

Leila Alaoui's *Les Marocains* (2010-2014) as
Photographie Engagée : Exploring the Place of the
Other in the Contemporary French Cultural
Imagination

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Statement of Originality

This work has been produced for the degree of Master of Research, at Macquarie University. It has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.



Chloe De Freitas

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In loving memory of my mother,

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Abstract

Drawing on the works of postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, and Edward Saïd's critique of Orientalism, this thesis addresses the ideological construction of Otherness in the contemporary French cultural imagination by examining how established modes of representation are challenged within the gallery space. Examined in relation to exhibition spaces, I argue Alaoui's *Les Marocains* is a postcolonial work that engages with the deconstruction of pervasive colonial stereotypes, showing photography can be a medium for articulating resistance to dominant narratives of cultural identity.

Taking cues from the French style of writing known as *écriture engagée*, or activist writing, a literary style that works to right the wrongs of Oriental representations (Vogl, 10), I demonstrate how Alaoui's *Les Marocains* utilises the photographic image in a style that I call *photographie engagée*. *Photographie engagée* is both a method of reading and a professional practice that considers the role of images in the construction and re-vision of cultural identity in terms of the relationship between the photographer and the subject, between ethics and aesthetics, between the photographer and the photograph. I propose Alaoui's *Les Marocains* functions as *photographie engagée* to realise the potential of art as a medium for considering tensions between self and space.

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Notes on the Style

This thesis employs the MLA 8th edition for the referencing of sources, apart from block quotations which conform to the MLA 7th edition of single spacing and indentations either side of quotations, rather than double spacing and single indentations.

Quotations from sources written in French are cited as they appear in the original to conform with the word length of the MRes thesis.

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PREFACE

A young woman with large, gentle eyes wears a spangled headdress of red, green and indigo. Draped over her shoulders is a *bandira*, a striped woollen cape of blue, black, white, green, and red. Beneath her cloak, the folds of a white dress are held to her body by a belt wrapped several times around her waist; an act which serves as a metaphor for the control of female reproductive capabilities and control within the boundaries of marriage (Becker 197). Strands of blue, green, yellow, red, and black wool—colours associated with fertility—create the belt decorated with small silver discs, chains, fringes and tassels. Her amber necklace symbolises protection and fertility.

Standing in a pose reminiscent of a Madonna, this young Imilchil an bride is dressed for the *Moussem* of Imilchil, an annual religious festival that brings together local Amazigh tribes in the Atlas Mountain region of Morocco (Bouhmouch and Zriouel *Al Jazeera*). This image, titled “A t Hani, 2014” is one of thirty portraits in a series known as *Les Marocains* (2010-14) by the late Franco-Moroccan artist and activist Leila Alaoui (1982-2016).



Fig. 1. *Aït Hani*, 2014 by Leila Alaoui. ¹

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INTRODUCTION

Framing the work of Leila Alaoui

Between 2010 and 2014, Leila Alaoui embarked on more than twenty road trips across Morocco equipped with a portable studio to compile a visual archive of the country's traditions and aesthetics (Alaoui, *Slate*). The result is a photographic portrait series known as *Les Marocains*. Made up of thirty three-quarter length images of men, women, and children of differing ages from a range of diverse ethnic and tribal groups from various urban and rural regions of Morocco, each of Alaoui's sitters appear in traditional costume, set against the same black background (Alaoui, *Dodho*). Individually, the images regionally document Morocco. Collectively, they showcase its diversity.

Born in Paris, 1982 to a French mother and a Moroccan father, Alaoui grew up in Marrakech, and studied photography and anthropology at the City University in New York (Snaije *Guardian*). In an interview with *Al Jazeera* (July 2015), Alaoui explained that during her time in the US, she developed "strong interests in ethnic minorities, sub-cultures, and marginalized groups" for whom "questions of belonging and identity construction" play a prescient role in everyday life (*Al Jazeera*). "I certainly believe that my hyphenated identity and my experience living abroad have deeply influenced my work and interest in cultural diversity, [and] identity" Alaoui explained (*Al Jazeera*). In an interview with *Femmes du Maroc* (FDM), a feminist magazine based in Casablanca, (September 2015), Alaoui described having nomadic tendencies: she explained "j'ai pendant longtemps eu le sentiment de n'appartenir à aucun endroit. Au Maroc, je suis 'Française', en France, je suis 'Marocaine' " (FDM). Alaoui believed that photography and art were a medium through which society could be "questioned and reflected" (*Al Jazeera*). As a result, her artistic practice engaged with issues of identity, marginality, and alienation in contemporary France and North Africa; work Alaoui described as "an attempt to understand the shared history of both countries" (*Al Jazeera*) as well as her own Franco-Moroccan identity in relation to what hides behind the question of the Other.

Thesis topic

Drawing on the works of postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, and Edward Saïd's critique of Orientalism, this thesis addresses the ideological construction of Otherness in the contemporary French cultural imagination by examining how established modes of representation are challenged within the gallery space. Examined in relation to exhibition spaces, I argue Alaoui's *Les Marocains* is a postcolonial work that engages with the deconstruction of pervasive colonial stereotypes, showing photography can be a medium for articulating resistance to dominant narratives of cultural identity.

Alaoui was an artist and activist committed to issues of human rights; much of her work explored ways of documenting and representing experiences of marginalised peoples in their own terms. As a photographer, Alaoui understood the extent of her responsibility to her subjects; in *Les Marocains* she engaged an approach that was sympathetic to the history of photography in Morocco as well as the apprehension some Moroccans display towards the camera. In her artist statement, Alaoui claimed *Les Marocains* is a manifesto against Orientalism (de Sardes). Similar to Saïd's idea in *Orientalism* (1978), which engages a humanistic critique "to complicate and/or dismantle the reductive formulae and the abstract but potent kind of thought that leads the mind away from concrete human history and experience and into the realms of ideological fiction, metaphysical confrontation and collective passion" (Saïd xvii-xviii), *Les Marocains* adopts Alaoui's subject position "as both an insider and native Moroccan, and simultaneously an outsider as the critically informed documentarian" as an attempt to "counterpoint the tired exoticization of North Africa and the Arab region by Euro-American artists through history" (Alaoui, "Statement" 9).

How then, does Alaoui's *Les Marocains* read as activism? In "Pourquoi écrire?" (1948), Jean-Paul Sartre refers to a "committed", or "engaged" style of writing called *littérature engagée* that is built on the notion of *engagement* which observes the relationship between writer and reader as a collaborative responsibility towards political or social injustices revealed in-text. Popularised in the years immediately following the second world war, *littérature engagée* resurrected the idea of the artist's moral responsibility to society and was founded on the existentialist principal of art: that a person defines him or herself by consciously engaging in willed action (Britannica "Littérature

engagée”). *Engagement* is understood as the individual moral challenge of making responsible choices that positively benefit society, as opposed to simply taking a position on specific issues, political or otherwise (Britannica “Littérature engagée”).

In *Picturing the Maghreb: Literature, Photography, (Re)Presentation* (2003), literary theorist Mary B. Vogl examines the works of four French-language writers—Michel Tournier, J.M.G Le Clézio, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Leïla Sebbar—specifically works that “look at how photography affects the experiences of North Africans in France and in the Maghreb” (6). Vogl describes these works as *écriture engagée*, or activist writing, a literary style that works to right the wrongs of Oriental representations (Vogl, 10). They address the Francophone bias that is latent in visual representations of North Africa produced in France in the post-colonial period. While Sartre’s notion of *littérature engagée* shares no immediate connection to postcolonial theory (it began in the period prior to the decolonization of North Africa) it does have anti-colonialist underpinnings. One example is Sartre’s “Orphée Noir” (1948)—an essay that originally appeared in Leopold Sédar-Senghor’s edited anthology of African and Indian poets (*Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, 1948)—demonstrates the unifying potential of poetry by Black writers beyond the oppressive confines of race through the cultivation of Black consciousness, or *Négritude*. As an expression of a revolt against French colonialism and racism, *Négritude* engages with many of the social and political issues that concern *écriture engagée*, especially those stressing the importance of alterity (the value of the ‘peripheral’, the ‘marginal’, and the ‘uncanonised’). The articulation of resistance to stereotypical representations of the Maghreb is the primary concern of texts considered by Vogl. As *écriture engagée*, these works question “the validity of the East-West opposition” whilst addressing problems experienced by North African immigrants living in France by “placing particular emphasis on the role of images in the construction and re-vision of identity” (Vogl 9).

The ideals of *écriture engagée* can be applied to the analysis of photographs by postcolonial artists through what I call *photographie engagée*. It is important to note that examples and formulations of the concept of *photographie engagée* exist in research that predates this thesis. Much of what is considered *photographie engagée* exists as photojournalism: images that capture the complexities of

conflict and war in photographs that serve to testify or denounce political, social, or humanitarian issues for a global audience.² My use of the term differs from the pre-existing research as it is a re-conceptualisation of the French style of writing as explored in Vogl's study. My study is primarily concerned with the photographic image as the medium through which the postcolonial artist writes with light to expose viewers/readers to a perspective that destabilises prevailing French Orientalist modes of representation. Here, *photographie engagée* refers to both a method of reading/viewing and a professional practice; it considers the role of images in the construction and re-vision of cultural identity in terms of the relationship between the photographer and the subject, between ethics and aesthetics, between the photographer and the photograph.

As a method of reading, *photographie engagée* can be applied an analysis of the image as a form of critique: those images that aim to show more truthful representations of the subject by engaging with stereotypical representations of North African cultures for the purpose of dismantling essentialised notions of cultural identity. In other words, photography that focuses on the humanity of the subject as a revindication of cultural identity. This style of photography is burdened with responsibility and commitment to the subject. In practice, *photographie engagée* is guided by the photographer's responsibility and commitment to the subject: the photographer assumes responsibility for the subject by engaging with their world; commitment to this subject is initiated in the instant the image is captured. As custodian of the subject's image, the photographer is responsible for its dissemination as work of art. Viewers assume responsibility toward the subject through looking. Here, meaning is guided by the mental work of imagination and inference based on the observer's recognition of familiar cultural symbols. *Photographie engagée* thus assumes readers will take up a more conscientious position towards Otherness in response to the recognisable elements contained within the composition. My use of the term is localised within a postcolonial framework through a study of photographs that aim to destabilise prevailing Orientalist modes of

² Nick Ut's Pulitzer prize winning photograph titled "[The Terror of War](#)" (1972) is one example of *photographie engagée*. Published in newspapers on June 9, 1972, Ut's horrifying image of a naked nine-year-old Vietnamese girl running towards the camera, screaming in agony from the napalm burning her body captured the world's attention for what it revealed of the devastation and suffering endured by casualties of the war in Vietnam. In *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag suggests this photograph helped crystallise the anti-war sentiment that led to the end of America's involvement in Vietnam: she writes "[Ut's image] probably did more to increase public revulsion against the war than a hundred hours of televised barbarities" (18).

representation in images that appeal to the humanity of the subject. In other words, the main concern of *photographie engagée* is to promote cross-cultural understanding as a form of resistance that reclaims part of the untold story of Moroccan cultural identity.

I argue that Alaoui's *Les Marocains* functions as *photographie engagée* to realise the potential of art as a medium for considering tensions between self and space within the context of specific French gallery spaces. *Les Marocains* can be seen as a culmination of representation and resistance mediated through photography, in conjunction with Alaoui's Franco-Moroccan hybrid subjectivity. Focusing on *Les Marocains*, this thesis aims to show how the photographic medium can be used to articulate resistance to dominant narratives of cultural identity through Alaoui's *photographie engagée*.

Orientalism and the Postcolonial

Alaoui's work is centered around the tensions of Oriental discourse in the photographic medium. Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* (1978) is theoretically relevant, aiding discussion for interpreting how Alaoui's *Les Marocains* breaks from the Orientalist tradition. The term *Orientalism* is attributed to Edward Saïd's book of the same title; defined as the distinction "between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority" and ultimately a political category that promotes difference "between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')" (42-3). As a "European invention", the Orient is characterised as a "place of romance, exotic beings, haunting landscapes, [and] remarkable experiences"; occupying a special place in the Western imagination, encompasses "all that is foreign, exotic, dangerous, or Other" (1-2). As a result, representations of Otherness and exoticism are "inextricably linked" (43) with the Oriental in the Western imagination.

Ultimately, Saïd's arguments pertaining to the "invention" or "discovery" of the Orient by Western writers, artists, and historians (18th century to present) suggest that there has never been such a thing as a "pure, or unconditional Orient" (23). As such, scholars of cultural discourse and exchange need to be mindful of the fact that Orientalist images often "do not depict 'truth' but representations" (21). Consequently, these representations are "highly artificial" due to the exteriority of the non-Oriental scholar, who in studying the Orient, makes it "into a *symbol* of the

whole” so that Oriental representations remain fixed—as representations, “*not* ‘natural’ depictions” (21). Further, the Orientalist, who is exterior to the Orient, speaks from a privileged position “makes the Orient speak ... *for and to the West*”; and “the principal product” of this exteriority are representations (20-21, my emphasis).

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), critical theorist/literary scholar Homi K. Bhabha draws on Saïd’s critique of Orientalism interrogating colonial authority and its dependence on ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of Otherness (94). According to Bhabha, fixity is “a paradoxical mode of representation [that] connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and ... repetition” (94), and is embedded in European discourses of ‘the Orient’, where it is stereotypically constituted as “a unified racial, geographical, political and cultural zone of the world” (100). In other words, the Orient is embedded in European discourse as a stereotype; a homogenised, racialised, essentialised, *fixed* representation that remains constant and unchanged in colonial discourse. The objective of colonial discourse, Bhabha explains:

is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, ... to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction [... and] resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. (101)

This “recognizable totality” is the stereotype, and the “system of administration” refers to colonial discourse. Arguing that cultural production “is always most productive where it is most ambivalent and transgressive” (*Synopsis*), Bhabha suggests the repetition of stereotypes in various historical and discursive arenas (such as colonial discourse), further endorse strategies of marginalisation and Otherness (95).

For Bhabha, the Other “is at once an object of desire and derision”, and “an articulation of difference” (96). Differences between race, colour, and culture ensure that the Other is always disproportionately placed in opposition to the dominant equivalent (103). The homogenising, essentialist tendencies of stereotypical representations of Otherness attempt to negate this articulation of difference. The Stereotype is:

not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations. (107, emphasis in original)

The stereotype is thus “an ambivalent mode of knowledge and power” that is “always in *excess* of what can be empirically proved or logically construed” (95). A Bhabhaian reading of *Orientalism* constitutes the Orient as a site of “alterity and ambivalence” and expands upon Saïd’s theory beyond a geographically bound interrogation of the East/West; Orientalism is both “a topic of learning, discovery, [and] practice,” and “the site of dreams, images, fantasies, myths, [and] obsessions” (102).

Leila Alaoui’s artist statement for *Les Marocains* suggests she was attuned to the problematic nature of representation in terms of a Saïdian/Bhabhaian reading. Alaoui describes how she was motivated to “re-visit the portrait practice [to] show Morocco in a way that [she] consider[ed] *more natural*, though no less objective *through the eyes of a native Moroccan*” (*Dodbo*, my emphasis). Alaoui’s choice of the word “natural” is significant here for it shows awareness of the problematic nature of authenticity in photographic representation. Choosing to photograph her *Marocains* “isolated from their environments in front of a black background” with a cold colour palette favoured over “warm and exotic natural colours of Morocco” (*Dodbo*) is suggestive of Alaoui’s experiences of alienation as a “Moroccan in France and French in Morocco” (*Al Jazeera*); experiences which evoke Bhabha’s notion of ambivalence.

Representation, Ambivalence and Postcolonial Art

According to Bhabha, the colonial subject is caught between two subjectivities: the colonialist Self and the colonised Other (64). The space located in-between these two subjectivities is a Bhabhaian Third space: “a position of liminality ... [a] productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness” (“The Third Space” 209). Bhabha writes:

It is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, but *the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness* ... It is in relation to this impossible object that the liminal problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes emerges. (*The Location* 64, my emphasis)

While subjectivity itself is an ongoing process, the colonised subjectivity is perceived as a fixed identity. Ambivalence arises out of the liminal positioning of the colonial Other. The tension that arises out of being caught between two subjective entities (as neither the colonialist self nor colonised Other) provides the terrain from which strategies of selfhood can be elaborated, displaced, challenged, and/or transgressed (Bhabha, *The Location* 96).

In “Rhetoric of the image” (1944), Roland Barthes reminds us of the link between the mechanical nature of the photograph and the fixity of the image. Barthes’ references to the spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority of the photograph evoke Bhabha’s notion of ambivalence. The photograph, Barthes explains:

establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its *having-been-there*. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then* ... is evidence of *this is how it was*. (44, emphasis in original)

The photograph thus resonates with the Bhabhaian Third Space; located in-between the spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority emerges an ambivalence that initiates a process of translation or transformation in the viewing subject. The photographic subject that is “fixed” within the photograph exposes viewers to an identifiable subjectivity, encouraging viewers to observe more critically.

Useful to this discussion is Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) which provides a theoretical account of the lived experiences of colonised peoples as embodied in postcolonial texts (1). They argue “literature [is] one of the most important ways in which these perceptions are expressed,” it is in art and writing “that the day to day realities experienced by colonised peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential” (1). Accordingly, the dialectic of place and displacement is “always a feature of post-colonial societies” and is embodied in the literature as “a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity”; a feature “common to all post-colonial literatures in English” (9) and arguably evident in Alaoui’s work. Consider the image of Alaoui’s Imilchiléan bride (Fig. 1, p. 2) as an example of authenticity: this woman was given no instruction as to what she should wear, or

how she should pose. Alaoui claims this image, amongst others in *Les Marocains*, is a more “natural representation” of a Moroccan as she was already dressed this way when Alaoui photographed her (*Dodbo*; Stoughton). However, Saïd would remind us that these claims of authenticity are ultimately undermined by the nature of representation, which fixes the subject within time and space effectively transforms the Imilchiléan bride into a metonym of Moroccan culture. Further, the notion of fixity can be extended to a critique of the power relations between the artist and the subject: as a photographer, Alaoui maintains a privileged position over her subject’s image. As custodian, Alaoui is thus responsible for how these representations are disseminated.

As portraits that claim to capture the day-to-day experiences of people living in post-colonial Morocco, *Les Marocains* can be read as postcolonial art. According to the Tate Gallery’s definition of Postcolonial art, the term applies to works produced in response to the aftermath of colonial rule, or the period after colonisation. Like postcolonial literature, postcolonial art addresses issues of national identity, culture, race and ethnicity in the form of an analysis or response

to the cultural legacies of colonialism and the human consequences of controlling a country in order to exploit the native people and their land ... it addresses how the society and culture of non-European peoples were seen from the perspective of Western cultural knowledge; how this was used to subjugate people into a colony of the European Mother Country; and the resulting identities of ‘coloniser’ and ‘colonised’. (Tate “Postcolonial”)

In other words, postcolonial art explores the experiences of oppressed individuals subjected to processes of imperialism, colonialism, and/or decolonisation and its lingering manifestations in roles of class, race, and national culture (Tate “Postcolonial”). A postcolonial artist is herein defined in accordance with the Tate Gallery’s definition of postcolonial art. Drawing on themes of identity, diversity and marginality, Alaoui’s *Les Marocains* can be read as a postcolonial work that satisfies this framework.

The Power of Photography and the Exhibition Space.

In *Picturing the Maghreb* (2003), Vogl differentiates between photography and other forms of visual representations such as painting. Vogl contends that painted images “are constructions

determined by the subjective creations of historians” (1) and claims photography is “a more powerful means of representation” due to its immediacy, “and supposed objectivity” (2-3). With the power “to illustrate, to educate, to authenticate, to entice”, Vogl maintains photographs can be used to produce “responsible, sensitive, and ethical representations” of the Maghreb (96). Further, these new images have the potential to “counter trite ideas” of the Orient, whilst promoting cross-cultural understandings (197). In other words, photographs created with the objective to “right the wrongs” (10) of past representations: images that take into account the history of photography in the region, and recognise/accommodate the agency of the photographed subject.

In *Les Marocains*, Alaoui engaged strong light and sharp depth of field (techniques borrowed from fashion photography) to help move the project away from prevailing Orientalist stereotypes toward “a more contemporary aesthetic” (Alaoui *Dodho*) helping viewers to focus on those depicted. Art critic Lara Atallah’s impressions of *la première Biennale des photographes du monde arabe contemporain* (2015) supports this claim:

[Alaoui’s] images lack spatial context, forcing the viewer into an intense vis-à-vis with the subjects standing against a black background ... In all these works, one detects a certain defiance in the eyes of Alaoui’s subjects. They do not seek [our] approval, nor do they exude any aggressiveness. (Atallah *Artforum*)

Within the spatial context of the gallery, the representative capacities of Alaoui’s images resonate with the Bhabhaian Third Space. Located *in-between* the spatial immediacy of the physical presence of Alaoui’s images within the gallery, and the temporal anteriority captured in the images themselves emerges an ambivalent, transitory space open to processes of cross-cultural understanding that exposes viewers to an identifiable subjectivity. Additionally, their presence in the gallery symbolically recognises the contribution of a contemporary North African artist as an authority within the contemporary canon. These aspects have been chosen for consideration as they will help show how Alaoui negotiates Moroccan identity within the French cultural imagination discussed in my analysis of critical and public reception of the work.

According to Art Historian Semine Long, the multiplicity of identities present in *Les Marocains* presents a perspective through which established modes of representation are challenged within the gallery space. In “Negotiating Moroccan Identity: The Art of Leila Alaoui” (2017), an

article which appears in online magazine *Friktion* (Sept 2017), Long reports on an exhibition of *Les Marocains* at *Collection Lambert en Avignon*, July-November 2017. *Les Marocains* was featured as part of a larger collection of Alaoui's work organised by *Fondation Leila Alaoui* titled "Je te pardonne", and was described by Long as an exhibition that "expose[s] the complex experiences and issues related to immigration, the Maghrebi diaspora and the search for cultural identity, while actively creating a space of inclusion that contributes to the dismantlement of othering" (Long).

Within the article, Long observes the link between the Orient and the gallery; as European inventions, both have played an important role "in the production of knowledge and meaning", with the power to "define and disseminate collective truths" (Long). Long points out that within the gallery space "[n]on-white bodies are rarely represented" because "the universal subject is white", *Les Marocains* makes the coloured body "hyper-visible in a museum context" (Long). Exhibiting images of this nature in the gallery invites a reading of Alaoui's work that simultaneously adheres to and defies the convention of the gallery as an institutionally white space. The history of asymmetric powers relations that is realised in the varied displays of objects, many of the items collected on civilising missions are a symbolic celebration of colonial commodities. *Les Marocains* actively increases the presence of brown bodies within the gallery space. This process works to subvert the hierarchies of convention and counteracts what Long identifies as the "process of essentialising, and ultimately the creation of an imaginary Orient" (Long). Instead a space of inclusion is initiated, a space which pushes against the boundaries of gallery as an "institutionally white space" (Long). Examined in relation to the gallery spaces in which they are exhibited, Alaoui's *Les Marocains* emphasizes the role of images in the construction and re-vision of identity (Vogl 9), and is a perspective that challenges established modes of representation.

Obituaries

When *Les Marocains* was shown at *La Maison Européenne de la Photographie* in Paris as part of *La première Biennale des photographes du monde arabe contemporain* (Nov. 2015—Jan. 2016), the event marked the first time Alaoui's portraits were presented to a French audience. Opening three days before the terrorist attack at the Bataclan concert Hall in Paris on the 13th November 2015, the

Biennale was an important event in itself, it was designed to challenge pervasive assumptions held by the West towards the Arab Region as outlined in Saïd's *Orientalism* (1978). The exhibition showcased the works of more than fifty photographic artists working across the Arab world. Many of the works called into question issues of representation relating to the portrayal of Arab cultures in Europe. As the *Biennale* was coming to a close on the 16th of January, Alaoui was injured in a terrorist attack in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, where she had been working on a photography project for a women's rights campaign called *My Body My Rights* with Amnesty International (Snaije, *Guardian*). She passed away on the 18th of January, 2016 at the age of 33.

Alaoui's work is yet to be considered in an academic context, with existing scholarship limited to reviews by art critics, as well as obituaries acknowledging Alaoui's contribution to the art world. Many obituaries dedicated to Alaoui's memory include vibrant images from *Les Marocains*, as writers generally consider it Alaoui's "best known work" (Snaije *Guardian*; Wilson-Goldie *ArtForum*). For example, in an obituary titled "Leila Alaoui: In Memoriam" (2016), Art historian/curator Gwendolyn DuBois Shore describes *Les Marocains* as possibly "the artist's most enduring legacy" (133); while *Artsy*'s Charlotte Jansen suggests the photographs "leave an ineradicable legacy" (*Artsy*). The obituaries generally follow the same format; as a notice of death they report on the circumstances of Alaoui's life, describing where the artist grew up, her family, education, as well her artistic motivation and practice.

In the "Leila Alaoui Obituary" (2016) that appeared in *The Guardian* on the 23rd of January, Olivia Snaije provides excerpts from an interview with Alaoui in November 2015 wherein the artist described how she approached photographing Moroccans. Snaije notes "Alaoui would pick a region in Morocco and then spend a week in a village with her mobile studio" (*Guardian*). This, Alaoui explained:

[was] so that people would get used to me and feel comfortable. I would wait for market day, when people not just from the village [...] and] surrounding villages would come. I installed my studio in the middle of the market, with a black background and two spotlights. Kids would come and I would take pictures of them, print them out and give to them. Out of 200 photos there would be one that was interesting ... [Engaging local women] was more complicated. On Fridays sometimes I would buy ingredients and we would make a big couscous together. (qtd. in Snaije *Guardian*)

DuBois Shore also describes Alaoui's artistic practice, which she maintains was "mainly concerned with recording and illuminating the lives of people in Morocco and other parts of North Africa, both in their home countries and throughout the Diaspora" (133). In *Les Marocains*, Dubois Shore notes "each sitter confronts the camera head-on, fully in control of their own representation, commanding the gaze of the viewer" (133). For Dubois Shore, the experience of looking at Alaoui's subjects evokes the mechanical process of taking a photograph: Alaoui "allows all of her Moroccans *a moment of photographic depiction* that is characterised by great personal presence and dignity" (133, my emphasis). Dubois Shore's allusion to the moment of photographic depiction is important as it draws attention to the way photographs can function as evidence, providing proof of the encounter between Alaoui and her subject, immortalised as a representation of Moroccan identity.

Writing for *Artforum Magazine* (April 2016), Beirut based writer Kaelen Wilson-Goldie provides what is possibly the most comprehensive description of *Les Marocains*:

Each picture shows a man or woman wildly dressed, dramatically lit, and set against the same black background; eyes locked on the camera. As portraits go, the images in [*Les Marocains*] are intense. *Alaoui's subjects stare down the lens with a look of playful or defiant challenge*. They rarely smile but always sparkle—whether in the confidence of their pose, the glint in their eyes, or their dazzling array of costumes and accoutrements. (*Artforum*, my emphasis)

Like Dubois Shore, Wilson-Goldie is drawn to the gaze of Alaoui's subjects, which are considered alongside each other. "Taken together," she writes, "the series offers a jumble of facts and attitudes to counteract some of the more orientalist fantasies and colonial fictions that have plagued the history of image making in Morocco for well over a hundred years" (Wilson-Goldie *Artforum*). These observations echo Alaoui's descriptions of historical representations of Moroccans in Western art and literature: Alaoui explains in her statement that Morocco has held "a specific position in the backstory of [Western] photographers using the culture—particularly elements from native costume and architecture—to construct their own fantasies of an exotic 'other' world" (*Dodho*). Her intention in *Les Marocains* "was to counter this in these portraits by adopting similar studio techniques to photographers such as Richard Avedon[s] 'In the American West, who

portrays his subjects as empowered and glamorous, drawing out the innate pride and entitlement of each individual person” (Alaoui “Statement” 9).

Chapter Overview and Methodology

Postcolonial theory has been chosen for its practical applications to my discipline of French Cultural Studies. An in-depth understanding of the disciplinary implications of the ‘post’ in ‘post-/postcolonial’ is paramount for explaining how the tensions at play in Alaoui’s work locate it within a postcolonial framework. According to French literary scholar Jean-Marc Moura’s article “Colonial influences and tropes in the field of literature” (2013), the term ‘postcolonialism’ has a number of uses. The hyphenated term ‘post-colonial’ refers to a historical moment “after the colonial era”; while the unhyphenated term ‘postcolonial’ refers to either literary works or a theoretical critique “written in a language inherited from colonization and contain[s] a number of characteristics related to this historical event” (Moura 510-11). Moura specifies the characteristics of the postcolonial as a text written outside of Europe in a European language (such as English or French) that “resist[s] and refute[s] or propose[s] a counter-discourse” (511).

Ashcroft *et al.*’s *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) is concerned primarily with writing “by those peoples formerly colonised by Britain”, but its content builds a rationale relevant to other countries colonised by other European powers such as France (Ashcroft *et al.* 1). Like Moura, Ashcroft *et al.* provide an overview of the varied spellings and implications of the term within postcolonial discourse. According to Ashcroft *et al.*, ‘Post-colonialism’

has come to mean many things and to embrace a dizzying array of critical practices ... many different post-/postcolonialisms [exist] with different, and sometimes contesting interests, and have [accordingly] characterised themselves as post-/postcolonial studies. (193)

These varied spellings are used strategically by postcolonial scholars, often to signal where their arguments are located in relation to the discipline as a whole. Ashcroft *et al.* use the hyphenated *post-colonial* to refer to “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” as opposed to “those who believe it necessary to limit the term by selecting certain periods as genuinely post colonial [generally those after independence]” (Ashcroft

et al. 195). The alternative spelling *postcolonial* “marks history as a series of stages along an epochal road from the ‘precolonial’, to ‘the colonial’, to the ‘postcolonial’” (Ashcroft *et al.* 195-6).

In contrast to Moura and Ashcroft *et al.*, Bhabha proposes the prefix ‘post’ in postcolonialism is suggestive of a sense of moving beyond that is never fully realised in postcolonial literature (2). Bhabha writes that it is in the ‘post’ that

we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, ... inclusion and exclusion ... These ‘in- between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood [... and] new signs of identity. (2)

In other words, in the spaces between normative constructions of difference—spaces between binaries of Frenchness/Otherness, Occident/Orient—normative constructions of identity might be displaced, challenged, and transgressed (Bhabha 96). This thesis adopts Bhabha’s usage of the unhyphenated term as it correlates with Alaoui’s Franco-Moroccan hybrid subjectivity, which Alaoui engaged in her work.

Through *Les Marocains*, Alaoui critically reflects upon her position as a photographer of both French and Moroccan nationalities. The work symbolically engages questions such as, who represents whom? How? And why? What constitutes an authentic or accurate representation of Moroccans?³ Guided by the above, this thesis seeks to answer the following: How does Alaoui’s *Les Marocains* break from the Orientalist tradition? How is the work postcolonial? How does *Les Marocains* function as *photographie engagée*? What is the significance of exhibiting these photographs in Paris? How does *Les Marocains* fit within this space of representation? What does exhibition reception suggest about conceptions of Otherness in the contemporary French cultural imagination?

In order to answer the aforementioned questions, this thesis is structured as follows; Chapter One examines how the ideological construction of Otherness emerged in the

³ In *Picturing the Maghreb* (2003), Vogl considers a similar range of questions: “Who represents whom? How? And why? How do French writers and “elite” North Africans who write in French avoid Orientalism in their representations of the Maghreb? Do these writers speak *on behalf of* North Africans or *in place of* them, or do they simply speak *on their own behalf* as concerned members of society? What is an authentic or an accurate representation?” (6).

contemporary French cultural imagination in relation to Orientalist images that are tied to processes of colonisation. Drawing on Edward Saïd's Orientalist discourse, prominent examples of Orientalist images derived from French art and photography (1800-present) will be analysed with regard to the depiction of colonial subjects. The aim is to demonstrate what constitutes the postcolonial perspective realised in Alaoui's photographs in response to this tradition. Chapter Two will demonstrate how Alaoui's *Les Marocains* functions as *photographie engagée*. In this chapter, I argue *Les Marocains* provides a platform through which binary notions of Frenchness/Otherness might be questioned and challenged. Seven of Alaoui's photographs (featured in exhibitions discussed in Chapter Three) are examined individually. The aim is to show how the photographic medium can be used to articulate resistance to dominant narratives of cultural identity, and inspire more engaged, responsible reading practices based on the familiar, recognisable elements captured within the composition. Chapter Three offers an analysis of art criticism and public reception associated with the debut exhibition of *Les Marocains* at *La Maison Européenne de la photographie* (Nov. 2015—Jan. 2016). This event will be compared to reception associated with a more recent showing of *Les Marocains* at *Collection Lambert en Avignon*, featured as part of a larger exhibition of Alaoui's work titled "Je te pardonne" (July—Nov. 2017). The intent is to understand how Moroccan identity is negotiated within the French cultural imagination as represented through the reception of the work. The chapter examines Alaoui's images collectively and is specifically concerned with how the multiplicity of identities presented in *Les Marocains* disrupts established modes of representation, as this is thought to create a space of inclusion that subverts processes of Othering (Long).

Analysis of critical and public reception to Alaoui's *Les Marocains* provides an opportunity through which researchers might better understand the workings of binaries such as Frenchness/Otherness, Occident/Orient in terms of how they come to exist, and how they are challenged in the French cultural imagination. Evaluation of such phenomena suggests artworks like Alaoui's *Les Marocains* work to shut down cultural and social gaps by promoting a (re)vision of identity that includes Others in the French cultural imagination (Vogl 9).

CHAPTER 1

Orientalism and Otherness:

Exploring the place of the Other in the contemporary French Cultural Imagination.

Since the eighteenth century, North Africa has served as the site of the imaginary Orient for French artists, writers, and historians. Prior to the French conquest of Algeria in the nineteenth century, the extent of what was known as ‘the Orient’ in the West was limited to Turkey and Egypt. It was a site few had visited, and so maintained a reputation as a place of mystery and exoticism (Benjamin 7). After the French capture of Algiers in 1830, parts of North Africa started to become accessible to European artists and travellers as the French empire expanded. When the French artist Eugène Delacroix visited Morocco in 1832 as part of an ambassadorial mission, the artist produced extensive records of the expedition in the form of sketches and watercolours. Delacroix’s presence in Morocco is important as the works he produced on the mission are amongst the earliest European records of everyday life in Morocco. As visual records, they introduced aspects of Moroccan culture to a nineteenth-century European audience. A major proponent of the Romantic art movement, Delacroix’s Orientalist paintings take up themes of violence, while also conveying ambiguity towards Oriental subjects.

Just as the history of painting and the Orient are intimately linked, so too is the history of Oriental photography in the region. In 1860, when photographers began to voyage to the East, Europeans were captivated with North Africa’s array of landscapes, costumes, and cultures. Many of the early photographs feature scenes of monuments, landscapes, and portraits taken with the aim of satisfying both ethnographic and exotic appetites of the West (D’Hooghe 17). Portraits in particular were taken according to *scènes et types* and emphasised visual details such as clothes, jewellery, and tattoos. These pictures were collected and categorised like botanical specimens according to racialised characteristics of the various ethnic groups such as Berbers or Jews (Crawford 16).

In 2010, when Leila Alaoui embarked on a road trip across Morocco to photograph Moroccans, she was attempting to counteract “the patronizing gaze of the Orientalist” (Alaoui “Statement” 9). Over the course of four years Alaoui compiled a visual archive of Moroccan

traditions and aesthetics “gradually disappearing under processes of globalization” (9). The resulting portrait series, *Les Marocains* showcases Morocco’s ethnic and cultural diversity independent of an Orientalist narrative. This chapter will determine where *Les Marocains* is situated within a wider historical context of visual representations of the Maghreb. Drawing on Edward Saïd’s Orientalist discourse, it examines how the ideological construction of Otherness emerged in the contemporary French cultural imagination in relation to Orientalist images tied to colonisation. Prominent examples derived from French art and photography (1800-present) will be analysed with regards to the depiction of colonial subjects. The aim is to demonstrate what constitutes the postcolonial perspective realised in Alaoui’s photographs.

Early Depictions of the Orient in Western Art

In the 1860s when European photographers such as Félix-Jacques Moulin (1802-75), Henri Béchard (b. unknown-1889), and Félix Bonfils (1831-85) began venturing to the North Africa, many were inspired by the legacy of Orientalist painting. Following in the footsteps of Orientalist masters such as Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) and Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), the Orient reflected in their photographs echoed themes found in Orientalist painting such as historical monuments, landscapes, and portraits (Khémir 189). These themes derive from documentary practices established by the first *mission civilisatrice*: Napoleon’s 1798 invasion of Egypt. Under Napoleon, the French government commissioned artists, scholars, historians and scientists to catalogue Egypt’s art, customs, history, and geography in an attempt to scientifically study and civilise Egypt’s indigenous population (Goldsworthy 7). The findings published in *Description de l’Égypte* (1809-29)—a highly detailed, lavishly illustrated twenty-four-volume mega-tome that documented important sites along the Nile—transformed Egypt into an object of cultural interest for Western travelers, artists, writers and photographers (Malcolm par. 1).⁴ In 1841, when paint became available in tubes, the artist’s studio became increasingly portable. The invention of the

⁴ According to the American historian Patricia Goldsworthy, Napoleon’s *Description* continued to influence later colonial missions to North Africa. The types of research established for the *Description* resurfaced in the Conquest of Algeria (1830) as the *Exploration scientifique de l’Algérie* (*Colonial Negatives* 7-8).

retractable easel in the 1850s made it even easier for artists to paint outside the studio. As a result, those artists with the means travelled to the Orient to paint exotic scenes and picturesque landscapes.

The focus on realism that pervades Orientalist painting derives from 19th century Romanticism in which the vogue for exotic, or *Oriental* subject-matter saw many painters employ a realistic style. Artworks that concealed the nature of their medium (i.e. paint on canvas) were favoured over those more whimsical in nature. Jean-Léon Gérôme's [*The Snake Charmer* \(c. 1860\)](#) is an example of the Realist style. The painting depicts the rear view of a boy standing on a carpet in the middle of a lofty blue-tiled room presenting a python to small audience of armed tribesmen huddled against the far wall. To his right sits an older man playing a flute. In an essay written to accompany the exhibition catalogue for *Orientalism: From Delacroix to Klee* (1997), curator/art critic Roger Benjamin suggests Gérôme was responsible for establishing this documentary realism in the Orientalist tradition (16). He explains:

Gérôme refined procedures for the documentary preparation of painting, utilising pencil drawings and precise oil sketches of landscape, and also pioneered putting the new technology of photography to use in his painting. (17)

Although technically brilliant, Gérôme's realism was not always well received: some critics found his visual approach "too static", and his figures "too wooden" (17).

In "The Imaginary Orient" (1989), American art historian Linda Nochlin suggests Gérôme's realism distracts viewers from what is absent in the painting: "the Western colonial or touristic presence" (37). She writes:

the Westerner, is ... always implicitly present in Orientalist paintings like *The Snake Charmer*; his is ... the controlling gaze, the gaze which brings the Oriental world into being ... Part of [Gérôme's] strategy ... is to make his viewers forget that there was any "bringing into being" at all, to convince them that works like these were simple "reflections" ... of a preexisting Oriental reality. (37)

The meticulous attention to detail and ethnographic exactitude accords the artwork a supposed authenticity in much the same sense as Roland Barthes has alluded to in *The Reality Effect* (1968):

Nochlin suggests the artist's attention to detail serves the purpose of "giving credibility to the 'realness' of the work" (38; Barthes 233).⁵ Barthes explains:

obsessive reference to the "concrete" [i.e. what is/has been ...] is always brandished like a weapon against meaning ... Resistance of the "real" ... is very limited in the fictive account, ... has no other constraints than those of intelligibility; this same "reality" becomes the essential reference in historical narrative, which is supposed to report "what really happened": what does the non-functionality of a detail matter then, once it denotes "what took place"; "concrete reality" becomes the sufficient justification for speaking. (233)

Although Barthes' observations are concerned with how written descriptions function in a narrative sense, the "resistance of the real" also applied in Realist paintings whereby any attempt to reflect the exactitude of the referent can only remain as such: a representation. In terms of an Orientalist critique, Edward Saïd points out that Western visual representations of Orient often "do not depict 'truth' but representations that are "highly artificial" (21) due to the exteriority of the non-Oriental scholar (or artist), whose subject position is exterior to the Orient, is only able to conceive of it for a European audience. Thus, any attempt at its representation is a confirmation of its opposing concrete (real) equivalent.

"To be a European in the Orient," writes Saïd, "*always* involves being a consciousness set apart from, and unequal with its surroundings" (157). Based on this consciousness, the Orient that appears in European representations has been cultivated by imagined geographical boundaries between the East and the West. These boundaries are based on European experiences of space which, according to Saïd, affect how the Orient is interpreted creatively: "in one's mind, a familiar space" is designated as "ours"; and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" is "theirs" respectively; and the difference between "us" and "them" accordingly (54). Associated fictions of Otherness and exoticism ascribed to the Orient therefore help the European mind to "intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it, and what is far away" (55). Those scenes captured *sur le motif* facilitated a means through which Europeans could travel vicariously through the artist's representations; representations that were symbolically possessed and dictated by the colony.

⁵ For Nochlin, these details are "a simple, artless reflection ... of a supposed Oriental reality" (38)

According to Belgian art historian/writer Alain D’Hooghe in “With Desire as the Sole Guide” (1999), in the context of European representations of Morocco, “everything began with Eugène Delacroix” (11). Previously closed to Europeans, European contact with Morocco commenced shortly after the French colonial mission to Algeria after France sent an ambassador to seek an alliance with the Sultan, Moulay Abderrahman (11). In 1832, when the French ambassador Comte de Mornay arrived in Morocco, his mission had been to draw up a treaty of “good-neighborly relations” between France and Morocco (11). Acting as official artist to the ambassadorial mission, Eugène Delacroix, captivated by the varied identities he observed amongst the population, kept detailed records of his journey in notebooks. Due to the restrictions of Islam, which forbids representations of the human face, he was limited to ink and watercolours as works realised in oil paints were considered too life-like by the locals (11).

Equipped with a portable toolkit consisting of chalk, ink, pencil, and watercolours, Delacroix filled seven notebooks with annotated sketches of everyday life and scenery (Benjamin 10). One example from this collection is Delacroix’s [*Arab Chieftain Reclining on a Carpet \(1832\)*](#)—a modest composition rendered in red chalk, lead pencil, and watercolour—presents a male figure in white robes reclining on patterned rug.⁶ Propped up on one arm, Delacroix’s Chieftain has a furrowed brow and a nervous expression, his gaze focused beyond the frame. While the reasons for the Chieftain’s expressions are ambiguous, Delacroix’s sketch suggests he was taken with his subject’s visage as it is the most developed element of the composition (Hartmann 5). In “Delacroix at Home and Abroad: A Comparative Analysis of Early French Orientalism” (2012), Bjoern Hartmann points out that the small area and peripheral location assigned to the face in the overall image de-emphasize the Chieftain’s individuality as the viewer’s eye—drawn towards ornamental and decorative elements of the image such as the patterned rug and intricately folded clothing—fuses the Chieftain’s appearance with “other ornamental signifiers of exoticism” associated with a generic representations of Oriental bodies (5).

⁶ Other examples include [*The Jewish Bride \(1832\)*](#), and [*Seated Arab in Tanger \(1832\)*](#).

Before Delacroix visited Morocco in 1832, the artist was already well versed in Orientalist imagery (Benjamin 8). Unlike the *Arab Chieftain* which is derived from direct observation, Delacroix's [*The Death of Sardanapalus* \(1827\)](#) is a work of imagination. Benjamin suggests the painting provides the stage upon which “imagined acts of violence and fancy are explored” (9). Based on the play by Lord Byron, Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* revolves around the nonchalant figure of King Sardanapalus who lies prone on a bed disinterestedly overlooking a scene of “riotous bloodletting” and “sensuous excess” (9). Swathed in flowing white fabrics and a gold headdress, Sardanapalus appears removed from the chaos that surrounds him: twisted and contorted bodies of men and women in various states of undress are either stabbing or killing each other (9). Art critic Jennifer Olmstead reads Sardanapalus as having a “detached and expressionless” demeanour, this, combined with his “supine pose” establishes an air of passivity and ambiguity that denies Sardanapalus the possibility for heroism associated with rulers in the West (72; 83). As a predecessor to the *Arab Chieftain* (which also features a reclining figure draped in white) Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* implicates the *Arab Chieftain* as an accessory to Orientalist excess; i.e. the difference that separates the East from the West, where Eastern/Oriental difference is perceived as mysteriously attractive in opposition to Europe/the West (Saïd 57; Nochlin 41).⁷

While Delacroix's sketches from the ambassadorial visit are some of the earliest visual records of Moroccan culture made by a European artist, they are constructed from a European perspective that projects a particular vision of Morocco. For Saïd, the Orient presented in nineteenth-century art and literature is essentially a European construction (1). Focusing on the production of images, Saïd affirms Western cultural and literary representations of the Orient foster biases against non-Western peoples and cultures, whereby themes of “sensuality,” “terror,” “sublimity,” “pleasure,” and “exoticism” (118) ascribed to the character of the Orient cumulatively “testify to a willed imaginative and geographic division” between the East and the West (201). In Saïd's esteem, what is missing are representations that account for what is “denied the Orient and the Oriental”: the possibility of “development, transformation, and human movement” (208)

⁷ Benjamin also notes the similarities between the *Arab Chieftain* and *Sardanapalus* (56).

within and beyond the geographical boundaries that separate East from West. Artists like Delacroix who witnessed the Orient first-hand, acted as ambassadors of Western rationality by translating its peculiarities for European audiences through the familiar medium of painting.

As interpretations, Delacroix's images contributed towards restructuring the Orient for a European audience. As a characterization of place, the *Arab Chieftain Reclining on a Carpet* (1832) contributed to this restructuring as a marker of cultural distance between France and Morocco, as the reclining figure becomes "redolent of the whole of the East" (Benjamin 56). Within the context of Western art, the reclining figure is the conventional pose of the female odalisque, whose languid nakedness played an instrumental role in characterising the Orient as feminised, sexualised, and thus inferior to the West.⁸ Conversely, Delacroix's *Arab Chieftain* responds to the familiarity of the posture that is typical of its Moroccan context wherein resting against pillows is standard. Here, the reclining figure transforms the convention: by replacing the female nude with a clothed male allows the passive eroticism of the naked feminine to be transferred to the male figure (Benjamin 56).

The varied Moroccan identities represented in Delacroix's Moroccan sketches are echoed in the diversity of Alaoui's portraits; like Delacroix's art, Alaoui's *Les Marocains* visually record an expedition across Morocco. While their processes might be similar (both artists brought portable studios with them), the intent driving the creation of their respective images is different. Working under processes of Imperialism, Delacroix's images, constructed from a European perspective for a European audience, project a vision of Morocco that is affiliated with Orientalism. In *Les Marocains*, Alaoui attempts to forestall processes of globalization by archiving Morocco's endangered cultural traditions and aesthetics. This point will be returned to later in the chapter.

The Conquest of the Image: Capturing the Orient

As with painting, the earliest photographs taken in the region of North Africa show the Orient inhabited by monuments. The humans that appear in these compositions were included

⁸ As an example, see Jean Auguste Dominique Ingre's [*La Grande Odalisque* \(1814\)](#).

for the purpose of measuring scale (Khémir 190).⁹ According to French photographic historian Mounira Khémir, the human presence, “se réduisait à une présence accessoire” (2) demonstrates the Orient was not always associated with the exotic in the European imagination. In her introduction to the catalogue of an exhibition at *L’Institut du Monde Arabe* in Paris (1994), Khémir writes:

... pour les premiers photographes travaillant en Algérie, l'intérêt était d'abord ethnographique, alors qu'en ce qui concerne les photographes visitant le Moyen-Orient leur intérêt se portait d'abord sur les vestiges du passé. Mais très vite ...
[l]'Orient désert et berceau de la civilisation deviendra peu à peu l'Orient brillant et haut en couleurs des *Mille et Une Nuits*. (1-3)

The Orient of *A Thousand and One Nights* corresponds with Saïd’s identification of “Orient of [European] memory”: imbued with “suggestive ruins, forgotten secrets, hidden correspondences, and an almost virtuosic style of being,” recorded in countless literary and artistic representations, presented an image of the Orient as solidly fixed in an “imaginative, and unrealizable (except aesthetically) dimension” (170). This fixity is emblematic of the European attitude towards, and treatment of the Orient as a “blank canvas” upon which writers, artists, poets, and painters could project their own image (Berg 1).

Like the Orientalist painters before them, European photographers visiting in the 1860s continued the tradition, replacing artistic renderings with mechanical reproductions (Berg 2). In “The imperialist lens: Du Camp, Salzmann, and early French photography” (2010), author/nineteenth-century French studies academic Keri A. Berg explains that although photography “follows traditional modes of visual representation, primarily painting and illustration, in its focus on the Orient, it does so with the cachet of visual truth ... offering its mid-century audience a purportedly objective image of the Orient” (2). This supposed objectivity was attributed to the mechanical nature of photography which, unlike painting and illustration, apparently did not rely upon an artist’s interpretive intervention, making it an “indispensable tool for documenting visual processes associated with colonization” (2). In *Culture coloniale: La France conquise par son empire*

⁹ According to Khémir, the French painter/daguerreotypist Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet took the first photograph in Egypt in 1839. The lost daguerreotype, titled *Palais du Harem de Méhémet Ali à Alexandrie* (1839), showed a half open door and two guards (190).

(2003), Pascal Blanchard *et al.* similarly suggest the image is a powerful ally of colonialism, “as an ideological, economic, and political system and structure— [the image] was, in France, the mirror in which the French could admire their work, while at the same time they elaborated upon it” (qtd. and transl. by Goldsworthy, “Images, ideologies, and commodities” 148).

Valued for its efficiency and accuracy, photography rapidly replaced painting as the preferred medium of French scientists, anthropologists and ethnographers commissioned by the Government to record aspects of its North African colonies. In her essay titled “The Orient in the Photographer’s Mirror: From Constantinople to Mecca” (1997), Khémir has observed in early ethnographic portraits of North Africans taken by Europeans in the 1860s, that many “denoted a contempt, sometimes even a violence, acted out against these colonised populations”; the evidence is observed in the gazes of these people which “express fear, alarm, or unease” (191). In such cases, Khémir suggests photography functions as a mirror, “reflecting one society as it shapes another” (191). Consider the expressions of three Algerian women photographed by Félix-Jacques Moulin in [*Ouled Naila, Sahara \(1857\)*](#): dressed in soft robes and an abundance of necklaces, chains, bangles, and rings, these women in their elaborately plaited crown-like headdresses scowl at the French photographer, seemingly unimpressed at having to pose in such a manner. This photograph features in *L’Algérie photographiée: Province de Constantine (1856-7)*, a photographic album that documents ethnographic and topological data in the French colonial province of Constantine, Algeria. In the [*Kalifa de Constantine \(1856\)*](#), another image from this album, a disgruntled looking man in white reclines on a mound of cushions. Gazing beyond the frame to the right, Moulin’s bearded *Kalifa* recalls Delacroix’s *Reclining Arab Chieftain* who also refuses to meet the gaze of the European artist.

According to Khémir, the emphasis placed on costume or race as highlighted by the image captions “subvert the models’ expression or appearance” (“The Orient” 191). Compared with captions of European portraits that recorded the sitter’s name, date, and place of the photograph (191), the captions included in portraits of North Africans are comparatively sparse. Descriptors such as *Moorish woman*, *Negress*, *Jew*, or *Arab woman*, although drawn from real figures observed in North African communities, deny the individuality of the sitter consigned to anonymity (191),

morphing individual North African cultures together as one homogenous identity.¹⁰ Accordingly, the title of Delacroix's *Arab Chieftain Reclining on a Carpet* (1832) acknowledges the sitter's status as Chieftain, but provides no information about his identity beyond his affiliation with the Arab world.

Part of a system of representation, Moulin's images contribute towards a particular way of seeing the Orient as culturally distinct (i.e. different) from Europe. As Homi Bhabha reminds us, the Other's difference is essentialised through stereotypical categorisations on the basis of racial origin (*The Location* 101). In Moulin's photographs, individual identities of the three Algerian women featured in *Ouled Naila* are never acknowledged: they are identified only by tribe and the broader region of the Sahara. Their identities which are conflated with territory denies these women their individuality as well as their agency. By contrast, Moulin's portrait of the French general [M. Guyon Vernier \(1856-7\)](#) retains his individuality: the image provides his name, role (Chef de bureau arabe), rank (Cap. de Spahis), and area of deployment (Bône, Province de Constantine, Algiers).

In a colonial context, the theme of conquest applies to both image and territory alike. In her essay *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag conflates the conquest of territory with the image by addressing the inherent violence associated with photography (14). Sontag points out "to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it [photography] turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (14). French photographer Marc Garanger's photographs of Algerian women in French regroupment villages taken during the Algerian war (1954-62) attest to this violence. The portraits known as *Femmes algériennes 1960* (another sparse title) were taken between 1960-62 when Garanger was sent to Algeria for his military service have been described by Vogl as "one of the few visual documents dedicated to the trauma of the period" (157). Commissioned the task of photographing people in the villages for French *cartes d'identité*, Garanger photographed more than two thousand people over ten days.

¹⁰ Other examples by Moulin include [Juive de Constantine \(1856-7\)](#), [La Soufia couchée, Sahara \(1856-7\)](#), and [Négresses, Marchandes de pains et de poisons, Alger \(1856-7\)](#).

The sixteen images reproduced by photographic historian Carole Naggar in [“Women Unveiled: Marc Garanger's Contested Portraits of 1960s Algeria” \(2013\)](#) show the faces of Berber and Muslim women forced to remove their veils. While the purpose for unveiling these Algerian women was to make them identifiable to French colonial authorities, author/critical theorist Karina Eileeras has pointed out it violated traditional customs surrounding the veil (812). Since the camera violates their privacy, the act of taking a photograph becomes symbolically linked with violence (Vogl 157). Vogl interprets the act of taking a photograph as “a double violation” suffered by these women: forced to removed veils for pictures taken against their will, these women suffered a loss of agency and privacy, “exposing what was meant to be seen only by members of [their] families or by other women” (Vogl 157). Vogl continues, “Garanger’s photos condemn the violent oppression of the Algerians by the French” (157). The returned gaze of these women demonstrates resistance, their hostile looks telling they “were not ... complicitous with the violation they suffered” (Vogl 161). Like three women in Moulin’s image, expressions and postures convey admonishment toward a situation they refuse to accept (Eileeras 827; Vogl 161).¹¹ In contrast, Alaoui’s subjects convey a sense of ease before the camera: their postures are relaxed and expressions are serene. This is addressed in the following section.

Contesting Representation: The Gaze in Alaoui’s *Les Marocains*

The images considered so far are tied to processes of colonisation. Collectively, they emphasise the unequal distribution of power between the coloniser and colonised. The passive eroticism of Delacroix’s *Arab Chieftain Reclining on a Carpet* (1832) that evokes the conventional pose of the female odalisque associates the Chieftain with stereotypical characteristics of the Orient as feminised, sexualised, and thus inferior to the West enacts a symbolic violence via its dismissal. The Algerians photographed by Moulin in the colonial provinces of Algeria are overlooked as autonomous individuals with emphasis placed on costume and race (all the while ignoring the

¹¹ In the introduction to Garanger’s *Femmes des Hauts-Plateaux : Algérie 1960*, Leïla Sebbar likewise imagines the voices of protest expressed by these women: “They say no, they don’t want to be regarded as primitive in their traditional African dress” (qtd. and trans. by Eileeras 831).

model's expressions). In Garanger's images, the camera is symbolically transformed into a weapon as Berber and Muslim women were forced to de-veil for unwanted identity cards.

In *Les Marocains* the camera is no longer a weapon used to divide and rule (Jansen, *Arty*) as the artist takes a sympathetic approach to the apprehension Moroccans display towards the camera. In an interview with Stephanie Gaou for *Urbain Tanger* in April 2014, Alaoui explained "Je n'aime pas voler des images. Je dois comprendre et faire des recherches approfondies sur un sujet, avant de le traduire en image" (32). In "Questions of Multiculturalism" (1993) Gayatri Spivak and Sneja Gunew address the researcher's difficult position writing about other cultures. They explain:

if you make it your task not only to learn what is going on ... through language, through specific programmes of study, but also at the same time through a *historical* critique of your position as the investigating person, then you will see that you have earned the right [to engage], and you will be heard. (qtd. in Vogl 7)

Although Spivak and Gunew's observations are concerned with the writer's position, the critique applies to photographer who also engages with the politics of representation (Vogl 6). In her statement, Alaoui critically addresses her position as a photographer of both French and Moroccan nationalities. She explains:

I spent time staying with different communities to create photographs from the perspective of the participant observer, aiming for a more informed angle than an external documentarian ... Rather than being objective, *the series adopts the subjectivity of my own position as both an insider and native Moroccan, and simultaneously an outsider as the critically informed documentarian.* (9, my emphasis)

For Alaoui, this hybrid subjectivity echoes a postcolonial position taken up by contemporary artists such as Omar Victor Diop and Lalla Essaydi, who attempt to counter in their work, the tired exoticisation of North African and Arab regions in European and American art of the past (*Dodbo*). This postcolonial position is realised dialogically in *Les Marocains* as a resistance to prevailing Oriental stereotypes and processes. For example, the emphasis European photographers placed on details such as clothing and jewellery in their *scènes et types* portraits visually correspond with the abundance of details shown in Alaoui's portraits such as the striped *bandira* and amber fertility beads worn by the woman from Aït Hani (Fig. 1, p. 2) which shows the typical adornments of an Imilchiléan bride. While the *scènes et types* portraits were reproduced for collection by armchair

Orientalists, access to *Les Marocains* is restricted to exhibitions.¹² For each person Alaoui photographed in the series, they received a small photo in return which she printed on site with a portable printer (Stoughton). These were the only photographs Alaoui entered into public circulation. This suggests she wanted to maintain control of how they were distributed and consumed, giving photographed subjects the chance to be in control of their representation.¹³

In her statement, Alaoui explained she encountered “many difficulties shooting portraits in a land where people have superstitious apprehensions towards the camera, and often see photography as a tool that steals the soul” (*Dodbo*). While she was able to convince many “to participate in the adventure” by setting up her studio in public places, many of her subjects, intimidated by the burst of light from the flash, would “automatically step out of the studio after the first click, leaving [her] only with a one shot opportunity” (Stoughton, *Daily Star*). Photographing women in remote villages was particularly difficult; “[they] are scared about what the men are going to say about them posing – their husbands or their fathers. Some the women are really reluctant. The men a bit less, but it takes a bit of convincing” (qtd. in Stoughton). Motivated to resist the Orientalist gaze, Alaoui allows her subjects to choose how they are presented in the photograph (*Dodbo*).

Unlike the recumbent figures of Delacroix’s representations, all of Alaoui’s subjects chose to stand. The only direction she gave was to face the camera (Stoughton). As a result, all subjects naturally struck the same pose: all gaze straight at the camera, backs straight, hands gently folded before them or relaxed at their sides (Stoughton). For example, in the photograph titled “Chefchaouen, Rif Mountains, 2010” (Fig. 2), a woman draped in lilac, burgundy, green, and white, blushes beneath a brightly decorated hat. Her observably friendly disposition suggests she feels at ease before the camera as she meets Alaoui’s gaze with a shy smile, arms relaxed by her sides. Alaoui has deliberately isolated her from her environment, standing before a black background allows viewers to focus on the details of her garments, expression, gaze, and posture,

¹² While these images can be viewed in web galleries such as [this selection in The Guardian](#), their resolution is limited to approx 28 pixels/cm (max dimension of 60cm x 40cm).

¹³ The question of agency is addressed in Chapter Two.



Fig. 2. *Chefchaouen, Rif Mountains*, 2010 by Leila Alaoui.

all of which offer a stark contrast to Garanger's photographs of Algerian women. The woman from Chefchaouen is fully in control of her representation, allowed to remain veiled, she autonomously *chose* to be photographed. This autonomy consequently rewrites asymmetric power relations enacted in colonial photography, reversing the roles of representer/represented.

Alaoui's images celebrate Moroccan identity; symbolically they validate the identity of every individual photographed, as a series they recognise the contribution of each individual within greater Moroccan culture. While Alaoui's photographs do not provide names or specific dates in their titles (like Moulin), all images identify the year, most include the location, some are untitled, while others include more detail. For example, "Bride of Khamlia, 2014" (Fig. 4, p. 36) is the most descriptive; the lack of an article evokes an ambiguity open to various interpretations: she is *the* bride of Khamlia, a representative metonymical identity inclusive of all brides from Khamlia (and Morocco by extension); *a* bride suggests the diversity of regional wedding traditions. Unlike the Ouled Naïla women, identities of Alaoui's subjects are not absorbed into an inventory of territory, nor are they reduced to a fixed identity.

In *Orientalism* (1978), Saïd advocates for the undertaking of "studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, [that] ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective" (24). He also acknowledges the difficulty it presents, as it would require us "to rethink the whole complex problem of knowledge and power" (24). Alaoui attempts Saïd's arduous task in *Les Marocains*; by acknowledging the agency of her subjects she addresses the inherent problem of knowledge and power in Orientalist representations. In "The Spectacle of the Other" (2013) Stuart Hall identifies the constituents of power in representation as "the power to mark, assign and classify; of symbolic power, of ritualized expulsion" (249). He explains power is understood

not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way—within a certain 'regime of representation'. (249)

For example, Orientalism produces racialised knowledge (i.e. stereotypes) about the Other according to imperialist/colonial operations of power (Hall 250). According to Eileeras, the forced unveiling of Garanger's subjects simulates colonial power relations whereby the "effort to

refashion or redress Algerian women's bodies according to divergent political objectives” is emblematic of Europe’s “aesthetic investment in the fantasy of the unveiled Algerian woman ... [and the] veil itself [is] the primary trope for the ‘Oriental feminine’” (813). This trope is disrupted in *Les Marocains*, as women remain veiled. For example, in “Essaouira, 2012” (Fig. 3), a woman with large, dark kohl-rimmed eyes wears a *baïk*, a garment worn in the colder, more conservative areas of Morocco, conceals her hair, neck, nose, and mouth. Her whole body is enveloped, save half her face. In *Anthologie du soufisme* (1995), French Islamologist Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch explains the veil holds particular importance in Islamic tradition: holding a duplicitous function, the veil represents “either withheld knowledge (veiled) or communicated knowledge (unveiled, revealed). Revelation is in the opening of the veil” (qtd. in Khemir, “The Orient” 196). The lower half of this woman’s face slightly visible through the black fabric symbolically suggests its wearer is open to communication.

Through an Orientalist lens, Alaoui’s image could be interpreted as a barrier to be overcome. In “Essaouira, 2012”, the part of her face this woman reveals through the sheer fabric draws attention to the politics of the gaze in photography. In *Le Harem Colonial* (1981),¹⁴ literary critic Malek Alloula explains the veil is an “obstacle to sight” for the photographer (7) and is thus an object to be overcome. Because the eye “cannot catch hold” of the woman beneath the veil, this garment indicates to the photographer a refusal of voyeurism (7). In “Bride of Khamlia, 2014” (Fig. 4), the woman standing before the camera is completely hidden beneath an *aâbroq*, a silken headdress of red and gold covers her face completely. Although her face is hidden, her identity will be known by those attending her wedding who know her name, and her family (Becker 191). In “Arts, Gender and Changing Constructions of Amazigh (Berber) Identity: The Ait Khabbash of Southeastern Morocco, 1930-1999” (2000), Cynthia J. Becker suggests the identity of brides wearing an *aâbroq* is diminished, “[s]he becomes a symbol of her group—a symbol of what it means to be Ait Khabbash” (191). Likewise, the Khamlian bride’s *aâbroq* symbolises a faction of

¹⁴ In *Le Harem Colonial*, Alloula investigates French colonial fantasies in relation to photographic representations of North African women (mostly Algerian) in postcards circulating between 1900-1930.



Fig. 3. *Essaouira*, 2012 by Leila Alaoui.



Fig. 4. *Bride of Khamlia*, 2014 by Leila Alaoui.

Moroccan-ness as her garments are an important part of Khamlian/Moroccan identity. From the red silk headdress, to the hearts woven into her dress, all serve as record of the Moroccan traditions and aesthetics that express shared cultural beliefs and values towards ethnicity, gender, and social status.

Where the photographed subject looks impacts how its message is received. The gaze can confront the camera face on; be directed elsewhere, beyond the frame; or it can be absent, hidden beneath a veil (Lutz and Collins 139). According to Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, in “The Photograph as an intersection of Gazes” (1991), the gaze which confronts the camera (and the viewer) suggests the subject’s acknowledgement of both photographer and viewer (139). However, when it comes to visual theorists, many disagree about what the look actually *does*: some argue that it evades the voyeurism identified as a major component of photography, while others suggest it is confrontational (139). Furthermore, for others the look is thought to involve a more “open” type of voyeurism: here, the returned gaze “does not contest the right of the viewer to look and may in fact be read as the subject’s assent to being surveyed” (139).

In Alaoui’s portraits, the subject’s gaze is mostly visible, permitting viewers to visually connect with photographed subjects. When looking relations are disrupted by a veiled subject, the role of the viewer is highlighted through the reversal of the viewing subject position (the viewer becomes the subject of the veiled gaze). Taking on the role of the photographer, Alaoui’s veiled subjects reverse the roles of viewer/subject looking-relations through a veiled lens. This ambiguous viewing space critically condemns and resists the European tendency to treat the Orient as a canvas upon which to project their own image (Berg 1). Alaoui’s photographs are a revindication of Moroccan cultural identity showcasing Moroccans as empowered individuals in control of their representation. In the chapter that follows, I will demonstrate how Alaoui’s *Les Marocains* reclaim facets of Moroccan cultural identity in her *photographie engagée* through images that re-present an alternative version of Moroccan culture.

CHAPTER 2

Leila Alaoui's *Les Marocains* (2010-14) as *Photographie Engagée*.

In 2015, when Leila Alaoui sat down with *Femmes du Maroc* (FDM) ¹⁵ to talk about her latest exhibit of *Les Marocains*, she explained “l’art doit être engagé et subversif. Il doit exprimer et aborder nos problèmes de société, combattre la censure et surtout l’autocensure” (Alaoui FDM). Committed to human rights issues, Alaoui’s works explored representing experiences of marginalised peoples in a manner that recognises their identities. In this chapter, I examine how Alaoui engages with issues of identity, marginality, and alienation in contemporary France and North Africa through *Les Marocains*.

Like language, photography has played a role politically in the formation and perpetuation of hierarchical structures of power and control associated with Empire (Ashcroft *et al.* 3). In connection with language, photography has the power to “illustrate, educate, and authenticate” more ethical representations of the Maghreb and its people (Vogl 96). The articulation of resistance to stereotypical representations of the Maghreb is the main concern of *écriture engagée*, or activist writing, this French style of writing works to “right the wrongs” of Western Orientalist representations (Vogl, 10). In *Picturing the Maghreb* (2003), Vogl examines the *écriture engagée* of Michel Tournier, J.M.G. Le Clézio, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Lëila Sebbar and argues that all these writers engage “the question of visibility” in their prose “to convey a message about problems of identity, marginality, [and] alienation in contemporary France” (5-6). Vogl characterises *écriture engagée* as a literary style that “question[s] the validity of the opposition between the Occident and the Orient whilst simultaneously addressing the problems of immigrants in France” in prose that places “particular emphasis on the role of images in the construction and re-vision of identity” (Vogl 9).

In *Les Marocains*, Alaoui reclaims part of the untold story of Moroccan cultural identity in her *photographie engagée*: images that re-present facets of Moroccan culture in relation to ethnicity,

¹⁵ FDM is a feminist magazine based in Casablanca concerned with art, activism, and politics associated with women’s rights.

gender, age, occupation, and social decorum. *Photographie engagée* is my re-conceptualisation of the French style. It concentrates on the photographic image as the medium through which the postcolonial artist writes with light to expose viewers/readers to a perspective that destabilises prevailing Orientalist modes of representation. It is both a method of reading, and way of taking photographs. This chapter demonstrates how *Les Marocains* functions as *photographie engagée*. Firstly, it will show how Alaoui's practice reveals the extent of her commitment to her subjects. Secondly, seven of Alaoui's photographs (featured in exhibitions discussed in Chapter Three) are examined individually and collectively, to show how the photographic medium can be used to articulate resistance to dominant narratives of cultural identity.

Drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of literary *engagement* and Roland Barthes' concept of denotation and connotation, I demonstrate how *Les Marocains* encourages more engaged, responsible reading practices amongst diverse spectators for whom meaning is based on familiar, recognisable elements captured within the composition. Because spectators are diverse, it also considers the role unfamiliar elements contribute towards understandings of cultural identity by triggering a (re)negotiation of the relationship between cultures.

Language, Meaning, and Sartre's Notion of *Engagement*

According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, culture is about shared meanings. Language is the privileged medium through which meaning is produced, exchanged, and made sense of culturally (xvii). In a postcolonial context, Ashcroft *et al.* remind us in *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) of the political role language played in the imperial education system: as one of the main features of oppression and imperial control, language was the medium through which "hierarchical structure[s] of power [were/are] perpetuated" and conceptions "of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established" in a given cultural context (7). Language is thus a representational system which uses signs and symbols to indicate, or represent to other people concepts, feelings, and ideas which are communicated, or expressed through creative mediums such as literature or painting (Hall xvii-iii). Photography is part of this representational system, using images rather than words, to communicate meaning visually about a particular person, event, or scene (Hall xxi). In this sense,

the experience of reading a literary text is comparable to reading a photograph, as both are reliant upon other people speaking the same language to ‘read’ or interpret meaning. However, the processes by which meaning becomes intelligible differs between text types. Since words are not always present in visual texts suggests that they are not a necessary part of image engagement.

In “The Photographic Message” (1977), Roland Barthes demonstrates how Saussure’s semiotic system (which differentiates between the signifier and its signified) may be applied to a photographic image to extrapolate meaning in much the same way one would a written text. Barthes reminds us of the mechanical nature of the photograph whereby the literal scene that appears before the photographer is “captured mechanically, not humanly” on light-sensitive material (or electronic image sensor) as an image of “analogical perfection” (17). This mechanical precision is what distinguishes the photograph from other analogical reductions of reality such as drawing or painting which rely heavily upon the artist’s imaginative and interpretative faculties (“Rhetoric” 44; 17). Barthes explains the style of such reproductions—whether aesthetic or ideological—are comprised of two messages: the *denoted* message, which is “the analogical content itself (scene, object, landscape)”; and the *connoted* message, which refers to “the treatment of the image (result of the action of the creator)” is “the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it” (17). In other words, because the photograph bypasses the *connoted* aspects of image creation it is able to provide a “message without a code” (17). However, the imposition of human intervention in the photograph in aspects such as framing and lighting compositionally induces associations of ideas drawn from a common cultural code based on familiar aesthetic concepts, or ‘signifieds’ (22-3). Connotations emerge from the signifying units ‘captured’ in the composition of the photograph, and its meaning is ‘read’ the same as any other language: from the reader’s cultural situation (23-28). “The reading of the photograph is thus always historical,” writes Barthes, “[because] it depends on the reader’s ‘knowledge’ just as though it were a matter of real language ... intelligible only if one has learned the signs” (28, emphasis in original). Meaning, therefore, is dialogical as it is reliant upon the collaborative exchange of knowledge between writers/photographers and readers.

For Jean-Paul Sartre, the relationship between writers and readers plays a critical role in his formulation of *engagement*, a notion which stems from his conceptualisation of *littérature engagée* as it appears in “Pourquoi écrire?” (1948) which is a key chapter in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (1948). *Engagement* refers to a “committed”, or “engaged” style of writing that observes the relationship between writer and reader as a collaborative effort focused toward inspiring change that demands action. Sartre argues that the author of a literary work appeals to the freedom of the reader via the revelation or disclosure of certain unjust aspects of the world in the text, such as the violation of human rights carried out by France during the Algerian War for Independence (1954-62).¹⁶ Sartre relies upon readers reacting to such injustices based on their identification of moral or social imperatives revealed within the work to evoke feelings of support, critique, consent, or opposition to the subject in question (Leitch *et al.* 1198).¹⁷

Sartre identifies prose specifically as the most effective means through which the author might address such issues. Distinguishing prose from poetry, Sartre proposes that the latter is conflated with painting, sculpture, and music. Unlike prose, poetry *represents* rather than *expresses* meaning. This, Sartre explains, is because:

[the poet] sees in the word the *image* ... and the verbal image he chooses for its resemblance ... is not necessarily the word which we use to designate these objects ... In short, all language is for him the mirror of the world ... which *represents*, rather than *expresses* meaning. Inversely, the meaning is realized, the physical aspect of the word is reflected within it, and it, in its turn, functions as an image. (Sartre, “Extract” 17-18)

In other words, because *engagement* relies on the clear conveyance of its message Sartre proffers prose writing as the most reliable language structure. This is due to his perception of the straightforward use of language that prose writing engages for the *expression* of ideas. How then does the prose writer make their work relevant to the recourse of injustice in the world? Sartre suggests readers and writers share that responsibility. He explains:

¹⁶ In his preface to Frantz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961) Sartre references suffering under colonialism.

¹⁷ Sartre’s evaluation of the reader acknowledges the individual’s feelings, prejudices, values and predispositions (Leitch *et al.* 1198).

[if the writer] accepts being the creator of injustices, it is in a movement which goes beyond them towards their abolition. As for me [the reader], if I create and keep alive an unjust world, I cannot help making myself responsible for it. And the author's whole art is bent on obliging me to *create* [imagine] what he *discloses*, therefore to compromise myself. So both of us bear the responsibility for the universe. (Sartre, "Pourquoi" 1211)

Responsibility is thus a quintessential characteristic of *littérature engagée*. For *l'écrivain engagé*, responsibility is assumed *a priori*, as commitment is activated the moment the writer commences writing. For readers, responsibility is assumed *a posteriori*, as soon as the reader engages with the writer's universe by imagining, and therefore participating in what is disclosed in-text. The reader's engagement with these imagined creations makes them responsible for the universe, which when measured against the reader's individual experiences of freedom, incites the moral imperative for change. Sartre thus assumes readers will take up a more conscientious position regarding the freedom of others based on their own experiences relative to what is presented in-text.

While Sartre's prose-centric notion of *engagement* dismisses the possibility of *poésie engagée*, i.e. the application of *engagement* to representative textual forms such as painting or photography, Roland Barthes suggests otherwise. Like Sartre, Barthes distinguishes between literary forms on the basis of message conveyance: "the photographic image ... is a message without a code" (Barthes "The Photographic", 18). The photographic message, like the poetic message is not immediately graspable: its meaning is inferred visually (18). Contrary to the photographic image, where meaning is realised from signifying units captured in its composition, the denoted aspects of the poem emerge from connotations, or images induced by language (i.e. words). Like the photographic message, the poetic is subject to infinite readings linked to a multitude of interpretations and associations which naturalise its symbolic message. Collectively, these interpretations/associations are an *expression* of what is valued within a specific cultural context suggesting they are compatible with *engagement*. However, before *engagement* can be approached in relation to photography, it is first necessary establish how it functions in *écriture engagée*.

Écriture Engagée and the Photographer's Responsibility

Like *littérature engagée*, *écriture engagée* is concerned with the writer's responsibility to society expressed through the creation of works with purpose; that is, works that draw attention to political or social injustices overlooked in contemporary society. Many works that function as *écriture engagée* are committed to social issues, humanitarian values, feminism, political and economic problems, and function as tools for activism by stressing the importance of alterity: the 'peripheral', the 'marginal', and the 'uncanonised.'

According to Ashcroft *et al.*, literature is "one of the most important ways" through which perceptions and experiences of the marginalised are expressed (1). In *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (1995), Mauritian-born academic/writer Françoise Lionnet suggests the appropriation of French offers writers "a means of translating into the coloniser's language a different sensibility, a different vision of the world, [and provides] a means therefore, of transforming the dominant conceptions circulating by the more standard idiom" (qtd. in Rice 119). These remarks suggest writing can be used strategically to disrupt hegemonic (i.e. Republican) notions of identity, memory, and culture within contemporary France. The didactic implications of writing as the site of creative resistance adheres to the aims of *écriture engagée* whereby writing, in the Sartrean sense,

revient à poser un acte public dans lequel [l'écrivain] engage toute sa responsabilité (rapport entre littérature et monde/société). Il écrit pour son époque, en misant sur sa volonté de rejoindre les hommes et de prendre part aux débats de son présent. L'écrivain, comme l'artiste, doit s'engager dans son présent. Bref, dès qu'il écrit, l'auteur est engagé et déterminé ; il s'adresse à tel public et utilise tel langage ... [pour] engager à fond avec son temps. (Bruneau 69)

Language is thus a tool through which the writer reveals something of the world. For *l'écrivain engagé* in particular, who comprehends the power of words, understands that *to write is to act* upon a profound desire to engage with the world in the hope that what is revealed will in turn inspire others to engage. Compared to prose, the photograph might convey more readily a message that can be grasped immediately by its viewer/reader whose suppositions inscribe new, or alternative meanings. In the discussion that follows, this point is revisited. But first, I wish to demonstrate

how *engagement* functions in *écriture engagée* with an analysis of a literary excerpt that explores asymmetric power relations between French-speaking subjects.

In *Picturing the Maghreb* (2003), Vogl identifies opposing cultural attitudes towards the use of the image as a common theme in *écriture engagée*. While the image plays a significant role in Western culture, Vogl explains it has traditionally been considered “suspect or even sacrilegious” by some Muslims (Vogl 6). The protagonists of novels written in the style of *écriture engagée* are usually “young North Africans” who are portrayed as “photographic victims” of the violence associated with taking a photograph: once protagonists have their images *taken* or *captured* by Europeans, they become caught in its web of representation (6). For instance, in Michel Tournier’s *La Goutte D’Or* (1986), the protagonist grows to become aware of the role photography plays in the construction of North African identity in France (6).¹⁸

The novel follows Idriss, a fourteen-year-old Berber shepherd boy who embarks on a journey from his home in Tabelbala (an oasis commune in the Algerian Sahara) to Paris after he is photographed by a French tourist. The scene depicting the encounter between Idriss and the French tourist draws attention to the asymmetrical power relations between French-speaking subjects in the novel. Tournier describes a Land Rover with two people in it:

un homme au volant et à côté de lui une femme dont Idriss ne distingua d’abord que les cheveux blonds et les grosses lunettes noires. La voiture stoppa. La femme retira ses lunettes et sauta la terre ... Elle brandissait un appareil de photo.
—Hé petit! Ne bouge pas trop, je vais te photo.
(Tournier 121)

Focusing her camera, the French woman does not wait for a response. “Donne-moi la photo,” Idriss utters (121). “Impossible, mon gars,” replies the French woman, explaining that the film must first be developed and printed, she offers to send Idriss his photo from Paris (121).

The fact of Idriss’ ignored protests, as well as being denied possession of his photograph adheres to a politics of representation, whereby the dominant culture holds monopoly over how the Other is represented. As the tourists drive away, Idriss’ image remains symbolically fixed, “enfermée dans le boîtier de l’appareil, lui-même à l’abri de la Land Rover” (122). This entails the

¹⁸ Michel Tournier (1924-2016) was a renowned French novelist, and photographer. Many works featured in his œuvre explore themes of identity, ethnocentrism, sexism, and power relations (Vogl 16).

extent to which Idriss is no longer in control of his image (Vogl 25). Further, the degrees of separation between Idriss and his image (there at least ten) equate to a loss of agency; the image, which is fixed on film, sitting in the camera, shut inside its case, tucked inside the Land-Rover, travels across the desert towards Béni Abbès, then Béchar, Oran, then the car ferry for twenty-five hours across the sea to Marseille, followed by eight hundred kilometres on the autoroute, finally to arrive in Paris, eventually to be printed (121). This demonstrates the extent of Idriss' disadvantaged position, and the reach of the loss of control make him vulnerable to others, who may use this image however they please (Vogl 25). Additionally, the French woman's selfish actions reveal the extent of power assumed in the photographer's role, as well as the extent to which she is responsible for his image.

"To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed," writes Sontag. "It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge — and, therefore, like power" (4). Here, Sontag observes the relation between ethics and aesthetics in photography as linked to the photographer's conscience. This can be interpreted as the photographer's sense of responsibility or commitment to the subject engaged with in the image. Unlike the selfish photographer in *La Goutte d'Or*, Sontag's characterisation of a photographer understands photography as a collaborative process that is reliant upon the people either side of the lens. Sontag's photographer assumes responsibility as soon as she engages with the subject's universe. Like the writer, her commitment is activated the moment the photograph is captured, she becomes custodian of the subject's image, responsible for its dissemination as work of art.

As a photographer, Alaoui understood the extent of her responsibility as an artist; her approach took into account both the history of photography in Morocco and the apprehension some Moroccans display towards the camera. In an interview with *The Guardian's* Olivia Snaije (2015), Alaoui explained, "Moroccans have the most complicated relationship to photography among Arabs because they are very apprehensive due to superstition. They are also tired of tourism, so there is a sort of rejection of the camera" (Snaije *Guardian*). Before taking a photograph, Alaoui first spent a week in the village with her mobile studio set up in a public space so the locals could get used to her. Alaoui photographed anyone who passed by her studio or asked about her

project, giving everyone she photographed a copy of their portrait which she printed on site (Teicher *Slate*). Unlike Idriss, Alaoui's subjects retain control of their subjectivity as photographs are given, rather than taken. Thus the images that Alaoui provided to her subjects facilitated an alternate subject position that symbolically allowed individuals to retain agency as the image remained in the hands of its subject.

La Photographie Engagée

As Barthes reminds us, the photograph is “not only perceived ... it is *read*” because it is a text, “connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs” (“The Photographic” 19, emphasis in original). Reading a photograph takes substantially less time than a literary text, as the image readily conveys a message that is interpreted according to a code of recognition unique to each reader/observer. In “Rhetoric of the Image” (1977), Barthes suggests varied readings do not confuse the photographic message, but rather strengthen it: “the image, in its connotation, is ... constituted by an architecture of signs drawn from a variable depth of lexicons” (46-7). Collectively, they are the sum expression of what is valued within a specific cultural context. They offer a medium for deeper cultural insight concerning attitudes that contribute to perceptions of cultural difference, suggesting they are compatible with Sartrean *engagement*.

The Sartrean notion of *engagement*, translated to the medium of photography, appeals to the immediacy of the photographic image as catalyst for political, or social change wherein problems of identity, marginality, and alienation are addressed. *Photographie engagée* is both a method of reading and a professional practice that considers the role of images in the construction and re-vision of cultural identity in terms of the relationship between the photographer and the subject, between ethics and aesthetics, between the photographer and the photograph. As a method of reading, it adheres to a postcolonial framework that is focused on destabilising prevailing Orientalist modes of representation through an analysis of the image as critique: images that aim to show more truthful representations of the subject for the purpose of dismantling and challenging stereotypical representations of North African cultures. In other words, photography that focuses on the

humanity of the subject as a revindication of cultural identity. This style of photography is burdened with responsibility and commitment to the subject. As a practice, responsibility and commitment are the quintessential components of *photographie engagée*. In practice, the photographer assumes responsibility for the subject as soon as she engages with the subject's universe; commitment to this responsibility is activated the instant the image is captured. As custodian of the subject's image, she is responsible for its dissemination as a work of art. The viewer's responsibility is assumed as soon the image is read, meaning is guided by the mental work of imagination and inference based on the observer's recognition of familiar cultural symbols. *Photographie engagée* thus assumes readers will take up a more conscientious position towards Otherness in response to the discernibly recognisable elements contained within the photographic composition.

If interpretation of the photographic message is reliant upon observer knowledge, how then might photographers aid those who are unable to make sense of/do not have the skills necessary to interpret culturally determined codes? In "Photographs of Agony" (1980), art critic/cultural historian John Berger suggests looking at images of suffering and despair can induce a very particular response in viewers.¹⁹ He writes:

As we look at [photographs], the moment of *the other's suffering engulfs us*. We are filled with either despair or indignation. Despair takes on some of the other's suffering to no purpose. Indignation demands action. We try to emerge from the moment of the photograph back into our lives. As we do so, the contrast is such that the resumption of our lives appears to be a hopelessly inadequate response to what we have just seen ... *The reader who has been arrested by the photograph may tend to feel this discontinuity as his own personal moral inadequacy* ... Either he shrugs off this sense of inadequacy ... [or considers] performing a kind of penance ... *The next step should be for us to confront our own lack of political freedom* ... *To realise this and act accordingly is the only effective way of responding to what the photograph shows.* (38-40, my emphasis)

Berger's observations suggest, much like Sartre, that viewers and photographers are equally responsible for the events presented in the photograph. Like Sartre's enlightened reader, whose newfound awareness of the other's suffering becomes impossible ignore, Berger's viewer is

¹⁹ Berger's observations were written in response to [a photograph captured by Donald McCullin in Hué, Vietnam, 1968](#) showing a wounded Vietnamese man holding a child with one hand pressed to a bleeding wound on his face. The child is also covered in blood (Berger 38).

compelled to act on the basis of their own comparative freedom. In other words, the feelings of horror and despair provoked by witnessing moments of suffering make viewers responsible for the events portrayed in the image.²⁰ While Alaoui's images do not depict scenes of suffering, as representations of Moroccan culture they engage with the legacy of prevailing Orientalist images that constitute a cultural baggage that continues to colour Western perceptions of the Maghreb.

Alaoui's *Les Marocains* as *Photographie Engagée*

Observed amongst the thirty images that make up *Les Marocains* are musicians, brides, snake charmers, fortune-tellers, shepherds, farmers, husbands, wives, mothers, daughters, fathers, and sons. While some compositional elements are easily recognisable, such as instruments and animals, the significance of others, such as shells sewn onto clothing or amber necklaces, are less obvious. How we make sense of these familiar and unfamiliar phenomena is inferred through connotations, or associations based on structural elements, such as pose, expression, clothing, jewellery, objects, colours, and lighting effects. The message conveyed depends on the reader/observer, whose understanding of the photograph is structured by cultural/ideological or personal/emotional associations informed by the reader's cultural situation (Barthes "The Photographic", 28).

Let us consider the photograph titled "Souk of Boumia, Middle Atlas, 2011" (Fig. 5). In this image, a man wears a wide-brimmed hat adorned with tassels in a mélange of gold ochre, burnt sienna, and green umber. He sports a light red shirt and has an array of brass and copper cups, bells, and a goat skin water-bag strapped to his chest. While these garments are the typical uniform of a water seller, to the reader unfamiliar with Moroccan culture, the significance of this man's attire indicate an alternative narrative.²¹ For example, the pompoms and tassels on his hat recall the tribal headdresses of the [Huli Wigmen](#)²² or the [Goroka](#) tribesmen of Papua New Guinea.

²⁰ Berger identifies such moments: "a terror, a wounding, a death, [or] a cry of grief" (39).

²¹ The role of the water seller is historically important for the Berbers of Morocco: the water he carries from desert oases is considered a precious commodity by locals who consider it lucky to drink.

²² Worn to ward off enemies, ornamental wigs are made from human hair, feathers, shells, beads, foliage, bird skulls, or pig tusks (Nelson, *Huli*).



Fig. 5. *Souk of Boumia, Middle Atlas, 2011* by Leila Alaoui.

Alternatively, the textural density of the tassels conjures ideas of imperial carpets, once splendid threads unraveled and repurposed into a magnificent headdress.

The water seller is an iconic image of Moroccan culture. In “Morocco: Restaging Colonialism for the Masses” (2016), Claudio Minca and Rachele Borghi suggest the “Oriental aura” emanating from the figure of the water seller, or *garraba*, plays an important role in “the global iconography” of mass tourism (21). Often appearing in promotional materials produced by tourist authorities based in Morocco, the water seller is transformed into a symbol of Moroccan-ness, part of “the European collective of travel imaginary” (21). As a cultural icon, the water seller’s presence in Jamaa el-Fnaa square—a popular market place in Marrakech—represents a “tourist experience”: staged and “fundamentally banal [in] nature”, it appeals to an exotic, or Orientalist understanding of Morocco (21-24). For instance, the first photograph in the [“Marrakech Full Day Tour” photo gallery](#) produced by Morocco Discovery Holidays provides an example of water sellers posing for tourists.

In *Picturing the Maghreb* (2003), Vogl cites a similar description of a water seller in Tahar Ben Jelloun’s introduction to *Morocco: Sahara to the Sea* (1995). He describes:

The water vendor has become a walking icon. *He has remade himself in the image others have of him*: his chest is laden with medals, brooches, little bells, and a few talismans. *He has become an object*, no longer selling water but instead, *selling the illusion of his job* ... is there to pose for tourists in search of *an exotic souvenir of the country*. (qtd. in Vogl 106, my emphasis)

Vogl blames tourists and reporters with cameras for the water seller’s transformation from “a living being” to a “static cliché” for imposing on the people they encounter, their expectation of the illusion of “folklore” (106). In other words, Vogl explicitly addresses issues of representation, drawing attention to photographic distortion of contemporary Moroccan culture.

In 2015, in an interview with *The Daily Star, Lebanon*—a pan-Middle Eastern newspaper written in English—Alaoui explained that in order to document Morocco’s disappearing traditions she travelled to “places that are not touristic” (Stoughton): the more remote villages where people are unaccustomed to photography. Alaoui elaborates:

... in the big cities people dress [in certain] way[s] to attract attention. I purposely go into areas where it's really rare that there are any tourists. All the people that I photographed were dressed this way when I photographed them ... they were either walking around or in their homes. (qtd. in Stoughton, *Daily Star*)

Alaoui's water seller was photographed at the souk of Boumia, a remote town in Morocco's Midelt province.²³ Compared to the clichéd images sold as part of Moroccan tourist experiences, Alaoui's water seller offers a more "natural representation" of a Moroccan (Alaoui, *Dodbo*). Balanced against the clichéd descriptions cited above, Alaoui's representations can be interpreted as a condemnation of tourists whose expectations of "tradition" and "folklore" are based on iconographic myths of Moroccan culture.

Conversely, the Moroccan-ness of Alaoui's subjects is not always clear. For example, the modest garments worn by figures that appear in "Khamlia, 2014" (Fig. 6), "Essaouira, 2012" (Fig. 3, p. 35), "A musician in Djemaa el-Fna Square, Marrakesh, 2011" (Fig. 7), or "Souk of Tounfite, Middle Atlas, 2011" (Fig. 8) can be observed across contemporary pan-Islamic or pan-African communities. In a review written by Sean O'Toole of an exhibition titled *Africa is no Island*²⁴ shown in Marrakesh, 2018, O'Toole references "Khamlia, 2014" which was selected by curators because she supposedly "doesn't look like a Moroccan" (*Aperture*). O'Toole elaborates:

the swaddled *Gnawa* woman's ancestry is linked to enslaved West Africans brought to the region by Arab and Berber traffickers. *Africa Is No Island* is mindful of the historical forces that have wracked the African continent ... In 2015, *New Yorker* critic [Hilton Als](#) praised Lo Calzo for bringing "disappeared bodies" back to life "by their living and breathing descendants." Alaoui's portrait achieves much the same. (O'Toole, *Aperture*)

In other words, curators selected a portrait presenting "a distinctly African perspective" (macaal.org); an iconic image that embodies the history and experiences of contemporary pan-African audiences. Based on O'Toole's observations, one could say Alaoui's portrait achieves the opposite of Ben Jelloun's characterisation of the water seller: this *Gnawa* woman is an icon in a

²³ According to the *Lonely Planet* (2019) entry for the Midelt, such towns are supposedly "of little interest to tourists, but make a good base for some off-piste exploring of the Jebel Ayachi [mountain] region" (*Lonely Planet*).

²⁴ *Africa is no Island* was shown at MACAAL, Marrakech. It featured the works of 40 photographers working across and beyond the African continent concerned with themes of tradition, spirituality, family and the environment (macaal.org).



Fig. 6. *Khamlia*, 2014 by Leila Alaoui.



Fig. 7. *A musician in Djemaa el-Fna Square, Marrakesh, 2011* by Leila Alaoui.



Fig. 8. *Souk of Tounfite, Middle Atlas, 2011* by Leila Alaoui.

different sense; caught within the confines of the photograph, she is transformed into a representative cultural symbol that is worthy of veneration. Her image appeals to humanity of others in a universal sense because Alaoui does not aspire to make her appear as anyone other than herself. This appeal is present in all of Alaoui's portraits.

The figure presented in "Souk of Tounfite, Middle Atlas, 2011" (Fig. 8) appeals to both Moroccan and Europeans audiences alike. The image presents an older man dressed in a simple garment, a *djellaba* made from coarse, heavy blue wool appears well-worn, suggesting its wearer lives and works in the neighbouring villages of the Atlas Mountains.²⁵ On this man's visage is written the labor of generations: the weathered texture of his skin and the seriousness of his gaze tell the story of a difficult life most likely spent working outdoors. In his hands he holds a tall wooden shaft with paper label attached (a new handle for an agricultural tool?). Held close to his body, this wooden implement emulates a shepherd's crook which, combined with his simple dress evokes a familiar image of the pastoral. However, clasped aviators indicate a connection to Western trade and tourism.

In the West, images of the pastoral evoked in art and literature often present life highly idealised. Examples can be found in poems such as Christopher Marlowe's (1564-1593) ["The Passionate Shepherd to His Love"](#) (1599), and William Blake's (1757-1827) ["The Shepherd"](#) (1789); or in paintings such as William Holman Hunt's (1827-1910) [The Hireling Shepherd \(1851\)](#), and William-Adolphe Bouguereau's (1825-1905) [Pastourelle \(1889\)](#). Subjects in all of these scenes are heavily romanticised with little attention given to the actual work of shepherds. Many promotional materials aimed at Western audiences interested in travelling to Morocco also use images of shepherds to promote ideals of picturesque landscapes. Examples can be found on [Morocco's office of tourism site](#), and in articles featured in [Lonely Planet](#).

For individuals affiliated with Berber/Amazigh communities, pastoral images are iconic. In *Nostalgia for the Present* (2014), American anthropologist David Crawford explains the rural is a "powerful ideal" associated with "purity and peace, cultural authenticity, and moral rectitude" (14),

²⁵ See Appendix 1 (p. 83) for a map of Alaoui's photographs.

and contributes to constructions of Berber identity. However, Crawford also stresses such images should not be romanticised, as life in remote locations tells a very different story. Crawford describes scenes witnessed first-hand whilst photographing locals in the village of Tagharghist, in Morocco's High Atlas Mountains, from 2008 to 2013:

[t]here are flies and mosquitoes in the summer, heat and dust ... and windstorms that fill every pore ... it comes to circulate in your blood; in the winter there is snow, rain, mud; roofs leak, walls drip, firewood sputters and smokes, resisting the flames ... There is always illness ... (Crawford 15).

Alaoui was cognisant of the lives lead by people in remote villages. In the interview with FDM, Alaoui recalled her encounter with the woman who appears in “Larache, Rif Mountains, 2011” (Fig. 9):

J’ai pris cette photo dans un marché de la région de Larache où j’avais installé mon studio ... J’avais trouvé le visage de cette femme très touchant. *On sent dans son regard et dans la texture de sa peau qu’elle mène une vie difficile comme beaucoup de femmes dans le monde rural.* (FDM, my emphasis)

Alaoui’s recollection reveals a sense of her *engagement* to showing the experiences of everyday Moroccans. This woman is [one of two from the Rif Mountain region](#) included amongst the final selection of *Les Marocains* bringing attention to the often-overlooked lives of women living in rural areas across Morocco. By extension, portraits of children, such as the sisters who appear in “Untitled 2010” (Fig. 10) or the girl in “Untitled 2010” (Fig. 11) are included for the same reason.

Alaoui’s images can thus be read critically as an account of the identities that are often overlooked (such as older people and children) within representations of Moroccan national identity. By domesticating the exotic, *Les Marocains* reimagines a more inclusive image of Moroccan identity by shifting focus away from stereotypical clichés towards individual subjectivities. This shifting focus helps normalise difference by affirming the value of the individual, who, regardless of age, gender, religion, ethnicity, or occupation deserves to be recognised as important. Alaoui acknowledges the experiences of those who are excluded from the dominant narrative of culture by making them visible in photographs, and as a result their marginal position within the hierarchy of representation is inverted. Allowing her subjects to choose how they are represented, Alaoui facilitates an alternate subject position that allows the individual to retain agency. Bound together

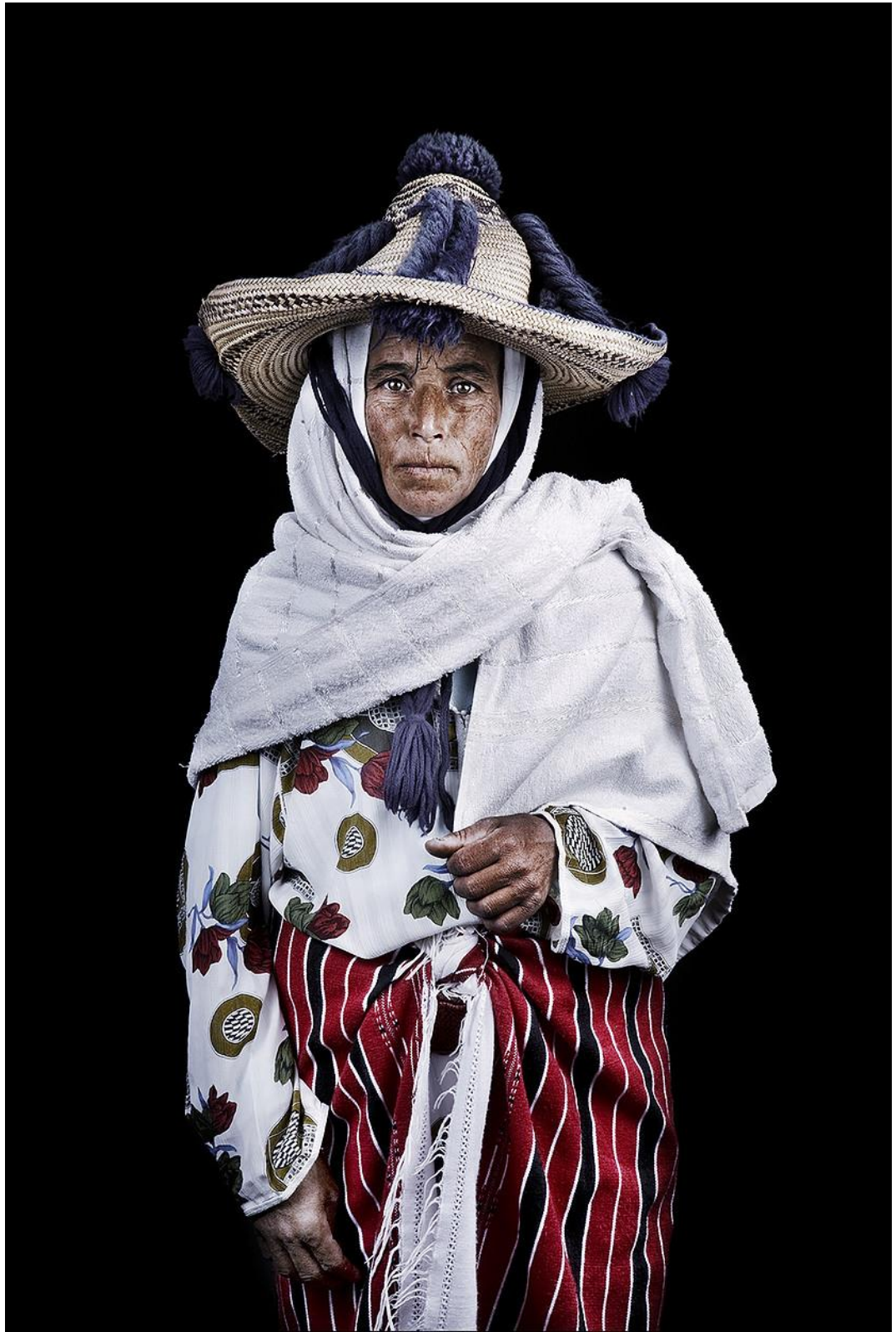


Fig. 9. *Larache, Rif Mountains*, 2011 by Leila Alaoui.



Fig. 10. *Untitled*, 2010 by Leila Alaoui.



Fig. 11. *Untitled*, 2010 by Leila Alaoui.

through the common endeavour of looking, those who observe Alaoui's subjects are connected through the gaze. This conjunction symbolically annihilates differences between cultures as observers are guided towards the idea of communion with the Other. The tensions that arise out of the familiar

and unfamiliar elements presented within these compositions provide the terrain from which strategies of selfhood can be elaborated, displaced, challenged, or transgressed in the viewer's imagination. How these strategies of selfhood are translated depends on who is observing. Analysis of how viewers respond to the work is connected to the idea of *photographie engagée* as a method of reading, and is addressed in the following chapter. An analysis of this reception is connected to the idea of *la photographie engagée* as a method of reading is explored at the end of this chapter.

Alaoui's photographs thus resonate with Bhabha's notion of the Third Space: located in-between the spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority caught within the image. The image, caught in-between the designations of identity, initiates an ambivalent relationship between the photograph and the observer, and becomes what Bhabha calls "the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference ... between black and white" (*The Location*, 5); between French and Moroccan cultural identities. The space that emerges from between the interstices of fixed cultural identities opens the possibility of a cultural hybridity "that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 5). The following chapter elaborates on how the ambivalence of Alaoui's photographs initiates what Mary Louise Pratt and James Clifford call a "contact zone" within the French cultural space as represented by the gallery.

CHAPTER 3

Image, Space, Context:

Negotiating Moroccan Identity in the French Gallery Space

On 12th of November 2015, *La première Biennale des photographes du monde arabe contemporain* opened in Paris. The event—the first of its kind—was collaboratively hosted by *La Maison Européenne de la Photographie* (MEP) and *l'Institut du Monde Arabe* (IMA) and showcased the works of more than fifty photographic artists working across the Arab world.²⁶ Collectively, the works included in the Biennale called into question issues of representation concerning the portrayal of Arab cultures in Europe; individually they offer differing points of view of artists working across the Arab world. Included amongst these artworks was a selection of portraits from Leila Alaoui's *Les Marocains*. The event marked the first time Alaoui's portraits were presented to a French audience.

As such, this chapter offers an analysis of art criticism and public reception associated with the debut exhibition of *Les Marocains* at *La Maison Européenne de la photographie* (November 2015—January 2016). This event will be compared to reception of *Les Marocains* at *Collection Lambert en Avignon*, where it featured as part of a larger exhibition of Alaoui's work titled “Je te pardonne” (July-Nov 2017). The intent is to understand how Moroccan identity is negotiated within the French cultural imagination as represented through the reception to the work. It draws on Mary Louise Pratt and James Clifford's conceptualisation of museums as “contact zones” to show how the ambivalence of the photograph initiates another type of contact zone that exposes viewers to an intersubjective experience of culture.

Exhibiting Others: The Western Museum and Art from the Arab World

Historically, the museum is a European invention dating from the Enlightenment age. Imbued with the idea of progress, the museum of this time represented the democratisation of

²⁶ The MEP is an exhibition site located in Paris in the 4^{ème} arrondissement dedicated to making contemporary photographic works “des artistes français ou étrangers” easily accessible (mep-fr.org). The IMA is a collaborative space founded on the principle of cultivating cross-cultural exchange between the Arab World, France, and Europe (imarabe.org).

knowledge and an incarnation of Western liberalism (Bennett 10). In *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco* (2010), Katarzyna Pieprzak explains the objects filling the halls of early museums were a reflection of what the nation and its people valued in terms of art and culture (16). Museum objects are a symbol of the state's wealth, a celebration of technological progress and scientific gains of the nation (16). With the apogée of empire at the start of the nineteenth century, objects collected for technological and scientific purposes effectively transformed the museum into what postcolonial academic Itala Vivan suggests was a “storeroom” of artefacts collected during civilising missions (196). Thus, by the end of the century when colonial ethnology and anthropology were in full bloom, imperial expositions (such as colonial expositions) saw indigenous peoples from colonised territories systematically categorised (196). They were displayed the same way animal or botanical specimens were classified as scientific and ethnographic curiosities (197).

In “The Poetics and Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures” (2013), gallery curator/academic Henrietta Lidchi suggests the *Exposition Universelle* held in Paris, 1889 was the first exhibition to include displays of people as spectacle (168). She explains:

[indigenous people living in imperial territories] were brought over [to Europe] as displays to provide viewers with the experience of being in other worlds. Situated in ‘authentic’ villages, they were asked to re-enact their every-day lives for the viewing public. These peoples were classified in terms of the geography of the exhibition, [... or] according to putative notions of their ‘relationship’ to each other in evolutionary terms. (168)

What these expositions *really* showcased was an asymmetrical display of power where the colonised subject was visibly reduced to an exotic specimen (169). This exotic lens contributed to the notion of cultural difference between the Western and non-Western peoples. The indigenous, non-Western entity was designated temporally, geographically, and chronologically distanced from Europe (Forsdick, “Revisiting exoticism” 49) which effectively limited the French cultural space. In relation to the museum, the staging of difference as spectacle underscores the way in which the museum functioned as a dominant cultural force at the turn of the nineteenth century that controlled/limited the intervention and participation of inappropriate actors (Pieprzak xvi). In a Francophone context, the alliance between exoticism and an imperialist display of power was

consummated at the *Exposition coloniale internationale* of 1931 at Vincennes, Paris where a small scale version of the French Empire was presented to the public who were encouraged to undertake “le tour du monde en quatre jours” (Ageron qtd. in Forsdick, “Revisiting exoticism” 48). According to postcolonial theorist Charles Forsdick in “Revisiting exoticism: From colonialism to postcolonialism” (2003), exoticism was used at Vincennes to

disseminate as widely as possible a sense both of the West’s right to colonize and of the justness of imperialism ... to create a popular justification of ownership of elsewhere inherent in imperial expansion; the aim was to demonstrate who was civilized and who required civilization. (49)

The processes of exoticism also helped situate non-Western colonial cultures at a distance from France, effectively dividing cultures accordingly as modern and non-modern.

Forsdick claims exoticism has played an integral role in past representations of other cultures, and continues to impact contemporary representations of people, objects, and places (“Revisiting exoticism” 47). Forsdick describes exoticism as “an imagined quality or essence of difference (mystery, savagery, eroticism, cruelty) ascribed by one culture to another radically different (and often threatening) culture” (47-8). In a colonial context, the foreign culture is absorbed into the home culture as a simplified, essentialised, less threatening version that accords with that culture’s understanding of it (48). In the early twentieth century, works produced by artists of African origin living in France were seen as exotic by the majority. This perception effectively construed both artist and artwork alike as fetishised objects available for public consumption within the European market. In her article, “What Museum for Africa?” (2017), Itala Vivan describes how European art critics at that time were reluctant to evaluate African art. She writes: “The European Gaze marked Africa as the absolute other, hence the unwillingness of Europeans art critics to evaluate African artworks as ‘art’ until their discovery by the Modernist generation of Paris artists” (198).²⁷

The reluctance demonstrated by European art critics suggests that heritage has played an important role in the evaluation of art that extends to works produced by artists of African origin seeking recognition within France. For postcolonial theorist Alec G. Hargreaves, the exotic lens

²⁷ Prominent artists of the Modernist generation included Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973).

ascribed to contemporary artists of African descent is thought to echo the manner in which indigenous peoples were “packaged for the consumption of visitors to colonial exhibitions” (146). In “The contribution of North and sub-Saharan African immigrant minorities to the redefinition of contemporary French Culture” (2003), Hargreaves points out that although such artists have been living in France since well before the period of decolonisation, the majority ethnic population (a white, Republican, Catholic majority) has maintained these artists “never truly become part of French culture” (146). This is largely due to the fact that Africans living in France—from colonial times to the present—have been viewed by the majority ethnic population “through a series of perceptual screens that have exoticized, belittled, or dehumanized them” (146).

While exoticism shares a symbolic space with Orientalism in terms of power relations, the terms are not synonymous (Santaolalla 10). In Orientalism, power relations tend to follow a one-way system guided by colonialism, and generally works in favor of Western ideals (13). However, exoticism has more versatile applications as a means of understanding intercultural relations beyond colonialism in terms of the “mutual implications of interactions” between cultures (Forsdick 52). With regards to Islamic art produced by artists from the Arab world living outside of France, the majority of the works considered by Western Islamic art scholars at the turn of the nineteenth century were viewed through an Orientalist lens. The term “Islamic Art” commonly refers to the art and architecture produced from the 7th century CE onwards within territories ruled or inhabited by Muslim populations from the Middle East, North Africa, India, and Central Asia (The Met “The Nature of Islamic Art”).²⁸ This is evidenced by their atemporal categorisation as “other” within the history of art (Pieprzak 98).

Due to the popularity of Orientalism which dominated Western ideas of art from the Arab region at the time, the majority of scholars agreed that Islamic art adhered to an abstract aesthetic mostly concerned with the divine (Pieprzak 98). It consisted of three forms: calligraphy, geometric arabesques, and floral/vegetal motifs.²⁹ Whilst these descriptions attempt to account for the

²⁸ For examples, see the [Met Gallery's photo gallery: The Nature of Islamic Art](#).

²⁹ The tiled entryway of the [Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque](#) (constructed 1603-19) in Isfahan, Iran provides an excellent example of this abstract aesthetic.

theological aspects observed by scholars, they are also static generalisations that fail to account for the existence of other forms of art in the Islamic world.³⁰ Pieprzak interprets this failure not as a denial, but rather as an indication that these scholars have ignored the possibility of its existence (98). She writes:

The primary discourse on Islamic art as a religious art that is uninterested in the secular world neglected a vibrant and political history of patronage, communication, and commentary through form, and a tradition of figuration represented in objects such as manuscript illuminations of history and poetry ... Art in the Middle East was not all about timeless religion; rather the arts were deeply tied to the dynamic of societies in which they were produced. They responded to change and presaged development. (Pieprzak 98-99)

While contemporary scholarship on Islamic art has made some progress moving away from this outdated understanding of art produced in the Arab world, for contemporary non-Western artists working across the Arab region, it remains difficult to extricate themselves from the “abstract geographic signifier of identity” that simultaneously gives and takes value from the work (Pieprzak 107). In other words, Arabness is marketed as a type of Otherness used as a measure of the work’s value. For instance, André Elbaz (b. 1934) is one such artist who does not want his work to be recognised or evaluated through the geographic signifiers of identity: “I am not a Moroccan painter. I am Moroccan and I am a painter,” stated Elbaz in an article written for Moroccan cultural journal, *Lamalif*, in 1967 (qtd. and transl. by/in Pieprzak 107).³¹ Pieprzak suggests that Elbaz’s words highlight how a more discursive approach to autonomy in art could help distance the works produced by Moroccans “from reified representations of Moroccan culture ... and politics” (107-8). As such, many of the works in Elbaz’s œuvre, such as the *Villes orientales* series, visually allude to works by European artists such as [Claude Monet \(1840-1926\)](#), and [Gustav Klimt \(1862-1918\)](#). Whether these allusions are deliberate or not is beside the point, as they help extricate Elbaz’s work from the classification of “Moroccan” towards the international art market.

³⁰ For examples of figural representations in Islamic Art, see the [Met Gallery’s photo gallery: Figural Representation in Islamic Art](#).

³¹ *Lamalif* was a monthly cultural and political journal published in Morocco between 1966 and 1988. Its main contributors were Moroccan intellectuals such as journalists, economists, academics, artists, and politicians covering a range of social, cultural, economic, and political issues. It was associated with a leftist political stance.

Les Marocains at La première Biennale des photographes du monde arabe contemporain

The image of the Arab world held in the Western imagination is bound to a history of domination and exclusion. This image edifies the need for exhibitions such as *La première Biennale des photographes du monde arabe contemporain*; events explicitly designed to challenge misguided assumptions held by the West toward the Arab Region. In the preface of the catalogue for *La première Biennale*, Jack Lang explains the idea for the exhibition grew out of a response to the negative focus adopted by French media concerning its coverage of events in the Arab world. In Lang's view, this negative position justified the need for an exhibition

qui rende compte avec grande sincérité et souci de qualités esthétiques, des transformations en profondeur de cette vingtaine de pays [du monde Arabe] ... des progrès qui s'y font jour, des difficultés sans doute qu'ils peuvent rencontrer, mais aussi des raisons d'espérer que l'on peut observer si l'on est objectif. (7)

Lang suggests that engaging with the various perspectives presented in the works of artists in the exhibition offers viewers the chance "de voir autrement les réalités changeantes du monde" (Lang 7).

The exhibition's emphasis on engagement is related to the postcolonial conceptualisation of museums as "contact zones". The term "contact zone" is used by James Clifford in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997) and indicates a transformational space that integrates the arts and cultures of marginalised peoples (Clifford 192-3).³² Clifford explains the "contact zone" is a term borrowed from the author/critical theorist Mary Louise Pratt. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel and Transculturation* (1992), Pratt defines the "contact zone" as "the space of colonial encounters ... in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact ... establish ongoing relationships, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt 6; Clifford 192). Further, the "contact" perspective "emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other ... in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices ... within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 7). For Clifford, these intersecting trajectories are located in the museum: he writes "[w]hen museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structures as a *collection* becomes an

³² See also Vivan 201; Lidchi 178.

ongoing historical, political, and moral *relationship*—a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull” (192, emphasis in original) reaching beyond the museum.

The objects that appear in museum collections are imbued with past contexts, and their histories are often caught up with stories of struggle, some of which are still ongoing. These histories call forth a sense of responsibility that asks museums be accountable for their objects in ways that reach beyond preservation (Clifford 193). For Clifford, accountability does not simply entail that museums represent the history of their objects “completely or accurately”, they are also responsible for correcting discrepancies concerning the misrepresentation of objects: particularly “ongoing power imbalances of contact relations” (193). In other words, disclosing how objects were attained. If museums as contact zones, are sites “traversed by people and things” (Clifford 8), a consideration of the objects suggests they also function as contact zones. Objects draw attention to discrepancies of ownership, problems of (mis)representation, and “the ongoing power imbalances of contact relations” (193) in the museum. The history of ethnographic artefacts in particular is significant to this discussion, as they are representative of the cultural encounter that led to its acquisition by the museum.³³

The photograph possesses the same representative capacity as an artefact, for it can attest that something, or someone *actually* existed.³⁴ Historically, photographs have also played a similar role to artefacts in exploiting people from other cultures in the sense that they were often taken without proper permission. As objects, photographs and artefacts alike offer tangible evidence of a cultural exchange. In *Camera Lucida* (1981), Barthes describes the photograph as “not a memory, an imagination, [or] a reconstitution, ... but reality in a past state: at once the past and the real” (82). Scholars such as Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown have suggested photographs have the same dialogical capacity as artefacts to evoke knowledge, promote discussion about cultural identity relative to other cultures, and help bridge the temporal distance that separates past from present (254). When it comes to exposing colonial era photographs of the Orient, Khémir suggests that

³³ For a recent example, see [Yohann Koshy's report in *The Guardian*](#) wherein four members of the Maasai tribe from Eastern Africa consider how an *orkata*, a sacred bracelet that symbolises the death of a father in Maasai culture, ended up in a museum in Oxford (*Guardian*).

³⁴ For example, [this photograph of Tasmanian Tigers](#) at Washington Zoo, c. 1906. The image attests to the existence of this now extinct animal.

for people of Middle Eastern and North African descent, viewing such images can actually be a positive experience (Vogl 196). She writes:

Exposer ces photographies aujourd'hui, c'est donner aux Arabes *la possibilité de contempler les images que les autres ont faites d'eux afin de les aider à mieux créer leurs propres images* et présenter d'autres photographes, arabes cette-fois. (qtd in Vogl 196, my emphasis)

In other words, familiarisation with Western representations of the Maghreb can better aid Maghrebians to re-present themselves in ways that can counter clichéd ideas about the region (Vogl 196). While re-exposing such images risks reviving counter-narratives that reinforce Orientalist ideologies such as mystery and exoticism, as Peers and Brown point out, their exposure can also ignite conversations *within* communities represented in the photographs: conversations about “issues [of] cultural identity, the uses of historic knowledge in the present, the shifting meanings of [photographs as] artefacts, and the nature of change and cultural continuity” (524). This suggests photographic exhibitions can help facilitate more informed readings of cultural identity as what they reveal of past attitudes/assumptions of one culture in relation to another can catalyse more responsible representations.

In terms of the *Biennale*, when curators selected works for exhibition, they were mindful not to exclude artists who expressed in their works political, ideological, or religious points of view towards their surrounds (Bauret) thus allowing for the Orientalist view of the Arab world to be surpassed by showcasing the diversity of modern Arab society. This was achieved through a selection of works that engaged directly with many of the clichés associated with the Muslim world, such as the frequency of war, conflict, and revolution, or the idea that Arab women are universally oppressed or confined to domestic spaces (Leduc, *France* 24). In other words, the exhibition explicitly encouraged a Sartrean style of engagement with the themes presented in its corpus. The works selected from Alaoui's capsule engage with Orientalism by subverting exotic fictions associated with Morocco in portraits of men, women, and children in traditional dress isolated from their environments.

The eight images from *Les Marocains* shown at the *Biennale* presented a diverse group of people of varied ages, genders, ethnicities, religions, and occupations. In each portrait, subjects

stand before a black background in a forward-facing position. Each image attests to the presence of the artist and authenticates the encounter that took place between Alaoui and her subjects. In the press release photographs by Anne-Frédérique Fer, [one image](#) shows how the portraits were arranged in the gallery; mounted slightly higher than eye level, printed at a scale that is almost true to life, their size encourages viewers to form a relationship with each photographed individual who is experienced vicariously through viewing. Let us consider one example featured amongst the selection titled “Tamesloht, 2011” (Fig.12).

This image depicts a young musician in a regal looking garment of iridescent blues and greens is known as a *djellaba*. Contrasted against the deep red of his embellished sash and cap, heavily beaded strands cascade over his shoulders. Confronting the camera straight on, his serious disposition and arresting gaze exude an air of dignity. While the details of his garments indicate he is a Gnawan musician, for viewers unfamiliar with Moroccan cultural history, the significance of this identity within contemporary Moroccan culture is difficult to ascertain.³⁵ In “Constructing a Diasporic Identity: Tracing the Origins of the Gnawa Spiritual Group in Morocco” (2008), Chouki El Hamel investigates the ethnic identity of the Gnawa in Morocco. Described as a “diasporic culture” originating from West Africa, El Hamel explains that historically, many of the Gnawa were “forcefully transported across the Sahara” where they were then sold as slaves in different parts of Morocco (241).³⁶ The contemporary Gnawa, El Hamel describes are:

a religious or spiritual order, [they] are traditionally a mystic order, and this marks their exclusiveness within Islam. As a style of music, the ancestral memory of the displaced and enslaved people that were brought to Morocco has been preserved in their songs and dances. Both the religious and spiritual components of Gnawa practice are expressed through their music, which incorporates references to their origin and enslavement. (243)

³⁵ Gnawan music combines spiritual songs, ritual music, and dancing.

³⁶ The term Gnawa can be traced to the 12th century. Meaning “the black people”, El Hamel stresses “it is important to note that not all [black people] in Morocco were slaves who originated from West Africa” (244).



Fig. 12. *Tamesloht*, 2011 by Leila Alaoui.

Gnawan musicians are thus religiously and spiritually significant in contemporary Moroccan culture. Gnawan music is performed at sacred spiritual ceremonies called *lila*, which are held for explicit reasons such as healing, to celebrate important life events, at initiation ceremonies, to express gratitude to the spirits, or to request a blessing (Sum 155). To those viewers unfamiliar with the Gnawan musician's significance, the details present in Alaoui's composition facilitate an alternative narrative through which Moroccan identity might be considered. For example, the large metal castanet-like instruments known as *grageb* observed in "Tamesloht 2011" are evocative of Spanish castanets. This is an association that reflects Morocco's historic relationship with Muslim Spain, and is a European point of reference in the image.

When we look at a photograph, we position ourselves as viewers. The role of the observer enables viewers prolonged consideration of the face in a manner that differs from a physical face-to-face encounter (Edkins 13). While the photographer captures in an instant, a fleeting moment, a look or an expression; as observers we are afforded the luxury of time to study the face before us (Edkins 13). We remain unseen, while the photographic subject, perpetually exposed, is frozen in time. Space and time are misaligned in the photograph; movement is frozen and time is expanded (Edkins 13). For Barthes, the spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority are entangled together in what he calls the "space-time category" ("Rhetoric" 44) which resonates with the Bhabhaian Third Space. Located *in-between* the spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority of the photograph emerges an ambivalence. According to Bhabha, these *in-between* spaces

provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. (Bhabha, *The Location 2*)

The ambivalence of the photograph initiates a "contact zone" exposing viewers to an intersubjective experience of Moroccan-ness that is negotiated in relation to the fixed identities of Alaoui's diverse photographic subjects.

The diversity that characterises *Les Marocains* attests to the richness of a culture that is at once African, Mediterranean, Atlantic, Berber, Judeo-Berber, Arab, Black and European (Dahlström). In “Le Maroc dans les yeux” (2018), art historian/museologist Björn Dahlström writes: “[e]n images, [Alaoui] dresse ... une cartographie du Maroc au moyen de tous ces indices [sociaux et géographiques] fièrement arborés par leurs sujets, et qui identifient immédiatement leur appartenance sociale et tribale” (Dahlström). For example, in the Rif mountain region, Alaoui photographed a woman from Larache (Fig. 9, p. 57) wearing a red striped *fouta*, a multipurpose garment made of cotton and wool, and a large straw hat with woolen pompoms. In the High Atlas, a woman dressed in the style of an Imilchiléan bride (Fig. 1, p. 2) wears a *bandira*. In south-east Morocco, a Khamlian bride (Fig. 4, p. 36) wears an *aâbroq*. Their presence within the gallery invites a reading of the work that simultaneously adheres to and defies the convention of the gallery as an institutionally white space in terms of its history of asymmetric powers relations that are realised in displays of colonial objects.

In “Negotiating Moroccan Identity: The Art of Leila Alaoui” (2017), Art historian Semine Long points out that “because the universal body is white,” non-white bodies are seldom represented within the gallery space (Long). Long suggests that Alaoui responded to this lack of representation by increasing the representation of bodies of colour, as *Les Marocains* makes the coloured body “hyper-visible in a museum context” (Long). The increased visibility of the coloured body initiates a space of inclusion that subverts the hierarchies of convention and counteracts what Long identifies as the “process of essentialising, and ultimately the creation of an imaginary Orient” (Long). Symbolically, their presence in the French cultural space recognises the contributions of contemporary African artists (i.e. non-European artists) as an authority working either within or beyond Africa. The connections and meanings that are articulated as a result of the associations made by viewers based on the familiar and unfamiliar elements presented in the compositions facilitate a zone of engagement, or “contact zone”, wherein geographically and historically separate French and Moroccan identities converge to establish new relationships and understandings of cultural identity. Like the ‘in-between spaces’ that Bhabha alludes to, the “contact zone” that Alaoui’s images initiate opens up the terrain for elaboration of selfhood and identity in terms of

cultural difference. Acknowledging the overlap and displacement caused by notions of difference (especially in terms of the shared common history between France and North Africa) facilitates critical reading that is related to *photographie engagée* as a method of reading, allows new understandings of French cultural identity to emerge from the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationhood, community, and culture, and highlights the complex issues and experiences related to immigration, national identity, the Maghrebi diaspora, and processes of Othering (Long).

While the extent of whether the gallery-goers are aware of their positioning as subject-viewers within the gallery space is difficult to ascertain, photographic historian Elizabeth Edwards suggests the material properties of the photograph itself—aspects such as framing and size, in addition to its signifying aspects—contribute towards making viewers aware of the act of viewing (196). Edwards describes the effects framed images can evoke in viewers:

forced to engage with the photographs as objects; knowledge is literally being presented framed, indexical yet mediated. This is not knowledge literally at a glance in the museum space; the material forms and scale of the framed photographs require closer attention. (196)

In other words, the frame affords the image a sense of legitimacy. As a marker of importance, the frame invites closer inspection of its content.

At the *Biennale*, Alaoui's portraits were framed in unobtrusive black fixtures that complemented the black backdrops. The reflective quality of the glass [allowed viewers to see themselves ghosted](#) alongside Alaoui's Moroccans within the same frame.³⁷ Combined with the almost life-size dimensions of the images themselves (150cm x 100cm) it allowed viewers and subjects to share the same dialogical space. In a sense, the reflective qualities of the glass can be read as a point of contact—a window or entranceway of sorts—that allowed gallery-goers and photographed subjects to enter the same cultural space. Here, ongoing differences between France and North Africa are symbolically recognised and accepted. According to Bhabha, such spaces are open to the possibility of a hybrid cultural identity “that entertains difference without an assumed

³⁷ See also [@kebirafoundation](#).

or imposed hierarchy” (*The Location* 5). In other words, an identity *beyond* normative subjectivities of French-ness/Moroccan-ness/Otherness.

“*Beyond* signifies spatial distance,” writes Bhabha, “[it] marks progress, and promises the future”: it explicitly suggests exceeding the barrier, the limits, or the boundary (*The Location* 6). An alternative interpretation of the frame in the gallery context can be read as a symbolic reference to the frontier that calls into question ideas of mobility, distance, and immigration across the Mediterranean. As a structural limitation, each frame separates photographed subjects from viewers and each other. The degrees of separation between viewers and subjects (there are at least eleven) metaphorically equates the historical/geographic/political distances and differences between France and Morocco: as each image is captured digitally on Alaoui’s camera, stored on a memory card (and backed up digitally), sitting inside the camera, within a case, transported across Morocco in Alaoui’s portable studio, flies across the Strait of Gibraltar, arrives in Paris, to be printed, framed, mounted on a wall in a room inside the gallery. While Alaoui’s journey from France to Morocco was made with relative ease, for those without a passport, crossing the borders is a perilous ordeal. Thus, the presence of *Les Marocains* in the French gallery space is significant because it marks a symbolic migration—a journey some of the people Alaoui photographed would not have been able to make otherwise.

Les Marocains at Collection Lambert en Avignon (July-Nov 2017)

When ten portraits from *Les Marocains* were exhibited in 2017 at *Collection Lambert en Avignon*, a contemporary art gallery located in Avignon in Southern France dedicated to contemporary art, gallery-goers were invited to actively participate in the exhibition.³⁸ [The gallery website](#), prompted its visitors “to watch and listen to each other’s stories [to] annihilate distance” and to “empathize with those photographed” (*Collection Lambert*). The capsule from *Les Marocains* featured as part of a larger exhibition of Alaoui’s works titled “Je te pardonne” (July-Nov 2017) and was organised in collaboration with *La Fondation Leïla Alaoui* and Galleria Continua as a “humanist response to the

³⁸ Originating from French designer Agnès b.’s personal art collection, who has collected works by young avant-garde artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat since 1983 (Eckardt; *Collection Lambert*).

terror” that led to Alaoui’s death in 2016 (*Collection Lambert*). In Long’s review, the exhibition was poignantly described as

[a reflection of the] new initiatives and attempts within the museum world that aim to materialize and incorporate Postcolonialism into the exhibition modes. *La Collection Lambert* initiates a negotiation of Moroccan identity by inviting a French-Moroccan portrayal of Moroccans into the museum space. (Long)

In other words, the exhibition initiated a “contact zone” that encouraged visitors to interact with the artwork as the images become tools of analysis and reflection. An analysis of this reception is connected to the idea of *la photographie engagée* as a method of reading is explored at the end of this chapter.

In relation to the exhibition space, the material qualities of the images were designed to suit the exhibition’s agenda. Digitally [printed at a scale](#) so they appear larger than life (320cm by 213cm), the unframed portraits allow Moroccans to stand together, side by side. This evokes a harmonious and welcoming atmosphere. [The lack of a frame](#) symbolically suggests a rejection of borders that encourages visitors to consider the continuing effects of colonialism in diasporic and immigrant communities across France. The network of French-speaking countries and communities that emerged from the French colonial presence in Africa is vast, and their collective contribution to the Francophone space is significant. The scale at which Alaoui’s subjects appear in the gallery draws attention to asymmetric power relations. According to Long, their scale effectively “forces viewers to acknowledge the continuing effects of colonialism” as well as recognises “the current diasporic communities and immigrant mobilization as part of French past and present” (Long). In other words, the scale and lack of a frame read as an attempt to make up for this lack of representation.

“Contact zones”, Clifford tells us, are constituted “through reciprocal movements of people, not just of objects, messages, commodities, and money” (195). Here “reciprocity” means fair dealings, not in the sense of a “give-and-take” exchange, but rather as a “translation term whose meanings depend on specific contact situations” (193-4). In other words, reciprocal cultural exchange means recognising various interactive processes leading to and extending from that specific contact situation. In response to *Collection Lambert’s* call for active engagement, many of

the people who visited Alaoui's exhibition photographically documented their interactions on Instagram. Photographs are taken by a third party to [capture the scale of Alaoui's images](#) within the frame. Some gallery-goers [face Alaoui's subjects](#), while others stand directly [in front](#) mirroring [facial expression and body language](#). Others focus on [specific details](#), or the whole image as it appears before them.³⁹

Unlike the ghostly contact zone of the *Biennale*, the bodily presence of visitors standing alongside Alaoui's portraits more readily integrates Moroccan identity into the hybrid cultural space. Cultural differences too, are seamlessly conflated. The ensuing cultural mélange of costumes and complexions witnessed in these images is suggestive of the positive potential of art for thinking about cultural difference in more positive, inclusive ways beyond exoticism. While Alaoui's images present an array of costumes and visages, the degree to which they are exotic is limited to cognitive processes of difference (Forsdick "Revisiting exoticism" 50). Each photograph that appears in the virtual gallery is constructed from a singular position, collectively they exhibit diverse perspectives open to further engagement with social media. While the virtual space demonstrates the potential of the exhibition to be a transcultural "contact zone" in the postcolonial sense in that it exceeds standard processes of reciprocal, relational cultural exchange, in the physical gallery *Les Marocains* facilitates a different type of "contact zone" that brings art from the peripheral to an established cultural centre (Clifford 202). Symbolically, their presence in the French cultural space recognises the contribution of a contemporary North African artist as an authority within France.

Indeed, the experience of engaging with art in a virtual space cannot provide the same experience as witnessing a work first-hand. However, the virtual experience can provide insight into a first-hand experience that in no way invalidates what can be grasped of the work first-hand. An analysis of this reception is connected to the idea of *la photographie engagée* as a method of reading that can effect a postcolonial re-ordering of traditional operations of looking that highlights the interconnected relationship shared between the observer and the photograph. The new modes of

³⁹ For further examples, see [@vicky.hell](#), [@margaux2514](#), [@thibault_ci](#)

interaction that take place in the “contact zone” are contingent upon the ambivalence elicited by the subject matter that is presented in Alaoui’s work. Ambivalence arises out of the liminal positioning of the viewer in relation to the gaze of the photographed Other. The tension that arises out of being caught in the contact zone—between French and Moroccan cultural identities—provides the terrain from which strategies of selfhood can be elaborated, displaced, challenged, and/or transgressed (Bhabha, *The Location* 96) beyond normative subjectivities of Frenchness/Moroccan-ness/Otherness.

CONCLUSION

Beyond the Frame

This thesis has shown the extent to which Leila Alaoui's *Les Marocains* functions as *photographie engagée* in terms of both the artist's approach and the representative/communicative capacities of the photographs within the context of the French cultural space represented by the gallery. I have shown how the gallery, as a European invention, has played an instrumental role shaping and producing knowledge and meaning in the West as a reflection of what the nation and its people value in terms of art and culture (Pieprzak 16). Saïd's arguments pertaining to the "invention" or "discovery" of the Orient by Western writers, artists, and historians (18th century to present) suggest the Orient is linked to the gallery in the sense that both contributed to the notion of difference between Europe and the Orient (42-3). I have attempted to show how Alaoui's work engages with the deconstruction of pervasive Oriental stereotypes to demonstrate how photography can be a medium for articulating resistance to dominant narratives of cultural identity in images that challenge normative ideas of orientalised subjects, and reclaim ownership of her Moroccan identity in a style that I call *photographie engagée*.

Photographie engagée is both a method of reading and a professional practice that considers the role of images in the construction and re-vision of cultural identity in terms of the relationship between the photographer and the subject, between ethics and aesthetics, between the photographer and the photograph. As a method of reading, *photographie engagée* was applied to a comparative analysis of Alaoui's portraits to show how the artist counteracts Oriental stereotypes by engaging with static representations of North African culture. Chapter One traced the link between painting and photography in the French Orientalist tradition demonstrating how portraits produced by and for Europeans (18th century-present) restructured the Orient for European audiences: the passive eroticism evoked in Delacroix's *Reclining Chieftain* embodies a stereotypical characterisation of the Orient as a symbolically inferior counterpart to the West; the ignored identities of Moulin's sitters overwrites Algerian cultural diversity in favor of geographic essentialism; the looks of Garanger's *Femmes Algériennes* condemn oppressive processes of

colonisation. Yet the observable ease shown by Alaoui's subjects suggests she understood the apprehension some Moroccans still display towards the camera. Giving little to no direction, Alaoui allowed her subjects to choose how they are presented in the photograph; women remain veiled and in control of their representation. The subject's gaze is mostly visible, permitting viewers to visually connect with photographed subjects. The veil disrupts looking-relations as roles of viewer/subject are symbolically reversed.

Balanced against clichéd representations of the culture, Alaoui's images appeared to suggestively condemn the touristy expectations of "tradition" and "folklore" taken from iconographic myths of Moroccan culture. This comparison showed how Alaoui's images operate as a form of critique, or *photographie engagée*, that explicitly addressed issues of representation, drawing attention to photographic distortion of contemporary Moroccan culture. Read critically, Alaoui's images account for identities that are absent from representations of national identity, such as children, and elderly people from rural communities. Included amongst the thirty portraits that make up *Les Marocains* are musicians, brides, snake charmers, and fortune-tellers, as well as shepherds, farmers, husbands, wives, grandparents, children, mothers, daughters, fathers, and sons. By including the bodies and experiences of those missing from the dominant cultural narrative, Alaoui reinstates their visibility, and inverts their marginal position within the hierarchy of representation. As a result, *Les Marocains* re-imagines a more inclusive image of Moroccan cultural identity by shifting focus away from stereotypical clichés towards individual subjectivities. This liberates them from institutionalized ideas of Orientalised subjects.

In Chapter Two, photography was established as part of the representational system of language, using images rather than words to communicate its message more readily. It showed how Sartre's notion of *engagement* can be adapted to the medium of photography. As Sartre suggests, for *l'écrivain engagé*, to write is to act upon a profound desire to engage with the world in the hope that what is revealed in-text will in turn inspire others to engage. Conversely, Sontag suggests using a camera is "a form of participation", and the act of photographing "is more than passive observing":

To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged, ... to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing—including, when that is the interest, another person's pain or misfortune. (Sontag 12)

Although Alaoui's images do not depict scenes of pain or misfortune, as representations of Moroccan culture they engage a method of reading as *photographie engagée* that addresses the legacy of Orientalism. By shifting focus away from stereotypical clichés towards individual subjectivities, Alaoui normalizes difference by affirming the importance and value of the individual. Further, each photograph attests to the presence of the artist as an authentication of the encounter between Alaoui and her subjects.

As a practice, *photographie engagée* is guided by the photographer's responsibility and commitment to her subject. The photographer assumes responsibility for the subject by engaging with them, commitment is initiated when the shutter is engaged. Chapter Two identified the extent of Alaoui's *photographie engagée* in practice, showing how Alaoui engaged a sympathetic approach that demonstrated knowledge of cultural beliefs in relation to the history of photography in Morocco. Alaoui's commitment to the subject is demonstrated in the following: before taking a photograph, Alaoui first spent a week in the village with her mobile studio set up in a public space so the locals could get used to her, photographing anyone who passed by her studio or asked about her project, giving everyone she photographed a copy of their portrait which she printed on site (Teicher *Slate*). This gesture problematizes the politics of representation whereby the dominant culture holds monopoly over how the Other is represented, and acknowledges the history violence associated colonial photography. By ensuring that photographed subjects retain control of their subjectivity, Alaoui initiates an alternate subject position that symbolically allows subjects to retain agency as the image remained in the hands of the subject.

As custodian of the subject's image, the photographer is responsible for its dissemination as a work of art. Viewers assume responsibility toward the subject through looking. Here, meaning is guided by the mental work of imagination and inference based on the observer's recognition of familiar cultural symbols. *Photographie engagée* thus assumes viewers/readers will take up a more conscientious position towards Otherness in response to the recognisable elements contained

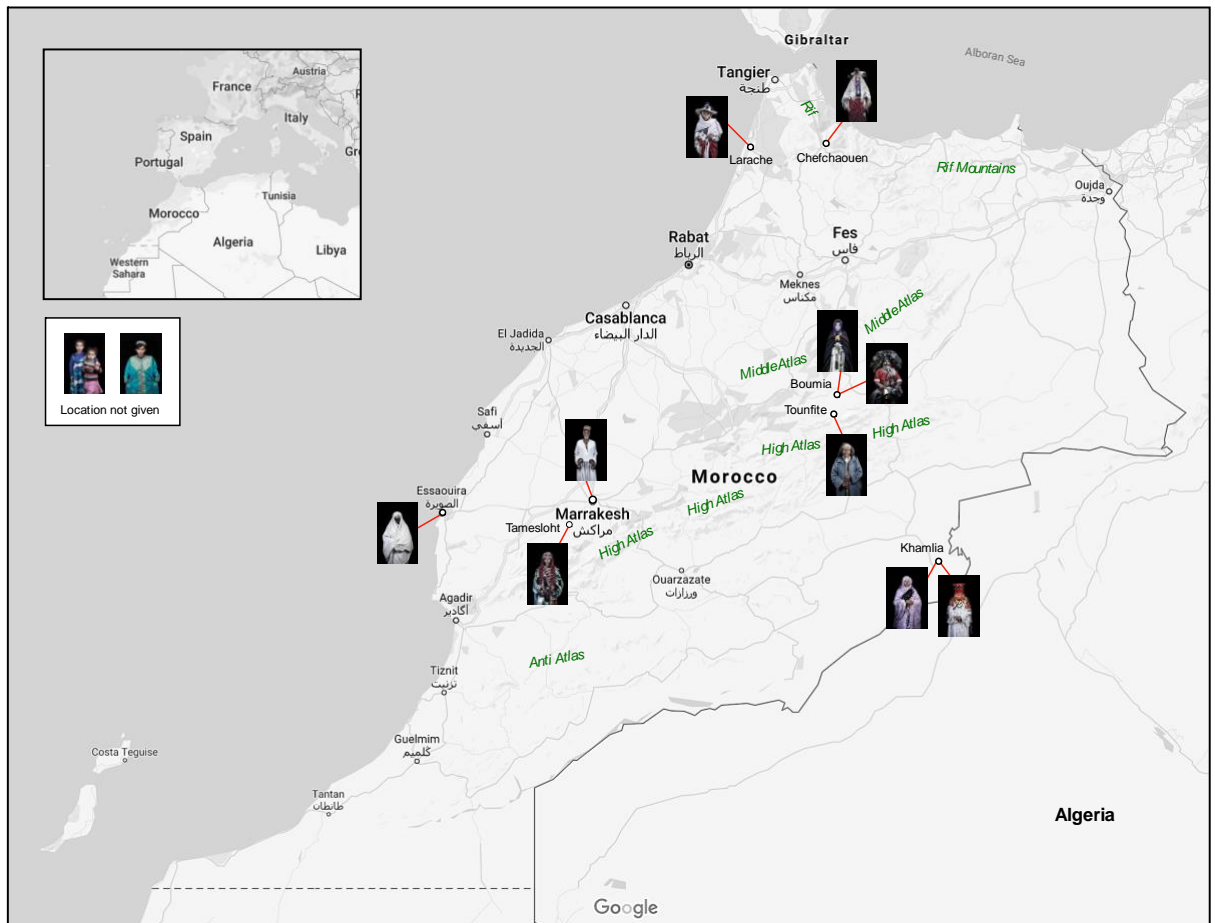
within the composition. Bound together the common endeavour of looking, those who observe Alaoui's subjects become connected through the gaze: a conjunction that symbolically annihilates differences between cultures. The tensions that arise out of the familiar and unfamiliar elements presented within these compositions provide the terrain from which strategies of selfhood can be elaborated, displaced, challenged, and/or transgressed in the viewer's imagination. How these strategies of selfhood are translated depends on the observing party.

Chapter Three showed how Alaoui's photographs facilitate a "contact zone" where geographically and historically separate identities converge to establish new relationships and understandings of identity based on connections/associations made by viewers in the gallery. In relation to the exhibition space, material qualities of the image, such as scale and frame affect how the photograph is experienced. Each exhibition facilitates a unique contact zone as the selection and sequence of *Les Marocains* are always presented in different configurations, which ensures their meaning is constantly in flux. While the virtual space has the potential to be a transcultural "contact zone" in the postcolonial sense in that it exceeds standard processes of reciprocal, relational cultural exchange, in the physical gallery *Les Marocains* facilitates a different type of "contact zone" that brings art from the peripheral to an established cultural centre (Clifford 202). Each photograph that appears in the virtual gallery is constructed from a singular position, collectively they exhibit diverse perspectives open to further engagement with social media. Analysis of this reception was connected to the idea of *la photographie engagée* as a method of reading that can effect a postcolonial re-ordering of traditional operations of looking that highlights the interconnected relationship between the observer and the photograph. The new modes of interaction that emerge in the "contact zone" were shown to be contingent upon the ambivalence elicited by the subject matter presented in Alaoui's work (ambivalence arises out of the liminal positioning of the viewer in relation to the gaze of the photographed Other). The tension that arises out of being caught in the contact zone (between French and Moroccan cultural identities) provides the terrain from which strategies of selfhood can be elaborated, displaced, challenged, and/or transgressed (Bhabha, *The Location* 96) beyond normative subjectivities of Frenchness/Moroccan-ness/Otherness.

Consequently, the presence of *Les Marocains* in the French cultural space symbolically serves to recognise contributions of contemporary African artists (i.e. non-European artists) as an authority working within and beyond Africa. This leads to a broader discussion that considers discourses of migration and mobility across cultures in terms of the ever-changing subject position of diasporic identities in relation to the gallery space. Carried through to a more expansive project, a larger scope of works that function as *photographie engagée* would be considered. As an example, the work of Moroccan photographer Lalla Essaydi re-introduces text to image via the application of sacred Islamic calligraphy (a traditionally male practice) [to the bodies of reclining female subjects](#) in compositions that overtly reference Oriental representations. The writing that appears on the bodies of Essaydi's subjects is applied in henna, a traditionally female practice, and consists of illegible fragments from the artist's personal diary. Essaydi's *photographie engagée* addresses the tensions between the visual and the literary, the public and the private, as well as "the richness and the confining aspects of Islamic traditions" (lallaessaydi.com). Evaluation of such phenomena in works like Essaydi's would contribute toward a greater understanding of the contradictions present in contemporary Arab culture, as well as issues of immigration and national identity in contemporary French politics. If photography has the potential to stereotype and Orientalise its subjects, then the *photographie engagée* of artists like Alaoui and Essaydi has the power to liberate and empower them by disrupting institutional paradigms of the gallery with representations of Moroccan culture that challenge ideas of Orientalised subjects.

Appendix

1. Mapping Leila Alaoui's *Les Marocains*



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