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Citation	Ian Campbell. "Tactile Labyrinths and Sacred Interiors: Spatial Practices and Political Choices in Abdelmajid Ben Jalloun's Fí Al-Tufúla and Ahmed Sefrioui's La Boîte à Merveilles," Bratt KR, Elbousty YM, Stewart DJ, editors. Vitality and Dynanism. Interstitial Dialogues of Language, Politics, and Religion in Morocco's Literary Tradition. Leiden: Leiden University Press; 2014.
Download date	2026-06-13 22:25:27
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/10598

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

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

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

This represents a last step in a long process of dominion over the Maghreb by the Western gaze of legibility and mappability; there is no longer even one place, even at the center of the high culture that once sustained Fes, that cannot be brought under the gaze of the Western reader. In another way, this represents a small triumph of the old city's resistance to the Western gaze; after all, it's the center of a booming tourism industry that has helped to develop the region's moribund economy. Mapping the old city did, however, put many of the local, human guides out of business.

This chapter will examine two semiautobiographical novels whose child protagonists experience the labyrinth of old Fes directly: for each of them, learning to map the labyrinth is an important part of his coming of age. Abdelmajid, the narrator of Abdelmajid Ben Jalloun's 1956 *Fí al-Tufúla* ["In (My) Childhood"][3] comes to Fes in late childhood, having grown up in Britain, where a very different organization of urban space holds sway. He finds the labyrinth bewildering and alien, and ultimately adapts by learning to map the strange culture of his "homeland." In Ahmed Sefrioui's 1954 *La boîte à merveilles* ["The Box of Wonders"][4], the narrator Mehdi grows up in Fes and thus finds the labyrinth less troubling. Yet as Mehdi grows, he learns that his family are strangers to Fes: they are Amazight or "Berber" people, come from the mountains to the city to make a better life.

Both novels were published in the years that Morocco, after years of increasingly violent struggle, succeeded in wresting independence from France.[5] Both are set in the 1930s, before the struggle had begun in earnest; neither undertakes any significant discussion of colonization or its effects. But both novels make a number of political choices in their portrayal of colonial Fes and its spatial practices: both show a tension between Western notions of legibility and mappability and the organization of space in traditional Moroccan culture. Both come out firmly on the side of modernity and Western spatial organization, though *Fí al-Tufúla* is significantly more open about this than *La boîte à merveilles*. If we can argue that these novels represent an embryonic "national literature,"[6] rather than atomistic works of personal remembrance, the nation they portray looks to the West, though it is held back by traditional culture.

Labryinthine Space in *Fí al-Tufúla*

In 2008, I published an article in the *Journal of Arabic Literature* that examined in detail the use of urban space in *Fí al-Tufúla*; readers that wish further detail are advised to seek it in the article. *Fí al-Tufúla* describes in great detail first Ben Jalloun's childhood in Britain, then the difficulties he had adjusting to his "native" Morocco, then his gradual embrace of that culture through his secondary studies at the Qarawiyyin. Much of the significance of the text stems from Abdelmajid's status as an outsider. This enables him to provide a sort of ethnography of traditional culture in colonial Morocco, thus enabling a critique of that culture.

Subsequent critics have pointed out the elitism inherent in this critique. Hamid Lahmidáni, writing in 1985, argues that the use of Ben Jalloun's childhood persona is at best disingenuous. Young Abdelmajid finds the ordinary practices of traditional culture and its material poverty alien and troubling: *Fí al-Tufúla* thus represents the point of view of a narrow, Westernized elite.[7] Muhammad Berada, whose 1987 novel *Lu3bat al-Nisyán* ["The Game of Forgetting"][8] is one of the finest achievements of Arabic-language Moroccan literature, writes in his Arabic translation of Abdelkébir Khatibi's *Le roman maghrébin* that: "the dominant perspective, the interpretations and the commentaries that the writer's adult awareness presents are a romantic, nationalistic point of view…"[9]

In the *Journal of Arabic Literature* article, I argue that young Abdelmajid's perspective on urban spatial organization echoes the work of the French cultural geographer Henri Lefebvre on *abstract space*. Lefebvre's primary interest in his writings on space lies in the relationship of spatial practices, which "structure lived reality, include routes and networks, patterns and interactions that connect places and people, images with reality, work with leisure,"[10] to the social practices of (sub)cultures. Lefebvre argues that in Western Europe, spatial practices underwent a transition from space structured by monuments to *abstract space*, wherein natural features and human interactions were subordinated to an abstract grid. The dominant feature of abstract space is *legibility*: the city is open to the gaze of anyone who is able to read it. For Lefebvre, this transition, and all spatial practices, serve the needs of political power: the transition to abstract space went hand in hand with the increasing domination of capitalist modes of production.[11] In Manchester, Abdelmajid experiences abstract space first-hand:

> When we rode the streetcar, I took to staring out the window, contemplating the city whose energy and animation grew and grew as we advanced through the commercial and industrial avenues. It could really give one the idea that the city itself had also awakened with its inhabitants, for my eye could not rest anywhere except on tireless, ever-increasing activity that really tempted me to get up and move around, to work; but I didn't know what I might devote myself to. [39]

The gridlines of the city are open and readable to Abdelmajid: he "reads" these avenues and is inspired to get up and work. Manchester's spatial practices transform him into some abstract worker on an abstract grid. This is further echoed in the language of the passage: when he writes "It could really give someone the idea," the Arabic text uses the word *al-mar'*, not a personal pronoun like "me" or "you," but an impersonal noun used where an English speaker might say "one".[12] But later, once Abdelmajid "returns" to Morocco, he is confronted with the significantly different urban practices of colonial Fes:

> We quickly entered the city to pass through its narrow streets… Is this the city that my uncle had been saying from the first day that it exemplified the truth of the country? The people must not be able to walk in the street without bumping shoulders. We entered at night, and saw the pale, sad streetlamps as if they were lamps left in place after a funeral. [83]

Abdelmajid cannot "read" the streets of Fes: they are too labyrinthine and narrow, the buildings present neither façade nor windows, and the light is too weak. People are forced to bump shoulders personally rather than enabled to become abstract workers. From this and a number of other close readings, I derive in the article the argument that traditional Moroccan cities are organized according to the principles of what I call *labyrinthine space*:

- A resistance to legibility and mapping, arising from the lack of central urban planning or a bird's-eye viewpoint
- The need for cultural or linguistic competency rather than literacy: in order to find one's destination, a guide rather than a map is needed
- A reliance on the tactile and on a more direct link to the human body, rather than on the visual and an abstract link to a mathematical grid

- The presence within the labyrinth, hidden from view except to those who have earned the right to guidance, of a *sacred interior* space subject to the gaze of all who can enter

In *Fí al-Tufúla*, the sacred interior space is the Qarawiyyin, the only place in the whole city that impresses Abdelmajid. He matriculates at the university, but does not stay long as a student of the traditional curriculum. Rather, he becomes tangentially involved with a group of nationalists, and from there with a group of nationalist poets and writers. He creates within his family's home a sacred interior of his own; this in turn enables him to create a "map" of the Moroccan writers of his day, which he publishes as an article in an Egyptian journal. Applying the principles of abstract space to writers raised within the labyrinthine gives Abdelmajid discursive and even political authority among his peers: he becomes the man one needs to impress to become a notable writer. In the article, I argue that this is in effect an act of colonization: by rendering the space of Moroccan writers legible and mappable, Abdelmajid is applying abstract space to his "native" land and thus gaining power for himself. At the same time, however, he creates from a group of individual writers an embryonic Moroccan national literature, and thus indirectly serves the cause of unifying Moroccan resistance to European colonialism.

The Sacred Interior in *Fí al-Tufúla* (1)

The article concentrates on labyrinthine space more than the sacred interior within; this chapter will examine the sacred interior in detail in both novels. The sacred interior is a space where the gaze does prevail: in the family home, everyone can see the garden or fountain within from their balcony, and anyone on a balcony is visible to everyone else. The sacred interior is legible space, especially when compared to its labyrinthine exterior. It is possible to view and read people in such a space because they have already passed the test of belonging to the tactile labyrinth. While the prevailing logic of the sacred interior is visual, not only are there also other senses, such as hearing, smell and touch, involved in the sacred interior, but the gaze is less one of reading than of mutual recognition, and often of family relations.

The twin spaces of the tactile labyrinth and sacred interior are not without precedent in the study of Moroccan literature. The critic Abdelkebir Khatibi, in his influential 1967 work *Le roman maghrébin*,[13] proposed the labyrinth and the grotto as two of the spaces that define Moroccan literature in the post-independence period. Writing on the work of Algerian novelist Kateb Yacine, Khatibi argues:

> Kateb use de deux espaces dont se sert la mythologie: la grotte et le labyrinthe, et d'un espace sociologique: la rue. Contre la compartimentation rigide de la ville colonisée, Kateb réagit par une puissante théâtralisation de la rue arabe. Espace tragique par excellence, elle est le spectacle de la violence, le foyer de la révolution. Si l'espace familial constitue un refuge de valeurs, la rue par contre active une série de comportements explosifs. [104]

For our purposes, however, two spaces serve quite adequately to mark off the social practices of the Moroccan city. In the autobiographical narratives of personal, urban and national history that we will examine in this study, the settings are entirely urban, so the grotto is rather too naturalistic a space to be entirely relevant. While the sacred interior within the Moroccan labyrinth has many naturalistic aspects, and is a space that informs and is created by social structure, it is an arranged naturalism and one that exists within an urban interior; furthermore, many of the sacred interiors we will encounter have at best tenuous links to nature. As for the distinction Khatibi makes between the labyrinth and the street, the mythological and the sociological, upon close examination it will be seen to collapse into a single space. The street of the old city is itself the labyrinth.

Moreover, the tension between abstract space on one hand and traditional spaces on the other is one that goes back to the very beginnings of Arabic literature and geography. The French scholar André Miquel, also writing in 1967,[14] traces in great detail the changes in the understanding of geography and its impact on human culture during the second and third Islamic centuries. An extremely reductive summary of Miquel's argument would state that in the second century, al-Jáhiz and other writers imported more or less uncritically the Greek concept of *klima* (*'iqlím* in Arabic)

directly into their writings on geography. The Greeks divided the Northern Hemisphere into seven "climates" based solely on latitude, and claimed that the varying degrees of solar radiation in each climate were the determining factors in the human cultures beneath. As time passed, however, and the Islamic empire became increasingly Persianized, writers began to shift the meaning of *'iqlím* until it came to have the same meaning as the Persian word *keshwar*, which denoted a city and its surrounding hinterlands. Human cultures became understood less as a result of insolation than as one of particular geographical circumstances: within the new *'iqlím*, people shared linguistic and cultural unity. More than a thousand years ago, the imposition of an abstract grid from without was resisted by a more localized pattern of localities that required acquaintance with local conditions in order to understand them. It is no accident, argues Miquel, that geographical works increasingly incorporated travel narratives as time passed.[15] In the Modern Standard Arabic of *Fí al-Tufúla*, the word *'iqlím* corresponds closely to English "region," i.e., a locality rather than part of an abstract grid.

Labryinthine Space in *La boîte à merveilles*

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

> Des bras inconnus me soulevaient du sol, me faisaient passer par-dessus les têtes et je me trouvais finalement dans un espace libre. J'attendais un bon moment avant de voir surgir de la foule les deux haiks immaculés. La scène se renouvela plusieurs fois durant ce voyage. Nous traversâmes des rues sans nom ni visage particuliers. J'étais attentif aux conseils de mes deux guides, je m'appliquais à me garer des ânes, butais inévitablement dans les genoux des passants. Chaque fois que j'évitais un obstacle, il s'en présentait un autre. [42]

The extent to which the urban environment of Fes structures itself around illegibility and anonymity is evident in the language of the passage as well as in the events it describes. Instead of "people lifted me from the ground," Sefrioui has Mehdi say "Unknown arms lifted me from the

ground." This makes use of the French partitive article to describe an indeterminate number of arms, disconnecting these arms from the individuals who might have used them and transforming the arms into anonymous lifting machines, then further emphasizing this by describing the arms as *inconnus*. After passing over equally anonymous heads, Mehdi finds himself in "a free space," a bit of irony that only serves to underscore the crowded, tumultuous spectacle of the very narrow street. This free space is not a public square or a broad avenue, marked off by street signs and sidewalks, but rather a temporary zone where the density of people and donkeys is low enough for him to have a moment where he isn't about to be trampled underfoot.

When he looks back for his mother and her companion, he does not see the two women, or the two individuals, emerge from the crowd, but rather *les deux haïks immaculés*. The women have been replaced by their garments, the sort of all-concealing drapery familiar in Western images of the Muslim world, garments which are immaculate, devoid of signifiers that might differentiate one woman from another, which is of course precisely the point of such drapery. In Moroccan public space, the purpose of the spatial practice of full drapery for women is to implement the social practice that women aren't to be gazed at by anyone other than their intimates. The very word *haïk*, a French transliteration of the colloquial Arabic word *Hayk*, provides an encapsulation of this trope of illegibility and anonymity, for the word is foreign to Sefrioui's French audience, marked off in italics, and wouldn't mean anything at all without the context that surrounds it. The word would be foreign and to a certain extent unsignifying to even a reader familiar with both colloquial Arabic and Moroccan social and spatial practices—the plural of *Hayk* in Arabic is *Huyúk*[16]—and Sefrioui's pluralizing of the word in the French manner by adding an S only serves to illustrate the unreadability of this practice.

The scene repeats itself several times, an iteration of the same, yet different, unreadable conclusion. The streets have neither names nor architectural characteristics that make them stand out as readable. Whereas the streets of a Western city operate according to a logic of visibility, with clear lanes marked off for pedestrian and vehicular traffic, the streets of Fes are narrow, winding and filled with all manner of traffic; they are a shared, crowded space in which the inhabitants are largely

unreadable to one another. Instead of a clear gaze out through broad avenues, Mehdi is confronted with one anonymous obstacle after another.

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

> Nous n'avions eu aucune peine à trouver la maison de Si El Arafi. Les gens du quartier Seffah, fiers d'être les voisins d'un homme aussi illustre, s'empressèrent de nous renseigner. Un enfant de mon âge s'était offert de nous accompangner. Il nous guida à travers un dédale de rues de plus en plus étroites, de plus en plus sombres, de plus en plus encombrées de tas d'ordures et de chats efflanqués. Nous aboutîmes enfin à une petite place inondée de soleil…
>
> L'enfant qui nous accompagnait, pointa son index droit vers la porte centrale, fourra l'index gauche dans sa narine et s'en alle sans rien dire. [149]

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

the city, to the set of cultural practices that make it seem advantageous to register one's self or business[17] in the directory—the system used by Mehdi's mother to find her way also entails a set of cultural practices that find resonance in the spatial practice of the city. The visitor needs to speak the local dialect of Arabic, something that requires assimilation to the urban culture of Fes; Mehdi's mother is a montagnard and thus most likely a Berber, and not a native Arabic speaker at all. The visitor needs to be someone who can approach the locals without antagonizing them; without their guidance, the visitor would be lost in the *dédale de rues*. The visitor needs to be someone who the locals think is worthy of meeting the fqih; if it were French soldiers, or bureaucrats, or Catholic priests, the locals might simply pretend not to know where the pride of their neighborhood resided—or pretend not to understand the question.

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

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

The Sacred Interior in *La boîte à merveilles*

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

Moroccan spatial and social practices pervade young Mehdi's life. His family becomes "more Fessi," i.e., less rural, by purchasing a newfangled kerosene lamp to light the house: "Tous les gens «bien» s'éclairent au pétrole," [36] his mother says. The resulting brilliant light sustains the household by drawing mother, father and son together over the dinner table:

> La chouafa qu'on appelait «tante Kanza» monta admirer notre nouvelle acquisition, nous souhaita toutes sortes de prospérités. Ma mère rayonnait de bonheur. Elle devait trouver la vie digne d'être vécue et le monde peuplé d'êtres d'une infinie bonté. Elle chantonnait, gourmandait avec tendresse un chat efflanqué, étranger à la maison, riait pour un rien. [36]

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

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

> Nous nous trouvâmes bientôt dans un cour qui me parut immense. Au centre trônaient quatre vaisseaux en terre cuite remplis d'eau… Au delà de cette cour s'ouvrait la zaouia. De chaque côté d'une pièce carrée où se dressait le catafalque du Saint, deux portes conduisaient aux chambres des pèlerins…
>
> En arrivant devant le catafalque, Lalla Aïcha et ma mère, se mirent à appeler à grands cris le saint à leur secours. L'une ignorant les paroles de l'autre, chacune lui exposait ses petites misères, frappait du plat de la main le bois du catafalque, gémissait, suppliait, vitupérait contre ses ennemis. Les voix montaient, les mains frappait le bois du catafalque avec plus d'énergie et de passion. Un délire sacré s'était emparé des deux femmes. Elles énuméraient tous leurs maux, exposaient leurs faiblesses, demandaient protection, réclamaient vengeance, avouaient leurs impuretés, proclamaient la miséricorde de Dieu et la puissance de Sidi Ali Boughaleb, en appelaient à sa pitié. [22-24]

It is evident in this citation that the function of the sacred interior to perpetuate a societal consensus through a gathering of those qualified to enter the space. Moroccan cities such as Fes have few large, open, publicly accessible spaces, which makes the courtyard seem so large to Mehdi. By its very nature as a saint's tomb, the space serves as a holy site and links the mundane to the transcendental; the intercedence by the saint on behalf of the petitioner serves to contain death and provide continuity between the lost Golden Age and the present. The process of praying to the saint

unbinds the individuality of each woman. They are taken over by *un délire sacré*, brought out of themselves and into an eternal consensus by their spatial relationship to the tomb of Ali Boughaleb.

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

Later, the master tells the students that as part of the celebration of the lunar New Year, "notre Msid serait illuminé à partir de minuit." [61] The students work hard over several days to whitewash the walls of the schoolroom and to place small oil lamps around the walls and ceiling. On the night of the New Year, the students and their parents, all in their best clothes, gather in the illuminated schoolroom to celebrate:

> Je n'étais plus le prince unique au gilet de drap amarante, je devenais un membre d'une congrégation de jeunes seigneurs, tous richement vétus, chantant sous la direction d'un roi de légende, des cantiques d'allégresse et des actions de grâce...
>
> Ce matin, les objets les plus ordinaires, les êtres les plus déshérités mêlaient leurs voix aux nôtres, éprouvaient la même ferveur, s'abandonnaient à la même extase, clamaient avec la même gravité que nous, la grandeur et la miséricorde de Dieu, créateur de toutes choses vivantes.
>
> Après la récitation du Coran, nous chantâmes des cantiques. Les parents de certains élèves psalmodaient avec nous. Ils étaient venus accompagner leurs enfants. Ils

> n'avaient peut-être pas de besogne qui les attendait: ils célébraient la Achoura au Msid comme au temps de leur enfance. [108-09]

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

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

Mehdi is a rather nervous child whose mother is too busy to assuage all his anxieties. In her absence,[18] Mehdi hits upon a rather novel solution that makes use of Moroccan space and spatial practices. He accumulates a number of shiny objects—buttons, beads, a glass bottle-stopper—and stores them within a small box that he keeps in his bedroom. This is the titular box of wonders: whenever Mehdi feels anxiety and can't get his mother to pay attention to him, he retreats to his room, opens the box and holds the objects therein up to the light. He has created a sacred interior for

himself, one that serves as a kind of fetish that takes him away from the anxiety of being a child in a world of adults.

> La nuit, la maison retomba dans le silence. je me sentis triste. Je sortis ma Boîte, la vidai sur un coin de matelas, regardai un à un mes objets. Ce soir, ils ne me parlaient pas. ils gisaient inertes, maussades, un peu hostiles. Ils avaient perdu leur pouvoir magique et devenaient méfiants, secrets. Je les remis dans leur boîte. Une fois le couvercle rabattu, ils se réveillèrent dans le noir pour se livrer à mon insu à des jeux fastueux et délicats. Ils ne savaient pas dans leur ignorance que les parois de ma Boîte à Merveilles ne pouvaient résister à ma contemplation. Mon innocent cabochon de verre grandit, se dilata, atteignit les proportions d'un palais de rêve, s'orna de lumière et d'étoffes précieuses. Les clous, les boutons de porcelaine, les épingles et les perles changés en princesses, en esclaves, en jouvenceaux, pénétrèrent dans ce palais, jouèrent de douces mélodies, se nourirent de mets raffinés, organisèrent des séances d'escarpolette, volèrent dans les arbres pour en croquer les fruits, disparurent dans le ciel sur l'aile du vent en quête d'aventures. [43]

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

The Façade in *La boîte à merveilles*

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

> A notre gauche, se dressait un portail monumental orné de clous et de marteaux de bronze d'un très beau travail.
>
> —Mé! Dis-moi à qui appartient cette maison?
>
> —Ce n'est pas une maison, c'est un bureau de Chrétiens.[19]
>
> —Je vois des Musulmans y entrer.
>
> —Ils travaillent avec les Chrétiens. Les Chrétiens, mon fils, sont riches et paient bien ceux qui connaissent leur langue.
>
> —Est-ce que je parlerai la langue des Chrétiens quand je serai grand?
>
> —Dieu te preserve, mon fils de tout contact avec ces gens que nous ne connaissons pas. [146]

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

> A façade admits certain acts to the realm of what is visible, whether they occur on the façade itself (on balconies, window ledges, etc.) or are to be seen from the façade (processions in the street, for example). Many other acts, by contrast, it condemns to obscenity: these occur behind the façade.[20]

This is the only mention of the French in *La boîte à merveilles*, but we can see the effects of the French and of Western spatial practice on Sefrioui himself, who in this autobiographical narrative describes his own origins as a montagnard child in Fes in the late colonial period. While there's nothing overtly nationalistic at all in Sefrioui's narrative, the effect of Western culture is most evident in the fact that *La boîte à merveilles* is written in French rather than in Arabic, and Sefrioui was indeed paid well by French, if not necessarily by the French government. To further understand the

extent to which Sefrioui's identity was influenced by Western, abstract spatiality, just look at his conception of his childhood subjectivity:

> Ma mémoire était une cire fraîche et les moindres événements s'y gravaient en images ineffeçables. Il me reste cet elbum pour égayer ma solitude, pour me prouver à moi-même que je ne suis pas encore mort. [9]

The spatial relationship of author/narrator to subject is here the Western trope of legibility; once the events of his childhood engraved themselves upon the fresh tablet of his memory, this tablet would then be readable—and it would also replace the tomb as a symbol of the absent presence of death. He can scry himself or map himself out from a bird's-eye perspective, something not at all native to Moroccan culture and something that allows him to view his life from a perspective that makes him a narrator in the Western sense.

The Sacred Interior in *Fí al-Tufúla* (2)

Abdelmajid's young life is not entirely structured by the abstract urban grid. His family is Moroccan, and Muslim, and while his father has molded himself into a Western businessman, he remains fundamentally Moroccan, especially in structuring his family life. This manifests itself in his spatial practices and the social practices they engender. Early in the narrative, Abdelmajid's mother grows ill and dies, and even despite his son's obvious pain, his father refuses to let him see his mother's body. The Petronous family, their neighbors and Abdelmajid's caretakers throughout much of his mother's illness, cause a conflict when they insist that five-year-old Abdelmajid be taken in to see his mother's corpse lying in state, even though it goes against traditional Moroccan sociospatial practices. That he has been allowed to enter into a forbidden spatial relationship renders his father and nursemaid *tá'ih*, [17] a word that means "lost," or "distracted,"[21] with the more poetic implication that they have become lost in a *tíh*, or labyrinth. His transgression of normative spatial relationships has caused his Moroccan family to react in a manner he expresses spatially, in terms of blockage. Because his family is so confused, Millie Petronous takes him outside to the park, under the light of the full moon, and tries to console him:

> Its light filtered along the branches and lit up the lawn. The lofty shadows of the trees spread out underneath them on the ground. The scene seized me with its glory and tranquility, but Millie turned me away from it with her speech. I heard her say:
>
> —Don't be sad, little one. This is life; your mother hasn't gone away, and won't go away, because she was a good woman. So she'll remain with us in spirit, and god will reward her for her goodness and she'll live in the Blessed Gardens. Don't fear for her, and try not to be sad. Look at the sky; heaven is there, behind the moon and behind the stars. If you want to see her, just wait for the full moon, then look at it. Don't you see her there, looking down at you, smiling, happy? Look; don't you see her? [17]

Essentially, Millie adapts Abdelmajid's spatiality to a Western context by moving his perspective from the particular and tactile to the abstract and visual. In the first movement of the scene, Abdelmajid leaves the house in order to experience his grief in a naturalistic setting. He has essentially inverted the sacred interior of Moroccan space by taking it out to the English lawn, creating something closer to Khatibi's *grotte* in the circle of trees. He has performed a kind of hybridity between Western and Moroccan space by creating a space where the tactile bodies of the trees and their capacity to block the light of the moon generate a labyrinth on the lawn. Millie's repetition of the verbs *rá'a*, "to see," and *naZara*, "to look," underscore the extent to which the mother in the moon as a source of solace depends on a clear line of sight to the moon above. Abdelmajid's full moon takes the place of the reader of the map of the city, looking down from a bird's-eye view to help him decode the confusing text that is adult culture for a child of any nationality.

Before he can step into this soothing place, however, Millie turns him away from this hybrid space and imposes Western spatial practices upon him. Rather than the tactile trees, she has him concentrate on the abstract gaze of the moon, using language to turn him away from the space he has created. She emphasizes the link between the moonlight and his mother's gaze, no less abstract since his mother is dead, and continues to emphasize the lines of sight and the visual, mapping aspects of

this manifestation of grief. As such, there is a certain extent to which Millie's speech replicates the violence of Western colonization of the Maghreb; though of course she is only trying to help a young boy for whom she cares assuage the grief brought on by the death of his mother, it is undeniable that she imposes her own, Western spatiality upon the hybrid coping mechanism into which he has transformed the grove of trees.

Political Spaces in Moroccan Literature

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

The analogous argument for *La boîte à merveilles* is a little less obvious: the text concerns itself only with Mehdi's boyhood, and there are no colonists nor politicians in the novel. But *La boîte à merveilles* is nevertheless a deeply political text, not only in its use of space but in its very presentation. When Mehdi sees the façade of the colonial bureau, he's deeply impressed—and this is even before he learns that the French pay well those who know their language. We know nothing of what happens to Mehdi the character after the text of *La boîte à merveilles* comes to a close, but Sefrioui the author gained fame and fortune by publishing his semiautobiographical novel *in French*. His main audience was not Moroccan at all, but rather readers in metropolitan France: *La boîte à merveilles* was published in Paris, not Morocco. Sefrioui is therefore mapping the old city: he exposes old Fes to French readers who are curious about what life might be like in these distant, soon to be independent colonies. This is evident from the first page of the text:

> Je vois, au fond d'une impasse que le soleil ne visite jamais, un petit garçon de six ans, dresser un piège pour attraper un moineau mais the moineau ne vient jamais. Il desire tant ce petit moineau! Il ne le mangera pas, il ne le martyrisera pas. Il veut en faire son compagnon…

> Nous habitions Dar Chouafa, la maison de la voyante. Effectivement, au rez-de-chaussée, habitait une voyante de grande reputation. Des quartiers les plus éloignés, des femmes de toutes les conditions venaient la consulter. [7]

From the start, Sefrioui is an object of his own storytelling. Not only does he view himself, from the sort of elevated perspective characteristic of abstract space, but he also views himself as a benevolent colonist: he only wants to cage the sparrow in order to make it his companion. Moreover, they live in the traditional Fessi style, a group of apartments centering n a courtyard, in a house named for the *seer*, *al-shawwáfa*, from Arabic *sháfa*, "to see/look," the colloquial counterpart to the formal verbs *rá'a* and *naZara*, those used in the citation from *Fí al-Tufúla* when Abdelmajid looks at the moon. From its very beginning, the text of *La boîte à merveilles* is entirely wrapped up in the abstract gaze, even if it never leaves Fes nor discusses politics. As such, it presents us with a map, in a Western language, of a labyrinthine space from an abstract perspective, and it is, like *Fí al-Tufúla*, a colonial text.

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[1] C. R. Pennell, *Morocco Since 1830: A History*. NYU, 2000, pp. 151-60.

[2] See, e.g., the difference between the 1995 edition of the *Lonely Planet* guidebook and its most recent iteration.

[3] Casablanca: matba3at al-'andalús. Citations in this chapter are taken from the second edition (Casablanca: dár nashr al-ma3rifa, 2006), as this is the edition studied in the secondary schools and is thus much more widely available to interested readers.

[4] Paris: Seuil.

[5] And Spanish, though Spanish colonial authority was never more than nominal. See Pennell, pp. 166-67.

[6] *Fí al-Tufúla* is part of the secondary-school literature curriculum in Moroccan schools, so it, at least, is viewed as a foundational text.

[7] *al-riwáya al-maghribiya wa-ru'yat al-wáqi*3 *al-'ijtimá*3*iy: dirása binyawiya takwíniya*. Cairo: dár al-thaqáfa, 1985, pp. 253-55. Reliance on the perspective of a narrow, educated, Westernized elite is the standard trope for Arabic-language Moroccan novels throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s. It is only with the novels of Muhammad Zafzáf, the first of which, *al-Mar'a wa-l-Warda* ["The Woman and the Rose"] (Beirut: manshúrát Gallery wáHid) was published in 1972, that we begin to see protagonists more representative of the vast majority of Moroccans.

[8] Rabat: dár al-'amán. An excellent English translation by Issa J. Boulatta is available as *The Game of Forgetting* (Austin, TX: The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1996).

[9] Berada (tr). *al-riwáya al-maghribiya*, from *al-mulHaq al-wathá'iqiy*. (manshúrát al-baHth al-jámi3í, 1971). p. 142.

[10] Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge, 2006, p. 112.

[11] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, pp. 268-69.

[12] Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*. New York: Ungar, 1955, p. 2702.

[13] Paris: Maspero.

[14] *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle*. Paris: Mouton.

[15] Though it must be mentioned here that for Miquel, travel narratives have another purpose: to make foreign lands seem more alien and therefore make the Islamic empire seem less fragmented than it was. See Miquel, pp. 69ff.

[16] Lane, p. 698.

[17] Si El Arafi is blind and makes his living from dispensing advice and blessings.

[18] One of the major plot points of the novel is Mehdi's father losing his job and having to go to the countryside to do agricultural work; this transforms Mehdi's mother, already a stranger in town, into the head of household.

[19] In Moroccan literature in Arabic, the French are typically referred to not as French, but as *naSrání*, "Christians."

[20] Lefebvre, p. 99.

[21] Lane, p. 326.