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Living and Perceived: Depictions of Gnawa Culture in American Literature

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ABSTRACT

The Gnawa are an ethno-cultural African diasporic group particular to Morocco. They are known for their spiritual and healing music rituals, which are a larger part of their unique practice of Sufi Islam. Their music often invokes a spiritual communion with a shared history of ancestral slavery and displacement, for example, in revering the Sufi saint, Bilal al-Habashi, or *Sidi Bilal*, who was an Ethiopian slave freed by the Prophet Muhammad according to canonical accounts. In this paper, I examine (mis)representations of the Gnawa in American writing. Firstly, I start with Elizabeth Fernea's travel memoir *A Street in Marrakech* and Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya's novel *The Storyteller of Marrakesh*. These two texts depict the Gnawa within an Orientalist framework and are situated within a larger tradition of American tourism to Marrakesh. Secondly, I discuss Randy Weston's memoir *African Rhythms* which outlines his lifelong musical relationship with the Gnawa. In this section I look at Gnawa music in relation to African American music styles such as jazz and blues. Lastly, I analyze Charif Shanahan's poetry collection *Into Each Room We Enter Without Knowing* and his representation of the Gnawa as a symbol of global Blackness. These representations offer new insights on how the Gnawa are perceived in the American literary imaginary.

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EPIGRAPH

If we read the history of the world, we realize that human culture is migration and fusions, that no regions or peoples could be who they are without the contact and assistance from others.

- Victor Hernández Cruz¹

¹ Víctor Hernández Cruz. *The Mountain in the Sea*, (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2006), 1.

Introduction

Fatima Mernissi, Moroccan sociologist, feminist, and author, tells in a memoir about her childhood in Fez of her relationship with an old and poor woman named Mina to whom she dedicates a chapter titled “Mina the Rootless.” As a young girl, Mernissi writes in *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994), Mina was captured from her home in Sudan and brought as a slave to Morocco. Mernissi idolizes Mina for her bravery in the face of immense hardship, likening Mina’s tale to the ones she heard from *The Thousand and One Nights* and comparing it to a terrifying fantasy external to Morocco where “princesses were kidnapped and sold as slaves when their royal caravans, heading towards Mecca for the pilgrimage, were attacked.”² In Mernissi’s account, the magic and terror of *The Thousand and One Nights* does not belong to Morocco, but to a fantasy world on Morocco’s periphery, in foreign lands that border her home. The slavery that dramatically and horrifically cut short Mina’s childhood both borders Mernissi’s life and yet exists in a land that does not fully concern her.

In the same chapter of Mernissi’s memoir, Mina’s tale is juxtaposed to the “foreign” music of the Gnawa. According to Mernissi, the Gnawa were an “all-male orchestra” that “was supposed to be all black. These musicians, said the legend, had come from a fabulous empire called Gnawa (Ghana), which stretched beyond the Sahara Desert, and beyond the rivers, all the way down south, into the heart of the Sudan.”³ While Mernissi represents the Gnawa in this way, R. David Goodman would contest that the Gnawa “brotherhood” was not really “all-male” but that instead, within the traditional contexts for Gnawa music, women were the main audience

² Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, (Reading, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1994), 169.

³ Mernissi, 163.

and many of the respected members, *mqaddema*, were women.⁴ Deborah Kapchan also underlines that “although the sexual division of labor is codified among the Gnawa – men are musicians, and women comprise the majority of the possessed – close analysis reveals a complexity and flexibility of gendered power relations and ritual responsibilities.”⁵ The public face of the Gnawa reveal them as a “brotherhood” of male musicians; however, the reality of the Gnawa community’s gender dynamics remain obscured and misrepresented. Throughout the writings that I discuss in this project, likewise, Gnawa women are missing. None of the authors represent Gnawa women at all let alone as an integral part of the Gnawa identity. This gendered representation of the Gnawa underscores the distortion and reconfiguration that outsiders to the Gnawa demonstrate in their writing.

In Mernissi’s story it is a group of women and their young children, including young Mernissi herself, who listen to the Gnawa music. The women are concerned with the authenticity of the Gnawa performance as a spiritual commodity. The appeal of Gnawa music for them stems from its “foreignness” and that foreignness is signaled by Blackness. The female neighbors of Mernissi would order entertainment by the Gnawa performers at the house of Sidi Belal, a member of the Gnawa order who did not play music himself. However,

[s]ometimes, someone would spot a white drummer in Sidi Belal’s supposedly all-Gnawa black orchestra, and then the honorable ladies who had paid for the ceremony would complain. “How can you perform Gnawa music, and sing genuine Gnawa songs, when you are white like an aspirin tablet!” they would shout, furious at the lousy organization.

⁴ David R. Goodman, “The Space of Africanness: Gnawa Music and Slave Culture in North Africa.” *Journal of Cultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002): 38.

⁵ Deborah Kapchan. *Traveling Spirit Masters: Moroccan Gnawa Trance and Music in the Global Marketplace*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University, 2007), 3.

Sidi Belal would try to explain to them that sometimes, even if you were white, Gnawa culture could rub off on you and you could learn its music and songs. But the women were adamant – the orchestra had to be all black and foreign. The blacks in the orchestra had better speak Arabic with an accent too, otherwise they might be nothing more than local blacks who could play drums.⁶

This foreign and accented Blackness signifies the Gnawa's ability to conjure authentic spirits through their music and lends them their credibility. Moreover, the women are concerned about the Gnawa as a product and a purchase. Although Sidi Belal insists that skin color and foreignness does not jeopardize the experience of the music, the women's judgments take precedence as they are the financial backbone for the performance's existence. The Gnawa themselves lose access to their own self-making and expression of their identity as they must conform to the desires of their audience.

Mernissi continues to sketch a genealogy of the Gnawa. Not only did they come from a fabulous empire in the heart of the Sudan, she writes, but “when they had come north, they had brought with them no luggage but their enchanting, irresistible rhythms and songs, and their preferred city in Morocco was Marrakech, the open door to the desert.”⁷ Historically, the reason that the Gnawa arrived in Morocco without their luggage is the same reason that Mina did not carry any luggage on her journey. The Gnawa did not *choose* to come to Morocco in the first place but were forcibly brought to the country by slavers. Marrakech was the city where many of them ended up by virtue of its proximity to sub-Saharan Africa and the prevalence of many

⁶ Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass*, 174.

⁷ Mernissi, 163.

public slave markets there up until the late 1920s.⁸ Gnawa music bears the mark of this slavery in its very content. Gnawa music is not actually “foreign” to Morocco at all, but part of a blending of various African musical traditions shaped by the Gnawa experiences of enslavement in Morocco. Goodman notes, “It seems that the greatest degree of departure between Gnawa music and West African griotic traditions concerns precisely those functions and identities challenged by slavery, as well as by Islam (although in less clear ways).”⁹ While the Gnawa musical tradition holds roots in other parts of Africa, the way that it is manifested is particular to the Moroccan context. There are no Gnawa outside of Morocco. Gnawa is a uniquely Moroccan identity.

In her memoir, Mernissi juxtaposes two lineages of external Africanness that she encounters in her childhood. Moreover, in Mernissi’s genealogy of the Gnawa she avoids mentioning the traumatic history of slavery, instead romanticizing the Gnawa origin story as one centered on a journey where they mysteriously needed no luggage and voluntarily flourished with their “enchanted, irresistible rhythms and songs.” Mernissi places Mina and the Gnawa side-by-side in this chapter but does not explain how they might be connected beyond their perceived “foreignness” and Sudanese origins. However, knowing the shared connections between a history of displacement through slavery and continued economic marginalization, their stories align exceedingly well. Like the Gnawa, Mina remembers her childhood and hometown through music. For instance, “Mina remembered fragments of her native language from her childhood, but they were mostly songs which did not make any sense either to her or to

⁸ Rita Aouad. “Slavery and the situation of blacks in Morocco in the first half of the twentieth century.” In *Revisiting the Colonial Past in Morocco*, trans. Driss Maghraoui and Eric Ross, ed. Driss Maghraoui. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 147.

⁹ Goodman, “The Space of Africanness,” 43.

anyone else. Sometimes, too, Mina was sure that djinni drum music, played during the hadra, or dance possession rituals, was reminiscent of the rhythms she had known in childhood.”¹⁰ The importance of music for Mina parallels its importance for the Gnawa and the spiritual connection that music provides to recover lost memories.

The Gnawa are both a population exclusive to Morocco and yet they are typified as peripheral or foreign to some sort of “central” or “true” Moroccan identity. Mernissi’s representation of Mina shows how Moroccan identity can be stretched to include hybridity and multiplicity. However, in the specific case of the Gnawa, this Moroccan identity is stereotyped by a label of foreignness and marginalization. Mernissi recounts her understanding of the term Gnawa as coming from “Ghana.” Chouki El Hamel confirms this possibility while also claiming that it could have historic and linguistic ties with the nation “Guinea.” Another possibility would be the linguistic connection between the term Gnawa and the Berber word “gnawi” meaning black.¹¹ In all cases then, steeped within the very name “Gnawa” is an emphasis on their foreignness, as a group that is “Othered” in the sense that they are viewed as different from a conventional conception of what it means to be Moroccan. El Hamel elsewhere writes about the supposed “externality” of Blackness to Morocco as a constructed falsehood, since there were groups of dark-skinned peoples indigenous to the south of Morocco called the Haratin.¹² Therefore, the Gnawa are a historically constructed group with their “Otherness” foregrounded, and in Mernissi’s Moroccan literary representation of them, they are commodified for their perceived difference. The Gnawa’s public identity does not have the flexibility or historical

¹⁰ Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass*, 168.

¹¹ Chouki El Hamel, “Constructing a Diasporic Identity: Tracing the Origins of the Gnawa Spiritual Group in Morocco.” *Journal of African History* 49 (2008): 245.

¹² Chouki El Hamel, “Blacks and the making of the Arab majority in Morocco.” In *Minorities, Women, and the State in North Africa*, ed. Moha Ennaji. (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 2016), 283.

accuracy to allow them to be who they really are—that is, a dark-skinned people born in Morocco with foreign ancestry. Instead, they must present a fiction of who they are so that they can access economic agency in Moroccan society.

While the Gnawa are a well-known feature of Morocco and appear throughout fictional and nonfictional depictions of the country, both Moroccan and foreign, little research has been done on the specific ways that they are represented in these literary accounts. Although I began this introduction with Mernissi, I will be concerned in this project principally with how the Gnawa are represented within American writing—literary, autobiographical, and poetic—where they are instrumentalized in multiple ways, similar and different to Mernissi's own representation of them. American authors writing about Morocco engage with the Gnawa as literary symbols, as Americans understand the Gnawa as part of the larger Moroccan landscape. In some cases, the Gnawa provide a connection to a Pan-African cultural heritage for African Americans who engage with Gnawa music and history to express their own struggles with racism in America. These literary representations are not of the Gnawa as they are, but as they are perceived, often telling us more about the viewer than the viewed. In his classic work *Orientalism*, Edward Said writes about the Orientalist gaze as revealing more about the Western Orientalist than about the Oriental subject that it purports to observe. In American representations of the Gnawa, we are then often learning more about these American authors than about the Gnawa themselves.

Studying American literature about the Gnawa, a scholar faces the problem not only of the fluid and multiple identity of the Gnawa, but also of Americans. Does American literature refer to literature written by American citizens? What if those citizens are immigrants? What if they represent a population marginalized within mainstream American culture? Does American

literature mean literature constructed within a certain American ideology or literary tradition? Is American literature a literature that primarily has an American audience?

Temporally and culturally different Americans have written about their travels to Morocco, including such notable figures as Mark Twain, Edith Wharton, Claude McKay, and Paul Bowles. The American gaze is a constantly shifting gaze that is individual according to particular American encounters across time, and yet American representations of race in Morocco are unified by locating a common reference point in the history of race relations in the U.S. and its institutions of race and constructions of racial identity.

In Mernissi's memoir, she observes American soldiers arriving in Morocco during World War II. At first, Mernissi and her friends are confused to see that some of the Americans are Black since "America was so far from the Sudan, the heart of Africa, and it was only in the heart of Africa that blacks were found. Mina was certain of that, and everyone else agreed with her."¹³ This statement ironically claims that Black people are only found in Sudan, when young Mernissi herself knows, from Mina's story, that Black people are also found in Morocco. Mernissi learns that the reason Black people are present in America, as they are present in Morocco, is due to the two countries' shared histories of slavery. However, Mernissi evaluates how America and Morocco differ in the particulars of their countries' histories.

"Why are the American whites still so white," asked Mina, "and the blacks still so black? Do they not intermarry?" When finally Cousin Zain gathered enough information to answer her question, it turned out that indeed, Americans did not intermarry. Instead, they kept the races separate.¹⁴

¹³ Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass*, 194.

¹⁴ Mernissi, 184.

Just as Mernissi brings her own preconceptions of racial identity into her evaluations of Americans, so do Americans map their own cultural identities and collective histories onto their understandings of Moroccan culture. While slavery was practiced in both Morocco and America, largely subjecting and marginalizing Black Africans, the distinct histories and practices of slavery differ greatly between these two countries. For example, as the Transatlantic slave trade began in the 15th century, European slavers displaced Africans not only from their homes and families, but also from their continent of origin. The physical distance in geographical terms as well as the economic foundation of slavery in America distinctly separates American from Moroccan slavery. Moreover, unlike in the American context, in certain circumstances, slaves in Morocco had opportunities to advance in social status and acquire wealth.¹⁵ In Morocco, slavery existed in different forms depending on time, location, and the slaveholders' own social status. Additionally, concubinage with Black slaves was common and, unlike in the U.S. where a child inherited its mother's social status, the children of Black concubines could inherit the father's social position and possessions.¹⁶ In addition, one of the major differences between the two contexts of slavery is that while slaves in Morocco operated as military and royal guards to the Moroccan monarchy, in the American context Africans were dehumanized and made to work grueling hours on plantations or as menial servants. Moreover, the country that is now Morocco has a rich history that did not start with the trans-Saharan slave trade as its foundation. However, America as a country and colony was economically and culturally founded on the violent dispossession and degradation of Africans, which interrupted hundreds of years of African

¹⁵ Aouad, "Slavery and the situation of blacks," 143.

¹⁶ Aouad, 145.

culture. As Hortense Spillers emphasizes in her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” African American life and consciousness in the United States can only be understood as an outcome of the gravity of this horror.¹⁷

Legacies of slavery led to modern identities in both Morocco and the United States which are partially informed and influenced by these histories both through physical and ideological differentiation. Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity* emphasizes the importance of breaking down the Manichean binary of “black” and “white” identities as well as the relationship that “race” has with nationalism, monoculture, and questions of authenticity. For example, he claims that “racism was generated in part by the move towards a political discourse which aligned ‘race’ closely with the idea of national belonging.”¹⁸ In both the American and Moroccan contexts, this racialized nationalism is visible where binaries of “white” and “black” blur into questions of authenticity and belonging. In her history of slavery and racism in Morocco, Rita Aouad writes that “[I]ike elsewhere in the Arab-Muslim world, the fact that the dual meaning of the term ‘*abd*’ in Morocco indicated a function (servant, domestic), a status (slave) and a skin color (black, of black race) confirms the tendency to relate a servile status to racial affiliation.”¹⁹ Just as America has continued its founding legacy of slavery in continuing forms of structural racism today, Aouad closes her essay by claiming that likewise Morocco continues to perpetuate “modern forms” of slavery and economic marginalization.²⁰ Therefore, both America’s own history of slavery and racism as well as the juxtaposed Moroccan historical context will inform the ways in which Americans represent the Gnawa. The

¹⁷ Hortense J. Spillers. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 68.

¹⁸ Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10.

¹⁹ Aouad, “Slavery and the situation of blacks,” 145.

²⁰ Aouad, 151.

instantiations of racial identities among these authors influence how they interpret and draw connections between the Gnawa and themselves.

Brian Edwards, Deborah Kapchan, and Christopher Witluski, among others, have addressed American representations of Morocco and Kapchan and Witluski have, in addition, written ethnomusicological and anthropological accounts of the Gnawa and Gnawa music. For Edwards, in his book *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*, U.S. interactions with Morocco paralleled U.S. geopolitical ascendancy and these global interactions led to new formations of American national identity as well as countercultural expressions of dissent.²¹ Likewise, in this project, I underscore how American representations of the Gnawa offer both countercultural American identities that disrupt racialized politics of nationalism, as well as representations of the Gnawa contributing to Orientalist constructions of Morocco writ large. Secondly, Deborah Kapchan in her book *Traveling Spirit Masters: Moroccan Gnawa Trance and Music in the Global Marketplace*, and Christopher Witluski in his book *The Gnawa Lions: Authenticity and Opportunity in Moroccan Ritual Music*, write anthropological and ethnomusicological accounts of the Gnawa in the changing local and global music marketplaces. Kapchan's book specifically focuses on trance and the reconfiguration of the sacred in secular music contexts. While Kapchan grapples with Gnawa music as a global phenomenon, I focus particularly on the intersections of American culture and modes of writing with the Gnawa which sometimes include musical collaboration. Relatedly, Witluski focuses on constructions of "authenticity" in Gnawa music according to various audiences as well as the Gnawa themselves. In my project, authenticity is challenged by

²¹ Brian Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 4.

American representations which turn the Gnawa into hybrid characters that assist in fashioning an American vision of a general Moroccan authenticity as well as a larger Pan-African consciousness and culture.

Specifically, Chapter One of this project looks at American representations of the Gnawa in a memoir by Elizabeth Fernea as well as in the novel *The Storyteller of Marrakesh* by Joydeep Roy Bhattacharya. These representations similarly invoke tropes of *The Thousand and One Nights* and exoticism, and they simplify the Gnawa as part of the local Moroccan charm. Chapter Two looks at the musical connections that Americans have made with the Gnawa, especially through African American jazz pianist Randy Weston's memoir *African Rhythms*. This chapter also explores how the Gnawa are viewed as part of a larger Pan-African identity. Chapter Three looks at *Into Each Room We Enter Without Knowing*, a poetry collection by Moroccan American poet Charif Shanahan, who writes about the Gnawa in connection to global Blackness and histories of slavery. This chapter focuses on the body as an object in history and of history, shaping how we construct the present.

The various genres of these American representations of the Gnawa offer different modes of imagining and reconfiguring the Gnawa. While the non-fiction memoirs include the Gnawa as distant elements of their larger autobiographical narratives, the fiction and poetry claim a deeper intimacy with an imagined Gnawa life. And yet as the Gnawa are imagined in fiction more questions arise as to the Gnawa's own perspectives. Even as the Gnawa feature centrally in a chapter of Bhattacharya's novel and two poems in Shanahan's collection, the Gnawa themselves are still missing and their representations only provoke more questions as to their true voices and perspectives. However, still Americans find it necessary to translate the Gnawa into a part of the Moroccan landscape. Why are these Americans so fascinated by the Gnawa? How do the genres

of memoir, novel, and poetry craft particular windows into the significance that the Gnawa hold for a Western audience?

During the summer of 2020, my hopes of spending time in Morocco were thwarted by COVID-19, so I alternatively participated in an intensive online Arabic program at Indiana University Bloomington. In the program, I had the opportunity to take a short one-credit Moroccan dialect (Darija) class with Professor Abdelali En nasry. During one of the classes, we were fortunate enough to hear live music (over Zoom) from Innov Gnawa band member Samir LanGus. Innov Gnawa is a Grammy-nominated, New York City-based Gnawa group led by Ma'alem Hassen ben Jaafer. Over Zoom, Samir LanGus played the guembri, sang, and talked to us about his experience with the music and its spirituality. This encounter was musically inspiring and made me increasingly fascinated by the Gnawa. I was especially perplexed when Professor En nasry and Samir LanGus disagreed on the origins of the Gnawa. I wondered why they disagreed on something as “simple” as origin. I was determined to discover the actual history of the Gnawa, only to learn that still so much about the Gnawa’s origins are uncertain and unknown.

Additionally, early in the process of conducting research for this project, I came across Penn State professor Maha Marouan’s article “Incomplete Forgetting: Race and Slavery in Morocco,” which explores her family’s personal history in Morocco and their selective remembering of her great-grandmother who was a slave. This narrative called for further exploration of racial constructs in Morocco as well as the binary constructions of “whiteness” and “Blackness.” In addition, I wondered if the article complicated readings of race relations in America. That is, how do Americans understand histories of racism and slavery as part of global economic and ideological structures? And in reverse, how might the recognition of racism in

Morocco also be informed by calls for racial equality in America? Despite the significant historical differences between slavery and race relations in these two countries, in these cross-cultural encounters of Americans and the Gnawa, information and perspectives on race are shared and disputed. Moreover, in both my initial interactions with the Gnawa and my preliminary understandings of racial tensions in Morocco, my experience was mediated by Moroccans who live in America and speak English. I am curious about how Americans, including Moroccan Americans, represent and frame the Gnawa in the context of their hybrid cultural identities. I believe that this project engages important questions about racial identities and how race is constructed in textual spaces in conversation with multiple identities and multiple histories.

Chapter 1 : The Most Expected Representations

In both American anthropologist Elizabeth Fernea's memoir *A Street in Marrakech* (1975) and Indian American author Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya's novel *The Storyteller of Marrakesh* (2011), we encounter the Gnawa in the famous Marrakech square, Djemaa el Fna. Marrakech native Mohamed Djellouli stars in an anthropological documentary project called *Morocco: The Past and Present of Djemma el Fna* (1996). He describes this much-photographed tourist site in the Maghreb and its contrasting significance between Moroccan natives and the many foreign tourists. He claims that "young visitors say our country is colorful and mysterious and have a very romantic view of the square. But my friends and I had grown used to it and dreamed about places far from here."²² Currently living in America himself, Mohamed Djellouli claims that American tourists travel to the famous Moroccan square with the binary expectations of seeing either terrorists or characters from the *Thousand and One Nights*. Likewise, in my readings of Roy-Bhattacharya and Fernea's texts, I find that Roy-Bhattacharya's fiction expresses both of these stereotypes and Fernea's memoir clings particularly to the romanticization of the *Thousand and One Nights*, emphasizing the magic and mystery of the square and its performers.

Claudio Minca, in his article "The Tourist Landscape Paradox," theorizes the psychological processes of tourists and their paradoxical expectations of cultural alterity. In summary, he suggests "that the tourist seeks an impossible balance between the need for order in the world – mapped and mappable tourist spaces, landscapes and cultures – and the

²² *Morocco: The Past and Present of Djemma el Fna*, narrated by Mohamed Djellouli (1996) DVD.

desire/possibility of transgressing that same order, of going behind and beyond the ‘map.’”²³

Tourists seek to penetrate the inner workings of a foreign culture, wanting to peer beyond the veil, and yet they must do so within the established accommodations of the tourist industry that translate, summarize, and perform culture for the tourist. While tourists seek authenticity, they are limited by the map, their guides, prior knowledge, and the length of their visit. Furthermore, Minca emphasizes the concept of “landscape” as an essential paradox for the tourist imaginary where landscape is a “geographical metaphor able to refer to both an object and its description; to recall, at once, a tract of land and its image, its representation.”²⁴ Landscape includes the living space where people live and exist and yet it is also a photographable object wherein its life and agency are frozen and consumable. Tourists visit the landscape both to merge with and become a part of it as well as to separate themselves, ultimately recording and preserving landscape as an object for their memory and self-making.

Minca offers Djemaa el Fna as an example in his further theorization of the tourist landscape paradox. He asserts that the historical foundation for Western tourist practices and expectations are rooted in European schools of thought and especially colonialism. He claims that “[t]he scripting of Morocco as a tourist destination for a European elite has a long history and can be traced back to the French Protectorate (1912-1956) and, especially, the efforts of its first Resident General: Maréchal Hubert Lyautey.”²⁵ American author Edith Wharton wrote her famous Morocco travel memoir during a trip accompanying General Lyautey and his wife Mme. Lyautey in 1917, five years after the establishment of the French protectorate. Wharton experienced a Morocco tinted by Lyautey’s colonial vision for the country as well as other

²³ Claudio Minca, “The tourist landscape paradox,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 8, no. 3 (2007): 434.

²⁴ Minca, 433.

²⁵ Minca, 441.

Orientalizing French perspectives such as Pierre Loti's *Au Maroc*, a travelogue written by French naval officer Louis Marie Julien Viaud, under the penname Pierre Loti, describing his voyage in Orientalist terms that center on "Arab energy and lassitude."²⁶ Wharton's inspiration for this travel memoir was the lack of reliable English-language guidebooks for the country. She hoped to make her tourist experiences in Morocco accessible to a larger American audience, writing both a historical account of Morocco (drawing on information garnered from her French sources) as well as including personal anecdotes to highlight the allure, danger, and mystery a tourist would find as they explored this magical and "untouched" land.

Minca connects colonial writings such as Wharton's with contemporary tourist expectations. Additionally complicit is the post-colonial Moroccan state which retains the colonial pathology and caters to the racism and epistemological control of the former colonizer. In the case of Djemaa el Fna, the colonial legacy lingers both in "the European tourist searching for a lost oriental innocence and ready-made exoticism, as well as Moroccan authorities who, through the square, endeavour to map 'true' national heritage and justify its preservation."²⁷ As mentioned in the introduction via Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity*, racial binaries reinforce modern constructions of nationalism, so that by locating and preserving perceived performances of racial heritage, the tourist industry and "heritagization" exemplify modernity's fascination with national identity. As Wharton – and later, Elizabeth Fernea – write representations of Djemaa el Fna in their travel memoirs, they capture Moroccan life as exterior to their own, while also claiming insider knowledge as a tourist who lives among

²⁶ Spencer D. Segalla. "Re-Inventing Colonialism: Race and Gender in Edith Wharton's 'In Morocco'." *Edith Wharton Review* 17, no. 2 (2001): 24.

²⁷ Minca, "The tourist landscape paradox," 445.

the culture. They attempt to merge and learn Moroccan culture while continuing to adhere to the rigid separations of national “heritage” opposed to a united human heritage.

Like Minca, Valdimar Hafstein theorizes the task of modernity to classify and define “heritage” through UNESCO World Heritage Sites in a practice that he calls “reflexive modernity,” where these modernizing practices of classification and preservation are attempting to save the past from the very reality of a modernizing world. He writes that

when deemed successful, safeguarding (1) reforms the relationship of subjects with their own practices (through sentiments such as “pride”) (2) reforms the practices (orienting them toward display through various conventional heritage genres), and ultimately (3) reforms the relationship of the practicing subjects with themselves (through social institutions of heritage that formalize informal relations and centralize dispersed responsibilities).²⁸

Assessed through this framework, Wharton, Fernea, and Roy-Bhattacharya are each collecting what they deem is “worthy” culture and heritage to methodically preserve and recount to a Western audience frustrated by the monoculture of modernization. However, as Hafstein notes, evaluating and reinforcing certain practices as culture indicative of a certain nation perpetuates the violence and epistemological tension instigated by modernity. The tourist gaze also reconfigures Americans as arbiters of their own culture and how they process their own identities in relation to the heritage performances that they observe.

²⁸ Valdimar T. Hafstein. “Intangible Heritage as a Festival; or, Folklorization Revisited,” *Journal of American Folklore* 131 (2018): 128.

To introduce the continued engagement that Fernea and Roy-Bhattacharya demonstrate with Orientalist discourse, I will begin by analyzing the Orientalist practices of Edith Wharton. As a widely celebrated American novelist, her interpretations have been greatly influential to American representations of Morocco. Likewise, her perspective indicates American political loyalties with France and a complicit acceptance of the French colonial project. Observing Djemaa el Fna, Wharton describes the people she sees as she would a collection of eye-catching merchandise in a market:

Fanatics in sheepskins glowering from the guarded thresholds of the mosques, fierce tribesmen with inlaid arms in their belts and the fighters' tufts of wiry hair escaping from camel's-hair turbans, mad negroes standing stark naked in niches of walls and pouring down Soudanese incantations upon the fascinated crowd, consumptive Jews with pathos and cunning in their large eyes and smiling lips, lusty slave-girls with earthen oil jars resting against swaying hips, almond-eyed boys leading fat merchants by the hand, and bare-legged Berber women, tattooed and insolently gay, trading their striped blankets, or bags of dried roses and irises, for sugar, tea or Manchester cottons.²⁹

In this passage, Wharton peels back the imagined curtain separating the East from the West to classify differences between people within a sort of cross-cultural inventory where these different people are forced into categories according to Wharton's standard of organization. Wharton projects various judgments upon these different groups of people despite only knowing their appearances, turning people into tropes. In addition, she etches simple ethnic classifications where you can be Black, Berber, or Jewish, but never all three. Morocco is a mystery and a

²⁹ Edith Wharton. *In Morocco*. (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1920), 136-7.

puzzle, and as this is Wharton's attempt to write a "guidebook" for future travelers, she attempts to fill in the pieces of the puzzle by making claims based on identities that are confined to limited interpretations of the body.

Within Wharton's discourse on Blackness, she reinforces a racial divide when it comes to slavery and servitude, a divide that, in reality, was not always so clear-cut. In Wharton's description, a slave is always Black. For this justification, she reaches back into Moroccan history where she notes that Sultan Mawlay Isma'il (1646-1727) created an exclusively black enslaved army which led to a racialized class consciousness similar to that of the United States. However, this was not always the case. For example, the term "Haratin" particularly means a Black ethnic group from Southern Morocco whose name translates to "freed" or "free person of a second class."³⁰ Additionally, the color divide operated differently in the U.S. versus in Morocco, since in the U.S., one drop of African blood meant you were Black, whereas in Morocco one drop of Arab blood made you Arab.³¹ However, Wharton's American reference point for race and racialized slavery informed her judgments of Morocco.

By 1917, when Wharton traveled to Morocco, slavery as a formal institution of oppression had been abolished in the U.S. (although African Americans were systematically oppressed in new ways). For this reason, Wharton treats slavery as an archaic barbarism, contrasting the slavery in Morocco to the "legal" abolition of slavery in the U.S. and various European countries. Wharton describes slavery in gothic and romanticized terms that portray it as dangerous, mysterious, and secretive, with "negroes ... secretly brought across the Atlas to

³⁰ Chouki El Hamel. "Blacks and the making of the Arab majority in Morocco" in *Minorities, Women, and the State in North Africa*, ed. Moha Ennaji, (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 2016), 282-4: More explanation and background of the Haratin will be given in Chapter 3.

³¹ El Hamel, 282-283.

that inmost recess of the bazaar where the ancient traffic in flesh and blood still surreptitiously goes on.”³² By classifying thinking and feeling human beings in terms of “flesh and blood,” she separates a body from the personhood and humanity that makes suffering a universal issue. Moreover, she calls slavery an “*ancient traffic* of flesh and blood,” which, on the one hand, romanticizes slavery as something ancient, mysterious, and primal, while also singling out cultural practices in an “Othered” Morocco as similarly violent and mysterious. However, versions of slavery and the unethical treatment of human beings were not unique features of Morocco. In Morocco, as a Muslim-majority country, slavery is forbidden by faith, just as slavery contradicted Christian doctrine in the U.S. For this reason, Morocco did not flaunt its slavery, just as after the American Civil War and the legal abolition of slavery, Americans tried to hide slavery’s continuation behind systems of sharecropping and imprisonment.

Additionally, the French Protectorate in Morocco, which Wharton lauded for its civilizing mission, was complicit in the continuation of slavery in the country. During its rule in the region, the French government ignored the issue of slavery so that only after Morocco gained its independence in 1956 was slavery abolished. Social justice was not France’s priority in Morocco. Wharton reveals the political motives of France’s involvement in Morocco as if it was a virtue. She explains that during World War One, Germany envied the colonies France held in North Africa because of their resources. Wharton adopts an American position, as an ally of France, in a war where extracting another county’s resources becomes tactical. Wharton writes a summary of the history of Morocco at the end of her travelogue, claiming that the Sultan sought France’s support to quell the rebelling tribes from the south who attempted to overthrow the

³² Wharton, *In Morocco*, 135.

government.³³ This very history, when put into the context of the American Revolution and the many French revolutions, highlights how France, imposing in foreign affairs to maintain the power of a monarchy because it was no longer supported by the people, stifled Morocco's ability to transition into a more representative government. While on the one hand, Wharton condemned slavery and inequalities in Moroccan households, she was also blind to the contradiction that France's presence preserved these unjust social practices, as France's only interest in Morocco was for the extraction of resources.

Over sixty years later, and post-independence, Fernea traveled to Morocco in a very different context and with a very different personal mission. Unlike Wharton, before her stay in Morocco she had also spent significant time in Egypt and Iraq, living among locals and learning Arabic. While Wharton's memoir references her hope to write a guidebook for Western tourists, Fernea wrote a memoir to share the experiences of her year-long stay, prompted by her husband's anthropological research. Wharton was guided through the country by French colonial administrators, only seeing what they chose to render visible. Fernea's guides were her Moroccan neighbors, who tentatively accepted her into their circle. Fernea wrote of her frustration at feeling like an outsider amongst these ladies, wanting to belong and learn as much as she could about the culture. Fernea was both a tourist and a temporary resident. She hoped that the length of her stay would increase the possibility of peering into "authentic" Moroccan culture.

Fernea wrote her memoir *A Street in Marrakesh* between 1971 and 1972. Instead of moving into an area of the city inhabited by foreigners and other Americans like herself, she chose to live on a traditional street surrounded by Moroccans to experience life as Moroccans

³³ Wharton, 258.

did. Fernea sparsely included the Gnawa in her memoir, represented in their public role as street performers who add to the ancillary environment of the city. Like Wharton and Mernissi, Fernea represented the Gnawa as a part of the mystery of the *Thousand and One Nights*.³⁴ However, for Fernea, the *Thousand and One Nights* was not a fantasy external to Morocco at all, but was centralized in Marrakesh where street performers gave life to its stories to earn a living. She describes the Djemaa el Fna of Marrakesh as a pastiche of scenes from the *Thousand and One Nights*, writing:

And surely the children had recognized here fragments of old illustrations from their fairy-tale books, images from the stories and fantasies they had always loved: the flying carpet whereon sits the turbaned prince in embroidered vest, and his dream maiden with flying hair and almond-shaped eyes; the gnarled, misshapen dwarf; the lost children crying; acrobats and jesters in costumes tipped with bells; snake charmers with magic pipes to soothe evil serpents.³⁵

Like Wharton, Fernea classifies different types within the Djemaa, as if by listing these stock literary characters she can capture and identify what is really there. Fernea brings the unknown spectacle of the Djemaa into her own context to justify her classifications. She claims to already know these types of people based on the fictions and fairytales that her children read. The people performing in the square *become* the characters that they really only present for the entertainment of others. These fantastical presentations are motivated by financial necessity.

³⁴ Various scholars write about the overall exoticism present in Fernea's memoir, including John Maier in his article "Fernea's Moroccan Pilgrimage", Bejjit Karim in his article "Female Spaces, Cross-Cultural Encounters: Elizabeth Fernea and the Moroccan Experience", and Rachid Agliz in his article "Fernea in Morocco: the women's exotic world."

³⁵ Elizabeth Warnock Fernea. *A Street in Marrakech*. (Waveland, 1975), 55.

However, ultimately, these fantasy performances bridge the gap between the harsh reality of poverty and inequality, and the emotional incompleteness of a bourgeois lifestyle that has all material needs met. The children and Fernea recognize, within the fictions, that they are attracted to these stories of wealth and magic due to the unending banality of their own lives, and yet they are simultaneously repulsed by the economic inequalities that lie at the core of the performances which make these fantasies necessary. The perceived extreme poverty translates into the fear of the possibility of ever becoming impoverished to a similar extent.

However, Fernea's itemization of the Djemaa and its wonders can never completely succeed in its efforts at classification. Without context and historical perspective, these people will never fully belong to the terms that she gives them. Notably, one group in the square is mentioned without a name. They are perceived but cannot be reduced to a specific name from a fairytale. Continuing her portrait of the square, Fernea writes: "it's a great novelty, the snake charmers and the pigeon men and those children who do leaps and pyramids and the black men who dance with bells and castanets, or whatever they're called!"³⁶ Despite not knowing their name, Fernea still adds these Black performers to the end of her list as an element of the unknown or the fantasy. These performers evade description or recognition within the fairytale, and yet she still associates them with the other fantastic performers. Moreover, in this instance their black skin color or even their Black race is demarcated as a prop or stage item that classifies them as part of this specific group of performers. Their race sets them apart from the other performers and marks them as separate and distinctive from the "Moroccanness" that Fernea witnesses on the street where she lives with her family.

³⁶ Fernea, 55.

However, this group of performers does have a name, and as the memoir progresses, Fernea inserts that name into her later analysis of the square as an indication of her progression towards “unravelling” the mystery of the unknown through her ability to classify. Fernea recounts:

With the coming of winter, the population had thinned, but there were always a few Saharan dancers, the Gnaoua, to be found; even on the coldest days, they would be there in their white cotton robes and black hats embroidered with cowrie shells, jingling their chkacheck cymbals and moving their bare feet in rhythm on the damp ground.³⁷

The Black men have a name which locates their race within geographical boundaries, in a way that echoes Mernissi’s classification of the Gnawa as Ghanaian. They are now Saharan, still externalized from Morocco’s borders despite their clear existence inside of them. They are both a part of Morocco’s everyday life, playing year-round in Marrakesh’s Djemaa el Fna, and yet they are also Othered as a group external to Morocco that has brought a culture and dance form completely foreign to Morocco itself. Unlike young Mernissi who sought clarification and insider knowledge from her family, Fernea’s only access to the perceptions of other Moroccans toward the Gnawa is through strained conversations with her uninterested neighbors. Fernea observes the Gnawa performance within her own emergent understanding of Marrakesh, largely unmediated by Moroccan guides. Attentive to details, she documents the experience carefully as if to reproduce the living performance onto paper. She gives details of color and texture; action and sound effect. However, what is missing in this description are the Gnawa themselves. They

³⁷ Fernea, 91.

are seen for the performance they are giving and nothing more. Their significance is their action and its repetition.

Moreover, the Gnawa are depicted as external to traditional Moroccan celebrations. For instance, Fernea and her family are invited to the Arab-Berber wedding of her neighbor Rabia. As the wedding procession trails into the Djemaa el Fna, the performers are separated from “standard” Moroccan life and customs. For instance, Fernea describes the wedding procession: “Ululating, crying, and shouting we went, across Djemaa el Fna (the pigeon man paused to look, the line of Gnaoua dancers turned as we passed); we turned right off the square past the beggars’ chorus to Sharia Bahoshy, picking up scores of excited children in our train as we went.”³⁸ The pigeon man and the Gnawa dancers turn their heads or pause to look at the wedding procession, so that Fernea represents them as external to the wedding procession as well as external to the custom. Their simple pausing to look presents them as curious and non-receptive to the wedding ceremonies of the normalized Moroccans who are Fernea’s neighbors. Unlike the children who join the celebration, the Gnawa are described as largely unresponsive and passive in the wake of the festivities, as if they do not understand the celebration’s significance. Over the course of her year in Marrakech, Fernea never recounts any interaction or conversation that she has with the Gnawa. We are left to assume that her transcriptions of them are purely from her observations of how they present in the tourist square, Djemma el Fna.

The final text that this chapter examines, likewise takes place predominately in the famous tourist site Djemma el Fna. Indian American author Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya’s *The Storyteller of Marrakesh* tells the story of two Americans who disappear while traveling in Marrakesh. This disappearance in the novel corresponds with Mohamed Djellouli’s assessment

³⁸ Fernea, 149.

of the American tourist imaginary, which categorizes Moroccans as either terrorists or characters from the *Thousand and One Nights*, as the tourists are violently abducted by armed terrorists during a celebration of music and dancing in the square. The different perspectives in Roy-Bhattacharya's prose represent Moroccans in ways that are reminiscent of the previously discussed travel narratives by Wharton and Fernea. The story is a fiction told through the first-person point of view of a Berber man named Hassan, but despite being a different literary genre, this text echoes the Orientalist tropes of Wharton's and Fernea's memoirs. However, unlike these memoirs, Roy-Bhattacharya's novel crafts interactions between Arab and Berber characters with the Gnawa, echoing lived social stratifications. Throughout the novel, new characters are introduced as main speakers in each chapter, giving their own perspectives and adding to the story about the mystery of the two missing Americans. The characters' stories feel isolated, as if they could be set apart and form their own short stories. For example, a story contributed by a Tuareg man describes an archery contest and the killing of a scarlet ibis which prompts philosophical ruminations about the "abyss of existence." This section does not push the plot forward but instead adds to the general mystery and abstraction of Moroccan life. Likewise, these distinct stories compile and categorize Moroccan life in a similar way to Wharton's and Fernea's categorization of the people in Djemma el Fna. Roy-Bhattacharya includes many Arabic words and cultural themes, showing that he researched extensively before writing this novel, just as Wharton readily researched historical facts about Morocco outlined by French scholarship. However, research alone does not guarantee accurate representation, and depending on the motive of the sources, can even create distance between representation and lived experience.

The character Hassan, who guides the reader through Roy-Bhattacharya's novel, claims the profession of storyteller. Mohamed Djellouli's documentary references the prominence of storytellers in Djemma el Fna, identifying one storyteller in particular who "tells a tale, I've heard many times, of a woman whose husband is impatient for her to produce a male child. Some days I heard about Sultans in ancient Morocco, life in faraway places and stories showing the everlasting wisdom of Allah."³⁹ The stories that Djellouli, a native Moroccan and speaker of Moroccan Arabic, references in his documentary vary greatly from the story given by Hassan in Roy-Bhattacharya's novel. Hassan tells a story centered on Western tourists whom he romanticizes for their beauty and class. Instead of the Moroccan storyteller offering stories particular to his culture and Moroccan past, Roy-Bhattacharya imagines stories idealizing the Western tourists who pass through the square each day.

The novel represents the Gnawa as though their lives revolve around the admiration of such Western tourists, as though the tourist buys the Gnawa's approval and esteem through their haphazard monetary offerings. There are three moments in the text where the Gnawa are directly or abstractly mentioned, often performing in Djemaa el Fna. These representations demonstrate the Gnawa's perceived alterity from a "central" Moroccan identity, while also contesting the conception of their identity as peripheral due to their increasing musical popularity. The first two encounters with the Gnawa occur before a dedicated chapter on the Gnawa appears, so that they remain initially shrouded in mystery. Firstly, the Gnawa are introduced playing in Djemma el Fna as the sun sets and Hassan begins his storytelling:

Farther away, a group of Gnaoua musicians had set up with their long-stemmed guitars and iron clanging hammers. They were accustomed to performing for hours on end,

³⁹ *Morocco: The Past and Present of Djemma el Fna*, narrated by Mohamed Djellouli.

inducing in their listeners a trancelike state akin to ecstasy. Tonight they were accompanied by three fiery youths who danced in white-stockinged feet, gyrating their heads in time to fixed rhythms. After a brief interval, however, the Gnaoua moved to a better spot near the centre of the square, leaving me with the more appropriate stringed Andalusian accompaniment with which to launch my tales and sustain their mystery.⁴⁰

This passage reads with a flair of old-fashioned ethnography, listing the various attributes of the Gnawa's performance without delving into too much detail. Instead of listing the names of the instruments and then describing them, the text mystifies the musical instruments as irregular guitars and out-of-place construction tools. In the glossary at the end of the book, the list of terms includes the gimbri / guenbri or "long-stemmed guitars" and the Karkabats or "iron clanging hammers," but here, the official terms are left out. The Gnawa are not a major focus in this section, as they move farther away from Hassan, they become peripheral to the plot. The Gnawa are background characters who cannot directly contribute to the story or even the ambient music of Hassan's tale.

Moreover, this passage exoticizes and sexualizes the Gnawa and their music, turning the spiritual aspect of "trance" into a sexed spectacle. For instance, trance is described as "akin to ecstasy" and the performers are introduced as "fiery youths" who were "gyrating their heads." Hassan expresses a desire to tell mysterious stories, juxtaposing Djemma el Fna and its performers, the Gnawa, as mysterious. The sexed spectacle, moreover, indicates that the mysteriousness of the square is tied to its sexuality, so that by hearing Hassan's story a reader

⁴⁰ Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya. *The Storyteller of Marrakesh*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 22.

penetrates the mystery of the square. In this way, this segment exemplifies the Orientalist desire to peer “beyond the veil” and “into the haram” of an exoticized, Oriental Other.

Secondly, the novel obliquely references the Gnawa in connection to music. Hassan recalls moments in his youth when he and his younger brothers Ahmed and Mustafa debated the concept of “beauty.” Hassan’s youngest brother Mustafa “picked up the lute he’d brought along and began to strum on it. Oh Lord, Ahmed protested without effect, must we now be subjected to the whine of your guembri?”⁴¹ In the glossary, Roy-Bhattacharya lists the gimbrī/guembri as “A long-necked folk lute.”⁴² However, the gimbrī is not just a folk lute, but an instrument made prominent in Morocco by the Gnawa. The gimbrī looks different from a traditional lute shape-wise and sounds very different when played. While the gimbrī has three strings, of which only two are strummed, the lute has fifteen and all of the strings are strummed. In this passage, “lute” and “guembri” are used interchangeably, and yet they are not interchangeable instruments. Moreover, the gimbrī as an instrument is inseparable from the Gnawa and the influence that they bring to Moroccan music. A Western writer understanding lute and gimbrī as interchangeable, as equally Moroccan, shows the progression Gnawa music has made, transitioning from peripheral to mainstream and commercialized.

Finally, in Roy-Bhattacharya’s novel, a Gnawa character is introduced to speak for himself. Bilal recounts his connection with the missing Western tourists through a dream he had about them despite never having seen them. However, from the start of Bilal’s chapter, his character is very flat. He opens with a monologue about why he plays music. Instead of referencing spirituality or cultural heritage, Bilal claims that the only reason he plays music is

⁴¹ Roy-Bhattacharya, 55.

⁴² Roy-Bhattacharya, 334.

to make himself happy. On behalf of the other Gnawa musicians as well, Bilal claims, “We believe that there is no meaning in life other than this happiness. It banishes the heat, makes the hours quiver, and sets everyone’s feet dancing.”⁴³ Both Bilal and Gnawa music become shallow and unremarkable since he claims that the music has no meaning other than happiness. Bilal becomes a caricature who does not have cultural depth. His only hope is to one day “play with that man Hendrix, who was here many years ago.”⁴⁴ Once again American tourism to Morocco becomes a central theme in the text, underlining the assumed importance of Western individuals in these spaces (although Bilal’s interest in Jimi Hendrix does indicate the historic fraternity between the Moroccan Gnawa and African Americans⁴⁵). Interestingly enough, whereas many of the other chapters featuring individual speakers are named after them, this chapter is not titled “Bilal.” Instead, Roy-Bhattacharya calls this chapter “Hendrix,” further centralizing the American tourist as a central figure in the imaginations of these Moroccan characters.

Bilal’s dream starts with him as a slave, and when the Western woman enters it, she frees him by introducing music and drumming. “I was part of a slave caravan. We were traversing endless dunes, following timeworn trails, journeying from oasis to oasis. I had no music with me; a chain bound me by my neck to my companions.”⁴⁶ This passage echoes the history of the Gnawa people as descended from slaves brought to Morocco from their families in Sub-Saharan Africa. Then, the white woman frees Bilal from his slavery. “I felt her hands drumming on my back... Soon I was running with that rain on my back. She urged me on with small, sharp cries.”⁴⁷ While the Western woman represents beauty in the text overall, the description of a

⁴³ Roy-Bhattacharya, 108.

⁴⁴ Roy-Bhattacharya, 108-109.

⁴⁵ I will expand more on this in Chapter 2

⁴⁶ Roy-Bhattacharya, 110.

⁴⁷ Roy-Bhattacharya, 111.

Black slave finding salvation thanks to a white woman invokes notions of the civilizing mission. This section implies that Bilal's fascination with the beauty of Western culture, exemplified by his idol Hendrix and his dream about the disappeared American tourist, frees him from slavery.

Moreover, in the text, Bilal shares his dream with Hassan and the audience in Djemaa el Fna, in the hope of receiving an analysis of the dream, asking if anyone understands what it signifies. Rather than interpreting the dream via the history of the Gnawa people and their social position in Morocco, their legacy of enslavement, or the spiritual healing of the *lila* ritual, Hassan replies bluntly, "I must disappoint you ... I don't know what your dream signifies."⁴⁸ After this response, Bilal rephrases his question, hoping for an answer, but he is ignored after the introduction of a different character. Bilal never reappears in the rest of the story. This startling silence on the topic of slavery and Morocco's history unsettles Hassan's agency as a storyteller since there are certain histories that are immediately silenced as soon as they are spoken.

I understand Roy-Bhattacharya's portrayal of the silencing of the Gnawa's past in two ways. Firstly, it could represent the lack of formal discourse about slavery by Moroccans themselves. This strategy of feigned ignorance and denial of culpability mirrors tactics of "color blindness" for issues of race in the United States. This passage shows how ignoring the past forces certain characters to the background so that their stories are never heard. Secondly, it could represent the destruction of historical and cultural memory due to commodification in the tourist space. According to Bilal, the Gnawa perform in the square to "be happy." The depth and meaning behind their performances are left to the ephemeral space of dreams, a space that is no longer understood in its connection to a collective past. Ultimately, this representation offers the shell of a character. The interiority of the Gnawa man, Bilal, is represented as unreflective and

⁴⁸ Roy-Bhattacharya, 112.

enraptured by the West. His music is reduced to an enjoyable hobby rather than a religion, inherited by ancestral trauma, and born of a struggle for agency in Moroccan society.

Roy-Bhattacharya's (mis-)representations of the Gnawa offer various perspectives in the American tourist imaginary of the 20th and 21st centuries. As the Gnawa become a more popular feature of the Moroccan cultural and musical landscape, Americans incorporate them into preexisting styles of travel writing and travel-inspired fiction. While Roy-Bhattacharya's novel follows in the tradition of writers such as Wharton and Fernea, the medium of fiction also sparks more robust questions about cultural appropriation and collective trauma.

Chapter 2 : Randy Weston and the Gnawa

Before introducing Randy Weston and his project in relation to the Gnawa, it is important to juxtapose the previous American travel writings of Wharton and Fernea with an African American tradition of interaction with Morocco. The Jamaican American Claude McKay, a famous figure of the Harlem Renaissance, traveled to Morocco in 1928 and interpreted what he saw there within the multiplicity of his own cultural context. Unlike Edith Wharton's memoir, which attempted to be a travel guide for Western tourists, and Elizabeth Fernea's memoir, attempting to peer beyond the veil, McKay wrote his memoir *A Long Way from Home* (1937) to reflect on how his travels contributed to his own personal development and his understanding of a Pan-African experience. McKay contextualizes his own cultural, ethnic, and national identity in a conversation that he has with a Moroccan man during his travels:

A chaoush (native doorman and messenger) from the British Consulate had accosted me in a *souk* one day and asked whether I was American. I said I was born in the West Indies and lived in the United States and that I was an American, even though I was a British subject, but I preferred to think of myself as an internationalist.⁴⁹

This section reveals some of the complications of speaking within national constructions. While McKay claims himself an "internationalist," he can likewise be classified as a "transnationalist," both defying a singular label of nationality and therefore transcending the category of nation altogether. Likewise, in McKay's representation of the Gnawa, he understands them within the context of his own experiences. He can imagine the Gnawa as both a group

⁴⁹ Claude McKay. *A Long Way From Home*, (New York: Lee Furman, 1937), 300.

belonging to Morocco and likewise claiming origin and cultural heritage from elsewhere, therefore transcending any singular national identity. Bending the notion of singular national belonging, McKay more readily draws connections between different cultures. McKay's representation brings the Gnawa into himself, unlike the tactics of the previous authors, who observed, but did not openly reflect on how other cultures resembled their own, or allowed them make sense of their own heritage.

During a trip to Morocco in the early 1900s, Claude McKay witnessed a Gnawa *lila* ceremony. Unlike Fernea, McKay did not encounter the Gnawa in Djemma el Fna, but instead his Martinican friend and guide introduced him to the Gnawa that lived nearby. McKay recounts,

At last I arrived in Casablanca. On the afternoon when the Martiniquan took me to his house in a native quarter, some Guinea [sorcerers] (or Gueanoua, as they are called in Morocco) were performing a magic rite. The first shock I registered was the realization that they looked and acted exactly like certain peasants of Jamaica who give themselves up to the celebrating of a religious sing-dance orgy which is known as Myalism. The only difference was in their clothing.⁵⁰

McKay associates the Gnawa with practitioners of Myalism from Jamaica. McKay notes the difference of their clothing and yet foregrounds the similarity in their overall ritual. He brings the Gnawa into his own cultural context, emphasizing the similarity between people across geographical borders. Unlike the previous texts discussed in chapter one, which underscore differences between groups to form tidy classifications, McKay draws connections within difference, to try and make sense of new cultural attributes. Moreover, McKay draws the Gnawa

⁵⁰ McKay, 296-7. Square brackets in the original.

into an African and Creole genealogy, as the Gnawa to him resemble Africans whose ancestors were displaced and brought to the Caribbean.

Like Mernissi, McKay crafts a mythology of the Gnawa and their geographic origins. In the previous excerpt he remarks that the Gnawa are descendants of people from Guinea.

Furthermore, he notes:

The members of the Gueanoua are all pure black. They are the only group of pure Negroes in Morocco. Men and women marry black, and it is the only religious order that has women members. If one is not a pure black he cannot belong to the Gueanoua. They say the strict keeping of this rule makes the Gueanoua magic powerful. The fetish rites are West African and are transmitted from generation to generation.⁵¹

His understanding of the Gnawa's origins both supplements and contradicts that of Mernissi, adding to the partial historic understanding of the Gnawa in the tourist imaginary. Like Mernissi, McKay emphasizes that the Gnawa must be all Black. However, he accentuates this claim by insisting that they are the only "pure" Black group in Morocco, and that it is impossible to marry or have children outside of the Gnawa community and still remain a part of it. This contrasts with Mernissi's statement that anyone who tries to keep races separated and distinct in Morocco would find it impossible. However, similar to the Moroccan women in Mernissi's account, the "authenticity" of the Gnawa is established along racial color lines. One cannot be "authentically" Gnawa unless they are Black. Historically, this notion is contested by Sidi Belal, who claims that anyone is allowed to join the Gnawa spiritual practice regardless of race as long as they are sincere in their spirituality.

⁵¹ McKay, 297.

Moreover, a clear difference between Mernissi's and McKay's representations is their understanding of the etymology of the word "Gnawa." While Mernissi claims it comes from "Ghana," McKay understands the term as coming from the word "Guinea." The name once again functions to "Other" the Gnawa and place their origin as external to Morocco, regardless of unity or consistency in the constructed terminology. McKay classifies the Gnawa as a group of "Negroes" in Morocco, drawing a distinction between racial identity and national affiliation, without directly claiming that these two identity markers are incompatible. Additionally, McKay emphasizes the Gnawa's inclusion of women in its religious order, in a historically accurate counterpoint to Mernissi, who claims that the Gnawa are only men.

In this way, McKay categorizes the Gnawa in ways that partially align with established historic facts. However, more importantly, McKay draws parallels between the Gnawa and certain Jamaican ritual dancers. He believes that this is an example of the strength of African culture and spirituality to transcend the violence of forced displacement. He further notes that the Gnawa "have a special place in the social life of Morocco. The wealthiest as well as the poorest families have them in to exorcise devils. Often they are protected by powerful sherifian families, and sultans have consulted them."⁵² Despite the displacement and trauma at the origins of the Gnawa, they have risen to positions of power by crafting their identity in the face of mystery and fragmented memories. McKay describes the Gnawa not as victims of their circumstances, but as innovators and contributors to Morocco's culture and spiritual well-being. The Gnawa are indispensable and empowered through making the most of their new circumstances in Morocco, and yet, the Gnawa cannot climb all the way to the top. Their social position and its potential for mobility is limited to the powerful Moroccan families and sultans who mediate the Gnawa's

⁵² McKay, 297.

success, providing a ceiling that they cannot surpass. The Gnawa use what they know and have to make the most of their situations. However, their situations only allow for so much. McKay describes the empowerment that the Gnawa have attained and their gradual acceptance in Moroccan society. The Gnawa are not seen quite as an ethnic group although racial/ethnic identity does play a role in their identity. They are also seen for their occupation as musicians and spiritual healers who perform and act in a specific way.

Half a century later, Randy Weston was drawn to the Gnawa for both their racial categorization and their musical occupation. He connected with the Gnawa as an African American who was trying to make sense of African musical heritage in the United States. Randy Weston is an African American jazz pianist. He writes in his memoir *African Rhythms* about the importance of his encounter with the Gnawa. Weston was born in Brooklyn in 1926 to a Jamaican father and an American mother and crafted himself as a jazz pianist in the 1940s and 1950s, inspired by Art Tatum, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Thelonius Monk, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and countless others. As he reports in his memoir, by the mid-1960s, he had decided to leave the United States, convinced that U.S. jazz music “was getting more and more western, for me it was getting away from the so-called black tradition, that *feeling*.”⁵³ He had initially hoped to make a life in Nigeria but was deterred by the Biafra war. In the end, Morocco called him back, as Moroccans expressed their enthusiasm for his music lingering from his 1964 tour there. He settled down in Tangiers and opened up a jazz club, which he called the African Rhythms club. Therefore, he explains, “Morocco chose me, I didn’t choose Morocco.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Randy Weston, *African Rhythms: the autobiography of Randy Weston*, (Durham: Duke University, 2010), 137.

⁵⁴ Weston, 138.

Likewise, he would claim that he did not choose the Gnawa, but that the spirit of the Gnawa chose him.

Weston contributed to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s which emphasized Black pride and was influenced by the Black Power Movement. For Weston, music told a story and being a professional musician required engaging in the politics and impacts of these stories. "I feel like I'm a cultural warrior, fighting 24/7 to liberate our people from this maddening racism because it's such an evil system.... In a way I could just be a musician – and it certainly is difficult enough just being a musician – but I'm also an activist, I'm an Africanist, and I'm very much involved in the struggle, which makes it doubly hard."⁵⁵ He was greatly inspired by Senegalese historian, anthropologist, and Egyptologist Cheikh Anta Diop. Early in and even before his career as a musician, Weston studied the history of African empires and the history of jazz's origins in Africa, and he befriended Langston Hughes with whom he discussed the global politics of decolonization. His belief in a shared African identity linking African Americans with people living on the African continent framed his impression of the Gnawa. He claimed that

[s]ome of the same faces you see on the Gnawa in Morocco you see in the U.S. and you would never know the difference until they opened their mouths. My Gnawa friend M'Barek Ben Outhman from Marrakech, who has made tours and records with me. In more recent times, could be a brother from Brooklyn, could be from Cleveland ... until he starts to speak. The physical characteristics of African Americans and the Gnawa are very close.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Weston, 257.

⁵⁶ Weston, 172.

Similarly, when the legendary African American trumpeter Louis Armstrong had traveled to Africa in the mid-twentieth century, he had reported seeing visible evidence of shared genetic heritage with the people there. When he performed in Ghana he met a stranger who resembled his mother:

Armstrong had a strong attachment to Africa as his homeland. Armstrong had traced his ancestry back to Ghana through his great grandparents. At the largest outdoor concert, he saw a woman that looked just like his mother. His mother had been dead since 1929. He was “shook up.” He was so “struck by the striking resemblance that he asked him if he could blow the horn for the lady.” He was told that the lady would be honored. He was “bursting with pride and joy that here in Mother Africa” he had found a “woman the exact image of his mom.”⁵⁷

Yet Weston’s connection with the Gnawa, although it included an element of physical identification with them, also went beyond this. What the Gnawa represented to Weston, as revealed by the role that they play in his memoir, was a means of reclaiming a lost African American musical heritage. For Weston, the musical rhythms of Africa represented the possibility to reconnect with the spiritual power of Africa and the pride in African culture across the continent and diaspora. Music for him was all about a spiritual connection and a *feeling*: “So it’s a combination of sending different messages, different kinds of mood ... but it depends on the audience; it’s something that you feel, it’s magic that I can’t explain, certainly not in

⁵⁷ Joshua Vincent and Lydia Lindsey. “Jazz is African Diasporic Music: Reconfiguring the Uniquely American Definition of Jazz.” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 10, no. 5 (2017): 174.

technical terms.”⁵⁸ With the Gnawa, Weston felt a spiritual connection that was beyond anything that he could explain in words. Instead, music did the explaining for him. He channeled this connection into his music while emphasizing that this feeling was a gift from forces greater and more universal than living humans. He identified that a “tendency in the West is to just jump in and play *about* Africa, not play *with* Africa. Even up until now there are things about Gnawa music, for example, that I don’t know. That’s very important to keep in mind, because this is Africa we’re talking about and you may think you know, but you don’t know anything.”⁵⁹ While Weston studied Africanist intellectuals like Cheikh Anta Diop and was aware of the politics and cultural messages in his playing, he still played for the sake of the rhythms and the spiritual feelings that would unite people across continents. He was playing to be a part of a feeling and to bring together a community of people through the language of music. This was his contribution to political activism.

The first time Weston attended a night-long Gnawa spiritual ceremony or *līla* (ليلة), he recounts that he “went into a trance that lasted two weeks,” during which he “was physically moving and otherwise going through my normal life, but I was in another dimension because this music had been so powerful. If you can imagine hearing the black church, jazz, and the blues all at the same time, in their original form, with all these rhythms coming together, that’s what it was like.”⁶⁰ For Weston, the Gnawa signify a spiritual force of displacement that is nonetheless still tethered to continental Africa. Gnawa music links African American music styles into something more “original” because of its embodied connection to Africa. He claims that Gnawa music is an amalgamation or palimpsest of Black church music, jazz, and blues so that through

⁵⁸ Weston, *African Rhythms*, 220.

⁵⁹ Weston, 221.

⁶⁰ Weston, 176.

this identification of the self within the Gnawa's music, he idealizes it as something larger than his own self. Gnawa music is fluent in all of these spiritual languages at the same time, despite its distinct identity as Moroccan-made. While Weston brings the Gnawa music into his own musical context of Black church music, jazz, and the blues, he also maintains distance to distinguish Gnawa music as external to his own music. With the Gnawa, Weston found a bond of shared cultural heritage through histories of enslavement and displacement that lead to the reinvention of West African music within different cultural contexts. Just as jazz and the blues maintain collective memories including the history of slavery, so do the Gnawa access a spiritual realm that reconnects them with their ancestors including "the Fulani (of Niger), the Bambarawi (Bambara, of Mali), the Sudani (generic term for the Sudan or Sahel, the region spanning from modern-day Sudan to Mauritania), and the Hawsawi (the Hausa, also of Niger)."⁶¹ The Gnawa reconnect with their ancestral roots through the spiritual remembrances of the Gnawa ceremony. Therefore, the Gnawa can connect with a lost part of themselves through an emotion or *feeling* of interconnected ancestral spirits. It is this feeling that Weston seeks to access and bring back to African American music.

Likewise, Jane Duran and Earl Stewart recount the Pan-African connections between African and African American music, specifically linking the West African musical and oral traditions of the griot or professional storyteller with African American music. Their shared features include "instrumental and vocal effects ... [like the] sliding or mudding of scales on fretted instruments, the importance of calls and vocal sounds imitative of calls, the use of percussive instruments."⁶² Moreover, music artists and scholars Marc Chemillier, Jean

⁶¹ Witluski, *The Gnawa Lions*, 39.

⁶² Duran Earl, and Jane Stewart. "Toward an Aesthetic of Black Musical Expression." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 31, no. 1 (1997): 77.

Pouchelon, Julien André, and Jérôme Nika theorize the connections between African music and jazz. They claim that some of the aspects they share include “la pulsation,” “la période,” “la subdivision,” “la structure métrique,” “la mesure,” in connections to the pulse, “les temps forts et faibles,” and “la contramétricité.”⁶³ They underline that the Gnawa, in particular, perform rhythms and pulses with the *qrâqeb* which is “un peu comme les croches écrites de façon binaire en jazz.”⁶⁴

Weston also connects his music to a West African griotic tradition of oral storytelling. Some of the attributes common to Weston’s music, especially in his *Blue Moses* album (YEAR?), that correspond with Pan-African music and Gnawa music include vocal sounds imitative of calls like in the beginning of the track “Marrakesh Blues,” and a general inclusion of percussive sounds and a playing of non-percussive instruments in a percussive way through staccato and repetition. Likewise, Deborah Kapchan makes the connection between the blues musical scale of the flatted fifth – employed in Weston’s music – and the “bending of thirds, sevenths, and fifths into quarter tones” as a defining feature of Gnawa music, whose “music is pentatonic, thus it does not contain quarter tones, per se. Nevertheless, the pentatonic minor scale contains the flatted third and the flatted seventh – both elements of the blues scale.”⁶⁵ Kapchan references musician and cultural anthropologist Charles Keil, explaining that

[t]he call-and-response of Gnawa invocations no doubt also reminded Weston of the call-and-response in the blues form. What’s more, in their singing the Gnawa often bend notes in a kind of “blues chromaticism.” Rhythmically there are also similarities: the blues are

⁶³ Marc Chemillier, Jean Pouchelon, Julien André, and Jérôme Nika. “La Contramétricité dans les musiques traditionnelles africaines et son rapport au jazz.” *Anthropologie et sociétés* 38, no. 1 (2014): 108-9; “the pulse,” “the period,” “the subdivision,” “the metered structure,” “the measure,” “the strong and weak beats,” “the counter-metering”.

⁶⁴ Marc Chemillier et. al., 120; “a bit like the eighth notes that are written in a binary way in jazz”.

⁶⁵ Kapchan, *Traveling Spirit Masters*, 190-1.

characterized by “a 4/4 twelve-bar pattern, divided into three call-and-response sections,” and Gnawa music also employs 4/4 patterns overlaid with triplets. There is, then, a style, a kind of “blues aesthetic,” that is shared by both musics. What’s more, both musics have what even the *OED* refers to as a “haunting character”; they evoke deep emotions in those who know how to listen.⁶⁶

She further claims that “Gnawa aesthetic” elements that Weston uses include “fore-fronting the bass” and “drawing on the rhythmic structure of Gnawa music.”⁶⁷

However, Weston did not seek merely to copy Gnawa music nor did he try to join a Gnawa order. He wanted to bring a new feeling into his own music, inspired by the Gnawa style. For instance, while he initially made it a priority to experience a Gnawa *lila* ceremony, he also recognized the limits of his experience of Gnawa music because of the necessary opacity of a culture that was foreign to him. Weston claims that his experience at the *lila* was so intense that he was unable to attend the next night, writing that “I was supposed to return the next night, to experience the color black and whatnot, but I declined. I think my mind had been blown enough by that point.”⁶⁸ Weston does not need to attend the entire *lila*. His goal is not to authentically submerge himself in the Gnawa tradition but to find an authenticity of feeling that he can incorporate into his own music. Weston’s journey into the world of the Gnawa is a journey of self-exploration into the feeling of connection with the self through African rhythms. This inspired feeling and Weston’s own originality led him to write the *Blue Moses* album inspired by the Gnawa saint Sidi Musa. This album, which includes a track titled “Ganawa (Blue Moses),”

⁶⁶ Kapchan, 191.

⁶⁷ Kapchan, 191.

⁶⁸ Weston, *African Rhythms*, 175.

reveals Weston's own personal journey into Gnawa spirituality and ritual. For instance, he translates Musa into Moses, bringing the Arabic into his own Anglophone rhetoric. Then, he connects the color "blue" with Moses since Sidi Musa was inspired by a Moroccan saint who lived near the water.⁶⁹ Weston most likely chooses his inspiration from the blue spirits and Sidi Musa because of his own personal connection to the color blue.⁷⁰ Therefore, Weston's album and inclusion of Gnawa music is especially translated and reappropriated into his own musical context and creative style. In the end, what Weston hoped to gain from his experience with the Gnawa was access to a feeling that he believed was lost to reauthenticate his jazz as African American music.

Weston's *Blue Moses* album is not a direct copy of Gnawa music. He does not merely reproduce the same things that the Gnawa perform. Instead, he draws on the Gnawa rhythms to reinvent them within the African American jazz tradition. Still, Weston saw the core of "Blue Moses" as belonging to the Gnawa, and the sacred aspect of the music meant that it should be respected with privacy and containment. A tension arose between respect for the music gained through privacy versus through international publicity.

The first tune I wrote in honor of the Gnawa was "Blue Moses," a translation of their reference to Sidi Musa that is based on one of their songs. But the chief Gnawa in Tangier forbade me to play it. He said, "Don't play that in public, that's sacred music." So for one year I wouldn't play that piece. Finally I went back to him to ask his

⁶⁹ Witlowski, *The Gnawa Lions*, 29.

⁷⁰ Weston, *African Rhythms*, 175-6: "In the midst of all this music and dance I began to experience the colors; I saw red, and I particularly saw blue, which turned out to be my color as determined by the Gnawa... At one point they played the color blue, and I swear I went into a trance that lasted two weeks."

Hisham D. Aidi, *Rebel Music*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2014), 135: Weston shares his spiritual connection to the color blue: "And I realized that my color was blue, the color of Sidi Musa, the spirit of the ocean. The color blue caught me —."

permission. His name was Fatah, so I said, “Fatah, I think the world needs to hear this music and I’m not going to commercialize it or disrespect it in any way. I’m going to put all the proper spiritual power behind this music because I respect you and I respect the Gnawa people.” Finally Fatah relented and said OK, that I could finally perform “Blue Moses.” But you can bet that if he didn’t give me the OK, there was no way I was gonna play that piece, because I’ve seen some strange things happen in Africa when there’s even a hint of crossing the spirits. Ironically, though I’ve played “Blue Moses” countless times since then, the first time I recorded it was in 1972 on the *Blue Moses* album for the CTI that was a real hit record for me.⁷¹

In Weston’s account, Fatah was concerned by the commercialization and publicity that Weston wanted to bring to the Gnawa’s sacred music. In the end, what convinced Fatah to allow Weston to perform “Blue Moses” in public was Weston’s promise not “to commercialize it or disrespect it in any way.” However, ironically, *Blue Moses* was a commercially successful album that introduced Gnawa rhythms into a Western market. A private sphere of spirituality and quiet tradition was brought into a global spotlight of expectations. Many Gnawa masters and musicians rely on their music for their livelihood, even to this day, performing rituals to heal people who have been possessed or have other illnesses. However, as the Gnawa have gained international renown and even become more popular within Morocco, the expectations for their music have diversified.

Like Weston, Claude McKay was also restricted from attending the entire Gnawa ritual healing ceremony. As he reports, “I did not see the end, when the devils would be driven forth,

⁷¹ Weston, 176.

because a dancing woman frightened me by throwing herself in a frenzy upon me. They said I was a strange spirit and a hindrance to the magic working. So I had to get out.”⁷² The spiritual depth of the Gnawa ceremony relies on the cultural legibility of their practice. Although McKay identifies the Gnawa as similar to the Myalism of Jamaica, he does not belong to the same Moroccan context of these dance and healing rituals. Likewise, the authenticity of the Gnawa’s product relies on its mystery and obscurity. As Gnawa music becomes popularized as mainstream Moroccan and global music, the music compromises on the power of its spirituality and healing properties.

In her book *Traveling Spirit Masters: Moroccan Gnawa Trance and Music in the Global Marketplace*, Deborah Kapchan writes about Weston’s representation of the Gnawa in a similar way. She establishes that “[f]or Weston, the Gnawa were a link to a spiritual path through music, a healing force emanating from ‘mother Africa’.”⁷³ Likewise, she confirms that “Blue Moses” was a song that “Weston wrote in the 1970s based on the chord progression and rhythm of the Gnawa melody used to invoke the spirit of Sidi Musa or Master Moses.”⁷⁴ However, she takes this analysis a step further by dissecting how the changing landscape of Gnawa popularity and commercialization complicates notions of “authenticity” and the “sacred.” She asks: “How does the rapid commodification of the genre of ritual trance music affect Gnawa musicians living *in* Morocco, especially in their traditional roles as healers of the possessed? How do processes of the marketplace infiltrate and change musical/ritual life?”⁷⁵ In this changing landscape, where Western artists bring Gnawa music to the center stage, questions arise about the originality of the

⁷² McKay, *A Long Way From Home*, 297.

⁷³ Kapchan, *Traveling Spirit Masters*, 159.

⁷⁴ Kapchan, 160.

⁷⁵ Kapchan, 141.

music, the privacy of spirituality and the sacred, and the authenticity of spiritual music and its potential effects such as trance.

The 1970s represented a turning point for the reputation and potential platforms for Gnawa music. Before, the music was largely marginalized in Moroccan culture. Not until the founding of the Moroccan musical group Nass el Ghiwane in 1970 did some of the stigma surrounding Gnawa music begin to dissipate. For example, Adnan, a member of the Moroccan musical group Bin Obin, recounts what his mother warned him when he was young: “si tu ne travailles pas à l’école, tu finiras gnaoui.”⁷⁶ In addition, Khadija Ouahamane, a friend of Randy Weston, explains that

[t]he older generation of Moroccans at least used to have a different view of the Gnawa. For instance my mother hates the Gnawa, but I love the Gnawa. When I was a kid they would come around and play their music and she would shutter the windows and everything. Meanwhile I would be responding to their music inside the house and I would have to hold it inside. Their music scared the hell out of her, and it still does.⁷⁷

Sylvie Clerfeuille explains that the Moroccan musical scene had been dominated by Western and Eastern musical styles which excluded African and Berber influences on mainstream Moroccan music. Accepting Gnawa musical styles in Morocco was accepting the Gnawa as a part of Moroccan culture. Moreover, Gnawa music emphasized Morocco’s shared heritage with Africa. Alongside the rise in popularity for Gnawa music among Moroccans was

⁷⁶ Sylvie Clerfeuille. “Les Gnawa : africains par la sève, maghrébins par la greffe.” In *Cultures Sud: Maghreb-Afrique noire : quelles cultures en partage ?* ed. Kangi Alemjrodo and Tahar Bekri, (Paris: Culturesfrance, 2008), 139.

Translation: If you do not work in school, you will end up like the Gnawa.

⁷⁷ Weston, *African Rhythms*, 179.

interest from Western musicians such as Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones, Bill Laswell, Adam Rudolph, and especially Randy Weston. Unlike these other Western singers, Weston's interest in the Gnawa began before the founding of Nass el Ghiwane in 1970.

Likewise, despite being an outsider to Moroccan culture, Weston had the same understanding of the public opinion of the Gnawa when he first got to Morocco. He recounts how

when I first came to Morocco the Gnawa were viewed as street beggars, undesirables. Some Moroccans initially tried to discourage me from having anything to do with Gnawa. They'd ask me, "What do you see in these people?" Everywhere you go the black folks are always on the bottom. But now the Moroccans are all touched by Gnawa; all the young, educated Moroccans are all influenced by Gnawa culture – black culture. They've now seen the importance of Gnawa traditions to overall Moroccan culture.⁷⁸

Weston's mission in Morocco was to find a *feeling* that was missing in African American music.⁷⁹ However, what he ended up contributing to even more was a larger sense of Pan-African solidarity through his contribution to bolstering Gnawa music and credibility for a new generation of Moroccan music consumers. The Gnawa were marginalized by stereotypes of them as "beggars" or "undesirables" particularly linked to skin color as an indicator of perceived "foreignness." Weston recentered Blackness as an identity marker of empowerment that unites diasporic African communities across the globe. In a discussion with Congolese filmmaker

⁷⁸ Weston, 172.

⁷⁹ Weston, 173: "The music was getting more and more western, for me it was getting away from the so-called black tradition, that *feeling*. So those were some of the music scene factors that sealed my desire to migrate to Africa."

Balufu Bakupo Kanyinda, Weston discovered the story of the Gnawa and the spiritual power of their music as extolled by Kanyinda,

who insisted that the Gnawa story is the most important story in Africa to have been revealed to the rest of the world in the twentieth century. I asked him, “What do you know about Gnawa, you’re from the Congo?” He said, “Man, let me tell you, the story of the Gnawa migration to Morocco proves that black institutions, black civilizations, were so powerful that even if we were taken away from our homeland, taken away as slaves, we created new civilizations.”⁸⁰

First, this excerpt claims that the Gnawa tradition belongs to a larger Pan-African tradition. For Kanyinda, Gnawa culture represents a black institution and a black civilization which is indicative of larger continent-wide traditions and power. Moreover, even as the Gnawa were oppressed and forcibly displaced, they still came to create a powerful civilization within Morocco to the extent that Moroccan culture would never be the same. However, in this exchange, Weston questions the universality of African civilizations due to the separation of cultures along the emerging lines of nation-states. In this case, Kanyinda is African but he is also Congolese, not Moroccan or Gnawa. Still, Kanyinda can share the importance of the Gnawa story for all Africans. To that extent, he can reinforce Weston’s own interest in the Gnawa as an outsider to Morocco and Gnawa culture, but also as an African American and an insider to Pan-African experience.

Secondly, while the Gnawa were marginalized when Weston first arrived in Morocco, they became accepted by the younger generation as indicative and representative of the diverse

⁸⁰ Weston, 172.

musicality of Moroccan culture. Weston emphasizes that although Black people are placed at the bottom of social hierarchies, they are clearly *misplaced* through a continuation of historical oppression; and moreover, the wealth that Black people bring into societies is often minimized. Just as Weston emphasizes that jazz music is African diasporic music manifested in America, Gnawa music is African diasporic music manifested in Morocco. While these musical traditions originate in Africa, they are also influenced and activated in the diaspora, bringing a deeper cultural wealth to the host country of Morocco or America while also creating a hybrid space of cross-cultural influence and sharing.

Ultimately Weston explains that it is difficult to define and cleanly categorize what African music is. However, he explains that virtually any music can become African if it is played by Africans or Africans in the diaspora:

The music is so varied that we still have no real idea what African music is. I do know this though: when an African touches an instrument, whether that African is a diaspora extension like Louis Armstrong or a master healer from Morocco, that instrument becomes an African instrument. When a person is touched by African music, from his skin to his soul, that person has become Africanized. Perhaps this is the true meaning of universal – something seemingly foreign that touches you and reminds you of your deepest self. In Africa I discovered what the true purpose of a musician is. We are historians, what some Africans refer to as griots, and it is our purpose to tell the people the true story of our past, and to extend a better vision of the future.⁸¹

⁸¹ Weston, 298.

While Gnawa music may have been foreign to Weston throughout his entire musical career, he was able to bring it into his own realm of musical creativity and genius to contribute to fundamentally changing how the Gnawa were viewed in Morocco as well as in the music industry across the globe. The 1970s represent a turning point for Gnawa music, and Pan-African solidarity puts Gnawa music on display as an instance of African genius and subversion of enslavement and oppression. As the Gnawa become commercialized and publicized, they begin to signify different things to people who want to read themselves between the musical notes.

Chapter 3 : Charif Shanahan Represents the Gnawa Boy

Charif Shanahan, an assistant professor of English at Northwestern university, is a poet, essayist, and translator. His poetry collection *Into Each Room We Enter Without Knowing* (2017) juxtaposes complex issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion, both in the past and the present, to unravel forgotten histories through their traces in our present language. The collection was the winner of the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award and a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry and the Publishing Triangle's Thom Gunn Award. Throughout this collection Shanahan drifts between historical depictions and reflections of his own personal experiences, forging a bridge between the self and the self's construction as both a Subject and an Object. Shanahan brings himself into this collection, born in the Bronx in 1983, to an Irish American father and a Moroccan mother, he dissects the complexity of transnational identity.

Shanahan opens the collection with the poem "Gnawa Boy, Marrakesh, 1968."⁸² Although the title of the poem provides a year, the scene that the poem describes does not seem bounded by any particular historical event. Indeed, the scene is so general that it could have occurred in almost any year and to any Gnawa boy, rendering the poem's content a template and a metaphor for the many Gnawa boys who are objectified and marked as disposable by Moroccan society.

In Shanahan's poem, we meet this Gnawa boy not as a boy but as a body. His body is "thin" and "between two sheets" so that it is at least partially obscured and hidden from view.⁸³

⁸² "Gnawa Boy, Marrakesh, 1968" has been reprinted in anthologies including *African American Poetry*, edited by Kevin Young, and *Halal If You Hear Me*, edited by Fatimah Asghar and Safia Elhillo.

⁸³ Charif Shanahan. *Into Each Room We Enter Without Knowing*. (Carbondale: Illinois University Press, 2017), 3.

The description of the boy's body reflects this partial view and the distortion of the individual parts coming together into a fractured whole. There are "[b]lack legs jutting out onto the stone floor, / The tips of toenails translucent as an eye. / Gray clumps of skin, powder-light, / Like dust on the curve of his unwashed heel / And the face, swollen, expanding like a lung."⁸⁴ The description of the body parts violently dissects and dehumanizes the corpse. The body parts are rearranged and spliced back onto his body: his toenails become an eye, his skin resembles the dust of a heel, and his face is a swollen lung. Through this description, the Gnawa boy represents a monstrous other, distanced from his actual human form. Moreover, colors play a large role in this poem and the description of the boy's body. His body is described in combinations of black, white, and gray, avoiding definition by a single color. The back of his hand is black, and the palm of his hand is white like "his desert's sky." His hand is not like the desert sky, but his own personal desert sky placing the Gnawa boy as in possession of his environment. He is indigenous and native to this desert so that it also belongs specifically to him. This description accentuates the relationship that the Gnawa boy has to his location, referencing how Morocco is his home.

Meanwhile, the light-skinned women who lift his body do not grieve for him as they hide from the sun. They do not grieve for the boy as if he were a part of their own family or community. Skin color plays an essential role in the different representations of the women compared to the Gnawa boy. While he is seen as "strange" and monstrously embodied, the women are silent and statuesque. They do not move but contribute to the "porcelain silence of the hall". Likewise, they cautiously guard the light color of their skin by hiding their bodies from the sun, demonstrating the way these women view their identities as intertwined with the color of their skin. This color distinction leads to the resounding repetition at the end of the poem which

⁸⁴ Shanahan, 3.

accentuates the silence and apathy of the light-skinned women towards the Gnawa boy. His death does not move them either mentally or physically for “They do not walk the streets, / They do not clutch their own bodies, / They do not hit themselves in grief–”. These women are all but complicit in the boy’s death for their lack of emotion and action. They are defined by what they do not do.

Hortense Spillers disentangles the terms “body” and “flesh,” outlining the distinction between them as central to the difference “between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.”⁸⁵ For Spillers, the distinction between body and flesh is essential because the “hieroglyphics of the flesh” brand bodies before they can even be conceived as “body.” Instead, the politics of the flesh dismembers the body, as in the case of the Gnawa boy, so that the body itself is dissected, alien, and unrecognizable. In the reading of the Gnawa boy poem, the Gnawa boy starts as a boy, turns into a body, and ends up as indiscriminate flesh. This is the opposite process from Spillers’ analysis, where black bodies are recognized immediately as flesh. Through this backwards process of signification, the Gnawa boy’s captivity is inscribed as a progression towards deformation. His humanity is already assumed within the title, but through practices of seeing through the light-skinned women’s interactions, the Gnawa boy transforms into captive and disenfranchised flesh.

Moreover, Alexander Weheliye, in his book *Habeas Viscus*, discusses the importance of racializing assemblages in conversation with Foucault’s notion of biopolitics and Agamben’s concept of bare life. Contributing to Spillers’ conception of the flesh, Weheliye clarifies that

⁸⁵ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.

“[t]he flesh, although not synonymous with racialization in toto, represents one such racializing assemblage within the world of Man, and consequently it represents both a subject and an object of knowledge within black studies’s intellectual topographies.”⁸⁶ Weheliye critiques Western humanism’s Eurocentric and androcentric orientations vis-à-vis Silvia Wynter and Franz Fanon, to the extent that racializing assemblages dehumanize people into bodies and flesh. The flesh as a subject and object of knowledge and of racial organization reveals the unequal power relations that remain omnipresent and embedded in a modern life, haunted by the history of slavery. As Weheliye explains, “As a result, the legal and extralegal fictions of skin color and other visual markers obscure, and therefore facilitate, the continued existence and intergenerational transmission of the hieroglyphics of the flesh. Spillers adds to and recasts the concept of bare life by forcefully showing how, within the context of racial slavery, it gives birth to a cluster of classifying assemblages that stands at the center of modernity.”⁸⁷ The history of slavery in Morocco, reinscribes a history of signifying the oppression and alterity of the Gnawa.

In Achille Mbembe’s reformulation of Foucault’s biopolitics as “necropolitics,” he adopts a similar approach to Weheliye, emphasizing the connections between shared histories of oppression such as slavery and colonialism which refigures relationships between the self and the body. He emphasizes that through the history of slavery, “Indeed, the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a “home,” loss of rights [for the slave] over his or her body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether).”⁸⁸ Once again, these histories are still relevant in the

⁸⁶ Alexander G. Weheliye. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 51.

⁸⁷ Weheliye, 50.

⁸⁸ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics.” Translated by Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture* 15, no.1 (2003): 21.

racializing assemblages that they maintain on black bodies. The dehumanization of slave bodies transforms into the false, biological justification for racializing bodies, while most importantly politically charging bodies. Weheliye underlines how “different forms of domination create both the conditions of possibility and the “semiosis of procedure” necessary to hierarchically distinguish full humans from not-quite-humans and nonhumans.”⁸⁹ In the context of the Gnawa boy and other Black Moroccans, histories of slavery and oppression lead to their continued valuation as stigmatized and financially disadvantaged. The Gnawa boy is not seen as a human to the light-skinned women, as his body likewise shows his poverty and disenfranchisement in Moroccan society. His feet are dusty from a lack of shoes and his body is attended by strangers instead of family.

In Shanahan’s poem, death represents something that is unequal and politically charged. Unequal histories permeate the current opportunities for life of certain groups. The first line of the poem announces that “The maker has marked another boy to die,” indicating that this Gnawa boy’s death is not an isolated instance, it is habitual, regular, and unsurprising. The Gnawa are marked as bodies that are disposable in Moroccan society. Blackness, in Morocco, is shown as a lethal stigma that has the capacity to kill, even if indirectly. The women do not behave as mourners, and do not respect the Gnawa boy’s body even after he has passed, leaving the imagination to wonder at the neglect and apathy that they must have felt for the boy while he was alive. The death of the boy is something that the women do not weep over because they did not appreciate the contribution of the boy’s life to Moroccan society. Death both mutates the body of the Gnawa boy, but it also reveals the mutilated moral priorities of the women.

⁸⁹ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 24.

Shanahan's entire collection outlines these complicated racial relations that assign hierarchical values to human lives depending on skin tone and nationality. Shanahan revisits the horrors of slavery throughout the world, from the American plantation, to the female slaves of Rome, to the African slave trader of Zanzibar, Tippu Tip, who on his own death bed must reckon with the systems of oppression and death that he supported and reinforced. These poems radically contrast the horrors of slavery with current forms of racism and oppression in the present day, where shockingly similar practices persist albeit under new names. In the poem "Ticino," a dark-skinned woman is harassed on a train in Switzerland. She is harassed for looking like the bodies of African migrants that wash up dead on the coastlines of the Mediterranean, the bodies that are dehumanized and devalued to Europeans whose colonialism and neocolonialism is the reason for the migrants not seeing a future for themselves and their families in Africa anymore. The racializing assemblages of Weheliye's book permeate each interpersonal interaction so that some bodies are disenfranchised and preyed upon. Race plays a central role in this collection, contrasting Whiteness and Blackness, where Blackness signifies lethal stigma and Whiteness signifies the callous enforcers of inequality.

Near the end of the collection, another poem picks up where "Gnawa Boy, Marrakesh, 1968" leaves off: "Haratin Girl, Marrakesh, 1968." "Haratin," according to Chouki El Hamel, is another term for Blacks in Morocco along with "Gnawa," "Sudan" (for Black Africans), and "Sahrawa" (from the Saharan region). However, the term "Haratin" is problematic since it is imposed onto Black people of the region, signifying that they are "freed black people" or "formerly enslaved black persons,"⁹⁰ which erases the history and autonomy of Black people.⁹¹

⁹⁰ El Hamel, "Blacks and the making of the Arab majority in Morocco," 281.

⁹¹ Mohamed Hassan Mohamed. "Africanists and Africans of the Maghrib: casualties of Analogy." *The Journal of North African Studies* 15, no. 3 (2010): 350.

Like the Gnawa, the Haratin are determined by skin-color and their exteriority to Moroccan society despite Morocco being their home. Again, similar to the Gnawa, “the *Haratin* could not easily be squeezed into a single somatic profile”, since like the Gnawa, the people labeled “Haratin” all have different ethnic and cultural family histories.⁹² While 19th century French scholar Flex Gautier claimed that the Haratin as a whole have “no common and ancient tradition,” El Hamel emphasizes that “slaves, assimilated or not, free or still enslaved, introduced new cultural practices into the societies to which they had been transported.”⁹³ Although their cultural contributions to Morocco were diverse, they are potent in a similar extent to the Gnawa. Bringing together the Gnawa and the Haratin in these poems shows how these two divergent cultural groups in Morocco share more than their distinctive labels suggest.

The poem “Haratin Girl, Marrakesh, 1968” begins “—As the room is emptied of the boy’s body, / she watches through a hole carved into a wall of stone.”⁹⁴ Once again, the “strangeness” of the boy’s body is the center, although now we are confronted with the girl with “strange” eyes who watches. Her eyes are described as “strange and dark” as if these two adjectives pair together—that is, as if her eyes are strange like the Gnawa boy’s body because they are dark. The Haratin girl watches: “the women carry the body awkwardly, / their pale hands tentative to touch it, grasping not the elbow or the knee, / not the ankle or the neck, but the rounded softnesses— / buttocks, side of torso – and the smallnesses – two fingers, / an ear, a tuft of rough hair – as if to carry him without touching him.”⁹⁵ The women demonstrate their perceived difference from the Gnawa boy in the way in which they interact with his body. They

⁹² Mohamed, 352.

⁹³ Chouki El Hamel, “‘Race’, Slavery and Islam in Maghribi Mediterranean Thought: The Question of the *Haratin* in Morocco.” *The Journal of North African Studies* 7, no. 3 (2002): 29.

⁹⁴ Shanahan, *Into Each Room We Enter Without Knowing*, 61.

⁹⁵ Shanahan, 61.

focus on the body's vulnerable parts, the "softnesses" and the "smallnesses." The women wish to "carry him without touching him," performing the emotional task as if it were a chore, and not a sacred moment for reflection and respect. They do not treat the Gnawa boy's body as that of a once-living human with a history and a story, but they clumsily carry him as an object to be discarded. Instead of washing the body, instead of preparing him to be seen and mourned over by the neighbors, we can only imagine that the women carry this boy's body straight to his grave. Instead of being respectfully honored as part of the community, the Gnawa boy is treated like he is a burden to the people around him.

Then, as the Haratin girl watches this scene, and as the women approach her, she starts to run. The poem runs with her in a sequence of enjambment which stretches until the end of the poem:

She does not know why she rushes down the side street
 to the small rooms where her mother and siblings sit, rushing ... the burning in her lungs,
 her lungs weak with swelling, swelling
 with a fear so deep she will soon no longer know it as fear ... beginning to understand
 somewhere inside herself, in a place she feels
 but cannot name, or speak from, that she will for the rest of her life
 run, even when her body does not run, even as she walks,
 or sits, or carries the olive hand of a child, or children, not yet born—⁹⁶

Unlike the women carrying the Gnawa boy, the Haratin girl can relate to the boy as a human individual, a relationship that translates into her unexplained fear and flight towards a

⁹⁶ Shanahan, 61.

non-existent safe place. Like the Gnawa boy, the Haratin girl is constantly in danger of losing her humanity in the eyes of others because of the marginalized status of the Gnawa and Haratin ethnic groups in Morocco. As a result of the girl's running away in fear, she starts to resemble the corpse of the Gnawa boy. Attention is drawn to her toenails which chip and the swelling of her face, just as the Gnawa boy is described as having translucent toenails and a swollen face like a lung. Her body is more generally described as strange and misshapen. For instance, "her one good eye blinded, the mind scabbing around it" portrays her monstrously as a cyclops born of an injury that the mind attempts to heal. The Haratin girl's running from the fear of the women's treatment of the Gnawa boy's body only leads her closer to the inevitability of destiny through her artificial kinship with the Gnawa boy. For instance, her shoes fall off so that she comes to resemble the Gnawa boy whose feet are dirty and shoeless. Then, in the final line of the poem, Shanahan hints that this Haratin girl represents someone similar to his own mother, a woman who will give birth to "olive-handed children" or children with lighter skin than her own. While the Gnawa boy has already died, and did not have the opportunity to express his subjecthood and agency, the Haratin girl still has the ability to move and shape her own life based on her experience of the Gnawa boy. This poem reads as a continuation of the first poem "Gnawa Boy, Marrakesh, 1968," so that the Gnawa boy acts as a catalyst for change.

The last poem of the collection is called "Whiteness on Her Deathbed," a poem dedicated to Shanahan's mother. Contrasting with the light-skinned women who cleaned the Gnawa boy's body, the first-person speaker in this poem recounts preparing a body for burial with care. With the dead bodies of the Gnawa boy and the woman of the final poem, we lose their interiorities. Their self-significations are rendered opaque, and yet the poetic "I" reveals that the woman attempted to renounce her Blackness by straightening her hair, the first-person narrator ties the

woman back to herself through lovingly braiding her curling tresses.⁹⁷ This poem motivates a freeing of the body from immediate signification through stereotype, to disentangle identity from overdetermined body: “Open to being, / Only now, without condition– / A net of fish / Cut open from below, freed ... Into the fire, freeing / Her from her containment.” This conclusion solemnly echoes the start, tying together the death of the Gnawa boy which opens the collection. Once again, death signifies a moment for the living to echo their appreciation and respect that they held for the soul of the person who has passed. Moreover, death opens up a new beginning for the living, as freeing the body leaves sadness as well as hope for each future life. No longer will Black bodies be discarded callously and without respect, as long as the family members have the resources and opportunity to cherish their loved ones. The callous objectification of the Gnawa boy is set into stark contrast with poetic narration’s heartfelt treatment of the woman’s body, so that unlike the Gnawa boy, the dead woman is washed, respected, and loved.

The title of Shanahan’s collection – *Into Each Room We Enter Without Knowing* – describes the blank spaces of signification that can never be understood. Despite not knowing the interiority of the dead, the relationships in which they participated during their lives can be sensed by the treatment that they receive in death. The woman’s body is like a room that many try to signify according to historicized, sexed, and racialized distinctions. However, Shanahan’s poetry collection emphasizes the opacity of each individual’s identity. Saidiya Hartman’s “Note on method” from her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* describes the difficulty of recounting the lives of the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved or previously enslaved due to the regimes of power institutionalized in the archive. Likewise, Shanahan’s poetry represents the difficulty of narrating lives of those who are not

⁹⁷ Shanahan, 72.

given voices in history, and are hardly given voices in life. Shanahan demonstrates the power and agency that the dead as flesh, bodies, and objects of signification hold over the people who remain, and how the stories of these bodies shape the way that we interact in the present and cautiously reapproach our history. In her article “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman asks: “[H]ow does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?,” and “Is it possible to construct a story from the “locus of impossible speech” or resurrect lives from the ruins? Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to “exhume buried cries” and reanimate the dead?”⁹⁸ Shanahan’s work seems to respond to these and similar questions, by creating a circuit of poetic experiences of and with death. In these poems, the body of the Gnawa boy is resuscitated, although only for an instant to pay homage to the violence of his historical absence, reimagining the trauma and death of discrimination and oppression. While the interiority and individuality of this boy is lost to the violent practices of selective historical memory, the Gnawa boy’s signification sets off a chain of events and possibilities for the Haratin girl who still lives. The boy’s body as an object still has the agency and power to speak.

Moreover, in Hartman’s ruminations on the difficulty in narrating the impossible and the forgotten, she mentions the particular difficulty of narrating histories of the ex-slave in America. As slavery in Morocco only legally ended in the 1950’s after Moroccan independence, the wounds of these violent histories are still tender, especially in the year 1968 which the first two poems reference. Hartman notes that “[f]or me, narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom, and the precarious life of the ex-slave, a condition defined by the vulnerability to

⁹⁸ Saidiya Hartman. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 3.

premature death and to gratuitous acts of violence.”⁹⁹ As the name “Haratin” signifies the concept of “now-freed” and “previously enslaved,” the vulnerability that she and the Gnawa boy share resides in the very words that are used to label their identity. While their freedom is limited by the social positions that condone their premature death, the Haratin girl holds on to her possibility for escape and a future. These three poems represent a cycle of progress and possibility. Death has been transformed as a site of irreverence and discomfort into a continual moment of veneration and appreciation.

Finally, Hartman strategizes reconstructing these gaps in the archive and historical narration by proposing that “The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited. To fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed.”¹⁰⁰ Shanahan does precisely that in his recreation of the death of the Gnawa boy. He describes the scene of the boy’s body in the first poem and gradually introduces a witness in the Haratin girl who understands the terror of this boy’s premature death while also reformulates her own agency accordingly. Shanahan’s poetry introduces these bodies while they are sites of mourning to prolong their veneration and memorialize their deaths. By performing the violence of the past in the present, Shanahan draws attention to the realities that these historical silences play in our narration of the present and the future, so that the living have the tools to evaluate their own possibility for agency.

⁹⁹ Hartman, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Hartman, 8.

Conclusion

Like the many identities of the Americans represented in this paper, the Gnawa themselves are much more complex than American renderings suggest. As previously outlined, the Gnawa claim cultural and physical ancestry from various sub-Saharan African tribes and ethnic groups. However, even beyond their complex historical dynamic, the Gnawa themselves transcend any notion of a neat cultural or ancestral lineage, even within their spiritual orders. While Gnawa orders operate as close-knit communities that claim cultural and spiritual ancestry from specific sub-Saharan groups, these boundaries are still permeable and dynamic. Those who ancestrally belong to and grow up in a Gnawa order sometimes leave, and likewise, sometimes outsiders find their way into a Gnawa order through a spiritual connection. For instance, in an anthropological study, Abdelhafid Chlyeh interviews the Gnawa *maalem* Abdeltif. While Abdeltif was not raised in a Gnawa order, he mentions how his father's brother was part of the first order he joined. After the death of his father, Abdeltif started to spend more time with his uncle and felt a spiritual connection to Gnawa culture. However, Abdeltif's brother did not support his calling, going so far as to forbid Abdeltif from joining the Gnawa order, a restriction that Abdeltif did not follow. Instead, he chose to join a Gnawa order as an outsider because he recognized this as his spiritual calling:

Je le dois aussi à un don, une prédisposition naturelle que Dieu m'a donnée et qui m'a permis d'apprendre à maîtriser cet instrument qu'est le *guembri*. En parler est une tâche compliquée, c'est le résultat d'un effet et d'une action difficiles à traduire par le langage. Ni la transmission d'un savoir, ni les pratiques coutumières n'interviennent dans ce domaine. C'est un don qui m'a été révélé de manière secrète et initiatique. J'ai aussi servi

pendant de longues années des *maâlmin*, ils ont contribué à mon apprentissage et à mon initiation. J'ai appris beaucoup de choses de ces *maâlmin* qui m'ont précédé.¹⁰¹

Abdeltif describes himself as descending from a lineage of Gnawa masters, still situating himself within the authenticity and authority of the Gnawa tradition. However, he explains that more important than any historical or linear connection with the Gnawa, all Gnawa masters must necessarily inherit a gift from God, a spiritual calling to play the music. In this sense, Abdeltif's authority as a Gnawa master does not come solely from the culture or tradition, but also from his own spiritual clout and the many prophetic dreams he shares, which guide him through his journey to become a *maalem*.

Moreover, he recounts the financial burden and exploitation he faced as he pursued his spiritual calling. At first, he played the *crotales* and had to give gifts to his order's *maalem*. Instead of earning wages from his labor working at Gnawa *lilas*, he had to pay the *maalem* by working a second job at a bakery. Likewise, he describes the physical demands of the profession:

J'étais dévoué à ma troupe à tel point que je négligeais ma santé. Je fus deux fois malade des yeux et crus que j'allais perdre la vue définitivement. Notre métier est très difficile et nous sommes exposés aux atteintes par les *mlouk* qui ne pardonnent pas les manquements aux obligations rituelles. Maintenant, cela fait trente huit ans que j'anime la *halqa* sur la

¹⁰¹ Abdelhafid Chlyeh. *Les Gnaoua du Maroc: Itinéraires initiatiques transe et possession*. (Paris: Editions La Pensée sauvage, 1998), 58.

Translation: "I also owe it to a gift, a natural predisposition that God gave me and which allowed me to learn to master this instrument that is the *guembri*. Talking about it is a complicated task, it is the result of an effect and an action that are difficult to translate into language. Neither the transmission of knowledge nor customary practices are involved in this area. It is a gift that was revealed to me in a secret and initiatory way. I also served other *maalemin* for many years; they contributed to my learning and my initiation. I learned many things from these *maalemin* who preceded me."

place Djemaâ El Fna. J'ai connu et fréquenté tous les *maâlemin* qui ont joué sur cette place.¹⁰²

He describes the hardships of becoming a *maalem* worthy of playing in Djemaa el Fna. These various struggles demonstrate the complexity of Gnawa life and the passion with which they must devote themselves to their calling. The Gnawa order consumes Abdeltif body and soul. This contrasts with the simplistic depictions of the Gnawa in Djemaa el Fna offered by Fernea and Roy-Bhattacharya in Chapter One. The Americans only see the final product of a life of struggle and refinement.

The story of Mohamed Tabal offers another example of the complexity of Gnawa identity, and the permeability of the boundaries of the Gnawa order. Tabal was born into a Gnawa order in Essaouira. However, instead of experiencing a calling to music like his father who played the drum and crotales, Tabal was drawn into a world of art and painting. Tabal's paintings reflect his spiritual connection to the Gnawa and their music. While he does not live within a Gnawa community or regularly practice their music or spiritual ceremonies, he retains a spiritual and cultural connection to the Gnawa in Essaouira. His paintings depict this intimate relationship as he renders the Gnawa in his art. He further explains that for him painting expresses a similar spiritual outlet that the Gnawa experience during a *lila* when they are in a trance. Abdelkader Mana describes Tabal's spiritual connection to painting:

¹⁰² Chlyeh, 66.

Translation: "I was so devoted to my troupe that I neglected my health. I had an eye illness twice and thought I was going to lose my sight permanently. Our profession is very difficult and we are exposed to attacks by the *mlouk* [the owners or financial authority i.e. those who pay for the lila] who do not forgive breaches of ritual obligations. Now, I have been leading the *halqa* [a performance in a public square] on the Djemaa El Fna square for thirty-eight years. I knew and frequented all the *maalemin* who played in this place."

He is a sort of medium possessed by the culture of his ancestors in exile and his work is the emotional and artistic expression of this African horizon. The spirits which possess him are those of the kings of ancient Africa and the wild beasts of the savannah. His African roots have survived years of exile in the land of Islam.¹⁰³

Tabal operates outside of the traditional Gnawa order, and yet he represents a borderland where he draws on the same spirits and culture in creating his art. The Gnawa are defined by their communities and rituals, seen for the music that they play. However, as Tabal reimagines ways to express Gnawa spiritual identity outside of the traditional Gnawa order, he demonstrates how the Gnawa are not confined to music for a spiritual outlet. He imagines different expressions and outlets for Gnawa identity and collective healing.

Contrasting with these accounts of the Gnawa, Americans mobilize the Gnawa as figures within their own ideological projects. Their literary representations are set to bring a certain kind of Morocco back to American audiences. In the case of Fernea and Roy-Bhattacharya, they craft their own idea of an “authentic” Marrakech within a tradition of Western tourism. They incorporate the Gnawa as a testament to their knowledge and participation in the tourist landscape of Djemaa el Fna.

Meanwhile, McKay and Weston recognize the historic importance of the Gnawa. They identify their place in an African diasporic tradition, and Weston respectfully engages and uplifts Gnawa musical prestige. He does not attempt to coopt or directly copy the music, but rather uses it to reinvigorate his own, reminding him of the soul of African American jazz. Weston represents the Gnawa as pioneers, bringing African music and culture to their new homes and

¹⁰³ Abdelkader Mana. *The Gnawa and Mohamed Tabal*. (Casablanca: LAK International, 1998),114.

forming traditions regardless of stigma. Weston engages with the Gnawa for their “pure” connection to African spirituality, uncontaminated by modernity and Western culture. However, Weston’s engagement with the Gnawa sparks a Moroccan movement of reconnecting with the Africanness of Morocco by reclaiming Gnawa music as Moroccan music. It also brings the Gnawa into global discussions and rebrands Gnawa music as a genre that can make money from Western audiences.

Finally, Shanahan’s poetry furthers the dialogue about Blackness in Morocco. He poses the Gnawa boy in contrast to other global expressions of Blackness across time. Shanahan addresses themes of slavery, oppression, trauma, and mourning, reconfiguring the lost stories of the Gnawa that were never told. However, just as in the previous depictions, the character of the Gnawa is a symbol for the ideologies of an American author. Shanahan gives no voice to the Gnawa boy but brings the Gnawa into larger conversations of ethnic identity in Morocco. He situates the Gnawa as an aspect of larger global forces, but through this worlding of the Gnawa, their cultural agency is absent. They are represented as a symbol of an American conception of global Blackness, and yet their cultural specificity and the specific practices and lives they lead in Morocco are missing.

Returning to Chlyeh’s anthropological account, Gnawa *maalem* Abdeltif recognizes the changes in the newer generations of the Gnawa since the 1960s, when Weston started introducing the Gnawa in a global music scene. Abdeltif notices that “[d]epuis les années soixante, on ne voit plus de véritables maîtres qui disposent du savoir traditionnel. La vieille génération s’est retirée cédant la place à la nouvelle.¹⁰⁴ Then, by the time Abdeltif retires, almost

¹⁰⁴ Chlyeh, 66.

Translation: “Since the 1960s, we no longer see real masters who have traditional knowledge. The old generation has retired, giving way to the new.”

two decades later, he complains that the younger generations do not keep the same traditions as the old:

En 1974, je n'ai plus animé de lila pour Rkia, qui a arrêté son métier de *tallaâ*. Cependant j'ai continué mon métier encore quelques années, jusqu'en 1977, puis j'ai décidé de ne plus animer de cérémonies rituelle car les temps ont changé. Les *maâlemin* n'ont plus le respect et le prestige qu'ils avaient autrefois. Les véritables *tallaâte* sont devenues de plus en plus rares. Les *maâlemin* de la nouvelle génération ignorent nos véritables traditions et considèrent ce métier uniquement comme un fond de commerce.¹⁰⁵

He sees how the respect for traditional Gnawa expertise, demonstrated in the diminished respect for the Gnawa master *maalem*, distances the new generation of the Gnawa from the spiritual and ritual practices of the music. Instead, Abdeltif explains that the new generation sees Gnawa music for its commercial possibilities. While Abdeltif emphasizes his authority as a *maalem* – derived from the fact that he has a God-given gift and a spiritual calling revealed to him in a series of dreams – he insinuates that the younger generations have had no such initiation. When Abdeltif originally started playing the *crotales* for a Gnawa order, he paid to be a part of the community. Instead of wanting to be a part of the order for the spiritual connection, no matter the cost, younger generations appropriate Gnawa music because they know that it will sell.

¹⁰⁵ Chlyeh, 67.

Translation: “In 1974, I no longer led lilas for Rkia, who stopped working as a *tallaâ* [clairvoyant therapist and medium]. However, I continued my job for a few more years, until 1977, then I decided to no longer animate ritual ceremonies because times have changed. *Maâlemin* no longer have the respect and prestige they once had. True *tallaâte* have become increasingly rare. The new generation *maâlemin* are unaware of our true traditions and consider this profession only as business.”

In his book *Rebel Music*, dedicated in part to Randy Weston, Hisham D. Aidi historicizes this shift in Gnawa music from sacred to secular. He lists many modern variations of Gnawa music, including Gnawa jazz, Gnawa reggae, and Gnawa rock. He underscores the global spread of Gnawa music:

Gnawa chants about suffering and oppression are now sampled by scores of producers and DJs. Healing ceremonies are staged at prestigious venues across Europe and North America – at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, New York’s Symphony Space, and festivals promoting religious tolerance in Sarajevo, Turin, and Jerusalem. Every year since 1997, the Cabaret Sauvage of Paris, a massive tentlike nightclub in Parc de la Villette, hosts its annual “Folles Nuits Berbères [Crazy Berber Nights],” a cultural extravaganza with belly dancers, acrobats, fire eaters on stilts, and jugglers, promising “an Oriental voyage that will enrapture the young and old!” The show prominently features “Gnawa jams” with “*lila* dancers” to trance on the catwalk as models strut alongside.¹⁰⁶

Aidi describes the 21st-century Western appropriation of Gnawa music. What used to be considered sacred and healing music, has now been turned into a spectacle for Westerners. The tourist spectacle travels to the West, featured in cities such as New York and Paris. The music that Weston brought to a global scene with respect and admiration, has turned into another aspect of the West’s Orientalist fantasy of the Arab world. Aidi juxtaposes the traumatic content of Gnawa chants which are about “suffering and oppression” with the callous and sacrilegious handling of the music in a global context. The music is haphazardly sampled by producers and

¹⁰⁶ Aidi, *Rebel Music*, 121-2.

DJs. Gnawa music is coopted into normative cultural production. The Gnawa feature as a spectacle alongside models who strut the runway.

Aidi continues by emphasizing the responses by those who still see the Gnawa order as a sacred and spiritual order that deserves respect:

Devoted practitioners of *tagnawit* [music of the Gnawa people] are horrified to see not only their music played outside its ritual context, but also how their religious practices are being commodified and marketed as “trance dub” and “*jedba* beat.” Believers are particularly stunned by the recklessness of the Western artists and entertainers who toy with powerful spirits, chanting their names at dance parties. In 2008, the American actor David Carradine starred in a French-made film called *Kandisha*, a “supernatural thriller” about Aisha Kandisha, the “fourteenth-century evil spirit.” ... This film would be Carradine’s last: a few days after the film won an award at the Mexico International Film Festival, the seventy-two-year-old actor was found dead in a Bangkok hotel with a rope tied to his neck, wrists, and genitals. As fans and film critics speculated on this mysterious death, believers had no doubt: the deed was vintage Aisha Kandisha – the film had mocked and provoked the spirit and she had exacted her revenge grotesquely.¹⁰⁷

While Western artists recklessly sample Gnawa music, they forget the significance of the history and culture involved in these retellings. These histories have a magic and power for those whose ancestors experienced this pain and whose current generations still carry that family trauma into their present. The American actor’s death emphasizes the violence of these past spirits, regardless of whether there was any supernatural impetus for his death. This story shows

¹⁰⁷ Aidi, 122.

how artistic representations of the Gnawa have a strong impact on world presentations of the Gnawa. However, they also reflect on the American cultures that engage with the Gnawa's story in a particular way and with specific aims.

Likewise, the American authors analyzed throughout this paper offer a variety of different engagements with the Gnawa and their story. These representations offer different possibilities for understanding the Gnawa's significance within an American, Moroccan, and global context. While American tourists attempt to peer beyond the mystery and capture an "authentic" Morocco, their very gaze and engagement in private and sacred spaces shifts the culture altogether. The act of perception, to an extent, undermines the authenticity that Americans came to search for in the first place.

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Witluski, Christopher. *The Gnawa Lions: Authenticity and Opportunity in Moroccan Ritual*

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ACADEMIC VITA

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University May 2022
Schreyer Honors College, Paterno Fellows Program
Integrated Undergraduate-Graduate (IUG) Degree Program

- Master of Arts in **Comparative Literature**
- Bachelor of Arts in **Comparative Literature** and **Philosophy**
 - Minors in Arabic and French and Italian and Middle Eastern Studies

AWARDS

Foreign Language Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowship (Year) Aug. 2021 - May 2022

- Competitive Scholarship for year-long Intensive Arabic Study

Foreign Language Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowship (Summer) June - July 2020

- Competitive Scholarship for Summer Intensive Arabic Study

Samuel P. Bayard Award April 2019

- Outstanding Undergraduate Student in Comparative Literature

Tom and Karen Flad Program Award April 2018

- Outstanding Undergraduate Student in Italian Language

EXPERIENCE

Penn State University Press State College, PA
Comparative Literature Studies Intern July 2021 – Present

- Solicit book reviews by qualified scholars and contact the publisher to send review copies
- Organize spreadsheet of information pertaining to book reviews

Penn State Department of Comparative Literature State College, PA
Graduate Research Assistant Aug. 2020 – July 2021

- Edited videos, acquired research and teaching materials, organized department events, and edited the weekly departmental newsletter under the supervision of Dr. Carrie Eckhardt
- Tutored Arabic in the StarTALK Arabic summer program

Graduate Research Assistant Aug. 2019 – May 2020

- Acquired research and teaching materials concerning emerging topics in digital humanities under the guidance of Dr. Eric Hayot

Penn State Learning Center State College, PA
Language Tutor (French & Italian) Aug. 2019 – Oct. 2021

- Organized on the spot explanations for grammar concepts and provide advice for improving language skills and study practices

- Presented on all the tutoring services offered by Penn State's Learning Center

**Kumon Learning Center
Tutor (Reading & Math)**

New Britain, PA
Nov. 2016 – Aug. 2017

STUDY ABROAD & INTENSIVE LANGUAGE

Intensive Arabic at Indiana University, Bloomington June – July 2020

- Improved Modern Standard Arabic Skills as well as Egyptian and Darija dialect skills
- Participated in weekly immersive activities about Middle Eastern and North African culture

Amman, Jordan

Dec. 2019 – Jan. 2020

- Awarded Travel Grant from the Schreyer's Honors College
- Improved Arabic language skills by listening and communicating in Modern Standard Arabic and dialect

STARTALK Arabic Program

June - July 2019

- Received scholarship to attend intensive Arabic learning program with interactive culture components

Todi, Italy

May - June 2018

- Awarded Student Enrichment Funds by the Comparative Literature Department Head
- Practiced Italian language skills through Italian courses and homestay

LEADERSHIP & CLUBS

Graduates in International Languages and Literatures (GILL), Historian 2020-2021

- Organized and updated archival documents
- Coordinated departmental peer review sessions

United Nations Campus Advocates (UNCA), Current Events Chair

2018-2019

- Researched and gave informative presentations on global events
- Selected for trip to visit the United Nations

Penn State International Affairs and Debate Association (PSIADA), Member

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LANGUAGE SKILLS

Italian (advanced), French (advanced), Arabic (intermediate-high), Spanish (beginner), German (beginner), Latin (beginner)