns itself only with Mehdi's boyhood since there are no colonists or politicians in the novel. *La boîte à merveilles* is nevertheless a deeply political text, not only in its use of space but in its very presentation. When Mehdi sees the façade of the colonial bureau, he's deeply impressed – and this is even before he learns that the French pay well those who know their language. We know nothing of what happens to Mehdi the character after the text of *La boîte à merveilles* comes to a close, but

Sefrioui the author gained fame and fortune by publishing his semiautobiographical novel in French. His main audience was not Moroccan at all, but rather readers in metropolitan France: *La boîte à merveilles* was published in Paris, not Morocco. Sefrioui is therefore mapping the old city: he exposes old Fez to French readers who are curious about what life might be like in these distant, soon to be independent colonies. This is evident from the first page of the text:

I saw, at the bottom of an impasse that the sun never visited, a little boy of six years, setting a trap for catching a sparrow, but the sparrow never came. He so desired this little sparrow! He wouldn't eat it, nor martyr it. He wanted to make it his friend ... We lived in Dar Chouafa, the house of the seer. On the ground floor lived a seer of great reputation. From faraway neighborhoods, women of all conditions came to consult her.⁴²

From the start, Sefrioui is an object of his own storytelling. He views himself not only from the sort of elevated perspective characteristic of abstract space but also as a benevolent colonist: he wants to cage the sparrow only to make it his companion. Moreover, his family lives in the traditional Fassi style, a group of apartments centering in a courtyard, in a house named for the seer, *al-shawwāfa*, derived from Arabic *shāfa*, “to see/look,” the colloquial counterpart to the formal verbs *rāʾa* and *nazara*, those used in the citation from *Fí al-Tufúla* when Abdelmajid looks at the moon. From its very beginning, the text of *La boîte à merveilles* is entirely wrapped up in the abstract gaze, even if it never leaves Fez nor discusses politics. As such, it presents us with a map, in a Western language, of a labyrinthine space from an abstract perspective, and it is, like *Fí al-Tufúla*, a colonial text.

Notes

- 1 C.R. Pennell, *Morocco Since 1830: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 151–160.
- 2 See, e.g., the difference between the 1995 edition of the Lonely Planet guidebook and its most recent iteration in 2012.
- 3 Casablanca: Matbaat al ‘Andalús, 1956. Citations in this chapter are taken from the second edition (Casablanca: Dār Nashr al-Maʿrifa, 2006), as this is the edition studied in secondary schools and is thus much more widely available to interested readers.
- 4 Paris: Seuil, 1954.

- 5 And Spain, though Spanish colonial authority was never more than nominal. See Pennell, 166–167.
- 6 Fí al-Tufúla is part of the secondary-school literature curriculum in Moroccan schools, so it, at least, is viewed as a foundational text.
- 7 In 2008, I published an article in the *Journal of Arabic Literature* that examined in detail the use of urban space in Fí al-Tufúla; readers who wish further detail are advised to seek it in that article.
- 8 Hamid Lahmidáni, *al-Riwáya al-maghribiya wa-ru' yat al-wáqi' al 'ijtimá'i: dirása binyawiya takwíniya*. (Cairo: Dár al-Thaqáfa, 1985) 253–255.
- 9 Reliance on the perspective of a narrow, educated, Westernized elite is the standard trope for Arabic-language Moroccan novels throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s. It is only with the novels of Muhammad Zafzáf, the first of which was *al-Mar'a wa-l-Warda* (*The Woman and the Rose*) (Beirut: Manshúráat Gallery Wáhid, 1972), that we begin to see protagonists more representative of the vast majority of Moroccans.
- 10 Rabat: Dár al 'Amán. An excellent English translation by Issa J. Boulatta is available as *The Game of Forgetting* (Austin: The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1996).
- 11 Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Le Roman Maghrébin* (Paris: Maspero, 1967).
- 12 Berrada (tr), “al-Riwáya al-maghribiya,” from *al-mulhaq al-wathá'iqiy* (Casablanca: manshúráat al-bahth al-jámi'í, 1971), 142.
- 13 Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 112.
- 14 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 268–269.
- 15 Ben Jalloun, 39.
- 16 A.-L. de Premare, *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français*, 12 vols. (Paris: Editione L'Harmattan, 1994), 3: 293–294.
- 17 Ben Jalloun, 83.
- 18 Ibid., 39.
- 19 Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Le Roman Maghrébin* (Paris: Maspero, 1967).
- 20 Ibid., 104.
- 21 *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu' au milieu du 11e siècle* (Human geography of the Islamic world until the mid-eleventh century) (Paris: Mouton, 1967).
- 22 Though it must be mentioned here that for Miquel, travel narratives have another purpose: to make foreign lands seem more alien and therefore make the Islamic empire seem less fragmented than it was. See Miquel, 69.
- 23 Ahmed Sefrioui, *La boîte à merveilles* (The Box of Wonders) (Paris: LeSeuil, 1954).
- 24 Ibid., 42.
- 25 A.-L. de Premare, *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français*, 12 vols. (Paris: Editione L'Harmattan, 1994), 3: 293–294.

- 26 Sefrioui, 149.
- 27 Si El Araf is blind and makes his living from dispensing advice and blessings.
- 28 Ibid., 36.
- 29 Ibid., 36.
- 30 Ali Boughaleb, a twelfth-century CE saint of Chalab.
- 31 Sefrioui, 22–24.
- 32 Ibid., 61.
- 33 Ibid., 108–109.
- 34 One of the major plot points of the novel is Mehdi's father losing his job and having to go to the countryside to do agricultural work; this transforms Mehdi's mother, already a stranger in town, into the head of household.
- 35 Sefrioui, 43.
- 36 Ibid., 21.
- 37 Ibid., 146.
- 38 Lefebvre, 99.
- 39 Sefrioui, 9.
- 40 Ben Jalloun, 17.
- 41 Ibid., 17.
- 42 Sefrioui, 7.

