

# The Saharan Intertext: Djaout, Ouologuem, Djébar

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## Introduction

Counter to literary depictions of the Sahara by celebrated colonial-era novelists such as Albert Camus (1913-1960) or Paul Bowles (1910-1999), a great many African writers have since written this desert not as a non-signifying, forbidding void awaiting Euro/American meaning-production, but rather as a heterogeneous and interconnected space already crosshatched by intricate networks of discursive and material exchange. The epistemes that this conference is committed to rethinking have, it seems to me, rendered the Sahara itself invisible in so many ways: whether figured as bridge or barrier, it is a negative space whose edges- that which it connects or divides -are what come into view. Inspired by Jacques Rancière's claim that the 'politics of literature' has little to do with the political commitments and statements of writers and much to do with how literary texts *intervene* in and *transform* shared perception ('partage du sensible') by adding to what it is possible to see and to know, this paper considers literary fiction not as a mode of representation (or counter-representation) but as a form of ethical reflection and epistemological critique. These novels can be read as challenging the very categories, metaphors, and borders -imagined and material- that my colleagues have rigorously put to question. It is an honor to learn from you, and to be able to speak with you.

This intervention travels by way of three texts by writers hailing from the Sahara's edges -Tahar Djaout, Yambo Ouologuem, Assia Djébar. I begin with a definition in order to clarify my title- what is a Saharan (or rather a *transSaharan*) intertext? After this moment of orientation, I will turn to the novels as a prompt for your questions and an invitation to future reading.

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## Intertextuality

My definition of ‘intertextuality’ relies on the work of many scholars, in particular Eileen Julien, Simon Gikandi, Gayatri Spivak, Réda Bensmaïa, and Christiane Chaulet Achour. In her PhD thesis, Chaulet Achour highlights the ‘intertextualité prismatique’ of Algerian literary texts in particular (though not exclusively). The text, she writes, is like a “carrefour et réceptacle de langues et de cultures diversifiées que l’écriture tente d’assimiler”<sup>1</sup>—we might revise this as ‘carrefour *saharien*.’ ‘Intertextuality,’ as Chaulet-Achour insists, is a name for how multiple threads cross in any literary text, and an illuminating metaphor for how a text is always connected to a multitude of other(s) texts, inhabited by and inscribed with them, polysemic, dialogic, multicoded, *open* at the ‘edges’.

Chaulet-Achour draws two clarifying distinctions. She notes, first, that intertextuality operates in at least two ways—in both *citational* and *generic* modes (that is, a text both repeats elements of other texts, for example by citing titles, lines, lyrics, motifs, epigraphs, images, transcribing verbal sounds and proper names; it also replicates genre conventions/codes that make it recognizable as, say, a novel, a *récit*, a *qissa* ; it’s the *generic* mode that especially interests me here). She then draws a critical distinction between a concept of intertextuality as passive ‘*acculturation*’ and a concept of intertextuality as dynamic ‘*inheritance*’. To ‘inherit’ is an active critical process, she argues—not unlike translation in that it always transforms what it transmits. The point of drawing this distinction is to recognize intertextuality not as a form for preserving and transmitting cultural and linguistic heritage in literary form as a kind of museumization or expression of national or ethnic identity, but as the rhetorical and aesthetic practice by which writers *invent* by reworking the diverse aesthetic resources available to them—for example, rich textual (by which I mean both written and spoken) traditions of the Sahara.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaulet-Achour, C. (1985), *Abécédaires en devenir - Langue française et colonialisme en Algérie*, Alger, Entreprise Nationale de Presse. Préface de Mostefa Lacheraf (édition intégrale de la thèse de doctorat d’État de janvier 1982), p. 461.

Eileen Julien reinforces this important point: ‘intertextuality’ not as a natural or inevitable *effect* but rather as a rhetorical strategy “through which the writer attempts to resolve aesthetic and social questions”<sup>2</sup>. “African novels are well read”, in Eileen Julien’s opinion, “if they are perceived as ‘fulfillment’ rather than as an ‘effect’. She adds: “Narrative is a privileged artistic and literary form because the very ideology of narrative is to endow events with meaning, in other words, *to rewrite history*”<sup>3</sup>. Novels, then, might be thought of as doing something other than reflecting, representing, and recording history—by their very form they intervene critically in its production.

## Djaout

Djaout’s *L’invention du désert* narrates the 12<sup>th</sup>-century desert peregrinations of Mahdi Ibn Toumert in what we might read as a novelistic reworking of the *rihla* form. The novel was published in 1987. Literary critic Réda Bensmaïa shares Eileen Julien’s and Chaulet-Achour’s sense of indignation concerning how African literary studies have historically been framed by US and Europe-based academics—as vessels for national allegory, in particular. As Bensmaïa points out in his own excellent essay on Djaout’s novel, it is also precisely because *L’invention du désert* was reduced to national allegory by certain Algerian readers that Djaout was assassinated in 1993, and he reads differently to do justice to the text and its author.

Ibn Toumert, Bensmaïa reminds us, was the “founder of the Almohades Dynasty and chief of the hordes that were to sweep away the Almoravides and attempt to establish the order of Islamic Faith and Purity” in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Djaout’s Ibn Toumert treks from the high Atlas to Mecca, Cairo, Tripoli, Tunis, Bejaia, Fez, Marrakesh, Mellala, reflecting on the return of a purified Islam to Algeria (which he advocates) and also describing the desert landscape through which he wanders. These descriptions almost insist that the reader draw parallels to the Algerian present. Bensmaïa lists potential questions a reader might feel compelled to ask in 1988, or 1993, or 1999: “What links, what

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<sup>2</sup> Julien, E. (2006), “The Extroverted African Novel”, *The Novel: History, Geography and Culture*, Vol 1., Princeton, éd. Franco Moretti, Princeton University Press, p. 679.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 667-8.

relations, might be established between the partisan of the Mahdi Ibn Toumert and the founders of contemporary Algeria's Brothers of the Purity of Faith and Salvation ?”<sup>4</sup> “Why is there Islam in Algeria and not, rather, nothing ?”<sup>5</sup> “Can we analyze Islam from our present perspective when it turns out that its mark was already inscribed on Algeria more than thirteen centuries ago ?”<sup>6</sup> “What is it to invent the desert ? Which desert is at stake ?”<sup>7</sup>

The novel is confusing, challenging. Djaout's prose blurs temporal and spatial distinctions so that the reader is forced to leave the nature of this desert territory uncertain. Bensmaïa reads this unhinged prose as a clue that—here he cites Homi Bhabha—the people, places, proper names, and dates in Djaout's text “are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic’ but rather ‘a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference where the claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address” (Bhabha 267 in Bensmaïa). That is, by rewriting Ibn Toumert's transaharan *rihla* in this style, *L'invention du désert* reveals historical meaning to be as unstable as the landscape that its reader is being pushed to imagine: “When he speaks of the desert”, writes Bensmaïa, “is Djaout speaking of the Algerian Sahara or might he rather be proposing an allegory of the impossible text about Algeria that he is trying to write?”<sup>8</sup>. The project of rewriting the desert *rihla* of Ibn Toumert in this form prompts the reader to ask questions about the place of Islam in the nation's history, and to assume responsibility for its future.

## Ouologuem

Yambo Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence* (published in 1968) also reworks trans-Saharan Arabic intertexts in a notoriously controversial critique of violence. The novel narrates an eight-century long history of the fictional Malian kingdom of Nakem by citing a stunning multitude of intertexts on any given page. As Ouologuem scholar Christopher Wise points out in his

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<sup>4</sup> Bensmaïa, R. (2009), “Postcolonial Nations: Political or Poetic Allegories? (On Tahar Djaout's *L'invention du désert*)”, *Experimental Nations: Or, the Invention of the Maghreb*, Princeton, Princeton Univeristy Press, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

introduction to the novel, most readers have been to some degree obsessed with this compositional style, in particular “the supposed theft of European literary resources” (such as work by Graham Greene, Andre Schwartz Bart), “a ‘theft’ that enabled Ouologuem to violently deconstruct Western practices of writing” by flagrantly violating codes of authorship and originality and scandalizing French sensibilities. The novel, as you may know, provoked a scandal and a plagiarism trial, and was banned in France for decades. Yet this plagiarism reflects the prolific and flagrantly irreverent intertextual logic that governs Ouologuem’s text, a logic that doesn’t apply only or even most importantly to European intertexts. The novel has *also* offended sensibilities for its unambiguous indictment of African/Muslim complicity in the long history of transaharan imperialism and slavery—an ‘artery’ of blood, as Ouologuem puts it, ‘un bain de violence sans précédent’ that preceded European capitalist expansion by centuries<sup>9</sup>.

*Le devoir de violence* is not chiefly preoccupied with responding to questions concerning European colonial violence or European conventions of authorship and originality, although those are also concerns. But as signaled from its opening pages, the novel’s most central intertexts include the 17<sup>th</sup> century Arabic historiographies *Tarikh el Fettash* (Mali empire, Songhay empire) and *Tarikh es-Sudan* (by Abderrahmane es Saadi, 1650, concerning Ghana, Mali, Songhai empires) as well as forms of Quranic and Sufi poetics and hermeneutics. The text’s central concern is for deep human suffering and liberation; it takes up the cause of victims of violence by, as Wise argues, undermining and “correcting earlier and false ‘corrections’ of West African history that once empowered evil and purely secular Muslim regimes”<sup>10</sup>. The text fully replicates and mimics conventions of the Arabic historiographies, drawing extensively on Quranic references and recitational forms in Arabic as well as Dogon. In brief, Ouologuem’s intertextual strategy appears to be fully in the service of a radically egalitarian vision of liberation from extreme violence.

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<sup>9</sup> Ouologuem, Y. (1968), *Le devoir de violence*, Paris, Seuil, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Wise, C. (1996), ‘Qur’anic Hermeneutics, Sufism, and *Le devoir de violence*: Yambo Ouloguem as Marabout Novelist,’ in *Religion and Literature*, vol. 28, n° 1, p. 97.

## Djebar

If Djaout and Ouologuem rework Arabic intertexts in their literary critiques of violence, Djebar draws upon an older archive. Her *Vaste est la prison*—a novel she interrupted writing during October 1988, stunned by the violence she saw on the streets of Algiers, then completed while in France in 1992 and published in 1995—makes visible a long history of imperial violence and destruction that she dates well before Phoenician and Roman colonization of North Africa.

Djebar's long history of destruction is threaded with a countertext of survival. *Vaste est la prison* is constructed as a puzzle that gradually discloses the secret of its title. The lyric appears in the novel's opening epigraph and repeats throughout the text, both in French and a transliterated Kabyle: "Vaste est la prison qui m'écrase. D'où viendrait-tu délivrance ?/Meqqwer lhebs iy inyan Ans'ara el ferreg felli ?"<sup>11</sup> A credit notes that the French verse comes from Jean Amrouche's 1939 collection *Chants berbères de Kabylie*, and that the Kabyle song itself was frequently sung and recorded by Taos Amrouche. The text sets the lyric in a more remote past, tracing it to the Lybico-Berber spoken and written at Carthage, Cirta, and Dougga before Punic and Latin, imagining the words spoken by Numidian king Jugurtha as he died of starvation in a Roman prison. The text thus articulates a suffering experienced century before Christ with contemporary Algerian suffering (the 1990s) through its incantatory repetition of a lyric sung in innumerable prisons since: "L'immuable c'est lui, le mot qui traverse, d'un coup d'aile, vingt et un siècles pour m'apporter, tout près, le dernier souffle de vie de Jugurtha"<sup>12</sup>.

*Vaste est la prison's* second chapter connects this spoken language—*souffle*—to its lost alphabet by reconstructing the history of a bilingual inscription that puzzled centuries of scholars who found it on a tomb at Dougga. This mysterious inscription in an unknown alphabet entices and frustrates generations of European scholars until one of them recognizes it as the same alphabet used by Touaregs on their camels' flanks and on sites from Tripoli to the Fezzan, and the chapter concludes by

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<sup>11</sup> Djebar, A. (1995), *Vaste est la prison*, Paris, Albin Michel, p. 7-236.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5-334.

connecting this to an even older Tifinagh inscription at the tomb of Tin Hinan at Abalessa, attributing the language's transmission to its use by women for their own purposes. Thus Djébar reimagines the Touareg legend of princess Tin Hinan—and her tomb at Abalessa in the Hoggar—as a way to account for the transmission and survival both of the Tifinagh script and spoken Berber languages despite the threat of violent erasure. *Vaste est la prison* critically revises the orientalist archaeology that produced such a loss (because this written language was mistakenly assumed to be dead) and also recasts the long history of gendered suffering and cultural survival as belonging to the rich heritage of the present.

## Conclusion

In summary, the 'prismatic intertextuality' of these novels not only poses a challenge to the reductive Saharan epistemes we have encountered; it offers other ways to imagine this space (e.g., rewriting the Sahara cannot only be a matter of a writing-back to Orientalist and imperialist representations of the Sahara). These novels are also responsive to locally-inflected problems with long histories in particular contexts—urgent problems such as state and Islamist violence across the Saharan region. The Sahara appears as an occasion for rewriting history, a space that compels us—as readers and writers—to think beyond inherited borders and historiographies that justify new forms of old violence.

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